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## **GIFTEDNESS IN LIFELONG PERSPECTIVE. A POSTULATE FOR EXTENSION OF THE RESEARCH AREA**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The proposed text is an attempt to go beyond thinking about skills outside the age framework and formal learning as well as an attempt to draw attention to the potentials of lifelong research on high abilities. The giftedness which (in my opinion) still constitute a small percentage of pedagogues' research interests<sup>1</sup>, is most often identified with school achievements and adequate age for that accomplishment. The term *giftedness* usually coexists with the expression of *gifted* or *talented children*. (Borzym 1979, Bates Munday 2005, Giza 2006, Limont 2012, Dyrda 2012). The monographs and articles on the subject, do provide us with such terms as gifted adult, and even if it exists, it implies specific skills and is referred to as competence or capacity, and is also considered primarily through measurable achievements usually in a professional or specialist field. Experiences of social life, as well as everyday observations, cast doubt on the unwritten agreement on the exclusivity of research on the abilities given to school pedagogy and the psychology of the adolescence period. There is no shortage of talented adults in the media, the press or in the literature. They are inventors, artists, doctors, Nobel Prize winners, innovators and pioneers. Their high abilities did not always manifest during childhood, their talent is often developing along with long-term work. Therefore, is there space for talented adult in pedagogy?

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<sup>1</sup> I wrote about trends in Polish research on high abilities in Educational Research Review: I. Murawska, *Contemporary tendencies in Polish research on high abilities*, "Educational Research Review" 2014, no. 19.

## INTERNAL INSPIRATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The experience of attending the school for gifted students has made me particularly involved in the subject matter. I am writing about it to mark personal and emotional interest in the area under discussion as well as to try to understand and organize my experience, then to confront it with theory. I noticed that in many people special predispositions appeared only in early adulthood, a few years after graduating from school. I observe gifted or talented adults every day. By and large, I encounter them on my way all the time. I have discovered in myself a few talents that have been revealed in recent years. I would risk the statement that some talents appear in people even at retirement age. Therefore, I am concerned with the question of talented adults, talented graduates, talented people. Why do we most often identify giftedness with a very young age in the public and scientific debate? The content from these messages (in my opinion) suggests that for the high abilities may be too late in adulthood. However, what if an adult discovers a poetic talent? What if it will be characterized by the flexibility and originality of thinking? What if the author can illustrate several solutions to the same problem? Not much – unless the potential is noticed by the employer. Sometimes we write about creative people or professionals in some field, but do not we ignore talented adults in the matter of developing their skills?

### TALENTED ADULT?

I decided to search in the space of the Internet for more terms describing talented adult, as I was curious how it is characterized. I found phrases such as: *capable of reproduction/breeding, children who may be envied by adults of their ability to digest milk, the role of adults is to discover these talents (in a child), a talented child notices mistakes in adult reasoning, why top students grow up on average adult, he is not able to respect her partner's feelings, capable of everything, the impact of child's talents on adult life...* Therefore, I will venture to say that adults' abilities are not always associated positively, and they are certainly related differently than in children. There is some value added here – often in the form of a pejorative factor.

## AIM AND QUESTIONS

The subject of the proposed text is a reflection on the status of pedagogy of abilities from a lifetime perspective. The goal, however, is not to criticize the achievements of researchers (whom I value very much), but a certain reflection on why giftedness is mainly discussed in relation to a particular period of life. I would also like to specify that study of gifted students is extremely important, necessary and valuable (I still feel unsatisfied with the amount of research in that field), furthermore, I consider wasting of children's talents as a serious inhibitor to human development and civilization. Nevertheless, I am intrigued by the specific research tendency (but not only) and I want to explore the subject of talented student. I am particularly concerned with several issues. Do the talents have a certain age (or limits)? Is there a place for adults in pedagogy of abilities study? Can a person of all ages become a subject of pedagogy of abilities? What can pedagogy of abilities gain by expanding the research interests?

The decision about a research group lies within the competence of the researchers and their choice. However, it is worth considering why researchers that are concerned with giftedness (rather) do not choose adults for their study groups. Maybe pragmatism lies at the root of this state of affairs, as it is easier to identify a talented person at school, where respondents can be found quickly. The young gifted student participates in competitions and is tested in many ways to verify his or her knowledge potential, and there are many other chances to demonstrate that talent at the school stage. Maybe in the course of adult life it is difficult to think about potential and talents, because only the effects and the measurable results count in the whirl of professional life? It seems that tangible achievements are not necessary in identifying younger people at the beginning of an educational path. Is it too late for adults to develop their high abilities as they will not be genius children after all? The fact that an adult is not noticed in these studies may also be caused by theoretical foundations and definitions adopted for the needs of the pedagogy of abilities, that is why it is worth to review them briefly here.

## THE CONCEPT OF GIFTEDNESS

In the pedagogical sciences, we encounter various definitions of giftedness. The term itself is usually associated with general skills, intelligence and

formal education, especially of school age. Other researchers are closer to the lifelong perspective, among them the definition proposed by Franz Mönks, in the light of which the giftedness is an individual potential that manifests itself through outstanding achievements in one or many areas (Limont 2012, p. 16). It is also worth specifying the concept of aptitudes, which is directly related to the directional skills or a given talent (Limont 2012, p. 17). Which definition of giftedness can also embrace adults in their theoretical framework?

The concept of giftedness is a key in researching talented individuals. Diversity in the way it is understood, a wide range of scientific definitions, as well as colloquial opinions of the society, makes it impossible to adopt one definition as it does not seem to involve the problem or immediately suggests a question about selecting a given group based on this concept. In the literature on the subject, there are many definitions of giftedness, hence in the considerations of pedagogy and psychology it is used in many senses. For this reason, the operationalization of the concept may become problematic for the researcher. In Wiesława Limont's opinion, a key factor in the research on giftedness is to choose a specific definition and concept of high abilities that allows the application and development of an appropriate theory as well as the research methods to accurately identify and to explore the essence of the matter (Limont 2012, p. 15). In turn, Teresa Giza emphasizes that defining the notion of gifted learner is not only important in theoretical considerations, but it is also crucial in helping the educational practice as well as in supporting the learners' special educational needs. She points out that one of the most popular definitions of giftedness is the one published in Sidney Marland report, which highly contributed to the adoption of the law regarding the care of high-achieving students (Giza 2006, p. 44):

“Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society”(Eby, Smutny 1998, p. 15).

The above-mentioned definitions clearly emphasize that it is a child or a student that is gifted. For adults these concepts are only applied in

a certain perspective, seeing them as a former student or a young gifted who has developed skills over time. More adequate, considering the subject of this paper, seems to be psychological theory that does not limit the age group of the recipient, where the concept of giftedness usually refers to the specific properties of the human psyche that allow effective action in some field and to perform exact tasks. One of the most popular definitions states that: high abilities are such personal differences, which make that individual people with the same motivation and prior preparation, achieve unequal results in learning and action under comparable external conditions (Pietrasinski 1976, p. 736).

An interesting concept of the definitional giftedness is the one proposed by Tadeusz Lewowicki, according to whom a learner displaying at least one of the following characteristics can be described as gifted. The definition does not have to refer to a person attending school because it concerns predispositions and achievements:

- “1) High level of general abilities, intelligence (intelligence quotient equal to 120 and more)
- 2) High level of special abilities, or talents
- 3) High achievement or potential to accomplish such achievements in science or in other areas that are socially valued
- 4) Original and creative achievements or the possibility of such achievements“ (Lewowicki 1986, pp. 62–63).

Of particular interest, in the light of this work's assumptions, is the approach that identifies the ability with creative skills or the possibility of achieving them in the future. The importance of creative achievements is also emphasized in other definitions of high abilities. One of them, developed by the National Council for the Gifted, acknowledges young people as talented when they are not only characterized by high intelligence, but also by the possibility of creative achievements in any socially useful field (Gondzik 1976, p. 24). In turn, Merle R. Sumption and Evelyn M. Luecking interpret the notion of being able to combine intelligence with creative predispositions. They referred to the gifted as:

„Those who possess superior nervous system characterized by the potential to perform tasks requiring a comparatively high degree of intellectual abstraction or creative imagination or both“ (Stańczak 2009, p. 14, Sumption, Luecking 1960).

Would not it be easier to operationalize the concept of abilities in the context of an adult person? Since we often talk about potential success in the future, the adulthood could verify or supplement the definition of gifted student. Is it not a domain of adults more than children to achieve the success in a socially useful field?

In this perspective, longitudinal studies, that take into account the development of a person in the long term, could be valuable as they constitute a kind of solution combining the problematic aspects of talented student and talented adult.

### MODELS OF HIGH ABILITIES

The factors beyond the intellectual predispositions of the candidate are also important for stimulating the development of talented individuals. This is emphasized by various theories of abilities, which include: models of general abilities, models of specific abilities, system models and development models (Limont 2012, pp. 37–76). The above mentioned types are more applicable from the point of view of andragogy, rather than the definitions of abilities which often contain the age factor. The aspects determining the full development of predisposition do not have to concern a specific age group.

According to Joseph Renzulli, the notion of giftedness has a complex character and cannot be determined on the basis of a single indicator, e.g. intelligence. Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness considers: creativity, above average ability and task commitment, and only these three factors in cooperation will give the expected result (see Limont 2012, Renzulli 1986). The author also mentions non-intellectual factors supporting the development of high abilities, including: optimism, courage, love of the subject or discipline, sensitivity to the problems of others, physical/mental energy, vision/sense of destiny (Limont 2012, pp. 54–59). Therefore, his systemic concept seems to be a general solution, since giftedness comprise a component of commitment to work, creativity and above-average abilities.

Franz Mönks in his multifactor model of giftedness extended Renzulli's theory to external factors, to which he included school, peers and family. At this point it is worth paying attention to the significant influence of external aspects on the development of abilities as well as the school education as

a stimulator or inhibitor of high abilities (Limont 2012 pp. 66–68). In case of adults, the school can be replaced by a place of work or further formal or informal education.

The Tannenbaum's giftedness theory is also very interesting in the context of the discussed topic. In the light of his model, giftedness refers only to adults, children in his theory are considered only to be "potentially gifted." Tannenbaum indicates the interrelationships responsible for the outstanding talent of the individual, including: general ability, special aptitude, non-intellective requisites, environmental support, and so difficult to study – chance factors (Limont 70–72). The model proposed by Tannenbaum is the closest to the lifelong perspective because it takes into account the understanding of the giftedness in a broader context that covers the whole life span. It could become the theoretical model adopted for the study of talented adults.

A milestone in the discussion on giftedness has become Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. He proposes eight types, among them: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic intelligence (Gardner 2002).

The selected models show that the process of discovering giftedness is a complex, multidirectional course of action, and the talents themselves can be internally very diverse and manifest themselves at different times and circumstances. A talented individual with appropriate personality predispositions should be also in a supportive environment that motivates and enables constant development.

### **A GIFTED STUDENT, OR PERHAPS A GIFTED ADULT?**

Focusing the development of research on abilities around the youngest members of society may be surprising, given the demographic data, which shows that pupils are on the decrease (demography base, CSO). In the population there are more and more people in the adult or senior age, along with special needs and unused potentials, whose development could be one of the ways of coping with changes in the structure of society. The assumptions of the Lisbon Strategy and its continuator – Europe 2020, which is aimed at making Europe the most dynamic, competitive region in the world, which is characterized by innovative solutions along with high quality research, and therefore by developing citizens who dem-



onstrate key competences in the process of lifelong learning. Europe's task is to become a continent of competence and capabilities inherent in human abilities that cannot be wasted (Department of Economic and Social Analysis, Office of the Committee for European Integration). Of course, the care for the development of talented students guarantees social development in this area, but abilities do not always manifest themselves in school, and some of them can develop only later in adulthood, and even in senior age.

### PEDAGOGY OF ABILITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL PARADOX

Absurd seems to be the fact, considering that pedagogy of abilities basically takes an exclusive interest in gifted student, that school in many studies is identified with inhibiting rather than developing abilities. The school itself, as a place of education for young people, is usually referred to as talent inhibitor, which fosters unused potentials. The report from the research of Z. Kwieciński and B. Śliwerski concludes that at school we encounter communication barriers between students and teachers, which hinder development. Moreover, reports from W. Limont and J. Cieślukowska also point to the primitive theories regarding the image of a talented student among teachers only, which makes it difficult for them to actually identify students' abilities (Dyrda 2012, p. 161). Such a picture of the school, often hurtful and explicit, prompts us to reflection on the legitimacy of speaking about giftedness mainly in student's context.

In this perspective, abilities are not always revealed during the school education process, which would probably be the most desirable, but during our life, often while performing more specialized tasks related to the area of interest and associated with a greater choice in later life. The development of students' abilities is often determined through the prism of given giftedness models, which indicate factors favouring their formation.

Returning to the models of giftedness, we should pay special attention to Gardner's theory of specific skills and capabilities. In his opinion, intelligence is directly related to solving problems, creating new ideas or products, and is associated with the eight previously indicated types of intelligence. These models are not pure, but they determine the appropriate



directional profile of the individual. They point to the specification of the development of high abilities and their diversity in the population, which is more characteristic for adults than children who usually oscillate among the more general areas of interest (Limont 46–48).

Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration is slightly forgotten but extremely insightful. Dąbrowski claims that in order to achieve the expected effects in terms of our own development, we must first break down the integration, the original whole, in order to assemble a mosaic that creates a more self-aware, mature, valuable person. (Dąbrowski 1979). In addition, disintegration in its structure takes into account different levels and stages of development. Not without significance is the development model of David H. Feldman's, which takes into consideration the process of directional changes and gaining competences in a detailed field, from all skills, knowledge and qualifications to the most specialized ones available only to a few individuals (see Feldman 1992, 1993).

### SUMMARY

The models and growing social needs clearly suggest that youth does not have a monopoly on developing high abilities. Besides, it depends on society whether the natural aptitude will be supported or suppressed. The major stimulator of high abilities is unquestionably the awareness of the possibilities of development, professional knowledge about giftedness, the society and system that favours the development of talents, supporting environment as well as personality factors and opportunities on the labour market. The inhibitor – ignorance in the field of giftedness, unused potentials, undisclosed abilities, unconscious society distrustful of developing talents (also in later stages of life), non-developmental work or lack of occupation, and absence of systemic along with personal development opportunities.

The features and specialized ability models presented here show their complex nature, nature of processes, and not individual human predispositions. They make you reflect on whether your giftedness really have a certain age. It turns out that the talents should be considered in the lifelong learning process of the individual and through the experience of the world. Some of them are not able to develop in school age because they require full dispositions, competencies and experiences. It is advisable, therefore,

to take into account the possibility of developing skills at every moment and stage of life, which seems to be an extremely constructive perspective, justifying the sense of lifelong learning and actions for the development of not only individuals but also society. Consequently, I consider to be justified both research and practice which aim is to talk about giftedness in a lifetime context.

Research on high abilities (and their properties) in the lifetime perspective requires disorganization, reformulation and continuous updating. Large internal diversity of this group puts its fate in the light of many pedagogical ambiguities, indistinct theories or considerations. On one hand, social changes impose the need to broaden the problem of abilities' progress in the context of the whole-life development of individual, on the other hand the world of learning does not seem to notice the problem. A discussion about research on gifted adults should inspire for gradual, thoughtful and verified changes in thinking about high abilities and open up to a new, developed perspective of their research.

### WHAT CAN BRING HOPE TO ADULTS?

The creativity researchers can certainly give us hope because their interest in the topic of giftedness goes beyond the age frame. The embodiment of these tendencies is the monograph "Twórczość codzienna jako aktywność całożyciowa człowieka" [Everyday creativity as a lifelong human activity] published in 2015, which perceives the capacity for creativeness as multifaceted and assumes that it is present in all stages of human development. Similarly with the talents and biographies of outstanding people who are not lacking at bookstores. Biographical research, which is becoming more and more popular in the native pedagogical discourse, can also bring hope. However, I would like to emphasize once again that my research paper is a polemic attempt or hopeful wishes to give hope to us, adults.

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## SUMMARY

The paper tries to capture giftedness in the lifelong perspective including all definitions and models. Known literature about high abilities analyses them mainly from child's and student's perspective. The author expands this point of view and states that bringing out more attention to adult's behaviour could

develop this discipline of science. Going beyond the age frames can be a very important element in a discussion on the optimal development of human and society. This is why the cooperation between pedagogy and andragogy educators is so important.

**Key words:** high abilities, giftedness, education, adult, gifted student, lifelong learning.