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Education for Giftedness and Creativity in International Perspective

Report from:

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Innovation in Education ICIE
“Excellence in Education 2008: Future Minds & Creativity”**

11th International Conference of European Council for High
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Introduction

The issue of the development of giftedness and education for creativity has been gaining the ever growing and due interest all over Europe. Two initiatives from this field we have recently participated in are worth paying attention to – namely international conferences which took place in Paris in the summer and in Prague in the early autumn of 2008. These initiatives are precious thanks to the possibilities they open for presenting various perspectives of considerable specificity worked out in various parts of the world. Thanks to this it is not only possible to initiate international contacts, but also mutual learning of new solutions, proved in other parts of the world.

Excellence in education 2008: future minds & creativity

Between July 1 and 4, 2008 Paris hosted a conference entitled *Excellence in Education 2008: Future Minds & Creativity*, devoted mainly to the issues of giftedness and creativity. It was the first undertaking of this type organized by the recently established International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE-PARIS). The organization was established with the aim of international exchange of experiences

and knowledge about giftedness and creativity. Its main assumption is creating a platform for connecting parents, teachers and specialists interested in identifying, supporting and developing giftedness. The proposed forums, conferences and workshops provided a chance for the representatives of various communities to meet and promote education directed at special needs of creative students. One of the most important aims is to become acquainted with systemic solutions for educating creative people, applied in various countries. Special attention is paid to application of the existing theoretical concepts as well as to searching for new solutions with the use of scientific research. The assumption of the members of the organization is to introduce in the future the tested, best solutions for general education. ICIE cooperates with The National Research Centre for the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT), The International Association of Educators for World Peace, and many other organizations. The conference addressed a wide circle of recipients: scientists, teachers, pedagogues, psychologists, therapists, artists and other people interested in the issue of creativity in as broad a sense as possible. Participants arrived from all over the world, but the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Great Britain, Germany and African countries sent the most numerous delegations.

The top issues debated during the conference were: education directed at supporting giftedness, presentation of methodological solutions, educational programs and the systems of instruction, teacher development, shaping of the environment conducive to creative people, creativity itself, as well as instruction with the use of modern technical means with special consideration of the idea of e-learning.

The conference opened with one-day workshops, run by such specialists from all over the world as T. Lubart (Université Paris Descartes, France), D. J. Treffinger (Centre of Creative Learning, USA), K. McCluskey (University of Winnipeg, Canada), S. White (Auckland University, Australia), and many others. Due to a large number of participants and multitude of topics, presentations were run simultaneously throughout the following three days in six morning and afternoon sessions. Scholarly sessions were intermingled with lectures of leading researchers and practitioners from all over the world who deal with giftedness and creativity.

Joan Freeman, a British psychologist, opened the first day of the conference with a presentation "*Living with Gifts and Talents.*" She presented a number of case studies of people who reveal outstanding abilities in various fields and areas of functioning – intellectual, musical, fine arts. Freeman attracted special attention to the social context of their development and its significance for individual achievements starting in the youngest age and highlighted the importance of not just the genetic dispositions, but also the enormous influence of the environment – parents, peer groups, immediate surroundings, society, and culture – on shaping eminent individuals. Basing on stories of a number of people and their families,

Joan Freeman talked about difficult maturation of gifted children, about problems that appear on their way to maturity, and social barriers that render functioning in a group and application of the extraordinary talents in life difficult.

Probably the greatest interest was attracted by the lecture of the American psychologist from Tufts University, previously professor of Yale for many years, President of *The Eastern Psychological Association*, *The International Association for Cognitive Education and Psychology*, and more recently also of the *American Psychological Association* – Robert J. Sternberg. In his speech on *Education for Creativity* Sternberg presented quite a liberal attitude to defining creativity, basing on the metaphor of buying and selling stock shares – known also as the investment theory of creativity (Sternberg, Lubart, 1991). According to the authors of the conception, creativity understood in this way is a question of choice and may apply to each and every one of us. In order to effectively invest in some field it is a must to buy cheaply and sell expensively. With regards to creativity, “investment” means choice of the area of interest, a subject we are inclined to devote our time, effort and other resources to. Sternberg presented the implications that result from the investment theory of creativity, as well as his own concept of intelligence of education. He emphasized the importance of not just analytical abilities, but practical and creative ones as well in the process of learning.

Professor of the University of Connecticut (USA), Director of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented – Joseph S. Renzulli talked about the practical applications of *The School-wide Enrichment Model*. He also presented the *Renzulli Learning System*, based on his own model, which is to constitute versatile multimedia electronic program adjusted to individual abilities of a student, his/her strengths, academic achievements, interests, learning styles. Its aim is to facilitate adjustment of appropriate Internet resources, data bases categorized in accordance with thematic areas, levels of difficulty, learning standards effective in individual states and the degree of content complexity, to the student’s profile. The program provides an opportunity for cooperation with other students of similar profiles, as well as support from teachers. It is also to facilitate creation of research, problem-solving, and the origination of individual or group creative projects. Thanks to keeping the works within the frame of Total Talent Portfolio, it is possible for their self-assessment, observation of changes and teacher evaluation. It seems that RLS is also to be a solution that on the one hand gives answers to the need for accounting for individual differences in education, and on the other – to the creation of modern learning tools based on electronic resources. As another presenter, Jerome Clayton Glenn, claims, we should combine our reflections about modern education with the anticipation of trends, chances and threats that may appear in this field in a few dozen years. In his speech, *“Future Possibilities for Education and*

Learning by the Year 2030,” he presented predictions for education in 2030 – the effect of research by 213 experts of various fields from all over the world, within the frame of the Millennium project. From among 19 potential changes in education, Glenn listed the following: the use of global Internet network as the main tool of social science research; creation of national programs for the development of intelligence; possibility to develop intelligence genetically; integrated systems of lifelong learning; e-teaching; individualized teaching; full map of human synapses in the brain and a possibility to observe their operations during the process of learning – discovering strategies.

In his presentation *Recognizing and Nurturing Talent in At-Risk Populations* Ken McCluskey from the University of Winnipeg in Canada presented and discussed the idea of detection and development of talents in threatened environments infested with pathologies. The speech concentrated around programs run in Canada, aimed at talented children and adolescents who for various reasons, such as problems with acclimation in new environment, untypical family situation, or tough return to reality after spending time in a penitentiary, do not realize their potential. During the lecture, the author presented works and samples of the capabilities of the participants of those programs. Fine arts creations appeared alongside musical tunes. The main emphasis was laid on indicating the effects the conducted and discussed programs had brought. A decrease in the feeling of alienation, decrease in the percentage of recidivism, decrease in the number of those joining youth gangs and organized crime groups, as well as decrease in the number of school failures, were noted by the participants of these activities.

The last day featured a lecture by Steven Smith of the Texas A&M University in the USA. This co-creator of the model of geneplore delivered a paper, entitled *The Science of Creative Thinking*. In his speech he attracted our attention to numerous paradoxes we are dealing with when defining creativity. Smith highlighted the significance of research in developing knowledge about creativity. He showed what, in a methodological sense, a process of getting acquainted with scientific phenomena should look like, and then, on the example of research, Smith depicted the entire course of empirical explorations. The presented analyses referred to the area of cognitive psychology and concentrated mainly on appearance, fixation and incubation. Smith concentrated mainly on the creative process claiming that it can be researched into and understood significantly more efficiently than e.g. the creative/creator's personality. The lecture commanded high respect.

Donald J. Treffinger from the Center for Creative Learning, Inc., in Sarasota, Florida, USA presented a paper on *Recognizing and Nurturing Creativity: Powerful Tools for Managing Change*. The speech showed how significant the ability of creative problem solving is for dealing with contemporary reality. The presentation

indicated tools and methods that might support research, pedagogical practice, as well as business activities. The speech was based on the model of creative problem solving, elaborated in the International Centre for Studies in Creativity, indicating the importance for creativity of divergent thinking and the much less appreciated convergent, critical thinking.

The presentation of Douglas A. Bernstein from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom, devoted to *Active Learning and Passive Students* was about the paradox of shaping a passive attitude of a student in the system of active teaching. The presentation highlighted the fact that activity during classes should rest on the side of the listener, and the role of the teacher should be to consider the course of the class in such a way so as the participants could discover regularities and get to the important rules by themselves. Bernstein not only presented what the phenomenon of pupils'/students' passivity is like, but also proposed methods that could incite a pupil/student to active participation in the process of teaching and learning.

Aside from the listed scholarly presentations, each day also featured symposia. The first two concentrated around experiences within the frame of developing and propagating the idea of creative education and education that aims at creativity in primary and secondary schools as well as institutions of higher education in Taiwan. The third symposium made it possible to get to know policies aimed at exceptionally gifted people, in such countries as England, France, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Spain.

What dominated the conference was the expression of the issue of giftedness from the pedagogical and psychological perspective, yet reflections about the biological attitudes of the functioning of gifted people did appear as well. This is how Jean-Pol Tassin presented neurobiological conditions for data processing in his presentation *The Development of Thought: Two Modes of Information Processing*. There, he also described physiological foundations of the functioning of abilities. It seems that this new scholarly attitude stands a chance of achieving recognition in the future of the studies of giftedness and creativity.

In conclusion, it must be stated that independently of some organizational deficiencies the conference enjoyed significant interest, and the multitude of presented content as well as choice of speakers from all over the world guaranteed presence of diverse substance that could be enjoyed by various groups of people interested in the issues of giftedness and creativity. One should anticipate that the future initiatives of this sort, undertaken by ICIE will enjoy similar level of interest.

11th International Conference of European Council for high ability 2008 (Echa 2008)

During the 11th International Conference of European Council for High Ability 2008 (ECHA 2008), a slightly different perspective, directed to a greater extent at care for developing giftedness and abilities of young people, could be noticed. The conference took place in the capital city of the Czech Republic – Prague. Whereas the Paris conference accentuated the significance of creative functioning as being equal with other aspects of giftedness, the Prague conference was attended by researchers – scientists and practitioners – interested in the issue of nurturing the abilities of pupils/students.

It is hard to exhaustively present the content of all the papers presented over the course of the three days of sessions, therefore it is worth concentrating on elements that were most representative and worth highlighting.

Just like during the Paris conference, the American psychologist – Robert J. Sternberg was key speaker during the first day. In his speech, richly illustrated with examples from his own life, Sternberg accentuated the importance of developing leadership competences and described key results of research conducted by his team at Tufts University.

During the first day, the participants also had a chance to listen to an interesting speech by Todd Lubart, American researcher working in France who in an exhaustive lecture presented key aspects of contemporary research into creativity and presented the new test measuring creative abilities, elaborated by his team. The issue of cognitive and personality-related factors that build creativity, the relation of creativity and intelligence, as well as the issue of domain-specificity of creativity were all paid attention to during the presentation. The next invited speaker – Willy Peters, on the basis of a case study presented an interesting analysis of a gifted child characterized by unequal development of individual abilities as well as conclusions and consequences derived from the diagnosis.

The conference participants also had a chance to meet Robert Sternberg at a discussion forum ‘Successful intelligence’ and discuss issues and factors that are conducive to achieving success.

From among the many parallel sessions of the first day of the conference, it is worth paying attention to those that enjoyed special interest of the participants. The session devoted in its entirety to underachievement stood out in this respect. During the session, hosted by Joan Freeman, the results of research into this phenomenon and ways of counteracting it were presented along with a sub-session devoted to early years of the gifted. There was also an interesting session devoted to the use of ICT in the education of the gifted – led by Sally Reis and Joseph

Renzulli, as well as a symposium “*Research on gender issues in gifted education*” conducted by Heidrun Stoger with research mainly based on the actiotope model of giftedness by A. Ziegler. The day concluded with a meeting with Joseph Renzulli and Jane Freeman – a combination of presentations, a discussion and a possibility to ask questions to the experts. Aside from those listed above, the following sessions also took place during the first day: Teaching Maths and Science I (T. Dahl), Nurturing the gifts (M. Vialle), Acceleration (A. Heinbokel), Social Issues (R. Hotulainen), National Reports (N. Steenberger), Assessment and Identification (W. Peters), Gifted Adolescents (S. Weyringer), National Reports (M. Plunkett), Special Needs (Autism and Asperger Syndrom) (P. Schuler), Parental Issues (C. O’Reilly), Supporting the Giftedness (W. Vialle), Special Groups of the Gifted (T. Dracup).

The next morning featured presentations of invited guests (K. Chandler, S. Zelenda) as well as five parallel sessions: Improving Provision (D. Ryan), Learning On-line (J. Touron), Language Learning (M. Dickenson & I. Warwick), Psychological Provision (L. Hooegeveen), Teaching Arts and Science (S. T. Janevski) as well as two parallel discussion forums: Future Perspectives of Gifted Education (J. Raffan, F. Monks, J. Freeman, T. Dracup, N. L. Vlajic), as well as Underachievement (D. Montgomery).

Among the afternoon sessions, those devoted to creativity proved especially interesting. We heard presentations by W. Limont, A. Kaputa, S. Maksic and D. Fleith & T. C. Sathler, which brought interesting information about the relationships between creative attitudes and overexcitabilities (W. Limont), or changes over time in the results of the popular TCT-DP (S. Maksic) test. The intriguing problem of perfectionism of gifted people was taken up during the session hosted by J. Piirto, where we could see internationally acclaimed quantitative and qualitative research into perfectionism (P. Schuler). Relations between perfectionism and personality dimensions were also discussed (J. Piirto).

However, special popularity was enjoyed by the symposium hosted by C. Fisher (European Advanced Diploma in Gifted Education: Present Situation and Future Perspectives), during which current work and plans connected with the certification of gifted people were presented.

The following sessions were also interesting: Gender Issues in Gifted Education and the next symposium organized by H. Stoger, this time fully devoted to research into an actiotope model of giftedness, during which also the practical application of this model in supporting and advising gifted students was presented (R. Grassinger).

The conference closed with Saturday meetings with D. Montgomery (Lifting Underachievement – the Teacher Is the Key) and D. Ostatnikova (Testosterone and Cognition).

Conclusions – specificity of the research into giftedness and creativity in Europe

The multitude and variety of the presented content does not render synthesis easy, yet basing on the subject matter of the two representative scholarly conferences it is possible to draw conclusions about the state of research into giftedness and creativity conducted in Europe. It seems that they can be reduced to a number of points.

Firstly, relative balance between scholarly and methodological, applied content is important. It is visible, therefore, that theory and practice come to agreement, and those who study theory and those who grapple with practice agree with each other more and more, and find fields for mutual application of their respective experiences.

Secondly, when analyzing the presented research it is important to highlight the availability of both quantitative and qualitative research. We are therefore dealing with both large studies with the use of standardized methods (tests and questionnaires), as well as studies based on interviews or observations, or equally frequently – on case studies.

Thirdly, research results and methodological solutions from countries which still a few years ago were not represented in the international arena are more and more frequently presented. Representatives from Asian, African or Central and Eastern European countries show the specificity of their approach and the interesting results of the research they conduct.

Unfortunately, it seems that it is also possible to formulate a number of doubts, concerns or even objections as to the realized research and presented studies.

First of all, what strikes is lack of the theoretical foundations of much of the presented research, which makes some of the studies seem totally exploratory, without a theoretical model underlying the conducted analyses and formulated conclusions. Lack of the explicitly expressed definition of giftedness or creativity, unclearly assumed relations between key variables – are the most fundamental characteristics of this issue.

Secondly though consequently to the previous point, it is important to mention the arbitrariness of the presented statistical data and the expected directions of interrelations. Regressive models, generally applied in numerous quantitative pres-

entations are created without sufficient justification why one variable is dependent and other ones are predictors, for very frequently the given research has a correlation rather than longitudinal or experimental character, and a lack of clearly laid out model does not legitimize treatment of one variable as predicted and other ones – as independent. Many authors refer only to some empirical works, without presenting reflections on the theoretical basis of relations. Generally, such works are not well grounded in the psychology of creativity and giftedness.

However, independently of those doubts one must state that the richness of the presented content as well as its variability clearly supports the thesis that research into abilities and creativity understood as extremely needed and positive aspects of human functioning are faring well. One should also express hopes that the multitude of obtained results will find its translation into the practice of educating children, youth and adults in order for their potential to be fully utilized.