Education and Support of Gifted and Talented Students

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The education and preparation of students in our schools is currently providing insufficient hands-on knowledge and experience, or even the fulfillment of pupils' needs. The learning process is still primarily focused on teaching facts, data, and memorizing information. This is not enough to make sure children are well prepared for life. The schools neglect the development of specific skills and abilities, such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. It is necessary to apply innovative forms of education of students, taking into account their personal dispositions and skills—e.g., personal development in order to optimally utilize their skills and knowledge. This is not only necessary for the general population in schools, but even more so to educate gifted and talented students. This article deals with effective education methods for gifted children in training future scientists, primarily in science and engineering, but also in the humanities and arts. By applying these forms and methods of working with talented children we managed to create an effective model of education, not only in Slovakia, but also in a wider European and world context.

Keywords: dynamic changes, conservative methods, world problems, support for talented

The need to invest in education is quite emphasized nowadays in the whole world. It is important for the overall development, but specifically for excellence and creativity. Therefore, in addition to high level of education, such factors as creativity, innovation, and flexibility should be part of the education process (Sternberg, 2016).

The contemporary world is:

- (1) Dynamic;
- (2) Turbulent; and
- (3) Changing fast.

Today's schools are:

- (1) Classical;
- (2) Conservative; and
- (3) Changing slowly.

Schools, which generally use classical methods, are not fast enough to react to sudden changes in the society or world and prepare their pupils for them. The solution to this problem is to ensure quality and more sophisticated forms of education and preparation for life for all students. For the talented, the Ministry of Education should prepare such educational forms which meet their educational needs. They are expected to solve many current problems and challenges that humanity is going to have to deal with in the future.

The biggest challenges of the contemporary world include serious problems, such as climate change,

global warming, migration, terrorism, disease, and armed conflicts in various parts of the world. To be able to solve these existing problems, we need to prepare young people during the education process already in school so that they are able to handle and solve such problems of the world, including Europe, of course.

We need to take care of the development of the basic skills of individuals, as well as a high level of giftedness and talent. It is particularly important not to squander the potential, disposition, and abilities of talented individuals. To be able to comprehend the full scale of prospects, future trends, which are already ruminating, it is not only necessary, but also inevitable.

Experts pointed out that the world outside of school gates is four to five times faster than the world inside schools. They emphasized that the schools of yesterday cannot prepare today's students for life in the future. School should provide high quality preparation for students. However, in today's schools, we educate children to what seems to be necessary for us in the present, and not for what they will need in 15 to 20 years. Experts predicted that 97% of children, who started school now, will be working in a field that has not been invented yet (Kronborg, Meath, Page, & Plunkett, 2011).

In parallel with the previous statements, we have to point out the evident need to change the current standard school system and create conditions for the development of natural aptitudes, innate abilities, skills, and talents of the child. It is generally stated that current human resources, such as abilities, skills, and talents are critically underutilized. The biggest problem is that during the entire process of education some individuals never discover what they are good at or gifted in. Later in life, they are forced to pursue an unsatisfactory way of earning a living.

Therefore, we lean towards the opinion that it is necessary to create and ensure conditions that facilitate the development of the individual and discover and develop their talents. It must be based on the fact that if people love what they do, then they are good at it, therefore, they will be successful and will achieve excellent results.

Proposals for changes in the education system emphasize the need to accept the results of experts and summarized requirements that will be needed in various jobs in the near future. Among the most important skills are:

- (1) Good communication skills;
- (2) Ability to solve problems;
- (3) Creative thinking;
- (4) Flexible personalities; and
- (5) Ability to learn from experience and from others.

Education and training should be structured to develop autonomy, flexibility, and general skills in students. The focus should be on abilities to the same extent as specific skills, e.g., giftedness and talent (Stephenson & Weil, 1992).

We believe that it is necessary to support the development of basic skills, as well as a high level of giftedness and talent. This argument comes in light of an economic point of view that focuses on the significant impact of vocational education as an immediate solution to improving the economy of the state. However, higher education has a greater economic impact on overall productivity, since a higher proportion of the population will significantly increase the level of the economy and GDP. The effect of talent cannot be ignored, because it improves the world's economy. It is calculated that by increasing the potential for highly gifted by 10%, GDP will increase by 1.3% (Hanushek & Womann, 2007). Therefore, it is important to create effective

conditions for the care of the gifted and talented students from early childhood, when the gift has been discovered, through to quality care of gifted adult. And it is equally important to also focus on the potential the gifted students have, but has not yet been activated. In the process of teaching gifted students, it is important to recognize their strength and their skills and give maximum support to develop their personal competences.

How Can We Do This?

We agree with the concept of White (2008) that there is a need for a wide range of ideas and educational opportunities in each state where support and developing talent in education is possible. It is necessary to do something extra in schools for a population of exceptionally gifted and talented people in the field of intellect. It is important to prepare appropriate educational conditions for them in view of their potential and the need to develop their talents.

However, the problem is that the society has very little tolerance for people who deviate from the average. This is a special concern of talented people. On one hand, it is officially declared that anyone should not be denied the possibility of developing their potential on the highest possible level, but this idea tends to apply in relation to assistance for pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds or handicapped individuals. Society is more prone to accept and support this kind of special care as opposed to special care for gifted and talented.

In Slovakia, we have been working with giftedness for more than 30 years and we can confirm that we feel as if we are moving in a vicious circle:

We started from a long period of having comprehensive, non-differentiated school (for about 50 years)—changed to a short term period of supporting gifted and talented (for about 20 years), and now we are back again having a comprehensive school with integration and inclusion.

What does exclusion mean in gifted education? We ignore it but gifted children are specifically identified in the School Act No. 245/2008 Coll. defined as children with special educational needs.

We were the first in Europe to begin with systematic education of gifted children from the first grade through high school graduation. Their actual talent is a clearly defined phenomenon. However, the claims and statements of the so-called experts say that, “Everybody has got some talent”. This statement is “politically and socially correct”, but it is misleading and false (Gross, 2004). I am talking about the statements and allegations mentioned in our journal in July 2016. We consider these statements as incompetent. It is not professional to confuse parents and the public by saying that we are all gifted, therefore, all children are gifted.

Talent is seen as an important socio-cultural phenomenon (Dai, 2010) with a major impact on the overall level and progress of any society. The declaration of the Council of Europe (1994) confirmed that in Europe, one in five children is gifted when taking into account all types and kinds of giftedness and talent. Therefore, they cannot be ignored.

It is important to consider all expert research findings included in the so-called “Pentagonal Theory of Talent” (Zhang & Hui, 2003) five basic elements were differentiated that distinguished talents.

These are the following elements:

- (1) Excellence;
- (2) Rarity;
- (3) Demonstrability;
- (4) Productivity; and
- (5) Value.

These are always present in people with real talent. I will give you an example from sport where talent is clearly demonstrated. Really talented people, such as U. Bolt, M. Phelps, or R. Federer. Their talent is clearly demonstrable, because their talents were transformed into excellent and exceptional performance.

Therefore, we want to emphasize the fact that although we have different levels of skills, it is not necessarily a talent. Thanks to declarations, such as these we have to overcome obstacles with advocacy and support gifted and talented students, and their entitlement to special forms of education. Other approaches and ways of working with them are lost in these “optimistic”, but still misleading claims.

The main idea of our approach is gifted advocacy and facilitation of the development, identification, and diagnosis of gifted and talented individuals for whom it is necessary to prepare “coaches”, teachers, psychologists, and mentors, just as it is in sport when taking care of elite athletes. We need to develop their potential for the benefit of all Europe, even the whole world.

When we refer to the above-mentioned statements about misleading people it defeats the purpose of what we are trying to do: to be socially accepted what is specific, exceptional, extraordinary, and excellent, and prepare the best conditions for the people in this part of population.

We believe that for gifted, schools should offer a broad spectrum of learning opportunities, which can be provided through education, supporting and developing the gifts and talents carried out under Sonia White (2008) proposal. They are exceptionally gifted and a talented individuals for whom it is necessary to do something more and it is necessary to prepare them for appropriate learning conditions.

It is important that at school—as a basic preparation for life are found ways to help students to develop the skills and abilities needed to succeed both in school and especially life. Traditional educational methods are not enough. It appears that many of the demands and requirements of the current students in schools are conventional and do not meet the cognitive or personality requirements necessary in today’s world. This applies generally to all pupils, and the big question remains how to effectively educate gifted pupils. They are students with “High Learning Potential”, who make up 15% of students and the top 5% of individuals with “Exceptional Learning Potential” who need to take into account social, emotional needs, and intellectual education and then transform their potential into high performance.

The aim of all good effort should be to prepare the best conditions for learning, development and overall support of this exceptional segments of the population, so that for effective work with gifted and talented we find effective methods and ways that their skills, gifts, and talent move from potential to performance. In doing so, it is vital to ensure the optimal development of personality of these individuals and taking into account the quality of how they apply themselves in life and consequently their effective contribution to society (Laznibatová, 2014).

It is important to focus on the potential that the gifted people have, but has not activated, we need to learn to recognize talent so that they can set their goals and at the same time also find effective strategies to achieve them. The talented pupils who are sensitive, perfectionist, and nonconformist need to strengthen their personal potential, emotional development, communication, and social skills even more. We mean increased focus on the development of the personal dispositions and skills in intellectually gifted individuals. Only then the gifted individual will be well prepared to tackle the underlying problems of this world—whether economic, environmental, ethical, and religious—in other words, the problems of the modern global world.

Within Europe’s competitiveness, we should be taking care of the gifted based on the European Action Plan for Gifted and Talented Education (GTE) gifted and talented in 2007, while taking into account the

following points:

- (1) Intensive international cooperation through the exchange of experience and good practice in the development of talent;
- (2) Defense and acceptance of various forms and various types of care of the gifted;
- (3) Improving the education of the gifted and improving teacher training and school administration to enhance the quality of policies for gifted; and
- (4) The need to learn from the different experiences of individual countries.

We believe that school system for gifted and talented education must be government's priority of each country and therefore must receive maximum support in these areas:

- (1) Social;
- (2) Political;
- (3) Economic;
- (4) Methodical and pedagogical; and
- (5) Professional psychological (Laznibatová, 2012).

Figure 1. Differentiation of teaching practice by the diagnosed level of talent (White, 2008).

We also think that it is necessary to search for gifted and talented students, to support and develop their personalities, because they are a genuine strategic wealth of each society. It is necessary to pay more attention

to human resource development in the context of economic prosperity and competitiveness of each state—e.g., encourage regional, local, but also global areas on the Pan-European level. At the conference: *On the Fostering and Development of Talent* (Laznibatová, 2016), it was emphasized that the promotion and development of talents and gifts in the field of education will be reflected in the personal development of each individual, as well as in increased competitiveness in society as talent is a driving force for development and economic growth.

It can be said that a competitive and dynamic society based on education thrives on the talents of its people. Promoting excellence, exceptional and outstanding gifted and talented individuals should become the overarching objective of Europe and the individual states should develop education systems with emphasis on promoting and developing the extraordinary abilities of each such individual. This was the conclusion of an action plan of GTE, which remains the topic of today.

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