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THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION PROGRAM IN TERMS OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE EDUCATION OF TALENTED AND GIFTED STUDENTS*

Davut HOTAMAN**

Abstract

School programs provide the guidelines for transforming the desired features of education into permanent changes in behavior through learning experiences. As well as being instructive in educational activities, programs constitute a necessity in terms of education's function of deliberate enculturation. However, education programs which are prepared considering group education cause inequality of opportunities for students who do not possess the qualities of an average individual (such as grasping power, learning skills, interest and motivation, etc.). When the fact that each student with a need of education and learning is essentially unique is considered, it is easy to come to the conclusion that these students will not have equal opportunities in benefiting from similar learning experiences. When practices are considered, it is seen that even though each and every student at a school live through the same learning experiences, they cannot benefit equally from these experiences and not all the students can improve their individual features to their biological limits. Thus, the need for schools and programs which offer educational opportunities for the students in accordance with their abilities and learning paces should be considered as a legal and educational right in terms of equal opportunities in education. In this process, talented or gifted children who are important for the development of their societies and all humanity are a neglected and lost minority. For the solution of today's problems, it is necessary that education programs for talented and gifted students are revised to offer equal opportunities. The equal opportunities concept which is emphasized here infers equal opportunities "which preserve and promote individual differences" rather than "the same opportunities for everyone". Today, the efficiency of an education program is closely related to the fact that whether it provides educational experiences which regard and promote individual differences. Educationists should aim to develop programs which offer self-improvement opportunities to talented and gifted students.

Keywords: Talented Children, Gifted Children, Education Program, Education, Equal Opportunities.

* I. Uluslararası Eğitim Programları ve Öğretim Kongresi, Anadolu Üniversitesi, Eskişehir'de (2011) sunulan bildirinin genişletilmiş şeklidir.

** Assoc. Prof. Dr., T.C. YTÜ Faculty of Education, Department of Education Sciences, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8715-2650, davuthotaman@gmail.com



Introduction

Education is an essential instrument that helps the individuals gain positions that they do not possess by nature. In order to maintain their lives in the society they live in, individuals go through similar or different education programs according as their personal interest and abilities, and experience an education process which is defined as the deliberate enculturation process (Ertürk, 1984:12; Demirel, 2019:31). At the end of this process, individuals become equipped with basic and specific knowledge and skills. Dewey (as cited in: Gutek, 2001) states that the most important function of education is to educate people and help them acquire the basic information that they are going to need in order to control and govern their future lives. Education fulfills its function of deliberate enculturation. At this point, it is controversial whether each and every student at education age is involved in a program in accordance with his/her interests and abilities and receives an education according as their comprehension. This controversy is about dealing with every student individually and providing them with equal educational opportunities as per their interests and abilities, rather than offering similar educational opportunities to everyone. The education of these special children who can change the times, come up with solutions to many problems created by human beings and develop solutions to many threats that humanity faces have gained considerable importance in the welfare of humankind, especially after all the social, political, military and environmental changes of today's world. However, when these special children receive education along with other normal children, they cannot recognize their own abilities and thus cannot develop these abilities. And as a consequence, these children, who can make great contributions to both their society and all humanity, wither away. The aim of this study is to consider the education of talented and gifted children, who are born with superior features, in terms of education programs that could offer equal educational opportunities.

Talented and Gifted Children

The generally recognized description of talented children is made by Witty (1963). Witty describes giftedness as displaying "consistently remarkable performance, in a potentially valuable line of human activity" (as cited in: Gökdere ve Ayvacı, 2004). Giftedness is not an exclusive feature in its own right or a characteristic observed in some people; it stems from the difference in the level of existence, occurrence, collection; and emergence time of some characteristics observed in all the people whatever their level of talent. In other words, gifted people are not different types of people; they are people who are different from others in terms of the distribution, frequency, timing and composition of some characteristics (Akarsu, 2001). The term giftedness is used by some people as having superior talents in fields such as music, arts and space sciences (Winner, 1996). Morelock (1992) asserts that giftedness is "*asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm*". According to Morelock (1992), giftedness which is named as *asynchronous development* is composed of various cognitive, social and emotional factors. Cognitive factors include high-level abilities and specific skills. High-level general abilities contain intelligence which can partly be measured by intelligence tests; power which is comprised of mental quickness and learning skills; thinking skills which include the personal skill of using one's brain; satisfaction which implies high-level of knowledge; and emotional structure. Specific skills, on the other hand, may correspond to an individual area or areas. Also it is possible to define it as the level of personal achievement in a specific field of talent.

Another dimension of giftedness is comprised of social factors. Giftedness does not come to existence out of nowhere; it needs various environments to develop and become effective. The child most probably needs systems composed of various people, nature, encouragement and his/her guided talents as the driving force (Morelock, 1992). Changing factors are related with one's view of life. Some people might be obstructive about accepting the existence of destiny and



change in our lives. This might be understood but it is inevitable that some people just appear to be at the right place at the right time. This brings out luck and might create the difference between success and failure. Emotional factors are another important dimension of giftedness. Gifted children not only think in a different way than their peers, they also feel differently. Kokot (1999) includes emotional factors and defines giftedness as “displaying more awareness, sensitivity and ability in terms of understanding and transferring emotional and cognitive experiences than people who are not gifted”.

Definitions and explanations regarding the gifted and giftedness are as complicated as the definitions and explanations regarding the talented and being talented. However, intelligence has been defined according to operational and theoretical approaches (Ataman, 2004). In operational approach, intelligence is “learning and general problem-solving skill”. In theoretical approaches, “Developmental and Psychometric” approaches come to the forefront. Developmental theory has been affected by the definition of intelligence which is made in accordance with Piaget’s developmental theory and it accepted intelligence as “the individual’s adaptation to and coordination with the environment”. Psychometric theories are based on the assumption that there are individual differences in intelligence and these differences might be measured by intelligence tests (Ataman, 2004). In the general sense, gifted children, who possess superior abilities in one or more fields, not only develop faster than the other children but also are remarkably different. Their ability to manage is developed and they are in little need of others’ supervision (Winner, 1996). Today it is accepted that intelligence is made up of many factors or abilities that are both related and unrelated with each other. Giftedness in young children points primarily to precociousness, that is to say a high rate of development in one or more fields. However, for most of the people, giftedness is related to academic achievement. In other words, it means that a student has received A for all the courses on his/her report card. But giftedness is quite different than the fast development of abilities or early accomplishment of developmental tasks. Gifted people are quite curious. They always form a series of questions, learn quickly, remember easily and have different opinions about the world than their peers (Smutny, 2000). The most common features of gifted students are as follows (Clark, 1997); (1) Learning pace, (2) The complexity of operations based on thinking and information, (3) Depth in understanding and achieving competence, (4) Novelty (originality) and uniqueness in personal expressions, (5) Intensity in participating in learning and an early and deep idealism (motivation).

Equal Opportunities in Education

There is a general belief about the education of the gifted. J. Davidson, who is one of the authors of “Genius Denied” states that the biggest myth about the education of the gifted is that “gifted children do not need help because, as they possess talents that many students do not possess, they can develop and prove themselves under any circumstances”. It might be asserted that this myth stems from a belief or emotion such as “the gifted, you possess things that the rest of us do not; so why should we feel the need to do something for you?” (Emmons, 1993). However, highly talented children or teenagers display a higher performance (in the fields they are interested in) than their peers and people who have the same experiences as them. These children and teenagers might show a superior performance in mental creativity and arts, possess rarely observed skills in terms of leadership, and might stand out in some specific academic fields. Nevertheless, general educational practices fail to recognize, let alone develop such characteristics of such superior children. Thus these children are in need of educational services apart from the general school programs (Kök, 2008). Davidson states that gifted children are rarely seen and they will not be able to know the limits of their abilities when they attend regular classes with regular curriculums. Until they recognize and understand gifted children, teachers who teach such classes will probably not feel the need to recognize these children as they will be busy dealing with other children who experience problems (as cedit in: Emmons, 1993).



When equality is mentioned, it should be understood as having the same and equal opportunities. Equality means providing the individuals with appropriate experiences that are individualized. Equal opportunities in education are not offering the same education to each and every child but to provide them with opportunities in accordance with their abilities. Hotaman (2009) also states that equal opportunities in education means “having the necessary educational opportunities that allows every student to develop his or her latent or manifest abilities”. According to Feldhusen and Moon (1992) justice can be served not by equal treatment but by equal opportunities. And the equal opportunities mentioned here is not providing the same or similar opportunities to everyone regardless of their developmental characteristics, interests, talents and intelligence; it infers providing all students with learning opportunities in which they can learn and develop in proportion to their grasping power. According to Agne (1999) a one-size dress does not fit everyone. While according to some people the word equality means the same learning experiences (Kök, 2008) for everyone, for some it means equal opportunities (Kök, 2008). Baska (1993) also states that equality means that each and every student has an equal access to opportunities in parallel with their talents (as cetid in: Kök, 2008). If equality is the main goal for everyone, exercising the same standards, the same education programs, the same type of education is basically inequality because individual differences are ignored. It is not equality to offer a talented musician and a scientist the same experiences (Kök, 2008). It is nothing but inequality to treat the unequal as equals.

If gifted students receive education designed in accordance with their individual needs, they develop a sense of self-sufficiency and positive self-concept. Otherwise they might rank among the high-risk group in terms of failure. These students study more effectively and efficiently and develop high-level problem-solving skills. Once they internalize and synthesize information, they integrate it and might offer many solutions (Bosch, 2005). It is a desperate situation for the individual and the society that the gifted are ignored educationally and experience talent loss. Due to their high capacity, gifted students are most likely to offer solutions to problems that human beings encounter today. Today’s gifted and talented students who possess leadership, problem-solving and complex thinking skills are of vital importance for societies as they are the adults of the future (Kök, 2008). Uniform general education programs are developed in accordance with the needs of students whose talents and achievements are at average level; thus, student attainments will be at knowledge, comprehension and application level and students will not develop high-level intellectual skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. When this situation is considered in the perspective of gifted students, it might be concluded that gifted students might experience talent atrophy and eventually talent loss as they will not be able to use their existing potential to the fullest.

Education Programs (Curriculum)

The aim of educational activities is to maximize the individual’s potential. Therefore the individual will improve himself/herself and contribute both to the society and to humanity. At this point, developing education programs is of crucial importance because all classroom activities which aim to help the students acquire desired behaviour are developed according to a plan. Erturk (1984) asserts that education program is “*a planned educational mechanism which aims to educate a certain group of students within a certain time period*”. The success of education-instruction process largely depends on a high-quality planning of educational and instructional activities (Senemoğlu, 2007; Demirel, 2019:5; Sönmez, 314; Bilen, 2). And to achieve this, it is necessary to fulfil the basic physical and psychological needs of the people (students, teachers, administrators, educationalists, etc.) and to meet the need of improvement and change in the education program.

For the education of gifted children, typical behaviour and skills of gifted children which are the indicators of their talent and intelligence should be specified according to every culture and the children who meet these specifications should be determined. However, this is not an easy task. The most effective way of detecting and defining gifted and talented children is to utilize



various approaches within an extended time period. It is essential in terms of the accuracy of the diagnosis to observe these children at different grades, consult the views of families and to monitor their productivity (artistic activities, diagrams, inventions, toy-block (lego) creations, stories and poems they recite and/or write, etc.). Physical, social and cognitive development of young children is fast and diverse (Smutny, 1998). For this reason, it is possible to detect the characteristics which cannot be detected or confirmed at one observation by way of monitoring the children's development within a longer time period. When we consider the fact that the definition of talent and its emergence vary from culture to culture, the length and diversity of such lists could be explained by factors such as different age groups, gender, geographical and socio-economical conditions of families.

Agne (1999) expresses that gifted and talented children do not feel the need to be dignified because of their difference. The author states that, instead of this, it is necessary to acknowledge their existence, accept the fact that they need different content and educational methods and thereby to meet their needs just as the needs of normal children are met. In order to ensure that gifted and talented children develop in their normal course, it is necessary that they are trained by teachers who have received special training or, at least, in homogenous groups because most research have proved the importance of talent grouping for gifted and talented students (Agne, 1999). Gifted and talented students naturally need a different presentation and education due to their different characteristics.

Some people claim that gifted and talented students motivate the other students in the classroom and that these children should receive education among normal children. However, research findings show that children model themselves on children who are similar to themselves in terms of level rather than children whose level are superior (Schunk, 1987). Moreover, it has been observed that the level of achievement among low and average level students increase when gifted and talented children are taken out of the groups consisting of normal children. The reason for this is that children with normal and low levels of achievement, who feel lowly and ashamed alongside children who display superior performance, feel more at ease and do not feel ashamed when they are not with superior children (Schunk, 1987). In general, systems of education which attach importance to the transfer and comprehension of information transform students into consumers of information while they should transform them into producers of information. It should be considered that gifted students have complex and abstract thinking skills and, rather than loading them with information, it is necessary to include these students in processes of information acquirement (Kök, 2008).

The fact that gifted children have a diversity of interests and that they want to acquire further, more profound and more comprehensive knowledge necessitates that they should be offered a lot more than general education programs that offer the same education to everyone. The main aim of the educational arrangements to be done is to recognize the characteristics of this group of students, assist the improvement of these characteristics, and transform them into individuals who come up with new solutions to problems (Kök, 2008). In standard education programs, gifted children are compelled to be successful without making use of all their talents. As a result of this, the student grows indifferent to the program and the level of information and other attainments fall a lot behind their cognitive levels. Therefore, most of the talent and interests of the child might shift to other fields than education and as a result of this they might be alienated from education. It is necessary, however, to define the information and cognitive skills that should be acquired and developed by these children and to offer such information and skills to their use by way of projects and activities. These projects and skills should offer a profound and extensive focus for the individuals. Furthermore, these educational activities should direct gifted and talented students to advanced efforts, profound thinking and conceptualization of abstract concepts and objects (Van Tassel-Baska, 1998).

As standard educational environments restrict the potentials of gifted and talented children, the education offered in such educational environments are not sufficient for these



children and they need more extensive educational opportunities (Gökdere ve Ayvacı, 2004). Programs designed for gifted and talented students should also point to the importance of materials to be used in the classroom. These materials should follow the lead of a single text as the source, offer advanced-level reading activities, provide interesting and thought-provoking ideas, consider information to be open-ended and indefinite, and offer a conceptual passage and depth that allows the students to establish bonds between multiple disciplines (Agne, 1999). The key point in educating gifted and talented children is respect; respecting their difference, their ideas and their dreams. It is necessary to provide a peaceful, safe and warm family and school environment in addition to special curricula, special software and specific programs for the talents to improve. Education programs which are prepared in order to meet the needs of children identified as gifted or talented are beneficial when the activities are a little harder than the current levels of students (Agne, 1999). Renzulli (1986;1999) also states that children at a higher level in terms of grasping power and learning pace need to study mathematics, history, social sciences and languages rather than wasting their time on disjointed projects. As the existing educational approaches are based on transferring information slowly, through various examples with a lot of time spent on practice and visual material support, this method slows down gifted and talented children. And while their classmates study the same materials over and over again, gifted and talented children waste most of the education time sitting and waiting because they go through materials faster than the others, comprehend the information instantly and rarely feel the need to review the references on previous materials. Gifted children generally like to memorize things automatically whether they are asked to or not. They like materials based on facts but they are able to comprehend information faster and in more abstract forms when compared to other students. They really like and prefer to learn fast and easily (Stevenson and Stigler, 1992).

In addition to the standard measurements used to evaluate the students' levels of learning, it is of vital importance to make use of instruments sensitive to performance in order to evaluate individual development and improvement. It is possible to portray individual progress towards specific educational goals more definitely when more standardized measurements are utilized. Especially for gifted students, the quality of the performance in such measurements could indicate more clearly the level of understanding of concepts and acquisition of skills when compared to the paper-and-pencil assessments (Van Tassel-Baska, 1998). Another point to take into account while utilizing alternative assessment approaches used for gifted students involves informing students about the important points while assigning the task and thus letting them know the level they are supposed to reach beforehand. This approach also guarantees the criteria that the decisional assessment is both specified clearly by the teacher and understood clearly by the students (Van Tassel-Baska, 1998).

Feldhusen (1997) and Renzulli (1999) assert that in some developed countries, gifted and talented people are offered education by the help of curricula and systems designed taking into account the talents, emotions, views and values that gifted individuals possess. Yet, even in developed and developing countries, there are few people who feel the need to attend to the developmental and educational problems of the gifted (Özdemir ve Berk, 2007). According to Tekbas and Ataman (2004) even in advanced societies, gifted education is the most neglected field in special education. Gifted individuals who are very low in number in every society constitute the core of a nation when viewed from this aspect (Özdemir ve Berk, 2007). Experimenting new education programs and developing creativity-oriented programs help the children live through different experiences at early childhood. Generally, students who receive education in normal classrooms and normal education programs are judged because of their creative thoughts, are not supported and are mocked because of their thoughts labeled as eccentric. And the students force themselves to think stereotypically fearing that they will be mocked and make a habit of such thinking in time. Eventually they might become individuals who do not produce original ideas with a weak ability to dream. But the individual forms cognitive models within the process of dreaming and concretizing abstract concepts and phenomena (Coll and Treagust, 2003). It is clear



that students with the ability to dream are able to form more effective cognitive models (LeBoutillier and Marks, 2003).

Conclusion

In every society, giftedness and talentedness are considered synonymous with enclosing valuable talents (Tannenbaum, 2000). Then, it is clear that the gifted and the talented need an educational practice that works on the richness and gifts that they possess and would help them step up to higher levels and such a practice not only creates equal opportunities in education, but is also a necessity since it harnesses such individuals' capacities for their own societies, as well as for solving the problems of the humanity as a whole. There are also rightful reasons to justify that these children should be handled within the scope of special education. The *first* one is that there are groups of children at schools who possess a greater talent for learning than the standard education requires. *Secondly*, if educational environments are not prepared and precautions are not taken today, the future of the nation will be jeopardized. Because, as the youth of today are the adults of tomorrow, the education they receive today and the investment that has been made for them will have been wasted. These teenagers will be able to create all kinds of novelties, innovations and advancements that will raise the country to the level of contemporary civilization. They are going to be the researchers, creative artists, crafts, scientists and leaders of the future. And *thirdly* and lastly, the effort made in order to find new ways to offer these children a different education than normal children will contribute to education itself and improve its general quality (Ataman, 2004).

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