

**Development of gifted children`s social competencies: German and Russian experience**

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**Abstract.** Reviewing studies on gifted children social competencies, it has been postulated that adults usually offer a proper vocational guidance to children. This paper argues that this stance neglects prospects and young people potential in developing gifted children social competencies. The paper exploits cultural and philosophical anthropology to reveal the role played by younger instructors in prompting the successful behavior and the right future career choice. A parallel is drawn between the “Successful Enrollee’s School” in Russia and “The Academy of Schoolchildren” in Germany, both of the programs offer an opportunity for gifted children to consider their life choices and to form, if necessary, their social competencies with the help of university students, postgraduates and young instructors.

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**Introduction**

A great deal has been said about turning “the Pedagogy of Knowledge” into “the Pedagogy of Competencies”. The competence means extended modes of action providing productive professional activities. The core of competence is ability to act, totality of action methods, “since competence is implemented through various activities to reach theoretical and practical goals, the competence structure includes procedure knowledge, abilities and skills as well as motivation, emotions and will” [1]. Zeer’s position is similar to the ideas of world importance. Sternberg, for instance, contends that successful behavior arises from a balance between analytical, creative and practical abilities, and these abilities should function collectively to allow a person to feel comfortable in particular socio-cultural contexts [2]. The “appropriate social environment” here is the factor of social competence development and this, in turn, maintains friendly, cooperative, prosocial, successful, and socially acceptable behavior of a person. Rubin, Booth, Rose-Krasnor, Mills define social competence as an ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time and across settings, and “the demonstration of social reticence, of unassertive social strategies to meet social goals, and of relatively high rates of unsuccessful social outcomes is likely to be judged as incompetent” [3].

Social competence should supposedly develop holistically throughout educational processes as a whole. Renzulli and Reis from University of Connecticut, USA proposed the Enrichment Triad Model to create meaningful, high-level and

potentially creative opportunities for gifted children. The third part of the model supposes “providing opportunities for applying interests, knowledge, creative ideas and task commitment to a self-selected problem or area of study” [4] and developing self-directed learning skills in different areas as well as “developing task commitment, self-confidence, and feelings of creative accomplishment” [4].

The goal of the paper is to highlight practices of educating gifted children in “The Academy of Schoolchildren” (ASC) in Germany and “The Successful Enrollee’s School” (SES) in the Ural Federal University, Russia. Both schools aim at the replenishment of skills ignored or even bungled during school period, but important for social competencies development. The key idea of both projects was to understand the need for social competence development, which would present the best choice of profession in the future, realizing one’s social prospects and social position [5, 6 p.]. This is like American Camp Association rich experience in developing children’s competencies through summer camp programs [6].

**The problem of vocational guidance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century gifted teenagers**

At present, school leavers choose their career in more complex informational, social and cultural circumstances in comparison to former times when the parents decided what their children should do. The previous Russian higher education system issued diplomas with so-called “qualification” record that targeted the graduate to take a definite professional position. Mandatory first job placement was supposed to give the state powers to distribute

young labor force effectively [7]. That is why many Russian parents consider education as an inseparable part of gainful employment.

Besides, in Soviet era schools and mass media were obliged to inform the youth about different professions regularly. This ideologically clever and well-organized vocational guidance eased the decision making process. The particular pupil's parents might be sure that the general educational content obtained by older generations could be transferred to the children. In general, standards of education content remained stable, both university lecturers' practice and public mind maintained graduates' models.

Even "professional vogue" arising did not weaken vocational guidance of the epoch educational culture. On the contrary, it encouraged wide discussions on knowledge perspectives and practicability.

The contemporary situation is radically different since the parents' training experience is useless. The parents recognize that they were taught differently. In terms of conceptions and contents, present-day programs of elementary and secondary schools have changed so dramatically that today's parents cannot be useful to their children.

Finally, there are hundreds of new job titles and, respectively, new professions the scope of which is not evident. Existing educational services market is rightly called "the titles competition" because paid education appeared. Market sales perspectives require new titles for familiar majors and jobs; new directions of training are opened unknown in the past.

The fact that the Russian educational system has become two-tiered makes this plural and ambiguous situation more complicated. Now, school-leavers, novice students are not given majors, but are educated in a certain direction. The educational direction is completed by Bachelor Diploma, the second level of education results in Master's Degree. Almost all majors disappeared in Russia, consequently, there will not exist diplomas certifying "qualification", i.e. certificates showing the content and the level of education.

This new educational paradigm represents Russia's admission to the Bologna process, and the concept suggests that a University Diploma does not mean a final educational stage for a man. He can have life-long learning. As a result, he obtains his personal unique set of competencies. His qualification sums up his job experience, self-education and the University course.

A similar situation is the case in the German education. Certainly, there were no "qualification" diplomas in Germany, two-level educational system is rather new, and 'Bachelor-Master' levels are the

result of the Bologna Process. The list of educational directions was changed both in Germany and Russia, especially at Technical Universities.

Taking into account all this, school-leavers' vocational competence development should obtain a new sense, "the educational goal of providing vast activities opportunities to the school-age youth still remains current, it will help them to make the right life choice" [8].

In addition, German and Russian introducers of the above-mentioned projects considered young generation's characteristic features, based on so-called 'pre-figurative' culture configuration.

M. Mead elaborated in the 1960s the typology of cultures according to the way the older generation transfers its social experience to the younger one. In traditional societies the culture is either "postfigurative", where children learn from their predecessors or "cofigurative", where both adults and children learn from their contemporaries [9, 322 p.]. The transfer of social experience in the present-day culture is characterized by the young generations' refusal to acquire social competencies of the adults due to civilization changes triggered by technical progress and globalization.

K. Lorenz regarded the break of the tradition as one of eight civilized humankind sins. He emphasized that the modern youth treats their parents' traditions with unnatural hatred which is alike national hostility, as if the older generation belonged to another ethnic group. Youth fashion is a visible indicator of that. This apparent stress on the 'difference' among ethnic groups can be seen only within territories which they have to share, "In Middle Europe country costumes typical for particular places had long disappeared, but in Hungary with neighboring Hungarian and Slovak villages they still remained" [10]. Quasi-national nature of the hatred manifests itself today not simply as neglecting parental behavioral stereotypes but also as observing them so that the youth could work out their own stereotypes, quite opposite and mirror-imaged. The parents' ideals along with traditions have become things of the past, national roots have been forgotten. Alien ethnic symbols are adopted instead, but they lose their original meaning. As a result of the loss of traditions, film stars and pop-idols become 'parents' or 'tutors'.

What causes this deregulation? It is technocratic consumer social system that enforces a modern man to live in search of money. Consequently, a young man's father is treated as his livelihoods supporter. Father's authority depends on his earnings, since the parents' tradition-bearing value is rejected. "A while ago elderly people could say. 'Look, I was young but you have not been old

yet'. But the youth answers, 'You have never been young in my world and nor will you ever be' [9, 360 p.].

A relation between gifted children and their parents affords a fair illustration of the phenomenon. Talented teenagers, as a rule, are more advanced, more informed than their peers are, so they refuse more frequently to adopt older generation's skills and experience. Since both projects, ASC and SES, focus on, in German authors' terms, "bridge building between School and University" [5, 4 p.] that is why vocational competence will be developed by younger teachers, postgraduates and students.

We can see a similar approach in Position Statements of American National Association for Gifted Children. They were elaborated for dealing with issues, policies, and practices that impact the education of gifted and talented students. To provide appropriate learning experiences their teachers need to possess knowledge and understanding of cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics, needs, and potential problems experienced by gifted and talented students; knowledge of and access to advanced content and ideas; an ability to create an environment in which "talents" can feel challenged and safe to explore and express their uniqueness [11]. Younger teachers or tutors can do this.

Gifted teenagers are usually exacerbated with many social and psychological problems that come from their school life and learning. An ordinary school does not provide any special conditions for gifted children. An ordinary teacher is not expected to 'supply' a talented child with additional information, supervise the quality of his study. Thus, most talented children have no opportunities for advanced intellectual development. The same problem indicates a study conducted in Israel which examined the social and emotional difficulties of gifted children. The children were compared in segregated classes and pull-out programs. The results indicated that gifted children score higher on need fulfillment, empathy, academic self-concept, and lack of emotional anxiety and lower on self-disclosure and physical self-concept [12].

The lack of social comparison leads to self-educational motivation decrease, as well as to the desire 'to be like others' or, by contrast, to overestimation of a student's capabilities, reinterpretation of communication and conduct norms in line with his 'exclusiveness'.

Finally, the real possibility of a gifted child's isolation should be mentioned. Hoping to make friends, to be sociable some of talented teenagers have to become 'like everybody'. But not every "talent" is ready for this personal conformity; most of

them cannot find companions of the same age and the same intellectual level.

### **German experience: the German schoolchildren's academy**

SCA (Deutsche Schülerakademie) is a network project supported by the Government of Germany and a wide variety of sponsor bodies. It is primarily aimed at patronizing gifted children, now the project keeps together 11 itinerant summer schools with thoroughly elaborated and successfully proven program.

Till 1990s' reunification of Germany; West Germany was focused on creating educational programs for schoolchildren who were not able to cope with school standards rather than for the gifted ones. At the same time, it was young talents support that German Democratic Republic paid special attention to, following the Soviet Union practice. One more reason was the need for technological leaps in the economy. For these programs and projects to appear pedagogical and psychological supervision and support for gifted children should be provided. The project development was inspired by higher education strategy as well, which made a great influence on school education concept resulted in the Bologna Charter documents.

Gifted children strive towards higher university education, frequently; they are a lot younger than their group-mates. This is usual for Germany. The project introducers realized the key importance of social competencies development because later it would be required in the University environment. The self-determination process of the gifted teenager lowered down without these knowledge and skills, and this would lead to personal qualities misdirection.

While formulating the Higher Education Development Strategy, the EU Council suggested the importance of social competencies development, which includes responsibility, joint decision-making work, abilities of project management, personal and social interest links understanding, as well as tolerance to different ethnic and confessional groups, readiness for democratic political practice.

The SCA participants' selection has its own specificity. Schoolchildren throughout the country are invited upon the recommendation of their teachers or in case they are school Olympiads winners. Since different camps are situated in different locations, the participants can choose the program of their interest.

Each camp creates its own curriculum, a list of courses which are taught and learned using project teaching methods. The project administration invites younger scholars, postgraduate students, new PhDs,

assistant professors, to create specialized courses for schoolchildren. Themes of the classes are the teacher's responsibility; they should not follow the school program or just extend the latter. The curriculum of 2012 Summer Academy contained a wide range of courses: "Plants in the Weather System", "Body Communication", "Why War?", "Mathematical Anatomy of the Universe", "Morals and Justice in Modern World", "Yours and Others in Documentaries". As to time-tables, animation programs, the calendar of creative events, they are the same for all camps, and present the result of long-term practice of the Academy. Such methods enable teenagers to reveal their talents and creative forces, and to develop motivation for the social competencies rise. For many children the Summer Academy participation represents a valuable opportunity to make friends, to extend their personality development horizon, to understand university culture of communication brought by young scholars.

The project's authors emphasize there is a crucial need for the study without intense drilling, stipulated by self-education, SCA shows one of the possibilities. Institutional and social nature of secondary school makes it incapable of producing university communication style.

University culture suggests some important for the teenager's growing communication principles, such as respectful aptitude toward other opinions, correct discussion, equal possibilities, openness, readiness for creative ideas support and realization, tolerance (in a broader sense). This comfortable environment produced by the educational project translates multidimensional social circumstances of self-realization to the teenager.

The German project creators draw the involved teachers' and psychologists' attention to arranging environment with maximal self-reliance possibilities. Self-education skills are positioned and interpreted as key and basic for social competencies development within German educational system.

### **The Russian University youth camp**

The Russian project, very similar to the German SCA by its principles and objectives presents the youth educational camp working in summer and winter school formats, the patron of the project is the Ural Federal University named after the First President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin (Yekaterinburg). This university is the largest in Russia, it educates more than 50.000 students, and its foundation induced the search for new approaches to enrollees, their competencies and quality.

Not only the best school leavers, but the best of the best should become the UrFU students, they

must be prepared to scientific research as well as to educational management when research turns into practice. The UrFU gets interested in enrollees of advanced intellectual development, able to learn successfully, with high cultural level and good manners. But it would be a great mistake to seek for such schoolchildren 'ready-to-use' in some educational institutions of the Ural region. But in reality the case is quite different, and no structure of secondary education system in the Middle Urals prepares school leavers for entering a higher education institution. School teachers say directly, that they have neither intention nor purpose to persuade their pupils to get higher education.

The reform of Russian education, the Federal University foundation, the two-tier education system transition completion, new structures within the Federal University, such as 'Institute' or 'Department' require new presentation forms and new communicative techniques to make these innovations popular. Most parents used to study at universities or institutes, they graduated from 'faculties', the idea of institutes inside the university seems senseless to them, and moreover, they tend to misinterpret the idea in negative way

Thus, the enrollment process managers have to solve triunquue problem: to motivate future enrollees to acquire higher education, to help them in choosing their future profession through giving them vocational guidance, to develop enrollees' personal traits necessary for the UFU students and graduates.

Such a complicated task can be realized within the UrFU youth camp, which is a principally new form of vocational work [13]. The youth camp includes schoolchildren in higher education values system and develops their personal potencies [14].

In terms of subjects and education content, the camp program suggests expert evaluation of the enrollees' knowledge, the improvement of basic subjects knowledge, the Unified State Examinations preparation, the basic research techniques study, the practice of school research projects writing. The curriculum also includes such concentrations as University Studies, Psychology, Testing, Russian Language, Mathematics and so on, as well as Research Project Workshop, Intellectual Work Techniques, Etiquette. A simple list of subjects witnesses that the schoolchildren are given versatile preparatory courses. At the end of the program they get their psychological profile from the psychologists and vocational guidance recommendations, and qualified analysis of their readiness to enroll from USE experts as well.

Intellectual Work Techniques course focuses on logical thinking development and argumentation practice. As to Research Project Workshop, it is

wholly applied. Here, children can acquire important students' skills of academic writing.

University Studies is positioned as a vocational course aimed at helping schoolchildren to understand the higher education system, its history, the university structure. There are Institutes' Directors, Chairs' Heads, and Vice Rectors among this course' instructors.

Cultural program of the camp supposes involving the schoolchildren in students' creative work, amateur student artistic groups, and the University modern creative teams. Children learn to organize and produce animating events by themselves using intensive methods.

Today SES includes two levels. First of them, named 'the Successful Schoolchild's School', deals with the pupils of the 7th and the 9th grades. The second, 'the Successful Enrollee's School' invites schoolchildren of the 9th -11th grades. One of SES main principles is its availability and accessibility for children from all parts of Russia. In 2013 there were participants from 12 regions of the country. The 'geography' is wide-ranged: in addition to the Sverdlovsk Region, the camp program has attracted schoolchildren from Moscow Region, Republic of Tchuvashia, Orenburg Region, Republic of Bashkortostan, Perm, Chelyabinsk, Kurgan, Tyumen, Omsk Regions, Khanty-Mansy Autonomous County and Chukotka Autonomous County.

### **Conclusion: a call for profound and extended investigation**

In conclusion, one idea should be highlighted: two different modern forms of the gifted children's social competencies development, practice of different countries witness the similar fundamental approach, though both projects were created independently and based on different educational, mental and cultural backgrounds. The process seems to require more profound and extended investigation. But even today the apparent transformation of general educational strategy can be clearly seen, there is a shift to a new type of a scholar, a researcher, who is not fully satisfied with his high proficiency level in his area of concentration, he has a fascinating personality with a whole set of social competencies as well.

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