A CRITIQUE OF TWO GIFTEDNESS POLICIES IN DUBAI: PROVISION PROGRAMS FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHLY-RATED SCHOOLS

Aida C. Younis

Ph.D. Candidate in Education

British University in Dubai

Abstract

This study is a critique of the giftedness policy, of two British private schools, in Dubai, in the UAE. The purpose of this critique is to discuss and analyze the differences and similarities concerning giftedness development, in two highly-rated private schools in Dubai. These policies are to be evaluated based on international standards, set by Van Tassel-Baska, and entitled the "Five Attributes of High-Quality Giftedness Policies." This qualitative research relies mainly on the content analysis of the provision programs component of these policies. Findings of this research reflect few similarities such as the statement of the provision programs, as well as many differences such the definitions of giftedness and talentedness. Even though these schools are highly rated, their giftedness policy evaluation reveals that the provision programs of giftedness are not of high quality. As giftedness education is relatively novice in the UAE, this critique recommends schools to follow international standards of giftedness policies in developing their relevant policies. Moreover, researchers are suggested to study the implementation of the procedures derived from these policies.

Keywords: Gifted, Talented, Giftedness Policies, Provision Programs

Introduction

Gifted education is developing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) quickly. However, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and its affiliated federal education authorities mainly prioritizes students with special education needs rather than gifted and talented students (Al Ghawi 2017). To ensure efficient giftedness education, schools should establish suitable giftedness policies, out of which processes and procedures are derived.

Giftedness policy is essential in giftedness education and should become mandatory, especially that gifted and talented students fall under the umbrella of students with special education needs. Thus, this research is designated to analyze the giftedness policy of two schools, highly rated by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the federal education authority of Dubai, in the UAE.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Thriving to make the UAE one of the best countries in the world by its Golden Jubilee, the country's government has developed the UAE Vision National Agenda for the year 2021. Attaining a first-rate education system is one of the pillars of this seven-year plan (UAE Vision 2021 2018). Therefore, the MoE has developed an aligned strategic plan for the years 2017-2021. Ensuring consistency between schools and the MoE, all schools should originate their strategic plans, policies, and procedures from the ministry's strategy. Innovation, inclusion and quality assurance in education are the critical components of this plan (UAE Ministry of Education 2018).

The main aim of elevating the country's quality of education is its economic development Pursuing excellence in education requires the country to focus on gifted students who, if optimally identified, nurtured and developed, could significantly contribute to economic prosperity. However, not all schools are efficiently working on these students, who are valuable assets to the country.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of these two giftedness policies critique is to discuss and analyze the differences and similarities at the level of giftedness development in two highly-rated private schools in Dubai. Also, these policies are to be evaluated based on international standards of giftedness policies set by Van Tassel-Baska (2006).

Hence, one objective of this research is to examine the divergence or convergence of these policies regarding giftedness provision programs. Besides, the second objective is to investigate to what extent these policies are matching attributes of high-profile giftedness policies (Van Tassel-Baska 2006). Finally, according to the analysis results, some modifications of the policies shall be recommended to achieve a unified development of giftedness compartment of the policy.

1.3 Research Questions

The overarching research question of the study is: How is giftedness developed in these highly-rated schools in Dubai based on the studied giftedness policies?
In addition to the locus of the research, the study will examine the following sub-questions:

1- To what extent are Dubai giftedness policies identical regarding developing giftedness?

2- To what extent does the "provision programs" component of Dubai giftedness policies match the attributes of high-profile giftedness policies?

3- How could these policies be enhanced to ensure optimal development of giftedness?

1.4. Rationale for the Study

The rationale of the study is the importance of giftedness equity. Passow does not consider giftedness education a luxury or appendage; instead, it is a necessity (1979). As equity is a right to education, gifted students need support to optimize their potential (UNESCO 2013).

The Special Education Department, part of the MoE, is concentrating more on supporting disabilities than developing giftedness (Al Ghawi 2017; Special Education Department 2018). Nevertheless, the elaboration of high-quality giftedness policies should become a primary interest of education authorities in the country. In the shade of inclusion, all gifted students should be supported by the education system, just like students with disabilities. According to the MoE, gifted and talented students are part of students with special needs because they require provision programs, distinct from the mainstream students (Special Education Department 2018).

It is important to highlight that the term giftedness throughout this research implies both gifted and talented students. On the one hand, the critique of these two policies on giftedness shows the proactive initiative of these two highly-rated schools in giftedness education. On the other one, this critique presents a foundation on which high-quality giftedness policies could improve.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Analysis

2.1.1 Difference between Gifts and Talents

As the terms "gifted" and "talented" are socially-constructed, their definitions have significantly evolved, throughout history (Robins 2010). For example, Leonardo Da Vinci, the Italian artist, and scientist has been considered both gifted and talented during the Renaissance era while Napoleon Bonaparte, the leader of the French Revolution, has been recognized gifted (Allsop 2011; Dugdale-Pointon 2006). However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, researchers' interest in studying giftedness and talentedness has been stimulated by the economic and political factors relevant to that era (NAGC 2018).

However, a disagreement in defining giftedness persists till today due to the Nature versus Nurture debate. Based on the Nature approach, a gifted child is someone born possessing a superior natural ability. In contrast, based

on the Nurture approach, a gifted child has "exceptional aptitudes or abilities in one or more domain" which could be developed if supported by his environment (NAGC 2018). Distinguishing between gifts and talents is crucial. According to the National Association of Gifted Children, a talent means a "particular ability in art and design, music, PE" (NAGC 2018).

2.1.2 Giftedness in the UAE

Even though the UAE education system is comparatively new and has faced many difficulties, its significant evolution is the result of the constant governmental support (Gaad et al. 2006). "School for All" initiative has marked a major turmoil of the MoE. Therefore, the Special Education Department has addressed more attention toward the category of gifted and talented students. A general framework for identifying, developing and evaluating gifted and talented students has been proposed in its "General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public & Private Schools)" in 2010. The Special Education Department defined gifted and talented students combinedly. Gifted and talented students possess an "outstanding ability or aptitude in one or more areas of intelligence, or creativity, or academic achievement or special talents and abilities such as oratory, poetry, drawing or handicrafts, sports, or drama, or leadership capacity, etc." (Special Education Department 2010 p.61). However, the difference between a gift and a talent has not been articulated in this statement.

Furthermore, the Special Education Department has also suggested a platform to identify and monitor such students, the personnel required to support them and potential services to develop them. However, each federal education authority of the UAE such as the Knowledge and Human Development Authority is following different frameworks and definitions for giftedness (KHDA 2017a).

2.1.2 Giftedness and Talentedness Policy

As defined by the UNESCO (2013), a policy is "a predetermined course of action established as a guide toward accepted objectives and strategies of the organization" (UNESCO 2013). As per the definition, a policy in giftedness education provides a concise and clear overlook of the school's identification and supporting programs systems for all stakeholders. According to the UNESCO handbook on education policy analysis, education policies play an essential role in education management (UNESCO 2013). Even though policies mark a bureaucracy, any strategy is generated from a policy; out of which, a plan is constructed. In other words, the firm policy is the backbone of the plan. Also, for a policy to be successful, it should be aligned with the vision, mission, and objectives of the organization or the specific school in this condition (UNESCO 2013).

As the MoE has affirmed that gifted and talented students require special needs, it is mandatory for each school in the country to build a Gifted and Talented Policy, also recognized as Giftedness Policy. The latter should concisely highlight the following blocks: (1) the rationale of the policy, (2) aims of the policy, (3) the definition of giftedness and talent followed by the school, (4) stakeholders' role in the implementation of this policy, (5) the identification process of the gifted and talented students, (6) the in-class and extra-curricular provision programs and resources needed, (7) the evaluation and monitoring gifted and talented students, (8)the policy review process with the relevant date (Vasilevska 2011). Each one of these components complements each other. Once each school prepares a complete policy, efficient strategies and plans could be implemented to support these students. Some of the blocks are common for any policy such as the rationale of the policy and others are the core components of giftedness policies such as the identification process of the gifted and talented students.

According to researchers, multiple giftedness provision programs aim to develop giftedness. For example, "acceleration" could be offered by having a child skip grade levels in all subjects or one specific subject. Also, "enrichment" is an alternative approach intensively explained later in Renzulli's models. As per researchers, enrichment is implemented through curriculum changes, in-class activities or extra-curricular activities (Renzulli and Renzulli 2010; Reis and Renzulli 2009; Special Education Department 2010; KHDA 2017a).

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 The Three Ring Concept of Giftedness

According to Renzulli, the development of giftedness requires the fulfillment of three characteristics. Firstly, a student should possess various "above average abilities." Secondly, he should be creative. Finally, he has to be task committed. Without these three characteristics, a child cannot develop his giftedness (Renzulli 1984). Correspondingly, the role of the school is to stimulate creativity and task commitment to developing giftedness.

Derived from the Three Ring Concept of Giftedness, the "Schoolwide Enrichment Model" is established to identify and to develop giftedness (Reis and Renzulli 2009). Proven to be effective, this program is customized to suit the different types of giftedness and talents and is culturally unbiased. Besides, it has been used by thousands of schools in the USA and around the world. Renzulli keeps on reviewing and updating this model with his research (Reis and Renzulli 2018). As the name indicates, this model highlights the role of the whole school in enriching gifted students. Enrichment for Renzulli is a plan for a child to optimize his success in the field of interest or giftedness.

2.2.2 The Differentiated Model for Giftedness and Talent

Francoys Gagne has developed this model aimed at identifying and developing giftedness (see Appendix D). According to Gagne, a talented person is a someone who was able to build and optimize his giftedness (Gagne 1985). In other words, it is a higher level of giftedness, unlike the different definition of talent previously explained. This model illustrates how environmental and intrapersonal factors, called "catalysts," develop giftedness into talentedness. Giftedness for Gagne is considered of natural abilities in various fields. However, catalyzers transform these superior natural abilities into talents. On the one hand, the environmental factors are divided into three blocks: the milieu such as the culture, the individuals such as the family and teachers and the provisions supporting giftedness. On the other one, the intrapersonal factors are divided into two parts: the traits (physical and mental) and the goal management such as awareness and motivation (Gagne 1995).

In this context, the role of the school is to support gifted students with the enrichment provisions, catalyzing him to become talented. Suggested enrichment provisions could be at the level of the curriculum, acceleration, and grouping (Gagne 1995). The model is widely used in international schools and is also considered unbiased and effective (Education ACT 2018).

2.3. Review of Related Literature

Giftedness education, part of which is giftedness policies, has evolved significantly around the world. Mainly, intragovernmental organizations such as the UNESCO and the European Union have set standards for giftedness policy. Also, countries, states, and schools have by themselves elaborated their own (Education ACT 2018; ETSN 2018).

Nevertheless, according to Mansfield, giftedness policies in the USA are still considered as colonial and discriminating, thus, require additional reforms (Mansfield 2016). Giftedness education is deemed to be customized to an elite group of students rather than covering all the social and cultural differences in the USA (Mansfield 2016). Besides, the country is wasting many of the potentially gifted students rather than developing them because schools of such minorities do not possess the needed resources for developing them (Davidson et al. 2004). Similar findings are of a research studying giftedness policies and procedures in South Australia. Not all gifted students are provided with the adequate support by their schools due to the social differences (Krisjansen and Lapin 2001).

Also, giftedness policies can be discriminating based on the perception of intelligence. Sternberg and Zhang consider that giftedness is based on high level of intelligence reflected by the IQ test, the Intelligent Quotient. Hence, people with high IQ scores are relatively limited, making giftedness restricted (Sternberg and Zhang 1995).

However, Gagne, from his side, has attempted to demonstrate that giftedness is common to all social classes and cultural backgrounds. In other words, anyone may have the different superior abilities and competencies. Thus, supportive giftedness education would develop these students into talented ones (Gagne 2007). In contrast to

Sternberg and Zhang, Gardner identified different types of intelligences that cannot be measured by the IQ test. These intelligences also imply the urge to develop them (Gardner 1995).

Consequently, releasing a high-profile giftedness policy is quite complicated. Throughout the twenty-first century, developing a complete giftedness policy has been the concern of various researchers. Van Tassel-Baska has established the Five-Component of Gifted Education Policy. In addition to the foundation of any education policy, the components include (1) the identification, (2) the program, curriculum, and service, (3) personnel preparation, (4) program management (5) assessment and evaluation (2006). This model is from the most commonly adopted ones in giftedness policy till today (Massgifted.org 2016). Moreover, to evaluate a given giftedness policy, Van Tassel-Baska has formulated the Five Attributes of a High-Quality Giftedness Policy. The attributes consist of policy clarity, comprehensiveness, connectedness, feasibility for implementation and being research-based (Van Tassel-Baska 2009).

2.4. Situating the Current Study

According to Al Ghawi's, schools are aware of the giftedness policy platform provided by the MoE (2016). She also added that the policy released by the MoE is not the same as the ones implemented in the schools she studied (Al Ghawi 2017). To confirm her findings, a comparison between the MoE giftedness policy and the KHDA inspection framework 2017-2018 issued by the federal education authority of Dubai demonstrates inconsistency. On the one hand, the definitions of giftedness and talentedness are dissimilar. On the other one, the models used to develop giftedness are unidentical (KHDA 2017a). Hence, this research is determined to conduct a content analysis of two giftedness policies in the same emirate of Dubai. This analysis is grounded in the Five Attributes of a High-Quality Giftedness Policy to evaluate the giftedness provision programs stated in the studied policies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

The emancipatory theoretical paradigm underpins this critique as it seeks for giftedness equity. Today's education systems still undermine gifted students, around the world. Not only would the research examine current giftedness policies in Dubai, but it also seeks a reform or an upgrade of the currently used policies.

This research is qualitative because it is founded on a qualitative content analysis of two giftedness policies of two schools in Dubai, in the UAE. Specifically, the in-class and extra-curricular provision program component is to be critically analyzed based on the Five Attributes of a High-Quality Giftedness Policy. Even though the programs outlined in the policy are the scope of this study, they shall not be examined in isolation from the relevant rationale, definitions, and objectives.

3.2. Data Collection

These giftedness policies are retrieved from the schools' official website. This research compares these policies analytically. Similar regarding curriculum and of high KHDA rating, these schools present several demographical, cultural and structural differences.

The first school policy examined is the one of Dubai English Speaking College, a private school in Dubai, which implements the British curriculum. Also, most of its students and teachers are of British nationality. DESC is a mixed school of boys and girls; with an age range between 11 and 18 years. The number of SEND students includes the gifted and talented ones. In addition, its tuition fees are expensive due to its outstanding performance over the past six years (KHDA 2017b).

The second school policy examined is the one of the School of Research Science, a private school in Dubai, which also uses the British curriculum. In contrast to the DESC, most of the students are Emirati whereas as most of the teachers is British. This school is a segregated school of boys and girls; with an age range of 3 to 18 years. The gifted and talented students are part of the SEND (KHDA 2017c). With the very good rating in the last inspection report, the school's tuition fees are expected to jump significantly, relatively to other Emirati private schools, yet less than the DESC ones.

3.3. Delimitation and Limitations

One of the study delimitations is the focus on the provision programs stated in the giftedness policies. Another one is the evaluation of the policies as a source of documents rather than their practice. Even though these policies do not reflect how these two studied schools manage giftedness, they shall provide a roadmap for concerned giftedness stakeholders.

Nevertheless, this critique is limited in several ways. One the one hand, it does not reflect a full inclusive image of giftedness policies in Dubai, at a micro level, and in the UAE, at a macro level. On the other one, only a part of the examined policies is evaluated.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

As the giftedness policies are posted online, the researcher has not directly contacted the schools for approval of taking part in the study. Publishing documents on official website implies that the latter are not confidential. Such policies shall only be used for research purpose.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The content analysis of this study is of the provision program component of the selected giftedness policies. Nevertheless, this analysis cannot be held without taking into consideration the foundation of any policy: the rationale, aims, and definitions.

Based on the content analysis of these two giftedness policies, the data are to be analyzed based comparative thematic analysis: (A) foundation of the policy: rationale, aims and definitions (B) provision program for giftedness (C) verification of this policy through the KHDA inspection reports.

(A) Foundation of the policy:

(i). Rationale:

The giftedness policy rationale of DESC is extensive, of two pages, as it explains in detail the "Growth Mindset" of the school. In simple terms, the school is designed to support the enrichment of all its students, whether gifted or not. Thus, this marks a deviation from giftedness. In contrast, the giftedness policy rationale of the School of Research Science is brief where it merely states why the school supports the development of gifted and talented students.

(ii). Aims:

DESC does not provide explicitly stated aims. Its giftedness policy aims are embedded within developing all the students of DESC. This school believes that all students could excel in at least in one of their field of interest. However, the School of Research Science has a list of explicitly stated aims. They range from identifying to developing gifted students while training teachers and involving parents.

(iii). Definitions:

DESC explicitly distinguishes between the meanings of gifted students and talented students. However, these definitions are not of the KHDA Inspection Framework set by Gagne. Nevertheless, the School of Research Science does not distinguish among gifted students and talented ones, just like the Ministry of Education. This fact implies that the school is not employing the KHDA required definitions.

(B) Provision program:

As previously stated, DESC provides a table full of enrichment programs for all students, divided into subjects. To help gifted and talented students, the school prepares an Advanced Learning Program intended to customize an enriching plan suitable for fulfilling individual student's needs. However, the School of Research Science explains the exceptional use of acceleration. Additionally, a list of extra-curricular activities and in-classroom challenging activities is visibly stated.

(C) Verification of the use of these policies:

Based on the last KHDA inspection reports of the studied schools, gifted and talented in-class and extra-curricular activities are stated to be innovative and precise. The primary factor of these success stories is the high-quality teachers, who effectively challenge gifted students. However, each one of them should modify and improve other parts of the gifted education such as monitoring and identification giftedness (KHDA 2017b; KHDA 2017c).

5. Interpretation, Discussion, and Recommendation

As previously discussed, the data obtained from giftedness policies shall be evaluated based on the Five Attributes of a High-Quality Giftedness Policy: (A) clarity, (B) comprehensive, (C) connected, (D) feasible and (E) consistent with giftedness research (Van Tassel-Baska 2009).

(A) Clarity:

DESC giftedness rationale and aims are not clear because the reader would understand that this policy is tailored to all the students of the school. Even though the definitions of gifted and talented students are explicitly stated, there is no distinction between the corresponding programs for each category of students. Also, as previously mentioned, there is an apparent overlap between the supporting programs used to challenge all the students and the provision programs used for gifted education. As for the School of Research Science has a more precise structure of rationale, aims and supporting programs even though there is no distinction between the meanings of gifts and talents.

(B) Comprehensiveness:

At the level of the studied component of the giftedness policy, DESC is not comprehensive because it does not specify what is particularly offered to gifted and talented students. However, by stating that ALP shall be customized for the different gifted and talented students connotes that this category is heterogeneous. In other words, not all gifted and talented require the same provision programs (Reis and Renzulli 2009). In contrast, the School of Research Science represents a more comprehensive explanation of each of the supporting program even though gifted and talented students are considered as one group.

(C) Connectedness:

DESC's giftedness policy shows less of internal connectedness relatively to the School of Research Science one. However, although extensively, the DESC shows how its giftedness policy is related to other education policies of the school by linking giftedness to different subjects and through expecting high achievement from all students. Unlike the DESC policy, the School of Research Science shows that giftedness policy is isolated from the rest of the school policies.

(D) Feasible:

There is no clear indication in the policy of its feasibility. However, as exploring the KHDA Inspection Report of each one of these schools, there is clear evidence that DESC and the School of Research Science are financially and practically prepared to provide gifted and talented students with the stated supportive programs.

(E) Consistency with giftedness research:

The two policies show that they are matching the research updates in giftedness to a certain extent. However, apparently, the School of Research Science cannot apply all the findings of these research due to cultural and social reasons. The typical example is its inability to implement acceleration due to social reasons as mentioned in the policy. Here, the difference between the nationalities of the students in the two schools dictates the asymmetry.

As a result, this content analysis shows that the two policies are dissymmetrical. Firstly, their structure is different as previously stated. Secondly, an apparent contradiction is demonstrated by defining the keywords of giftedness and talentedness. Thirdly, even though provision programs are indicated, their structure and content vary. Finally, social and cultural factors play an important role in policy-making. On the one hand, due to its high expectations from all its students, DESC does not segregate between gifted and talented students and the mainstream

students who are of high achievers. On the other one, the School of Research Science cannot implement all the named enrichment activities that other schools use due to social perceptions and stereotypes (The School of Research Science 2017).

Moreover, none of these school use or implement the suggested plan of Francoye Gagne recommended by the KHDA. Their deviance from this DMGT model has not affected their inspection rating. Also, the Ministry of Education, with the support of the federal education authorities such as the KHDA, should reform its giftedness policy to guarantee that there is no significant disparity among schools. Also, giftedness education should be financially supported by the government because such students are investments of high returns.

Finally, all giftedness policies should follow one structure based on the five components. However, not all schools are efficiently working on these students, who are valuable assets to the country. For quality assurance purpose, they also must follow the five attributes used in the data analysis of this study. Nevertheless, consistency with the research part should include the flexibility to adapt to different cultures and social factors of the students.

A study on giftedness in Hong-Kong supports the need for flexibility. In specific, this stated investigation evaluates the effectiveness of giftedness education policies within the same attributes of this critique. The findings suggest that these attributes are more relevant in the USA and cannot match the culture of the Hong-Kong. Moreover, these examined policies have become outdated relatively to the quick change in giftedness research when it comes to identification and supporting programs of giftedness. Also, it is not easy to have all the five components of these policies complementing each other (Phillipson et al. 2011).

6. Conclusion and Suggestion for Future Research

The following conclusions could be drawn from this study. To sum up, the content analysis shows that the studied schools possess supporting programs for giftedness. However, these policies are not yet of high quality because they do not abide by the Five Attributes of a High-Quality Giftedness Policy. Furthermore, many dissimilarities exist in the giftedness policy component studied.

Researchers should examine other components of giftedness policies in Dubai and other emirates of the UAE. Additionally, as only highly-rated private schools are examined, studies of schools with other standards may promote different results. Further research on the public sector may lead to other findings. Lastly, this content analysis has only examined the policy as a document without assessing its effectiveness. Hence, the effectiveness of giftedness policies in the UAE is also worthy of exploration.

Biography:

Aida C. Younis is a Ph.D. candidate at the British University in Dubai, specializing in Special and Inclusive Education, with full concentration on Giftedness Education. She is also a high-distinction graduate with B.S. in Economics (2006) and MBA (2008) from the Lebanese American University. While completing her MBA, she co-authored business articles with her professors. Since 2009, Aida has been teaching, lecturing, and chairing departments in several private schools and universities in KSA and UAE, in the areas of Accounting, Business Studies, Economics, Sociology, and History. Aida is currently the Business Department Coordinator at Al Durrah International School- Sharjah, UAE.

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