

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gifted and Talented Learners in Inclusive Preschools: A Multi-Case Analysis of Identification, Teaching Practices, And Child Experiences

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Abstract

Inclusive preschool education has increasingly emphasized equitable learning opportunities for children with diverse developmental characteristics; however, gifted and talented children frequently remain underidentified because educational systems traditionally associate inclusion with disability rather than exceptional ability. This study investigates the identification of giftedness, pedagogical practices, quality of teacher–child interactions, and children's educational experiences within inclusive preschool environments through a multi-case analytical perspective. Drawing upon established theoretical foundations, including Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, and interaction-based learning frameworks, the study synthesizes contemporary evidence from preschool education literature to examine how institutional policies, educator beliefs, curriculum implementation, and classroom environments collectively influence talent development. A qualitative multi-case methodology is conceptually adopted to compare diverse preschool contexts characterized by inclusive educational philosophies. The analytical framework applies thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify recurring patterns across educational settings regarding identification procedures, instructional adaptation, classroom interactions, leadership support, and child participation. The review further explores barriers such as limited teacher preparation, inconsistent policy implementation, misconceptions regarding giftedness, and insufficient systematic assessment during early childhood.

The findings indicate that effective identification depends on continuous observation rather than standardized testing alone, while high-quality teacher-child interactions substantially influence children's cognitive engagement, creativity, motivation, and socio-emotional development. Inclusive pedagogical practices that emphasize differentiated instruction, inquiry-based learning, enriched classroom environments, and collaborative partnerships with families provide stronger opportunities for nurturing diverse forms of giftedness. Nevertheless, considerable variation exists across preschool settings because institutional understanding of gifted education remains inconsistent despite inclusive educational policies.

The study contributes an integrated conceptual understanding of gifted education within inclusive preschool contexts by connecting developmental theory, educational policy, classroom practice, and qualitative evidence. The research provides practical implications for policymakers, school leaders, teacher educators, and preschool practitioners seeking to establish sustainable systems for early talent recognition while maintaining educational equity

KEY WORDS

Gifted education, inclusive preschool, early childhood education, talent identification, differentiated instruction, teacher-child interaction, thematic analysis, preschool pedagogy, qualitative research, multi-case study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Inclusive education has progressively evolved from a policy primarily concerned with supporting learners experiencing disabilities toward a broader educational philosophy that recognizes diversity as a defining characteristic of all learners. Within this expanded understanding, gifted and talented children represent an often-overlooked population whose educational needs differ substantially from those of age peers despite their participation in mainstream classrooms (Borders et al., 2014). Contemporary preschool education therefore faces the dual responsibility of ensuring equal educational participation while simultaneously recognizing exceptional developmental potential that may require differentiated learning experiences.

Early childhood represents one of the most influential periods of human development because cognitive, linguistic, creative, emotional, and social capacities emerge rapidly during the preschool years. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, 2006) emphasize that children's development results from continuous interactions between individual characteristics and multiple environmental systems, including families, educational institutions, communities, and broader societal structures. Within preschool environments, these reciprocal interactions significantly influence whether gifted characteristics become observable, nurtured, or remain unnoticed.

The concept of giftedness itself has undergone considerable theoretical transformation over recent decades. Earlier perspectives frequently equated giftedness with exceptionally high intelligence measured through standardized assessments. Contemporary theories instead conceptualize giftedness as multidimensional, developmental, and influenced by environmental opportunities. Gagné (2013)

distinguishes naturally occurring abilities (giftedness) from systematically developed competencies (talent), emphasizing that environmental catalysts, educational opportunities, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal characteristics collectively transform potential into achievement. This theoretical evolution has substantial implications for preschool education because very young children often demonstrate advanced potential through curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, language development, artistic expression, or social leadership rather than conventional academic performance.

Despite increasing theoretical sophistication, preschool systems internationally continue to experience difficulties in recognizing gifted learners within inclusive educational settings. Research indicates that many preschool teachers possess limited formal preparation regarding early gifted identification, resulting in misconceptions that gifted children will naturally succeed without additional educational support (Kaplan & Hertzog, 2016). Such assumptions contribute to the phenomenon of "invisible giftedness," where advanced abilities remain hidden because classroom activities insufficiently challenge children's developmental capacities (Merrotsy, 2013).

International evidence demonstrates substantial variation in national approaches toward gifted education during early childhood. Nordic educational systems, for example, have traditionally prioritized educational equality and inclusive participation while placing comparatively limited emphasis on explicit gifted education policies (Margrain & Lundqvist, 2019; Margrain & van Bommel, 2022). Swedish preschool curricula emphasize individualized learning and child-centered education but provide relatively limited direct guidance regarding giftedness identification (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2018). Consequently, preschool

professionals frequently rely upon personal interpretations when identifying exceptional developmental characteristics (Ekesryd Nordström, 2021; Ekesryd Nordström, 2022).

Identification practices have likewise shifted toward multidimensional approaches that acknowledge the complexity of early childhood development. Coleman (2016) argues that observation-based frameworks enable educators to recognize advanced developmental indicators across multiple domains rather than relying exclusively upon psychometric assessments. Similarly, Reis et al. (2021) advocate educational environments that cultivate creativity, motivation, and enrichment opportunities capable of supporting diverse manifestations of talent development.

Teacher-child interactions constitute another critical dimension influencing gifted children's educational experiences. High-quality interactions characterized by emotional support, instructional responsiveness, and effective classroom organization significantly enhance children's cognitive engagement and developmental outcomes (Hamre et al., 2013). Within inclusive preschool settings, educators must simultaneously respond to heterogeneous learning needs while maintaining equitable participation among all children. Such pedagogical complexity requires sophisticated professional competence, reflective teaching practices, and continuous observation of children's individual learning trajectories.

Furthermore, preschool leadership and institutional culture substantially affect the implementation of inclusive gifted education. School principals influence teacher collaboration, professional development priorities, curriculum implementation, and resource allocation, thereby shaping organizational capacity for recognizing and supporting gifted learners (Ivarsson, 2023). Leadership commitment therefore functions as an important contextual factor within comprehensive talent development systems.

Recent international reviews demonstrate increasing scholarly attention toward early identification and inclusive educational strategies for gifted children (Mossberg et al., 2024). Nevertheless, empirical evidence remains fragmented regarding how identification processes, teaching practices, classroom interactions, and children's lived experiences collectively operate within inclusive preschool environments. Multi-case analytical approaches provide opportunities to examine these interconnected dimensions across different educational contexts while preserving sensitivity to contextual

variation.

Qualitative methodologies have become particularly valuable for investigating educational experiences because they facilitate exploration of complex social processes within authentic learning environments. Thematic analysis provides systematic procedures for identifying recurring patterns across qualitative data while maintaining analytical flexibility. The framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) has become one of the most influential approaches for qualitative educational research because it enables rigorous interpretation of participant experiences, institutional practices, and contextual influences. Its structured analytical procedures support transparent comparison across multiple educational cases and therefore provide an appropriate methodological foundation for investigating inclusive preschool gifted education.

Collectively, these theoretical developments suggest that understanding giftedness within inclusive preschool education requires examination beyond isolated identification techniques. Instead, gifted education should be viewed as a dynamic interaction among developmental potential, educational environments, teacher expertise, institutional leadership, policy frameworks, and children's daily classroom experiences.

Problem Statement

Although inclusive preschool education has expanded internationally, the educational needs of gifted and talented children continue to receive comparatively limited attention within policy implementation and classroom practice. Many preschool educators remain uncertain about identifying advanced developmental potential during early childhood because gifted behaviors often differ considerably from traditional academic achievement patterns. Consequently, gifted children may experience insufficient intellectual stimulation, limited curriculum differentiation, reduced engagement, and underdeveloped potential despite participating in inclusive educational settings.

The absence of consistent identification frameworks, variability in teacher preparation, differing institutional priorities, and limited empirical integration across preschool contexts create significant challenges for educational practice. Existing literature addresses individual aspects of gifted education, yet fewer studies comprehensively examine identification, teaching practices, classroom interactions, and

children's educational experiences simultaneously through a multi-case analytical perspective.

Research Relevance

The present study addresses an increasingly significant issue within early childhood education by integrating theoretical, pedagogical, and institutional perspectives on giftedness in inclusive preschool environments. As educational systems worldwide continue promoting inclusive schooling, understanding how exceptional developmental potential can be recognized without compromising educational equity becomes critically important.

The study also contributes to contemporary discussions concerning curriculum differentiation, early intervention, teacher professional competence, and educational policy implementation. By synthesizing current literature within a coherent conceptual framework, the research provides evidence-based guidance for preschool practitioners, educational leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers responsible for strengthening inclusive educational quality.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative multi-case research supported by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework for understanding complex educational phenomena that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative indicators alone. The analytical approach enables systematic interpretation of multiple contextual influences affecting gifted children's preschool experiences.

Research Objectives

The study is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine theoretical perspectives explaining giftedness and talent development within inclusive preschool education.
2. To analyze approaches used for identifying gifted and talented learners during early childhood.
3. To evaluate instructional practices that support gifted children's learning within inclusive preschool classrooms.
4. To investigate the influence of teacher-child interactions on children's developmental experiences.
5. To examine institutional, curricular, and policy factors influencing inclusive gifted education.
6. To synthesize implications for improving preschool identification systems, pedagogical practices, and educational

policy.

Scope and Significance

This research focuses exclusively on gifted and talented learners enrolled in inclusive preschool settings. The analysis synthesizes evidence drawn solely from the selected reference literature, emphasizing identification processes, educational practices, classroom interactions, institutional leadership, curriculum implementation, and children's developmental experiences. The study does not examine specialized gifted schools or secondary educational settings.

The significance of the research extends across multiple educational levels. Theoretically, it integrates developmental, ecological, and talent development perspectives into a unified analytical framework. Methodologically, it illustrates the application of qualitative multi-case analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analytical principles. Practically, the findings provide guidance for teachers, preschool administrators, curriculum planners, and policymakers seeking to establish more effective systems for recognizing and nurturing giftedness within inclusive educational environments. Ultimately, the study contributes toward balancing educational equity with excellence by demonstrating that inclusion and gifted education should function as complementary rather than competing educational objectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptualizing Giftedness and Talent in Early Childhood

The understanding of giftedness has shifted considerably from traditional intelligence-centered definitions toward multidimensional developmental perspectives. Earlier educational systems frequently identified gifted children primarily through intelligence quotient (IQ) assessments or exceptional academic achievement. Contemporary scholarship, however, recognizes that giftedness encompasses a broad range of cognitive, creative, artistic, leadership, psychomotor, and socio-emotional capacities that emerge differently across developmental stages. This conceptual transition is particularly important in preschool education because children's abilities are often expressed through play, exploration, language development, creativity, and social interaction rather than formal academic performance.

Among the most influential theoretical perspectives is Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), which

distinguishes natural abilities (giftedness) from systematically developed competencies (talent). According to Gagné (2013), giftedness represents outstanding natural aptitudes, whereas talent develops through structured learning experiences, environmental opportunities, motivation, and sustained practice. In the revised DMGT framework, environmental catalysts—including family, school, teachers, educational policy, and community—play essential roles in transforming potential into demonstrated achievement. Gagné (2021) further emphasizes that educational systems must intentionally cultivate these developmental catalysts because giftedness alone does not guarantee future excellence.

This developmental interpretation aligns closely with inclusive preschool education. Rather than viewing giftedness as a fixed characteristic possessed by only a small proportion of children, contemporary frameworks recognize that early developmental potential requires appropriate educational opportunities to flourish. Consequently, preschool teachers become facilitators of talent development rather than merely identifiers of exceptional ability.

Sternberg and Kaufman (2018) similarly argue that no single theoretical model sufficiently explains giftedness because exceptional performance results from interactions among cognitive abilities, creativity, motivation, environmental influences, and adaptive thinking. Their synthesis of giftedness theories reinforces the need for educational systems that recognize diverse developmental pathways rather than relying exclusively on standardized measurement.

Sayler (2009) extends this perspective by emphasizing that giftedness should also be understood through children's personal experiences, motivation, well-being, and meaning-making. Such interpretations are especially relevant during preschool years, where emotional security, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation strongly influence learning behaviors.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate broad consensus that giftedness is developmental rather than static, multidimensional rather than singular, and context-dependent rather than universally observable.

2.2 Inclusive Preschool Education as a Context for Talent Development

Inclusive education has traditionally focused on ensuring equitable participation for learners with disabilities or learning difficulties. More recent educational discourse has broadened inclusion to encompass all forms of learner diversity, including

giftedness (Borders et al., 2014). Within this broader interpretation, inclusive education seeks not only equal access but also equitable learning opportunities that acknowledge varying developmental needs.

Borders et al. (2014) argue that gifted education and inclusive education should not be viewed as competing educational philosophies. Instead, both share common commitments to individualized instruction, differentiated learning, educational equity, and maximizing every learner's developmental potential. This perspective challenges assumptions that gifted learners require separate educational environments and instead advocates instructional flexibility within mainstream classrooms.

Nordic educational systems provide an interesting context for examining this relationship. Margrain and Lundqvist (2019) demonstrate that preschool curricula frequently acknowledge children's individual developmental differences without explicitly identifying giftedness. Consequently, gifted children may receive implicit support through child-centered pedagogy but lack systematic identification or specialized educational planning.

Margrain and van Bommel (2022) further observe that Swedish preschool policy emphasizes participation, democratic learning, and individualized education while avoiding formal categorization of children according to ability. Although this approach promotes educational equality, it may unintentionally obscure exceptional developmental potential because teachers lack explicit policy guidance regarding gifted identification.

The Swedish preschool curriculum (SNAE, 2018) similarly encourages individualized learning opportunities and developmental support for every child without specifically addressing gifted education. The curriculum therefore provides flexibility but leaves substantial responsibility to teachers for interpreting children's developmental needs.

This policy orientation illustrates an important tension within inclusive education: while educational equality seeks to avoid unnecessary labeling, the absence of explicit recognition may contribute to underidentification of gifted learners. Therefore, balancing equity and differentiation remains a central challenge for inclusive preschool systems.

2.3 Identification of Gifted Learners During Preschool Years

Identification represents one of the most debated issues in

gifted education because developmental characteristics emerge differently during early childhood than in later educational stages.

Coleman (2016) proposes observation-based identification systems such as U-STARS~PLUS, emphasizing continuous assessment of children's behaviors, interests, creativity, language development, memory, curiosity, and problem-solving abilities. Such approaches recognize that preschool children's developmental trajectories remain dynamic and cannot be accurately captured through standardized intelligence testing alone.

Similarly, Reis, Renzulli, and Renzulli (2021) advocate talent development approaches that prioritize children's emerging strengths rather than fixed classifications of giftedness. Their enrichment-based perspective suggests that providing challenging educational experiences may itself reveal advanced potential that otherwise remains hidden.

Renzulli and Rizza's Primary Interest-A-Lyzer further supports multidimensional identification by encouraging educators to recognize children's interests, motivations, and preferred learning activities rather than relying exclusively upon academic performance.

Despite these conceptual advances, preschool teachers frequently experience uncertainty regarding gifted identification. Ekesryd Nordström (2021) reports that Swedish preschool staff often associate giftedness with exceptional academic performance rather than broader developmental characteristics. As a result, many educators hesitate to identify gifted learners during preschool because they perceive children's abilities as too unstable or insufficiently observable.

A subsequent investigation by Ekesryd Nordström (2022) reveals considerable variation in preschool teachers' and principals' understandings of giftedness. Some educators interpret giftedness primarily through cognitive achievement, whereas others recognize creativity, curiosity, language development, or social leadership as equally significant indicators. Such inconsistencies demonstrate that professional understanding substantially influences identification practices.

Merrotsy (2013) introduces the concept of "invisible gifted students," describing children whose advanced abilities remain unnoticed because classroom environments fail to provide sufficiently challenging learning opportunities. Invisible giftedness becomes particularly problematic within inclusive classrooms where teachers must simultaneously address

multiple developmental needs.

Mossberg, Lundqvist, and Sund (2024), through an international scoping review, conclude that early identification should involve multiple sources of evidence, including teacher observations, family perspectives, developmental documentation, and longitudinal assessment rather than isolated testing procedures.

Overall, the literature consistently indicates that successful identification requires systematic observation, professional expertise, collaborative assessment, and developmentally appropriate evaluation strategies.

2.4 Teacher Knowledge, Beliefs, and Pedagogical Practices

Teacher competence represents one of the strongest determinants of successful gifted education during early childhood.

Kaplan and Hertzog (2016) argue that preschool teachers require specialized pedagogical knowledge to recognize advanced developmental potential while simultaneously supporting heterogeneous classrooms. Gifted children benefit from differentiated instruction, inquiry-based learning, flexible grouping, project-based activities, and opportunities for independent exploration.

Similarly, Reis et al. (2021) emphasize enrichment pedagogy as an educational philosophy that promotes creativity, problem-solving, and authentic investigation rather than acceleration alone. Such instructional practices benefit not only gifted learners but also broader classroom participation by encouraging higher-order thinking.

Saranlı (2017) supports early enrichment interventions, arguing that preschool represents an optimal developmental period for cultivating advanced abilities before motivational decline or academic underachievement occurs.

Podobnik and Selan (2021) demonstrate similar findings within artistic education. Their research indicates that giftedness in visual arts emerges through creative exploration, sustained interest, and opportunities for experimentation rather than conventional assessment. Their findings reinforce broader arguments that giftedness manifests across multiple developmental domains.

However, teacher beliefs frequently influence whether differentiated practices are implemented. Kahveci (2023) demonstrates that teacher attitudes substantially affect children's academic progress, motivation, confidence, and

participation. Positive expectations encourage children's developmental growth, whereas misconceptions may unintentionally limit educational opportunities.

Collectively, the literature indicates that effective gifted education depends not merely upon instructional techniques but also upon teachers' professional beliefs regarding children's developmental capacities.

2.5 Teacher–Child Interactions and Learning Experiences

Educational quality within preschool classrooms depends heavily upon teacher-child interactions.

Hamre et al. (2013) propose the Teaching Through Interactions framework, emphasizing three interconnected dimensions: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. High-quality interactions promote children's cognitive engagement, language development, self-regulation, and academic achievement.

For gifted preschool children, responsive interactions become particularly important because advanced learners frequently require intellectual challenge, meaningful dialogue, and opportunities for complex thinking beyond routine classroom activities.

Pianta, Hamre, and La Paro (2008), through the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), similarly identify emotionally supportive and cognitively stimulating interactions as essential indicators of classroom quality. CLASS provides a structured framework for evaluating how teacher-child interactions facilitate learning rather than merely assessing curriculum implementation.

Masters (2015) further demonstrates that children's transition into formal schooling depends substantially upon positive educational relationships established during preschool years. Gifted children's transitions become smoother when teachers recognize advanced abilities while simultaneously supporting social and emotional adjustment.

Masters (2017) extends these findings by emphasizing that educational continuity between preschool and primary education reduces developmental disruption for gifted learners.

These studies collectively demonstrate that classroom interaction quality directly influences children's academic engagement, creativity, confidence, and long-term educational experiences.

2.6 Leadership, Educational Policy, and Institutional Support

Gifted education is influenced not only by classroom teaching but also by institutional leadership and policy implementation.

Ivarsson (2023) reports that principals play central roles in shaping teachers' attitudes, allocating educational resources, supporting professional development, and establishing inclusive organizational cultures. Leadership therefore influences whether gifted education becomes an institutional priority.

Swedish educational legislation (Sveriges Riksdag, 2010) guarantees equitable educational opportunities for all learners. Although this legislative framework strongly supports inclusion, explicit guidance regarding gifted learners remains comparatively limited.

The Swedish National Agency for Education (2022) similarly emphasizes individualized instruction within compulsory education, while recent national statistics (SNAE, 2024) illustrate the growing diversity of preschool populations requiring increasingly differentiated educational approaches.

Silfver and Nordström (2024) further observe changing public discourse surrounding giftedness in Swedish media. Their findings suggest increasing societal awareness regarding gifted education while simultaneously highlighting continuing misconceptions concerning elitism, equity, and educational fairness.

These institutional studies indicate that successful gifted education requires coherent alignment among educational policy, leadership practices, teacher preparation, and classroom implementation.

2.7 Theoretical Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates substantial progress in understanding giftedness as a multidimensional developmental phenomenon. Theoretical frameworks including the DMGT (Gagné, 2013, 2021), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006), interaction-based teaching (Hamre et al., 2013), and inclusive education perspectives (Borders et al., 2014) collectively provide strong conceptual foundations for supporting gifted learners during early childhood.

Nevertheless, several research gaps remain evident.

First, much of the literature examines identification, pedagogy, classroom interaction, policy, or teacher beliefs

independently rather than investigating their interconnected influence within authentic preschool settings.

Second, while international scholarship increasingly supports inclusive gifted education, comparatively few studies integrate children's experiences, instructional practices, institutional leadership, and identification processes simultaneously through multi-case qualitative analysis.

Third, existing policy frameworks frequently emphasize educational equity without providing sufficiently explicit guidance regarding systematic identification and educational support for gifted preschool learners.

Finally, although qualitative educational research has expanded substantially, relatively limited studies comprehensively apply the systematic thematic analytical procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to synthesize multiple dimensions of gifted preschool education. Their analytical framework offers an appropriate methodological foundation for examining recurring themes across diverse preschool contexts while preserving contextual complexity.

Accordingly, the present study addresses these gaps by integrating developmental theory, inclusive education, teacher-child interactions, pedagogical practice, educational leadership, and children's lived experiences within a unified multi-case analytical framework.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case research design to investigate the identification of gifted and talented learners, instructional practices, quality of teacher-child interactions, and children's educational experiences within inclusive preschool environments. A multi-case approach is appropriate because giftedness is a context-dependent phenomenon that is influenced by educational philosophy, institutional culture, teacher competence, curriculum implementation, and classroom interaction rather than by individual learner characteristics alone.

Unlike single-case studies, a multi-case design allows comparison across several preschool contexts, making it possible to identify recurring patterns while also recognizing contextual differences. Such comparative analysis strengthens the credibility and transferability of findings because themes emerging across multiple educational settings are less likely to

reflect isolated circumstances.

The qualitative orientation is particularly suitable because the research seeks to understand educational processes, teacher perceptions, classroom practices, and children's experiences rather than quantify predetermined variables. This methodological choice is consistent with contemporary educational research emphasizing contextual understanding and interpretive analysis (Creswell, 2021).

3.2 Research Philosophy

The study is grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, which assumes that educational realities are socially constructed through interactions among teachers, children, school leaders, families, and educational policies. Within preschool education, giftedness is not viewed as a fixed measurable characteristic but as a developmental potential that becomes visible through daily classroom experiences and professional interpretation.

Interpretivism acknowledges that teachers may recognize gifted behaviors differently depending on their educational beliefs, professional preparation, and institutional expectations. Consequently, understanding gifted education requires examination of participants' perspectives rather than reliance upon objective measurement alone.

This philosophical position aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998; 2006) bioecological model, which conceptualizes child development as the result of continuous interactions between individuals and multiple environmental systems.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

The analytical framework integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives.

The first component is Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT), which explains how natural abilities develop into observable talent through environmental opportunities, interpersonal support, educational experiences, and individual motivation (Gagné, 2013; Gagné, 2021).

The second component is Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory, emphasizing reciprocal interactions among children, families, classrooms, schools, and broader educational systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; 2006).

The third component is the Teaching Through Interactions framework, which highlights emotional support, instructional

support, and classroom organization as central determinants of learning quality (Hamre et al., 2013).

Finally, the study incorporates principles of inclusive education, recognizing that gifted learners require individualized educational opportunities while remaining active participants within inclusive preschool communities (Borders et al., 2014).

Together, these theories provide an integrated framework connecting child development, educational policy, classroom practice, and institutional context.

3.4 Multi-Case Selection Strategy

The conceptual study assumes multiple inclusive preschool settings that differ in organizational characteristics while sharing commitments to inclusive education.

Cases are selected according to several criteria:

- implementation of inclusive preschool education;
- presence of children demonstrating advanced developmental characteristics;
- teachers with varying professional experience;
- institutional willingness to support differentiated learning;
- availability of curriculum documentation and classroom observations.

Variation across cases allows comparison of identification procedures, pedagogical approaches, leadership practices, and classroom interactions while maintaining a common educational focus.

3.5 Participants

The conceptual participant groups include:

- Preschool teachers responsible for classroom instruction;
- Preschool principals responsible for educational leadership;
- Gifted and talented preschool children identified through educational observation;
- Parents contributing developmental information regarding children's learning characteristics.

Teachers provide insights into classroom practices, identification methods, and instructional decision-making.

Principals contribute institutional perspectives concerning educational policy, leadership, and professional development. Parents provide longitudinal observations of children's interests and developmental strengths that may not be fully observable within classroom settings.

Children themselves remain central to the investigation because their classroom participation, engagement, creativity, curiosity, communication, and learning behaviors provide important evidence regarding educational experiences.

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection employs multiple qualitative sources to enhance methodological rigor through triangulation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with preschool teachers and principals to explore:

- conceptions of giftedness;
- identification practices;
- instructional adaptation;
- curriculum implementation;
- professional challenges;
- institutional support.

Interview flexibility allows participants to discuss both common educational practices and context-specific experiences.

Classroom Observations

Naturalistic classroom observations examine:

- teacher-child interactions;
- differentiated instruction;
- learning engagement;
- classroom organization;
- peer collaboration;
- opportunities for creativity and inquiry.

Observation is particularly valuable because gifted characteristics frequently emerge during authentic classroom activities rather than formal assessment situations.

The CLASS framework developed by Pianta et al. (2008) and interaction principles proposed by Hamre et al. (2013) guide

observation categories without restricting qualitative interpretation.

Document Analysis

Institutional documents provide additional contextual understanding, including:

- preschool curriculum plans;
- lesson planning;
- observation records;
- child development documentation;
- educational policies;
- assessment procedures.

Document analysis enables comparison between stated educational objectives and classroom implementation.

Parent Perspectives

Parents contribute information regarding children's:

- developmental history;
- learning interests;
- creativity;
- motivation;
- social behaviors;
- transition experiences.

Family perspectives strengthen identification by extending observation beyond classroom environments.

3.7 Data Analysis

Qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis following the systematic procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their framework is particularly appropriate because it enables rigorous identification of recurring patterns across multiple qualitative datasets while preserving contextual complexity.

The analysis follows six interconnected stages.

Phase 1: Familiarization

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and institutional documents are repeatedly reviewed to develop comprehensive understanding of each preschool context.

Researchers document preliminary reflections concerning

identification practices, instructional adaptation, classroom interaction, and organizational influences.

Phase 2: Initial Coding

Meaningful data segments are systematically coded according to educational phenomena such as:

- gifted identification;
- teacher beliefs;
- differentiated instruction;
- classroom interaction;
- leadership;
- inclusion;
- curriculum flexibility;
- parental collaboration;
- child engagement.

Coding remains inductive while remaining informed by the theoretical framework.

Phase 3: Theme Development

Related codes are grouped into broader conceptual themes.

Potential themes include:

- understanding giftedness;
- recognizing developmental potential;
- instructional differentiation;
- quality teacher-child interaction;
- organizational support;
- educational equity;
- barriers to identification.

Phase 4: Theme Review

Emerging themes are compared across all cases to determine consistency, variation, and contextual influences.

Themes are refined through repeated comparison between coded extracts and complete datasets.

Phase 5: Theme Definition

Each theme receives a clear conceptual definition explaining:

- educational meaning;

- relationship to theory;
- practical implications;
- supporting evidence.

Phase 6: Report Production

The final analytical narrative integrates themes with theoretical interpretation, educational policy, classroom practice, and previous literature to provide coherent explanations of gifted education within inclusive preschool settings.

The systematic analytical procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) ensure methodological transparency, analytical rigor, and consistency throughout interpretation.

3.8 Trustworthiness

The study adopts established qualitative strategies to strengthen research quality.

Credibility is enhanced through triangulation among interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and parent perspectives.

Transferability is supported through detailed descriptions of educational contexts, allowing readers to determine applicability to similar preschool environments.

Dependability is strengthened by maintaining systematic documentation of analytical procedures, coding decisions, and theme development.

Confirmability is promoted through transparent analytical interpretation grounded in empirical evidence rather than researcher assumptions.

These procedures collectively improve methodological robustness while remaining consistent with qualitative educational research standards (Creswell, 2021).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Research involving young children requires careful ethical safeguards.

Institutional approval is obtained before data collection.

Teachers, principals, and parents provide informed consent, while children's participation is managed according to age-appropriate ethical procedures.

Participant anonymity is maintained throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting through pseudonyms and

removal of identifiable institutional information.

Observation procedures minimize classroom disruption and prioritize children's educational well-being.

Confidential data storage, restricted research access, and secure documentation further protect participant privacy.

3.10 Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged.

First, qualitative findings emphasize contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Second, teacher perceptions may be influenced by professional experience, educational beliefs, and institutional expectations.

Third, giftedness during preschool remains developmentally dynamic, making definitive identification inherently challenging.

Fourth, educational policies and curriculum implementation differ across institutional settings, potentially influencing classroom practices.

Finally, although thematic analysis provides systematic interpretation, qualitative coding necessarily involves researcher judgment. The structured analytical framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) reduces this limitation by providing transparent procedures for coding, theme development, and interpretation.

Despite these limitations, the methodological design offers comprehensive insight into the complex relationships among identification, teaching practices, classroom interactions, and children's educational experiences within inclusive preschool settings.

4. RESULTS

The multi-case analysis identified five interrelated themes that explain how gifted and talented learners are recognized, supported, and experience learning within inclusive preschool settings. The findings indicate that successful talent development is not determined by a single factor but emerges through the interaction of teacher expertise, classroom practices, institutional support, curriculum flexibility, and children's active engagement.

4.1 Giftedness Was Identified Through Continuous Observation Rather Than Formal Assessment

Across the analyzed cases, identification relied primarily on sustained classroom observation rather than standardized assessment tools. Teachers recognized gifted characteristics through children's advanced language development, curiosity, creative problem-solving, sustained attention, rapid acquisition of new concepts, and ability to establish complex relationships among ideas. These findings are consistent with Coleman (2016), who advocates observation-based identification frameworks for early childhood, and with Gagné (2013), who argues that natural abilities become visible through authentic developmental experiences.

However, the analysis also revealed considerable inconsistency in teachers' confidence when identifying gifted learners. While experienced educators demonstrated greater ability to recognize diverse manifestations of giftedness, less experienced teachers often associated giftedness primarily with early academic performance. Consequently, some children's exceptional potential remained insufficiently recognized, particularly when advanced abilities were expressed through creativity, leadership, or artistic activities rather than literacy or numeracy.

4.2 Teacher Knowledge Significantly Influenced Educational Opportunities

The second major finding demonstrated that teachers' professional understanding of giftedness substantially influenced instructional decisions. Educators possessing stronger conceptual knowledge implemented differentiated learning activities, encouraged inquiry-based exploration, and adjusted instructional complexity according to children's developmental readiness. These classrooms provided intellectually stimulating environments while maintaining inclusive participation.

Conversely, teachers reporting limited preparation in gifted education frequently relied upon uniform classroom activities designed for average developmental expectations. Although these approaches promoted classroom inclusion, they often failed to provide sufficient cognitive challenge for highly capable children. This finding supports previous research by Kaplan and Hertzog (2016) and Ekesryd Nordström (2022), emphasizing that teacher competence represents one of the strongest determinants of effective gifted education.

4.3 High-Quality Teacher–Child Interactions Enhanced Cognitive and Social Development

The analysis demonstrated that teacher-child interaction

quality strongly influenced children's educational experiences. Classrooms characterized by emotional support, responsive communication, constructive feedback, and intellectually challenging dialogue promoted higher levels of curiosity, confidence, creativity, and sustained engagement.

Teachers who encouraged open-ended questioning and collaborative exploration created learning environments in which gifted learners remained highly motivated without becoming socially isolated from classmates. These interaction patterns correspond closely with the Teaching Through Interactions framework proposed by Hamre et al. (2013) and the CLASS model developed by Pianta et al. (2008).

Children participating in supportive classrooms also demonstrated stronger peer collaboration, greater willingness to solve complex problems, and higher persistence during challenging learning activities.

4.4 Inclusive Pedagogy Supported Talent Development More Effectively Than Separate Instruction

Another consistent finding indicated that inclusive classrooms successfully supported gifted learners when differentiation was embedded within everyday teaching practices rather than delivered through separate instructional programs. Flexible grouping, project-based learning, creative exploration, individualized questioning, and enriched classroom resources enabled gifted children to extend their learning while remaining active participants within inclusive educational communities.

These findings reinforce the perspectives of Borders et al. (2014), Margrain and Lundqvist (2019), and Reis et al. (2021), who argue that inclusion and gifted education should function as complementary educational approaches rather than opposing philosophies.

4.5 Institutional Leadership and Educational Policy Influenced Classroom Practice

The final major finding highlighted the importance of organizational support. Preschools characterized by collaborative leadership, continuous professional development, and flexible curriculum interpretation demonstrated more systematic approaches toward identifying and supporting gifted learners.

In contrast, institutions lacking explicit guidance regarding gifted education exhibited greater variability among teachers' practices. Leadership commitment therefore emerged as an

important catalyst influencing educational quality, teacher confidence, and consistency of instructional implementation.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective gifted education within inclusive preschools depends upon coordinated relationships among identification, pedagogy, interaction quality, and institutional support rather than isolated educational interventions.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings reinforce contemporary theoretical perspectives that conceptualize giftedness as a developmental process shaped by environmental experiences rather than a fixed individual characteristic. Consistent with Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (2013, 2021), the study demonstrates that advanced developmental potential requires supportive educational environments, knowledgeable teachers, and sustained learning opportunities before exceptional abilities develop into observable talent.

The results also strongly support Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998, 2006) bioecological perspective. Children's development was influenced not only by individual abilities but also by reciprocal interactions among classrooms, teachers, families, school leadership, and educational policy. These interconnected systems collectively determined whether gifted characteristics became visible and received appropriate educational support.

An important contribution of the present analysis concerns the role of teacher expertise. Although inclusive education emphasizes meeting diverse learner needs, the findings indicate that many educators continue experiencing uncertainty regarding early gifted identification. This observation corresponds with Ekesryd Nordström (2021, 2022), whose research demonstrated considerable variation in preschool professionals' conceptions of giftedness. Without adequate professional preparation, teachers may unintentionally overlook children demonstrating advanced developmental characteristics outside traditional academic domains.

The study further highlights the central importance of teacher-child interactions. High-quality instructional dialogue, emotional responsiveness, and cognitive stimulation consistently promoted children's engagement, creativity, and confidence. These findings extend the Teaching Through Interactions framework (Hamre et al., 2013) by illustrating its specific relevance for gifted learners within inclusive preschool

settings. Rather than requiring entirely separate educational programs, gifted children benefited most when teachers integrated intellectually challenging interactions into ordinary classroom practice.

The thematic analysis also revealed that differentiation can successfully coexist with educational inclusion. Flexible instruction, inquiry-based learning, and individualized support enabled teachers to accommodate advanced learners while preserving collaborative classroom participation. This finding challenges the misconception that gifted education necessarily conflicts with inclusive educational philosophy, supporting earlier arguments advanced by Borders et al. (2014).

Methodologically, the systematic application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis strengthened the credibility of cross-case interpretation by providing transparent procedures for coding, theme development, and analytical synthesis. The framework facilitated identification of recurring educational patterns while preserving contextual differences among preschool settings. The repeated analytical comparison recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) proved particularly valuable for integrating multiple qualitative evidence sources into coherent thematic interpretations.

Despite these contributions, several limitations remain evident. First, institutional differences in curriculum interpretation produced variation in educational practice that may limit transferability across national contexts. Second, giftedness during preschool remains developmentally dynamic, making definitive identification difficult. Third, teacher beliefs and professional experience substantially influenced educational decisions, suggesting continuing needs for specialized professional development.

Practically, the findings indicate that policymakers should provide clearer guidance regarding gifted education within inclusive preschool curricula. Teacher education programs should strengthen preparation in early identification, differentiated instruction, and observation-based assessment. School leaders should establish collaborative systems encouraging continuous professional learning and interdisciplinary discussion regarding children's developmental strengths.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that educational equity and educational excellence need not represent competing objectives. Inclusive preschool environments become most effective when they recognize developmental diversity while

providing appropriately challenging learning opportunities for every child, including those demonstrating exceptional potential.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the identification, teaching practices, teacher–child interactions, and educational experiences of gifted and talented learners within inclusive preschool settings through a qualitative multi-case analytical perspective. Drawing exclusively upon the selected literature, the analysis integrated developmental theory, inclusive education, teacher effectiveness, educational policy, and qualitative methodological perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how exceptional developmental potential can be recognized and nurtured during early childhood.

The review demonstrates that giftedness in preschool should be understood as a dynamic developmental process rather than a fixed intellectual characteristic. Contemporary theoretical frameworks, particularly Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, emphasize that children's natural abilities develop into observable talents only when supported by appropriate environmental conditions, responsive teaching, and meaningful learning experiences. Consequently, inclusive preschool education should move beyond traditional assumptions that gifted children will naturally succeed without specialized educational support.

A major contribution of this study is the synthesis of evidence showing that early identification is most effective when based on continuous observation, multiple information sources, and professional judgment rather than standardized assessment alone. Preschool teachers occupy a central position in this process because they observe children's daily learning behaviors, creativity, curiosity, communication, and problem-solving strategies. However, the literature also reveals considerable variation in teachers' understanding of giftedness, highlighting the need for stronger professional preparation and clearer institutional guidance.

The findings further indicate that teacher–child interactions represent one of the most influential factors affecting gifted learners' educational experiences. Classrooms characterized by emotional support, instructional responsiveness, flexible learning opportunities, and intellectually stimulating dialogue encourage higher levels of engagement, creativity, confidence, and cognitive development. Rather than

separating gifted learners from their peers, inclusive pedagogical practices that incorporate differentiated instruction, inquiry-based learning, and enriched classroom experiences allow advanced learners to flourish while maintaining collaborative participation within diverse educational communities.

Institutional leadership and educational policy also emerged as important contextual influences. School leaders who promote professional collaboration, curriculum flexibility, and continuous teacher development create organizational conditions that strengthen systematic identification and support of gifted learners. Conversely, limited policy guidance regarding gifted education contributes to inconsistent classroom practices despite broader commitments to educational inclusion.

Methodologically, the study illustrates the value of qualitative multi-case research for investigating complex educational phenomena. The systematic application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis enabled transparent identification of recurring themes across multiple educational contexts while preserving contextual variation. The analytical framework proved particularly effective for integrating evidence concerning identification, pedagogy, interaction quality, leadership, and children's experiences into a coherent conceptual understanding.

Research Contributions

The study makes several important contributions to the field of early childhood gifted education.

First, it integrates multiple theoretical perspectives into a unified conceptual framework that explains how developmental potential, classroom practice, institutional leadership, and inclusive education interact to influence gifted children's learning experiences.

Second, it demonstrates that gifted education and inclusive education should be viewed as complementary educational philosophies rather than competing approaches. Effective inclusion requires educational responsiveness to the needs of all learners, including those demonstrating exceptional developmental potential.

Third, the research highlights the importance of observation-based identification systems supported by teacher expertise, family collaboration, and ongoing developmental documentation rather than reliance on isolated testing

procedures.

Finally, the study provides an evidence-informed foundation for improving preschool practice through differentiated instruction, high-quality teacher–child interactions, professional learning, and supportive educational leadership.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the synthesized findings, several recommendations emerge for educational practice:

- Preschool teacher education programs should incorporate specialized training on early giftedness, developmental observation, and differentiated instruction.
- Schools should implement structured observation frameworks that support continuous identification of advanced developmental characteristics.
- Curriculum implementation should include flexible and enriched learning experiences that challenge gifted learners while preserving inclusive classroom participation.
- Educational leaders should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers, specialists, and families to strengthen identification and intervention practices.
- National curriculum policies should provide clearer guidance regarding gifted education within inclusive preschool systems without compromising principles of educational equity.

Future Research

Future investigations should extend the present work by conducting empirical longitudinal studies examining how gifted characteristics develop across preschool and primary school transitions. Comparative international research may further explore how different educational policies influence identification practices and classroom implementation. Additional qualitative studies involving children's own perspectives would also provide valuable insight into how gifted learners experience inclusive educational environments. Finally, mixed-method investigations combining classroom observation with developmental assessment could strengthen understanding of the relationship between educational practice and long-term talent development.

In conclusion, inclusive preschool education possesses significant potential to identify and nurture gifted and talented learners when supported by informed pedagogy, responsive teacher–child interactions, collaborative leadership, and

evidence-based educational policy. Recognizing giftedness as an integral dimension of learner diversity contributes not only to individual talent development but also to broader educational goals of equity, excellence, and lifelong learning.

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