

# The Attitudes of GCC Citizens toward the Services Offered to Gifted Students

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## Introduction:

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have shown a growing interest in the field of education in the past few decades. Much effort has been devoted to developing educational programs for average and below-average students. In addition, throughout the GCC countries, a number of programs have been developed that focus specifically on gifted students, but those programs differ from country to country. Some countries have made considerable progress in developing and advancing gifted programs, while others are yet at their early stages. However, even the more advanced gifted programs in this region lack synchrony between their various activities, preventing them from meeting actual needs of gifted students. The other difference that exists among GCC countries has to do with standardizing the core definition of the term “gifted” in referring to gifted students. Some refer to these students as ‘Glorious’ while others call them ‘Achievers’ and still others describe them as ‘Gifted.’ Interestingly, such differences, be they in defining the term “gifted” or in the levels of programs targeted toward gifted students, exist not only in the GCC countries, but in many different countries worldwide. A study conducted by Mitchell and Williams (1987) among member countries of UNESCO found that “the definitions of giftedness differ from nation to nation, as does the organizational structure of formal education” (p. 531).

## Literature Review

Previous studies in the field of gifted education indicate that selectively identifying individuals causes elitism among students. That is, education targeting gifted students selects a group of students and treats them as the best and the brightest. One study stated that more attention and care were given to special-needs students than to gifted students, out of fear of elitism. As a result, some countries started taking better care of special-needs children than gifted children. Tannenbaum (1998) addresses five major criticisms of the current enrichment practices for the gifted. One of these criticisms is “that such programs foster elitism in schools by singling out gifted children for quality education” (p. 3). Dr. Mara Sapon-Shevin (1987) is an educator who strongly believes that current gifted education programs are based on selectivity, treating talented students not only differently, but also as if they were better than others. In addition, Howley, Howley, and Pendarvis (1995) pointed out that most criticism comes from outside sources, from people who lack any expertise in the area of gifted education and are therefore very concerned with maintaining equality among children. To the contrary, Lawrence (1999) states, “Unfortunately, by confusing political equality and equality in opportunity with equality in ability we have created a climate of anti-intellectualism and fear of elitism that has undercut our ability to benefit fully from the gifts of the academically gifted” (p. 9). Hence, the fear of elitism is to be blamed for the lack of attention given by several countries toward gifted education (Mitchell & Williams, 1987). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that fear of gifted programs is a phenomenon not related to any particular culture (Yoder, 1986). Therefore, this research attempts to

explore the effect of elitism among the GCC countries' citizens by answering the following questions:

1- Do GCC countries' citizens feel that gifted education programs might create feelings of superiority and elitism among their gifted students?

2- Are there any significant differences among the participants in gifted education with regard to the following variables:

- a. Nationality
- b. Major
- c. Nature of job (occupation)
- d. Gender
- e. Having children

3- How would GCC countries' citizens feel about having separate schools for talented students?

#### Methodology

##### Participants

This research targeted citizens of the six GCC countries (Sultanate of Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia). Participants must have been at least 17 years old to participate in the study.

##### Survey

The research used 10 items from the survey adopted by D. Betsy McCoach and Del Siegle (2007). The items were translated from English into Arabic and vice versa. The survey was made available to the participants in both languages.

##### Data collection

The study was conducted through an electronic survey that was e-mailed to friends, acquaintances, and university lecturers throughout the GCC countries. Approximately 1,170 people accessed the survey, out of which 758 actually started it, but only 439 (57.9%) completed it. Most participants were from the Sultanate of Oman (200 participants) followed by Saudi Arabia (146 participants). Few participants were from the other four GCC countries. The percentage of male participants (56.95%) was greater than that of female participants (43.1%). The majority of participants had children of school age (56.9%). It was observed that the percentage of participants who were educators either in schools or in higher education (26.4%) was far less than the percentage of those in other careers (64.6%). Most participants held a bachelor's degree (56.3%), followed by a master's degree (19.7%). Furthermore, most participants were older than 40 years (36.6%), followed by those whose ages ranged between 28 and less than 40 (34%).

##### Results

The purpose of the study was to gain a perspective on how gifted education programs are perceived by citizens of the GCC countries. This was achieved by addressing the three key questions cited earlier. The results of the study showed that GCC countries' citizens do not believe that gifted education programs create a sense of elitism in the students. Slight differences in opinion do, however, exist between members of this community of countries.

Although results did not show any significant difference in opinion toward gifted education amongst people in regard to their nationalities, gender, or age, or to whether they had children, level of education did produce a difference in opinion (Ph.D. degree holders,  $M = 31.3$ ; master's degree holders,  $M = 29$ ). In other words, Ph.D. holders showed higher positive attitudes toward gifted education. In addition, the attitudes of participants who worked as teachers in the past ( $M = 30.6$ ), were better than those of current teachers ( $M = 28.9$ ), which also in turn were higher than the attitudes of people from other professions ( $M = 27.7$ ). The majority of people supported the idea of starting schools for the gifted ( $n = 288$ ). Those who disagreed were definitely in the minority ( $n = 144$ ).

In sum, the study clearly reveals that citizens of the GCC countries believe in educating and supporting gifted students. Very few believe that developing gifted programs creates elitism. More interestingly, most support the idea of having separate schools for gifted students.

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