

## GIFTED EDUCATION – A CHALLENGE FOR CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL

The literature claims that around 2-6% of the population has outstanding intellectual qualities, and the individuals of this category are generically called "gifted persons" or „geniuses". The attitude of the others towards them includes different nuances, from the failure to acknowledge them to the desire to stifle their personality, from support and recognition to envy and even desire to eliminate them. Nevertheless, even the most vehement contestants of the gifted have to admit that the latter represent an absolutely remarkable human resource, fully able to decisively contribute to the reaching of progress in contemporary society.

In this context, the collaboration among all the factors which are or should be involved in the management of the issues related to the valuing of the outstanding human potential should manifest itself in a coherent and organised manner, and this is already largely promoted within the concept of "GIFTED EDUCATION". During the past ten years, we have witnessed in Romania some preoccupations, both from the part of government and of those active in the field of privately-funded research and initiative, so that, although the results are not yet spectacular, this domain does exist and it is continually enriched as a domain delimiting its own direction of action and goals to reach. We should list here the *Law regarding the education of gifted youth capable of high performance*, adopted by Romanian Parliament on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2006 or the activity of the IRSCA GIFTED EDUCATION Institute in Bucharest.

This should make us optimistic if we were only to regard things from the perspective of the fact that our country is a recognised source of exceptional talents or sharp minds (if we only cite Coandă, Titulescu, Pallady or Brâncuși), but unfortunately it is not a welcoming home for the elites to manifest their exceptional creative capacities right here at home, on the Romanian soil.

The exceptionally gifted children come from diverse social milieus, being generally exposed to a certain social risk related to the rejection by their groups - their huge potential makes them be much more intellectually advanced than the others, they learn faster and more, and are able to easily grasp the complexity and depth of problems. All these qualities imply the fact that their full development must be achieved in a specialised educational system where there must be differentiated training strategies, which is still triggering controversy and debate regarding the types of giftedness, the influence of diverse cultural groups upon their psychic capacity, the causes of the phenomenon, the identification procedures, and, last but not least, the efficiency of the training programmes.

In today's Romania, largely due to the educational egalitarianism promoted in the communist period, this giftedness phenomenon remains rather confuse, being treated more or less scientifically. As a young member of the European Union, our country must rise to the international standards in order to be competitive in the context of global economy. It becomes thus obvious that it is necessary for the children and youth with outstanding qualities to be able to train and develop in view of reaching their maximum potential. However this can be done only if one offers these young people a specific education, up to the level of their needs and requirements.

A first challenge for today's Romanian school is to adapt the curriculum, in the sense of its differentiation, which should be harmonised with the educational ideal and the finalities proposed in the educational system.

The elaboration of differentiated curricula supposes an ample analysis of all the educational aspects. In essence, the crystallisation of the differentiated education premises was the result of certain endeavours (Passow, 1985), such as:

- Organisation of contents so that all knowledge from one or several fields of knowledge should be integrated;
- development of "productive thinking" by training methods which provide the competency of re-conceptualisation and knowledge generation;
- shaping an open attitude towards knowledge;
- use of educational resources in order to stimulate initiative in learning;
- facilitating self-awareness, comprehension of the others and institutional relations;
- an objective assessment of cognitive abilities, performances and high creative products.

In this context, school should aim at reaching everybody's highest intellectual potential and aptitudes, using an appropriate methodology and implementing programmes and curricula focused on the maximising of the development of their native potential. Moreover, school training should facilitate independent thinking, stimulation of creativity, development of the sense of responsibility, along with the identification of new contexts and methods that could also be applied to the general education.

In the case of children with special abilities we speak about the accelerated training, starting from the fact that those children with high cognitive endowment and learning easiness (in comparison with the colleagues of the same age) assimilate the standard curriculum faster. The speeding up of studies is a modality of stimulating and recognising the children that are different from the others grace to the quick pace of knowledge acquiring. In practice, this fact provoked certain legislative changes in the education system, the most frequently measures of educational politics being the following (Stănescu, 2002):

- skipping a grade;
- graduating from two grades in one year;
- early admission to school, high school or college,
- extra-curricular additional activities;
- progress in one single school subject;
- extra-curricular courses.

The speeding up was not a unanimously accepted concept, as we witness oppositions from the part of both teachers and parents. Some of the criticism was focused on the fact that for the intellectual performances acceleration is considered disadvantageous as the gifted pupils and students do not have enough time to acquire knowledge, the increasingly theoretic requirements coming in contradiction with the non-participation in the classes of practical testing of theories. Speeding up was criticised also for the possible emotional drawbacks. In this respect, one refers to sacrificing playing time in favour of study time, to the absence of some special activities adequate to the child's age, but also to the absence of social affiliation feeling (friendship) or of belonging to a group (play group). Reality proved that in fact speeding up is disadvantageous only for the "false gifted", i.e. the pupils and students who were erroneously ranked as gifted, who cannot cope with the accelerated training.

The differentiated education of children also means the "enrichment" of the curriculum, which supposes the existence of some enhanced and varied contents that remove routine, monotony and boredom. Moreover, it is necessary to deeply approach knowledge together with the inclusion of new contents. Kaplan (1979) conceptualises this type of curriculum development, introducing the notions of "vertical enrichment" and "horizontal enrichment". The *vertical enrichment refers to the teaching of a theme (idea, problem) that is not part of the regular school curriculum, whereas the horizontal enrichment is focused on the enhanced approach of existing themes* (Stănescu, 2002).

An important part in the approach of giftedness is played by school strategies. They take the practical form of projects with profound innovating character, often materialised in special schools. Within all school strategies one grants a special attention to the learning environment, defined by several components:

- achieving a homogenous grouping of students and pupils, in accordance with their specific abilities;
- employing teachers with high professional potential;
- endowment with educational equipment appropriate for certain high-performance didactic activities – computers, audio-video devices, subject-focused specialised laboratories,
- ensuring communication and relations with the community of the stay-in students;
- creating an atmosphere of safety and confidence, of mutual respect and commitment for the personal improvement.

The differentiated curriculum supposes also particular extra-curricular strategies. It is a mistake to conclude that the gifted can cope alone, not needing special guidance and encouragement. In this case, the talented individuals will not reach the maximum level of their capacity. In order to avoid these training failures, one should put extra educational services at the disposal of the gifted, which completes the educational experiences necessary for satisfying their special needs. In practice, these services can be offered in the after-school activities, in weekends or during holidays. In Europe there are many competitions, contests and events, but also reunions without competitive character, in which a large number of gifted

children and youth take part. Their purpose is to reach the public acknowledgement of talented individuals, and the UNESCO conferences always recommend the member states to encourage the children capable of high performance through the most diverse extra-curricular activities.

An important issue in approaching the training and education of gifted children and young people is to train teachers for differentiated training. Elaborating some programmes and curricula in this respect is a process in close interdependence with a series of factors such as the policies in the fields of education, conceptions regarding giftedness, educational practices and the material resources identified.

It is known that a primordial factor that can decisively influence school success is the didactic competency. This professional attribute is permanently benchmarked against the results of the teacher's actions reflected in the trainees' acquisitions. It is an evaluation of didactic competencies by the level of reaching educational goals..

Bishop (1975) sketches a portrait of the teacher fit for teaching gifted youth and mentions a set of qualities and features:

- mature and experienced;
- possessing a high level of intelligence;
- having various interests (intellectual, cultural and artistic);
- possessing aspiration towards exceptional achievements;
- endowed with the ability to see things from the pupils' point of view;
- systematic, organised, hard-working;
- stimulating, imaginative, enthusiast;
- exhibiting and encouraging attitude, so that the pupils and students can freely express their opinions;
- having a participative attitude, getting involved in the classroom activity.

In the literature one may identify also sets of unwanted features of the teachers for gifted youth (Torrance, 1967):

- authoritative;
- defensive attitude;
- pressure due to the short time at disposal;
- insensitive towards the children's emotional and intellectual needs;
- lack of energy;
- intellectual inertia;
- excessive preoccupation for discipline;
- lack of commitment in the learning / teaching process;
- not interested in promoting initiative.

Baldwin (1993) identifies three important aspects regarding the training programme of teachers for the gifted children classes:

- the content of the curriculum (essentials, researches, experiences, training strategies, curriculum development, classroom management, identification);
- areas where the exceptional endowment is manifested (psychomotor, psychosocial, academic, creative);

- chronological age (up to three, 4-6 years of age, 7 to 9, 10 to 12, over 12 year-olds).

If we take into account the types of giftedness, the complexity of the curricular content and the psychic development, the extra training of teachers for the differentiated teaching of gifted pupils and students is absolutely motivated, both from the pedagogical and the psychological points of view, even from the philosophic perspective.

The differentiated education of gifted students and pupils supposes the solving of certain conceptual and legislative problems, but especially an attitude problem. We speak about the position expressed by teachers, parents, financing bodies etc. In the educational practice solutions were identified, and some of them may be listed below:

1. The differentiated training strategies may trigger lower costs in the educational system, because they suppose accelerating studies, skipping grades or early admission in a higher form of education;
2. By courses and training addressed to the teachers of gifted pupils, the former may identify early on the subjects capable of high performance, may enrol them in special system of training, avoiding thus the social losses;
3. The curricula addressed to the teachers of gifted children must also contain the former's competencies in choosing the form of differentiated pupils' training, but also a permanent assessment of their own behaviour towards them;

Gifted education uses certain practices, procedures or theories through specific curricula meant to socially value this immense human resource – super-intelligence. In this respect, we must keep in mind that the didactic methodologies practised in the “Gifted education” programme should be differentiated in accordance with the objective of the curriculum, the high degree of information absorption in the case of gifted children, the particular abilities of students and pupils, the specificity of the school and the need for individualised education of children and young people with remarkable qualities.

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