

How Labels Both Impair and Nurture the Academic Performance of Gifted and Talented Students

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Introduction

In *WRS 102 Writing in the Disciplines*, students may write a reflective essay on a topic they had some personal experience with. The reflection was a starting point for their research: this was not a diary or personal journal, but an argumentative, academic essay. Students had to use their experience as evidence that supports, complicates, or conflicts with what the research says about the topic. **Ishrath Khan**'s essay explores what it means to be labelled a gifted or talented student—this piece deftly describes the conflicts these labels bring.

Keywords: academia, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), influence, label, nurture, teaching.



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When you are told at the age of eleven that you are academically advanced compared to your classmates, you internalize that label and shape your academic self-concept on the basis of the expectations that come with it. From my primary to secondary schooling in Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs, I was taught advanced content because teachers assumed my peers and I were above grade level due to our results on GATE screening tests. However, I believe that it was the label of Gifted and Talented Student (GATS) that propelled my academic performance, not the program style of GATE. For instance, I viewed myself as a high achiever because I was told by my teachers that I was self-disciplined and talented enough to accomplish anything I set my mind to. Moreover, my teachers fostered my academic performance by building a good rapport with me and creating a nurturing learning environment. I was excited to learn advanced content about the human body in my science classes and debate critical political issues in my social studies classes because I knew I was capable and well-equipped to do so. If you tell a student that they have the potential to achieve academic success and give them the means to do so, they are highly likely to fulfill these expectations (Elhoweris, 2008).

Whenever I failed to meet the expectations of a GATS, I would be excessively critical of myself and spiral into a pattern of overworking and burnout. Instead of being confident in my abilities as a student because of my GATE enrolment and the expectations others had of me, I was overwhelmed with self-doubt and felt the need to overcompensate. Because of experiences like these, I am able to critique GATE on the basis of my history in it. As a psychology major, I am now able to assess the consequences of the GATS label on my mental health and profile as a student. On account of my knowledge of psycho-sociological theories and concepts, I have a deeper understanding of how labels and expectations have both nurtured and impaired my academic performance because of my academic self-concept and my teachers' behaviours, respectively. How do labels and expectations influence a GATS' academic performance? I argue that the labels we put on GATS influence their academic self-concept and their teachers' behaviours, and this is what shapes their academic performance.

Impairment of Students' Academic Self-Concept

The GATS label distorted my academic self-concept, making me believe that I had to achieve certain grades or accolades in order to be a good student. I felt ashamed when I did not perform well compared to my classmates because I was not meeting the expectations of the label. On the other hand, when I did perform well, it was because I believed in my capacity to achieve my goals, which was due to the praise that came with the GATS label. Siegle et al. (2020) examined this effect in their study of perspectives of overachieving GATS,

deducing that when GATS have confidence in their skills, they have high levels of self-efficacy. The mixture of a fear of failure and a pattern of high academic performance plagues GATS with perfectionistic concerns (Grugan et al., 2021). The pressure of maintaining an academic standing and keeping up with the high-achieving students in my class made me obsess over having a flawless academic record. Consequently, when I did perform according to the expectations of my label as a GATS, I felt elated.

The downside of being labelled as a GATS appeared when I did not meet the expectations that came from myself and others. When I scored low on an exam or did not meet an academic goal, my self-confidence plummeted, and my academic self-concept wore down. Should a student's academic self-concept be solely based on test scores and awards? No. Rather it should be shaped by their self-growth in the learning process and optimal efforts to better themselves. Teachers and parents should foster a growth mindset within students. With a growth mindset, students will be comfortable with making mistakes, seeing it as part of the journey of conquering challenges (Wiley, 2020). Although I have come to accept that I do not need to meet the expectations of labels in order to have a strong academic sense of self, I wish I had done so earlier to avoid the negative impacts on my mental health.

Nurturing via Teachers' Behaviors

GATS are predicted to have high academic performance. Because teachers expect this, they make sure to facilitate the growth process (Peperkorn et al., 2020). Peperkorn et al. subsequently argued that GATS receive special treatment from their teachers in order to foster academic excellence; applying this method to all students would make a more equitable education system. My teachers always made an effort to build a rapport with me when I was in GATE, and this positive student-teacher relationship increased my academic performance. Teachers' positive expectations of their students are manifested in their behaviours towards them, as seen in the Pygmalion Effect (PE) (Rosenthal, 1981). After learning about the PE in my psychology courses, I made the connection between it and my experiences as a GATS. Under the influence of the PE, teachers create a warm social environment, give differentiated feedback, teach more advanced content, and give more opportunities to engage in class (Rosenthal, 1981). Teachers' positive expectations—that come from the GATS label—guide their behaviour toward gifted students.

Positive expectations shape gifted programming (Wiley, 2020). In order to accelerate GATS, teachers must ensure that advanced content is taught in a timely manner, alongside the administration of complex exams (Alodat et al., 2020). Teachers expect that GATS can handle a rigorous curriculum because they are above grade level, and the GATE program stimulates their potential (Siegle et al., 2020). My teachers would always expect high-quality

work and answers from my fellow GATS and me, making sure that we fix every flaw they pointed out. For this reason, I was primed to be the best student I could be. The benefit of this differentiated feedback is that it makes students more aware of their areas of strengths and weaknesses (Rosenthal, 1981).

The teaching strategies employed in GATE promoted my academic achievement. The rapport built between teachers and students was successful in creating a positive learning environment for myself and my fellow GATS. We were challenged and made to believe that we were high achievers, capable of grasping advanced concepts and accomplishing anything we set our minds to. Had my teachers not employed the PE, I would not have been able to perform as well academically. This is why I believe that the stratification of GATE programs and regular programs does not create an equitable learning environment for students and that equal attention and efforts should be invested in all students regardless of their labels. If all teachers treated their students the way GATS are treated, I believe that the net academic performance in schools would increase.

Conclusion

Fulfilling the expectations of a GATS did not leave me unscathed. With the bar set high, I often found myself losing balance as I tried to reach it. Did I internalize the GATS label and have an overall positive academic performance? Yes, and this benefited my academic career and opened doors for me. Was the bad toll on my mental health worth it? No, and I have yet to recover from these consequences. After reviewing the articles about the psychology behind GATE programming and reflecting on my history with it, I strongly recognize the influence of the GATS label and how it sets a precedent for students' academic self-concept and teachers' behaviours. As a university student, I am now more comfortable with my academic self-concept, and I am trying my best to develop healthy habits and adapt to my own definition of success. To me, it's not about having a certain transcript or receiving accolades; rather, it's about putting in one hundred percent of my effort and making peace with whatever outcome I get.

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