



Forced Choice Dilemma in Gifted Students: A Narrative Review

Özel Yeteneklilerde Zorunlu Seçim İkilemi: Bir Anlatısal Derleme

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Abstract

Forced choice dilemma (FCD) is defined as a conflict between gifted students' urges to strive for social acceptance and to pursue higher levels of achievement. In this narrative review, we presented a groundwork for forced choice dilemma and argued that this dilemma is mostly a cultural construct. The forced choice dilemma experienced by gifted students has not been widely recognized in the literature. Therefore, we proposed several strategies to address this complex issue. The existing literature has few studies that investigate the frequency, prevalence, and types of student abilities in which the forced choice dilemma is observed in different genders. The lack of research on this topic emphasizes that the forced choice dilemma's gender differences, prevalence, and situations in which it occurs need broader research. Such studies can aid educators and mental health professionals in offering better support to gifted students in their academic and social growth, customizing interventions and programs to individual requirements and contexts.

Keywords: forced choice dilemma, giftedness, stigma of giftedness paradigm, big fish in the little pond effect, social comparison theory, peer relationship.

Öz

Zorunlu seçim ikilemi, özel yetenekli (üstün zekalı / üstün yetenekli) öğrencilerin sosyal kabul için çabalama ve yüksek seviyelerde başarmaya yönelik dürtüleri arasında bir çatışma olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu anlatısal derlemede, zorunlu seçim ikileminin temellerini sunduk ve bu ikilemin neden çoğunlukla kültürel bir yapıdan kaynaklandığını tartıştık. Özel yetenekli öğrenciler tarafından yaşanan zorunlu seçim ikilemi literatürde henüz yeterince yer almamıştır. Bu nedenle, bu karmaşık sorunu çözmek için çeşitli stratejiler önerdik. Literatürde zorunlu seçim ikileminin farklı cinsiyetlerde görülme sıklığı, yaygınlığı ve hangi yetenek türünde görüldüğü hakkında az sayıda araştırmaya rastlanmıştır. Bu konudaki görüş birliğinin eksikliği, zorunlu seçim ikileminin cinsiyet farklılıkları, yaygınlığı ve meydana geldiği durumlar üzerine daha geniş araştırmalara ihtiyaç olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. İleri araştırmalar eğitimciler ve ruh sağlığı profesyonellerine özel yetenekli öğrencilere akademik ve sosyal gelişimlerine daha iyi destek sunmada, müdahaleleri ve programları bireysel gereksinimlere ve bağlamlara göre özelleştirmede yardımcı olabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: zorunlu seçim ikilemi, üstün yetenek, üstün zekâ, özel yetenek paradigması, büyük balık küçük gölet etkisi, sosyal karşılaştırma teorisi, akran ilişkileri.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the "forced choice dilemma" is known to potentially pose a challenge for virtually all gifted students (Jung et al., 2011). One of the earliest propositions about this field of study was laid out by Gross (1989), who characterized this dilemma as the conflict in gifted students between the pursuit of social acceptance and the higher levels of achievement. Gross considered this unique circumstance as a predicament where students are forced to make a choice between two alternatives, thereby referencing it as a dilemma. Thus, a gifted student trapped in this

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Received Date: September 23rd, 2021. Acceptance Date: December 17th, 2023.

quandary might put their close relationships with their peers at risk if they choose academic success, or the opposite could be equally true (Barber & Wasson, 2015). The aim of this narrative review is to elucidate this dilemma by examining the literature, to uncover its possible theoretical foundations, to investigate the factors contributing to the dilemma, to share findings from relevant research, and to illuminate potential directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings and Two Ends of Dilemma

2.1. Theoretical Underpinnings

The theoretical underpinnings of the FCD, from the perspective of gifted students, are rooted in the differentiated model of giftedness and talent (DMGT) proposed by Gagne (2004) (Jung et al., 2012). According to the DMGT, the process of talent development mainly depends on motivation and peer influence. Gagne assesses motivation as a personal factor and peers as an environmental factor. Consequently, in the context of the FCD, these factors may create conflict as the motivation for academic success (personal) and the need for peer acceptance (environmental). To express it plainly, Jung et al. (2011) described this conflict as follows: "motivation for academic success and need for peer acceptance may be seen to represent two fundamental aspects of the choice that intellectually gifted students need to make if faced with the forced-choice dilemma" (p. 183).

The concept of social comparison illuminates the root causes of the forced choice dilemma in gifted students when examined from the perspective of their so-called non-gifted peers. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that students may develop negative self-perceptions when they observe their gifted counterparts excelling beyond their performance. Cross-national research by Cross et al. (2019) further reveals that gifted students may harbor anxiety, suspecting their peers are making unfavorable comparisons with them. To mitigate the negative emotions triggered by gifted students' success, non-gifted peers may resort to pressurizing or even ostracizing them. Consequently, to escape this feeling of exclusion, gifted students might suppress or even disavow their abilities (Foust et al., 2008).

As we consider these perspectives, it's crucial to remember that the population of gifted individuals is remarkably diverse. In contrast to these findings, some research suggests that gifted students are generally more sociable and approachable (e.g., Košir et al., 2016). It is therefore imperative to note that such theoretical propositions and their manifestations are mostly not static. To conclude, there are competing approaches that can explain the reciprocal nature of this dilemma between the two camps. However, in fields of research such as labelling, it may also be necessary to consider the agency of the individual within a system (Ziegler & Bicakci, 2023; Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2017). In conclusion, depending on the context, researchers can use a variety of theories that offer effective explanations, but it is important to keep in mind: what constitutes the unit of analysis of the given study?

2.2. Forced Choice Dilemma and IQ

In which range of IQ do students exhibit the FCD? Due to the fact that psychometric and structural studies on this phenomenon have not yet reached maturity, we found explanations based on classic views. In particular, Hollingworth's (1926) definition of the 125-155 IQ range as the "socially optimum intelligence" stands out. According to Hollingworth, the incongruences experienced by students in this IQ range are not at a clinical level. However, it was argued that students above this IQ range may experience unique problems. Nevertheless, these problems can result in social maladjustment (i.e., disharmony), and individuals can be left in the dilemma due to individual and environmental factors. Additionally, even though research has found that the academic self-perceptions of gifted students are higher than their peers (see Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2015), negative behaviors exhibited by peers (targeting/victimizing the gifted student) can negatively affect the student's academic success (Casino-García et al., 2021), thus damaging the academic self-perception. However, Gross (1998) adds a note to this individual-centric explanation, reminding us that the social isolation experienced by the student can arise not only because the student is gifted, but also because there will be no peer group with which they can communicate. Therefore, Hollingworth's "socially optimum intelligence" approach, made about a century ago, may not always help make useful inferences due to factors not originating from the individual (e.g., lack of intellectual peers in the environment). In conclusion, considering systems in research on this phenomenon might be more practical. This is because the pathways pushing the gifted student into the dilemma consist of very complex routes. In short, whether the intelligence level is within the optimum range (i.e., 125 – 155), the system in which the individual is situated is important.

2.3. Forced Choice Dilemma and Academic Self Concept

The big fish little pond effect (BFLPE; Marsh, 1984, 1987; Tokmak et al., 2021) focuses on the formation of a gifted student's academic self-concept based on the position in their class, grounded in social comparison theory. If the student is a big fish (intellectually above the class average) and is in a little pond (the class average is low compared to the gifted student), they can have a high academic self-perception (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Tokmak et al., 2021). However, if a student is ostracized due to their high academic performance, they may be pushed towards the FCD in order to receive social acceptance from their peers. This is when the student in the little pond sometimes sabotages themselves to be accepted socially by their classmates by "descending" to their academic level (Barber & Wasson, 2015). Peers, who think that the characteristics defining the academic and social identities of the gifted student are related to their intelligence, i.e., their "superiority", might leave the student alone. In other words, a gifted student may not always experience the benefits of always being the big fish and may end up experiencing more social isolation from their peers (Perales et al., 2019).

When we consider a gifted student dealing with societal cliches, peer pressure, parent/teacher expectations, and the anxiety of "wasting their talent," it is difficult to predict that they will experience a healthy identity formation process. What makes this prediction difficult is the possibility that the student may be willing to risk their identity development processes for peer acceptance (Gross, 1998). A student caught in such a social squeeze can sacrifice not only their identity development but also their academic potential. Upon understanding the dynamics of network in the class, the student who finds the strategy of "flying under the radar" as a solution begins to camouflage themselves to protect from peer rejection (Gross, 1998; Kaya, 2021). Continuing with the analogy, we are drawing a profile of a gifted student who accepts the social dynamics and requirements of their pond. Due to its nature, the FCD may be more likely to occur in students who change schools frequently. The fear of failure in this new pond they have entered can cause difficulties in forming their identity (Merrotsy, 2013). To summarize, we would like to emphasize that the premise of the big fish little pond effect, which is at the forefront of academic self-construction, may be disrupted by the fact that the student is undergoing FCD.

2.4 Forced Choice Dilemma and Cultural Orientation

In the research by Jung et al. (2011), it has been found that the forced choice dilemma is more likely to be a problem among peers with different cultural orientations (compared to peers with a similar cultural background). Cultural orientation in this research included the concepts of individualism/collectivism and power distance. The concept of individualism refers to being autonomous and independent, while collectivism refers to people being interdependent in their broadest definitions. To put it also broadly, power distance represents the two ends of hierarchical relationships (low – high; Triandis, 1995). Cultural orientation is mainly examined in four factors. Generally, vertical individualism refers to being independent, competitive, and achievement-focused; horizontal individualism refers to being unique and independent; vertical collectivism refers to being responsible and duty-bound; and finally, horizontal collectivism refers to being harmonious and cooperative (Triandis, 1995). Jung et al. (2011) found that vertical collectivism was effective in the forced choice dilemma among gifted students in Australia.

Jung et al.'s (2011) emphasis on the pursuing of success in the intersection of the forced choice dilemma and cultural orientation emphasizes the motivation dimension of the DMGT. The argument that forms the basis of Jung et al.'s discussion is that motivation empowers the drive for success. If we broaden the discussion, in the study by McClelland et al. (1953), the achievement motive was defined in the individualistic psychology tradition of America as individual effort, effectiveness, and competition with others. However, this definition is clearly based on individualism. Nevertheless, the pieces that form the achievement motive in different cultural environments may have different foundations. Thus, in collectivist cultures (e.g., Türkiye, South Korea, China), there can be a "socially oriented achievement motive" (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2012). That is, sometimes a student can be motivated by saying, "I want to succeed so that my friends will admire me." In other words, "a socially oriented achievement motive would involve upholding group achievement, transcending the self, in such a way that achievement would not only exalt the self but also some other social entity encompassing the self" (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2017, p. 122; emphasis in original).

In conclusion, in conjunctions where dependent relationships are observed, there may be motives for success other than individualistic motivation. Additionally, if academic success is not valued in large and small cultural systems such as peers, family, and school (Merrotsy, 2013), an individual may be caught between gaining peer acceptance and achieving academic success, and thus forced choice dilemma could emerge. Therefore, when studying the forced choice dilemma, it is important to consider the cultural structure of the examined sample.

3. Reasons

The dilemma that the student is in often does not originate from a single cause. Privileged classes, asynchronous development, non-supportive peers, and labeling can prevent gifted students from establishing healthy friendships (Cross, 2016). In addition to academic and social values, we can also discuss the reasons for the forced choice dilemma in the field where these two values are collectively formed. The "stigma of giftedness paradigm" has been established on this dialectical basis. According to this paradigm, the student's perception of others seeing him or her as gifted creates problems that he or she has to cope with in social contexts (Coleman, 1985; Coleman & Cross, 1988). In other words, "some gifted students believe that when others view them as gifted, they are perceived as different and are treated as such" (Foust et al., 2008, p. 122). Furthermore, gifted individuals tend to blame themselves for these perceived differences (Gross, 1998). In a study by Cross and others (1995) on the prevalence of this situation, 26% of nearly 1500 gifted high school students reported that they felt their peers saw them as different.

Certain factors that are shown as causes for the forced choice dilemma have both corrective and disruptive functions. For example, if we start with "privileged classes," research (see Cross & Swiatek, 2009) has shown that gifted students receive more social acceptance and achieve psychological adjustment more easily when they are with peers of equal ability levels (Barber & Wasson, 2015; Eddles-Hirsch et al., 2012; Gross, 1989). Furthermore, academic acceleration or grade skipping can help students find their intellectual peers (Culross et al., 2013). That is, with appropriate academic grouping, a student can experience less labeling when gathered with peers with similar thoughts and may have opportunities to develop more positive friendships (Barber & Wasson, 2015). In such an environment, a student who feels the support of peers can develop their academic self (Casino-García et al., 2021). In short, when students with similar intellectual characteristics come together, a unique social context can be formed, and the programming done for the student can be effective (Coleman, 2014). On the other hand, grade skipping without necessary precautions and adjustments can cause social incompatibility and can also lead to the forced choice dilemma.

The results that emerged in the research of Hoogeveen et al. (2009) demonstrate how improper grouping can lead to the forced choice dilemma. Hoogeveen et al. found that accelerated students were seen as less likable, less funny, less helpful, less cooperative, possessing less leadership qualities, and more arrogant compared to their classmates. An anecdote involving Ted Kaczynski, known as the "Unabomber," can illustrate the most unwanted results of improper grouping. Kaczynski skipped a grade after receiving an IQ test score of 167 in the fifth grade of elementary school and has expressed that he experienced maladjustment in his new class. Indeed, the finding that academic acceleration negatively correlates with peer relationships is not rare in the literature, but it is known that these pieces of evidence are not robust enough to generalize (Barber & Wasson, 2015). What we intend to emphasize by providing the speculative Kaczynski anecdote is the underlying idea that it is possible for a student to face difficulties in gaining peer acceptance due to their characteristics or the dynamics of the class, and consequently experience the forced choice dilemma. Ultimately, the literature emphasizes that the frequency of encountering the forced choice dilemma is less when the student is among peers of similar ability levels and/or those who value academic success/effort (Cross & Swiatek, 2009). These insights call attention to the importance of careful consideration and planning in educational settings, particularly when it comes to interventions like grade skipping or acceleration. The potential social and emotional consequences must be weighed along with the academic benefits, and supportive measures may be needed to help students navigate these transitions.

4. Prevalence, Emergence, and Identification of the Dilemma

4.1. Prevalence

The existing literature has few studies that investigate the frequency, prevalence, and types of student abilities in which the forced choice dilemma is observed in different genders. From a gender standpoint, Jung et al. (2011) found that boys experience this dilemma more frequently than girls. This could be explained by findings such as girls possessing higher emotional intelligence than boys (Abdulla Alabbasi et al., 2020) or being more adept at fostering positive relationships with peers (Al-Onizat, 2012; Rinn et al., 2011). In terms of prevalence, the situation is diverse. Brown and Steinberg (1990) revealed that only 10% of 8000 high-achieving high school students would choose to be part of a "brain team," with girls being less inclined than boys. Conversely, Foust et al. (2008) found in their study with 84 gifted students that they did not experience the forced choice dilemma, indicating that they could strike a balance instead of picking between extremes (Barber & Wasson, 2015). The research also shows that the type of giftedness can impact peer relationships. For instance, those with verbal ability were found to be more likely to face difficulties in peer relationships (Lee et al., 2012). The lack of consensus on this topic emphasizes that the forced choice dilemma's gender differences, prevalence, and situations in which it occurs need broader research. Such

understanding can aid educators and mental health professionals in offering better support to gifted students in their academic and social growth, customizing interventions and programs to individual requirements and contexts. It further highlights the complexity of giftedness and the potential challenges it may bring, illustrating the necessity for an intricate and thorough approach.

4.2. *Emergence*

Unlike the gender differences in the frequency of occurrence, there is almost a consensus on when the forced choice dilemma is observed. Cross (2016) has reported that gifted students are popular in elementary school, but many experience peer rejection during adolescence. Cohen et al. (1994) have similarly found that being gifted provides an advantage in peer relationships at an early age. Generally, the literature emphasizes that gifted students lose this advantage as they grow older and may sabotage themselves by experiencing the forced choice dilemma (Adler et al., 1992; Brown & Steinberg, 1990; Foust et al., 2008). Jung et al. (2011) reported that the forced choice dilemma is more frequently observed in gifted individuals during early adolescence (compared to late adolescence). In summary, according to the literature, the forced choice dilemma is rarely seen until middle school and becomes more frequent afterward.

4.3. *Identification*

Detecting students facing the forced choice dilemma using psychometric methods is a complex task. In the existing literature, only a single tool, a 10-item scale developed by Jung et al. (2012), has been found to measure the forced choice dilemma. This scale uses a seven-point Likert type, ranging from complete agreement to total disagreement. Gifted students who deliberately underperform to fit in with peers often go unnoticed by most diagnostic tools, including widely-used ones. Identifying these students as "underachievers" is a substantial challenge (Merrotsy, 2013). Such students are labeled as "invisible gifted," where they purposefully conceal their abilities to avoid or distance themselves from the gifted label by reducing their visibility (Cross et al., 2019). Some propose alternative systems like dynamic assessment to diagnose these invisible gifted students (Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1998), while others suggest conscious observations by teachers or parents might be more effective.

The intricacy of identifying "invisible gifted" students accentuates the necessity for a varied approach to assessment. Depending solely on quantitative measurements might not encapsulate the detailed experiences and difficulties these individuals face. An amalgamation of formal evaluations, interviews, observations, and collaboration with teachers and parents can grant a more well-rounded insight into a student's skills, needs, and potential conflicts between scholastic accomplishment and peer acceptance. Furthermore, educational systems may contemplate incorporating training for teachers, counselors, and parents to discern signs of the forced choice dilemma. Such training initiatives could prepare them to assist and steer gifted students through their singular challenges, nurturing both their intellectual progression and social well-being. By integrating awareness of this dilemma into the educational culture, more supportive environments for gifted students may be fostered, emphasizing the significance of equilibrium and the acknowledgment of various talents and abilities.

5. **Coping with and Intervening in Dilemma**

5.1. *Coping with the Dilemma*

In a study across the United States, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Ireland, and France, anxiety was discovered among gifted students due to their relatively high performance (Cross et al., 2019). This social anxiety prompts them to undertake different coping strategies to gain acceptance, though these strategies can vary in their impact. Positive coping strategies include engaging in extracurricular activities, which can be beneficial to the students' growth (Cross, 2016). However, many coping strategies could be harmful. For instance, intentional failure in exams, refusing to participate in class, or even denying their abilities (Foust et al., 2008; Swiatek, 1995) can damage a student's academic growth. Tannenbaum (1983) found that some gifted students even prefer to be seen as underachievers or popular rather than as "nerds" or possessing an "unhealthy personality" (p. 466), a perception they avoid by not fully displaying their potential. Such efforts to fit in with peers can lead to situations where gifted students feel compelled to act contrary to their abilities. Kaya (2021) mentioned how a gifted student might overlook not being understood or avoid asking questions in class for fear of ostracization. Some even might use their academic skills to help others cheat for social acceptance. Cross et al.'s (2019) cross-cultural study provides an example where a gifted student complied with friends' cheating demands to avoid social exclusion. Additionally, gifted students may deliberately avoid revealing

their talents or seek secondary identities in areas like sports, painting, or photography to relate to their peers (Beuscher & Higham, 1989; Carrington, 1993). An illustrative anecdote from a 10th-grade student who was mentored by the first author highlights this issue:

"I attended half of the seventh grade in one school, the other half in another school, I was bullied in the early days when I moved to my second school. This lasted about four months. Then, a soccer tournament was organized. I wasn't interested in it, but I participated in this tournament because everyone was participating. After the tournament, everything was almost resolved. It was as if they had known me for years and accepted me into their group."

This anecdote underscores how gifted students often mask their abilities to socially integrate, resulting in a division between intellectual growth and social life. The need to choose between the two often leads to underachievement or denial of their giftedness. All in all, the coping strategies abovementioned underscores the importance of fostering a school environment that appreciates diverse talents and abilities, without forcing students to choose between intellectual and social development. They also emphasize the role of extracurricular activities, such as sports, in providing alternative paths for social interaction and acceptance. Creating an atmosphere where students can simultaneously pursue intellectual growth and peer-approved activities without conflict can alleviate this forced choice dilemma, allowing them to flourish both academically and socially.

5.2. Intervention

The forced choice dilemma experienced by gifted students has not been widely recognized in the literature. Therefore, we proposed several strategies to address this complex issue. As a first step, identifying the underlying causes of the dilemma, such as the lack of intellectual peers that some grouping strategies might lead to, could be the first step towards intervention (Cross, 2016). Schools may implement alternative grouping methods that allow gifted students to interact with intellectual peers (by providing necessary controls), thereby avoiding the social and intellectual isolation that can lead to the dilemma (Coleman & Cross, 1988). For chronic situations, individualized solutions including specialized grouping, family support, counseling, and even homeschooling can be suggested. For example, in certain cases, homeschooling has been advocated as a response to the asynchronous development of gifted students, which can precipitate the forced choice dilemma (Killeen, 2000; Merrotsky, 2013). Furthermore, the implementation of mentorship programs specifically designed for gifted students facing this dilemma could provide personalized guidance and support. Rimm (2002) has presented a multifaceted approach to peer intervention, encompassing supportive family dynamics, fostering talents, creating communities for like-minded students, and engaging in professional guidance services. Adapting this approach by providing suitable conditions could be the solution to the forced choice dilemma. By transforming these strategies into a coordinated application, schools, families, and psychologists can prevent the formation of an environment where gifted students feel compelled to choose between realizing their intellectual potential and social belonging. A multifaceted approach that considers each student's unique situation will alleviate the pressures of the forced choice dilemma.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this narrative review, we presented a groundwork for forced choice dilemma. Ziv (1977) briefly summarized the forced choice dilemma as follows: The student has two paths in front of him/her, either s/he adopts the same interests as his/her peers as his/her own and gives up on academic success, or s/he walks the path of success alone. This dilemma is mostly a cultural construct. Nevertheless, we can also say, as found by Jung and others (2011), that most of the studies conducted on the forced choice dilemma have been conducted in Western culture-based countries. For example, no study has been encountered on this subject in Türkiye. Conducting research in countries with different cultures will increase the understanding of this phenomenon.

Alongside the differentiation of country level culture, additional research and adjustments should be made considering the differentiation of school or classroom culture. Emphasizing academic values in school and classroom is important as it can create an environment where gifted students can be themselves. For example, if a teacher cannot create an environment where bright and highly successful students can be themselves, and moreover does not accept the students' identity, it can create a butterfly effect. That is, the teacher's behavior can spread to the peers. For instance, a teacher who perceives a student's success as disrespect for their authority may cause the student to be marginalized in the classroom. The students hiding their identity or becoming alienated to fit in socially can make them unhappy due to conflicts created by living with a second identity. In short, educators and parents should accept

the gifted students as they are and strive for the students to accept themselves as they are. For example, scenarios can be created in the classroom and social environments where gifted students can be included using their existing abilities. Thus, the occurrence of the forced choice dilemma can be prevented.

In the process of preparing this narrative review, we have not encountered any research that has intervened in the forced choice dilemma. There is a need for research on this subject. There are very few studies examining the decision-making processes of gifted students to resolve this dilemma (Jung et al., 2011). It is important to examine whether students prefer to mask their special talents or intelligence to solve this dilemma (Cross et al., 1991; Gross, 1989) or to follow their mental development at the expense of damaging peer relationships (Gross, 1998). It would also be meaningful to investigate whether social balance is possible (Hollingworth, 1926) or not for a particular IQ level. Which students with what personality traits experience the forced choice dilemma? The answer to this question has not been found in the literature. There is also a need for further research on this subject (Neihart, 2015).

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