

Support of the Education of Gifted Students in Poland.

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The term 'gifted students' refers to persons who are characterised by a high intelligence quotient and a high level of general or special abilities or who distinguish themselves with particular achievements at school, in all sorts of contests and subject-related olympiads. Thus, the identification of a gifted student is essentially based on two criteria: a psychological criterion – tantamount to a high intelligence quotient index, measured by means of a test of intelligence, and a psycho-pedagogical criterion, which includes an above-average level of school and out-of-school achievements (Sękowski, 1998). Limont notes that despite the multitude of strategies and methods useful in diagnosing gifted persons, so far no uniform system has been worked out, which could be used to unequivocally identify such individuals. According to the author, apart from the criteria taking into account the intelligence quotient index and all sorts of achievements, one should also consider nominations by teachers, parents and peers (Limont, 2005).

Researchers dealing with the problem of giftedness concentrate on the functioning of the mind of gifted persons, the mechanisms at the basis of giftedness, but also, more and more often, on problems embracing a wider context of the activity of those individuals. One can thus observe transition from research concentrating on giftedness alone to that devoted to the gifted student. The knowledge of the specificity of functioning of gifted persons allows one to adapt educational strategies and optimise programmes so that they promote the development of those individuals (Ledzińska, 2010).

The education of gifted persons, aimed at developing their potential abilities and achievements, should ensure an even and harmonious development of all psychological functions as well as an optimum social functioning. Nowadays, various practical solutions are used to provide education and support to gifted persons, however, the fundamental problem concerning the conditions of educating these persons is the question whether they should study among other equally gifted peers or whether it is better when the students attend ordinary schools together with peers of average abilities. Inasmuch as there are no doubts as to the necessity of supporting the development of gifted students, the problem of choosing between an integrative and a specific system of education seems a difficult one (Sękowski, 2000). Those in favour of educating gifted students in conditions adjusted to their intellectual needs and possibilities emphasise the specific nature of those children's needs and the necessity of optimum development and self-fulfilment as well as of adjusting the teaching methods and the pace of work. In their opinion, integrative schooling of such students together with persons of average abilities, inhibits the development of the talented children, without preventing their social and emotional difficulties (Limont & Cieślukowska, 2004). Supporters of the integrative approach underline the role of interaction with averagely bright peers and social development as well as accenting the risks following from special teaching of gifted students. Experiences of individuals working with gifted persons point to the fact that both approaches may represent an effective form of educating those students, but may also be rather uncreative and ignore the real needs following from the specific nature of the functioning of gifted persons (Urban & Sękowski, 1993). Education of gifted students, due to the special

educational and developmental needs they exhibit, should be versatile and take into account both analytical and creative intelligence as well as the shaping of social abilities and life wisdom. Apart from intellectual development, this type of education should also concentrate on personal development (Sękowski, 2005b, 2010).

It seems obvious that to create an educational system supporting the development of students' abilities, one needs appropriate educational acts and directives enabling the implementation of specific educational programmes (Limont, 2005). In the Polish educational system, new acts have been developed as part of reforms in education, which contain regulations on the possibilities of educating gifted students. Article 1 of the Act of 7th September 1991 states that the system of education shall provide care for gifted students by delivering education plans and giving the students the possibility of completing any type of school within a shortened time frame (Education System Act of 7th September 1991). The Act has been supplemented, among others, by *The Order of the Minister of National Education and Sport of 19 December 2001 concerning conditions and methods of granting permissions for Individual Education Plans or Accelerated Learning Programs and organization of IEP and ALP*. This document specifies the conditions for the development of a student's special abilities and interests, which mainly involve adjustment of the teaching content and teaching pace to his or her individual possibilities and needs. It also contains selected educational solutions which help satisfy the needs of gifted students. Some important forms of support for students with above-average abilities include "the Polish national grant system", olympiads, championships, competitions, the activities of the Society of Creative Schools, the Polish Children's Fund, the educational activity of educational care centres and supporting actions of local governments (The Ministry of Education on the Gifted Student, 1999).

One example of a school created especially for the purposes of working with outstandingly gifted students is Zespół Szkół Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Gimnazjum i Liceum Akademickie (The Nicolaus Copernicus University Academic Secondary School Complex) in Toruń. The institution that runs the schools is Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The school has a Curriculum Committee whose members are NCU professors. The curriculum is divided into three strands: liberal arts, natural sciences and mathematics. Owing to the individualized learning programmes, the students, starting from second grade, can choose elective classes based on their interests. Higher grade students participate in seminars. The school implements the model of an enriched and accelerated education. Students of the Academic Secondary School Complex can take part in classes at NCU with the same rights as university students; they can also attend classes specially prepared for them by NCU professors. The school hosts a series of thematic lectures aimed at arousing students' interests and offers them the possibility of participating in scientific research and art workshops. Moreover, the students are encouraged to get involved as volunteers in pro-social activities and to take part in humanitarian actions, which raise their awareness of social problems and the need to engage in pro-social activities (Deptuła & Kierys, 2007, www.gimakad.torun.pl).

Among institutions created for gifted students, art schools, which teach visual arts and music deserve some attention. Artistic schooling in Poland provides gifted children and youth with the opportunity of receiving individualized education in various fields of art. The system comprises

- (1) art schools which offer courses in artistic subjects alone;
- (2) art schools which offer both artistic and general-knowledge courses in accordance with the same core curriculum and principles as schools of general education;
- (3) artistic institutions, including art centres, which enable the development of interests and artistic abilities of students at various levels of education (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage).

Artistic education in Poland is an area where the results of intensive psychological research are the most conspicuous. The system of education of musically talented children allows persons with abilities in this domain to be relatively early and adequately auditioned for acceptance to a music school (Sękowski, 1992). The music school system in Poland has a three-stage structure and comprises three types of schools: lower-level music schools, higher level music schools and music academies. Lower-level music schools educate students aged 6 to 16 years who have successfully passed so-called suitability tests evaluating their musical talent, psycho-physical condition and predisposition for studying in institutions of this type. In this kind of school, children are offered artistic courses alone within 6-year or 4-year programmes. Apart from lower-level music schools, there are also general education lower-level music schools, in which apart from a programme covering artistic courses, the students also take general education courses. These institutions only admit children aged six or seven. The teaching programmes in higher-level music schools and general education higher-level music schools have an analogous form. The former admit candidates from age 10 to 21 on the basis of a passed entrance exam, and graduates can receive a vocational certificate. General education higher-level music schools, apart from artistic training, offer general education courses at a secondary school (middle school and high school) level. The graduates, apart from a vocational certificate, can receive a maturity certificate (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage). In some schools of this type individual education plans are created for especially gifted students. An example of such an institution is the Lower and Higher-Level General Education Music School in Gdańsk, where individual class schedules are constructed for students showing outstanding abilities; thanks to this the students can adjust their learning pace to their own possibilities and use the time saved in this way for additional music lessons or participation in various types of workshops and competitions. Gifted students can also accelerate their learning process and graduate from the school in a shorter time (Szatan, 2005).

Fine art schooling in Poland has a two-stage structure and comprises fine art schools of general education (which admit primary school graduates and offer 6-year teaching programmes) or art high schools (which admit middle school graduates and offer 4-year teaching programmes) and fine art academies. In secondary art schools, students take general education courses and art courses. Graduates can receive a vocational certificate and a maturity certificate (Ministry of Culture and National Heritage).

Institutions which promote the integrative approach to the education of gifted students in Poland include the Society of Creative Schools, Association of Active Schools (an organization with aims analogous to the Association of Olympic Teachers). On the initiative of these organisations, networks of schools offering programmes for students with above-average abilities are being created. Each network has its centre (a mother school), in which specialists prepare instruction and education programmes adapted for gifted children. The Society of Creative Schools, which is a rank-and-file educational movement founded by Danuta Nakonieczna, concentrates on the individualization of teaching, incorporation into curricula of students' research work done in cooperation with academic staff, and participation of students in various types of science camps (Nakonieczna, 1998). The Association of Olympic Teachers facilitates the cooperation of teachers of gifted children to optimize educational programmes and to determine the educational needs of this specific category of students (Limont, 2005).

In Poland, students can participate in subject-related olympiads and championships organized by universities, scientific centres, scientific and professional associations and other educational or scientific institutions. Among the various forms of support for the development of gifted students, an important role is also played by specialty and general camps and academic summer camps organised for gifted adolescents. These types of activities are conducted, among others, by the Polish Children's Fund. The aim of this Fund is to disseminate information concerning the special educational needs of gifted children and adolescents and methods of working with them as well as to provide institutional and material conditions for the development of those students. Depending on the kind of abilities, the Fund provides various forms of support to gifted persons. It organizes seminars, specialist workshops and research training for cognitively and technically gifted persons; musically gifted students are offered participation in music workshops and concerts, receive partial funding for participation in competitions and are aided in purchasing musical instruments and accessories. Artistically gifted persons take part in plein-air workshops, art workshops, exhibitions and tutorials at Fine Art Academies. Furthermore, all fellows of the Polish Children's Fund can participate in language camps (www.fundusz.org).

The process of supporting gifted persons requires integration of psychological and pedagogical knowledge. The ability to diagnose giftedness as well as the knowledge of the specific nature of the functioning of persons with above-average abilities are essential for developing optimum forms of both instructional and educational activities. It seems that the development of awareness and knowledge of the specific needs of gifted persons in Poland will make it possible in the future to refine the existing forms of support and to generate new solutions that could contribute to the development of an aid system for gifted students.

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