

CHARACTERISTICS SHOWN BY GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR TEACHERS IN THE CLASSROOM

EĞİTİM BAĞLAMINDA YETENEKLİ ÇOCUKLAR VE ÖĞRETMENLERİNİN NİTELİKLERİ

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ABSTRACT

Special Educational Needs is so broad an area that there are many issues and problems to be studied. One of the important issues in this broad area is gifted children and their needs, in other words, their situations in the educational context. In general, many people think that special educational needs (SEN) is necessary in particular for children who have difficulty in learning. However, gifted children should also be considered in the SEN.

This study aims to clarify who gifted children are and what their situation is in the teaching-learning context. In addition, the characteristics of the teachers who teach gifted children will also be taken into consideration in this study.

ÖZ

Özel Eğitim Gereksinimleri alanı incelenecek birçok konu ve sorun içeren çok geniş bir alandır. Bu alandaki önemli konulardan birisi yetenekli çocukların gereksinimleri, bir başka deyişle, yetenekli çocukların eğitim bağlamındaki yeridir. Genelde birçok kişi özel eğitim gereksinimlerinin öğrenme güçlüğü olan çocuklar için gerekli olduğunu sanır. Oysa yetenekli çocuklar da özel eğitim gereksinimleri kapsamında ele alınmalıdır.

Bu çalışma yetenekli çocukların kim olduklarını ve eğitim, öğretim bağlamında onların yerinin ne olduğunu açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, yetenekli çocukların öğretmenlerinin nitelikleri de bu çalışmada ele alınacaktır.

INTRODUCTION

In considering research on special educational needs, many issues can be found essential and interesting. One of the issues in the area of special educational needs is the needs of gifted children (Ataman 1998, 1999). In this study, the characteristics of gifted children, their needs and their teachers' roles in the educational context will be briefly discussed.

Who are Gifted Children?

The literature provides a variety of labels for gifted children such as 'more able', 'talented', 'exceptional', 'superior', 'brilliant', 'higher educational potentials' (Weeks, 1993; George, 1992). However, it is questionable whether these labels mean the same thing. This shows us that there are many different labels for these children. In other words, there is no simple and precise definition of giftedness, as Hitchfield (1976)

points out. The subject of gifted or exceptionally able children is still treated with confusion and misrepresentation (Congdon, 1985). This leads us to the question of "How can we recognise gifted children?"

Firstly, it might be useful to clarify who gifted children are. The definition of giftedness given by HMI (1977; cited in Straker, 1980: 4) in their report included superiority in intellectual, academic and/or aesthetic areas:

... children ... who are generally recognised by their schools as being of superior all round intellectual ability, confirmed by a reliable individual test giving an IQ of 130 or more....

or

... who exhibit a markedly superior developmental level of performance and achievement which has been reasonably consistent from earlier years ...

These types of definitions are not limited. Briefly, it can be said that the term 'gifted' is perhaps best used as an umbrella term to cover a number of groups of children of exceptional ability. The groups encompass children of high measured intelligence, those of high academic aptitude and those with talent or outstanding ability in a specific area or group of related areas

(Congdon, 1985: 111). However, presenting different lists for identifying gifted children used by the researchers so far reveals the details. Table 1 below gives some of the characteristics of gifted children with regard to different researchers' views.

Table 1 given below indicates that all these lists consist of similar characteristics. It shows that gifted

Table 1. Some indicators given by different researchers in defining gifted children

WHAT KINDS OF CHARACTERISTICS DO GIFTED CHILDREN HAVE?	
Straker (1982)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense, curious, sometimes in one special field • Superior in quantity and quality of vocabulary, but not always keen to write • Compulsively perfectionists about their own achievements and impatient with second best • Able to listen to only part of the teachers' explanation, and then withdrawing into private thought or thinking on ahead • Possibly arrogant, but at the other extreme, sometimes shy, reserved and unassertive • Able to work for long periods with persistence and total absorption
SISK (1988; cited in Young & Tyre, 1992: 18)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High mathematical ability • Alert curiosity • Independence of action • Initiative, anxious to do new things • Fluency in non-verbal communication • Imagination in thinking • Learning quickly through experience • Retaining and using ideas and information well • Originality and creativity in thinking • Varied interests • Responding well to visual media • Ability to generalise • Ability to learn other areas and to show relationships among unrelated ideas • Resourceful, ability to solve problems by ingenious methods • Imaginative storytelling • Language rich in imagery • Mature sense of humour • Responsive to the concrete
LACKOK's Checklist For Teachers (1957;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have great intellectual curiosity • Learn easily and readily • Have a wide range of interests • Have ability to do effective work independently • Have learned to read early (before school age) • Exhibit keen powers of observation

<p>cited in Young and Tyre, 1992: 16).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show initiative and originality in intellectual work • Show alertness and quick response to new ideas • Are able to memorise quickly • Possess unusual imagination • Follow complex directions easily • Are rapid readers • Have several hobbies • Effective use of the library • Are superior in arithmetic, particularly in problem solving
<p>PARKER (1989; cited in Young & Tyre, 1992: 16-18)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Fluency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressiveness • Spontaneous flow of ideas • Lengthy periods spent on problem finding and solution 2 Flexibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tendency to experiment freely with a variety of ideas and subjects, media, materials, and techniques • Facility for solving problems • Using non-traditional methods • Aptitude for viewing/approaching art from a different perspective • Tolerance of ambiguity and conflict • Ability to adopt from one situation or medium to another 3 Originality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High degree of imagination • Ability to imagine clearly • Freedom from stimuli • Tendency to experiment with problem findings as opposed to adopting preconceived situations 4 Elaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of many elements • Facility for piggybacking/hitch-hiking on the ideas of others
<p>Midlands LEA list (HMI, 1992: 3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learns easily • Original, imaginative, creative • Persistent, resourceful, self-directed • Informed in unusual areas often beyond their years • Artistic • Outstanding vocabulary • Verbally fluent • Independent worker • Good judgement, logical • Versatile, many interests • Shows high level of sensitivity • Has excellent sense of humour

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibits unusually extroverted behaviour within a group • Unusually high motivation and self-expression
George (1992)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have everything going their way • Are more emotionally stable and mature than their non-gifted peers • Prefer to work alone • Are model students • Always reveal their giftedness • Are organised and neat • Are creative • Are good learners • Are very verbal • Have a low tolerance for slower students • Are perfectionists • Work harder than average kids • Look or act differently
Stephans & Crawley (1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find usual resources and tasks superficial, and get impatient with easy things • Display rapid command and recall of information • Are intensely curious and ask deeply searching questions • Even when seemingly daydreaming, know exactly what's going on, and respond quickly and accurately to sudden questions • Make quick connections between theoretical principles and real events • Don't accept 'teacher knows best' because 'teacher says so' • Are often quick-witted and catch-on to humorous nuances with ease • Sometimes ponder over detail and deeper meanings to the extent that they don't write enough when subjected to time constraints • Employ advanced use of language in spoken and written work • Are astonishingly sure-footed in computing, engineering, mathematical and general problem-solving exercises
Kokot (1999: 39-40)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insightfulness • Need to understand • Need for mental stimulation • Perfectionism • Need for precision/logic • Excellent sense of humour • Sensitivity/empathy • Intensity • Acute self-awareness • Tendency towards introversion

children, in fact, have many common characteristics in terms of different researchers' views. It should also be noted that psychologists agree among themselves that it is not easy to define and recognise these children. In a sense, they generally assert that many factors can be important in defining these children.

Gerrard (1973) indicates that recognising these children in their early years might be more beneficial for them. According to him, the primary years are usually exciting times when life is full of discovery and boundless energy. In comparison to this, some researchers, for instance, Martinson (1968) noted that identification of abilities in the early years is difficult and it might not be easy to understand this group of children's characteristics or interests in the classrooms in those years. Some children, for instance, are observed as unsuccessful and are even called as 'under-achievers'. Even though these children have potential, they have difficulty in showing it in the classroom (HMI, 1992). Ataman (1996) states that we should bear in mind a question like 'how can we recognise gifted children early?'. In addition to this, she states that to answer this question, the limitations of the ways of recognising gifted children should be defined.

According to George (1992), there are some indicators to understand these types of children in the classroom such as poor test performance, being orally knowledgeable, apparently bored, restless and inattentive, preferring friendship with older pupils or adults and having a wide range of interests. Similar to Gerrard (1973), he also asserts that it is not easy for their teachers to recognise gifted children. Beethoven, for instance, is given an example of this situation because he was defined as hopeless as a composer by his music teacher. This actually shows how difficult the role of the adults is in recognising and directing these children. The adults might be parents, friends or teachers. In this study, teachers of the gifted children and their strategies will be discussed.

Gerrard (1973) notes that the gifted children are generally observed in the classroom as they raise hands first and know all the right answers or they always finish their work first or they are clever enough to be at the bottom of the class if they want to be.

However, this seems open to discussion because any hard-working child in the classroom can also demonstrate these kinds of characteristics. Therefore, not all the children who demonstrate these characteristics can be called gifted or more able or brilliant. Here, clearly, in order to decide whether a child is gifted or not, some form of measurement or objective assessment is required. Therefore, it can be repeated that it is not easy for teachers to recognise these children in the classroom and help them. Another aspect on the gifted issue is that teachers' strategies affect these children in different ways in the classroom. Knowing gifted children's feelings about their teacher might give us more insight into the situation:

He doesn't like me to try my own way, or let me start when he has done just one on the board. He does six or seven so that everyone in the class understands, and then we all start together doing them his way. (Straker, 1982)

These words indicate that what gifted children say is very valuable in helping the educators to understand their feelings. Another example clearly demonstrates their feelings.

... I am the loneliest person in the world because I should really be in the twenty-first century. I'm inventing things now but I have to wait until I'm grown up because no one will listen to me... (Golightly, 1987: 39)

These examples indicate that teachers have important responsibilities in understanding gifted children and in applying some strategies to help them. Torrance (1981, cited in George, 1992) gives a list of common characteristics of the creative child which may be helpful to teachers in recognising these children. The list includes some characteristics such as being full of ideas and seeing the relationship between them, being imaginative and enjoying pretending, having flexibility of ideas and thoughts, constructing, building and then re-building, being able to cope with several ideas at once, always telling others about discoveries or inventions, liking to do things differently from the norm.

Certainly, these characteristics give vital clues about gifted children to their teachers. In addition to these clues, intelligence tests used by educational psychologists or other specialists provide another means of recognising these children, even though

Weeks (1993) notices that these tests are not available to teachers (e.g. The British Ability Scales, the Weschler Intelligence Scales for Children and the Kaufmann Assessment Battery for Children). However, Weeks (1993) indicates that there are many tests such as The AH Series, Roven's Progressive Matrices and Vocabulary Scales which teachers can use both for groups and individuals.

According to George (1992), teachers can identify these children from their own personal knowledge of their children, but it is also essential that teachers should provide the creative learning environment where children have the opportunity to show their talents. In this context, the teacher can be considered as the facilitator, the resource manager, the enthusiast, the guide, the prompter and so on. Therefore, it seems that an essential part of any strategy for identifying gifted children is to provide the environment and materials which will allow their giftedness or talents to emerge. Part of such an environment should be encouragement and development of critical, logical and creative thinking skills (Congdon, 1985:116).

Slightly different from the others, Golightly (1987) indicates that teachers of very able children must realise that they need teaching and inspiration, guidance, reassurance and praise as much as other children do. The question posed to teachers in the study conducted by Golightly was: 'Which of these methods of identifying gifted children would you prefer?'. Three options were given to them: 1. School-based identification only (tests and observation), 2. Expert identification only, 3. School-based identification (tests and observation) followed by a second opinion from an expert. Teachers involved in this research study said that they felt insufficiently knowledgeable to identify giftedness without a second ('expert') opinion. In addition to this, the majority preferred the third option which requires combining their own with experts' ideas.

On the other hand, as Swell (1996) points out, some very able pupils will have high attainments in all subjects and to identify them can be easy, but there will still be some who are unrecognised. Here, the important point to be considered is that not all the gifted children display all of the characteristics given

and discussed above (Feldhusen et al., 1989).

Briefly, it can be said that, the view from the teacher's desk is different from that of the parents' living room (Enrlich, 1989). Teachers have important roles in identifying and then applying suitable strategies to gifted children. All these views lead to other issues related to gifted children such as how they should be taught and what teachers can do.

Teachers' Strategies for Gifted Children

Able children need opportunity to present their ideas and show their interests and for this reason teachers take very important roles in this sense as discussed above. Since gifted children will have a great deal to contribute to the future well-being society, provided their talents are developed to the full during their formal education. One of the precious resources is the ability and creativity of these children (Straker, 1982). However, what kinds of teaching methods teachers should use in the classroom should now be discussed.

According to Gerrard (1973), there are four possible methods of teaching. One way is to put gifted children into special classes, special groups or special schools – a policy of separation from other children. The second way is to make them work harder and longer than other children by a process of prolongation of the school day, term or year. This might include other less-obvious forms of prolongation like homework, dinner-time work, starting school at an earlier age, vocation courses and extra work at the weekends. The third way is to accelerate gifted children's work by the familiar process of moving them up into a class a year (or more) above those of the same age as them. Finally, there is a process of enrichment of the school and classroom environment. However, it is obvious that all these approaches have some limitations in application. For instance, applying acceleration might not always be useful for these children. When gifted children are separated from the other children, they might experience some emotional or physical difficulties. Therefore, what Gerrard (1973) offers seems open to discussion. Unlike Gerrard (1973), Daniels and Anghileri (1995) assert that teaching is often equated with 'telling' and 'explaining' and it is assumed that children will gain knowledge when they

have been told. Yet they claim that this approach has many shortcomings or limitations, and this is valid also for gifted children. According to them, this kind of technique, in particular, is not always suitable for gifted children. Unlike some children, gifted children may need to be able to participate in a higher level of discussion. This can be observed as they often communicate their thoughts to their peers or adults. Therefore, teachers of gifted children should use a variety of teaching techniques and they should also use these techniques efficiently to encourage gifted children to develop their feelings and beliefs comfortably. Thus, it can be said that the ideal teacher of gifted children has to have some personal characteristics such as being sensitive, sincere, empathetic, open, competent, confident, responsible, creative, innovative, respectful, resourceful and flexible. Similar to George (1997), Maker (1975; cited in Golightly, 1987) suggests that teachers of the very able children should be flexible, creative, self-confident, with a love of learning and exploration. In addition, she advocates that the teacher should be a 'change agent' who encourages pupils to value and accept the process of experimenting and the consequent tension of risk-taking and uncertainty. Feldhusen (1984; cited in McLeod and Cropley, 1986) also lists personal characteristics of the ideal teacher of the gifted. According to his list, the ideal teacher of the gifted should 1. be intelligent and knowledgeable, 2. have broad interests, 3. be hardworking and achievement-oriented, 4. be well-organized, 5. be highly enthusiastic about his/her work, 6. possess a good sense of humour, 7. be flexible, 8. understand and accept gifted students.

Weeks (1993) gives some ideas related to what individual teachers can do about giftedness. According to him, teachers can accentuate the positive screen, be aware of individual interests, enrich the curriculum, support other teachers who are trying to do something, get outside help, take pride in the achievement of talented pupils, criticise misconceived views of 'giftedness', persuade any non-believers or the apathetic, and liaise with parents. As seen, teachers of the gifted have to have a variety of characteristics and carry important responsibilities. In a sense, it has been suggested that the teacher of the very able needs the maturity to accept a child with possibly higher potential than him-

self, who will sometimes challenge and even threaten a teacher's own knowledge and sense of security. In addition to this, teachers of gifted children can provide some useful help to these children.

According to Finkelstein and Finkelstein (1992) teachers of the gifted should be supportive. Thus, they can support and encourage these children to pursue opportunities. Gifted children's teachers should also be mentors to provide them with opportunities to learn in more depth. According to these researchers, these teachers should also be role models and resources. In addition to some personal characteristics, teachers of gifted children are expected to have some special knowledge and skills. Sisk (1975) and Seeley (1979; cited in & McLeod and Cropley, 1986) list knowledge and skills needed by these teachers such as knowledge of the nature and needs of gifted students, knowledge of new developments in education, knowledge of relevant current research, skills in educational diagnosis, and skills in counselling and guidance.

Costello (1991), for example, notes that many forms of extracurricular provision have been suggested for gifted children. These forms include extra social lessons, out-of-school visits, work experience, short residential courses, mathematics clubs, displays or exhibitions, the production of a magazine, and periodical competitions and contests. However, as Costello himself emphasises, it might not be easy to provide these children with these types of special arrangements. On the other hand, it might be possible to prepare these arrangements for the summer or at weekends. All these mean that the teacher of gifted pupils has to have a number of detailed characteristics. In fact, the characteristics mentioned so far are valid for teachers of all children. However, not everyone, including teachers, will have all these characteristics. Ataman (1982) states that teachers of gifted children do not have to be gifted. On the other hand, because gifted children have a variety of characteristics, their teachers are also expected to have all these characteristics or more.

Another point in this section is the teachers' expertise and experience.

Novice and Experienced Teachers' Strategies for Teaching the Gifted

Research studies in the area of novice/experienced teachers indicate that there are some differences between these groups in applying some teaching strategies in the classroom. Many researchers (Çakmak, 1999; Swanson et al., 1990; Strahan, 1989; Berliner, 1994; Magliaro and Borko, 1986) have pointed out these differences in their research studies. As a result, it can be said that applications of teaching methods used by novice and experienced teachers in teaching these children in the classroom can vary. It is necessary to take this point into consideration in the giftedness context since experience might be a crucial factor in identifying such children. As Straker (1982) mentions, for instance, true mathematical ability is not difficult for the experienced eye to recognise. On the other hand, novice teachers can feel differently towards these children. Giving an example might be useful here:

Having just graduated from college and having no background in academic situations with gifted children, I'm totally amazed at their tremendous variety. One would expect homogeneity from this 'homogeneous' grouping of children, however, diversity seems to me the guideword necessary in the thinking of the teacher of a class, whether totally gifted or heterogeneous- diversity in thinking in desires, interests, capabilities in different areas, motivation, methods of expression, etc. It is through realisation of and capitalisation upon the factor of diversity, that the teacher of the gifted begins to guide planning around this. Here is located her personal frame of reference for curriculum planning (a first-year teacher) (Martinson, 1968: 1).

These words from a first year teacher indicate that experienced teachers might be considered as more successful in identifying these children. According to Gerrard (1973), most experienced teachers can identify these children. They offer more thoughtful or reasoned answers to questions or show signs or divergent thinking. They will contradict them openly if they make a spelling mistake on the blackboard or write the data incorrectly. On the other hand, even experienced teachers might experience difficulty in identifying them, but their views seem more reliable than those of the novice teachers because their expe-

rience can be considered as a very important factor, as discussed above.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It may seem unusual to include a discussion of gifted children within special needs. On the other hand, all pupils have their own educational needs and some have needs which require the provision of additional resources or opportunities, including those who are gifted as well as those with particular learning difficulties. Gifted children or very able/able/talented /brilliant children also need special education. Kerry (1981), for instance, orders the needs of bright children as follows: a sound psychological climate, opportunities from competition (to learn co-operation), stimulus of work the higher cognitive levels (to develop skills of problem solving and problem devising), security (to ask the teacher difficult questions), independence in the learning, appreciation of their ideas and suggestions, encouragement to speculate, experience of failure, development of the ability to become self-critical, the ability to accept criticism, social skills, peer-group friendships. As can be understood, these children's special needs seem quite different than those of other children. Here, it should be noted that the gifted child is not 'better' than other children; she/he is different from them as Smutny et al (1997) indicate.

However, to understand their situation in the educational context requires firstly recognising them by considering that not all gifted children display all the characteristics discussed (Feldhusen et al, 1989). As discussed above, recognising these children is difficult for teachers in the classroom, but it is not impossible. In addition to teachers' observations, some tests can help to recognise them as briefly explained above and also to define their characteristics. On the other hand, it should be noted that parents of these children can also help teachers about this important case even though this was not discussed in this study.

Briefly, many people, in particular teachers, in the school context have very essential tasks helping these children. If their needs are neglected, they can face many difficulties in their formal or informal life. To prevent this unwanted situation, teachers should be aware of some characteristics of these children as

given before.

It should not be forgotten that high ability is a national resource and there are many issues in this area that should be taken into consideration. Therefore, gifted children and their needs in the educational context require more detailed research.

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