

The Situation of Gifted Students in the Polish Education System

Abstract

The author presents results of triangulated qualitative and quantitative research concerning institutional and individual support for gifted students' development in Polish schools. The research study was conducted in three stages: case studies of schools, a survey of teachers' perceptions and educational biographies transcribed from interviews of gifted and talented students. Conclusions are presented in the form of a model of educational support of gifted students' development and recommendations concerning the planning and implementation of this support are proposed.

Keywords: *education of the gifted, supporting gifted pupils' development, triangulated research*

Introduction

This paper is derived from a study published in 2012 (Dyrda, 2012). Since the 1970s, there has been increased interest in educational support for individuals endowed with additional capabilities in the form of outstanding abilities and talents. This social demand for realising and using the potential of especially gifted people is a consequence of technological change and progress, as well as urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation in which the role of gifted individuals in shaping post-modern societies has been increasingly stressed. Human potential, abilities and talents significantly predict how a person will develop, function and achieve goals in every area of his or her activity. Educational performance, profes-

sional careers and even success in personal life are determined by individual and environmental factors, inseparably connected with individual differences in abilities and talents. However, a human being's potential has to meet with a favourable social response, because even the most promising 'diamonds' turn to ashes without an educational or professional environment that is stimulating and supportive. Supporting especially talented and gifted individuals' development has important social and political dimensions; it can be linked to recent concepts of managing talents, 'the creative class' (Florida 2010), social group and political party interests and to cultural phenomena. In the long term, investment in the effective education of gifted individuals brings notable benefits in the form of faster scientific and cultural development, or outstanding achievements in the fields of art or sport.

School environments clearly have a major impact on the realising of human potential. Observations of educational practice and scientific research suggest that countless children start school as talented, creative and inventive individuals only to lose this potential after a few years. It is popularly believed that school, instead of discovering talents, kills them regardless of slogans, such as 'the year of discovering talents', which was the catch-phrase for the 2010/2011 school year announced by the Polish Ministry of Education. School, in the experiences and memories of many pupils, students, adults and parents – instead of nurturing diversity, uniqueness and 'otherness' – appears to make them average, common and encourages them to adapt to the norms of the majority. According to one parent of a gifted student, some schools exploit gifted students for the benefit of the school's reputation, not offering anything in return. This perception aptly conveys the negative views of many of the teacher and student respondents about the public evaluation of the role of the school.

Poland's recent results of the PISA study indicated that from 2006 and 2009 the number of students achieving the best results, e.g., in the 'ability to read and interpret' category decreased from 15.8% in 2006 to 9.1%. This indicator may suggest that there is a '*problem of elites*'. The general average scores declined less than those for students of higher academic ability.

Methodology

In this research educational support of the development of gifted student was understood as exerting intentional and unintentional influence, through teaching activities that enhance their abilities and results. These activities promote factors

that both stimulate and facilitate this development as well as suppressing those factors that threaten its development.

The following areas of support of gifted students' development were distinguished:

1. Institutional planned and implemented educational support specifically for gifted students' development;
2. Educational activities of teachers and school counsellors;
3. Activities in the family environment to stimulate the development of the child's abilities;
4. Extracurricular activities undertaken by students to support the development of their abilities and character;
5. Individual social and psychological experiences, planned and unplanned, in school that supported their development
6. Students' personal actions associated with self-improvement and developing their abilities.

The theoretical categories and research areas adopted in the study are based on a social constructivist perspective as is the logic and structure of the chapters of the resulting full report of the research (Dyrda, 2012). Gifted students, the basic subject of the research study, were studied at both social (including institutional) and individual levels. The research was carried out between 2008 and 2010 and employed triangulation, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. It was implemented at three basic stages:

1. case study research (carried out in selected schools in the Silesian Region, whose work with the gifted student was studied),
2. survey research (carried out among teachers),
3. biographical research (focusing on gifted students' educational experiences).

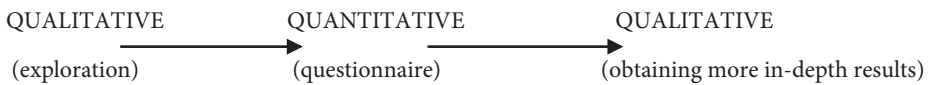
The main cognitive value of the research is that of illuminating the complexity of the significant factors that determine and influence the support of gifted students' development.

The design of the research study draws on theories, sources and methods of triangulation (Denzin, cited in: Dróźka 2010, Flick 2011) and involves both quantitative and qualitative methods. It involved a standardised research survey with random sampling, a collective case study, as well as biographical case studies. The three basic stages featured both qualitative and quantitative methods. At the second stage of the research they were combined.

Diagram 1. Systematic factors employed in the empirical research into the educational support of gifted students' development

How to support?	Who to support?	For what purpose?	When to support?	Who is to support?	In what way?	With what result?
Educational support of development	Gifted students	Proper recognition of potential Development of abilities and talents	Social level	Family	Upbringing, Direction, Early identification, Support of adequate self-assessment	Identification/awareness
				School, teacher/class tutor	Education, Appropriate educational and didactic influence, Diagnosing, Pedagogical and psychological help,	Fulfilling developmental potential
			Group level	Peer group	Nominations, Help, Support, Positive interpersonal relations, Motivating	Direction regarding further development
			Stages of education	Non-school institutions coaches/mentors	Stimulating development, Formulating developmental objectives, Mentoring	Motivation Commitment Deliberate practice
				Individual level	Self-education Motivation and commitment Planning own development Self-assessment, Self-awareness of potential, Deliberate practice, Self-motivation	Self-actualisation ¹ Satisfaction Feeling of fulfillment

¹ It should be stressed here that the notion of self-actualisation was treated as identical to the notions of self-shaping, self-creation, and self-improvement. Such an assumption was made on the basis of M. Dudzikowa's work (1993, 2007).
Source: (Dyrda, 2012)

Diagram 2. Research project integrating qualitative and quantitative methods

Source: (Miles and Huberman 2000, p. 43 as cited in: Flick 2011, p. 157)

To summarise the results of the study, the author constructed a model to illustrate the interrelated factors that constitute educational support of gifted students' development.

Research results

Family, school, peer group as well as self-educational activity play an extraordinary role in the individual's development. These influences overlap with the individual's age-related needs and the expectations from the wider social and cultural environment in which he or she functions.

The school case studies research conducted at the first stage led to polarised conclusions arising from document analysis, on the one hand, and interviews on the other hand. The documents outlined a number of activities undertaken at schools with respect to students showing additional potential. However, interviews carried out with school counsellors revealed many imperfections and tensions in the school environment in the area of work with the gifted student. Most visible were tensions regarding obligations and habits as well as tensions between collective and individual experience. Statements made by the interviewees indicated that the 'ostensible actions' recorded in the documents often contrasted with numerous examples of inappropriate or even negative situations that occur at school. They included:

- incorrect methods used by teachers in communication with gifted students,
- ineffective methods of the organisation of the process of education
- lack of multi-level coordinated action (coordinating collaboration between parents, the class tutor, the school counsellor and the student)

The research also indicated that collaboration between school and psychological and counselling centres was problematic, or only minimally fulfilled the requirements of educational law. One can therefore conclude that many actions undertaken in schools with respect to gifted students in practice contradict the aims stated in policy documents. This conclusion was particularly evident in the results

of the survey research, relating to schools' provision of extracurricular activities for the gifted. These activities are dominated by activity clubs, whose essential purpose is not to develop the most gifted students, but to compensate for the gaps in the education of average and poor students. The narratives of the counsellors who participated in the study and the results of the analyses of the second stage of the research (the survey) proved that the proper process of identification of students' abilities and talents is not undertaken at school. Procedures for diagnosing the potential of students were not in place in any of the schools examined. Recognising the abilities and talents of gifted students was based solely on intuition or even, more often, on teachers' stereotypes associated with the prevailing theories of the gifted student. The survey research showed that these theories are dominated by the stereotypical perception of the gifted student based on characteristics associated mostly with the intellect, the cognitive sphere, learning and knowledge as well as high academic achievement. The survey research also exposed the problem of teachers referring to the collective responsibility of school in this area, while simultaneously failing to perceive their own errors or gaps in their competences.

The research carried out at the first and second stages revealed significant problems in the schools connected with inappropriate collaboration with the gifted student's family. This seems especially serious in the case of the students coming from family environments characterised by neglect or the threat of marginalisation.

The analyses of the biographical research, based on transcriptions of the narratives of gifted individuals, made distinctions between subjective and situational, as well as social and cultural factors determining support of gifted students' development. The subjective intrapersonal factors included: personal competences, self-assessment, self-knowledge, ability to cope with failure and ability to plan or manage one's own development. The analysed narrative passages from the gifted individuals' educational biographies revealed that positive influences coming from different environments are important conditions for the development of one's potential. During the research, situational and socio-cultural factors that promote development were stressed by the subjects. They included the atmosphere of the family home; parental attitude; the first, early-school educational experiences; significant people (coaches, teachers); significant educational events; and the atmosphere in the respondent's peer group. These factors occurred at social, institutional, group, peer and individual levels. During the third stage of the research, the author managed to capture the role of developmental crises connected with setbacks and failures. Such experiences involved strong, negative emotions relating to the students' abilities. If further development was to follow, it turned out to be important whether and how an individual coped with experiencing these crises.

It appeared to be important to gain new competence in the reduction or elimination of these tensions. The results also showed the role and the indispensability of the “10-year rule” (10,000 hours of practice in the area of talent). Systematic practice and hard work are factors determining the development of abilities. The behavioural patterns found in the transcribed narratives revealed that the actions and activity of individuals in a given area of special talent were the key category in the model of their support. A significant majority of the subjects participated in various forms of additional, non-school stimulation of their talents. This was particularly noticeable in the individuals with talents related to sport, music, visual arts and dancing. Development of abilities requires a capacity to self-assess one’s potential and then to consciously select and take actions leading to the achievement of one’s goals. The biographies testified that skills in organising their own work, time management, self-monitoring of progress and activities, in addition to collaboration with experts (coaches, eminent teachers) enhanced the education, abilities, talents and interests of the subjects. The transcripts showed how important these factors were for the development of the students and adolescents in the study. They also showed that the most significant role is played not only by these factors, but by the significance that the respondents attribute to these factors.

The research offers conclusions about how to increase the effectiveness of work with gifted students in Polish schools. To be significantly successful, activities have to be undertaken in a well-thought-out and planned way. A model of educational support for the development of gifted students is shown in Figure 3. It systematically sets out the research findings about the range of factors that have to be taken into account in the planning of support. Four significant stages in planning changes should be taken into consideration:

- initiation;
- implementation;
- supervision;
- appropriate resources.

The initiation stage includes preparing plans of specific, practical and systematic activities associated with supporting gifted students’ development. The implementation stage should include identifying abilities and talents properly, preparing suitable syllabuses, using appropriately prepared and competent teachers, who employ teaching methods and materials to stimulate the development of abilities and talents.

The analysis of standards regarding the education, preparation and competences of teachers working with gifted students allows us to make three basic recommendations in this area. Firstly, these teachers should understand basic problems

associated with defining and identifying gifted students and have theoretical knowledge in this field. Secondly, teachers should recognise differences and norms associated with gifted students' learning styles, their specific developmental characteristics and personalities. They should be able to identify specific educational needs of these students connected with these norms. Thirdly, gifted students' teachers should understand, plan and apply diverse teaching strategies, achievement evaluation, and support of gifted students' development. The system of supervision should be based on the activities associated with educational and legislative policies, proper administration and management of schools and the efficiently operating system of counselling as well as psychological and pedagogic care over gifted students and their parents.

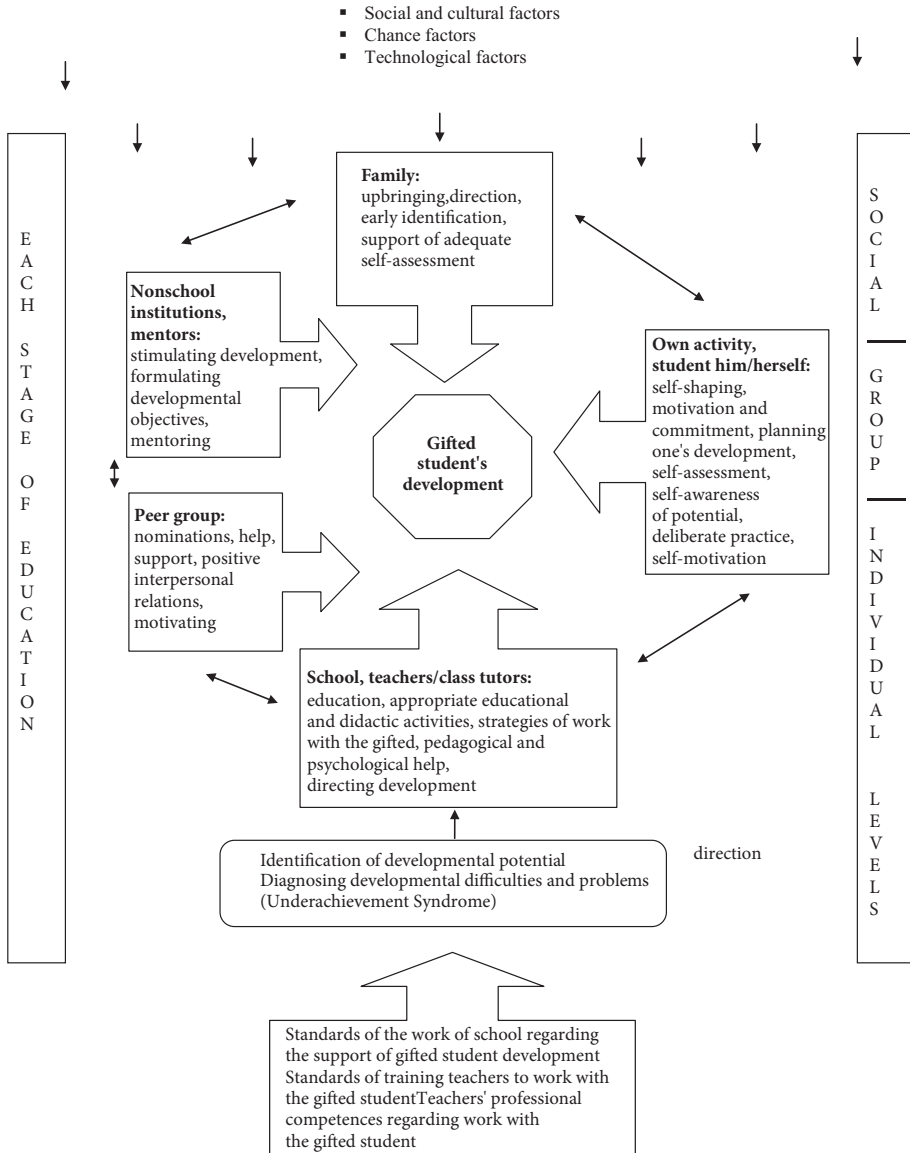
Standards of measuring the quality of work with gifted students used in the world suggest the significant role of the philosophy of quality management. Schools themselves can operate a system for diagnosing students' predispositions and interests and curricula that can be adapted to students' individual capabilities and interests. Methods of achievement evaluation should be acceptable to students and should incorporate self-assessment. And, of course, educational and vocational counselling must be available. Family and community support for educational activities for the gifted are required. Finally, additional resources for support and enrichment can be provided in the form of the activities of different private organisations, associations, local social initiatives; the organisation of summer courses, schools for gifted students; appropriate extracurricular activities; the system of counselling and support for gifted students' families; publishing magazines; organising meetings, conferences devoted to the issues of educating gifted students; collaboration with higher education institutions.

The results of the third stage of the author's research indicate that non-school educational institutions, which have had a number of financial difficulties in Poland in recent years, play a highly significant role in supporting gifted students. In the narratives of the gifted students participating in the study, they are often identified as the only places where their abilities and talents develop.

Conclusion:

The model summarising the factors relating to the educational support of the gifted student's development is presented in the following diagram. It is based on the analysis of data from two sources:

Diagram 3. A model of educational support of gifted students' development



Source: (Dyrda, 2012)

- the systematic recapitulation of the results of empirical research described in both the Polish and foreign literature on the education of gifted students, broadly defined, in selected education systems;
- new data collected in Poland about the effective functioning of support for gifted students.

It is anticipated that this synthesis of factors contributing to the support of gifted students' development could be of value in planning and implementation of a new and fuller reform strategy for enhancing human capital as well as the education of talented individuals in Poland in the future.

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