

Promotion of very able children in preschool age

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Abstract

The reform ideas in kindergarten education in Germany more than twenty years ago did not change the insufficient recognition and promotion of gifted children in pre-school age substantially. The stronger consideration of socialising environments though improved the equality of chances for children from disadvantaging socio-economic and -cultural backgrounds. The cognitive and behavioural characteristics of gifted pre-school children mean remarkable challenges for their parents and educators. A more-dimensional, holistic, child- and action-oriented educational-psychological approach for the work with gifted children in pre-school age is proposed.

Introduction

Many publications about giftedness and gifted children stress the point how important and necessary it is to identify these children as early as possible. Regardless of all other differences regarding strategies and methods of identification and furthering this statement seems to be indisputable. Early identification shall ensure an early and adequate education and promotion in order to avoid all possible negative effects of neglect and lack of challenge. Very seldom though it is described and explained how such an adequate education and tutelage in early age should look like.

At the same time the promotion of very young children as early as possible is discussed controversially from a societal and educatio-political point of view; understandable if such a “promotion” restricts the learning autonomy and interests of the child and determines its self-realisation in a one-sided way, if it prescribes goals of life and achievement in a dirigistic manner and is lastly conducted at the cost of a holistic and harmonic development of the child’s personality. In the frame of responsible and defendable projects and programs for the education of gifted pre-school children you will not find such “negative goals” and strategies (see, for example, Mehlhorn, 1989; Urban, 1990a).

Under different conditions, more than two decades ago, in Germany early education of children had been a key topic in pedagogical and educatio-political debates. Turning away from maturational approaches developmental psychology and educational research had pointed out the importance and impact of learning and developmental potential of the young child. The education in/for kindergarten no longer could offer to children just a safe and spare room for maturation and unfolding, or just offer a place for shelter to children of working mothers (Schwartz, 1970b). I had been shown in what close relationship to factors of socio-cultural and socio-economic environment the development of cognitive and general personal traits and abilities had to be considered. Thus beside the idea of pre-school as a “stimulating

institution for all” special “provisions for furthering learning abilities and maturation” in order to compensate former inhibiting developmental conditions were stressed (Schwartz, 1970b, p. 146). Seldom though it was seen that such an equalising and “compensating education”, trying to guarantee a justice of starting circumstances, at the same time had retarding and hampering effects on some (very able) children (Schwartz, 1970a), or in different terms that such an equality of chances meant individually adequate learning opportunities for the gifted, too. Already at that time Heckhausen (1970, p. 99) wrote that the right of equality of chances is maltreated, too, “if children with a high capacity of learning are not challenged when entering school or not furthered according to their speed of learning”. Mostly the (seemingly) paradox was negated or neglected that improved or equally favourable starting conditions for all in any case will lead to very different and “unequal” learning results, to disparate individual developments of achievement.

In spite of stressing the term giftedness (not in the sense of highly gifted) the endeavours to reform school, pre-school and kindergarten did not lead to a special concern or provisions for gifted children; they probably have enhanced the developmental chances for gifted children from disadvantaging environments. Several educational and psychological ideas which came up at that time are still fruitful for today’s discussion about education of gifted children in pre-school age, such as a dynamic approach of giftedness and endowment, freeing education, learning autonomy, the learning of the child as an active operating with and acquiring of the environment, the principle of fit etc.

For the following gifted or very able children are meant as those with remarkable advantage or precociousness in their cognitive development, children with very high intellectual potential (in a broad sense), but not children with a special, even extraordinary talent, like musical talent - even if such specific talents often are closely linked with special intellectual aptitudes.

Characteristics of gifted children - developmental foundations

When a pedagogically and psychologically adequate education of gifted pre-schoolers shall consider their special needs, interests, and aptitudes, then it is necessary to ask first, if and to which degree they have (been) developed, if they differ from those of other children, and if special, but generalizable traits can be found and described. Publication on those questions are comparably rare; very often they are not empirically based in a sufficient way. Casey & Quisenberry (1976, 1982) had to rely in large parts on literature about older children. Roedell, Jackson & Robinson (1980) support their monograph “Gifted young children” with data from their Seattle-Project with 53 pre-schoolers. More recently in Germany there are contributions and studies dealing with questionnaires and Checklists by Stapf (1990, 1992), Stapf & Stapf (1987, 1988) as well as the extensive report by Urban (1990a,c) about the Hannover-Project with 20 highly gifted children in pre-school age.

Already in very early age some traits, which have specially been focused at in the developmental research of the last two decades (see, for example, Mönks & Lehwald, 1991), can be observed with gifted children very early and to a strong degree, such as self-activity, self-steering, explorational behaviour and curiosity. The development and the further progress

of such explorational behaviour as a “typical form of learning of toddlers and pre-schoolers” (Mönks & Lehwald, 1991, p. 9) are highly dependent on the ecological conditions, specially on the sensitivity of the child’s partners in social interaction and their ability to react adequately to the child’s explorative initiatives. Only recently it has been stressed and described more clearly to what high degree not only adults have effect on the children, but, vice versa, how intensively the curious child, rich in explorative behaviour and strive for knowledge, influences its care taking social partners and thus shapes the interaction process (Lehwald, 1991). Here the development of a positive binding behaviour is of eminent importance; it is the foundation for being able to act safely and to develop competence, not only in cognitive, but in social respect, too. Relying on the literature the following cognitive or cognitively bound traits or behavioural patterns may be seen as characteristic for gifted pre-school children (Abraham & Hartwell, 1985; Casey & Quisenberry, 1982; Ehrlich, 1978; Roedell et al, 1980; Stapf, 1992; Tarshis & Shore, 1991; Urban, 1990a):

- High degree of curious and (self-dependent) explorative behaviour;
- highly efficient and fast perception and processing by highly structured encoding, specially with interesting and often complex tasks or problems;
- remarkable achievements in logical thinking, abstraction and transfer;
- very early interest and intensive operations in/with symbols (numerical, verbal) and abstract concepts, in activities of classifying, arranging, ordering;
- early signs of reflexive thinking, perspective taking (not only with spatial tasks), metacognition;
- outstanding memory;
- very fluent and flexible in thinking; finding new and original ideas, verbally or with material objects (Urban, 1991);
- high concentration and task commitment in self-given tasks, mostly in the intellectual area;
- self-initiated and mostly independently acquired reading (and writing) from the age of two or three on;
- elaborated, expressive, fluent talking with often unusual and broad pool of words; precocious in the area of language structure and linguistics;
- extraordinary self-will in the sense of self-steering and self-determination of activities and directions.

It is not necessary or proved that all those traits and behaviours mentioned must to be found observing a gifted child. For example, very early and self-initiated reading as a rule is a very good indicator of very high intellectual giftedness, on the other hand, lacking this aptitude does not necessarily mean average or low potential (Urban, 1990a). The individual intellectual profiles may be shaped very different.

There is no generally shared conviction that the cognitive abilities mentioned above implicate a qualitatively different thinking, or if just differences are mirrored, which are typical for a comparison of older with younger children in general.

For other domains of personality than the cognitive one there are no general developmental advantages or characteristic differences between gifted and non-gifted children, with the exception of cognitively bound areas, like social cognition as compared to

actual social behaviour. Though very often it has been tried to compile list with personality traits, they seldom are empirically safe, since mostly socio-economic or -cultural factors have been neglected. Thus Roedell et al. (1980) give the statement: Gifted children show a wide range of personality characteristics and levels of social maturity” (p. 26).

Educational challenges for the parents

Considering the discussion about recent findings on the very early development (of cognition) above it seems critical for a positive developmental progress, that the outstanding explorative behaviour of very young children in pre-school age is provided with sufficient stimulations or “material”, so that their early interest in unusual objects, facts, and questions gets an adequate and positive feedback. Parents have to be highly sensitive for verbal questioning of their child, open for his/her self-determined activities as well as flexible, inventive, and broad in offering support and mediation if necessary and asked for. The object- or idea-oriented stimulations must meet the “principle of fit”, as all good tasks they must be challenging but not overcharging. Parents need to find the right balance between educational tutoring and mediation, between participating observation and cognitive and emotional involvement, between stimulating intervention and acceptance of “autonomous” activities of the child. That all means remarkable challenges and endeavours for the parents, in regard to physical efforts as well as to psychic loads, in regard to content and size as well as to time and schedule; challenges parents are seldom prepared for.

Lehwald (1991) suggests that basic abilities, areas of knowledge and motives should become “enriched”; thus he is in favour of a kind of “enrichment approach” (Gallagher, 1985) which tries to detect starting points for individual promotion by systematic intervention into developmental processes. But on the one hand, a “systematic intervention” seems to be a strong overcharging of parental competencies, and on the other, this would imply the risk and negative effects of too early schooling and deterministic outside-regulation of developmental processes. Only as far as children with developmental retardation or children from disadvantaging socio-cultural backgrounds are concerned this kind of intervention could help in avoiding deviant or problematic developments and behavioural disorders (Urban, 1990b), and contribute to realise and nurture the children’s potentials.

Many children of high intellectual potential are in danger of being considered only under that dominating domain and being dealt with just as “brains”, just as rational, thinking entity and not as sensing, feel, suffering, loving soul and human being. Therefore it is important to offer a broad variety playful activities in an emotional safe and warm environment, which addresses not only the intellectual development of the child, but aims at a holistic and harmonic development of the individual.

Psychological and educational guidelines for groupwork with gifted children

The ideas mentioned above are true, too, for programs or institutions working with gifted children (not only in pre-school age). In his short overview about foreign, mainly American programs, Urban (1990a) states, that most of them are closely bound into the frame of a

school (system) and aim more or less implicitly at (advanced or accelerated) academic learning; some others are relatively one-sided and oriented at distinct abilities in either the creative-musical-artistic area or intellectual talent.

The following refers very shortly to the educational and psychological work with the children in the Hannover-Project (Urban, 1990a,c). The concept developed for and in that project was based upon a model in which the gifted individual is considered a holistic personality (in development); a foundation is given by the biological and neurophysiological basic structures, then the personality develops in concrete interaction with the natural, material-objective, symbolic and social micro-environment, which again is in exchange with and influenced by the societal, political, economic, ecological, and cultural macro-environment. Beside developmental advantages in the cognitive domain, including generally the highly effective perception and processing as well as the creative production of data, ideas, and knowledge, we differentiate into the following areas of personality: the emotional-affective, the conative, and the social area. The complexity of interaction, the principles of a holistic view and more-dimensionality were educational postulates for the work with and of the children.

These principles are closely linked with the principle of a framework-orientation at the child, its action and development in general, and secondly at the individual needs, potentials and abilities, concrete actions and motives of the single child. The educational work aims at the development of autonomy and competence in various material, content and personality areas which again have to become integrated in the child's activities.

In the cognitive domain for gifted children the preconditions for a development of autonomy and competence are to a high degree given by their curiosity, strive for knowledge, self-dependent exploring and the principally "granted" ability to "learn the learning". Broad and meaningfully combined activities and rich, stimulating material shall offer free space for discovering and detecting learning, for creative playing and acting full of fantasy, in order to develop content and cultural competence which is not just an accumulation of simple knowledge facts. From the side of the institution, the organisation, and the educators a high degree of openness (Urban, 1995) and flexibility is requested.

Specially the project-method seems adequate to transfer that more-dimensional and holistic, the child- and action-oriented approach into concrete pedagogical work (see, for example, the project "fire", described in Urban, 1990a, pp. 116-130):

"Starting point is a theme which either comes from the interest or motivational situation of the children, arises from directly observed behaviour of the children, or from special stimulations of the educators which refer to the children's area of activities and experiences... This theme is worked on more-dimensionally and under several aspects, it is dealt with/by the children over a longer period of time in such a way, which as far as possible incorporates the whole personality with the domains of cognition, emotion, social interaction, and conation, of expressive and movement behaviour, which includes, for example, knowledge, feeling, responsibility, curiosity, shaping, design, role games, language etc." (pp. 99-100).

More-dimensionality is reflected in various ways, the change of activities during the day, the variety of methods and themes over the time, the manifold areas addressed to;

openness and flexibility becomes obvious in the large number of activities outside the grouproom which partially are in connection with long-term projects, partially originate from spontaneous and concrete needs or opportunities; there is additional or integrated enrichment by “playful foreign language”, by rhythmic and musical education without using school curricula.

Special consideration with all activities is given to social (inter)action, the playing and learning together. Some gifted children, specially those with negative experiences from the normal kindergarten, do need not only offers and stimulation, but special support and help, in order to develop their emotionality and social competence in an adequate way. Even if they are precocious in their social cognition, even if it becomes obvious that they are interacting verbally far above average in amount and style and cope with conflicts (Urban, 1990a, c) within the group, gifted children often are relatively underdeveloped in regard to their social behaviour and aptitudes, they often are unstable or insecure in their affectivity and emotionality.

In spite of the great independence of the children the educator plays an eminent role, for the development of the personality as well as for the acquisition of knowledge and actional competence. Educators have to play a broad variety of different roles:

“He/she stimulates and initiates play- and learning processes, opens new fields of activities; he/she elicits reactions and interests, often in the sense of a positive challenge; he/she moderates on the one hand between the child and a topic, on the other between the children, opens and supports relations; he/she stabilises and offers a safe pole, which children can trust in psychically and physically; he/she helps in activities which at a time are still too difficult for the child or other children without destroying learning interests; he/she gives instruction in skills and knowledge; he/she participates in the grouplife while observing, e.g. from a certain distance without dissociating him-/herself; he/she counsels with children (and parents) in regard to situations of psychical burdens; he/she organises and structures learning processes and undertakings; sometimes he/she is expert for certain areas of knowledge, in first line he/she is expert for learning how to learn as well as for creative thinking and doing... In all these functions he/she at the same time is a model for the children” (Urban, 1990a, p. 54).

Closing proposals

On the basis of the experiences of the Hannover-project, knowing on the one side the situation of many parents of gifted children in pre-school age and on the other the situation in many German kindergartens in conclusion some proposal are formulated, which may contribute to an improvement of developmental chances for gifted pre-schoolers in the interest of all children:

- Parents of gifted children in pre-school age are often overcharged when trying to cope with the needs and demands of their children; they need competent counselling and guidance. Therefore in every large city such counselling services should be established.
- Specially children from socio-culturally deprived families are in need of extra stimulation in play and learning which could be offered additionally in kindergarten.

- For gifted children in danger of developmental or behavioural disorders (Urban, 1990b) special places should be hold in kindergarten with specially trained personnel.
- In spite of all endeavours of integration there will be some (extremely) gifted children, who cannot get an adequate education in a regular kindergarten; therefore opportunities and means for the establishment of specific (parallel) groups, specially with preventive intention, should be provided.
- The professional training of educators in kindergarten, pre-school, and elementary level should include pedagogical and psychological information about identification and furthering of gifted children.
- The spatial, material, personnel equipment of pre-school institutions must become remarkably enriched in general, in order to improve the developmental opportunities of gifted pre-school children on the basis of a generally qualitatively high education for all.

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