

香港資優教育學苑  
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

---

## RESEARCH BRIEF

### Adjustment Issues among Gifted Youth in Hong Kong

Alfred Lau  
Research Officer

**Background.** Gifted learners have unique learning and socio-emotional needs. Locating and assessing their needs is a vital step for the Academy to respond to their needs through our student programmes and services. In line with this, the literature on giftedness, such as Chan, Chan and Zhao (2009), emphasises the importance of addressing students' learning and socio-emotional concerns that arise from adjustment to their gifted identity along their developmental trajectory. In Chan (2003, 2006), six types of adjustment issues were identified, namely, unchallenging schoolwork, poor interpersonal relations, parental expectations, perfectionism, multipotentiality, and intense involvement. These issues have a direct impact on psychological distress among Hong Kong gifted students. (Chan, 2006)

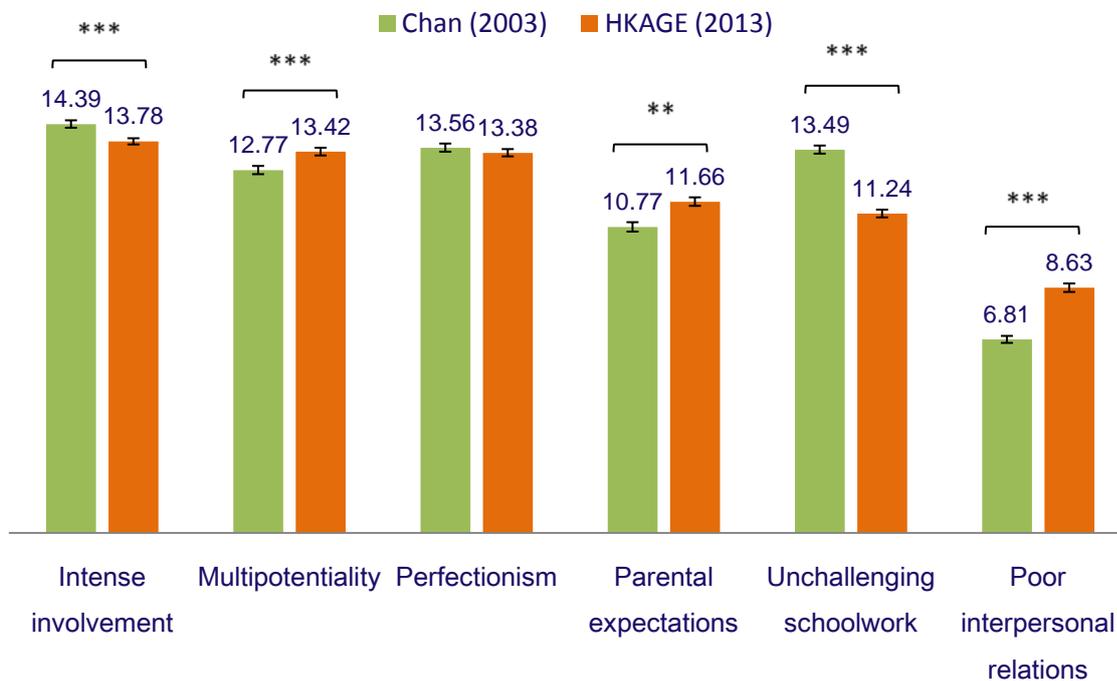
**Objectives.** The main goal of this study is to look into the psychosocial learning issues that student members are facing in light of their gifted identity. By identifying the more prominent adjustment issues, we will gain a better understanding of students' needs and student programmes can be planned more effectively.

Apart from the six categories of issues proposed by Chan (2003), it is important to know if there are any other issues/changes that student members are facing, and to see if their gifted identity brings any positive impact.

**Method.** Participants included 645 secondary one to secondary six student members of the Academy who demonstrated gifts and talents in mathematics, sciences, humanities, and/or leadership domain(s). As part of an online student needs assessment, issues pertaining to adjustment to gifted identity were assessed with the revised 24-item Student Adjustment Problems Inventory (SAPI-24; Chan, 2003). Developed in the Hong Kong context, the Inventory surveys gifted students' adjustment issues in six dimensions (unchallenging schoolwork, poor interpersonal relations, parental expectations, perfectionism, multipotentiality, and intense involvement). We included students' demographic variables (gender and age) and level of giftedness as control variables. Level of giftedness of students is measured by their standardised score in selection tests or interview. To obtain an in-depth understanding of the changes our student members are facing, an open-ended question "Please share with us if you have come across any changes / issues with your family / peers / school / community because of your gifted identity" was included in the online assessment.

**Results.** Analyses indicated that intense involvement was the most prevalent adjustment issue among gifted youth in Hong Kong, followed by multipotentiality, perfectionism, parental expectations, unchallenging schoolwork and poor interpersonal relations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Comparison of mean scores of adjustment issues among gifted youth in Hong Kong.



Note. Min. score = 4, Max. score = 20  
 \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Gender, age, and level of giftedness were unproductive of adjustment issues in general, except that senior grade students reported less parental expectations than their junior counterparts, and that male students reported significantly higher levels of unchallenging schoolwork than female students.

From the open ended question, eight content categories emerge from our qualitative data using content analysis: no change (mentioned by 225 students), changing peer dynamics (121 students), intense workload (89 students), recognition and favouritism (72 students), reactions towards gifted identity (69 students), changing family dynamics (69 students), changes in self (36 students), and changing relations with teachers (35 students).

Both positive and negative views on changing peer dynamics, the most-mentioned category, were expressed. A positive change identified by the gifted students was about making new friends or having better peer relationship, such as opening up a topic, i.e. giftedness, for peer talks, or having the opportunities to socialise with other gifted students. They also mentioned heightened expectations from peers. For some gifted youth, such change was a result of others' misunderstanding about giftedness that gifted students are all-rounders, and that gifted students can solve everything by themselves. Another prominent view expressed by students was that they experienced a sense of "differentness", yet people around them did not really understand them. In some cases this may result in being disliked or isolated by peers. For

example, some students expressed that others were “jealous of me”, and “saying things behind my back”. Critical evaluation of others is also reported by some students, who found it somehow detrimental to peer relationships. Some gifted students expressed views about having difficulty making friends as well.

**Discussion.** Taken together, the study provides an alternative lens for exploring giftedness. Our data echo the idea of the asset-vulnerability paradox (Peterson, 2012), that being gifted is both an asset and a burden for gifted youth. As illustrated by the qualitative data, being gifted is not merely about stellar performance. The learning and socio-emotional characteristics of the gifted, and other people’s (unrealistic) assumptions about giftedness collectively present adjustment issues unique to gifted youth, and add complexity to the day-to-day challenges they face, and further to their psychosocial development.

At the operational level, the present study offers insights to student programme planning to better address the issues and help gifted youth thrive. Based on the results of SAPI-24, we recommend more workshops on stress coping and emotion management, career planning, and perfectionism for gifted students. We also call for a clarification about giftedness in teacher and parent programmes to clear the myths about giftedness.

To further better understanding, a longitudinal study on how these adjustment issues evolve as gifted youth develop, and how gifted youth cope with the issues is recommended. Moreover, gifted children have different developmental challenges compared with gifted youth. They may encounter adjustment issues of a different extent, or different type. A survey on adjustment issues among our primary student members would provide an estimate of the learning and socio-emotional needs for future primary student programme planning and service delivery as well.

## References

- Chan, D. W. (2003). Adjustment problems and multiple intelligences among gifted students in Hong Kong: The development of the revised Student Adjustment Problems Inventory. *High Ability Studies, 14*(1), 41-54.
- Chan, D. W. (2006). Adjustment problems, self-efficacy, and psychological distress among Chinese gifted students in Hong Kong. *Roeper Review, 28*(4), 203-209.
- Chan, D. W., Chan, L., & Zhao, Y. (2009). Twenty-five years of gifted education research in Hong Kong 1984–2008: What lessons have we learned? *Educational Research Journal, 24*(1), 135-164.
- Peterson, J. S. (2012). Giftedness: The asset-vulnerability paradox. In R. J. R. Levesque (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Adolescence* (pp. 1171-1180). New York, NY: Springer.

## Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Prof. David W. Chan from The Chinese University of Hong Kong for his permission to use the Student Adjustment Problems Inventory.

## Contact information

Research Division  
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education  
Tel: (852) 3940 0105  
Fax: (852) 3940 0201  
Email: [research@hkage.org.hk](mailto:research@hkage.org.hk)

October 2013

Copyright © 2013 HKAGE. All rights reserved.

This publication may be reproduced in whole or in part or downloaded or printed in an unaltered form for personal, research or study use, subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgment of the source and provided that it is not being used for commercial usage or sale.