

The meaning of adult giftedness and opportunities for its development in non-formal education

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Summary

This paper provides an overview of the meaning of adult giftedness in non-formal education. Although the concept of giftedness is historically related to adulthood, then (Põlda, 2018) as nowadays public communication mostly talks about the gifts of children, whilst adults with their abilities, skills, and giftedness have been left in the background (Brown et al., 2020; van de Ven, 2022). The reason for the lack of discussion of a lifespan approach to giftedness is that existing models fail to understand adult giftedness primarily because (a) they do not take into account the social roles of adults; (b) they focus excessively on achievement and comparison with peers; and (c) they rely on external definitions, ignoring the individual's internal motivation (van Thiel et al., 2019). The aim of this paper is to clarify the term's content and describe how the development of adult giftedness is supported in non-formal education. The research questions fulfilling the purpose were: (1) How do non-formal education practitioners construct the meaning of adult giftedness, and (2) What opportunities do practitioners see in their work to support the development of adult giftedness and abilities?

Rooted views present giftedness as a high level of people's mental abilities (high IQ) and also describe giftedness as different types of intelligence divided into cognitive modules based on sociocultural context (Theory of Multiple Intelligences) or as a system made up of different components (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008). In order to fulfil these criteria, it is necessary to expand the understanding of giftedness as a phenomenon specific to children and formulate the meaning of giftedness over the lifespan, including defining the concept of adult giftedness (Brown et al., 2020). In order to comprehend the meaning of adult giftedness, it is necessary to consider an adult's experiences, including gifted adults' experiences, in various contexts and stages of life (Brown & Peterson, 2022). It is claimed that supporting the development of

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an adult's giftedness strengthens and empowers the individual in daily work, improves people's mental and physical well-being, and improves relationships in the organisation (Nauta & Ronner, 2013). Thus, the need to conceptualise the development of giftedness over the entire lifespan is a key issue in the concept of lifelong learning. Non-formal education is one of the most suitable types of education, as it creates a supportive environment for individual development and considers people's individual development needs (Põlda et al., 2021a). Research shows that in non-formal education, the development of general competencies takes place continuously and essentially in every field and across the lifespan, including in adult education, and that through the development of general competencies, we also support the development of gifts and abilities (Põlda et al., 2021b).

The requirements of this study called for a qualitative approach to be used for both data collection and analysis. The research material consisted of a secondary dataset of 17 focus group interviews with non-formal education practitioners (n = 64), who represented the fields of adult education, youth work, culture, well-being, economy, and environmental education. The research was based on interview material in which non-formal education practitioners describe their daily work in supporting learning. Representatives of these fields deal with issues of personnel development and career development support, including specialists, consultants, and adult trainers, as well as organisers and facilitators of interest in education and activities and youth work. We used qualitative-directed content analysis by Saldaña (2012) and grouped the marked codes by research questions based on common features. As a result of the answers to both research questions, a total of six main categories emerged: *content of the term, personal characteristics, development, environment, practitioners' role, and responsibility*.

The findings revealed that practitioners of non-formal education describe their work by creating linguistic connections with the concept of adult giftedness and using three important constructions. The concept of giftedness is associated with the phenomenon's direct or indirect signifiers (gift, skills, abilities); with the personal characteristics of the bearer of the gifts (internal motivation, self-directedness, analytical ability); and with the developmental aspects of the giftedness, which can happen by itself but rather takes place with support and awareness. The prerequisites and unique features of adult giftedness are autonomy, professionalisation at work, being aware of one's giftedness or potential, taking responsibility for the development, and realising that it is possible across the lifespan. It must be understood that the recognition of gifts requires the individual's willingness to work hard in competition or for the sake of success and the willingness to stand out, requiring special attention and support

from the surrounding environment. Our results show that in supporting the development of adult giftedness, the non-formal education environment is an enabler of good opportunities and interest-based activities, assuming that the created environment takes into account the changing world, is flexible, and enables a person-centred approach. In supporting the development of adult giftedness, both the role of the practitioner of non-formal education and the importance of the environment are highlighted.

The study revealed the need for flexibility in the environment and the importance of transferable skills for individuals in the context of adult giftedness. According to the study, finding opportunities and resources for the development of one's giftedness and its transfer, as well as for coping with changes in society, is primarily the individual's own responsibility. Theorists refer to "adult giftedness" as the individual's struggle with isolation and social disapproval (Jacobsen, 2000). The study also confirmed the understanding that giftedness in adulthood is related to differentiation and competition, e.g., in a professional career and elsewhere. Giftedness is related to adult social roles, and non-formal education supports a person in the struggle between these roles. The study showed that non-formal education is a non-judgmental environment that an adult enters voluntarily, and it offers different options in various fields. This is where the main activities of supporting giftedness in non-formal education can be highlighted as important, which we venture to recommend based on the study.

The results of the research allow adult educators (e.g., lecturers at universities and vocational schools) to understand the meaning of adult giftedness and to see opportunities to support the development of the gifts of their adult learners by offering specific activities and solutions. Both practitioners working in non-formal education as well as creators and developers of non-formal education opportunities, could benefit from the research results. The more clearly the importance of adult giftedness and the opportunities to support it are highlighted, the broader the benefits will be for the whole society. Its recognition is a priority in education codes and strategies of different countries (UNESCO, 2016). Glück and Tischler (2021) argue that 'Perhaps we should move from "giftedness" to "giftiness" from individualistic competition to collaboration. 'This is the idea we should follow.

Based on the processed theoretical material for this research and the analysis of the practitioners' interviews, we are able to offer recommendations for supporting adult giftedness in non-formal education. A safe and supportive learning environment can be created through flexibility, freedom of choice and equal opportunities. From the lifespan perspective, the development of giftedness is the learner's responsibility. The practitioners' role is to consider

the demands of a changing world and to support giftedness by noticing it and using a person-centred approach. When identifying giftedness, we should use the vocabulary referring directly to the phenomenon. It is important to consider all social roles of an adult and to support transversal skills and career competencies. Considering the above discussed, it can be summarised that the meaning of adult giftedness includes individual awareness, responsibility for developing one's gifts, safe and supported environment, professionalisation, and consideration of adult's social roles.

Keywords: giftedness, talent, lifelong learning, adult education, non-formal learning