

SPECIFICS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHER AND PARENT OF GIFTED PUPILS IN RELATION TO TYPE OF SCHOOL**SPECIFIKA KOMUNIKACE MEZI UČITELI A RODIČI NADANÝCH ŽÁKŮ VE VZTAHU K TYPU ŠKOL**

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Abstract

The present research deals with the issue of communication between parent and teacher of a gifted pupil. The presented study is qualitatively conceived through interviews with teachers of gifted pupils. In analysing the testimony of teachers, several different types of schools were revealed, each with a different experience of nurturing gifted pupils and communication with parents of gifted pupils. Also of interest is the different attitude of parents of gifted pupils to their children. Last but not least, the impact of inclusion on the quality of care for gifted pupils dealt with in the research.

Key words: *giftedness, gifted pupil, inclusion, eight-year gymnasium, teacher of gifted pupil, parent of gifted child.*

Abstrakt

Článek prezentuje výzkum zabývající se problematikou komunikace mezi rodičem a učitelem nadaného žáka. Předložená studie je kvalitativně orientovaná, zdroji dat jsou rozhovory s učiteli nadaných žáků. Při analýze odpovědí učitelů bylo odhaleno několik různých typů škol, z nichž každá měla jinou zkušenost s výchovou nadaných žáků a komunikací s rodiči nadaných žáků. Zajímavý je také odlišný přístup rodičů nadaných žáků k jejich dětem. V neposlední řadě výzkum identifikoval vliv inkluze na kvalitu péče o nadané žáky v kontextu komunikace mezi rodiči a učiteli.

Klíčová slova: *nadání, nadaný žák, inkluze, osmiletá gymnázia, učitel nadaného dítěte, rodič nadaného dítěte.*

Preface

This research is part of a planned dissertation whose principal objective is to ascertain the specifics of communication between the parent of a gifted pupil and the school from the perspective of the gifted pupil's teacher. In analysing the testimony of teachers, three core types of schools were revealed, each with a different experience of nurturing gifted pupils and communication with parents. Traditional elementary schools appear to overlook the issue of developing gifted pupils. Children's parents only focus on the gift to a marginal extent. Inclusive elementary schools endeavour to develop the pupil as part of standard teaching using an enriched curriculum, and also outside standard teaching. The final type of schools is the eight-year gymnasium (grammar school) where we see a similar school approach to developing talent. Parents are very active in communication when children first join the school. Gradually, their interest and communication subsides and they leave the development of talent to the responsibility of the child and school. Our results call for more extensive further education of teaching staff and for development of proper and active cooperation between parents and schools.

Giftedness and a Definition of Giftedness

We understand giftedness as the ability of an individual in a selected area recognised by the socio-cultural environment as quantitatively and qualitatively more developed in comparison to their peers (Heward, 2013). According to Sternberg and Zhan (2004), there are over a hundred different concepts of giftedness. Some authors (Carman, 2013; McBee & Makel, 2019; Dai, 2009) attempt to classify the concepts by their attributes, with each of them coming up with different ideas on what giftedness involves. These include, e.g., a conservative vs. liberal concept, a qualitative vs. quantitative concept, an aptitude vs. achievement concept, a being vs. becoming concept, a single- vs. multi-dimensional concept, etc. Adopting a particular definition of giftedness affects the further focus of development of the gifted child. According to Machů (2019), one can deduce development focus from giftedness definitions, e.g. a liberal, qualitative and aptitude concept definition,

which assumes the setting up of an appropriate enriching environment within educational institutions for the gifted pupil.

Educating Gifted Pupils

Gifted individuals are marked out by specific characteristics in cognitive, affective, social, and psychomotor areas. They require extra educational support in order to be able to fully develop their potential.

In the Czech Republic, the prevailing focus of developing gifts relates to inclusive schools, where most talented pupils are educated. In regard to segregated education, this has been generally phased out, in terms of both specialist schools and classes for gifted pupils. In practice, this approach has been replaced by the existence of schools which form groups consisting of gifted pupils within ordinary classes. For pupils entering educational level ISCED 2, the option of studying at so-called eight-year gymnasiums is available, with some selection involved.

In our research, a gifted child is a child who has undergone a formal diagnosis of intellectual giftedness. In the Czech Republic, a formal diagnosis of giftedness is made by Education Counselling facilities. On the basis of a diagnostic outcome, the pupil in the school is classified into one of four levels of so-called support measures, which define the quality and quantity of modification of the curriculum (Riley, 2011; Tomlinson, 2013).

There are also informal ways to identify giftedness, although in contrast to the above-described diagnostic process, the outcome of these cannot be officially respected in schools. These include a diagnosis of intellectual giftedness by Mensa Czech Republic, or various diagnostic tests and checklists which are generally accessible to the public on Czech websites. We incorporate these informal diagnosis options within methods of gifted child prediagnosis (Johnsen, 2018).

Parents of Gifted Pupils and Family Communication with School

Building up relations between the school and family is considered an important component of education policy (Education Act, no. 561/2004 Coll.). The legislative amendments this enforces expand parental rights and thus allow for parents to share in

decisions on what happens at school beyond the framework of previous experience. The increased need for communication between the family and school may lead to disagreements and make relations more complicated. Štech (2009) talks of ideological and moral issues, where the school impinges upon the family, giving families feedback on desired values; he then talks of psychological issues in which the school impacts on parents' feelings, the child's successes and failures at school bringing pride or shame and influencing relations between family members. He also notes the new institutional role of parents, who are guided to engage in relation to the school and confront their feelings and positions with other parents.

Thus the difficulty of teachers' work increases, with teachers feeling they are forced to individualise their approach to pupils more and open up their communication with families. In regard to giftedness and gifted pupils, communication with parents may be specific in nature. Porter (2008) outlines particular sources of conflict between family and school. She claims that these include in particular a different approach to giftedness between families and schools, which is reflected in respecting or not respecting myths on giftedness and gifted children.

If we apply the theory to our research, one can anticipate problems, or topics, dealt with between parents and teachers on the identification, as well as the social and emotional characteristics of gifted children, on ethical issues and educational needs of gifted pupils.

Research

This research is part of a planned dissertation whose principal objective is to ascertain the specifics of communication between the parent of a gifted pupil and the school from the perspective of the gifted pupil's teacher. The submitted study presents only some of the results produced by an ongoing qualitative data analysis.

We take a gifted pupil to mean an intellectually gifted pupil who has undergone diagnosis in an Education Counselling facility and has been included in one of four levels of support measures. The teacher of a gifted pupil means any teacher who has worked or works with a gifted pupil in their class. We have included standard elementary schools and eight-year gymnasiums in our research, both at a lower secondary education level (ISCED 2).

The data source comprised testimony through semi-structured interviews with teachers of gifted pupils, whose topic focused on mapping pedagogical practice with gifted pupils in the context of communication with pupils' parents. Interviews were held with a total of 21 teachers from standard elementary schools and eight-year gymnasiums. They comprised 2 men and 19 women, with individual interviews each around half an hour in length, and some interviews repeated with some teachers.

The data was analysed using open coding and gradually organised into themed categories. The analysis was mainly inductive in nature since most codes and categories primarily arose on the basis of elements contained in teachers' testimonies (i.e. they were not created deductively on the basis of anticipated categories). In most themed categories, we were provided with three thematic focuses in regard to the three basic types of schools, which correspond to the titles of the following subchapters. Each of these types of schools offers typical support for gifted pupils, which is reflected in their communication with the parents of gifted pupils. Each of these types of schools has different experience of looking after gifted pupils and communication with their parents.

Traditional elementary school

The first type of schools that came out of the analysis is the traditional elementary school, which is not particularly focused on talent and gifted pupils. These schools, according to their teachers, are overly burdened by inclusion and are often the catchment schools for a nearby deprived area. In these schools, we find teachers who need to focus more on weaker pupils, as well as on pupils with various problems, and as a result the needs of the gifted are sidelined. If there is a gifted pupil at this type of schools, the school recommends that they transfer somewhere else in their own interests.

In this first type of schools, gifted pupils are mainly identified by their performance in lessons. "*The clever are revealed by their work in lessons, ... the gifted assert themselves...*" We can see that pupils need to manifest their gift through working well in lessons and performing highly. Pupils who exhibit themselves more as a problem or disruptive influence in the class have a lower likelihood of being considered gifted, and will likely be classified as weaker pupils. If the school suspects a pupil of being gifted, they suggest the parents visit an Education Counselling facility, and regardless of the outcome, also

transferral to another school because the pupil has already exhibited a certain level of potential. The school they transfer to may be a different elementary school which, however, focuses more on the field in which the pupil exhibits greater skills, e.g. a mathematics or languages elementary school, or a gymnasium if the pupil has reached the appropriate age. Teachers say that if the pupil were to remain at their current school, they could become bored – or, in contrast, they could require a huge amount of extra work from the teacher. (*“If these children remained here, they would clearly be bored and it would be work for us to ensure we give them the extra work...”*)

Despite the recommendation to change school, there are often parents who do not want to make such a change. The reasons given for such a decision include not wishing to tear the child away from their peers, or in the case of transfer to a gymnasium, a desire not to shorten the child’s childhood. Where such children remain at the school, the school endeavours to help them by letting them take part in competitions and school Olympiads, which they also offer. (*“What we offer such pupils is preparation for competitions; I consider that our main duty with them.”*) In terms of teaching, teachers describe these pupils as capable and independent and as such they do not need to be dealt with in a special way.

The school does not avoid communication with the parents of such pupils, and it is available to them if required. Nevertheless, teachers stress the lack of available time due to frequent communication with parents of problem pupils, leaving little time for gifted pupils. (*“We are more in contact with the parents of pupils with problems. Basically, there are so many of them that there isn’t time for anyone else.”*) However, the parents of gifted pupils do not have a need for communication and cooperation either; according to teachers they are often mainly focused on the grades their children receive, and if they have good grades they do not feel the need to take an interest in their education, or to cooperate with the school in any way. (*“When we as the school give the parents a recommendation to visit a counselling facility, that’s the end of it. The parents don’t usually come to us with the results afterwards.”*)

Inclusive elementary school

The second notional type of schools is the elementary school which endeavours to provide the best possible care they can for gifted pupils, and which attempts to actively identify

gifted pupils from amongst their students. These schools often look for and admit gifted pupils from neighbouring schools, as well. They endeavour to identify gifted pupils as early as possible, frequently through tests for identifying talents.

Teachers speak of the need to work with gifted pupils particularly in the early primary years, where they consider such work to be most important. *“Gifted pupils who are not worked with in time may fall into a routine and allow for bad grades since they don’t feel the need to bother with the school.”* Working with gifted pupils in the schools we spoke to involves in particular the provision of various clubs focused on developing the children’s gifts, and also a wide range of competitions and Olympiads. Teachers stress, however, that children also need to be worked with during standard lessons so they don’t feel they are getting anything more than the others.

Teachers are also aware of the danger of the child being labelled. *“There is a danger with children who are openly described as gifted that they begin to consider their gift a reason for not having to do anything, and they thus lose the motivation to develop themselves further.”* According to the teachers, all the methods of work which the school offers to pupils diagnosed as gifted are also offered to other pupils.

These schools do not give much weight to diagnosis by Education Counselling facilities. Besides the above-mentioned loss of motivation which a diagnosis may lead to, the schools also say they bring them negligible benefit. The recommendations the school receives from these facilities are things the school already practises with gifted pupils, and the teachers also perceive the financial support for gifted pupils as vastly insufficient. Teachers call the funds assigned to gifted pupils an “encyclopaedia allowance”, for example, and note the need for this financial support to go more towards paying for the time teachers spend working with the pupils. *“(The fact that they are diagnosed and have it in black and white means we get money for them, but this is only for buying them an encyclopaedia or some such. That doesn’t solve anything. It would be better for us to get money for the person who is going to be working with the pupil, and this we don’t get.)”*

Teachers consider preparation for secondary school to be the most serious problem in this regard. Their objective is to prepare children so they can ideally get to a gymnasium, allowing for a path to university, where they could put their gift to use. However, pupils whose gifts are accompanied by deficits in other areas, or whose gifts are very narrowly-

focused, have problems getting to a gymnasium, and they then have a problem getting through the secondary school, which teachers consider an intermediate step on the path to university, where the gifted child would no longer have this problem and where they could excel.

Schools see great shortcomings in their cooperation with parents and in parents' interest in education and their child's development. Although teachers' testimonies mention parents who show an interest in the work of the school, mothers and fathers tend to give advice and feedback to the school. *"But we often encounter a lack of communication, and often also very combative communication."* Schools say that it is always the school that initiates contact between the two parties, and it almost never happens that parents themselves make contact and express an interest in their child. Often, schools have to convince parents and persuade them to make time and visit the school for the good of their child. Teachers criticise parents' unwillingness to take time off work and visit the school, while parents demand that teachers remain in school until late afternoon to wait for them. *("That's unfair to us, because we also have families: this is our job. Some parents think we should wait until they've finished work, so that they can do their shopping first and then come to visit us.")* Schools often encounter the problem of not knowing what to do with the child, because their parent has no interest in discussing this with the school. *("We get just a blank sheet of paper to work with and often we spend the whole of the primary years trying to put information onto this paper which the parent could have told us already.")* A certain lack of basic trust between the family and school is perceived. *("Some parents do not consider our teachers to be experts. Nobody doubts doctors, but everyone doubts teachers. Anyone who has been to elementary school feels entitled to comment on the school's work.")* Teachers come across the unreal expectations parents have of their children, but this could easily be avoided if the parents and school communicated more. A common phenomenon is parents demotivating their child, giving their child the impression that they don't need to do anything, or rather excessively criticising them for minor matters. The child has to write some article, and the parents focus on grammar mistakes disparaging their child and saying that they can't write. We also often come across an excessive focus on grades amongst parents, where having and developing a gift subsequently seem of secondary concern.

Eight-year gymnasiums

We determined the third notional school type to be eight-year gymnasiums that, while being similar in many regards to the second type of schools in their approach, show a certain difference in their work with gifted pupils. Again, these schools focus on actively identifying gifted pupils from amongst their students, but their position within the education process means they operate more like a school to which gifted pupils transfer from other schools.

If a gifted pupil is suspected, again the school recommends that parents visit an Education Counselling facility, but as at the above-discussed schools, they do not take much heed of the results of the diagnosis, and often consider the diagnosis counterproductive. (*“When I declare someone a talent and they also have it in black and white, they usually stop learning and take advantage of it. They lose their motivation.”*) Children marked out as gifted lose the need to further develop in the areas they feel they excel at.” Another example is a similar situation, except not in an area of the pupil’s favourite subject. (*“It has happened to us that pupils who have been diagnosed as gifted have eased up in other subjects.”*)

The case is similar in regard to intelligence tests which the school might offer, e.g., in collaboration with Mensa. (*“The results they yield are often depreciated. We haven’t done them for two years after seeing that it demotivates some children in some subjects. We think it isn’t the best idea.”*) Rather than diagnoses or various tests, teachers prefer their own intuition and pupils’ efforts. (*“If someone has diagnosed them, then okay, but if they don’t manifest it with me in my lessons, then I don’t take it too seriously.”*)

The schools offer pupils various extra clubs and activities outside of standard teaching, e.g. a programming club. In our case, however, we most commonly see an acceleration of lessons, commonly including visiting lessons in the particular subject for higher year groups.

Gymnasiums generally do not maintain active contact with parents of gifted pupils. More extensive communication occurs at the beginning, when the school sets up an individual education plan with the parents and the pupil, and subsequently the parents come to the school at the end of the academic year when the school is interested in feedback and evaluation of how their work has impacted the student.

Thus, if no problems arise which need to be dealt with parents, the school leaves it to the pupils themselves to develop. We assume that it is very much the responsibility of the pupil to take an interest and act on it themselves. Naturally, this does not mean that the school does not want to communicate with parents. Both sides are well aware of the opportunities for contact, and they carefully monitor the child and their development. Parents and the school certainly cooperate.

Here too, parents are highly focused on pupils' overall results. The schools understand this and therefore endeavour to also focus on the pupil maintaining acceptable results in other subjects, and in more severe cases they rework the pupil's individual education plan, or implement a general return to the standard education.

Discussion

The analysis of the teachers' testimonies revealed three basic types of schools, each with a different experience of looking after pupils and communication with the parents of gifted pupils.

Traditional elementary schools appear to overlook the issue of developing gifted pupils. The schools recommend gifted pupils transfer to another school. Where the school is willing to develop these pupils, this only entails preparing them for competitions and Olympiads. The outcome corresponds to the Czech School Inspectorate's thematic report (ČŠI, 2016), where schools generally declare this strategy to be the most implemented one. Teachers' general tendency towards a performance definition of giftedness is also presented by Machů (2019) in his study. According to a performance definition, a gifted pupil means a "child who presents with a demonstrated gift for which it is redundant to undertake specific care of." We also anticipate the majority of schools are this type of school. In these schools, parents mostly overlook their children's gifts, and do not feel the need to develop their children further mainly because they are "problem-free top-of-the-class students." Where parents do decide to have the gift diagnosed, the school is not informed of the results, the child remains in the school, and adequate support for the child is not set up.

We have termed the second type of schools "inclusive." Here, the schools endeavour to develop children within standard lessons through an enriched curriculum, and also

outside teaching (preparation for competitions and Olympiads). These schools mainly deal with diagnosis through their own efforts. They consider diagnosis in Education Counselling facilities to be redundant. The schools are more focused on the issue of the labelling of gifted children. This is the logical outcome of increased care for gifted individuals, as labelling is a part of this according to Heward (2013). Looking after gifted pupils should be undertaken in an ethical, professional, and effective manner, something which does not often happen in practice. It is not respecting these basic conditions which creates the negative consequences of labelling and further impacts the formation of the child's social identity in an inappropriate manner (Gates, 2010).

The parents of pupils in these schools have greater ambitions in regard to developing the gift of their children. Teachers describe communication with parents as combative – parents are unwilling to cooperate, disparage teachers' skills, and deliberately label gifted children, resulting in it being more difficult to nurture gifted pupils within the school.

In the final type of schools, the eight-year gymnasium, we see a similar approach to developing gifts. However, these schools deal more with the negative consequence of labelling. Parents are very active in communication with teachers when children initially join the school. Gradually, they lose interest in communication and leave the development of their children's gift to the pupil and school. Here too, however, it is true that where results are acceptable, there is no reason for contacting the teacher.

Conclusion

The submitted article notes the state of care for gifted pupils in standard elementary schools and eight-year gymnasiums. It notes the inappropriate concept of talented pupils at standard elementary schools in the form of performance definitions which do not encourage development. Good practice with gifted pupils in schools notes the development of labelling and its negative impact on children and also their parents. The results call for a more extensive further education of teaching staff and development of proper and active cooperation between families and the school.

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Acknowledgements

The article has been produced with the support of the project IGA (IGA/FHS/2019/001) at the Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín.

Bc. Petr Lukeš is a student of Social Pedagogy at the Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín. Presented article is a part of a diploma thesis.

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