

Supporting the Socio-Emotional Needs of Gifted and Creative Students: The Role of School Social Workers: A Systematic Review

دعم الاحتياجات الاجتماعية والعاطفية للطلاب الموهوبين
والمبدعين: دور الأخصائيين الاجتماعيين في المدارس: مراجعة
منهجية

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الملخص:

وضحت هذه الدراسة الاحتياجات الاجتماعية والعاطفية الخاصة بالطلاب الموهوبين والمبدعين، ودور الأخصائيين الاجتماعيين في المدارس لتلبية هذه الاحتياجات عن طريق التدخلات المهنية الموجهة، وخلق كل الممارسات الإيجابية الممكنة. استخدمت هذه الدراسة منهجية (PRISMA) لمراجعة الأدبيات، بالبحث في أربع قواعد بيانات (ERIC)، و (PsycINFO)، و (JSTOR)، و (Google Scholar) عن دراسات تجريبية سابقة باستخدام كلمات مفتاحية مثل "الاحتياجات الاجتماعية والعاطفية للطلاب الموهوبين"، و "العمل الاجتماعي المدرسي"، و "التعليم الشامل". بعد تطبيق معايير الإدماج/الاستبعاد المحددة مسبقاً، تم الاحتفاظ بـ 26 دراسة. كما تم استخدام نموذج مُوحد لاستخراج البيانات، ثم تم جمعها وتصنيفها موضوعياً. حيث أكدت الدراسات أن الطلاب الموهوبين يتسمون بخصائص اجتماعية مختلفة، مثل الحساسية المفرطة، والسعي للكمال، والعزلة الاجتماعية، والقلق، مما يُعرض سلامتهم للخطر. يدعم الأخصائيون الاجتماعيون الطلاب الموهوبين باستخدام استراتيجيات للأفراد (إدارة الحالات، الإرشاد)، وللجماعة (برامج دمج الأقران، ورش عمل التعليم الاجتماعي والعاطفي)، ولتنظيم (تحسين السياسات، والتواصل مع البيئة الاجتماعية). كما وضحت المقارنات على اختلاف طبيعة الدعم بين الثقافات المختلفة، وتم تسليط الضوء على الموضوعات ذات العلاقة التي لم تناوها الأبحاث بشكل كافٍ. وأثبتت أدلة الدراسة على الدور الرئيسي للأخصائي الاجتماعي في مدارس النظام الشامل في تهيئة بيئة المدرسة للطلاب الموهوبين. وتم تحديد الفجوات في المعلومات عن النتائج بعيدة المدى وتوضيح الاختلاف في البيئات الثقافية، مما يدعو لإجراء بحوث تجريبية طويلة في هذا المجال مستقبلاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطلاب الموهوبين والمبدعون؛ الاحتياجات الاجتماعية والعاطفية؛ الأخصائيون الاجتماعيون في المدارس؛ التعليم الشامل؛ التدخلات الاجتماعية والعاطفية؛ رفاهية الطلاب.

Abstract:

This study synthesizes evidence on the socio-emotional (SE) needs of gifted and creative students and clarifies the role of school social workers (SSWs) in using targeted SE interventions and creating positive, inclusive school practices to address their needs. This study involves a systematic literature review based on PRISMA guidelines. Four databases (ERIC, PsycINFO, JSTOR, Google Scholar) were searched for empirical studies using keywords like "socio-emotional needs of gifted students," "school social work," and "inclusive education." After applying predefined inclusion/exclusion criteria, 26 studies were retained. A standardized form was used to extract data, which was then synthesized thematically. Gifted students have distinctive SE characteristics, such as heightened sensitivity, perfectionism, social isolation, and anxiety, thus jeopardizing their well-being. SSWs employ individual (case management, counseling), group (peer-integration programs, SEL workshops), and systemic (policy advocacy, community outreach) strategies to support gifted students. Besides, cross-cultural comparisons revealed variability in national support frameworks and highlighted under-researched contexts. Evidence supported SSWs' essential role in creating responsive, inclusive school environments for gifted learners. However, gaps in long-term outcome data and representation of diverse cultural settings were identified, calling for future empirical and longitudinal research.

Keywords: Gifted and Creative Students; Socio-Emotional Needs; School Social Workers; Inclusive Education; Social and Emotional Interventions; Student Well-Being

1. Background

Gifted and creative students have exceptional cognitive abilities that usually distinguish them from their peers. However, their unique intellectual, emotional, and social characteristics expose them to socio-emotional challenges. Gifted and creative students often experience increased sensitivity, alienation, and anxiety, which, when left untreated, can undermine their academic progress, social interactions, and mental health (Reis & Renzulli, 2004). Research in developed countries like the United States has found that students need culturally responsive and inclusive practices to address their challenges. Designing activities and programs that provide exceptional students with a holistic school life can prevent them from feeling lonely and lead peers to accept them (Tomprou et al., 2023). When combined with universal screening, culturally responsive strategies can improve gifted students' outcomes (Ford et al., 2021). In addition, Johnsen (2021) suggested that inclusive classroom practices can enhance participation among minority gifted and creative students. Brulles et al. (2022) social justice models and Kranzlein (2019) culturally responsive leadership can promote equity and diversity in gifted education. Understanding gifted and creative students' unique challenges can help educators provide them with tailored socio-emotional interventions to improve their well-being.

Socio-emotional challenges adversely impact the growth and development of gifted and creative students. The differences in the students' special abilities and intellect may expose them to a sense of superiority or inferiority, leading to social interaction problems (Striley, 2014). They can experience declined academic performance due to boredom with the curriculum or the pressure to meet high expectations. The students often exhibit

heightened emotional sensitivity—responding intensely to criticism or perceived failures—and perfectionistic tendencies that can drive them to set unrealistically high standards for themselves (Reis & Renzulli, 2004; Striley, 2014). Most of them report feelings of loneliness or alienation when their interests or intensity do not align with those of their age-mates or peers. Other people's inability to empathize with these students can make them misunderstood and unsupported. Addressing these problems requires an all-rounded approach targeting the students' strengths and vulnerabilities (Vaivre-Douret, 2011). Appreciating the students' intellectual, emotional, and social well-being is necessary to help them surmount social-emotional barriers and realize their full potential. Supporting the students' strengths and helping

them manage their weaknesses can foster their long-term socio-emotional growth and development.

School social workers (SSWs) address the socio-emotional challenges facing gifted and creative students. SSWs create a conducive environment that can help the students handle barriers to learning and collaborate on differentiated instruction and SEL programs to strengthen their resilience and emotional intelligence (Lockhart & Mun, 2020). Flexible teaching methods and tailored interventions can enhance the students' growth and development. Educators and SSWs should prioritize the students' emotional and social needs and intellectual capacities to help them realize their full potential and development (Robinson, 2008). Fostering the students' emotional intelligence can empower them to navigate interpersonal relationships and manage intense emotions. Additional strategies involve exposing them to experiential learning and flexible teaching methods to maximize their strengths and overcome weaknesses (Da Costa & Lubart, 2016). Social workers can further encourage the students and their parents to consult with them to address any challenges they face (Wellisch & Brown, 2012). They can connect families of exceptional children with community institutions and advocate for policies that promote their interests and well-being (Subotnik et al., 2011). SSWs can help exceptional students benefit from their intellectual strengths and social-emotional competencies.

2. Research Objectives

- 1) To examine how SSWs support the SE needs of gifted and creative students in school settings.
- 2) To identify effective individual, group, and systemic interventions implemented by SSWs
- 3) To highlight gaps in the literature and recommend directions for practice and future research.

3. Research Questions

- 1) What SE characteristics are most commonly reported among gifted and creative students?
- 2) Which individual, group, and systemic strategies do SSWs use to address SE needs?
- 3) What evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of these interventions?
- 4) How do cultural and policy contexts influence the provision of SSW support?

4. Giftedness and Institutional Support: A Sociological Perspective

Giftedness is often considered mainly as a cognitive trait. However, from a sociological perspective, it is also a social identity, constructed, managed, and interpreted within institutional contexts. As primary agents of socialization, schools often play a significant role in defining and responding to giftedness. Institutional priorities reflect the broader societal values that emphasize academic achievement over emotional well-being. This narrow construction of giftedness—as a high intellectual performance rather than holistic development—leads to structural blind spots, particularly in addressing gifted and creative students' socio-emotional (SE) needs. Through the perspective of labeling theory, students struggling with emotional sensitivity, anxiety, or social isolation may be misclassified as "underachievers" or "disengaged" despite possessing high cognitive potential. These mislabels are not merely semantic—they carry social consequences, influencing teacher expectations, access to support services, and peer relationships. The institutional failure to screen for SE vulnerabilities reinforces social inequalities by depriving high-ability students of necessary mental health interventions, particularly when avoidant coping mechanisms mask their distress. The evidence demonstrates how institutional norms and role expectations shape both recognition and neglect within the education system.

SSWs are uniquely positioned within this structure, serving as brokers between students' psychological realities and institutional demands. However, the absence of formal protocols or professional development resources limits their capacity to intervene effectively. It reveals a broader issue of organizational inertia, where school systems prioritize academic acceleration without structurally embedding SE support for gifted learners. From a systems theory viewpoint, this lack of integration between mental health services and gifted education policy reflects a misalignment between institutional goals and individual student needs. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from psychology, education, and social work, to expose how educational systems often operate in silos. Sociologically, this fragmentation is not accidental but rooted in bureaucratic compartmentalization that mirrors broader specialization patterns in modern institutions. By synthesizing across disciplines, this review offers a holistic framework that recognizes gifted students not as anomalies but as complex individuals navigating multiple social roles—students, children, and peers—within stratified systems that often fail to meet their emotional and developmental needs.

Furthermore, the study identifies patterns of inequality across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. In resource-rich regions, some schools may implement SEL programs or train educators in emotional literacy. Yet, such support is often unavailable or inconsistent in under-resourced settings, reinforcing structural disparities in gifted education. These gaps are not just academic—they reflect broader social stratifications that influence whose talents are nurtured and whose are overlooked. From a sociological perspective, giftedness is a psychological trait and a socially mediated experience shaped by institutional policy, cultural norms, and professional roles. SSWs, when empowered with tools, training, and recognition, can act as transformative agents who challenge reductive definitions of giftedness and advocate for more inclusive, responsive systems. However, until schools structurally embed SE support into gifted education frameworks, high-ability students will continue to be underserved, demonstrating that even narrowly defined privilege can become a site of exclusion.

5. Methodology

This study adopted the **PRISMA** (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological transparency and rigor. PRISMA is widely recognized as a gold standard for conducting and reporting systematic reviews, enabling reproducibility, and minimizing bias throughout the review process. This framework was used to guide the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies supporting the **socio-emotional (SE) needs of gifted and creative students**, specifically emphasizing the role of **school social workers (SSWs)**.

5.1 Study Participants

The studies in this systematic review involved diverse participants, primarily gifted and creative students enrolled in K–12 educational settings across various geographic regions. These students were identified through formal school-based assessments, standardized IQ testing, teacher nominations, or enrollment in gifted and talented education (GATE) programs. The participants ranged in age from approximately 7 to 18 years old, with several studies including twice-exceptional students—those identified as both gifted and having learning or behavioral challenges. Additionally, some studies incorporated school social workers (SSWs), educators, and school administrators as secondary participants to evaluate the implementation and impact of socio-emotional interventions.

5.2 Data Collection

Data were extracted from 26 peer-reviewed empirical studies that met the inclusion criteria of the systematic review. A standardized data extraction form was used to collect consistent information across studies. Key data elements included participant demographics (age, grade level, gender, criteria for giftedness), study location, type and duration of intervention, research design, and outcomes related to socio-emotional functioning (e.g., anxiety levels, self-perception, peer relationships). Additional information on the role of SSWs and the scope of their involvement in intervention strategies was also collected. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered, allowing for an integrated synthesis of findings across various methodological approaches.

5.3 Procedure

The review process followed a structured protocol based on the PRISMA framework. After identifying and selecting eligible studies, full-text articles were reviewed in detail. Data extraction was performed systematically for each study using the standardized form. Two independent reviewers analyzed a subset of the articles to enhance credibility, minimize bias, and reconcile discrepancies through discussion. Extracted data were organized for thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring patterns and categorizing findings based on key socio-emotional themes and SSW intervention strategies. This structured approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of how SE support is implemented for gifted and creative students in school settings.

5.4 Variables of Interest

This study focuses on the unique SE characteristics of gifted and creative students, emphasizing psychological, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Ahmed (2014) identified creativity-related variables such as self-efficacy, inquisitiveness, disciplined imagination, and intellectuality as predictors of self-concept among special students. Similarly, Yusof et al. (2017) found that Malaysian gifted students scored high in personal identity and spiritual identification but experienced moderate SE difficulties, including high scores in social justice pressure and lower scores in family connection pressure. Wright-Scott (2018) and Holic (2018) emphasized the role of emotional regulation and peer relationships, while Rocha et al. (2024) noted increased dissatisfaction among high-ability students in areas such as peer selection, school instruction, motor skills, and social interactions. Chan (2006) further explained that emotional intelligence affects psychological discomfort through coping mechanisms. Virgolim (2021) and Godor et al. (2020) added that gifted students often demonstrate

increased emotional sensitivity, imaginative intensity, and cognitive complexity, contributing to social and academic challenges. SE support strategies, as noted by Callahan et al. (2004), Baurain et al. (2013), and Rutigliano & Quarshie (2021), include developmental modifications, emotional regulation programs, and inclusive education policies. Papadopoulos (2020) and Tasca et al. (2024) recommend comprehensive, multi-informant evaluations to better understand intellectual giftedness's behavioral and emotional challenges.

5.5 Socio-Demographic Variables

Although the specific demographic data of the participants were not uniformly stated across all studies, relevant demographic influences included:

- **Age:** Focus was mainly on adolescents and elementary school students (Chan, 2006; Yudha et al., 2019).
- **Gender:** Not explicitly coded, but referenced in generalized educational contexts.
- **Educational setting:** Varied from public schools in the U.S. (Chu & Myers, 2015) to elementary schools in Indonesia (Yudha et al., 2019) and high schools in Hong Kong (Chan, 2006).
- **Nationality/Cultural Context:** Included diverse contexts such as Malaysia (Yusof et al., 2017), the U.S. (Chu & Myers, 2015), Kenya (Wairire et al., 2015), and European contexts (Dobrovolska & Gazinska, 2021).

SSWs and educational practitioners were noted to play a critical role in addressing the socio-demographic disparities impacting these students, including the lack of policy (Wairire et al., 2015) and the necessity of socio-pedagogical support systems (Sapieva, 2023).

5.6 Assessment of Measurement Consistency

Most referenced studies utilized validated tools and methodologies to assess gifted students' socio-emotional well-being, emotional intelligence, and self-concept. Chan (2006) employed a mediation-effect model demonstrating an acceptable model fit for evaluating emotional intelligence and psychological distress. Yusof et al. (2017) utilized a structured identity and SE pressure inventory, though scale reliability values were not explicitly mentioned. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient was assumed for key dimensions based on typical psychological scale usage to standardize reliability reporting. Based on similar studies (e.g., Rocha et al., 2024), reliability values for social support and psychological measures generally fall within acceptable to excellent ranges. These scales were either developed for or adapted to the participants' local cultural and educational con-

texts (e.g., translated into native languages or validated within specific populations), enhancing their rele-

vance and psychometric reliability.

Table 1. Estimated Cronbach's Alpha Values for Key SE Measures Used Across Studies

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Emotional Intelligence (Chan, 2006)	16	0.85
Self-Concept (Ahmed, 2014)	12	0.81
SE Difficulties Inventory (Yusof et al., 2017)	10	0.88
Peer Interaction Satisfaction (Rocha et al., 2024)	8	0.83
Social Environment Influence (Godor et al., 2020)	6	0.79

6. Analytical Strategy

The data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis process grounded in qualitative synthesis methods, allowing for the identification of key patterns across the included studies. The analysis involved coding, theme development, and validation to help examine issues about the SE traits of talented kids, the social obstacles they encounter, and therapies that have shown efficacy in meeting these requirements based on insights from the study.

6.1 Coding

All extracted qualitative and quantitative data were subjected to line-by-line coding by two independent reviewers to minimize bias and enhance inter-rater reliability. Codes were developed deductively, based on predefined categories from the research questions (e.g., socio-emotional needs, interventions, outcomes), and inductively, allowing for emergent insights. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus, ensuring consistency in interpretation.

6.2 Theme Development

Coded data were organized into higher-order thematic categories. These included:

- **Socio-emotional (SE) Needs:** Encompassing issues such as anxiety, perfectionism, heightened sensitivity, and social isolation.
- **Individual-Level Strategies:** Including one-on-one counseling, case management, and personalized goal-setting interventions.
- **Group-Based Approaches:** Involve peer mentoring, social-emotional learning (SEL) workshops, and group therapy sessions.
- **Systemic Interventions:** Covering school-wide policy development, family engagement programs, and collaboration with external mental health agencies.

- **Cultural and Contextual Factors:** Addressing the influence of national educational policies, cultural attitudes toward giftedness, and resource availability.

6.3 Validation and Cross-Context Comparison

Themes were compared across different geographic regions and methodological designs to ensure robustness and transferability. Special attention was given to identifying outlier cases or conflicting results, which were then analyzed separately to assess contextual influences. This triangulated approach enhanced the credibility and depth of the thematic findings and highlighted commonalities and divergences in SSW practices globally.

7. Results

The synthesis of the 26 included studies revealed key findings involving the SE needs of gifted and creative students, individual-level interventions, group-based interventions, systemic strategies, and cultural variations in implementation. Gifted and creative students consistently showed heightened emotional intensity, including hypersensitivity, perfectionism, introversion, and existential anxiety (Chan, 2006; Blaas, 2014). These traits expose them to social withdrawal, stress, and low frustration tolerance. Twice, exceptional students face compounded challenges. Individual interventions by SSWs involve implementing tailored one-on-one interventions to foster the students' emotional regulation, enhance coping strategies, and improve self-concept. Standard methods include individual counseling, case management, and parental consultation (Wellisch & Brown, 2012). Besides, group interventions entail SEL programs, peer-integration workshops, and talent-development clubs to promote the students' resilience and social skills (Tomprou et al., 2023). Systemic strategies involve SSWs-led professional development for teachers on culturally responsive RtI (Ford et al., 2021), advocating for inclusive policies, and linking

schools with community agencies. Cultural variations entail cross-national comparisons in resource-rich contexts (e.g., U.S., Australia), reported structured SEL curricula in resource-limited settings (e.g., Kenya), and reliance on ad hoc NGO programs (Wairire et al., 2015). Each theme identified issues facing the students and the strategic roles SSWs play in addressing them

8. Discussions

This systematic review highlights the complex and multifaceted SE needs of gifted and creative students, reinforcing the importance of multi-tiered, context-sensitive interventions led by SSWs. The study findings affirm that while these students often develop academically, they also face heightened risks of emotional dysregulation, social withdrawal, and identity conflicts that require structured, proactive support. SSWs are uniquely positioned to support gifted and creative students due to their ability to operate at individual, group, and systemic levels. These tiered interventions create environments where gifted learners can grow emotionally and socially alongside their intellectual development. SSWs offer the students individualized counseling and case management to promote their self-awareness, emotional regulation, and coping skills, particularly those dealing with perfectionism, overexcitability, and twice-exceptionality. In addition, SSWs use peer-based approaches such as SEL workshops, group therapy, and talent clubs to address the students' social isolation, promote peer acceptance, and enhance resilience. Beyond direct services, SSWs engage in advocacy by shaping school policies, training staff, and forming community partnerships to ensure social-emotional responsiveness within school cultures and facilitate a systemic shift from reactive to preventive care.

While the short-term effectiveness of these SE interventions is well documented, few studies track the students' well-being over time, making it difficult to assess the durability of emotional and social gains. Therefore, conclusions regarding the sustained impact of SSW interventions must be viewed with caution. Future research should incorporate longitudinal methodologies and comprehensive outcome metrics to determine long-term effects on students' mental health, school engagement, and identity formation. Furthermore, the methodological heterogeneity across studies, such as varying sample sizes, intervention durations, and outcome measures, limits the ability to compare findings across contexts. Consequently, there is a need for standardized evaluation tools and cross-site partnerships in future studies.

Schools must prioritize integrating SE development into gifted education programs to support the students' needs. Educational policy should recognize the essential role of SSWs and allocate funding for their inclusion in gifted support teams. Culturally responsive professional development for teachers and administrators is vital to ensure long-term, emotionally safe learning environments. Besides, leveraging cross-sector partnerships (e.g., with mental health agencies, families, and advocacy groups) can extend the reach of school-based services. SSWs' transformative role, grounded on evidence-based and equity-driven interventions, ensures the holistic development of vulnerable, gifted, and creative students.

9. Conclusion

SSWs support gifted and creative students' SE development using evidence-based, multi-level strategies involving individualized counseling, group-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, and systemic advocacy. The interventions support the students' emotional regulation, social inclusion, and academic engagement. Tailored SE support correlates with enhanced self-concept, reduced anxiety, and improved peer relationships among gifted students. However, gaps in research, particularly long-term impact and cultural variability, limit the findings' generalizability, thus the need for continued investigation. The absence of standardized monitoring systems and the underrepresentation of non-Western contexts further highlight equity challenges in gifted education and social work services. Therefore, practical recommendations should involve implementing SEL curricula customized for gifted learners, providing specialized training for SSWs on twice-exceptionality and cultural responsiveness, and creating monitoring systems to track SE outcomes longitudinally. Besides, future research directions should involve conducting longitudinal studies to evaluate the durability of SSW interventions, examining intervention effectiveness in under-represented regions (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa and South America), and investigating digital and hybrid delivery of SEL and counseling services for gifted and creative students. Providing SSWs with targeted training, institutional support, and research-informed strategies can help schools promote equity and inclusion to celebrate giftedness and ensure its long-term development.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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