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### **Culturally Diverse Gifted Students – a brief overview of multicultural education context in Macedonia**

The culturally diverse gifted students' stories, artwork, music, religious practices, and customs are often not reflected in the curriculum. Many concepts of excellence in different cultures are incompatible with our understanding of giftedness. In many cases, culturally diverse gifted are prejudiced. To reduce prejudice, we should be prepared to respect and acknowledge cultural and ethnic heritage, deepen cultural experiences, challenge cultural stereotypes and include cultural positives into curriculum. Teachers need interaction and knowledge about diverse students as they transform the curriculum to reflect multiple perspectives, ethnic preferences and learning styles. They have to develop their own intercultural competencies to face the needs of the diverse gifted students. This paper addressed culturally diverse gifted students who have not had a fair chance to succeed. The main purpose was to determine if culturally diverse gifted students have a fair chance of high achievement by Macedonian education legislation and curriculum. Research questions explored two issues on the problem of educating culturally diverse gifted students: Are teachers trained for working with these students? What are the barriers to the participation of culturally diverse gifted students in programs for gifted learners? The research was based on consensual qualitative research (CQR) paradigm which uses medium-length, semi-structured interviews. The results showed that there are no programs or practices that equate the chances of culturally diverse gifted students for achievements and lack of teacher training in the field of gifted and multicultural education.

**Keywords:** multicultural education, gifted education, teacher, macedonian education system

#### **Introduction**

Culturally diverse gifted students have unique needs so their teachers are concerned about the best practices to be used in their education. In this regard, the multicultural perspective has the greatest potential to clarify issues of culturally diverse gifted students' disadvantage in achieving. On the other hand, Eriksson and Wallace (2006) emphasize "motivation to want to learn" (p. 34) as the biggest challenge for teachers in educating students different from mainstream school culture. Children of minorities face a lack of motivation and underestimation because they acquire school knowledge which is determined by the dominant culture that often does not correlate with their cultural concept. This often leads to experiencing failure and underachievement. Donovan & Cross (2002) are concerned with "the intersection of racial and ethnic diversity and achievement and with why certain children are overrepresented in some special education programs and underrepresented in those for the gifted and talented" (p. 18). According to these authors in the US "most gifted children do not have a legal entitlement to an ability-appropriate education" (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 23). Some authors (Sternberg, 2007; Pfeiffer, 2012, 2013; Heller, 2012; Dai & Chen, 2013) consider the gift as a socially constructed concept which needs to be contextually defined specific to place and culture. This is a problematic definition of the giftedness that leads to accepting the constataion that the repertoire of skills and knowledge, which would cause a student to be viewed as gifted, are specific to a particular culture (Peters & Gentry, 2012) and therefore such a universally acceptable definition that applies to all cultures is challenging.

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In a multicultural society, two are educational approaches for the education of culturally diverse gifted students. The assimilation approach favors the absorption of these students into the core or predominant culture. Access to opportunity resides in the diverse individual's ability to compete within the core culture (Kitano, 1991). The pluralistic approach aims to preserve the essence of the original culture within the boundaries necessary to advance society as a whole. Another aspect in this dimension is student identity. Cultural identity is of great importance in avoiding student disadvantage in competitions and achievements. Ford (2004) recounts her experience that diverse children who have strong, positive racial identities are more likely to achieve and be resilient in the face of adversity than children who are lost, confused, and ambivalent. In addition to racial identity, culturally diverse gifted students face forms of disadvantage in achievement for other identity reasons such as ethnic and religious identity. Lee and Low (2013) findings suggest that up to 93% of children's books were about White children. Ford (2014) emphasizes four misperceptions where, among other things, she emphasizes the dilemma of whether multicultural education should be taught as a separate subject. All theoretical findings have led to the conclusion that multicultural education cannot be practiced as a separate subject but as an interdisciplinary issue.

Educators must recognize that culturally diverse gifted students need to have their abilities recognized. They have strongly emphasized the need to be challenged. Just like diverse students, they need to have their traditions and values affirmed and respected. In this regard, the role and competence of the teacher is what makes the difference if these students will gain equal opportunities for high achievement. Based on the findings of several authors (Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Cushner, 2001; and Pang, 2001), Ford and Trotman (2001 p. 236) constructed a table of Characteristics of Effective Teachers of Gifted Diverse Students.

<b>Characteristics of Effective Teachers of Gifted Diverse Students</b>		
<b>Characteristics of Gifted Education Teachers</b>	<b>Characteristics of Multicultural Education Teachers</b>	<b>Characteristics of Gifted Multicultural Education Teachers</b>
Knowledge of the nature and needs of gifted students.	Knowledge of the nature and needs of diverse students.	Knowledge of the nature and needs of students who are gifted and diverse.
Ability to develop methods and materials for use with gifted students.	Ability to develop methods and materials for use with diverse students.	Ability to develop methods and materials for use with students who are gifted and diverse.
Skills in individualized teaching.	Skills in addressing cultural differences in students' learning styles, cognitive styles, and behavioral styles.	Skills in address individual and cultural differences.
Skills in teaching higher level thinking skills and questioning techniques.	Skills in teaching higher level thinking skills and questioning techniques using multicultural resources and materials.	Skills in teaching higher level thinking skills and questioning techniques using multicultural resources and materials.
Ability to identify gifted students.	Ability to recognize the strengths of diverse students.	Ability to recognize the strengths of students who are gifted and diverse.

Seeks to develop students' self-concept.	Seeks to develop students' concept as a person of color (i.e., racial identity).	Seeks to develop students' sense of self as a gifted individual and diverse individual.
Skills in counseling gifted students.	Skills in counseling diverse students (multicultural counseling skills).	Skills in counseling students who are gifted and diverse.
Skills in creating an environment in which gifted students feel challenged and safe to explore and express their uniqueness.	Skills in creating an environment in which diverse students feel challenged and safe to explore and express their uniqueness.	Skills in creating an environment in which diverse gifted students feel challenged and safe to explore and express their uniqueness.

Figure 1. Characteristics of Effective Teachers of Gifted Diverse Students (Ford & Trotman, 2001)

From the table we clearly see the advantages that characterize Gifted Multicultural Education Teachers sublimated as knowledge, ability and skill specialized for working with students who are gifted and diverse. In addition to the way of thinking, based on the philosophy of inclusion, Ford (2006) proposes recommendations for creating culturally responsive classrooms for culturally diverse gifted students. She has in mind teacher preparation, culturally responsive classrooms, culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally responsive curriculum. The unique needs of these students should be addressed by considering dimensions such as culturally sensitive identification protocols, early and continuous access to advanced curriculum, essential supports for culturally diverse gifted students, and effective home, community, and school connections. These needs also require good practices: revision of school policies and practices to determine where diverse students are excluded from gifted programs and the evaluation process; All instruments used for identification should be culturally sensitive; Teachers should provide culturally diverse gifted students to demonstrate their giftedness in gifted programs. Educational institutions should use the University Teacher Preparation Programs for professional development. Schools should help gifted students from diverse backgrounds develop strong academic identities with supportive programs; School should build relationships with diverse families; Educational authorities should seek funding for research projects related to equity issues and to ensure continuation of programming toward upgrading such programs. Ford, Walters, Byrd, & Harris (2019) emphasize “the benefits of multicultural literature for gifted Black girls extend beyond the content of the book” (p. 55). Cultural characteristics and identity in books are presented through characters who promote the recognition of heritage, values, way of thinking and the possibility of reviewing worldviews. Scott (2014) states that “the same type of instruction that works with one student or group of students may be ineffective or may not work as well as with another individual or group of students” (p.149). Poor performance is caused by ineffective instruction so identifying culturally different students is difficult considering the curriculum and teaching. Ineffective instruction is most often the result of poor quality teacher training or professional development deficit. Szymanski and Shaff (2013) reports that “five of the six participants reported a lack of training for understanding and working with gifted students” (p. 12). In our case we can strongly recommend a teacher training in this area.



## Macedonia's multicultural context

Macedonia is a multicultural society that is reflected in the education system. The data from the State Statistical Office show that in 2016/2017 the total number of students in primary education was 190,225 students. Of these, 123,250 or 64.79% study in Macedonian, 60,578 or 31.84% in Albanian, 5,976 or 3.14% in Turkish, 280 or 0.14% in Bosnian and 141 or 0.07% in Serbian. The state has passed laws and documents that provide education for all students. In primary education, teaching is organized in four languages of instruction (Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and Serbian), while in secondary education in three languages of instruction (Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish). About 29% of primary schools and 34% of secondary schools are bilingual/trilingual.<sup>2</sup> The education strategy emphasizes the commitment to "provide comprehensive, inclusive and integrated education aimed at the "student", with modern programs that enable future generations to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies according to the needs of a democratic multicultural society ..."<sup>3</sup> while the content of education will be oriented towards "acceptance of multiculturalism, interethnic integration, respect for diversity and democratic values"<sup>4</sup> in order to "promote the integration of students belonging to different ethnic communities, through joint teaching and extracurricular activities, joint language learning, improving the spatial conditions for integration, ensuring interpersonal and intercultural social competencies"<sup>5</sup>. In terms of activities in the intercultural context, in 2012 a five-year project for interethnic integration in education was launched. The aim of the initiative was to create a political, social and economic climate in the country to support interethnic integration in schools. The project covered all primary and secondary schools and organized trainings and joint activities for teachers and students who teach/ learn in different languages of instruction.

According to Education STRATEGY for 2018-2015, in multilingual schools students are separated according to the language of instruction (working in different shifts, facilities, floors, different administration, etc.) so they do not have enough opportunities for interaction. Multicultural/intercultural education is underrepresented in teaching and extracurricular activities, as well as in some of the textbooks. Teachers themselves do not promote sufficient respect for diversity and equality (in terms of gender or ethnicity, social status, intellectual and physical abilities), as well as multiculturalism. Appropriate system solutions for identifying and working with talented students are also lacking (STRATEGY, 2018, p. 35) but there are no recommendations to address this problem. It is left to the commitment, finances and leisure time of parents, as well as the initiative of teachers to organize extracurricular activities. Additionally, the measure of additional classes for above-average students and additional classes for students with lower success is no longer applied.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Education STRATEGY for 2018-2015 and Action Plan. p. 14

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. 19

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 19

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 20

<sup>6</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa. Najavena strategija za podrška na talentiranite učenici. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%88%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0->

In our country, it is necessary to develop a national strategy in which the treatment of the gifted will be operationalized. It is also necessary to create a structure for supporting the teacher and coordinating the activities at the state level (Naumovska, Sivakova, & Vangelova, 2014). A study on the situation in the multiethnic municipalities (Mickovski, Aleksova, & Raleva, 2011) indicates that teachers feel they are only partially trained to use appropriate methods for multiethnic education, since most of them are not prepared to work in multicultural environments in the course of their studies, neither have attended additional training; some teachers and parents support the existence of so-called ethnic shifts; teachers are not very successful in choosing appropriate action in certain ethnically sensitive situations. The results obtained by examining the initial situation in relation to the indicators of the School Designed for the Child on the dimension of multiculturalism (and children's rights) indicate that "the teaching contents offer much greater opportunities for the students from the classes in Albanian and Turkish to study on the culture, tradition and history of the Macedonian nation" and that "the teaching content intended for students who follow Macedonian language teaching offer much smaller opportunities to learn about culture, tradition and history of other ethnic communities."<sup>7</sup> The fact that multicultural education and good interethnic relations are important features of a quality education that leads to improved student outcomes, in the next phase of educational reforms these elements should be especially emphasized.

## Method

Research questions explored two issues on the problem of educating culturally diverse gifted students:

Are teachers trained for working with these students?

What are the barriers to the participation of culturally diverse gifted students in programs for gifted learners?

Qualitative methods were used to answer the research questions, which enabled the investigation of personal thoughts and perspectives. The research was based on consensual qualitative research (CQR) paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) which uses medium-length, semi-structured interviews in which researchers do not interact with participants except during interviews (Szymanski & Shaff, 2013). Semi-Structured Interview Questions Classroom Teachers<sup>8</sup> designed by Szymanski and Shaff (2013) were adapted and used to interview teachers. The research was conducted on a purposive sample. Six elementary school teachers from two primary schools in the Tetovo region of Western Macedonia were interviewed. During the analysis of the results their names were replaced with pseudonyms: 1. Ms. Bregu, 2. Ms. Zafirova, 3. Ms. Zogu, 4. Ms. Koceska, 5. Ms. Petriti, 6. Ms. Ivanoska. The interviews were conducted online via skype for 30 minutes for each participant. The

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<sup>7</sup> School designed for child. <http://www.umd.gov.mk/istrazuvanje.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Szymanski, T., & Shaff, T. (2013). Teacher perspectives regarding gifted diverse students. *Gifted Children*, 6(1), 1. <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/giftedchildren/vol6/iss1/1>. Appendix A. p. 26.

interview was recorded and then transcribed and translated into English. We used constant comparison analysis to analyze the data for this qualitative study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008 according to Szymanski & Shaff, 2013).

## Results

The results are presented according to the interview questions and according to the ranking of the participants in the method section.

Question 1. What are the typical characteristics of gifted students (i.e., what does a gifted student “look like”)?

All six participants described the gifted student as a "normal-looking" child. The features that characterize it are high intelligence, high motivation, dedication, work and advanced skills in specific areas. According to them, special areas are mathematics, languages and arts. Only Ms. Bregu described the gifted student as introverted and with outstanding skills in the natural sciences and music. Teachers have also listed other features related to gifted students. According to Ms. Zafirova gifted students "respond quickly and are independent in learning" and according to Ms. Zogu "they are very intelligent." Ms. Koceska said there was a student who "had the ability to solve math tasks twice as fast as other students" and Ms. Petriti added that gifted students have the ability to "socialize" and Ms. Ivanoska stressed that these students "are capable of solving problems". We note that teachers attribute intelligence and skill to gifted student.

Question 2. Tell me about any experiences and training that you've had about gifted students or culturally diverse gifted students?

All participants claimed to have received training regarding gifted students but not about culturally diverse gifted students. Ms. Koceska and Ms. Ivanoska stated that they had a subject on talented children for two semesters in pre-service education. Ms. Bregu, Ms. Koceska, Ms. Petriti and Ms. Ivanoska stated that they have experience in multicultural activities called "interethnic integration in schools" but do not have any training regarding culturally diverse gifted students. Ms. Zogu stated that "for the first time he hears about the culturally diverse gifted students category". All participants read something about gifted students and about multicultural education. On the other hand, three of the six participants who recently graduated said that they had subjects from multicultural education in the faculty.

Question 3. How did your experiences and training help you develop your picture of what a typical gifted student looks like?

In this question Ms. Zogu recounted the experience with her child: "I have to start with my daughter's experience. She has talent in painting and language. While in the painting she shows achievements in multiethnic competitions at national and international level, in English and French as well, in Macedonian it is not possible to participate higher than local competitions. Her knowledge of Macedonian culture and literature is poor. This limits creative skills in competitions to higher levels. She does not receive the necessary knowledge due to curricular limitations and incompetence of teachers of this subject. In her school, the subject of Macedonian language is considered an insignificant subject. All participants described the training as "boring and very abstract". Few of the knowledge gained in training can be applied to identifying and working with gifted children. Teachers

do not possess standard procedures for identifying and working with gifted children. Teachers have had no experience with any culturally diverse student who is gifted.

Question 4. Were there differences in gender or an equal balance of boys and girls? Race/school interests? Economic status?

Participants did not report any differences in gender representation of gifted students. All participants in different forms emphasized that students prove their talent within the competitions that take place in their mother tongue. We asked them about the chances of all students achieving? Teachers' statements can be generalized to the fact that Roma students have a disadvantage and do not have equal opportunities for achievement. "I have a Roma student in the class. She attends classes in Albanian and does not speak this language well. There are few chances for her to achieve high results, although she does not show any talent in any field of education," Ms. Bregu sad. All participants agree that sport is the area where students can show their full talent.

Question 5. Do you modify your lesson plans for the students you think are exceptionally bright? To accommodate learners of higher ability? If so how?

We work with lesson plans approved by the Ministry of Education and Science which are unified for all students - said all participants in the interview. "I'm more focused on helping children with learning disabilities," Ms. Petriti said. "I don't feel capable of making plans for working with gifted students," and "I have no idea how to realize them." Zafirova and Ms. Ivanoska stated. Ms. Bregu pointed out that there are two students in her class who feel bored because they do their homework faster and understand the content earlier. All participants stated that the biggest challenge for them is working with children who show low achievement in learning. Only Ms. Koceska added that "sometimes learners of higher ability are challenged with tasks of large amount."

Question 6. How are gifted students identified in your school/district?

To understand and respond to new situations, teachers rely on their own experience and personal beliefs (Pierce, Adams, Neumeister, Cassady, Dixon, & Cross, 2007). Thus, in this research, teachers are based on personal beliefs to understand the characteristics of gifted students and to work with diverse gifted students due to the lack of specific training. This can lead in creating barriers to the identification of diverse gifted students. When asked how are gifted students identified in your school, all participants pointed out that in their school gifted students are usually identified when they start showing high scores in school competitions. "So far I have not identified a gifted student ... I am not sure if I know how to identify such a student. What I can do is identify students who show better skills in understanding content and completing tasks," said Ms. Zafirova. "Considering my 32 years of experience in education, I can say that I have had the opportunity to notice many excellent students ... some of them have achieved high degrees in education, some of them are successful in their professions. I don't know if they were gifted students." Ms. Zogu admitted. Teachers agree that they are not trained in identifying gifted students. Only Ms. Ivanoska claimed that in her class there was a case when a culturally diverse student showed higher skills than other excellent students and was not a member of the community in whose language the teaching takes place. "In my class I had a Roma student who showed extraordinary singing talent" Ms. Petriti sad. "He was not treated in a special way compared to others and to the best of my knowledge he did not continue his high school education,"

she added. The differences between teachers regarding this question are negligible. Lack of training regarding gifted students identification procedures is evident.

Question 7. What do you think of that process? If you were assigned to coordinate the gifted program in your school, would you make any changes?

Teachers think that the process of identifying gifted students is very complicated and that this should be done by school staff in collaboration with teachers. But none of the teachers could explain what that meant by a very complicated process. All teachers strictly said that there is no gifted program in their school. Everything is in the hands of teachers. The individual approach of teachers is what drives this process if it exists. "Working with gifted students is a great pleasure ... they are often proof that I perform well in class ... although there are many excellent students according to our assessment criteria, gifted students are rare in my class ... I would create a special plan to support gifted students but I have little knowledge in this area," Ms Bregu said. Ms. Ivanoska stressed that she has no competence for working with gifted students and that she wants to participate in the creation of a gifted program after intensive training. Teachers are unaware of the existence of gifted programs.

Question 8. Do you see any differences in your classroom among different student groups in terms of their involvement in class discussions or work habits?

In this question the teachers have given different comments mainly based on their experiences. Their experiences consist of multicultural activities in schools such as visits to other schools with different ethnic structures, multicultural education training and literature. "During my experience, in the classroom I had students from other groups such as Vlachs, Serbs, Bosnians and Roma ... I did not notice their higher abilities compared to Macedonian students. But I have noticed lower achievements, especially of Roma students ... Roma students are much different than other students," Ms. Zafirova said. "The students of the Vlach and Serbian minorities are very capable and do not differ at all from the Macedonian students ... I very rarely manage to distinguish which group they belong to ..." Ms. Koceska said. "Minority students who have learned in my class have spoken Macedonian very well ... but have not shown good results ..." Ms. Ivanoska reported. "In my experience, I did not have a student of the Macedonian ethnic group in the classroom ... I had students of the Turkish and Roma ethnic group ... these have a lot of problems with expressing themselves in the Albanian language ..." Ms. Bregu said. Ms Zogu and Ms. Petriti has worked all their career with students of the Albanian ethnic group. Teachers have clearly stated that they know how to identify students from different cultural backgrounds.

9. What are any barriers that you see for particular groups of students being identified for gifted programs?

As a barrier for particular groups of students being identified for gifted programs teachers report language recognition. Teachers who teach in Macedonian classrooms identify Macedonian as a barrier. Many minority students are unfamiliar with the Macedonian language and thus cannot show good results in school competitions in many subjects. Teachers who teach in classes in the Albanian language identify the Macedonian language and the Albanian language as a barrier. Three out of six teachers stated that non-Macedonian students have less chance of good results in national educational competitions due to poor knowledge of the Macedonian language. Three out of six teachers stated that students of Macedonian ethnicity cannot participate in school competitions organized in the

Albanian language because students of this ethnicity do not learn the Albanian language in schools. These barriers make it impossible for students of all cultures to have equal opportunities for achievement. The economic barrier was identified as another barrier. "A child from a poor family cannot take additional language or IT courses," Ms. Zogu said. The main barrier to the participation of culturally diverse gifted students in programs for gifted learners is the lack of programs for gifted learners. "We call the program for gifted learners the selection of students with the best results to participate in school competitions in certain subjects," Ms. Petriti stated. This definition can be generalized to the other five participants in the interview.

## **Discussion**

Teachers who graduated at least 10 years ago did not receive the necessary education in the field of multicultural education to work with culturally diverse students. Their skills for working with these students are based on experience and reading literature. Teachers who have recently graduated have a course in multicultural education. Training for all teachers in this field is generally scarce and short. In the field of working with gifted students is the same situation. There are no programs for these two fields in schools. Activities for identifying and working with culturally gifted diverse students take place within the framework of school competitions. Moon and Brighton (2008) point out that the lack of training may have a direct impact on the education of gifted students. The results showed that there is no specialized person in schools to identify and work with culturally diverse gifted students. Identification of gifted students is done through school competitions. Teachers rely on personal experience to work with students they identify as very able. The main criteria for such classification are the abilities that the student shows in some subjects. This may be an indication that teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the characteristics of gifted students and diverse students. Teachers as a barrier to students' participation in gifted program have highlighted the low level of knowledge of the Macedonian language and the Albanian language, the economic situation of the students' families and the lack of programs.

## **Conclusion**

Lack of training is a problem that leads teachers to work according to personal experiences and beliefs. This can reduce the opportunities for culturally diverse gifted students. Teachers in this study reported that they did not practice differentiated instruction for gifted students and that all students performed the same learning activities. This research highlights the need for integrated training for all teachers and school staff for working with culturally diverse gifted students. Identifying CDG students is an important step towards enriching national resources in the Republic of Macedonia. Identification procedures and protocols need to be researched, developed and implemented. Promoting equitable access for CDG students needs to be strategic and committed to altering common identification and programming practices. In addition to training in the field of gifted education, teachers should also receive training in the field of intercultural education. Lack of intercultural competence can lead to misunderstanding of the specific needs of culturally diverse students. A combined training in the field of gifted education and multicultural education may increase teachers' awareness of the characteristics of gifted students even when Macedonian or Albanian is not their first language.

## Limitations

We could not conduct the interview with physical participation in school due to pandemic Kovid 19. The results of this research cannot be generalized more broadly than the case examined because the interviews were conducted with participants from only two schools in Western Macedonia. Teachers have given their perceptions based on their experience and beliefs. It is possible that greater teacher involvement in a wider region will yield more credible results or results that differ from these.

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