

Education of Gifted Pupils in Türkiye

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Introduction

Sustainable quality education activities should be carried out for the efficient use of human capital in nations. Gifted students, when their potential is considered, emerge as some of the most valuable components of human capital. Considering that gifted individuals will be at the forefront of leaders, scientists and artistic activities in their societies, it is clear that if they are not supported and cannot reveal their potential, they will not be able to contribute to the society in which they live, and this situation will have a destructive effect. One of the skills that individuals should have in the twenty-first century is higher order thinking skills including creative thinking, critical thinking and problem solving. These skills increase individuals' problem-solving abilities, their capacity to produce innovative and original ideas, and also contribute to their personal and professional development. It is thought that the use of higher-order thinking skills in education will affect the future success of gifted students and may increase the contribution expected to be made to their countries on the road to independence. More than one discipline should work together, unusual perspectives should be included, thoughts should be questioned, and new thoughts should be opened. The basic condition for achieving this goal and ensuring permanence is qualified education. The idea that it will help the country to use its resources more efficiently and help the country to become technologically, economically, politically and militarily stronger shows the strategic importance of the education of gifted individuals. Today, different strategies such as grouping, enrichment, acceleration, mentoring are used in the education of gifted students. Different strategies aim to improve students' academic skills as well as their higher order thinking skills.

Education of gifted pupils

From the past to the present, the definitions of gifted individuals have changed from conservative and restrictive approaches to more liberal and flexible definitions. In other words, today, the concept of giftedness is beyond being defined only by numerical criteria. Gifted individuals differ from their peers in terms of their learning styles and comprehension abilities. For this reason, it is necessary to differentiate the education of gifted individuals who are considered to have different educational needs. When education is differentiated according to the characteristics of students, all students can develop and learn (Bildiren, 2016; Sak, 2013). The most lasting impact of the Marland Report (1972), which was published after three years of data collection, testimony and interviews with a wide range of stakeholders including researchers, educators, administrators, policy makers and legislators, is the first federal definition of gifted children. In the 50 years since the report's

publication, no other report has been published with broad public acceptance that specifically addresses gifted students. However, the direction in which the field of gifted education will evolve in the near future is still uncertain. For this reason, there is no agreed definition among experts (Jolly & Robins, 2022).

While the search for consensus continues, gifted children often have clearly visible characteristics that distinguish them from the average of their classmates. They need special attention and support from school environments because their educational needs are different from their peers (Vouglanis & Driga, 2023). Strategies such as differentiated instruction, enhanced learning standards, teacher development programmes and specialised training programmes for talent development contribute positively to the educational success of gifted students (NAGC, 2019). The differentiated instruction approach applied by teachers for gifted students is used to foster their talents by considering their interests and socio-emotional development. Schools that function for average students must make changes in the educational experiences they offer in order to unlock the potential of gifted students. Gifted students need enriched and challenging activities, differentiated lesson plans and programmes, active learning processes, learning environments with adequate physical infrastructure and legal regulations (Davis et al., 2013).

Education of gifted pupils in Turkiye

In Turkey, gifted students receive support education at Science and Art Centre (SAC) affiliated to the Ministry of National Education. These centres were established in 1995 in order to enable children to develop their potential in the best way possible. It is important to know that these centres are not a school, and that students receive additional education in these institutions for the purpose of support education after continuing their formal education in the schools where they are enrolled. In order to gain the right to enrol in SAC, students must be identified as 'Gifted'. The identification process is initiated for primary school 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade students nominated by their teachers/schools. Students are nominated from the fields of 'General Mental Ability', 'Music' and 'Visual Arts'. Each student can be nominated for at most two talent areas (Ministry of National Education, 2023). Although identification can be made by Guidance Research Centres in pre-school or other grades, there is no identification process for admission to Science and Arts Centres. For the specified grade levels, the commission established in the schools, with the nomination of the class teacher, determines the candidates, not exceeding 20% of the total quota. The limited quota leads to various disadvantages. This situation leads to the deprivation of the right to be recognised for gifted students who are not nominated among heterogeneously distributed classes. One of the important problems in the identification process is that classroom teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about the general characteristics of gifted students. Due to the frequent confusion between bright students and gifted students, the desired efficiency cannot be obtained in the nomination process. At the same time, families also put pressure on teachers to nominate their own children for inclusion in the identification process, which leads to problems.

Identification Process

Individuals nominated for the selection of students for SACs, which are established to support the development of gifted children, are subjected to the “Group Screening Application”, also known as the “Tablet PC Application”. In this screening application, students who exceed the threshold determined at the grade level are subjected to individual assessment according to the field of talent they are candidates for. ‘Individual assessment’ is carried out with a separate appointment system for each of the talent areas related to general mental ability, music and visual arts. Students nominated in the field of general mental ability are subjected to an intelligence (WISC or ASIS) test by experts. In the visual arts talent area, students are asked questions to reveal their visual creativity and to make original visual works, and they are asked to draw accordingly. In the field of music talent, applications are carried out in the areas of musical hearing, musical memory and musical awareness in accordance with their grade levels. Children who are successful in individual assessment are entitled to enrol in Science and Art Centre (Ministry of National Education, 2023).

Education in SAC’s

According to the SAC Directive (2019), a gifted individual is defined as ‘an individual who learns faster than his/her peers, is ahead in creativity, art, leadership capacity, has special academic talent, can understand abstract ideas, likes to act independently in his/her fields of interest and performs at a high level’. It can be said that this definition is quite comprehensive among other definitions of gifted students. However, when the identification process is analysed, it is seen that there are deficiencies in areas of giftedness such as creativity, leadership and sports, but the definition is important in terms of showing the vision of the country. It gives hope that the education to be offered to gifted individuals in the future can be more comprehensive.

Today, the number of SACs is close to 400 in Turkey and there is at least one SAC in each province (Figure 1). Considering the population density and the need, the number of centres in the provinces may vary. As seen in Figure 2, approximately 105 thousand students receive support education in these institutions (Ministry of National Education, 2023).

Figure 1. *Change in the Number of SACs Over the Years*

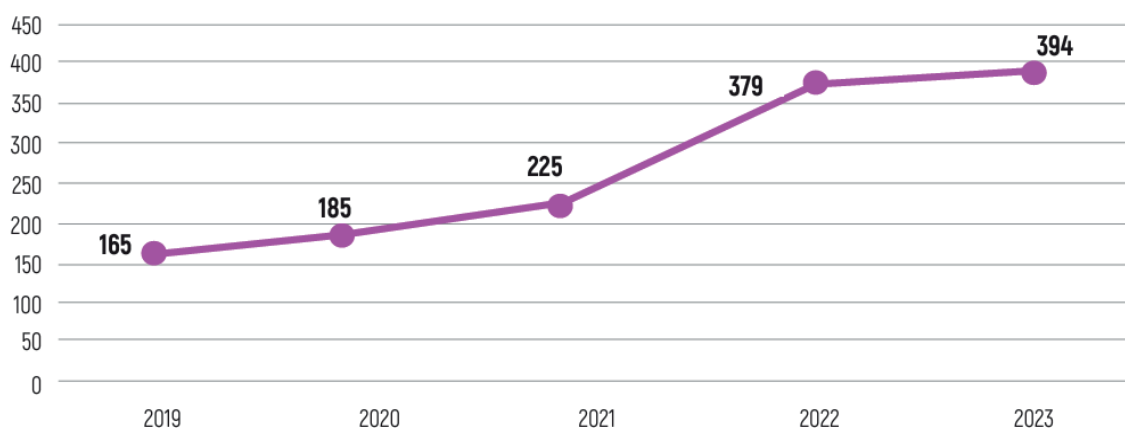
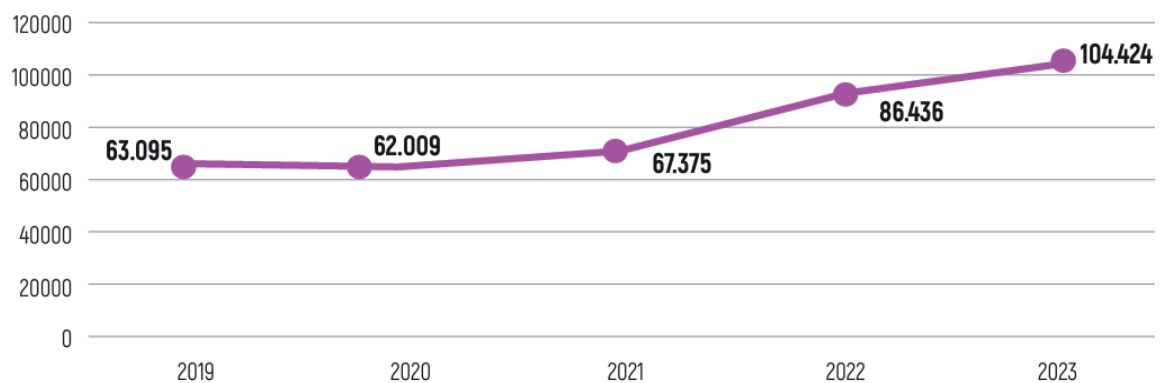
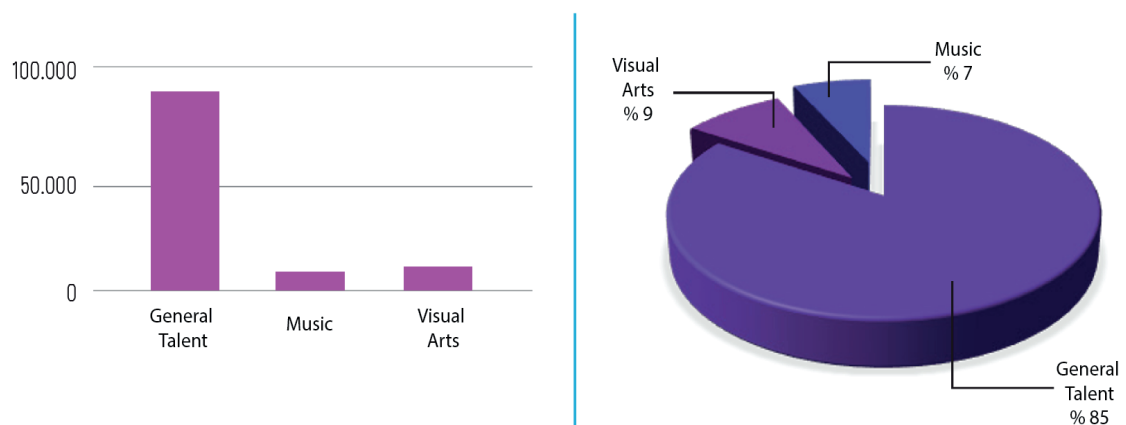


Figure 2 *Change in the Number of Students Benefiting from SAC Over the Years*

Diagnosed gifted children who are entitled to enrol as a result of individual evaluation go to the most appropriate SAC in the cities where they live and make their registrations. These centres are state-funded, and students do not have to pay any fees during the education process. Every student who successfully completes the identification process in Turkey has the right to benefit equally from the education and opportunities provided in SACs. Students are categorised according to the talent areas they are accepted as a result of individual assessment. The number of students selected from Music and Visual Arts talent areas is considerably lower than the number of students selected from 'General Mental Ability'. As shown in Figure 3, students selected from General Mental Ability constitute 85% of the total number of students selected.

Figure 3. *Distribution of SAC's-Registered Students by Talent Types*

Education and training activities to be carried out in SAC are planned to be on weekdays and / or weekends outside the hours when the student receives formal education. Each lesson/activity/workshop is planned and implemented for 40 minutes. The duration of unexcused absenteeism in an education and training year at SAC cannot exceed 30% of the training period. An absenteeism warning is sent to the student whose absenteeism reaches 20%. Students who exceed the absenteeism limit without an excuse are deregistered at the end of the term. At the end of each programme, the status of the students attending the programme is evaluated in the SAC teachers' board. Students who cannot benefit from the programme they are attending and who are decided by a majority of

votes that there is no benefit in continuing the programme are dismissed from SAC. This decision is notified to the student's parents.

A 5-stage programme is implemented for students enrolled in SACs (Ministry of National Education, 2019). The programmes are given below under headings.

Adaptation programme

It is a short-term training programme organised for gifted students who are newly enrolled in SAC, aiming to introduce the mission, vision and core values of the institution and to enable them to get to know teachers, students and programmes. Activities that contribute to personal development and encourage scientific thinking are prepared and implemented for students enrolled in the orientation programme. The adaptation programme is planned for an average of 40 lesson hours and a total of 2 months. Students who complete the adaptation programme and are selected for general mental ability are admitted to the 'Support Education Programme', which is a higher programme. Students selected in visual arts and music are placed in the 'Special Talents Development Programme'.

Support education programme (SEP)

Students selected general mental ability who have completed the adaptation programme start the support education programme as the second stage. In this programme, students continue their education with activities aimed at developing their basic skills in connection with all disciplines. Within the programme, it is aimed to provide skills such as cooperation, scientific research, higher order thinking skills, technology literacy and social responsibility. The support education programme is implemented for at least 2 academic years, including the adaptation programme, for students enrolled in the 2nd and 3rd grades, and at least 1 academic year for students enrolled in the 4th grade. Students who complete the support education programme are directed to the 'Individual Talents Awareness Programme'.

Individual talents awareness programme (IAP)

The main aim of this programme is to identify the areas in which students can carry out in-depth studies in areas where they are talented and have potential, taking into account their interests and curiosity. With the programme, activities are designed and implemented in order to enable students to realise attitudes and skills specific to different fields and disciplines. At this stage, teachers determine the students for whom they will take responsibility. At the end of this programme, which lasts for two academic years, students are directed to the areas of the 'Special Talents Development Programme' as a result of the multidimensional evaluation made by the board of teachers for each child individually.

Image 1: *Sample of SAC Classroom*



Image taken from the 2023-Activity Report of the General Directorate of Special Education and Guidance Services of the Ministry of National Education.

Special talents development programme (STDP)

Talent groups (General Mental Ability, Music and Visual Arts), which were separated after the adaptation programme, come together under the same roof again at this stage, but continue to specialise in their own fields. In the fourth stage, the special talent development programme, intensive activity-based studies are carried out on a scientific and artistic axis for the special talent areas to which students are directed by taking into account their interests and curiosities. The aim of the programme is to enable students to acquire advanced knowledge, skills and behaviours in line with their potential. Studies are carried out to enable them to produce ideas and products, especially at the synthesis stage. In the fields of Visual Arts and Music, studies are carried out to provide students within the programme with competence in the field. In-depth artistic activities are included after this stage. For this reason, the STDP programme continues for 2 years for student groups with general mental ability and for other fields for 5-7 academic years according to the grade level at which they are enrolled in SACs.

Project production and management programme

The Project Production and Management Programme, which is the last stage for students in SACs, is a training programme carried out individually or in groups in line with the student's wishes, interests and curiosities. In the programme, project preparation and implementation trainings related to the field in which the student is thought to have talent are also provided. Students participating in the programme are obliged to prepare at least one project in each academic year. Students are guided by their counsellor teachers during the project preparation process. The prepared project is evaluated in front of the jury. For the projects deemed appropriate, the patent application is made

by the ministry on behalf of the student.

Students who complete the above programmes are given a ‘Programme Completion Certificate’ for each stage.

Selection of Teacher

Teachers who will work in SACs are determined in accordance with the guidelines published by the Ministry of National Education for each year. According to the Guide for Selection and Appointment of Teachers for Science and Art Centres (2024), the newly appointed teachers must have served at least 3 years in public educational institutions. Eligible candidates are placed in the vacancies announced in the guideline as a result of the scoring calculated by taking into account the evaluation criteria and oral interview.

Among the evaluation criteria is the “education” received by the candidate teacher. According to this criterion, if the teacher has a master’s degree or a doctorate, he/she gains additional points at different levels. Certificates of achievement or awards received by the candidate teacher during his/her service period, projects he/she has participated in at national and international level, scientific studies, artistic activities, in-service trainings, congresses, foreign language and having an expert/head teacher career level also provide points to the teacher in different categories. In the oral interview, the candidate teacher’s communication skills, reasoning power, openness to scientific developments, merit, ability to represent in front of the public, up-to-date knowledge, creativity and willingness are evaluated.

Score ranking is taken into account in the evaluation criteria used in appointments. Among the teachers who fulfil the score requirement, 3 times as many teachers as the announced quota are invited for an oral interview. The final score is calculated by combining 60% of the score obtained from the evaluation criteria and 40% of the oral interview score. Teachers are placed in the vacant quotas according to the total score (Ministry of National Education, 2024).

In addition to the placed teachers, the Ministry of National Education organises field-based in-service trainings, seminars or courses every academic year in order to increase the efficiency and quality of the teachers currently working in SAC. These programmes are held at least once a year (Ministry of National Education, 2019).

Conclusion

Countries want to increase their national income by processing the mines they have. As well as the mines, which are called underground treasures, gifted individuals, which are considered as above-ground treasures, have a strategic importance. Developed countries owe their success to the quality of projects and products produced by gifted individuals. That is why the education of gifted students is of essential for every country. Turkey has mobilised its means to reach gifted individuals in the last 30 years. With the increase in the budget allocated to education in the last 20 years, the number of gifted individuals and the number of SACs where these individuals receive education has increased. The main objectives of SACs include meeting the needs of students with

leadership spirit and creativity, encouraging learning by doing and experiencing, providing project-based learning and supporting the social and emotional development of students with a holistic approach. In SACs, a project-based, interdisciplinary education programme is implemented by differentiating through enrichment and acceleration in accordance with the abilities of students in order to realise original products, projects and productions (Ministry of National Education, 2019). It is necessary to give importance to quality as well as quantity. For this reason, it is necessary to provide training for teachers who will deal with gifted students and to provide support for interdisciplinary cooperation and teamwork. There is a need to develop environments that will enhance the experiences of gifted people.

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