

Gifted Education in Germany

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Challenging and promoting the highly talented has become an increasingly important topic of education policy in many countries in recent years. The same applies to my own country, the Federal Republic of Germany. For this reason, I gladly take avail of the opportunity to report to you on Gifted Education in Germany. In this context, I would first of all like to clarify the basic position of the Federal and Laender Governments, and then to describe the activities in the four sectors of "school", "extracurricular measures", "on-the-job training" and "institutions of higher education".

Basic position of the Federal Government

First of all, the basic position of the Federal Government: It considers the promotion of giftedness to be an important task of education policy; It would like to see the stimulation and cultivation of the highly talented in all areas of education; it is aimed at differentiation of the educational

opportunities and supplementary promotive measures available, in the conviction that only thus can justice be done to the wide variety of aptitudes, inclinations and achievement potential.

1. It is clear at a glance that this statement of policy is not self-evident. Until the 70's, our attention focused on the expansion of broad-based training and the promotion of those at a disadvantage in the training process.

The attitude towards gifted children during these years was moulded by the false notion that they required no particular attention, and that they would get under their own steam. The most famous example often cited was Einstein, who experienced considerable difficulties during his grammar school days in Munich.

At the beginning of the 80's, the attitude towards the gifted and their promotion changed very quickly and radically. One of the main reasons for this lay in new scientific insights and the practical experience acquired in other countries, particularly in the USA.

2. Motivation for challenging and promoting the highly talented is two-fold. The Federal Government gives priority to the individual aspect - being convinced that the full development of special talent is an essential condition for the development of the overall personality and, therefore, for fulfilled life.

Alongside this, considerable significance is attributed to the social aspect. The demands on society are increasing all the time, especially in Germany, as the result of our unification and the simultaneous consummation of the unification of Europe. In order to do justice to these demands and, at the same time, to safeguard our high standard of living and maintain our cultural independence, as well as our natural prerequisites for life, it is essential to settle the level of achievement at above-average. This high standard will be achieved, above all, by the highly talented.

3. Allow me to outline the key points of the fundamental considerations which the Federal Government follows in its initiatives:

-First, participation in these measures must always be voluntary and the measure must thus have the nature of an opportunity and a

challenge; they must relate to the special requirements of highly talented young people, stimulating them to deepen and broaden their interests.

-Second, promotion of the talented must be geared to the development of the overall personality; the aim is not to produce one-track specialists. Social skills should be taught. A sense of responsibility and of duty should be especially encouraged.

-Third, promotion of the highly talented should fundamentally start in good time, i.e. at the earliest age possible. In this context, there are considerable distinctions to be made between the different types of talent; as a rule, musical talent must be supported at an earlier age than intellectual talent.

- Fourth, constant counselling both before and during the participation in promotion schemes for the talented is essential; in this connection, cooperation with the parents is indispensable.

- Fifth, it is the task of schools and institutions of higher education to promote particularly gifted by means of counselling and suitable special programmes. Educating these young

people in special institutions or classes must remain the exception rather than the rule, particularly if this involves separation from the family.

Basic position of the Laender

The Federal Republic of Germany is a federal state. The constitution assigns cultural affairs and the schools to the sphere of responsibility and activity of the Laender. Therefore, the basic position held by the Governments of the Laender is of significance for the important field of schools. Regardless of the general political differences between the individual Governments of the Laender, I can confirm that Laender - concerning the promotion of the highly gifted - essentially share the basic positions of the Federal Government.

Measures for the promotion of the talented

Public awareness, counselling

1. Let me now come to the concrete measures for promotion of the talented in Germany. One of the most urgent tasks is to achieve public awareness of the justification and necessity of special

promotion of the gifted, particularly among parents and teachers. Decision-makers and experts in all fields of society must be won over to the idea of scientific research and practical measures in the sphere of promotion of the gifted.

Allow me to demonstrate this task of winning support by way of an important example. Some time ago, the Federal Chancellor, Dr. Kohl, made the following statement to the press: "I have invited you here in order to emphasize once again how important it is for our society to promote talent and the disposition to achieve, the spirit of invention and ability in the widest variety of fields. This also requires that the political leadership makes it clear that it champions those who have confidence in themselves, who have proved their readiness to strive for achievement and who have demonstrated inventiveness and ability".

2. An equally important task is to offer those involved - and by that, I mean the parents, older pupils, and also the teachers - the possibility of expert counselling. They are often overtaxed, even helpless, when encountering the problem of great giftedness. A general obligation to provide pedagogic counselling is rooted in the German

school laws and school ordinances. The counselling possibilities have been expanded considerably in recent years, but they must still be intensified in the case of the highly talented and their parents.

Schools

The right place for challenging and promoting highly talented young people is the school. It will be all the better able to fulfil this task, the greater the differentiation it can offer in terms of teaching methods and the performances demanded. In Germany, therefore, we fundamentally adhere to a differentiated system of advanced, general education in schools. After a standard period usually amounting to four years in primary school, secondary school or grammar school for later professional training - at grammar school, for example, primarily for university study.

Following unification, we Germans had a good opportunity to get to know the educational equalization resulting from the undifferentiated comprehensive school system of the former communist GDR. It was very surprising how much significance parents placed on their children changing to a certain type of school in the newly created differentiated

school system.

In the individual Laender, various forms of teaching, as well as measures to complement the lessons, have been introduced to promote the gifted in recent years, or are in the pilot stage.

Allow me to present some of them:

- In almost all of the Laender, pupils who demonstrate such a high standard of achievement that immediate successful participation in a higher class is to be expected can be promoted, i.e. they can "skip" one or even two years.

- In other Laender, highly talented pupils have the possibility of completing their grammar school education in special grammar schools or so-called "express classes" in 8 years instead of the usual 9.

- Before unification we had only one school which solely accepted particularly talented pupils into its second stage classes; I have already mentioned that there are major reservations in Germany concerning the segregation of these pupils. The government of the former German Democratic Republic had established quite a number of special schools of this sort, some of which are now being continued in the new German

Laender.

-Laender in Southern Germany have set up working groups in schools on a considerable scale; these groups work through specific topics outside regular school hours. A high standard of quality is partially guaranteed by the demands on the teachers in charge the groups, but is mainly assured by the fact that the topics for these working groups are laid down by teachers and school authorities jointly.

In this connection, a word on the teachers in all schooling systems: they must not only be convinced of the necessity of promotion of the highly talented - this problem has already been addressed above - but must also be in a position to recognize special talent at an early stage and to develop this in a professional as well as sensitive manner.

Extracurricular Measures

1. Nationwide competitions in the fields of mathematics, chemistry, physics, information technology, foreign languages and history have proved to be a very significant tool in the promotion of the talented. These competitions pose particular demands on analytical skills and creativity. They

are an invitation to the talented young to develop their particular capabilities and to test them in a fair competition. The most importance of these competitions is "Young Researchers" (Jugend forscht) where, unusually, the entrants are not judged on the solution of set tasks, but rather submit to the jury scientific and technical projects which they have undertaken of their own accord. This competition thus particularly promotes scientific and technical creativity. The national winners are sent to the international scientific "Olympics" in mathematics, chemistry, physics, information technology and biology. We are pleased to report, the German teams regularly achieve impressive success. Cultural and artistic competitions supplement the opportunities for the young.

2. Participants in German competitions unanimously complained, again and again, of the grievous lack of discussion partners in their specific area of interest and at their advanced level. As a consequence, the Federal Ministry organized a series of pilot projects with a pupils' academy between 1988 and 1993. Selected under very stringent conditions, the young people, aged between 16 and 18, live together for

several weeks in selected, somewhat out-of-the-way places, e.g. in boarding schools, and are instructed in specialist fields - chosen by the pupils themselves - by university professors, esteemed artists and leading economic experts. These pilot projects were very successful and convincing. Therefore, in 1994, the German Bundestag made funds from the ordinary budget available, for the first time, for implementation of the Federal Pupils' Academy. The Ministry is in the process of establishing these pupils' academies on a permanent basis and gradually expanding the capacity to some 1,500 young people annually. The Federal Minister of Education and Science personally opened the "Federal Academy for the Talented" just some days ago on 23rd of July 1994.

Promotion of the gifted in on-the-job training

Approximately two-thirds of all young people in Germany are prepared for their career in a system of on-the-job-training. Training begins after a ten-year schooling period and normally lasts for three years. 4 days of the week are spent in the firm gaining hands-on experience, and this is supplemented one day a week by general education

and specialized theoretical education in special schools. The training ends with an examination.

Extensive measures for the promotion of the gifted in this training area - which is, in terms of numbers, extremely significant - came into effect in the summer of 1991. Particularly gifted young employees, who have successfully completed a training programme in the prescribed manner and who - especially in the final examination - have shown high vocational aptitude, receive grants for their participation in exacting training schemes - which run parallel to their jobs - for the further development of their vocational and personal capacity to act. The grants can, for example, be used for learning foreign languages, for visits abroad, for the acquisition of knowledge and skills in related fields of training, or for promotional training (e.g. master craftsman, economist).

Individual recipients of grants can remain in the promotion scheme for up to three years. Approx. 9,000 gifted and highly qualified young employees annually benefit from these measures.

Promotion of the gifted in the sphere of higher education

1. In the sphere of higher education,

the situation is very different in comparison with the other spheres of education. Here, the concept of promoting outstanding talent is considerably more familiar. In institutions of higher education, gifted students are seldom in the position of the "loner"; they find highly qualified discussion partners with the same special interests. Thus, the traditional and doubtless proven form of promoting the talented in this field is direct contact between students, professors and assistants. Nevertheless, special efforts to promote and challenge the highly talented are also essential in this field.

2. Allow me to mention two examples: One major development - also important to our considerations - was initiated by the Science Council ("Wissenschaftsrat"), a highly esteemed committee which advises the Federal and Laender governments on questions appertaining to the field of scientific institutions and research: the establishment of so-called postgraduate study groups ("Graduiertenkollegs").

After completing a first degree, particularly eligible people work in these groups on special projects lasting two or three years. It is expected of the participants that they attain their

doctorates during this period. The German Research Association (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) decides on the establishment of such study groups following an exacting and extensive examination of the project and the qualifications of the participating professors and postgraduates.

There is no doubt that these schemes mainly serve specialist projects; however, there can also be no doubt that the participation of the selected postgraduates represents a highly effective opportunity for them to obtain scientific qualifications. Approximately 4,200 gifted graduates are currently participating in this special promotion scheme.

3 This review would be incomplete where attention not drawn to the nine large foundations devoted to the promoting of the gifted, of which both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches have established one each, five having been established by the political parties represented in the Bundestag (the German Lower House of Parliament) and one by the German Federation of Trade Unions. In addition, there is the most well-known and the largest such institution - the traditional German National Scholarship Foundation.

The task of these foundations is to provide guidance - including academic guidance - but their particular aim is to prepare outstanding students for responsible involvement in cultural, political and social tasks in society. These foundations currently take care of approximately 12,500 students and 2,700 doctoral candidates.

Research

We at the Federal Ministry of Education and Science are aware that our work in the field of promoting the gifted can only be successful if it is based on scientifically sound principles with scientifically evaluated measures. Therefore, the Ministry has initiated and financed multifarious projects in this field within the framework of its research work.

Unfortunately there is no more time to report about single research projects. Please find some advices in the proceedings. I hope that I have succeeded in providing you with a comprehensible overview of "Gifted Education in Germany" its fundamental considerations, goals and practical measures.