

An analysis of attitudes towards the gifted students with learning difficulties using two samples of Greek and Czech primary school teachers

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Abstract

The provision of gifted students with learning difficulties (GSLD) composes a complicated educational problem that deserves special care. This study explores teachers' attitudes towards the GSLD in two samples of primary school teachers: 225 Greek teachers and 158 teachers in the Czech Republic, 40–59 years of age and with 14–28 years of teaching experience. A questionnaire of 26 questions, created for the purpose of this study, was administered referring to teachers' attitudes towards opinions and information regarding the GSLD characteristics, along with three open-ended questions on the most preferable types of the GSLD educational provision. Through multi-dimensional scaling solutions in their trigonometric transformation (MDS-T) one large common and one minor separate system of items emerged for the two samples, which were meaningful in the direction of understanding teachers' difficulties in accepting the contradictory core of the GSLD characteristics and educational needs. These systems of attitudes are discussed in respect to their relative importance to Czech and Greek teachers and the respective educational settings.

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Introduction

Gifted students with learning difficulties (GSLD), a newly recognized group of learners, are not easily identified and frequently are under-served in school systems across countries (Assouline et al., 2006; Willard-Holt et al., 2013). These students have been referred to as being “invisible in many school settings” (Rosner and Seymour, 1983: 77), consequently attempts for their identification, which often rely on the separate definitions for giftedness and learning difficulties, are “mostly inadequate for accommodating students who exhibit the characteristics of both groups simultaneously” (Brody and Mills, 1997: 283). Thus, appropriate diagnosis and intervention confront with difficulties in defining a student profile that includes the characteristics of both exceptionalities, learning difficulties and academic strengths, while it seems incomprehensible by the school community members that a student is possible to be simultaneously learning-abled and learning-disabled (Assouline et al., 2006; Brody and Mills, 1997; Chan, 2000; Crepeau-Hobson and Bianco, 2011; Fetzer, 2000; Neihart, 2008; Schultz, 2012; Willard-Holt et al., 2013).

Various myths seem to perpetuate some misunderstandings about the GSLD. Two widespread myths are that “gifted students do not require any special intervention as they will make it on their own” and that “all gifted students love school, read well, process information quickly, and are able to learn new material independently.” Another myth is the idea of gifted children being able to excel in every academic domain, supported somehow by Terman’s conclusions on the global giftedness, in his effort to eliminate another set of myths of the early part of the 20th century summated to the “early ripe, early rot” of gifted students. The myths built gradually that all gifted children are happy and healthy, well-adjusted by nature, not requiring special attention, have led to effectively “miss” many gifted students—especially those with difficulties in various domains of learning and behaving—from receiving proper instruction (Assouline et al., 2006).

The GSLD characteristics

Although psychologists focused on this controversial group of learners approximately 30 years ago, specific difficulties are still present in the identification procedure due to “the masking phenomenon” imposed on giftedness by learning difficulties, and vice-versa; specifically, giftedness can mask learning difficulties, as many of these students are often able to compensate for their learning difficulties because of their giftedness (Baum et al., 2001; Gari et al., 2008; Lovett and Lewandowski, 2006; Silverman, 1989). The GSLD are considered as students with special educational needs, who require the design and implementation of special educational programs for early identification of their exceptional abilities and the specific learning difficulties they have to confront with

(Yewchuck and Lupart, 2002). Additionally, it is emphasized that there is an intense need for a continuum of service options and intervention strategies (Nielsen, 2002). In the international literature, it becomes evident that a bright student who presents developmental advancement or advanced abstract reasoning, may have difficulties in reading, writing, spelling, calculating, or organizing his/her school duties. On the one hand, the GSLD may have extensive vocabulary, in comparison with their peers, high listening comprehension skills, fluent oral speech, abstract thinking, high motivation, high problem solving abilities, a sophisticated sense of humor, etc. (Deshler and Bulgren, 1997; Ferri et al., 1997; Fetzer, 2000; Rivera et al., 1995). They may also present high communicative abilities, high mathematical abilities, high visual memory, and advanced mechanical and mathematical thinking, and they may prefer creative activities and hobbies outside school with exceptional outputs (Baum, 1988; Tannenbaum and Baldwin, 1983). On the other hand though, they often present difficulties in written speech, space perception, sequence understanding, along with poor reading performance, incomprehensible handwriting, difficulties in learning by heart, low achievement in activities with time restriction, inattention, high impulsivity and distraction aggressiveness. Additionally, they often complain of headaches and stomach-aches, they get easily frustrated and disorganized and they often neglect their school duties (Fetzer, 2000). However, the need for accepting the GSLD as twice-exceptional learners who must be viewed as being “at promise” rather than “at risk” has already been emphasized (Coleman et al., 2005; Gardynik and McDonald, 2005; Nielsen, 2002; Willard-Holt et al., 2013).

Teachers’ role on nominating and supporting the GSLD

Teachers seem to have great difficulties in nominating the GSLD, so they are not often able to satisfy their educational needs in the setting of the mainstream school or in collaboration with suitable educational programs (Baum et al., 2001; Blacher, 2002; Brody and Mills, 1997; Daniels, 1991; Dole, 2001; Fetzer, 2000; Gari et al., 2000). It is argued that teachers tend to focus mainly on the specific learning difficulties, so they rarely estimate and nominate high abilities (Brody and Mills, 1997; Davis and Rimm, 1994; Cline and Hegeman, 2001; Little, 2001; Winebrenner, 2003; Yewchuck and Lupart, 2002). In case that a GSLD was diagnosed *only* with his/her learning disabilities, the GSLD giftedness will continue to be unrecognized without any intervention on gifted development. Thus, appropriate opportunities for challenges will be absent and an increasing frustration will appear, in combination with de-motivation, psychological distress and behavioral disorders. As far as school demands are gradually becoming stronger, when students enter middle or high school, learning difficulties of the GSLD become more evident (Brody and Mills, 1997; Volker et al., 2006). Nevertheless, teachers are mostly not aware of the specific characteristics of these students and the precise educational changes that are essential to satisfy their needs (Fetzer, 2000; Weinfeld et al., 2002; Coleman et al., 2005). Three different types of GSLD have been studied, according to the interaction existing between the two controversial sets of characteristics:

1. already identified gifted students with mild learning difficulties, included in an educational program for gifted students. Their learning difficulties are rarely

identified, thus the students are confronted with periods of underachievement at school and low self-esteem (Brody and Mills, 1997; Lovett and Lewandowski, 2006; McCoach et al., 2001; Silverman, 1989),

2. gifted students with severe learning difficulties, identified for their difficulties at school and not for their giftedness, which is mainly evident only at home. These students mostly attend special courses for learning difficulties but they face barriers for expressing their gifted abilities (Brody and Mills, 1997), and
3. gifted students who are not able to satisfy their educational needs because their giftedness abilities and their learning difficulties overlap. This subgroup of gifted students, which is the largest, are able to confront with their learning difficulties relying on their excellent abilities, and, although they manage to counterbalance difficulties, their final achievement is closer to average than to the gifted students' one, and is of course disproportionate to their potential (Brody and Mills, 1997; Gardynik and McDonald, 2005; Volker et al., 2006).

This “*masking effect*” may hinder those students from participating in any type of educational programs either for gifted students or for students with learning difficulties (McCoach et al., 2001). Silverman (1989) has suggested some “guidelines” that may help teachers to identify effectively the GSLD, focusing on asking for support from school counseling services and employing the available screening lists as basic sets of the specific characteristics of the GSLD. It is clear for teachers that the GSLD are not able to overcome their learning difficulties by just trying harder and harder, but they need help through specific strategies and programs (Winebrenner, 2003; Yewchuk and Lupart, 2002). Thus, it is well known that the GSLD require unique curricula focusing on both their abilities and learning difficulties and also simultaneously allowing them to develop their special talents and providing them with strategies to compensate for specific weaknesses (Baum et al., 2001). Additionally, school collaboration with the GSLDs' parents seems to be very important for children to satisfy all necessary acceptance needs; also necessary is any possible professional guidance and support suggested by specific psycho-educational services, available to parents as well on psychosocial, cultural and linguistic diversity issues they may be facing (Patton et al., 2005).

Aims of the study

This study explores teachers' attitudes towards the specific characteristics of the GSLD in two different cultural contexts with different educational parameters, namely in Greece and in the Czech Republic. In the Greek public mainstream educational system, the lack of programs for gifted students, along with the legislation greatly emphasizing special education strategies for students with learning difficulties and other deficiencies, rather than for students with high abilities and talents (State Law 3699/2008), makes the understanding of the GSLD characteristics a very complicated issue, not only in handling it but even in accepting the existence of such an issue. On the other hand and since 2005, in the Czech Republic, due to the educational legislation that defines exceptional giftedness and determines how gifted students should be educated (School Act 561/2004 Coll.), many teachers have been gradually involved in various courses and seminars

on this issue, while some of them have had direct experiences with gifted children in their schools. Although Czech legislation also emphasizes the educational intervention programs for the handicapped and the disabled, it sets out an obligation for specific modifications in the educational program for learners with diagnosed extraordinary intellectual abilities; this allows for Czech teachers to get better informed on the issue (Portešová, 2009, 2011). The aim of this study is to compare teachers' attitudes towards the GSLD across the two cultural educational settings and to set the line of understanding their specific knowledge of information on the issue. Three questions are addressed:

- a. how much do teachers of the two samples accept that the GSLD exist as twice-exceptional learners who need special provision;
- b. to what extent do teachers of the two samples differentiate the GSLD from the group of gifted students and in which direction; the direction of emphasizing their learning difficulties or their gifted features, and
- c. how extensively do teachers manage to accept the GSLDs' both sets of difficulties, in different learning fields and also within specific fields.

The answers to these questions can be seen in light of legislation in Greece and in the Czech Republic. The different national directives might be one of the factors that may contribute to comprehend teachers' attitudes towards the GSLD.

Sample

Two samples of primary school teachers were employed: 225 Greek teachers (36.9% men, 63.1% women), and 158 teachers in the Czech Republic (96.2% women). For the majority of teachers, in both countries, age ranged from 40–59 years and teaching experience in primary schools ranged from 14 to 28 years. None of the Greek teachers had any official contact with gifted students and educational programs for the gifted or the GSLD. Among the Czech teachers, 15 out of 158 had a previous experience of teaching in a program for gifted students and one of them had a previous experience of teaching in a program specifically designed for “gifted students with learning difficulties.”

Instrumentation

A questionnaire of 26 questions, created for the purpose of this study, was administered. It is a part of a broader questionnaire that has previously been employed (Gari et al., 2008; Gari and Tsigri, 2009) for the exploration of teachers' attitudes towards the acceptance and psychological support of the GSLD. This 26-item questionnaire assesses teachers' attitudes towards various opinions along with a variety of information based on the relative literature regarding the controversial nature of the GSLD characteristics, and information on the extent to which teachers of the two samples are able to recognize, accept and handle such a situation. A Yes–No scale was employed (1 and 0, respectively). Three additional questions that refer to teachers' demographic characteristics were employed along with three open-ended questions, which asked on the extent to which the teachers of the two samples have already met a GSLD in class, which were his/her main characteristics and which are the most suitable methods for the GSLD

facilitation in class. Cronbach α for all the 26 questions was: 0.73 for the total sample, and 0.66 and 0.78 for the Greek and the Czech samples, respectively.

Research procedure

The teachers of the two samples participated voluntarily in the research project, after a short discussion on the aims of the study with them in the teachers' office at each school separately. A small percentage of recruited teachers argued that they knew hardly anything on the issue and they could not understand how a gifted student is likely to face learning difficulties; consequently, they denied participation and were thus excluded from the samples. Informed consent was obtained for all teachers in the final sample. The questionnaires were administered and collected within a time-frame of three days, maximum.

Results

Teachers' experience on educating a GSLD

The three open-ended questions of the questionnaire were analyzed first. In the first question the teachers of the two samples were asked whether they had ever met a GSLD. Among the 225 Greek teachers, 146 (74.2%) answered "yes" and among the 158 Czech teachers 108 (68.4%) also answered positively. Those teachers who answered positively to the above question were invited to answer the second open-ended question regarding the GSLDs' most important characteristic.

Both samples, but mostly the Greek sample of teachers (30.2%) underlined the GSLD high level of inconsistency in class activities and school courses, along with great difficulties in writing, organizing their school duties and paying the necessary attention to courses (15.9%); however, they referred to their high intelligence and high achievement in math (29.1%) and their high achievement in arts and sports (13.7%). The Czech sample highlighted the GSLD advanced level of selecting a huge amount of information and acquiring knowledge in a great variety of fields (29.16%), but also contrasted their learning abilities to their difficulties (12.5%), and stressed specific difficulties in writing (12.5%), behavior at school (12.5%), and tendency to reject specific school activities (12.5%).

Finally, for the third open-ended question, all teachers were asked which were the most suitable methods of teaching the GSLD in class. The Greek teachers emphasized the individualized teaching methods (62.5%), high motivation in class (11.1%), creative activities (9.72%), differentiated instruction (7.64%) and cooperative learning techniques (5.6%). A small percentage of teachers argued in favor of the employment of oral exams at school and the necessity of working harder in class projects and tasks. The Czech sample of teachers suggested mostly the individualized teaching strategies (38.6%), high motivation in class (7.9%), but they also focused on enrichment programs (14.8%), employment of tools for the GSLD specific learning difficulties assessment (10.2%) and extra courses on learning difficulties (5.7%), along with the teacher-family cooperation and the employment of computer programs adapted to the GSLD learning characteristics (5.7%).