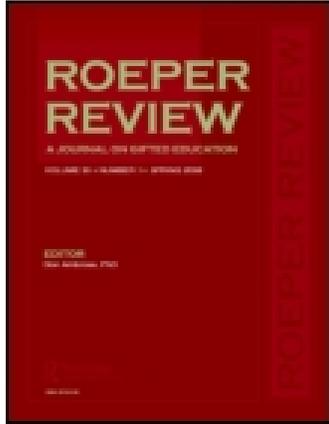


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# The Case of a Self-Contained Elementary Classroom for the Gifted: Student, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Existing Versus Desired Teaching–Learning Aspects

Hava E. Vidergor and Lea Azar Gordon

This study examined whether a self-contained gifted classroom meets the needs of its learners. Considering the existing and desired aspects, as perceived by students, teachers, and parents, it offers a unique lens forming a holistic in-depth view of the self-contained classroom. Forty-two participants took part in this study: 20 students, 15 parents, and 7 teachers. Data were collected via semistructured interviews focusing on the perceptions of desirable and existing aspects of teaching/learning in this program. Findings demonstrate positive student attitude toward being grouped with similarly able students, level of learning, interest, curiosity, and teachers' approach. Parents were satisfied with the decision to transfer their children to this special classroom. Teachers were satisfied with the opportunity to work with this unique population. The study concludes that the self-contained classroom still prevails and caters to the needs of gifted students.

Keywords: gifted student perceptions, parents' perceptions, self-contained classroom, teacher perceptions

## THE SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM

Segregation can take place in a range of educational settings including, for example, self-contained classrooms where gifted children study all year round in a special classroom or in general-education classrooms where ability grouping can take place in a more flexible and less permanent setting. Placement in such settings takes students' abilities and other factors into account, such as motivation, interests, instructional level, and an individual's willingness to invest in learning (Renzulli & Reis, 1991).

A self-contained class enables grouping children of high-academic ability to study at a level suitable for their abilities and needs (Landau, 2001). These self-contained classrooms in Israel are located in general-education schools starting from third or fourth grade onwards in elementary school and continue through secondary school, which enables creating academic connections within class and social connections with peers from general-education classrooms (Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2013).

A school-within-a-school approach, with self-contained classes constituting one form, is one way of providing both specialized gifted programs and opportunities for gifted learners to interact with the general school population in mutually enriching ways (Matthews & Kitchen, 2007). Studying the school-within-a-school approach, Matthews and Kitchen (2007) found that teachers and students expressed strong satisfaction with their academic programs, whereas concerns arose regarding the relationship between the special gifted program and the school in which they were housed.

There are various arguments for and against segregation. For example, Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam (2004), commenting on self-contained classrooms, pointed out that by concentrating the brightest students in one class the costs incurred are no more than teaching many students in mixed ability classrooms throughout a school district.

## THE SELF-CONTAINED CLASSROOM IN ISRAEL

The Division for Gifted and Excellent Students (2014) in the Ministry of Education offers basically two types of programs for the gifted in Israel: (a) pullout enrichment programs in

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55 centers around the country mainly located in rural areas and (b) self-contained classes in 26 elementary and secondary schools located in urban areas. The Israeli version of self-contained classroom is a modified one in which the homeroom teacher, who is an expert in gifted education, teaches at least 50% of the hours and other teachers teach the arts, sciences, mathematics, music, gym, and life skills. Division for Gifted made this decision because teachers are expected to be experts in their fields, even in elementary school, and one teacher cannot be expected to master all subjects taught in class (Division for Gifted and Excellent Students, 2014).

The gifted identification process begins in second or third grade (depending on the district) and is managed solely by the Division for Gifted and Excellent Students (schools in Israel do not identify or select students for this program). The process is carried out yearly by an institute commissioned to conduct two-stage tests and analyze results. Tests measure general aptitude and academic ability in math and reading comprehension (creativity and motivation tools are currently in the final stages of development). The Division notifies the parents that their child has qualified for a gifted program and are granted the opportunity to enroll him or her in the self-contained class in the district (Division for Gifted and Excellent Students, 2014).

Identified gifted students (top 1%) in a given year are invited to attend a gifted self-contained classroom in their district starting from Grade 3 or 4 (depending on the district) to Grade 12 and travel to this magnet site rather than attend their local neighborhood general-education school. Self-contained classes are located in a chosen urban school alongside general-education classes in the same grade. Official numbers indicate that 2,500 students attend self-contained classes in Israel in 100 classrooms. The average class size is 25 students (Division for Gifted and Excellent Students, 2014). Selected students usually show high levels of performance in all academic subjects, in addition to possessing special talents in arts or other areas like leadership or sports, which were not tested. Students selected for these special classes come from all socioeconomic status levels and varied families having two parents, a single parent, and divorced parents, all nonreligious, similar to students in general education.

Teachers are usually identified by the school principal and attend professional development workshops offered by the Division for Gifted and Excellent Students. New teachers are mandated to attend a 2-year professional development program for teachers of gifted and excellent students offered by universities and colleges in five locations in Israel. Graduating from the program entitles them to teach in any program for the gifted (Division for Gifted and Excellent Students, 2014).

Teaching in these self-contained classes is often based on accelerated mainstream curriculum, which is taught in

greater depth, offering more autonomy for students in selecting areas of interest and individual projects incorporating cooperative learning in small groups (Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2013). Core curriculum is adapted in terms of level and pace, considering issues and topics of interest, involving enrichment activities, inquiry, discussions, debates, invited guests, and field trips (Division for Gifted and Excellent Students, 2014).

### The Learning Process

As early as 1993, the U.S. Department of Education report noted that the general-education school curriculum failed to challenge gifted students, who already mastered half of the curriculum before it was actually taught (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1993). When students are forced to study material they often become bored, which can create loss of interest, lack of motivation, and underachievement (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002).

Cohen and Hertzog (2007) reported that elementary school gifted students studying in a self-contained classroom expressed experiencing an increasing sense of academic satisfaction and challenge. Parent feedback supported student perceptions focusing on enthusiasm about learning, never being bored, and love of attending school.

Adams-Byers, Squiller Whitsell, and Moon (2004) studied secondary students' perceptions of academic and social effects of self-contained classes (homogenous grouping) versus general-education classes (heterogeneous). Results showed the participants perceived homogenous grouping more positively with respect to academic outcomes. They learned more in the more challenging environment provided by homogeneous classes. A troubling finding that emerged from this study was the preference of a few of the students for heterogeneous classes because they were easier and enabled them to attain a high class ranking with little work.

### Social-Emotional Aspects

Researchers found that when gifted students are segregated and grouped with others of similar ability, their self-esteem tends to drop (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). The drop in self-esteem is explained by changes in the social comparison dynamics operating within the group attending the gifted program. The changes tend to affect areas of self-concept specific to academics (Swiatek & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2003). This is, however, usually temporary (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991).

A recent study by Vogl and Preckel (2014) paired 99 fifth-grade students from special classes for the gifted with statistical peers from general-education classes. They found that attending a gifted class had positive effects on students' self-concept of acceptance but not assertiveness. In addition, students in gifted classes exhibited more interest in

school and reported better student–teacher relationships than counterparts in general-education school.

Zeidner and Schleyer (1999a, 1999b) found that gifted students in self-contained classrooms in Israel expressed more positive attitudes relating to school atmosphere, level of studies, teacher–student interaction, and teacher characteristics than general-education students and gifted students in pullout programs. On the other hand, students reported having more social problems than those learning in general-education classrooms, indicating that they felt more supported and protected when studying in a general-education class. Researchers conclude that from this perspective, it appears that a heterogeneous or mainstreamed environment offers some distinct advantages for the gifted student (Zeidner & Schleyer, 1999a, 1999b).

Adams-Byers et al. (2004) found that students had mixed feelings about which setting, homogenous or heterogeneous classes, better met their social needs. Participants seemed to value having both similar peers in homogenous classes and the social diversity of heterogeneous classes.

### The Teacher of the Gifted

In a study of two elementary self-contained classes, Cohen and Hertzog (2007) documented and analyzed the daily practice of two teachers and teaching experiences. Findings showed that teachers used strategies that challenged their students, starting from students' interests, offering choices of planning and evaluation of their work, and promoting control of their learning. They also indicated that teachers felt more autonomous to develop curriculum, compact it, and delve into connections between disciplines and curriculum and curriculum and the real world.

Specific competencies of successful teachers include the ability to teach thinking skills, problem solving and creativity; interact with students effectively; use appropriate motivational techniques; conduct student-directed activities; and facilitate independent research (Feldhusen, 1997). Whereas Feldhusen (1997) stressed teachers' acquisition of knowledge and competencies in the course of their professional development over the importance of their personal characteristics, Mills (2003) examined the characteristics of effective teachers of the gifted and suggested that teachers' personalities and cognitive styles may play an important role in their instructional effectiveness. Elaborating on Mill's (2003) findings, two more recent studies by Eilam and Vidergor (2011) and Vidergor and Eilam (2012) revealed that gifted students and their teachers, regardless of their cultural orientation, valued the personal and cognitive over pedagogical characteristics.

Vialle (1998, cited in Vialle & Quigley, 2002) interviewed elementary-school students enrolled in a gifted program concerning the qualities that make a good teacher. Findings demonstrated that personal and academic qualities of the

teacher were equally well regarded. Key qualities rated by students were (a) understanding, (b) helpfulness, and (c) ability to facilitate their learning through setting challenging tasks. Additional characteristics valued by students were: smart, creative, curious, and possesses a sense of humor. Students also pointed out that their teachers should make the work interesting and be well organized.

Another Australian study reported that elementary and junior high school students preferred the more open climate established by trained teachers of the gifted and those undertaking training, compared to untrained teachers of the gifted (Rowley, 2003). Students also reported these teachers' greater emphasis on higher-level thinking (analysis and synthesis) rather than on retention, on discussion rather than on lecturing, and on feelings (the affective dimension).

Vidergor (2010) found that gifted Israeli students related to the teacher as the most important factor in the educational setting, mentioning characteristics such as flexibility, openness, patience, creativity, originality, and sense of humor. They also considered teachers' knowledge, experience, and professionalism. Teacher attitude toward students was also perceived as important for students, who mentioned teachers respecting students, understanding and helping them, and showing personal interest in students.

Teaching–learning strategies often practiced with gifted students in the various programs are based on different models and include the application of higher-order cognitive skills (Anderson & Krathwhol, 2001), problem-based learning (Gallagher, 1997; Stepien & Pyke, 1997), independent study (Johnsen & Goree, 2005), creativity and creative thinking (Cramond, 2005; Van Tassel-Baska, 2004), technology (Pyryt, 2003), and the application of metacognitive strategies (Van Tassel-Baska, Avery, Little, & Hughes, 2000).

### Parents' Perceptions

Parents, in most cases, are the ones responsible for the decision to enroll their child in a self-contained class and supply a more challenging environment that exposes them to varied learning topics (Schleyer & Sheild, 1996). Parents raising gifted children tend to consult with experts regarding their children, seeking help in coping with intensities, overexcitabilities, labeling, and the need for stimulus (May, 2000).

Ziv et al. (1994) pointed out three reasons why parents choose to enroll their gifted child in a self-contained classroom:

1. ambition to make the most of their child's intellectual talent;
2. concern for the occurrence of special problems, ranging from social problems or academic ones starting in boredom through underachievement; and
3. information concerning their gifted child and placement options offered by the Ministry of Education.

Hertzog and Bennett (2004) explained that parents' attitudes often reflect their own values. Ziv (1998) noted that parents transferring their expectations to their children often results in high levels of ambition, the need to succeed, and high levels of commitment exhibited by the gifted. Shani (2009) elaborated and warned that parents and family members develop high expectations that are sometimes exaggerated compared to their child's actual abilities. Accumulated information on parental perceptions indicates that they tend to be very much involved and are central partners in the decision to transfer their child to a self-contained classroom.

## FOCUS OF THE STUDY AND THE MAIN HYPOTHESES

In light of accumulating knowledge, the current study attempts to examine whether a self-contained gifted classroom meets the unique needs of its learners. It is focused on the contribution of the self-contained classroom reflected in the perceptions of teachers, parents, and students themselves. Taking into consideration the existing and desired aspects, as perceived by all involved parties, it offers a unique lens, forming a holistic and in-depth view of the self-contained classroom.

## METHOD

This study is focused on evaluating the contribution of a special framework; that is, self-contained classroom for gifted students in elementary school. Qualitative research design was utilized to collect and analyze data employing grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### Participants

Study participants consisted of elementary school gifted students studying in a self-contained classroom in a general-education school, their teachers, and their parents. The self-contained classroom included students, teachers (including the homeroom teacher and those teaching specific subjects), a counselor, and an instructor. Families varied from two parents, single parent, and divorced parents, all nonreligious. Participants comprised all parties involved in the educational setting of the self-contained classroom: (a) gifted students in an elementary self-contained classroom in fifth grade ( $N = 20$ ); (b) teachers of the same self-contained classroom, including counselor and instructor ( $N = 7$ ); and (c) parents of the gifted students studying in the self-contained classroom ( $N = 15$ ).

### Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews with participants conducted during 2013 were designed to collect data regarding the

perceived existing versus desired contributions of the self-contained classroom ( $N = 42$ ). All participants were interviewed in their time of choice on selected site (school or home) for about half an hour. The interviews, conducted as open dialogues, focused on teachers, students, and teaching strategies. They also addressed perceived existing and desired differences between self-contained and general-education classrooms.

### Data Collection

Data collection began with an initial request to students, teachers, and parents asking them to take part in the study and presenting the subject, purpose, and research question. Forty-two out of 49 potential participants gave their consent to participate in the study. Interviews with students and teachers were conducted individually at school in a separate and quiet room. Interviews with parents were conducted at individual place of residence. At the beginning of each interview the purpose, procedure, and anonymity were explained, as well as the request to record the interview. Interviews were video recorded (when possible) and transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

Students', teachers', and parents' responses were analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analysis of the responses yielded the following results:

1. The axial coding categories generated from the initial coding procedure included gifted students' belonging, gifted students' competitiveness, gifted students' group support, learning enjoyment, learning challenges, learning pace, teachers' personal characteristics, and teachers' pedagogical characteristics.
2. Selective coding created three core categories: students' society, learning process, and the teacher of the gifted.

A reliability of 90% was calculated for 20% of analyzed content, performed by two independent coders. Inter-coder agreement was calculated in percentages, as the number of agreed upon classifications of statements out of total number of statements multiplied by 100 (Keeves, 1988). Definitions of problematic criteria were refined, and an additional random sample of that content was categorized to obtain 90% of inter-coder reliability. Table 1 presents examples of the coding procedure.

Our memos on the initial stage of analysis and coding exhibited the following subcategories: teachers' personality, teaching methods, teaching tools, level of studies, pace of studies, level of interest, students' competitiveness, students' labeling, students' motivation, and group support. Core categories that emerged were teacher, studies, teaching strategies, students, and teaching-learning environment. Some subcategories were renamed, refined, and combined to

TABLE 1  
Examples of Coding Procedure of Student Responses

<i>Level I Codes</i>	<i>Level II Codes</i>	<i>Level III Codes</i>
Original Responses From Students	Categories Generated From Level I Codes	Consistent Themes Created From Level II Codes
“In a self-contained class each pupil feels part of the group.” “I think that a pupil in a self-contained class has a sense of belonging.”	Belonging	Students’ society
“One feels that he has to compete with his classmate so he tries harder.”	Competitiveness	
“There is a lot of competitiveness in this classroom, which makes you feel you are not good enough.”	Group support	Learning process
“I needed help in understanding the learning material and a friend helped me.”		
“The pupil enjoys learning in depth.” “The learning methods are a lot of fun.”	Learning enjoyment	
“In a self-contained class pupils can teach their peers.”	Learning challenges	
“Teachers give us riddles and activities that challenge us to think.”	Learning pace	
“Gifted pupils understand faster and learn quicker.” “In our class we learn more and in a faster pace.”		
“The teacher puts a lot of effort in teaching the pupils in variable ways.”	Teacher’s pedagogical characteristics	The teacher of the gifted
“A teacher that teaches beyond the curriculum.”		
“I feel good when I come to school, I want to succeed. I have some difficulties and the teacher helps me.”	Teacher’s personal characteristics	
“She teaches me but she is also my confidante.”		

form one core category. Core categories emerging, describing the teaching–learning situation in the self-contained classroom, were found similar to the commonplaces suggested by Schwab (1973, 1978) with one exception, because subject matter was not addressed in this study.

### RESULTS

The gifted student studying in a self-contained classroom goes through this process with partners. In the current study, the perceptions of these partners—that is, gifted students, teachers, and parents—were examined relating to the existing and perceived teaching–learning aspects in the classroom. Analysis of interviews yielded categories and subcategories presented in Figure 1.

#### Student Society

The first category deals with students’ society and relates to social aspects. Five subcategories emerging from the analysis were,

1. belonging: referring to the sense of belonging the student has or does not have toward the self-contained framework;
2. support: referring to the group and ways of supporting the individual student;

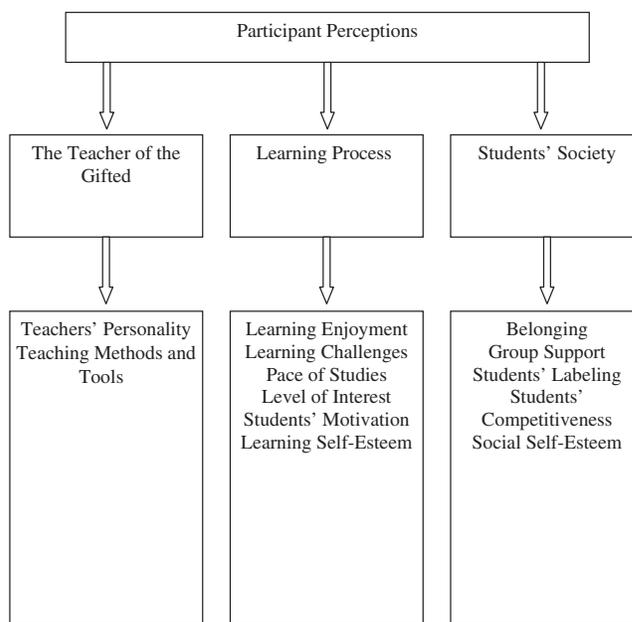


FIGURE 1 Participant perceptions of existing and desired aspects in self-contained class: Main and subcategories.

3. labeling: referring to results of identification as gifted;
4. competitiveness: referring to the question about whether competitiveness occurs as part of group characteristics; and

5. social self-concept: referring to students' perceptions of self as part of society in class.

### Belonging

Fifteen students addressed the first subcategory of belonging where they stressed the fact that they "feel at home" and "in an environment that other students understand me because they are gifted too." Students perceived learning in groups as enabling them to get to know each other better and feel the closeness and togetherness of the group: "We work in groups most of the time which enables team building and working with friends, and not alone." Another student stressed the fact that he wants to feel that he belongs, as opposed to the general-education classroom where he felt socially alienated: "I expect a higher level of social team building because everybody is equal in the gifted class, opposed to the general-education class where I felt socially alienated."

Four teachers related to the sense of belonging. One of them explained:

The students feel that they belong as they are not out of the ordinary academically and socially. They feel they get answers to their questions, and this creates a sense of home, a place where they belong and suits them.

Another teacher described the process the student goes through and said, "In my opinion, and my experience, the gifted child entering the fourth grade faces difficulties and then gradually feels that he belongs and is more at home in the self-contained classroom."

Eleven parents addressed the feeling of belonging. One of the mothers connected it to the characteristics of the gifted child, explaining that "sensitivity to details, great curiosity and need to know new things, created an immediate connection between the children." One father described his daughter's experience "as being the odd one out in the general-education school, and since attending this class she feels she is among the popular kids."

Relating to the desired aspect of belonging, parents mentioned, "It will occur as a consequence of academic abilities and the more homogeneous the class, the better."

### Support

The second subcategory deriving from the first one dealt with the sense of support the individual student receives from the group and the quality of connections created between peers. One girl described "academic support"; the other mentioned the "feeling of security and less cases of violence." Some students focused on the help from adults: "One teacher also serves as my confidant. When I feel bad she recognizes that and tries to help me as much as possible." Another student felt that "the teachers are more attentive and helpful in solving social issues." Some students mentioned seeking

the advice and help of parents related to learning assignments: "I asked my father about the subject" and "My parents translated things I did not understand."

Four teachers mentioned that they support their gifted students because they are aware of their characteristics and needs: "The teacher teaching gifted are aware of the needs of this special population and try to accommodate to it." Three teachers claimed that supporting and encouraging these children is imperative in order to help them with their social and emotional difficulties. Another teacher suggested, "One of the ways of supporting the kids could be by exposing them to, and sharing the teachers' experiences."

Three parents related to this subcategory describing the existing situation in the classroom. One of them described the students as "attentive and respectful of each other." Another focused on the support of teachers saying, "We were glad to find out that there was a strong emphasis on developing life and social skills, which will strengthen the interface between the gifted students and society." The third parent described the teachers' support by "being sensitive to their students' sensitivities."

### Labeling

Three students related to the third subcategory of labeling. One student compared his situation in the general-education classroom and as a gifted student in the self-contained classroom saying, "In the special class you do not feel like the out-cast because you are gifted, but more average." On the other hand, gifted students find it difficult to cope with labeling by students from general-education classes, explaining that "a student in the general-education class feels sometimes bad because of social problems that occur because of different stigmas." Relating to the desired situation, six students addressed the issue of arrogance and showing off of their gifted peers: "Some kids show off because they were told all their lives how excellent they were, so they are full of themselves. I would take that away." Another student added that he would eliminate the "perception of the gifted child that it is not good to make friends with general-education students because they are not smart." Students also mentioned controlling high expectations of teachers: "A gifted child in this class many times feels bad because of the high expectations from teachers."

Two teachers related to the subcategory of labeling, addressing the difference that exists among students studying in the self-contained class:

A gifted child who has passed the tests and got the approval that he is gifted is constantly moving between feeling successful and unsuccessful. This child who studied in a general-education classroom till third grade and did not have to make any effort to be considered smart, is now attending the self-contained class where everybody is as successful as he is.

Two parents related to the labeling subcategory, explaining that their child “suffered from loneliness, mockery, and violence in the general-education classroom as a result of being identified as gifted” and “being labeled as gifted the child went to the general-education class emotionally hurt.” They added, “In the self-contained classroom the child does not contemplate on how to change in order to fit in.”

### Competitiveness

The fourth subcategory dealt with competitiveness among the gifted students. The need to achieve sometimes creates an atmosphere of competition. Only three students related to this issue, reporting “In the classroom we feel a great amount of competitiveness that could lead to the feeling that you are not good enough, or even worse than others.” Another student described a situation in which he compares himself to his classmates and acts to be better than them but does not always succeed: “The student feels the competition because he needs to try harder, and does not always succeed to become better than others.” The student continues, “[That is why] I would make all students’ abilities equal, so that they will not be better in one thing and less successful in other things, and get hurt because he is not picked by his peers to participate (in a project or a game).”

Two teachers mentioned competitiveness, explaining, “The gifted students compare their grades and abilities to their peers and it sometimes becomes stressful.” Adding, “The students ask: Why did I get 99 and not 100?”

Four parents related to competitiveness, being aware of the consequence of the importance that students attribute to academic success. As presented by one parent, “A self-class could be very competitive because individuality which characterizes the gifted students could prevent them from connecting and could cause many conflicts, as each student places himself in the center.” One parent mentioned that he “would not have wanted to find extreme competitiveness and we should be on guard to prevent the gifted from coming up with ideas in that direction.”

### Social Self-Concept

The fifth subcategory dealt with the social self-concept of the gifted student studying in the self-contained classroom and was only addressed by two students. One student described a situation where “there are children playing with other children and feeling good, while others are loners and feel bad about themselves.” On the other hand, the second student said, “At large, me and my friends, we feel good about our choice to move to this class. We have thought many times about what would have happened if we had not passed—we would not have met each other and known everybody.”

## DESIRED VERSUS EXISTING DIMENSIONS OF STUDENT SOCIETY

The extent of relating to each dimension was calculated by taking the number of interviews in which it was mentioned (presented in Figure 1). The distribution of replies indicated that parents and students place great importance on the sense of belonging to the self-contained class, whereas teachers focused on group support. The students were the only ones to relate to their social self-concept. The distribution of replies indicated a strong sense of students addressing the labeling issues and teachers’ recognizing the gifted students’ needs for support in the classroom.

### The Learning Process

The second main category related to participants’ perceptions of the process of learning. This category was divided into six subcategories:

1. enjoyment: describing the sense of enjoyment students have from the learning process;
2. challenge: relating to the extent of challenge students experience doing different assignments;
3. pace: relating to content areas in which students are taught at a higher pace or offered enrichment or in-depth learning;
4. curiosity and interest: representing types of learning assignments that create curiosity and interest;
5. motivation: representing types of learning assignments that motivate students to learn; and
6. academic self-concept: describing students’ self-perceptions from academic points of view.

#### *Enjoyment*

Thirteen students related to this subcategory describing the existing situation in the self-contained classroom. One student mentioned, “The child enjoys learning and does not treat the teachers as experts who know everything better.” Another student added, “It is more fun to study because of the projects, debates and working in groups on special assignments.” Students did not refer to desired aspects in this subcategory.

One teacher indicated that when she plans a lesson it is important for her “that the students also enjoy the assignment.” One parent said his “daughter has fun going to school as studies are suitable now and she feels much better, opposed to the previous school (where she attended a general-education class).”

#### *Challenge*

Eighteen students related to this subcategory. A female student mentioned, “It is more challenging as the teachers make us think, opposed to the other (general-education)

school where we just studied from books.” Another student added, “The class challenges me. In the previous class I was bored, but here studies are up to my level. We pay attention to details, compare, contrast and debate.”

All seven teachers perceive that setting challenges to their gifted students is of great importance. One teacher described the gifted students as “striving for knowledge. Having a rich world and many fields of interest, these children often ask me to elaborate on a subject. I feel that as a teacher, I am there to stimulate them.” The art teacher emphasized that she makes sure her lessons are “interesting, versatile, and challenging.” When relating to the desired aspect, one teacher expressed the fact he would like to see in the class “work on strategies that nurture self-regulated learning and teaching high-order thinking skills like metacognitive and metastrategic thinking.”

Eight parents related to the subcategory of challenge. They reported that they were very impressed with the challenging assignment their children received. From discussions with their children, they understood that “the assignments were challenging but not frustrating” and “the curriculum was much more challenging and interesting than the one in the general-education classroom.” Three parents emphasized, “It is desired to challenge the children to prevent boredom and encourage seeking for knowledge and expanding horizons”; that is why they expect the teacher “to be able to challenge his students to think, express themselves, and help them acquire good leaning habits that will maximize their abilities.”

### *Pace*

The third subcategory dealt with the pace of studies. Seven students related to the fact that “in self-contained classroom in most subjects students learn material that is learned in higher classes in the general-education school.” They added, “Gifted students understand faster, therefore learn faster, while in the general-education class there are differences of levels and learning is slower.” Relating to the desired aspect, six students mentioned, “It would be better to study the general-education material for the first half of the year, and the more advanced material in the second half. In this way the next year will start with the more advanced material of the higher grade.”

Four teachers related to pace, while the first explained, “In a self-contained classroom there is no need to teach to the middle, because the students are bright enough to understand what the teacher strives for.” The other three teachers believed, “It is desired to teach according to students’ abilities and needs.” One teacher explained, “When I teach literary genres in fifth grade, which is actually a sixth grade topic, I include fantasy because gifted children like it.”

### *Curiosity and Interest*

The fourth subcategory is curiosity and interest students discover in their studies. Six students related to the existing

aspect of curiosity and interest indicating that they “appreciate teachers who teach in an interesting way because it makes students more curious and they want to continue listening and learning, as gifted students are naturally more curious to learn.” Students mentioned different teaching methods like games, debates, enrichment, and in-depth learning and said they “sometimes read on Wikipedia topics that interest them that are not directly connected to school assignments.” As for the desired aspect, they suggested to preserve the existing situation: “Learning should be like now, through games, lectures, work groups, and I would like to add outdoor lessons.”

Three teachers related to curiosity and interest, saying that they “believed learning should fit the level of interest and curiosity of students,” and “it is desired that sometimes the children get to lead directions of thinking and level of depth.” Nine parents related to this subcategory. One parent explained, “The greatest contribution of the self-contained class, in my opinion, is the fact that it preserves and even develops the curiosity and openness to new ideas.” Five parents mentioned they would like “more activities, field trips and hands-on topics like home economics.”

### *Motivation*

Eight students related to their motivation to learn and defined themselves as “possessing a strong will to learn, and therefore, able to work well and succeed.” In the students’ opinions, “Whatever we do in class is only suitable for gifted students, who have the abilities and the will to learn, because there are assignments that only a man who wants to learn, will be able to do.” Three students related to the desired aspect explaining that they “would like teachers to give them a choice between subjects and what to focus on” and “students need to get more space for action and learning and get more creative assignments that make them think and motivate them to learn.”

The teachers described situations they create in class in order to motivate the students by experiential teaching, elaboration on learned subjects, going in depth, inquiry, and focusing on skills. One teacher described the following:

Teachers in the general-education class are not free to prepare gifted students special assignments, and gifted are not willing to do such projects, because it is more convenient for them not to make an effort. In the self-contained class there is a commitment to create a meaningful curriculum that will develop motivation, as well as addressing the social-emotional components.

The teachers would like to “expand the options for creating motivation by using teaching strategies and methods including selecting subjects, visiting sites, meeting experts, and using interdisciplinary units which connect between sciences and social studies, that are not so common in school.”

Seven parents reported that they recognized the internal motivation of their children to learn. They indicated, “This class enables that kind of learning, and there is an

atmosphere that encourages learning and inquiry.” In their opinion, “The gifted children possess a higher motivation to learn compared to children in the general-education class, and it helps them to feel more at ease” and “the self-contained class is a source for stimulating and mutual learning.” It is of great importance for parents to preserve their children’s motivation by keeping the class composition; they would like to continue and see this class “as a population of high-ability successful students focused on learning and achievement.”

### *Academic Self-Concept*

The sixth subcategory reflects the way students perceive themselves academically and how the environment perceives them. Ten students related to this category, with one student explaining that “opposed to general-education classrooms, where their academic self-concept was high, in the self-contained class the gifted are sometimes good in special areas and not so bright in others; therefore, they feel they are less successful.” When academic work was demanded, the gifted students could pinpoint exactly what strategies they used and where they would seek help: “I consulted my father and the homeroom teacher regarding the sources/references for my project, and it helped a lot.” They also used previous experience: “This year was easier than last year because I had greater experience”; and they learned how to manage time, “I learned how to manage my time more efficiently and started organizing my day according to the frequency of the assignments.” Relating to the desired aspects, students offered to add, “individual or extra lessons for students who encounter some problems or difficulties.” Another suggestion was “avoiding very difficult subjects like physics, which are taught in ninth grade in the general-education school and as enrichment in self-contained elementary classes.”

Four teachers related to this subcategory, describing “most of the students as being aware of their academic self-concept, pointing out that some could face a small failure which could shatter it to pieces.” These students will “avoid carrying out certain assignments in order to prevent them from being unsuccessful.” Another teacher described the students as “perfectionists who can be frustrated by the smallest event of lack of success” and “when facing a danger to the academic self-concept, students tend to deal with what they are successful at, and do not deal with the difficulties.”

Two teachers related to the desired aspects of academic self-concept, describing the gifted student as “having the tendency to be very critical as part of his self-concept.” They would like to “change the excessive criticism towards themselves, toward friends, teachers, school, and country.” One teacher added, “It is expressed by great cynicism, remarks about boredom, and more.”

Two parents related to the academic self-concept of their children, which is determined in their opinion by the environment, saying, “The gifted children have a very high

academic self-concept, as they hear it all the time from their surroundings.”

### DESIRED VERSUS EXISTING DIMENSIONS OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Comparing the existing versus desired aspects mentioned by all participants yielded the following results. Comparison of all active factors in the classroom shows that both students and parents perceive the great importance of posing challenges to students in the learning process, and parents see curiosity and motivation to learn as the most important components of the self-contained classroom. Comparing all active factors in the class shows that students’ desire to find challenge in their studies is crucial for them. Teachers mainly addressed the issue of pace, and parents focused on the desire that students in the self-contained class will develop curiosity and interest and motivation.

### The Teacher

The third category is the teacher, which is divided into two subcategories: (a) teacher’s characteristics and (b) teaching strategies and methods.

#### *Teacher’s Characteristics*

Ten students described the characteristics of the teacher. One student described the desired teacher as being “patient, tolerant, possessing thinking flexibility, good listener, and willing to learn from his student.” Other students emphasized things like “understands how the gifted students feel,” “knows how to work with them,” “has the patience to answer all our questions,” and “makes sure everybody understands the material.” Another student added personal characteristics like “listens well,” “serves as my confidant,” and “wants to help.” One student mentioned that he would like a teacher “who was gifted once, who understands the children and knows how to work with them.”

Six out of seven teachers related to this subcategory, with one teacher stressing the fact that “the teacher possesses a high-academic level, being able to answer questions and satisfy the curiosity of the child, as children appreciate teachers’ knowledge and insights and is willing to learn from him.” In the opinion of another teacher,

The teacher should be curious, should love children, be creative and be able to think out of the box, possess the ability to learn and the will to innovate and develop new ideas, respects others’ ideas, as well as willing to invest in his work.

A different teacher mentioned he would like the teacher to be “professional, flexible, possess the ability to adapt to the needs of the class, loves learning new things (from and with his students), and be open minded and creative in his teaching.”

Ten parents related to the teacher describing him or her as “knowledgeable, uses varied teaching strategies, investing in the lesson enriching learning beyond the textbook.” Another teacher described the teacher as “involved and interested in what happens among students, even though it is not directly connected to learning.” One parent explained that “teachers participating in the professional development focusing on the needs and characteristics of the gifted contributed to the children’s feelings of belonging and inclusion.” Describing the desired characteristics, one parent made a list of qualities he would like the teacher of his child to possess: “Educated, possesses love of knowledge, encourages creative thinking, and sensitive to the needs of the gifted” and also added, “a teacher who is trying to hear the student’s voice, can examine his social behavior and draw information on his sensitivities, social problems, family problems, etc.”

### *Teaching Strategies and Methods*

Nine students related to the second subcategory of teaching strategies and methods. The students compared the curriculum in the self-contained class and the general-education class, saying, “In the general-education class the focus is on understanding, and in our class it is the in depth learning, understanding, and analysis.” Another student added, “In our class we read every chapter in the Bible and analyze it in depth, while in the general-education class children say they are more advanced but this is as a result of not digging deeper.” One student suggested “using open discussions more often” because it is his favorite way of learning.

Four teachers addressed the varied teaching strategies and methods they use, stressing inquiry, developing skills, experiential teaching, and exposure to initial sources and creating connections to interdisciplinary subjects. The art teacher explained that during the lessons,

I develop high-order thinking skills and problem solving; for example: How to create an original painting, how to design the page, how to solve the problem of image and background. I also take the students to museum visits, and use PowerPoint presentations and films for enrichment.

Relating to the desired aspect in this area, one teacher mentioned that she “would like the academic freedom to decide what to teach, because if I am enthusiastic about the subject, I am sure the students will be excited, too.”

Ten parents related to this subcategory. One parent focused on the individual project, explaining, “A child chooses a subject and researches it with guidance, deciding how to present it with a personal touch. This kind of work develops a sense of organization, responsibility to carry out the assignments.” Two parents indicated that they would like to see some changes in teaching strategies and methods, explaining that “in the self-contained class we can also find differences in students’ levels so special

hours should be devoted to different subjects students could choose, according to his gift, and then further develop his expertise.”

### *Desired Versus Existing Dimensions of the Teacher*

Comparison of participants’ replies relating to the two subcategories of the teacher of the gifted indicates that students and their parents perceive teachers’ characteristics and teaching strategies and methods of similar importance, whereas teachers attribute a greater importance to the teachers’ characteristics. Results show that teachers were more concerned with the desired teaching strategies and methods, similar to parents, but to a lesser extent. Students were not concerned with the desired aspects of teachers’ characteristics or teaching strategies and methods.

Results show that students related to the existing process of learning and the teacher of the gifted, whereas parents and teachers perceived the teacher as the most important factor. Results indicate that teachers and parents were mainly concerned with the desired process of learning, whereas students showed very little concern for all three desired categories.

## DISCUSSION

This study focused on a self-contained classroom for the gifted in elementary school. It set out to examine how all parties involved in the educational setting (i.e., students, teachers, parents) perceived the contribution of this framework to these experiences. It also examined the existing versus desired aspects as perceived by study participants.

### *Contribution of the Self-Contained Framework*

#### *Student Society*

The student society in the self-contained classroom is quite homogeneous, because students were identified and opted to attend this class. The quality of interaction between gifted children and their surroundings is imperative to the sense of belonging. Student ability and will to support classmates indicates good adjustment to the peer group. This support was translated in the study findings in terms of mutual help, tolerance, and creating a comfortable social environment. Students emphasized teacher support and even defined them as “confidants” and “counselors.” They also emphasized parent support in learning assignments. This support could be explained by the fact that the best predictor of student success in school is related to family capability to a supportive learning home environment (Ziv, 1998).

#### *The Teaching–Learning Environment*

The self-contained classroom captures a special place in the gifted students’ world. They receive encouragement,

stimulus, and expression of their abilities more than anywhere else. This classroom creates a challenging environment and enables high-level debating, special activities, and compatibility between teaching methods and student preferences.

Findings indicate student enjoyment of both the process and products of learning. Parents, similarly, find that the self-contained classroom meets the needs of their children but did not focus on the issue of enjoyment. One explanation could be that parents perceive the teachers focusing on the academic aspects of learning, emphasizing challenge, pace, curiosity, interest, and motivation, rather than the emotional aspect of enjoyment. Schleyer and Sheild (1996) claim that the gifted are aware of their abilities to perform high-level cognitive tasks because they have been exposed to prior positive experiences. All students and most teachers perceived challenge to be a crucial aspect in the learning process. Teachers were aware of student needs and reported using and looking for interesting, varied, and fun teaching methods and strategies.

Some students pointed out that the pace of studies in the self-contained setting was faster and they studied higher-level material. Pacing answers, student needs for constant stimulus, and prevention of repetition and unity of materials, which could cause lack of challenge and boredom, were emphases. This could be a result of students' abilities to think and solve problems quickly and process large chunks of knowledge in a relatively short period of time (Van Tassel-Baska, 2003). Teachers, aware of student abilities and preferences, tend to vary and offer in-depth learning upon student request. Students' expected adaptation of learning pace according to giftedness levels, whereas teachers and parents considered student-level needs according to subject matter.

Developing curiosity and interest was addressed by a large number of students as a main goal in their studies, enabling them to exploit their self-regulation to achieving the required product. A possible explanation could derive from gifted students' typical thinking abilities motivating them to inquire about phenomena and subjects of interest (Webb, 2000). Parents perceive their child's curiosity and interest in the willingness to invest academic effort at home and noted that they would like to preserve the factors motivating them to learn.

Students and teachers reported certain autonomy in learning exercised by free choice of topics, goal setting, and occasionally the choice of teaching methods. Affection and time devoted to students, as stressed by their teachers, result in decreased competitiveness and increased sense of belonging and confidence in individual abilities, promoting internal motivation. Personal characteristics of gifted students like curiosity and interest, commitment, and patience in achievement of goals also may contribute to the development of intrinsic motivation.

### *Quality of Teaching*

Teachers teaching in the self-contained class are knowledgeable experts in their fields and received ample professional training in the cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of giftedness. These teachers and the counselor accompany the students for 3 years and have weekly meetings with the whole class, as well as individual meetings with students based on need.

Findings related to the pattern of relationships between teachers and students show that students describe their teachers as experts, using innovative methods of inquiry, enabling peer learning and group work, extending the curriculum, challenging, being flexible and open to new ideas, and being warm and supportive. A possible explanation would be that most teachers attended the professional development program for teachers of gifted students (Vidergor, 2010).

Most teachers perceive themselves as curious, investing in their work, developers of new ideas, and respectful of ideas presented by others. Like their students, they emphasized teaching strategies as inquiry and added higher-order thinking and other skills developed, creating challenges for their students.

Parents attributed great importance to the education of the teachers, relating to existing teaching strategies and methods, describing the teachers as encouraging creative thinking and sensitive to their special needs. The learning material and independent learning strategies were perceived as central, especially focusing on the personal project, which enriches student knowledge and creates responsibility and commitment for completing the assignment. However, the parents wish that the framework would allow more distinction between the diversity of giftedness and that every child would be able to expand his or her knowledge in the area of interest.

The comparison regarding the extent to which participants addressed the main categories revealed that most students focused on the learning process, whereas teachers and parents chose to state their opinions relating to the teacher. Most students chose to express their perceptions regarding the desired student society, whereas teachers and parents would like to see change occurring mainly in the process of learning.

### *Perils of the Self-Contained Framework*

#### *Labeling*

The difference between gifted children and general-education students increases after being identified and exposes them to processes of labeling, which includes them in a generalized category of giftedness (Schleyer & Sheild, 1996). Findings indicate that the gifted who experienced ridicule and jealousy as a result of labeling in the general-education classroom now feel that they are in a safe a protective environment. The difficulties regarding labeling

arise in the self-contained classroom in the form of arrogance on the part of some peers. This pattern of behavior could be explained by gifted students' tendencies to interpret and take the constant support and investment in them for granted, without translation into investment into studies or contribution to society (Schleyer & Sheild, 1996). The teachers, similar to students, placed great importance on the issue of labeling, apparently as a result of being exposed to ongoing discussions with students. Parents were happy to report that in the self-contained classroom their children felt much better among other gifted students and did not deliberate on how to change and become "like everybody."

### *Competitiveness*

The theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954) claims that, in comparison with similar people, individuals can evaluate their abilities and detect whether they are better. Findings show that a small number of students reported competitiveness, which threatened them. A possible explanation could be differences in levels of giftedness and talent areas. Teachers reported students comparing their grades but apparently felt they were contributing enough to the social process, which met the needs of students. Parents were concerned with excessive competitiveness, which could hinder the social connection, but in their opinion is not present in the investigated classroom.

### *Motivation, Self-Concept, and Fear of Failure*

Basic needs mentioned by students comprising internal motivation include satisfying the sense of ability, the ability to cope with challenging assignments and situations of failure by detecting it and finding solutions, as well as supportive messages delivered by teachers ensuring student success.

Academic self-concept is determined by comparison with peers. Students getting higher grades will perceive themselves as possessing a high-academic self-concept, whereas those getting lower grades will suffer from a low-academic self-image. Findings from this study show that students are required to make greater academic effort in the self-contained class. In the general-education classes they came from they had higher-academic self-concept, and in the self-contained class some students face academic difficulties hindering their self-concept. Their high ability to analyze social situations enabled them to employ strategies like use of former experience, getting help from experts, and managing time.

Parents connected academic self-concept to expectations from the surrounding environment, meaning, and the tendency of parents and teachers to expect high-academic achievement to help the gifted build their academic self-concept. When these expectations are unrealistic and there is a tendency to attribute special powers and abilities to the child, situations of friction and pressure are created both at school and at home.

Teachers reported that some students possessing high-academic self-concept tend to be arrogant and experience great difficulty in coping with lack of success. Sometimes students, fearing the possible damage to their academic self-concept, avoid dealing with difficulties and retreat to safe and known areas in which they are proficient. Teachers need to be very careful in praising effort and not intelligence to create motivation and avoid underachievement (Dweck, 2007). When students do not worry about how smart they will appear, they take on challenges and stick to them (Dweck, 1999, 2006). When students fail, those praised for their intelligence will display less task persistence, less task enjoyment, more low-ability attributions, and worse task performance than children praised for effort (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). An additional possible explanation for avoiding an assignment could be perfectionist tendencies which confuse children emotionally and lead them to believe that they are incapable of completing (Webb, 2000). According to teachers' perceptions, the high-academic self-concept leads to overcriticism, which could be explained by the high intensity with which these students experience feelings and express them perceived as criticism (Webb, 2000).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on the perceptions of all parties involved in the educational setting of the self-contained classroom. The study presents the perceptions of all of these parties relating to the social, emotional, and academic aspects taking place in this classroom. In general, grouping students in a self-contained classroom in elementary school shows great advantages from all examined aspects. Still, teachers and parents need to be aware of possible perils that might occur as a result of studying in this unique framework. The following conclusions derive regarding the student society, learning process, and teaching quality.

### Student Society

1. Student society as an academic framework meets the social needs of gifted students. The interaction with students of similar characteristics creates a sense of belonging and promotes their ability to cope with mutual problems like labeling, competitiveness, overexcitability, and perfectionism through a mutual and teacher support system. This positive interaction contributes to the social self-concept of most gifted students in the class.
2. Parents positively affirm their decision to transfer their child to the self-contained classroom and would like to preserve the special conditions offered to their children in the class, including a smaller number of students, challenging human composition, specially

trained teachers, and social conditions of belonging and support.

3. Teachers find the tools for dealing with the social-emotional aspects of giftedness as efficient as they enable managing the process to the satisfaction of the children.

### Learning Process

1. The process of learning is the top priority of a group of students with outstanding academic abilities. The educational framework meets their special needs, such as enjoyment from learning, intellectual challenge, accelerated pace, curiosity and interest, and response to internal motivation.
2. Parents support varied teaching methods suitable for gifted children, but some think that the differences within class levels should be addressed to meet the needs of all students.
3. It is of great importance to teachers to meet the needs of their gifted students by designing interesting and challenging lessons, including higher-order thinking assignments.

### Teaching Quality

1. The quality of teaching, as perceived by students, is different from classes they originally came from in the general-education school. In student perceptions, the teachers are experts in pedagogy and possess the qualities for meeting their needs.
2. Parents think that the school does its best in choosing the right teachers based on the understanding of the special needs of this population.
3. Teachers in the self-contained classroom act based on the perception that giving the students the feeling that they believe in them and their abilities will result in strengthening internal student motivation and belief in themselves.

### Implications

1. It is important to train all of the teachers working in the self-contained class to cope with student difficulties and challenges.
2. It is imperative to continue and integrate the counselor in lessons in the self-contained classroom in order to meet the social-emotional needs of the gifted and nurture skills of discourse between students and teachers.
3. It is advisable to consider using ability grouping within the self-contained classroom in different subject areas compatible with students' interests starting from elementary school.

### Limitations

This study examined student, teacher, and parent perceptions regarding the contribution of the self-contained classroom. Findings indicate that this unique framework contributes to the development of gifted students as it contains a small number of students possessing similar abilities. Moreover, input invested in this class, including carefully selected teachers attending a professional development program and special curriculum enabling exposure to varied topics not taught in the general-education class, contributes as well to meeting the needs of the gifted students.

This study is unique because it presents the subjective perceptions of all parties involved in the self-contained classroom—students, teachers, and parents—focusing on their personal voice using a qualitative design, which differs from many other studies in the field of giftedness. Investigating and understanding the process all parties go through from the moment this self-contained class is formed is of great importance and will enable us to better meet the needs of the gifted students learning in it.

The current study used a small sample size focusing on one self-selected class using a qualitative design. Therefore, the conclusions cannot be generalized and do not represent all self-contained classrooms for gifted. However, this study could serve as a basis for future study investigating larger populations and a large number of self-contained classrooms. A mixed qualitative and quantitative design could broaden the view of participant perceptions. Examining phenomena in one point in time, this study shows a broad but specific view. A study examining two points of time, such as the beginning and end of a school year, could form a better view of the contribution of the self-contained classroom.

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