

Challenges Facing Gifted Students in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Gifted education and general education are inseparable in Saudi Arabia. Gifted students are integrated with other students in public schools. Like regular students, gifted students study the same curriculum, and in many schools they have been taught by non-specialist or untrained teachers of gifted education. In spite of some special programs for gifted children, such as summer enrichment programs and weekend programs, gifted students still face challenges and difficulties in Saudi public schools. This study attempts to explore some of these challenges: a) the nature of the Saudi educational system, (b) the structure of curricula, and (c) the readiness of Saudi teachers to deal with gifted students. The findings show that, though the Saudi educational system has witnessed significant development and has received considerable support from the government, education in Saudi Arabia is still behind global standards. The balance between Islamic and Arabic studies on one hand and scientific subjects (i.e., mathematics and science studies) on the other is still uneven. In addition, the preparation and training programs of Saudi teachers to deal with regular students in general and gifted students in particular need a lot of work from the Ministry of Education and the teachers themselves. The consequences for gifted students as part of the Saudi educational system, as well as further recommendations, are later discussed.

Keywords: gifted students, Saudi educational system, difficulties facing gifted students, religious education.

1. Introduction

My two daughters, Fatmah and Manar, motivated me to explore this issue. They started their compulsory study at an Australian public school. As a specialist in gifted education, I noticed their talents at an early stage. They scored at the top of their classroom. Fatmah was one of the top five winners in a Victoria State reading competition and Manar obtained a number of prizes in reading and mathematics in her class and her school. They were very enthusiastic about their studies and nothing bothered them except for school holidays. When they returned to their home country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Fatmah was in grade six and Manar was in grade four. They affirmed their exceptional abilities when they took the Gifted Children Test and ranked in the top 5% of gifted Saudi children. However, since they have returned home I have changed their school five times. All attempts to find a suitable school environment that would meet their exceptional academic abilities have failed. It could be argued that hundreds of gifted children perhaps suffer insufficient care in Saudi schools. Such a problem has raised several questions: What are the real attitudes held by Saudi teachers toward giftedness and gifted education? Are Saudi teachers qualified to deal with gifted children? Do Saudi schools have adequate equipment and resources for gifted children? Do Saudi curricula consider the needs and exceptional ability of gifted children? In order to understand the situation of gifted education/gifted children in Saudi Arabia, I explore three challenges with particular relevance to gifted education: (a) the nature of the general education system, (b) curricula, and (c) the readiness of teachers. It is safe to admit that few resources in English or Arabic are available on the Saudi educational system in general, or on Saudi teachers and curricula in particular. Most come from various theses or opinions in the media.

2. The Nature of the General Education System

In Saudi Arabia, the general education system and gifted education are inseparable (Aljughaiman & Grigorenko, 2013). As a young country founded in 1932, its primary attention since its establishment focused on general education. The new country faced a real challenge in removing the Ottoman education which was centered in the *Hijaz* region (western district of Saudi Arabia) and some cities in *Najd* (central district of Saudi Arabia) (Rugh, 2002). It aimed to construct its own educational identity in light of its political and social objectives. The first formal institution for education in Saudi Arabia, the Directorate of the Education, was established in 1925. The message of this institution relied on Islamic instructions as a main source to formulate the educational system in all schools across the country (Aleisa, 2009). As a result, religious education has dominated the core of the Saudi educational system up until the present (Rugh, 2002). Aleisa (2009) reviewed the subjects taught in Saudi schools and found that the proportions of religious studies and Arabic language classes are higher compared to other subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies. He calculated this and found that, from grades 1 to 12, students of Islamic studies study religion (3,488) and Arabic (3,072), while mathematics, science, and social studies lessons were 1,408, 992 and 1,120, respectively. Students of mathematics and science studies, on the other hand, study throughout the same grades religion (2,976), Arabic (2,268), and social studies (928). Interestingly, these students have science studies as their major field of study math (1,792) and science (1,824). Moreover, the style of learning and teaching in Saudi schools relies heavily on memorization and lecturing. This results not only in narrowing the participation of the graduates of Islamic and Arabic studies in scientific areas of

society, but also hindering the knowledge of gifted children from meeting global standards. The argument here is not against religion itself. Rather, it is about the domination of the religious teaching style in all theoretical and practical subjects at schools. Al-Riyadh newspaper, in a section referring to the development of teaching: converting from a lecturing style to a thinking style, Aba Alkhale (2014) stated that lecturing, memorization, and recalling styles, which are characteristics of religious education, expand to include scientific and mathematical subjects. It argued that the majority of our students rely on these traditional styles not only to study religious and Arabic studies but also to understand mathematics and scientific laws

3. The Structure of Saudi Curricula

In Saudi primary schools, students from grades one to six study 189 hours per week (90 hours in grades one to three and 99 hours in grades four to six). Approximately 57% of the hours from the entire amount are devoted to Islamic and Arabic studies in each grade. No social studies lessons are given to students from grades one to three, while students from grades four to six study this subject only 3% of the time in each grade. The proportion of mathematics and science lessons is about 22% of the hours in each grade (from one to six). English language lessons are given only to students from grades four to six (3%). Other hours (about 14%) go toward other class activities such as Art and physical education.

In Saudi intermediate schools, students from grades seven to nine take 105 hours of classes per week (35 hours per week in each grade). Approximately 43% of these hours are allotted for Islamic and Arabic studies in each grade. Mathematics, science, computer science, and English are given about 40% of the total hours. The remaining hours are devoted to national and science studies, art, and physical education (17%).

In Saudi secondary schools, students study for three years. In the first year, they study a general curriculum (35 hours); 31% of these hours go toward Islamic and Arabic studies, and 37% of the hours are given to mathematics, science, and computer science. Social studies, English language, physical education, and national education are given 23%. The remaining hours (9%) are assigned to other activities and the library. In the two remaining years, they study either liberal arts (Islamic and Arabic studies) or sciences (mathematics and science). In the liberal arts, they study 66 hours in grades 11 and 12. The proportion of Islamic and Arabic studies in these grades is about 46% of the hours. Computer science takes up 7% of the hours, but students do not study mathematics and science in these grades. English language instruction is given about 13% of the entire number of hours. National and social studies are given 28% of the hours, and library and physical education take up 6% of the hours. In the science curriculum, students from grades 11 to 12 study 73 hours (38 in grade 11 and 35 in grade 12). They study Islamic and Arabic studies 26% of the hours. The proportion of scientific studies (mathematics and science) is about 58% of the hours. The remaining hours go toward English language study, national studies, and physical education (16%).

Except for grades 11 and 12 in the science curriculum branch, Islamic and Arabic studies dominate about 50% of the time from primary to secondary levels. Bearing in mind that most Islamic and Arabic studies rely on basic elements of cognitive abilities (i.e., memorization), this may result in storing information without understanding. Boyle (2006) conducted a qualitative study in three different Islamic countries and found that most students were able to memorize a lot of Qur'anic verses but were not able to understand or explain them. The argument here is not against religious education. Rather, it is against the domination of religious teaching which, as mentioned above, expands to include scientific subjects. It could be argued that memorization is an effective method for learning the Qur'an and *Sunnah* (sayings and teachings of the prophet Mohammed) or other important Islamic pillars. From its early appearance, when ignorance dominated the wide range of Muslim countries, memorization played a key role in maintaining the Qur'an and other religious instructions. However, today, the technology boom facilitates this job and people of different ages are able to read and listen to the Qur'an or review any theoretical information on their electronic devices. Aleisa (2009) claimed that Saudi educators acknowledge that the Saudi educational system apparently fails in its quality of education. As a result, several committees for reviewing and developing Saudi education discussed tens of proposals during the last five years.

Currently, the Saudi government is determined to develop the educational system. The King Abdullah Public Education Development Project aims to develop education; one of its objectives is to achieve harmony between Saudi curricular and 21st-century skills (King Abdullah Public Education Development Project, 2014). The Minister of the Ministry of Education announced that the educational field in Saudi Arabia will witness significant development within the next few years. He indicated the additional amount (\$21.3 bn) that has been declared by King Abdullah to support education in Saudi Arabia (Zillah, 2014). While this amount will be allocated for the four elements of education (teachers, students, school environments, administrations), the announcement of the Minister did not mention the curriculum.

Of course, developing Saudi education to meet global standards is a very important factor, but it cannot be obtained unless these efforts replace or minimize the lecturing and memorization styles that dominate the structure of the curriculum. Limiting students to studying with traditional methods that allow only teachers to play the main role will create a considerable lack of independent graduates. Students need to rely on themselves and play an essential role in the educational process. The current Saudi curriculum does not allow students to

play this type of role. Aleisa (2009) criticized the Saudi curriculum and stated that the content of the subjects is studied separately. For example, Islamic studies consist of six main subjects: Qur'an, *Tawhid* (declaration of the oneness of God), *Tajwid* (rules of recitation), *Tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an), *Sunnah* (sayings and teachings of the prophet Mohammed), and *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). However, although they have a strong relationship in both goals and content, they are taught separately from each other. This also applies to Arabic studies, which include subjects such as Arabic literature, Arabic grammar, reading, and comprehension. The lack of harmony in presenting and teaching these subjects though the apparent relationship between them has extended to include scientific subjects. Aleisa argued that such problems plus the reliance on lecturing and memorization in presenting and studying subjects results in weak educational outcomes. Although Saudi Arabia has spent huge amounts of money on education, it is still ranks low compared to other countries that have spent less. According to the World Bank (2012), the result of the competition between 144 countries in the Knowledge Index (KI) ranked Saudi Arabia in 50th place with 5.95 points. According to International Mathematics Report (2007), eighth-grade Saudi students ranked at the bottom of the list (42nd). In 2012, Saudi Arabia showed significant progress and was ranked 29th in the same list (Almarefa, 2012). However, whether this can be attributed to improvements in Saudi education has not been proven. Since this is beyond the scope of the current study, it is recommended that others investigate this issue to let us know if these improved students have been affected by the Saudi curriculum or by something else.

4. The Readiness of Teachers

Bearing in mind that the Saudi government has allocated a huge amount of money for education and has established several plans to develop teachers' skills while its educational system is still below the global standards may urge us to understand this gap. In spite of the importance of this issue, it is beyond the scope of this study. Conducting a national project to investigate this matter and to propose solutions is highly recommended. The author, in this section, focuses on the characteristics of Saudi teachers, while attempting to understand the roots of these traits and whether they are related to their personalities or to the nature of the Saudi educational system.

In Saudi Arabia, prospective teachers spend four years in college studying several disciplines. From graduation day onward, teachers face two main problems. First, the structure of the curriculum they already studied from grade one to college, plus the domination of lecturing and memorization styles, negatively impact their eligibility for and contribution to scholastic environments. Second, there is a gap between what prospective teachers were already taught at schools and what they are required to practice with their students. The second problem stems from the first one. The better the preparation of prospective teachers during college, the fewer problems teachers will face in schools. Al-Mushaigeh (2005) emphasized the willingness of teachers to teach and considered it a magic key to make their efforts more meaningful. He criticized the preparation of teachers in Saudi Arabia and proposed that educational faculties have to improve their curricula in order to meet competency levels. In addition, they must prepare teachers to be facilitators, not dominators, and not the only source for knowledge. This includes using technology and self-improvement techniques to be capable of dealing with all educational challenges inside or outside of classrooms. Altayar (2003) summarized the characteristics of Saudi teachers. She claimed that Saudi teachers display low levels of responsibility, passion, and enthusiasm for teaching. In addition, they possess poor skills that do not help them either in lesson-planning or in classroom management. To solve this, a number of regulations have been created such as Test of Teachers competencies and a preparatory year for new teachers, which aim to ensure the desirability and the eligibility of people who intend to teach. According to this regulation, teachers who show unwillingness or incapability of teaching are forced to attend additional courses in education, or even to quit altogether. In a similar manner, the Ministry of Education joins the eligibility of teachers who deserve incentives with their students' performance (Almadina Newspaper, 2011). However, except for in-service teacher-training programs that are scheduled from time to time, it is rare to hear that a teacher has quit teaching even if he or she attended several courses and is still unqualified. Alnahdi (2014) claimed that "the lack of accountability for teachers' performances is one of the obstacles that Saudi Arabia is facing nowadays in many fields of work" (p. 3). It could be argued that the Ministry of Education does its part by imposing regulations that allow teachers to do their job in healthy atmospheres. Teachers, on the other hand, are still unsatisfied and arguing against the role of the Ministry of Education. In a section of the newspaper Al-Riyadh about developing curricula and weak teachers, Al Saqran (2014) interviewed a number of teachers to explore their attitudes toward the educational process. Most teachers perceived no balance between the development of education and the training of teachers. They all agreed that the Ministry of Education has attempted to develop the curriculum and did not take into account the situations of teachers and students. This has resulted in increasing the load of some teachers to 24 hours per week, which leaves no margin of flexibility for teachers to improve their skills to meet all their students' requirements. Teachers also argued that the Ministry of Education in the last few years has flooded the field with long lists of regulations and new educational plans. One teacher who was interviewed during this investigation stated that the Ministry of Education established these plans and forced teachers to implement them without sufficient training.

A heated debate is still being exchanged between the Ministry of Education and teachers. Unfortunately, students are the ones who pay the price. As a parent and a specialist in the field of education, I believe that the government and the Ministry of Education have done a great job despite some weaknesses in the educational system and curriculum. The government paid large amounts of money to develop education and curricula, and established many educational plans to train teachers. The carelessness and lack of knowledge of some Saudi teachers are behind many problems that Saudi students face today. The relationship between those teachers and their students can be likened to the one between a jailer and a prisoner. Students are not allowed to express their feelings regarding the way they have been taught or the knowledge and information they have received. Teachers do not distinguish between regular and gifted students. Despite the fact that all students are entitled to attention and understanding, neglecting the needs of gifted students harms not only gifted students themselves but also the nation as a whole.

5. Consequences for Gifted Students

It is widely known that gifted students “differ from the norm in respect to precocity and complexity” (Van Tassel-Baska, 2008, p. 3). The nature of the general education system in Saudi Arabia lessens the participation of gifted students. Students who are brilliant in mathematics and/or science cannot be expected to expand their talents if the system does not give them adequate knowledge related to their needs. The domination of religious studies, which may provide students with spirituality and ethics, does not necessarily work to meet the needs of their exceptionality in scientific areas. Gifted students have special learning needs that require a competitive curriculum and skilled educators. Identifying appropriate curricula for gifted students is a universal challenge (Feldhusen, 1989; Finley, 2008; Gagné, 2005; Hudson, Hudson, Lewis, & Watters, 2010, Van Tassel-Baska, 2008). It is suggested that we implement curricula that meet the levels of gifted students’ needs. Feldhusen (1989) proposed that using differentiated curricula with gifted students in regular classrooms would lead to “higher academic achievement and better academic attitudes for the gifted” (p. 10). Tomlinson (1987) argued that gifted students need learning experience that matches their intellectuality and that is relevant to societal problems in order to encourage them to develop solutions. They need to be taught in the way they prefer. In some subjects, some gifted students prefer to study quickly, while in others they prefer to go more slowly through them; teachers must understand this. Providing gifted students with curricula that satisfy their talents would not allow them to maximize their talents unless they are lucky to have trained and qualified teachers. Unfortunately, many gifted students are taught in regular classrooms by teachers who are either untrained or unknowledgeable about their needs (Paine, 1990; Finley, 2008).

Gifted Saudi students have experiences similar to other gifted students around the world. However, interest in studying issues related to gifted education in Saudi Arabia is still insufficient (Alamer, 2010; AL Garni, 2012). In spite of establishing two professional institutions, the General Department for Gifted Students at the Ministry of Education and King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity, many challenges still face gifted students in our schools. Reviewing the goals of these institutions showed that “the ultimate goal of the Ministry of Education and The King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for Giftedness and Creativity is to identify gifted children in order to provide them with all knowledge that can meet their needs (Alamer, 2010, p. 2). Putting this goal into practice shows that the gap between theory and practice regarding gifted education in Saudi Arabia is still wide. In Saudi public schools, gifted students are still forced to study a regular curriculum, while several theorists and researchers in the field of gifted education have urged schools to differentiate the regular curriculum in order to meet the needs of gifted students (Finley, 2008; Gagné, 2005). This fact is known by Saudi policymakers and is clearly mentioned in all regulations for identifying gifted students. Except for some efforts by some teachers who do their best to modify mathematics and sciences to be appropriate for the gifted, there is neither a special curriculum for gifted students in public schools nor in gifted programs in Saudi Arabia. Currently, gifted students in Saudi Arabia have missed the opportunity of finding curricula and instruction of an appropriate level and complexity. In order to accommodate gifted students and to support their growth in regular classrooms, schools are strongly recommended to provide those students with suitably differentiated curricula and instruction (The National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2014).

Of course, providing gifted students with an appropriate curriculum would be meaningless unless we provide them with teachers who are “knowledgeable and informed about this population of students, and instructional practices that promote differentiation” (Finley, 2008, p. 80). Teachers must know that one of their main duties is to encourage and motivate all gifted students to reach their maximum potential. Therefore, teachers should do their best to identify the needs of all gifted students and to make them attainable.

In Saudi Arabia, the majority of teachers of gifted students in public schools are not professionally trained to deal with this specific population. Except for one unit in Introduction to Gifted Education that is given in the Special Education branch, no special classes for gifted education are given to prospective teachers in Saudi universities. It is recommended that we place gifted students “with teachers who have received at least 12 university hours of professional training” (Van Tassel-Baska, 2008, p. 17). In the best-case scenario, Saudi teachers would attend a number of workshops on gifted education. However, a number of Saudi researchers

(e.g., Alfahaid, 2002; AL Garni, 2012; Al Qarni, 2010) have investigated the impact of training upon the attitudes of Saudi teachers toward gifted students and concluded that some teachers had insufficient knowledge and negative attitudes toward gifted education and gifted students. The uselessness of Saudi training programs for teachers to deal with the gifted creates many problems for gifted students in our schools. This may increase the number of teachers who are perceived as qualified teachers of gifted students when in reality they are not. Furthermore, some teachers may increase their misunderstanding of the characteristics and needs of gifted students since this issue has been proven as a negative element of teachers' attitudes toward gifted students (McCoach and Siegle, 2007).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aims to explore the challenges facing gifted students in Saudi public schools. Although the field mentions many challenges that face gifted students, in this study the author focuses on three challenges: the nature of the Saudi educational system, the curricula, and the readiness of teachers to deal with gifted students in their classrooms. As the discussions above mention, the system of gifted education is embedded within the general education system. Due to the fact that much attention has been paid to regular students in the Saudi educational system, this could result in neglecting the needs of gifted students in our schools. Of course, I am not suggesting separating gifted education from the general education system, but I do believe, based on the views of many experts in the field of gifted education, that gifted students would benefit from not being forced to study in the same way that regular students do. Furthermore, it is noted that gifted students in Saudi public schools do not follow a special curriculum. Moreover, throughout their education, they are restricted to considerable amounts of Islamic and Arabic studies while their amount of interest in mathematics and science, for example, seems to be below the level of their needs. Policymakers should understand that not all students in our schools are required to be specialist in Islamic and/or Arabic studies. Rather, it benefits both the government and society to graduate various students who are skilled in different areas.

Policymakers and teachers themselves should understand that gifted students have unique characteristics and special needs. As mentioned above, several teachers who work in our public schools still struggle with some points (e.g., the load of weekly hours, promotions, and the ambiguity of the educational system). Regardless of the importance of these requirements based on teachers perspectives, gifted students deserve to be at the center of our attention, and policymakers must ensure that gifted students are taught by well-prepared and highly skilled teachers. This requires establishing special branches of gifted education in some selected universities. In addition, we must review the content, strategies, and objectives of training programs for gifted education and ensure that these programs contribute valuable knowledge and information that allow teachers to deal with gifted students in professional ways.

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