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Teacher of the gifted – what is needed?

*Teachers can change lives
with just the right mix of chalk and challenges.*
Joyce A. Myers

The paper casts an eye on the teacher of the gifted as well as on the teacher in general. There seems to be a consensus that gifted students have special needs, that they also need teacher with special abilities, but have the teachers to be gifted, too? A view in the relevant literature shows a lot of research, discussion and reflection around the characteristics, the role and the education of teachers for gifted and talented students. Even not all will agree, it is possible to say that it is not necessary that teachers themselves have to be gifted. Feldhusen (1994) for example stated that the characteristics of good teachers of the gifted are the same as those often found in gifted students themselves, and that the characteristics represent virtues that should characterize all teachers. With these basic idea the aim of the paper is to reflect the competencies and qualities of a teacher, who should be good teacher for all students and thus also for the gifted students. Using the metaphor 'teaching as art' the teacher's professionalism will be presented and discussed as a combination of personal and professional skills, which makes the teacher able to create and to orchestrate learning processes. The good teacher knows the rules of teaching and he/she is able to apply them appropriately to the particular case. To be a good teacher for all requires a long developmental process of becoming a teacher. The core in this process has to be the development of the professional self, which ultimately makes the teacher a 'wise teacher'.

Keywords: *teacher of the gifted, teaching as art, teacher competencies, the wise teacher*

Introduction

The big meta-study by the New Zealand school researcher John Hattie (2013) has strongly confirmed that the most important component for success in teaching learning processes is the teacher: all depends on the teacher. This is probably no surprise rather a cliché, which easily overlooks the implicit implication of this statement, namely that the source of the variance of the learning outcomes lies with the teachers, too. Therefore, Hattie specifies his statement that *"what some teachers do is important, especially for those who teach in a deliberate and visible way. When these professionals observe that learning takes place or does not take place, they intervene in a well-intentioned and meaningful way"* (p. 28; author's translation). When Hattie here emphasizes that 'some teachers' do so, he draws attention to the individual component of pedagogical action, which first and foremost manifests itself in the personality of the teacher. Learning is a very personal matter for both the learner and the teacher. What, however, is the quality that makes some teachers 'a teacher' in a deep sense?

When Albom (1997) describes the ability of outstanding teachers as to see potential and support its realization, it seems as a vague description, an almost indefinable quality that makes the difference. *“Have you ever really had a teacher? One who saw you as a raw but precious thing, a jewel that, with wisdom, could be polished to a proud shine? If you are lucky enough to find your way to such teachers, you will always find your way back”* (p. 192).

When we reflect about a ‘gifted teacher’ it should not be understood in that way that the gifted teacher is the teacher for gifted students. A gifted teacher is desirable for all students. This understanding is in accordance to Feldhusen (1994), the famous American educational psychologist and giftedness researcher, who said that the characteristics of good teachers of the gifted represent virtues that should characterize all teachers.

Teaching as Art

It was first Howard Gardner (1993), who expanded the concept of intelligence and identified seven distinct intelligences. Among these there are probably ‘interpersonal intelligence’ and its correlated ability ‘intrapersonal intelligence’, which most and best clearly distinguishes the good or gifted educator. Interpersonal intelligence is the ability *“to read the intentions and desires – even when these have been hidden – of many other individuals and, potentially, to act upon this knowledge...”* (p. 239). In the same understanding, he described the intertwined ability ‘intrapersonal intelligence’, which focused attention on itself: *“... access to one’s own feeling life”* (p. 239). Exactly this exceptional ability, to ascertain and to respond to others’ thoughts, feelings and intentions, this can be referred to ‘the art of teaching’ how it is described of Schwab (as cited in Shulman 1986). *“Every art, whether it be teaching, stone carving or judicial control of a court of law [...] has rules, but knowledge of the rules does not make one an artist. Art arises as the knower of the rules learns to apply them appropriately to the particular case. Application, in turn, requires acute awareness of the particularities of that case and ways in which the rule can be modified to fit the case without complete abrogation of the rule. In art, the form must adapted to the matter”* (p.31). To manage all components in learning situations, to find the situational best of all possible variations and to combine with the most adequate pedagogical and didactical strategies, these all characterize a high level of sovereignty and virtuosity, which make experts to ‘artisans’. The interpersonal intelligent teacher lays a lot of empathy in his work, the teaching-learning situation, but not in favor to him- or herself, but for the students. They offer challenging curricula, they open it for the view and the level of each student and they are skillful in

monitoring the students' learning by giving supervising and feedback. In this sense, also Nieto (2003) underlines the outstanding importance of the 'interpersonal giftedness' (Towers & Porath 2001), when he stated that schools are "not simply sites where particular strategies are enacted. They are, above all, places where relationships are created, relationships that can be tremendously significant in either positive or negative ways for young people" (p.387).

Competencies of the Teacher of the Gifted

"The competencies and characteristics attributed to excellent teachers have begun to assume almost Herculean proportions. Teachers need professional expertise in subject matter and pedagogy. Teachers with deep conceptual understanding of their subject area ask higher level questions, better engage students, and enable students to apply and transfer knowledge"

(Croft 2003, p.558). This claim may be correct, but in fact must in principle apply to every teacher. This impression reinforce also by looking at the various overviews of characteristics of 'expert teachers', 'effective teachers' or 'teachers of the gifted' (e.g. Davis & Rimm 1998; Croft 2003; Vialle & Quigley 2002; Porath 2009; Stronge 2010; Chan 2010). All the lists and overviews of teacher's characteristics and competencies do not differentiate substantially.

They show a combination of personality traits, knowledge and skills, professional attitudes and teaching approaches and strategies (s.a. Vialle & Quigley 2002; Aleksandrovich & Zoglowek 2012). Therefore, it seems to be more productive not to put the focus on characteristics, but on teacher behavior as shown in competence behavior and role behavior. Renzulli already raised this postulation in 1978. Finally is this assessment also in accordance to Gagné's (2005) pedagogical approach that not static personality characteristics contribute to improvement of giftedness, but active promoters or catalysts. Gagné's model is to understand more as a developmental theory, because learning and practice are the moderators that natural abilities are transformed into talents. *"The 'gifts' are the genetic endowments while talents are the product of the synergistic interaction of genetic predispositions with home, school, and the physical and social environment surrounding a child"* (Feldhusen & Jarwan 2000, p.273).

The list of competent behavior, which Croft (2003) after analysis of several reports about successful teachers has summarized, seems to be most relevant in this context.

"Insights into the affective needs of gifted students encourage highly successful teachers to:

- Inspire and motivate students

- Reduce tension and anxiety for students who are frequently perfectionists

- Plan for high levels of excitability, including high energy and powerful emotions, as well as disruptive humor and extreme competitiveness
 - Encourage patterns of divergent and original thinking
 - Help students overcome tendencies toward disorganization, inattentiveness, and/or social ineptness
 - Recognize student perceptiveness, often expressed as the awareness of truth and justice, but also as intolerance and rigidity
 - Appreciate high levels of sensitivity, expressed both in compassion and easily hurt feelings”
- (Croft 2003, 561).

In this context Croft pointed out that *”commitment to student learning is best reflected through knowledge of theories (e.g. multiple intelligence) and experiences in classroom that have taught teachers that each student has different strength, even gifts”* (p.559).

The probably most crucial competence for all teacher is the ability to differentiate well. This is in favor of all students, including the gifted ones. Good differentiation is the first step to detection and identification of giftedness and special talent, after this can follow tests and measurements, and last but not least attention and good supervising. *“Talent alone is no guarantee of future success. Every potential talent needs to be cultivated and nurtured with great discipline for many years if it is to be applied usefully”* (Czikszenmihalyi a.o. 1993, p.1).

Roles of the Teacher of the Gifted

The role of the teacher has undergone several changes in the last century, both in general and in particular. Overall, one can say that these have led to a greater student orientation. An important aspect of this student orientation is the endeavor to gain more knowledge about the individual background and development opportunities of each student. Arlin (1999) called this endeavor getting *“sense of the context of instruction and the context in which students are being instructed”* (p.13). It is important to understand the classroom as a diverse space related to the persons, the learning materials, the learning opportunities and the relationships of all of them to each other. This is the prerequisite for flexible teaching that accommodates and responds to students needs. In the course of a more and more differentiating and individualizing education, the situation has also improved considerably for gifted students. In the past, the roles of the counselor, the consultant and the coordinator were generally reserved for the special teachers or leaders, but nowadays these roles are increasingly being taken over by every teacher. The individualized teaching also leads to an individualized relationship

between teacher and student, because every student needs their own affection, much attention and adapted tasks.

It seems appropriate to conclude that the teachers of the gifted must not necessary to be gifted themselves, but they have to be professional teachers. That means that they are able to adapt their general teacher competences, their interpersonal attitudes and their various teaching approaches to the special needs of the gifted children as well as to the special needs of all students. Professionalism, however, means also to know about the own limits and to include other colleagues, specialists or consultants, in favor of development and promotion of the students, of each student.

Education and Development of the Teacher of the Gifted

After the previous reflections, it seems that the teacher activities and the teaching approaches in relation to the gifted students are not far away general teaching situation, especially if you take inclusion seriously, which is the current educational policy today. Inclusion means the right to a common individual education for every child, also the gifted. The crucial point in the inclusion policy is that everybody in his or her otherness can be enrichment for all the others.

To be or to become a good teacher for all students is not least a matter of professional experience and professional progression. As a simple but impressive example, Fuller & Bown's (1975) model 'stages of learning to teach' can be used. Even if it is almost fifty years old, it still has its validity, as it reflects the 'natural' developmental course of becoming a teacher (s.a. Zoglowek 1995):

1. stage: 'survival stage' - reference point of the development is the teacher him/herself
 - main aim is to survive in the classroom
2. stage: 'mastery stage' - reference point is the teaching situation; transition from
 him/herself to the situation
 - main aim is managing the teaching situation
3. stage: 'routine stage' - reference point are the students and their individual needs;
 transition to an individual-pedagogical perspective
 - main aim is pedagogical responsibility for the students

Routine is here to understand as a positive attribute that means a sovereign attitude to oneself and the teaching situation, which gives the freedom and the possibility to lead all attention to

the students. This stage of development may be akin to ‘being a teacher’ (Coleman 2004), an experience that reflects successful integration of all basic competencies of teaching. Nearly in the same sense, but with other terms, Porath (2009) describes the ‘development of gifted teachers’ with the end result “*teaching as orchestration*” (p.832), which is “*the result of mature forms of understanding of the act of teaching and self as teacher*” (p.833). The encounter and the approach to the gifted students as well as to every student needs a special understanding and adapted manner. These abilities teachers have to learn and to develop, in order that they can fulfill the responsibility, the demands and the challenges of each child. This understand is a result of a developmental process, which should be a central part in the education of the professional teacher, and which shows up in the professional ‘self as teacher’. According to Porath the ‘self as teacher’ is composed of these aspects:

- “1. Detect and symbolize complex and highly differentiated sets of feelings Gardner 1983) as they relate to elaborated beliefs and values about teaching practice.
 2. Complex feelings, beliefs, and values provide the basis for ‘inner work’ [...] related to teaching practices.
 3. Depth of knowledge resulting from inner work is used in relating to, supporting and understanding students”
- (Porath 2009, 834).

Teachers who have appropriated and developed these qualities have integrated the components of the teaching-learning situation, can center the focus to the students and are able to orchestrate teaching.

A Characteristic of the Teacher of the Gifted: Wisdom

Arlin (1993; 1999) has introduced the term ‘wisdom’ in teacher education and understanding of teaching. She describes the wise teacher as one who reflects “*an orientation toward self, students, and teaching that highlights the teacher as learner in the act of constructing knowledge with her students*” (Arlin 1999, p.12). ‘Wisdom’ seems to be a good and comprehensive term, which in a way integrates and lays great stress upon the teacher qualities, which has been emphasized in the models of Fuller & Bown (1975) and Porath (2009). The professional self and thus the interplay of intelligence and personality and the results in this interplay (e.g. creativity, social intelligence) are the ingredients of wisdom (s.a. Porath 2009). Wise teachers are characterized by

- Rich factual knowledge about teaching and about their subject matter

- Rich procedural knowledge about teaching strategies and the practical knowledge of how and when to use them
- A sense of the context of instruction and the context in which the students are being instructed
- An awareness of the relativism associated with variations in values and priorities of both their peers and their students
- An uncertainty about the effects of specific teaching decisions coupled with a willingness to take risks and to try a variety of ways to actively participate with the students in the learning process (Arlin 1999, p.13).

Flexible, differentiated and inclusive teaching, which integrates all students, gives a good learning platform for all students. The wise teacher is able to design such one, for the enrichment of all. *“Where there is excellence in general education, gifted education will more likely flourish; where gifted education flourishes, there is increased potential for excellence in general education”* (Parker 1996, p. 159).

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