

Construction of the meaning of giftedness as a special educational need in the context of the changed learning approach in Estonia

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Summary

One of the main principles of the Estonian educational policy is the development of all students according to their abilities, including noticing and considering their special educational needs. In the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, a new, more personalised learning approach has been formulated to support the individual and social development of a learner. In Estonia, the education of children with special needs, incl. gifted and talented students, is supported and ensured at national level (see Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, 2010²), but there is no comprehensive support system for developing gifted learners. Also, in PISA studies, the lack of work with more gifted learners is pointed out as one of the problems of Estonia.

There are no specific criteria for identifying giftedness (Laine & Tirri, 2015; Mönks & Pflüger, 2005); giftedness depends on the sociocultural context (Borland, 1997, 2005; Cigman, 2006; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008; Mazzoli *et al.*, 2012). Both our research task and the chosen methodology are based on the viewpoint that giftedness is a social construct that reflects specific forces serving socio-political interests in the education system (Borland, 2005, p. 3).

Our sample consists of oral interviews with five professionally responsible focus groups which were studied as stakeholders: teacher training faculty researchers, officials from education support bodies, education officials from local governments, school headmasters and teachers. The study is qualitatively focussed on how people from those five groups, all responsible in their field of education, understand the notion of special educational needs, underlining giftedness as one of them, according to our laws. The research problem is whether the new learner-centred approach is

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² See Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/513012014002/consolide> (12.01.2016).

reflected in the understandings of the education stakeholders and how do these stakeholders construct the meaning of giftedness and shape the roles of their own and other participants in the field of education. Our research questions are:

1. How do the focus groups nominate special educational needs, especially giftedness and a gifted learner, and through which discourses are those needs constructed?
2. Which is the common part of the focus-groups' viewpoints and which varieties are present when the stakeholders speak about gifted learners in the context of the changing learning approach?
3. How agentive are the responsible stakeholders as the representatives of certain power structures?

Based on the assumption that the physical world constructed with the help of language acquires a meaning through discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 15) and accounts for the linguistic meanings created for participants, which are used for presenting and establishing social relationships (Fairclough, 2001), the Critical Discourse Analysis has been used as the method of analysing the interviews.

In the estimation of stakeholders, special educational needs are acknowledged; however, there are not enough resources for accommodating the gifted learners. Therefore, our findings on beliefs common for all studied stakeholder groups support the quantitative measurements of PISA, according to which average learners are attended to, but the top learners remain without attention (cf. Säälük, 2012). The lexical analysis also confirmed that – similarly to the education discourse in general (Bernstein, 1996) – the discourse of special educational needs designed social identities: in social hierarchy, gifted learners were sometimes placed in the top position, at other times in the lowest position (from genius to a dork and outcast).

When comparing the labels put on gifted learners by the respondents and the names used in theories of giftedness, it was only teachers who mentioned the personal characteristics through which the theoreticians who handle giftedness as a system describe this phenomenon – abilities higher than average, commitment, sophistication, intelligence and creativity (Renzulli, 1978; Sternberg, 2005). *Intelligence* as the term most often used for describing and measuring gifts only came up during the interviews with teachers (although they used Estonian synonyms for that). The only theory that was referred to was Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences named by education research faculty members.

Giftedness in education discourse was handled through personal characteristics, not based on developmental aspects (compare Gagné, 2004). Gifted people were rarely described through their own activities (e.g., *studies in an untraditional way*) or through activities of the others (*outcome of teacher's work*) but rather through their innate personal characteristics (*smart, broad-minded in a natural way*).

The representatives of the stakeholders described the situation from their position of an expert-communicator. However, in the majority of situations, the respondents did not identify themselves as agents; in the changing learning situation, the responsible parties were abstract: *school, teachers, the gifted learners* themselves. Furthermore, the work with gifted learners was also described in an impersonal-passive way (*they are left without attention, need to be supported / sent to subject-competitions*). Consequently, a gifted learner was verbally turned into an object of activity (*(s)he has to be acknowledged / encouraged*). Therefore, it can be assumed that the responsible participant groups of education in Estonia do not clearly position themselves as actors of the on-going change.

The common part of the viewpoints of the groups expressed the lack of possibilities (*teachers have physically no time, where to find this money*). Hence, the results of the present survey support the earlier conclusion that in our education, reality pupils are not encouraged to achieve their whole potential (Kitsing *et al.*, 2015) and these facts were revealed during PISA studies that Estonian education system does not support the development of gifted learners in the classroom (PISA, 2012; Säälik, 2012).

To sum up, the survey indicated the awareness of the responsible participant groups about the problem, but not so much their readiness to act. The present survey also suggests that when it comes to gifted students, the new learner-centred approach is not reflected in the understandings and language used by education stakeholders, the traditional teacher-centred approach being prevalent (as also stated by Jõgi *et al.*, 2015; Loogma, 2014; TALIS, 2008). Nevertheless, the teachers who participated in the survey saw the high potential of a gifted learner, describing him/her in the most versatile way. Meanwhile, there are some pre-requisites for introducing the changed learning approach on a broader scale. Every responsible group studied some discourse which indicated a readiness for changing course, supporting the implementation of the changed learning approach, although the same discourses were absent in other groups' interviews, or on the contrary, appeared simultaneously in two groups. Those more hidden discourses may provide the basis for a broader dialogue needed in the field to realise the idea of the new type of education (see Mumby, 1989 on the

prerequisites for cultural change). Therefore, cooperation in the society and creating a meaning to the changed learning approach is important for education stakeholders, helping them to support the individual development of all students, including talented ones.

Keywords: special educational need, giftedness, gifted learner, changed learning approach, critical discourse analysis