Teacher and Student Perspectives on Safe Learning Climate in Gifted Education

Üstün Yeteneklilerin Eğitiminde Güvenli Öğrenme Ortamına İlişkin Öğrenci ve Öğretmen Görüşleri

Sayed Masood HAIDARI*   Fazilet KARAKUŞ**

Ayhan KOÇOĞLU***

ABSTRACT: This study explored the views of the lower secondary gifted students in relation to the learning climate established in their regular schools and the gifted education centers, with a focus on their psychological safety, in the Turkish context. It also investigated what these students and their teachers expect from a potentially safe and desirable learning atmosphere. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was employed. The data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the gifted students (*N*=12) and their teachers (*N*=5). Then, the interview data were transcribed and content analyzed. The findings show that gifted students had a positive description of the Art and Science Center (SAC) as a safe and desirable place compared to their regular schools. They felt happy and psychologically safe at the SAC, where they could disclose their opinions and ask questions without being subjected to embarrassment. The regular schools, however, were not described as fully safe from a psychological perspective, mostly because of the crowded classrooms. Students' expectations of a safe learning climate were in relation to teacher approachability, peer relationships, learning process and the physical characteristics of the learning environment. Teachers were also of similar opinions with regard to these findings.

Keywords: safe learning climate, gifted students, gifted education, regular school.

ÖZ: Bu çalışmanın amacı Türkiye'de öğrenim gören ve ortaokula devam eden üstün yetenekli öğrencilerin, normal okullarındaki ve Bilim Sanat Merkezlerindeki öğrenme iklimi ile ilgili görüşlerini güvenli öğrenme ortamı bağlamında belirlemektir. Çalışmada ayrıca, bu öğrencilerin ve öğretmenlerinin potansiyel olarak güvenli ve arzu edilen bir öğrenme ortamından ne bekledikleri de incelenmiştir. Bu nedenle çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın verileri, üstün yetenekli öğrencilerle (*N*=12) ve onların öğretmenleriyle (*N*=5) yapılan birebir yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler vasıtasıyla toplanmıştır. Elde edilen nitel verilerin çözümlenmesinde içerik analizi kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, üstün yetenekli öğrencilerin Bilim Sanat Merkezlerini normal okullarına kıyasla daha güvenli ve arzu edilen bir yer olarak gördükleri şeklinde olumlu bir görüşe sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Yine bulgularda öğrencilerin Bilim sanat Merkezinde kendilerini psikolojik olarak güvende ve mutlu hissettikleri; orada düşüncelerini rahatça ifade edebildikleri ve suçlanmaya maruz kalmadan soru sorabildikleri ortaya çıkmıştır. Bununla birlikte öğrenci görüşlerinde normal okulların, çoğunlukla kalabalık sınıf mevcutları nedeniyle psikolojik açıdan tam olarak güvenli şeklinde tanımlanmadığı görülmüştür. Araştırmada öğrencilerin güvenli bir öğrenme ortamından beklentilerinin ise; "öğretmen yaklaşımı, akran ilişkileri, öğrenme süreci ve fiziksel ortamın özellikleri" ekseninde toplandığı belirlenmiştir. Aynı konudaki öğretmen görüşlerinin de buna benzer olduğu saptanmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: güvenli öğrenme ortamı, üstün yetenekli öğrenciler, üstün yeteneklilerin eğitimi, normal okul.

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* *Corresponding Author*: PhD Candidate, Mersin University, Mersin, Turkey, haidarimasood@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3221-6343

** Associate Professor, Mersin University, Mersin, Turkey, kkfazilet@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6455-9845

*** PhD Candidate, Mersin University, Mersin, Turkey, ayhan526@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0245-3957

Safe Learning Climate

When the word 'safe' is uttered, the only thing which goes through our mind is the physical safety. However, emotional and psychological safety also matter to the same degree as the physical safety does. The latter meaning of safety applies in many situations, more importantly in the classroom setting, which is the focus of this study. A safe space could be ensured when the learning climate is positive. Many definitions exist on positive learning climate in general. For instance, it is seen as a desirable learning atmosphere created by the teacher in the classroom with welcoming, encouraging and supportive characteristics (Meyer & Mao, 2014; Sriklaub, Wongwanich, & Wiratchai, 2015). According to Barr (2016), "The classroom climate is a reflection of students' opinions of their academic experience" (p. 1). This is accompanied by how students perceive the classroom atmosphere, their communication with their teachers and classmates as well as their engagement in the classroom activities. These characteristics also apply when the classroom is a safe haven for the students' engagement in learning. However, according to Turner and Braine (2015), the term 'safe' is not easy to interpret as it looks. In addition, there is no a specific definition of safe learning climate but interpreted in many ways in the existing literature.

Greene and Mitcham (2012), see the safe classroom as a community of learners and instructors, who work together ensuring mutual respect and sense of collaboration. They further argue that "When students feel valued and respected, they gain the confidence that they need to share their own experiences, to engage in authentic opportunities for learning, and to work in space that might be challenging and unfamiliar" (ibid, p. 14). Moreover, according to Holley and Steiner (2005), the 'safe classroom environment' is used as a metaphor to refer to a learning atmosphere, where students willingly and actively participate in their own learning process without being labeled or humiliated. In another word, "Classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm" (ibid, p. 50). Conversely, in an unsafe learning climate, students will think about how not to be subjected to embarrassment other than thinking about how to learn (Clapper, 2010).

Creating a safe learning climate in the classroom contributes to considerable positive changes in the way students see the teaching and learning process (Holley & Steiner, 2005). A sense of freedom, trust, and persuasion will be cultivated in their minds to socially interact with the classroom population on their own will. This, of course, would happen when they find themselves psychologically safe. Surely, the personal growth of students requires them to face their fear of the unknown and be ready to take creative risks. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to eliminate the possible obstacles that nurture a sense of fear amongst the students and stop them interact with their peers or share their thoughts openly in the class. To reduce such kind of feelings, teachers could stop judging and punishing students at first hand on their own part comforting the existing stress-borne classroom atmosphere (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Teachers are required to set a learning space, where the students can get utmost benefit of the instructions with the purpose of maximum learning to be ensured. However, for the learning to take place efficiently, the classroom climate should be positive, safe, supportive, and friendly plus intellectually motivating (Falsario, Muyong, & Nuevaespaña, 2014).

As it appears from the above discussions, the safe learning climate seems to be partly synonymous with the positive classroom climate. Both share similar characteristics although the existing literature does not say so. As Schunk (2011) argues that a positive learning climate illuminates the condition where students are emotionally secure and they are not in a lurking fear or in a stressful position. Instead, they are relieved of stress and trust their teacher who sees their mistakes as a way of learning. Clapper (2010) emphasizes that "Errors are an opportunity to learn" (p. 3). However, some students might be afraid of being judged for their performance as lazy or smart by their teachers or peers. Such kind of beliefs in students can stop their risk-taking to express themselves to avoid judgment for their mistake in an unfavorable manner. When they do make mistakes, they prefer not to ask the teacher or their peers for help, but hide them. Building a trusted space between the students and also between the students and the teacher "requires a trustful atmosphere where people can make mistakes without worrying about suffering negative consequences" (Clapper, 2010, p. 2).

Moreover, the relationship between the teachers and students is another important issue to be focused upon in order to ensure quality learning. Maintaining a respectful and friendly gist in the classroom atmosphere contributes to the self-esteem of the students and serves the development of a positive learning climate thereafter (Falsario et al., 2014). In the meantime, maintaining a trusted relationship in the class increases the possibility of students' engagement by giving them a feeling of 'being accepted'. However, the experience of boredom and negligence of the student identity hinders their full participation in the learning process. They should be respected for what and who they are (Maryland Board of Education, 2015).

At the outset, the teachers should get down of their authoritarian positions and take the role of a facilitator instead. They are required to model good behavior, respect, and accept the individual students' identities and their personal values to produce critical thinkers out of them (Greene & Mitcham, 2012). Listening to the students, valuing their commitments, showing interest in them, supporting them, persuading them to actively participate in the activities, and positive reinforcement are a number of ways to build rapport with them (Barr, 2016).

This notion is supported by one of the prominent learning theories, constructivism, which emphasizes mental and emotional security of the students putting forward the learner-centered approaches to be followed in the class. Social interaction of the students in a stress-free classroom environment is of primary importance to the constructivists (Wang, 2007). It gives students a freedom of choice and a freedom of expressing themselves in the process of teaching and learning. The main aspiration of the constructivism is to create a safe and positive learning climate, where the students could construct knowledge being exposed to different interactive instructional approaches (Schunk, 2011).

Problems in Creating Safe Learning Climate

According to Holley and Steiner (2005), safe learning climate does not mean that there is no any tension and inconvenience in the class because they have to face things which make them feel uncomfortable. This happens when students feel vulnerable in the process of "self discovery and self-disclosure" (Garran & Rasmussen,

2014, p. 401). Therefore, psychological safety in the classroom is an inevitable necessity in order to decrease the level of discomfort and trouble the students experience in an unsafe learning climate.

Sometimes, misunderstandings could arise when trying to create a safe learning climate (Holley & Steiner, 2005). For instance, letting students to say whatever they want in the class without having any clue and without facing any academic challenges or their comfort not being disturbed to participate in the activities are not what could be assumed by the word 'safe'. It does not mean that they should remain uninformed about their ignorance. They should be made aware of their strengths and weaknesses in order to be critical of their actions and knowledge to grow successful individuals. The factors which cause students to feel troubled is the harassment, ridicule, being subjected to embarrassment or emotional harm and neglecting their identities as significant social individuals. These are the main problematic issues to be eliminated from the classroom environment and a psychologically safe space should be provided for students. Moreover, safe learning climate could be mistakenly seen as conflict-free when trying to create a stress-free environment (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Boostrom (1998) states that "If critical thinking, imagination and individuality are to flourish in [the] classrooms, teachers need to manage conflict, not prohibit it" (p. 407).

If there is no conflict in the class, it means that students are not being academically challenged and learning is not taking place as desired. Negative beliefs of the students are changed when they are encouraged to expose them and be aware of their inner self. It is not easy to do so, though. Creating a safe climate in a classroom comprised of the students with the multicultural or multilateral backgrounds is challenging to the teacher. It will be difficult for the teacher to help students to expose their personal identity and speak up without harming other students' feelings (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

Gifted Students and the Safe Learning Climate

Gifted students normally maintain a higher position in learning than their peers in a regular classroom. They even can learn complex things faster. The cognitive abilities and the problem-solving skills of these students develop dramatically faster at a younger age compared to their non-gifted counterparts. Their curiosity to learn things in details and critical thoughts often drive them to ask too many questions or talk excessively (Çitil & Ataman, 2018; Doğan & Kesici, 2015; Kazu & Şenol, 2012). Research indicates that such behavior can sometimes lead to misunderstanding. For example, asking questions, criticizing other students' opinions, demonstrating excessive desire to share their thoughts, and being overactive in the class are a few of many examples that teachers see them as behavioral problems and thus take preventive actions (Sezer 2015). Referring to literature, Özmen and Kömürlü (2013) argue that the educational needs of the gifted students are ignored at schools by being educated under the same circumstances with their non-gifted peers in Turkey.

Both their educational and psychological needs of the gifted students show differences from the normal students and if these needs are not met, they can develop emotional and psychological problems (Doğan & Kesici, 2015). In addition, the fast-paced learning capabilities of the gifted students and their intelligence level may cause their normal peers to take distance from them (Çitil & Ataman, 2018). However, they

can overcome such problems if they get proper emotional support (Doğan & Kesici, 2015).

With these issues in focus, an important job falls to the teacher to acknowledge the different needs and interests of the students in the classroom, especially when the gifted and non-gifted students are being schooled together. Or else, the gifted students will suffer more from the negative aspects of the classroom and develop negative behaviors. The classroom environment must be enjoyable and engaging to all students, where the lessons are delivered effectively using diverse teaching methodologies (Roberts, 2005).

For instance, Shaunessy (2005) introduces higher-order thinking skills by posing challenging questions for gifted students. However, for giving a sense of emotional security to the students in the process of asking and answering questions, she emphasizes creating "a safe, non-threatening, encouraging, mutually respectful environment" in the class (p. 7). More importantly, the ideas of the students should be respected and valued at an individual level to enable risk-taking and self-disclosure. Unlikely, when the students do not feel connected to their class, their peer group, and their teachers, they will be deprived of learning and feel isolated.

Talas, Talas, and Söznmez (2013) argue that the gifted students face many problems in the teaching and learning process in regular classrooms at schools. In their study, students said that the teachers are uninterested in them, the lessons are boring, the book contents are irrelevant and have many shortages, and the learning activities are unexciting. Some of them compared school to a prison with a chaotic classroom environment. Even the school administrators looked down on them. Likewise, teachers believe that gifted students find the "regular education boring" (Altıntaş and Ilgun, 2016, p. 961). Many other Turkish researchers have reported similar findings on the perceptions of the gifted students as regards the school or the SAC (e.g. Aslan & Doğan, 2016; Kunt & Tortop, 2013; Ülger, Uçar, & Özgür, 2014).

Gifted students are very curious to inspect things in details compared to other students. Their way of thinking is different. Besides, they learn faster than their peers do (Altıntaş & Ilgun, 2016). However, when the gifted students are taught at the same pace as their non-gifted peers in the regular classrooms and are not given proper attention, they may not get challenged or motivated. Therefore, it could be useful to incorporate some extracurricular materials according to the learning capacity of the individual students to keep them motivated in learning. Heitzmann (2009) investigated the impact of classroom climate on students' motivation through qualitative research. She reported that the teaching styles of the teachers, their interest in students and their subject plus the support they give, will stimulate the students' motivation by making them interested in learning and encouraging their active participation in the classroom activities.

However, the insincere teacher-student relationship, boring lessons, and unexciting activities might put a bad impact on students' learning. When the students do not feel valued and their needs are left unfulfilled, they may not feel safe in such a classroom environment. As discussed before, within-class relationships and approachability of the teachers are of primary importance in creating a safe learning climate, where the needs of the student with different levels of achievement are met. Apparently, no research has been done regarding the safe learning climate with the

school level gifted or non-gifted students, but only some exist with non-gifted students in tertiary education.

As noted elsewhere, safe learning climate does not mean that students should be allowed to say whatever they want to, either willingly or unwillingly by emotionally harming other students in the class. They must have the freedom of disclosure, but in a controlled manner into a "protective shell" where students can take a risk in "making errors" (Senior, 2001; p. 251).

This Study

Life conditions, social status, and education system seem to be different in different countries as well as the expectations from education in various degrees. Similarly, safe learning climate may also be perceived differently in different levels of school contexts with different student abilities. Since the students are vulnerable individuals in unsafe classroom environments, exploring the students' views about the nature of a safe and effective learning climate is necessary. Fonseca (2011) maintains that problems the gifted students experience with their peer group and emotional development at schools is more profound because of their giftedness.

As discussed earlier, there are various definitions of safe learning climate. However, all of them point to similar characteristics that a safe space in the class should have. The opinions about the safe learning climate could be diverse in different contexts according to the kind of biases students experience in the classrooms. However, when it is looked from the gifted students' perspectives, they might view the safe learning climate way different than non-gifted students. Gifted students are usually one step ahead of their non-gifted peers and in a higher level of thinking compared to their present age or grade level.

In a classroom where the gifted students are educated considering the same level of instruction to everyone, they could be in a more disadvantaged position. For instance, there might be only one are two gifted students in one class, and the teacher also has many other students to look after. Here, he might believe that the gifted students are already good and he must attend to underachievers in the class, but in reality this assumption is completely wrong. So doing they will be ignored and their gifted talent may not flourish, but feel alienated because of not being valued for their strength in higher-order thinking and learning. Every day, they may repeat the content that they already know and get bored. As a result, they will not get an opportunity for personal growth, get psychologically harmed, and remain passive (Fonseca, 2011).

Though the gifted students reveal their giftedness at a very young age, they might develop self-awareness or their identities at older ages like during their secondary education. Students at this level seem to be suitable for this study. Raising them as productive and creative critical thinkers from this very level can play a crucial role in what and who they could become in the future. Secondary education is the level, where students find the ability to discuss logically and critically. In addition, Beamon (1993) describes the middle school students as "young adolescents" whose "intellectual capacity is rapidly unfolding, the need to foster thinking ability is a critical one" (p. 92).

Therefore, the current study was planned to explore the views of the gifted students in relation to the learning climate in their schools and the SAC in terms of their

emotional or mental safety. It was also aimed to explore what these students and their teachers expect from a safe and desirable learning atmosphere as well as explore how the teachers view the learning atmosphere in the SAC. Therefore, three research questions were devised for the purpose of this research:

1) What are the views of the gifted students on the learning environment at school and SAC in terms of their emotional or psychological safety?
2) How do the teachers of the gifted students view the learning environment at SAC in relation to the mental safety of the students?
3) How do the gifted students view a safe learning environment?
4) How do the teachers of the gifted students view a safe learning environment?

Method

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study to do a detailed investigation with regard to the in-class safe learning climate in a SAC and the regular schools through one-to-one in-depth semi-structured interviews with the gifted students and their teachers. Prior to that, the interview questions were reviewed by at least four educationalists to ensure their validity and reliability. The questions were formulated according to the following definition suggested by the researchers:

A safe learning climate indicates an emotionally and psychologically safe learning environment, where the student queries, curiosities, creative thoughts and opinions are welcome, whilst the judgmental behaviors, ridicule, bullying, harassment, and alienation are impeded. The learning takes place in an authentic, encouraging, and challenging way. The teachers are trustworthy, approachable, and sincere who act as facilitators or co-learners in the learning process respecting the individual differences and cultural heterogeneity amongst the students. They build a good rapport with and between the students by encouraging them to work in collaboration and harmony with each other avoiding bias or discriminative actions.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed in this study since it allows the researchers to select a group of participants that hold specific characteristics or those who can provide the information required (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Hence, the sample was selected from a government-funded Turkish educational center established for the gifted students called *Science and Art Centers*, SAC in short throughout this paper. These students are given extra education alongside their regular schooling at public or private schools. Twelve students comprising of five boys and seven girls of lower secondary level (grade 6-8) volunteered to participate in the study. Eight of them represented *General Intellectual Ability* talent area, two *Visual Arts*, and two others the *Music*. These students were pursuing different educational periods in the SAC (Developing Special Skills, $n = 5$; Recognizing Individual Talents, $n = 5$; and Project Management and Production, $n = 2$). The second group of the participants included five teachers from SAC, comprising of two males and three females. They represented five different fields (Visual Arts, Mathematics, Physics, Music, and Information Technology). Each had two to four years of work experience in the SAC.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected in the second half of the academic year 2017-2018 through semi-structured interviews conducted by one of the researchers. Abiding by the ethical rules of academic studies, the researchers secured necessary administrative permissions prior to the data collection. Besides, the purpose of the study was explained to the interviewees and their consent sought, all the interview sessions, each lasting 20-25 minutes, were audio-recorded. Any information about the participant identity and school whereabouts was kept confidential as the anonymity and confidentially ethics of the research requires (Creswell, 2012).

Seven main interview questions were directed to the students and the teachers, which focused on different aspects of a safe learning climate such as a) freedom of asking questions and self-disclosure, b) type of activities used in the classroom, c) suitability of the classroom context to the student characteristics and needs, d) students' emotional or psychological security in the classroom e) teacher characteristics, f) teacher-student relationships, and g) the peculiarities of an expected learning environment where students would feel safe and happy and learn joyfully.

After the completion of the data collection process, the interview sessions were transcribed for the content analysis. To ease the coding process, the interview data collected from the gifted students and their teachers were separately entered into QDA MINER LITE V2.0.5; computer software designed for qualitative data analysis. The raw data were reviewed several times and then coded under different sub-categories by at least two researchers. To ensure coding reliability, the retrieved codes were shared between the researchers and the final set of codes was approved with 100% consensus.

Findings

Learning Spaces Viewed by the Gifted Students

During the interview process, the gifted students mostly compared their regular schools with their free-time class at the SAC. Their enthusiasm could be read in their eyes when they described how happy they were when they came to the SAC. The SAC is established by taking their particular learning needs into account in addition to their normal classes at schools. Table 1 reflects how gifted students find their learning climate at SAC. Accordingly, the findings are summarized under three categories, that is, the identity safety, teacher approachability, and the learning process.

As seen in Table 1, the learning environment created at SAC ensures the identity safety of the students. Students usually found themselves happy and comfortable in the classroom as evidenced in a student's comment: "*Generally, I am comfortable and feel very happy*" (S4).

It was also found that there are a small number of students in the class with positive peer relationships, where they can express themselves without any restriction. For instance, one student said, *"our teachers here (SAC) allow us to speak out our opinions. It is more comfortable"* (S6). One of the students also explained that one of the things that make the SAC distinctive from the normal schools is the absence of exam pressure. Surely, one of the contributive factors to how students feel safe in the classroom could be the teacher approachability as the present study revealed. Students believed that the teachers valued their individuality and accepted them for who and

what they are without acting discriminatorily. Students also found their teachers sincere, flexible, and understanding.

Table 1

The Learning Atmosphere at SAC According to the Gifted Students (n=12)

Categories	Codes	*f*
Identity Safety	Feel happy	7
	Feel comfortable	6
	Small number of students	6
	Positive peer relationships	4
	Freedom of self-disclosure	2
	No exam pressure	1
Teacher Approachability	Teachers value students	7
	Teachers are sincere	6
	Teachers are nondiscriminatory	5
	Teachers are flexible	2
	Teachers are understanding	1
Learning Process	Feel free to ask questions	12
	Student-centered activities	10
	Teachers are supportive	7
	There is a democratic learning space in the class	6
	Joyful learning opportunities	1
	Critical thinking is encouraged	1
	No homework	1
	Educational trips	1

Teacher approachability at SAC can be evidenced in the following comment:

"I think the teachers are flexible and value for who I am. They ask how I feel. When something is bothering me, they try to help me. Last year I had a conflict with one of my best friends. He wouldn't talk to me. During the break, my mathematics teacher asked what was bothering me and I told him the matter. Then, I noticed he had talked to my friend and made peace between us". (S12).

Moreover, they felt free to ask questions without a sense of fear or hesitation. The learning took place through participative learning activities, where students learned by doing and experiencing. The teachers also supported students throughout the learning process and established a democratic learning atmosphere to provide equal learning opportunities for everyone in the class. Some other individuals stated that SAC provides joyful learning opportunities, encourages critical thinking, lifts the burden of homework, and even organizes educational trips. One of the students stated that *"A lot of educational trips are organized and the education is enjoyable here (SAC). This does not exist at schools"* (S7).

As stated elsewhere, the students compared the classroom learning environments at normal schools and SAC. The findings in Table 2 indicate that there were some students who thought the learning climates at schools are also of desirable quality. Besides, some students thought that the normal schools do not establish a psychologically safe learning space in the classroom compared to that of SAC. They faced negative reactions like discrimination, humiliation, and ridicule, especially when they asked questions or shared their ideas during the classes at school. One student asserted that *"the unsuccessful students do not welcome successful ones. This is what annoys me a lot. I do express myself freely, but some of my successful friends cannot, which makes me upset" (S1)*. Another one spoke of his school experience, saying "*I had a classmate. He was tall and the students used to ridicule by calling him a camel*" (S7).

Table 2

The Learning Atmosphere at Schools According to the Gifted Students (n=12)

Categories	Codes	*f*
Identity Safety	Negative reactions	6
	Crowded classrooms	4
	Feel happy	4
	Positive peer relationships	4
	Feel uncomfortable	4
	Feel bored	3
	Feel unhappy	3
	A democratic learning space is established	3
	Concerned of getting lower marks	3
	Not a democratic learning environment	1
	Hesitate to ask questions from the teacher	1
Teacher Approachability	Treat students equally	6
	Supportive	5
	Behave coldheartedly	4
	Act discriminatorily	3
	Values their students	2
	Not flexible	1
	Sincere	1
	Do not allow students to express themselves	1
Learning Process	Feel free to ask questions	12
	Teacher-centered	9
	Do off-campus investigative activities	3
	Annoying student behaviors	2
	Shortage of materials	2
	Critical thinking is hampered	1

Further, the students complained that the classrooms were crowded at school. They felt uncomfortable, bored, and unhappy. These findings are well reflected in the following comments:

> "Be it physically or psychologically, I don't ever feel comfortable at school. The classrooms are crowded with insufficient space. SAC is a better place in this respect due to having fewer students in each class" (S9).

> "Teachers see students as their enemies. This is what makes me irritated at school" (S7).

Besides, they worried about getting lower marks at the exams. One of them believed that the learning environment is not democratic, while another one stated that he feels hesitation when asking a question from the teacher. Nonetheless, some students had positive remarks about the classroom atmospheres at schools. Some of them felt happy in the class and had positive relationships with their peers at both schools. Their classmates treated them *"respectfully and equally"* (S4). A few others were of opinion that there is a democratic learning atmosphere in the school classrooms.

Likewise, the student views as regards the teacher approachability varied to some degree. They stated that their teachers treated them equally, supported them when needed valued their individual differences in both schools. According to S1, teachers *"value the students"* and *"treat everyone equally"*. One of them also said that teachers are sincere. However, some others added that the teachers are coldhearted and insincere as indicated in these comments:

> "Generally, the teachers are more sincere here (SAC), but some of our school teachers are cold-hearted" (S5). "They lose their temper after teaching several classes with more than 40 students in each and their anger erupts in the last class they enter" (S2).

A few also thought of the teachers as discriminative and unfair, who treat them differently by prioritizing one student to another in the class and in the examinations. The inflexibility of the teachers and their preventive actions against student self-disclosure were also among the comments made by two of the students respectively.

In the learning process, however, all the students felt free to ask questions no matter how others reacted. One of the students declared: *"Asking question is something between me and the teacher. I don't care what my classmates think of me"* (S1). Moreover, teacher-fronted instruction was found dominant in schools. A student put this way: *"Teacher is at the center at school, but here* (SAC) *the teacher introduces a topic and we learn in an empirical way"* (S2). Nevertheless, some students engaged in after-school investigative activities about the topics of their interest or the homework given by the teachers. The findings also indicate that gifted students find some student behaviors annoying during the class. Shortages of materials and hindrance of critical thinking were other examples of problematic issues in the learning process.

Learning Spaces Viewed by the Teachers

Students and teachers responded to similar questions and their responses were quite similar concerning the learning environment in the SAC. Teachers' descriptions of the kind of safe learning climate they created for the gifted students were affirmed in the findings obtained from the students reported above. As seen in Table 3, teachers claimed that they tried their best to acknowledge student identity by providing a safe ground to take risking and sharing their thoughts in the classroom.

Teachers claimed that they establish a learning environment for gifted students, where students feel comfortable to ask questions and do not get exposed to negative and annoying reactions5. They felt happy and psychologically safe in the classroom, where they could disclose their opinions without any embarrassment and sense of fear.

Table 3

Identity Safety, Teacher Approachability and Relationships in the Classroom According to Teachers (n=5)

Categories	Codes	*f*
Identity Safety	Students feel comfortable to ask questions	5
	Students feel happy	4
	Students feel safe	3
	Students do not show negative reactions to the questions asked	2
	Students feel comfortable to express ideas	2
Teacher Approachability	Treat students equally	3
	Encourage students to ask questions	3
	Convince students that asking questions is normal	2
Relationships	Sincere student-teacher relationships	4
	Positive peer relationships	4
	Good communication between the teacher and students	3

Teachers maintained that they are approachable to the students displaying equal demeanor towards everyone in the class. Since the gifted students are curious and eager to ask a lot of questions, teachers did not stop but encouraged them by welcoming their queries. They broke the barriers that withheld students from asking questions and convinced them it is normal to ask questions. Teachers described the in-class student-teacher and student-student relationships as sincere and positive respectively. Moreover, their communication gateways were open with the students. Some of the teacher comments regarding these findings are given below:

> "The students who come from the public schools are kind of anxious at start because of having experienced strictly rule-governed situations, but we break such and any other barriers that make them feel so once we meet… None of the children in my group misses any of my classes. Generally, they feel safe and happy here… These children are full of love and are not judgmental like adults. That is why they get along well with each other right away" (T1).

> "They feel comfortable here (SAC) because of not experiencing any kind of fear.... but they might be wary of even asking questions from the teacher schools. Such a problem does not exist here. They are free to ask whatever question they have. I try to encourage them as much as I can" (T2).

> "If I notice the students are bored, I give a break. Go out together to take some fresh air or do an entertaining activity. I try to provide the kind of support they need (T4).

> "Each student's approach to himself and the other students is always constructive and respectful. They're incredibly supportive. They are more supportive of each other than competitive. Learning together, developing and advancing together is one of the best aspects of these students" (T5).

The teachers stated that learning takes place via participative learning activities and each student gets equally supported (See Table 4). There is no pre-determined formal curriculum at SAC. The courses are usually designed in accordance with the individual needs of the students through project-based teaching and learning process. Teachers also maintained that they turn the classrooms into ideal places for the gifted students, where they can learn joyfully and do not feel frustrated. The teachers did not see student differences as a limitation, but an opportunity for more learning. They allowed self-disclosure and student engagement in challenging activities as reported by two of the teachers respectively.

Table 4

The Learning Process and the Existent Problems According to the Teachers (n=5)

Categories	Codes	*f*
Learning Process	Participative learning activities	5
	Students receive support	4
	No specific curriculum is followed	3
	Courses are designed according to student needs	3
	Project-based learning	3
	An ideal place for gifted students	3
	Students learn joyfully	3
	Teachers see student differences an opportunity for more learning	2
	Students can express themselves freely	1
	Students can engage in challenging activities	1
Problems	Shortage of technological tools and other materials	2
	The programs need improvement	2
	Exam pressures affects their learning at the SAC	1

As shown in Table 4, teachers had encountered some problems, too, despite all those positive aspects of the learning climate at SAC. Shortages of technological tools and instructional materials were felt and the programs needed further improvement. Besides, one of the teachers asserted that exam pressures at schools negatively affect the learning quality of the gifted students at SAC. See the example quotes below regarding the findings in Table 4:

> "We are working with these kids by following an activity-based approach. We don't follow a specific curriculum here (SAC) as the nature of this place necessitates. We get acquainted with them over time. Then we prepare a number of special activities according to their talents and abilities. We first try to identify their weak points and then work with them to improve accordingly… there's a practical teaching process through activities" (T3).

> "I benefit from various teaching methods here such as group work, cooperative learning activities, project-based teaching and so forth. No matter what methods we try, the students should be in the center. I plan activities that will make them active participants in the learning process" (T5).

> "I value student difference and treat all students equally. However, from time to time I try to be more supportive and close to the students, who need more support. This is positive

discrimination, which continues until the problematic situation of these students is taken care of" (T3).

Expected Learning Atmosphere

Students' Perspectives. When the gifted students were asked to think of a learning atmosphere, where they would feel safe and comfortable, they had different expectations regarding the teacher approachability, peer relationships, learning process, and physical condition of the classroom.

Table 5

Expected Learning Atmosphere from the Gifted Students' Perspectives (n=12)

Categories	Codes	*f*
Teacher Approachability	Treats everyone equally	1
	Behave non-discriminatorily	1
	Flexible	1
	Friendly	1
	Provides freedom	1
Peer Relationships	Respectful	3
	Sensible	2
	United	1
Learning Process	Practical learning activities	7
	Equipped with technological tools	6
	Small number of students in the class	5
	Students support each other	3
	Effective teaching	3
	Organize educational tours	3
	Teachers support students overcome their problems in learning	2
	Activities are done outside the classroom	1
Physical Conditions	Airy	4
	Comfortable	3
	Colorful	2

Table 5 shows that students stated that teachers treat everyone equally in a safe learning environment. They will not discriminate between the students, but demonstrate flexibility and friendliness as well as provide freedom of self-disclosure to them. Similarly, there will be positive relationships with their peers such as respecting each other, trying to be understanding and sensible towards one another, and having solidarity in between them. Moreover, the learning process will be active and productive, where experimental and practical learning activities will be designed for them to learn by actually doing. The classrooms are equipped with technological tools.

There will be fewer students, and effective teaching in the class. Teachers will organize educational trips in order to promote their learning and the way they see the world. Moreover, they will support students with their problems when learning is taking place in the classroom. One of the students also added that the classroom activities will be done outside the boundaries of walls in an open space. According to the students, the physical conditions are also important for their motivation and learning. They expected an airy, comfortable, and colorful classrooms, where they can get fresh air, feel relaxed, and do not get sleepy when they look at the colors around. Some example comments about how students expected an ideal classroom are given below:

"There would always be experiments and practical activities. I never wanted memorization. No need for memorization, we learn by doing and experiencing" (S12).

"Teachers would be flexible and treat everyone equally. Students would be respectful and sensible. The curriculum should be practical as it is in SAC. Teachers wouldn't get angry or act discriminatorily" (S2).

"I don't want my classmates to be jealous or selfish, but friendly, funny, and hardworking" (S9).

"We can do different activities and experiments in the garden. There shouldn't be paper and pencil activities all the time" (S7).

"We could have been free. There wouldn't be doors and walls. When tired, it would be very amusing if we could ask the teachers: we are tired. Let's do an activity outside the classroom…" (S7)

"I would expect a colorful learning environment. When looking around, I wouldn't feel like suffocating. I don't want strict rules at school and when these rules get ignored, the reactions should not be harsh…If I forget do my homework, I wouldn't get scolded in the class, but informed not to forget again. I don't want the classroom to be crowded" (S9).

Teachers' Perspectives. On the other hand, when the teachers were asked to think of classroom with an emotionally safe and welcoming learning climate, they had somewhat similar responses to that of the students in terms of the learning process (See Table 6). They thought that such an environment provides rich learning experiences within a classroom that is fully equipped with essential instructional materials with fewer students. Besides, during the learning process, the students get encouraged to have a positive relationship with their peers. Some of the teachers, however, had their own individual remarks. They stated that a safe and welcoming learning climate provides a democratic learning atmosphere for the students, where they can work in cooperation with each other and receive support as needed. Besides, they can learn whatever they desire.

As indicated in Table 6, teachers had some remarks about the physical conditions of the classroom as a contributive factor to their learning process. They expected that there should be a small garden to do the learning activities outside the classroom. The classrooms are comfortable from a physical perspective and the students do not come tired and exhausted as they do now. One of the teachers suggested a policy change regarding the gifted children and stated that separate schools should be established for gifted students. Another also added that there should not be any exams for such students at all.

Table 6

Expected Classroom Atmosphere from the Teachers' Perspectives (n=5)

Categories	Codes	*f*
Learning Process	Rich learning spaces are created	2
	Classrooms are equipped with the essential teaching materials	2
	Classrooms are not crowded	2
	Positive relationships are encouraged	2
	Classroom has a democratic learning atmosphere	1
	Cooperative learning models are incorporated	1
	Students are supported	1
	Students can learn what they desire	1
Physical Conditions	A small garden for activities	2
	Classrooms are physically comfortable	1
	Students do not come exhausted	1
Policy Change	There are separate schools for the gifted students	1
	There are no exams	1

These findings are reflected in the following elaborative comments provided by the SAC teachers:

"The education should be completely democratic in my opinion. Every student has to learn what s/he wishes or interested in. We are actually trying to do like this here. Since there is no specific curriculum, we think it should be more student-centered and freer. Besides, educational centers could be bigger and more equipped. We are short of robotic materials here. The number of students should be small as is now. This can be more efficient to deal with each student. Most importantly, there should not be any exam. Their energies will be wasted if they come with exam anxiety and concerned about what I will become in the future" (T5).

"It should be a democratic environment…, where the students can share their opinions and make any kind of criticisms. There should be group work and cooperative learning models…and it is necessary to create suitable environments for cooperative learning models" (T2).

"Respect and value is everything. First of all, this should be ensured. We have created such a relationship. Our students are respectful to us, so are their parents as we are to them" (T5).

"A natural space could be created. We could have a big green garden and could do a variety of activities" (T3).

Discussion and Conclusion

Learning Climates at Schools and the Art and Science Centers

The findings of the present study indicate that the learning atmosphere at the SAC provides a desirable place for gifted students, where they feel safe and comfortable from both a physical and psychological perspective. The results show that students could better reveal their identity in the class since they felt happy and comfortable with their teachers or peer group in their less-crowded classrooms. They felt relaxed in self-disclosure and opinion exchange. Their teachers were nondiscriminatory, approachable, and sincere, who valued their individualities no matter who they are. Besides, they

created a joyful and democratic learning atmosphere, where the students could ask questions about their topics of interest and take active participation in student-fronted activities in the learning process by getting effective teacher support. Similarly, Kunt and Tortop (2013), in a metaphoric study of 112 gifted students, found that SAC provides a safe learning atmosphere with joyful learning opportunities for the students. They feel free to express themselves and acquire knowledge based on their individual needs.

Shaunessy (2005) emphasizes the students' emotional security in the classroom to enable them to function well in the learning process by responding to and asking higher-order questions or disclosing their opinions. However, a study in an American gifted education program revealed that teachers often find it difficult to deal with the individual gifted students because of their different needs and their never-ending questions (Kaya, 2015). This situation put them in a difficult situation, but they admitted that it is their responsibility to create suitable learning opportunities for these students and overcome the existing problems. Actually, teacher support in a learner-centered learning atmosphere contributes to the student outcomes by improving participation in the learning process (Kearney, Smith, & Maika, 2016). However, if they feel unsupported and psychologically unsafe, they will withdraw from the learning activities.

The students in the present study had a different description of their regular schools compared to the SAC. The negative reactions, crowded classrooms, annoying student behaviors, and exam anxiety undermined their identity safety. They felt uncomfortable, bored, and unhappy in the classroom. Some also believed that the teachers are insincere and discriminatory. Besides, teacher-fronted instruction and shortage of teaching materials were other problems that affected students' feelings and their learning. In contrast, some students believed that both school and SAC make them feel mentally safe since they feel happy in both places and have good peer relationships. They thought the teachers treated them equally by supporting them in their learning process although the teacher-fronted teaching was dominant. One thing that did not negatively affect them at all was their ability to ask questions both at school and the SAC. In line with these findings, a case study of 47 gifted students by Aslan and Doğan (2016) revealed that these students prefer SACs to regular schools. Their metaphoric descriptions reflected that school encourages competition and therefore holds back their thinking abilities. It is an undesirable place where they do not feel comfortable. Contrarily, they see the SAC as an exciting place where they feel comfortable, learn joyfully, and develop their thinking abilities. Moreover, Talas et al. (2013) had similar findings concerning the negative perceptions that gifted students had of their regular schools which were later supported by another study conducted with teachers by Altıntaş and Ilgun (2016) as elaborated in the introduction of this paper. In contrast, one study partly rejected the findings of the current study on student perception of regular schools and schoolteachers. The gifted students thought of school as "peaceful and protective" and their teachers as "supportive and protecting person" (Ogurlu, Öpengin, & Hızlı, 2015, p. 67).

Fonseca (2011) argues that gifted students are sensitive to conventional learning strategies. They get easily frustrated by the repetitive or monotonous tasks in the classroom and get disengaged from the learning process thereafter. Therefore,

establishing collaborative and rich learning opportunities by considering the needs of the gifted students may increase the likelihood of their engagement to the learning environment. Acknowledging their identity and individuality during the learning process and showing friendly behavior may provide a safe ground for them to disclose their thoughts and queries. Although the logical reasoning ability of the gifted students is believed to be high (Fonseca, 2011), they tend not to disclose their personal thoughts to their peers (Shechtman & Silektor, 2012).

Furthermore, the teachers at the SAC claimed that they put every effort to establish a learning environment, where the students feel psychologically safe and happy. This is important because these students "naturally possess strong emotions that can fluctuate easily between very happy and very sad" (Fonseca, 2011, p. 29). Herewith, teachers encouraged the gifted students to put their thoughts and questions forward without a sense of fear or hesitation. The sense of fear hampers student participation in the learning process, badly affecting their behaviors and academic success (Frisby, Berger, Burchett, Herovic, & Strawser, 2014). Therefore, trusted teacher-student relationship and good communication need to be fostered to reduce participation apprehension and abolish students' fear by ensuring their psychological safety. Findings from the present study indicate that when these students come to the SAC, they are kind of shy and hesitant in asking questions or expressing themselves at the start. However, teachers break such barriers by paying them equal attention and encouraging them not to leave their queries unasked by convincing them that it is normal to ask questions. Besides, they tried to establish good relationships with and between the students by keeping the communication doors open. Good communication positively influences the in-class relationships and student behavior (Ming-tak & Wai-shing, 2008). It also cultivates a sense of respect, trust, and acceptance in students, which will help them, in turn, feel safer in the class. However, these qualities can be ensured when the teacher is willing to listen to the students' voice in a non-judgmental manner by respecting their individual differences.

The findings also revealed that no specific curriculum is followed in the SAC. Instead, the courses are designed according to the student needs through student-fronted and project-based teaching and learning strategies. Kazu and Şenol (2012) maintain that educational programs, in these centers, are run based on the individualistic learning principles to develop the cognitive and affective capacities of the gifted students within different discipline areas. Other findings from this study revealed that teachers support these students in the learning process by creating a desirable learning atmosphere with joyful learning opportunities. In addition, they see individual differences as opportunities for better learning and let the students express themselves or engage in challenging activities. Nonetheless, they thought that the program still needs improvement and require attention considering the shortage of technological resources and teaching materials. Teachers in Kazu and Şenol's (2012) study addressed similar problems in terms of the physical features of the SACs including the shortages of instructional materials and equipment. Another problem was the exam pressure at schools that negatively affected students' learning at the SAC. Worrying about the exam result is natural in gifted students since they often have a tendency towards perfectionism. They rarely accept making mistakes as a normal part of the learning process (Fonseca, 2011).

Expected Learning Atmosphere

Both the gifted students and their teachers resembled their expected learning environment just like the SAC, where these students feel mentally safe compared to their regular schools. Students described teachers, in a safe learning climate, as approachable, friendly, and flexible, who will treat them equally. Besides, the peer group will have a respectful and positive relationship valuing unity and sensibility. The learning will be participatory in a classroom that is equipped with technology and accommodate fewer students, who are supportive of one another in the learning process. Students also emphasized the effectiveness of instruction, teacher support in solving their problems, and even the organization of educational tours. They even pointed out the physical features like classroom comfort, airing, and coloring. That is to say a place, where they do not feel suffocated and bored. In line with these findings, a case study of experienced teachers and postgraduate trainee teachers on the concept of 'safe' in instruction by Turner and Braine (2015) indicated that respect and sense of comfort in the class contribute to a feeling of safety in students. Their findings indicated that students feel safe in a learning environment where they do not feel embarrassed, but confident enough to ask questions or share ideas. Not being exposed to bullying or excessive criticism, but being happy and feeling comfortable are also conducive to emotional safety in the classroom. Similarly, Capern and Hammond (2014) found that Australian secondary gifted students treasure friendly gesture and sense of humor reflected in teacher behavior. They prefer teachers, who avoid discrimination in terms of their racial background, capacity level, and so forth, but maintain respectful conduct and allow equal participation in activities.

Likewise, teachers' opinions on a potentially safe learning climate were in congruence with that of the gifted students. They also underlined the establishment of rich learning opportunities to these students within less crowded and fully equipped classrooms. They believed a safe and desirable learning space would promote good relationships, provide democratic learning opportunities, incorporate cooperative learning models, provide support to the students, and lets them learn, as they desire. Likewise, teachers were of similar opinions about the physical features as students. These findings are supported by the existing literature. For example, Holley & Steiner (2005) conducted a mixed study to investigate the undergraduate and master of social studies students' perspectives on safe learning space. They found that nearly all of the students believed that creating a safe learning climate is important in their learning. Exposure to a safe learning climate helped most of the students to learn more in both quality and quantity. They had the opportunity to learn from their peers and so doing improved their cognitive abilities. Majority of them also admitted that the challenging atmosphere in the safe learning climate contributed to their personal progress. More than half of them said that the teachers in such an environment were not judgmental, but respectful and helpful nurturing student learning by incorporating participative activities in the class. However, they described the teachers in an unsafe learning climate as discriminative, judgmental, and not valuing student opinions. The same also applied to their peer group. Participation was low and the students were unconfident or did not feel safe to be part of the learning in unsafe classrooms.

Last but not least, to deliver effective education to the gifted students, teachers thought a policy change would be necessary. Attending both their regular schools and

gifted education can be exhaustive to these students as teachers contemplated. Therefore, founding a gifted school without a summative examination policy was envisaged. This is in parallel with the existing research findings (Ülger et al., 2014). Ülger et al. (2014) reported the tendency of some teachers and administrators towards establishing separate schools for gifted and talented students. They suggested converting the SACs into gifted schools. Ogurlu et al. (2015) argue that school curricula and the SAC programs are implemented differently. School-based education is mostly theoretical while SAC-based education is mostly experiential. Students usually worry about their school lessons and examination and this may decrease student participation in SAC enrichment programs.

Scholars entertain different ideas about the education of gifted students (Bakioğlu & Levent, 2013). Some believe that these students should be educated in separate schools, while others believe it is against democratic norms and they should be schooled with normal students in heterogeneous classes to promote their socialization. In spite of this controversy between the scholars, many countries like USA, Russia, Germany, England and South Korea, have established separate schools with many enrichment programs for the gifted students. In Turkey, however, there is only one such school, that is, Beyazit Ford Otosan Primary School in Istanbul. This number could be increased throughout the country to offer school choices for the highly gifted students as Bakioğlu and Levent (2013) suggest.

To sum up, ensuring the emotional and psychological safety of the gifted students is seemingly one of the main factors in establishing an effective teaching and learning environment. This environment will not tolerate bias and discriminatory behaviors, but encourage risk-taking and creativity amongst the students as a community of learners where they get respected for who and what they are. It is the right of every student to be valued and supported in discovering his/her identity. Therefore, considering the needs and expectation of gifted students is essential in helping them flourish in an individual and academic level. They appreciate less crowded classrooms with well-behaved students and approachable teachers who acknowledge their identities, considering their individual differences. Therefore, teachers are required to exhibit friendly intimacy by establishing good relationships with and between the gifted students to allow these students to reveal their individuality through self-disclosure and questions.

This study limited in scope since it only investigated the opinions of the gifted students and their teachers at a SAC. Besides, the literature review, carried out by the authors, showed that apparently no research has been done on psychologically safe learning environment in Turkey except some metaphoric studies where the gifted students provide general descriptions of regular schools, the SAC, or both of them. Therefore, further research is recommended to investigate the learning spaces at the SACs and the regular schools concerning the emotional or psychological safety of both the gifted and non-gifted students. Herewith, obtaining both qualitative and quantitative data from the students, teachers (who work at school and SAC), and the school administrators, would be worthwhile to provide a clearer picture with regard to the education of these students in the learning climate of the sort described. To validate the findings of this study further, parents' opinions could be sought in that they may

provide a different evaluation of the learning spaces at school and the SAC in line with the individual needs of their gifted children.

Statement of Responsibility

Sayeed Masood Haidari; conceptualization, software, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing-reviewing & editing, visualization, and project administration. Fazilet Karakuş; methodology, validation, resources, writing-reviewing & editing, visualization, and supervision. Ayhan Koçoğlu; validation, investigation, data curation, writing-reviewing & editing, and project administration.

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