

THE ISSUE OF EXTRAORDINARY TALENT IN THE RESIDENTIAL CHILDCARE INSTITUTION: GIFTEDNESS OR DUAL EXCEPTIONALITY?

Dr. Alois Daněk

AMBIS University (Czech Republic)

Abstract. The residential childcare setting is not commonly associated with the phenomenon of exceptional talent. The main aim of this paper is to present to the professional community the results of research that has explored the domains of giftedness and the domain of dual exceptionality in residential childcare setting. The qualitative research design was based on a combination of observations, interviews, and case studies. The results showed that the prevalence of exceptionally gifted individuals in residential childcare facility is at least as high as in the intact population. However, we observed characteristics typical for dual exceptionality among all research participants. In the discussion, we outline the possibilities of adapting the conditions in the residential childcare setting, emphasizing the need for quality diagnostics. Our findings could lead to greater effectiveness in working with the exceptionally gifted not only in the setting we studied, but in any institutional setting worldwide.

Keywords: Giftedness; dual exceptionality; multiple intelligences; inclusion; special educational needs

Introduction

Giftedness is still seen by many as an elite phenomenon. There is a common perception that exceptionally gifted children are automatically destined for high performance and are not affected by the typical difficulties of the standard student population. However, the issue of giftedness and the problems associated with giftedness are so complex and present several educational and social challenges that it is an area of interest for special education. The situation in residential childcare settings is even more complicated. Here, we encounter a range of special educational needs. Moreover, when a gifted individual does emerge, it is often an object of incredulous wonder. It is as if the exceptional talent has a place only in elite schools and only average individuals are usually reserved for residential childcare environments.

The main aim of this paper is to present to the professional community the results of our qualitative research in which we explore the issue of exceptionally

gifted children in residential childcare settings. We have focused on the specifics associated with this unique target clientele. First, we will present the theoretical background and methodological design. Then, the paper will introduce the research setting and present the research process. We have obtained a unique set of case studies of children who have been found to have exceptional abilities in several areas, particularly in aesthetics, sports, and, last but not least, mathematical logic. We highlight the challenges for educators and children arising from the issue of dual exceptionality. In the second part of the paper, we outline recommendations that could lead to improved work with the exceptionally gifted, not only in residential care settings.

1. Theoretical background

Giftedness is important topic in modern education (Colangelo and Davis 2003). Regarding the essential literature on giftedness, one cannot mention Freeman and her excellent publications (2012). However, even the view of giftedness is gradually changing. The theory of multiple intelligences is becoming more and more popular. The concept of multiple intelligences is based on the acceptance of understanding intelligence as a complex multidimensional phenomenon, whereby intelligence is the ability to reason logically and excel in different areas. The list of individual intelligences is continuously changing. Currently, the literature speaks of Naturalistic, Musical, Logical-mathematical, Existential, Interpersonal, Linguistic, Bodily-kinaesthetic, Intra-personal and Spatial intelligence. The different domains intersect and influence each other. They allow the compensation of possible deficits in one area by more robust competencies in the others; in principle, there is no superior intelligence (Gardner 2011).

This grasp of the phenomenon of intelligence, where logico-mathematical intelligence is not the only form of intelligence, is very beneficial for individuals who, precisely by being able to compensate for partial deficits with their vital partial intelligence, can achieve excellent educational results. This is especially true for children with special educational needs (Foley-Nicpon et al. 2013). Dual exceptionality is a term used in a situation where an individual is exceptionally gifted on the one hand but has a special educational need on the other. Children with dual exceptionality can achieve great results, especially in creative areas (Abramo 2015). However, sometimes special needs overlap with exceptional giftedness (Gierczyk and Hornby 2021). This fact complicates the depiction of potential talents and impacts the development of the talent itself. Dual exceptionality places high demands on educators (Rowan and Townend 2016). Often, negative behavioral patterns are excused by exceptional giftedness, while at the same time, dual exceptionality can be a significant factor in the development of a range of serious difficulties. Teachers often overlook the signs of exceptional giftedness and instead focus on the deficit area. On the other hand, the area of

giftedness may compensate for the area of deficit (Baum et al. 2017). Children with dual exceptionalities are among the least understood and neglected in the student population (Whitmore and Maker 1985).

2. Research design

We engage in research employing a qualitative methodology, a method academic literature has underscored for its profound influence on shaping the contemporary inclusive paradigm (Lindsay 2003; Willing 2017). Qualitative research is versatile, finding approaches across diverse disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and educational sciences. Its overarching objective is to provide a comprehensive, profound, and meticulous understanding of the research issue. The inherent advantage of qualitative research lies in its capacity to conduct thorough examinations of cases, facilitating a detailed exploration of their evolution and allowing for specific comparisons. This approach goes beyond surface-level observation, considering the influence of context, nuances, and conditions. As a result, we can scrutinize individual processes and discern their impact on the overall research framework (Hendl 2016).

Consequently, qualitative research constitutes a methodological approach directed toward interpreting and comprehending human behavior and experience. This method is characterized by its nuanced exploration of subjective phenomena by employing observation, interviews, and document analysis techniques. Research is typically conducted on a limited scale with a small cohort of participants; qualitative research demands a meticulous examination of the collected data. Its distinctive merit lies in the capacity to capture subjective viewpoints from individuals intimately engaged with the investigated subject matter. Subsequently, these subjective experiences, perspectives, and opinions transform into scientific knowledge through qualitative research design (Given 2008; Leavy 2014). A salient advantage inherent in qualitative research lies in its capacity to refine the subject of inquiry iteratively, progressively unveiling novel avenues, perspectives, and research objectives throughout the investigation (Gulová and Šíp 2013).

Our research design operates on two distinct levels. In the initial stage, we employ interviews and observations and analyze pedagogical documentation to gather preliminary data. Subsequently, the acquired information undergoes scrutiny through grounded theory methods and phenomenological interpretive analysis. The research methodology undergoes regular reviews and adjustments to align with current research objectives. It encompasses diverse instruments and techniques, allowing adaptable responses to the nuances of the research context and the targeted population. The continuous refinement and integration of new research tools and methods contribute to the ongoing evolution of our research methodology. We perceive research as a dynamic and perpetual process, continually evolving and necessitating appropriate tools and methods to meet its evolving demands.

In the context of this study, we find ourselves presented with a distinctive opportunity to leverage multiple in-depth case studies. Recognized as a highly effective research tool, case studies, often associated with qualitative inquiry, have evolved into a valuable methodology for delving into complex issues within real-world scenarios. The utilization of case research becomes especially pertinent when scrutinizing contemporary phenomena (Hyett et al. 2014; Patnaik and Pandey 2019). Regularly utilizing case studies as a research approach has presented particular challenges, which can be alleviated by employing exact language and careful research design (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). However, because we are present in the researched environment as part of it for a long time, we can operate in the linguistic code of the target group. This advantage provides our qualitative research with the possibility of deep insight into the issues under study.

3. Researched environment and target group

We examined the residential childcare setting. It was a children's home located in Prague, Czech Republic. This institution is designed for children and young adults whose families cannot provide a safe and appropriate environment. The target clientele is not individuals with behavioral disorders but with severe disorders in their families. The devastation of the families is so severe that family rehabilitation is not possible, so the vast majority of children stay in the children's homes until they are 18 years old. If they continue their studies, they may stay until they are 26. Due to the need for suitable foster parents, this care for children is still very much needed in the Czech Republic.

The children's home provides a safe environment for 54 children and young adults who share a common experience. They all came to the Children's Home from pathological family backgrounds. There is documentation of alcoholism, substance abuse, domestic violence, and other pathologies that have been present in the children's original families for a long time. Despite the efforts of the responsible state authorities and the high commitment of social services, it was not possible to rehabilitate the original families, and the only possible way was to place the children in a children's home. Our children are affected by this fact; they are all emotionally deprived. The long-term impact of pathological families is reflected in a range of psychological, social, and educational challenges that are evident in the children when they arrive at the children's home (Daněk 2023).

The interviews and observations were conducted in the researched environment of the children's home during regular operation in January-May 2021, working with 20 respondents. All those involved were asked for consent and informed about the interaction's purpose. We reviewed the primary results and conducted a control data collection, which took place between November 2022 and March 2023. Our long-term research presence makes This massive time allocation possible; the author is also employed as a tutor at the target children's home. The interviews were recorded

on a dictaphone and subsequently transcribed. At the same time, we conducted interviews with teaching staff. We processed a selection of each child's educational records from 2009. We could analyze a group of children of almost 100 individuals. We were surprised by the results obtained.

In the research period under study, several children who could be described as gifted or exceptionally gifted came to the children's home. Most often, we could meet children who were gifted in general intelligence in 6 cases in total. Initially, we expected that the second place would be occupied by sporting giftedness, but we recorded five cases of artistic giftedness. We identified four gifted athletes. Of this group of fifteen children, three excelled in general intelligence, two in artistic, and two in sports to the extent that they met the definition of exceptionally gifted pupils. In particular, a pupil whose distribution of abilities reaches an extraordinary level with high creativity in a range of activities or particular areas of intellectual ability, motor, manual, artistic, or social skills can be considered exceptionally gifted. We are thus talking about seven exceptionally gifted children. The prevalence of gifted children in the residential childcare setting is similar to the intact population.

While we have found that we can encounter exceptionally gifted individuals even in residential settings, our research has shown much more complex results. It turned out that the respondents needed help to fulfill their talents' potential. This will be demonstrated in the following case studies. This is a unique insight into the residential setting that other researchers cannot access. The author's long-term presence in the research setting has made this research advance possible. Therefore, the following case histories contain information from the time of residence in the research setting and from the time before arriving at the children's home and after leaving.

Case study 1: The boy came to the study setting at the age of 13 with his two siblings from a broken family background. The mother was unable to care for the children for a long time. Upon arrival, his high intelligence was evident, which was also indicated by the reports of previous examinations. He had no problems, especially in technical subjects, and excelled in mathematics. However, he did not devote his potential to the field of study; he invested all his free time in playing computer games. The problem escalated during the transition to secondary school. The boy deliberately chose the most accessible possible high school to have more time for computer games. Although he did not prepare for four years, he graduated quickly. He subsequently passed the college entrance exam, moving into the top ten applicants. However, he did not make it, was confronted with preparation requirements, and dropped out after failing the first exam. He left the children's home at age 22, working as an agency security guard.

Case study 2: The boy came to the children's home with his two older siblings at age 7. From the beginning, he had significant difficulties in school and was

diagnosed with ADHD. However, in the long term, he managed to compensate for many difficulties with the help of sports. The boy was an excellent athlete, excelling in speed events. He participated in competitions and received several offers to transfer to top sports clubs. However, at the onset of puberty, there was a drift away from sport, and the boy began to experiment with drugs and tended to join risky peer groups. Behavioral disorders emerged, and the boy was moved to a children's home with school and then to an educational institution. According to our information from colleagues from the educational institute, the problems are escalating; the boy refuses to cooperate, is often on the run, and the prognosis is not good.

Case study 3: The girl came to the children's home at the age of 13. The mother failed to care for her, and the extended family broke down. The girl shows signs of Asperger's syndrome, especially in her difficulties in communicating with others. The girl was accepted as a prestigious multi-year high school scholarship student. Initially, she showed excellent results, especially in math and art. However, over time, she lost interest in her studies and began to escape into the virtual world. Gender identity difficulties were added to the incipient addictive patterns of risky behavior. She could not participate in a social group at a multi-year high school. She refused to continue her studies and will transfer to a mainstream primary school next year. We are working intensively to find a special education intervention to enable the girl to fulfill her potential.

Case study 4: The girl came to the children's home at the age of 6, along with her younger brother, from an environment that was unimaginable even by our standard of a broken home. The mother was a drug addict; both children were born with withdrawal syndrome. Often left at home unsupervised, they were present at domestic and sexual violence. They came to the children's home with developed night fright and the beginnings of behavioral disorders that gradually gained momentum. Although the children's home tried, its environment is not adapted for children with behavioral disorders; the girl went to a children's home with school. During her stay in the children's home, she was surprised by her artistic talent. Apart from artistic expression, she excelled in music. She was active in a string orchestra and played the violin. She had an absolute ear and precise intonation. Regarding violin technique, she had no problem playing the violin with both her left and right hand. However, she refused to accept the authority of the orchestra leader and tried to draw all attention to herself. The problems escalated into a situation where the girl brutally killed the class guinea pig. She was subsequently expelled from the orchestra. She gave up music but demanded alternative musical activities for the rest of her stay in the children's home. Currently, the girl is still in the correctional institution; the prognosis is not good.

4. Discussion on the research results

During interviews with the teaching staff at the children's home, we noted some common manifestations of our gifted and exceptionally gifted children. Respondents spoke of characteristics such as a specific sense of humor, a tendency to seek friends from the other side of the Gaussian curve, and the apparent need for an adequately talented significant adult that was repeatedly expressed. If this adult is not available, difficulties with authority figures may accelerate. Further, we noted unrealistic perceptions of gifted children's abilities. Boys often had a diagnosis of ADHD and frequent experimentation with drugs, while girls had apparent gender ambiguity and frequent self-harm. Across genders, escape into the virtual world was evident in all respondents.

Teaching staff often spoke about the challenges of working with exceptionally gifted children in a children's home setting. It happens that the gifted child achieves, compared to other children, much better results with less energy. Repeatedly, we have been in situations where the gifted child becomes discouraged and resigns to fulfilling school obligations. Another common occurrence is when a child comes to an institution with a firmly established idea that he or she is brilliant. He attaches great importance to intelligence and elevates himself above other children. He refuses to fit in with the team and condescends the teaching staff. We have observed this, especially in children with general intelligence talents.

In determining the responses to our research, the information we gathered provided us with several suggestions. All of the children in the study group, and therefore the children identified as gifted and exceptionally gifted, were psychologically deprived. All had special educational needs, and a number had behavioral difficulties. Sooner or later, although the children's home tried to provide maximum support, we could observe a move away from the area of giftedness and a refusal to engage in activities leading to its development. With one exception, none of the children fulfilled their potential. The target group studied fulfilled the criteria for using the term double exceptionality.

As mentioned, we have repeatedly encountered unrealistic adoration of giftedness. Recently, the fixed and pro-growth mindset model has made inroads in professional circles. Here, the phenomenon of intelligence is understood as a tool, not as a determinant. It has been shown that focusing purely on talent in the educational process can negatively affect a student's self-concept (Dweck 2017). This situation appears because it needs to cope with a confrontation with equal or, on the contrary, better-resourced individuals. Then, if we associate achievement only with talent, we build a negative confirmation of educational reality, where the student transfers his/her successes or failures to the phenomenon of talent. The ensuing tension often leads to the building of negative habits. Our respondents exhibited a relatively fixed pattern of adjustment, which partly explains their departure from the area in which they excelled.

In particular, the issue of dual exceptionality requires quality diagnosis, which is the basis for adequate special education intervention (Ruban and Reis 2005). In the case of twice-exceptionality, a wide range of information is needed for quality diagnosis (Hafenstein et al. 2021), which must be considered. Close interdisciplinary collaboration and a reappraisal of intelligence as a phenomenon associated with intact populations will be needed.

Every student requires adequate support (Basit and Tomlinson 2012). As experts agree, it would be a mistake to assume that a gifted student does not need the necessary support (Freeman 1985; Gross 1993; Landau 2007). Our research has confirmed that the issue of exceptional giftedness associated with special educational needs places significant demands on the education and care system (Portešová 2011; Baum et al. 2017). For the target group of our research, education is of critical importance. A quality education enables an individual to better integrate into society after leaving the children's home (Daněk 2022). Since the education of children with special educational needs is primarily concerned with special education, we can, therefore, describe special education as an instrument of social change (Stárek 2023).

Conclusion

The research conducted brought several key findings. The main result is the confirmation that even in the residential childcare environment, we can encounter exceptionally gifted children. This finding can also be applied to other institutional settings, such as correctional or social service institutions. This finding will allow professionals working in various institutions to become aware that there may be an exceptionally gifted individual among their clients. At the same time, our findings highlight the complexity of giftedness and special educational needs. This dual exceptionality requires a quality educational approach. Otherwise, the potential of gifted individuals may be at risk. At the same time, by identifying the area of giftedness, we can significantly influence the educational and social competence of the individual. However, there will be a need to improve the training of future teachers, educators, and other professionals. Giftedness does not have to be only an elite phenomenon; giftedness can also be a tool of modern special education, which intensively helps overcome difficulties related to special educational needs. If we realize that each of us has the potential to excel and be talented, we will significantly strengthen inclusive education and the entire contemporary society.

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✉ **Dr. Alois Daněk**

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0239-7358

WoS Researcher ID: HKP-1605-2023

AMBIS University

Prague, Czech Republic

E-mail: alois.danek@ambis.cz