JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL CRISIS AND RISK COMMUNICATION RESEARCH
ISSN: 2576-0017
2024, VOL 7, NO S11

Social Learning Outcomes of Gifted Programs in Al-Ahsa Region: An Evaluative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the impact of the gifted program in the Al-Ahsa region on developing selected social skills among students enrolled in the program. The sample consisted of 90 gifted students across four program levels, ranging from sixth grade to third intermediate in the Al-Ahsa region. The study employed a social skills assessment scale and used the Wilcoxon statistical test and effect size measurement for analysis. The findings revealed that the gifted program implemented in the Al-Ahsa region significantly contributed to the enhancement of social skills among the enrolled students. Based on these results, the researchers proposed several recommendations, including the design and integration of specialized programs aimed at improving social skills—such as communication, collaboration, and leadership—within gifted education programs. Additionally, the study emphasized involving gifted students in the design of tailored programs that address various aspects of their personalities and foster their diverse and multiple intelligences. The researchers also suggested investigating the impact of such programs on achieving psychological well-being, as well as fulfilling the need for knowledge and understanding among gifted students. Moreover, they recommended considering the extension of this program to mainstream students to help them develop similar characteristics.

KEYWORDS: Evaluation, Gifted Students, Learning Outcomes, Social Skills, Gifted Programs.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies in gifted education indicate that approximately 2-5% of students possess exceptional intellectual abilities (Al-Nafea et al., 2001). According to some contemporary theories of giftedness, this percentage could rise to 10-15% of the student population in any given school (Renzulli, 1992). Gifted students exhibit unique learning styles (Rogers, 1986), yet their cognitive, emotional, and social needs are often inadequately addressed in regular classrooms (Whitmore, 1980;

Whitmore & Maker, 1985). Consequently, these students face a mismatch between their intellectual abilities and the curriculum offered in general education, which can hinder their potential (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Many researchers, therefore, emphasize the necessity of specialized programs for gifted students that challenge their abilities and meet their needs (Feldhusen, 1997).

While attention to gifted students has historical roots, the establishment of dedicated school programs for them only began in the second half of the 20th century in developed nations. This was driven by heightened competition between the Eastern Bloc, led by the Soviet Union, and the Western Bloc, led by the United States (Davis & Rimm, 1998). This interest eventually spread to some Arab countries by the end of the 20th century, albeit to varying degrees (Al-Majaini, 2008).

Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in identifying gifted students through its national initiative, The Program for Identifying and Nurturing Gifted Students. This initiative developed and standardized several cognitive ability tests for the Saudi context, including the Wechsler Individual Intelligence Scale, the Cognitive Abilities Test, and the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. These measures have been instrumental in the implementation of the Gifted Student Identification and Nurturing Program, which is overseen by the Ministry of Education and delivered through gifted education centers across the Kingdom. Additionally, the King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity was established to support gifted individuals in Saudi Arabia (Al-Nafea et al., 2001).

In recent years, the Ministry of Education has developed an initiative to establish gifted education programs within public schools, representing a significant step towards achieving the objectives of creating dedicated departments for gifted education within the Ministry. The ultimate goal is to cultivate a generation of highly skilled leaders. Achieving this requires consistent and sequential support (Al-Jughaiman, 2005).

Focusing on developing social skills within gifted education programs is essential for balancing academic excellence with personal growth. These skills prepare gifted students to be effective and engaged members of society. The following points highlight the importance of emphasizing social skills:

- Enhancing Effective Communication: Social skills improve gifted students' ability to express their ideas and develop positive interactions with peers and teachers. According to Kim and Anderson (2021), gifted students with strong communication skills demonstrate greater capacity for effective participation in collaborative learning environments, positively impacting both academic and social performance.

- Developing Teamwork Abilities: Collaboration is a critical component of both educational and professional life. Parker et al. (2022) found that gifted students with well-developed social skills are more adaptable in team settings and demonstrate stronger problem-solving and collective creativity abilities.

- Adapting to Emotional Challenges: Gifted students often face psychological challenges, such as anxiety and isolation, due to their unique interests. Lee and Wang

(2020) suggest that social skills foster psychological well-being, enabling gifted students to cope healthily with school and personal pressures.

- Boosting Self-Confidence: Gifted students with strong social skills exhibit higher self-confidence and a greater ability to navigate diverse challenges. Tang and Li (2019) found that enhancing social skills increases gifted students' self-assurance and ability to achieve academic and personal goals.

- Promoting Social Integration and Reducing Isolation: Gifted students sometimes experience isolation due to intellectual differences. Social skills help them interact with peers and build friendships, reducing feelings of exclusion. Jiang and Chen (2021) reported that developing social skills improves gifted students' social integration and decreases their sense of isolation.

- Preparing for University and Professional Life: In higher education and professional settings, gifted individuals must navigate diverse environments. Zhou & Liu (2023) emphasized that early development of social skills equips gifted students for future challenges, enabling them to work effectively in multicultural contexts.

Despite the importance of gifted education programs, the evaluation of such programs has been historically neglected, even though it is a fundamental component of program design (Purcell & Eckert, 2006). This oversight has negatively impacted the evaluative practices used to assess these programs (Avery & VanTassel-Baska, 2001; Callahan & Ries, 2004). Callahan (2004) warned that failing to design robust evaluation methods risks losing evidence of the programs' impacts on students. Most programs that conduct periodic evaluations focus on improving activities rather than reaching conclusions that can be generalized, as is typical of published research. Program administrators often prioritize program enhancement over determining overall success.

Achieving a balance between cognitive and affective learning outcomes is a central issue in designing gifted programs (Rogers, 2002). The interaction between cognitive and affective factors is also integral to the concept of giftedness. Modern models of giftedness emphasize that it arises from the interplay of cognitive and affective factors (e.g., Renzulli, 2003, 2005; Heller et al., 2005; Gagne, 2003, 2005; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2007).

Given the significance of gifted programs and their widespread implementation across the Kingdom, evaluating these programs is a critical and necessary endeavor. Such evaluation is closely tied to the program's development, including its goals and ambitions set by the Ministry of Education, as well as its planning, design, and execution phases.

The present study aims to evaluate the gifted education program in public schools in the Al-Ahsa region to determine its success in achieving its objectives. The central research question can be framed as follows: What is the impact of the gifted program in the Al-Ahsa region on the social skills of participating gifted students?

Importance of the Study

The importance of the current study stems from its attempt to draw attention to the

necessity of linking cognitive and affective aspects in the design and evaluation of gifted programs. A review of enrichment programs for the gifted reveals a predominant focus on intellectual aspects with clearly defined procedural objectives, while often neglecting affective and social factors. These programs typically fail to incorporate educational implications for affective and social dimensions that can either facilitate or hinder the development of giftedness. While gifted students possess high cognitive potential for success across various fields, the realization of this potential depends on other internal and external variables.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have emphasized the importance of focusing on social skills within gifted programs. For example, Kim and Anderson (2021) explored the significance of developing effective communication skills among gifted students, highlighting that these skills enhance their ability to interact with peers and teachers. The study found that gifted students with strong communication skills demonstrated higher levels of participation in group activities, positively impacting their academic and social performance.

Lee and Wang (2020) examined the emotional impact of social skills on gifted students. Their findings indicated that developing social skills helps reduce feelings of isolation and anxiety that gifted students may experience due to their intellectual differences. The study stressed that building these skills enhances the mental health and emotional resilience of gifted students.

Parker et al. (2022) focused on the role of social skills in fostering teamwork among gifted students. Their research revealed that students who develop strong social skills are more capable of working effectively within teams. These skills enable them to adapt to diverse collaborative environments and solve problems collectively.

In another study, Tang and Li (2019) investigated the relationship between social skills and self-confidence among gifted students. They found that enhancing these skills boosts students' confidence and prepares them to tackle academic and social challenges more effectively.

Jiang and Chen (2021) explored the influence of social skills on improving the social interaction levels of gifted students. Their findings demonstrated that students with strong social skills are better at forming friendships and avoiding social isolation, helping them feel more integrated into their educational environment.

Zhou & Liu (2023) examined the importance of social skills as a critical factor in preparing gifted students for college and professional life. Their study showed that students with advanced social skills are better equipped to adapt to diverse university and work environments, positively impacting their performance.

These studies collectively underscore that social skills are as important as academic abilities in gifted programs. They help gifted students enhance communication, build confidence, foster social integration, and improve teamwork skills, equipping them for success in future academic stages and professional and social life. Moreover, the studies emphasize that focusing on the development of social skills in gifted

programs enhances students' ability to address emotional challenges and prepares them for success in academic and professional endeavors.

3. Theoretical Framework

Social skills refer to an individual's ability to engage positively with others in a specific social context, in a manner that is socially acceptable and beneficial both to oneself and others. They represent an internal psychological readiness (a genuine predisposition) that precedes the response in a social situation. In other words, they are a latent and stable trait within one's personality, shaped by the individual's development (Ahmed, 2006).

According to behavioral theories, social skills are learned or acquired. These theories focus on observable and acquired behaviors that individuals employ in interpersonal interactions to build and maintain cohesive social environments (Mansour, 2001). From a cognitive approach, which highlights cognitive processes such as perception, awareness, thought, and learning as intermediaries between stimuli and responses, social skills encompass all forms of communicative knowledge required by individuals and groups to interact appropriately and effectively (Shash, 2002).

Social skills also involve an individual's ability to express emotions and social cues verbally, regulate and manage nonverbal expressions, interpret others' emotions, and understand the implicit norms of social interaction. They include the capacity to take on roles and present oneself effectively in social contexts (Al-Samadoni, 1994).

From the above, social skills can be defined as the ability or competence to quickly establish and sustain social relationships with others. This competence involves a range of sub-skills, such as:

- Initiating social interaction or communication.
- Easily forming and maintaining social relationships with others.
- Expressing oneself in consistent verbal (clear language) and nonverbal (gestures or movements) ways that convey positive or negative feelings.
- Objectively receiving and interpreting others' emotions and behaviors, free from personal biases.
- Understanding the underlying intentions and motives behind others' visible behavior, such as decoding hints or gestures (social intelligence).
- Regulating one's emotions in social situations and being aware of them (personal intelligence).

Social Skills Models

One notable model of social skills is Riggio's Model, which consists of the following components:

1. Expression (Sending): Refers to how something is communicated and the accompanying gestures.

2. Sensitivity (Receiving): Involves how the recipient interprets the communication message.

3. Control (Controlling): Focuses on how communicative information is organized during social interactions.

Riggio posits that these components operate at two levels: emotional and social. Consequently, there are six dimensions of social skills:

- Emotional Expression (EE): The authenticity and spontaneity in expressing emotions and feelings through nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, vocal tones, and eye contact. Individuals with high emotional expression tend to be lively, empathetic, and capable of encouraging others to share their emotions.

- Emotional Sensitivity (ES): The ability to receive and interpret others' nonverbal communication accurately. Individuals with heightened emotional sensitivity can recognize others' emotional states but may also be prone to emotional contagion or over-identification.

- Emotional Control (EC): The capacity to regulate nonverbal behavior, such as concealing inappropriate internal emotions. It involves the ability to align one's emotional expressions with situational demands, such as smiling at a joke or suppressing anger in an embarrassing situation.

- Social Expression (SE): Refers to verbal communication skills, including linguistic fluency and the ability to engage in social conversations. Individuals with strong social expression skills are persuasive, extroverted, and socially interactive.

- Social Sensitivity (SS): The ability to interpret verbal communication during social interactions, recognizing the norms and rules governing appropriate social behavior. Individuals with strong social sensitivity demonstrate a commitment to social norms and are aware of their actions.

- Social Control (SC): The skill of role-playing and self-presentation, characterized by politeness, social confidence, and adaptability in social settings.

Riggio developed a scale for these components, which has been translated into various cultures, including Arabic, and is utilized in the current study.

Implications of Social Skills

Social skills contribute to positive personal traits, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, a positive self-concept, and self-efficacy. They help mitigate shyness, social anxiety, anger, and aggression while reducing dependency. Many psychological programs have been designed to enhance desirable behaviors and reduce undesirable ones.

Moreover, social skills satisfy individuals' psychosocial needs, promoting personal balance and group cohesion. They act as a dynamic link between individuals, fostering healthy interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, and social harmony. Additionally, social skills are instrumental in addressing behavioral and psychological challenges, serving as a criterion for normal behavior and enhancing productivity in various work environments.

Research Hypothesis

There is a statistically significant effect of the Gifted Program on developing social skills among gifted students participating in the program in Al-Ahsa. Specifically, there is a statistically significant difference in rank-related statistical measures between the pre- and post-test, favoring the post-test.

Research Methodology

The study employed a one-group experimental design (pre-test and post-test). The gifted programs in Al-Ahsa represented the independent variable, while social skills served as the dependent variable.

Research Participants

The study sample consisted of 90 gifted students enrolled in the Gifted Care Program at the Madinah Center. These participants volunteered to participate in both the pre-test and post-test assessments.

Research Instrument

Social Skills Scale

The instrument used to measure social skills was developed by Ronald Riggio (1990). It has been validated for reliability and validity in the American context. It is based on the principle that social skills can be accurately measured using self-report methods (Abdulrahman, 1998a). Abdulrahman (1998b) translated, standardized, and employed the scale in several studies, and it has since been widely used in the Arab context.

The scale consists of 90 items designed to measure six components of social skills. To facilitate easier application and participant interaction, the researchers reduced the scale to a 30-item version, while ensuring it maintained the same objectives as the original.

To verify the reliability of the short version, both the original 90-item scale and the 30-item scale were administered to a sample of 125 middle school students in Madinah, yielding a correlation coefficient of 0.83. A re-administration to 55 students from the same sample produced a reliability coefficient of 0.92, confirming the short version's validity for use.

The shortened scale measures the same components as the original:

- Emotional Expression
- Emotional Sensitivity
- Emotional Control
- Social Expression
- Social Sensitivity
- Social Control

Validity and Reliability Testing

The scale was piloted on a sample of 50 students in the Gifted Care Program in Madinah, distributed across program levels as follows:

- Level 1: 15 students
- Level 2: 12 students
- Level 3: 15 students
- Level 4: 5 students
- Level 5: 3 students

The reliability and validity of the scale were assessed using the following methods:

- Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient: The general alpha coefficient was calculated for each dimension. Additionally, item-specific alpha coefficients were determined by analyzing the alpha values when individual items were excluded. Most items demonstrated reliability, as their item-specific alpha values were lower than the general alpha value for their respective dimensions. However, two items (12 and 16) showed item-specific alpha values higher than the general alpha, indicating their lack of reliability.

The table below provides the results of Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis for the Social Skills Scale:

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Results for the Social Skills Scale

Emotional Expression		Emotional Sensitivity		Emotional Control		Social Expression		Social Sensitivity		Social Control	
Item	Alpha Coefficient	Item	Alpha Coefficient	Item	Alpha Coefficient	Item	Alpha Coefficient	Item	Alpha Coefficient	Item	Alpha Coefficient
1	.778	2	.529	3	.443	4	.406	5	.603	6	.437
7	.846	8	.604	9	532	10	.584	11	.647	12	.729
13	.863	14	.637	15	607	16	.679	17	.672	18	.632
19	.838	20	.638	21	611	22	.532	23	.628	24	.617
25	..753	26	.432	27	417	28	.417	29	.623	30	.416
Overall	865.	Overall	643.	Overall	612.	Overall	604.	Overall	693.	Overall	.666

The validity of the items was calculated by determining the correlation coefficients between the scores of each item and the total scores of the dimension to which the item belongs (excluding the score of the item itself). The total scores of the remaining items were considered a benchmark for the item scores. It was found that all correlation coefficients were statistically significant (indicating the validity of these items), except for items 12 and 16, whose correlation coefficients were not significant (indicating their lack of validity). The table below presents these results.

Table 2: Correlation Coefficients Between Item Scores and the Total Scores of Dimensions (Excluding the Item Score) for the Independence Scale

Emotional Expression		Emotional Sensitivity		Emotional Control		Social Expression		Social Sensitivity		Social Control	
Item	Corr. Coefficient	Item	Corr. Coefficient	Item	Corr. Coefficient	Item	Corr. Coefficient	Item	Corr. Coefficient	Item	Corr. Coefficient
1	.875**	2	.638**	3	.609**	4	.681**	5	.642**	6	.755**

7	.663**	8	.579**	9	.513**	10	.482**	11	,448**	12	.124
13	.523**	14	.524**	15	.427**	16	-.256	17	.451**	18	.478**
19	.694**	20	,512**	21	.486**	22	.601**	23	.487**	24	.428**
25	.892**	26	.654**	27	.634**	28	.658**	29	.618**	30	.764**

After excluding the unreliable and invalid items (items 12 and 16), the reliability of the dimensions was calculated by determining the correlation coefficients between the scores of the dimensions and the overall score of the scale. All correlation coefficients were statistically significant, indicating the reliability of the three dimensions and, consequently, the reliability of the scale as a whole. The table below presents these results.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficients Between Dimension Scores and the Total Score of the Social Skills Scale

Dimension	Correlation Coefficient with the Total Scale Score
Emotional Expression	.763**
Emotional Sensitivity	.824**
Emotional Regulation	.599**
Social Expression	.647**
Social Sensitivity	.782**
Social Regulation	.822**

4. Results

To address the study hypothesis: "There is a statistically significant effect of the gifted program on the development of social skills among the gifted students participating in it in the Al-Ahsa region, meaning that there is a statistically significant difference in the rank-related statistical parameters between the pre-test and post-test, in favor of the post-test application," and to verify the program's impact on developing social skills, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was utilized.

The test analyzed the students' scores in the pre-test and post-test to determine whether the score distributions significantly differ between the two applications. Given that the scores from the two applications are non-normal, the Wilcoxon equation was applied to calculate the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores on the Social Skills Scale (including dimensions and the total score). The results are presented in the table below:

Table 4 illustrates the differences in social skills between the pre-test and post-test using the Wilcoxon equation.

Dimensions	Ranks	Count	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks	Z Value	Statistical Significance	Effect Size Value	Effect Size Strength
Emotional Expression	Positive Negative	80 9	48.69 12.17	3895.50 109.50	7.751	0.0001	0.958	Very Strong
Emotional Sensitivity	Positive Negative	74 11	46.26 21.05	3423.50 231.50	7.004	0.0001	0.964	Very Strong
Emotional Regulation	Positive Negative	70 16	46.47 30.50	3253.00 488.50	5.694	0.0001	0.966	Very Strong
Social Expression	Positive Negative	58 23	47.78 23.91	2771.00 550.00	5.236	0.0001	0.968	Very Strong
Social	Positive	25 57	47.93	2732.00	4.773	0.0001	0.968	Very

Sensitivity	Negative		26.84	671.00				Strong
Social Regulation	Positive Negative	78 9	47.03 17.72	3668.50 195.50	7.433	0.0001	0.961	Very Strong
Overall score	Positive Negative	82 6	46.83 12.67	3840.00 76.00	7.832	0.0001	0.956	Very Strong

The findings from the Table 4 indicate that the differences between the pre-test and post-test for the social skills scale dimensions (emotional expression, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expression, social sensitivity, social control, and total score) are statistically significant (at the 0.0001 level) in favor of the post-test. This implies that the gifted program had a positive impact on improving and increasing social skills scores. The effect size is close to one, indicating a very strong effect (according to the equation used).

Thus, the third hypothesis is confirmed, suggesting that the program has an impact on developing various types of social skills. This result aligns with numerous indirect studies targeting the same objective, which is evaluating gifted programs and their role in the development of emotional aspects.

In the Saudi context, a study by Al-Jughiman et al. (2009) aimed to evaluate the gifted programs conducted by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia. The results showed statistically significant effects of the gifted program implemented in elementary schools on the development of creative thinking and academic achievement among participating students. Among the most studied emotional variables in the context of talent development are intrinsic motivation, self-concept, locus of control, interests, and goal orientation (Bloom, 1985; Dai et al., 1998; Feldhusen et al., 1990; Joswig, 1996; Vlahovic-Stetic, 1999). Several studies have shown that gifted children's performance was significantly affected by emotional factors such as perseverance and goal orientation. Additionally, the results of various studies confirm that group-based learning positively impacted student motivation and their attitude toward learning, as it helped gifted students develop a realistic self-concept (Borland et al., 2002; Fiedler et al., 2002; Rogers, 2001, 2004; Tieso, 2005).

Social skills are considered an individual's ability to express themselves emotionally and socially in an effective verbal manner, as well as their capacity to regulate and control non-verbal expressions, receive and interpret the emotions of others, be aware of the underlying rules behind social interaction, and their ability to role-play and present themselves socially (Al-Samadoni, 1994).

Based on the above, social skills can be defined as the ability or competence to quickly form social relationships with others and maintain those relationships. This ability requires a set of sub-skills, including (Abdulrahman, 1998a):

- Initiating social communication or interaction.
- Easily forming and maintaining social relationships with others.
- Expressing emotions verbally (explicit language) and non-verbally (gestures or movements) in a consistent manner that conveys both positive and negative feelings toward others.

- Receiving and interpreting the emotions and behaviors of others objectively, without personal biases.
- Understanding the underlying behaviors of others, such as intentions and purposes, or in other words, the ability to interpret hints and gestures from others (social intelligence).
- Regulating personal emotions in social situations and being aware of them (personal intelligence).

Many researchers in the field of giftedness view cognitive and emotional aspects as interconnected and interactive. The way an individual performs a task cognitively is influenced by their emotional aspects, and vice versa (Ziegler & Heller, 2000). This interaction makes the emotional factor essential. The difference between mental and non-mental factors, as noted by Tannenbuam (1997), lies in that mental factors refer to the cognitive processes and powers needed by an individual to generate ideas, whereas non-mental factors refer to social and emotional characteristics that can either help or hinder an individual from utilizing their full potential. Talent alone does not lead to great achievement, and talent development requires, in addition to ability, the interaction of mental factors with many other non-cognitive factors, regardless of the domains in which talent manifests. This emphasizes the need for the integration of cognitive and emotional aspects in designing gifted programs. As clearly stated, these skills are crucial for the psychological well-being of the individual, the cohesion of the group, and the development of society.

5. Recommendations of the Study:

1. Design and integrate specialized programs aimed at developing social skills, focusing on improving communication, collaboration, and leadership skills within gifted education programs.

2. Encourage gifted students to participate in group activities such as open discussions, interactive games, and collaborative work on creative projects.

3. Involve gifted students in designing their own programs targeting various aspects of their personalities, as well as developing multiple and diverse intelligences.

4. Investigate the impact of these programs on achieving mental health and satisfying the need for knowledge and understanding among gifted students.

5. Organize training courses for teachers to equip them with the tools and skills necessary to support gifted students in developing their social skills.

6. Utilize technology to enhance communication between students through interactive educational applications and platforms.

7. Develop effective assessment tools to evaluate the impact of programs designed to develop social skills on the overall performance of gifted students.

Authors Contributions: S.S. contributed to building the theoretical framework,

methodology and interpretation of the results, R.A. contributed to building tools, statistical analysis and review, and M.H. contributed to collecting data. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The authors acknowledge the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia for financial support under annual research grant number Grant [KFU 242502]

Conflicts of Interest: This manuscript has not been published or presented elsewhere, in part or entirety, and is not under consideration by another journal. There are no conflicts of interest to declare. On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there are no conflicts of interest.

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