

The drama of highly gifted children or what can we do to avoid personal tragedies

A Case study

(after Annette Heimbohel, Identifying the highly gifted. Problems and solutions. Münster 2001)

When Martin's parents had to decide which type of secondary school to send him to the elementary school teachers persuaded them to try out the secondary modern school¹ in spite of quite a few low average grades on his report card.

At his new school he soon began to attract attention and was often the topic of discussion among the teachers: he didn't do his homework, enjoyed arguing with his classmates, and played the class clown. Whenever he did participate in class discussions his answers would tend to lead the topic in another direction.

By the end of 5th grade he failed German, English and Maths, he was recommended to repeat the year since his achievements didn't meet expectations.

Martin's new teachers observed him carefully from the very beginning. During most classes he just sat there passively and whenever he raised his hand his classmates started laughing before he had even opened his mouth. Once again he soon turned into the class clown.

When the class was working on the topic "At the seaside" all children were allowed to draw a picture. Martin didn't participate in the activity. When the teacher checked the results it turned out that Martin had drawn an accurate, detailed plan of a harbour, with special harbours, fire facilities and more details. He continued not to do his homework but it soon became obvious that he had read a lot, was able to think logically and had an excellent memory. He achieved an outstanding grade in history, a subject he was very interested in.

Martin was passed on to 6th grade but his grades in Maths and English soon deteriorated. By pure coincidence an opportunity arose to have his intelligence tested (HAWIK=Hamburg Wechsler intelligence test for children) and much to the surprise of his teachers Martin scored well above average. In order not to jeopardize the therapy which was then started, Martin was passed on to 7th grade even though he had failed the core subjects Maths and English.

However, his grades continued to be erratic, they went up and down between outstanding and failing. By the end of 7th grade he was still failing Maths and English. Faced with the choice of either repeating the school year or changing to a secondary modern school he decided on the latter.

Talented and highly gifted children. How can we support and promote them to find their niche in our society? In the following ten minutes

I don't intend to present a new definition of the highly gifted child, neither do I want to come up with a new checklist to identify highly gifted students. There is plenty of specialist literature on this topic already. Instead I want to outline the possibilities and opportunities we have as headmaster² and teachers to deal with highly gifted children in our country. I will focus on the state of NRW within the FRG where I work as a headmaster.

¹ In Germany we have got three secondary school forms : grammar school, secondary modern school and a middle academic standard school

² School leader / superintendant/ school director

Nevertheless I'll start with a few words on the term "the highly gifted" in order to establish a common ground of understanding for the exchange of ideas during our seminar.

There is no universal definition of the term "highly gifted". Most people associate it with a high level of intelligence and its means of measurement, the intelligence test. The truth however is that the concept of being "highly gifted" has become more complex in the 20th and 21st century. It now includes all areas of human performance which can be summarized under the following aspects:

- intellectual talents in its various expressions
- artistic talents (dance, music, arts etc.)
- psychomotor talents (sports, dance, artistry)
- social skills (ability to cooperate, willingness to accept responsibility, acting according to high moral standards etc.)

All these aspects are connected with each other in various ways. No individual is going to be highly talented in all these areas at the same time. A special talent can become obvious in a single or a very specialized area.

For historical reasons the term "Elite" has had a very negative connotation in Germany. As a consequence not much attention has been devoted to the question of whether children who learn faster than the majority of their year group should be entitled to special opportunities to enhance their speed of learning, to be promoted according to their level of learning and understanding just like any other child. If the individual promotion of learning is considered a democratically legitimate right for everybody, highly gifted children should obtain opportunities to acceleratated and intensive learning processes in their areas of competence. Since the 80ies the scientific and pedagogical interest in the topic of the highly gifted has increased in Germany. There has been a lot of discussion on the highly gifted in the context of developmental psychology, theory of learning and pedagogy. The following two main streams of enhancement of children and adolescents have since been developed:

- educate teachers to recognize special gifts
- develop appropriate enhancement programs

The programs are not restricted to schools, they include institutions and places of learning outside school such as

- **universities:** pupils can be admitted to university courses, special seminars are developed and offered to highly gifted pupils (e.g.: University of Münster, University of Bielefeld)
- **academies:** summer schools for highly gifted pupils
- **competitions**

Individual schools are not left alone with the issue of how to deal with gifted children. Professional knowledge around this topic has been developed. There are experts on various specialities. To complement the offers individual schools have developed, a wide range of opportunities for the highly gifted pupils and their parents.

An increasing number of cities and communities have accepted the responsibility to set up offers for highly gifted pupils or to make already existing programs available to them.

Under the motto " talent is an opportunity" the ministry of school, youth and children of the state of NRW opened an internet page in February which presents a map of the various programs the different communities have developed:

www.chancen-nrw.de

I would now like to

1. present the NRW guidelines for the enhancement of highly gifted pupils
2. sketch one such local initiative using Düsseldorf as an example
3. list specific measures an individual school can put into practice

1. Guidelines of the school ministry of NRW

The existance and enhancement of the highly gifted is considered profitable for society in general. All initiatives to enhance the learning process of the highly gifted follow the motto " talent is an opportunity" - that means each talent!

1. The enhancement of the highly gifted is considered primarily a pedagogical area of action. Special strengths of individual pupils are to be promoted. The learning process is to be intensified. Recognize and promote differences : that means give equal opportunities to everybody. However giving everybody equal opportunities does not mean giving everybody the same treatment - committed and socially responsible politicians need to accept this differentiation in order to meet their obligation of giving a good education and further education to everybody.
2. The enhancement of the highly gifted is considered to be socially important. On the one hand high achievers are an economic factor, on the other hand they are essentially needed for the cultural future of a society.
3. This enhancement can only work if school, business and other institutions cooperate with each other. This cooperation is sought out and intensified. Big companies like Bertelsman or local bank branches (Kreissparkasse Köln) have demonstrated their commitment through financial sponsorship. School psychological consultancies, education centres, sports clubs and special interest clubs offer personal and spatial resources.
4. Schools should be places where the highly gifted are sought out and promoted. Not every highly gifted pupil is a self confident independent learner who is motivated and strives for the highest possible level of success. Individual highly gifted pupils can be very difficult learners, particularly for example if their talent isn't identified and enhanced at an early stage. Problems can arise when high performances are not recognizable because of the poor development of personality traits such as how to cope with stress, fear of failure or because of environmental aspects (critical life experiences, expectations to fulfill a certain role...). In that case the pupil's actual performance does not reflect his high potential , in other words "underachievement" . In these cases it is often difficult to identify the highly gifted pupils. It sometimes takes the results of a professional test to find out that we're dealing with a highly

gifted pupil. Unfortunately the identification of a highly gifted pupil does not automatically lead to success. The dependencies and interferences between non cognitive personality traits, environmental aspects and aspects of talent are dense and complex .

(see: The Munich Gifted Pupils Model after Heller and Hany)

Children are not consistently high achieving and assertive , they don´t fit into clichés. Schools therefore must offer differentiating programs rather than the promotion of an equal learning pace. They have to recognize talents, accept them and enhance them. The state has to give the schools freedom to develop differentiating enhancement concepts.

NRW concentrates on integrating the enhancement of the gifted. Special talents are promoted through programs of acceleration and enrichment, there is an accelerated acquisition of knowledge combined with an enrichment of challenges. In addition, systematic counseling must be in position to complement these programs.

5. Recently the development of the program for the highly gifted has involved particular children at preschool and primary school age:

- preschool teachers attend training courses on how to recognize and promote highly gifted children
- entrance age to primary schools has become more flexible, it is easier for younger children to start school at an earlier age
- cooperation between preschool, primary school and secondary school
- development of pre diagnostic instruments which enable teachers to identify conspicuous children and have them examined by experts.

About 2% are considered as highly gifted , that means there are 300000 children and adolescents in Germany. At the moment about 50% of the highly gifted children are identified at school, but only 20-30% in preschool. Why is that?

The reason seems to lie in a set of prejudices which leads people to think that young children are simply incapable of doing certain things. Abilities that are not allowed cannot be shown, they are inhibited. As a consequence children are dissuaded from learning to read at a very young age, logical thinking is looked down upon as wisecracking, clever children are confronted with suspicion and prejudice. They are not allowed to demonstrate that they are capable of thinking profoundly.

6. The further development of the program for the highly gifted includes the professional training of teachers. Courses are offered on a regular basis, they address beginners as well as experienced teachers . A module on highly gifted children has just become an integral part of the course program for the training of school counselors.

7. It is important to educate parents and parent counselors. They need to be encouraged to acknowledge their child´s special talent and, where possible, enhance their development. They need support to cope with possible negative reactions from their environment such as jealousy or an unbearable amount of praise which leads to (false) expectations.

There are also parents who think their child is gifted when it is not. They also need professional counseling and advice for the sake of their child´s development. Any work with highly gifted children can only succeed with intensive parental education and cooperation.

An example of a communal initiative: Düsseldorf

In 1999 the political representatives of all parties of Düsseldorf commissioned the school authorities in cooperation with the school psychological service to develop a model on how to promote highly gifted children.

Aims:

- Gifted high achieving pupils are supported to gain access to extra learning opportunities which enhance their talents, for example they should be able to move up a year without losing contact to their peers which is vital for their social development. Integrated enhancement should be considered.
- Highly gifted children with behavioural problems get support to find a school that suits and promotes their talents.
- There should be a definite contact person for teachers to give expert advice to the parents of highly gifted children.
- A coordinated approach to the enhancement of gifted children should be developed using the already existing facilities in the areas of culture and education including schools. These resources should cooperate in forming a community network.

A

city committee "enhancement of gifted children" was founded to guide the preparation of the model project and the foundation of a consultation centre, the CCB Düsseldorf (Competence Centre for the enhancement of gifted children)

Members of this committee: headmasters to represent the different school forms (preschool, primary school, secondary modern school, grammar school, comprehensive school), directors of music schools, museums, theatre and sports clubs.

Common points of reference of the different members:

- Differential enhancement of existing talents is considered as equality of chances
- All varieties of talent are included, not just the cognitive ones. Children and adolescents are addressed who are highly gifted in one or a number of areas, who show outstanding intellectual, creative, musical or sportive skills.
- Psychological and pedagogical diagnostics ensure the identification of the highly gifted, in particular with regard to underachievers.
- Every effort is made to ensure qualified counseling, to offer a wide range of possible learning paths (e.g. Japanese courses at the education centres), and to make use of institutionalized measures (e.g. to move up a group of gifted pupils within a school)

- Make an effort to identify gifted children at an early stage and give them the opportunity to experience success

Contact Centre : CCB (Competence Centre for the enhancement of gifted children)

This is responsible for the development of the program providing service for individuals and schools. Appropriate counselors are found and professional training courses for teachers are organized.

First results:

Preschool : After a weekend seminar for interested families suitable children were chosen to participate in a " play and learn circle" for highly gifted children over a period of a few weeks.

Primary School : 6 out of 94 primary schools in Düsseldorf were chosen to participate in a project for highly gifted children. Experiences made by these schools are then passed on to further primary schools.

Secondary Schools: Secondary modern schools are developing a project for pupils who are highly gifted in the area of technology. Grammar schools and comprehensive schools are offering specific opportunities to specialize, for example through subject choice of various foreign languages or a concentration in the natural sciences or artistic subjects.

Places of learning outside school: The music school, the art academy for children , the literature centre , the theatre for children and youth as well as the city sport administration organized events to discover special talents. They then developed and ran various development courses.

Unfortunately many of these activities outside school cost money so that children from poorer family backgrounds are underrepresented.

Possibilities how to put ideas into practice

Please take a look at the materials enclosed to find specific ways of how to put the models of enhancement of the highly gifted children into practice at school. They illustrate a variety of methods of enrichment and acceleration to promote pupils individually, in small groups or in a class.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention. I'm now looking forward to a stimulating discussion .