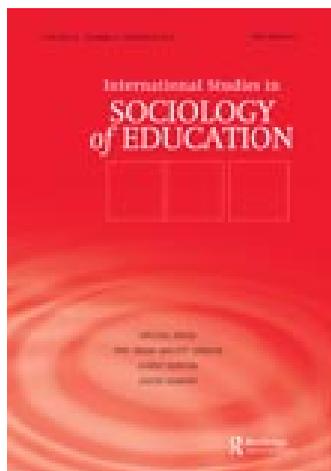


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What's wrong with giftedness? Parents' perceptions of the gifted label

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The label 'gifted' has been a source of contention for decades, possibly because it seems to imply a desirable status that is mysteriously granted to some yet remains unavailable to others. Some writers have suggested that the term should be abandoned altogether, though a replacement that retains the same utility for classification purposes and delivery of services remains elusive. We asked 106 parents of gifted learners about their usage of the term 'gifted' to learn more about when they perceive the term to be useful and when or why they avoid using it. The majority of respondents reported avoiding the use of the gifted label in conversations with others who were not labelled. Findings suggest that these parents felt they or their children would be judged negatively by others if the parents used the term 'gifted', and that in many cases, they used alternate language or (for twice-exceptional children) gave priority to describing their child's disability. Respondents who did choose to use the term framed their decision in terms of a need to educate other parents about giftedness as an important aspect of individual differences.

Keywords: gifted education; parenting; labelling theory; phenomenological analysis

The benefits and detriments of labels are fiercely debated in the exceptional education literature. While labels conveniently define attributes (e.g. giftedness, specific learning disability or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and assist educators in meeting a child's individual needs, excessive emphasis on labels may devalue the child as a person (Gates, 2010). Yet, the practice of labelling is widespread in centrally funded educational systems such as in the US, in part because federal funds are only distributed to public schools where specific disabilities are categorically identified (Blum & Bakken, 2010).

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Labels also offer administrative convenience and a means of record keeping related to schools' scheduling and staffing needs.

To label or not to label

Arguments against labelling predominately concern its harmfulness to a child's individuality and potential. In terms of a child's individuality, more than 40 years ago Gallagher (1972) contended, 'Placing any label on any human being does violence to that individual uniqueness which is the joy of humanity. Yet, we do it all the time because it is such convenient communication shorthand' (p. 527). Although labelling may serve as a useful communication tool, it can also result in damaging stereotypes (Blum & Bakken, 2010). For example, while a label of learning disabled (LD) might bring a child one step closer to receiving the services necessary to succeed in school, the negative connotations associated with that particular label may impair his or her social adjustment (Robinson, 1990).

The arguments in support of labelling are as compelling as the arguments against it. Gallagher (1976) described the 'sacred' uses of labelling to include providing a means of classification, diagnosis and differentiated treatment for individual students; laying a foundation for future research; and establishing a starting point for acquiring support and resources for a specific disability (p. 3). Thus, labelling in and of itself is not 'bad' in this perspective; rather, it is the irresponsible use of labelling to discriminate and/or deny children what they need for success that invalidates the practice.

In a critical theory approach, Margolin (1994) draws upon the perspective of Foucault (1980) to frame the positive aspects of the label of 'gifted' as merely a tool through which social control is exerted on the non-labelled, often with 'little awareness' (p. xiv) on the part of educators or scholars in gifted education. In this viewpoint, the gifted label is always positive, and efforts by scholars to consider challenges such as differential identification or underachievement serve merely to draw attention away from the underlying social control that presumably is exerted by the existence of 'the gifted'.

A popular argument in support of labelling revolves around funding. When federal funds in the US are allocated to state and local organisations, those funds must be distributed by specific disability categories. Labelling, therefore, becomes the practical means by which schools receive federal financial support for the services and programming necessary to help students succeed (Mukuria & Bakken, 2010). In the area of gifted education, given the absence of a US federal mandate for services, labelling plays a similar role at the state level for those states that provide funding for gifted programming and services (see National Association for Gifted Children & Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted [NAGC], 2013).

Given the controversial nature of labelling (Margolin, 1994), a variety of theoretical perspectives have been advanced to explain labels, the varied

functions they may serve and the consequences they may produce. Below, we outline four approaches that have received attention in the literature. These include: the halo effect; stereotype threat; the Pygmalion effect; and labelling theory.

Theories of labelling

Halo effect

The halo effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Thorndike, 1920) concerns how individuals perceive one another. It suggests that perceptions about a single attribute spill over into one's perceptions of other related areas, leading to unwarranted assumptions regarding the other areas. Both positive and negative perceptions can produce a halo effect. For example (Gates, 2010), a creatively gifted student may be perceived by his teacher as being disruptive because he asks too many questions in class. The global perception generalised from this single attribute leads his teacher to believe the student also is a problem (or has problems) in other areas such as intellectual ability; consequently, his giftedness is completely ignored. Gates further contends:

there is a deep-seated inability to rise above the global perception in order to make an impartial assessment of individual traits of a person ... This inability is unconscious as well. Assessors tend not to be aware of their own biases in perceptions of others and therefore perpetuate incorrect assumptions about people. (p. 203)

If the global perception based on a single salient attribute overshadows other attributes and dictates how the student is treated in school, this could have a potentially negative impact on his or her educational outcomes.

Alternatively, a widely held yet fallacious belief among the general public is that students with gifts and talents do not need additional educational services, because 'high-ability students do not face problems and challenges' (Moon, 2009, p. 274) and thus, they will make it on their own. In this case, the positive perception of gifted ability has an erroneous influence on beliefs about other aspects of these children's lives. Halo effects also may contribute intertwined positive and negative consequences, as in the tendency to generalise from domain-specific giftedness to perceptions of global gifted ability. Inappropriate instructional or placement decisions may result in this manner from what otherwise might seem to be a positive halo effect.

Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat is believed to exist when an individual is stereotyped negatively by others and fears acting in a way that confirms that stereotype, leading to observable changes in her/his performance under the threat

condition (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 1997). In the most straightforward case, a stereotype such as ‘girls are not as good at math as boys are’ can produce lower math scores among girls when the stereotype is highlighted just before the female students take a math test. However, the stereotypes surrounding gifted ability may be more complex.

For students with gifts or talents, the label of giftedness may convey different things to different people; therefore, one group’s perception of the gifted label may involve a negative stereotype, whereas another group’s perception may involve a positive stereotype. Further, the stereotype represents perceptions of both others and the self regarding the individual’s deviation from her ‘typical’ peers. To this individual, perceptions of others and self about this deviation may lead to either a positive or negative internal attitude towards the stereotype, which in turn influences her future behaviour. If she feels negatively towards it, for example, she may attempt to conceal the attributes that make her ‘different’ in order to conform to the attributes of her academically typical peers. Thus, the stereotype may lead the individual to feel ‘social anxiety or pressure to perform in a certain manner’ (Gates, 2010, p. 201). This complex duality in others’ perceptions of individuals with giftedness likely also is relevant to other theoretical approaches that attempt to explain the influence of labelling.

Pygmalion

The Pygmalion theory contends that the expectations of others can influence an individual’s behaviour, in a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) demonstrated that teachers have the power to influence student performance through their perceptions. For example, if a teacher believes a student is gifted, the teacher will have higher academic expectations, which in turn will influence the student’s performance in this class. Though subsequent research has questioned some of the originators’ claims about it, this effect implies that the gifted label’s consequences might be uniformly positive.

Conversely, if the teacher believes the student is not capable of high performance, perhaps because the student is labelled as having a disability, the teacher may inadvertently signal to the student that it is acceptable to perform at a lower level. The student receiving this message may feel he/she is in an unsupportive environment, leading to self-doubt or questioning of his/her ability, resulting in disengagement and failure to achieve at a level commensurate with ability. These feelings also may lead the student to choose consciously to do only the minimum work required to achieve a satisfactory grade. In contrast to the positive direction of a Pygmalion effect, when an expectancy effect operates in this negative direction it may be referred to as the ‘golem effect’ (Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982).

Labelling theory

Labelling theory (Becker, 1963) emerged from studies of the sociology of deviance. According to this view, there are two phases of deviance, labelled primary and secondary. Primary deviance refers to the initial appearance of antisocial behaviours, while secondary deviance involves engaging in deviant behaviour to satisfy the expectations of the deviant role (Ray & Downs, 1986). Labelling theory suggests furthermore that individuals respond interactively, using the reactions of others in their environment to justify their continued practice of deviant actions.

Though primarily concerned with explaining behaviours considered socially deviant, labelling theory also has been applied to gifted education (Guskin, Okolo, Zimmerman, & Peng, 1986). Students labelled gifted may view themselves differently from their non-identified peers. Consequently, this could result in a set of behaviours that may or may not be viewed as negative (e.g. perfectionism); labelling theory posits that these behaviours would not have occurred in the absence of the gifted label. It also follows that others' reactions to those labelled gifted may be used, by the individuals so labelled, as support to continue acting in the expected manner.

Perceptions of the gifted label

While the issue of labelling students with disabilities has received a great deal of attention, the impact of labelling students gifted has also been studied. Although the term 'gifted' indicates seemingly positive qualities like above-average intelligence, many English-speaking cultures and educational systems tend to be ambivalent towards this label (Colangelo & Brower, 1987; McCoach & Siegle, 2007); specifically, there is little sense of urgency among the public or the general education system for providing for the education of students labelled as gifted. Within the past five years the suggestion to move away from the label 'gifted' and towards the term 'talent development' met with strident resistance from many in the US gifted education community, even though the idea of a talent development perspective has been present in the literature since the mid-1990s (Feldhusen, 1995; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2014). In a parallel development, during the time since our interviews were conducted, a recent book (Peters, Matthews, McBee, & McCoach, 2014) has advanced the argument that the gifted label should be replaced entirely by the term 'advanced academics'. These authors argue that the reification of the term 'gifted' has done more harm than good for students of high academic ability, and furthermore, that it would make more sense to label services rather than labelling students.

Kerr, Colangelo, and Gaeth (1988) found that adolescents labelled as 'gifted' had positive self-perceptions, but that their social adjustment was adversely affected by negative connotations associated with the 'gifted' label. Given the sometimes-painful social implications that being labelled

gifted may have for children, ambivalence seems an inadequate response. If this sounds somewhat judgemental, we admit that it is; consistent with practice in many other areas of education, scholars of gifted education – especially in the US context, which is the focus of this article – often adopt an advocacy perspective in their writing (cf. Margolin, 1994; McCoach & Siegle, 2007 for a different perspective on this issue) in order to convey a sense of urgency about meeting the needs of specific groups of learners. Research with students with gifts and talents in other contexts (e.g. Freeman, 2010) also highlights the influence of effective advocacy, or the lack thereof, on long-term outcomes achieved by these learners. In this spirit, we believe that stereotypic views of giftedness should be examined more closely for their potentially harmful and possibly beneficial effects on students labelled as gifted (Cornell, 1983). We have attempted one approach to examining this issue through the current study.

Dweck (2000) contends that the label ‘gifted’ promotes an entity theory of intelligence, by sending a message to students that intelligence is fixed rather than malleable:

It [the gifted label] implies that some entity, a large amount of intelligence, has been magically bestowed upon students, making them special. Thus, when students are so labeled, some may be over concerned with justifying the label and less concerned with seeking challenges that enhance skills ... if being gifted makes them special, then losing the label may mean to them that they are ‘ordinary’ and somehow less worthy. (p. 122)

This is a legitimate concern, and the importance of instilling a mindset that intelligence is malleable has been echoed in numerous recent works in the gifted education literature (e.g. Subotnik, Robinson, Callahan, & Gubbins, 2012). Additionally, others (Peters et al., 2014) have suggested that the gifted label should be abandoned in favour of terms such as ‘advanced academics’ that do not convey the implication of being magically bestowed.

Looking beyond the problems posed by the entity view encouraged by current usage of the term gifted, the gifted label also leads to tension due to differing views of equity vs. excellence as the appropriate goals of an educational system. While this issue is not unique to the US, Gagne (2011) notes that it is readily documentable in the US setting. Specifically, McCoach and Siegle (2007) state that ‘fears of elitism cause many educators to view gifted education as involving special privileges for the “already advantaged”’ (p. 246).

Regardless of the role the gifted label may play, decades of research have converged on an understanding that both genetic and environmental influences are responsible for individual differences in cognitive ability (see Thompson & Oehlert, 2010). Regardless of how intelligence or any other complex construct is defined, it seems likely that some individuals will always have more of it than others do. Nevertheless, it also is clear that

what individuals *do* with their intelligence is ultimately of greater importance than are most differences in its amount (see Freeman, 2010; Simonton, 2001; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011), and thus, Dweck's focus on the motivation leading individuals to practice for skill enhancement is appropriate.

Freeman's work (2010) also highlights the role of motivation, as well as interpersonal and family dynamics, in fostering or inhibiting the success of both students labelled gifted and those of equivalent ability who were not so labelled. Her findings document the complexity of positive and negative effects of the gifted label in children and their parents. Though clearly germane to the labelling issue in the broadest sense, the causal role of interpersonal and family dynamics falls largely outside the scope of the current study.

Findings from studies of parents' perceptions of the 'gifted' label have been mixed. Cornell (1983) found parents associated the label positively with feelings of pride and closeness for their gifted children; however, positively labelling one child 'gifted' had a negative impact on siblings who indirectly were labelled 'nongifted'. Further, Cornell and Grossberg (1989) reported that over one-quarter of parents of gifted children in their study chose *not* to use the gifted label in discussion with parents of non-identified children. Colangelo and Brower (1987), on the other hand, reported that the 'gifted' label did not appear to have any long-term negative effects for families of gifted children. Because of the relatively high error rates found in many gifted identification procedures (McBee, Peters, & Waterman, 2014), we use the term 'non-identified' rather than a more judgemental term such as 'typical' or 'average'.

There also exists some descriptive literature on parental responses to the gifted label. Freeman (2010) offers an in-depth longitudinal examination of the lives of 20 high-potential individuals in Britain, some of whom were labelled gifted as children. Freeman found that 'children who had been volunteered by their parents as gifted were more likely to have more emotional problems. They were likely to have fewer friends and be more "difficult"' (p. 205). In her chapter on the gifted label's influence, Freeman details the case of a musically able girl whose parents put excessive pressure on her to achieve eminence based on this label. The girl's failure to achieve the expected eminence led to adverse, lifelong consequences. However, the chapter also describes a second child who developed into a successful adult despite the gifted label. Freeman also suggests that many of the problems of children labelled gifted may in fact be due to other issues that are external to the gifted label.

Another contradictory set of findings relates to the extent to which parents are involved in the gifted labelling process of their child. For example, while parents' overuse of the 'gifted' label may have negative effects on the social adjustment of their children (Cornell, 1989), lack of parental

involvement in the process also may cause children to develop discomfort with the label (Robinson, 1990).

Despite mixed findings, what all of these studies share in common is how parents' use of the gifted label affects their children, both gifted and non-identified. However, what generally is missing is a closer examination of how parents, themselves, perceive, use and cope with the 'gifted' label. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine in-depth parents' perceptions of their use of the gifted label. Specifically, we used interviews with parents of gifted learners to explore how they approach the sensitive topic of their child's giftedness in discussion with parents of non-identified children.

Methods

In 2009, parents of children with gifts and talents ($N = 987$) responded to a national online survey about their parenting experiences (Matthews & Jolly, 2010). Of these respondents, 431 (43.7%) indicated their willingness to participate in a follow up interview, and 400 provided contact information to do so. Among these, 330 reported having one or more children attending a public school.

We attempted to contact all of these parents. The parents were interviewed during 2009–2010 by research assistants with graduate training in gifted education. Respondents ($N = 106$) who were available and who consented to participate in an interview included 30 public school parents (all mothers) interviewed in July/August 2009, and 77 public school parents (13 fathers and 64 mothers, including one husband/wife pair who responded jointly) interviewed in March/April 2010. Two responses that were not related to the prompt were discarded, for a final N of 104 responses representing 105 individuals. Interviewees' self-identified ethnicity included one male and four females of Asian heritage, two Black females, three Hispanic females and two females who identified their ethnicity as 'Other'. The remaining respondents were White. Approximately one-third of interviewees included their self-reported household income among the low to middle range of the survey's income scale (bottom four income categories; from \$0–14,999 to \$50,000–74,999), while the remaining two-thirds indicated household incomes at the middle to high range (top two income categories; \$75,000 to \$100,000 or >\$100,000 annually).

Parents were interviewed using a script containing 10 questions related to their parenting practices and perceptions of their child and of giftedness. Interview questions were selected and developed based on a systematic review of the literature about parenting of gifted students (Jolly & Matthews, 2012). This article reports and analyses results from the following prompt, which was presented near the end of the interview: The gifted label can be a sensitive topic in some circles. How do you approach

discussions of your gifted child's needs when talking with other parents whose children have not yet been identified as academically gifted?

Analytical procedures

Using phenomenological data analysis as a foundation for this study (Patton, 2002), all interview data from this prompt were analysed collectively. Open coding was used initially; the data were annotated and side notes were made. During this process, the researchers searched for emerging patterns and colour-coded phrases related to particular categories (or themes). Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was then used to confirm emerging themes and to relate them to the overall phenomena of how these parents perceived and reported using the gifted label. Two researchers read through the transcripts and discussed coding until 100% agreement was reached on the themes, subthemes and representative quotations that illustrated each (see Table 1).

Results

Five major categories or themes emerged from the data analysis (see Table 1). Some parents felt it was necessary to *Explain/Educate* parents of non-identified children about their children's giftedness. Similarly, some parents were *Upfront/Honest* about their children's giftedness; they did not attempt to conceal it. Other parents trod carefully, demonstrating *Sensitivity/Understanding* towards parents of non-identified children. These parents also were cognizant of the *Language* they used, opting to use terminology other than 'gifted'. Further, many parents went to the opposite extreme of *Upfront/Honest* and instead chose *Avoidance/No Discussion* when the topic of giftedness arose. We use direct quotes from interviews in the sections that follow to illustrate representative parents' voices within each theme.

Explain/Educate

The *Explain/Educate* theme, with five subthemes, was discussed in 34% of the interview responses. The most common response (in 20 transcripts) reflected parents' willingness to *Share knowledge of giftedness* [only] *when asked specifically about it*. Two parents felt it necessary to frame *Giftedness as a difference, not superiority*. One explained, 'There is a need to help other parents understand that although their kids need extra help, our kids need help to remain engaged and fully develop so their school year is not wasted'. Eight parents of the gifted educated other parents about gifted services, and even went so far as to *Encourage formal testing for identification* when they felt a non-identified child showed signs of gifted potential. One such parent commented, 'I do a lot of advising of people to get them

Table 1. Representative parent responses by category and subtheme.

Category and subthemes	Number/ percentage ^a	*Representative quotation
<i>Explain/Educate</i>	35 (34%) ^b	
Shares knowledge of giftedness when asked specifically about it	20 (19%)	There is a lot of need for stereotype debunking ... I try to do a lot of education and a lot of awareness, trying to keep people aware of gifted children ... everybody is different, and you're always learning something from someone else
Giftedness as difference, not superiority	2 (2%)	
Encourage formal testing for identification	8 (8%)	I encourage people to get the [gifted identification] test because it might behoove them later and who knows? It couldn't hurt. I don't know how it could possibly hurt. But I don't bring it up unless there's some reason to. Usually it's because I am trying to help someone with a problem [related to their child]
Encourage participation in extracurricular gifted activities	4 (4%)	If I think the [another] student is gifted I will share information with the parent ... I will tell them about specific classes, programs, weekend trips, and things to get parents involved
Encourage parent advocacy	8 (8%)	... locally, I've really tried to encourage parents to push for programs to benefit their child that is gifted or has above average needs that are not being met at the local public school
<i>Sensitivity/Understanding</i>	32 (31%)	
Concern for others' feelings as the basis for not using gifted label around non-identified children or their parents	13 (13%)	I tend to try to make sure I say something positive about their child, in some area of strength, so they feel good too, so they don't feel sensitive about the fact their child may be gifted or not
Understanding of gifts and talents as a single exceptionality among many	18 (17%)	... rather than just saying tests show my child is far out here on one spectrum but he's average on this spectrum and figuring out what's best for him. Another kid might be different places on those spectrums so that kid is different that way. Why [do] we have to stamp that label on top of it? I think it makes things worse

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Category and subthemes	Number/ percentage ^a	*Representative quotation
Desire to minimise the label's impact on one's own child	11 (11%)	I have one who is gifted, and I have one who is in a regular class, so, and I try my best not to [emphasize the gifted label], because in our own household we have that, and I don't need to make another child [from a different family] feel that they're not as smart as her
<i>Language</i>	69 (66%)	
Use of a different term rather than gifted	16 (15%)	I think sometimes instead of using the label 'gifted', I often use 'quirky' as a term instead
Refer first to disability of 2E child	4 (4%)	I prefer to say that my child is ESE which is exceptional student education and that encompasses a large spectrum. A lot of gifted children do have other issues. They are either LD, or have ADD, ADHD, language or social interaction problems, or sensory integration disorder. There is a wide variety of issues these children come with and I try to explain to them that my child deserves to learn just as much as the next child. Whether they're labelled gifted or any other label
Use varies, depending on context	26 (25%)	I've learned very quickly what people it is okay to use the word 'gifted' with, and what people I just have to gloss over what my daughter is doing
General reasons why 'gifted' is not used	16 (15%)	I avoid it. Because people have bizarre feelings. They are jealous of gifted, they are angry that gifted children get more ... supposedly. They're angry that kids with needs get more, they're [just] angry ...
<i>Avoidance/no discussion</i>	24 (23%)	
Flat refusal or avoidance, without specific rationale	54 (52%)	We tell the children we never talk about religion, never talk about politics, and you [don't] talk about your giftedness. [All these] things we try to avoid in conversations in public
Gifted as emotionally loaded	22 (21%)	... we don't bring it up to anybody. It is almost a curse because parents think you are bragging verses being just trying to say how difficult it is to deal with someone who is so smart and make sure they are not bored in school

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Category and subthemes	Number/ percentage ^a	*Representative quotation
Fearful of loss of friendship (with other parents or for their child)	2 (2%)	It's very touchy especially with friends he has grown up with along the way that he is very similar to him, but they have been screened and not been put in the program
<i>Up front/Honest</i> Use 'gifted' label without hesitation	20 (19%) 10 (10%)	The groups we're in, the friends we have, the other groups we're in, I don't think it's seen as a stigma. It's just the people we're around I think. Even though, I don't ever remember being concerned about talking about him being in the gifted program. That has not been an issue for us
Gifted behaviours are obvious to onlookers	9 (9%)	It's obvious to anyone who knows him that he is very, very smart. It's a kind of smart that when he was younger and we would be chatting while we were shopping at the mall and complete strangers would stop us and comment on how smart he was
Uses label with a coping strategy to deflect stigma	3 (3%)	I never talked about them being gifted because the magnet they went to was for gifted and talented – TAG – so they were in – the core classes they were in they were all gifted. But it was a school that had a lot of arts so both my boys like music and they were in the plays so the truth is no one really – our friends didn't know whether they went there because of their identification as 'AG' or did they go there because we liked all the arts they offered

Note: Each quotation listed in the table represents a unique individual's response. Two of the 106 responses were not included in the analysis due to their being unrelated to the question (these two individuals continued discussing other issues after being read the question about their use of the gifted label).

^aPercentages will not total to 100 because many respondents mentioned more than one subtheme. The number of different subthemes mentioned by individual respondents was distributed as follows: One only (37 individuals); Two (36 individuals); Three (19 individuals); Four (eight individuals); or five subthemes (four individuals). No response included more than five subthemes.

^bCategory counts represent unique individuals, each of whom expressed one or more subtheme within her/his response.

involved with a diagnostician and once they've been diagnosed, you know, labeled gifted, then I help them figure out what to do next'. In this manner, parents shared their knowledge, gained from experience with their own children, with parents of other potentially gifted learners.

Four parents *Encourage(d) participation in extracurricular gifted activities*. For example, a parent reported, 'If I think the [another] student is gifted I will share information with the parent ... I will tell them about specific classes, programs, weekend trips, and things to get parents involved.' Finally, eight respondents thought it was important to *Encourage parent advocacy*. One parent described herself as a participant in '... an alliance for the gifted that meets in a Barnes and Noble which is a parent support group ... [I encourage] parents to come and check us out'.

Upfront/Honest

Twenty percent of parents reported being *Upfront/Honest* about their children's giftedness when speaking with other parents. Of these, only 10 individuals (10%) reported using the gifted label without hesitation in their conversations with other parents.

When asked about using the term gifted with parents of non-identified children, one mother commented, 'I'm actually very, very open about it and frank about it. The word doesn't scare me'. A subtheme that emerged from this category in three percent of responses was the use of a *Coping Strategy* to help defuse tension. One mother referred to her son's openness with other children about his giftedness, explaining, '... whenever kids start questioning him. He just goes, 'yeah, my brain just works faster than everyone else's, but I can't hit a baseball.' So, that's his standard answer for everybody'.

Nine parents did not feel a need to bring up the gifted label in conversation because they believed their children's *Gifted behaviours were obvious to onlookers*. For example, one parent explained, 'The people I talk with are ... parents from school, and are aware of [my] child's talents because they have met him'. Another said of her daughter, 'I'm straightforward about it. People can tell pretty quickly when they meet her that she's different!'

Sensitivity/Understanding

Approximately one-third of these parents, 32%, gave responses demonstrating *Sensitivity/Understanding* towards parents of non-identified children. Thirteen of the 32 responses in this category indicated *Concern for others' feelings* as the reason for not using the gifted label around non-identified children or their parents. For example, one parent candidly articulated that she tried her 'best not to bring it [her child's giftedness] to light' because she did not 'want any other kids to feel ... "I'm not that smart"'. Another parent described her attempt to make other parents feel at ease about their

children not being identified for gifted services. She explained, 'I tend to try to make sure I say something positive about their child, in some area of strength, so they feel good too, so they don't feel sensitive about the fact their child may be gifted or not'. Other parents explained, 'labels can really be hurtful. Sometimes parents can see this as a reflection that their child is not doing as well', and 'I try not to say anything because ... I feel like they feel like I'm putting myself up on a pedestal and that their children aren't good enough'.

Another subtheme that emerged in 18 responses from this category was an *Understanding of gifts and talents as a single exceptionality among many*. For example, one parent commented, 'I instill in my children that everybody is different, and you're always learning something from someone else'. Though this subtheme is related to the *use of a different term* subtheme in the Language category, we felt it fit more clearly into the Sensitivity/Understanding category because these statements placed the primary emphasis on consideration of others' feelings. Finally, 11 responses emphasised the closely related *Desire to minimise the label's impact on one's own child* in explaining how their sensitivity to others led them to consider carefully or even avoid any use of the gifted label with their own child.

Language

The language of the term 'gifted' was viewed as a source of difficulty for two-thirds (66%) of the parents interviewed. For example, one parent commented, 'I hate the term 'gifted.' If I had my way, it would be a different word'. Three subthemes emerged in this category. Sixteen responses chose *Use of a different term rather than Gifted*. For example, 'quirky', 'bright and advanced' or 'learning fast' were considered to be more acceptable descriptors than the term 'gifted'. Four parents felt it necessary to *Refer first to the disability of their twice-exceptional child*. These parents of twice-exceptional children (that is, children who are identified as both gifted and having a concurrent disability) thought other parents would be more accepting of and sympathetic to their children's disability as opposed to their giftedness. As one mother explained, 'I just say my kids are very intelligent, but have learning disabilities. That makes people feel less like I am just trying to brag about my kids'. For one-quarter of the parents interviewed ($n = 26$), *Use of the gifted label varies depending on context*. One parent reported that she 'learned very quickly what people it is okay to use the word 'gifted' with, and what people [I] just [have] to gloss over what [my] daughter [is] doing'. Sixteen responses were general in nature; these clearly were related to the language aspect of the gifted label, but could not clearly be categorised into the other subthemes in the Language category.

Avoidance/no discussion

Approximately one-quarter of parents, 23%, opted directly for *Avoidance/No Discussion* concerning their children's giftedness. One poignantly explained, 'We tell the children we never talk about religion, never talk about politics, and you [don't] talk about your giftedness ... in public'. Another parent commented, 'I don't mention it. I don't discuss it with anybody'. These all were variations on the subtheme *Flat refusal or avoidance, without specific rationale*, which had a far larger number of responses (54) than the number of overall respondents in this category (24) due to a number of parents making this point in multiple ways (i.e. in different subthemes) at different points in their responses. The category total still is likely to be an underestimate of the proportion of parents who were unwilling to discuss the gifted label, as some responses in the Language and Sensitivity/Understanding themes also demonstrated a great reluctance to use the term in most settings.

A subtheme in 22 responses was the idea of *Gifted as emotionally loaded*. These parents of identified gifted children felt that they were made to feel badly by parents of non-identified children. One expressed, 'I was hurt, you know, put down by [other] parents ... [for] things my elder daughter did. It turns out, I learned quickly, that they could brag about their kids but I wasn't allowed to brag about mine'. Further, two parents were *fearful of loss of friendship* from friends and acquaintances of their own, or of their child. As one of these parents stated, 'I keep it more of a secret because I'm afraid of what they'll think or say or lose them as a friend'. Two other mothers reported the actual loss of friendships with other parents when the other parents' children were not identified for gifted programming; however, a slightly larger number of parents (5) reported that many of their friendships were developed with other parents of gifted children through shared volunteer activities in the schools.

Many parents also avoided using the gifted label for fear of being perceived by others as 'bragging'. These parents expressed this as 'I don't want to be perceived as one of those bragging mothers', 'I don't mention it, I guess out of fear that they may think that I was, you know, bragging or something' or (from a parent who did sometimes use the label), 'the reaction is usually a defensive one from, on the part of other parents about their own children ... looking at me a little funny like I'm somehow bragging about my own child. I'm not. This is who he is'.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine parent perceptions of the gifted label. More specifically, this study explored how parents approached the sensitive topic of their child's giftedness in discussion with parents of non-identified children. In the paragraphs that follow, we discuss two broad and

opposing approaches taken by these parents. Then, we consider our findings in light of each of the theoretical approaches gleaned from the literature.

Two overarching approaches emerged from our analysis. Parents of gifted children either felt confident in their interactions with parents of non-identified children (total: 20%) or they felt self-conscious and guarded in their responses to the point of avoiding the term completely (23%). The remaining majority reported using the gifted label only sparingly, and this was generally only when they were prompted directly to do so by others or were in conversations with other parents whose children they knew also bore the gifted label.

Parents who felt confident tried to *Explain/Educate* other parents about their children's giftedness, but this usually was initiated only if they saw signs of giftedness in another child, or if they were prompted by parents' direct questioning on the topic. One-fifth of the respondents did not fear the potential repercussions of using the gifted label; rather, they embraced it and were *Upfront/Honest*. They saw their interactions with other parents as opportunities to celebrate their children's giftedness, to explain misconceptions surrounding the term and to advocate for the needs of gifted children. Overall, these parents viewed the label in a positive light, in a manner similar to the findings of Cornell (1983), who found parents associated the label positively with pride and closeness for their gifted children.

Conversely, the majority of parents appeared to feel somewhat or entirely uncomfortable with labelling their children's giftedness, though they did not appear to have any discomfort with giftedness itself. Their past experience with other parents' reactions to their use of the label made them wary and caused them to conceal it, as if exposure of the label would make them vulnerable around parents of non-identified children. They tried their best to demonstrate *Sensitivity/Understanding* for other parents' children, praising these children as opposed to their own, but expressed feelings of frustration due to not being able to discuss their own child's abilities openly. If their children happened to be twice exceptional, they played down the child's giftedness and highlighted his or her disability instead. Interestingly, they felt other parents would be more sympathetic to the disability label, a label that has been thought to be stigmatising (Gallagher, 1976). Other parents opted to use alternative, and potentially less polarising, terminology like 'quirky', 'really quick' or 'very bright' to describe their child, or they simply chose *Avoidance/No Discussion*, similar to the findings of Cornell and Grossberg (1986), perhaps to avoid offending other parents with talk of their own child's academic abilities.

How might the theoretical perspectives on labelling inform these findings? Relatively few teachers have received specific training in the area of gifted education, and some research suggests that teachers with greater training may hold more positive views of students with gifts and talents (Geake & Gross, 2008; Mills, 2003). Thus, if halo effects are the

predominant outcome of the gifted label, then this would suggest specific outcomes for the student so labelled – chiefly in the form of teachers’ tendency to equate domain-specific abilities with global giftedness, as well as an expectation of these learners having few needs in either academic or affective domains. While this is consistent with anecdotal observations and with the literature on teacher perceptions, it is difficult to determine the extent to which it may be relevant to parent perceptions investigated in the present study. While parents who responded tended to be well educated, more importantly, most also had educated themselves about issues related to gifted children in order to meet their own child’s needs.

Stereotypes of learners labelled as gifted are complex; they may influence and in turn be influenced by both external perceptions and by the individual student’s internal views and visible behaviours. Because of this complexity, stereotype threat does not appear to offer any straightforward predictions about the direction of effects that might be produced by the gifted label. Other, more nuanced studies are needed to establish whether and how stereotype threat theory might relate to the gifted label.

The Pygmalion effect implies positive effects of the gifted label within the traditional classroom, but it may also be relevant to understanding parents’ responses to the gifted label and to their understanding of underachievement. It is possible that parents may perceive their child as in need of greater challenge due to the gifted label, and in such a scenario the label may support, for example, parents’ decisions to home school a child (Jolly, Matthews, & Nester, 2013) or to provide greater access to tutoring, specialised educational programs or other individualised learning opportunities. Conversely, the label may also lead parents to over-schedule their child’s life, or to over-estimate his or her abilities, potentially leading to underachievement or other undesirable long-term outcomes (Freeman, 2010; Margolin, 1994).

Labelling theory appears to apply chiefly to students’ justification for their own behaviours, but may also be relevant to parents’ perceptions of the behaviour of their gifted child. This could also be described under the halo effect; though there is some overlap in these approaches, the halo effect applies to others’ perceptions, while labelling theory identifies similar outcomes within the individual. Overall, the parents we interviewed seemed primarily concerned with minimising conflict in their children’s lives, rather than with rationalising their parenting decisions or the child’s behaviours through use of the gifted label. Though the halo effect or labelling theory may be relevant in other contexts, we found these perspectives of relatively little utility in understanding how parents used the gifted label.

Guskin and colleagues (1986) used labelling theory to examine whether students felt stigmatised by the gifted label, and found that the majority did not; however, it may also be useful to extend labelling theory to understand how parents of gifted children may be affected. Parents who were

self-conscious and guarded when the gifted label arose in conversations with other parents certainly viewed themselves differently; their children's giftedness set them apart from others whose children were not so identified. Consequently, some parents reacted in ways that may be viewed as negative or less favourable: they downplayed their child's gifted abilities when conversing with other parents. Some parents did this by deliberately using different terminology so as not to offend other parents or lose friendships for themselves or their child. A few parents even celebrated the non-intellectual qualities of other parents' children as a means of deflecting attention from the academic or intellectual accomplishments of their own child.

On the other hand, not all parents reacted negatively to the gifted label. Some parents felt empowered by it. They found their child being different to be a positive quality. They used this difference as an opportunity to educate parents of non-identified children about what it means to be gifted, to dispel myths about giftedness, to celebrate their children's accomplishments and to advocate more broadly for the needs of the gifted. Though only about one-third of parents reported engaging in activities we classified as Explain/Educate, each reported being involved in these activities with multiple other parents, suggesting that the influence of these parents' practices may be far more widespread than their numbers alone would suggest.

Conclusions

We determined that parents could be classified broadly as engagers or as non-engagers with regard to their use of the gifted label. Non-engagers' perceptions of how they and their children would be regarded by others – if they were to use the gifted label – led them to avoid using the label at all. This widespread wish to avoid any social damage, which may arise from others' actual or potential reactions, seems to be what parents think is wrong with giftedness (or, at least, with the gifted label).

Conversely, for those parents who viewed others' responses as an opportunity to engage in dialogue, the gifted label was far less problematic. These interesting differences in parents' self-described strategies for using the gifted label should be examined in greater detail in future research. Specifically, is it possible for parents to move from being a non-engager to being an engager, and if so, how does this happen? Can it be accomplished through learning opportunities alone, or must it be arrived at solely through internal contemplation?

It seems likely that the perceptions that lead to these strategies may also be related to popular conceptions of the nature of intelligence in general, as detailed in Dweck's work (2000), and in perceptions of IQ scores in particular; these aspects should be investigated to learn how they might inform perceptions of the gifted label. Certainly future research might also examine family dynamics, which were not a central focus of interview questions

in the current study; issues such as pride, competitiveness, vicarious attention seeking, so-called 'helicopter parenting' and other related issues may also play a role in parents' perceptions of the gifted label. Finally, parents who are uncomfortable with the term 'gifted' and who are currently using different words in its place could perhaps be surveyed to learn their suggestions for other terms that would convey fewer problematic connotations, or to gauge their acceptance of potential alternative terms from the literature, such as 'talent development' or 'advanced academics'.

Acknowledged limitations of the current study include its non-random, convenience sampling design, which may yield unknown biases on the responses received. It is possible that the online nature of the initial survey also encouraged participation by more technologically savvy respondents, or by those parents who tended to spend time online educating themselves about issues in gifted education. However, the sample size was relatively robust, and our examination of geographical distribution, income distribution and other related background variables of the respondents did not reveal any apparent selection biases, in comparison to our background knowledge of the characteristics of gifted learners and their families in the US context. Parent education levels were characterised by a far greater proportion of graduate degrees than among the general population, but this too is characteristic of gifted populations in general; unfortunately, no national US data exist against which to evaluate statistically the relative rate of any of these variables among parents of gifted learners. In addition, respondents were mostly mothers, and were predominantly of White ethnicity.

Future study should seek to understand whether the responses we have identified are shared across culturally and economically diverse families, or if different groups of parents may have different feelings regarding the gifted label. Additional work also should examine whether different responses are correlated with other parental styles or attitudes, and should examine how these attitudes form and whether they may be subject to change over time.

Overall, our findings illuminate the complex and varied emotional reactions that parents may feel towards the use of the term 'gifted'. The fact that so many parents feel uncomfortable with it, to the point of not using it at all, highlights the need to continue examining this issue. Recent efforts to redefine giftedness and gifted education using different terminology, whether we call it talent development, advanced academics or something else entirely, suggest that scholars also perceive this discomfort. Though an in-depth discussion of these arguments is beyond the scope of this article, we suggest that understanding the issues raised by the parents interviewed in the current study will be vital to our ability to provide an appropriate education for these learners, regardless of what we call them.

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