

Students' Opinion of Gifted Education and Teaching Profession

Branka Radulović¹, Maja Stojanović², Milanka Džinović³, Oliver Zajkov⁴

¹ University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Republic of Serbia

E-mail: branka.radulovic@df.uns.ac.rs

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2377-4773>

(Corresponding author)

² University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Republic of Serbia

E-mail: maja.stojanovic@df.uns.ac.rs

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0440-9677>

³ University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia

E-mail: Milanka.Dzinovic@uf.bg.ac.rs

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1143-626X>

⁴ Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia

E-mail: zoliver@pmf.ukim.mk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8410-7256>

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Abstract

Gifted education is specific and requires extensive investment from teachers to respond to their students' cognitive and social needs. Due to the link between beliefs and behaviors, teachers' views on this issue are often monitored to ensure that gifted students receive educational opportunities appropriate to their learning needs. This paper presents student teachers' attitudes to gifted education and their perception of the teaching profession. It was considered essential to look at how future teachers relate to the teaching profession to prevent possible problems and better respond to gifted students' needs. Eighty-three students of the Teacher Education Faculty, University of Belgrade, participated in the research. A customized Gagné and Nadeau questionnaire *Attitudes towards the gifted and their education* and a customized questionnaire *Teacher job satisfaction* were used. The results showed that students have favorable opinion of gifted education in Serbia. Thus, positive thinking and the theoretical concepts related to gifted education they studied will be appropriately incorporated into their teaching practice. It also shows that these students are sensitive to other groups of students with disabilities. A significant belief was that 'Children with disabilities have the greatest need for special educational programs.' The research showed that students are satisfied with the social position and opportunities for advancement that the teaching profession offers them, while they are somewhat more dissatisfied with society's economic position. The positive results are encouraging because they indicate the existence and maintenance of a positive trend toward Serbia's gifted education.

Keywords: gifted education, attitude towards the teaching profession, future teachers, Serbia.

Мнение студентов об образовании одаренных детей и профессии учителя

Бранка Радулович¹, Мая Стоянович², Миланка Джинович³,
Оливер Зъяков⁴

¹ Нови-Садский университет, Нови-Сад, Сербия

E-mail: branka.radulovic@df.uns.ac.rs

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2377-4773>

(Автор для корреспонденции)

² Нови-Садский университет, Нови-Сад, Сербия

E-mail: maja.stojanovic@df.uns.ac.rs

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0440-9677>

³ Белградский университет, Белград, Сербия

E-mail: Milanka.Dzinovic@uf.bg.ac.rs

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1143-626X>

⁴ Университет Святых Кирилла и Мефодия в Скопье, Скопье, Македония

E-mail: zoliver@pmf.ukim.mk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8410-7256>

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Аннотация

Одаренные дети имеют особые познавательные и социальные потребности, и их образование требует больших усилий со стороны учителей. Поскольку между убеждениями и поведением существует прямая зависимость, необходимо исследовать взгляды учителей, чтобы гарантировать одаренным учащимся получение образования, соответствующего их потребностям. В настоящей статье изучается отношение студентов-будущих педагогов к работе с одаренными детьми, для того чтобы предотвратить возможные проблемы в деятельности молодых специалистов, направленной на учащихся с особыми потребностями. В исследовании приняли участие 83 студента педагогического факультета Белградского университета. Для сбора данных был использован опросник Ганье и Надо «Отношение к одаренным детям и их образованию» и опросник «Удовлетворенность работой учителя». Результаты показали, что студенты положительно относятся к образованию одаренных детей в Сербии. Теоретические концепции, связанные с обучением одаренных учащихся, будут включены в их преподавательскую практику. Студенты с пониманием относятся к студентам с ограниченными возможностями и осознают необходимость для них специальных образовательных программ. Авторы приходят к выводу, что студенты довольны социальным положением и возможностями, которые предлагают им профессия учителя, но не довольны экономическим развитием общества. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о положительной тенденции в развитии образования одаренных детей в Сербии.

Ключевые слова: образование одаренных детей, отношение к профессии учителя, будущие учителя, Сербия.

Introduction

The school represents a significant social environment that influences students' development and their self-image (Perković Krijan & Borić, 2015:165). Teachers have a major role in creating a stimulating environment for the cognitive and socio-affective development of students. That is why researchers often survey teachers' opinions about

gifted primary and secondary school students (henceforth, the term gifted students will be used for this group of students) because their attitudes, beliefs, and training depend on how they will work with them. The importance of teacher training for working with specific groups of students is recognized in Troxclair (2013):

"When preservice teachers are not exposed to information about the nature and needs of gifted learners, their cognitive beliefs about this population of learners remain undeveloped, and their feelings and behaviors toward this population of learners may be biased or skewed because of this information deficiency (p. 58)."

So, lack of information can cause non-identification of gifted students, application of an inadequate teaching approach, inadequate selection of teaching content and myths. According to Siegle et al. (2010), teachers often develop their conceptions of giftedness and identify students who fit them, and less experienced teachers hold more stereotypical thoughts about the gifted (Carman, 2011). To prevent this, all teachers' faculties in Serbia have included subjects that deal with the needs and support of students in specific groups within their curricula. This makes student teachers - students enrolled at the teacher training faculties - more willing to work with them. To continuously improve employees in education, in each cycle the Institute for the Improvement of Education approves more and more programs that focus on the needs and ways of supporting students from specific groups. Noticing the importance of gifted students, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia and other institutions are making great efforts to improve the education of gifted students.

Numerous factors affect the teacher's work with students in specific groups. Some are related to their training, school equipment, the existence of a pedagogical assistant, etc., while others are related to the teacher's perception of satisfaction with their profession. The problem of teachers leaving the profession has been noticed in the literature (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). Almost one-third (32%) of participants indicated currently having a high intention to leave teaching (Arnup & Bowles, 2016: 236), while around half of participants (53%) reported that they would remain in teaching for 10 years or less (Arnup & Bowles, 2016: 238). The reason for this can be found in Bogler's findings that teachers' perceptions of occupational prestige, self-esteem, autonomy at work, and professional self-development contribute the most to job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001). So, the social component, expressed through seeing oneself and how others see them, significantly affects to job satisfaction. If the teaching profession is valued in society, teachers will have more positive attitude towards work. A more positive attitude towards work results in a greater sense of self-efficacy, as one of the motivation components (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Self-efficacy ultimately determines how an individual behaves, thinks, and becomes motivated to be involved in a particular task (Akomolafe & Ogunmakin, 2014). So, the satisfaction of teachers with their work directly affects their view of themselves in society and their motivation to work in general. If the teacher is more motivated to work with students, he/she will better respond to their cognitive needs by applying new approaches to teaching, presenting them with open scientific problems that can further motivate gifted students, etc. Although teacher job satisfaction is a complex issue, the authors subjectively assessed three subscales, Opportunity for Advancement, Social and Economic Position, as the most important.

Education of gifted students in Serbia

Gifted education in Serbia and the world is gaining increasing interest among researchers and educational policy creators. Dating back to 1960, significant positive developments have been made in legislation and school practice in Serbia. The Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System (Paragraf, 2020) and other bylaws, defines a

particular document, aimed at optimal development of students and achieving educational outcomes, by the prescribed goals and principles, i.e., meeting the educational needs of the children and students (Article 76 of the Law). This document is an individual education plan (IEP) that contains:

- Information about the student and the support team
- Pedagogical profile of student
- Individualization measure plan
- Personalized teaching and learning program
- Data on monitoring and evaluation of student work,
- Parent approval.

This Law regulates the rights of gifted students and teachers' obligations to support the expressed talents and participate in their affirmation (Article 79 of the Law).

Forms of gifted students' education in Serbia

There are two forms of gifted education in Serbia. One happens within specialized, homogeneous schools or classes, while the other takes place in heterogeneous classes. In homogeneous specialized classes/schools, gifted students attend a special program that is significantly broader than the program for students of average cognitive ability. The teachers in these faculties are subject specialists and so, gifted students in specialized classes get more detailed information.

Unlike gifted education in homogeneous classes, these teachers use enriched teaching content to respond to students' cognitive needs in heterogeneous classes. Therefore, it is important to prepare students (future teachers) to respond to the needs of gifted (or included) students.

Gifted students can enroll in specialized classes in two last years of primary school in terms of age. Because there are few such classes, younger gifted students usually are in heterogeneous classes. On the other hand, homogeneous classes are significantly more numerous at the secondary school level. In addition to specialized schools, there are over 50 specialized classes for gifted students' education where students can discuss and confront opinions with their peers.

Although numerous steps have been made in providing conditions for gifted students' education, it is necessary to continuously examine the student teachers' opinions for the timely identification of possible problems and find an appropriate solution for them.

Methodology

Numerous papers emphasize the importance of the teacher's opinion because it can affect the classroom climate and encourage and suppress students' cognitive and socio-affective development. This research examines the student teachers' attitudes about gifted students' education and their view of the teaching profession. It was considered important to look at how student teachers relate to the teaching profession to prevent possible problems and respond better to gifted student's needs. The goal was realized by:

1. Examining student teachers' attitudes about gifted students' education.
2. Examining student teachers' attitudes about the teaching profession.
3. Examining the relationship between attitudes toward gifted education and the teaching profession.

Instrument

For this research, a customized Gagné and Nadeau questionnaire *Attitudes towards the gifted students and their education* and a customized questionnaire *Teacher job satisfaction* were used. The first instrument examined student teachers' attitudes towards

gifted education and comprised 27 items divided into six subscales: Needs and Support, Resistance to Objectives, Social Value, Rejection, Ability Grouping, and Acceleration. The units remained the same as in the original questionnaire, but some tax-related items were omitted because this is relevant for Serbia. Each item is given a five-point Likert scale so that student teachers could express their (dis) agreement. Code 1 represented complete disagreement, while code 5 represented complete agreement with the item. Cronbach Alpha was 0.680.

Perković Krijan and Borić (2015) used Gagné's interpretation of the scores. According to this interpretation, the values above 4.00 indicate a highly positive attitude, while the values below 2.00 indicate a highly negative attitude. Values from 3.26 - 4.00 should be interpreted as positive, from 2.75 - 3.25 as ambivalent, and from 2.00 - 2.74 as negative attitude (Perković Krijan & Borić, 2015: 168).

The second instrument determining the attitude to the teaching profession contained 25 items divided into three units (subsubscales): Possibilities for advancement, Economic, and Social position. Items were created using Lester's questionnaire of the Teacher Job Satisfaction Questionnaire. Each item is given a five-point Likert scale so that future teachers can express their (dis) agreement. Code 1 represented complete disagreement, while code 5 represented complete agreement with the item. Cronbach Alpha was 0.754.

Survey sample

83 first-year undergraduate students of the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Belgrade, participated in the research. The survey was conducted in January 2021. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2021), the entire student population for 2019 in the field of Education was 13,795. According to the application developed by Raosoft, for the value of margin of error between 5% and 10%, the research sample of 83 future teachers represented a convenient sample.

5 boys and 78 girls participated in the research. This division of the sample reflects the profession itself: teaching is considered to be more of a female profession. Because the number of respondents by gender was unequal, this paper does not consider the gender difference. The age of the student teachers was from 19 to 20.

Data processing

Descriptive statistics and a neural network model were used for data processing using the SPSS 20.0 program. Spearman's ρ coefficient was used to determine the correlation between the variables.

Results

According to Gagné's interpretation, the overall results show that the student teachers had a positive opinion of gifted education ($M = 3.36$; $SD = 0.32$). They expressed the greatest agreement for the items *Our schools should offer special educational programs for gifted students. Gifted students are a valuable resource for our society*. Other highly rated items *Children with disabilities have the greatest need for special educational programs. We have a greater moral responsibility to provide special assistance to children with disabilities than to gifted children*, recognize the responsibility and sensitivity of students to all groups of students.

The lowest-rated item was *Gifted students are often bored in school*, which indicates a positive attitude towards Serbia's education system with the belief that adequate support is provided to gifted students in heterogeneous classes. The lowest-rated items *It is more harmful for a gifted child to waste time in class than to adapt to skipping class. A greater number of gifted children should be allowed to skip a grade* emphasize the student teachers'

positive attitude towards the possibilities of accelerating gifted students through the educational system.

Table 1 shows the results on student teachers' attitudes towards the subscales in Gagné's questionnaire.

Table 1. Student teachers' attitudes towards giftedness subscales

	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Needs and Support	1.00	5.00	3.43	0.56
Rejection	1.00	5.00	2.95	1.05
Resistance to Objectives	2.00	5.00	3.42	0.46
Social Value	2.00	5.00	3.66	0.71
Ability Grouping	2.00	5.00	3.26	0.51
Acceleration	2.00	5.00	3.25	0.47

The results show that student teachers recognize and support the individual's different educational needs to express his/her maximum following his/her potentials. They support the grouping and acceleration of the gifted through the Serbian education system.

The second part of the research examined student teachers' attitudes about the teaching profession (Table 2). In general, the research revealed student teachers' positive attitudes towards the teaching profession ($M = 3.21$; $SD = 0.40$). They expressed the greatest agreement for the items *The teaching profession offers the possibility of progress in school. The teaching profession offers the opportunity to develop and use many skills. The teaching is very interesting work. Teachers feel responsible for the way they teach. Working at school encourages teachers' creativity.* The highest-rated items emphasize the student teachers' awareness of the responsibility that the teaching profession brings with it and the possibilities for improving numerous competencies and personal development.

The research included three subscales, which the authors subjectively assessed as the most important, to gain insight into student teachers' attitudes on this issue.

Table 2. Student teachers' attitudes about the teaching profession

	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Possibilities for advancement	1.00	5.00	3.60	0.50
Economic position	1.00	5.00	3.29	0.89
Social position	1.00	5.00	3.91	0.56

According to these results, the student teachers are acquainted with the possibilities of progress in education. Also, they evaluate the teaching profession as a socially valued but not so well-paid job. The lowest rated item is *Teacher's income (salary) is quite sufficient for the daily expenses of one family.* According to the Republic Bureau of Statistics (2021), the average net salary in education is 60,638 RSD, which is about 500 EUR and corresponds to Serbia's average net salary.

Research has shown that subscales correlate with each other. Possibilities for advancement correlates with Social position, Spearman's $\rho = 0.532$, $p = 0.000$. The data is important because of the prediction of changes in student teachers' attitudes. By increasing their competencies reflected in a better quality of teaching, the teachers' reputation in society is enhanced. The teacher's greater commitment to explaining the teaching content through the application of new approaches was recognized as having a special value.

Therefore, a teacher who invests more in their competencies that will be reflected in their work in the classroom will be on a higher social scale, in terms of social position. This result is significant because it shows the student teachers' awareness of the importance of competencies and the need to upgrade them constantly. The awareness of the importance of competencies and properly constructed curricula that will best prepare them for the teaching profession ensures the application of quality education for all students.

A positive correlation was obtained between attitudes about gifted education and the teaching profession (Spearman's $\rho = 0.286$, $p = 0.009$). The neural network model was applied to determine which of the subscales most influences the student teachers' positive attitude towards gifted students' education. The overall percent of correctly classified students in the training sample is 90.9%, while the test sample is 88.2%. The AUROC (area under the ROC curve) gives the model's accuracy of 0.737. This value indicates that the model applied describes the examined variables well.

Table 3. Importance and the normalized importance of each predictor of future teachers' opinion of gifted education.

	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Normalized importance</i>
Possibilities for advancement	.415	100.0%
Economic position	.362	87.3%
Social position	.222	53.6%

As shown in Table 3, student teachers' positive attitude to the education of gifted students is mainly influenced by the possibility of progress. Due to numerous reforms and the development of pedagogical-psychological theories that provide answers to certain practical questions, the teaching profession requires constant improvement of teaching competencies to best respond to students' cognitive and social needs. Therefore, the creation of greater opportunities for improving teacher competencies will positively impact their work with students. Better trained teachers will find it easier to apply the patterns defined by certain theoretical settings and include many students in the teaching process. This can result in higher student motivation to learn a given subject, followed by higher achievements on knowledge tests, social development of personality, etc.

Discussion and conclusion

If we see gifted students as a significant resource within society, it is important to monitor and examine the factors affecting their (cognitive) development. Teacher competencies, are a basic factor to be monitored and examined, and represent a set of specific requirements, aimed at improving the quality of their professional performance, in the context of the student's needs (Predanociová & Jonášková, 2018). In addition to competence, the teaching–learning process is influenced by teachers' attitudes. Therefore, it is important to examine student teacher's opinions about gifted education. Therefore, the research aims to examine future teachers' attitudes about the education of gifted students and their perception of the teaching profession.

The main results from this research indicate student teachers' positive attitudes towards gifted students' education. The results are somewhat more positive than in the research Perković Krijan and Borić (2015) and Troxclair (2013). These researchers discovered that teachers' have somewhat more restrained attitude towards resistance to objectives, ability grouping, and acceleration. On the other hand, Siegle et al. (2010) found that high academic achievements in particular school subjects (such as science and math) lead to negative reactions in the peer group whereas high achievements in other

school subjects (eg, sport) result in positive peer reactions. Although that result shows discrepancies in students' attitudes toward the gifted students, the student teachers surveyed for this research showed greater support for the gifted students than the respondents in the Siegle et al study. However, regardless of the positive result, which reflects the serious and dedicated work of the Ministry of Education and teacher training faculties, it is necessary to continue with intensive training of (future) teachers to work with students from specific groups.

We were guided by the assumption that if the teachers are not satisfied with their profession, they will not give their maximum and will not arouse students' curiosity, and may not respond to all the cognitive gifted students' needs. Therefore, the second research task was related to examining student teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession. The results showed the existence of a positive attitude towards the teaching profession. The result is significant because it reflects the current situation in society and shows the readiness of student teachers to stay in the teaching profession, which is contrary to the observed negative trends in some countries. Of the components examined, *Opportunity for Advancement* and *Social Status* were rated more positively than *Economic Status*. and *Opportunity for Advancement* and *Social Status* were rated more positively than *Economic Status*.

The research also found a positive correlation between the teaching profession's attitude and gifted students' education, which emphasized the importance of the social component, more precisely on the social ladder (how a teacher sees his/her position in society and how others see his/her position). So, increasing teachers' social importance and the possibility of their advancement will increase teachers' motivation to work with students and response better to their (cognitive) needs. Therefore, it is necessary to continue with the positive elements of educational reforms that have led to student teachers' better preparation for the teaching profession.

Limitation

Although promising data have been obtained that the positive trend of support for gifted students will continue, they still need to be considered with a certain amount of caution. The basic limitation is related to the sample size. Therefore, it is recommended that a larger number of student teachers are included in future research, regardless of whether the sample is convenient. Then, it is necessary to include other subscales in the job satisfaction questionnaire. The authors singled out three that they assessed as the most significant, based on subjective assessment; however, there are more areas for expanding the questionnaire.

Future research

Future research should be oriented towards comparing the attitudes of teachers and student teachers on topics related to gifted students' education and job satisfaction and monitoring the student teachers' attitudes during their studies to find possible problems and their solutions. It is also proposed to compare the attitudes of practicing and future teachers' attitudes at the international level to find patterns that could be included in future educational reforms.

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