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UNI Honors Program students' perceptions of gifted programming in k-12 education

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UNI HONORS PROGRAM STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GIFTED PROGRAMMING IN

K-12 EDUCATION

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As with many aspects of education, people have a lot of opinions about gifted programming in K-12 schools. Gifted programs exist in schools so that students who have been identified as high-ability are able to be challenged adequately and grow in their learning. One of the primary functions of gifted education is offering enrichment opportunities that can add to or modify student learning. Acceleration in one or more areas is another practice used to educate gifted students. However, gifted programming tends to be viewed by some as elitist or unfair to other students. While there are definitely issues within gifted education that need to be addressed, such as the identification process, getting rid of gifted programming is not equitable to students that need these services. All students with learning needs, including high-ability students, deserve access to programming that will address those needs.

The purpose of this thesis is to determine and evaluate the experiences of students in the UNI Honors Program who participated in gifted programming in their K-12 education. This research focuses on student perceptions of impacts of these programs on their lives, from their time of identification through their college experience. It explores both positive and negative impacts in the areas of academic growth and achievement, college preparation, and socioemotional well-being of students. Survey and interview questions examined how students felt about the impacts of gifted programming on these areas. There were also opportunities for students to give general thoughts about the impacts of gifted programming on their overall education. Based on these specific student responses detailing their personal experiences, this research highlights what is working within gifted education programs, what can be improved upon, and the importance of these programs.

Importance

Although there are many studies involving gifted education in general, there are gaps in specific areas within the discipline. Very few studies take a look at impacts of gifted education on college-aged students. Some studies have looked at both academic and socioemotional effects, like this study does, but many focus on specific groups of younger students, some only look at academic outcomes, and so on. Many schools have been placing less of an emphasis on gifted education recently because of a focus on lower-achieving students instead (Bui et al., 2014). It is certainly important to make sure struggling students are not falling behind in the classroom, but on the other end of the spectrum, gifted students also need to be able to obtain services that will challenge them. Gifted students should be able to access Response to Intervention supports as students in other areas of learning needs do, but this is not always the case (Dixson et. al, 2020). In a section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was stated that American education policy should focus on providing equal education for all types of students (Plucker & Peters 2016). However, this was often taken to mean that all students should reach the minimum standards, rather than advanced levels that they might have the potential to reach. Plucker and Peters (2016) stated that, "The fact that some students would quite literally be 'left behind' as states and teachers focused their efforts on below-proficiency students never appeared to enter into the equation for equity" (p. 9). Research on how to best support gifted students is essential for educators, so that these students' educational needs can be met. Otherwise, gifted students will not have access to the challenges they need to grow as learners, and they will be much more likely to fall through the cracks in our education system.

Literature Review

Hertzog (2003) conducted a study that directly falls in line with this research and is the basis for other studies conducted on the effects of gifted programming. Hertzog's study is

essentially a more extensive version of what the current study does within the UNI Honors Program, and was a model for how the survey and interviews were set up. She interviewed 50 undergraduate students to discover their perspectives on the various forms of gifted programming that they experienced in their K-12 education. She also sent out a survey to a broader group of students to gain some concrete data about gifted programming. During the interviews, Hertzog asked students personal questions about the types of instruction they received, their relationships with other students, and effects that they recognized from participating in gifted programming. This study focused on academic achievement, socioemotional effects, and other influences of gifted education programs on college students. Hertzog found that overall, students who were interviewed rated their gifted programming experiences as 8.04 out of 10 on average, and students who completed the survey rated their experiences as 8.37 out of 10 on average. Most of the students believed that the benefits of their gifted programs strongly outweighed the costs. The major benefits that many students attributed to their gifted programming experiences were college preparation, learning how to be better students, and preparation for lifelong learning.

The categories of academic achievement and socioemotional effects reflect a trend that is present in other studies that focused on gifted education. Kim (2016) also separated the effects of gifted programming into these two groups. In this study, academic achievement factors were looked at quantitatively, whereas socioemotional influences, such as self-concept, self-esteem, academic attitude and motivation, self-confidence, and career aspirations were identified with qualitative data. Kim found that in general, enrichment programs had an impact on both academic achievement and socioemotional development in students. This study showed that there was a tendency toward positive effects of gifted programming on academic achievement,

with more intensive programs having a higher positive effect. A slightly positive effect was also found when looking at socioemotional effects, although this depended greatly on the type of programming as well as the age of the students.

Although there are not many studies involving gifted programming and college students, another study that used perceptions of college students to guide the research was conducted by Gierczyk and Pfeiffer (2021). Although this study took place in Europe and involved British and Polish college students, it was very similar to the Hertzog (2003) study because it looked at college students that had previously been identified as gifted, and conducted interviews based on the students' perceptions of their own gifted programming experiences. This study also examined how students thought their gifted programming opportunities directly impacted their college lives, while most other studies did not. The main research question was, "How do gifted students, in college, look back on their K-12 school environments in terms of fostering the development of their abilities?" Themes that emerged in the results were the significance of factors such as teacher involvement to student learning, challenges in the school environment, the role of extracurriculars, and individual approaches to learning.

Kemp (2006) also focused on perceptions of gifted education, not just data. His study specifically compared gifted students' perceptions of their needs with teacher perceptions of these student needs. The focus of this study was on academic needs, and Kemp proposed how gifted education can be improved upon based on research findings. This study was similar to other studies regarding student perceptions, but did not include a section for perceptions of socioemotional effects, instead only looking at academic needs. Kemp found that overall, teachers and students both agreed that encouragement towards advanced studies as well as opportunities to explore topics of interest were the main benefits of gifted programming, and

agreed that ability grouping was beneficial too. Teachers and students also agreed that forced acceleration of work was not beneficial to student learning. The areas in which teachers and students disagreed mainly consisted of learning techniques, and some results of this study suggested that there was a need for a better understanding of the relationship between teachers and gifted students. Another area in which perceptions differed were the needs of gifted students in their general education classrooms.

Bui, Craig, and Imberman (2014) looked at the causal effects of gifted programs on student achievement outcomes. This study, like several others, mainly focused on academic factors, and did not evaluate socioemotional impacts. Students who were marginally eligible were included in this research, as well as students who were higher achieving than average gifted students. Part of this research also evaluated how being surrounded with like-minded peers and well-prepared teachers contributed to students' education. It was found that schools with strong gifted programs had much higher retention rates of students staying in the district. This study compared gifted programs in regular schools with gifted magnet schools, and found that students in the gifted magnet schools scored slightly higher in science than the gifted students in regular schools. However, otherwise they did not see a difference in academic achievement between the two.

Research questions that were considered by Redding and Grissom (2021) also focused on academic effects from gifted programming. This study included achievement outcomes as well as some nonachievement outcomes related to academics. One of the research questions specifically looked at the relationship between gifted program participation and achievement on standardized tests, school absences, and student engagement with school. Redding and Grissom found that students in gifted programs scored 85% of a standard deviation unit higher on

standardized tests in reading and mathematics than students not in gifted programs. They also saw lower rates of absences in gifted students, and found a consistent small positive increase on reading and mathematics achievement in students who received gifted programming.

After studying the current research in the field of gifted education, and specifically student perceptions of impacts from gifted programming, research questions for this thesis were developed. The overarching question was:

How did gifted programming in K-12 education impact current UNI Honors Program students' lives in their K-12 education, and how does it still impact their college lives? Some more specific research questions were as follows:

How did gifted programming in K-12 education affect students' academic achievement at the time?

How did gifted programming in K-12 education affect students' socioemotional development and behavior at the time?

How has gifted programming in K-12 education affected students' academic development in college?

How has gifted programming in K-12 education affected students' socioemotional development and behavior in college?

Although these were the broad questions, more specific topics were mentioned in the survey and interview questions and brought up in student responses. When beginning this research, it was expected that both positive and negative effects would be found from these research questions. It was assumed that most academic achievement effects would be positive, while socioemotional effects would be more varied, with negative effects occurring alongside the positive effects. These trends were present in some of the previous research studies that were

mentioned, and therefore similar results were expected to be found within the UNI Honors Program. There has not been any specific research looking at how gifted programming has affected college honors program students, and so although parts of other studies were used as models, this research will expand on the work already done in the field.

Methodology

All 417 UNI Honors Program students were sent a link to a survey about their participation in gifted programming in K-12 education and the perceived impacts. The survey assessed demographic information first, and then moved on to some more open-ended questions. The questions asked about types of gifted instruction that students received, academic impacts, and socioemotional impacts, and left room for elaboration in these areas. Students could choose to write as little as a few words or as much as they wanted for each question. Survey responses were assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively based on the nature of the questions. In the interview process, three students that responded to the survey and provided contact information were randomly selected for a more in-depth interview. Because students were not required to provide information, the students who did may have had information about gifted programming that they felt was significant to share. However, the interviews still gave a great deal of insight about students' own perceptions of their experiences. The interview questions were open-ended questions of similar nature to the survey questions, but allowed for more opinions on the structure of gifted programming that students had either experienced or wished they could have experienced. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, and they were recorded so that they could be referenced and quoted accurately. Many of the survey and interview questions were modeled from Hertzog's questions in the study, "Impact of gifted programs from the students' perspectives" (2003).

Participants

College students were chosen as the research focus because this research was conducted at the University of Northern Iowa, and similar research had not previously been conducted on campus. As Hertzog (2003) suggested, college students' perceptions also gave a unique viewpoint, because "...they had recent memories of elementary and secondary schooling and were in the stage of their lives where they were considering options for their future" (p. 135). Students who participated in the survey, as well as the interviews, were all UNI Honors Program students. They represented a variety of majors, and had a range of experiences with gifted programming at various years of their K-12 education. Miller (2018) said, "In my research, we found that 92% of [college] honors students reported some kind of previous participation in gifted programming during elementary, middle, and/or high school but reported wide variation in the types of programming" (p. 40). While it was assumed that a similar percentage of UNI Honors Program students had some experience with gifted programming, the nature and amount of students' gifted education varied widely, which is something to take into consideration with the results of the current study. 417 students were sent the survey, 31 students responded to the survey, and 14 provided contact information for the interview process.

Procedures

This research was approved by the Institutional Research Board at the University of Northern Iowa before the survey was sent out and the interviews were scheduled. The methodology was reported in the application and approval process, and included all of the survey and interview questions. All 417 UNI Honors Program students received the survey through their school email when it was sent out. The survey was open for two weeks, and all survey questions were required except for the last question, which gave the respondents the option to provide

contact information. The students who provided their emails for a possible interview knew that they were self-identifying, and that their responses would not be anonymous within the data going forward. However, all other students could not be identified and their responses were confidential. After the survey closed, 3 students out of 14 were randomly selected to be interviewed. These students were emailed, and interviews were scheduled at a campus location at a time that worked best for them. The interviews took place one-on-one, and allowed students to give more personal information about their gifted programming experiences.

Results

The survey respondents represented a variety of ages within their college years, and came from many different high schools throughout Iowa, with 3 students representing other states as well. Students who responded to the survey went to 24 different high schools, and many of these students had experience with gifted programming within several different schools in their district as well. Most respondents were female, with only 9.7% of respondents identifying as male.

Students who responded to the survey also experienced a wide variety of types of gifted programming. 67.7% of respondents were involved in a gifted pull-out program at some point in their K-12 education, and 77.4% took at least one Advanced Placement or Honors class when the option was available to them. Some students were accelerated in certain subject areas, and some took dual enrollment courses. 64.5% of respondents were first identified for some kind of gifted programming in early elementary, anywhere from pre-kindergarten to second grade. 19.4% of respondents were first identified in their later elementary years, anywhere from third to fifth grade. 16.1% of respondents were first identified in their middle school years. Students were involved in gifted programming anywhere from one year to 13 years.

When asked initially to describe their experiences with gifted education, respondents had a diverse collection of responses. Some students were very thankful for the experiences they had with gifted programming in their K-12 years, and had very positive experiences overall. A theme throughout these more positive responses was that the content within gifted programming was much more challenging and interesting, and that respondents were able to connect with like-minded students through these experiences. One student described their gifted education assignments as "*more informative and meaningful*". Several students also appreciated the connections they were able to make with their gifted education teachers, with one respondent describing their teacher as an "*outstanding emotional support*". Some other advantages of gifted programming that students mentioned were the ability to enroll in highly desired classes and to explore various subjects with more creative projects than they would have been able to do otherwise.

However, when some were asked to describe their experiences with gifted education, they had fairly negative experiences to report. Many students described their gifted programming as a lot more work than their regular schoolwork, and said that they felt a lot of academic pressure at a young age. One respondent said that they were "*...really stressed out because of the depth and intensity of* [gifted] *classes*". Another self-described as a "*stressed perfectionist at 10 years old*" because of expectations that they should do well in school all the time, and felt that they would be "*talked down to*" if they did not meet these expectations. One student said they felt a similar amount of pressure in their early years of gifted education, but were able to move past this as they continued through their school career. A lack of resources to support gifted programming was another theme that emerged within the responses, with one student feeling like they were not properly challenged because their program "*lacked the resources or drive*".

Another felt like they were too stressed about school at a very early age, because they were taken out of their gifted program and then put back in several times. Yet another student "*felt a strong sense of 'imposter syndrome'*" and was constantly worried about proving their worth among other students in the gifted program. Some students who reported these negative experiences also had positive things to say about their time in gifted programming, but a few regretted their involvement with gifted programming altogether.

When looking at particular factors within gifted programming, students had some more specific thoughts about their experiences. The first group of questions in the survey asked students about academic impacts that they saw from their time in gifted programming. One question asked students if they felt as if their grades were positively impacted by their involvement in gifted programming. 58.1% of respondents believed that they could see a positive impact on their grades, but there were different reasons provided for this. Some students felt that gifted programming turned them into perfectionists, and that their high grades were a result of this quality. Others stated that their Advanced Placement and Honors classes were weighted higher than regular classes, so this boosted their GPA. Many students felt that the content knowledge and skills that they learned within gifted programming helped their grades as they continued on with their education. However, some respondents believed that they would have gotten the same grades without their gifted programming experiences. A little under 30% of students said that their grades were not positively impacted by gifted programming, while a few respondents were unsure either way.

When asked about other academic factors and how gifted programming affected these factors, several themes were brought up by respondents. Almost half of the respondents mentioned that they were able to be challenged academically, and that they were given

opportunities that other students may not have had access to. Some specifics that were mentioned included National History Day, first pick to take Advanced Placement or Honors classes, and field trips. Another theme that emerged from the responses was that students involved in gifted programming had to spend more time on academics, and felt like they had a heavier workload compared to others. Similarly, a few students stated that they had to miss out on regular class time to go to their gifted programs, or even ended up missing out on a year of instruction in a certain subject because they were accelerated. Some negative impacts that were amplified by factors that were already mentioned included academic burnout and a lack of focus towards regular classes. One respondent expressed that they "*100% experienced 'gifted kid burnout'*", which resulted in motivation and procrastination issues. Another respondent stated that they "*focused less on classes that weren't advanced*", because these classes did not matter as much to the student. When asked generally about how their academics were affected by gifted programming, respondents discussed a wide variety of effects, many of which were positive and prepared students for their academic future. However, gifted programming also had some negative effects on students, including a heavy workload and a loss of time in their regular classes.

The next question asked students if they saw any effects from gifted programming on their work ethic. A large majority of respondents believed that their work ethic increased due to their experiences in gifted programming. One student said that because of gifted programming they "*started time managing, organizing, and working harder*", while another reported that their work ethic was "*definitely better when being challenged*". However, a few students were aware of their work ethic decreasing because of factors within gifted programming. One respondent said that their work ethic suffered, but at the time they were not quite sure why. Looking back,

they realized that it was because of burnout, which was a result of their "*overachieving nature*".

A couple of respondents saw their work ethic fluctuate because of gifted programming. One student described themselves as a "*perfectionist procrastinator*", because they felt the need to be the best, but also became overwhelmed with their workload and tended to put things off until the last minute. The majority of respondents believed that gifted programming increased or positively impacted their work ethic, but a few saw opposite effects or did not see an impact.

Now that respondents had thought about how gifted programming impacted academic factors in their K-12 education, they were asked about impacts on their college education so far. Because the ages of respondents varied within their college years, some did not have much to report yet, as they had only been in college for a few months. However, some had several years of college experience to consider. One question asked students how they believed their college grades had been impacted by K-12 gifted programming experiences. There were a variety of responses, but many felt that their grades had been positively impacted. Some said that gifted programming helped them learn how to push themselves and work hard, and some believed their habits of perfectionism helped increase their grades. Others similarly felt like the college-level classes that they took in high school had a direct positive impact on their college preparation, and consequently their grades. Several people, however, thought that their grades in college suffered because of their gifted programming experiences. One respondent said, "*Gifted programming drove me in the opposite direction of what should have been*", because of feelings of dread surrounding academics. Another person attributed a negative impact on their college grades to never learning how to study, because they did not need to in their K-12 education. A few were unsure of impacts on their college grades, either because they had just recently started college or did not see any direct effects from past gifted programming.

Still considering their college experience, respondents were asked about other academic effects that they could see from their past gifted programming. Student responses mentioned spending lots of time on academics, feeling well-prepared for the rigor of college, feeling academic burnout, and having less credits to complete, among other factors. One student stated, "*I believe I study more than some of my peers because of the value that I've placed on education from a young age*". Another respondent thought that "*being pushed and challenged early on*" led them to realize that "*sometimes it feels better to succeed after failure*", so they push through in their college classes when things get hard. Academic burnout was a very common theme throughout several of the questions, and several students brought that up again in this question. Regarding this question, academic burnout was the only negative theme present throughout the responses. One student did also mention that they "*felt obligated to join the honors program*" as a result of their past gifted programming. However, generally responses were positive in regards to these other academic factors. Another student said that because of their experiences, they were able to "*feel comfortable participating in leadership roles*" within the UNI Honors Program, and mentioned better relationships with professors as another advantage.

When asked about their work ethic in college, student responses had some contrast. A few students did not see a direct correlation between their K-12 gifted programming and their current work ethic, which was a shift for some respondents from their time in K-12 schools. A majority of respondents recognized either an increase in work ethic once they got to college because of gifted programming, or stated that their already strong work ethic stayed consistent. A few respondents believed that their work ethic had decreased from their K-12 years to college as a direct result of gifted programming. Some said that this was once again because of burnout, such as a student who said that it is very difficult to keep up the work ethic that was instilled by

gifted programming for fifteen years. Others mentioned that school came very easy to them in their K-12 years, like one respondent who said, "*I'm not good at forcing myself to work through difficulty, and often find myself wanting to give up when something doesn't come easily to me…*", because they were never taught the skills to push through when things were difficult. However, the consensus from most respondents was that they have a fairly strong work ethic in college, and most believed that this developed at least partly from their gifted programming experiences.

The next part of the survey asked respondents about socioemotional impacts that they perceived from their gifted programming, both in K-12 education and college. One question asked about the effects of gifted programming on students' self-esteem in their K-12 years. Only a few respondents believed that their self-esteem solely decreased as a result of gifted programming. These several respondents generally agreed that it was because they placed most of their self-worth in academics, and felt disappointed when they fell short on something. Many respondents said that their self-esteem increased due to gifted programming, and gave a few different reasons why this was the case. One student said, "*I liked helping people with their school work and having the knowledge to do that made me feel competent*". Another said, "*It made me feel more confident in my academic abilities. I wanted to prove I was capable of those* [gifted] *classes and was motivated to do well*". However, many respondents felt that gifted programming both boosted their self-esteem and lowered it at other times. The general consensus was that students felt good about themselves when they did well with something academically, but their self-worth decreased when the opposite was true. Several others said that when they were involved in gifted programming at a younger age, their self-esteem increased as a result, but when they got older and felt more academic pressure, gifted programming tended to impact

their self-esteem negatively. One respondent said the opposite- that they had low self-esteem when they were younger because of other students' views on gifted programming, but when they got to high school their self-esteem increased as the stigma surrounding gifted programming decreased for them. In their words, "*In 3rd-8th, my self-esteem was very low, especially due to how it* [gifted programming] *was viewed by others. My self-esteem improved in high school as the views on Honors and AP classes were more positive than the 3rd-8th classes*".

The next couple of questions asked respondents how gifted programming affected their peer and family relationships in their K-12 years. A large segment of responses mentioned having a peer group of like-minded students as a positive impact on their K-12 education. Other responses said that this same factor isolated them from peers that were not in gifted programming, citing a negative impact on their peer relationships. Within these different responses, some students felt that these impacts affected them greatly, and some said the impacts did not have too much of an effect on them. Respondents were then asked about how gifted programming affected their family relationships. Some mentioned their family's pride in them, either as a positive impact or as a stressor that made them put too much pressure on themselves. One student said, "*Well my family really pressured me to do my best in school and be in the gifted programs but this dynamic from them and pressure distanced me tremendously…*", while a contrasting response stated, "*My family has always been very good about not putting my worth in my academic success*". However, many respondents felt that their family relationships at the time were not really impacted by their participation in gifted programming.

Although some respondents discussed the pressure to succeed that they felt throughout their education in prior responses, the next question specifically asked students how their gifted programming experiences affected their pressure to succeed in K-12 education. Respondents

mentioned pressure that they put on themselves, pressure from parents, and pressure from the schools themselves. It is important to note that while almost all respondents reported that they felt pressure to succeed, some attributed it to themselves and not gifted programming, and some welcomed the pressure, and felt it was a positive factor. However, many respondents viewed this pressure to succeed as a negative influence on their K-12 education. One respondent said, "*I definitely felt a pressure to succeed however, I don't know if that would've been different if I wasn't in the gifted program*". Another said that they "*welcomed the pressure*" because it motivated them. Many responses were similar to the following student's response, who said, "*It kicked up the pressure quite a bit and made it feel like getting a B letter grade was failing which was difficult to deal with*". If there was one question in the survey that had the most homogenous responses, it was about this pressure to succeed, with almost all respondents agreeing that they felt a strong pressure to succeed throughout their K-12 education.

The next portion of questions asked respondents about perceived socioemotional impacts on their college experience. When asked about effects on their self-esteem in college, several students did not see an impact from their gifted programming experiences in K-12 education. A few respondents recognized growth in college in the area of not correlating their self-esteem with their grades, like one student who said, "*Really I think I just learned it didn't matter*". A typical response from the group who still saw a negative impact on their self-esteem was stated by a student who said, "*My high standards and imposter syndrome have definitely carried over into my college experience. I still want to be one of the smartest in the room and mistakes directly impact my self-esteem*". One of several students who saw a direct positive effect on their self-esteem said, "*It positively impacted this to where I felt more prepared because of the programs I had been a part of for the past five years of my education*". A good portion of respondents,

however, saw both positive and negative impacts that had either changed over time or they still felt effects on both sides of the spectrum.

Respondents were also asked about the impacts of gifted programming on their current peer and family relationships. Students had fairly varied responses when it came to peer relationships. Some students saw no impacts of gifted programming experiences on their current peer relationships. A common theme across the responses from those who did see an impact was that students were able to connect with peers in the UNI Honors Program. One student said, "*I am friends with a lot of students in my honors courses in college*". Others sought out peers with similar characteristics of students they were surrounded with in their K-12 education, like the student who said, "*I think I learned that I like being friends with people of similar academic abilities because we can cooperate on the same level and push each other to go above and beyond*". A couple of respondents mentioned that they felt like they focused more on academics than the typical college student, which led to a slight disconnect from those who did not. When it came to family relationships, responses once again ranged, with some students seeing no impact and some seeing major impacts in this area. One student said, "*My family still has high standards for my grades*", which was a fairly typical response. Another suggested that gifted programming had increased their family's confidence in their ability to succeed, which was also a common response. One student stated, "*...my parents were a bit worried about me, knowing that I'm a perfectionist*", and another said, "*It hasn't really had an impact on my relationship with my family, most of the pressure on me to succeed comes from myself*". One respondent felt that gifted programming had a huge impact on their family relationships, saying, "*It has distanced me completely as I moved out of my family's house in my senior year of high school. They do not care about anything but my academics…*", and while this was not a typical response, there were

several other students that saw negative effects as well. Because of the nature of this question, responses were fairly individualized, but common themes did emerge.

The last question of the survey once again asked respondents how they felt about the pressure to succeed, this time in college instead of in their K-12 education. A strong majority of respondents felt that the pressure to succeed that was instilled in them from gifted programming is still present in college. One student suggested that the pressure is "*great for motivation*" but also said they have "*a constant anxiety that failure is inevitable*". Several students still felt like they have to prove their worth, saying things like, "*I feel like I have to maintain a 4.0 to prove that I wasn't just smart then*", and, "*I feel expected to get straight As and graduate with honors because that would be consistent with how I've always performed academically*". Some attributed the pressure to hearing lots of approval in gifted programming, like a student who said, "*Failures are much harder to move past because I was praised so much when I was younger in gifted programming*". A few students, however, could not see a connection between their former gifted programming experiences and pressure to succeed in college. A couple students even mentioned feeling much more relaxed about academics now, like the student who said, "*I feel less pressured in college now because I was able to handle honors/AP workload*". As usual, a variety of responses were present, but this question showed some of the most consistent responses- that most students still feel a strong pressure to succeed in college, at least partly because of their gifted programming experiences.

The interviews provided many similar thoughts to the survey responses. However, the interviewees were able to give more personal anecdotes and opinions within their answers, providing invaluable perspectives to this research. The first interviewee had mostly very positive comments about her gifted programming experiences. This interviewee was a 20 year-old female

who is a senior, and had 12 years of gifted programming experience. When asked to describe her overall experiences, she said, "*I got pushed how much I needed to, and I also got pretty close with the people I was surrounded with, because we stuck together for 12 years*". The highlights of her experience included working on interesting projects instead of just completing homework during advisory time, having a teacher that got to know the students very well, and learning how to "*persevere when things got tough*". However, she remembered some negative experiences as well, and stated that, "*I'm really hard on myself and I think that* [gifted programming] *made it worse almost, just because I was held to a high expectation and I wanted to continue to be in the gifted program and I didn't want to lose that*". This belief was held by other survey respondents as well, and a recurring theme within responses was that gifted programming was viewed by students, especially when they were younger, as a privilege that could be taken away at any time if they were not academically successful enough.

When asked about socioemotional learning, this interviewee could not recall any instances of practicing socioemotional learning in her gifted programs, just in her general education classes. However, when asked how gifted programming itself contributed to her socioemotional learning, she described her experiences as affecting her both positively and negatively- she has experienced academic burnout, but she also feels more equipped to deal with problems when they arise. Interviewees were also asked how much of a role gifted programming played in their K-12 education, and this interviewee said, "*I think it played a huge role. I was involved in enjoying school, and I think had I not been pushed it would have looked differently, and I probably would not have wanted to go to school as much*". When thinking about the effects of gifted programming on college preparation, she talked about wanting to get her master's degree, and wanting to be involved in the UNI Honors Program so that she could have some

experience with research and feel prepared for that program in her future. Her final thoughts

about gifted programming were as follows:

"*I think gifted education is great. It helped me a lot, and I don't think gifted programs should go away because they're really beneficial, and just because there's this talk about not allowing gifted programs because you want all of your students to be able to learn together, but if you're not pushing all of your students, then it's not equitable to anyone. And so I think they should continue, I think there are changes that need to be made in gifted education and I think it also takes a lot of consideration like who's teaching it and who gets in, but I think they're great*".

The second interviewee also had a lot of involvement with gifted education throughout

her K-12 years. This interviewee was a 22 year-old female who is also a senior, and she had 11

years of gifted programming experience. When describing her gifted programming experiences

in elementary school, she had a lot of positive things to say about both academics and

socioemotional development. Her early elementary years consisted of a lot of independent work,

and she specifically remembered doing a lot of free reading when classmates would work on

other content. One of the things she enjoyed most about elementary gifted programming was

having access to a gifted teacher to ask for help and get more personalized guidance. She

described herself as a shy child, so she said that the smaller-group and one-on-one academic

work really benefited her. When thinking about socioemotional development, she said, "*I really

liked how it was a small group of us, so I felt like I became close friends with those people*". This

was a common response throughout all three interviews, and was also mentioned a lot

throughout the surveys when respondents were asked about their social life in school. However,

this interviewee did have some negative experiences in elementary school as well. She said, "*I

didn't have a great experience in 5th grade because I got un-identified, or like not identified for

math TAG, which was really annoying for me because it was like I didn't get in on a really small

qualification thing*". Several other students mentioned similar experiences in the survey

responses, and said that this led to anxiety about either not feeling good enough or worrying that

they would get their gifted programming taken away again. This interviewee also said that she had to spend a year learning math that she had already learned the previous year in her gifted pull-out program, which led to boredom and frustration. She suggested a broader identification program as an improvement that could be made to minimize those negative experiences in the future.

Regarding socioemotional factors in her education, this interviewee had some more negative responses about gifted programming. She described herself as a perfectionist with some anxious tendencies, and said that her gifted programming definitely played into this throughout her education. She said that constantly being pushed to go the extra step on assignments and projects was helpful to her growth as a student, but she became very hard on herself regarding academics. This has continued into her college years, as she has continued to experience a lot of stress surrounding academics. "*Identity crisis*" was a phrase that this individual used to describe what a lot of gifted students go through as they enter college and realize that many other students are academically successful as well. When thinking about the timeline of her gifted programming experiences, this interviewee said that the negative traits that she described started to set in around high school, when grades and academics started to matter more. However, even with these negative experiences, this interviewee felt strongly about the importance of gifted education in her school experience. She said, "*...it was definitely a defining part of my K-12 education. It was the thing I always liked the most*". She felt that she would not have been as academically successful without those experiences, and said, "*It helped ease a lot of the frustration that I often felt in my general education classroom, like I had to force myself to slow down just because the class was moving slowly, or when I did have to work in a group and then I would become literally the only one doing anything*". Without gifted education, this interviewee

said that she would not have been challenged and would not have experienced the opportunities to reach her academic potential.

The third interviewee also felt strongly about the beneficial effects of gifted programming on her education, although she felt that improvements to the system could be made. This interviewee was a 20 year-old female who is a sophomore, and had 13 years of gifted programming experience. She especially had a lot of gifted programming experience in her elementary years, and the group of students that this interviewee was a part of did not get reevaluated once they were identified, unlike what many other students reported. She remembers feeling a little weird about being pulled out of class all the time, and said that sometimes other students who were not identified as gifted acted a little strange about it as well, not understanding why they did not get those opportunities too. However, this interviewee remembered a lot of positive things about the social impact of staying with the same group of students throughout her schooling, saying that, "*What I did like about it being a constant group was that I got really close with them, and it wasn't like 'oh you were out of it* [gifted programming] *and you were in it this year*". This group of like-minded students had a very positive impact on this interviewee's academic experiences, and she described liking being surrounded by peers who were also very involved in academics. She also mentioned being able to eventually talk about the college application process with this group once they got into high school and liking this aspect of the program. However, one negative trait that stood out to this interviewee was the labeling that went along with gifted programming. She stated that, "*I think it was the labeling I didn't like. I still struggle that I was the smart kid in my class, and that's been always*". She said that it still impacts her to this day, and added, "*Carrying on to college it's like, this is a lot harder, and so you're confused when you get your first B and little things like that,*

and it definitely wears on you, where you're supposed to keep up this label". As an improvement to these issues that she mentioned, she suggested that schools could try to find a way to include more students in gifted programming at least a little bit.

This interviewee also felt strongly about the importance of gifted education to students' learning needs. When describing different types of students, she said, "*It's just similar to like, you need extra help, like we need help in a different way*". Gifted programming helped this interviewee learn how to work as a team on group projects, and having a gifted teacher that would encourage and talk students down when they were having a bad day made a big difference to her education. However, like other respondents, she saw negative traits arise from her participation in gifted programming. She described intelligence as feeling like a burden sometimes, because it came with pressure and high expectations, and said that regular classroom teachers would not always think to help gifted students because they assumed the students did not need that assistance.

When thinking about the social aspect of gifted programming, this interviewee appreciated the social benefits that came with her gifted program. She described being able to rely on gifted peers for different needs than she would rely on other friends, and mentioned several times how nice it was to have the same group of students to connect with throughout her education. When it came to emotional needs, this interviewee did not think the gifted programming itself was the main problem, but said that she was very hard on herself and that the gifted program did not necessarily help this aspect of her personality. Some other negatives that were mentioned by this interviewee included missing out on things like nap time in preschool and learning phonics in early elementary, and having to take standardized state-wide tests several years before other students. She described her education as being "*wired differently than other*

students". This interviewee also mentioned that her brother struggled in school, and that her gifted programming experience made him feel as if he needed to keep up with what she had done in school, which had a negative impact on him. A more positive aspect of gifted programming mentioned by this interviewee was that she was able to learn her strengths and weaknesses and how she learned best in school. When thinking about her current college life, she said that she feels out of place when she struggles in hard classes, because most things came so easily to her regarding academics in her K-12 education. She also felt like she was expected to join the Honors Program here at UNI. However, she mentioned that she has had a great experience with the program and the benefits that come with it. Her final thoughts on gifted programming were: "*It helped me socially for sure, and the only problem I somewhat deal with now is just like doing well and thinking that if I'm not immediately good at something then I've completely failed or I'm not going to be good at it*". She also simply stated, "*I don't think I'd be the same person without it*".

Discussion

Because only 31 out of 417 students responded to the survey, this research represents a limited sample of students. The interviews only included a few students as well due to time constraints. As previously mentioned, students who chose to take the survey likely had some information they specifically wanted to share in their responses, so some of their experiences and responses might not represent a majority of students who were involved with gifted programming. The same is true of the interview process, because if students were willing to be interviewed, they may have had stronger feelings about the topic than others might have. Another factor that must be considered is that respondents had highly varied amounts of time in gifted programming, both in years of experience and depth of programming. Students had

anywhere from 1-13 years of gifted programming, with an average of 7.9 years. However, the students who chose to take the survey and those who were interviewed had great insight to provide based on their experiences with gifted programming. Their perceptions give valuable information regarding this research topic, and provide knowledge that had not been specifically collected before. Although there are some limitations, as with any research, these student perceptions of gifted programming provide lots of data and personal anecdotes from within the UNI Honors Program.

Although this research sample was limited, the results provided plenty of information to analyze. A majority of survey respondents experienced gifted pull-out programs in their K-12 education, and a slightly larger majority experienced Advanced Placement or Honors classes, with a lot of students experiencing both. Most students went to high school in Iowa, so their experiences generally represent the state's various gifted education programs. When asked to describe their gifted programming experiences with no other direction, 35.5% described their experiences positively, 38.7% described their experiences negatively, and 25.8% were neutral in their response. Before conducting this research, it was assumed that academic effects would lean more positively, while there might be a larger portion of students perceiving negative socioemotional effects from gifted programming. Most students did see at least a few positive academic effects, and most also felt that overall, gifted programming made a positive impact on their education. However, a few students described only negative impacts on their academics, which was somewhat surprising. When it came to socioemotional impacts, there were more negative responses than for academic impacts, as expected, but respondents also had a lot of positive effects to report.

A feature of many responses that stood out within this research were the connections to Dweck's entity theory of intelligence. The entity theory of intelligence refers to the idea that "...intelligence is portrayed as an entity that dwells within us and that we can't change" (Dweck 2013). Many gifted students begin to feel this way after some time in gifted programming, especially when they are praised for their natural smarts and are not explicitly taught skills to cope with challenges. Students who believe that their intelligence cannot really change have fixed mindsets, whereas ideally students should have growth mindsets, where they can recognize areas of weakness and accept some failures so that they can grow in these skills with time and effort. Especially when describing elementary gifted experiences, many respondents implied that they had characteristics of a fixed mindset, which ties into Dweck's theory. If students can be taught to move towards a growth mindset, they will be able to focus more on academic improvement than scoring well and other achievement measures. They will also be able to realize that even if they are identified as gifted, it does not mean that everything will come easy to them and that there will not be any academic challenges or struggles.

While many students thrived in gifted pull-out programs and Advanced Placement and Honors classes, and their academic achievement factors reflected this, there is work to be done with gifted learners and socioemotional development. Students that have been identified as gifted excel in a wide variety of areas, but socioemotional learning is beneficial to all. Many gifted learners have strong academic skills already, but because they may face extra challenges and pressure to succeed, it is important that they are not overlooked when it comes to socioemotional skills. Most of the negative impacts seen in the survey and interview responses were socioemotional effects that arose from students' academic experiences. While there is plenty to

improve upon in the area of academics as well, addressing these socioemotional issues would help to decrease a lot of the academic issues that stem from these.

Another issue that is present within gifted programming, and especially pull-out programs, is the isolation that many gifted students face when being taken out of their general education classrooms. Many respondents mentioned this in both survey and interview responses as one of the more prominent negative impacts that they saw from their gifted programming experiences. This isolation can make gifted students feel out of place in their general education classrooms, because they are losing out on time with their peers who are not in gifted programming. However, a more positive side of this issue that many respondents mentioned is that they were able to spend a lot of time with their peers who were also in gifted programming. This allowed students to become closer with peers of similar abilities and interests, which led to some great social experiences within these programs. Pull-out programs definitely have their benefits, but the isolation from their peers in general education classrooms is definitely an issue that needs to be addressed when considering ways to improve gifted programming.

It seems necessary to add that although this research does not address the lack of diversity in gifted programming, including the identification process, this is a huge issue within gifted education. Research has confirmed this, and this is something to be taken into consideration when thinking about improvements that are necessary to gifted programming. Plucker and Peters (2016) said, "Years of distinctly different opportunities, levels of support, and levels of resources- all against the backdrop of racial, socioeconomic, and perhaps gender bias (some intentional, some not)- create very different educational experiences for talented students" (p. 4). As one student mentioned within their responses, expanding the idea of what it means to be gifted may help diversify the students identified for gifted education. Including more types of

students in this type of programming will allow more students to reach their potential in different areas. Iowa and specifically the University of Northern Iowa's general lack of diversity made it difficult to include issues related to diversity and gifted education in this thesis, but other research is available on the topic.

The importance of gifted education programs comes back to the need for equitable education for all students. Curriculum and instructional adaptations are necessary for many types of students, and gifted students are no exception. Dixson et al (2020) stated that, "...equity in education requires that every student receives appropriately challenging and culturally relevant instruction that helps them fulfill their academic potential (p. 24). Along with the advantages to students themselves, society benefits when all students are allowed to reach their full academic capabilities. Every student deserves to be able to be supported with the necessary modifications tailored to their learning needs. While teachers are often understandably overwhelmed with the amount of differentiation needed within their classroom, this is where gifted instructors are necessary. Without gifted programming taught by additional educators, gifted students will likely be left behind. Although respondents discussed many areas that could be improved upon within gifted programming, it was clear from responses that gifted programming played a valuable part in students' K-12 education. Without this programming, students would have likely gone unchallenged and may not have been nearly as academically successful as they were.

Conclusion

To fully support gifted learners, there is a strong need for gifted programming and educators who are willing to put in the time and effort to best support these students. As one interviewee suggested, expanding gifted programming to include more students would also benefit learners and schools themselves, and give many different types of students opportunities

for academic growth. This is obviously easier said than done, and takes a lot of planning within schools, but the benefits will ultimately outweigh the costs of taking these steps. Differentiating instruction to best meet the specific needs and skill sets of students is important to all learners, and gifted programming is no exception to this. Making sure that students are adequately challenged, but not to the point where they cannot succeed, is another important factor, along with checking in with students and how they are dealing with their stress. Helping students grow and develop their socioemotional skills may be the most important way to help gifted programming and gifted students succeed. Students will be at their most successful if they know how to work through challenges without giving up, and if they know it is acceptable to fail before they succeed at different concepts and skills within their education.

This can be applied to all levels of K-12 education, but it can also be included in gifted programming opportunities in college. Miller (2018) states that, "A holistic understanding of gifted individuals, including their social and emotional lives, can be addressed through programming and services in honors colleges, perhaps demonstrating whether the enhanced curriculum and learning experiences, or the concurrent social aspects of honors participation, contribute positively to their cognitive and affective states". Although many educators may be taking this into consideration already within K-12 schools as well as college honors programs, these instructional factors, and emphasis on socioemotional development, should be a guaranteed part of gifted curriculum. These factors of gifted programming should also continue on into college as students move on towards involvement in college honors programs. Considering the results of this research, along with other research on gifted programming, will help educators better understand and be able to fully support the academic and socioemotional needs of gifted students throughout the entirety of their education.

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Appendix

The survey consisted of 24 questions that required responses. The final question was

about contact information for the survey, and was not required. The survey questions were as

follows:

1. What is your gender?

2. What is your age?

3. What is your year in college?

4. What is your hometown?

5. Where did you go to high school?

6. What kind of gifted programming did you experience in your K-12 education? (Honors

    classes, gifted pull-out program, etc.)

7. Can you describe or give some details regarding what your experience in gifted education

    was like?

8. At what age were you identified as needing or qualifying for gifted resources?

9. What grade did you start with gifted education?

10. How many years of your K-12 education did you receive instruction in gifted

    programming?

11. Were your grades positively impacted in your K-12 education by your involvement in

    gifted programming? Please explain your response.

12. How were other academic factors impacted in your K-12 education by your involvement in gifted programming?

13. How was your work ethic, in regards to academics, impacted in your K-12 education by your involvement in gifted programming?

14. How have your grades been impacted in college by your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education?

15. How have other academic factors been impacted in college by your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education?

16. How has your work ethic in regards to academics been impacted in college by your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education?

17. How did being involved in gifted programming in your K-12 education impact your self-esteem during your K-12 education?

18. How did being involved in gifted programming in your K-12 education impact your peer relationships during your K-12 education?

19. How did your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education have an impact on your family relationships at the time?

20. How did your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education impact your pressure to succeed at the time?

21. How did your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education impact your self-esteem in college?

22. How did your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education impact your peer relationships in college?

23. How did your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education impact your family relationships in college?

24. How did your involvement in gifted programming in your K-12 education have an impact on your pressure to succeed in college?

25. If you wish to possibly be contacted for an interview, please provide your email. This is completely optional.

The interview process consisted of 15 questions. Students could pass on questions that they preferred not to answer, but otherwise responded to each of the questions. The interview questions were as follows:

1. Describe the gifted/Honors program(s) that you were a part of in your K-12 education.

2. Describe experiences you liked about gifted programming.

3. Describe experiences that you did not like about gifted programming.

4. How might your experiences in gifted programming have been improved upon?

5. How did gifted programming address your academic strengths/weaknesses?

6. How did gifted programming address your social or emotional needs?

7. How did your participation in gifted programming impact your family relationships?

8. How did your participation in gifted programming impact your peer relationships?

9. How would you describe the role that your participation in gifted programs played in your K-12 education?

10. Describe how your past experiences in gifted programs have influenced your current college life.

11. Do you believe that your socioemotional well-being has changed as a result of participation in gifted programs? Why or why not?

12. Do you believe that your academic achievements have been positively or negatively impacted as a result of participation in gifted programs? Why or why not?

13. Do you believe that your gifted program experience prepared you for college? Why or why not?

14. Why did you choose to continue on with a gifted program in college?

15. Is there anything else you would like to share about your gifted experience during your K-12 education and how it impacted you during your K-12 years and/or during college?