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The Means for Teachers and Parents to Identify the Abilities of Students at a Younger Age

Agnieszka Gronostajska¹

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyze how teachers and parents alike identify the abilities of students at a younger school age. Identifying a person's potential is an important step to better understanding the individual, and guides educational and upbringing activities both in and out of school. Although abilities do not always reveal themselves right away, discovering them makes it possible to design the student's further development path in line with the student's known aptitudes, interests, and preferred learning style. Thus, in the cognitive activities of these students, the term "diagnosis", which has so far been associated with the identification of difficulties, disorders, deficits, and educational barriers, takes on a different meaning.

KEY WORDS: abilities, gifted students, identifying, diagnosis, individualization

Introduction

Educating gifted students is a significant challenge for the contemporary education system (Wojnarowska, 2013). Gifted students are seen in their environment as unique individuals. They differ from their peers not only in terms of their intellectual level, but also in the ways in which they process information, take on challenges and develop (Nęcka, 2005; Dyrda, 2007; Limont, 2010; Uszyńska-Jarmoc et al., 2014). Their educational potential is enormous, but often remains untapped due to a lack of understanding, support and adaptation of curricula to the specific needs of gifted students (Dyrda, 2000; Limont, 2010).

1 Faculty of Education, University of Białystok, Poland.
E-MAIL: a.gronostajska@uwb.edu.pl ORCID: 0009-0002-0871-6719

Małgorzata Wojnarowska (2013) lists the following among the tasks of educators and teachers in the system of supporting students' talents: obtaining detailed information about gifted students, meticulous observation, and undertaking activities related to the identification and diagnosis of gifts. According to Marzena Czarnocka, Maria Foryś and Kinga Truś (2014), the key terms and concepts involved must be known and understood in order to successfully perform the above.

The concept of "ability" in an educational context is very much comprehensive and multidimensional. Among the many definitions, particularly relevant is the position presented by Wiesława Limont (2010, p. 17), who claims that abilities are understood as "individual differences in the functioning of cognitive processes, involving such functions as memory, attention, as well as reasoning and information processing strategies". Abilities are also understood as (Eby & Smutny, 1998; Sternberg et al., 2011; Davis, 2006; Dyrda, 2012, Szmidt, 2013) a potential opportunity that does not currently exist, but can be acquired; the ability to perform an activity and the proficiency in performing it, as well as an individual characteristic that guarantees success in the undertaken activities. There are also two other approaches to giftedness and ability: elitist and egalitarian. The former assumes that individuals with outstanding abilities make up a small portion of the population, while the latter assumes that every student, without exception, has innate abilities (Porzucek-Miśkiewicz, 2018). The authors of the book, *Zdolny, ale jak?*, Janina Uszyńska-Jarmoc, Beata Kunat and Jerzy Mantur (2015) claim that a gifted student is also one who currently does not reveal special, above-average abilities, skills or aptitudes, but who has the potential and resources to reveal and use them under the appropriate conditions. They believe that a student who is not achieving above-average success in education at the moment may also be a gifted student—one with abilities in some other field.

Both the term "ability" and "gifted student" are complex concepts; hence, a clear, unambiguous and binding definition is yet to be adopted. However, the above concepts indicate that the approach to identifying students' abilities should be flexible and based on their individualized needs.

Identifying students' abilities

One of the key issues in contemporary education is the search for answers to the question: how to effectively recognize and support the potential in students at a younger school age? Identifying potential is the first step in its better understanding and navigating educational and upbringing activities both inside and outside the school. Discovering students' abilities makes it possible to design their development path in line with their individual aptitudes, interests, as well as their preferred

learning style (Skałbania, n.d). Discerning abilities requires not only attentiveness on the part of teachers, but also the right tools and strategies to create an environment conducive to the development of the aptitudes. Daniela Maj (2008) argues that the most effective in this regard is the observation of the student, as well as the results of the student's actions in the form of test scores or achievements in competitions and contests. According to Aneta Kamińska (2014), teachers in their work attempt to create situations that will allow them to pinpoint the abilities of their charges. They frequently use relevant activation methods to foster the discovery of the students' creative inventiveness, their own and unforced will to take action—often ingenious or out-of-the-box. Observation is thus a purposeful, systematic and focused activity of looking at and recording a person's behaviour (Dłużniewska & Szubielska, 2017, cited in: Sztumski 2005; Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 2009).

Diagnosis of abilities often involves psychological criteria. Psychologists have developed a number of intelligence, ability and personality tests to detect abilities (Partyka, 1999). Unfortunately, only those who work in this area are authorized to use these professional tools. Educationalists do not have access to them. Thus, the identification of students' abilities should be multidirectional and based on, among others: observation of students, surveys of students and parents alike, analysis of records on school certificates, performance in individual subjects, information provided from previous educational institutions and received from parents and guardians, as well as intelligence and diagnostic tests that examine students' aptitudes (Panfil-Smolińska, 2014).

Given these considerations, it should be concluded that there is a need for a process approach to the diagnosis of abilities and all that follows, as well as for the interaction of interdisciplinary teams—educationalists, psychologists, form tutors, teachers, and parents alike.

Methods

Research design, question, and aim

The research was conducted between July and September 2023 and employed a qualitative biographical method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using a detailed interview guide containing open-ended questions and instructions for interviewing respondents.

The main research question was formulated as follows: How do teachers and parents recognize the abilities of students at younger school age? The primary objective was to identify the ways used by both teachers and parents to recognize abilities in primary school students in grades I–III.

Participants and sampling

The selection of the research sample was purposive, meaning that participants were selected according to specific criteria relevant to the subject of the study. The study included twelve participants: six primary school teachers working in Białystok with gifted students in grades I–III, and six parents of gifted students.

Teachers: The teachers invited to participate in the study were identified through their colleagues who confirmed they were currently working with gifted students and supporting their development. The teaching staff included in the survey represents a diverse group in terms of age, length of service, place of work, professional degree, and the grade they supervise.

Parents: Parents were selected by the participating teachers. This group is also diverse in terms of age, gender, and educational experience. It includes both parents with one school-age child and those with several children at different stages of education. This diversity enables a broader perspective on the ways in which abilities are identified, the support activities undertaken, and the challenges parents face in their daily functioning and cooperation with the school.

Data collection procedures

All respondents were acquainted with the purpose of the research and gave their informed consent to participate. Depending on the preferences of the respondents, the interviews took various forms: some were conducted at the respondent's place of work, some in public places (e.g., café, restaurant), and others were held online using the Microsoft Teams video conferencing application. All participants agreed to have the interview recorded and transcribed.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences in recognizing student abilities. Teachers were asked about their professional practices, the indicators they observe, and collaboration with parents. Parents were asked about their observations of their children's development, support strategies they employ, and their experiences cooperating with schools.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a multi-stage process. The first step involved creating initial concepts through preliminary coding of the "raw" data. This involved reviewing interview transcripts, highlighting relevant portions of text, and assigning preliminary codes. The purpose of this stage was to capture the basic categories that emerged from the interviews with respondents.

After this initial review, the next step involved more precise coding of detailed text passages. The third step of the research procedure was to determine the relationships

between the emerging categories, with the aim of understanding how the identified aspects coexist with one another. The final step was to interpret the data, allowing conclusions to be drawn in relation to the theoretical context of the study.

Research results

The purpose of the presented analysis of the research is to reveal the ways in which students' abilities are identified and to reveal differences in the perception and approach of the respondents to the process of recognizing the educational potential of the students at a younger school age. The difficulties faced by the surveyed teachers and parents in this regard will also be scrutinized.

A good starting point for recognizing students' abilities is, first of all, finding out how respondents understand the term "gifted student". Respondents agree in taking the broader perspective shown in the theoretical part of the text, which is supported by the authors of the book *Zdolny, ale jak?*, J. Uszyńska-Jarmoc, B. Kunat, J. Mantur (2015), stating that a gifted student is also one who at a given moment does not reveal special abilities or skills, but has the internal potential to reveal and use them under the right conditions. Respondents put it as follows:

For me, a gifted student is a person who obviously shows some ability in a certain aspect, but it is also a student who has a certain potential (...) concerning various aspects of their life and functioning in this community (teacher 1);

and:

We should start with the fact that every student actually presents their abilities differently. Everyone is gifted, just not everyone at any given time has the potential to show it, because they are good in another area (teacher 2).

The presented position implies that students' abilities should not be limited to their achievements alone, but should be viewed in a broader context, as a set of qualities, predispositions or skills that enable development in different areas.

Analysis of the survey results reveals that there are several ways to identify a gifted student: observation, an interview with the parents, information from the student (self-assessment), selection by teachers, written work, student creations and achievements (Figure 1).

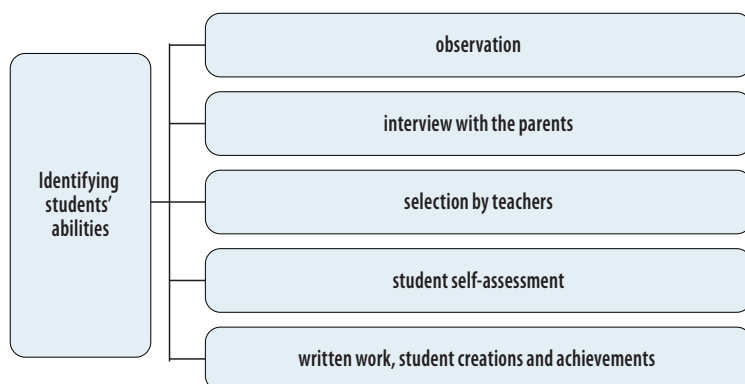


Figure 1. Identifying the abilities of students at a younger school age—map

Source: own study.

Student observation as a means of identifying abilities

The observation conducted by the teacher is an extremely important stage of the diagnostic procedure. Teachers participating in the survey point to it as the first step in recognizing a student's abilities:

First I observe, I get to know the student themselves individually, and what they feel strong in, what is perhaps their weaker side, what resources they have in general, in an educational context, but also in a personality context (teacher 1).

Respondents also mentioned that during the observation, it is not always the manifested abilities that come to the fore, but very often it is the behaviour while performing tasks; even sometimes the behaviour that hinders the work:

Certainly observation, observation, and once again observation... I can see that the child is bored very quickly, unable to focus, gets discouraged soon, is interested in many things at once. This is the first sign to me that this child is bound to demonstrate something at some point—either deficits or abilities. Typically, these are abilities. The strange thing, however, is that such children are very often labelled as naughty, while in fact they only show more interest and simply have greater educational needs (teacher 3).

The parents participating in the questionnaire also say they can see their children's abilities through observations made during fun and games, and time spent together:

I always spend a lot of time with my child—not only at play, but I also noticed his abilities when he started kindergarten. The child had highly developed emotional intelligence; in addition, he quickly established peer relationships, had a richer vocabulary compared to the group, and memorized texts in different languages easily (parent 4).

Parents notice their children's abilities at an early age, often observing their inquisitive questions, quick association of facts or interest in their surroundings:

My daughter learned how to read all by herself, as well as to write, while still in kindergarten; she asks about various things, when getting an answer she drills into the topic. For example, what does water consist of? How is it that two gas molecules form a liquid molecule? (teacher 6)

The statements of the teachers and parents participating in the questionnaire highlight the need for systematic and careful observation, since it is through a meticulous analysis of behaviour that potential abilities and educational needs of students can be discerned.

Interview with parents—an important element in the process of assessing abilities

Assessing a student's abilities is a complex process that requires a multifaceted approach to take into account both observation in the school environment and information from the parents. The interviewed teachers also point to the parents as being very significant in recognizing a student's abilities and taking further action. They point out that this is often done during one-on-one meetings—consultations, but also during general meetings, as long as the space is well prepared for this:

In addition to observation in comparison with other students in class, contact with parents—during one-on-one or general meetings—helps me a lot in identifying a particular student's abilities. They are the ones who bring in a great deal of relevant information about their children, but I am the one who has to give the space for them to be willing to tell me all about it (teacher 5).

Interviewing parents plays a key role in this process, enabling teachers to gain a broader picture of the child; their interests, predispositions and specific talents that may not manifest themselves in a school setting, as also mentioned by the respondents:

Contact with the parents is of great importance to me. I organize one-on-one meetings where we have the opportunity to talk through the child's situation, what I see and what I would like the parents to see. They then also talk a lot about their children—what they like, where they've been and what they've done, and I'm sometimes strongly surprised, because at school you don't see this at all (teacher 2).

The statements of the respondents confirm that effective cooperation between school and family fosters not only the identification of talents, but also the creation of an atmosphere of mutual understanding and support, which is crucial for the child's edu-

cation. An interview, especially with parents, conducted under favourable conditions, contributes a lot to the diagnosis of children's abilities.

Selection by teachers in recognizing students' potential

Selection by teachers also proves to be a very useful tool in discovering students' abilities, especially for those teachers who have the opportunity to work with students and know them in various task situations. Teachers, with their extensive pedagogical knowledge and experience, can spot students' abilities in different spheres. A student's potential often manifests itself in areas other than education, so the opinion of those who spend a lot of time with them seems particularly important:

In addition to observing the class and constant contact with parents, I very much value the opinion of my colleagues—other teachers working with my class, who very often point out to me the students and their abilities (teacher 6).

Selection by teachers does not dictate how a teacher will gain knowledge about a student. This can be done by analyzing the student's creations for aspects of interest to the teacher, or it can be done in the course of a conversation with the student or more or less planned observations of the student's behaviour. Most often, however, this is done by comparing the behaviour observed over a long period of time to that recorded in the past (Grygier et al., 2013). The interviewed teachers also talked about how their colleagues do it:

Most often, my colleagues' comments are related to what they have observed in their lessons; for example, some time ago a PE teacher came to me, saying that my Krzysz was an excellent football player and that it might be a good idea to discuss extra classes with his parents. This was very valuable to me, as it would have been hard for me to see it myself, since I don't do movement activities with my class (teacher 6).

The above statements by the respondent confirm that selection by teachers is a valuable tool in the process of identifying students' abilities, as it enables the exchange of insights between different parties working with students, resulting in better adjustment of methods of working with students with special needs.

A student's self-assessment as part of recognizing their abilities

A student's self-assessment plays an important role in the process of identifying their abilities and potential. It is a subjective assessment of one's own skills, competencies and achievements that affects a student's development and motivation for further learning. By analyzing what students say about themselves, valuable information can be gained about individual interests, aspirations, and areas in which the student feels

confident or needs support. Respondents also confirm that it is a valuable source of information for them:

Sometimes the words of the students should already make us wary. The simplest messages, when they come and talk about how they have achieved something, how they love to do something and how they can do it... and it is actually reflected in reality (teacher 2).

In addition to the messages appearing in conversations, teachers pay attention to a good organization of work, in which it is the student who will have the opportunity to demonstrate what they are best at:

It is important to organize the work with the student in such a way that the student can talk about it, too (...) Just remember to make students aware that each of us is different, and the fact that Jaś is great at football and Małgosia is great at maths is just as important (teacher 4).

Three of the respondents mentioned the organization of lessons on talents as the best opportunity to identify their students' abilities, saying that they could then really find out a lot:

It is very common for me and my class to carry out projects on talents and giftedness, when the children themselves present what they are best at. In this way, I also gain a great deal of information about the student (teacher 6).

By consciously using methods that support self-reflection, teachers can help students discover their talents and build self-confidence, which consequently affects their further educational and personal development.

Students' written works, creations and achievements as evidence of their abilities

Students' written works, creations and achievements are key tools in the process of identifying and assessing their abilities. The creations can provide teachers with important information about a student's intellectual potential, analytical skills, creativity and independence. How a student approaches the tasks assigned to them, what skills they use to complete them, as well as how they express their thoughts makes it possible to accurately identify their strengths and areas that require further development. This was also noted by the researchers:

In educational/classroom situations it is possible to recognize a gifted student by their creations—in arts, but also other creations, all kinds of creations... Based on my examples, it will probably be some recitation of poems, some staging, it will also be this natural ability to perform like actors at different moments, and it is by this, as

much as possible, that we can recognize a student, by their written works, that is, just the creation of some stories and these creative works of their own (teacher 1).

According to the interviewed teachers, this form of diagnosis often shows the creativity and out-of-the-box nature of their students:

In the system of identifying a gifted student, the work that they do (write or create, for example, art) is also important, because it shows their creativity, originality, allows us to understand the student's skills, to find out more about their potential (teacher 4).

The position of the teachers is also confirmed by parents, who claim that they could identify their children's abilities thanks to their works:

I noticed my child's abilities based on the works he drew/painted. Even then I could see that he had a knack for it, that it worked well for him (parent 3).

Students' creations and written works provide teachers and parents alike with a lot of valuable information. However, if one were to take a closer look at these tools, one would also find some limitations. Still, a comparative analysis of these materials over time should be applied. This will then help in making an accurate diagnosis about the students' abilities.

Challenges and difficulties in identifying students' abilities

Analysis of empirical research indicates that there are several effective methods to identify a gifted student. These various approaches provide a starting point for recognizing and later understanding the potential of a gifted student. However, teachers and parents face some difficulties in the process. Among the most common ones, teachers mention, for example, the child's personality traits, when the child is socially inhibited, unforthcoming and withdrawn, but also when the child tries to be visible in the group:

Recognizing a gifted student is by no means easy (...) children in the first grade come with great curiosity, a desire to explore, so it is difficult to recognize the student who manifests abilities, and who would like to excel, because it should be remembered that a child at this age will do anything to grab the teacher's attention (teacher 3).

Respondents also point to situations related to students' deficits that make it difficult to identify abilities:

Especially such situations related to the deficits and limitations of our students, as well as problems with emotions can cause difficulties in recognizing gifted children. A child with a psychologist's opinion may just as well be a gifted child, but due to problems in dealing with stressful situations it is hard to assess this (teacher 6).

Parents of students in grades I-III are also most afraid that their children may not be noticed within the whole class:

In large groups, a child can disappear. Since the child does not cause problems and is independent, in a large, sometimes educationally demanding group, the teacher does not pay attention to the student (parent 1).

Parents' worries are also caused by the fact that their children manifest their abilities in different ways, and this is often the reason for misunderstanding and lack of acceptance among peers:

My son is a sensitive child, very curious about the world. What worries me is how he will take possible setbacks. What worries me is that because of his intelligence, he is not accepted by most of the children in the class—he is often the only one who can solve a maths problem, and none of the children want to admit he is right—only the teacher (parent 2).

The statements of the interviewed teachers and parents allow us to conclude that identifying a gifted student is a significant challenge for the teacher, requiring not only precise diagnostic tools, but also sensitivity to subtle signals in the behaviour and achievements of the student.

Concluding remarks

The conducted research leads to some important conclusions. One conclusion is that the definition of a gifted student should be broad, encompassing not only students currently demonstrating outstanding skills, but also those with latent potential for future development. Based on the statements of the teachers participating in the questionnaire, an individual approach plays a key role in identifying students' abilities; this involves observing and getting to know the student in question. As a result, the student's strengths and weaknesses can be much better understood. This is done by analyzing the presented behaviour, written and artistic creations, as well as on occasions when the student themselves can demonstrate what works best for them. A more accurate picture of the student, according to the respondents, is also provided by insights obtained from other teachers. The importance of cooperation with parents was also noted, as they provide valuable information about their children, especially about their interests and skills manifested outside school.

An important issue highlighted by parents and teachers alike is the difficulty identifying gifted students. It is by no means an easy task to recognize abilities in children who are withdrawn, unforthcoming, inhibited, or those who cover up their abilities

through inappropriate behaviour, earning them the name of naughty. This indicates the need for teachers to be more sensitive to the subtle signals that make the presence of abilities apparent, even in situations where the child's behaviour is not typical of that characterizing gifted students. These difficulties, according to research, can lead to some children being overlooked in the process of identifying abilities; as a result, this can ultimately affect the development of their potential.

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