

Are future foreign language teachers prepared to educate the gifted and talented in schools in Herzegovina?

Izabela Dankić & Ana Matić-Raguž

University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to contribute to advancement of foreign language teaching and to direct attention to exceptional children as a group of students very often neglected in the elementary and high-school educational system in Herzegovina-Neretva canton. Data are collected using reflection and we attempt to answer the question whether the future foreign language teachers, upon completion of their foreign language-teacher education, feel prepared to work with the gifted and talented. The results suggest that work with gifted and talented children should be included in FL-teacher education in the future.

Keywords: language teaching, talented students, Herzegovina canton

Introduction

Formal elementary and secondary school educational systems in many countries in Europe are organized to give gifted students the opportunity to reach their full potential. The public educational system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily organized at the cantonal level, is set to promote the concept that different needs of all students should be met. As in many other countries (Page, 2010), gifted learners and their educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in Herzegovina-Neretva canton, face many challenges. While the special-learning needs of children are met by engaging teacher assistants who individually assist the children in schools by providing additional classes or organizing special programs, the special needs of the gifted are not met in a systematic way. If these children are identified in the public elementary and secondary schools in Herzegovina-Neretva canton, it is up to the school and its principal and teachers to decide how these special needs should be met. The prevailing belief is that gifted children adjust better than non-gifted children and gifted children are not systematically identified. However, this dominant view of gifted children (Kessner, 2005) may be changed by the practitioner research results,

which indicate that gifted students appear to adjust better, but experience different social and emotional difficulties.

Gifted children are exceptional children and there is no agreement on how gifted children and learners should be identified. Some still believe that we should maintain the traditional approach of identifying gifted learners as children who score approximately 130+ on an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test (Krause et al, 2003), while others like Langrehr (2006) propose a series of tests that replace the intelligence-quotient method with “multiple-answer thinking”. Zovko (1996) also points to the difference between gifted and talented learners, stating that the talented learners have one gift, while gifted learners have more than one gift. He prefers the term “exceptional children” because there are gifted and talented children who are learners with special needs. As far as this study is concerned, we define gifted learners as children who are talented in foreign language learning.

During their education and foreign language-teacher training, future foreign language teachers are trained to work with the average-ability students and special attention is not devoted to the specialized practical training – for example, how to organize a higher streaming class or how to handle the problems that usually accompany the gifted (self-esteem, self-concept, affective needs of gifted students). At University of Mostar, pre-service teachers study all factors influencing learning (including intelligence, aptitude, social-psychological factors, etc.) from the perspective of their role in the second-language acquisition and within the foreign language-teaching methodology courses.

Since the importance of gifted children's relationships with their teachers is emphasized in many research studies (Kessner, 2005), the aim of this study was to contribute to advancement of foreign language teaching through examination of the position of pre-service teachers on teaching gifted students. Based on the obtained data, we can examine the pre-service teachers' position on teaching the gifted and whether they feel prepared to teach them.

Methodology

In this study, we combine the use of practitioner knowledge (Johnson, 2009) and the reflective practice within the exploratory practice framework. We use them to examine the teaching practice in the context of preparing future foreign language teachers to address the needs of gifted students.

The term “reflective practice” is differently defined, but it includes processes that involve “meta-thinking” (Shkedi, 2000; Loughran 2002) and is based on a belief that

teachers can improve their understanding of teaching and the quality of their teaching by reflecting critically on their experiences related to teaching (Richards, 2002). Halbach (2002, pp. 245-246) writes that the type of reflection the students are able to produce and whether they comment on the course methodology indicates the course's effect on their ability to be reflective and to think critically. She distinguishes three degrees of reflection: summarizing (a simple summary of the ideas covered in class), exemplifying (a certain degree of introspection supported with their personal experience as students), and commenting (meaningful reflection including comments and questions that indicate critical thinking).

We used the principled framework of exploratory practice to investigate the students' reflection on their own learning and teaching in classes preparing them to become English teachers. Exploratory practice helps them better understand the quality of foreign language classroom life. It also helps to teach pre-service teachers how to develop reflective mind habits when the content to be reflected upon and the quality of reflection are determined (Valli, 1997). The present study used the reflective practice of pre-service teachers when asking them to reflect on their training and preparation for teaching gifted students.

The subjects are 19 second-year graduate students (pre-service English teachers) at the University of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina who have met all the requirements (completed teaching practicums and colloquiums) in 2013. They were asked to write a reflective essay on "Are future English teachers prepared to teach gifted children?" The suggested time for essay writing was 45 minutes and the essay length was not specified. As far as the quality of reflection was concerned, they were told that their essay should reflect their pre-service teacher experience and training, and that their essays would be taken into consideration for initiating an elective course called "Gifted children and foreign language teaching".

Results

Although the group of 19 students (pre-service teachers) included 14 women and 5 men, only three of them (two male students and one female student) signed their essays. They were allowed not to sign their essays in order to express themselves more freely, knowing that they would not be judged or evaluated. They were also allowed to choose the language in which they wanted to write the essay. Two students wrote their essays in English, one student combined both English and Croatian and 16 students wrote them in Croatian.

The reflective data analysis was conducted after we had sorted the essay data according to three degrees of reflection as suggested by Halbach (2002): summarizing, exemplifying, and commenting.

Interestingly, all 19 essays are classified as the third degree of reflection. The students do not summarize what was covered in the classes about the gifted. They provide their position based on their experience as students (pre-service teachers) and directly proceed to express their opinion on how well the future English teachers are prepared to teach gifted children. They support their position by providing interesting comments and suggestions that indicate critical thinking. They all agree that the needs of gifted children in public schools in the region are not met.

Eleven pre-service teachers believe that they are prepared to teach gifted children in the public schools. Five pre-service teachers consider “the educational system”, “schools”, “the wider community” and “the cantonal government” to be responsible for problems gifted children and teachers might face. Three students particularly blame the foreign language teachers who currently teach in the public primary and secondary schools as not being motivated and properly trained to cater to gifted students. Only one student specifically states that no elective course should be introduced, while the other 10 do not mention it at all.

Three pre-service teachers believe that they are not ready to teach gifted students. They also believe that they are not prepared to teach the non-gifted children. They consider their practical experience to be limited and propose that courses on practical teaching issues should be added to the curriculum starting from the first year of their college education. They strongly recommend that the elective course on teaching English to gifted children should be introduced.

Five students state that they are prepared to teach the foreign language, but they need additional training on how to teach gifted children and how to manage the classroom and teach gifted and non-gifted children together.

Discussion

Reflective essay analysis suggests that the observed pre-service teachers believe that the needs of gifted students in the region are not met. One might argue that gifted and talented children do not require supplemental resources at all and that their needs should be considered in the same way as the needs of the other non-gifted children. This is a view supported by the standard-based cost-function educational model (Baker, 2001) where the gifted must fit into the general public educational system and no supplemental resources are available for their education. The alternate resource educational model provides for special programs for gifted children and they vary depending on available funds. As far as the situation in the Hercegovina-Neretva canton is concerned, these pre-service teachers correctly identified that there

is no cantonal educational policy with clearly established procedures for identification and assistance that would aid gifted elementary and secondary students. The foreign language teachers currently employed and teaching in the public schools have not been trained how to identify, assist and help gifted students reach their educational goals based on their special needs.

Three students feel that they are not prepared to teach either gifted or non-gifted students. Further analysis of their essays suggests that the reason for this position is that they do not consider that the practical training they received in the process of obtaining their teaching degree adequately prepares them for the challenges of teaching in the real classroom away from the micro-teaching context. Wellich and Brown (2012) point to the particular challenge related to the identification of gifted students proposing their classification into gifted achievers and gifted underachievers. As a result of interplay of different factors (motivation, confidence, lack of certain skills, socio-emotional adjustment) some gifted children do not achieve their educational goals in school and are not recognized as exceptional. They also state that gifted students may be misunderstood by their parents, by their peers at preschool and school, and by their teachers because of their style of communication and their different needs. As a result of these failing experiences coming from the primary social context, they might become underachievers.

Based on their experience and practice in Herzegovina's public schools, five pre-service foreign language teachers think that they are prepared to teach non-gifted students but are not trained adequately to face the challenge of teaching gifted and non-gifted students in the same classroom. Mandatory or elective courses as a part of foreign language-teacher education might help better prepare the future teachers for this challenge. Beyond the curriculum additions at the university level, some authors suggest the adjustments and changes in the (foreign) language curriculum that would take into consideration the nature of the learner, the selection of the grouping model, and the literary and linguistic material. This curriculum treatment resulting in differentiated curricula would help gifted students produce significant and important learning outcomes (Van Tassel-Basko et al., 2002) and it might result, if funding is provided, in the establishment of special "gifted programs" like the program based on a small-group affective curriculum (Peterson & Lorimer, 2011).

All observed pre-service teachers state that gifted children in public schools in Herzegovina need special attention in foreign language classrooms. Foreign language teachers must aim to develop positive attitudes in all children and need training to help gifted students utilize their general or specific cognitive abilities, combined with their foreign language learning ability, to master a foreign language.

Conclusion

The practitioner knowledge becomes part of the knowledge base of teacher education after it is made public for examination and discussion (Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler, 2002) and we hope that our work will initiate a discussion on whether pre-service teachers are prepared to teach gifted students in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on this practitioner research and our findings we propose that preparatory courses for teaching gifted children should become a part of foreign language-teacher education and training.

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