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Investigating Lebanese primary school teachers' perceptions of gifted and highly able students

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Abstract

This paper outlines findings of a study that investigated perceptions of Lebanese primary school teachers in relation to gifted/highly able students. While there are no specific policy or formal school practices for gifted students in Lebanon, education is nonetheless highly regarded. The aim of the study was to determine whether there were cultural differences in the way giftedness in students was perceived and supported by teachers at the primary school level in comparison to Western conceptualisations and provisions. A study utilising qualitative and quantitative methods underpinned the gathering of data from 281 teachers across three governorates of Lebanon. Of the 281 teachers who completed the survey, 12 also participated in the qualitative component, which involved individual semi-structured interviews. Findings suggested a generally positive attitude by teachers but also an acknowledgement of limited awareness of evidence based on Western understandings and practices associated with gifted education. The resultant data provided insights regarding the implementation of effective teacher education and concomitant support to improve identification.

Background to the study

How teachers perceive and identify giftedness appears to vary greatly between different cultures as giftedness is a social, belief-based construct ingrained in culture (Gardner, 1983; McAlpine, 2004; Sak, 2011; Sternberg, 2007). Teachers' perceptions and attitudes have been found to be a fundamental element in the success of educational policy or practice (Meister 2010; Morgan, Ludlow, Kitching, O'Leary, & Clarke, 2010; Ryan & Cooper, 2013). Additionally, teacher perceptions and classroom practices influence the academic achievement of gifted students as well as their creativity, and social and emotional development (Zundans, 2006).

Much of the literature and research relating to giftedness has emanated from the USA, UK, Europe and Australia, resulting in a Westernised focus on identification processes and programming options. Subhi-Yamin (2009) argues that research into giftedness in the Middle East is dominated by the Western view of these concepts.

Education in general is well respected in the Lebanese culture as it is considered a pathway to better lives and social prestige (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). Yet neither Lebanese law nor the revised national curriculum framework includes any stipulations concerning the issues of educating gifted students in Lebanese schools (Sarouphim, 2010; 2015). Exposure to educational issues for the gifted has been found to be critical for teachers to overcome misconceptions that arise from a lack of teacher education or limited confidence in providing for gifted students' academic needs (Geake & Gross, 2008; Plunkett, 2000; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011). Through extensive reading in regard to understanding the perceptions of primary general education teachers in Lebanon, the gap in the literature became increasingly evident (Sarouphim, 2010; 2015; Subhi-Yamin, 2009).

The Research Aim

The purpose of this study was to investigate understandings of giftedness from a Lebanese perspective, through examining primary school teachers' perceptions of highly able/gifted students in Lebanon. The main research question underpinning the study was: *How is giftedness perceived in Lebanon and how does this impact appropriate educational provision?* Due to the extensive body of data that emerged from the study, only information and understandings related to perceptions of giftedness, rather than educational provision for giftedness, will be presented in this paper.

Literature Review

The Lebanese education system

In Lebanon, schools are either public or private; they provide for students from different social classes and offer a range of standards and quality of education. Public schools tend to attract students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and do not achieve as well academically as private schools, which tend to attract students from higher socio-economic categories (Ayyash-Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, 2010; Bahou, 2015; Bahous & Nabhani, 2008; Nader, 2014). The Lebanese curriculum content is complex and varied, as students learn to think and work in at least 3 different languages (Arabic, English and French). In Lebanon, standards of excellence are emphasised and the definition of success is high performance, which underpins the foundation for a successful identity as an adult within society. According to Bahous and Nabhani (2008), there is a focus on achievement as an end product in Lebanese culture, a view supported by Ayyash-Abdo et al. (2009).

Importance of perceptions and attitudes

An interwoven relationship is argued to exist between beliefs and attitudes, as a person's perceptions and attitudes are shaped by their beliefs (Ajzen, 2012; Maio & Haddock, 2010; Matheis et al., 2017; Matheis et al., 2019; Plunkett, 2000). Stern and Keislar (1975) maintain that teachers' construction of attitudes is acquired from cultural knowledge, which is based on their beliefs about their students, and includes a predisposition to perform or respond to particular situations in their classrooms. According to Berman, Schultz, and Weber (2012), teachers' preconceived ideas about gifted and talented students guide their willingness to teach these students and the instructional approaches they choose to use. Numerous other studies also have illustrated that teachers' perceptions and attitudes critically affect not only their teaching practices but also the attitudes and performances of their gifted students (Lee, Cramond & Lee, 2004; McAlpine, 2004; Megay-Nespoli, 2001; Miller, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2005). According to Plunkett (2000) this indicates a need to find out what teachers believe and, if necessary, challenge the attitudes based on these beliefs.

Teachers' perceptions of gifted students and their education

Many researchers have investigated teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards gifted students and their education (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Kronborg & Plunkett, 2012; Plunkett & Kronborg, 2019; Smith & Chan, 1996; Zundans, 2006). A common misconception is that due to high intelligence, gifted students will succeed without special programs or effort from their teachers (Cooper, 2009; Moon, 2009; Peterson, 2009). Yet, research suggests that gifted students need teachers who can identify their potential and help them accordingly (Clark, 2008; DeLacy, 2004; Winebrenner 2000; 2009). A related issue is the perception of gifted education as being discriminatory and inequitable (Benbow & Stanley, 1996; McCoach & Siegle, 2007). However, equity and equality are quite different concepts according to Kitano and Kirby (1986), who suggest "equality of educational opportunity refers not to providing the same education for every child, but to providing the means by which every child can strive to meet his or her individual potential" (p. 5).

It would appear that an informed understanding of the concept of equity, and what is contextually equitable, is required if Lebanon's identity as "the classroom of the Middle East" (Vlaardingerbroek, 2017, p. 255) is to be preserved. With such an understanding, appropriate attention is required in order to address the needs of high-ability students. Therefore, understanding Lebanese educators' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes is necessary in order

to change the status quo because these perceptions “are thought to serve as predictors of behaviours” (Bai & Ertmer, 2008, p. 95), both in the classroom and at the level of policy development.

Giftedness and culture

The definitions of giftedness have changed over time as researchers of giftedness have become more aware of the multidimensional cultural context and the interplay of culture and values on the development of talents. It has been suggested that the study of giftedness should be brought in line with cultural diversity (Bevan-Brown, 2005; Ford, Moore & Milner, 2005; Persson, 2012; Reis & Renzulli, 2009). In light of this discussion, when research is conducted in one cultural setting, it should not be applied uncritically to other settings.

Culture has been described as the major shaper of mental processes and the lens through which all learning is filtered (Denbo, Lynson, & Beaulieu, 2002). Increasing cultural awareness has prompted researchers to realise that a gifted person is an individual who is more able than most others in regard to a culturally valued ability in any given population (Sternberg, 2007). As a result, each country has its own notion of the term giftedness and defines it according to its societal and cultural values. Sternberg (2007) argues, “Different cultures have different conceptions of what it means to be gifted. But in identifying children as gifted we often use only our own conception ignoring the cultural context in which children grow up” (p. 160).

Borland (2009) proposes that giftedness is a socially constructed concept. In a similar way, Pfeiffer (2013) asserts that a gifted student demonstrates extraordinarily high cognitive potential with a thirst to excel in one or more specific culturally valued academic domains. While certain abilities are in demand and diligently sought after in a particular culture, others are ignored, unwanted or even ridiculed (Persson, 2009; 2011). Therefore, it is beneficial to draw on several definitions to facilitate the representation of various viewpoints across diverse cultures. As Cramond (2004) has pointed out, there is no universal concept of giftedness. In order for giftedness to be fully understood, it has to be studied in a context in which individual variables interplay with cultural forces, which in turn are identified and acknowledged.

As various cultures differ in their valuing of exceptional abilities, it is important to determine which talents are recognised and valued in the Lebanese context. Lebanese students may not necessarily meet traditional criteria for gifted identification and programming due to the particular values within Lebanese culture. Thus, a single definition used globally would defy the principle of the cultural relativity of the concept of giftedness. However, cognitive ability is generally associated with gifted potential in the various contexts (Warne, 2016).

In summary, the review of literature surrounding the conceptions of giftedness has revealed that the definition of giftedness is viewed through a variety of lenses. Identification and educational provision for gifted and talented students are based on the accepted conceptions of giftedness. Awareness of the cultural context is also recognised as an important determinant in helping to understand how giftedness is viewed in any particular country. Examining the underlying teacher perceptions related to identification of giftedness would appear to be a good starting point.

The Research Context

Although the education of gifted learners is not referred to within the Lebanese national curriculum, a number of private schools, located in the capital, do provide enrichment activities for highly able learners (Sarouphim, 2009; 2015). There is no Lebanese literature on the identification of the gifted, the instruments used to identify such children, or any information on what happens when children are identified as gifted. Both Sarouphim (2010; 2015) and Diab (2006) have expressed concern about the lack of suitable identification and assessment processes for giftedness within Lebanon.

Ghaith (2003) maintains that highly intelligent individuals in Lebanon are considered to be those who excel in mathematics to the exclusion of other domains, such as high performance in the arts. However, not all gifted students are high achievers (Gagné, 2003, 2004; Kingore 2003), and may actually underachieve due to lack of motivation, or negative attitudes towards school, teachers and classes (McCoach & Siegle, 2007). According to Gagné (2003), giftedness reflects high potential abilities, which may or may not emerge as exceptional talent.

Teacher education programs in Lebanon, mainly focus on mainstream education, with the exception of a few graduate programs available at some prestigious universities, which offer a Master's degree in Education with an emphasis on special education (Sarouphim, 2010). However, according to Sarouphim (2010), the emphasis is mostly on the area of learning disabilities and does not sufficiently address the area of giftedness. Consequently, teachers with qualifications in gifted education are scarce in the country.

In Lebanon, special needs programs mainly focus on students with academic difficulties rather than on gifted students. In Beirut, Lebanon's capital city, some private schools that provide for students from the higher socio-economic bracket, attempt to nurture the ability of high-achieving students by offering some enrichment programs (Sarouphim, 2009). However,

according to Sarouphim (2009), these programs are not theoretically well-grounded compared to programs offered for gifted students in schools situated in various western countries.

Sarouphim (2010; 2015) proposed that the limited response to gifted education in Lebanon was mainly due to a lack of understanding of the concept of giftedness. The way giftedness is conceptualised generally guides programming within the country, including identification, instruction, and evaluation (Schroth & Helfer, 2008). Simply importing gifted programs and identification tools from one context and attempting to force-fit these into another context without any thought of modification or concern for cultural differences is likely to be inappropriate. Renzulli (2004) maintains that achievement tests need to be considered along with socio-economic and cultural differences. This multiple perspective approach applied fits with the Lebanese experience of gifted students as well as western experience of giftedness.

A concept of giftedness remains unclear to many teachers, despite the extensive body of research literature associated with the term and construct. This is particularly pertinent in a country such as Lebanon, where no formal identification procedures exist. Understanding the concept of giftedness may be confusing for some Lebanese teachers, because the terms gifted and talented are not used in official educational documents in the country.

There have been no specific studies conducted within Lebanon to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding the characteristics of gifted students and associated teaching practices. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature on gifted education within the country (Sarouphim, 2010). Given that Lebanon does not have any legal or educational policy framework referring specifically to gifted provision, the responsibility for such education lies with individual teachers to make special provision for their gifted students. However, without adequate knowledge about giftedness, teachers appear to rely on the myths, and their perceptions about giftedness to influence their attitudes and practices, which may be positive or negative.

It was anticipated that data from this research would provide important information for the Lebanese Ministry of Education, to underpin the establishment of an appropriate gifted education program based on a critical analysis of Lebanese conceptions of giftedness, in addition to relevant western research that may help broaden their knowledge and understanding of the gifted education research literature. This study may also be of value to teachers who want to improve their knowledge and understandings about giftedness and the creation of challenging learning environments for gifted learners. Overall, the development of a framework to inform educational provision for gifted students is a valuable starting point that

could assist Lebanese educators to work towards meeting the needs of their most academically able students.

Methodology

A sequential mixed methods approach provided a suitable framework for the process utilised for conducting the study (Creswell, 2014). The schools and teachers representing different parts of Lebanon provided the context, which was substantiated through the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach appeared suitable as it provided a method to explain, illustrate, describe, and gain insight into the perceptions and ‘lived’ experiences of the teachers of gifted and highly able students as well as their beliefs of best educational practice. The mix of quantitative and qualitative data occurred during both the data collection and analysis processes, with survey results helping to determine the selection of appropriate teacher participants of gifted/ highly able students to interview, and interpretation of interviews which provided further insight, as a form of triangulation for the survey results.

Sampling Procedure/Procedures for Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases in order to facilitate the procedure for analysis and specifically to support data triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Phase One related to the quantitative research, and Phase Two to the qualitative research. To enable representation across different regions in Lebanon, teachers in English-medium and French-medium public and private schools in North, Mount Lebanon, and Beirut governorates were asked to complete a survey that included a section from a previously validated and widely used instrument, Gagné and Nadeau’s (1991) *Opinionnaire*, focused on the characteristics of gifted learners and gifted provision. The quantitative phase was based on a two-staged cluster sampling technique.

Phase 1: Quantitative research phase sampling procedure

Stage 1 sampling: selection of the governorates. According to officially published data from the Lebanese Ministry of Education, 2,807 schools existed in Lebanon at the time of data collection, and were divided into six governorates as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Population Size and Number of Schools Across the Governorates

Governorate	Population Size		Number of Schools	
Mount Lebanon	1,294,500	25%	874	31%
North	1,151,400	22%	723	26%
Bekaa	980,200	19%	490	17%
South Lebanon	688,500	13%	530	19%
Nabatieh	674,200	13%		
Beirut	463,400	9%	190	7%
Total	5,252,200	100%	2,807	100%

Population Size: Central Administration of Statistics, 2009 National Census

Number of Schools: Centre of Education Research & Development – Lebanese Ministry of Education

However, due to the high-risk security situation in South Lebanon and the Bekaa at the time of the study, these two governorates were omitted and the study sampled alternative schools located in the Mount Lebanon, North, and Beirut governorates. These governorates accounted for 64% of the schools in Lebanon chosen from various geographical areas with diverse populations, representing a diversity of ethnicities and socio-economic levels. Furthermore, Beirut is the capital city of Lebanon and home to the majority of the ‘upper-class’ or ‘elite’ educational institutions in the country, therefore its inclusion provided a further level of geographic and educational contrast in this study.

Stage 2 sampling: selection of the schools. Schools in the three governorates under study were classified into three categories based on their overall ranking in the Grade 9 National Exams (Brevet Exams) over the previous 5-years in order to gain representation from across Lebanon. Unlike some Western countries, primary schools in Lebanon are not separate from middle school and high school. As such, schools do not only have primary grades but the ranking information for the school is generally only available via grade nine National exams, which provided a means of classifying schools (including primary grades) into the different achievement categories.

Hence, schools which included primary classes were classified according to their ranking in the Grade nine national exams as these provided rankings for students that represented learning development from earlier primary grades. These rankings were accessible through the Ministry of Education in Lebanon. The three ‘achievement categories’ were:

- High achievement schools
- Average achievement schools
- Low achievement schools

Accordingly, six schools from each governorate were randomly selected within each ‘achievement category’, bringing the total number of schools to be surveyed in each governorate under study to 18, and an overall total of 54 schools. The 18 schools in each category were further divided according to the following two sub-categories:

- Status: Private or Public schools
- Foreign language education: English-medium or French-medium

Of the 54 schools approached, 39 agreed to participate in the study, yielding a total potential respondent base of 72.2%. Each school received 10 individual teacher surveys, with a total of 287 of the 390 returned, yielding a high response rate of 73.5 %.

Phase 2: Qualitative research phase sampling procedure. This phase was based on a one-stage selective qualitative sampling technique and on analysis of the survey data that identified teachers who appeared relatively experienced in working with gifted students.

Selective sampling: selection of participants for interviews. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers’ daily experience with gifted students in the classroom, the most experienced teacher participants were identified and selected through purposive sampling, to assist in understanding the problem better, as well as to provide an information rich sample (Merriam, 2009). From the survey participants, a total of 12 teacher participants who agreed to participate in interviews were selected to be interviewed. As part of the sequential mixed methods component of the study, the analysis of the quantitative data provided the basis for choosing the possible interviewees. The sampling criteria for selecting participants for the interviews took into account the following:

- Teachers who indicated they either provided, or aimed to provide for gifted students’ educational needs,
- Teachers whose responses indicated they were information rich cases (i.e. teaching practices that were acknowledged in the literature as suitable for gifted students),
- Teachers who worked in schools known for providing for gifted students.

The demographic data relating to each of the twelve interviewees, using pseudonyms, is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Data for Interview Participants

Name	Gender	Years of Experience	Education	Subject	Grade	School location
Angelle	F	11+	Masters in Biology	Science	4,5,6	North
Rana	F	11+	BS International Education (Canada)	Generalist Class teacher	5	Beirut
Rima	F	11+	BA. Special Education	French	4,5,6	Mount Lebanon
Helene	F	11+	TD	English	4,5	North
Janette	F	1-3	TD	English	4	Beirut
Sara	F	11+	BA in Ed and TD	English	6	Beirut
Natalie	F	1-3	BA in Maths	Maths	4	Mount Lebanon
Mira	F	8-10	BA in Law	Social Studies	4,5,6	North
Maya	F	11+	TD	Science	4,5,6	Beirut
Julie	F	11+	TC	Science	4,6	Mount Lebanon
Ruba	F	1-3	BS in Psychology	English	6	North
Mark	M	11+	TC	Maths	6	Mount Lebanon

Note: TD = Teaching Diploma, TC = Teaching Certificate, BS = Bach.of Science

Measures

A survey instrument and an interview protocol were utilised to collect data from respondents. The self devised survey included a number of sections and also collected demographic information regarding age, gender, teaching experience, educational background, type of school (e.g., French, English, public or private) and any education/studies completed in relation to gifted education.

Part A of the survey included 32 of the 34 items from Gagné and Nadeau's attitude scale, Opinions About the Gifted and Their Education (Gagné & Nadeau, 1991). The original instrument was designed to measure attitudes towards six issues in gifted education, namely Needs and Support; Resistance to Objectives; Social Value; Rejection; Ability Grouping; and School Acceleration. For the purposes of the current study, 2 of the 34 original items were removed as they were deemed not applicable to the Lebanese context. These two items

involved financial concepts not applicable in Lebanon. A five point likert scale was used for responses, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. For descriptive analytic purposes, and as suggested by Gagné (1991), mean scores were classified as follows: mean scores ranging between 4 and 5 indicated a high positive (HP) attitude, mean scores between 3.24 and 3.9 were classified as positive (P), mean scores in the range of 2.75 to 3.25 could be interpreted as ambivalent (A) and mean scores ranging from 2 to 2.74 were considered as negative (N). Mean scores less than 2 were classified high negative (HN). Seventeen of the items were negatively worded; thus scores were reversed during analysis.

Part B of the survey included a self-devised list of 20 items that were chosen from the literature as representative of generally perceived characteristics of gifted and talented students. Responses were provided via a five point likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

The interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews consisted of nine open ended questions relating to the meaning of giftedness, identification strategies and practices and provisions within the Lebanese school context, although not all of these areas are covered in this paper.

Data analysis

The survey data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS version 20. While descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted, only the descriptive results are discussed in this paper. To assist with reliability and validity, prior to analysis, data were screened to determine and rectify any irregularities or anomalies such as incorrect coding. This process was followed by a range of screening tests to ensure that assumptions such as those relating to normality could be met.

For the qualitative interview data, thematic analysis was selected due to the ability it provided for exploration of different concepts and their interrelations but also because it is compatible with the sequential explanatory mixed method design used in this study (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011). The multiple sources of data also ensured a high degree of triangulation.

To determine trustworthiness, a number of strategies were incorporated to help establish credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was assisted through the use of frequency tables to highlight the main features of the qualitative data (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010) and the use of participants words in the form of quotes to clarify meaning. While only 12 teachers were interviewed,

they were representative of teachers in primary schools in Lebanon, and their percentages were representative of the figures released by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD, 2011-2012). The common themes that arose from the interviews could be relevant and transferable to other school settings within the Middle East context. The intention was to develop a set of recommendations and a concomitant framework based on this context, in order to provide some guidance for similar educational contexts rather than develop a highly generalisable model. Establishing the criteria of dependability is similar to the requirement of reliability in quantitative studies. The use of thematic analysis, ensured that the open coding system and categorisation of data were conducted in a rigorous manner. Finally, confirmability was assisted through the involvement of the three authors in each step of the process for the interview analysis.

Results and Discussion

Survey Results

For organisational purposes, items have been categorised in terms of the six different subscales (Gagné, 1991) and are presented in Table 3, with further discussion of each following the table.

Table 3

Assessing Perceptions of Lebanese Teachers Towards Highly Able Students in Relation to Gagné and Nadeau's subscales

Item No	Item	M	SD	Rating
Subscale 1: Needs and support				
A15	The gifted need special attention in order to fully develop talents	4.41	0.727	HP
A24	In order to progress a society must develop the talents of gifted individuals to a maximum	4.25	0.92	HP
A01	Our schools should offer special educational services for the gifted	4.19	0.971	HP
A14	The specific educational needs of the gifted are too often ignored in our schools	4.04	1.095	HP
A09	Gifted children are often bored in school	3.72	1.146	P
A30	The regular school program stifles the intellectual curiosity of gifted children	3.39	1.105	P
A11	The gifted waste their time in regular classes	3.27	1.192	P
Subscale 2: Resistance to Objection				
*A16	Our schools are already adequate in meeting needs of gifted	3.72	1.092	P
*A27	Gifted children might become vain or egotistical if given special attention	2.92	1.157	A
A23	The gifted are already favoured in our schools	2.64	1.224	N

Item No	Item	M	SD	Rating
*A04	Special programs for gifted children have the drawback of creating elitism	2.57	1.203	N
*A05	Special educational services for the gifted are a mark of privilege	2.44	1.275	N
*A12	We have a greater moral responsibility to give special help to children with difficulties than to gifted children	2.32	1.215	N
*A26	Average children are the major resource of our society so they should be the focus of our attention	2.26	1.106	N
*A18	It is parents who have the major responsibility for helping gifted children develop their talents	2.11	1.053	N
*A03	Children with difficulties have the most need of special educational services	1.78	1.019	HN
Subscale 3: Social Value				
A13	Gifted persons are a valuable resource for our society	4.48	0.802	HP
A17	I would very much like to be considered a gifted person	3.53	1.156	P
A31	The leaders of tomorrow's society will come mostly from the gifted of today	2.81	1.225	A
*A25	By offering special educational services to the gifted we prepare the future members of a dominant class	2.14	1.181	N
Subscale 4: Rejection				
A19	A child who has been identified as gifted has more difficulty in making friends	3.18	1.254	A
A29	Often gifted children are rejected because people are envious of them	2.93	1.187	A
A22	Some teachers feel their authority threatened by gifted children	2.62	1.276	N
Subscale 5: Ability grouping				
A02	The best way to meet the needs of the gifted is to put them in special classes	3.23	1.32	A
*A20	Gifted children should be left in regular classes since they serve as an intellectual stimulant for the other children	2.53	1.251	N
*A06	When the gifted are put in special classes the other children feel devalued	2.44	1.257	N
*A21	By separating students into gifted and other groups we increase the labelling of children as strong-weak, good-less good, etc.	2.18	1.131	N
Subscale 6: Acceleration				
*A08	It is more damaging for a gifted child to waste time in class than to adapt to skipping a grade	3.35	1.127	P
*A28	When skipping a grade gifted students miss important ideas (they have "holes" in their knowledge)	2.74	1.183	N
A32	A greater number of gifted children should be allowed to skip a grade	2.72	1.196	N
*A07	Most gifted children who skip a grade have difficulties in their social adjustment to a group of older students	2.68	1.123	N
*A10	Children who skip a grade are usually pressured to do so by their parents	2.63	1.009	N

HP=High positive, P=Positive, A= Ambivalent, N=Negative, HN=High negative

* negatively worded items

Needs and Support. The mean results for responses to items in this section suggest this sample of Lebanese teachers had an overall positive attitude toward general provision for gifted

students. Means for this section ranged from a low ($M=3.27$) for item A11 to a high ($M= 4.41$) for item A15, indicating strong agreement with the statement that gifted students require special attention in order to fully develop their talent. Teacher participants also acknowledged the educational needs of the gifted and expressed support for offering special services for them. Item A24 ($M=4.25$) indicated strong agreement that society must fully develop the talents of gifted individuals.

Resistance to Objection. All items in this subscale were negatively worded so the scores were inverted to keep in line with the other subscales, whereby a higher score indicated a higher degree of positivity. As in the other subscales, the inverted scores if low, indicated a non-supportive attitude toward the gifted and their needs. Responses to the items in this subscale provide some evidence that teacher participants have a degree of resistance to the idea of making special provisions for the gifted in the regular classroom, despite the fact that the majority appeared to be positive toward the needs of this group of students. The low ratings for item A03 ($M = 1.78$) and item A12 (inverted $M = 2.32$) suggests teachers perceived that children with difficulties had the most need of special educational services. The responses to items A04 (inverted $M = 2.57$) and A05 (inverted $M = 2.44$) illustrate that these teachers perceived gifted education as a privilege. In terms of parental responsibility for talent development, the response to item A18 (inverted $M = 2.11$) suggests participants agreed with this. The response to item A16 ($M = 3.72$) indicated agreement with schools meeting the needs of the gifted, but the response to item A23 (inverted $M = 2.64$) indicated a negative response to objections often raised in relation to provision for giftedness.

Social Value. This subscale sought to measure teacher respondents' attitudes toward the social usefulness of gifted persons in society. Teacher participants strongly agreed with gifted students being a valuable resource for society as illustrated in item A13 ($M= 4.48$). They also indicated they would like to be considered gifted (item A17, $M = 3.53$), which in turn may explain their positive attitude towards the concept of 'giftedness'. A possible explanation for the negative response to item A25 (inverted $M = 2.14$) could be uncertainty or scepticism around the meaning of the term, "dominant class", which is not commonly used in Lebanon. Results also indicated that teacher participants had low level of agreement with the idea that the gifted are leaders of tomorrow's society as indicated by item A31 ($M = 2.81$). ***Rejection.*** Items in this subscale related to the idea of possible isolation of gifted students by others in their immediate environment. Item A19 ($M = 3.18$) was associated with the difficulty gifted students may have in making friends in mainstream environments. Teacher responses appeared ambivalent with respect to this statement. Similarly, teacher participants were hesitant to accept

that gifted children could be rejected due to problems with envy from others ($M = 2.93$). Item A22 indicated also that teacher participants felt their authority threatened by gifted students ($M = 2.62$). **Ability grouping.** Items in the fifth subscale sought to measure teacher participants' attitudes toward special homogeneous groups, classes and schools. Although teachers were positive toward the academic needs of the gifted, the response to Item AO2 ($M = 3.28$) indicated uncertainty in relation to the efficacy of separating gifted students and putting them in special classes. There also was a perception that high ability grouping could make other Lebanese students feel de-valued (Item A06, inverted $M = 2.44$) or labelled (Item A21 inverted $M = 2.18$). **Acceleration.** The items in the last subscale investigated attitudes toward accelerative learning. A teacher preference for gifted student placement in mainstream classrooms was evident, with results not supporting the value of acceleration, as items A7 (inverted $M = 2.68$), A10 (inverted $M = 2.63$), and A28 (inverted $M = 2.74$) reveal. Item A32 ($M = 2.72$) indicated that teacher participants did not agree with gifted children skipping a grade (A07, inverted $M = 2.68$), as they thought students might miss important ideas when accelerated (A28, inverted $M = 2.74$). Conversely, the response to item A08 (inverted $M = 3.35$) indicated a higher level of agreement to teachers' concern of gifted students wasting time in class than from acceleration. This contradiction indicates that whilst these teachers were not supportive of acceleration for Lebanese gifted students, they acknowledged that gifted students may not be learning adequately in their classes.

Teacher perceptions of characteristics of giftedness

Part B of the survey included 20 characteristics generally associated with giftedness, that participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with using the 1-5 scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. Means and standard deviations were calculated and arranged in order of level of agreement, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Means and Standard Deviations for Teacher Perceptions of Characteristics of Giftedness
($n=281$)*

Characteristics	M	SD
Able to learn with amazing speed	4.46	0.811
Intellectually curious	4.37	0.815
Possess an exceptional reasoning ability	4.32	0.866
A divergent thinker	4.27	0.745
An inquirer	4.24	0.878
Possess an exceptional memory	4.18	0.845
Creative	4.12	0.902
A critical reader	4.04	0.963
Independent	3.98	1.052
Good at spatial reasoning	3.98	0.882
Always achieves highly	3.96	1.053
Motivated	3.9	1.057
Hard working/highly task-committed	3.89	1.135
Good at mathematical reasoning	3.89	1.013
More mature than aged-peers	3.86	1.035
Perfectionistic	3.78	1.09
Advanced in language/verbally skilled	3.68	1.059
A leader	3.4	1.138
Sensitive to others' feelings and expectations	3.09	1.09
<i>Obedient/follows rules</i>	<i>2.94</i>	<i>1.131</i>

Mean ratings for all gifted characteristics except one, were above 3. The eight top rated characteristics highlighted in bold were associated with intellect, including being “able to learn with amazing speed,” “intellectually curious,” and “possessing an exceptional reasoning ability.” This indicates a focus on cognitive characteristics being associated with giftedness by participants, while non-cognitive characteristics such as “leadership,” “sensitivity to others’ feelings and expectations,” and “obedience” received lower ratings. The characteristic of being “obedient/follows rules” which is italicised in Table 4, received the lowest rating ($M = 2.94$), as the teachers acknowledged this quality in students least characterised giftedness as in most previous research (Brighton, Moon, Jarvis, & Hockett, 2007; Harrison, 2004; Porter, 2005; Silverman, Chitwood, & Waters, 1986; VanTassel-Baska, 1998). However, these teacher respondents also rated the characteristic of ‘advanced in language/verbally skilled’ lower than other characteristics, which was an unexpected finding.

Lebanese teacher participants rated “good at mathematical reasoning” quite highly at ($M = 3.89$), which supports a general perception within Lebanon of the social value of science and maths, due to its relevance for future valued careers. Science and maths teachers are paid more than other teachers, and doctors and engineers earn more than other professionals (Beyrouiti, & Arida, 2009). In a study conducted by Khishfe and Boujaoude (2014), the

majority of Lebanese students stated that they would like to pursue science-related careers to ensure recognition and respect. Hence, socio-economic factors appeared to influence these findings, as students in developing countries, such as Lebanon, tend to emphasise the value of science in society more than students in developed countries (Awan, Sarwar, Naz & Noreen, 2011; Baram-Tsabari & Kaadni, 2009; Osborne & Collins, 2001).

Interview results

For the purposes of this article, findings from the analysis of responses to the interview questions regarding the *meaning* and *identification* of giftedness are presented. For each of these topics, two major themes and a number of subthemes emerged. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 5, with corresponding details of frequency by participants.

Table 5

Themes From Interview Data

Themes			No of Times mentioned
1a. Teachers' understandings of constructs (giftedness vs. talent) Giftedness	Academic characteristics	Advanced abilities	12
		Fast learning/ Reasoning ability	12
		Complexity and uniqueness of giftedness	10
		Task commitment	10
		Need to be supported by families to achieve	4
	Personality characteristics	Curiosity	6
		Perfectionism	3
		High achievement	6
		Talented but not gifted	6
1b. Understandings of constructs (giftedness v. talent) Talent		Artistic ability	4
		work hard/ persistence	4
		Compliance	3
	2. Complexity of identification	Higher level of knowledge	6
		Test results	4
		Attitudes and work habits	4

Not surprisingly, a continuum of perspectives on the concept of giftedness was reflected in the findings from this cohort of Lebanese teachers.

An emphasis on intellectual ability and academic performance

This study provided insights into Lebanese primary school teachers' focus on the intellectual component of giftedness, rather than on broader conceptualisations. The teacher

interviewees equated giftedness to academic characteristics, and the importance of developing the students' talent in relation to what could be considered personality or behavioral characteristics. When asked to define giftedness, 9 of the 12 interviewees focused solely on academic ability and academic performance. To exemplify advanced ability, Helene described her gifted students by stating, "If they're gifted I can see that they have an excellent ability to read text that is above their grade level... they're quite able with higher order thinking". Ruba commented that "it [giftedness] shows by the way they are doing their work or by the way they're talking to their friends, you can tell that they have a higher level of knowledge." Additionally, Angelle mentioned that gifted students "are able at critical thinking and higher ability thinking."

The interview transcripts of the Lebanese teachers also revealed that all participants viewed gifted students as fast learners and possessing characteristics of advanced ability not shared by age-peers. Sara described this attribute as the notion that "their brain functions quicker than others." Furthermore, in terms of outlining characteristics that gifted students commonly possess, survey responses indicated that teachers ranked the 'ability to learn with amazing speed' at a very high mean score of 4.46 out of 5. The next highest mean ranking was given to 'intellectual curiosity' ($M = 4.37$), and 'possession of exceptional reasoning ability' ($M = 4.32$). These findings were supported also by the interview transcripts showing that all 12 participants acknowledged gifted students as fast learners, with half of them also identifying curiosity, and a third mentioning exceptional analytical ability as major indicators or characteristics of giftedness. These characteristics are commonly associated with giftedness in the literature (Brighton et al., 2007; Clark, 2013; Copenhaver & McIntyre, 1992; Gallagher, 2007; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Renzulli, 1978; Sankar-Deleeuw, 2004). Identification of academic and intellectual abilities was highlighted also, by the overwhelming majority of teacher participants in New Zealand studies, as an important quality indicator for identification of gifted students (Riley & Bicknell, 2013; Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind & Kearney, 2004).

The teacher survey data indicated that giftedness tended to be equated with high achievement, because gifted students were generally perceived by teacher participants as "always achieving highly" ($M = 3.96$). This particular emphasis on academic achievement was evident also in the interview transcripts of the teachers. For example, one of the interviewees, Maya, who had less than three years of teaching experience stated, "For me a gifted student excels in all academic subjects, he gets good grades in everything", additionally Natalie's comment also reflected this view, "I know them from their grades in class... someone

who doesn't get less than 100 is for sure very smart." Although researchers such as Renzulli (2004) caution teachers against viewing giftedness and test scores as one, these comments appear to be reflective of the prevailing perception within Lebanon of giftedness being associated with and identified via high academic achievement (Ghaith, 2003; Sarouphim, 2009). A drawback of using performance-based tests exclusively has found, that they can exclude diverse populations of students from special programs (Burney & Beilke, 2008; McBee, 2006). However, this is not a perception exclusive to Lebanon as it was highlighted in Dunn, Corn and Morelock's (2004) discussion of popular constructs of giftedness, which focused on students' academic performance and being outcome oriented.

It appears that other characteristics often associated with giftedness that are not academically oriented, include "sensitivity to others' feelings and expectations;" and "leadership ability" (Hamby 2010; Mendaglio, 2003, Silverman 1989). These were overlooked by most participants. This was also evident in the low rankings provided in the survey responses for these characteristics, with "sensitivity to others" receiving a mean score of 3.09 out of 5, and "leadership ability" a slightly higher mean score of 3.4. A possible explanation may be linked to Lebanon's ancient cultural history and religions. The education system in Lebanon is based on a view of knowledge inherited mainly from the French. According to Subhi-Yamin (2009), the underpinning philosophy of education therefore had an emphasis on cognitive development and excellence in education without taking into account the development of the whole person or the needs of the society. Consciousness of social and emotional development of students was not apparent in interviews with teacher participants. This is explained by Ayyash-Abdo, Alamuddin, and Mukallid (2010), as there is a scarcity of counselling services available at Lebanese private and public schools, despite the need for such counselling services due to the inevitable psychological consequences of the many years of war, and the economic and political instability in the country. It appears that within Lebanon, social-emotional development and support within schools has a limited focus, with more importance placed on academic development (Ayyash-Abdo, Alamuddin, & Mukallid, 2010).

Six of the interviewees referred to the difference between high achievement and high potential when presenting their conceptions of giftedness. For instance, Julie's comment expressed this perception succinctly: "the gifted are not necessarily high achievers... sometimes there are students who do not study." There was also a tendency to conflate the term 'gifted' with the term 'talented' and use both interchangeably. Six teachers emphasised the importance of high achievement, where persistence, task commitment and hard work could

result in high grades.

These teachers accentuated deliberate practice and working hard as means for students to reach their full potential, which is consistent with other research (Dweck, 2006; Pfeiffer, 2013; Renzulli, 2003). When discussing task commitment Janette and Mira reported that their gifted students were committed, and described how they took their work seriously. Helene appeared to share the same view and described a gifted student as one who is focused with a sense of purpose. She added that “gifted students are able to control their focus and interest ... they have a sense of purpose ... they take on more challenging tasks.”

Four of the teacher interviewees demonstrated an understanding of Gagné’s (1985, 2003) proposition that giftedness alone will not produce talent, acknowledging a range of support catalysts, which are also required but were not available in their contexts. In fact, these perceptions align with the general belief in the literature that a gifted student could be an underachiever (Gagné, 2004; Gross, 2004, Plucker & McIntyre, 1996; Renzulli, 2003; 2004), but this would be construed as contradictory to the underpinning rhetoric of Lebanese society, where achievement is generally perceived as expected in relation to ability.

A third of the interviewees viewed gifted learners as those with high abilities in one or more academic subjects, and talented learners as those who displayed abilities in sport, music, design or creative arts. For example, Rima claimed that a child was talented in sports, arts and music but referred to giftedness as academic ability. This perspective is similar to findings from a study by Downs, Matthew and McKinney (1994), where teachers identified giftedness as academic ability and talent as artistic ability. Yet this view of giftedness does not fit with the existing body of literature, albeit mainly Western literature, and current developed theories of giftedness (Brown et al., 2005; Gagné, 1995, 2003; Mrazik & Dombrowski, 2010; Renzulli, 2003; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986; Sternberg, 1984; Thomson, 2006).

An explanation would be the very limited specific education or professional development to which these teachers have been exposed, in regard to giftedness. Giftedness is a field of research that is still quite new in Lebanon, and for this reason, a widespread understanding of the difference between the terms gifted and talented in relation to theories of giftedness and talent development were not part of the educational literacy of the country.

Teachers’ perceptions of the highly able/gifted students in terms of identification

Research suggests that the procedures used to identify students with gifts and talents depend largely on how educators define the concept of giftedness (Clark, 2013; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994), with a narrow concept of giftedness potentially leading to misidentification

(Sarouphim, 2004). A lack of acknowledgment of the multifaceted nature of giftedness could hinder both the identification of and provision for the range of areas of giftedness beyond the academic arena (Gardner, 1983, 2006).

Lack of awareness of appropriate practices used to identify gifted students.

In terms of the methods used to identify gifted students in Lebanese schools, the interview transcripts indicated an overall lack of awareness of research evidence related to appropriate educational practice for identification of gifted students. Neither the use of standardised assessment procedures or multiple criteria were discussed, and interviewees were not aware of different identification methods available. For example, Helene proclaimed, “we look at them as high achievers... I feel they are excelling cognitively or analytically but we don’t call them gifted, we don’t have this label....” These results confirm previous findings by Diab (2006) and Sarouphim (2010), of a lack of awareness of appropriate gifted identification measures and assessment procedures within the Lebanese education system.

All teacher participants used their observations of what they understood as gifted characteristics as their method of identification rather than any formal processes. However, this is probably not uncommon in Western nations as well. For instance, Plunkett (2000) found that Australian teachers used observation as a strategy to identify giftedness. Within the current study, few participants had any specific teacher education in gifted education to assist them in identifying students, and thus were not confident in their ability to accurately identify gifted students. For example, Helene admitted, “I cannot say that they’re gifted because I don’t think that I have enough training to judge.” As a result, there is a need for Lebanese teachers to carefully examine their understandings of gifted characteristics, and the approaches they adopt to identify gifted students. Teachers’ perspectives appeared to be due to a range of factors including giftedness not being covered in initial teacher education and a lack of professional development for teachers related to giftedness within the Lebanese education system. Matheis et al. (2019) also found limited teacher education affected teacher beliefs, self-efficacy about providing effective educational provision for gifted students. Plunkett and Kronborg found that professional learning for pre-service teachers (Plunkett & Kronborg, 2011; 2019) can significantly change teacher attitudes and beliefs about teaching gifted students with one semester of teaching and reading for assessment of evidence-based gifted education literature. Riley and Bicknell’s (2013) study indicated that “the growth and awareness in gifted and talented education needs to be harnessed and injected with ongoing resources for funding, professional learning and support, and, most importantly, encouragement to continue

developing an evidence-base of effective practices” (p. 16). The limited teacher knowledge of gifted education is an area of concern, and both pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development opportunities for teachers of the gifted, should focus on these issues, as well as the overall needs of gifted students (Kronborg, 2018a, 2018b; Kronborg & Plunkett, 2012, 2013).

Lebanese teacher participants generally reported identifying gifted students through comparison of students’ higher level of knowledge compared to their chronological peers, achievement levels, and/or their attitudes and working habits. Teacher survey data demonstrated a perception of gifted students as “always achieving highly” ($M = 3.96$), highlighting a focus on achievement rather than potential (Lee, 1999). That also was evident in interview transcripts. For example, Helene proclaimed, “we look at them as high achievers... I feel they are excelling cognitively or analytically but we don’t call them gifted, we don’t have this label.” This corresponds with the myth that academic performance is the main indicator of giftedness (Gardner 2006; Sternberg, 2003; Worrell, 2009). In fact, Sarouphim (2009) and Ghaith (2003) point out that school achievement in subjects such as science and maths is the most common criterion used for determining highly able students in Lebanon. In the current study, only Helene and Rana, who had studied overseas and who both worked at international English private schools, acknowledged the possibility of using IQ testing to identify gifted students.

It appears to be important within Lebanese culture, with the emphasis placed on the value of successful academic outcomes for students, that the gifted identification process be more informed by the research evidence, and inclusive of a broader range of criteria. Research suggests that the use of multiple criteria in professional identification of gifted students be used in Lebanon, with assessment practices including standardised cognitive ability assessment, achievement tests, observations, self or peer judgments, teacher and parent nominations and recommendations (Gagné, 2004; Gardner, 2006; Renzulli, 1999; Sternberg, 2003). Of concern, evident in the interview transcripts, was the focus placed on conforming classroom behaviours valued by these teachers, including cooperation and compliance noted by a number of participants, as a way of identifying gifted students, despite such behaviours not being generally associated with giftedness (Bracken & Brown, 2006; Silverman, 1989).

Identification procedures and gifted underachievement.

As teacher participants identified giftedness mainly in terms of exceptionally high academic ability, it follows that the identification procedures employed would fit this

understanding, with the focus on high performing behaviours. Sara, who was able to differentiate between the identification of gifted students and high achievement scores, mentioned that schools in Lebanon do not have knowledge of identification procedure, "... in Lebanon, we don't have any schools who really care about these gifted, they consider that they're just high achievers, who have high grades." The concept of gifted underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2002; Ritchotte, Rubeinstein & Murry, 2015; Rubenstein, Siegle, Reis, McCoach & Burton, 2012), whereby high potential is not realised, was only raised by one of the interviewed teachers, who acknowledged that students could be cognitively able yet also underachieve due to limited environmental factors. She highlighted that if the needs of gifted students are not met, "They fall through the cracks of the educational system." Within the Lebanese context, this is particularly problematic (Sarouphim, 2004).

The findings of this study illustrated that only a small proportion of Lebanese teacher participants demonstrated the knowledge and understanding that high achieving and gifted learners can have different abilities depending on the focus of the assessment process. Teachers interviewed revealed a lack of understanding of the concept of gifted underachievement, where students with high reasoning ability, which is also integral to cognitive ability, may not be motivated to realise their talents in order to achieve highly.

Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that identification processes within Lebanese primary schools are heavily reliant on teacher observation, which is an ad hoc process based on a view of giftedness that prioritises performance rather than developing a student's high potential. In terms of a student's underachievement, this is problematic as gifted potential needs to be identified in order to implement support structures to help bring about the realisation of that potential. It appears that teacher education in gifted education and guidance in terms of guidelines and procedures for identifying gifted students would be a valuable step.

Conclusion

This study revealed some important insights into the limited knowledge of teachers in the area of gifted education in Lebanon. Additionally, a culturally shaped focus on high academic achievement, competitiveness, and strong commitment were identified as the most valued aspects of giftedness by the interviewed teachers from the Lebanese system, providing insight into the Lebanese view of giftedness. The study has important implications for gifted education policy and practice within Lebanon. It is apparent that both pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development opportunities should focus on these issues, as well as the overall needs of gifted students. As teachers' knowledge might not necessarily

translate into effective provision for gifted students, both knowledge of gifted education research and practical experience teaching gifted students are needed. This, in turn, has implications for professional development course designers and university educators regarding teacher education in gifted education.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that ‘giftedness’ was not a measured construct due to the lack of formal identification processes in Lebanon. Thus, it was only possible to try to elicit an understanding through self-report measures of teachers in relation to their personal experience of teaching gifted students. This is not a limitation that could be easily overcome in the Lebanese context but it is still worthy of noting.

It became apparent also that the Lebanese population of teachers may not have interpreted the survey items in the same way as in other studies, particularly Western ones where participants are likely to have had a better understanding of relevant concepts. In future studies, attention should be paid to developing a survey that is culturally more sensitive, in order to provide a more accurate picture of teacher perceptions towards gifted students.

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