



Exploring the Silent Struggles of Gifted Adolescents in School Counseling Programs

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the personal experiences of talented adolescents in facing often-overlooked challenges and examines the role of school counseling programs in addressing their needs. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, the research involved 15 gifted students aged 13–17 enrolled in academic enrichment programs at three secondary schools, along with 3 school counselors as supporting informants. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participatory observations, then analyzed using NVivo-assisted thematic analysis. The findings reveal three key themes: excessive academic pressure and anxiety, difficulties in building peer relationships, and limitations of counseling programs that emphasize learning issues over psychosocial needs. Additionally, communication gaps among students, teachers, and counselors were identified, contributing to feelings of isolation. The study concludes that counseling programs should adopt a holistic approach integrating academic, social, and emotional support. Theoretically, it enriches understanding of the psychosocial dynamics of gifted adolescents, while practically offering recommendations for more adaptive and inclusive policies and counseling services.

INTRODUCTION

Talented adolescents are a group of individuals who have above-average abilities in a particular area of academics, arts, or skills. They are often seen only in terms of achievement excellence, so they are considered not to require additional support in psychological or social development. In fact, recent research shows that talented adolescents also face complex pressures and challenges, both from the school and family environment (Wang & Neihart, 2021; Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2022). This phenomenon indicates that the label "talented" is not always synonymous with a stable emotional state, but can actually bring its own vulnerability (Papadopoulos, 2023).

In educational practice, the existence of counseling services in schools has an important role to support the overall well-being of students. School counseling ideally not only helps students with learning difficulties or problematic behaviors, but also accompanies high-achieving students to balance academic, social, and emotional needs (Zeidner & Matthews, 2022). However, in reality, in many schools counseling services still focus on general interventions, while specific support for gifted students has not been a priority (Rahayu et al., 2022; Miller & Gentry, 2021). This shows that there is a gap in services that need to be considered in the development of education policies.

The local context in Indonesia also shows a similar situation. Guidance and counseling programs in high schools are generally directed at academic problems and student discipline. Meanwhile, talented students who are considered "not problematic" rarely receive in-depth attention from counselors (Puspitasari & Sutoyo, 2021). As a result, they can experience academic pressure, difficulty adapting to peers, and hidden self-identity conflicts (Rahayu et al., 2022; Sari & Dewi, 2023). This condition illustrates the need for a new understanding of special needs-based counseling for talented student groups.

International studies support the view that gifted adolescents have unique psychosocial dynamics. (Matthews & Dai, 2021) found that the academic pressure experienced by gifted students tended to be higher than that of their peers, due to excessive expectations of teachers and parents. Meanwhile, (Cross et al., 2022) highlight the feelings of loneliness and social isolation that often arise in gifted students, especially because they feel different from their peers. Similar findings were shown by (Peterson, 2020), who found a higher risk of anxiety and stress in gifted students than in non-gifted students. This confirms that talent does not always bring benefits, but also challenges that require special attention in school counseling.

On the other hand, research on counseling practices for gifted students is still relatively limited. Most school counseling research focuses on students with behavioral problems, learning difficulties, or general social adjustment (García-Cepero et al., 2020; Karakoyun & Lindstrom, 2022). This creates a research gap, which is the lack of studies that specifically discuss the effectiveness of school counseling in assisting talented students to face emotional and social difficulties. In fact, an in-depth exploration of their experience can open up new perspectives on how counseling services can be optimized (Moon, 2021).

Fugate emphasizes the importance of a strength-based approach in gifted student counseling, which emphasizes individual strengths and potentials as the cornerstone of intervention (Fugate et al., 2021). However, phenomenological research that truly explores the subjective experiences of gifted adolescents is still rare (Plucker & Peters, 2020). Most studies have placed more emphasis on measuring intelligence levels or academic achievement, rather than on hidden emotional experiences (Neihart & Pereira, 2022). This condition reinforces the reason for the need for research that focuses on the silent struggles of gifted students in the context of school counseling programs.

In addition to academic pressure, social factors are also a significant challenge. Many talented teens find it difficult to form relationships with peers due to differences in thinking or unusual interests (Cross et al., 2022). They can feel social isolation despite being academically successful. If this condition is not detected, then the risk of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, or academic burnout increases (Wang & Neihart, 2021; Kettler & Bower, 2023). Therefore, school counseling needs to be seen as an important instrument in supporting the social and emotional development of talented adolescents.

Looking at existing research gaps, this study explicitly aims to explore the hidden struggles that talented adolescents experience in high school, as well as analyze the extent to which school counseling programs are able to meet their needs. The research focus is directed at the experiences of gifted students regarding academic pressure, social relations, and perceptions of the counseling services they receive. In other words, this study not only describes the problem, but also assesses the relevance and effectiveness of existing counseling practices.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of studies in the field of guidance and counseling, especially in the context of counseling for talented students. The results of the study are expected to enrich the literature on the psychosocial dynamics of gifted students and open up space for counseling approaches that are more responsive to individual needs (Fugate et al., 2021; Peterson, 2020). This research also provides a phenomenological perspective that is still rarely used in the counseling study of gifted students (Moon, 2021).

From a practical perspective, this research has implications for schools, counselors, and education policymakers. Research findings can serve as a basis for developing more inclusive counseling programs, which focus not only on academic difficulties, but also on the emotional and social well-being of gifted students (Zeidner & Matthews, 2022; Kettler & Bower, 2023). Thus, school counseling can act as a safe space to express hidden difficulties, thereby supporting the development of talented adolescents more fully.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Characteristics of Gifted Adolescents and Their Psychosocial Challenges

Gifted teens are known to have intellectual abilities, creativity, or skills that exceed the average of their peers. However, these advantages are not always in line with emotional or social stability. Many studies show that talented adolescents face academic pressure, feelings of isolation, and difficulties in establishing social relationships (Suyitno et al., 2024). According to recent

findings, high expectations from parents and teachers often cause anxiety that interferes with mental well-being (Noor, 2023). This is supported by research showing that gifted adolescents more frequently experience loneliness than their peers, mainly due to differences in thinking and interests (Lee & Anderson, 2024). Thus, the label "talented" does not mean that it is free from problems, but it can create its own psychological pressure.

The Role of School Counseling in Supporting Talented Adolescents

School counseling basically aims to help students overcome academic, social, and emotional problems. However, the reality is that counseling services in many schools are still more focused on students with learning problems or disciplinary cases, while specific support for gifted students has not been fully developed (Miller & Gentry, 2021). Recent studies highlight that inclusive counseling services must address the needs of all students, including those with high achievements, in order to foster both academic success and emotional well-being (Karakoyun & Lindstrom, 2022). Moreover, counseling that applies a strength-based approach, which emphasizes students' positive potential, has been shown to enhance resilience and adaptability among gifted adolescents when facing academic and social pressures (Zeidner & Matthews, 2022). Nevertheless, the application of this approach in schools across developing countries remains limited, signaling the need for further research and practice innovations.

Research Gaps on Talented Teens' "Silent Struggles"

International studies show that most research on gifted adolescents still emphasizes cognitive aspects or academic achievement, while their emotional and social struggles are underexplored (Matthews & Dai, 2021; Peterson, 2020). Recent scholars have noted that phenomenological research focusing on the lived experiences of gifted students remains scarce, despite its importance in capturing their hidden psychological challenges (Lopez & Carter, 2023). Silent struggles such as loneliness, anxiety, or identity confusion significantly influence their developmental trajectory and overall well-being (Kettler & Bower, 2023). Without a deeper understanding of these psychosocial aspects, school counseling programs will continue to face difficulties in meeting the real needs of gifted adolescents (Moon, 2021). Thus, there remains a significant research gap, particularly regarding the hidden emotional experiences that shape their growth and resilience.

Global and Local Context Dynamics

In a global context, studies in various countries show that the academic stress experienced by talented adolescents is closely related to high levels of anxiety and the risk of burnout (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2023; Papadopoulos, 2023). Meanwhile, research in Asian settings, including Indonesia, indicates that gifted students seldom receive counseling services tailored to their needs because they are often perceived as not having problems (Puspitasari & Sutoyo, 2021). Consequently, many talented high school students struggle with social adjustment and hidden psychological distress, which remain

underrecognized by educators and counselors (Sari & Dewi, 2023). These conditions highlight the urgency of developing cross-contextual perspectives in designing counseling programs that are both globally informed and locally relevant (Lee & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2022).

Research Development Directions and Practical Implications

Recent literature emphasizes the importance of integrating counseling approaches that are sensitive to the specific needs of gifted students. For instance, empathy-focused group counseling has been shown to decrease feelings of isolation and foster stronger peer relationships among gifted adolescents (Cross et al., 2022). Likewise, approaches grounded in positive psychology and strengths-based counseling are considered effective in enhancing self-confidence and emotional resilience (Zeidner & Matthews, 2022). Nonetheless, empirical studies on the implementation and effectiveness of such interventions in developing countries remain scarce (Karakoyun & Lindstrom, 2022). Therefore, phenomenological investigations into the lived experiences of gifted adolescents within school counseling programs can provide substantial theoretical insights and practical guidance for more inclusive and responsive educational practices.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the subjective experiences ("lived experiences") of talented adolescents who are often invisible (silent struggles). The phenomenological approach was chosen because the focus of the research is on the meaning of experiences experienced by individuals in depth, according to the characteristics of the exploration of emotional and social phenomena (Turner & Knight, 2022). This method is consistent with applied psychology-research that explores the internal experiences of gifted students (Lopez & Carter, 2023).

Population and Sampling Techniques

The target population is gifted students ages 13–17 who are enrolled in academic enrichment programs in high school (junior and senior high schools), as well as school counselors who serve them. The sampling technique uses non-probability purposive sampling, because the researcher selects informants based on certain criteria namely having experience and insight into the psychosocial struggles of talented students (Evans, 2021). The total participants consisted of 15 talented students (from three secondary schools located in Denpasar, Bali) and 3 counselors as supporting informants. This number was chosen to achieve data depth, following the principle of information saturation in phenomenological design (White & West, 2024).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through two main instruments: semi-structural in-depth interviews and participatory observation. The interviews were designed by researchers based on previous literature on the psychosocial challenges of

gifted adolescents (Kim & Nguyen, 2022; Patel et al., 2023) and modified according to the local context. Observations were made in counseling sessions and limited school interactions to capture interpersonal dynamics and service contexts. The instrument was tested first through a pilot test on two students and one counselor to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions. Although construct validity and quantitative reliability are not fully applicable in phenomenology, researchers apply data triangulation and ask for informant feedback (member checking) to ensure the credibility of the data (Sanchez & Huber, 2020; Martinez & Taylor, 2021).

Research Implementation Procedure

The implementation of the research began with ethical permission from the institution as well as the permission of the school and parents/guardians of students. The research steps in sequence are:

- a. School selection and identification of talented students through coordination with teachers/enrichment programs.
- b. Initial relationship, explanation of the purpose of the research, and collection of informed consent.
- c. Data collection was done through in-depth interviews (45–60 minutes per session) and participatory observation during student interaction with counselors.
- d. Data recording (audio) and literal transcription by the researcher.
- e. Data triangulation through cross-examination between interview findings and observation notes, as well as member checking with multiple participants (Ahmed & Zhou, 2023).

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke steps, namely: (a) transcript familiarization; (b) initial coding; (c) theme development; (d) theme review; (e) the naming of the theme; and (f) report writing. This process is facilitated by NVivo software (latest version), which helps with the management and organization of code as well as visualization of relationships between themes (Lopez & Fischer, 2022; Rivera & Black, 2024). NVivo improves interpretation consistency and enables transparent trail audits for the validity of the analysis process.

RESEACRH RESULTS

Excessive Academic Stress and Anxiety

The results of the study show that most talented adolescents face high academic pressure due to the expectations of teachers, parents, and the school environment. Of the 15 talented students interviewed, 12 of them mentioned that they often feel anxious when they are unable to achieve a standard of value that is considered "perfect". This anxiety arises especially in the run-up to an exam or when they score below expectations, even though they are still above average classmates. Academic stress not only creates emotional tension, but also has an impact on physical conditions, such as difficulty sleeping, headaches, and prolonged feelings of fatigue. This is in line with observations in the classroom,

where gifted students tend to display perfectionistic behaviors, such as repeating homework or being reluctant to collect assignments before they are completely sure the result is perfect. One of the informants described the feeling of anxiety very clearly: "I was always afraid that my score was not 100, even though the teacher said that a score of 90 was good. But if it's not perfect, I feel like a failure, and it makes it hard for me to sleep through the night." (S3, Interview, July 10, 2025).

This symptom of perfectionism is also reinforced by feelings of pressure due to parental expectations. Many students feel academic success is the primary measure of their existence. This is evident in the following quote: "My parents always said that I was smart, so I always had to be able to do more than others. Sometimes I feel like I have no choice but to keep learning, even though I'm actually tired." (S7, Interview, July 14, 2025). In addition, teachers at school often exert indirect pressure by relying on talented students to always set an example for their peers. Some students said that this condition made them reluctant to show weakness, so anxiety increased. An informant recounted the experience: "The teacher often pointed me to answer questions in front of the class. If I'm wrong, I feel like everyone will be disappointed. It scared me to look weak." (S11, Interview, July 21, 2025). The following table shows the main indicators of academic stress experienced by gifted students in this study:

Table 1. Indicators of Academic Stress Experienced by Talented Teenagers

Academic Stress Indicators	Number of Students (n=15)	Percentage
Feeling anxious because of grades	12	80%
Difficulty sleeping ahead of exams	9	60%
Academic Perfectionism	10	67%

The data shows that academic pressure is one of the main silent struggles experienced by talented teenagers. The majority of students bear not only academic burden, but also psychological pressure due to high expectations from parents and teachers. This makes them vulnerable to anxiety, burnout, and decreased emotional well-being.

Difficulties in Social Relations

The second finding suggests that gifted teens often experience barriers in building social relationships with peers. Of the 15 talented students interviewed, 9 students stated that they felt "different" in their way of thinking and interests, making it difficult to blend in with a wider group of friends. This condition makes them prefer to stay away or only interact with friends in small circles. Observations at schools show that many gifted students tend to spend their time alone, such as reading or doing assignments in the library, rather than participating in group activities in the field or canteen.

These different feelings often lead to loneliness, even though they look academically superior. One of the informants shared his experience: "*Sometimes I feel like I don't have friends who really understand the way I think. If I tell you something I like, many friends even say it's weird or not connected, so I finally choose to keep quiet.*" (S5, Interview, July 12, 2025). This phenomenon of alienation is also seen in daily social situations. Some talented students feel their talents are actually socially distanced, as peers often label "smart kids" who are hard to approach. This was said by another student: "*Friends often say I'm nerdy or too serious. It makes me feel like there's a distance. Even though I also want to have close friends who can have a casual chat, not just about lessons*" (S8, Interview, July 15, 2025).

Furthermore, some students said that this isolation experience made them withdraw from society, because they were afraid of being rejected or misunderstood. This condition reinforces the feelings of loneliness they experience, as expressed by one of the informants: "*Now I spend more time alone. When I play with friends, I feel like an outsider. So I think it's better to be myself than to feel rejected.*" (S12, Interview, July 23, 2025). The school counselors interviewed also acknowledged the existence of this phenomenon of social isolation, but often they considered it not a serious problem because talented students were considered capable of being independent. In fact, the results of the study show that the social isolation experienced by talented students can cause long-term psychological impacts, including insecurity, difficulty building healthy relationships, and the risk of social anxiety. These findings confirm that social relations are one of the *silent struggles* The main issues facing talented teenagers, who are often hidden behind their academic performance.

Limitations of School Counseling Programs

Analysis of the results of interviews with students and counselors revealed that school counseling programs in general still focus on handling behavioral problems, discipline, and academic difficulties for students with low achievements. Counseling services have not been specifically geared towards supporting the emotional and social needs of gifted students. Of the 15 talented students involved in the study, only 4 had ever attended a school counseling session. Most students said that the counseling they received felt general and did not touch on the psychosocial problems they faced, such as academic anxiety or social loneliness.

One student described his experience while taking counseling: "*When I participated in counseling, the content was more about discipline and a good way of learning. But my problem is not that, I am more often anxious because I am afraid of failure or feeling alone. So I feel that the counseling is not helpful.*" (S2, Interview, July 9, 2025). This condition is reinforced by the statements of other students, who reveal that counseling is often perceived as a space for problematic students, so talented students are reluctant to access the service. This shows the stigma inherent in school counseling. One student said: "*At my school, if someone is called to the BK room, it is usually because they made a mistake. I'm a little scared that if I get in there, I'm going to have a problem. Even though I need a place to tell stories about my feelings.*" (S6, Interview, July 13, 2025).

In addition to the student's perspective, the counselors interviewed also acknowledged the limitations of the existing counseling program. They said that the administrative burden, rigid counseling curriculum, and large number of students made the focus of services more directed to disciplinary and academic cases, rather than to the unique needs of talented students. One of the counselors revealed: "*We rarely make special programs for talented students. Usually more attention is paid to students who are considered problematic. Even though talented children also have great pressure, but it is rarely a priority.*" (K1, Interview, July 18, 2025). These findings confirm the existence of a significant service gap between the real needs of gifted students and the interventions available in schools.

Communication Gap between Students, Teachers, and Counselors

The results of the study show that there is a significant communication gap between talented students, teachers, and school counselors. Many students feel that teachers judge them more solely on academic achievement, while emotional and social conditions do not receive adequate attention. This makes talented students feel that their existence is valued only when they are able to demonstrate high academic achievement. On the other hand, from the counselor's side, there is a view that talented students tend to shut themselves off or are reluctant to seek help, so their emotional problems are often not detected early. This perceived mismatch reinforces feelings of isolation and decreases the effectiveness of counseling programs in schools.

One student expressed his experience that teachers often only appreciate academic results, without asking further questions about psychological conditions: "*The teacher always told me to maintain high grades. But no one ever asked me how I felt when I was constantly learning. So sometimes I feel like a value machine.*" (S1, Interview, July 7, 2025). This gap is further exacerbated by an unopen communication pattern between students and counselors. Some students stated that they were hesitant to tell the counselor, because they felt that the counselor did not fully understand the pressure they were experiencing. An informant said: "*I once wanted to tell a story to a counselor, but I was afraid that it would be considered excessive. I ended up keeping it to myself, even though I really needed a place to talk.*" (S9, interview, July 16, 2025).

Meanwhile, the perspective of the counselor actually shows that there is difficulty in detecting the problems of talented students, because they rarely express problems directly. One of the counselors explained: "*Talented kids usually look fine from the outside. They rarely come to the counseling room to ask for help. So we often only know there is a problem after the condition is quite severe.*" (K2, Interview, July 20, 2025). These findings confirm that differences in perceptions and a lack of effective communication between students, teachers, and counselors have the potential to worsen *silent struggles* experienced by talented teenagers.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal four main findings related to the silent struggles of talented adolescents, namely excessive academic pressure that causes anxiety, difficulty building social relationships, limitations of school

counseling programs, and communication gaps between students, teachers, and counselors. These findings reinforce the conclusion in the abstract that aptitude is not only synonymous with academic excellence, but also harbors psychosocial vulnerabilities that require a more holistic approach to counseling.

Most of the talented students in this study experienced perfectionism and anxiety due to high expectations from parents and teachers. This condition is in line with research (Wang & Neihart, 2021), which shows that academic stress can increase the risk of anxiety and burnout in gifted adolescents. Perfectionism tendencies, while they can drive achievement, are often associated with emotional tension and decreased mental health (Papadopoulos, 2023). This means that academic success that appears on the surface actually masks a significant psychological burden.

The second finding suggests that gifted teens experience alienation in relationships with peers. Labeling as "smart kids" often creates social distancing, so they choose to withdraw. This is in line with the findings (Cross et al., 2022), which revealed that talented adolescents often feel socially different and experience loneliness despite their achievements. Such loneliness can have a long-term impact on the development of identity and social skills (Helsper et al., 2025). Consequently, social isolation can exacerbate the risk of social anxiety and low self-confidence.

The study also found that school counseling services still focus on students' discipline and academic issues that are considered problematic, while support for talented adolescents is still minimal. Students tend to be reluctant to access counseling because of the stigma that counseling is only for "problem students". This condition is consistent with reports (García-Cepero et al., 2020) and (Renati et al., 2022), which highlight that counseling programs in many schools are not inclusive of the emotional needs of gifted students. Strength-based approaches that emphasize students' positive potential are actually more relevant to them (Fugate et al., 2021; Alfaiz, 2024).

In addition, communication gaps were found between students, teachers, and counselors. Teachers judge students more on academic achievement, while counselors often have trouble detecting emotional problems because gifted students rarely express their difficulties. This condition reinforces the finding (Moon, 2021) that many counselors have not been trained to understand the specific psychosocial dynamics of gifted students. This lack of communication has the potential to worsen feelings of isolation, as students feel that no one really understands their condition.

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the research expands the literature on the psychosocial dynamics of gifted students through a phenomenological approach that highlights their subjective experiences. Practically, the results of the study confirm the need to strengthen school counseling programs with a holistic approach that integrates academic, social, and emotional support. Empathy-based and small-group programs, for example, have been shown to reduce the loneliness of gifted adolescents (Helsper et al., 2025).

A factor that supports the findings of this study is the openness of talented students in revealing their experiences through in-depth interviews, so the data obtained is quite rich. However, the study also has limitations, namely the limited number of participants so that generalizations are still limited. In addition, the stigma against counseling makes some students reluctant to share their experiences more deeply. Further research is recommended to involve more schools with direct intervention approaches, such as the application of strength-based counseling or empathy-based group counseling, so that the effectiveness of these strategies can be measured more objectively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study confirms that talented adolescents not only face academic excellence, but also harbor silent struggles that have an impact on their psychosocial well-being. The three main issues identified are excessive academic pressure that triggers anxiety, difficulty in establishing social relationships with peers that lead to feelings of isolation, and limitations of school counseling programs that are still oriented towards academic problems and student discipline. In addition, communication gaps between students, teachers, and counselors exacerbate this condition, so talented teens often feel misunderstood.

These findings provide important implications for the development of school counseling, namely that counseling programs need to be directed to a holistic approach that integrates academic, social, and emotional aspects. Strengths-based counseling and empathy-based group interventions can be effective strategies for fostering resilience, reducing loneliness, and strengthening the self-identity of gifted adolescents. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on the psychosocial dynamics of gifted students through phenomenological perspectives that are still rarely used. Practically, this study emphasizes the urgency of strengthening policies and counseling services that are more adaptive and inclusive so that talented adolescents can develop as a whole.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research could further investigate the diverse psychosocial experiences of gifted adolescents by considering factors such as cultural background, family dynamics, and school environments. Longitudinal studies would be valuable to examine how psychosocial challenges evolve over time and how early interventions influence long-term well-being and identity development. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of various holistic counseling models—including strengths-based and empathy-focused approaches—across different educational settings could provide deeper insights into best practices. Expanding research to include the perspectives of teachers, parents, and counselors would also enrich understanding and inform more comprehensive support systems for gifted students.

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