Development of an Academic Well-being Model for Gifted Students: A Grounded Theory Study

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A R T I C L E   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to identify the factors influencing the academic well-being of gifted students to develop a model.

Methods and Materials: The research method used in this study was qualitative, utilizing a grounded theory approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The data were examined and analyzed based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory methodology. The study population consisted of all male and female gifted sixth-grade students in the city of Isfahan in 2022. The research sample was selected through purposive sampling, and after conducting interviews with 23 students, the factors influencing academic well-being were identified. It should be noted that data analysis was conducted using three stages of open, axial, and selective coding.

Findings: Based on the results of the study, open codes were organized around 57 concepts, axial codes included 8 concepts, and selective codes were identified and extracted into 4 concepts under the titles of school context, family context, social context, and individual resources.

Conclusion: The findings of the research suggest that by recognizing and understanding the factors influencing academic well-being, it is possible to create conditions that enhance the academic well-being of gifted students.

Keywords: *Academic well-being, gifted student, grounded theory.*

1. Introduction

The positive psychology movement has consistently sought to identify the conditions and processes that contribute to individuals' flourishing (Darbani & Parsakia, 2023; Mohammadi et al., 2021; van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022). Today, the construct of well-being has permeated the field of education, and one of the key educational objectives in advanced societies is to create conditions that enhance students' well-being (Soutter, 2011). This focus is due to the fact that education, learning, and academic success are among the most pressing concerns of educational systems across different societies. Academic well-being is one of the newest concepts in positive psychology, with a particular emphasis on the active role of students and their capability

in creating a vibrant academic environment (Kinnunen et al., 2016). Belfi et al. (2012) consider academic well-being as students' attitudes towards education, encompassing four dimensions: general attitude toward academic life, attitude toward teachers, attitude toward peers, and attitude toward the school environment (Belfi et al., 2012). Overall, academic well-being reflects the role of well-being-promoting factors in the school context (Lee et al., 2014).

Tuominen-Soini, Salmela-Aro, and Niemivirta (2012) believe that academic well-being consists of four components (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012). The first component is academic burnout, which includes academic fatigue, a cynical attitude towards school, and a sense of inefficacy, leading to stress, undesirable motivation, and ultimately academic decline (Kinnunen et al., 2016). The concept of academic burnout overlaps with concepts such as sleep problems, worry, and rumination. However, it is important to note that psychological pressure, fatigue, anxiety, and symptoms of depression are not related to any specific situation, while academic burnout is situation-specific and is only measured within the school context (Fiorilli et al., 2017).

The second component is the multidimensional structure of school engagement, which can be easily influenced by social and educational conditions. This component includes psychological, academic, motivational, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Recent studies indicate that more than 40 to 60 percent of students exhibit disengagement from academic activities (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). The third component is academic satisfaction, which serves as a protective and empowering factor for successful academic performance, increased learning, and psychological well-being (Suldo et al., 2006). On the other hand, academic dissatisfaction can lead to a tendency toward undesirable behaviors such as substance abuse (Baykal et al., 2005). The fourth component is school value, defined as students' perception of the value of their education, including both intrinsic and extrinsic value (Duffy et al., 2015).

One of the target groups in schools is gifted and talented students, to whom educational systems pay special attention (Jawabreh et al., 2022). It is important for these systems to have a clear understanding of the academic well-being of this group. Various studies have shown that certain characteristics of gifted students specifically affect their academic well-being and academic functioning (Gnilka et al., 2012). According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2015), gifted students are learners who, compared

to their peers of the same age, experience, and environment, show potentially higher levels of achievement and are more successful and show greater progress in their academic endeavors (Jawabreh et al., 2022; Mofield et al., 2016).

Gifted students, due to their perfectionistic tendencies, are exposed to a wide range of negative outcomes, such as academic stress (Mofield et al., 2016), avoidance coping strategies (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2019; Mofield et al., 2016), and academic procrastination (Foster, 2007). Perfectionistic learners are more inclined to succeed in their tasks, which results in a heightened fear of failure. This pervasive effort to avoid failure experiences strengthens their inclination to use various forms of defense mechanisms, such as procrastination, avoidance of effort, and self-handicapping, in order to preserve their sense of self-worth, and they may seriously avoid engaging with new experiences (Guénolé et al., 2015).

Given that gifted students frequently perceive themselves as under pressure, they also report higher levels of stress due to self-imposed expectations and stress resulting from the expectations of significant others. Often, these learners set unattainable standards for their academic performance, leading to intense reactions when faced with academic failures. In addition, some other common traits among high-achieving learners include self-criticism, external criticism, lack of time management skills, chronic worry, control issues, and judgmental attitudes (Hill & Madigan, 2022), all of which target students' academic well-being.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the factors influencing academic well-being. Govorova, Benitez, and Muniz (2020), in a study involving 248,620 students, demonstrated that self-efficacy, enjoyment of learning and education, and motivation are among the factors influencing students' academic well-being (Govorova et al., 2020). Zautra et al. (2015) believe that social intelligence, which encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, is one of the factors that can relate to students' academic well-being (Zautra et al., 2015). Engels, Alterman, Van Petegem, and Schepens (2004), in a study involving 342 students, showed that the school climate, teacher relationships, class participation, and school rules and regulations are factors influencing students' academic well-being (Engels et al., 2004). Konu et al. (2002), in a study, showed that school conditions, social relationships, self-actualization, and students' physical health are among the factors influencing students' academic well-being (Konu et al., 2002). Jahan-Nezhadi, Taghvaei, and Pirani (2021) studied the structural model of academic well-being and

demonstrated that family communication patterns, academic self-handicapping, and self-efficacy play a role in students' academic well-being (Jahan Nezhadi et al., 2022).

A review of the research literature reveals that no study has been conducted on discovering the factors influencing the academic well-being of gifted students, indicating a research gap in this area. Overall, a thorough examination of the issue of academic well-being and the factors influencing it is a priority for educational authorities, as improving students' academic well-being is one of the fundamental goals of educational systems. Furthermore, given the importance of academic well-being in the academic lives of gifted students, this study was conducted with the aim of discovering and exploring the factors influencing the academic well-being of gifted students to develop a model.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was conducted using a qualitative method with a grounded theory approach. The study population included all male and female gifted sixth-grade students studying in elementary schools in the city of Isfahan during the 2022–2023 academic year. The sample size was determined during the research process, as in qualitative research, the saturation of information is more important than the number of participants studied. This means that the researcher continues to collect data until the information gathered from participants becomes repetitive and no new information is added, reaching theoretical saturation.

Considering the above points, the participants in this study included 23 students (13 girls and 10 boys) selected through purposive sampling based on inclusion criteria such as a confirmed diagnosis of giftedness (an IQ score above 130 on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children–Fourth Edition), an age range of 11 to 12 years (sixth grade), studying in public schools, living with both parents, and exclusion criteria such as a concurrent diagnosis of a psychological disorder in the child (screened through a clinical diagnostic interview) and a lack of willingness to cooperate.

Ethical considerations in this study included explaining the research objectives, the interview method, participants' right to participate in or withdraw from the study, ensuring the confidentiality of their names and information, and obtaining consent for recording the interviews.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The research process involved extensive study and consultation with advisors, after which the final interview questions were prepared, and interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved. Participants were allowed to express their opinions on the details related to the main topic to the extent of their knowledge and experience. It is worth noting that each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes, depending on the participant's willingness to respond. The data collection method was field-based, and the data collection tool was a semi-structured interview, which is one of the most common tools in the qualitative approach.

2.3. Data analysis

To analyze the conducted interviews and enhance the accuracy and precision of the analyses, all interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The researchers carefully reviewed each recorded interview and the associated notes within the first 24 hours, noting any concepts that came to mind. This phase is one of the initial stages of data analysis in grounded theory, known as coding. The collected data were then analyzed using a three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective coding). To enhance the internal validity of the interview findings, the results were reviewed by an expert familiar with the grounded theory research method. During this stage, the coding of the interview data was evaluated by the expert, and their suggestions were incorporated.

3. Findings and Results

The data were analyzed based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory, resulting in the identification of four main categories: School Context, which includes three subcategories (Educational Content and Competitive School Environment, Educational Justice, and Teacher Interaction); Family Context, which includes two subcategories (Parental Demands and Expectations and Guidance Ability); Social Context, which includes one subcategory (Social Security); and Individual Resources, which includes two subcategories (Academic Self-Evaluation and Personal Self-Evaluation). Table 1 presents the process of axial and selective coding for discovering the factors influencing the academic well-being of gifted students based on the systematic grounded theory approach. Figure 1 presents the proposed model of factors affecting the academic well-being of gifted students.

Table 1

Axial and Selective Coding Process for Factors Influencing the Academic Well-being of Gifted Students

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding
School Context	Educational Content and Competitive Environment	Inflexibility of the educational program / Dominance of grade-centered and exam-focused perspectives / Limited opportunities for creativity and its cultivation in school / High volume of tedious and repetitive homework / Uniformity and repetitiveness in educational activities and the school environment / Outdated teaching and learning methods / Perception of control by the teacher and the school / Participation in class and educational activities
	Educational Justice	Teachers' attitudes towards gifted students as exceptional / Different treatment of gifted students due to their high abilities and intelligence
	Teacher Interaction	Feeling free to communicate with the teacher / Realistic expectations from the teacher / Avoiding excessive academic pressure on students / Valuing students' creativity / Cheerful and social teachers / Teachers' commitment to their duties / Positive attitude of the teacher towards giftedness / Fair and impartial teachers / Teachers' receptiveness to criticism and tolerance of students' differing views
Family Context	Parental Demands and Expectations	Higher expectations than the child's capacity, leading to anxiety / Neglecting the child's need for leisure and recreation / Excessive emphasis on getting a perfect score in all subjects / Parental criticism and blame / Parental perfectionism
	Guidance Ability	Positive parent-child interactions / Family support for the child / Providing a calm and conducive environment for studying and doing homework / Parents' ability to assist the child in academic matters / Warm and friendly behavior towards the child / Granting independence to the child / Participation in the child's education and comprehensive interaction with the school / Guiding the child towards talent development
Social Context	Social Security	Feeling secure in the learning environment, acceptance and friendliness from others / Acceptance and interaction with peers
Individual Resources	Academic Self-Evaluation	Resilience in the face of academic challenges / Impact of personal abilities on learning / Ability to set goals / Academic optimism / Academic hope / Enthusiasm for learning / Perseverance and determination in carrying out activities / Greater effort in planning and managing academic matters / Finding alternative ways to achieve academic goals / Viewing obstacles as academic challenges / Learning from past successes and failures to achieve future academic goals / Not giving up / Valuing academic goals / Considering courses as valuable / Having more positive emotions than negative ones in academic life
	Personal Self-Evaluation	Self-compassion / Kindness to oneself in dealing with negative experiences / Non-judgmental and non-reactive attitude towards life experiences / Less fear of failure / Pursuing every activity from start to finish successfully / Belief in one's abilities and talents / Relying more on one's judgments than others / Having a growth mindset

School Context: Data analysis from the interviews revealed that participants mentioned two components related to the school context.

Educational Content and Competitive Environment: In Iran's centralized educational system, the opportunity to address the learning needs of gifted students comprehensively is minimized. Schools operate based on a predetermined curriculum, and teaching is seen as the transmission of knowledge from the teacher's mind to the student, leading to rote learning, which causes boredom among students. In this regard, Wang and Eccles (2013) argue that students' perception of the school environment influences their achievement motivation (Wang & Eccles, 2013). Three students stated, "School really isn't exciting for us and has become boring... Sometimes the teacher repeats a lesson a lot, and we have to listen, which is really tiresome."

Educational Justice: Concerning the concept of educational justice, identified as the second subcategory, six participants stated, "I get upset when the teacher treats me differently and always has different expectations from me in class. I wish I were just like the rest of my classmates."

Teacher Interaction: Regarding the concept of teacher interaction, identified as the third subcategory, eight participants stated, "I feel close to the teacher, and if I have a problem, I can talk to them and get guidance." Additionally, five participants expressed, "I can't express my opinions much in class, and because of that, I get upset because our teacher isn't receptive to criticism."

Family Context: Data analysis from the interviews revealed that participants mentioned two components related to the family context.

Parental Demands and Expectations: It should be noted that there is a complex relationship between risk and protective factors for academic well-being at the individual, family, and social levels (López et al., 2021). Among these, one of the important factors influencing academic well-being is parental demands and expectations. In this regard, 15 students stated, "My parents constantly criticize me and expect things from me that they couldn't achieve themselves. I wish, instead of all this blame, they would understand that life isn't just about studying, going to Olympiads, and attending elite schools."

Guidance Ability: Research shows that effective parent-child interaction at home and with the teacher at school enhances students' academic performance (Topor et al., 2010). In this regard, six participants stated, "My parents are truly supportive and give me encouragement... Because I know they support me, I can overcome the obstacles in my path." Additionally, three participants stated, "My parents always try to pay attention to my interests and talents, and they've invested a lot in me so far."

Social Context: Academic achievement and its relationship with socioeconomic background is a persistent topic in educational research, and according to the demand-resources model, it is understood that when individuals face academic demands and tasks, if they have high social resources, they will approach academic tasks with more enthusiasm (Thomson, 2018).

Social Security: Concerning social security, identified as the first subcategory, five participants stated, "Sometimes I think none of my classmates like me, and because the teacher gives me more attention, their reaction gets worse." Additionally, two students stated, "I'm alone at school, and nobody becomes friends with me."

Individual Resources: Personal resources are personality aspects generally associated with resilience and refer to individuals' sense of their ability to control and successfully influence their environment (Eslami et al., 2016).

Academic Self-Evaluation: One of the factors influencing academic success is efficient academic skills, which can predict academic well-being. In this regard, four participants stated, "I think we should be able to set our goals now and not get discouraged if there are obstacles."

Personal Self-Evaluation: According to the person-environment fit theory by Maslach and Leiter (2008), individual factors such as self-esteem and self-efficacy interact with environmental factors to determine whether an individual experiences engagement and enthusiasm or burnout under specific conditions (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). In fact, personality differences explain why some individuals thrive and succeed in challenging environments, while others find the same conditions overwhelming. In this regard, 10 participants stated, "I know my strengths and weaknesses, and if I fail, I try to make up for it."

Figure 1

Proposed Conceptual Model of Factors Affecting the Academic Well-being of Gifted Students
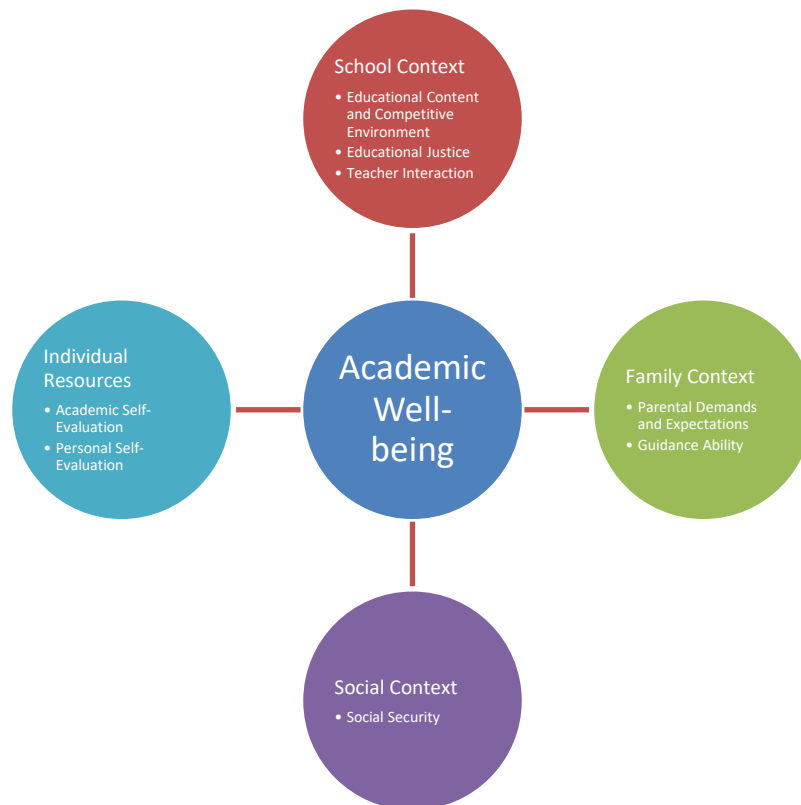
4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop a model for the academic well-being of gifted students. The results of the interview analysis led to the identification of four main categories: School Context, which includes three subcategories (Educational Content and Competitive School Environment, Educational Justice, and Teacher Interaction); Family Context, which includes two subcategories (Parental Demands and Expectations and Guidance Ability); Social Context, which includes one subcategory (Social Security); and Individual Resources, which includes two subcategories (Academic Self-Evaluation and Personal Self-Evaluation).

In explaining the research findings, it can be stated that in recent years, the increasing trend of gifted students joining the group of underachieving or unsuccessful gifted students has been one of the most concerning and significant research questions among various researchers, particularly educational psychologists (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2019). Additionally, entry into school serves as the starting point for educational advancement, and the educational system must strive to cultivate effective human capital, enhance the cultural and value levels of society, and prevent the decline and loss of educational opportunities. School is a place for children's daily lives and an opportunity to gain skills and abilities for a better future, and success in school and academic life has a significant impact on the present and future status of gifted children.

Given the above, the increasing trend of membership in the unsuccessful gifted group has been a fundamental concern in recent years and has prompted a significant amount of intellectual investment from researchers interested in the field of gifted psychology studies (Veas et al., 2018). In the present study, the researcher, influenced by this research trend, aims to take a small but complementary step towards alleviating the theoretical knowledge gap in the field of gifted psychology and education by developing a model.

Based on the results of this research, each of the identified categories can be an influencing factor on the academic well-being of gifted students. In explaining the first category, labeled School Context, it can be said that the flourishing of gifted individuals partially depends on their experiences, environment, and awareness. In this regard, Cross, Cook, and Dixon (1996) point out that a positive educational environment can lead to positive psychological and academic outcomes (Cross et al., 1996). Teachers' failure to use effective teaching and learning methods and neglect of individual student differences reduce gifted students' interest and motivation for learning, leading to negative consequences and decreasing academic well-being. In this regard, the research results of Eloff et al. (2022) and Engels et al. (2004) also showed that the learning environment and school context, as well as teacher relationships, are among the factors influencing academic well-being (Eloff et al., 2022; Engels et al., 2004).

In explaining the Family Context as the second category, it can be said that the most important role of parents is to provide a calm and conducive environment for studying and completing homework. Family environments where at least one parent is supportive foster a good attachment relationship between the child and the parent and are a strengthening factor for students' academic well-being. Families that engage in dialogue with their children about educational matters and show greater flexibility in dealing with issues have children with better problem-solving skills and independence. Many studies have shown that parental control and pressure related to academic achievement can have negative effects on students' academic performance (Llorca et al., 2017; Piskorz-Ryń & Chikwe, 2024). In this regard, the results of the study by Jahan Nezhadi et al. (2020) also showed that family communication patterns play a role in students' academic well-being (Jahan Nezhadi et al., 2022).

In explaining the Social Context as the third identified category, it can be said that social support is a form of awareness that leads an individual to believe they are cared for and valued. Rosenfeld, Richman, and Bowen (2000) argue that students who perceive their parents, friends, and teachers as supportive exhibit more positive behaviors at school (Rosenfeld et al., 2000). Although perceived support from teachers appears to be a necessary condition for positive academic outcomes, it is not sufficient. Therefore, positive academic outcomes increase when support from teachers is combined with support from parents and friends. On the one hand, social resources reduce academic demands, pressures, and costs, which functionally contribute to achieving academic well-being, and on the other hand, they stimulate the growth and enhancement of personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). In other words, social resources directly impact personal resources, leading to increased self-esteem, optimism, and especially self-efficacy (Eloff et al., 2022). Consistent with this finding, the research results of Eloff et al. (2022) and Konu et al. (2002) also showed that social support and resources are factors

influencing academic well-being (Eloff et al., 2022; Konu et al., 2002).

In explaining Individual Resources as the last identified category, it can be said that Karasek's (1979) demand-control theory is based on the assumption that individual and environmental factors interact and explains that a person who effectively confronts obstacles and has sufficient resources perceives the activity as satisfying and considers stressors manageable (Govorova et al., 2020). On the other hand, an individual who finds the availability of resources insufficient to meet demands perceives the activity as a source of chronic stress. This theory emphasizes the interaction of social and personal resources in how tasks are approached, which can be explained in two ways: with enthusiasm and satisfaction or with emotional exhaustion and burnout. Therefore, if students have appropriate social-support resources (such as family, peer, and teacher support) and, on the other hand, suitable conditions for enhancing personal resources (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism), it can be expected that their academic well-being will increase. In this regard, the research results of Govorova et al. (2020), Konu et al. (2002) and Jahan Nezhadi et al. (2021) also showed that personality traits are factors influencing academic well-being (Govorova et al., 2020; Jahan Nezhadi et al., 2022; Konu et al., 2002).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

One of the primary limitations of this study is the reliance on qualitative data gathered through interviews, which may not fully capture the breadth of factors influencing the academic well-being of gifted students. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific cultural and educational context in Iran limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or countries with different educational systems and cultural norms. The sample size, while adequate for qualitative research, may not represent the broader population of gifted students, particularly those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study means that it cannot establish causal relationships between the identified factors and academic well-being.

Future research should consider employing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data to validate and expand upon the findings of this study. Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore the causal relationships between the identified factors and academic well-being over time. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural and educational contexts would be valuable in understanding how these factors operate in diverse settings. Research could also focus on specific subgroups of gifted students, such as those with dual exceptionalities or those from underrepresented backgrounds, to determine if the factors influencing their academic well-being differ from the general gifted population.

Educational policymakers and practitioners should consider integrating the identified factors into the development of support programs tailored to the needs of gifted students. Schools should provide training for teachers on differentiated instruction and the importance of fostering a positive, inclusive environment that nurtures the well-being of all students, particularly the gifted. Family engagement programs that educate parents on the impact of their expectations and interactions on their children's academic well-being could also be beneficial. Furthermore, enhancing social support networks within schools, such as peer mentoring programs and teacher-student relationship-building initiatives, could help mitigate some of the challenges gifted students face, thereby promoting their overall well-being and academic success.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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