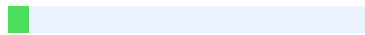




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# EDUCATORS' ATTITUDES REGARDING THEIR COMPETENCIES FOR WORKING WITH GIFTED CHILDREN

## ABSTRACT

Early identification of giftedness and timely support during the preschool years are essential for developing individualized educational strategies and for enabling children to realize their full potential. The aim of this study is to examine the attitudes of preschool educators in the Republic of North Macedonia toward their competencies for working with gifted children, their perceptions of professional support, and their need for continuous training.

The study included 132 educators and used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews **6** to provide a comprehensive understanding of their attitudes and practices. The results indicate that **2** educators recognize the importance of their role in identifying and nurturing gifted children, while also emphasizing a substantial need for specialized training, mentoring support, and the systematic development of professional competencies.

The findings suggest that continuous professional development directly strengthens educators' ability to create stimulating, individualized, and differentiated learning environments for gifted children. These results have important practical implications for the design of educational policies and training programs aimed at improving the quality of preschool education for gifted children.

Keywords: attitudes, competencies, gifted children, preschool years, preschool educators, professional development.

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period for laying the foundations of children's cognitive, **2** social, and emotional development. During this sensitive stage, timely recognition and appropriate stimulation of each child's unique potential, including giftedness, are essential

for overall development. Gagné (2009) defines giftedness as an undeveloped natural ability which, through the interaction of intrapersonal, environmental, and developmental catalysts, can lead to the emergence of highly developed competencies. Renzulli (1978), in contrast, emphasizes that giftedness results from the interaction of above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity, making early identification a key factor in fostering these potentials.

In this context, Hertzog (2024) notes that current global trends in education are moving toward a holistic approach that emphasizes the early identification not only of academic giftedness, but also of creative and leadership potential in the earliest years of life.

Accordingly, preschool educators, as direct practitioners <sup>7</sup> in early childhood education and care, play a crucial role in recognizing early signs of giftedness and in providing a stimulating, individualized, and differentiated educational environment. Vygotsky (1978) highlights the importance of social interaction and adult guidance in child development, while Tomlinson (2001) stresses that a differentiated approach enables each child to develop in accordance with their abilities and individual needs.

Empirical studies show that educators' attitudes and perceptions directly influence their ability to identify and effectively support gifted children (Callahan & Müller, 2023; Gubbins & Haeck, 2024). Contemporary conceptions of giftedness also emphasize the need for an integrated and comprehensive approach from the earliest stages of development (Subotnik et al., 2025). Similar challenges related to educators' competencies have been identified in other international educational contexts, making this topic relevant beyond national boundaries.

Professional development through structured training, mentoring support, and continuous learning significantly increases educators' ability to recognize and support gifted children (Li & Wong, 2023). However, empirical evidence indicates that insufficient systemic support and limited access to specialized training often hinder effective practice.

Although international research highlights the role of educators in early identification, there is still a lack of sufficient empirical data in the Republic of North Macedonia regarding

educators' self-perceived competence and readiness for differentiated practice. This paper contributes to the existing body of scientific literature by presenting data on educators' attitudes and competencies in a context that has so far been insufficiently explored. <sup>5</sup> The

aim of this study is to examine educators' attitudes toward their competencies, their perceptions of professional support, and their need for continuous professional development. The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. How do educators assess their own competence <sup>1</sup> for working with gifted children?
2. What are their perceptions of available professional support and specialized training?
3. Which aspects of professional development are considered priority for improving support for gifted children?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, <sup>3</sup> combining quantitative and qualitative research in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of educators' attitudes and perceptions regarding work with gifted children.

The quantitative component was conducted through a standardized survey involving 132 preschool educators and collected data on their self-perceived competence, the professional support available to them, and their need for continuous training. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. The data show that 66% of the surveyed educators work in preschool institutions in the city of Skopje, while 33.3% work in other cities in the Republic of North Macedonia.

The qualitative component included semi-structured interviews with a subset of the surveyed educators, with the aim of exploring their practical experiences, motivations, and the barriers they face when supporting gifted children.

The combination <sup>3</sup> of quantitative and qualitative methods makes it possible to identify general trends and dominant attitudes through survey data, while also providing a deeper understanding of individual experiences, perceptions, and challenges through interviews.

This methodological approach offers a comprehensive overview of the research problem and provides a solid basis for formulating relevant educational policies and designing effective professional development and support programs for educators working with gifted children.

Graph 1: Location of the preschool institution (Skopje and other cities in North Macedonia)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Graph 2: Recognition of characteristics of gifted children within the educational group

The analysis of the data on educators' ability to identify giftedness reveals a notable gap between professional awareness and practical confidence. The results show that 25.8% of respondents are fully confident in their ability to recognize <sup>4</sup> the characteristics of gifted children, while the largest proportion, 58.3%, report being only partially confident. These findings suggest a relatively high level of self-perceived competence, but they also indicate that most educators experience some degree of uncertainty in everyday practice.

This partial confidence is consistent with recent research by Pfeiffer & Shaughnessy (2024), which emphasizes that, <sup>2</sup> in the absence of clearly defined national protocols and access to modern diagnostic tools, practitioners often have to rely on intuition rather than on scientifically grounded identification criteria. Such an approach increases the risk of overlooking specific forms of giftedness, especially in children whose talents are expressed not through traditional academic achievement, but through creativity or leadership.

Furthermore, the fact that 15.2% of respondents are unsure of their ability, and that 0.8% are unable to assess it, confirms the need for the systematic development of professional competencies. These results are consistent with international findings reported by Callahan

& Müller (2023), who note <sup>4</sup> that early childhood educators face distinctive challenges when applying differentiated approaches to the developmental characteristics and talents of gifted children.

Uncertainty in self-perception directly affects the quality of early identification and, consequently, the possibility of timely individualization of the educational process. These findings highlight the need for specialized training, continuous mentoring support, and access to professional literature in order to transform partial confidence into stable professional competence and enable every gifted child to reach their full potential.

### Graph 3: Educators' self-assessment of knowledge regarding models and theories of giftedness

The data were obtained through a self-assessment scale on which educators evaluated their level of theoretical knowledge of different models and theories of giftedness. The analysis shows that only a small proportion of respondents, 6.8%, are fully confident in their knowledge, while the largest share, 42.4%, report partial confidence. <sup>1</sup> At the same time, a substantial number of educators adopt a neutral position (27%) or believe that they do not possess sufficient theoretical knowledge (6%).

These results <sup>3</sup> indicate the need for the systematic improvement of educators' theoretical preparedness through continuous professional education. Limited understanding of different models and theories may negatively affect educators' ability to translate theory into practice and to develop individualized strategies for supporting gifted children (Gubbins & Haeck, 2024; Subotnik et al., 2025). These findings underline the importance of continuous training and professional development, with a particular focus on strengthening theoretical foundations <sup>3</sup> in the field of giftedness.

Graph 4: Educators' preparedness **1 for working with gifted** children based on their pedagogical education

The graph presents educators' self-perceptions of whether their pedagogical education adequately prepared them to work with gifted children, based on 132 responses. The data show that the largest proportion of respondents, 42.4% or 56 educators, assessed their preparation as moderate. This finding points to the presence of basic theoretical preparation, but also to a lack of full confidence in addressing the specific challenges associated with **4 working with gifted children** in practice.

Additionally, 38.6% of respondents, or 51 educators, believe that their education provided good preparation, reflecting a positive, though not maximal, level of professional confidence. In contrast, 11.4% or 15 educators assessed their preparation as insufficient, while only 7.6% or 10 educators feel fully prepared. Importantly, none of the respondents rated their preparation as 'very insufficient,' suggesting that educators do not perceive themselves as completely unprepared, but rather as only partially qualified.

These empirical data directly support the argument of Sánchez-Escobedo & Hollingworth (2025), who maintain that competencies **1 for working with gifted** children should become an integral part of mandatory coursework in teacher education programs. The authors emphasize that such content should not be optional or elective, but should instead be included in core study programs. The absence of this specific preparation during formal studies creates a long-term competency gap and forces practitioners to rely on additional training that often serves only as an ad hoc solution.

The findings are fully consistent with previous international research (Gubbins & Haeck, 2024; Callahan & Müller, 2023), which shows that educators often possess basic, but insufficient, **3 knowledge and skills for** providing effective support to gifted children.

Studies by Li & Wong (2023) indicate that limited theoretical and practical preparation contributes to educators' feelings of inadequacy when responding to specific needs, which corresponds to the very low percentage of fully prepared respondents in this study, 7.6%.

Similarly, Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell (2025) emphasize that high-quality support for gifted children requires continuous and specialized professional development that enables the application of advanced models and theories. The importance of systemic support and mentoring, highlighted in international literature, further underscores the need for ongoing professional development. The conclusions of this study confirm recommendations that only through the integration of theoretical preparation, practical training, and mentoring support can educators effectively identify, stimulate, and support gifted children from the earliest stages of preschool education.

#### Graph 5: Educators' ability to differentiate activities for gifted children

The data show that educators are generally confident in their ability to adapt existing activities to the specific needs of gifted children. Specifically, 10% of respondents fully agree with this statement, while 60% agree, indicating <sup>3</sup> that the majority of educators, 70%, perceive themselves as having this competence.

<sup>1</sup> At the same time, 28% of educators adopt a neutral stance, suggesting uncertainty or a need for additional clarification and practical experience in applying differentiation. A small percentage, 3%, disagree that they can adapt activities, pointing to individual weaknesses or to a lack of support and knowledge.

These results suggest a relatively good level of practical differentiation skills, while <sup>1</sup> at the same time highlighting the need for additional training, professional seminars, and practical examples that would strengthen the implementation of differentiation in everyday educational work. Aligning theoretical knowledge with practical application is essential for effectively supporting gifted children and for developing individualized strategies.

#### Graph 6: Educators' self-perception of competence in creating a stimulating and inclusive environment for gifted children

The majority of educators, 60%, are confident that they can create a stimulating and inclusive environment for gifted children, while 39% remain neutral and 1% disagree. The

results indicate a certain level of competence, but they also demonstrate the need for additional support and practical strengthening of these skills.

The analysis of data from Graphs 5 and 6 reveals an interesting discrepancy: although educators previously assessed their preparation as moderate, they report relatively high confidence in practical work. As many as 70% of respondents state that they can successfully adapt activities, while 60% consider themselves capable of creating a stimulating environment for gifted children.

This high level of self-perception is important because it reflects educators' willingness to experiment in the classroom. It also aligns with the recent concept of 'inclusive excellence' (Kwan & Lau, 2025), which redefines differentiation not merely as extra work for **1 a small number of** talented children, but as a tool for raising the quality of learning for the entire group. By introducing higher-level cognitive challenges, educators create an environment in which every child can develop their potential to the fullest.

However, the data also require careful interpretation. The fact that a substantial proportion of educators, between 28% and 39%, remain neutral suggests a level of uncertainty that should not be overlooked. This gray zone indicates that many practitioners lack concrete tools and mentoring guidance. Rather than only general training, educators need clear examples and strategies that can be applied immediately in daily practice. Without such practical support, there is a risk that differentiation will remain largely theoretical, without a real impact **1 on the development of gifted** children.

Graph 7: Need for additional training and knowledge for more effective work with gifted children

The results show that a large proportion of educators recognize the need for additional training and knowledge in order to work more effectively with gifted children. Specifically, 49% fully agree and 42% agree with this statement, meaning that 91% of respondents express this need. Only 8% are neutral, while 1% believe that additional knowledge is unnecessary. These data clearly indicate **1 a high level of** awareness among educators of

the importance of continuous professional education and competency development for work with gifted children.

Graph 8: Educators' perception of the importance of special support and attention for gifted children

The results indicate that most **2** educators recognize the importance of providing special support and attention to gifted children in preschool institutions. Specifically, 51% fully agree and 39% agree with this statement, meaning that 90% of respondents consider such support important. Only 10% adopt a neutral stance, while just 1% believe it is unimportant. These data highlight educators' awareness of the need for an individualized approach and sustained support **1** for the development of gifted children.

These findings are consistent with the theoretical concepts of Renzulli (1978) and Gagné (2009), which emphasize that transforming natural abilities into developed competencies requires specific educational strategies and a stimulating environment. Contemporary research also confirms that pedagogical approaches involving focused attention to gifted children directly enhance their motivation, creativity, and social skills (Kwan & Lau, 2025; Hertzog, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

The study showed that preschool educators in the Republic of North Macedonia **2** recognize the importance of their role in identifying and supporting gifted children, but that most perceive their competence as moderate or insufficient. Despite their experience and strong motivation to contribute to children's development, additional training, practical experience, and mentoring support are needed to strengthen self-confidence and improve effectiveness in practice.

The findings highlight the need for systemic interventions, including specialized and practice-oriented training, continuous mentoring, access to resources, and structured programs **1** for working with gifted children. The use of individualized strategies,

differentiated activities, and stimulating and inclusive environments is essential for developing the potential of gifted children. Overall, investment in professional development and systemic support will strengthen educators' competencies and enable the comprehensive and effective development of all children, including those with pronounced giftedness

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