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Problems of Gifted and Talented Students Regarding Cursive Handwriting: Parent Opinions *

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Abstract: We are living in an age where knowledge is rapidly produced and consumed. In this period, the future of the individual and the society depends on accessing, using and producing information. This situation requires a qualified education and first literacy teaching which is the foundation of it. Primary school is the foundation of everything; likewise, the first literacy learning is the foundation of learning (Gunes, Uysal and Tac, 2016). First literacy is to create a new communication and interaction channel for the individual by teaching the symbols of humankind that it created in ten thousand years. Education performs a great miracle by making a seven-year old child comprehend this script that humankind developed in ten thousand years within a seven- or eight-month period (Guleryuz, 2001). It is desired for and expected of the children who start the first grade in primary school at the level of illiteracy to reach the level of basic literacy with qualified first literacy education under the supervision of an effective program, equipped teacher (Sagirli, 2015). Education in cursive handwriting in our country has started in Ataturk era. Ataturk demonstrated examples of the New Turkish Latin Letters on the blackboard with the cursive handwriting. Elderly and young people of the generation of Ataturk era have learned the cursive handwriting very well and used for many years. Many documents of that period such as diplomas, identity cards, registry of deeds etc. have been prepared with cursive handwriting in a clear, cursive and aesthetic form (Gunes, 2006). In our country, it has been decided to start the first literacy education with the cursive handwriting under the scope of the 2004 draft program. For nearly thirteen years, our students are becoming literate with cursive handwriting. There are many studies in literature that examine the opinions of teachers, students, and parents about the cursive handwriting. The aim of the concerned study is to express the view from the perspective of the parents of the gifted and talented students on the practice of cursive handwriting in first literacy education. Within the scope of the research, interviews were conducted with the parents of the gifted and talented students and their opinions were taken about starting the first literacy with the practice of the cursive handwriting. All of the parents are the parents of gifted and talented children who are attending primary school. The data collected during the 2016-2017 academic year have been obtained by face-to-face interviews. The answers of the parents are recorded and then reported. Screening model is used in the study that is designed by content analysis. The research is a qualitative study. Recommendations are brought at the end of the research.

Keywords: *Gifted and talented students, parents opinions, first literacy, cursive handwriting, writing skill.*

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Introduction

We are living in an age where knowledge is rapidly produced and consumed. In this period, the future of the individual and the society depends on accessing, using and producing information. This situation requires a qualified education and first literacy teaching which is the foundation of it. Primary school is the foundation of everything; likewise, the first literacy learning is the foundation of learning (Gunes, Uysal and Tac, 2016).

Mother language education starts with listening. This process is supported by a designed, planned, organized institution respectively with speaking, then with reading and finally with writing. An individual whose mother language education is insufficient is quickly eliminated from the business world because of the competition in our age. The most key element for the success of the individuals who have to work in order to survive is to get the mother language education in the most effective way (Kadioglu Ates, 2016).

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First literacy is to create a new communication and interaction channel for the individual by teaching the symbols of humankind that it created in ten thousand years. Education performs a great miracle by making a seven-year old child comprehend this script that humankind developed in ten thousand years within seven- or eight-month period (Guleryuz, 2000). It is desired for and expected of the children who start the first grade in primary school at the level of illiteracy to reach the level of basic literacy with qualified first literacy education under the supervision of an effective program, equipped teacher (Sagirli, 2015).

The human being has written down what he has lived, imagined, seen, witnessed, in brief, all the events and facts he has experienced with the invention of writing. All written information, records and documents have been made available to all humanity. Whatever it is that is in writing is now applicable at all times. Moreover, there is an interwoven and tight bond between history, culture and writing. Thanks to the written documents, whatever has occurred in the past is known. Nuncupative oral history may change or wither. It has low reliability. However, history that is put on paper means that it has perpetuated its existence. The importance of script in human life is important (Kadioglu Ates, 2015).

Education in cursive handwriting in our country has started in Ataturk era. Ataturk demonstrated examples of the New Turkish Latin Letters on the blackboard with the cursive handwriting. Elderly and young people of the generation of Ataturk era have learned the cursive handwriting very well and used for many years. Many documents of that period such as diplomas, identity cards, registry of deeds etc. have been prepared with cursive handwriting in a clear, cursive and aesthetic form (Gunes, 2006). The handwriting that Ataturk taught is not cursive handwriting.

In the process of self-realization, it is necessary to provide an appropriate environment and opportunities for the individual in order for him/her to use his/her potential and the skills at the highest level. This arrangement in educational environments is of great importance not only in terms of meeting individual needs, but also in terms of social development. The uttermost important traits that create individual differences are intelligence and skills (Afat, 2017).

Gifted and talented children are children who are highly performing compared to their peers in terms of intelligence, creativity, arts and leadership, and who need learning materials and individualized or enriched teaching programs beyond the school's normal curriculum in the development of their skills areas (Science and Arts Centers Directive, 2009). The given abilities of the gifted and talented students must be felt to be of great importance for themselves, their families, their countries and for the future of the world, and they must be equipped with universal values (Gur, 2011). It is important for individuals with special needs to be supported at the earliest possible time, in the training environments appropriate for their needs, using appropriate methods and tools, in order for them to use their existing capacities at the highest level. Furthermore, the ability of these individuals to fulfill their developmental duties by their roles and responsibilities that are required by their societies depends on their opportunity to benefit from the most appropriate special education service (Ummanel and Gurkan, 2017).

The difference in emotional and intellectual development of gifted and talented children, and especially the fact that these two areas of development do not develop simultaneously, may affect the gifted and talented students to own a perfectionist structure according to family attitude. Thanks to the high level of problem solving, reasoning and creativity skills that the gifted and talented students possess, by evaluating the factuality of the expectations that are required of them to realize, they can determine correct and achievable targets and, therefore, can act with high motivation. Because being aware of one's own potential and trying to increase this potential is a positive perfectionist trait (Ogurlu, Sevgi Yalin and Yavuz Birben, 2015).

Students with high self-efficacy perceive problems as challenges and commit to overcome the failure quickly; however, students with low self-efficacy believe that they will fail against the challenges, focus on their weaknesses and inadequacies and lose their self-confidence. Unfortunately, low self-efficacy can develop in early childhood and continue throughout life, depending on experiences, assignments and problems encountered while dealing with new situations (Faragher, 2014). In a research conducted in our country, psychological disorders such as depression, somatization, obsessive-compulsive disorder, paranoia, and psychoticism were found to be seen more frequently in gifted and talented teenagers compared to their normal peers (Cigerici, 2006).

Gifted and talented children are generally enthusiastic about learning. They devote themselves to ideas and activities with passion. They have intense curiosity about the surrounding world. Their internal motivations are high (Webb, Gore, Amend, DeVries, 2016). Noticing the existing abilities in a child as early as possible will make it easier to keep the student away from the factors that will create atrophy in his/her skills. In doing so, appropriate environments will be provided for the development of skills. The pre-school teachers and classroom teachers have an important duty in the diagnosis process of the gifted and talented students (Oznacar and Bildiren, 2016). Boyhood period is one of the most important periods that needs to be taken into consideration in order to understand the superior intelligence and how it develops. No child is born with superior intelligence, but only as a child that has the potential to have superior intelligence. Almost all children have exceptional potential, but only those who develop in an environment that is appropriate for them and that responds to their needs will have the chance to realize their own uncertainties and skills (Clark, 2015).

The current paradigm of self-induced literacy presumes that the experiences with the general patterns of the language during infancy form the basis of a child's reading skills. Literacy development may begin in early childhood years, such as at 2-3 years of age. Early readers can learn to recognize the letters, the sounds of letters, the structure of stories, the role of writing by listening to books that are read aloud, playing games and talking to people who are in charge of taking care of them. The interactions between children and their parents can help improve basic reading skills such as improving vocabulary, top-to-down and left-to-right orientation and higher-level thinking skills (Robinson, Shore, Enersen, 2014).

In our country, it has been decided to start the first literacy education with the cursive handwriting under the scope of the 2004 draft program. For nearly thirteen years, our students are becoming literate with cursive handwriting. There are many studies in literature that examine the opinions of teachers, students, parents about the cursive handwriting and their academic performances. The aim of the concerned study is to express the view from the perspective of the parents of the gifted and talented students on the practice of cursive handwriting in first literacy education.

Method

Within the scope of the research, interviews were conducted with the parents of the gifted and talented students and their opinions were taken about starting the first literacy with the practice of the cursive handwriting. All of the parents are the parents of gifted and talented children who are attending primary school. The data collected during the 2016-2017 academic year have been obtained by face-to-face interviews. The answers of the parents are recorded and then reported. Screening model is used in the study that is designed by content analysis. The research is a qualitative study. Unstructured interview form is used in the research. A total of 86 parents are interviewed. Fifty-six of the parents are women and thirty are men. Ages of the parents vary between 33 and 46. The educational levels of the parents are between high school and doctoral degree. The diagnosis of the gifted and talented was made by RAM (Counseling and Research Center-CRC), training and research hospitals, private psychologists and/or associations/foundations providing training for the gifted and talented. IQ scores of only two of the gifted students were told to their families. All of the students, except five of them, are having education in children's universities, support rooms, foundations or associations, apart from structured education. All of the gifted and talented children learned first literacy with the cursive handwriting. Forty-five of the students still prefer this type of handwriting.

Findings

While six of the parents responded that cursive handwriting is *appropriate* for their children, five of them partially agreed with this opinion, and seventy-five of them opposed to this opinion. When the opinions of the parents in relation to the cursive handwriting skill levels of their children are examined, the number of parents who indicated that their children have an illegible writing is fourteen. The number of parents who indicated that their children can *partially* write in cursive handwriting is twenty-one. The number of parents who indicated that their children can write in cursive handwriting is forty-six. The number of parents who indicated that their children can write in cursive handwriting pretty nicely and completely in conformity with all the rules is five.

According to the parent opinions, most of these children (seventy-three of them) faced problems in learning cursive handwriting.

Homeworks about writing become quite boring for the children (parents of seventy-nine students). Five out of eighty-six children in the process of first literacy period easily learned cursive handwriting. While ten of the gifted and talented children were illiterate before attending school, sixty of them were able to read, and sixteen of them were literate. According to the parent opinions, literate students learned reading and writing by themselves.

Samples of parent opinions;

"He/She repeatedly erases and writes again in order to write nicely."

"He/She definitely does not want to make his/her homework."

"He/She does not like writing. We are experiencing difficulty because drawing the lines over and over during the learning process becomes very boring for him/her. Over a period of time, his/her handwriting was very ugly that it even became illegible. Now he/she does not have a very beautiful handwriting, but a legible one."

"He/She tries everything to abstain from doing the homework on writing. He/She waits until the last moment and at the last moment, he/she writes his/her writing in boredom."

"He/She constantly questions why he/she has to use cursive handwriting. He constantly says it is nonsense. Writing is already a problem and cursive handwriting is our biggest challenge. Now he/she wants to switch to plain handwriting. Unfortunately we cannot convince our teacher."

"He/She constantly complains about not being able do it, not being able to write it. His/Her academic self-esteem and self-confidence is adversely affected. This handwriting created in him/her the fear of not being able to succeed."

"He/She gets mad because of not being able to read his/her own handwriting. When he/she writes slowly, it is legible. Whenever I offer help, he/she does not want me to. From affective perspective, this handwriting adversely affected my son."

"He/She got bored of doing homework during the first literacy period. He/She constantly questioned why he/she had to do the unnecessary repetitions. As all the class has to make progress at the same time, his/her boredom caused him/her to demonstrate undesired behaviors. Maybe painting activities that would draw his/her attention, the activities that would improve his/her thinking skills, creative writing activities could have made him love the cursive handwriting."

Only ten of the parents find cursive handwriting a good practice to start the first literacy education. Seven of the parents indicate that cursive handwriting must absolutely not be used in the education system. Sixty-nine of the parents expressed that starting the first literacy education with plain basic letters, teaching cursive handwriting as well only in the further grades, allowing the student to use the desired writing technique depending on his/her preference would be the correct practice.

An opinion of a parent:

"There is no area in life that has cursive handwriting. Signboards, magazines, storybooks, writings on the television, etc. are all written in plain, basic letters. The gifted and talented child already sees and learns the letter from these rich stimulants even before he starts school. When he/she starts school and the teachers show the cursive handwriting, he/she encounters a dilemma. So let's allow the child to learn the way that he/she sees in the natural flow of life. Let there be calligraphy classes in the 3rd or 4th grade. Let's also teach the cursive handwriting in those classes. Let's end the persistence between teacher and student."

"Is there a student who is using cursive handwriting in middle or high school? Why is this insistent attitude? Since we will not use in the future, why do we teach it? Why do we insist? Why right to choose is not allowed? The classroom teachers should have the right to teach whichever handwriting technique they prefer. The principle of effectiveness must be exercised."

"Make the literate child sit and have him/her start to draw lines. Tell him/her that 'the one you learned is not an a, the correct one is this one.' The child gets bored and does not want to go to school. Have the same word written repeatedly on one page. What kind of an education system is this? Then, they say that my child is problematic. How many teachers can realize a student who is diagnosed to be gifted and talented if the family does not mention it? Why are the gifted and talented literate students the classroom teacher's nightmare? Our education system does not cater the needs of gifted and talented."

Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

Most of the research results about cursive handwriting are similar. Students indicate that they get bored and have difficulties when learning to write. Reading skills that do not already develop simultaneously with writing progress, becomes less developed with the difficult cursive handwriting practice. There is not any study on the cursive handwriting area conducted with the superiors. It is understood from the opinions of the parents of gifted and talented students that the superiors also face problems in using cursive handwriting. In our country, teachers have freedom in using any method, technique, strategy they desire in any class they desire. However, only the method recommended by the Ministry in the first literacy education should be utilized. In the announced draft 2017 program, writing method of some of the letters related to first literacy were changed, however cursive handwriting was not abolished. With the draft program, the opinions of all academicians, teachers, parents, and students, in summary, of all stakeholders were obtained via e-mail and examined by the ministry. During the program development process, counselors of Ministry have met with field experts in the field of publishing across Turkey and obtained their opinions on cursive handwriting. The announcement made by the Minister of National Education in March 2017 announced the abolishment of the cursive handwriting to public. Starting from the 2017-2018 academic year, the first literacy skills are taught without utilizing cursive handwriting. In our country, despite the fact that first literacy education in private education is taught in plain basic letters and materials (class and student books), this does not apply to the gifted and talented students that require special education.

In our country, in all the classes except the first literacy teaching, teachers have freedom in choosing and utilizing the methods and techniques they desire. However, primary school first grade teachers do not have the right to choose methods for first literacy teaching. Throughout the whole country, first grade of primary school students learn the first reading and writing in Turkish class by the method and technique set forth by the Ministry of National Education. It is strictly forbidden for teachers to choose and utilize a different method. With the program that changed starting from 2005, the first literacy education in our country is carried out by cursive handwriting with the Sound Based Sentence Method (Kadioglu Ates and Kadioglu, 2017).

Due to the fact that there are tailed, dotted and diacritical letters in our alphabet, writing of Turkish in cursive handwriting can bring along problems at small age groups. The creation of new letters from the connecting words leads

to the writing to be illegible. If attention is paid to the handwriting during Atatürk era, the fact that it is not written in cursive handwriting is immediately noticed. The letters are written in handwriting font independently. In order for the cursive handwriting to be aesthetic, repeated practices are required. These practices can serve to make learning happen for students who are illiterate. Yet, if an individual who has learned to read during early childhood by his/her own or who learns much faster than their peers in 25-30 days without the need of any practice, practices handwriting for hours, this can cause him/her to demonstrate a negative attitude towards writing. For a student whose hand gets tired, who gets bored and constantly questions why he/she has to use cursive handwriting, the classroom becomes an un-amusing environment for him/her.

The written homework in our country given by the teachers especially in the first grade are in the form of writing the sentences, texts repeatedly. This is a wrong attitude. Instead, the practices that students will have fun and that require short writing will be more effective (Yilar, 2015).

The fact that early readers in the first grade of primary school start the process with drawing line practices like the other students is a big mistake. The classroom teacher that should prepare an individualized education program can make program differentiation that aims to develop the critical and creative literacy skills of the gifted and talented student.

It is expected from the individuals that have critical thinking skills to have critical writing skills. For this reason, first, it is necessary to bring critical thinking skills to the students and adults in order to bring critical writing skills (Ekmekci, 2015). Gifted and talented people are individuals who have vivid imagination, are creative, have superior language skills, demonstrate quick language development, have superior logic skills and problem solving skills, are inquisitive, have strong desire to discover the 'why' and 'how' (Davis, 2014). Creative writing is an effective practice especially for children at the advanced level. While the child has the pleasure of creating a product of his/her own, he/she has the opportunity to utilize his/her cursive handwriting skills. Especially children who are literate should be motivated while learning the cursive handwriting process. The child tends to write rapidly because he/she thinks rapidly (Bas, 2015). The writing activities in critical literacy classes make the students think. Opportunities should be given for students in the critical literacy environment to write their emotions and ideas (Potur, 2016). In order not to have problems in classroom management of the gifted and talented students, the classroom teachers should include activities that will reveal their capacities, instead of asking them to make photocopies, to run after things like obtaining material and tools, or to check the studies of their peers. Keeping the gifted and talented individuals busy by time traps and preventing them from getting bored and from creating problems means that the teacher does not fulfill the responsibilities of the teaching profession sufficiently. Activities about creative writing, critical writing is an ideal teaching technique for the teachers of gifted and talented students in primary and middle school Turkish classes.

Teachers should be able to question their competence and think critically. Thus, they become much more than someone who only practices the curriculum developed by others. Such that, a teacher should also take on the role of the program developer. In this way, he/she can strengthen his/her professional knowledge and better comprehend how he/she will meet the needs of his/her students best (Goodnough, 2001). Teachers should question their own competencies about the educational models of the gifted and talented individuals. In order to develop themselves in this field and to be more beneficial to the gifted and talented individuals, they should know how to develop themselves in this field and act upon it. They should participate in the training environments that will provide the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to make differentiation.

The vast majority of teachers made recommendations for the education of gifted and talented children in the following areas: "Identification and Orientation", "Separate Education", "Raising Family, Educator and Community Awareness", "Providing appropriate personnel and training environment", "Appropriate Education", "Planning expected to be done in government authorities". Besides these, it is quite remarkable that there is a portion of teachers who had no recommendations for the education of gifted and talented children. The fact that no recommendations were made by our teachers in this regard, who are especially responsible for the education of children and whose opinions are very valuable in attaining the goals of education, is rather meaningful (Altintas and Ilgun, 2016).

The impact of a classroom teacher on students is not limited to the content knowledge and teaching ability only in the context of subject area. Emotional elements also have immense influence, such as forming classroom interaction between teachers and students. This positive interaction influences both teaching and learning. This can be expressed as the effect of human relations on learning such as attitude, emotional ties (Troclair, 2013). The classroom teachers have great contribution in the development of positive attitude of gifted and talented students towards school, education and learning.

In the study conducted by the classroom teacher Marianetti (2016), whose class consisted of 24 people including gifted and talented students, he homogenously grouped the class. He made qualitative evaluations related to the process where the students whom he described as advanced readers and the students with slower progress developed their language skills in cooperation with their peers at their own level. He stated that his duty load as a teacher has decreased, the communication between students has increased, and that it is a practical teaching technique that can be utilized by all teachers.

Today, the development goals of many countries, including our country, include increasing the opportunities for gifted and talented individuals to develop their own interest fields, skills, creativity, and enabling them to become good citizens of their own countries and the world. In societies that believe that equality of opportunity in education is necessary, each individual should be provided training opportunities in line with their needs and competencies (Afat, 2017). Samples of activities to be used in the Turkish classes can be included in the researches that will be conducted. In the classrooms of gifted and talented students, the effect of use of games and drama in Turkish classes on the attitudes of students toward the class can be studied. Early readers should be educated with individualized student plans. They must be equipped with fun, creative activities that will trigger their thinking skills in order for them to be able to use their existing capacities to the maximum. Fine examples can be published about activities that can be utilized in first literacy classes for gifted and talented individuals. Activities on creative writing that can enhance the writing skills of gifted and talented individuals in Turkish classes, and painting activities can be published.

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