

Article

Online Mentoring and Creative Problem Solving for Academically Talented High-School Students

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Abstract

Technology is changing the way in which gifted students are identified and supported. In the past, the focus has been on acceleration and enrichment. However, with technological progress, academically talented students can connect with mentors both locally and globally, and mentors can customize individualized support to match gifted students' interests and talents. The cultivation of 21st-century skills among talented students has become a global goal, including in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). To enhance the creative problem-solving skills of academically talented high-school students in the UAE, the College of Education at a leading institute launched an online mentoring program for several students based on the Real Engagement in Active Problem Solving (REAPS) model. This paper describes the experience of implementing an online mentorship program designed to enhance creative problem-solving skills among talented students in the UAE. Through this program, talented students had the opportunity to work with experienced mentors on complex real-world problems, collaborate in teams, consider multiple perspectives, and develop innovative solutions to local and global issues. This innovative experience showed that the REAPS model is an effective method for teaching creative problem-solving skills, and online mentoring is a promising strategy for gifted education to develop future and life skills.

Keywords: academically talented; online mentorship program; creative problem-solving; REAPS model; high-school students; UAE

1. Introduction

The field of gifted education is rapidly evolving, driven by technological advances and a growing emphasis on 21st-century skills, Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) education, personalized learning, diversity, and inclusion. Today's global economy requires a highly skilled workforce equipped with 21st-century skills, including ideation, problem-solving, empathy, collaboration, data-driven decision-making, adaptability, communication, and resiliency. The leadership in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is committed to meeting these demands by prioritizing the development of a first-rate education system, specifically in STEAM, and innovation. This is evidenced by initiatives such as the National Innovation Strategy, which identifies cultivating 21st-century skills through an innovative curriculum in the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and the arts. Gifted education has recently gained popularity in the UAE, and it is developing (Ismail et al., 2022). Exemplary initiatives include the following: the "Development of gifted and talented students' skills" initiative by the Ministry of Education (MoE), the MoE

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developmental plan (<https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/strategies-plans-and-visions/strategies-plans-and-visions-until-2021/ministry-of-education-strategic-plan-2017-2021>, accessed on 15 April 2026), the “Integrated system to identify and care for talents” by the MoE with similar initiatives by several other organizations, (e.g., the Hamdan Bin Rashid AlMaktoum For Medical and Education Sciences and the Emirates Association for the Gifted). Indeed, in 2025, nearly 9000 students were evaluated and identified through the national Talent Identification Program, leading to the discovery of over 400 gifted students who received advanced enrichment programs focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and the arts. In addition, in April 2021, the Hamdan Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation for Medical and Educational Sciences started offering the Hamdan Foundation Online Mentoring Program (Global Mentorship Program). The goal of the Global Talent Mentoring is to transform advanced talents into experts and future leaders in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) through mentoring, connecting gifted and highly motivated students with leading international experts in STEMM. Various agencies in the UAE organized activities to support gifted and talented children (e.g., the Abu Dhabi Education Council, the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge, Sandooq Alwatan), along with the establishment of the Emirates Association for the Gifted. Moreover, a teacher-training university (UAEU) in Abu Dhabi offers a specialized track in Gifted and Talented Education within the bachelor’s program in Special Education since 2009 (Garces-Bacsal et al., 2022a). In 2021, the UAEU conducted professional development opportunities to teachers of gifted students (see Garces-Bacsal et al., 2022a, 2022b). In 2020, the Ministry of Education in the UAE issued Ministerial Resolution No. 209 concerning the policy for the care of gifted students. The goal of this policy is to ensure early identification, continuous support, and development of gifted and talented learners across academic and non-academic domains, from early childhood through general education. This policy promotes enrichment and acceleration programs (Ministry of Education, 2020). Additionally, in 2015, the Hamdan Center for Giftedness and Innovation was established to discover and nurture outstanding talents while fostering a culture of creativity and excellence. Through its programs, the center identifies, supports, and empowers exceptional talents in STEM. These programs extend well beyond traditional academics, including innovation labs, national and international competitions, expert mentorship, and global learning experiences.

A lack of recognition and accommodation of gifted learners’ educational needs may lead gifted children to underachieve. Without appropriate identification methods and education, gifted children may experience psychological damage. Cultivating exceptional talent not only requires the development of a domain-specific, integrated knowledge structure but also the development of domain-general and creative problem-solving abilities. Cultivating students with exceptional talent in STEAMS is critical for the future of all nations. To become future leaders, talented students need opportunities to work on real-world problems, collaborate with teams, and develop innovative solutions to meet community needs.

Historically, the identification of gifted students has relied largely on standardized intelligence tests. However, contemporary practice recognizes giftedness as a multidimensional construct encompassing diverse intellectual and non-intellectual skills, task commitment, and contextual factors. This definition moves beyond cognitive ability measures to include domain-specific talent and creativity, which involve the design and effectiveness of educational programs (Antoun, 2022). Some scholars posit that giftedness might be multifaceted (Renzulli, 2001) and look at giftedness as a composite of components (Sternberg, 2000). The progression of gifted education requires a critical examination of several curriculum models, such as the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1994), Parallel Curriculum Model (Kaplan et al., 2009), and the School-wide Enrichment Model (Reis & Peters, 2021) to determine their applicability and effectiveness in enhancing advanced skills and

creativity within an online learning environment (Gil, 2025). The effectiveness of these models lies in their capacity to provide enriched and varied educational experiences that extend beyond the general curriculum, fostering intellectual growth and creative problem-solving (Gül & Ayık, 2023). Contemporary theories of giftedness adopt a multidimensional view, as giftedness is not limited to cognitive abilities, but also involves psychological variables such as motivation and environmental factors. This understanding necessitates the use of digital tools to personalize learning experiences by adapting processes to individual interests and abilities. Renzulli's School-wide Enrichment Model (Reis & Peters, 2021) provides a comprehensive framework for enriching students through a range of activities. The integration of digital tools into differentiated instructional designs, such as those that leverage artificial intelligence (AI), is essential for enhancing the differentiation process of gifted students. This personalized approach not only supports academic acceleration but also cultivates the critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary for complex real-world applications (Vidal-Fernández et al., 2025).

The curriculum model that informed the development and implementation of the online mentoring program was the Real Engagement in Active Problem Solving (REAPS; Maker, 2021). This model integrates several curriculum models, including Discovering Intellectual Strengths and Capabilities while Observing Varied Ethnic Responses (DISCOVER), Thinking Actively in a Social Context (TASC), and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). The REAPS presents an integrated model for developing talent through inquiry and problem-solving. At the center of the model are its key outcomes: a rich network of knowledge, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. These outcomes are supported by three approaches. The first is the DISCOVER model, which emphasizes active hands-on learning, open-ended tasks, interdisciplinary themes, and exposure to various types of questions and problems. The second is the PBL model, which focuses on real-world issues and encourages students to examine problems from the perspectives of different stakeholders. The third is the TASC approach, which views problem-solving as a recursive and circular process that moves between divergent, exploratory thinking and convergent, evaluative thinking. Together, these processes operate through a "prism" of diverse talents, including auditory, mathematical, emotional, interpersonal, intrapersonal, scientific, mechanical, visual-spatial, bodily, linguistic, and moral or ethical abilities. The REAPS has been an effective teaching model for students across different educational settings and curricula and for addressing the diverse interests of high-ability students (e.g., Maker & Bahar, 2024). Wu et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study using the REAPS model to explore elementary students' perceptions of their engagement. The implementation of the model resulted in positive emotions and development of intrapersonal skills. Overall, the REAPS suggests that meaningful learning occurs when gifted students engage in authentic problems, use multiple ways of thinking, and draw on different strengths and talents.

It is important to develop special programs for gifted and talented students, as they have unmet needs in the traditional school curriculum, and enrichment programs that group them together are beneficial (Elhoweris, 2021). Curricular and extracurricular activities tend to represent a viable means of promoting the academic and socioemotional development of gifted students. Meta-analytic studies have shown that enrichment programs positively affect the students' academic achievement and socioemotional development (Gül & Ayık, 2025). Research on the effects of enrichment programs in the UAE has revealed that they positively influence gifted students' academic achievement and thinking skills (Alhossani et al., 2025; Elhoweris et al., 2022). Enrichment strategies engage gifted learners in real-world problems and foster coping mechanisms for conceptual complexity, thus promoting productive struggles and resilience (Wai & Lovett, 2021). Concurrently, combining advanced academic material with avenues for creativity and problem-solving is vital for these students, as it promotes cognitive development and supports the practical application of

knowledge in complex scenarios (Reis et al., 2021). Mentorship serves as a key mechanism for advancing the progress of academically advanced students, providing expertise beyond routine classroom instruction and creating iterative feedback cycles that elevate creative output (Zimlich, 2017). In virtual environments, mentorship becomes especially noticeable; it mitigates geographic barriers and broadens students' access to specialized academic and professional expertise (Casino-García et al., 2021). Extended mentorship provides academic and socio-emotional support, enabling high-ability students to apply their learning to real-world problems and refine their advanced problem-solving skills. Specifically, online mentorship programs can deliver high-quality curricula that enhance students' self-perceptions, planning, and self-monitoring while also increasing accessibility and making differentiated instruction easier to implement (Desmet et al., 2023). Many online platforms use asynchronous communication that provides learners with more time to think carefully and respond thoughtfully. This can lead to deeper reflection, more detailed feedback, and stronger metacognitive and self-regulated learning skills (Bocoş et al., 2023). The effectiveness of online mentoring is further supported by research showing that it can provide interactions and levels of support similar to face-to-face mentoring, while also helping overcome geographical barriers through technology (Lehmann et al., 2021).

Online mentoring platforms, particularly those that use AI, can help students work on complex problems by providing targeted feedback and personalized learning paths that strengthen their creative and critical thinking skills (Zha et al., 2025). The flexible and asynchronous nature of online interactions allows gifted students to explore complex problems at their own pace, encouraging deeper reflection and repeated revision, both of which are essential for creative thinking and problem-solving (Zimlich, 2017). Academically talented students need specialized instructional approaches to maximize their potential and promote their advanced interests and abilities (Trpin, 2024). Gifted education has begun to evolve toward enrichment programs that integrate mentorship to develop scientific research skills and content knowledge. These tailored experiences are important for developing academically talented students' abilities and helping them address real-world problems (Daunicht et al., 2025). Online mentoring programs have emerged as effective tools for extending extracurricular gifted education, especially in the STEM field, by connecting students with experts who guide their academic and professional development (Stoeger et al., 2017). Evolving definitions of giftedness, moving beyond a sole dependence on cognitive ability measures, including creativity and domain-specific talents, affects the design and effectiveness of these programs (Gül & Ayık, 2025), contradicting traditional identification methods that focus more on evaluating exceptional talent involving the dynamic interplay among creativity, giftedness, and problem-solving skills for an individual's development (Maker, 2025). This highlights the necessity of integrating innovative instructional strategies, including creative problem solving, into the educational framework for academically talented students, especially within online learning platforms that have expanded due to global circumstances (Ziadat & Sakarneh, 2021).

Online mentoring can provide differentiated instruction and psychological support, and creative problem-solving can enhance the higher-order thinking skills necessary to tackle complex problems in students' chosen fields (Lim et al., 2023). Tang et al. (2022) reviewed 61 studies on digital technology and student creativity and found that various digital tools could help foster students' creative development. Their review suggested that technology can promote creativity by increasing motivation, supporting higher-order thinking, and encouraging collaboration, although its effectiveness depends on the teaching methods used and the ways in which students engage in the learning process.

2. Overview of the UAE Online Mentoring Program

Given the UAE demand for STEAM jobs, which is expected to increase significantly in the coming years, and in response to globalization, digital transformation, and changing workforce needs, the College of Education at a leading institute in the UAE offers an online mentoring program to support academically talented high-school students and improve their creative problem-solving skills through regular interactions (synchronous/asynchronous) with experts and trained mentors. The program focused on inquiry-based learning, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective practice. This paper outlines the implementation of the UAE online mentoring program, participants' learning experiences, and the outcomes observed.

The UAE online mentoring program was held for academically talented youth aged 14–16, nominated by teachers. Indeed, the eligibility criteria included high academic achievement, demonstrated interest in cluster areas, including STEM, Arts/Literature, and Research, and strong motivation and commitment to participate. Thirty-six schools participated in this program. The schools involved in the project were located in an urban area of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

The online mentorship program aimed to enrich the experiences of academically talented secondary school students through creative activities that help them explore their skills and talents and to improve participating students' higher-order thinking skills, including creative problem solving, as well as leadership, research, and collaboration skills.

This program follows Joseph Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM), an evidence-based, effective approach to enrichment for gifted and talented learners (Renzulli, 2001). All students involved in the program participated in the enrichment clusters and Types I, II, and III enrichment activities. For Types II and III, the online mentorship program introduced the REAPS model (Maker et al., 2015). The program outcomes include increasing the sense of belonging and self-esteem of academically talented students, enhancing academically talented students' higher-order thinking skills, and offering academically talented students a chance to meet other academically talented students and work side by side with an adult mentor studying their selected topics in great depth.

The online mentorship program comprises three phases. The first phase lasts for four weeks and aims to introduce students to various topics, areas of interest, and fields of study, including art/literature, STEM, and research. The core of SEM is to nurture students' interests. Therefore, in the first phase, students' interests were assessed using adapted instruments that measured their areas of interest and preferred modes of learning, along with the Renzulli Rating Scale (Renzulli et al., 2010). The total number of students who participated in Phase 1 clusters was 96. The administered surveys identified students' top interests, including STEM, research, art, and literature (78 in the STEM cluster, 11 in the research cluster, and 7 students in the art/literature/book club cluster).

Phase 1 (Type I Enrichment) began with an orientation session in which students learned about the online mentorship program, including its goals, duration, and the expected roles and responsibilities of participating students. In addition, the students were introduced to an online mentoring platform. The College of Education developed this platform to inspire gifted and talented children. Through this platform, the goal is to help each student realize their potential by providing resources to nurture their unique talents, including access to mentors and like-minded learning communities, and inspiring them to pursue excellence in their endeavors and become lifelong learners.

Type I enrichment clusters are scheduled once a week, offering students opportunities to engage in various activities. Typically, each cluster includes a group of students who share common interests. Each cluster is headed by a facilitator (a faculty member from the institution) who is competent and experienced in the subject. The STEM Cluster includes several activities, such as discussions of STEM-related careers, with a focus on space sciences

and other STEM fields that might attract students to their future jobs. During these sessions, the students completed several activities, including commenting on YouTube videos, writing journals, participating in discussion forums, and exchanging information about their STEM interests and skills. In the last week of the STEM cluster, students shared their reflections on the program's first phase. In the research cluster, students were exposed to a wide variety of research topics, including articles, printed materials, and videos on research and innovation. Students were also provided with opportunities to discuss and share their research ideas. In the arts/literature cluster, students were exposed to a range of books, concepts, ideas, and videos. The art/literature and book club clusters included online discussions about students' favorite readings, authors, and artists. Students were given the opportunity to create a five-song playlist describing a book and create videos, podcasts, or PowerPoint presentations. Finally, students were encouraged to participate in a poetry challenge and book review contest.

In the second phase of the Online Mentoring program (Type II Enrichment), 29 students continued participating, while others opted to discontinue participation due to changes in the school exam schedule, the holy month of Ramadan, or other personal reasons. All the students who participated in the second phase attended a master class. This phase aimed to promote students' higher-order thinking skills, specifically creative problem-solving, research, and communication skills. In the master class, high-school students were trained in the Real Engagement in Active Problem Solving (REAPS) model by international experts for three months (Elhoweris, 2021). REAPS is an evidence-based teaching model developed by Maker and her colleagues in 2004 (Maker et al., 2015). To train students and teachers in the REAPS model, all participating teachers and students were randomly assigned to different stakeholder groups (e.g., bully, victim, teacher, administration, and bystander or witness) and asked to work together on the bullying problem. The idea behind the stakeholder groups is to broaden their thinking and encourage students to leave their comfort zones. It helps students consider a problem (bullying) from a perspective that they might not have thought of before. In collaboration with their stakeholders, each group was asked to focus on their research from the perspective of their stakeholders and to develop a questionnaire to gather data on the issue. Each group was provided with a guide for solving the REAPS problem.

The master class included 13 sessions, each lasting between 60 and 90 min. Nine secondary school teachers from Abu Dhabi participated in this program and were trained in the REAPS model, which consisted of 10 abbreviated sessions, with each session lasting for 20 to 30 min. After teacher and mentor training, the students attended a master class. The master class was designed to teach students, their teachers, and mentors an effective problem-solving model for addressing complex, open-ended problems across any content area. The class structure was based on the TASC problem-solving process, which includes eight steps. The students, teachers, and mentors received written materials and videos explaining the process, and provided detailed instructions for completing each step. At each stage, the students were expected to share their progress. Additionally, teachers and mentors (faculty members) worked closely with the students in small groups to guide them throughout the entire process. At the end of the master class, participating students were placed in eight stakeholder groups, real associations/agencies whose responsibilities were related to plastic recycling (e.g., Abu Dhabi Environmental Agency, EEG Waste Management, and Plastic Industries) to collect the required data (Elhoweris, 2021). Students were then tasked with developing solutions to the plastic recycling problem from their assigned stakeholder perspectives and sharing their work with a real audience and panel of international experts over two consecutive days.

Phase 3 (Type III Enrichment) aims to support high-school students in investing their personal time in acquiring deeper knowledge in their areas of interest and receiving guidance from mentors (UAE faculty) to investigate real problems and create a final product that

they need to communicate to a real audience. Interested students submitted their proposals to participate in phase 3. Students were asked to identify the type of project they would pursue, including designing a prototype, creating a business plan, and conducting research. A culminating product was expected at the end of Phase 3 through mentorship/guidance of the mentor/showcase event and student presentations. Nine proposals were submitted; however, only three were selected by the jury committee. Students whose proposals were selected worked with their mentors to implement their solutions for two to three months. The final activity of the online mentoring program involves reflection. Specifically, all participating teachers and students were asked to write reflections on the enrichment program, including the master class and the problem-solving process, and to evaluate their own thinking, leadership, and creative problem-solving.

3. Lesson Learned, Implementation Considerations, Challenges, and Recommendations for Practice

The UAE online mentorship program aims to help academically talented high-school students develop collaboration, communication, and creative problem-solving skills. Through guided inquiry and reflection, these students become active learners. Feedback received from participating students and teachers, as well as reflections collected at the end of the program, suggested positive perceptions of the online enrichment activities and master classes. More specifically, student feedback frequently indicated that the master class encouraged the use of creative and critical thinking skills. Especially, when they considered multiple solutions and aimed to address the problem from various perspectives while keeping the SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) in mind. In addition, the majority of students reported that the master class included advanced/challenging and interesting topics, was practical, improved their life skills, and motivated them to achieve higher academic performance. In addition, all participating high-school students reported enjoying working together on the problem and described their contributions. Furthermore, the participating teachers indicated that the master class encouraged the high-school students to use their critical and creative thinking skills, which they found practical, effective, and interesting. Teacher and student feedback suggested that the REAPS-based mentoring activities supported the development of creative problem-solving skills and engagement among participants.

The online mentoring program provided academically talented students based in the UAE with an opportunity to enrich their learning and interests, enhance their thinking skills, connect with same-gender peers from different schools, learn from US experts in the area of gifted education, and work with trained schoolteachers from several government schools and university and industry facilitators across the UAE.

Face-mentoring programs encounter several problems, including geographical distance and the need to hold frequent meetings with mentors and mentees. In this online mentoring program, students communicated regularly with mentors and facilitators via the online mentorship platform and received timely, consistent feedback. In addition, this program enabled students to be trained in the REAPS model by two international experts from the United States. It was flexible in terms of timing and scheduling, allowing schoolteachers and secondary school students to participate at mutually convenient times. Indeed, the UAE Online mentorship programs provide digital access and promote inclusion by enabling UAE high-school students, regardless of their cultural background, gender, socioeconomic status, or geographic location.

Although online mentoring programs offer many benefits, scheduling master classes is difficult because of time zone differences between the UAE and the USA, school exam schedules, and the holy month of Ramadan. In the future, schools might need to avoid

offering enrichment programs during exam periods and the holy month of Ramadan and consider scheduling them after school hours, on weekends, or during summer break.

Implementation of the online mentorship program based on June Maker's REAPS model was associated with positive participant experiences and encouraging educational outcomes, as perceived by participating students and teachers. Specifically, according to the authors' observations and feedback from participating teachers and students, this new initiative implemented in the UAE has enhanced students' creative problem-solving, communication, motivation for learning, and life skills. In addition, this program allows teachers and faculty members who served as mentors to offer their students interest-based opportunities to explore and learn, gain advanced knowledge and skills, and engage with diverse students and stakeholders. We hope that, in the future, more of these online mentorship programs will be widely used by general and special education teachers in the UAE.

4. Conclusions

Global economic development depends on innovation, complex problem-solving, and technological expertise; therefore, all students need to be well-equipped with 21st-century skills. Traditional gifted education models, including pull-out programs, acceleration, and enrichment clusters, face criticism for failing to provide equal access to all students and for being exclusionary (Meyer et al., 2024). The online mentoring program is accessible to all students regardless of their geographic location, socioeconomic status, gender, or other factors. In the future, AI-driven educational systems are expected to transform differentiation for gifted and talented learners through adaptive learning platforms that can adjust content, the difficulty of the task, analyze students' performance patterns, and provide personalized feedback (Klašnja-Milićević & Ivanović, 2021; Rimm et al., 2021). Additionally, digital mentorship platforms can connect gifted and talented students with content experts worldwide, enabling participation from rural and developing regions and countries around the globe. Virtual reality, augmented reality, and simulation platforms offer gifted and talented learners opportunities to experiment, design, and innovate beyond their classroom.

Gifted and talented students must be nurtured in ways that are culturally responsive, academically rigorous, challenging, and sufficiently flexible to accommodate their various interests and abilities. The future of gifted education is expected to be accessible to all students and to consider AI, innovation, and global collaboration. Online mentorship programs are critical to the future of gifted education as they expand access, personalize learning, foster global collaboration, and accelerate innovation. Therefore, schools and universities should use digital tools to nurture gifted and talented students.

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