

The relationship between teachers' understanding of giftedness and their classroom practices in a selected school in Kazakhstan.

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The relationship between teachers' understanding of giftedness and their classroom practices in a selected school in Kazakhstan.

Abstract

Gifted students are believed to possess above-average abilities that need to be considered while teaching them. It has, however, been reported that very often teachers do not adjust their classroom practices to gifted students' needs. Teachers' beliefs about giftedness, attitudes towards gifted students and receiving training in aspects of giftedness play a role in how teachers plan for differentiating their instruction. The aim of this study was to explore teachers' beliefs about giftedness and how these beliefs affect their pedagogical practices in a selected school for gifted students in Kazakhstan. This study also sought to discover the challenges that teachers face in teaching gifted students and the ways they deal with these challenges. A qualitative case-study with a sample of 8 English language teachers and 1 principal was conducted in a school for gifted students in Kazakhstan. Data collection incorporated semi-structured interviews, non-participant lesson observations and post-observation discussions. Evidence from lesson plans, medium-term plans and written classroom assignments were also analyzed to answer the research questions. According to the study findings, there are two major beliefs among teachers. The most prevalent belief is that every child is gifted. Second, teachers do not have stereotypical views about giftedness and believe that all gifted students possess very diverse characteristics. Also, it has been found out that teachers do not hold too positive or too negative attitudes to gifted students. The classroom practices that the teachers used during classroom observation showed that most activities in the classroom did not contain any differentiated instruction in response to the needs of students who were ahead of their peers. However, differentiation was found to be planned as a whole-school approach of ability-

grouping to optimize English language learning. These findings suggest that though the study participants are aware of the diversity of gifted students, they do not have planned strategies for differentiated instruction in the classroom. Lack of emphasis on differentiation by the school leadership combined with no systemic approach to training teachers in aspect of giftedness justify the recommendations made to the pertinent stakeholders. The Ministry of Education can support teachers by creating consistent and practical pre-service and in-service professional training for teachers in gifted education. These courses should be focused on the successful classroom practices and help teachers collaboratively develop lessons aimed at enrichment and differentiated instruction. School leadership should advocate the principles of differentiated instruction and support teachers in their journey towards improving their classroom practices.

Key words: *giftedness, teachers of gifted students, teachers' beliefs about giftedness, differentiated instruction, classroom practices.*

Взаимосвязь между пониманием одаренности учителями и их методами обучения в одной из школ Казахстана.

Аннотация

Одаренные ученики обладают способностями, которые должны учитываться в их обучении. Однако очень часто учителя не адаптируют свои методы обучения к потребностям и особенностям одаренных учащихся. Понимание учителями концепции одаренности, отношения учителей к одаренным ученикам, а также, прохождения учителями обучения в аспектах одаренности играют важную роль в том, как учителя используют дифференцированное обучение. Цель этого исследования – изучение понимания учителями одаренности и влияние этих убеждений на их методы обучения в школе для одаренных детей в Казахстане. Это исследование также предназначалось для выявления проблем, с которыми сталкиваются учителя в обучении одаренных учеников, и способов решения этих проблем. В школе для одаренных учеников в Казахстане было проведено качественное тематическое исследование с образцом из 8 преподавателей английского языка и 1 директора. Сбор данных включал полуструктурированные интервью, сторонние наблюдения уроков, и обсуждение уроков с учителями после наблюдения. Были также проанализированы данные из планов уроков, среднесрочных планов и письменных заданий в классе для ответа на вопросы исследования. Согласно результатам исследования, среди учителей есть два основных убеждения. Самое распространенное – мнение о том, что каждый ребенок одарен. Во-вторых, учителя не имеют стереотипных взглядов на одаренность и считают, что все талантливые ученики обладают очень разнообразными особенностями. Кроме того, выяснилось, что учителя не имеют чрезмерно негативного или чрезмерно позитивного отношения к одаренным ученикам. Наблюдения уроков выявили, что методы обучения используемые учителями не

содержат каких-либо дифференцированных заданий в ответ на потребности студентов, которые опережали своих сверстников. Тем не менее, было установлено, что дифференциация обучения используется в качестве общешкольного подхода к формированию групп и классов согласно способностям учеников для оптимизации обучения английскому языку. Эти данные свидетельствуют о том, что, хотя учителя осознают различные особенности одаренных учеников, у них нет запланированных стратегий для дифференцированного обучения в классе. Отсутствие акцента на дифференциации со стороны руководства школы, а также, отсутствие системного подхода к обучению учителей в аспекте одаренности оправдывают рекомендации заинтересованным сторонам. Министерство Образования может поддерживать преподавателей путем создания последовательной и практической профессиональной подготовки в ВУЗах и повышения квалификации для учителей в области одаренности. Эти курсы должны быть ориентированы на успешные методы обучения и помогать учителям совместно разрабатывать уроки, направленные на обогащение и дифференцированное обучение. Руководство школы должно призывать к использованию принципов дифференцированного обучения и поддерживать учителей в их пути к совершенствованию методов обучения в классе.

Ключевые слова: одаренность, учителя одаренных учеников, понимание учителями одаренности, дифференцированное обучение, методы обучения.

Қазақстандағы бір мектептегі мұғалімдердің дарындылықты түсіну мен олардың оқыту әдістері арасындағы байланыс.

Аңдатпа

Дарынды оқушылар олардың оқытылуында ескерілуі керек қабілеттерге ие. Дегенмен мұғалімдер өздерінің оқыту әдістерін дарынды оқушылардың қажеттіліктері мен ерекшеліктеріне бейімдемейді. Мұғалімдердің дарындылық жайындағы түсініктері, дарынды оқушылар туралы көзқарастары, сондай-ақ дарындылық тақырыбында біліктілікті жетілдіру мұғалімдердің дифференциация әдісін қолдануларына әсер етеді. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты - Қазақстандағы дарынды балаларға арналған мектеп мұғалімдерінің дарындылық тақырыбында түсініктерін анықтап, сол түсініктердің мұғалімдердің оқыту әдістемелеріне ықпалын айқындау болып табылады. Сондай-ақ бұл зерттеу мұғалімдердің дарынды оқушыларды оқытудағы қиындықтарын анықтауға және осы мәселелерді шешу жолдарына арналған. Қазақстандағы дарынды оқушыларға арналған мектепте 8 ағылшын тілі мұғалімі мен мен 1 директордың қатысуымен тақырыптық сапалы зерттеу жүргізілді. Деректер жиынтығы жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар, сабақты бақылау, және бақылаулардан кейін мұғалімдермен сабақтарды талқылауды қамтиды. Сондай-ақ сабақ өткізу жоспарлары, орта мерзімді жоспарлар және сыныптағы жазбаша тапсырмалардағы деректерге зерттеу сұрақтарына жауап беру үшін талдау жүргізілді. Зерттеу нәтижелері бойынша, мұғалімдер арасында екі негізгі көзқарас бар. Ең таралған пікір – әрбір бала дарынды деген пікір. Екіншіден, мұғалімдердің дарындылық туралы пікірлері стереотипті емес, мұғалімдер дарынды оқушылардың барлығы әр түрлі өзгешеліктерге ие екенін жақсы түсінеді. Оған қоса, мұғалімдердің дарынды оқушыларға көзқарастары тым оң немесе тым теріс емес екені анықталды.

Сабақты бақылау барысында, басқа балалардан озып кеткен оқушылардың қажеттіліктеріне арналған дифференциалды тапсырмаларды көп жағдайда қолданылмағаны анықталды. Дегенмен, балалардың қабілеттеріне сай ағылшын тілін дифференциалды оқыту жалпы мектептік сыныптар мен топтарды құру тәсілі ретінде қолданылып жүргені мәлім болды. Бұл деректерге сүйенсек, мұғалімдердің дарынды оқушылардың әр түрлі ерекшеліктерін біліп, түсінгенмен, мұғалімдерде сынып аясында жоспарланған дифференциалды оқыту стратегиялары жоқ.

Дифференциацияға мектеп басшылығының ерекше көңіл аудармауы, сондай-ақ мұғалімдерді дарындылық тақырыбында оқыту жүйесінің жоқтығы мүдделі тараптарға ұсыныстарды ақтайды. Оқу және білім министрлігі жоғары оқу орындарында мұғалімдерді дарындылық аспектілерінде даярлау және дарындылыққа қатысты біліктілікті арттыруды жүйелі және практикалық түрде ұйымдастыра алады. Бұл курстар дарынды оқушыларды ең үздік оқыту әдістемелерді қамтып, мұғалімдерге бірлесіп дифференциалды сабақтарды жоспарлауға көмектесу керек. Мектеп басшылығы дифференциация принциптерін қолдануды насихаттап, мұғалімдерді өздерінің оқыту әдістемелерін шыңдауларына қолдау көрсету керек.

Кілт сөздер: *дарындылық, дарынды оқушылардың мұғалімдері, мұғалімдердің дарындылық жауында түсініктері, дифференциалды оқыту, дифференциация, оқыту әдістемелері.*

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Chapter one: Introduction

Introduction

The aim of this research study is to explore teachers' beliefs about giftedness and how these beliefs affect teachers' pedagogical practices in a selected school for gifted students in Kazakhstan. This study also seeks to discover the challenges that teachers face in teaching gifted students and the ways they deal with these challenges. This introductory chapter covers several important sections. First, there is a section on the background of the study. It is followed by the discussion of the statement of the problem. Next, the purpose and the significance of the study are outlined. This chapter ends with the research questions and the definition of terms used in the study.

Background of the study

Gifted students are believed to be learning at a different pace from students of typical abilities. Therefore it is important to provide them with appropriate learning experiences in the classrooms. The three ways in which gifted students are distinguished from other learners are how fast they learn, how deep they understand what they learn, and how keenly interested they are in their learning (Maker, 1982, cited in Parke, 1992). It is thought-provoking, though, that while some students are bored in the classroom (Gallagher, Harradine & Coleman, 1997), others may downgrade their performances in response to low academic demand (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2014). Besides, there are a lot of myths related to gifted students and one of them is that gifted students do not need extra attention or guidance, simply because they are good enough to navigate their own educational journey. Moon (2009), for instance, describes this myth as "High-ability students don't face problems and challenges" (p.274), propagating that this is a misstatement and many advanced students cannot be successful in their academic and regular lives regardless of their training. This view is supported by a wealth of research on

the topic of underachievement of gifted students (Seeley, 1993; Bell and Roach, 2001; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Renzulli, 1978; Schultz, 2002), where “school etiology” or the school climate (Davis et.al, 2014) is claimed to serve as one of the many reasons for underperformance of gifted and talented students.

Why should serving the gifted students be of such significance to us? One of the most prominent scholars in the field of Gifted Education, Joseph S. Renzulli (2012) pinpoints three major objectives of the gifted education:

1. Creating conditions for self-fulfillment of individuals with superb abilities;
2. Generating a pool of individuals characterized by problem-solving, leadership and knowledge-producing abilities in order to initiate progress in a society;
3. Developing programs and provisions that are more sensitive to the needs of these individuals rather than to the “good lesson learners” (Renzulli, 2012, p.151).

As the gifted student is the “ultimate beneficiary” (Johnsen, 2012, p.55) of the educational practices and strategies utilized in the classroom, so the teacher is viewed as the main facilitator of academic and personal evolution for these students. Indeed, most teachers are vis-à-vis with their gifted students in the classrooms from day to day, and they are at the heart of classroom-based decision-making pertaining to the forms of academic activities introduced in response to the needs of diverse student populations, including the gifted students. As Sekowski and Lubianka (2015) nicely put it:

Usually, it is them [teachers], who, in cooperation with psychologists or school education specialists, recognize the abilities of their students and monitor the choice and implementation of appropriate educational solutions to stimulate the development of gifted children and young people’s latent talents” (p.628).

These views redirect us to an area of concern, which is related to the process of teaching the gifted students. In a wide-scale study conducted by Archambault, Westberg, Brown, Hallmark, Zhang & Emmons (1992), approximately 7000 teachers of 3rd and 4th grades in the USA were found to demonstrate little or no modifications to their teaching methodology in regards to the gifted population in the regular classrooms, a fact which the authors of the research call “a disturbing picture” (Archambault et.al, 1992, p.115).

Certainly, tedious or undemanding curricula, a plethora of family and emotional profiles are also among the factors subject to blame for the fact that gifted students may fall behind their potential performance (Reis & Renzulli, 2004), however, it is the teacher who can adjust and differentiate the curriculum and his/her pedagogy according to the students’ needs and have the expertise on the peculiarities, challenges and bonuses of teaching the gifted population (Sekowski & Lubianka, 2015).

Remarkably, gifted education paradigm has been receiving criticism from scholars who advocate inclusion and rethinking the notion of giftedness as such. For instance, Mara Sapon-Shevin, in her book *Playing Favorites: Gifted Education and the Disruption of Community* (1994) expresses her concern about the implementation of gifted education and characterizes the process as being “elitist, meritocratic, and constitutes a form of educational triage” (Sapon-Shevin, 1996, p.195). Similarly, despite admitting that children do learn in different ways and with different pace, Borland (2003) argues that giftedness is a concept that was constructed by people to favor one group of people and segregate another one and the current approach to gifted education should be revisited and rebuilt.

Inclined to akin views, there are some countries which adopt a shift in the policies against the notion that gifted students should receive privileged services. Such countries as Finland (Laine & Tirri, 2015) and Japan (Cooper, 1999), for instance, do not have any policies and provisions in regard to gifted students. Also, countries with highest PISA results do not have any distinctive lines between the gifted and less able students and do

not push students towards competition-based schooling (OECD, 2014). In Kazakhstan, however, gifted education has been highly prioritized during the Soviet times and after gaining sovereignty in 1991. One of the key transformations in education took the form of founding special schools for talented young children in all major cities of the country (Yakavets, 2013; Bekishev, 2013; OECD, 2014). In 2011, official data showed that there were 115 specialised schools for gifted children in Kazakhstan (OECD, 2014). Gifted students have been perceived to be the country's future driving force for economic development and 20 intellectual schools have opened its doors to the students who would "generate scientific discoveries and produce ideas which will contribute to the country's economic growth" (Yakavets, 2013, p.514).

My career as an English language teacher started in one of the schools for gifted students and since then I have been teaching gifted students. My experience showed that even in gifted schools every teacher will face students with various levels of knowledge and abilities. Some of these students will be in need of more challenging tasks that need to be thoughtfully pre-planned. What I also saw was that planning differentiated instruction requires extra time and work, and more often than not, requires solid knowledge about gifted students, their cognitive characteristics, and their learning styles. As Gallagher et al. (1997) put it, "Unless prepared to teach gifted students, most teachers have had little or no background on strategies to cope with these creative and fertile minds" (p.136). Hence, realizing that many teachers, including me, find differentiation quite challenging, I have become keenly interested in learning how teachers conceptualize giftedness, whether all teachers understand giftedness in the same way, and what methods they use to teach their students.

Statement of the Problem

The existing literature on teachers of the gifted population reveals that the USA, for instance, has professional standards in Gifted Education. These standards provide guidance

to educators in the field and also serve as a benchmark for licensing and certifying teachers who are passionate about their careers in teaching the gifted students and develop appropriate skills and knowledge (Johnsen, 2012). The analysis of this framework indicates that these standards are of profound assistance to teachers in terms of training and providing them with professional competence. Other countries like England, Scotland, and Australia offer continuous professional development in gifted education for the teachers, and after a study of the teachers in this program, it was found out that negative attitudes towards gifted students can be alleviated through these professional development programs (Geake & Gross, 2008).

Compared to the abovementioned countries, Kazakhstan's system of gifted education is inherited from the Soviet system, where high ability students were and still are educated in special schools opened to meet the needs of intellectually capable students. The official data on standards in gifted education and on pre-service and in-service teacher training in giftedness is scarce. The nationwide training courses launched in 2011 by the Centres of Excellence are aimed at retraining the in-service teachers, "equipping teachers to educate citizens of the 21st century' and revolutionize the teaching practices in Kazakhstan (Turner, Wilson, Ispussinova, Kassymbekov, Sharimova, Balgynbayeva, Brownhill, 2014). Differentiation is one intention of the philosophy of this program (Turner et. al, 2014) and it is approached as differentiating and developing strategies to meet the needs of the gifted and talented students. It was aimed to train 120 000 teachers by 2016 through the given initiative, however, presumably, there will still be thousands of teachers who will stay beyond the reach of the national retraining program.

Teacher training is critical in gifted education, because whatever issues gifted students may face in their school lives, teacher is the ultimate person who can alleviate these issues. However, there is evidence that many teachers view giftedness as elitist or

think gifted students are fine on their own (Geake and Gross, 2008; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2010). Teachers pedagogies tend to reflect their beliefs about gifted students (Brighton, 2003). The good news is that teachers' views can be positively affected by specific training in giftedness (Geake & Gross, 2008; Hansen & Fedhusen, 1994; Tomlinson, 2003).

In Kazakhstan, no studies have been conducted in order to see how teachers, with or without appropriate training in gifted education, tailor their methodology in order to meet the needs of gifted students either in special schools, or in general classrooms. It is unknown how teachers understand giftedness and what strategies teachers currently apply to the gifted students they encounter on a daily basis. As Gallagher et al. (1997) suggest, "Even good school systems need to review whether they are really providing their brightest students with academic and intellectual challenge..."(p.136). These elaborations lend some support to the need of investigating the pedagogical practices existent in our classrooms in order to inform us about the state of gifted students. We need to examine the abilities or inabilities of teachers to meet the academic needs of highly able students, particularly those, accommodated by specialized education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate into teachers' understanding of giftedness and teaching the gifted students and the nature of the pedagogical practices teachers apply in their classrooms in a selected school in Kazakhstan. The study aims at discovering how teachers' views about giftedness and gifted students influence their classroom practices, what challenges they face in teaching the gifted and how they address those challenges. It will also look at the school leaders' views and the school's policies in regards to teaching gifted students and training the teaching staff in aspects of giftedness.

Significance of the study

The most large-scale study into whether curriculum is modified through appropriate teaching to meet the needs of gifted students and what types of strategies are used in these classrooms is the Classroom Practices Study by Archaumbalt et.al (1992). The study involved a survey administered to more than 7000 teachers of 3rd and 4th grades and observations of 46 classrooms across the USA. The study concludes that teachers were able to tailor their pedagogy for the needs of the gifted students only insignificantly. Since more advanced activities were used on a very rare basis, the researchers concluded that “Few differences were noted in the responses of teachers who teach in schools in which a gifted program exists and schools in which a formal program does not exist” (Archaumbalt et.al, 1992, p.115). Of course, this research has provided us with substantial data on the state of gifted education in the USA, but it did not examine the reasons behind such thought-provoking data. There are a number of questions this study evokes in relation to what challenges teachers experience from day to day basis and what their beliefs concerning the giftedness are. Therefore, my research focuses be on investigating teachers’ perspectives to the issue.

In addition to that, previous research conducted in the field of classroom practices for the gifted involved regular classrooms and schools. These studies were also predominantly of quantitative nature, whereas my study looks at the nature of pedagogical practices and strategies for the gifted learners in a specialized school for gifted learners and is an exploratory qualitative study. This study offers valuable practical implications for the special schools with gifted services and regular schools alike, because in both settings there will always be students in need of more profound instructional provisions. The study may inform the school administrations about the need for continuous professional support in terms of training the teaching staff on the peculiarities and characteristics of gifted learners, on the best pedagogical strategies to teach the gifted students and the

differentiation policy of the school. The policy makers (Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Kazakhstan) may benefit from this study in terms of reviewing their policies about gifted education and raise the question of the need for pre-service and in-service teacher training in aspects of teaching the gifted students. The participants may reflect upon their professional development and their choice of teaching strategies with their students. Moreover, this study helps me gain basic skills of conducting a thorough empirical research and has practical benefits for me as a teacher-leader in my workplace. Finally, it may contribute to the existing literature on gifted students, particularly to the scarce body of knowledge about practices in gifted education in Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

The research questions:

1. How do English language teachers understand giftedness in a selected school in Kazakhstan?
2. What pedagogical practices do the English language teachers use with gifted students in their classrooms?
3. What challenges do these teacher face in teaching gifted students and how do they address those challenges?

Definition of Terms

To ensure clarity for readers and maintain common understanding of specific terms, it is important to define them based on the existing literature. Though there are no universally agreed upon definitions, I am applying the following definitions in this research study:

1. "Giftedness - the possession and use of untrained and spontaneously expressed natural abilities (called outstanding aptitudes or gifts), in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10 per cent of age peers. The four domains are: intellectual, creative, socio-affective and sensorimotor" (Gagné , 2004, p.3).

2. Pedagogical practices – strategies and activities teachers apply in the classroom to ensure student learning.
3. “Differentiation of instruction” - a modification of the curriculum and instruction to meet students’ differing learning needs, styles, interests and abilities (Archambault et. al, 1993).
4. “Otlichnik” – a Russian term widely used in Kazakhstan in relation to students who get only highest marks in all subjects at school.
5. “Troyechnik” – a Russian term widely used in Kazakhstan in relation to students who get only poor marks in all subjects at school.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of literature on a range of topics relating to gifted students. Some of the topics are generally related to the concepts of giftedness and gifted students, and others are specifically related to issues around gifted education and pedagogical approaches used for gifted children. The literature includes references to research from sources such as books, articles, and research reports originating from both western and local contexts.

Giftedness

Controversies surrounding how to define the true nature of giftedness and identification of gifted students are beyond the scope of this study, nevertheless, a brief overview is provided in this section. Recorded history of efforts to comprehend giftedness dates back as early as a century ago (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius & Worrell, 2011). Throughout all the years that “giftedness” has been researched in order to understand and define, it has delivered us so many definitions of giftedness that it only moved research away from a consensus related to this issue. According to Jolly (2008), Terman offered the earliest descriptors of giftedness, employing the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale and defining giftedness using the high Intelligence Quotient (IQ) (p.27). Terman’s definition depicted giftedness to be the general intellectual capability at the top 1% of the rank, as measured by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (Renzulli, 1978). This definition has been acknowledged as limited to academic achievement only, because human beings can be gifted in many other areas apart from intellectual (Renzulli, 1978). Furthermore, Subotnik et al. (2011) argued that nature of giftedness develops over time and it is not the same as intelligence. Though there are numerous and various definitions, IQ has been the dominant indication of giftedness up to this point (Yakavets, 2014).

Some more complicated and sophisticated definitions of giftedness can be observed among scholars as well. Among the early ones is the definition by Renzulli (1978), who summarized past and current definitions of giftedness, proposing that in order to be classified as gifted, a human being should possess three key traits – above-average IQ, perseverance and task commitment, and outstanding creativity (Renzulli, 1978, p.87).

Gagne (2004) is another prominent researcher involved with giftedness. According to him, giftedness is the ability to apply exceptional innate abilities in any of the four fields – intellectual, creative, socio-affective, and sensorimotor, provided that the manifestation of these skills locates the individual at least among the top 10 % of his/her age peers (p.120). The National Association for Gifted Children in the USA has employed a definition similar to Gagne’s generalization (NAGC Position Statement, 2010, para.1). It also advocated that giftedness should be narrowed to the notion of school-based giftedness while looking at issues that gifted children face within the school context (Cross and Coleman, 2014). Gifts and talents develop from the early stages of life through adolescence, and they should be also thought of as the results of an individual’s development over a period of time (Subotnik et al., 2011; Cross & Coleman, 2014).

The achievement aspect of giftedness, too, has been discussed, because even though giftedness can be identified in a person, it may not always result in achievement over time and is rather a dynamic entity. As can be seen, there is no one common approach for identifying or classifying gifted children and the definition has evolved from being static and tied to intelligence to one that emphasizes a more holistic view of various talents.

Issues surrounding teaching gifted learners

One of the most pressing matters of concern for many educators across the globe is that gifted students can occasionally stumble upon various barriers and sometimes be at

risk of failing academically (Mills, 2003). A myriad of reasons are seen as causing bright students' underachievement at schools (Van Boxtel and Monks, 1992; Whitmore, 1986), including personal emotional hardships and family-related complications (Gallagher et al., 1997; Baker, Bridger & Evans, 1998). The focus of this paper, though, is the school experience by gifted learners, which is also considered to be a leading cause of gifted learners' underachievement, because gifted students spend most of their academic life in regular classrooms in front of teachers with different backgrounds and teaching methodologies (Mills, 2003). Gifted students are sometimes seen to be neglected by the administration, teachers, and counselors of the school because there is a common belief that gifted students do not need extra attention and assistance (Reis, Hebert, Diaz, Maxfield and Ratley, 1995; VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh, 2010). The educational experience of every gifted child depends on the curriculum, which can appear to be tedious and unchallenging for them (Diaz, 1998; Gallagher et al., 1997) and the instructional routine within the schooling organizations, therefore considerable amount of attention is focused on the way the gifted learners are actually taught.

It has become crucial for educators to understand that their students are not a homogeneous group of individuals, but all have their own unique peculiarities and needs. Gifted students are not an exception and are also all very different. Therefore, teachers should always remember that "Only when individual differences are acknowledged, embraced, and acted on in the classroom, will gifted students be adequately served" (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2010). The literature on the topic of teaching gifted students (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2010; Tomlinson, Brighton, Hertberg, Callahan, 2003; Starko & Schack, 1989; Laine & Tirri, 2015) goes hand in hand with the vast topic of differentiated instruction for the gifted population and also explores the characteristics of effective teachers of gifted learners (Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Chan, 2001; Mills, 2003).

While it is not debatable that differentiating curriculum is one the most effective ways to serve the gifted students (Tomlinson et.al, 2003), whether teachers of bright students should be trained or not, and what makes a successful teacher of this population is still being explored from various perspectives (Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994; Mills, 2003).

Giftedness in Kazakhstani Context

It is well-known that Kazakhstan prioritizes gifted education as a means of facilitating economy growth in the country. On 16 September, 1996, the order N1125 “On governmental support and development of schools for gifted children” was signed by the president. Since 1996, this order has undergone slight changes, and in 2008, January 25th, schools for gifted students were first referred to as “specialized organizations for gifted students” in the order N69 (“Postanovleniye Pravitelstva Respubliki Kazakhstan”, 2008). In this order, a specialized organization is defined as an organization that “realizes specialized educational programmes, providing elitist education aimed at in-depth mastery of basics of science, culture, art, sports, and military skills...in the specialized schools of the Republic of Kazakhstan” (order N69, January 25th, 2008). In 2017, the regulations for the specialized educational organizations were clarified in the annex to the order and highlighted that the aims of the specialized organizations include providing “individualized manner of instruction for the gifted students to enhance quality learning of gifted children and foster independent learning, project-based and research activities for gifted children”(Order N499,2003. Modified in 2017). It also says that while specialized schools are provided with specialized curriculum based on the general curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education, a specialized educational organization is free to identify the forms and methods of teaching in accordance with their charter.

In Kazakhstan, special provision for gifted students is mostly provided by the state’s unified chain of specialized educational organizations called “Daryn”. There are about 120 schools which educate nearly 61 thousands students across the country

(“Odarenyh detei v Kazakhstane stanovitsya bolshe”, 2016). Schools for gifted children receive a lot of support from the president and the government, however, when we think about the terminology around the concept of giftedness, in Kazakhstan it is not articulated in policies (OECD, 2014) and it is not clear who can be considered to be gifted. Usually, the label of the gifted learner is granted to a child who has won a competition/ Olympiad or has been accepted to a specialized school for gifted children. Also, it is questionable, whether educators around the country understand giftedness in the same way, and how effective is the process of identifying gifted learners (Yakavets, 2013). It is not surprising that there is no research into peculiarities of teaching the gifted within the local context and no data available on what certain strategies are used in Kazakhstan in response to the needs of gifted students. It is particularly important to explore what services are provided for children who were identified and recruited for gifted programs within specialized schools. Both pre-service and in-service teachers may be right in asking questions like “Who is a gifted student? What are cognitive and psychological needs of gifted students? Who is meant to receive differentiated instruction in my classroom? How do I differentiate for the gifted? Do I need to differentiate for the gifted students?”. If teachers have not received proper support and training, answering these questions will not be easy for them. Nevertheless, as there is no ready-to-use definition of “giftedness” and no one universally eligible way of identifying who is gifted, it is in fact natural, that many countries do not have a clear definition of giftedness in their policy documents. As Borland (2013) suggests, “...defining giftedness is a matter of values and policy, not empirical research” (p.112), therefore it is essential that defining giftedness should not break the society into superior and inferior groups. On top of that, the author hypothesizes about the chance of abandoning the tradition of gift identification, because if a student is in need of more advanced content, it should be provided without necessarily labeling him/her as special or gifted. This, in opinion of the same author, is the primary task of differentiating the

curriculum for all types of learners (Borland, 2013). Accordingly, the next section is devoted to the role of differentiation in gifted education.

Differentiation

One of the most discussed strategies that inform school-based decisions related to teaching across the world is differentiating the curriculum according to the needs of students. Differentiation is known as a modification of the curriculum “to meet student's differing learning rates, styles, interests and abilities” (Archambault et. al, 1993, p.105). Differentiation requires minding the differences of the learners and providing learners with choice and an array of learning opportunities in the classroom (Davis et. al, 2014). In the book “Education of Gifted and Talented” by Davis, Rimm, and Del Siegle (2014) authors categorize various enrichment and acceleration activities for gifted students according to grouping strategies. These include gathering all gifted students in one setting part-time or full-time (like, the special school for the gifted learners that was selected for this study), homogenous or heterogeneous grouping, and differentiation and other types of enrichment models. The most important thing for educators to remember is that differentiating curriculum for gifted students is providing them with appropriately designed, higher level tasks, and not “simply having them do more of what they already know” (Taylor L.R., Smiley R.L., Richards B.S., 2015, p.491)

Interestingly, differentiating the curriculum has also been viewed as a means of giving up on gifted education and an alternative strategy to creating special programs for more able or average students. Education systems were even encouraged to abandon “giftedness” as a categorization process and focus on differentiating curriculum instead for all kinds of populations (Borland, 2003). May we be proponents of gifted education or not, it is obvious that differentiation has become a universally accepted response to the students’ needs in the contemporary classrooms.

A case-study by Westberg and Archaumbalt (1997) of 10 elementary schools' successful classroom practices for gifted students revealed that teachers and leadership in these schools demonstrated awareness of the diversity of their students' needs, abilities, and interests and were able to differentiate the curriculum by not expecting all students to complete the same types and the same amount of tasks all the time. However, not all schools and not all teachers are as successful as the schools discussed in the abovementioned study. Despite the fact that differentiation is advocated as an indispensable strategy for teaching a mixed-ability classroom (Archaumbalt et. al, 1992; Tomlinson, 2003), there is ample evidence from other studies that teachers, by and large, do not differentiate their instruction for the gifted learners (Archambault et. al, 1992; Westberg et al. 1993; Whitton, 1997; Laine, 2015).

Since so many teachers appear to exhibit only slight differentiated instruction, there may be a range of reasons behind these discouraging statistics. It should be realized that teachers are not deliberately reluctant to differentiate their instruction. This issue may be a consequence of teachers' having no previous training in aspects of giftedness and differentiated instruction. In many circumstances differentiating the curriculum is painful for teachers in terms of extra time and effort needed for planning it (VanTassel-Baska and Staumbagh, 2005). Empirical research has proved that teachers need at least three face-to-face courses in gifted education to gain the specific essential skills for educating gifted learners (Hansen, 1994). Otherwise, it is improbable that teachers will be aware of the characteristics of gifted students and how to deal effectively in teaching them. Another study concluded that teachers' mindsets and philosophies are strong predictors of their practices of differentiated instruction in the classroom (Coubergs, Struyven, Vanthournout & Engels , 2017).

All the studies exploring the classroom practices with gifted students to date were of quantitative nature. Therefore the need to explore teachers' views and actual practices through interviews and observations gains more importance in this regard.

Teachers of gifted students

Unsurprisingly, teachers' roles are in the spotlight when teaching gifted students is being discussed (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell & Hardin, 2014). As Parke (1992) puts it very neatly, "As a facilitator, orchestrator, designer, or coach, the teacher presents the conditions for learning" (p.2). It is reported that teachers are mainly aware of the diverse needs of their students and demonstrate eagerness to differentiate the instructional practices within their classrooms, however, there is also some evidence that some teachers hold negative attitudes towards gifted students (Geake and Gross, 2008; VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh, 2010).

If this is not the case, then it may be that teachers are either under qualified in terms of basic class management skills (VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh, 2010) or they have limited practical knowledge about how to serve their gifted students (Laine & Tirri, 2015). Teachers are also too overloaded with mundane paper work so that they do not have enough planning time, especially for gifted learners. Thus, they are simply annoyed by the additional load foisted on them to deliver differentiated instructions for the gifted (VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh, 2010). It is suggested that a teacher should not be alone in endeavoring to serve the bright students and should gain the support of the administrators in order to use effective teaching strategies for gifted students (Archaumbalt et.al, 1992; Starko & Schack, 1989). Schools should provide specific in-service training, such as demonstration lessons and simulation activities, for teachers in order to encourage them to differentiate more in their classrooms (Starko & Schack, 1989; Dixon et al., 2014).

Mills (2003) propagates that credentials and the amount of training that the teacher underwent in his/her career does not necessarily make him/her effective in teaching the

gifted. It is rather the expertise in the specific subject and the passion for the subject is what may shape a successful teacher of the gifted students (Hansen, 1994; Mills, 2003). Teachers' sense of self-efficacy is also mentioned to be decisive in whether they will differentiate for the gifted or not (Starko & Schack, 1989; Dixon et al., 2014). In other words, teachers should strongly believe that the differentiation they apply will make a difference for every individual in the classroom, including the gifted learner.

The downside to the abovementioned thoughts is that it has been consistently reported that teachers for the most part do not tailor their instruction according to the needs of gifted students and continue to teach the average student in mixed-ability classrooms (Archaumbalt et.al, 1992; Whitton, 1997). The results of an Australian study by Whitton (1997) found out that the reason behind such a pitfall is that there are not enough knowledgeable teachers in the field. Moreover, most teachers do not know about the latest effective practices that could be applied in the classroom for gifted learners (Whitton, 1997, p.38). This may be very true for the Kazakhstani context as well; therefore there is a justifiable need for research into how the teachers in our schools manage teaching the students with higher than average abilities so that their full potential could be achieved.

Teachers' understanding of giftedness

Teachers can be a source of motivation for better performance to their students by demonstrating positive attitudes (Wilson, 2016). In general, teachers' views about the concept of giftedness and educating gifted students were found to be very diverse (Szymanski, Croft & Godor, 2017). While there is evidence that teachers, by and large, acknowledge that gifted students need differentiated instruction (Laine & Tirri, 2015), it is also concurred that giftedness is viewed in a negative light by educators without training in gifted education (Geake and Gross, 2008; VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh, 2010). Teachers sometimes get frustrated by the complex questions gifted students ask in the lessons.

Researchers in the field of gifted education in the USA highlight four prevailing views about gifted students:

- 1) Gifted students do not need support because they will succeed in any environment;
- 2) Gifted programs are elitist because they serve children with better socio-economic backgrounds;
- 3) Schools favor non-academic talent more than academic talent;
- 4) Academically gifted students are labelled as “nerds” (Subotnik et al., 2011, p.8).

It is also noteworthy, that teachers’ views of gifted students may change along the grade level. It was discovered that teachers of elementary school would associate more negative characteristics with gifted students than their colleagues from secondary school level (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992). It was also revealed that teachers who had training and experience in gifted programs had more awareness about the gifted students’ frustrations and challenges in the classroom (Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992).

Teachers of minority and disadvantaged students were asked to name main characteristics of gifted students and as a result, it became known that teachers tend to name typical, positive characteristics of gifted students more than other characteristics (Neumeister, Adam, Pierce, Cassady & Dixon, 2007). They associated giftedness with high achievement, good memory, better learning skills, deeper understanding of topics, curiosity, wider range of vocabulary, higher motivation. Fewer teachers associated boredom with gifted students, and most of the characteristics that are pertinent to minority ethnicities were not mentioned by most of the teachers (Neumeister et al., 2007).

Early childhood teachers expect gifted students to be “excellent, having potential, being rare, being noticeable, possessing innate or God-given ability, being motivated as well as demonstrating asynchronous development (Lee, 1999, p.194).

According to Blair (as cited in Vantassel-Baska & Staumbagh), there are two main beliefs that make teachers successful in teaching the gifted students. First, understanding

that students have different abilities, and second, a belief that teacher is rather a facilitator than a single source of all information. Also, as it was mentioned before, teachers' understanding of giftedness depends on their pre-service training and further professional development in the aspects of giftedness (Blazic & Stanojevic, 2014).

Classroom practices with gifted students

The literature on classroom practices for gifted students has not prescribed a universal formula for teaching the gifted students. Different authors have varying views on what classroom practices are effective with gifted students. However, there are two major strategies commonly proposed by research for educating gifted students – acceleration and enrichment (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011; Subotnik et al., 2011; Vantassel-Baska & Staumbagh, 2010).

Acceleration is providing an opportunity for gifted students to move faster through the standard subject content, which may also include grade-skipping (Davis et al., 2011). Single-subject acceleration, access to specific college courses, independent, self-paced study are examples of acceleration (Subotnik et.al, 2011).

Enrichment includes involving gifted students in work with advanced materials and tasks that are not offered by the regular curriculum (Davis et al., 2011). Some examples of enrichment activities include research projects, field trips, mentorship programs, subject contests, technology use, creative writing projects, science and art fairs, school-wide reading programs, clubs, summer programs, internships, student exchange programs, mini courses, interest groups etc. (Davis et al., 2011, Parke, 1992; Vantassel-Baska & Staumbagh, 2010)

What is integral for both acceleration and enrichment in the classroom is grouping gifted students. Davis et.al (2011), categorize grouping types into full-time homogeneous grouping, full-time heterogeneous grouping and part-time grouping. Grouping students is believed to make the task of differentiating instruction more manageable for the teacher

(De Corte, 2013; VanTassel-Baska & Staumbagh, 2010). As Davis et al. (2011) propose, “Differentiation relies on flexible grouping, clear expectations, and a shared understanding that different students must be doing different things at the same time” (p.174).

Teachers of gifted students are encouraged to plan activities that match gifted students’ abilities and interests. Empirical research revealed that reality does not correspond to what is usually theoretically advocated. For example, a study by Archaumbalt et al. (1992) included 39 classroom practices used with gifted and average students under six broader categories : Questioning and Thinking, Providing challenges and Choices, Reading and Written Assignments, Curriculum Modifications, Enrichment centers, Seatwork . This study demonstrated that the most frequently used strategy for gifted students in regular classrooms is questioning and thinking skills activities. The authors of the same study concluded that some of other activities teachers actually use with gifted students were “advanced readings, independent projects, enrichment worksheets, and reports of various kinds” (Archaumbalt et al., 1992, p.114).

Data gathered through classroom observations revealed that gifted students were mostly engaged in written tasks and review activities, and worked individually or in groups for less than 14% of their whole time in the classroom (Westberg et al., 1994). Some other types of classroom practices that gifted students were doing included “audio-visual tasks, demonstration, discussion, explain/lecture, games, non-academic, oral reading, project work, review/recitation, silent reading, role-playing, testing, verbal performance, written assignments” (Westberg et al., 1994, p. 129).

A more recent study demonstrated that differentiation and promoting independent learning were among the most popular strategies with Finnish teachers (Laine & Tirri, 2015). In addition to these, Finnish teachers mentioned giving extra work and using gifted students as their assistants as some of the practices they apply in the classroom. Flexible grouping and self-paced learning were seldom used by Finnish teachers (Laine & Tirri,

2015), even though there is evidence that cluster grouping, for instance, creates positive conditions for gifted students (De Corte, 2013). However, there are teachers who were found to be quite successful at teaching the gifted students. The study of classroom practices (Westberg and Archaumbalt, 1997) described teachers who coped best with differentiation as follows:

“They did not expect all of their students to complete all of the same pages in a textbook, at exactly the same times throughout the year, with the same readiness, and with the same outcomes. They did not believe it was important to “keep them all together”; Instead, the teachers established high standards, made curriculum modifications, found mentors, encouraged independent investigations and projects, or created flexible instructional groups to develop the talents of their more capable students” (p.49).

To conclude this section, classroom practices with gifted students should be planned with consideration of several important factors – student interests, students’ pace of learning, degree of challenge, giving choice to students and differentiation through appropriate grouping.

Summary

To sum up the overview of existing literature, major studies in the field of teaching gifted students demonstrate that teachers do not modify their pedagogies in response to gifted students’ interests and needs (Archaumbalt et al., 1992; Laine & Tirri, 2015; Westberg et al., 1993;). Teachers’ beliefs about giftedness and teaching gifted students are claimed to predetermine teachers’ readiness to address the needs of gifted students (Brighton, 2003). Notably, teachers’ beliefs can be affected by professional training in giftedness (Tomlinson et al., 1994).

The available literature offers a variety of definitions of giftedness, but very few studies examined how teachers understand the concept of giftedness and how this

understanding influences their classroom practices. Kazakhstan places a lot of emphasis on gifted education, but what teachers in Kazakhstani schools actually know about giftedness and strategies to teach gifted students has not been researched. This study may address bridging this particular gap in existing literature.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' and school leaders' perceptions and views about gifted students and the nature of the pedagogical practices applied in the classrooms while teaching gifted students in a selected school in Kazakhstan and the rationales they have for the preferred pedagogical practices. This chapter explains the research design and methodology, sampling strategies, data collection instruments, data analysis procedures, and the ethical considerations taken into during the study.

Research Design

As the aim of this study is examining the school leaders' and teachers' views in relation to gifted learners and teachers' practices applied in the classroom in response to the needs of gifted children, the qualitative research design, particularly, a case study was seen as most appropriate to answer the research questions for two reasons: the existing studies have been dominantly quantitative and secondly, I wanted to keep my mind open to different perspectives and not limit the study to certain variables, have a smaller sample and gain more in-depth knowledge about the topic. Also, as the primary purpose is to talk directly to people to discover their perceptions, interpret the events from their perspective, in their settings, the paradigm of the study is interpretivist in nature (Glesne, 2011). The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the teachers, non-participant observations of their teaching in the classroom, and through document analysis. The purpose of observing the teachers was not only for methodological triangulation, but for discovering the relationship between the teachers' beliefs and knowledge about giftedness and the practices they exercise in the classroom. I developed a semi-structured interview guide questions based on my research questions and main concepts from Classroom Practices Questionnaire (Archaumbalt et.al, 1992;).

Additionally, the codes for instructional activities from Classroom Practices Record (Westberg et al., 1993) guided me in developing a classroom observation protocol according to the focus of my study.

Besides, document analysis allowed me to look at the data available in the form of text and other “nonliving data” (Leavy, 2017, p.146) within the school. This data included lesson plans, middle-term plans (called “KTP”), and samples of classroom assignments. Initially, I had also planned to look at the school mission and vision, but it was not accessible. The school had just embarked on designing the school mission and vision with an external expert, so the school was in the process of working out its school mission and vision and could not share it with me. However, I was advised to use the school website to find the mission and vision of the school.

Sample

The research site is a renowned school for gifted learners and has a long history of identifying and educating gifted youth in Kazakhstan. The students are selected to the school by a highly competitive examination and it has two divisions – a primary school, which is not funded by the government and charges fees from the parents, and the middle and high school fully funded by the government, which provides educational grants for accepted students. Though the primary school does not offer such grants, students are selected through examination. The school has an extended school day, focuses primarily on sciences and has just entered the International Consortium of Specialized STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) schools. The school’s main mission is to “identify and develop talented youth, and form the intellectual elite of the country” (“Istoriya”, n.d.). Including the primary and the secondary divisions, the school provides education for nearly 1100 students, and employs 120 teachers.

By purposeful sampling technique, the principal, the vice principal and all teachers of English language in a selected school in Kazakhstan were invited to participate in the

study. All of them were sent recruitment letters via emails. I have received responses with consent to participate from the principal and the vice principal via email, while other teachers did not respond to my email. The head of the department then organized a meeting, where she introduced me and allowed me to talk about my research topic and clarify my purpose of coming to the school. During the meeting, where most of the English language teachers were present, I presented details about my study, answered questions, and distributed the recruitment letters to all teachers. I asked them to read the information after the meeting and decide whether or not to participate in the study. I left my email address for teachers to send me their consent or refusal to participate. Not receiving any responses from teachers by the end of the week, I had to request their phone numbers and tried to reach them through Whats-app. Eventually, 9 teachers were reached through whatsapp, and 7 of them gave consent to voluntarily participate in the study. I had planned to recruit 7-9th grades' teachers for the main sample, but only 6 teachers of 7th and 9th grades (including the principal and vice principal) agreed to voluntarily participate in the study. Therefore I invited two more teachers of 5-6th grades to participate in the study and they agreed to do so. Thus my sample consisted of 9 participants - 8 English language teachers from grades 5 to 9(including the vice-principal) and the principal of the school.

I focused on English language teachers because as a teacher of English myself, I am more familiar with the teaching methods and activities in this particular subject. 5-9th grades were selected as most studies on the topic of classroom practices with gifted students have been focusing on teaching at the elementary school level (see Archaumbalt et al.,1992; Westberg et al.,1993; Laine & Tirri, 2015) , while literature suggests that gifted students' academic performance may start going downhill and patterns of underachievement can become evident at the level of senior primary and middle school level (Baker et al.,1998). Therefore it is sensible to address this age group in order to

understand more about underachievement among preadolescents. Analogically, Tomlinson discovered that middle-school teachers were not knowledgeable about the ways to differentiate instruction for gifted learners (cited in VanTassel-Baska, 1998), which the author finds disturbing because it is generally accepted that students can realize their full capabilities at the middle school level (VanTassel-Baska, 1998). If this is the case, examining the teachers of middle-school learners in regards to their pedagogy is helpful in understanding the abovementioned phenomenon. Moreover, after 6th grade, students go through one more selective examination and only the most able students are accepted to the middle school, which means that teachers of middle and high school will need to attend to these students' needs using various strategies to enhance their potential. The sample was not criterion-based, i.e. age and work experience, sex, previous training in gifted education did not play a role in selecting the participants.

Instrumentation [Data collection tools]

The qualitative nature of the study entailed three methods of data collection that were employed to generate the data required to answer the research questions – interviews, non-participant observations and document analysis.

Interviews

Classroom Practices Study (Archaumbalt et.al, 1992;) was the central tool that informed the interview questions for this study, because it contained all the strategies that teachers would be expected to use with gifted learners in a mixed-ability classroom. Though the Classroom Practices Study was a quantitative survey, the variables presented in the survey guided me in constructing questions for the interviews with the participants. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) was “used to organize and guide the interviews with teachers” (Brighton, 2003, p.183). Through the medium of interviews, each individual's perceptions and experiences were scrutinized. Possible reasons behind

the teachers' reported inability to differentiate their instruction in the classroom were examined from a locally relevant perspective.

Teachers were asked to answer a series of questions about giftedness in general and about teaching strategies they use with the highly able students, in particular. They were asked to talk about the challenges they face while trying to meet the needs of their students. Also, some questions focused on differentiation for the more able students, and according to the Teacher Nominations technique (Painter 1993, cited in Sekowski & Lyubianka), teachers were asked to answer the interview questions picturing in mind either the students who were formally identified as gifted, or those students who they think "stand out against others in school performance" (Sekowski&Lyubianka, 1993, p.625) in their particular classrooms. The interviews included such questions as: What do you know about giftedness? Who do you think are gifted learners? How would you describe a gifted student? What challenges do you have in teaching the gifted students? What professional development or training have you had in gifted education? What strategies do you apply with your students in the classrooms? What do you think are the most successful activities in your classroom?

Post-observation discussions with teachers, who were willing to allocate time from their schedules to meet me after the observations, were conducted in order to clarify some questions that emerged during observations pertaining to the activities in the classroom and the teachers' reflections. Despite my initial plan to meet each participant for a post-observation discussion, I could meet 4 out of 9 of the participants and the interviews lasted for up to 15 minutes each. Rest of the teachers could not manage time for such interview due to their heavy workload. The way the lesson had been planned by the teacher and what the teacher thought of how the lesson went were the questions discussed during the follow-up interviews.

By interviewing the school leaders, I got to know the school policy about gifted children, pedagogical approaches, and resources required and provided to facilitate gifted children's learning, professional development of teachers, and curriculum and assessment-related policies and practices. Examples of the interview questions for the school leaders included the following ones: How are students assessed on entering the school? How are different students' needs attended to in the school? How the gifted students' needs are met in the school? What kind of support do teachers get in order to teach gifted students?

Except two interviews, which were conducted in English and Kazakh, all other interviews were conducted in Russian and were audio-recorded to my mobile phone. The audio-recordings were then transferred to my personal computer and were saved under such names as Interview 1, Interview 1, post-observation discussion 1, post-observation discussion 2, etc. All the interviews were then transcribed and coded manually.

Observations

Classroom observations are essential for seeing “the school and classroom context” (Brighton, 2003, p.184). Observations assisted me in seeing the relationship between the teachers' perceptions about how gifted children should be taught and their actual teaching practices in the classroom. Field notes for the observations were made with the help of the Instructional Activity Codes from the ‘Differentiated Classroom Observation Scale’ (Cassady, J. C., Neumeister, K. L. S., Adams, C. A., Dixon, F. A., Pierce, R. L., 2004), which is a tool used to explore how teachers navigate their lessons in order to meet the needs of gifted students. This observation protocol (see Appendix D) had originally been designed for examining the pedagogies in gifted education, but the authors of the protocol acknowledge that it can potentially be of great benefit for any type of classroom (Cassady, et al., 2004). The second tool that guided me in constructing the classroom observation guide was “The semi-structured observation protocol”, which I partly derived from the

study of Brighton, C. M., Moon, T. R. Jarvis, J. M., & Hockett, J. M. (2007) and adapted to answer the research questions of this study.

A minimum of two observations were planned and made for each teacher.

Observing for several times was considered to be optimal since the mutual trust and rapport were needed to be built with the teachers, which would not be necessarily possible in one observation session. Moreover, each lesson is a unique one, thus there was a possibility that during the given timeframe, some lessons would not be typical and that could influence the meanings derived from observations. Therefore to minimize such nuances, I observed each teacher 2-3 times, except for one teacher and the principal who I could observe once only. As guided by the observation protocols, I invited the teachers to share with me their lesson plans before I observed their lessons. This was necessary for me to orient myself with the topic and objectives of the lessons. Also, I could refer to the lesson plan in the post-observation discussion with the teachers to see what the teachers had planned and how they actually delivered the lessons.

The observations were non-participant and no student or group of students were identified to be observed, the observations were rather aimed at observing the general learning process and activities taking place in the classroom, type of interactions happening, the grouping types, the pace of instruction, the level of cognitive activity, etc. I was also examining the involvement of various groups of students into the lesson, and the teacher's style of instruction.

Document Analysis

Documents provided the study with very valuable additional data on how the teachers plan the lesson, what kind of tasks are given to the students during reading or other extension activities, what the school mission and vision are, and how the English language teaching is planned in the department. The document analysis involved “skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation”

(Bowen, 2009, p.32). By looking at the selected data more closely, the categories and themes related to the main topic were identified. “The codes used in interview transcripts, for example, may be applied to the content of documents (Bowen, 2009, p.32).

Lesson plans and medium-term plans were analyzed to see whether planning incorporated activities for differentiation. Worksheets containing classroom assignments served as a demonstration of types of classroom activities used by teachers in this study.

Data Collection Procedures

In order to gain trustworthy data, theoretical triangulation with the help of three sources of data (interviews, observations and document analysis), “extended time in the field” (Glesne, 2011), member checking and descriptive analysis was applied during the data collection. Follow-up interviews were also used as a possibility to complement gathered data.

Before collecting the data, a tentative schedule for interviews and lesson observations was worked out together with the teachers and the school leaders. The approximate time of the research was indicated in this schedule. However, it took me longer to coordinate my research, because many times, teachers would postpone interviews and lesson observations due to various circumstances – personal or school-related (change in their teaching schedule, lessons cancelled due to extreme low temperatures, winter break, illness, etc). Instead of two weeks initially planned for the interviews to be finished, it took me one month to interview all participants, and about one and a half month to complete 13 observation sessions with 8 teachers (and 4 post-observation discussions. Not all teachers were accessible for the post-observation discussions, and I talked only those who agreed for a post-observation discussion, though after each lesson there were some informal discussions of the teachers’ planning and choice of materials/activities.

Data Analysis

After transcribing all interviews and expanding observation notes, I read each transcript and note very carefully. Keeping in mind my research questions, I coded all the accumulated data manually. I then organized the codes into groups and developed themes closely tied to the research questions (Tomlinson et.al, 1994). These themes were inspected through the observation notes and each participant's case was summarized with the help of this data. Patterns of similarities or differences in teachers' beliefs, most prominent ideas that emerged during the interviews and that were recurrent in other interviews were also reported. Most significantly, the relationships between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices were closely examined. A constant case comparison described by Glesne (2011), involved thinking about "how each of your cases vary in terms of such things as events, participants, settings, or word use" (p.187), therefore all cases were compared to one another to see not only commonalities while thematic coding, but also for the details that stood out as important.

Ethical Considerations

I have followed the guidelines of the NUGSE Ethics Committee and carried out all the necessary precautions to protect the rights of research participants. After my Ethics Application was approved on 13th November, 2017, an invitation letter was sent to the gatekeeper of the school. The gatekeeper, who was the principal of the school, accepted the invitation and subsequently, signed an official consent form (see Appendix A). All teachers of English were sent invitations to participate in the study. After teachers were recruited, a sample of 5-9th grade teachers were selected for the study and were also be provided with consent forms to sign (see Appendix B). The official consent form to the school administration and to the teachers contained the research aims and summary, where procedures for ensuring the anonymity of the participants and research site, and confidentiality of the information were mentioned. It was made clear in the consent form

that all the notes, interview recordings and transcripts would be stored on the researcher's personal computer, which cannot be accessed by anyone else. The consent form also underlined the participants' rights for withdrawing their consent, not responding to particular questions, stopping the interview as well as member-checking and having access to the ultimate research report. The participants were asked to voluntarily agree for an interview and a possible post-observation discussion (if required) and allow the researcher to observe their lessons for at least, two times during the course of the study (informed by the speech of Tomlinson, Tomchin, Callahan, 1994). The interviews and observations did not take place until the consent forms had been signed.

The interviews took place in a setting that the participants found most convenient for them and most times was a room in the school. It was my priority to find a room or office where the possibility of others seeing the interview in progress was minimal, but due to the shortage of unoccupied classrooms in the school, some of the interviews were conducted in classrooms which could be locked from inside to avoid interruption by others. Audio-recording software on my mobile phone was used in order to record the narration of the interviewees.

The collected data would not be discussed with anyone except the participant and the supervisor. Research findings will be carefully represented in the reports without providing information that can make the research site and the participants identifiable.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter outlines the study's findings derived from the interviews, lesson observations, and document analysis. The information presented below fulfills the research aim, which was to find out how teachers understand giftedness and how they perceive teaching gifted students in the selected school, what pedagogical practices they use while teaching English to gifted students and what issues these teachers have in teaching and how they address them.

To begin with, I present teacher's understanding of giftedness. This also touches upon their attitudes to gifted students, which in literature are stated to play an important role in teachers' decision to select certain teaching strategies to meet the needs of gifted students. Following this theme, I uncover teachers' stories about their teaching philosophies, their grading, seating and grouping policies, and what activities teachers deem to be the most successful with their student. This part also integrates the information about the classroom practices used by teachers during lesson observations. I also discuss how teachers differentiate their teaching methods for the fast learners. Finally, I discuss the challenges teachers face in their teaching and what kind of professional development teachers find crucial for their further career.

Teachers' understanding of giftedness

Teachers' opinion on what giftedness is and what characterizes a student as gifted unfolded in two main streams. About half of the teachers interviewed for this study were convinced that all students, all people, in fact, are gifted in one way or another, and the other half of the interviewed teachers had diverse opinions on what constitutes giftedness. They would mainly underline the idea that a gifted student would stand out and be

different from the rest of the class. Nevertheless, in the participants' view, generalizing gifted students' characteristics was not possible.

When asked about how they would identify gifted students, some teachers hesitated to answer, but one of them stated:

I do not divide the class into strong and weak students. Probably, teaching at my former school shaped this view, but here, in this school also, I do not make any division. And I guess, again, each student is gifted, and each student has some moments, that he/she could develop. So I don't divide them yet. (Participant B)

Another teacher, when asked about whether she attended any courses on giftedness before, replied: "You know...I don't divide students into gifted and not gifted and I did not have any training specifically in giftedness" (Participant D).

Very similarly, another teacher with 7 years of teaching experience, was asked to describe giftedness as she understood it and she said that she had a very clearly shaped understanding of giftedness, not related to some specific ability, and it was not about a specific subject, either. As she revealed:

....I think that any kid is gifted in all things from the very early age, and it is a matter of seeing their giftedness at the right time. There are many examples, when kids start to demonstrate some kind of extraordinary abilities and there are many stories of success or failure, when parents take notice of that at the right time and these people became very talented, gifted....So this giftedness is something when the kid starts to take interest in something, and this inclination – it can be manifested in various ways. And it would not necessarily be hard sciences. Giftedness can manifest itself through amazing physical capabilities of the child, and this kid could be the future Michael Phelps (Participant C)

She went on to say that it was difficult for her to characterize a gifted student, because firstly, everyone is gifted, and secondly, if the child, for example, has an excellent ability of persuasiveness, this kid is also gifted in this particular domain. She admitted that all students and their gifted abilities are so diverse that she did not want to characterize a gifted student, because that would limit our understanding of giftedness. She argued:

So if we are going to say that a gifted child is communicative, can easily connect with others, then, by saying so, by default, we are defining that kids-introverts, or kids with the Down syndrome, are not needed in the society just because they do not fit our definition of giftedness.... (Participant C)

The ideas mentioned above were confirmed by Participant D. She was contemplating about the stereotypical views of giftedness and how academic success does not always come to gifted students, as she stated:

I am among those freaks, who believe that every child is gifted. Because there is no human with no interests, and with something that they wouldn't like doing... So we have this stereotype, that a gifted child is "otlichnik"... (Participant D)

In slight contrast to the opinions above, other teachers were not so certain about their understanding of giftedness. While they did talk about gifted students and their needs, they did not have a settled and clear opinion about this concept despite having received some sort of training in giftedness earlier in their academic studies.

One of the participants said that giftedness is not about genes, but about grit. Basically, grit, not giving up on what you do is what makes you gifted, in the respondent's opinion. Another participant was struggling with answering my questions, because she said that giftedness for her equals to exceptionality, to something, which she has not yet seen in her students. She said that in her training, gifted children's needs were studied as a part of

a “special needs education” and that this topic was studied along with how to teach ADHD or mentally retarded students. As a teacher, she could not tell whether student is gifted or not, because it is a matter of special identification, and she compared it to “a medical condition”, which should be diagnosed only by specialists. Also she added:

...I think this concept has not settled down in my mind yet. For me, gifted is like a genius, so I have this sitting in my head, and this does not allow me to say that...yes, I have students who sing well, who draw well, I do not deny that, we have such kids. But I think they are...or maybe I am mixing up the concepts, and when I was agreeing to participate in this study, I had told you that I do not have clear understanding and it is hard for me to answer. I can say that some kids are more talented in music, for example. Ok, good. Some people are better at math. Some people, I don't know, have better language. They read more, love to read, but to name them gifted – I don't know, it's kind of hard for me. (Participant E,)

Also, in every interview, I asked teachers to name 5-6 main characteristics of gifted students. From the responses I received, I can see a great variety of personality traits teachers associated with gifted students. These traits were both negative and positive, but the overall trend in the teachers' responses was that teachers were very well aware of the fact that gifted students have very diverse characteristics – some of them are talkative, while some are reserved. Some of them are goal-oriented, while others may be disorganized and have low motivation. Many teachers would present their descriptions with words like “different”, “individualistic”, “original thinker”, “perfectionist”, “in their own world”, “creative”, “fast learner”, “independent”, “have high self-esteem”, “hard-working”, “brave thinker”. Teachers mentioned that some gifted students may also be “disorganized”, “anti-social”, “passive”, “hyperactive”, “noisy”, “low self-esteem”,

“strange”, “disruptive”, “slow”, etc. As can be seen, teachers were very well aware of the fact that gifted students do not possess only positive traits. As one of the teachers said:

Some people think that giftedness is when children are very fast learners...but it is not always the case. Because there are gifted students who have their own pace...hard-working, but, no, not always...they are curious, grasp everything quickly, learn deeply, are inquiring, hungry for knowledge, but...they may be passive sometimes. They have a good memory. Their relationship with other people may be complicated, because they live in their own world, and it is important to include them into the society (Participant B).

Some of the teachers were convinced that gifted students are modest, more respectful to teachers, to older people, are forgiving and are more inclined to help others around them. As one of the teachers with six years of teaching experience expressed:

Frankly speaking, I always tell kids, even if you are brilliant at math or physics, you have to be a human. If the person is immoral, does not know how to behave in the society, is inadequate, insults others, humiliates, and does not greet adults, does not respect teachers, I do not see this child as gifted (Participant H.).

In addition to talking about moral values as related to giftedness, some teachers, when asked about how they deal with fast learners, expressed their concern about students who want to oppose the teacher, or becoming disruptive because they always finish tasks earlier than others. This teacher, who has four years of teaching experience, shares her experience:

I have a student in the 7th grade, and I don't know, whether he is gifted or not, but he has good base in English, and he tries or explain the synonym of the word...for example, I am trying to explain that this words means “this”, but he tries to prove that this word also means “that”. He tries to prove, argue.

Sometimes, it frustrates me as a teacher, because you don't want some students to defy me. Nevertheless, even if he/she is not right, I can say "ok, in some sense, you are right". I can say that (Participant F,).

Overall, the participant teachers' views, perceptions and understanding of giftedness and gifted students were diverse, but there was one common pattern in participants' responses. It was quite apparent that most participants believed that giftedness is not something specific to a certain group of students, but rather was described as an ability present in each student but in different domains. In general, teachers were aware that giftedness is not limited to the academic accomplishment only. Students with different gifted abilities can excel high in different areas of their development.

Teaching philosophy and pedagogical strategies

The teaching experience of all interviewed teachers ranged from 2 years to 10 years of teaching. 6 out of 9 teachers had previously had some sort of training in giftedness – either during university studies, or as a part of their in-service professional development courses. Teachers mentioned taking part in the in-service professional development such as the 3-month national training courses organized by the Centre of Excellence in Kazakhstan, and the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth (CTY) trainings. I was especially interested in knowing how participant teachers organize their lessons, how they arrange seating for students, what type of tasks they assign and what strategies they think are the most successful ones in their classrooms and why.

One of the common themes reoccurring in teachers' responses about their teaching philosophies was that these teachers emphasized respect to students and their different abilities, and for creating a friendly environment in the classrooms. Most of the teachers talked about freedom of students to sit with whoever they want during classes and about

not having any stringent policy on grouping. Teachers also said that they wanted students feel relaxed and free in their lessons. As one of them stated:

This year I realized that I want students feel comfortable in the class. I want to create a climate where students can joke, with humor, so that they wouldn't be afraid to say something. It's essential in terms of learning the language, because they have a barrier. And at the same time, I want them to learn something new, because there's a tendency going on now – English for fun. They come, laugh, and leave, but there needs to be balance so that they have a little of this, but drill sometimes, if it's grammar (Participant B).

Another teacher participant had a similar view:

My main principle is not to frighten kids and create a friendly, safe environment for them, so that students are not afraid to speak up in the lesson. In general, I want to be a teacher-friend to my students. Probably, it has some drawbacks, but I like it this way more, and cannot do it other way. I cannot stand by them scolding or yelling because I believe it is ineffective and humiliating. I value them as individuals. I want my teaching to be student-centered. But I know I am not always successful in that, but I am working on it..." (Participant E).

Participant I, the most-experienced teacher, explained that nowadays students like lessons to be fun. She also said that students get bored very quickly, and always wait for something extraordinary and new. That is why, for example, if she uses a certain activity for reciting new words, she will have to use another one after a short while, because students get used to it very quickly.

As for the grading policy, most teachers said that they value hard work and grade students according to the work they demonstrate having done during the lesson. A couple

of teachers mentioned being generous in their grading to “weaker students”, but in case they see that there is effort and hard work seen on the part of this student. Hard work and effort is what teachers said to value while deciding how to grade their students. One of the teachers said that the lowest mark she has given for students is 4 on a 5-point scale, where 5 is the highest mark.

Also, as I have already mentioned, most of the teachers confirmed having almost no policy for seating and grouping, some of them mentioned they prefer flexible grouping during their lessons. Teachers were in favor of allowing freedom of choice to the students. As one of the teachers shared:

By the way, I miss this part. Because students should be grouped by the compensation principle, right? I mean, if someone does not know well, we should pair him with someone who knows better, so that there would be exchange of experience, right. In my class, they sit with those who they feel most comfortable with. Because I don't want them to feel uneasy with those who they are not friends with” (Participant F).

“They choose themselves. I don't have any priorities. I don't have this thing...when an “A” student sits with a “C” student. There must be some freedom, I guess” (Participant D). Another teacher shared a similar view: “While arranging the seating...I don't have certain principles. When they come to the class, they sit with those who they are comfortable with” (Participant B).

Participants E and I, however, had some grouping and seating policies. They said that they would group students according to the tasks in the classroom and it depended on whether it was a pair work, or a group work. Participant E mentioned that she would mix everyone and not stick to one technique – sometimes she would have strong students together, and sometimes she would pair strong and lagging students together for a task.

Moving on to talking about various tasks and activities, I asked teachers to share their experience about the most successful activities in the classroom. It was important to learn teachers' choice of activities for their students and how students responded to them, because it would shed light on the classroom practices and pedagogical approaches of teachers in a school for gifted students.

According to what teachers' revealed about some of the most successful activities in the classroom, a great emphasis is placed on "Home reading project" among other activities that were mentioned. Home reading is a project that is a part of the curriculum for English language, when students have to complete 4 books in an academic year. Home reading is an activity conducted for two hours every two weeks, and students are assigned to read 3-5 chapters in two weeks. As participant teachers said, mostly, unabridged books, both fiction and non-fiction are selected together with students based on what they have not read and would be interested to read. However, teaches also mentioned that often times, the choice of a book simply depends on whether teachers have access to this book online or in the school library. After reading the chapters at home, students come to the class and teachers may test them on basic facts from the book, then ask students to prepare three questions for their classmates, and discuss the book as a whole class.

Based on teacher's responses, it was clear that the way home reading is organized depends on the teachers' pedagogical approach. If one teacher, during my observation of the lesson, distributed worksheets, which contained multiple-choice questions on understanding and remembering the facts from the book, another teacher would organize "literature circles" for home reading, by grouping students and assigning a role for each student – summarizer, discussion director, artist, and other roles.

These are example of multiple choice questions for a home reading class
(Organized by Participant D):

1. In what state does the story open?
 - a. Illinois
 - b. Pennsylvania
 - c. Ohio
 - d. Wisconsin

2. What season is it when the story opens?
 - a. Spring
 - b. Winter
 - c. Fall
 - d. Summer

Two worksheets that were distributed to the students contained quite similar questions with multiple choice answers. During my observation of the home reading class, students were answering these questions silently. When students finished the task, the teacher collected the worksheets. After asking a couple of sentences about the book and not receiving clear answers from the students, the teacher said that it was apparent that students were not ready, so as a punishment, they would be given “a test”. Students tried to resent, but the teacher distributed some worksheets, which contained a test on what had been studied previously. Students remained silent doing the paperwork for the rest of the lesson.

Another teacher (Participant E) had home reading lesson organized in a different way. In her interview, she said that she prefers to group students in literature circles and with each student having a special role, make students share their ideas in these circles. During my observation of the lesson, this teacher explained that this time home reading was organized in the form of individual presentations. 11 grades’ students came in front of

the class with a PowerPoint presentation and had to give a talk for 5-7 minutes on what the book they read was about, what the benefits of the books were. The rest of the class was asked to make notes on: the title of the book, the author, the content, and write down one positive comment and one suggestion for improvement in the presenter's speech. The books presented in the lesson were the unabridged versions of "Rich Kid, Smart Kid" and "Getting to Yes". The activity was well-organized, timed, and the learning process was shared between the teacher and the students. Students were asking the presenting students questions like: "How can disabled people use their talents?", "How can young people start earning money?", "What is your success formula?".

Participant A thought that using visuals, Powerpoint presentations, Kahoot, Edmodo are the activities students like the most regardless of their ages – junior or senior classes both enjoying them. She admitted that with mere home reading and general English, it is impossible to keep students on task and learning from the process. She said that teachers always have to work on developing their pedagogies. Participant F also said that games and competitions, like Kahoot are very popular with kids.

Participant B highlighted the activity of preparing and presenting posters. She said that students enjoyed it, because during this activity students had freedom to be creative. Though they would have the criteria and time limit, students had an opportunity to invest more creativity in this type of task. Similar to other participant, she also said that home reading is one of the projects that even parents are grateful for, because some kids who had not read at all, were now reading books in English.

While these teachers underlined the importance of creative tasks, Participant D said that she liked to overwhelm students with lots of grammar and drilling tasks. She said that students nowadays have very basic mistakes in grammar and that this part is often neglected, therefore she bought a lot of books on grammar that she found helpful. She

admitted that students hated these exercises, because they have to write a lot of words and sentences, which hurts even physically.

“Because physical memory – it remembers everything. It is like, for example, “I am going to the cinema” and students have to make up about one hundred sentences with this structure, and consequently, they learn how and when to use “going to”. These are good textbooks. I like them”.

I asked this teacher to show me the textbooks she was talking about and she eagerly showed them to me. They turned out to be some books of Soviet and post-Soviet time authors, including Khristorozhdestvenskiy, Golitsinskiy and Drozdova. This teacher said she liked these books because they have fundamental grammar exercises and also, she would study using these books when she was at school herself.

Participant I, who was teaching the 6th grades, said that she prefers using activities which would involve kinesthetic component – make students mime, move around, exercise. She says that this type of activities calm students down and help them focus on the lesson, because at this age, they are hyperactive and noisy.

I also asked teachers about the frequency of independent projects and project-based learning in this school. Some participants said they organize some sort of projects for students twice a year at most. Teachers said that in this school, there is no focus on projects, but still, if there is some extra time, teachers try to assign projects on the unit topics. For example, one teacher said students had to make a survey on eating habits among students of the school, and another teacher mentioned a project, when students had to self-present themselves as a historical or a fiction character and present a speech in English. There were also such projects as roleplaying the latest read book, presenting an ideal home, conducting a research on “Ideal parents for teenagers”. One of the teachers said that she assigned projects like conducting surveys and presenting the statistics to her

student, but she also admitted that these projects were poorly conducted by her students because there was no guidance from the teacher.

In general, teachers highlighted that fun should be embedded in teaching the 21st century kids. Teachers believe that students become disengaged if not provided with entertaining activities. Presumably, teachers fear that losing students' attention equals to failure in maintaining learning in the classroom.

Classroom Practices

All interviews were analyzed along with data gathered during lesson observations. As informed by other studies (Archaumbalt et al., 1993, Brighton, 2003; Westber et al., 1993) on the topic of classroom practices with gifted students, it is not enough to learn what teachers know and believe, but it is also crucial to observe their teaching to see how teachers' beliefs and attitudes affect their choice of pedagogical practices. Lesson observations were difficult to analyze, because my observation protocol was semi-structured and contained questions about the teachers' style of teaching, types of activities performed during the lesson, grouping techniques and I was especially interested in how teachers address the needs of different learners, or simply, differentiate the curriculum according to the needs of various learners. However, after filling out the protocols with field notes during observations and before starting to analyze the data, it became apparent for me that coding the classroom practices was also needed to organize the sheer amount of information gathered from the observations.

I referred to The Differentiated Classroom Observation Scale (Cassady et.al, 2004) and some activity codes from the study of Westberg et.al (1993) to code the data collected via observation protocols.

Overall, almost all the codes from the mentioned observation scales were present in the lessons of the teachers. However, I have decided to make a visual representation of these activities and divide them into four categories by the frequency of occurrence in the lessons observed – frequently used, sometimes used, rarely used, never used.

Classroom Practices

Table 1: Classroom Practices used during the lesson observations

Frequently used	Sometimes used	Rarely Used	Never Used
Lecture/Teacher presentation	Student-led presentation	Manipulatives and hands-on (working with real objects)	Activities differentiated by level or readiness
Class Discussion	Role play/drama	Project work (preparing a brochure, making an origami)	Technology use by students
Student responding	Individual work	Advanced content (authentic reading /listening materials)	Independent Projects (investigation and research)
Group work	Use of Graphic Organizers or Other Visuals	Teacher interacting with small group	Student Choice (students select topic, resource, activity, product)
Games	Teacher interacting with small group	Self-assessment	
Silent reading		Informal, non-academic talk	
Vocabulary activities (defining, miming, guessing, matching, guessing)	Technology use by teacher		
Homework checking	Assessment by teacher		

Grammar activity (fill in the blanks, write examples)	Peer assessment		
Written assignments	Testing/quiz		
	Teacher higher- order questioning		
	Competition activities		

The table above demonstrates that students spent most of their time on activities that are common for everyone in English lessons. Obviously, teachers showed preference for vocabulary and grammar activities, reading and writing assignments, games and roleplays, and homework checking. Teachers used both group work and individual work, but grouping was observed as an organizational strategy not aimed at differentiation. Though teachers facilitated a great variety of activities in the classroom, there was no instance when teachers assigned independent projects, technology use by students, or differentiation activities. I should mention that this table summarizes only the lessons that I attended during my research and I attended 1-2 lessons of 7 teachers, therefore it may not reveal the holistic picture of classroom practices used by all teachers of all subjects in the school.

Differentiation

The school selected for this study enrolls students after a stringent testing, where students have to demonstrate deep knowledge of mathematics and physics, as well as spatial thinking skills. The school principal and the vice-principal were interviewed and asked questions about the admission process and the school policy regarding teaching gifted students. The school leadership representatives revealed that being one of the strongest schools in the hard sciences, they adhere to the long-held tradition of educating “the future elite of the country – the political elite, the business elite” (School Principal).

The principal also adds that, though there have been many changes in education since the fall of Soviet Union, they try to keep the old traditions and also build upon what they had, but still try to equip their students with the 21st century skills. The vice principal also said that though their focus is on STEM subjects, they also aim at developing other skills of the students, such as public speaking skills, and encourage students' interests in other subjects – history, geography, biology or languages. The vice principal also added that in general, the school has a competitive climate and many students would not handle staying as competitive as others in the school in a psychological sense.

As I was only interviewing English language teachers, they were sharing their experience of teaching in this school. One prominent thing was that though the students selected for this school had relatively same high level of knowledge of hard sciences, their knowledge of English language varied greatly. It caused multiple challenges for teachers, so one school-wide policy they chose to adapt was a differentiated approach to divide students into classes. Basically, the process involved two stages – students with highest scores on an English language placement test were placed in so-called “specialized classes”, which carried special letters beside their names. These specialized classes were formed with the aim of providing them English-language instruction for sciences as well. For each grade starting from 1 to 11th grade, the school has 2-3 specialized classes. The second stage of differentiated grouping involved division within the already formed classes into two – a stronger group and a group with students who scored lower on the placement test.

During interviews, teachers said that this is the way they wanted to make the job a way easier for them, because they wanted to form more or less homogeneous groups and classes so that the teacher would not be struggling with students who have absolutely different levels of language mastery. But as some of the teachers noted, even though they

tried to make groups homogeneous, they still remain to be mixed-ability classes, where they have at least one or two lagging students.

In light of this, all teachers reported experiencing awareness that either a faster /stronger student, or lagging/slower students' needs had to be taken into account in the process of teaching:

I do not normally pay attention to weak students, for example. I use only-English instruction, students help each other, and I give them some additional tasks.

Instead of complex tasks for homework, instead of writing descriptive essay, for instance, I give them something simple. They come to extra classes and we try to catch up with the topics that the student did not understand. Then I try not to overwhelm the students with lots of work, I assign the same amount of work, but maybe on a level lower than the rest of students have to do (Participant A)

“Yes, in the 7th grades, for example...For the special classes, I told students to read the “Little Prince”, the unabridged version. We have this “special” class with especially selected students for learning English on a higher level. And for other classes, for A and B classes, they tell me it’s too difficult for them. So we assign less work for them. If I tell the special class to read three chapters, these classes are asked to read only one. There is a big difference between these classes, and I teach in both of them”. (Participant B)

“Ideally, I realize that I need to find an approach to each child, that there has to be differentiation, but this is ideally. In reality, I am not sure. I don’t know what others do, but in my case, it’s not always possible to lead the whole class in one direction and to give some supplementary work for the faster student – it’s easier, because you give it to them and they just sit on their own and work, because they are motivated. As for the lagging student...what do I do? I just stand by him, and

when I explain the task, I just probe him and ask him to repeat the task. Because I don't know how else...you see, I don't want to single him out, and don't want him to feel left out, to make him feel like falling behind" (Participant E)

"Yes, it's a bit inconvenient for me as a teacher...hmmm...[...] I have such kind of students. More than one. Yes, they finish early, but they don't ask for anything. Or they just say – what's next? And there are also students who do not want extra work and sit silent, do not say they finished. These students usually start tossing and surfing their smartphones, and I allow them to do that so that they could relax. And sometimes, I give something extra to them. But I think, in such cases we have to reward such students, not punish them with extra work for finishing early" (Participant F)

While some teachers understood differentiation as "giving something different", others were saying they increased the amount of work of fast learners, or decreased the level of the task for lagging students. There was one trend standing out, and which is also mentioned in the literature (Tomlinson, 1994; Sekowski & Lyubianka, 2015). Some teachers were saying they see stronger students as someone who should help them in organizing the lesson or helping lagging students. Participant D said that she treats these students as someone who should supervise others when the teacher needs assistance. When asked about how she dealt with students who are bored or early in finishing the tasks, she said that she gives them the responsibility of a leader of the class. Participant E also mentioned treating faster learners as "mini-teachers" – someone who can help the teacher in the lesson. But later in her talk she said that when she assigns some responsibility or work for that sort of students, it feels like you are punishing your students. Therefore, she said it was important to balance that and she often prefers to say – ok, you're done, go and have some rest.

Participant I, on the contrary, was quite vocal about gifted students and accountability. She said that gifted students are the future leaders, and the nation counts on them, therefore they do not belong to themselves. By assigning roles of teacher assistants and leaders in the class, teachers show them that with their abilities and knowledge, they have a responsible mission for the future. This teacher did not think it was unfair to them.

Coming back to the lesson observations, as I have demonstrated in the table above, there was no differentiation by readiness/level of students evident in any of the lessons observed. Some students, namely in “special” classes, demonstrated excellent command of the language. I imagined these students to be provided with an option to form groups and engage in self-regulated research projects. In my field notes, in almost each lesson I documented cases when certain students were finishing the task early and therefore started being disruptive. I saw the need for differentiation when students would raise their hands and say: “Why are we doing this again?” “I know all the words, what should I do?”, “This exercise is so easy”. Sometimes students were not vocal about the tasks they were assigned, but started to entertain themselves – talked to their peers, started fidgeting. In other cases, they would just disengage with the lesson and stay silent. I have also documented certain students apparently not following the lesson and not involved in any type of discussion or even written work in some of the lessons. I approached Participant F after seeing such a student and she admitted that this student was her “strange student”, and that he was absolutely uninterested in learning English. She said she did not know how to approach and motivate him.

During the interviews, teachers were saying that they would assign different tasks for different learners, but during the observations, I did not see any evidence of the content being differentiated according to the needs of fast or slow learners. Similarly, teachers’ lesson plans and the medium-term plans did not contain any options for various students

apart from what the curriculum and the class textbooks prescribed for the teachers of English in this school.

Challenges and need for training.

In general, teachers reported having various issues, starting from technical ones (lack of equipment, materials, books) and ending with lack of training in the psychological characteristics of gifted students. The school leadership team said that they trust their teachers wholly and always listen to what teachers need or do not need in terms of training or other issues. The principal and the vice principal were aware of the fact that teachers have some difficulties with switching to a new system of criteria-based assessment. Among other problems, the vice principal said that teachers get burnt-out very quickly because of the constant changes in the system of assessment and the documenting.

Teachers reported having some issues with figuring out the teaching strategies that work with the contemporary kids. According to teachers' experiences, students get bored so quickly and it is really hard to keep their focus. Some teachers said they need some training in "successful strategies in teaching English", because the courses in giftedness they had previously attended were too general, in their opinion, and they wanted to have a specialized course related to linguistic aspect of teaching the gifted students. One of the teachers said that she had never thought about the psychological aspect of teaching to the gifted students – are they too sensitive, maybe? How are they taught best? How can we build good rapport with students? She said that training in these topics would benefit her a lot. Another participant said that a guidebook for teaching the gifted students would be a good idea to support teachers in the school because it is important to know not only how to identify talented students, but how to develop their talents.

To my question about what challenges teachers have in teaching, most of the participant teachers said that they did not have any major challenges as the school

leadership was very supportive. Teachers had a sense of flexibility and freedom to teach the way they thought was best for students. In fact, during my observations, I could feel that most of the teachers were successful in building good rapport with students, and it was obvious that the climate in the classroom was not threatening. At the same time, though teachers had awareness about the diverse needs of their students, their classroom practices demonstrated no planned differentiation. Students with either above average pace of learning, or the ones who were not participating in the lesson at all, stayed in the shadow of the majority of the students in the class. Teachers are unfamiliar with ways to design differentiated instruction. Also, interviews with teachers revealed that many teachers see boredom of the students as the main challenge they have to cope with in teaching.

Interestingly, teachers reported that time constraint is not a big issue for them. Teachers are not pressed to bring a lesson plan for every lesson and are not penalized for not having one. School leadership also confirmed that they try not to overburden teachers with unnecessary work and respect teachers' personal time for family and rest. These facts lend us some incentive to assume that teachers are in the comfort zone with teaching the average student.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study investigated how English language teachers in a selected school for gifted students in Kazakhstan understand giftedness and what pedagogical practices they use in order to meet the needs of their students. It has also attempted to explore how teachers' views about giftedness and gifted students impact on their classroom practices, and what challenges they face in teaching gifted students. The discussions in this chapter, which are supported by both empirical data and insights from literature, attempt to respond to the research questions that guided this study.

Teachers' understanding of giftedness and attitudes towards gifted students

As the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews demonstrates, there is no shared understanding and unanimous agreement on giftedness and who the gifted student is among teachers of English in the selected school. It is not surprising to see diverse definitions and perspectives on giftedness, because the main issue in gifted education actually lies in the sheer number of definitions and different understandings of giftedness. Such a difference in defining giftedness complicates the process of identifying children for gifted programs (Subbotnik, Olsewski-Kubilius, & Worrel, 2011).

Teachers who participated in this study have expressed diverse views, but there is one belief that was the most prevalent among other views teachers have about giftedness. The majority of the teachers believe that everyone is gifted, or every child is gifted. Some teachers expressed emotional discomfort when asked about describing a gifted student, justifying it with their reluctance to categorize students into gifted and non-gifted and prescribing any type of general characteristics or signs of giftedness to their students. This view is rather unusual for the field of gifted education. A number of scholars made an attempt to expand the definition of giftedness from solely intellectual one to a more

inclusive one. Dai (2009) provided an exhaustive account of controversies around the concept of giftedness in “International Handbook on giftedness” and gives credit to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and Sternberg’s classification of intelligence into analytic, creative, and practical, thereby altering our understanding of giftedness by “pluralizing” it (Dai, 2009, p. 43). However, this account of tension and criticism of how giftedness has been conceptualized does not provide us with a paradigm that “every child is gifted”.

Ahead of many scholars’ critique of the construct of giftedness is Borland’s (2003) argument that the concept of giftedness is “a chimera”, which should be disposed of and let us have “gifted education without gifted children” (Borland, 2005, p.3). According to Borland, the concept of giftedness should be deconstructed and disposed of since it creates social inequity in education. The views of teachers in this study do not directly correspond to the views of Borland, however, it is possible for us to assume that by stating that “everyone is gifted teachers mean that everyone is equal in their eyes. This view is referred to as a widespread myth that “All children are gifted” (“Myths about Gifted Students”, n.d.). Though the concept of giftedness has become less limiting nowadays, it cannot be stated that all children are equally gifted. As Runco (1997) discusses in his article, it is probable that the definitions of giftedness will become so inclusive and will be broadened to an extent when everyone will have at least one gift, and this, in turn, will cause the term “gifted” become blurred and bewildering.

Apart from the view that “every child is gifted”, one of the school leadership team members said that giftedness is all about grit and not giving up on what you want to achieve. Again, this participant underlined that you are born with a gift, but if you do not work hard and persevere, in the participant’s words, “it is for nothing”. The idea that giftedness develops by the interrelation of such factors as grit, creativity, motivation

resonates with concepts developed by some major authors in giftedness (Gagne, 2004; Renzulli, 1978; Subotnik et al.2011). Renzulli (1978), for instance, focuses on the productivity and creativity aspect of giftedness, where in order for an individual's potential be realized, in addition to above average ability and creativity, one important factor is task commitment.

Attitudes towards gifted students were examined by asking teachers to list at least 5 characteristics they thought were most prevalent among gifted students. I wanted to see whether participants' attitudes would reflect any kind of bias or negative attitudes towards gifted students. As I have already mentioned, some teachers were insisting that they consider all students to be gifted, and were unwilling to characterize a gifted student. I asked them to describe a student who would, specifically in their lessons, demonstrate outstanding abilities and performance. Teachers would then start describing some characteristics of gifted students.

Overall, the participants' descriptions yielded both negative and positive characteristics. Teachers who participated in this study were not inclined to overpraise or underpraise gifted students. What was common for all teachers' answers was that teachers' were well aware that gifted students are very diverse as a population. They were all admitting that it was difficult for them to come up with adjectives that would be all-inclusive, because all of the children are different – some are sociable, while some have issues with the skill of socializing with their peers. This finding goes in line with the study of Szymanski et al. (2017). A less common, but still existent among these views, was a belief that gifted students are expected to exhibit characteristics such as being morally right, respectful, adequate, and a more responsible behavior than their peers. This view is present in the book by Davis et al.(2014), where gifted students are claimed be more sensitive to the questions of justice.

What do all these views mean in the context of this study? There are two things to consider. First, teachers consider every child to be gifted. Naturally, I can infer that teachers think that every child deserves to receive high quality learning opportunities in the classroom. If teachers do not categorize their students as more able or less able, they would cater for each child's individual needs and interests within a classroom. Quite the opposite scenario is probable, too. If teachers think that every child is gifted in some or other way, they admit that everyone in the classroom should receive same-level instruction (Brighton, 2003).

A similar confusion was described in an empirical study by Brighton (2003), who found out a belief that teachers often hold is that "Equity and fairness for students means all students do the same thing" (p.196). This study showed that teachers' beliefs about equity were in conflict with their awareness of the diversity of learners in the classroom, therefore, most of them were not tailoring their teaching to the needs of individual students (Brighton, 2003). Indeed, classroom observations conducted to observe teachers in this study align with the Brighton's findings. Despite the fact that teachers were reportedly aware of the diversity in gifted students' characteristics, teachers' belief that each child is gifted may be the factor that affected their teaching, which demonstrated almost no differentiation according to the students' readiness and level.

Secondly, teachers who participated in my study do understand that each gifted child possesses individual traits – both positive and negative. Most of the participant teachers are not biased and do not expect a gifted student be a well-behaved "otlichnik". They appear to value effort and hard work, which is described as having "growth mindsets" (Coubergs et al., 2017). This fact minimizes the risk of misunderstanding underachieving gifted students, because gifted students underachievement can be reversed if addressed with proper instructional strategies (Baum, Hébert, Renzulli, 1995).

One of the aims of this study was to find out teachers' perceptions about teaching gifted students. From the information outlined above, it can be seen that the participant teachers do not hold predominantly positive or negative attitudes to gifted students. They acknowledge the gifted students' diverse characteristics and needs. However, their classroom practices do not demonstrate planned differentiation for the learners' needs, and the prevailing belief that each child is gifted may be the cause of this situation.

Teaching philosophies and pedagogical approaches

In the previous section teachers' understanding of giftedness and their attitudes to gifted students were specifically outlined and analyzed with regards to their classroom practices. While interviewed, the teachers talked not only about their attitudes, but they were also asked about their teaching philosophies, classroom management, seating and grouping policies in general. The teachers shared their insights about the most successful activities in the classroom, their assessment policies, and all other details about the pedagogical practices they use.

The reemerging theme in participants' philosophies of teaching was that they place a lot of value on creating a friendly environment in the classroom. They thought that building rapport with students based on partnership, rather than on authority was very important for them. Classroom observations revealed that an unthreatening environment was indeed in place. The role of safe learning environment in sustaining healthy communication with students and among students is highlighted in the discussion of Teacher Education Standards in the USA (VanTassel Baska & Johnsen, 2007)

As for the flexibility, most teachers reported having no rigid seating and grouping policies in the classroom. Teachers did not want to interfere with this and encouraged students to choose where and who they want to sit with during activities. This was not true for all teachers, because some of them used various techniques for grouping and seating. It

was apparent, though, that grouping was not made with the purpose of differentiating the curriculum, but with the intention of providing students with opportunities of working with various students. However, appropriate grouping in the classroom is believed to be a fundamental part of differentiation (Davis et al., 2014; VanTassel-Baska and Staumbaugh, 2005). The participant teachers admitted that they do not group students by their abilities, known as “cluster grouping”, which is believed to be beneficial for the learning of gifted students (De Corte, 2013).

Another theme that was recurrent in the teachers’ philosophies was that effort was very important for them while grading. The participant teachers said that even a “troyechnik” (a Kazakh term used to name students with poor grades) can get excellent marks if he demonstrates enough effort and hard work. They admitted that they differentiate their grading according to the students’ level. Setting higher expectations for stronger students and lower expectations for weaker students for getting the same “A”, for instance, was a practice that some teachers use. According to a study into teachers’ perception of differentiated instruction, teachers’ understanding of successful learning is defined by their mindsets (Coubergs, Struyven, Vanthournout, & Engels, 2017). According to these authors, teachers with “growth mindset” think that effort predetermines students’ success, while teachers with a “fixed mindset” relate success to the innate intelligence. Teachers with growth mindset are more eager to adapt their teaching to students’ differences (Coubergs, et al., 2017).

The participants in this study indicated boredom of the students as one of the reasons that they have to use various strategies and activities in their classroom. They claim to use activities like games, competitions (for example, “kahoot” and “jeopardy”) to stimulate students’ interest and motivation. Students, in these teachers’ views, also like visuals, manipulatives, interactive activities, roleplaying, presentation of posters, and

improvisation. These teachers' views are supported in a study by Brighton (2003), where teachers showed preference for entertaining their students by making learning fun for them rather than engaging them in challenging tasks in the classroom. Research has shown that many gifted students are indeed bored in the classroom (Gallagher, 1997; Diaz, 1998), but the strategies to overcome such barriers to learning are not related to the notion that "teacher is an entertainer" (Brighton, 2003, p.186). In fact, gifted students are in need of higher level tasks and materials that would match their abilities (Gallagher, 1997).

The project that all the teachers in this study considered successful for all their students was "Home-reading". Because home reading was used with all grades for English language learning, it could be viewed very similar to the School-wide Enrichment Reading Framework (Housand & Reis, 2008), where students are encouraged to select and read books independently in various genres and themes. At the same time, these teachers admitted that there is not much focus on independent and project-based learning at the school and it was up to the teacher whether to focus on it or not. Home-reading, too, was organized by different teachers in different ways. Some teachers would use "literature circles", and some used multiple-choice tests and discussion to organize home-reading classes. It is noteworthy that the teachers claim to differentiate the home-reading activities – students with low proficiency in English language were expected to read fewer chapters, while students with higher level of English language proficiency were expected to read more chapters from the same book. This was fair, as the teachers said, because they wanted to be realistic in their expectations. This is referred to as "variable pacing" (Tomlinson, 2003, p.132) and is advocated as one of the effective ways to differentiate instruction.

Overall, the teachers' philosophies reflect that they believe in a democratic approach to teaching, where students have the freedom to choose learning activities according to their interests and abilities. These teachers were aware of the need to create

positive learning environment in the classroom and were flexible in the grouping and grading policies. These teachers admitted that students often get bored during their lessons, but they use new and entertaining activities to address this issue.

Classroom Practices

It was essential to see how the teachers' beliefs and teaching philosophies manifested themselves in the teachers' actual practices. For this purpose, in addition to interviews, at least two lesson observations and post-observation discussions were held with each teacher to examine what pedagogical practices they use in their classrooms. The codes from Differentiated Classroom Observation Scale (Cassady et al., 2004) and Classroom Practices Record (Westberg et al., 1993) were used to organize the data collected and construct Table 2 in the Findings Chapter. This table demonstrated that all students in the classroom were mostly engaged in classical practices as lecturing, class discussion, group work, written assignments, silent reading, grammar and vocabulary activities, etc. Quite a lot of time was spent on homework checking. Such practices as using advanced content, project work, using manipulatives, self-assessment were present in the lessons, too, but more rarely. The practices that were not observed in any of the lessons were activities differentiated by level or readiness, technology use by students, independent projects (investigation and research), student choice (students select topic, resource, activity, product), though all of these activities are considered to be among the "special educational measures" mentioned by Sekowski and Lubińska (2015) that are encouraged to be used by teachers of gifted students. These authors argue that creativity and independence in learning should be fostered in order to help gifted students develop their problem-solving, organizational and emotional abilities, as well as communication and self-awareness (Sekowski & Lubińska, 2015).

We can see a similar picture in the literature as well. Westberg et al. (1993) in their study of classroom practices in 46 primary school classrooms concluded that gifted students in regular classrooms “spent the majority of their time doing written assignments and participating in review/recitation activities” (Westber et al., 1993, p.140). This study showed that 84% of the activities that gifted students were engaged in demonstrated no differentiation, which denotes that their individual abilities and needs were mostly not met in the regular classrooms. In an earlier study examining novice teachers’ classroom practices, Tomlinson (1994) had concluded that “For the great majority of the novices, the notion of proactively differentiating curriculum was absent in both their conversation and practice” (p.19).

As I have already mentioned in my findings, although I see that the teachers mostly do not offer more complicated and challenging tasks and materials to their faster and stronger students in their lessons, the observations were conducted within a limited timeframe and may not reflect how teachers actually teach throughout the academics year. Therefore, we cannot state with full confidence, that some students’ needs are totally neglected. Moreover, differentiation does exists in this school, because, as it will be discussed in the next chapter, the school and the department of English have a certain differentiation policy in regards to teaching English.

Differentiation

As the data gathered through interviews showed, the school applies a system of differentiation by ability grouping right from the moment of student admission process. This policy is used only for English language teaching and seems an attractive way to, in teachers’ words, make the job of English language teachers easier. Students are tested on their level of English upon entering the school and are then placed into either “special classes” or regular classes. The next stage is grouping students within these special or

regular classes. Each class is divided into two groups which then receive instruction from two teachers. As teachers said, one group is usually stronger and the other one is weaker. Grouping takes place based solely on the English language placement test results.

It is evident that the school leadership and teachers are aware of the students' varying levels and therefore apply a class forming and grouping policies in order to create relatively homogeneous groups of students who would eventually be easier taught. I believe this is a good start to enhance the learning process in the school. However, another important aspect of differentiation should not be neglected. As Stradling and Saunders (1993) argue, various grouping strategies are not sufficient for the ultimate goal of differentiation, stating that differentiation should be mainly understood not as a means of organizing the learning process, but as a matter of pedagogy.

This whole-school policy is, no doubt, an asset to teachers in terms of planning and organizing their lessons. Nevertheless, teachers reported that still their classroom remained to be mixed-ability settings and that they had students who had various levels and interests. In the interviews, teachers had difficulty answering the question about what they do when they see that in their lesson the students are fast or on the contrary, lagging behind. They said that they did not plan for weaker or stronger students. Some teachers said they did not have a lesson plan for every day. However, they admitted that if they see that students need more complex materials, or are not understanding in the lesson, they would try to tackle this issue during the lesson by giving them something more or by helping the lagging student. Teachers responses show that their teaching in such situation is rather reactive than proactive. Such kind of coping strategy was mentioned in the review of differentiation instruction by Tomlinson et al. (2003) as "improvisational" and "not pre-planned" (p.122).

It is also interesting that many teachers understood differentiation as providing the student with additional tasks. Teachers had controversial feelings about assigning more

tasks to the fast learners. They thought that students perceived such kind of provision as a punishment, therefore tried not to overdo with assigning additional work for their faster students. Research shows that this is common for many teachers and as it was mentioned in the literature, teachers sometimes think that differentiation is “simply having them [students] do more of what they already know” (Taylor, Smiley & Richards, 2015, p.491) .

Another form of meeting the needs of gifted students was mentioned as assigning the role of the tutor or “mini-teacher” to the students who are ahead of their classes. Most teachers believed that though students may not like the practice, it is beneficial for them in the long-term run. This practice was also mentioned in the literature and is considered to be a weak form of meeting the gifted students’ needs (Tomlinson, 1994).

Interviews and lesson observations delivered me to a point where I concluded that even though teachers understood differentiation the way they understood it and were saying they would make provisions for students who are in need of any, teachers practices showed that no differentiation took place on the classroom level in this school. But this statement by no means is an attempt to underscore gaps in the teachers’ practices, it is rather a finding that should redirect us to an area of teacher training in giftedness, because “educators need ongoing training and modeling of the relevant pedagogical skills in their specific discipline(s), including when and how to apply the various strategies as part of their repertoire” (VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005).

Challenges and need for training.

The teachers in this study reported no serious problems pertaining to teaching their students. Most of them seemed content with the current state of affairs in their classrooms, though half of them had no more than 5 years of teaching experience. During the interviews, the teachers said that they do not face issues in teaching that are unresolvable. Only after probing them on whether they think they need any professional development in

gifted education, they said they would not mind attending courses where they would learn more about the psychological aspects of teaching the gifted students. But more important than that, as one teacher said, they wanted up-to-date and subject-specific training in effective methods of teaching English.

Classroom observations allowed me to see that overall, the teachers demonstrated a high level of subject knowledge and were successful in creating a friendly learning environment, which is stated to be integral for inspiring and motivating gifted students (Sekowski & Lubianka, 2015). However, the fact that teachers do not use any kind of differentiating strategies in the classroom really put many students' learning abilities at risk of not being realized. What this study has shown is not unique, though. For example, Finnish teachers were found to be aware that gifted students need differentiation, but were not using any research-based successful differentiation strategies in their classroom as a consequence of not receiving any training in this field (Laine & Tirri, 2015). It is interesting, that gifted education does not exist in Finland as a form of educational policy in contrast to Kazakhstan, where gifted education is so highly prioritized, but both Finnish and Kazakhstani teachers demonstrate lack of proper knowledge in how to differentiate instruction for the gifted students.

The fact that 6 out of 9 teachers received some form of pre-service and in-service training in aspects of giftedness put the quality and practicality of these courses under question. As some teachers said, these courses were too theoretical, and too general. And indeed, these courses were beneficial in providing the teachers with the firm belief that all gifted students are very different and there is no one single acceptable set of characteristics belonging to a gifted student. What these courses did not, evidently, provide is what differentiation truly looks like in practice. There's ample evidence that proper training in giftedness has positive effects on teachers' willingness to meet the students' needs and on

their actual practices (Dixon et al., 2014; Hansen & Feldhusen, 1994). Johnsen et al. (2002) also confirm that one of the factors that help teachers make changes in their practices to serve the gifted students was professional development and training activities.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed at examining how teachers of English in a selected school in Kazakhstan perceived teaching the gifted students and what pedagogical practices they use to meet their needs. It also looked at how teachers understand giftedness and how these views affect their classroom practices. This chapter summarizes the research findings, the implications of these findings, and makes recommendations for policy and practice. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do English language teachers understand giftedness in a selected school in Kazakhstan?
2. What classroom practices do these teachers use with the gifted students in their classrooms?
3. What challenges do these teachers face in teaching gifted students and how do they address those challenges?

According to the study's findings, there are two views that teachers hold and that stand out among others. I consider them important for answering my research questions. First, many teachers believe that each child is gifted. Second, teachers are aware that gifted students are a very diverse group of learners and that they have diverse characteristics and needs. To me, these two views are in conflict with each other. Presumably, by claiming that every child is gifted, teachers did not want to prioritize one group of students over other students. Hence, teachers' classroom practices were affected by their intention of maintaining equity, or in other words, teachers felt differentiating their instruction would mean singling some students out as special. However, participant teachers were also convinced that their students were diverse in their needs and characteristics. The fact that teachers' classroom practices do not correspond to their views implies that teachers need

more knowledge about implementing effective differentiation without feeling that they are being unjust.

Overall, teachers' attitudes to gifted students were not too positive or too negative, though some teachers associate giftedness with morally right behavior. This finding leads to the conclusion that the teachers' understanding of giftedness is evolving, because some of the participant teachers admit they lack knowledge about gifted students' characteristics and needs. They are open to revisit their perspectives as they get more experience and knowledge about gifted students.

The pedagogical approach and classroom practices that the teachers used during classroom observation showed that most activities in the classroom did not contain any differentiated instruction in response to the needs of the students who were ahead of their peers in terms of completing the learning activities and assigned tasks. The teachers also reported that they do not plan for any enrichment activities for the more able students or fast learners in the classroom, because that is too time-consuming and teachers did not feel confident as to how to plan differentiation in their classrooms. It cannot be stated that no differentiation is in place, because there is a whole-school policy of ability-grouping specifically used for teaching English, such as grouping students into classes and subgroups. However, differentiation as an organizational strategy is not enough because at the classroom level, students still had various levels of abilities and interests. Some students were bored or becoming disruptive after completing the tasks that were below their level of mastery, whereas others were still doing the tasks. It can be concluded that teachers need to provide students with activities and tasks according to their pace of learning, instead of relying on the same task for everyone, which some students complete just in a few minutes and then having nothing else to do, whereas other students take long

to understand and complete the task. Therefore teachers should be trained in planning classroom-based differentiation.

Although the participant teachers did not mention any major issues in teaching the gifted students, the classroom observation showed that they do not have any strategy to address the needs of two categories of students: fast-learning students and struggling students. Most teachers were successful in creating a friendly and collaborative learning environment in their classrooms, but this could unintentionally result in lack of challenging tasks for more able students. However, the teachers do not seem to see it as a challenge. The relationship between teachers and the leadership at this school is based upon mutual trust and respect. Interviews with the school leaders revealed that the school emphasizes talent development in various domains for the students. However, there was no emphasis or any clear policy in regard to differentiation as a powerful tool to serve the gifted students in the school. Thus it can be concluded that although the school realizes that different students have different talents which must be harnessed, it does not have a plan and strategy for how to exploit students' varying talents.

All of the data gathered during this study implies that though gifted education is in the spotlight in the country, there is no systemic approach to teacher training in giftedness. If teachers in gifted education lack knowledge and skills to differentiate the curriculum, what can be said about teachers in regular classrooms? How many talents may be neglected due to the lack of teachers' training in the aspects of giftedness? I am not stating that teachers are to be blamed for this situation, it is rather a call for the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, to pay attention to creating a rigorous pre-service and in-service training programs specifically aimed at equipping teachers with all the necessary knowledge and skills in order to meet the needs of gifted

students and to learn to differentiate the curriculum in a way that would benefit all kinds of students.

Recommendations

Several key recommendations for the pertinent stakeholders would be helpful in addressing the issues discussed in this study:

1. To the policy makers: support teachers by creating consistent and practical pre-service and in-service professional training for teachers in gifted education; create a system for certifying gifted education specialists;
2. To the school leadership: advocate the principles of differentiated instruction and support and monitor teachers in their journey towards improving their classroom practices;
3. To the teachers of gifted students: seek new knowledge and effective practices to teach gifted students;
4. Future research: focus on gifted students' experiences and perspectives to successful classroom practices;

Limitations of the study

The major limitation of this study is that it focuses on the beliefs and practices of English language teachers only, while a study involving teachers from all subject departments in this school may have generated different findings. Also, since the study participants work in a school for gifted students, the study results may not be representative of the situation in mainstream schools. A comparative study of a school for gifted students and a mainstream school with a larger sample could be conducted to gain better understanding of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices with gifted students in Kazakhstan.

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Appendices

Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PRINCIPAL

Title of the study

The relationship between teachers' understanding of giftedness and their classroom practices in a selected school in Kazakhstan

Dear Principal,

Let me introduce myself, my name is Madina Nurmanova and I am a Master student at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education in Astana. As part of my Master Program, I am conducting a study on the relationship between teachers' understanding of giftedness and their classroom practices. I am very keen to conduct my study in your school because it is a specialized school for gifted students and therefore fits well to the focus of my study.

The main aim of the study is to examine teachers' understanding of teaching the gifted learners and the instructional practices they apply in the classrooms. In addition to this, the study also aims to make a substantial contribution to the literature on instructional provision for gifted learners in Central Asian countries, especially in Kazakhstan.

I would like to invite your school to participate in this study and kindly request you to allow me to conduct my study in your school. Before you give me permission, please read the information about the study and if you want to know more about the rights of the research participants, please contact me anytime. I assure you that the aim of this study is not to evaluate the work of the school or teachers' beliefs or professionalism. The aim of

this study is to explore school leaders` and teachers` perceptions about teaching the gifted students and strategies teachers use in response to the needs of gifted students.

For the research I need to interview three people from senior management team (SMT) and approximately 6 or 7 English language teachers, preferably from those teaching Grade 7 to 9. SMT members will be interviewed in order to explore their views about gifted students, as well as examine the school`s policies in teaching the gifted students and teachers` professional development.

Please, read the information below, and do not hesitate to ask any question before deciding to participate:

- All the work related to my research will start only after permission from the participants is gained.
- Participants are free in deciding to participate or not to participate in this study. They are also free to decline to answer those questions that they feel uneasy about. Each participant will be interviewed twice. Roughly, the interview will last for up to 45 minutes.
- The content of the interview will be kept confidential and teachers` name and the school`s name will not be mentioned in any part of the research.
- In order to remember the responses from the interviews correctly and analyze them, I will use a voice-recording device during the interviews. Therefore, I need your permission to use this sort of device.
- The teachers and the members of the SMT may be asked to share some school-related documents, such as a school mission, course plans, lesson plans, etc.
- The school will not be identifiable in any written reports about the study.

- During the research all the recordings will be kept on my personal computer protected by a password, and following the completion of my study, will be deleted immediately.
- The study will take place in your school. The interviews may be held either in a convenient room in your school, or in an appropriate place outside of the school.
- I am planning to start my study in November and finish it by the end of January, so the interviews and the observations will take place within this time.

Once I have received your consent to approach teachers to participate in the study, I will

- obtain informed consent from participants
- arrange a time with your school for data collection to take place
- arrange for suitable time and place according to teachers` timetable

Risks and benefits:

You can be sure that this study does not put you, your school and the teachers into any risk. It will not harm your health, safety, career, and well-being. I am committed to the ethical guidelines of NUGSE and ensure anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of information received from you.

You may feel uneasy while talking about certain topics and it is your right not to answer these questions. However, I assure you that any kind of information you share will be used only for research purposes and will not be linked to your name.

Overall, your participation will have no direct benefits for you, but it will help me answer my research questions and hopefully, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on giftedness in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia.

If you would like your school to participate in this research, please complete and return the attached form.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that the school is free to withdraw participation at any time, without affecting the relationship with the University;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to allow you to conduct your study at our school and I also agree to participate in this study;

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures,

risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work, Professor Mir

Afzal, afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a

participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee to speak to someone independent of the research team at _____. You write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz

Principal Signature _____ Date _____

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

According to the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan an individual under the age of 18 is considered a child. Any participant falling into that category should be given the Parental Consent Form and have it signed by at least one of his/her parent(s) or guardian(s).

(Note: The Consent Form does not require to be translated into another language because all the participants have good command over the English language and most of them are English language teachers).

Appendix B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Title of the study

The relationship between teachers' understanding of giftedness and their classroom practices in a selected school in Kazakhstan

Dear Participant,

My name is Madina Nurmanova and I am a Master student at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education in Astana. As part of my Master Program, I am conducting a study on the teachers' understanding of instructional provision for the gifted students and their classroom practices in a selected school for gifted learners in Kazakhstan.

You are kindly invited to take part in this study which aims to find out the answer to the questions:

1. How do English language teachers understand giftedness in a selected school in Kazakhstan?
2. What classroom practices do the English language teachers use with the gifted students in their classrooms?
3. What challenges do these teachers face in teaching gifted students and how do they address those challenges?

The study also aims to make a substantial contribution to the literature on instructional provision for gifted students in Central Asian countries, especially in Kazakhstan. Since you are an English language teacher working in a specialized school for gifted students, I am interested in your experience and believe you can provide valuable information on the topic of my study.

Please, read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

- I want to stress that participation in this study is completely voluntary. If at any time and for any reason, you would prefer not to participate in this study, please feel free to tell me. You may withdraw from this study at any time, and it will not have any negative consequences for your career and well-being;
- If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed twice, each interview lasting for up to 45 minutes;
- Also, if you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to allow for two or three observation sessions in your lessons;
- If you decide to withdraw from this study, the researcher will ask you if the information already collected from you can be used;
- The aims of the interviews and observations are not to evaluate you, your teaching, or the school. The aim of these procedures is to learn about how giftedness is understood and what strategies are used to teach gifted students in Kazakhstan, because there is little research that has examined this topic in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia;
- Your answers to the interviews and all the data collected as a result of this study will be kept confidential and your name will not be mentioned in any part of the research;
- If this research is presented or published anywhere, school name and your name will not be linked to the information;
- In order to remember your responses correctly and analyze them, I will use a voice recording machine during the interviews. Therefore, I need your permission to use this device;
- During the research all the recordings will be kept on my personal computer protected by a password, and following the completion of my study, will be deleted immediately;
- The study will take place in your school for which I have obtained approval from the principal. The interviews may be held either in a convenient room in your school, or in an appropriate place outside of the school;
- Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish.
- You may be kindly asked to share lesson plans and other documents that may pertain to the topic;
- You are also kindly asked to allow at least two observations in your classes. The purpose of the observation is not to evaluate your teaching, but to explore the topic of this research;

- I am planning to start my study in November and finish it by the end of January, so the interviews and the observations will take place within this time;

Risks and benefits:

You can be sure that this study does not put you into any risk. I am committed to the ethical guidelines of NUGSE and ensure anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of information received from you.

You may feel uneasy while talking about certain topics and it is your right not to answer these questions. However, I assure you that any kind of information you share will be used only for research purposes and will not be linked to your name.

Overall, your participation will have no direct benefits for you, but it will help me answer my research questions and hopefully, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on giftedness in Kazakhstan.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor for this student work, Professor Mir Afzal, afzal.mir@nu.edu.kz

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee to speak to someone independent of the research team at _____. You can also write an email to the NUGSE Research Committee at gse_researchcommittee@nu.edu.kz

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have **the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate.** You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

Please sign this consent form if you agree to participate in this study.

- I have carefully read the information provided;
- I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study;

- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason;
- With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

According to the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan an individual under the age of 18 is considered a child. Any participant falling into that category should be given the Parental Consent Form and have it signed by at least one of his/her parent(s) or guardian(s).

Appendix C

Interview Guide for English Language Teachers

1. General questions

Please tell me about your teaching experience.

How did you start your career in teaching?

What are the things that you like in your profession?

Can you tell a little about your classroom organization?

How do you organize seating in the classroom?

2. Perceptions about giftedness and gifted students.

How would you describe giftedness?

Who do you think are gifted learners?

How would you describe a gifted student? Can you name 5 characteristics of gifted students?

3. Teaching Practices/ Instructional Strategies for gifted students.

How do you assign homework?

What strategies do you apply with your students in the classrooms?

What do you think are the most successful activities in your classroom?

What do you usually do with the fast and bored learners?

How often do you assign writing tasks on the topics selected by the students?

How often do you have independent study projects?

4. Challenges of teaching gifted students

What challenges do you have in teaching the gifted students?

What professional development or training have you had in gifted education?

5. Suggestion for policy and practice regarding teaching gifted students.

How do you think teachers could be supported in teaching the gifted students by the school and by the government?

***I developed this interview guide based on my research questions and the strategies from the Classroom Practices Questionnaire (Archaumbalt et.al, 1993)**

Interview Guide for the School Management Team

1. General questions

Can you tell a little bit about your school mission?

What are the school's goals for the nearest future?

How are students admitted to the school?

What abilities are important to have a chance to pass the examination successfully?

After students are selected, how do you split them into classes? By ability?

2. Perceptions about giftedness and gifted students.

What is your school's definition for giftedness?

How would you describe giftedness yourself?

3. Teaching Practices/ Instructional Strategies for gifted students.

How are teachers guided in terms of strategies to be used in classrooms?

What kind of training do they receive in giftedness?

4. Challenges of teaching gifted students

What kind of issues do teachers report having in teaching?

How does each teacher decide on what to teach and how to teach? What kind of support can teachers offer to gifted students?

How do teachers select students for Olympiads?

Who will teach the students in the Olympiad team? Do these teachers have clear vision on developing giftedness in students?

5. Suggestion for policy and practice regarding teaching gifted students.

What kind of support does the school need to enhance the teaching and learning process?

What would be some suggestions for policies considering the specialized schools for gifted students in Kazakhstan?

Appendix D

Observation Protocol For English language teachers

General Information:

Observer/Interviewer: _____	
Teacher: _____ Grade: _____	
Observation date: _____	Time Start:
_____ End: _____	
Subject: _____	Student
number:	
Lesson topic:	
Lesson objectives:	
Student seating:	
Resources:	

Instructional Activities:

- 1) How is the lesson started? What is the tone of the teacher?

- 2) How does the teacher assess student learning?
- 3) Does the teacher pay attention to students' interests, talents, preferences? How?
- 4) How effectively is the time used? Does the teacher's teaching reflect his planning?
How?
- 5) How does the teacher engage students in the lesson? To what degree?
- 6) Who leads the learning process? Is it shared between the teacher and the students?
- 7) Is the pace of instruction right/slow/too fast?
- 8) What level of cognitive activity students are engaged in?
Remember? Understand? Apply? Analyze ? Evaluate? Create?
- 9) Is there any evidence of differentiation? Does the teacher modify some tasks according to the students' needs? Readiness? Level? Interest?
- 10) How does the teacher address slow learners? Fast learners?
- 11) Is there evidence of talent in the class?
- 12) What is the teacher's style? (Lecturing, Presentation, Discussion, etc.)
- 13) What is the teacher's emphasis? What is the teacher's subject knowledge level?
- 14) Is technology used for teaching and learning?
- 15) Is there student presentation, drama, demonstration, etc.?

- 16) Are visuals and manipulatives used? What kind of additional materials are used?
- 17) Types of collaboration the teacher organizes among students (group work, pair work, individual work)?
- 18) Does the teacher allow students to choose a topic, resource, activity, product?
- 19) Any independent project work? Research?
- 20) Does teacher offer advanced content? Supplementary materials, original texts, above-grade level?

Reflective Notes:

Strengths:

Suggestions:

Overall thoughts:

*The observation protocol questions were adapted from the codes used in The Differentiated Classroom Observation Scale (Cassady, J. C., Neumeister, K. L. S., Adams, C. A., Dixon, F. A., Pierce, R. L., 2004) and Semi-structured observation protocol (Brighton, C. M., Moon, T. R. Jarvis, J. M., & Hockett, J. M. , 2007).