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EXPLORING PROVISION FOR GIFTED STUDENTS IN CHINA: A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' PRACTICES

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Abstract:
This qualitative case study aims to explore how three Chinese primary school teachers understand, identify and provide for gifted students in ordinary classroom contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with teachers from rural Shandong, an urban public school in Northeast China and an urban school context in Shanghai, the article examines gifted provision as a situated practice shaped by classroom routines, assessment pressure, family resources, school culture and teacher agency. The study uses thematic analysis to compare teachers' accounts of giftedness, identification, differentiation, institutional support and constraints. The findings show that teachers recognize high potential through everyday signs such as rapid comprehension, accurate responses, independence, advanced preparation, wide reading, curiosity, knowledge transfer and subject-specific engagement. However, public recognition of giftedness remains narrowed by examination performance, ranking and visible classroom achievement. Differentiated instruction is valued in principle but is usually enacted informally through questioning, peer sharing, occasional extension, role assignment, after-class suggestions and teacher encouragement rather than through systematic curriculum adaptation. Across the three cases, teachers' professional agency is bound by common pacing, large or mixed-ability classes, workload, safety responsibilities, parental expectations, monitoring, limited training and weak policy guidance. The article argues that the absence of school-based gifted provision is not neutral, because it shifts enrichment opportunities onto families and therefore reproduces uneven access. Building on a comparison with previous case-study work in Madrid, the article recommends a modest, inclusive and sustainable model of gifted support that frames challenge as educational fairness rather than elitism.

Keywords: gifted education; differentiated instruction; Chinese primary education; teacher agency and equity

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1. Introduction

Primary classrooms are increasingly shaped by visible differences in pupils' readiness, learning pace, prior knowledge, motivation, language background, family resources, and sociocultural experience, and as a result, a single instructional route is unlikely to provide either sufficient access for learners who require support or sufficient challenge for learners who move beyond the expected level (Tomlinson, 2017; Gibbs & McKay, 2021). Research on differentiated instruction (DI) emphasizes the need for teachers to adapt content, process, product, pace, grouping, learning environment, and assessment in response to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017; Gibbs & McKay, 2021; Gheyssens *et al.*, 2022; Adam & Porta, 2025).

Although DI is commonly discussed as an inclusive response to learner diversity, its connection with gifted education is especially important. Gifted learners may be physically present in mixed-ability classrooms while remaining educationally underprovided for if the curriculum is designed with a focus on average attainment. Ardenlid *et al.* (2025), Langelaan *et al.* (2024), Kaplan (2022), and Opoku *et al.* (2025) therefore argue that inclusive classrooms must not only support pupils who struggle but also provide advanced challenge and opportunities for complex output.

In this article, I focus on the provision made for gifted or high-potential learners in state Chinese primary classrooms. The framing for this study builds on my previous case-study work on gifted provision in STEM within a bilingual private secondary school in Madrid, in which I argued that gifted provision should not be reduced to isolated classroom techniques, because identification, teacher knowledge, institutional culture, and school-level support all shape whether gifted learners are actually recognized and challenged (Xhuxhi, 2025). In Xhuxhi (2025), I also found that provision can become minimal, ad hoc, and reactive when identification depends heavily on parent initiative, when classroom pedagogy remains exam-oriented and teacher-led, and when teachers lack shared protocols for differentiation (Xhuxhi, 2025). In this article, I aim to transfer concerns identified in Madrid with provision, agency, and institutional support to the Chinese primary-school context.

This study uses semi-structured interviews with three state Chinese primary school teachers working in different contexts: a rural township school in Shandong, an urban public primary school in Northeast China, and an urban school context in Shanghai. By comparing these three cases, the article examines how giftedness and differentiation are understood in practice rather than only in policy or theory. The central concern is not whether teachers support gifted learners in an idealized sense, but how they reason about what is possible in the classroom, institutionally and culturally.

1.1 Background and Rationale

Gifted education in China has developed unevenly, where provision for gifted students includes key schools or key classes, Special Classes for the Gifted Young, and experimental classes, but these models have been repeatedly shaped by concerns about

equity, elitism, public policy, and examination culture (Dai & Chen, 2013; Dai *et al.*, 2016; Cai, 2025). Cai (2025) notes that gifted education remains fragile in China because of the absence of a clear universal definition of giftedness, limited policy guidance, and insufficient infrastructure for identification and support.

The absence of a national Chinese definition of giftedness matters because teachers' perceptions influence which pupils are noticed, how they are interpreted, and whether they receive additional challenge. In the Chinese context, giftedness is associated with high examination scores, fast comprehension, diligence, family education, or visible classroom participation. However, broader conceptions of giftedness also include curiosity, creativity, task commitment, advanced questioning, problem solving, leadership, and domain-specific potential (Renzulli, 1978; Gagné, 2000; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005; Subotnik *et al.*, 2011; Plucker *et al.*, 2021; Cai, 2025). This distinction is important because pupils whose potential is not immediately translated into high scores may be overlooked. Recent China-focused research also suggests that teachers may value individual differences while struggling to transform recognition into systematic provision. Cai (2025), for example, found that early-years teachers in China often understood giftedness as advanced ability in a specific area, but also reported difficulties linked to professional knowledge, time, energy, parental resistance, and equity concerns. Although Cai's study concerns younger children, its findings are relevant to primary education because it highlights the same central issue: when official systems of identification and support are weak, teachers' beliefs and working conditions become decisive.

DI offers a useful framework for analysing classroom provision because it links learner differences with practical instructional responses. Tomlinson (2017) defines DI as the adaptation of content, process, product, and learning environment while maintaining meaningful academic expectations. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development also supports DI, because effective teaching should place learners slightly beyond what they can already do independently and should adjust scaffolding as learners develop. For gifted learners, this means that appropriate provision should involve qualitative challenge, not merely extra work or faster completion.

In Chinese educational discourse, DI overlaps with the long-standing idea of yin cai shi jiao, or teaching according to individual aptitude. Cai (2025) shows that Chinese teachers may feel more confident discussing yin cai shi jiao than discussing DI, partly because individualized instruction is culturally familiar and associated with moral responsibility, while DI may be interpreted as giving different pupils different treatment. This distinction is significant for gifted education. A teacher may endorse the principle of responding to individual differences but still hesitate to provide visible enrichment or flexible grouping if it appears to conflict with fairness, uniformity, or parental expectations (Cai, 2025).

The tension between equity and excellence is therefore central to this article. In policy and everyday school culture, fairness is often associated with equal treatment, common pacing, and avoidance of visible stratification. However, gifted learners may

experience a different kind of inequity when their needs are not addressed. The issue is not whether gifted learners should be separated from others, but whether inclusive classrooms can provide flexible opportunities that respond to high potential without reproducing elitism or rigid tracking.

International and Chinese studies show that teacher agency is essential but insufficient on its own. Teachers may support DI in principle but struggle with planning time, assessment pressure, classroom management, large classes, insufficient training, and limited resources (Deunk *et al.*, 2015; Gibbs, 2023; Langelaan *et al.*, 2024; Letzel *et al.*, 2023; Yuen *et al.*, 2023). Bi *et al.* (2023, 2024a, 2024b) similarly indicate that Chinese teachers tend to differentiate more according to students' readiness than according to interests, learning profiles, or advanced potential, which can narrow the support available to gifted learners.

Lv *et al.* (2024) found that Chinese teachers working with mathematically gifted students experienced stress across ecological levels, with students and school leaders especially influential and education policy and culture also important. Although the present article concerns primary teachers rather than Mathematical Olympiad teachers, this finding helps explain why teacher practice cannot be analysed only as a matter of personal willingness. Teachers work inside school, family, policy, and accountability systems that shape what they feel able to do.

The rationale for the present study is therefore threefold, a) gifted learners in ordinary Chinese primary classrooms remain under-examined, especially in relation to teacher narratives and everyday practice, b) DI is often discussed as a general inclusive strategy, but its relevance to gifted learners requires more explicit attention, c) provision needs to be studied as a situated process involving identification, pedagogy, resources, school culture, and teacher agency, rather than as a single intervention or label.

Theoretically, this study reconnects inclusive DI with gifted education by examining how gifted learners are understood and supported in ordinary Chinese primary classrooms. Drawing on Tomlinson (2017), Vygotsky (1978), Ardenlid *et al.* (2025), and Opoku *et al.* (2025), it treats differentiation as a way of maintaining shared classroom participation while also providing advanced challenge for learners who require it.

Empirically, the study contributes teacher-centred qualitative evidence from three contrasting Chinese primary-school contexts, but it does not claim to represent all Chinese schools; rather, it provides a small but detailed set of cases showing how teachers reason about giftedness, identify potential, and negotiate the limits of classroom provision.

1.2 Research Aim and Questions

The general aim of this study is to explore how Chinese primary school teachers understand, identify, and provide for gifted or high-potential learners within ordinary classroom contexts, with particular attention to differentiated instruction, institutional support, and the tensions between equity, examination accountability, and excellence.

The central research question is:

1. How do Chinese primary school teachers understand, identify, and provide for gifted or high-potential learners within ordinary classroom contexts?

The study is guided by the following sub-questions:

1.1 How do teachers define or conceptualize giftedness in primary classrooms?

1.2 What indicators do teachers use to recognize gifted learners, and how formal or informal are these identification practices?

1.3 What forms of differentiated instruction, enrichment, or extension do teachers report using for gifted learners?

1.4 What institutional, cultural, pedagogical, and family-related factors support or constrain teachers' provision for gifted/high-potential learners?

1.5 How do teachers explain and manage the tension between equality of treatment, inclusive classroom practice, examination demands, and the educational needs of gifted learners?

2. Literature Review

Giftedness has been conceptualized in different ways across research traditions, with earlier psychometric approaches tending to emphasize general intelligence and measurable cognitive ability, while later approaches widened the concept to include domain-specific talent along with creativity, motivation and sociocultural context (Renzulli, 1978; Gagné, 2000; Gardner, 2011; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005; Subotnik *et al.*, 2011; Plucker *et al.*, 2021). Identification procedures shape provision, for schools, if giftedness is defined narrowly as high-test performance, support may focus mainly on harder exercises; if it is understood as advanced potential, curiosity, creativity, and capacity for transfer, support may include inquiry, independent projects, advanced reading, complex discussion, and alternative forms of output (Plucker *et al.*, 2021)

In China, definitions of giftedness are complicated by the historical development of gifted education and by the importance attached to examination performance. Cai (2025) explains that China has no clear and universal definition of giftedness and that different programs have defined giftedness according to changing policies, needs, and circumstances, resulting in practical uncertainty at the classroom level. Teachers may recognize multiple forms of giftedness, but school routines often make academic performance the most visible and defensible indicator (Cai, 2025)

A sociocultural view is particularly useful for my study because it avoids treating giftedness as a fixed property that exists independently of educational opportunity. Plucker *et al.* (2021) argue that gifted behaviour is produced through interaction between learners and context, and Cai (2025) relates this to the Chinese emphasis on nurture, family, effort, and environment, helping frame gifted provision as an educational responsibility. Schools can either create contexts in which high potential develops or leave support for gifted students to private family resources and chance teacher attention.

2.1 Gifted Education and Provision in China

The development of gifted education in China has been described as uneven or torturous (Dai & Chen, 2013; Dai *et al.*, 2016; Cai, 2025). Provision has included Special Classes for the Gifted Young, experimental classes, key classes, discipline competitions, and programs aimed at outstanding, innovative talent. However, concerns about equity, elitism, psychological pressure, and legal ambiguity have repeatedly limited or reshaped these models (Chu, 2012; Fu, 2017; Shi & Li, 2018; Cai, 2025).

This policy history affects ordinary classrooms in that formal gifted programs are scarce, discontinued, or socially sensitive; teachers become central to provision. (Chu, 2012; Fu, 2017; Shi & Li, 2018; Cai, 2025). They may notice high-potential pupils through classroom responses, rapid mastery, high scores, reading habits, and questioning, but they may lack formal protocols for identification or sustained enrichment (Chu, 2012; Fu, 2017; Shi & Li, 2018; Cai, 2025).

My previous STEM case study (Xhuxhi, 2025) offers a useful comparative lens, although conducted in a bilingual school in Madrid rather than in China, it similarly showed that provision for gifted learners can remain inconsistent when identification is reactive, school-level protocols are unclear, and classroom pedagogy is oriented toward test completion and the middle of the class. This insight supports the present study's focus on provision as a system of relationships among identification, pedagogy, policy, teacher knowledge, and institutional support, rather than as a single classroom activity.

2.2 Differentiated Instruction for Gifted Learners

Differentiated instruction is widely presented as a response to learner diversity. Tomlinson (2017) defines DI through adaptations of content along with adaptation of process, product, and learning environment based on students' characteristics such as readiness, interests, and learning profiles. For gifted learners, DI should not be reduced to giving additional worksheets or allowing faster completion. (Langelaan *et al.* 2024). The key issue is a qualitative challenge; Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development suggests that all learners, including high-potential learners, need tasks that extend beyond current independent performance. Without such a challenge, gifted pupils may experience boredom, disengagement, or underachievement.

Recent work on DI indicates that implementation is difficult even when teachers value the principle. Gibbs (2023), Langelaan *et al.* (2024), Letzel *et al.* (2023), and Yuen *et al.* (2023) identify workload, preparation time, classroom complexity, and lack of professional development as recurring barriers. Bi *et al.* (2023, 2024a, 2024b) in their studies show that Chinese teachers may use flexible questioning, additional tasks, or grouping to manage differences, but that differentiation is often limited by class size, assessment pressure, and scarce resources. Chinese teachers may also differentiate more readily for readiness than for interests, which has direct consequences for gifted learners. The Chinese concept of yin cai shi jiao further complicates the discussion. Cai (2025) found that teachers could strongly endorse individualized instruction while still expressing difficulty with DI. One interpretation is that individualized instruction is

culturally familiar and morally valued, whereas DI can sound like unequal treatment and, as a result, when it comes to gifted provision, teachers may believe in responding to individual aptitude but hesitate to create visible differentiated pathways for high-potential learners because such pathways may be interpreted as unfair advantage.

2.3 Teacher Perceptions, Agency, and Barriers to Provision

Research shows that teachers' beliefs influence gifted student identification and classroom expectations from gifted students (Brighton *et al.*, 2007; Miller, 2009; Cai, 2025). However, teachers' beliefs and practices do not always align; they may recognize that gifted learners need challenge but still do not act on that recognition (Margrain & Farquhar, 2012; Dal Forno *et al.*, 2015; Cai, 2025).

Teacher agency is therefore bounded by context. In my previous study, the need for teacher agency was linked to the need for structural support and collaboration, because individual teachers could not build coherent gifted provision alone (Xhuxhi, 2025). Lv *et al.* (2024) provide further evidence that teachers working with gifted learners in China experience pressures that extend beyond classroom pedagogy. Their qualitative study of 33 Chinese teachers of mathematically gifted students found that stress was shaped by interactions with students, school leaders, parents, tutoring institutions, education policy, and cultural expectations. These findings support an ecological interpretation of provision; what teachers do for gifted learners is influenced by the classroom, the school, families, wider policy, and social beliefs about examinations and success.

Taken together, the literature suggests that gifted learners in China are affected by definitional uncertainty, uneven policy support, examination culture, family resources, and the limited institutionalization of DI. Existing studies provide important insights into gifted education in China, teacher perceptions in early years settings, teachers of mathematically gifted students, and DI in primary and secondary schools (Bi *et al.*, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Cai, 2025; Lv *et al.*, 2024). However, there remains a need for qualitative research that focuses specifically on ordinary primary school teachers' narratives across different Chinese school contexts.

This study addresses this gap by examining how three teachers conceptualise giftedness, recognise gifted students, and describe the provision they make or cannot make for gifted students. In this study, I aim to offer teacher-centred evidence of how DI and gifted provision are interpreted in practice, and it clarifies how everyday classroom decisions are shaped by broader tensions between equity, excellence, accountability, and resources.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design to explore how Chinese primary school teachers understand, identify, and provide for gifted or high-potential learners in ordinary classrooms. Case-study inquiry is appropriate because the research asks how participants make sense of complex professional decisions within specific institutional and cultural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The design allows the study to examine the interaction between teacher beliefs, school context, resources, curriculum pressure, and policy sensitivity without reducing these issues to survey categories.

The study is informed by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. I assume that teachers' accounts are not neutral reports of an objective classroom reality; rather, they are professional interpretations shaped by experience, school culture, local expectations, and the language available to describe giftedness and differentiation. This approach is consistent with narrative-informed qualitative inquiry, which treats teachers' professional stories as a source of meaning about practice, agency, and constraint (Riessman, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I do not claim to produce a school-wide model, but I draw from my earlier work and principally the idea that gifted provision is situated, relational, and institutional. My focus is therefore on how teachers describe provision within their real conditions of work, rather than on whether they comply with an abstract ideal of DI.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select cases from different educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dahal *et al.*, 2024). Selection criteria included primary-school teaching experience, willingness to discuss classroom practice in detail, and variation in region, school type, subject background, and resource context. Recruitment took place through snowball referrals. Participants received information about the purpose of the study, interview procedures, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw before interviews were scheduled. The three participants, whose names have been pseudonymised, are Alex, Ana and Andy. Alex has 36 years of experience in rural township and village schools in Shandong, mainly teaching Chinese and mathematics. Ana has more than 30 years of experience in an ordinary urban public primary school in Northeast China, with a general science teaching background and responsibilities linked to teaching reform and school-level coordination. Andy has several years of language-teaching experience in Shanghai, with comparative insight from working in both urban district schools and migrant-children schools. The three participants were not selected to represent all Chinese primary teachers statistically. Instead, they were selected to highlight how gifted provision and DI may be understood across contrasting contexts.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022). Semi-structured interviewing is

suitable for the Chinese primary-school context, where teachers may be cautious when discussing policy, examination pressure, parental expectations, and school constraints. The interview was framed as a professional reflection rather than an evaluation.

The interview guide contained four main areas: (1) teacher background and professional experience; (2) understandings of giftedness; (3) identification and classroom provision for gifted pupils; and (4) DI practices, school support, family involvement, professional development, and perceived barriers. Open-ended questions and follow-up prompts invited teachers to describe examples, such as a pupil they considered high potential, a lesson in which pupil differences were visible, or a situation where they wanted to provide extension but found it difficult.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese, lasted approximately 60 to 85 minutes, and were audio recorded with consent. Recordings were transcribed and pseudonymised. The interviews were translated into English for analysis and writing, with the help of the language translation services provided by Altalingua. Translation was treated as an interpretive process, attention was paid to preserving the meaning of culturally specific terms such as yin cai shi jiao, fairness, burden reduction, and examination pressure rather than replacing them with overly simple English equivalents. The semi structured interview guide and the full interview transcripts, due to sensitivity of the study, are available on request.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), Byrne (2022), and Deterding and Waters (2021). The analysis moved through six overlapping stages, familiarization with the transcripts; open coding of meaningful units; grouping of related codes into categories; comparison of categories across the three cases; development and review of themes; and analytical writing supported by representative extracts.

Initial coding focused on segments related to definitions of giftedness, indicators of high potential, classroom differentiation, extension practices, after-class support, school policy, professional development, family resources, parental expectations, and teachers' feelings of agency or constraint. Codes were then compared within and across cases. For example, references to fast comprehension, high marks, accurate answers, and quick homework completion were grouped into a broader category of academic-performance indicators. References to class size, common pacing, safety accountability, monitoring, and workload were grouped into structural constraints.

Through this process, four overarching themes were developed: (1) a narrowed and examination-oriented definition of giftedness; (2) the gap between idealized DI and classroom practice; (3) the absence of systematic policy, resource, and professional-development support; and (4) teachers' cognitive tension and bounded professional agency. A sample of the coding trail can be found in Appendix 2 available on request; the full coding trail is also available on request.

3.3 Ethical Procedures

Participants received written information about the purpose of the research, interview process, data use, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw. Consent was obtained before recording. Real names and school-identifying details were pseudonymised.

The study did not collect individual student data or formally label any pupil as gifted. When participants described classroom examples, names and identifying details were pseudonymised. The research, therefore, focused on teachers' professional reflections rather than evaluating pupils, parents, or schools.

The study does not aim to produce a national model of gifted education in China, but to provide a detailed qualitative account of how three teachers in different contexts understand and enact provision for gifted learners.

4. Data Analysis

The four themes identified in the analysis of the three interviews are a) Giftedness narrowed by an examination culture, b) differentiated instruction as an ideal, c) a lack of systematic support in policy and d) tensions in teacher agency. The analysis of each theme is presented in terms where I try to compare the three participants in the three cases rather than treating them as unrelated.

Theme 1: Giftedness Narrowed by an Examination Culture

All three teachers recognised that some primary pupils learn faster, understand more deeply and show stronger independent learning than their peers. However, the criteria that became most visible in everyday school life were still academic performance, quick responses, neat homework, examination results and classroom participation. This does not mean that the teachers ignored curiosity, creativity or moral character. Rather, the interviews show a repeated tension; teachers noticed broader forms of potential, but the school system mainly rewarded what could be measured, ranked and compared.

Andy offered the most explicitly examination-oriented definition, where, for him, giftedness was not a separate psychological category but a practical classroom judgement about who learns quickly and performs reliably. Andy explained that his " *understanding of a gifted learner is basically someone who studies well. I do not mean "smart" in a vague sense. I mean a stable advantage shown in classroom response, homework quality, and exam performance.*" This extract shows that Andy's definition is not only about test scores, but it remains anchored in school-verifiable evidence. He judged pupils through classroom response, dictation, homework and the speed with which they absorbed new knowledge. His distinction between a child who understands immediately and a child who succeeds through repeated copying suggests that he recognised a difference between performance and learning efficiency. However, because exams remain the clearest public proof of success, ability that cannot be translated into marks is likely to remain informal and unrecorded.

Alex used a broader language of aptitude; he resisted the idea that giftedness means only a rare 'genius child', and he focused instead on observable classroom behaviours such as fast comprehension, independent preparation and the ability to extend ideas. In his example of a classical Chinese lesson, he described pupils who had already completed vocabulary analysis, sentence segmentation, translation and even memorisation before the teacher formally introduced the text. He summarised this as "*This kind of rapid absorption, active construction, and advanced internalization is what I observe as exceptional aptitude*."

Alex, therefore, recognised giftedness as a process of learning, not merely as a score. His additional example of a pupil asking, 'What would have happened if the son of the Ming family had not answered well?' shows that high-potential pupils may reveal themselves through speculative, interpretive or counterfactual questions. Yet he also acknowledged that such signs are still easier to notice in academic subjects than in leadership, artistic expression or wider forms of creativity.

Ana was more cautious about the label 'gifted'. She did not describe a formal school procedure for identifying gifted learners. Instead, she drew on long-term observation of ordinary classrooms, where the pupils she called 'smart children' were those who read more, thought more actively and expressed themselves clearly. Her description is significant because it both widens the idea of potential and shows the limits of ordinary schooling: "*The so-called smart children I see in daily teaching are usually individuals who read a lot, think actively, and express themselves clearly, but they still remain within the unified whole-class teaching system and are neither systematically identified nor differentially cultivated*."

Across the cases, giftedness was therefore understood as a classroom phenomenon before it was understood as a formal category. The common core was academic efficiency, quick understanding, accurate response, independence and the ability to move beyond routine practice. The difference lay in emphasis in that Andy foregrounded examination confirmation; Alex foregrounded interpretive extension; Ana foregrounded reading, expression and development within the constraints of ordinary education.

The teachers' accounts repeatedly linked high potential to family conditions, although they interpreted this link differently. Andy gave greater weight to innate steadiness and self-discipline, where his memorable example was a "*quiet pupil who did not volunteer answers, but responded accurately when called on, reviewed mathematics examples alone after class, and later entered a top university in China*". Andy noted that this pupil and his sister were "*raised mainly by grandparents while their parents worked away from home*". The striking point in his account was that strong performance appeared despite limited family educational involvement, supporting Andy's belief that some forms of aptitude must be innate.

Ana gave family education a more active formative role, and she argued that children's early language, habits and ways of thinking are strongly shaped before they enter school. Her explanation links giftedness to family culture rather than to school

intervention alone: "*As the child's first teachers, parents directly shape the child's cognitive patterns and learning qualities through the way they guide them*."

This statement places responsibility for potential development partly outside the school, but it also complicates any simple claim that teachers can produce giftedness through classroom differentiation alone. If early language, reading and habit formation differ sharply across families, then the same whole-class curriculum will not provide equal opportunities for advanced development.

Alex made this social dimension especially visible through his comparison of two school contexts: "*Pupils in the better-resourced Shanghai setting often had parents who arranged reading, debate, writing camps and other enrichment opportunities. In contrast, children from migrant-worker backgrounds could be capable but lacked comparable cultural and economic support*". His conclusion was,

> "*As a result, the development of gifted learners depends almost entirely on the family: tutoring classes for advanced learning, parents reading classics with them, and weekend debate camps or writing camps*."

We therefore understand that, based on these three cases, when schools do not provide systematic enrichment, family resources become the hidden infrastructure of gifted provision. Giftedness may be recognised in school, but its sustained development often depends on resources outside school. This means that the absence of school-based provision does not produce neutrality; it transfers opportunity to families unevenly.

The interviews also show that the teachers did not hold a purely academic image of the child; for example, Andy cared about character, respect, rule-following, and not bullying classmates. Nevertheless, he admitted that "*Exam scores are hard currency; everything else is a soft indicator*." Andy himself values moral qualities; he expressed, therefore, the contradiction between educational values and institutional recognition, where, consequently, a pupil with strong character but weaker scores might be valued by the teacher but not recognised as 'excellent' by the system. Ana on the other hand pushed the definition of potential beyond grades, she described a quick-thinking twin who read widely but struggled with self-control, and a normally disruptive second-grade boy who became highly focused in science class when the activity involved doing, observing and verifying, she expressed that "*Children like this remind me that what appears strange is sometimes only a mismatch between a child's learning pathway and the dominant rhythm of teaching*." This example is important because it complicates a narrow gifted/ordinary division. Giftedness may appear through curiosity, subject-specific engagement, responsibility, or a learning pathway that does not fit standard classroom routines. Alex similarly recognised that leadership, artistic performance and curiosity could matter, but he found them difficult to observe systematically within the normal pace of teaching. The first theme, therefore, shows a narrowed but not simplistic understanding of giftedness; teachers saw more than scores, but the system made scores easier to notice, record and act upon.

Theme 2: Differentiated Instruction as an Ideal

All three teachers supported the principle that pupils differ and should ideally receive appropriate challenge. However, actual differentiated instruction was limited. The classroom pace was usually set by the average or majority group, while enrichment for high-potential learners was pushed into after-class moments, occasional questioning, peer sharing or individual teacher improvisation. Differentiation existed, but it was informal, fragile and rarely built into the formal lesson design.

Andy's description of a fourth-grade Chinese lesson shows how the ordinary lesson structure leaves little space for high-potential pupils. The key issue is not that the teacher lacks awareness of difference, but that difference does not change the lesson design: "*The whole lesson proceeds strictly according to a uniform pace, without adjusting rhythm or content because of student differences*."

Andy explains that a gifted pupil may answer first or complete work quickly, but the content, speed and product remain shared by all. Andy added that he does not design extension tasks for gifted pupils or lower requirements for struggling pupils; "*the whole class previews, reads, answers and completes homework together*". In this model, the only flexible space is the order of questioning, not the curriculum pathway.

Public schools, in Ana's account, work with classes of forty or fifty pupils and have to protect the majority rhythm. What is often called differentiation becomes a limited adjustment of quantity rather than quality. "*For example, in mathematics, what is called differentiation often just means letting students who learn quickly do a few more extension questions, while allowing weaker students to do fewer basic questions*." As Ana mentioned, more questions are not necessarily richer questions; a pupil who already understands a concept may need greater complexity, inquiry, autonomy or transfer, not simply additional routine items. Anas accounts, therefore, confirm a central gap between differentiated instruction as a pedagogical theory and differentiation as a practical compromise in crowded classrooms.

A further layer is added by Alex, he highlights that sometimes he recognised pupils who had already mastered the basic text before the lesson began, but he still had to teach at the pace of the middle group. In his words, classes of more than forty-five pupils made it impossible to attend to individual rhythms, so he had to move at the comprehension speed of average students. Because the formal lesson remained uniform, differentiation for gifted learners moved to marginal spaces. Alex gave the clearest examples. For pupils who had already mastered a text, he sometimes designed comparative reading, such as comparing Yangshi zhi Zi with other passages from Shishuo Xinyu, or asked advanced pupils to help compile a list of commonly mistaken characters. In class, he used a gradient of questioning; all pupils might first summarise a paragraph, while a more advanced pupil might be asked to analyse the author's stance behind the tone. Yet Alex was clear about the limits, where he says, "*Most of the time it is simply a matter of "giving a little light in the cracks*." The metaphor is useful because Alex does provide a challenge, but only in the narrow spaces left by the official lesson,

timetable and class size. Such support depends on the teacher's initiative and is vulnerable to workload, inspection routines and parental expectations.

Ana's approach was different, she did not usually assign extra tasks to pupils with more capacity, instead, she tried to create a classroom ecology in which pupils who read widely could share information and expand the class's collective knowledge. Her approach was to affirm additional knowledge when it emerged naturally, "*When a child is able to provide knowledge or perspectives beyond the textbook because of wide reading, I affirm that immediately and invite the child to share, so the whole class can hear a different voice*." However, Ana also acknowledged that there may be only one or two such children in a class, so their influence is limited and cannot create a sustained enrichment pathway. Gifted learners become occasional knowledge sources for peers, not participants in a planned programme of advanced learning.

For Andy, it was collegial conversations that sometimes made him aware that a pupil had shown originality in mathematics or had finished work early several times. He might then quietly add a variant question next time he called on that pupil, but as he says, "*It does not change my overall teaching framework, but it allows me to retain a trace of sensitivity within the uniform rhythm.*" In these extracts, we see therefore that catering for giftedness is not absent in teachers' minds, but it survives as a 'trace' rather than as a curriculum structure. The teacher sees a difference, but can only respond through small, temporary adjustments that do not disrupt the shared pace.

The interviews also show that richer, more open-ended learning is highly constrained by accountability. Ana, for example, had previously valued hands-on experiments, but two safety incidents led her to change practice, one involving potassium permanganate and burns, and another involving a candle flame and eye injury. She explained that "*This was not a retreat in teaching philosophy, but an adjustment forced by safety responsibility*." Andy described a parallel constraint through classroom cameras and government inspections. "*The external governmental inspection expected the same lesson plan, same pace and same exercises across teachers*" If he departed from the uniform arrangement, he risked failing inspection or being questioned. He explained that "*camera surveillance and parental complaint risk created an instinct of 'safety first'*". For Andy, this made visible differentiation risky because it could be interpreted as disorder, favouritism or failure to follow the plan. Differentiation for Andy does not feel safe to attempt.

Theme 3: A Lack of Systematic Support in Policy

The third theme concerns the support environment around teachers, and in all three cases, gifted provision lacked a stable institutional pathway. Andy, Ana and Alex described no clear school policy for gifted learners, no specialist training, limited professional discussion and uneven home-school collaboration. This means that gifted provision was not simply weak at the classroom level; it was weak across the whole school support system.

The institutional absence of provision for gifted students is given by Andy when he explained that "*The school also has no special support mechanism for gifted learners, there*

are no school-based extension courses, no competition training groups, and no links to outside resources." After class, Andy had marking, preparation and administrative work; from fourth grade, compositions and weekly journals added to the workload. The only visible recognition in Andy's rural setting was material encouragement for the top three pupils in the town's final examination rankings. Andy explained that the examination ranking is a "*reward after performance has already been demonstrated*", reinforcing the link between giftedness and ranking. The contrast with subsidies for financially disadvantaged pupils is important. Andy mentioned that policy has a route for poverty support, but "*not for high-potential development*".

Alex reported that in public primary schools, occasional competitions existed, such as hosting contests, but selection was based on general school performance rather than a clear understanding of gifted potential. Ana made a similar point when she stated that "*schools have no specialised staff, courses or evaluation mechanism to respond systematically to gifted learners' needs*". Across the cases, 'fairness' was often interpreted as uniform treatment, but uniformity also meant that advanced needs were left unplanned.

In Alex's school, regular teacher meetings were held, but the focus remained on common errors and how to raise average scores. His frustration with these meetings is clear when he explains, "*No one asks*, "*Why does this child always bring in historical materials beyond the textbook*?" or "*How should we respond to this philosophical kind of question?*"" These meetings "*do not help teachers respond to advanced curiosity, cross-text knowledge or unusual questions*".

Ana's account of school-based training was similar. Ana saw that training updated subject knowledge and discussed general methods such as question chains, inquiry organisation and explaining everyday phenomena through science. However, she goes on to say that in those meetings "*We do not discuss how to teach good students or how to cultivate gifted learners, because the logic of teaching and research in ordinary primary schools is to guarantee the minimum and leave the maximum open, rather than to provide precise support*."

The phrase 'guarantee the minimum and leave the maximum open' summarises the institutional logic across the cases. In all three cases, the schools aim to ensure baseline attainment for the whole group, but the developmental ceiling is left to chance, families or individual teachers. This is consistent with Alex's concern that advanced pupils may "*lose motivation when underchallenged*", and with Andy's statement that rural teachers need usable strategies rather than theory. Andy was explicit about the kind of training he wanted: "*I do not need theoretical lectures. I need methods that can be used in tomorrow's classroom immediately*."

Home-school collaboration appeared in every interview, but not as a coherent partnership for gifted development. In Andy's case, many parents simply dropped their children at the gate and did not tutor, check or ask further questions, and when they contacted the teacher, it was usually about a specific homework problem. Andy concluded that such interaction did not involve learning strategies, interest stimulation or long-term planning. Alex described a different but equally limited relationship where some parents created extracurricular pathways for their children, but teacher-parent

communication remained narrow, "*basically transactional*." He contacted parents when a pupil's condition declined, while parents tended to ask about classroom performance and scores. This relationship could support achievement, but it narrowed the educational goal to helping the child run faster within the existing system rather than exploring interests, personality or long-term development.

Ana offered a clearer division of responsibilities where she argued that families should build habits, interests and values, while schools should provide systematic knowledge, thinking methods and collective rules. Her point is not that schools have no responsibility, but that "*home-school roles become confused when parents outsource habit formation to teachers or when schools assume families can provide enrichment*". In a system without school-based gifted provision, children from families with more time, money and cultural resources are more likely to receive challenge outside school, and according to her, this "*intensifies inequality because enrichment becomes private rather than public*".

Theme 4: Tensions in Teacher Agency

The participants were not indifferent to gifted learners; they noticed differences and reflected critically on policy. Yet their agency was bound by institutional rules, workload, parental pressure and lack of materials. The central pattern is a gap between seeing and doing; teachers could identify need, but could not consistently translate recognition into provision.

Andy captured the boundary of teacher agency most strongly; his school emphasized uniform pace, same lesson plans and same exercises. He does "*not dare to slow down for weaker students, nor dare to speed up for stronger students, and even less dare to try layered homework or flexible objectives*." This is not personal reluctance, "*it is not that I do not want to support gifted learners; it is that I cannot support them, do not know how to support them, and do not dare to support them*." This three-part formulation, cannot, do not know how, and do not dare, separates the three layers of constraint, structural impossibility, professional preparation and accountability fear.

Alex once imagined using project-based learning to stimulate potential, but ordinary timetable and workload conditions changed his view. Reflecting on his first year of teaching, he recognised that one student later found belonging in a competition-oriented advanced class after entering junior secondary school, while he had not been able to create even a suitable reading list within his primary school. Alex goes on to explain that "*The bottleneck of gifted education lies not in teachers' willingness, but in whether the system can leave institutional space for difference*." Taken together, Andy and Alex show that teachers may recognise high-potential learners without having the institutional space to act. The problem is not merely a lack of care or awareness; it is the absence of authorised and resourced pathways for responding to difference. Ana was critical of the recent reform when she said that they have "*not solved the problem because the examination system remains unchanged*". In her account, "*The result is that schools reduce burden on the surface, while families add even more. It looks like burden reduction, but in practice it means pressure intensification*." For gifted learners, this has two contradictory effects; on one

hand, reduced textbook difficulty may leave them underchallenged in school. On the other hand, families with resources may compensate through private tutoring, debate camps, reading classes or advanced materials. Again, according to Ana, creating "*unequal enrichment and reinforces the role of family*". Ana also raised a concern about early acceleration and class streaming. She acknowledged that past streaming could be efficient, but "*Children with real ability do not need to be pushed ahead by drilling or early primary-school preparation; they will emerge naturally at the right time*." This view differs from Alex's desire for more structured enrichment and from Andy's concern that gifted learners lose challenge. In these three cases, teachers do not simply call for more acceleration, but rather negotiate a difficult balance between fairness, natural development, examination pressure and the need to avoid underchallenge.

Although the teachers described strong constraints, they also created small spaces of agency. Ana explains that her science lessons began by "*refreshing prior knowledge, such as asking what pupils already knew about the Sun*", and she ended lessons by inviting pupils to "*share unexpected discoveries*". Ana explains that "*I do not ask them simply to repeat knowledge points; I want to catch moments when their thinking sparks*." Showing therefore that agency can operate in strict controlled environments, Ana tries to notice moments of curiosity and cognitive connection. Ana gives the example of a "*disruptive boy who became a science helper*", she responded not by labelling him, but by matching responsibility to interest. These actions do not replace policy or resources, but they matter because they show that teachers are not entirely passive implementers. They continue to seek small openings for pupils to be seen beyond scores.

How these three teachers interpreted constraints shaped their professional identities. Andy did not ask for idealised theories, "*but for practical, low-resource methods*". Ana, on the other hand, described love for children not as an abstract slogan but as a professional duty, she explained that she does "*not give up on any child… even if a child is temporarily behind, I still believe that child has his or her own developmental rhythm*." Ana valued potential, but she also worried about forcing growth prematurely or reducing children to scores. Alex's professional identity was shaped by contrast and disillusionment, university preparation, migrant-child schooling and the Shanghai context, all of which revealed a gap between lesson-plan ideals and classroom realities. Across cases, teacher identity did not remove constraints, but it shaped how teachers responded, practical survival in Andy, developmental care in Ana, and reflective improvisation in Alex.

5. Discussion

This discussion returns to the central research question of how Chinese primary school teachers understand, identify and provide for gifted students within ordinary classroom contexts. The evidence from Andy, Alex and Ana suggests that the main issue is not a complete absence of teacher awareness. Each teacher could describe pupils who learned quickly, prepared independently, read widely, asked unusual questions or showed

strong transfer of knowledge. The problem is that this recognition rarely becomes a formal pathway of identification, challenge, enrichment and review. This finding is consistent with Tomlinson's (2017) argument that differentiated instruction requires planned adaptation of content, process, product, pace and learning environment, and with Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning should be pitched just beyond what the learner can already do independently. It also develops the central argument of the Madrid STEM case study, which stressed that gifted provision cannot be reduced to isolated teacher techniques, because recognition, teacher knowledge, family involvement, school culture and institutional support all shape whether gifted students are challenged (Xhuxhi, 2025). The three cases in this study confirm this pattern in different settings, but they also show pressures that were less visible in Madrid, such as public-school equality norms.

In relation to the first research question, the teachers defined giftedness mainly as visible learning efficiency rather than as a formal psychological category, supporting therefore Cai's (2025) point that Chinese gifted education is weakened by the lack of a clear and universal definition of giftedness. The teachers' language also reflects the wider literature's distinction between narrow achievement-based definitions and broader conceptions that include creativity, task commitment, advanced questioning, transfer and domain-specific potential (Renzulli, 1978; Gagné, 2000; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005; Subotnik *et al.*, 2011; Plucker *et al.*, 2021). Andy's definition was closest to school achievement, because long rural teaching experience had taught him that grades and reliable classroom performance were the most defensible forms of evidence. Alex gave a broader definition based on learning speed, independent inquiry and the ability to extend a text beyond the expected answer, but he still acknowledged the limits of what teachers can see in ordinary lessons when he said: "*Other aspects, such as leadership or artistic performance, are difficult to observe systematically under the regular pace of teaching*." Ana was the most developmental in her language, linking potential to heredity, early family language, habit formation and the child's own rhythm of growth. Taken together, the answer is that giftedness was conceptualised as a practical classroom phenomenon, but the school environment made academic achievement the easiest evidence to recognise and defend.

This narrowing is significant because it shows how context shapes the meaning of giftedness. In the literature review, I identify that giftedness should not be treated as a fixed trait isolated from opportunity; rather, high-potential behaviour emerges through interaction between learner, task, teacher and environment (Plucker *et al.*, 2021). The interviews in the study support this sociocultural view. However, they also show that ordinary classroom systems privilege the signs of potential that fit existing routines. A pupil who answers quickly or scores highly is easy to identify; a pupil who shows originality, curiosity, practical reasoning or uneven development is more difficult to place. The Madrid case study found a related problem, in a bilingual private school with more apparent resources, giftedness was still inconsistently recognised when the school lacked a shared definition and when identification depended on parents, external assessment or individual teachers (Xhuxhi, 2025). The contrast is that the Madrid case

was marked by role ambiguity within a private institutional setting, while the Chinese cases are marked by cultural and policy sensitivity around visible differences. In both contexts, however, broad theoretical definitions of giftedness become narrowed when schools lack shared and practical procedures for noticing more than attainment.

The second research question concerned how teachers recognise gifted learners and whether identification is formal or informal. The answer to this is clear: identification was almost entirely informal, experiential and teacher-mediated. None of the participants described a school-wide checklist, referral route, gifted register, multi-source assessment process or systematic record of advanced learning. Instead, teachers relied on long-term classroom judgement, and Andy's comment about professional learning is revealing here. He said that "*what truly supported my teaching was the experience accumulated over thirty years on the job, repeated trial and error, observing students' reactions, adjusting questioning methods, and making immediate decisions according to what happened in class.*" The type of judgment Andy talk about is valuable because it is rooted in everyday contact with pupils, but it also remains private and fragile. It depends on the individual teacher's confidence and workload.

Andy's experience aligns with research showing that teachers are often the first gatekeepers of gifted recognition (Brighton *et al.*, 2007; Miller, 2009; Cai, 2025), but it also confirms that teacher perception alone is insufficient. If recognition is not connected to structured provision, the pupil's need may be noticed without being acted upon. In Madrid, identification was often reactive and could be activated by parents, external documentation or visible achievement in STEM; in these Chinese primary classrooms, identification was more embedded in daily lesson routines and exam-visible behaviours (Xhuxhi, 2025). Yet the outcome was similar; noticing did not reliably generate sustained enrichment. The implication is that identification should be low stakes but more systematic.

In relation to the third research question, which asked what forms of differentiated instruction, enrichment or extension teachers reported using, the findings in this study suggest that the teachers practised micro-differentiation rather than systematic differentiated instruction. In Tomlinson's (2017) terms, they made small adjustments to questioning, participation, examples or after-class expectations, but rarely changed content, product, assessment, grouping or pace in a planned way. This supports Bi *et al.* (2023, 2024a, 2024b), who found that Chinese teachers often differentiate more around readiness and immediate performance than around interests, learning profiles or advanced potential. Andy's account explains why, when he says that "*Rural class sizes varied greatly, from just over ten students to as many as 52, so there were no conditions for detailed layering. I could only rely on a teaching rhythm built through a great deal of repeated training, almost like muscle memory*." This quote is important because it shows that a uniform classroom rhythm is not only an ideological preference; it is also a survival mechanism.

Alex's case shows a slightly stronger impulse toward enrichment, especially through deeper questioning and comparative reading, but he, too, described provision as marginal rather than structural. His most striking diagnosis was that "*school is only a*

transfer station for knowledge transmission, not an incubator for ability growth." This statement captures the gap between the ideal of differentiated instruction and the ordinary school's operational logic. If a school is organised mainly to transmit the same curriculum to all pupils and measure common outcomes, gifted learners may be included physically but not cognitively. Ana's science teaching offered a different route; she tried to let students share wider knowledge and to use peer contribution as a classroom resource. Yet she also recognised that when only one or two pupils in a class can contribute at that level, their presence cannot become a sustained enrichment pathway.

The fourth research question focused on institutional, cultural, pedagogical and family-related factors that support or constrain provision. The constraints described by the teachers strongly reflect the DI literature; positive attitudes are not enough (Gibbs, 2023; Langelaan *et al.*, 2024; Letzel *et al.*, 2023; Yuen *et al.*, 2023). They also fit Lv *et al.*'s (2024) ecological account of Chinese gifted education, in which teachers' work is shaped by school leaders, parents, policy and cultural expectations as much as by classroom pedagogy. Andy's professional development example shows how support can be formally present but practically misaligned. He explained that demonstration lessons are "*usually conducted in city schools with good equipment and relatively homogeneous student populations, which are too different from our real rural setting*." This is a crucial point for policy and teacher education, professional development that ignores teachers' actual conditions may increase frustration rather than build capacity.

Ana's account of training also points to the absence of gifted education as a recognised professional category in ordinary schools. She explained that training often updates subject knowledge and general methods, using the familiar image that a teacher's "*bucket of water*" must be sufficient to pour out "*a cup of water*" for students. However, this training did not address how to identify advanced learning needs, how to compact work after mastery, how to design richer questions, or how to communicate enrichment to parents without creating anxiety. Alex made parallel criticism when he said that professional development often becomes "*a formalized check-in activity, let alone deep work on specific educational needs*." These accounts extend the Madrid findings. In Madrid, one problem was the absence of shared protocols and a lack of coordinated teacher learning around gifted STEM provision (Xhuxhi, 2025). In China, the problem is compounded by public-school constraints, even when teachers want to act, they may lack training, time, materials and institutional permission. In both contexts, individual teacher agency is real but bounded.

Family factors further complicate provision, the literature review suggested that when schools do not provide sustained enrichment, family resources become the hidden infrastructure of gifted development. The interviews strongly support this. Alex described families who created private enrichment pathways through advanced tutoring, reading, debate or writing activities. Ana framed the issue as a division of responsibility, families should form habits, interests and values, while schools should provide systematic knowledge, thinking methods and collective rules. Her practical example was sharp, "*If a child has to be reminded three times to do homework at home, how can that child*

possibly be self-disciplined at school?" This does not blame parents; rather, it shows that gifted provision is not only a classroom issue but rather shaped by family time and cultural capital.

The fifth research question asked how teachers manage the tension between equality of treatment, inclusive classroom practice, examination demands and the needs of gifted learners. Previous studies argued that equality is not the same as sameness, inclusive teaching should support struggling pupils while also providing advanced challenge for pupils who require it (Tomlinson, 2017; Ardenlid *et al.*, 2025; Opoku *et al.*, 2025). At the same time, Cai (2025) shows that in China visible differentiation may be interpreted as unequal treatment, even when the teacher's intention is to respond to individual aptitude. The teachers in this study did not reject equality. Rather, they feared that visible differentiation could create accusations of unfairness and possibly expose teachers to complaint. Andy's discussion of changes in education policy illustrates the contradiction, "*Textbook content has become simpler, practice books have been greatly reduced, and students' schoolbags have become lighter, but the density of thinking training has also declined*." For gifted learners, such changes may therefore reduce visible challenge unless schools deliberately replace routine workload with richer thinking tasks.

Ana's position adds an important caution, although she did not argue for aggressive acceleration or a return to rigid tracking. Her concern was that forced early advancement can distort development, "*To force growth too early only means that some children are artificially raised, while others are artificially covered up*." This offers a useful balance to some gifted-education arguments. "*The problem is not that every advanced pupil should be pushed faster at all costs; the problem is that pupils with advanced learning needs should not be left without depth, autonomy or intellectual companionship*". This distinction is also visible in the Madrid STEM case. There, the inclusive identity of the bilingual school did not automatically guarantee advanced challenge; gifted students could remain underprovided for when inclusion meant participation in the same teacher-led tasks rather than access to different levels of inquiry (Xhuxhi, 2025). In China, the language is different - equality, burden reduction, random assignment and common pacing - but the risk is similar, pupils are included in the same room while their cognitive needs remain only partly addressed.

The teachers' management of this tension can therefore be described as quiet differentiation, they adapt through extra questions, careful observation, occasional extension, peer sharing, role allocation and private encouragement, rather than through visible grouping, acceleration or formal gifted pathways. This quietness protects teachers and reduces conflict, but it also makes provision unstable. Alex expressed the need for a different framing when he argued that support for gifted learners is "*not about creating elites, but about preventing gifted learners from losing their internal motivation because they are constantly underchallenged*." This statement connects the interview evidence with the literature's concern that gifted pupils require qualitative challenge, not simply more of the same work. It also suggests a practical way forward; schools could speak of advanced learning needs rather than fixed gifted labels. Such language would allow teachers to

identify pupils who need depth, inquiry or faster movement without presenting support as privilege.

The study aims to answer the central research question by showing that Chinese primary teachers understand and identify gifted learners through situated professional judgement, but provide for them mainly through informal and constrained practices. The way forward is not a return to elitist separation, but a more practical and equitable model of differentiated support, low-stakes documentation of advanced learning signs, shared extension resources, teacher training grounded in real classroom conditions, compacting of mastered routine work, richer questioning, inquiry menus, and parent communication that frames enrichment as educational development rather than ranking. Without such structures, gifted provision will remain dependent on individual teacher sensitivity and family resources, and equality will risk becoming sameness rather than fairness.

6. Conclusion

In this study I conclude that that the three Chinese primary school teachers did recognise gifted learners, but their provision for these learners remains mostly informal, cautious and dependent on individual judgement. Across the three teacher case studies, giftedness was usually identified through classroom-visible signs such as rapid understanding, strong memory, independent preparation, wide reading, accurate responses and the ability to transfer knowledge. However, recognition did not automatically lead to a planned pathway of differentiated instruction, enrichment or sustained review. The main problem was therefore not teacher indifference, but the gap between what teachers noticed and what ordinary school structures allowed them to do.

The three cases show this gap in different ways. Andy's rural case demonstrates how gifted provision can disappear inside a uniform teaching rhythm when resources, policy guidance, teacher training and parental involvement are weak. Alex's urban case shows that even when pupils have stronger family support and some access to extracurricular learning, school provision can still remain limited to after-class extension, competition opportunities or the teacher's personal initiative. Ana's case adds an important developmental and ethical perspective, she recognised curiosity, reading, habit formation and peer contribution, but she also showed how examination pressure, parental anxiety, safety accountability and concern about premature acceleration restrict what teachers feel able to offer. Together, the cases suggest that gifted provision in these three ordinary Chinese primary classrooms is best understood as a negotiated practice shaped by teacher care, institutional caution and wider cultural expectations of fairness. This study develops the argument made in the earlier Madrid STEM case study (Xhuxhi, 2025) which concluded that gifted provision required a school-specific model based on shared identification, teacher capacity, enrichment opportunities, family communication and evaluation of progress (Xhuxhi, 2025). The present study reaches a similar conclusion in a different context. In both the Madrid and Chinese cases, gifted learners' risk being underprovided for when recognition is not converted into coordinated school action. The

contrast is that the Chinese cases place stronger emphasis on equality-as-uniformity, examination accountability, burden-reduction policy, safety responsibility and the sensitivity of visible differentiation. This means that any recommendation for China must be modest, non-stigmatising and workable inside ordinary classrooms, rather than dependent on elite labels or separate tracks.

The first recommendation is for the three schools to develop a shared, low-stakes language for advanced learning needs. Rather than relying only on the term 'gifted' or on examination ranking, these schools could agree on observable indicators such as rapid mastery, unusual questioning, independent reading, creative transfer, sustained curiosity and advanced subject engagement. This would allow teachers to discuss pupils' needs without turning identification into a rigid label. The second recommendation is to create practical enrichment resources that match teachers' real conditions, short extension tasks connected to textbook units, optional challenge questions, reading lists, inquiry prompts, oral reasoning tasks, open-ended writing or science observation activities, and compacting routines for pupils who have already mastered basic work. These resources should be easy to use in large or mixed-ability classes and should not depend on expensive equipment.

The third recommendation is to strengthen teacher professional development in differentiated instruction for gifted learners. Training in the three cases should move beyond general advice to 'teach according to aptitude' and should show teachers how to design layered questions, manage flexible grouping, replace repetitive work with deeper tasks, document advanced thinking, and communicate enrichment to parents as developmental support rather than preferential treatment. The fourth recommendation is to broaden parent communication. Families need guidance that values reading, habits, curiosity, self-regulation and balanced enrichment, not only higher scores or more tutoring. The fifth recommendation is to protect equality while also protecting challenge. Schools should avoid permanent early streaming where it produces stigma or anxiety, but they should also avoid assuming that identical work is always fair. Open-access enrichment, rotating interest groups, optional challenge menus and subject-based inquiry tasks would allow pupils to access advanced work without being publicly fixed into a hierarchy.

The study also points to subject-specific ways forward. In rural contexts such as Andy's, support needs to be low-cost and embedded in ordinary lessons. In language teaching, Alex's case suggests the value of advanced reading, comparative text discussion and tasks that ask pupils to interpret, justify and create rather than only recall. In science, Ana's case shows the need for safe inquiry protocols, clear responsibility guidelines and low-risk materials so that teachers can preserve experimentation and curiosity without feeling personally exposed to unreasonable safety risks. Across all contexts, schools should gradually broaden what counts as learning success.

The limitations of this study must also be recognized, it’s based on three teacher interviews and therefore cannot represent all Chinese primary schools. The data are self-reported and do not include classroom observations, student voices, parent perspectives

or school-leader accounts. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English, so some nuance may have shifted in the translation process. The cases also cover a limited range of regions, school types and subjects. For these reasons, the findings should be read as analytically suggestive rather than statistically generalisable.

Future research should build on these cases by including classroom observation which would help confirm how teachers' reported strategies appear in practice, while interviews with students and parents would show how gifted provision is experienced beyond the teacher's perspective.

Gifted provision in ordinary Chinese primary classrooms should not be framed as elitism or separation. It should be framed as a question of educational fairness. If pupils learn quickly, think deeply or show unusual curiosity, equal schooling should not mean asking them simply to repeat what they have already mastered. The way forward is a public, modest and sustainable model of differentiated support, teachers need shared language, usable resources, professional development, safe enrichment opportunities and parent communication that values development as well as achievement. Without these structures, gifted provision will continue to depend on individual teacher sensitivity and family resources. With them, high-potential learners can remain part of the shared classroom community while still receiving the challenge they need to flourish.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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