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## The place of a gifted student in teaching practice

### KEYWORDS

gifted student, abilities, needs  
of a gifted student, problems of  
a gifted student

### ABSTRACT

The aim of the thesis is to draw attention to issues related to gifted students, their needs and problems at school. The author reflects on the ways of satisfying the needs of a gifted student in the classroom. A gifted student is a person with special educational needs. Teachers in schools, which should take care of the development of each individual, often leave gifted students without assistance, as they believe that they will manage on their own. The author shows fragments of the Polish educational reality of gifted students.

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## Introduction

Optimal educational opportunities should be provided for each student. It is difficult to reach a uniform position on the issue of the educational practice of talented individuals, as due to the lack of a coherent system of caring for the said group of people, we do not have common solutions in our country. Although gifted students are not offered comprehensive stimulation at all stages of education, there is an increased interest in the issue of skills – both in theory and in pedagogical practice. In recent years, there have been numerous studies, interesting initiatives and scientific publications devoted to issues related to the functioning of a gifted student at school and outside school. Since it is known that there is no uniform

system for supporting the development of students' talents, it would be necessary to combine individual actions in order to provide individuals with a solid basis for believing that they can achieve success on many levels. Undoubtedly, the education of talented people is a desired investment.

## **What does “gifted” mean?**

The group of gifted students is not homogeneous. It is divided based on the level of achievement into high-performing students and students below their capabilities. Who, then, deserves to be called a gifted student? We may say that particularly talented students are characterized by specific cognitive function, a high level of intelligence or specialist abilities, creative abilities, specific personality traits and characteristic behaviour. Only a specific configuration, synthesis and balance of all components is responsible for the creation of outstanding abilities and talent (Limont, Dreszer, Bedyńska, Śliwińska, 2010: 34). Such students are characterized by accelerated development, cognitive inquisitiveness, manifested in the form of comprehensive interests, they express a constant desire to learn and explore new phenomena and theories. In the school environment, talented students are distinguished by better adaptation than their peers, which is largely due to their problem-solving skills.

In terms of diagnosing the talents of students, discrepancies in the tools used by teachers have been detected. The Supreme Audit Office has requested the Minister of National Education to take a legislative initiative to introduce a definition of “abilities” and “special talents”, which will allow to avoid freedom and diversity in diagnosing and supporting students' talents. Interestingly, only half of the schools audited identified systems for selecting outstanding pupils. The audited schools provided solutions for particularly gifted pupils in the form of individual learning programmes only occasionally.

## **Symptoms of interest in gifted individuals**

I cannot agree with the accusation that Polish educational institutions do not offer anything to the most talented students and neglect their needs. One of the evidence confirming the growing interest in this category of students is, for example, the fact that the Minister of National Education established 2010/2011 as the Year of Talent Discovery. Until mid-June 2011, the action awarded 578 titles of “Place

of Talent Discovery” and as many as 1118 titles of “School of Talent Explorers”, which is undoubtedly a reason to take a more optimistic look at the situation of outstanding students in Polish educational institutions. The next step in reflecting on this subject should be a short review of documents regulating the situation of a gifted student in a Polish school. Contrary to popular opinion, the environment surrounding gifted students is legally regulated, as indicated by the applicable legal norms.

In the Act on Educational Law of 14 December 2016 we read that the educational system ensures education understood as supporting the child in development towards full maturity in every sphere of functioning, including the intellectual sphere. The document mentions the care of gifted students and enabling them to implement an individual education plan, as well as to complete school in a shorter time. In addition, students should be guaranteed appropriate conditions for the development of talents and interests through access to extra-curricular and out-of-school activities, thus shaping the ability of spending free time. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 30 April 2013 on the rules of granting and organising psychological and pedagogical assistance refers to the recognition and subsequent satisfaction of individual needs and opportunities, in particular special talents. It is proposed to introduce talent-developing activities to schools and kindergartens, dominated by active methods. The tasks of school specialists include helping students, teachers and parents in stimulating natural predispositions, opportunities and talents. Therefore, first the diagnosis of needs and then their satisfaction – this is the proper order of actions for the school pedagogue, whose competences include determining the forms and ways of supporting students with outstanding talents. The teaching staff is obliged to identify a talented individual attending the institution and provide him/her with the best care.

## **Conditions for the education of gifted students**

The general picture of the place of a gifted student in educational practice will consist of such elements as the broadly understood conditions of education, starting from the ways of working, and ending with mutual relations with peers and self-realisation activity of the individual.

Moving on to the individual elements of the education process analysed from the perspective of talented individuals, we can see specific opportunities or their lack. Undoubtedly, it happens that a gifted student is demotivated from the very

beginning. The question is whether a child, who demonstrates outstanding abilities from the very beginning of the learning process, is motivated enough to patiently wait until the last part of the learning process and to demonstrate achievements adequate to his/her intellectual capabilities. By following the working styles of some teachers, we may feel concern about the real cognitive space for the class genius. The state of national curricula, the selection of educational content, methods of their implementation, didactic measures or organizational forms leave much to be desired.

The traditional model of education based mainly on the transfer of theoretical knowledge will have an adverse effect on the development of skills. The lack of methodological flexibility will not serve to change the mental potential of students. The organisational uniformity in the class-lesson system is by no means effective for the education of talented individuals. There is a clear need to use activation methods in an effective way. By far the greatest value will be the strengthening of students' independent thinking. It would be desirable to create conditions for the students to reach conclusions independently through empirical experience. It must be said that during the lesson not enough emphasis is put on the above mentioned elements (Krzyżanowska, Wiśnicka, 2009: 21). Both teachers and students appreciate the value of student experiments. In practice, however, they usually take the form of teacher demonstrations.

Another form of the school's influence on a gifted student are individual classes. They are based on the independent work of the student under the guidance of a teacher. The most valuable individual forms include subject contests and competitions. According to T. Żuk, the idea of the contest awakens cognitive competition and research independence of students (Żuk, 1996: 126).

It would be advisable to implement subject blocks in diversified groups, whether within one class, one year, or in advanced teams. Such a solution brings benefits in terms of student stimulation, but also, and perhaps above all, takes into account the integrative value. Bearing in mind adaptation difficulties and lack of social acceptance of talented students among their peers, we can effectively integrate talented individuals into informal structures of the classroom and even the school.

The question remains whether contemporary curricula take into account the real mental abilities of students, whether operations such as divergent thinking characteristic of creative activity are triggered during their stay at school.

As it turns out, teachers, even though they usually value the use of activating methods, say that they have no possibility to use them. They mention a number of difficulties related to the implementation of classes based on students' activity, in-

cluding: inadequate equipment in the classroom, haste or too many students in the class. By finding the conditions of education in a Polish school as they are, a gifted student is often forced to look for circumstances conducive to the realization of individual passions.

## **Forms of development outside the classroom**

If traditional school lessons do not meet the expectations, are inadequate to the needs and educational aspirations of gifted students, then the student may satisfy them through a wide range of optional, additional, extra-curricular activities. It is not uncommon for talented individuals to take part in extracurricular activities. The main needs include cognitive needs, the need for achievements, mastery, recognition, meaning and self-realization. Lessons fulfil these needs to a much lesser extent than extracurricular classes. Taking part in extracurricular forms of didactic-educational classes, participants explore various problems, act more thoroughly, achieve more ambitious goals, overcome difficulties, practice professionalism, and emphasise their unquestionable values (Stańczak, 2009).

The offer of classes aimed at the development of extracurricular, additional skills and interests is very rich. Gifted children and youth have plenty of opportunities to take up challenges and initiatives. The key issue remains the free flow of information, the orientation of teachers, where - for example - to refer an outstanding student from a small rural school.

While supporting talented students, in addition to creative activity, we should also take into account actions stimulating their emotional, social and personality spheres. The first one can be nurtured by preparing students for contests and competitions. The second one, by entrusting him/her with the role of an assistant or expert, or organizing voluntary and charity work for him/her. Finally, in order to stimulate the student's personality development, it would be desirable to allow him/her to present the results of research and creative work, to enable him/her to conduct classes, workshops and prepare for the monitoring and planning of one's own development (Branch, 2014: 85). We should open the way for students to show their full potential. However, we must not expect a similar development of the student in all spheres, because there may be clear disproportions in cognitive and emotional development. The task of people from the immediate environment is to prepare the student for independence, success, but also, and perhaps above all, for failure. The role of adults in the development of talented children and youth is invaluable.

## Types of support for the most talented students

Children and adolescents are constantly looking for role models. A significant role is attributed to authority figures, therefore it is worthwhile to arrange meetings with interesting people. We assume that an individual has potential and its realization takes place while communing with a person who has reached the master level (Góralski, 1991: 7).

Each student has an individual developmental potential and its effects and realization depend on people from the educational environment. Hence the need to integrate environmental impacts and the importance of partnership in the development of students' capabilities (Wawrzyniak, 2016: 264).

An important factor, often overlooked in discussions, determining the achievements of a gifted student is the teacher. Going further, one can ask whether there should be a place for talent educators in the Polish school.

It seems that teachers who achieve outstanding results in their work with children and young people with abilities "are characterized by enthusiasm, passion, a sense of mission, i.e. they are active, because they are interested in what they do and they enjoy the action itself". (Limont, Cieślikowska, Jastrzębska, 2012: 31). Students also appreciate their commitment and charisma. The highest educational values are shared by teachers who do not build lessons in a standard manner, use didactic means in an innovative way and encourage students to be independent and imaginative (Bieluga, 2003: 80).

Naturally, the form and intensity of solutions aimed at students with outstanding intellectual skills will depend on the country. American solutions look interesting. Already at the stage of recognition of individuals with above-average abilities, the Rotating Door model is used, based not only on psychometrics, but also on other classification indicators, such as opinions or achievements of talented people. Educating gifted students is enriched by three levels of programs, which emphasize the triggering of interest, specialized training or work based on research problems. The task forces are accompanied by the teacher in charge. In line with the increased complexity and difficulty of the explored issues, the student works with a "first contact teacher" who recognizes his or her abilities and then moves on to a "specialist teacher" who is an expert, a master, a trainer (Limont, Cieślikowska, Jastrzębska, 2012: 31).

Many schools appoint a Talented Student Coordinator to take care of the interests of this particular group and monitor their progress, needs and difficulties. The coordinator is also responsible for organizing cooperation with other schools, extracurricular organizations or acts as an intermediary in contacts be-

tween students, parents and teachers. Some schools and coordinators can even boast Individual Educational Plans for the most gifted students (Bates, Munday, 2005: 21-26).

A method of teaching called tutoring, designed to help students discover and develop their personal talents, is becoming more and more popular. Under the supervision of a tutor, the talented individual can shape his or her own path of development. In weekly individual tutorials, the learner is activated by the tutor, who also continues to improve his or her technique. The benefits of such an approach for children and youth, such as broadly understood individualisation, acceptance of needs and predispositions, or stimulation of self-improvement, strongly support its popularization in Polish institutions (Baranowska, 2014).

I am of the opinion that in order to work well with a gifted individual, no additional studies, courses or schools are needed, because what is most valuable for a gifted student is elusive, it results from a vocation or passion and turns into a spark of inspiration that can have an impact on the life choices of young people. Let us not forget about supporting gifted students. Perhaps we have not sufficiently mastered the ability to praise someone, as well as to boast about one's own achievements and talents. When shaping the personality of children and then young people, let us try to appreciate their unique abilities, all their activity. Maybe leaving modesty and intimidation with otherness behind will be the first step to success.

## **Initiatives for the benefit of gifted students**

Evidence and echoes of talent promotion activities are coming from all over the country. For example, in June 2016 in Tradition Park the project "Comprehensive support for schools in Siemianowice Śląskie in the field of work with gifted students" was summed up. The participants of the Talent Forum Conference presented high level, versatility of presentations and true passion. This event is a good opportunity to promote the talents and passions of students from schools in Siemianowice and to demonstrate the activity of their teachers. As many as ten schools promoting talents have been awarded certificates. In the face of such activities, the common belief that schools pay attention only to weaker students turns out to be false. Such initiatives are admirable and exemplary.

The Centre for the Development of Education, which is a public in-service teacher training centre, which aims to raise the awareness and quality of education in the area of e.g. working with gifted students, good practices, the publication of guides and their dissemination during meetings and conferences, is concerned

with issues relating to talented individuals. As part of the European Social Fund, the Centre has carried out a project entitled “The development and implementation of a comprehensive system of work with gifted students”. Elements of the system of working with gifted students were examined in order to develop and implement comprehensive solutions (Korbecka, 2013: 241). The report shows that among the limitations in shaping talents, school principals mention the time and remuneration of teachers, because they would like to be able to appreciate and reward commitment beyond the norm. The research shows cooperation between schools and universities, they participate in such projects as Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates Comenius and foreign exchanges (The development and implementation of a comprehensive system of work with gifted students, 2011: 23). In addition, school principals organize special groups for students with similar interests and abilities that can work under the supervision of an academic teacher who implements the extended version of the curriculum. Sometimes such a team is formed by students with an Individual Educational Programme. The aim is also to prepare for contests or competitions. It is true that a significant motivating factor for gifted students is the time, interest and attention devoted to them. There are also ways of rewarding students, such as congratulations, praise, titles. Another effective motivator includes scholarships for children and young people who stand out in terms of intellectual capabilities. In this way, selected schools express their appreciation for the achievements of the students.

In 2000, the Lower Silesian Talent Support System was initiated in the Lower Silesia Voivodeship, including direct support for schools and teachers in working with gifted students, coordination of projects and subject competitions.

There is a practice of cooperation at the level of local entities. Students with above average talents are supported by sports clubs, libraries, theatres. Apart from places, people are also very important. The National Fund for Children which has access to laboratories and the possibility of undertaking research work offers a wide range of opportunities for young and future scientists. The Programme of Assistance for Outstanding Students supports people with outstanding musical, artistic and cognitive talents in a comprehensive manner. The participants can take part in camps, workshops, research internships, concerts and exhibitions. In addition, this organization equalizes opportunities for access to education, nearly half of the scholarship holders come from small towns and villages.

Good practices related to the development of interests and talents - sent to the Centre for Education Development from “Schools of Talent Explorers” and “Places of Talent Discovery” – include educational materials for students, teachers and parents to support students in their development, enrich the teacher’s workshop



and help parents raise their talented children. It is an inspiring database with lesson plans, educational projects or proposals for school events such as the Spring Talent Concert.

The school model of talent support can be either elite or egalitarian. It can respond to the needs of a small group of outstandingly talented individuals. A wider audience includes egalitarian solutions addressed to all, according to the principle that everyone has innate abilities and the task of the pedagogical group is to recognize and nurture them. It is important to do anything towards building a culture of success, encouraging the achievement of results according to individual possibilities.

There are many organizations and associations that act in the name of improving didactic-educational practices. One can get the impression that the integration of all these activities into a common, uniform voice has never been closer. The Polish Association of Creative Teachers, the Association of Contest Teachers, the Association of Creative Schools, the Association of Schools Active in the Communities, the Jura Association of Creative Teachers - these are methodologists organizing themselves in order to search for, inspire with passion, share innovative solutions. There are also places on the map of Poland where good practices have been used for years, including the Complex of Schools of Nicolaus Copernicus University – the Academic Lower Secondary School and Secondary School (GiLA), which is an institution for particularly talented youth.

In addition to people building the core of Polish education of gifted students, in addition to places used for this purpose, a new virtual space is being created, designed for the needs of outstanding individuals. The opinion on the support for talented individuals became important for the representatives of the Ministry of National Education, as a special e-mail address was launched: [uczenzdolny@men.gov.pl](mailto:uczenzdolny@men.gov.pl) with an invitation to send proposals and comments. According to the information published on the Ministry's website, this will be used to develop new legal regulations supporting students with exceptional abilities and achievements.

Gifted students are the subject of talks. A review of social networking sites provides enigmatic slogans like “gifted students have it tough”, with comments on the impact of intelligence on success in life. Teachers ask their colleagues about their experience in creating individual work programmes with gifted students, which the school principal requires teachers to write. It may be concluded that teachers feel lonely, or even incompetent to work with the most talented, as evidenced by conversations on Internet forums and fears and dilemmas expressed during conversations, research or meetings of the teaching staff.

## Conclusions

- Despite a number of regional activities, the monitoring of Polish schools in terms of taking care of gifted students suggests that these issues are still treated peripherally.
- In 2006, the Supreme Audit Office revealed insufficient stimulation of students' talents development and failure to make use of the possibilities of individual educational paths. In Poland hardly anyone finishes education earlier than assumed.
- There is another unfavourable issue, which highlights the problem of poor environmental cooperation. Research shows that schools do not cooperate with parents of gifted children or with psychological-educational counselling centres.
- There is a need to apply effective solutions in the individualisation of didactic and educational work with gifted students.
- For the purpose of educational practice, it is important to improve the quality of care for gifted students and to implement opportunities to develop inborn talents, and to encourage institutions that have not yet developed local systemic solutions.

## Conclusion

When reflecting on the practice of educating gifted students there is a deficit in the sphere of the holistic model, which consequently leads to a multitude of solutions. On the other hand, it is not necessary to artificially program the educational profile of outstanding individuals. Assuming that we work in the spirit of pedagogy of skills, i.e. assuming a comprehensive, harmonious realization of the creative potential of the student, we gain excellent conditions for each student. We do not have to create homogeneous units in elite schools. Increasing educational challenges in the classroom has a certain universal advantage - it benefits everyone, not only the most talented. If students take up the challenges which activate creativity during lessons, each of them has a chance to be inspired, to stimulate more areas of their minds, to take a step forward.

In order to ensure that the effort made for the development of improving the educational paths of talented individuals is not wasted - it is worth constantly asking ourselves what else we can do for outstanding students, what sphere of their functioning can be made more perfect, so that they feel that they are not indifferent to us.

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