

Causes and Consequences of Labelling Gifted Pupils at Selected Elementary Schools

Abstract

The article describes qualitative research analyzing causes and consequences of labelling gifted pupils. Causes and consequences were identified after an analysis of semi-structured interviews with gifted pupils, their classmates and teachers. Identified causes included certain pedagogical strategies such as excluding a gifted pupil from a group of their peers, using specific names for classes, excessive media coverage of specialized classes and pupils. Labelling was further promoted by a curriculum differing in its content, processes and materials offered to gifted pupils only. Consequences of labelling included ostracism and ridiculing of gifted pupils by their classmates, rivalry and hostility. The article concludes with proposals which might help to reduce labelling.

Keywords: *labelling, gifted pupil, causes and consequences of labelling*

Introduction and Present State of the Problem

The topic of our research is the category of labelling. The term itself is defined by a labelling theory. The labelling theory deals with labelling individuals according to their abilities and skills. After an individual is labelled, their attitude as well as the attitude of professionals and their environment towards them changes and the individual thus becomes stigmatized. As a label we understand, e.g., a psychiatric diagnosis, which may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Consequently, a diagnosed person begins to show behavioural deviations (Urban, Prošek, 2008).

The labelling theory, except for its early concepts (G. H. Mead, E. Lemert) began to be explored in the 1960s (Munková, 2004) and was further made popular by a book *Outsiders* by H.W. Becker. A process of accepting new roles by labelled individuals was described on an example of people diagnosed with behavioural deviations (Munková, 2004). In his book *Stigma*, Goffman explores how stigmatization affects an individual's identity.

An individual's level of giftedness can also be seen as a stigmatizing attribute, negative or positive. The attribute "gifted" usually appears during the pedagogical and psychological diagnostic process and this label is given by subjects dealing with an individual. The label further affects the individual's sense of identity. Moreover, the level of giftedness is not a constant quality. Giftedness is associated with external factors of the environment and internal factors of an individual and its level changes during the individual's lifetime and may even disappear completely (Dočkal, 2005).

In spite of the above-mentioned, no thorough research is carried out in the Czech Republic. There are several academics that touch upon the subject but do not go into detail (Machů, 2010). Foreign scholars often discuss the subject of labelling gifted children, e.g., Matthews and Foster (2005) or Renzuli (2004).

As for research into giftedness, it is often carried out not only in the school environment, but also in the family and among one's peers and it relies on quantitative research methods. If we focus on research carried out in the school environment (Gates, 2010, Renzulli, 2004, Moulton et al, 1998), we find conclusions that point out positive as well as negative aspects of labelling. Negative aspects, which tend to be mainly social ones, include, e.g., stereotypical evaluation of a gifted pupil, a gifted pupil's concerns that they will fail the academic expectations, surrounding pressure and high expectations of their parents and teachers alike, which are not compatible with the pupil's level of giftedness. Positive aspects, which are mostly personal and academic, include, e.g., influencing the teacher's expectations, enriching educational methods and tools available for labelled pupils, a highly individual educational approach, interaction with other gifted pupils, etc.

Our research is qualitative and its aim is to analyze causes and consequences of labelling gifted pupils. As we employ qualitative research methods and we have a low number of informants, we are aware of the fact that it is impossible to generalize the results. Moreover, the experiences and knowledge of informants evolve and they cannot be treated as statistical phenomena. The above-mentioned fact frames our further thoughts about the researched issue and about possible further research.

Research into labelling gifted pupils

Aims of the research: a) define educational methods, strategies and attitudes which may result in labelling gifted pupils at elementary schools, b) find out if labelling tends to appear in connection with a certain educational form, c) assess the consequences of labelling.

Research sample: The research sample purposefully included 16 informants: 6 teachers of gifted pupils, 6 gifted pupils and 5 classmates of gifted pupils. As for the teachers, 4 of them taught their pupils in a specialized class for gifted pupils created specifically for educating gifted pupils at standard elementary schools (so-called transitional educational form, henceforth: transitional form) and 2 of them taught at standard elementary school with integrated gifted pupils (integration as educational form, henceforth: integration or integrated form).

A gifted pupil (henceforth: GP) in our research is defined as an intellectually GP, diagnosed by a pedagogical and psychological counselling centre. Interviewed classmates of these GPs were not diagnosed as intellectually gifted. All pupils attended the 4th or 5th grade of elementary school.

Data sources and their processing: Data were collected in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were collected in January 2011 at selected elementary schools in the region of Southern Moravia. After having processed qualitative data, we opted for the methods of the grounded theory including open, axial and selective coding (Strauss, Corbin, 1999).

Research data processing

Open coding

Transcribed interviews were given codes relating to the research aim. The codes were named and grouped into six categories (cf. below). The information in the categories was not retrospectively filled in.

1. Formulas of schools and teachers on education of GPs

In the given category, there is a clear difference in educational methods according to the educational form followed by each school.

One teacher describes how she usually works with a GP in an integrated class: *“The pupil excels in mathematics. At the time he spends with us in class he is given some extra work or he works with us for a while and is a kind of an assistant for me, he checks on other pupils, looks up information, I have him to help me”*. Another

informant adds: *"This pupil is given some extra work when he finishes before others do. He may be asked to look up some information online or help other (slower) children."* Another teacher says: *"Those two gifted pupils are able to do more than others and because I do not want them to feel punished for that, they are allowed to bring books, encyclopaedias to school, so they may fill up the remaining time the way they like."*

Transitional education forms do not single GPs out of class since all children are diagnosed as gifted. Nevertheless, GPs are singled out among individual classes of the school. To answer the question of what the school has to offer to develop the skills and abilities of GPs, one teacher said: *"We offer individual studying plans, we have a reduced number of pupils in classrooms and we use different teaching methods. We work on projects a lot and we speak with parents more often."* Apart from their usual subjects, GPs also attend a subject of enrichment where they learn more about their area of interest. As one of the teachers says, *"the subject of enrichment is attended by pupils from XY classes (name of GPs' classes) once a week... they work on projects or we invite interesting lecturers for them."* Some of these schools offer their pupils so-called work in blocs. GPs are taken away from regular classes and grouped into new working teams. Another school teaches its GPs in regular classes in main academic subjects, other subjects are taught together with pupils of the grade. One GP claims: *"We do not form a class together with class B, we are a group of gifted pupils so we only share several subjects – swimming, art and music."*

2. The attitude of schools and teachers to GPs

One of the strongest attitudes to GPs is held by a school with a transitional education form. The fact that the school is targeted at gifted children education is well promoted. The situation is described by one of the teachers: *"The management of our school often emphasizes the fact that gifted pupils may study here. It appears in the press and we often get the GPs involved in competitions and projects, so even other children hear about it even though they may not seek out the information themselves. They hear it on the radio, see posters, read articles on their gifted classmates."* The school also introduced specific labelling of classes with GPs, thus even the uninformed public knows which classroom is the one with GPs.

Another school with the transitional education form distributes GPs to its first level classes evenly (ordinary class mixed with a group of GPs). The school has not introduced special labelling of classrooms. It is clear that teachers are aware of certain risks when labelling GPs: *"It all started with a club of gifted children of Menza. But later on, we did not want to give way to labelling so we opened the club to everyone interested."*

The attitudes of teachers to GPs are of two types. Either a teacher considers as gifted only a pupil who has been diagnosed by experts as such – and selectively offers them an enriching curriculum: *“The pupil has their individual plan and may work with the class or by themselves”* or the teacher may understand all smart and motivated pupils in their class as gifted and thus they may offer an enriching curriculum to the whole class. *“I could call several other pupils gifted, or maybe smart ...”* The teacher says and then adds: *“Gifted pupils should be treated carefully and not ostentatiously. A teacher may say that there will follow an interesting task knowing that gifted pupils will be interested. They may motivate others who are just interested.”*

The category also includes labelling GPs as gifted and emphasizing the fact that they are gifted throughout their classes. The teachers claim that they do not label pupils as gifted. The specific term for GPs is used by one teacher only in the transitional education form. She calls her pupils either *“bright sparks”* or *“sillies”* and she uses it with humour and says the children do not find it offensive.

3. Self-esteem of GPs

The GPs consider their giftedness as something positive, especially from the personal growth point of view, even though they realize possible social disadvantages of giftedness. That may be why certain pupils deny it: *“It is an advantage even though it may be a disadvantage in this world. It seems average people talk more to each other than to us.”* Another girl says: *“Sometimes being a gifted one is clearly a disadvantage, I may boast off and regret it later. And sometimes it is an advantage as I may attend this school and be in a nice classroom with a different style of teaching.”*

The teacher from the school with the transitional education form believes that recently society's perception of giftedness and being knowledgeable has changed: *“I think that nowadays people do not conceal so much that they know more or can do something. On the contrary, because they are appreciated for it and as there are more of them in a class they do not feel ashamed of being gifted or smart.”*

4. Breeding elitism?

Teachers from schools with the transitional education forms stated that they tended to meet parents who liked to stress the fact of being gifted to their child. *“In the beginning, some parents, even though asked not to do it, emphasized the child's giftedness in front of them.”* Another teacher says: *“The greatest weakness is that some parents like dwelling on the fact that their child is gifted, they like to breed elitism. When they consult counsellors, they push psychologists into diagnosing their child as gifted, they know that we are careful to do so, but they believe it is something extra for their child.”*

Teachers from standard schools are not aware of too much labelling going on among GPs' parents. Sometimes they come across the following situations: *"There was a diagnosed gifted boy. He kept telling me that he doesn't need to do this and that as he is really gifted, with very high IQ and his psychologist says that there is no need for him to do those things... we are speaking about elementary things, like taking notes or singing."*

5. Material provision as a guarantee of quality education

Computers with online Internet access and specialist literature constitute typical didactic aids for teaching GPs in specialized classes. One teacher herself says that ten computers in the classroom for GPs are above everyday standard and she explains it like this: *"They have computers here mostly because they start typing with their both hands, which is above standard. They work on an all-year-long project which they prepare by themselves. So we brought more computers, but we are still testing it."* Then she adds: *"At least one computer can be found in every classroom, but we tend to take pupils more often to a computer classroom as we have computer classrooms here so everyone works on a computer at least once a month."* In classrooms with so-called "regular-classrooms," didactic aids are used according to one teacher in the following way: *"In classrooms with gifted pupils, there are about 4 to 6 computers with online Internet access, so if they do not understand something they may look it up and sometimes they work on a task to look something up, they write essays, as most of them have trouble with hand writing, typing is, of course, more legible."* To a question whether only GPs can do so, the teacher answers: *"It is not only gifted pupils but also pupils not diagnosed as gifted, but about whom the psychologist said that they would be able to do it."*

Another teacher claimed that children from standard classes are aware of differences among classrooms: *"The only thing the children see is that classrooms for gifted children are better equipped so sometimes there is envy when passing the classroom, but this is about material provision. When they are envious that there are computers in other classrooms, we tell them it was paid for by the parents of GPs and if their parents contribute financially, they may buy whatever they want for their classroom."*

6. Social background of education

There is healthy competition among GPs and their classmates, but there is also hostility illustrated by the following words of a classmate of a GP: *"When we once went for lunch, Zuzka talked about things none of us really understood. She is into chemistry and lots of kids do not talk to her because she is so smart."* Another classmate of the girl expresses certain effort in making the girl part of the team and

says: “*She is interested in so many things almost as if she was an adult. And we have tried to tell her to be more involved with us, to enjoy her childhood more.*”

GPs educated in the system of regular classrooms talk of being sworn and sniggered at quite often by their classmates. It is a two-way process when a girl says that gifted children like boasting and that makes their less gifted classmates react. One of the gifted girls describes the situation: “*Sometimes we discuss it a lot that some kids like to sneer at us, ha, ha, ha, (a class of GPs), the smartest ones in the world... sometimes they are very rude.*” Even the teacher mentions mutual hostility: “*It happens sometimes in this class that when GPs fail, other children welcome it and say, well, finally.*” Another teacher comments on competition between GPs and their classmates in the class: “*Well, there is certain rivalry, a desire to show others what I am good at, but it is the teacher’s job to bring kids into line.*”

Axial coding

The aim of open coding was to map which education methods, strategies and attitudes may cause (and have consequences) labelling GPs. The aim of axial coding is to identify possible causes and consequences of labelling and show identified phenomena in a coding paradigm. We worked with a simplified model during axial coding: Causal conditions, Phenomenon, Context, Intervening Conditions, Actions and Interactional Strategies, Consequences (Strauss, Corbinová, 1999).

Phenomenon, its central category is labelling GPs. *Causal conditions*, which in our opinion may result in the occurrence or origin of labelling, include media coverage of classes for GPs or individual gifted children. Another cause may be inappropriate education strategies used by pedagogues. In elementary schools, GPs are often excluded from the group of children in order to be offered a specific enriching curriculum. Educating gifted children in specialized classes promotes labelling by the use of non-standard aids, but also by different pedagogical attitudes which are perceived by other pupils in the school. The way education is organized is an omnipresent *context*.

Intervening conditions, which may influence and promote the existence of labelling, include categories from causal conditions (cf., above), but also addressing children as bright sparks and sillies. *Actions and interactional strategies* show various reactions to the phenomenon, or elimination of the labelling of GPs. Most often it means that a school realizes the overuse of the adjective “gifted” or, more specifically, the school renames its club for gifted children. Another appropriate strategy is to apply an enriching curriculum to all pupils in a class, not only to gifted ones. *Consequences* of labelling include ostracizing a gifted child from the group of their peers, sneering at them by their classmates, rivalry and hostility, envy of other

children because of the above-standard equipment and teachers not being able to explain the differences. Another consequence may be the attitude of a gifted child towards themselves and their own giftedness, calling their classmates ordinary, calling themselves “gifted”, refusal of necessary tasks and activities because of their giftedness and making their environment aware of their giftedness, which does not develop a GP in any way.

Selective coding

After having defined relationships among categories, let us now address the phase of selective coding. We deal with a simplified method of selective coding, so embedding of a theory is only implied.

The central category is formed by the labelling of GPs. It seems logical that the integrated form of education shows more labelling present on the level of a class. Once the form of acceleration is used, a pupil attends a selected subject in a higher grade, labelling appears on the level of school, too. The transitional form of education shows labelling both on the level of a class and school, as all pupils of a specialized class are diagnosed as gifted. Labelling on the level of a grade is manifested in standard classes with a group of GPs. We follow with specific data on causal and intervening conditions of labelling.

As for the integrated form of education, labelling appears mostly as a result of inappropriate pedagogical strategies which lead to ostracizing a GP. It may include the overuse of a strategy when a GP assists the teacher and helps them with slower children. Another inappropriate strategy is the use of an enriched curriculum for diagnosed pupils only and in the way that excludes them from the group of their classmates.

Transitional forms of education introduce labelling through classes or groups for GPs only where the above-standard teaching conditions are available. These may include above-standard material provision in the classrooms of GPs, application of an enriched curriculum to GPs only, calling children little bright sparks and sillies, specific names of classes for GPs and exaggerated media coverage.

Recommendations against labelling

Recommendations against labelling are our proposals of how to eliminate consequences of labelling. Nevertheless, these proposals are not based on our own research. Recommendations in all forms of education include:

- a) We recommend the following strategies to eliminate labelling in a standard integrated class. The first one is the use of so-called standard and above-standard tasks. Standard tasks are objectively simpler and are based on lower

levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive aims. Pupils may individually choose tasks according to their knowledge and momentary dispositions. The second option is the use of so-called complementing tasks, which may be given to the children who have already finished their work (and they are not only GPs). Another strategy may be the incorporation of activating methods which enable a pupil to deal with a task individually and there is no need to single a GP out (Machů, 2010).

- b) As for recommendations concerning the so-called transitional form of education, schools may find inspiration in the Revolving Door Model by J.S. Renzulli (Renzulli, Reis, 1997). Enriching activities are offered to all pupils and only those who succeed in a series of tasks thanks to their interests and motivation follow to higher stages of enrichment. Dočkal (2005) suggests that GPs should be incorporated in small groups into standard classes. They have a supporting teacher at hand, who offers an enriching curriculum and tasks are not always carried out by the same pupils. GPs may attend standard classes as well as a pupil doing well in a subject, who may join the subject of enrichment.
- c) As to the causes of labelling, e.g., calling children little bright sparks and sillies, specific names for classes of GPs and excessive media coverage, it is essential to create a team of expert teachers in the field of giftedness and thus help to set up correct conditions for the development of children's giftedness.

Summary and Conclusions

The research was based on the qualitative research methods of grounded theory and touched upon the essence of labelling of GPs at selected elementary schools. As most of the cited researchers, we see both positive and negative consequences of labelling. Positive consequences include selected academic and personal aspects (cf., the Introduction). However, we identify differences in the social aspects, dependent on the specific character of the socio-cultural environment of research. Several cited foreign sources emphasize social aspects which appear as a result of private school education. Our research emphasized negative social aspects based on different development opportunities for diagnosed GPs only.

The expected consequences of labelling are those on the level of a standard integrated class and selected external consequences (codes of elitist parents, media coverage and specific names of classes). The surprising findings (and not described in any of the research cited) were the causes of labelling in specialized classes

related to the inner policy of a school, where we identified completely different opportunities for GPs in specialized and standard classes within one school. Moreover, these differences could be easily eliminated by the recommendations against labelling. As there is an ever growing number of specialized schools for GPs, we suggest that the above-mentioned phenomenon should be further examined in quantitative research which could be based on our conclusions.

Labelling of GPs is an ethical problem which, in the changing socio-cultural conditions, becomes even more urgent.

References

- Dočkal, V. (2005). *Zaměřeno na talenty: aneb Nadání má každý*. Praha: Lidové noviny.
- Gates, J. (2010). *Children With Gifts and Talents: Looking Beyond Traditional Labels*. Roeper Review. vol. 32, n. 3, pp.200 – 206.
- Goffman, E. (2003). *Stigma: Poznámky k problému zvládání sociální identity*. Praha: Slon.
- Machů, E. (2010). *Nadaný žák*. Brno: Paido.
- Mathews, D.J., Foster, J.F. (2005). *Being Smart about Gifted Children*. Scottsdale: Great Potential Press.
- Munková, G. (2004). *Sociální deviace*. Praha: Karolinum.
- Renzulli, J.S., Reis, S.M. (1997). *The schoolwide enrichment model: A how-to guide for educational excellence*. Mansfield Center: Creative Learning Press.
- Renzulli, J.S. (Ed.) (2004). *Identification of Students for Gifted and Talented Programs*. California: Corvin Press.
- Strauss, A.L.; Corbinová, J. (1999). *Základy kvalitativního výzkumu: postupy a techniky metody zakotvené teorie*. Boskovice: Albert.
- Urban, L., Prošek, Z. (2008). *Sociologie trochu jinak*. Praha: Grada.
- Moulton, P. et al. (1998). *Gifted & Talented: Exploring the Positive and Negative Aspects of Labeling*. Roeper Review, Vol. 21.

I would like to thank to Pavla Mertlová, Bc. and Vendula Sikorová, Bc., students of Tomas Bata University, for their help collecting data. The article was realized as a part of IGA, č. IGA/66/FHS/11A project.