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Perceptions of Giftedness and Classroom Practice with Gifted Children – an Exploratory Study of Primary School Teachers

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Abstract

The Decree-Law 54/2018 combined with Ordinance 223-A / 2018 - Article 33 regulates the inclusion of gifted students in Portuguese schools. This study aims to investigate primary school teachers' perceptions of giftedness and their experiences of working with gifted children in their regular classes. This is an exploratory study with 13 teachers and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Our participants tended to represent giftedness with an emphasis on the intellectual traits of gifted learners and to adjust their pedagogical approach accordingly. Their assessment practices focused essentially on product-oriented approaches instead of process-oriented approaches. Our findings suggest that there is still a long way to go, especially in terms of formal teacher training, to tailor teaching to the needs and characteristics of gifted learners.

Keywords: traits of giftedness, gifted children education, primary school teachers, curriculum adaptations

Percepciones de Superdotación y Prácticas con Niños Superdotados: un Estudio Exploratorio con Maestros de Educación Primaria

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Resumen

El Decreto-Ley 54/2018 junto con la Ordenanza 223-A / 2018- en el artículo 33 regulan la inclusión de los estudiantes superdotados en las escuelas portuguesas. Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar las percepciones de los maestros de educación primaria sobre la superdotación y sus experiencias de trabajo con niños superdotados. Se trata de un estudio exploratorio con 13 maestros. Los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. Nuestros participantes asociaban la superdotación con los rasgos intelectuales de los estudiantes superdotados, y en consecuencia ajustaban su enfoque pedagógico. El proceso de evaluación se centraba esencialmente en enfoques orientados en productos en lugar de centrarlos en procesos. Nuestros hallazgos sugieren que todavía queda un largo camino por recorrer, especialmente en la formación del profesorado, con la intención de adaptar la enseñanza a las necesidades y características de los estudiantes superdotados.

Palabras clave: rasgos de superdotación, educación de niños superdotados, maestros de educación primaria, adaptaciones curriculares.

The education of gifted children has been a recurrent topic of discussion and research (Jie & Hassan, 2019). In terms of formal education many of the difficulties that children with exceptional abilities face "have to do with the discouragement and frustration they feel in the face of an academic programme that strives for repetition and monotony and a psychological atmosphere in the classroom that does not favour the expression of greater potential" (Alencar, 2007, p. 374). The physical, emotional and cognitive development of gifted children can generate insecurities in both themselves and their teachers. It is essential that adults control their expectations considering the high cognitive abilities of these children, "because the lack of consideration of other less favored areas in their psychological development can influence the emotional development of the child" (Rocha et al., 2017, p. 25).

Gifted children are different children for a number of traits at cognitive, creative, affective and behavioral levels, and must be recognized as such. In general, gifted children have high levels of intelligence and cognitive self-consciousness, leadership skills, and fear of failure associated with the excellence of performance imposed by self or others (Narimani & Mousazadeh, 2010). They show persistency and enthusiasm in learning, and tend to be very active, perfectionist and emotionally sensitive (Clark, 2008). Gifted children usually learn to talk, read and write at an early age compared to their peers and are prone to feelings of frustration when having difficulty meeting standards of performance. Furthermore, they like to be independent, and to mark their learning route in view of their personal talents (Altintas & Ilgun, 2016).

The advances in the areas of education and human development have made more and more evident the need for support and special assistance for the development of the capacities and potential of children with exceptional skills. Within the educational community, more specifically, among countless numbers of students in schools, there are gifted children who need institutional, family, and social support. For these students' abilities to continue to prosper, it is necessary to adjust the educational process to their needs, motivations and interests (Little, 2012).

In Portugal recent policy and legal initiatives emphasise the need to consolidate the practice of inclusion as a priority of the educational system and reinforce the schools and teachers' autonomy in the flexible management of the curriculum, methods, times, instruments and activities

to respond to the singularities of the students (Decree-Law 54/2018 and Ordinance 223-A/2018). However, despite these official efforts, schools in Portugal (with a few exceptions) do not have an educational environment prepared to meet the needs of gifted students. In schools the identification of gifted children is expected to follow two main steps: initially done by teachers in an empirical manner based on the observation of the commonly accepted traits followed by psychological evaluation by the school psychologists (Azevedo & Mettrau, 2010; Miranda & Almeida, 2019).

Several international studies have also highlighted the professional development needs of teachers to identify and cater for gifted students (Khalil & Accariya, 2016; Rowley, 2012; Sayı, 2018). While previous empirical research has been conducted in different countries in Europe, the USA and Australia, in Portugal research on this topic is scarce and focused mainly on teachers' preparedness and challenges faced in their work with gifted students. Evidence suggests that in general Portuguese teachers have no specific training to work with gifted students and to respond adequately to their needs, and most schools do not have educational experts to support teachers in dealing with this kind of students (Camelo, 2014). Teachers often feel threatened by the complex questions that gifted students raise in the classroom context (Rodrigues & Antunes, 2012).

The present study aims to contribute to filling this research gap by addressing the primary school teachers' views of giftedness and the inclusion of gifted students in their regular classrooms. Despite its focus on the Portuguese context, we believe that our findings may be of interest to an international audience, especially in countries with similar educational contexts.

Teachers' Beliefs about Gifted Students

The findings of empirical research conducted in different countries (e.g. Australia, England, Germany, Korea, Nigeria, and Scotland) on pre-service and in-service teachers' beliefs about giftedness have provided evidence for an ambivalent view of giftedness and gifted students (Matheis et al., 2017). From a positive perspective, gifted children have been defined on the grounds of a number of attributes such as high academic performance, high intellectual and cognitive abilities, great creativity, and social intelligence (Altintas & Ilgun, 2016). Strong leadership skills, great interest in social

events, a developed sense of fairness, and high self-confidence (Olthouse, 2014) were other attributes mentioned by teachers to characterise gifted children and to account for the positive contributions that such children make to the climate of the classrooms.

The teachers' positive perspective contrasts with a negative view of giftedness associated with low social, emotional, or behavioral competencies. This has been the case with some studies where gifted students appear characterised as higher in intellect but more introverted, less emotionally stable, less agreeable, less prosocial and more maladjusted than average-ability students (Baudson & Preckel, 2013; Preckel et al., 2015). Problems have been reported related with high academic and high intelligence attributes. As curious, hyperactive, and quick learners gifted children get easily bored and lack interest in the classroom activities (Ozcan & Kotek, 2015), leading to disruptive behaviours and maladjustment (Lassig, 2009) or even depression (Cross & Cross, 2015). Social support is critical to prevent gifted students from "relying on psychologically unhealthy coping strategies" (Olszewski-Kubiliu et al., 2015, p. 202).

Underlying these findings are the theoretical principles of the disharmony hypothesis, which ascribes negative assumptions about non-cognitive characteristics to intellectually highly capable individuals. In other words, "the disharmony hypothesis states that the high intelligence comes at a cost, resulting in negative perceptions of non-cognitive characteristics" (Matheis et al., 2017, p. 136). However, while research has shown that high cognitive ability is a characteristic of gifted students, empirical evidence has revealed that giftedness has no association to psychological disorders (Martin et al., 2009), and that there is no significant difference between gifted and average-ability students in regard of their social and emotional abilities (Neihart et al., 2002). Therefore, adherence to the principles of the disharmony hypothesis may explain, at least in part, teachers' tendency to hold negatively biased beliefs about, and perceptions of gifted students. This raises, among others, the issue of teachers' preparation to work with gifted children. Although research has revealed that teachers' beliefs are unrelated to professional experience, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that teachers with training in gifted education tend to develop more favorable views of gifted students than their counterparts without training (Lassig, 2009; Pedersen & Kronborg, 2014; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011).

With the new legislation, the curriculum and student learning are at the heart of the school activity, with a decisive commitment to the autonomy of schools and their professionals (Decree-Law, 54/2018; Ordinance 223-A / 2018). In this context teachers become a fundamental element in inclusive education in general and the education of gifted students in particular. In Portugal, continuous professional development plays a crucial role in improving teacher performance, commitment and job satisfaction (Reis-Jorge et al., 2020). Continuous professional development can become a vehicle of excellence to transform beliefs and attitudes about the development of a school that wants to be truly inclusive (Schleicher, 2018).

The present study aims to contribute to an effective inclusion of gifted children in regular classes as we seek answers for the following questions:

1. What are Primary School teachers' perceptions of giftedness and gifted students?
2. How do Primary School teachers meet the advanced learning needs of gifted students integrated in their regular classrooms?
3. What main challenges do Primary School teachers face in dealing with gifted students integrated in their regular classrooms?
4. What in the Primary School teachers' views can be done to mitigate or overcome the challenges faced in meeting the advanced learning needs of gifted students integrated in their regular classrooms?

Methods

This is an exploratory study of Portuguese primary school teachers' perceptions of giftedness and experiences of working with gifted children in their regular classrooms. The focus is on their current perceptions of the phenomenon, the challenges that they may have faced, and their views of action that can be put in place to facilitate their work with gifted students. Therefore, from an epistemological perspective, this study adopts a personal constructivist stance. Personal constructivist theory "claims that people learn by constructing meaning to their personal experiences as they interact with their environment" (Mogashoa, 2014, p. 57).

As Marton (1986) explains, "phenomenography is a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (p. 31). Given the focus of our study on

identifying the perceptions and experiences of the participants, and the fact that experiences and perceptions by nature are colored by the participants' points of view and thus are not 'value neutral' (Ormston et al., 2014), we utilised a phenomenographic approach to our study as we sought to explore the participants' "lived experiences" primarily through the eyes of the participants (Vagle, 2018).

Participants

For the study we used a purposeful sample, a sampling technique that allows the identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that represent information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) for being knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon under investigation (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The participants were selected from 7 schools in the District of Lisbon upon the confirmation by the principals that they had received gifted students in their schools recently. The initial contact with the teachers was by the principals. The participants who volunteered to take part in the study were given all the information necessary for them to provide informed consent. They were told about the purpose of the study and were assured that participation was on a voluntary basis. They were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the dissemination of the findings of the study.

The teachers were selected upon two main inclusion criteria: having taught in primary school for at least 5 years and having some experience of working with gifted children in their regular classrooms. These criteria were aimed to ensure that the participants were able to provide the data required for the objectives of the study.

The group was formed of 13 female primary school teachers with 10 to 32 years ($\bar{x}=17$) of professional experience in primary education. The participants had between 36 and 65 ($\bar{x}=39,4$) years of age. All the teachers were trained at graduate level (Bachelor of Education). Two of them had completed post-graduation studies – one Specialist Course in Education and one Master's Degree in Education. All the participants had some experience of working with gifted students. None of the participants had any specific training to work with gifted students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006). Each individual interview was conducted face-to-face in one 45-60-minute-long session. In order to check for face validity and enhance reliability of the data collection tool (Cohen et al., 2019), two experienced researchers – one expert in qualitative research and one expert in giftedness and special educational needs – were asked to review the interview protocol looking for clarity of the questions and their suitability to the objectives of the interview. The final version of the protocol consists of four main segments. The first one aimed at gathering sociodemographic data about the participants; the other segments, which are concerned with the topics related to the research questions, aimed at eliciting the participants' views/concepts of giftedness and gifted students, their approach to deal with the gifted students in their classrooms, the main challenges faced, and their views of support needed to feel more confident working with gifted students in the future. More specifically, the interview protocol included questions such as: “What does giftedness and gifted students mean to you?”; “On what evidence do you build upon to identify a potential gifted student in your classroom?”; “How does the presence of gifted children in your classroom affect your teaching routines?”; “What differentiating strategies do you use with gifted children in your classroom?”; “What main challenges have you faced in working with gifted children in your classroom?”; “In terms of assessment do you usually take into account the characteristics of the gifted children? If so, in what ways?”; “In view of your professional experience what kind of training do you find necessary to improve your work with gifted children?”

The interviews were audio tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. For the purposes of analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and each participant was then asked to read their individual transcriptions, which represented a means of validating the data (Cohen et al., 2019). The data were analysed following the six-step-procedure thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as “a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p.78). We adopted a deductive approach to the analysis. Based on our research questions we started by developing an initial set of codes reading through the data and assigning excerpts to codes.

Afterwards, various rounds of coding were made, grouping them according to themes, allowing us to build the categories of description which are a key feature of phenomenographic research (Marton & Booth, 1997) and which describe the ways the participants perceived and experienced giftedness in their regular classrooms.

In order to ensure confidentiality, the interview transcripts were assigned codes

The thematic analysis procedure found three different themes and eight subthemes. Table 1 shows the overall organization of our findings.

Table 1

Themes and subthemes from the analysis

Themes	Subthemes
1. Perceptions of giftedness and gifted students	1a. Cognitive development 1b. Behaviour and social and emotional development
2. Strategies for differentiated instruction and assessment	2a. Differentiating practices 2b. The students' role as assistants 2c. Appraisal and differentiated forms of assessment
3. Challenges and mitigation strategies	3a. Classroom management challenges 3b. Creation of an appropriate learning environment 3c. Professional development and inclusive education

Findings

Theme 1. Perceptions of Giftedness and Gifted Students

Our participants tended to represent giftedness in association with cognitive development and behavior. Only in a couple of cases was giftedness described in association with the socioemotional domain. At the cognition level, our participants described gifted children as those with above-average learning abilities, superior IQ, more developed literacy, complex

vocabulary, distinct learning interests and curiosity, and quick knowledge acquisition as best illustrated in the following testimonials:

they are children with above average abilities. They have far superior capabilities ... I think that in terms of literacy the gifted child stands out (T1).

it would be an above average ability to grasp concepts. Basically, they are far above average capabilities (T4).

they show curiosity for knowledge that other children do not reveal, and they perform tasks very quickly and autonomously (T7).

I would say it's the ease of learning, the anxiety about knowing and not being able to wait that distinguishes gifted children from the average children (T11).

Being a gifted child is about knowing how to read earlier than usual, having a very rich vocabulary, being perfectionists in what they do and very competitive (T12).

Another way our teachers had to describe gifted children was in terms of behaviour. Most of our respondents characterised gifted children as being restless, very participative in the classroom but usually very inattentive when they are not motivated to learn:

Sometimes, it seems that they are not even in the classroom, they are so distracted (T4).

for the speed and autonomy in carrying out the tasks they keep making interventions and asking lots of questions, which can be disturbing for the rest of the class (T6).

They are a little restless and get tired of activities too quickly (T10).

It should be noted that only two participants referred to the socioemotional domain to characterise gifted children as those who reveal a

superior maturity in the relationships with adults but have adaptation difficulties and problems with socialization:

a gifted child has a very high cognitive level, but on the other hand, the emotional part does not follow this cognitive evolution because they found it difficult to relate with the other children ... the gifted child ends up having difficulties in being able to create a balance between the intellectual part and the affective part (T13).

sometimes they can reveal serious difficulties to socialise with the other children and sometimes even with teachers, especially if we do not respond to their demands (T5).

Participants view of gifted children as having socialization problems, deviant behaviors and adaptation difficulties resonates with a stereotyped view of gifted students which has been challenged by the findings of research suggesting that gifted children may have social skills that help them in their interpersonal relationships, thus exposing positive feelings about themselves and showing greater maturity in their interactions with peers (Alencar, 2007).

Theme 2. Strategies for Differentiated Instruction and Assessment

When asked about how the presence of gifted children in their classrooms has influenced and would continue to influence their pedagogical routines the participants' testimonials revolved mainly around the concept of differentiated instruction. They listed a number of differentiating practices that they believe are appropriate to meet the gifted students' needs and keep them motivated: increasing the number of tasks, implementing learning tasks appealing to the children's interests and curiosity and with a level of difficulty consistent with their intellectual and cognitive development, and using more stimulating resources and learning materials were the plans of action more frequently mentioned by the teachers. The following quotes are representative of the ideas expressed by the group of teachers:

You have to be more demanding. You can walk in parallel, but with a higher level of demand (T8).

two adjustments I made to adjust my teaching to that gifted child in my classroom were look for more stimulating resources and opt for differentiated tasks, more demanding tasks (T1).

a lot of research work and then I asked for presentations to colleagues, I remember the student enjoyed that a lot and it worked with him (T4).

One of the participants alluded to the need to value the students' line of reasoning through conveying the idea that it is important to take into account the child's thinking to avoid putting the class in an uproar" (T2). Praising the students' contributions was mentioned by another participant as she considered that "giving the gifted children more chances to speak, to debate with colleagues and then always give positive reinforcement" (T9) to be a successful strategy to use with gifted children.

Assigning gifted students, the role of assistants and "asking them to help the teacher and help the other colleagues" was another strategy used by T8, T9 and T13 with the gifted children they had in their regular classes.

There was a lot of consensus among the group about the assessment of gifted children. Except for two participants, for whom "the assessment would be the same for all the students" (T9) as "the evaluation criteria do not differentiate for gifted students" (T13), all the other teachers were in favour of differentiated forms of assessment. In their view the cognitive and learning abilities that characterise those students require teachers to be more demanding and raise the level of difficulty of both the formative/continuous and summative evaluation tasks and instruments:

I would perform more demanding assessments and even in the classroom, when I evaluate, I would have to take into account the abilities of these students. Not because of the difficulties, but because of the excess of knowledge the gifted students have. We have to find a different way to evaluate those children (T3).

in a written test ask a few extra questions, although I wouldn't penalize the student if they got it wrong. But, definitely always ask for a little more. The level of demand needs to rise ... it is up to the teacher to demand extra work (T4).

For example, in the case of assessment tests, I would change the questions to be more demanding. If doing classroom tasks, I would place a higher level of demand on these gifted children (T10).

Our participants focused essentially on the more orthodox forms of assessment like written tests, which are mainly conducive to product-oriented approaches to assessment.

Theme 3 - Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

One objective of our study was to understand the main difficulties felt by teachers in dealing with gifted children in their regular classrooms and possible ways to overcome those challenges. The main difficulties expressed by the teachers were to do with classroom management, particularly the lack of time to attend to, and control the deviant behaviour of the gifted children included in large regular classes (20 and over students), the lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials, and the lack of support of technical staff such as psychologists and educational needs teachers. According to our participants:

It is the resources, the lack of resources at the level of therapists and materials (T3).

Above all the difficulty is the number of students (T4).

Keeping the students motivated was another main challenge felt by some participants:

I think it is keeping the student motivated to keep on task (T10).

gifted people are constantly waiting to be challenged ... it is not easy to maintain the students' motivation for learning. (T13).

The ways referred by the participants to mitigate or overcome the main challenges are of a developmental, pedagogical, and structural nature, namely in what concerns professional development and the creation of an appropriate teaching and learning environment. In the participants' view the creation of an appropriate learning environment is paramount. This can be

achieved by sensitizing the regular classes where the gifted students are included to the theme of giftedness, reducing the number of students per class, implementing new teaching and learning strategies, and encouraging the regular involvement and collaboration of the families with the teachers and the school life:

creating a favorable environment and proposing challenging activities (...) adapting the class to the existing reality ... With a lot of dialogue and contact with the family (T10).

It is really about grabbing the child, creating empathy and then understanding what the child is like ... so here families have to contribute a lot (T3).

new global strategies for gifted children have to be implemented ... like for example talking to the class and make them understand what giftedness is about so they can accept the differences and have a better relationship with their gifted class mates (T5).

Reducing the size of the classes (...) creating material and human resources to accompany these children (...) they must be followed up individually (T2).

Some participants identified a perceived gap in the training of teachers to deal with gifted children and argued that filling in that gap would be an important form of support, especially at a time when inclusion is a guiding principle of the Portuguese school system. As some of the them explained:

I think there is not enough training. Even during the initial training of teachers this topic should be addressed as a special educational need (T8).

there should be specific training like short training courses related to this theme (T5).

You learn a lot with practice, but there should be deeper formation and training ... I have not seen the inclusion of gifted children to be a topic explored in detail in the in-service courses I have done (T13).

In sum, in reflecting on the main challenges faced in working with gifted children, the participants' main concerns were with their ability to provide adequate educational responses to those children. Such concerns were in result of issues of a structural nature, large size classes and lack of appropriate material and human resources, and of behavioural/classroom management nature – dealing with the demanding and disrupting behavior of the children and feeding their curiosity. Apart from the need for greater support from those responsible for the school system and greater involvement of the families, the need for training in both teaching gifted students and inclusive education was seen by the participants as obstacles to a better performance and their ability to fully adapt their educational practice to the needs of gifted children.

Discussion

Overall, the perceptions of gifted children hold by the participants in our study reflect the ambivalent view of giftedness expressed in the literature. The cognitive and traits pointed out by our participants are in line with the positive view of gifted children as possessing above-average learning abilities, more developed literacy, complex vocabulary, distinct learning interests, quick knowledge acquisition, self-critical ability, perfectionism, and superior IQ as a predictor of higher adult achievement (Clark, 2008; Netz, 2014; Vaivre-Douret, 2011; Webb et al., 2007). However, research has shown that giftedness is not just about higher IQ and academic skills; gifted people present high skills in different domains: academic, artistic, social, motor and mechanical (National Association for Gifted Children, 2019). Only a few teachers in our study mentioned social and emotional characteristics of gifted children that echo the findings of previous studies which portray gifted children as having social relationships and adaptation difficulties, and deviant behaviours (Rinn, 2018; Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). In this respect our findings suggest that in general our participants tended to value the intellectual and academic skills of gifted children more than their personality and social and emotional characteristics.

In terms of classroom practice, using stimulating resources, opting for more demanding and differentiated tasks, involving gifted students in project-based learning tasks, assigning them the role of assistants to help the teacher and peers, and raising the level of difficulty in the assessment

criteria were the differentiated instruction and assessment strategies that our participants claimed to adopt to work with gifted children in their regular classes. Such strategies have been highlighted in the literature as appropriate to meet gifted students' needs and interests and to keep them motivated (Benny & Blonder, 2016; Little, 2012; Newman, 2008; Stanley, 2012; Welsh, 2011). Regarding classroom practice, the approach our participants claimed to adopt with gifted children appear to be consistent with their tendency to view giftedness mainly through the lenses of the academic and intellectual traits.

To some extent, these findings help to explain the challenges faced by our participants in dealing with gifted children. Lack of time to attend to the students' pedagogical needs, the large number of classes, and lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials were the main causes most frequently mentioned by the teachers in our study for the difficulties they feel in meeting the gifted children cognitive needs and demands and controlling their deviant behaviours. In Rowley's words (2012) "[t]eaching gifted and talented students is exhilarating, exhausting and is not an easy task" (p. 79).

In discussing the major obstacles to the implementation of differentiating practices and activities for gifted learners in the regular classrooms, authors like VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2005) and Jie and Hassan (2019) have stressed the importance of the role of technical staff such as psychologists and special education teachers inside the schools to help teachers to deal with gifted children. This was also suggested by our participants as one measure to support their work with gifted children. Talking to the class and make them understand what giftedness is about so they can accept the differences and have a better relationship with their gifted classmates, and encouraging a regular involvement of the families in the school life were other helpful strategies mentioned by our participants, which are in line with the suggestions made in the literature as mitigating strategies that can be put in place to help teachers overcome the challenges faced with gifted children (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2014; Rimm, 2002).

Another kind of support valued by the teachers in our study relates to training and professional development. In reflecting about their own preparation to work with gifted learners, while valuing practice as an important source of learning, our teachers expressed the need for specific training on the inclusion of gifted students in the regular classrooms.

Professional development is undoubtedly essential for the inclusion of all the students, with or without giftedness. In the case of gifted students, Khalil and Accariya (2016) found in their study that “[t]eachers of gifted students should ideally have unique personal, intellectual, and didactic characteristics and a unique attitude that empowers their students to realize their potential” (p. 407). More formal training on specific strategies and methodologies for inclusion practices has been advocated to enhance teachers’ understanding of new knowledge and promote adherence to innovative educational responses as part of their continuous professional development (Benny & Blonder, 2016; Netz, 2014; Wearmouth et al., 2000).

The family and the school represent the children’s first educational pillars. In the case of gifted children, the family and the school must implement a shared teaching and learning process especially designed to meet the children’s unique characteristics and educational needs and create a stimulating environment to promote the full development of the children’s potential (Gama, 2007). It is the role of the school to mobilize responses to the social and cultural needs of each gifted student. By listening to the teachers’ voices and uncovering their perceptions of giftedness and experiences of teaching gifted students our findings add to the current knowledge of the inclusion of gifted children in Portuguese regular classrooms.

Concluding Remarks

Our study focused on the role of primary school teachers in the education of gifted children as we aimed to investigate the extent to which the legal rhetoric on inclusion has been internalized by the Portuguese primary school teachers and incorporated into their classroom practices with particular emphasis on the phenomenon of giftedness and gifted students. We sought to achieve these aims by uncovering the primary school teachers’ views of giftedness and gifted students, the ways they have chosen to deal with those students in their regular classrooms, the main challenges faced in dealing with those students and the forms of support they envisage to overcome those challenges.

In general, our findings parallel the findings of previous studies as regards the teachers’ views of giftedness, the strategies the teachers have

adopted to attend to gifted children's learning needs and development, and the ways the teachers consider the most relevant to help them address the challenges faced in their work with gifted children integrated in the regular classes.

One interesting aspect emerging from our study is the teachers' tendency to perceive of giftedness essentially in terms of the cognitive and intellectual traits of gifted children, which was consistent with the nature of the strategies they claimed to implement to deal with gifted children. This and the teachers' perceived need for more specific training suggests that, despite the efforts of the Portuguese educational authorities to promote a better inclusion of gifted students in Portuguese schools there is still a long way to go to tailor teaching to this specific group of learners. It is well known that legislation and the theoretical discourse per se are not enough for change to materialize in practice. As Wood and Laycraft (2020) refer,

education outreach and professional development are recommended for parents, teachers and other professionals, including policy makers to curv misunderstandings, misidentification and misdiagnosis. Mandates to appropriately identify and support the education and development of highly-profoundly gifted children and adolescents, are imperative (p. 143).

Portuguese schools must be given and find for themselves the conditions to find adequate answers to the potential expectations and needs of every student, thus contributing to raising the levels of inclusion and social cohesion. However, such aims will not be achieved without the required resources. One of the most important characteristics of gifted children is the learning speed which, in association with an insatiable curiosity constitutes one main challenge that teachers face in dealing with gifted children in regular classrooms. Teachers have an indispensable role in the education of gifted and talented students (Khalil & Accariya, 2016; Rowley, 2012). In order to meet the demands of such role, teachers need to be able to understand the characteristics of this kind of children and acquire the knowledge and ability to implement the appropriate strategies to help gifted and potentially gifted students to realize their full potential. Most of teachers' knowledge and competences are acquired through facing new challenges and reflective practice. Training and continuing professional

development courses and in-service initiatives focused on giftedness play a critical role in equipping teachers and schools with the knowledge and skills required to provide a better education for gifted children integrated in regular classrooms.

Although we make no claims for the generalization of our findings, we acknowledge the small number of participants as one limitation of our study. Nevertheless, “member checking”, i.e. having participants to read the transcriptions of the interviews they participated in and the inclusion of the participants from several schools to reduce the effect of local factors peculiar to one institution are provisions suggested in the literature to promote credibility of findings (Shenton, 2004). The adoption of these two procedures in our study contributed to establish “trustworthiness” (Court, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our results.

We consider that more studies are needed with larger numbers of participants that provide better understanding and deeper insight into effective practices that teachers can implement with gifted learners at primary school and other school levels. The impact of training initiatives on teachers’ classroom practices and how changes in practice can be transversal to gifted education practices is a relevant area for enquiry. Future research should also be concerned with examining approaches to identification and development of talented children within the diversity of giftedness. While contributing to filling in a current gap in empirical work on the education of gifted learners in the Portuguese context, our findings can be of interest to those responsible for the education of gifted children and the training of teachers as well as policy and decision makers both in Portugal and in international contexts similar to the one of our study.

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