

## Including the gifted learner: perceptions of South African teachers and principals

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*We report the findings of a qualitative study embedded in an interpretive paradigm to determine the perceptions of South African primary school teachers and principals regarding the inclusion of learners considered gifted. Eight principals and 16 classroom teachers in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) in public primary schools situated in communities that were representative of the different socio-economic and language groups in the Western Cape province participated in the study. Qualitative data collection methods included in-depth individual semi-structured interviews with the eight principals and two semi-structured focus group interviews with the 16 classroom teachers. Qualitative content analysis revealed the following themes: inclusive education and the learner who is gifted; curriculum differentiation; obstacles to curriculum differentiation; and possible solutions for more effectively including the gifted learner. Despite their diversity in terms of culture, language and positioning by the previous apartheid regime, the participants acknowledged the marginalisation by default of gifted learners. Gifted learners were most often those who were not receiving appropriate education and support and data suggested that a particular drive for the inclusion of gifted learners was absent in the agenda of education authorities.*

**Keywords:** Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model; collaborative support networks; curriculum differentiation; equality of challenge; gifted learners; inclusive education; perceptions; primary schools; school principals; teachers

### Introduction

We report the findings of a qualitative study to determine the perceptions of South African primary school teachers and principals regarding the inclusion of learners considered gifted. Key role-players in mainstream primary schools were targeted as research participants as the majority of gifted learners are being educated in mainstream public schools in South Africa. The study was based on the premise that the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding education for gifted learners needed attention before clear guidelines for their optimal education could be formulated (De Villiers, 2010).

Gifted education is a complex issue. Social and education concerns in a country impact on how potential and achievement are perceived (Winstanley, 2006). Gifted education is most often directly related to the historical, cultural and political context of a country which may influence policy decision regarding gifted education (Taylor & Kokot, 2000). Similarly, human perception is impacted by external factors (Lewis, 2001). The perception of significant role-players in education regarding gifted education thus will be entangled with the drastic transformation that has taken place in

South Africa on a socio-political and educational level since 1994.

Before 1994 South Africa was the only sub-Saharan country in which significant developments in gifted education were noted. Although a growing interest in gifted education had become evident since the 1960s, it was only in the 1980s that gifted education was more obviously fore-grounded. Several works on this topic were published and various conferences dealing with gifted education were organised. While the emphasis was predominantly on white gifted children (given the agenda of the apartheid government), the needs of gifted black children were also acknowledged and investigated. A 1988 report motivated the establishment of a special school for black gifted children. From 1994 onwards, however, the scenario concerning education for the gifted changed (Taylor & Kokot, 2000).

Education has been a high priority ever since the election of the first democratic government in 1994. While the debate focused mainly on educational reform to address the needs of the historically disadvantaged population groups, the government wanted simultaneously to provide all children with relevant and equal education of an acceptable standard. This was not easy to accomplish. The country inherited enormous inequalities and fragmentation in education (Ozler & Hooegeveen, 2005). Nineteen different education departments had to be integrated into a unitary education system. Lack of finance to redress these past inequalities without lowering the standard of previously advantaged schools has been a major problem (Taylor & Kokot, 2000). Moreover, the rapid transformation of the education system has placed considerable demands on principals and teachers. In some cases this has led to cynicism, hopelessness and even to a rejection of the transformation policies as symbolic rather than a practical reality (Welton, 2001). The ever-increasing poverty levels in South Africa and the many challenges in the schools – such as the learners' poor socio-economic background, the lack of appropriate educational support, the shortages of textbooks, overcrowded classrooms, the absence of a healthy learning culture and communication problems due to the language diversity in the country – add to the challenges confronting principals and teachers in schools (Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2006). Post-apartheid education policy was intended to transform the education system on a cultural and structural level from one that was bureaucratic, conservative, disempowering with a lack of ownership, fragmented, closed and discriminatory, to one that was transformative, democratic, empowering with member ownership, open and inclusive (Morrow, 2002; Powell, 2002). According to Bloch (2009), these policy initiatives have not succeeded in changing school and classrooms practices sufficiently.

It does not come as a surprise then that gifted education in South Africa has received minimal attention since 1994. The current state of gifted education in South Africa is perceived as “not encouraging”, “dismal” and “the plight of the gifted learner seldom mentioned” (Kokot, 1998, 1999 in Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2006:204). When an education system is in jeopardy it will not be a priority to make special provision for a relatively small group of learners who are deemed gifted.

Democratic governments, “whether long established or newly formed, often have reservations about special programmes that meet the needs of only a few – particularly when those programmes expand the gifts of the already talented individuals” (Wollam in Winstanley, 2006:26). Given South Africa’s troubled history, conceptions of giftedness that result in singling out a group of learners with advanced abilities may be seen as exacerbating still existing inequalities and providing for a minority who are already perceived as privileged due to their unique gifts (Taylor & Kokot, 2000). Moreover, this group of learners is often stereotyped as an elite group due to special education provision during the apartheid dispensation (Kokot, 2005).

The focus has thus moved from separate and specialised education for learners who are gifted to inclusive education with all learners being educated in mainstream schools and classrooms (Kokot, 2005). The questions now at stake are: How is inclusive education defined and implemented within the South African education system? How does this affect learners who are considered gifted?

### Inclusive education for the gifted

The Salamanca Statement was signed in 1994 by South African representatives, amongst others, at the ground-breaking conference in Spain. The Statement shifted the focus for inclusion to the mainstream school and classroom (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994). The mainstream school in future had to become the site for transformation to accommodate the diverse learning abilities and needs of all learners. Inclusive education requires a system-wide approach dedicated to making schools accessible and amenable for all learners. “In the final analysis, policy and practice in inclusive education require a focus on an enabling and nurturing environment that supports the learner, rather than on a learner who must fit into an exclusionary environment” (Peters et al., 2005 in Oswald, 2010:1). To realise inclusion as a value in education will thus call for a shift from a more traditional and segregated approach to “an enabling and nurturing environment that supports the learner.” This will require deep changes in what goes on in South African classrooms, staffrooms and playgrounds.

The Education White Paper 6: *‘Building an inclusive education and training system’* (Department of Education [DoE], 2001), the most recent initiative for the transformation of the education system to ensure quality education for all learners, ratified South Africa’s answer to the global call for inclusion in education. The South African model of inclusive education supports the main principles of the Salamanca Statement. It stresses that all learners can learn and that all learners need support. It calls for the respect of differences in learners and for enabling educational structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the needs of all learners. There should be changes in teachers’ attitude and behaviour, as well as changes to teaching methods, curricula and the classroom environment. Finally, the White Paper contends that the participation of all learners in the culture and the curriculum of educational institutions should be maximised and that barriers to learning uncovered and

minimised (DoE, 2001). Classroom teachers have been identified as the primary resource for achieving the goal of inclusive education. They will have “to improve their skills and knowledge and also develop new ones” in order to accept ownership for the learning of all learners (DoE, 2001:18).

Although gifted education has not been fore-grounded in the White Paper, it nevertheless upholds the wider interpretation of inclusive education: namely, the inclusion and support of all learners. It supports the strong human rights perspective fundamental to the South African Constitution. In a more recent document, *Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning* (Department of Basic Education, 2010), the gifted learner is mentioned as one category of exceptionality when curriculum differentiation is discussed. The new curriculum initiative, the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* (Department of Basic Education, 2011) has been released and will be implemented from 2012 to 2014. This document has identified inclusivity as one of the general aims of the South African curriculum:

Inclusivity should become a central part of the organization, planning and teaching at each school. This can only happen if all teachers have a sound understanding of how to recognize and address barriers to learning, and how to plan for diversity. To address barriers in the classroom teachers should use various curriculum differentiation strategies such as those included in the Department of Basic Education *Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning* (Department of Basic Education, 2011:5-6).

Inclusivity is therefore fore-grounded and giftedness is identified as one of the ‘exceptionalities’ that need addressing within a process of curriculum differentiation.

The equality clause in the Constitution implies that all people will be treated equally and that discrimination is not allowed. In line with this, the Education White Paper 6 emphasises the equal right of all learners to be included in quality learning settings. How equality is understood is important. Equality in education can mean equality of opportunity and therefore the right to be treated according to one’s particular abilities and needs; or it can imply that all learners should be treated identically. This distinction is particularly pertinent for the learner who is considered gifted. Hutchinson & Martin (1999) draw a distinction between equality and equity: equality implies treating all learners the same; equity implies treating all learners fairly. Shaklee (1997:217) argues strongly for the equitable treatment of learners who are gifted:

No child should be expected to limit their ability and potential development for an idealistic notion of the ‘social good’. All children have a right to an education that is challenging, stimulating, ‘enriched’ and will enable them to develop their abilities.

Despite the fact that gifted education falls under the umbrella of special education as “part of the continuum of exceptionalities” (Shaklee, 1997:212), the literature in the field of special education most often ignores the unique needs of learners who are gifted (Moltzen, 2006). Hughes & Murawski (2001) argue that the goals of gifted edu-

cation differ significantly from that of special education as the latter was traditionally understood. Given the nature of learners who are gifted, if their talents are developed appropriately then initial differences will become more even more enhanced rather than diminished. There is no 'closing the gap' goal inherent to gifted education.

Another important sentiment stressed with regard to gifted education is highlighted by the Australian Senate Committee: "[D]enying the need, on the ground that the gifted are already privileged, or because of ideas about [equality], is misguided and counterproductive. Denying the need is most damaging to the prospects of poorer or minority children" (in Jewell, 2005:112). Given the extent of both diversity and poverty in South Africa, providing viable educational opportunities for our gifted learners who hail from all cultures and contexts becomes challenging indeed.

The closure of the centres for the gifted in South Africa after 1994 was widely regarded as detrimental to the nurturing of the gifted child. The reality is that inclusive education is about the inclusion of all learners, including gifted learners, within the mainstream school setting (Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2006). The celebration of difference is a particular focus of inclusive education. Bruna (2009) argues that all learners bring differences to schools which may influence their schooling experience. According to Roth (2008) every learner is different from his or her peers and is also at difference with him- or herself. Roth (2008:90) refers to "the inherent singular plural nature of people, culture and languages" and how "things and events embody inner differences (contradictions) and therefore their non-self-identical nature." Bruna (2009:185) argues that a state of "differenceless" is impossible as "to be without difference ... is to be without one's voice and vision" and therefore non-human. Roth's argument (2008) for an ontology of "difference" rather than of "sameness" brings into sharp focus the central assumptions and principles of inclusive education. He argues that difference should be the norm and starting-point of our thinking and work in schools. Thinking difference means to think the inside outside the box and the outside inside: "to think of difference for itself rather than as a deviation (deviance) from the same" (Roth, 2008:92). We understand difference only when we see difference as "an originary condition and therefore common to us all. That is, human beings have in common that they have nothing in common." This way of thinking about difference provides "some form of breaking mechanism" to help us to overcome the limitations of traditional models of learning that operate from a too simplistic "mechanical and deterministic problem-solving cycle" (Roth, 2009:114).

Teachers therefore cannot work with learners from a one-size-fits-all approach. They need to start from knowing each learner well and then building on that learner's particular knowledge base (Tomlinson, 2004). All learners have different learning needs, different learning styles and different methods of engaging with the teaching and learning process. They require different levels and forms of support at different times during their lives and are affected in different ways by a range of external factors that influence their participation in the classroom (Howell, 2007). Teachers therefore need to accept ownership for all the learners in their classrooms. Allington

(1994) and Tomlinson (2004) argue that as part of the support delivered in the classroom it seems best to accelerate learning for more learners (including those who are gifted) rather than slow it down. It is advisable to pair the highest quality of responsive differentiated instruction with the highest quality curriculum to ensure access to quality learning for all learners in inclusive classrooms.

As always, the gap between policy development – at both global and national level – and implementation at grassroots’ level remains a challenge in South African classrooms. The more recent South African literature on gifted education (Kokot, 2005; Lomofsky & Skuy, 2001; Van der Westhuizen & Maree, 2006; Wallace, 2007; Xolo, 2007) indicate that learners who are gifted do not receive adequate support within mainstream classrooms. Van der Westhuizen and Maree (2006:201) argue eloquently that “the need for gifted learners to be better equipped for the challenges of a post-modern society and tertiary study must be prioritized: far too many of the gifted currently do not stand even the remotest chance of achieving near their potential.” Before learners who are gifted (and others) will be able to receive appropriate education and support, this gap – between policy ideals and classroom realities regarding the implementation of inclusive education – needs to be addressed. Engelbrecht (2006:254) asserts that “the implementation of inclusive education ten years after the publication of the Salamanca Statement and the establishment of a democratic government in South Africa” is still problematic. Since this process begins and ends with the intentions and attitudes of school principals and classroom teachers as manifested in their perceptions towards gifted education, the study reported on in this paper posed the following research question: “*What are the perceptions of primary school teachers teaching in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) and their respective school principals regarding learners who are gifted?*” Primary school teachers involved in teaching learners in their first three years at school were specifically targeted as research participants as literature indicated that early intervention has a positive impact on the optimal development of gifted learners (De Villiers, 2010; Kokot, 2005; Xolo, 2007).

### Theoretical framework

This research study was theoretically underpinned by Kokot’s (2005; 2011) theorising of giftedness as an interrelated system. Her theoretical position on giftedness derives from Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner stresses the interaction between an individual’s development and the systems in his or her social context. Underlying his model is the proposition that human development takes place whenever there is a person-environment interaction. At a more advanced stage in his career Bronfenbrenner extended his original model by adding the morpheme *bio* to the term ecological to highlight the importance of biological resources in understanding human development (Ceci, 2006). Ceci (2006:173) however claims that for Bronfenbrenner “biological potential was just that – potential”. The actualisation of potential depended on “the presence of enduring, reciprocal, highly interactive

processes between a developing organism [learner] and other individuals and objects in the environment (Ceci, 2006:173). Bronfenbrenner named these processes *proximal processes* and claimed that they “have the power for actualising genetic potential for effective functioning” (Swart & Pettipher, 2011:12). Proximal processes are played out in the systems in which the learner actively participates such as the family, the school or the peer group.

In line with Bronfenbrenner’s extended model Kokot (2005; 2011) defines giftedness as an innate potential for a remarkable achievement in one or more areas that have value for a particular culture. The development of this potential is however dependent on a system of mutually constitutive influences within the individual child’s inner and outer environment. The school, as one of the immediate systems in which the school-going learner actively participates, can therefore play an important role in the optimising of potential. This study targeted school principal and teachers, as important proximal influences within the outer environment of gifted learners, as research participants in an effort to determine the quality of education for gifted children in certain primary schools in the Western Cape province.

## Methodology

The inquiry was conducted as a basic qualitative study which was embedded in an interpretive paradigm. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select the participants. Eight public primary schools in the Western Cape province were approached to participate. The schools were situated in communities that were representative of the different socio-economic and language groups in the Western Cape province. The eight principals of the selected schools voluntarily agreed to partake in the research inquiry. Each principal invited two teachers who were actively involved as classroom teachers in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1-3) in their respective schools to join the project as research participants. Sixteen classroom teachers voluntarily agreed to participation in the project. See Appendix A for the demographics of the research schools, school principals and teachers.

Qualitative data collection methods included in-depth individual semi-structured interviews with the eight principals and two semi-structured focus group interviews with the sixteen classroom teachers. An interview schedule included as Appendix B was employed in both the individual and focus group interviews. The teachers were divided equally between the two focus groups. Qualitative content analysis was used to reveal themes that were constructed from the data (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). Qualitative content analysis refers “to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002:453). The themes constructed from the data provided evidence to substantiate the arguments about our emerging knowledge claims (Henning et al., 2004).

Guba and Lincoln’s criteria – namely, *credibility* (checking the truth of the findings); *transferability* (ensuring that the findings can be applied in other contexts and

with other participants); *dependability* (ensuring consistency of the findings); and *confirmability* (to confirm that the findings is the product of the study and not distorted by the bias of the researcher) – were applied to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Credibility was addressed through the triangulation of data collection methods. The data generated from the focus group and individual interviews were integrated and verified in light of the literature review. The two researchers performed as a team in analysing the data while the services of a peer were also acquired to verify the findings. Transferability was enhanced by the purposeful selection of participants from different schools in different communal settings to allow for a diversity of voices and subsequently richer data. A thick description of the findings was offered to enable other researchers to draw meaningful comparisons. The dependability and the confirmability of the research findings were addressed by leaving an extensive audit trail of the processes of data gathering, data analysis and data interpretation to enable the auditor “to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the inquiry” (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:278).

Ethical considerations, as suggested by Babbie & Mouton (2001), Henning et al. (2004) and Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter (2006), included the following: care was taken to acknowledge participants’ privacy and to address them with sensitivity; their right to anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation was respected; and the interviews were conducted within a relationship of trust and transparency after a consent form was signed by each participant.

## **Findings**

As the findings generated through the focus group interviews with the teachers were largely confirmed by the data collected by means of the individual interviews with the principals, the data will be discussed in an integrated and thematic way. The data largely confirmed the gap between policy intentions and classroom realities. The following themes will be addressed regarding the participants’ perceptions of learners who are gifted: inclusive education and the learner who is gifted; curriculum differentiation; obstacles to curriculum differentiation; and possible solutions for more effectively including the gifted learner.

### **Inclusive education and the learner who is gifted**

The data indicated that the teachers were familiar with the notion of inclusive education but held divergent views on how to define it. The narrow interpretation of inclusive education prevailed with an emphasis on the inclusion of learners with disabilities and learning challenges. There was general consensus that the philosophy of inclusive education was acceptable but that “classroom realities” (O’Sullivan, 2002) made it difficult to implement. They declared themselves inadequately trained to address the needs of all learners, especially those with more challenging learning needs. Teacher B4 felt strongly that teachers needed to be empowered by the Western Cape

Education Department (WCED) to deal with inclusive education. Teacher B8 voiced her dismay: “Currently we are not geared for it. If they have to bring inclusive education into the classroom, I do think [sic] it will be the biggest chaos. They cannot throw learners who are disabled at us.” The education of the gifted learner was not considered in their interpretation of inclusive education. They did, however, indicate that it was unlikely that the gifted learner would be singled out for extra attention and support:

“We have to give attention to many things. We also sit with the language problem ... You have Xhosa children that do not understand English or Afrikaans. In the end you are not going to stimulate the gifted child. You cannot stimulate the gifted child, because your class is too large” (Teacher A7).

The teachers believed that inclusive education was not a priority in the vision and mission statements of their respective schools. The school principals confirmed this: in their schools policies did not address inclusive education or gifted education. Moreover, they were not aware of any school or institution in the Western Cape province that made specific provision for gifted learners. They asserted that the policy documents from the National Education Department made no direct reference to giftedness or provided guidelines with regard to the education of the gifted learner:

“Nowhere any information is given on what to do with the gifted child. And you know, if they do not expect anything from you, the majority of teachers will not do it. They will only do what is expected of them” (Principal H2).

The participants suggested that provision for gifted children should be enforced. The learner who is gifted should be adequately educated within the mainstream classroom:

“It is important that the child who is gifted does not become lost to society. We cannot only say that we accommodate the child who is gifted in the school like all the others without purposefully working with the child for the child to eventually perform to his potential in the high school and in society to the benefit of all in the country” (Principal H1).

One of the principals suggested that a particular challenge for inclusive education in South Africa was related to the notion of “mass production” which focused on the average learner: “The average learner determines the standard and not the gifted learner. Inclusive education is not interpreted correctly. A lot of work still needs to be done before inclusivity will become a reality” (Principal H7). Other principals contended that teachers’ energy was mostly directed at those learners who were not making appropriate progress. This was also the ‘brief’ that they received from the Western Cape Education Department:

“If we talk about inclusive education then we think about a classroom with the gifted learner, the less gifted learner and also the disabled learner. Then we do the gifted learner a disfavour. All the time and energy are spent on that learner ... that learner that struggles; the gifted learner cannot come into his right, you know. So I have my doubts about inclusive education” (Principal H3).

They suggested that “*the government’s focus is only on the high rate of failure and*

*the children who cannot read. This should not be the only focus. South Africa will not become a better place if we do not shift our focus*" (Principal H7). Gifted learners whose needs were not appropriately met could become frustrated and present challenges in the classroom. Teachers had been trained to address the needs of the learner who struggled rather than the learner who was gifted. The current interpretation of inclusive education and how it was promoted was not conducive to the development of the gifted learner. They suggested "*specialised teachers to give specialised attention to those children*" (Principal H3).

In light of the exclusionary agenda of the previous apartheid regime, emphasis on inclusivity was considered positively:

"To be inclusive means to include people and to give them opportunities on grounds of equality. Inclusive education means to say that the school should give the child the chance to develop [his/her] own talents and gifts. It wants all children to come into their right" (Principal H1).

Principal H7 struggled with his personal interpretation of inclusive education. He believed it meant that all learners were equal and therefore needed to be treated the same. He wanted to know where this left the learner who was gifted: "*The gifted learner should be seen as one of the groups that should be accommodated, but that gifted learners were always on top and never under the last. Top is good and bottom is bad and inclusive documents want all to be equal ...*" He suggested that this was a contradiction in terms. The next theme deals with the issue of curriculum differentiation. Participants regarded this as the only viable option to deal with the education of the learner who is gifted.

### Curriculum differentiation

The outcomes-based education (OBE) system was still relevant when this research was conducted. OBE will only be phased out when the new curriculum initiative is introduced during 2012. The participants believed that OBE allowed scope for the inclusion of the gifted learner. The curriculum was learner-centred, flexible and enhanced independent learning:

"I do think that the gifted learners will, if OBE was correctly implemented, benefit; there is not really any limits placed on his development. He can develop as far as he wants in Grade 1. But the teacher is the facilitator and she has to create the space for his development" (Teacher B7).

OBE came with a lot of baggage. It was never implemented optimally in the South African classroom. Knowledge about the fundamental principles of the curriculum was often lacking as was the will and energy to implement it in the most effective way:

"I am not sure that OBE really stimulates my gifted child. Maybe if OBE was implemented 100% correctly as it should have been, it could have worked, but in our schools, we have to battle with difficult circumstances ... no, I am sorry,

it does not work for us. Our children really suffer and they don't even realise it; that is the worst" (Teacher B8).

The data indicated that, contrary to the fundamental principles of OBE, learners were assessed according to a code system which put a 'ceiling' on the progress of gifted learners. Gifted learners were never acknowledged for progress beyond the mediocre, thereby potentially lowering their motivation levels:

"The assessment standards were written for the average child in the class" (Teacher A2).

"All children who do well can only progress up to a four; they all receive fours on their report cards. The gifted child can therefore not score higher than a four. In the learner's report, nobody will be able to see the child's giftedness" (Teacher A4).

"If you follow the directions of the curriculum to the letter, then nothing will remain of the gifted child. They will lose all their motivation because why do you have to work hard to score the same as Peter who is an average learner and receives the same code for doing less work" (Principal H2).

Curriculum differentiation was underscored when education for the gifted learner was discussed. Teacher A2 acknowledged that "learning material that is presented may not be stimulating enough for them. The fault will then be with teachers; it is our fault, we should differentiate." Teacher A6 believed that the curriculum was not suitably enriched for the gifted learner: "Enrichment and support should be the same. For the gifted child stimulation is important but we usually only support the struggling child and not enrich the learning of the gifted child."

According to Principal H7, education policy implied that the gifted learner should be able to receive appropriate education in any school: "The teacher and the education system should change to accommodate the learner and not the opposite." Principal H8 summarised as follows:

"It is expected of you to apply differentiation in class and the good teacher will always try to differentiate. It is however very difficult. They try to do extra work with the child but our circumstances are difficult. They do try."

Principal H1 explained that the teachers in his school were trying to enrich the curriculum for gifted learners. According to Principal H2, the gifted child was always the first to be left on his/her own: "You want everybody to pass the grade to ensure that your average for the year is on standard. In this process, the gifted learner is not given enough support." Obstacles to curriculum differentiation will be discussed in the next theme.

### **Obstacles to curriculum differentiation**

The challenge of identifying the gifted learner is the first obstacle to the employment of differentiation in the classroom. This resonates with literature on gifted education

(Kokot, 2005; Sattler, 2002; Wallace, 2007). The participants believed that IQ testing should not be the only means to determine giftedness as other factors could also play a role. The participants highlighted academic prowess as an indication of giftedness. The gifted learner was often endowed with exceptional academic prowess, was curious, and had an exceptional will to learn and accumulate knowledge that surpassed that of all other learners. The gifted learner could also be the one with outstanding cultural and sport talents. Although the teachers emphasised that gifted children could come from all walks of life, learners from lower socio-economic communities frequently were not recognised as gifted due to challenging environmental factors such as poverty and illiterate parents.

Teacher A3 highlighted another important aspect of gifted education. Learners often hid their giftedness behind a façade of indifference: “Sometimes the most aggressive child in your class is the one that is gifted. The particular child that I refer to managed to find his feet at a later stage in his life and then he just flew; he soared and left everybody behind.”

The peer group often played a role in gifted learners’ academic underachievement. They might choose to underperform as a result of their need to be socially acceptable:

“I am prepared to give the gifted learner extra work or send him to the library, but he wants to remain with his friends. The rule in the class is that he should first complete his work before he is allowed to go to the library or the computer room. Because he does not want to be different, he will work very slowly in an effort to keep up with his friends and to stay in the classroom. I worry about this” (Teacher A4).

Other obstacles to differentiation in the classroom included overcrowded classrooms; increasing learner diversity; a lack of appropriate learning material, computers and other resources; and an overload of teachers’ administrative responsibilities. Moreover, intervention for the gifted learner was not expected by the WCED: “Such a lot of time is spent on those that struggle that time does not allow any extra work with gifted children.” (Teacher A3). Principal H3 confirmed that “there was not the capacity to work with gifted learners. The majority of learners in the class struggled and the teachers’ energy were channelled towards them.” Principal H8 stressed that this focus was compelled by WCED officials: “They come to visit the school on a regular basis to see what we do for the child that is struggling and not for the gifted child.”

Challenging learner behaviour in class was also detrimental to the progress of the gifted learner. Valuable teaching time frequently was wasted on managing disruptive learners. Gifted learners themselves could become a problem in class, especially if they did not receive adequate stimulation: “I give the child more difficult work to do because you need to keep him busy. You have to teach him interesting things all the time. Should you not keep him busy, he becomes a troublesome child” (Teacher B5).

Parental involvement (uninvolved or over-eager) was highlighted as another obstacle. Particularly in schools in lower socio-economic communities parents struggled to assist their children's learning: frequently they did not have the financial means to support their children.

Teachers acknowledged their central role in the identification and education of the gifted learner, but confessed to a lack of training: "Nobody told us how the gifted child should be taught. You really get a fright when you come into your class and the child is more intelligent than you are. Nobody taught you how to handle him" (Teacher B3). Teachers' lack of knowledge could result in them ignoring and marginalising the gifted learner. Teacher A1 was older. Although she had received some training on gifted education during her formal training and her years of teaching experience had helped with the identification and education of gifted learners, she still felt that this was insufficient. Principal H7 indicated that teachers were currently not trained to identify and nurture gifted children. Principal H3 confirmed that "teachers were in need of training that could enable them to teach gifted learners to develop optimally. These learners disappear in the class and this is a problem." Pre-service programmes focused on the average and struggling learner: gifted education received minimal attention. This tendency was repeated in in-service training workshops conducted by the WCED. The principals argued forcefully that the National Education Department should allocate funding to train teachers and principals in gifted education. The data clearly suggests the gifted learner in the mainstream classroom was not adequately supported:

"I do feel that the gifted learners should come into their right. They are the future of South Africa. We can all try to do something for the child that struggles, but when we think about our future, the gifted child is the one that needs the attention and it does not happen. This is really sad. We all try to throw out rescue buoys for the child who does not want to work, but the child who can really make a difference for the country, this child is ignored. It is a crying shame" (Principal H8). The participating teachers professed feelings of guilt, shame and hopelessness mainly because they were not performing according to the standards that they had set for themselves. Although they acknowledged that an effective process of differentiation in the classroom could be beneficial to all learners – including gifted learners – they were nevertheless unable to do their best for the gifted learner in particular due largely to the obstacles listed above.

### **Possible solutions for including the gifted learner**

Teachers and principals suggested several potential solutions to the challenge of the successful inclusion of gifted learners in the mainstream classroom:

"I do think that South Africa still has a lot to learn. I do think that there are other countries, a list of countries, where the government does more to identify and educate those who are gifted. There are certain countries where education is free.

The governments in those countries see that gifted learners are immediately educated at their level. The role of the government [in South Africa] is very important and they have to take the matter further, but now we are a developing country..." (Principal H1).

Teachers need adequate training and support from the WCED. Principal H1 suggested that the Department of Basic Education in South Africa should accept responsibility to promote the fact that gifted learners have particular educational needs which must be met in mainstream classrooms if they are to realise their full potential. Such support was key, especially because teachers' overwhelming workload meant that insufficient time was available for quality teaching and support in the classroom. Principals could not always support their teachers as most of the time they had to do "*damage control*" (Principal H3).

A practice that was inclusive and accommodating of all learner diversities could offer the necessary support to the gifted learner. For this to happen, the input of all relevant role-players was essential. The teachers acknowledged that they were central to the collaborative network of support and should reach out to others. Parents, professional people in the local community and support personnel were identified as a potential network of support. Gifted learners could only develop optimally if all role-players became partners and shared responsibility. Personal giftedness was not a prerequisite for supporting the gifted learner, but role-players "*should have a heart for the child.*"

Parents must be adequately informed about giftedness and empowered to counter ignorance and misperceptions. Parents should accept responsibility for their children's learning: their support as equal partners in collaborative partnerships was indispensable. In certain communities parents would find it challenging to support their children financially but they could do a lot by motivating them to learn and do their best. The teachers acknowledged that certain parents were already prepared to do a great deal to support their children. Principals H4 and H8 stressed the role of the learning support official in the support of gifted learners. Local community members could also play a positive role in these learners' lives. They could assist with the enrichment of the curriculum and provide extra financial support for those parents who lacked the means to support their children.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their diversity in terms of culture, language and positioning by the previous apartheid regime, all the teachers and principals participating in this study acknowledged the marginalisation by default of gifted learners. Given South Africa's political history and years of exclusionary practices as well as current challenges in education, it is perhaps understandable – but not justifiable – that gifted learners are receiving inadequate education, despite the country's propagation of democratic and inclusive education. Any country which values notions of justice and democracy needs to be

tirelessly attentive to maintaining equitable structures and fair practices. Equal should not be confused with identical, as it denies people's individual identities and dehumanises them (Bruna, 2009; Jewell, 2005). Winstanley's (2006:35) contribution – the notion of “equality of challenge” where the “learning experience is linked to the potential achievement gap” – should perhaps be taken seriously. In this model, learners “are not measured by their success, but by the relationship of this success to their potential achievement” (Winstanley, 2006:35).

Policy documents have identified inclusive education as the way forward to ensure quality education and achievement for all learners in South Africa. Giftedness has been recognised in more recent curriculum documentation as one form of exceptionality that has yet to receive appropriate attention in the mainstream classroom. The participants in this study agreed that inclusive education, when well-implemented in schools and classrooms, offered a viable option for the schooling of gifted learners. Although the WCED is targeted with the implementation of the policy of inclusion and for resource development in the Western Cape province (Landsberg, 2005), this study's data suggest that a particular drive for the inclusion of gifted learners was absent in the WCED's agenda. The emphasis was placed instead on those learners who were struggling to progress and those previously marginalised by the apartheid regime.

Differentiation – the only strategy mentioned that would make provision for the gifted learner – was not the practice in the majority of classrooms. Gifted learners were most often those who were not receiving appropriate education and support. As they were not seen as experiencing barriers to learning and development, they were not considered in need of support. Curriculum differentiation and accommodating learners with diverse learning abilities and needs was practically impossible in certain schools with overcrowded classrooms (up to 50 learners in a single classroom). Teachers indicated that they most often face overwhelming challenges that prohibit equal and meaningful engagement with all the learners in their classrooms. They highlighted the negative emotions resulting from their perceived inability to accommodate all their learners effectively. In addition to support and acknowledgement from the National and Provincial Education Departments that they perceived as being absent hitherto, smaller classes would enable them to reach all their learners in more meaningful ways.

The data indicated that pre-service teacher training at local universities, as well as in-service training provided by the WCED, was not directed at giftedness as a particular exceptionality in need of special attention. The research participants urged the National and Provincial Education Departments to focus more on gifted education in their training on inclusive education. It would appear as if Higher Education institutions have not succeeded in training teachers to support all exceptionalities in South African classrooms. These need to be at the forefront of innovation and change in country's education system. In the light of the findings of this study we suggest a re-

focus of teacher training programmes to include training for the successful inclusion of all our gifted and talented learners from different cultures and contexts.

Participants agreed that giftedness and talents come in different packages and were often masked by indifference, aggression, boredom, and apathy. Moreover, poverty and illiteracy in certain communities contributed to the masking of giftedness. Hymer & Michel's (2002) general guidelines for creating inclusive learning environments – environments which stretch the ablest without excluding or alienating the least able, and vice versa – could be applied to the South African context. According to these guidelines, all learners have the right to a high quality education in inclusive classrooms; inclusivity is best seen in relative rather than in absolute terms; giftedness and talent must be seen within the context of a learner's profile of strengths and weaknesses and his/her wider learning environment; the school has an important role in helping every learner to identify his/her gifts and/or talents; the primary aim of education is to excite in learners a passion for learning and to facilitate the acquisition of skills and attitudes which permit this passion for learning to be satisfied and sustained; the school has to maximise opportunities for all learners to reach their educational goals; learners' goals will differ; and that deep learning takes place collaboratively, rather than competitively.

Perhaps it is time now to stop asking whether teachers in South Africa 'can do it' and rather to ask 'How teachers can do it?' (Moltzen, 2006). The participants have made several suggestions to this effect but have particularly foregrounded the positive effect of collaborative partnerships. Given the status quo in today's educational arena, all role-players should come on board to form a network of support for teachers and learners. Parents, learning support officials from the district-based support team, other professionals and the broader community should be invited as partners to share accountability and responsibility. Collaborative problem-solving therefore could be the way to address the many challenges in schools and not only those presented by the inclusion of gifted learners in mainstream classes.

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**Appendix A**

School	Principal						Teacher						
	Principal	Gender	Age	Mother tongue	Years teaching exp.	Years Principal exp.	Teacher	Gender	Age	Mother tongue	Teaching	Job title	Years teaching exp.
School 1 (in an affluent community)	Principal 1	Male	47	Afrikaans	24	4	Teacher 1	Female	42	Afrikaans	Grade 1	H O D	19
							Teacher 2	Female	27	Afrikaans	Grade 3	Teacher	3
School 2 (in an affluent community)	Principal 2	Male	45	Afrikaans	20	11	Teacher 3	Female	51	Afrikaans	Grade 2	Teacher	16
							Teacher 4	Female	39	Afrikaans	Grade 3	Teacher	14
School 3 (in a less affluent community)	Principal 3	Male	49	Afrikaans	27	6	Teacher 5	Female	42	Afrikaans	Grade 1	H O D	20
							Teacher 6	Female	49	Afrikaans	Grade 2	Teacher	15
School 4 (in a less affluent community)	Principal 4	Male	46	Afrikaans	23	5	Teacher 7	Female	58	Afrikaans	Grade 1	H O D	36
							Teacher 8	Female	49	Afrikaans	Grade 3	Teacher	28
School 5 (in a poor community)	Principal 5	Female	54	isiXhosa	32	2	Teacher 9	Female	38	isiXhosa	Grade 1	Teacher	7
							Teacher 10	Female	38	isiXhosa	Grade 2	Teacher	11

Note: H O D = Head of Department

**Appendix A** (continued)

School	Principal						Teacher						
	Principal	Gender	Age	Mother tongue	Years teaching exp.	Years Principal exp.	Teacher	Gender	Age	Mother tongue	Teaching	Job title	Years teaching exp.
School 6 (in a less affluent community)	Principal 6	Male	54	Afrikaans	35	21	Teacher 11	Female	52	Afrikaans	Grade 1	Teacher	32
							Teacher 12	Female	38	Afrikaans	Grade R	Teacher	6
School 7 (in a less affluent community)	Principal 7	Male	44	Afrikaans	19	6	Teacher 13	Female	44	Afrikaans	Grade 3	H O D	22
							Teacher 14	Female	43	Afrikaans	Grade 2	Teacher	23
School 8 (in a less affluent community)	Principal 8	Male	51	Afrikaans	27	7	Teacher 15	Female	49	Afrikaans	Grade 1	Teacher	29
							Teacher 16	Female	47	Afrikaans	Grade 2	Teacher	24

Note: H O D = Head of Department

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Schedule**

How would you define giftedness?

How would you identify a learner that is gifted in your classroom?

Have you received any training with regard to quality education for the gifted learner?

Can you identify any specific barriers to learning for the gifted learner in today's classrooms?

Do you think that outcomes-based education allows for gifted learners to reach their full potential? Please motivate your answer.

Do you think that mainstream schools/classrooms make specific adaptations for learners who are gifted? Please motivate your answer.

What is your personal view on inclusive education in South Africa?

What is your school's view on inclusive education?

Do you think that an inclusive education system allows for gifted learners to reach their full potential? Please motivate your answer.