Am I That Talented? The experiences of gifted individuals from diverse educational backgrounds at the postsecondary level

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Am I That Talented? The experiences of gifted individuals from diverse educational backgrounds at the postsecondary level

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The experiences of gifted students at the postsecondary level have not been studied widely. The goal of the present study was to explore and describe gifted students’ perceptions of their first year after high school regarding experiences of success and failure. Two focus groups were conducted with 12 students (8 males, 4 females) from different educational backgrounds, who had participated in a university-based enrichment program, to discuss topics related to their academic and socio-emotional experiences at a postsecondary level. Many students who attended vocational high schools experienced high levels of discomfort with their academic preparedness to face postsecondary education. Other initial problems were adapting socially to a new environment and perceiving themselves as “less” gifted than their peers. However, after these initial adjustment problems, students revealed high perseverance to face difficulties and a strong motivation for continuing the academic path they had outlined for themselves. Conducting longitudinal research and rethinking college services offered for gifted students are some of the implications discussed in this study.

Keywords: gifted college students; college adjustment; students’ perceptions

Current research on giftedness is focused on children and adolescents, and less information is available about gifted adults, especially in the traditional postsecondary ages between 17 and 22 (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). The focus has been placed on gifted college students in certain special populations; however, postsecondary experiences of gifted students from different academic backgrounds, such as students from vocational schools, have not been investigated extensively. Rinn and Plucker argue that research has been focused on the academic experiences of gifted students, including choosing a university, learning, and academic success, traditionally measured through college students’ grade point average. However, less research has focused on students’ emotional and social experiences after exiting secondary education. How gifted college students adapt and adjust to college, the academic, and/or psychosocial difficulties they might face, and the coping mechanisms they use to face different challenges have been addressed only partially.

Chilean investigators have addressed the issue of the first-year college experience focusing only on special programs, retention, and drop-out rates. However, the real experiences, adjustment, and struggles of highly able students within college have...
not been addressed extensively by researchers in Chile due to the lack of a clear and consistent monitoring process for the academic and social progress of gifted students attending Chilean universities. The societal and institutional expectations are that gifted students will succeed academically without additional support. However, Olszewski-Kubilius and Laubscher (1996) found that gifted students experienced higher academic stress than their non-gifted counterparts. Also, special populations of gifted students, such as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have conflicting college experiences and are likely to face financial, social, and personal difficulties (Hollis & Guzman, 2005).

Factors influencing gifted students’ adaptation and adjustment to postsecondary education
Students’ abilities to adapt to college and the factors that predict college success have been investigated in depth in the last few decades. The importance of student adjustment in the first year of college is of special interest to higher education administrators who need to increase their retention rates (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996) because the majority of withdrawals occur within the first year, a time during which all students experience some degree of difficulty adjusting to college (Tinto, 1993). Individual and environmental factors that affect gifted students’ college experiences included (a) previous academic experiences in high school (Muratori, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2003), (b) social factors (Muratori et al., 2003), and (c) individual components such as motivation and personal and academic experiences in programs for the gifted (Hammond, McBee, & Hebert, 2007; Hertzog, 2003; Rinn, 2007).

High school preparation
Gifted students’ high school preparation included their academic experiences prior to entering college: high school curriculum, regular and honors classes, extracurricular activities, and study habits. Adelman (2006) concluded that the quality of the curriculum had a greater impact on students’ persistence and completion of the first year of college than the scholastic aptitude test (SAT) or the American college test scores. Muratori et al. (2003) found that many gifted college students were not satisfied with the academic preparation received in high schools due to the (a) slow pace in their classes, (b) assignments that were not meaningful for them, (c) lack of teacher preparation and knowledge, and (d) teachers who were reluctant to receive feedback from their students.

Another topic related to high school preparation that has been studied is the academic rigor and study habits that are also necessary for academic success. Authors have found that giftedness by itself is not enough for academic success in college; students need to display an array of complementary skills that help them organize, administrate, and structure the act of studying and, therefore, mastering an academic topic. Coleman (2002) found that for gifted students, learning how to study was harder than the task itself. He studied the academic experiences of students in a boarding high school for the gifted and found that students’ transition and adaptation to a new highly demanding context was hard, especially because students, in previous academic environments, used to succeed with little personal effort. Students had to dedicate a high amount of time to study and organize themselves to better face their class and study schedules; however, this process
involved knowing themselves and identifying how to react to a great amount of external pressures. The author found that students initially were highly shocked with the amount of demands and pressure, because, among other aspects, it affected their perceptions about their own skills.

An important problem existing in Chile with high school preparation is the significant differences found in the academic performance on standardized tests between students from public, voucher, and private schools. Public schools are institutions that are financed and administered by school districts, and their socioeconomic composition included approximately 70% of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Valenzuela, Labarrera, & Rodriguez, 2008). Voucher schools in Chile are jointly funded by the central government and the parents who pay tuition. Voucher schools in Chile vary in academic quality. The ones considered in this investigation were academically prestigious institutions that had a population of mainly middle-class students.

Several causes for the problem of varying test scores among students from different types of schools have been investigated—students’ SES and cultural capital, socioeconomic segregation of public schools, and curricular differences among the types of schools. In Chile, generally, students from voucher and private schools have had challenging high school academic preparation and college preparation courses. Students attending public high schools usually have gone to public vocational high schools because of (a) the proximity to their neighborhoods and (b) their parents’ expectations and/or desires for their children to obtain a trade certificate so that they could find a job if they did not enter college. Although these students might have the talent for higher education, they might not consider this option because their parents, typically, have not attended college and do not have the economic means to send their children to college. Vocational high schools offer two years of general academic preparation and two years of technical training. Therefore, their graduates have lacked the necessary content knowledge to meet some of the college requirements. In addition, implementers of the curriculum in vocational schools did not address the same content covered in regular high schools in Chile (Eyzaguirre & Le Foulon, 2002), which has caused students to achieve low scores on college entrance tests and possible academic failure during their first year in college.

**Engagement and involvement in college**

Social and academic integration are the most important factors related to a successful college experience, especially during the first year (Tinto, 1993). Social integration includes variables such as self-esteem, relationships with peers, and informal interactions with faculty members (Saenz, Marcoulides, Junn, & Young, 1999). Peer relationships are one of the most significant experiences of students during their first year of college, and social networking has become a powerful source of influence for students (Astin, 1993).

**Social integration**

Moving away from home and entering a higher education institution might influence gifted students’ initial adjustment to college according to Muratori, Colangelo, and Assouline (2003), who found that some students experienced homesickness during
their first semester in college due to the severance of their relationships with significant people back home (e.g. friends or teachers). For some students, forming new relationships in college was a difficult experience; however, they were capable of integrating socially to the institution by making new friends on campus.

**Academic integration**

Some academic variables have been defined as important for successful academic integration to college such as: grade point average, perception of intellectual development, and perception of faculty interest for teaching and students (Saenz et al., 1999). Rinn (2007) found that participation in an Honors Program in college was a more significant factor for academic achievement in gifted college students than their SAT scores. She also found that gifted students participating in these kinds of programs had a higher academic self-concept than non-honors gifted students. Reis, McGuire, and Neu (2000) interviewed 12 college students who had a learning disability but were thriving in college. They found that in achieving this successful academic integration, students displayed a series of compensatory strategies such as the following: (a) tactics to address their studying process, (b) learning strategies, and (c) use of compensatory supports.

**Motivation**

Motivation has been researched in the literature about giftedness, and to some extent in gifted college students. Hammond et al. (2007), in a qualitative study, investigated the motivational trajectories of six gifted students entering college for the first time and found that the factors most mentioned by the students as relevant to their motivation were: (a) taking advantage of the autonomy and independence of being far away from home, (b) being part of a social network and making meaningful friendships, (c) learning to overcome difficulties and a strong desire for surmounting challenges, and (d) earning recognition among the college community and peers.

**Previous experience in programs for the gifted**

Most researchers (cf. Subotnik & Arnold, 1994) who have conducted longitudinal or retrospective studies were able to analyze the impact of special programming on students’ achievements, career choices, and other personal variables. They have used quantitative measures to identify different types of cognitive skills that were acquired before adulthood. Little qualitative research could be found about college students’ perceptions and feelings about their past experiences in programs for the gifted. Hertzog (2003) found that students greatly appreciated the preparation and skills for their academic future provided by teachers of special programs for the gifted and that these academic challenges increased their self-esteem. On the other hand, the author also found that students had negative feelings about being separated from their classmates and friends when participating in pull-out programs because this could compromise their social relationships.

**College delay**

Many factors have affected students’ decisions to enter college. The lack of financial resources is one of the most important factors investigated as the cause for college
delay and attrition (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003), as well as their perceptions that they lack the academic preparedness to succeed on college entrance tests and, subsequently, in the first year of college (Steele & McDonald, 2008).

Indecision also has been investigated as a variable that might affect students’ choices to enter higher education (Lopez & Ann-Yi, 2006). After knowing their scores on the college entrance test, PSU, Chilean students have to choose a career and stay with that career for an average length of five to six years. The early commitment to a course of study is different than in the USA where students are free to choose and change majors or have the status of “undeclared” during their first years of college.

High school gifted students also experience feelings of indecision about their entrance to college. As many as 53% of academically gifted students experience difficulties and need help with their career and educational planning (Kelly & Cobb, 1991). This indecision might have several causes such as having to make the “perfect choice” and pleasing their families (Symes & Stewart, 1999). These perfectionist feelings could result in stress and anxiety and even delay college entrance.

Purpose

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the stories of a group of Chilean gifted students from two different educational backgrounds – those who attended public and those who went to voucher schools – about their postsecondary experiences.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are gifted students’ perceptions about their academic preparedness at a postsecondary level?
2. How do gifted students describe their social and emotional experiences in postsecondary settings?
3. What is the impact of students’ participation in an enrichment program for the gifted in their postsecondary experiences?

Method

Research design

The aim of this research was to honor participants’ stories and their voices as well as to acknowledge the perceptions they hold regarding their post high school experiences as gifted individuals. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was chosen because it allowed us to unfold people’s stories by analyzing the meaning of their narratives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The qualitative approach also was a suitable option because many of the current studies on gifted college students have been conducted quantitatively with the use of surveys or other self-report measures. We, however, wanted to focus on the group as a unit of analysis rather than on individual measurements (Lancy, 1993). Therefore, we conducted analyses of the perceptions and psychosocial experiences of a group of college students. Because no previous research was found on this topic in Chile, we took an exploratory-descriptive approach to capture participants’ experiences. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg
(2003), descriptive research involves making accurate descriptions of educational settings or events, which in the case of this investigation were gifted students’ experiences in postsecondary settings. Participants’ narratives were, therefore, analyzed to provide descriptions of their unique experiences after high school.

The focus group was chosen as the qualitative technique that would facilitate a deep dialogue among participants. The focus group is an effective way for people to exchange ideas about their feelings and ways of thinking and to reflect upon topics or situations they have experienced recently (Wong, 2008). The discussions that took place as part of this research were about perceptions; that is, participants’ feelings and thoughts about their postsecondary experiences. One advantage of using focus groups in this study was that they allowed participants to discuss not only general topics regarding postsecondary experiences but also emergent themes that were not considered a priori.

Participants

Participants were former students from a university-based enrichment program, the BETA (Buenos Estudiantes con Talento Académico) program, and were part of it for three consecutive years (grades 10–12). The concept of talent that underlies the BETA program is based on the differentiated model of gifts and talents (Gagné, 2009). Therefore, students who presented capabilities that placed them in the top 10% of their age group were eligible to enter the program. The modality for recruiting students for the program was based upon teacher nominations as the first stage and used preset scales. Once students were nominated from their educational institutions, they participated in an evaluation process at the BETA program. The evaluation included an intelligence assessment using the Raven Standard Progressive Matrices test and a motivation evaluation.

The BETA program provides systematic opportunities for students aged 11–17 to develop their talent potential. The program offers courses and workshops all year long (two academic semesters plus a summer session) every Friday afternoon and Saturday morning in different topics according to students’ motivations and interests and classes are taught by university professors. The courses are not part of school curricula; they are specially designed for these students and they focus on specific and in-depth content knowledge, providing numerous hands-on and challenging experiences for students to develop high-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

Twelve students participated in the focus group sessions. According to their post-secondary experiences, they were divided into Group 1, former BETA students with one year of college experience (5 male, 4 female; 6 who attended vocational high school, 3 who attended voucher high schools); and Group 2, former BETA students who deferred college entrance and attended private academic preparation courses to retake the national college entrance test (3 males who attended vocational high schools). Three participants in the sample attended voucher schools; whereas, nine came from vocational high schools.

Procedure

All former BETA students were contacted first via email. Then, a follow up telephone call was made to confirm their participation in the focus groups.
Approximately, 80% of the first generation of students who graduated from the BETA program \( (N = 42) \) were contacted for this research; however, because the data collection was performed during the summer, many of the students could not attend the focus group sessions. The sample included in the study represented 30\% \( (n = 12) \) of the first-generation BETA population of postsecondary students that graduated from the program.

Two separate focus groups were formed and discussions with each group were conducted at the University where the BETA program was located. One researcher in each of the groups acted as the facilitator for each discussion with the focus group members. Discussions in each group had an average length of two hours, and the entire session was audio recorded. First, participants were informed about the purpose of the activity, and they were invited to respond openly to an open-ended question. To ensure that each member’s opinion was included in the discussion, facilitators constantly encouraged students to participate actively.

The questions for each group were the same except for some wording/phrasing variations applicable to the postsecondary experiences of the group. The guiding topics for each focus group were: (a) general evaluation of first postsecondary year, (b) perceptions of success/failure during the year, (c) skills and personal resources needed to deal with critical events, (d) satisfaction/motivation with college/non-college experiences, (e) dreams and aspirations for the future, and (f) impact of the BETA program on postsecondary experiences.

We conducted the discussions in Spanish and students used very informal language and youth-related colloquialisms. For the purpose of this research, some of the students’ comments were translated into English. Throughout the translation process, we tried to capture the richness and depth of these comments.

**Data analysis**

To increase reliability of the research, investigator and participant triangulation was considered for the analysis. Researcher triangulation was done by the two authors of this study plus a research specialist. Each investigator read the transcriptions separately and identified themes; then, we gathered to discuss the themes and create categories. Investigator triangulation helped us with the interpretation of the results and provided insights about data that were difficult for just one person to consider (Denzin, 2001).

Participant triangulation was a process of verification and feedback was used for checking the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data that were collected in the study (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Participant check was done through a meeting with individual students who participated in the study.

After verbatim transcription of focus group discussions and interviews, the first step of the analysis was to find general themes and code them. Coding responses allowed us to group participants’ responses that shared similar ideas or themes (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The search for common themes among participants’ responses was completed using the constant comparison procedure, a process that required us to compare incidents and establish and refine categories (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Comparisons helped to achieve more consistency and greater precision in the research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Incidents that were conceptually similar were grouped under a tentative label or theme; then, broad
categories were created to describe the general phenomena. A summary of the categories and emergent themes underlying each category can be found in Table 1.

Findings
The participants’ opinions, feelings, and thoughts as expressed throughout the focus group sessions were related to several topics including academic, social, and emotional experiences during their adaptation to postsecondary education. Three main categories were found: (a) academic achievement in college; (b) personal and interpersonal postsecondary experiences, and (c) impact of the BETA program.

Academic achievement in college
When talking about their adaptation to the postsecondary level, participants provided differing types of explanations. These explanations usually were elaborations based upon their initial experiences in the postsecondary academic setting due to the new challenges and demands they perceived in their new academic setting. These initial experiences, in some way, altered their perceptions of their giftedness and personal abilities because students realized that they were lacking the necessary skills and/or academic preparedness to face these challenging academic experiences.

Themes found in this category were associated with (a) current performance/achievement levels compared to their performance in high school, (b) academic preparedness for challenges related to the type of high school they attended, and (c) giftedness in the college setting.

Comparison of current to past performance/achievement
Seven participants (six from vocational schools, one from a voucher school) defined their previous academic experience in high school as very easy and as an experience that required little academic effort from them. As one student stated, “In high school I never had a notebook. I just listened in classes.” Participants acknowledged that during their high school years, they reviewed quickly before taking a test and did not take many notes during their lessons, which was different from what was needed in college. As the same student said, “In high school I used to quickly review more than really studying. It was like yes, I’m going to read this and I did fine. But not now.” After entering college or when preparing for the college entrance test, students found greater academic demands and were faced with content knowledge

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that was not addressed in their schools. Therefore, students had a lower academic performance in college than during their high school years. One student from a vocational school described it: “In college my grades are lower. Because [college] is not as easy as high school.” Because of these new challenging academic experiences, participants revealed feelings of incompetence, uncertainty, and questioning of their academic skills and study habits especially if they attended a vocational high school. One student viewed these challenges as affecting her beliefs about her competence: “[This experience] has made me question myself. Am I That Talented? What does it mean to be talented? Because after exiting high school with a lot of awards … I go to college and it’s not like that at all.”

Academic preparedness

We noted a major difference about the academic preparedness of the participants according to the type of school they attended. On one side, gifted students who went to voucher schools ($n = 3$), regardless of their lack of study habits and/or skills necessary for college, felt very competent and prepared to face the academic rigor of college. A student from this type of school explained, “I studied in a voucher school. In that school they prepare you to go to college. They prepare you for the PSU … so it’s not that different.” On the other side, the majority of students who studied in public/vocational high schools ($n = 8$) felt a lack of preparedness, specifically in content knowledge. A student described this lack of preparation as a feeling of being misplaced, “[S]ince I was in a vocational school I had other content, and when I got to college, to business management, it was terrible (…) I didn’t get the concepts. At the beginning, I was lost.”

In this way, students from public vocational schools felt that the curriculum presented in these institutions was not adequate to prepare them for college. One student described this as a lack of academic knowledge and skills to face college demands, “What happens is that the foundation I got in high school was very bad. Luckily, I knew how to add and subtract. However, I’m doing much better now.” Another student recognized his potential as a gifted individual; however, he also recognized a lack of the necessary academic skills for college: “I know I have the talent, but maybe I don’t have the academic knowledge that I need.”

All students from vocational schools failed, on average, one to three courses in their first academic year, mainly in the content areas of Biology, Mathematics, and Physics. This lack of preparedness, according to the participants, made them feel unable to meet the initial academic requirements of college. However, after this initial academic “shock” – which meant lower grades and failure to meet the requirements of certain courses – students felt as though they were at the same academic level as their classmates. One student from a vocational school clearly described this idea: “[In school] sometimes I felt sad. Sometimes I felt happy. I was in a vocational school and it was very practical. I studied carpentry. I spent the day sanding the wood. And now I’m studying to become a teacher. There are concepts that I never ever saw in my school. But after months of hard work, I am able to succeed.”

Being gifted in college

Only participants from vocational schools ($n = 5$) analyzed the experience of being gifted in college. They saw themselves as losing their “uniqueness” and being in an
environment where everyone could be as gifted as they were. Some participants were recipients of a special college scholarship for being a BETA student; however, they did not like people knowing about this label because the academic expectations were very high. For example, one student who was a former BETA wanted people in college to acknowledge him without a specific label: “They said you are BETA, the gifted child … I told them yes but I have other skills as well.” Another student was concerned about the high academic expectations associated with the label of being gifted in college: “They asked, ‘Why do you have such a low achievement? You are a BETA student’.” Also, participants believed that being gifted in college was not always recognized or acknowledged by the institution, especially by faculty members, as stated by one of the students: “I think that it is very difficult for professors here to recognize your talent.” Also, according to them, college was a place where it was harder to be noticed and to stand out from the crowd. One of the students stated, “It is difficult to stand out here in college.”

The participants’ overall feeling was that, in this new academic context, it was much harder for them to be noticed, recognized, or identified, than it had been during their high school experiences. This feeling of anonymity led to uncertainty and disbelief about their giftedness. One student described this situation as experiencing feelings of inferiority: “I am a BETA student but all my classmates could have been so as well. And my grades are not as good as their grades.” Another student felt that everybody possessed the same abilities as she did: “I am one more student in the lot. Everyone is as gifted as I am.”

**Personal and interpersonal postsecondary experiences**

All the participants agreed that exiting high school was a stressful life experience for them; however, they also recognized that the adaptation to a postsecondary setting helped them grow and become more mature and that growth enabled them to face different challenges. Facing a new, challenging, and demanding academic and social environment made the participants acknowledge who they were and, more importantly, what they were capable of doing. Themes in this category were, therefore, related to emotional and social experiences.

**Emotional experiences**

Emotional experiences were addressed more frequently by students who did not go to college immediately after high school (n = 3) than by those who attended public vocational high schools (n = 7). Those who waited a year were preparing to retake the national college entrance test (an event that occurs just once a year in Chile). One student who deferred college described feelings of anger because of not being able to enter college in his first attempt because of a low PSU score: “I was very lonely. I needed to be alone, to be able to know myself, what was going on, because I was angry with myself.” Another feeling of participants who deferred college was that the adaptation experience forced them to rethink themselves and made them face some of their fears. One stated, “This was a year to find myself.” However, they also felt that the deferral experience helped them become more independent and move away from their “comfort zone.” One acknowledged that “I needed to be able to move by my own means, in a way that I’m the one who asks questions, I seek for answers, I don’t have to wait for someone to solve my problems. I was used
to sitting down and waiting. And my parents and friends would tell me ‘do this’, ‘go this way’. This year I wanted to do things.”

Another aspect that students closely related to their emotional experiences in adapting to college was motivation. Students who did not defer college but attended public vocational schools in the past found this especially true. These participants conceptualized motivation as the way to overcome difficulties and as the strength that kept them moving along the academic racetrack. One student described motivation as her capacity of setting goals and being able to achieve them: “This year I figured out that all the things I said I wanted to do, I want to do them. I mean I really proved to myself that this is what I like.” Other students viewed motivation as surmounting any difficulty, “I realized that I am able to overcome anything” and as a way of moving forward: “I want to overcome this, because I don’t want to be stuck.”

Almost all students in both groups (n = 10) believed that motivation and perseverance were two main elements that helped them succeed and prevented their withdrawal from college. For some students, quitting was not an option that they would consider: “I never thought I would quit. If I’m here it is because of something, and I have to learn.” For others, being obstinate was what helped them go through: “I like being a stubborn person. If I hadn’t been a stubborn person, I would have left myself to be defeated by adversity.”

Motivation also was related to feelings of commitment to their majors/careers. In some cases, motivation was translated into passion about the knowledge and skills they were acquiring: “I feel love and passion for my career.” Other participants showed feelings of intense commitment, which helped them to overcome difficulties: “I am happy here, even though it’s difficult … until I die.” Until I die is a popular Chilean colloquialism that is used by young people to mean orienting all personal efforts and motivation toward achieving a goal; the expression is appropriate in this instance because the student was stating her strong conviction to continue with post-secondary education despite the difficulties.

Finally, participants’ motivations also were apparent when they expressed a strong desire for graduating and continuing their studies at a graduate level (n = 5). Some students wanted to attend graduate school and study abroad: “I would like to be a graduate student and go to a foreign university” stated one student. “I want to keep studying, and go to Milan” said another one, while another added, “I want to continue studying, go to another country, to broaden the spectrum of my current career.” This motivation was translated into clear goals for the future regarding professional work and continuous education. One of the students drew a very clear path for his future career: “I want to work, graduate as an engineer and, afterwards, teach at the university.”

Social experiences

Participants who attended college agreed that adjusting to the social, academic, and classroom environments was difficult. This initial difficulty was identified as the obstacles they faced when entering and adjusting to a culturally or socially diverse setting. One student in this group defined this social difficulty as feelings of isolation: “It was hard for me to feel integrated. I felt isolated. I don’t know why yet.” Another student felt he could not integrate easily because of his lack of academic
knowledge: “I was in a study group. I felt embarrassed to ask them, because I didn’t understand, and they kept saying ‘it’s so easy.’”

Some of the participants who attended vocational schools \( n = 8 \) initially perceived the socioeconomic differences and snobbery among their classmates: “Half of the class had scholarships and the other half was very snobby. So the differences were evident.” These differences translated into a social disconnection between the student and his or her classmates: “I didn’t like anybody at first. They were so snobby, not very good people; I had difficulties connecting with them.” However, these differences began to dissipate as the academic year came to an end. “The first year I had a hard time adapting. That was the hardest part,” said one student. After their initial adjustment problems, participants agreed that they now had solid study and/or friendship groups that provided support to them when they experienced problems. One participant stated, “We all have the same interests. We are very good friends. And their support helps a lot.”

When students from voucher schools referred to their social adaptation to college \( n = 2 \), they mentioned it as a smoother process than students from vocational high schools. One of the students even found high school friends to help him in the process: “I found high school friends in my career so we supported each other a lot.” Another participant found that his academic skills helped him integrate into college: “I found a group of friends very quickly and also offered to help them academically. It wasn’t hard for me at all.”

**Impact of the BETA program**

All the participants \( n = 12 \) agreed that their participation in the university-based enrichment program, BETA, was a transforming experience for them, both academically and socially. The aspect mentioned most frequently by participants was that the program fostered the development of different cognitive and social skills. These skills helped them in contexts that involved problem-solving at a postsecondary level. Themes they discussed in this category included the impact of the program on cognitive skills and the impact on social skills.

**Cognitive skills**

Many participants \( n = 9 \) defined their academic journey in the BETA program as an experience that “opened their minds” and gave them the skills to think and reason in a different and complex way. Problem-solving and critical thinking were skills highly recognized by the students as useful in a postsecondary setting. A student acknowledged that “the critical analysis that I acquired (in BETA) … helps me for everything.” Critical thinking also was associated with the act of reflecting and was understood as a skill that helped them avoid taking things for granted. One student described it as opening her mind: “BETA developed our minds …, a mind that now is more open and reflective.” Another saw herself as a more critical person than in the past: “We are more critical people now, more reflective people.” Finally, other students acknowledged the fact that the BETA program made them think differently than when they were in high school. One said, “The program made me reason in a way that was different from school.”
Social skills

Some of the participants \((n = 7)\) referred to the social skills they acquired through the program, especially how different relationships and activities in the BETA program helped them overcome personal and other difficulties. One student viewed it as a deep inner change: “The change was tremendous … I was very introverted.” The fact of just talking with other gifted students and meeting people who accepted them as they were was a highly valued aspect of the BETA program. One participant noted the possibility of having different types of dialogues with peers: “With my friends here I was able to have other types of conversations.” Lastly, environmental aspects of the program, such as an accepting and non-judgmental setting, were considered important factors that influenced participants’ social development: “I feel that I achieved so much in my social skills. I matured a lot, I would say.”

Discussion

Results of this research need to be interpreted with caution. Due to the nature of the investigation, results cannot be transferred to the overall population of gifted college students. However, the different approaches that we used to conduct the qualitative analyses in this investigation lend credibility to the findings and outline tentative and preliminary explanations for the current problems that gifted students may face when adjusting to postsecondary education.

Academic preparedness and adjustment

One of the findings of this study is a description of the ways gifted students in the sample adapt to a postsecondary academic setting and the psychosocial complexities that underlie this process. Academic preparedness has an influence on the adjustment of gifted students to a postsecondary academic setting, and this adjustment affects the way they see themselves. For the group from vocational schools, one of the main problems with the adaptation was the lack of content knowledge needed to meet the minimum requirements for success in their college courses. On the other side, students from voucher schools adapted easily to college academic demands. The lack of academic preparation of students from vocational schools is consistent with Adelman’s (2006) findings about current differences in the academic intensity of high school curricula. According to Adelman, students from the lowest SES quintiles tend to attend high schools that have low quality curricula where teachers do not prepare them appropriately for postsecondary studies. In this study, the main differences can be explained by the curriculum of vocational and regular schools. Regular high school curriculum includes the study of science, mathematics, and humanities; whereas, the content knowledge of vocational schools is oriented to the apprenticeship of theoretical/practical skills that need to be displayed when performing a particular trade. Because of its orientation, the curriculum in vocational schools includes just half of the general preparation content that usually is found in regular high schools (Eyzaguirre & Le Foulon, 2002). In summary, these vocational schools do not prepare students for college entrance, and being unprepared is one of the reasons for the academic struggles and low achievement faced by students from vocational high schools in this study. Students’ low performance in college could be conceptualized as underachievement; however, we prefer to use the definition proposed by Steele and McDonald (2008), which is gifted students who are academically unprepared but academically capable.
For students from vocation and voucher schools, one substantial problem was to modify their study habits to meet the academic rigor of college courses, which is consistent with the findings made by Coleman (2002) about the “shock” to face growing and complex academic demands in highly competitive and demanding environments. Gifted students’ transition to college, therefore, requires constant adaptations related to study habits, rigor, time management, and finding balance between leisure and study time.

The complex scenario of postsecondary academic rigor, academic difficulties, perceptions that they lack preparedness, and doubt about their own capacities is complicated by the assumption that giftedness predetermines academic success. Academic success, within the specific results of this research, is shown to be related to the ability to keep up with classmates and achieve the necessary level of content knowledge. Gifted students are no longer “special,” standing out in the crowd. They meet peers of similar abilities, and their uniqueness is lost within the “academic elite” that makes up the college population in Chile.

Social and emotional adjustment

The participants in the study encountered social and emotional complexities related to their initial experiences in postsecondary settings. Their challenges included initial difficulties adapting to the new social contexts, particularly to environments that have a diverse socio-cultural composition. These difficulties were more evident for students from vocational high schools. An example of this adaptation was students’ referral to “snobby” classmates who were frequently students from upper socioeconomic classes that might talk, dress, and think in a different way. However, once the initial social connection was made, students showed a clear progression in the adjustment to college’s social environment by making new friends and participating in study groups. These findings are consistent with Astin’s (1993) findings about the value of social networks in students’ success and adjustment to their first year of postsecondary experiences.

Despite initial socio-emotional adjustment difficulties, motivation for the students in the study acts as a “safety net” that helps them succeed and prevents their withdrawal from college. Students in the sample described motivation as an affirmative dialogue with the inner self translated into a strong desire to overcome difficult experiences and succeed in their career paths (Hammond et al., 2007). Motivation and perseverance act as triggers to implement coping strategies to successfully face college stressors, such as developing efficient study habits, managing time successfully, and compensating the lack of content knowledge to face college courses. Students seemed to use problem-focused coping, a strategy that involves use of problem-solving behaviors to face a situation that is likely to change in the future knowing that social and other supports are available (Holahan & Moos, 1987). Also, motivation to finish tertiary studies can be crucial to some students, to whom college is a life-changing experience and a way through which social mobility can be achieved.

Previous experiences on a program for the gifted

Previous participation in a program for the gifted had a major impact on the development of students’ cognitive and social abilities. One important skill acquired
throughout the BETA program was critical thinking, described by participants as current thinking patterns and ways of approaching different content areas. Vaughn, Feldhusen, and Asher (1991) found that the effect of special programming for the gifted on critical thinking is highly significant. The BETA program supported interactions with similar peers in an environment that reinforced social openness and encouraged students to make new friends and develop social skills that positively impacted their transition. However, participants stated that being identified as a gifted student sometimes had a negative impact on their first year of postsecondary experiences. The “gifted” label, for some of the participants, had a negative effect because of the higher expectations held by other individuals (e.g. students and professors) who knew about this label. The negative impact of labeling found in this study is consistent with the findings of Hertzog (2003) who found that college students refer to the label of gifted with caution because of the expectations the label carries and the chance of disappointing people in their close environment.

Implications for practice

The main question that arises in light of this research is the following: what kind of services can be offered to gifted students from different educational backgrounds at a postsecondary level?

A monitoring model for first-year gifted students that includes a support system devised to meet the different needs of these students should be developed through initiatives such as mentoring, counseling, and academic preparation for college. Mentoring can be a meaningful experience for gifted students, especially for those who are struggling with academic and social integration during their first year of tertiary education. Interactions with experienced members of the university learning community also can be a significant contribution and a life-changing experience. However, even if academic support is available for gifted students, and many Chilean universities have implemented remedial programs for freshmen students to reinforce academic contents, support also is needed to help students develop study skills. Skills associated with studying, such as self-regulation, learning strategies, and time organization, can be important when facing college academic demands and for gifted students can be as important as the task itself.

For those students deferring college, counseling can help guide them through the process of choosing a career and help them deal with the emotional problems associated with the decision of delaying college. Support can be provided before they exit secondary education through vocational orientation programs, such as the one that is currently offered each year in the BETA program.

Creating opportunities for students to access extra-curricular academic preparation is a short-term suitable option. For example, college entrance preparation centers, called Preuniversitarios in Chile, have proven to be a powerful tool for students to acquire the necessary skills for entering college. Creating more centers or promoting free access to the existing ones can be a suitable option for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who do not have these opportunities, especially those from vocational schools.

Implications for research

This research provided preliminary evidence about the postsecondary experiences of a very particular group of Chilean gifted students who came from different
educational backgrounds and had a variety of experiences that affected them in different ways. Some questions that arise for further research are the following: (a) What happens to gifted students in their following years of study? (b) Are there differences in college trajectory for students that came from voucher and vocational high schools? (c) What happens with identity development of these students and their conceptions of giftedness? and (d) How are families and schools affected? A longitudinal study with a larger sample would provide much needed information to examine variables such as students’ trajectories in their postsecondary education, percentages of student withdrawal, average length of time to graduation, support systems available for gifted students, and relationships with peers.

More studies need to be conducted with students from vocational schools who are disadvantaged due to their socioeconomic backgrounds and high school academic preparedness. Aspects that can be addressed when conducting research with this particular group include the benefits and detriments of vocational preparation for college academic success, the value of pre-college preparation, and the employment of compensatory strategies by students when faced with academic or psychosocial difficulties through help-seeking behaviors. The study of these problems can provide valuable input for universities that currently are concerned with student attrition but have not addressed the particular issues that can affect an important number of enrolled students.

References


