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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN GIFTED EDUCATION – WHY AND HOW?

Abstract: PROGA (*A Flexible Model of Quality Assurance in GE and Gifted Students Career Orientation Support in the Slovenian Context*) is a three-year project evaluating provisions for gifted students in Slovenian upper secondary education. The main goal of the project is to develop guidelines for an unified quality GE programme that (1) would fit Slovenian context, (2) be accessible to all gifted students in the country and (3) serve later as a basis for a national strategy in Slovenian GE. Evaluation of current provisions is thus of extreme importance, giving the providers and evaluators an insight to the strengths of the programme to be kept and the weaknesses of the programme to be addressed in the future. By implementing enrichment activities that require monitoring programme outputs, evaluation produces a variety of data referring to the ongoing provisions for gifted students from different sources (surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observation sessions) and stakeholders (gifted students, their peers, teachers, mentors, programme coordinators, parents) which provide a rich base of evidence for evaluation purposes. The link between quality assurance and evaluation lies in the identification of areas of potential improvement and the specification of plans to address these.

Key words: gifted education, gifted students, quality teaching, models of evaluation.

Why quality assurance in gifted education?

Gifted students are often not challenged enough in their classrooms, because general education programmes are not yet ready to meet their needs. They are not stimulated with activities that would be challenging enough for their educational needs, which can cause boredom, diminish student's interest for schoolwork and lead to underachievement (Jurišević, 2012, 2015; Kanevsky in Keighley, 2003). The beginning of research in the field of gifted education has shown the longitudinal benefits of the implementation of special curriculums, services and programmes into the work with gifted students as this helps them increase their aspirations, raise achievements and degree levels, develop creativity, interests and motivation, productivity and career goals (Delcourt, 1993; Hébert, 1993; Lubinski et al., 2001). Further benefits of gifted programmes have shown that students who had participated in gifted programmes maintained their interests over time and stayed involved in creative productive work after they finished college and graduate school (Westberg, 1999). Gifted education therefore identifies and

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develops the most talented and motivated students into the next generation of innovators, professionals, creators, and leaders (Steenbergen-Hu in Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016).

Moreover, Renzulli (2005) has noted that many educational innovations, such as differentiation and enrichment, that were proven to be beneficial for the achievements of students of all ability levels, different ethnic and SES backgrounds and also in different educational settings (Reis, 2008) are a product of gifted education pedagogy. Recently, talent development has been even put forth as a conceptual model that emphasizes early enrichment for all children and long-term, domain-specific educational programme with the ultimate goal of enabling more individuals to reach eminent levels of achievement in their domains of talent (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011; Subotnik & Rickoff, 2010) including overseen students due to different factors. At this place, it is also important to address the common misbelief that 'gifted children will make it on they own', however, being gifted does not necessarily equals superior performance, creative production or effortlessness (Subotnik et al., 2011). Gifted students need different educational approaches that will challenge them in regular classroom settings, enrichment and accelerated programmes to enable their continuous progress in school (Loveless, Farkas, & Duffett, 2008) as well associoemotional development.

Looking at these benefits of gifted education the importance of quality assurance is evident. Yet it has to be stressed that not all the gifted programmes are necessarily beneficial for gifted students, especially if they are not designed and conducted properly. The quality of general education and gifted programme curriculum is at risk in an educational climate that is concerned primarily with minimal competency (Hocket, 2009). Hocket (2009) has summarized in literature review on quality in gifted education that both, general education and gifted education curriculums, should be authentic, driven by meaningful outcomes, flexible to account for student differences and challenging. She further outlines that high-quality curriculums in gifted education should:

- use a conceptual approach to organize content that is a discipline based and integrative,
- pursue advanced levels of understanding beyond the general education curriculum through abstraction, depth, breadth, and complexity,
- ask students to use processes and materials that approximate those of an expert, disciplinarian, or practicing professional,
- emphasize true-to-life problems, products, performances, and outcomes that are transformational,
- be flexible enough to accommodate self-directed learning fuelled by student interest, adjustments for pacing, and variety.

Based on theories and empirical findings in the field of giftedness research (Gagne, 1999; Subotnik et al., 2011), it could be reasonable to add to this list that quality gifted education should (besides school achievement and abilities development) pay special attention also to the socioemotional development of gifted learners. There is a consensus among the authors that emotional and social well

being is the basis for effective learning, realization of potentials and corresponding achievement.

How to assure quality in gifted education?

First important factor for assuring quality in gifted education is to consider the resources we have, i.e. to conduct needs analysis. As identification of the gifted population and programme decisions are intertwined, we are often faced with a dilemma, when developing a programme for gifted students. Davis and Rimm (1989, as cited in Boyd, 1992) stated that identifying who will be "in" the programme may be influenced by the programme that is offered, meanwhile, Clark (1988, as cited in Boyd) pointed out that the programme offered may depend on the needs of the gifted learners. Therefore, in the initial stage we ask ourselves: What happens after establishing a definition of giftedness? Do we identify the students and build a programme around their specific needs? Or, do we decide on the type of programme we can/want to offer, and then identify students whose needs match the programme? Regardless of the approach, collected data provides information for the identification decision and can help in making programme decisions that are most appropriate for gifted learners (Alexander & Muia, 1982; Clark, 1988, in: Boyd, 1992). Each gifted committee must decide for itself which approach is ethically, or practically appropriate (Renzulli, 1975, in Boyd, 1992). The needs assessment process generates a vast amount of information that allow gifted programme planners to make appropriate decisions. Decision-makers are confronted with the task of deciding to what extent programme ideals are compromised to accommodate the practical issues. Many educators may feel the process of conducting needs analysis too time consuming, too difficult, or not worthwhile. However, a major asset of the assessment process is that it provides a clearer picture of what can and cannot be developed when programmes are offered in a specific context (Boyd, 1992).

After setting up a decision about a programme, it is important to thoroughly plan it, considering its quality. NAGC (Johnsen, 2012) has released A Guide to Planning and Implementing High-Quality Services in which main aspects for assuring quality of gifted programmes are described. At this place, we sum-up the most emphasized ones: (1) First on their list is identification process that should be comprehensive, cohesive, technically adequate, offering students appropriate environment, where they have the opportunity to express their diverse potentials and abilities.(2) Next important element are the educators and their professional development. Mentors should be trained properly as only with mentors that fully understand the characteristics and needs of gifted students and encourage their self-understanding, those will be able to realize their potentials. Mentors need to help students identify their interests along with their strengths and develop activities that match these. They should also represent a role model, collaborate with students' families and provide career guidance. To be able to assure appropriate support for gifted students, high-quality constant educators' development is crucial. Therefore, educators need to participate in ongoing, research-supported, and multiple forms of

professional development that model how to develop environments and activities for students with gifts and talents, provide sufficient human and material resources for professional development, become involved in professional organizations, assess their practices and identify areas for personal growth, and comply with rules, policies, and standards of ethical practice.(3) Third important point to consider is programme designing. Educators should develop comprehensive, cohesive programmes for students with a variety of gifts and talents, incorporate differentiated curricula in all domains, use a balanced assessment system, and include the development of strategies such as critical and creative thinking, metacognition, problem-solving. (4) Another aspect that cannot be overseen in learning environment.

It is important to facilitate students to develop personal, social, cultural, communication, leadership competencies, and specifically promote their self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, confidence, motivation, resilience, independence, and curiosity. Encouraging positive peer relationships, social interactions, along with interpersonal and technical communication skills with diverse individuals and across diverse groups that also demonstrate personal and social responsibility. To achieve these outcomes, educators need to create environments that not only have high expectations, but also honour effort, are safe and welcoming for exploring issues and for risk taking, provide opportunities for self-exploration and leadership, promote positive interactions with artistic/creative and chronological-age peers, support diverse learners as well as teach positive coping, social, and communication skills. (5) Last but not least, one of most important keys for a quality gifted education programme is systemic endeavour. Educators should be active in creating policies and procedures, providing sufficient funding, coordinating services, collaborating with families and other professionals including development and implementation of a comprehensive set of services such as acceleration, enrichment, grouping, individualized learning, mentorships, internships, and technology that develop relevant student talent areas.

To assure and maintain quality standards in gifted education, it is further important to evaluate programmes. Programme evaluation is a process critical to the success of an educational programme as it provides evidence on the degree to which a programme is carrying out planned activities effectively and the extent to which the programme is achieving its stated outcomes. Evaluation of a gifted programme affords the opportunity to create data for programme improvement, development, refinement, and/or expansion. Valuable information can result from learning that a programme is or is not achieving its goals and maybe even more importantly from examining why a programme is, or is not, achieving its goals. The intent of implementing a programme evaluation is to systematically look at not only what does or does not work, but also for whom, where, and under what conditions. These types of data provide information to stakeholders about programme effects, potential limitations of the programme, and strengths of the programme. Each of these components is crucial to create quality gifted programme systems, as gifted programmes, in many instances, are not providing the types of services necessary to contribute significantly to the academic, social, and emotional development of gifted

youth (Callahan, Moon, &Oh, 2017). What makes evaluation particularly relevant in the context of quality assurance is the importance of sound procedures and documentary evidence for decision making (Cao, Jung, & Lee, 2017; Neber & Heller, 2002; VanTassel-Baska & Robinson, 2017). On the other hand, programme evaluations can be also a powerful tool for increasing gifted education mentors' knowledge and thus causing positive changes in the development of quality assurance (Robinson, Cotabish, Wood, & O'Tuel, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to make a detailed evaluation plan in the very early phase of the programme designing (Nebel & Heller, 2002; VanTassel-Baska, & Robbinson, 2017). Further work is required in order to make more explicit links between evaluation and quality assurance, but there is also a need to incorporate evaluation more closely into everyday practice. This will allow the value of evaluation to be recognised through quality auditing procedures, but more importantly, good practice and models will be available to all practitioners in a flexible and easy-to-use format (Conole, 2004; Callahan, 2004).

Conclusion

Overall, on the basis of the theoretical background of "why and how" quality assurance interplay in gifted education, the aforementioned project PROGA will proceed from the following key questions: (1) How is giftedness understood? (2) Which instruments are used for the identification of giftedness? (3) Which method is used for the selection of gifted students for the particular programme activity? (4) Which competences of mentors are most relevant? (5) What kind of programme activities are chosen? (6) What are the main criteria for selecting the appropriate partners outside schools to conduct programme activities? (7) What are quantitative and qualitative aspects of collaboration within the gifted education networks? (8) What are the main strengths of the particular programme activity to qualify it as appropriate for gifted students? (9) What is the nature of transfer of programme activities inside and outside schools? (10) What are quantitative and qualitative aspects of collaboration with parents?

It can be concluded that answers obtained from these TOP 10 questions would give an important and useful information on the authentic context of the particular programme activity performed and thus the prediction of its possible benefits or impact on the cultivation of gifted students' potentials and their further career development. The evaluation outcomes might serve as a support for designing a national strategy for working with gifted students in Slovenia.

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ZAGOTAVLJANJE KAKOVOSTI V IZOBRAŽEVANJU NADARJENIH – ZAKAJ IN KAKO?

Povzetek: PROGA *(Prožni model ugotavljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti celostne obravnave nadarjenih dijakov in spodbujanja njihovega kariernega razvoja v slovenskem kontekstu)* je projekt evalvacije programa za nadarjene srednješolce v Sloveniji, ki bo trajal tri leta (2017-2020). Glavni cilj projekta je preko evalvacije programa izdelati smernice za enoten kvaliteten program dela z nadarjenimi dijaki, ki bi ustrezal slovenskemu kontekstu in bil dostopen vsem nadarjenim dijakom v državi. Ocena trenutnega stanja je izjemnega pomena, saj ponudnikom in izvajalcem aktivnosti ter evalvatorjem služi za vpogled v prednosti trenutnih programov, ki jih je vredno obdržati tudi v prihodnje, ter v šibkosti programa, ki bi jim bilo potrebno posvetiti več pozornosti. Evalvacijske aktivnosti pomenijo spremljanje programskih aktivnosti in zagotovijo evalvatorju širok nabor podatkov iz različnih virov (ankete, vprašalniki, intervjuji, fokusne skupine, opazovanje) in s strani različnih deležnikov v projektu (nadarjeni učenci, njihovi vrstniki, učitelji, mentorji, koordinatorji programa, starši). Vsi ti podatki predstavljajo široko bazo dokazov za ocenjevalne namene. Povezava med zagotavljanjem kakovosti in evalvacijo je v identifikaciji področij, ki imajo potencial za izboljšanje in specifikacija načrta, kako jih nasloviti.

Ključne besede: vzgoja in izobraževanje nadarjenih, nadarjeni učenci, kakovostno poučevanje, modeli evalvacije.