

## Giftedness as a risk

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*IF NO SUPPORT IS OFFERED TO A HANDICAPPED CHILD, IT IS PERSONAL TRAGEDY FOR THE CHILD AND FOR HIS/HER FAMILY; IF NO SUPPORT IS OFFERED TO A GIFTED CHILD, IT IS A TRAGEDY FOR THE WHOLE SOCIETY*

### THE PROBLEM

The UN Convention on Children's Rights focuses especially on their rights to receive an adequate education aimed at full development of their abilities and talents and at the growing up of their personalities. The population of gifted children has its specific needs which are very often neglected by the educational system and therefore, those children's rights of being supported by the social institutions in their intellectual and personal development are violated, although unconsciously.

What really makes gifted children to be children at risk is the widespread public opinion that gifted and talented children have no psychological problems. This opinion is not only wrong, but even dangerous. Research works, school observations and guidance and counseling practice have shown that these individuals might experience severe psychological difficulties, related to their

intellectual superiority. As a philosopher said, "There is no heavier burden than a great potential" (cited in Harding & Berger, 1979). Talented children need to be supported and their development should not be left to chance. We must find our gifted children, give them the chance to grow as talented adults and help them so that they can give society all those things which it so desperately needs.

### CAUSES FOR CONCERN

The presentation summarizes the author's experience in the field of gifted education and creativity. Research data and observations are analyzed with the purpose to identify factors, which in the Bulgarian cultural and educational context, make gifted children to be children at risk: stereotyped images of the sex-role appropriateness of the behavior; teachers' perceptions about gifted children and gifted education; relationships with peers. Their negative impact on children's motivation, self-concept and value-system is examined. On this basis the need of special educational and psychological provisions for gifted children will be emphasized.

### Dependence Versus Independence

Personality studies with 16 - 18 years old students with outstanding in-school and out-of-school achievements have shown that their self-concept, as that of the other boys and girls, is dominated by values like personal autonomy, love, friendship and criticism to social injustice; they deny the value of personality

characteristics like "being disciplined" and "sticking up to adults' requirements". At the same time, compared to their peers, they exhibit more stronger dependence on norms and evaluative standards posed by the world of the adults: their self-concept shows greater correspondence with norm-referred expectancies of parents and teachers; they are anticipating higher level of adults' requirements for themselves; they score lower on need for independence; as the knowledge is highly valued and the school constitutes a powerful source of knowledge, teachers' norms are more easily incorporated in gifted students' values and behaviour.

This seems quite inappropriate compared to results that have been obtained in personality studies of eminent creators. But other authors reported similar to our findings with secondary students and suggested their interpretation on the basis of students' social status (cited in MacKinnon, 1978). Society is more tolerant to the unconventionality of the acknowledged creators than to the striving for recognition gifted adolescent. Students with high-level achievements are still students and they are not easily allowed to behave in a different way. Gifted adolescents are neither independent from the world of the adults nor are accepted as equals to adult creators. The ambivalence of this social position hinders the process of self-identification as a creative personality in them and that might be crucial for their further development.

#### The price for being different

Gifted adolescents score significantly higher on need for achievement. They are attracted by the possibilities the active professional life and the interesting work are providing for personal development and acknowledgment. Gifted student's personality is centered around the idea of self-actualization through development and implementation of one's gifts and abilities. They mostly value characteristics like "readiness to attack difficult problems", "inventiveness", "curiosity", "breadth of interests", "ambitiousness", "originality and flexibility in thinking" in themselves. In their Ideal Self they stress on improved effectiveness and work habits, rationalism and industriousness. So achievement orientation and task commitment are revealed to dominate in the self-concept of the gifted students. And that is exactly what makes them different.

The other boys and girls are giving their preference to good interpersonal relations and satisfying social contacts as a field of one's self-realization. They are interested in qualities like "politeness", "good manners", "sense of humor", "emotional stability", "sociability", "responsiveness", "understanding of the others" and they consider them as a principal criterion of personal worth.

Due to these differences, gifted students often have problems in their search for peer acceptance. When we compared Real and Ideal Selves of the gifted students,

greatest differences were observed in the ratings of the characteristics related to sociability and making friends: according to their own estimation, that is what gifted students are mostly lacking.

Similar findings were reported by Eccles, Bauman & Rotenberg (1989). They found intellectually gifted students age 7 to 14 to be superior in peer acceptance in the academic field, but not in social and sports activities. These students were also superior in school self-esteem, but did not differ from average IQ children in measured attitudes towards the self in the relations with peers and parents.

Gifted students in general don't enjoy greater self-acceptance and self-confidence, although they have positive self-concept and higher self-esteem.

#### To be or not to be a gifted girl?

The lack of appropriate role models for self-identification is another problem, experienced by the gifted youngsters, especially by girls. The question "to be or not to be a gifted individual?" seems to be a fact and not a fiction for them. Why?

We know that sex-role appropriateness of the behavior is subjected to a strongest cultural stereotypization. In our culture task orientation and orientation towards achievements are still considered to be mainly a sign of male-appropriate behaviour and not to be female-convenient features. Because of that preference for intellectual

activities and high-level achievements are usually considered to be a departure from the socially approved "female" behaviour and are often interpreted as a lack of individual resources to fit the sex role requirements. At least this is the way it is very often interiorized by the gifted girls. Unaware of other options available, these girls just assumed they have to choose between either pursuing their interests or being a "true" woman, as the other girls are. They estimate themselves as less beautiful and less attractive than the other girls do; they also assign significantly lower value to "family happiness" as a life goal.

These findings show us that this population is experiencing severe psychological difficulties when trying to bring to terms social expectancies for being a girl and its own interests and motivations. Gifted girls have to pay greater psychological price for being both a girl and a gifted individual. They don't know how to deal with what appear to be a dilemma for them - career or family. And the society is even sharpening this juxtaposition rather than helping them in their sometimes painful fight for self-identity and complete self-actualization.

Facing the same kind of problems, Harding and Berger (1979) organized a Future Images Seminar for high school gifted girls which got them together to meet outstanding career women and to discuss with them options in combining successfully career, marriage and family. The



evaluation of the outcomes of the Seminar stress the need for appropriate career education programmes for gifted young women.

### Is Creativity a Value?

#### Pupils' Response

Gifted subjects we studied are both scoring higher on need for creativity and innovations and valuing higher creativity as a life goal. Embedded in leading values, creativity has its positive influence on students' high-level performance by providing its evaluative justification and by supporting one's efforts in cases of temporary failure.

In terms of values hierarchy our gifted students were quite similar to their peers, except for creativity - the difference in its ranks between the groups of gifted and normal students is the greatest one we observed. What does that mean?

In a society like our where creativity and achievements are emphasized, this phenomenon might reflect a kind of psychological defence on the part of those who perceive themselves as non-achievers. The average school population decreases the value of creative performance in order to avoid negative psychological experiences that the fact of its non-involvement in creative activities might cause. On the other side, it might be that just because of this non-involvement they don't understand the variety of valuable

possibilities for personal growth and acknowledgement that creativity presents indeed.

Whatever the interpretation would be, such a differentiation in the values systems is supporting and is even deepening the differentiation between the students themselves. And this is unfavorable for both the gifted and their peers. Many children fail to develop their abilities because neither they nor the school recognize their potentialities and nourish their realization. Ones who succeed in realizing outstanding achievements in their own fields aren't good company for these children. And gifted achievers, wrapped in an atmosphere of misunderstanding and non-acceptance, can easily give up and sacrifice their further development and personal fulfillment.

That is why the extension and the enrichment of the common curriculum and the implementation of creativity methods in the normal schools are of greatest importance, when educational provisions for the gifted are planned. This is the best way to guarantee that all gifted children will be recognized and their development will be fostered, whenever and wherever they enter school. The fact is that most of the gifted students remain in regular classrooms for most of their schooling. This is the best way to help each child to discover his/her potentialities and to make use of them. By so doing, the differentiation between gifted and non-gifted will gradually disappear, as everyone will have the opportunity to find out one's own area of expertise.

Therefore, a more favorable to giftedness and creativity school climate might originate. And that's what we are striving for, isn't it? Such a strategy requires the least additional resources, mainly for teachers' training. Because of that it is highly effective for the education in general too and of use for all children. So that gifted education is consonant with humanistic values and with the ideas of social justice.

#### Teachers' Response

A research with 6th grade teachers has shown that they consider creativity to be not as relevant to achievements in school as intelligence is. Such a lack of understanding for the creativity as an important aspect of children's learning and cognitive development obviously makes teachers rather insensitive to the variety of its manifestations. We were quite surprised by this finding, due to the fact that in the students' population those teachers are working with, a moderate positive correlation between creativity scores and school marks was found.

Biases in teachers' perception of creativity are complemented by cultural stereotypes in teachers' perceptions of the ideal pupil (Torrance, 1962). In a study of the images of the ideal pupil we found that Bulgarian teachers from primary, elementary and secondary schools systematically rejected a rather stable pattern of personality characteristics, related with emotional withdrawal and self-sufficiency: "be timid", "be quit", "be

bushful", "be emotional", "be haughty, self-satisfied", "be sophisticated", "be domineering", "desires to excel". At the same time both research and observations show that unusual emotional sensitivity as well as unusual strength of the Self are very often concomitants of high creative abilities. So the non-acceptance of these personality characteristics may cause the non-acceptance of highly creative children having such traits. In this way the personality characteristics of the creatively gifted children make them children at risk: they are subjected to the risk of being discouraged in their search for personal dignity and uniqueness.

All these data led us to the idea to pay special attention in our Workshops on Giftedness and Creativity with teachers to: 1) increasing teachers' understanding of the multidimensionality of the concepts of giftedness and creativity; 2) training them in classroom techniques of observations, grounded in behavioral characteristics; 3) teaching them how to perceive children's individual characteristics as functional rather than dysfunctional.

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