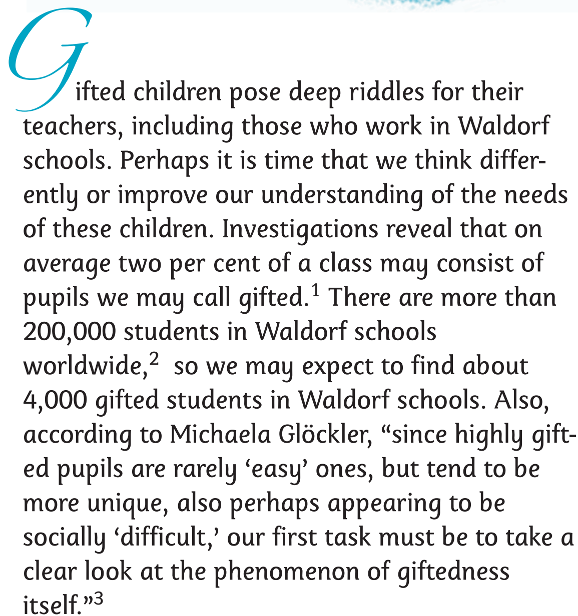
Educating Gifted Students in Waldorf Schools

Ellen Fjeld Køttker and Balazs Tarnai



Gifted children pose deep riddles for their teachers, including those who work in Waldorf schools. Perhaps it is time that we think differently or improve our understanding of the needs of these children. Investigations reveal that on average two per cent of a class may consist of pupils we may call gifted.[1] There are more than 200,000 students in Waldorf schools worldwide,[2] so we may expect to find about 4,000 gifted students in Waldorf schools. Also, according to Michaela Glöckler, "since highly gifted pupils are rarely 'easy' ones, but tend to be more unique, also perhaps appearing to be socially 'difficult,' our first task must be to take a clear look at the phenomenon of giftedness itself."[3]

Too Smart for School?

Markus is now ten years old. The pedagogical-psychological authorities in Norway became aware of him at the age of seven. One and a half years later, it was clear that he could not be diagnosed with Asperger's or ADHD, or any other of the many diagnoses suggested along the way. Extensive examinations, inquiries, and investigations have been part of Markus's life for years now. His symptoms? He is too smart. He says about himself, "I look like a child, but inside I am different, I think." School does not appear to meet this child's needs. For one thing, he is musically precocious. And, as a young child, he asked questions all the time, to the point of irritating those around him, questions for which he demanded proper, accurate answers. As a four-year-old, he wanted to hear about photosynthesis. As his parents managed to answer one question, he was ready with a new one. He learned quickly and was often bored in school.

Markus has no friends in school, not students, not teachers—not that he has enemies. When he tries to play with other children, he is often seen as a nuisance. He does not understand them, and they do not understand him. He frequently does not understand unspoken social rules. His emotional life has not developed at the same rate as his intellectual life. This leads to misunderstandings and frustrations. He asks, "Why do people, including my father and mother, not think the way I do?" For his parents, it is painful not to understand their own child.

It helped Markus's parents tremendously, however, when they learned to think of their son as gifted. His talents themselves are not so important to them, however; they want him to enjoy his childhood. His mother started an association, which translates from Norwegian as "Happy Gifted Children," and she now sees her son interacting with other gifted children cheerfully and comfortably.

> Steiner … himself carried many questions as a child that were not addressed at home or at school, and … this made him a lonely boy.

In Norway, there are no special schools, programs, or lessons for gifted children.[4] When Markus's parents asked for help, one authority suggested that the family move abroad. Denmark, Australia, England, Switzerland, and Germany have special classes for gifted children;[5] and, in the U.S., every state is obliged to institute a program for such students.[6]

What Is Giftedness?

In the past, giftedness has been strongly associated with the concept of genius.[7] This connection began around the turn of the 20th century, when psychologists developed tests designed to meas-

ure intelligence.[8] People who scored on the low end of a scale were labeled "retarded," and those who scored on the high end were considered "geniuses." The use of intelligence tests as the sole evaluation of giftedness has been seriously criticized in recent years, primarily because such tests are often confounded by ethnic origin, language, schooling, and acculturation. Since then, researchers and educators have come to consider giftedness as more than intellectual talent; it also includes creativity, memory, motivation, physical or manual dexterity, social skills, and artistic sensitivity.[9]

Smart or knowledgeable children	Gifted children
Know the answers	Ask questions
Are interested	Extremely curious
Have good ideas	Have wild ideas
Work hard	Do many other things and manage well
Answer questions	Discuss in detail and get circumstantial
Are among the best in class	Are ahead of the class
Listen with interest	Demonstrate strong attitudes and views
Learn easily	Know it already
Have good friends	Prefer adult company
Are perceptive	Are intense
Are technically-oriented	Are inventors
Copy accurately and precisely	Create novel items
Enjoy logical thinking	Enjoy multifaceted and complex thoughts
Take delight in school	Take delight in learning
Understand ideas	Think abstractly

More recently, the Marland Report offered a definition of giftedness that has been, and continues to be, the one most widely used by authorities.[10] The report defines as "gifted and talented" those children, identified by professionally qualified persons, who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance in a particular area. These are children who require educational programs or services beyond those provided by regular school programs in order to realize their potential contributions to their own self-development and to society. According to the Marland Report, children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement or potential abilities in many of the following areas, solely or in combination:

- General intellectual abilities
- Specific academic aptitude
- Creative or productive thinking
- Leadership abilities
- Visual and performing arts
- Psychomotor abilities

According to McClellan, an explanation of giftedness is the basis, the groundwork, upon which an educational curriculum for such children is built. Specific abilities included in a definition of giftedness determine the criteria used to select children for a program and the services provided to those children. The abilities included in a definition are, therefore, important to those who determine which children are identified as gifted and what kinds of educational services they receive.[11]

Being Excellent at School or Being Gifted

The Danish Association for Gifted Children created the table above to distinguish between smart or knowledgeable children and truly gifted children.

Gifted or ADHD? Other Perspectives on Giftedness

Gifted children and adults are at risk of being labeled ADHD. Some may be both gifted and suffer from ADHD, but many are not, and it is not currently possible to determine whether or not these conditions are linked. Such students may also exhibit the following behaviors:

- Anger and frustration
- High energy, intensity, fidgeting, impulsiveness
- Individualistic, nonconforming, stubborn attitudes
- Emotional swings, moodiness
- Underachievement

- Disorganization, sloppiness, poor handwriting
- Forgetfulness, absentmindedness, daydreaming
- Low interest in detail

These behaviors or characteristics may blind us to a student's giftedness. As a consequence, many gifted children may be medicated for conditions from which they don't actually suffer; they may be medicated to make their parents' and teachers' lives easier. On the other hand, some claim that medications allow gifted children and adults to manage boredom or to allow the gifted to thrive in environments in which they otherwise might act out or which they might otherwise find too difficult.

There is evidence that as many as half of all children with IQ scores above 130 receive below-average grades; and, in one study, 13% of high school dropouts could be labeled gifted. In another study, 25% of children diagnosed with ADHD tested so highly in creativity that they qualified for state scholarships.

Unconventional intelligence may further complicate matters. A student may not be able to grasp simple mathematical operations, for instance, but be able to play the piano exceptionally well. Few persons are gifted in many areas.

Labeling a child as gifted is not without its pitfalls, too. Some of these children feel that they are judged solely on their intelligence, not on their effort. Failure then means that they are not as smart as everyone believes. It is important, then, that teachers and parents praise children for their actual work and efforts, not for relatively innate qualities like intelligence.

Gifted Children and Schooling

Generally, schools take one of two approaches in dealing with gifted children. Some are included in a "normal" class and receive individualized, enriched instruction at grade level; others are segregated and attend gifted classes.

Another strategy to address giftedness is to skip grade levels, but often, schools oppose this idea because of concerns about social-emotional maturation. Another possibility is to allow gifted students to attend higher grades for certain subjects. Several schools in the U.S. have "enrichment programs" for gifted students. Such programs usually take the form of enhancement rather than acceleration. Lessons often involve more work, and children may feel punished for being smart.

Many parents choose alternative education for their gifted children, and home schooling is currently a popular choice. Home schooling parents try to meet the social needs of their children in such activities as sports, clubs, and camps.

Gifted Children in Waldorf Schools

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some students leave Waldorf schools because they don't feel sufficiently challenged. Waldorf education, however, is based on two principles. One of these is to educate according to the general laws of human development, and the other, equally important, is to educate according to the individual needs of each child. As Christoph Lindenberg writes, "The Waldorf school is no place for preventing or hindering the development of intelligence." Rudolf Steiner himself assisted with or taught a few classes in the first Waldorf School; two of the students attending his class were extremely talented in music. He told the faculty to change the students' course of study so that there would be more space for music in their schedules.

> Anecdotal evidence suggests that some students leave Waldorf schools because they don't feel sufficiently challenged.

Steiner describes in general how teachers may address gifted students:

> First of all, you must carefully ascertain whether the self-assertion of pupils who are more gifted, and therefore more capable, is justifiable or not. You must not allow their greater talent to develop into an ambitious kind of egoism, but you should help them using their gifts in the service of other children. "John is a good boy. Look what he can do. Such people are a great help to others, and I am pleased with you all that you have learnt so much from John." So you begin by praising one child and end up by praising them all! You will nearly always find that you can deal with them best by combining two meth-

> ods. First, you must speak to them, not in front of the class, but in private, so that they realize that you look through them. The other thing is this: You should give such a child tasks which are beyond his powers, and try to make it clear to him why he has to solve these problems that are too difficult to him.

Gifted children may need a curative approach, in particular, so that they develop the courage necessary to take up their gifts.

Ernst Lehrs, one of the founding teachers of the first Waldorf School, describes the following case. As a twelve-year-old, Alexis von Vivenot read Kant and Hegel, and, with his newly gained "understanding," started to criticize the Catholic Church. He was, therefore, forbidden to read such literature. His mother and he were later present when Steiner was visiting an acquaintance of theirs. Steiner told the boy about the Waldorf School in Stuttgart, and, some months later, Alexis joined Grade 9. He was politically interested and engaged, and he asked Lehrs to help him to express in writing what was important to him. Lehrs brought this to Steiner's attention in one of his conferences with the teachers of the Waldorf School. Steiner asked first if the adults involved had observed how the student walked, which was not in a straight line. Further observations included that his hair fell down over his forehead; when reading, he breathed irregularly; and his handwriting was unclear. Steiner noted the boy had difficulties in three-dimensional space and suggested that he should do Bothmer gymnastics, write five lines beautifully each day, and receive other assistance. This helped the boy; he became more focused and attentive. Later, Steiner described this boy's karma. Among other things, Steiner remarked that the last part of the boy's previous incarnation had now joined with this present one. Later, Alexis studied at Oxford and became an important diplomat in the Second World War.

In another case, the Waldorf School faculty wanted to dismiss a gifted boy because he was too difficult to cope with. Steiner suggested math problems and geometry exercises as therapy. They helped.

Finally, from Steiner's autobiography, we learn that he himself carried many questions as a child that were not addressed at home or at school, and that this made him a lonely boy.

Implications

Many gifted children occupy themselves early with content that they can't really digest emotionally, often for lack of experience. Such a discrepancy between special interests and personal potentials can lead to isolation. Expectations and reality clash. This challenge may be addressed by working with art because each work of art draws imagination and reality closer together. We should keep in mind, too, that "Waldorf school education is not a pedagogical system but an art—the art of awakening what is actually there within the human being."

Further, according to Steiner, we have a task as teachers to be conscious of our guidance of a child's *ego* so that it does not enter too deeply into the body, nor does it incarnate insufficiently. If the ego is too strongly connected to the body, we tend to become too oriented to the physical world. Vice versa, given a loose association with our bodies and surroundings, we are inclined to become impractical dreamers.

Too much or too little, this indeed is the issue at hand: to apply the right measures so that we help each child to find balance in meeting his or her destiny. It is helpful, then, to see giftedness as a process in development, as a growth of potentialities. Gifted children may need a curative approach, in particular, so that they develop the courage necessary to take up their gifts.

Schools contemplating the education of gifted children may consider the following conditions or accommodations:

- Earlier readiness for school
- Flexible grade enrollment
- Skipping grades
- Partial participation in higher grades for certain subject matters—sharing main lesson periods
- Individual or group support lessons
- Special homework

- Open-ended problems, tasks, and projects that can have several solutions
- Instruction in how gifted students may help other pupils in a class

In addressing these topics, of course, we cannot lose sight of a student's social-emotional health. We know that when intelligence is emphasized and nurtured too early, there is a danger that life forces are not allowed to complete the physical growth of the child healthfully.

Intelligence, creativity, and other forms of giftedness are gifts of destiny that should be respected, enhanced, and helped to grow. Intellectuality, in this respect, is not a goal in itself. Many of our brightest and most creative minds may be unrecognized and even falsely pathologized because of a lack of understanding. Recognition of giftedness as a permanent characteristic of the self and as a question of growth and development may help us to understand and support the whole gifted child. We will not ignore or misunderstand such a student, nor will we focus solely on that child's gifts or immature accomplishments.

This child
Of the spiritual world
Has descended to you
So that you may solve its riddle,
From day to day,
From hour to hour.

– Rudolf Steiner

Endnotes

1. Glöckler, 2006.
2. e.V., 2008.
3. Glöckler, 2006.
4. Thune, Gutten som så gjerne ville lære, 2008.
5. Ibid.
6. Zettal, 1982.
7. McClellan, 1985.
8. Terman, 1982.
9. Pritchard, 1951.
10. Marland, 1972; McClellan, 1985.
11. McClellan, 1985.
12. Barn, 2007; author's translation from Danish.
13. Webb, 2004.
14. Gallagher, 1997.
15. Ibid.
16. Webb, 2004.
17. Gallagher, 1997.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Steiner, 1996.
21. Lindenberg, 1981.
22. Steiner, 1919–1924.
23. Steiner, 1967, pp. 72–73.
24. Lehrs, 1979, pp. 333–344.
25. Niederhäuser, 1962.
26. Steiner, 1999, pp. 83-94.
27. Steiner, 1976, p. 23.
28. Steiner, 1982.

References

Barn, L. (2007, June). Kjennetegn. Retrieved 2008, from http://lykkeligebarn.

e.V, B.d. (2008). Weltliste. Stuttgart: Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen e.V.

Gallagher, T. (1997). *Born to Explore*. Retrieved June 14, 2008, from http//borntoexplore.org/gifted.html.

Glöckler, M. (2006). *Children with Special Gifts. Education—Health for Life Kolisko Conferences* (pp. 153-159). Dornach: Medical and Pedagogical Sections at the Goetheanum.

Lehrs, E. (1979). *Gelebte Erwartung*. Stuttgart: J.Ch. Mellinger Verlag GmbH.

Lindenberg, C. (1981). *Geschichte Lehren*. Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben.

Marland, S. (1972). *Education of the Gifted and Talented*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office.

McClellan, E. (1985). "Defining Giftedness." *Digest*.

Niederhäuser, E.G. (1962). *Konferenzen Rudolf Steiners.* Stuttgart: Rudolf Steiner-Nachlassverwaltung.

Pritchard, M. (1951). *The Contribution of Leta Hollingworth to the Study of Gifted Children.* New York: D.C. Heath.

Steiner, Rudolf (1982). *Balance in Teaching.* New York: Mercury Press.

__________ (1967). *Discussions with Teachers.* London: Rudolf Steiner Press.

__________ (1996). *The Foundations of Human Experience.* Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press.

__________ (1919–1924). *Konferenzen mit den Lehren* der Freien Waldorfschule. Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag.

__________ (1999). *Min Livsvei.* Oslo: Antropos.

__________ (1976). *The Younger Generation.* Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press.

Terman, L. (1925). *Genetic Studies of Genius.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Thune, G. (2008). "Gutten som så gjerne ville lære." *A Magasinet*, 8 and 12.

Webb, E.N. (2004). *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children and Adults.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Zettal, J. (1982). "The Education of Gifted and Talented Children—from a Federal Perspective" in *Special Education in America: Its Legal and Governmental Foundation.*

Ellen Fjeld Køttker, MSEd, *is a lecturer at the Rudolf Steiner University College in Oslo, Norway. She spent 23 year as a Waldorf school therapeutic teacher and class teacher. She is involved in international work connected to the Waldorf school movement, to Hague Circle, and to the European Council and Pedagogical Section of the Anthroposophical Society.*

Balazs Tarnai, PhD, *is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Seton Hill Catholic University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. He often lectures on remedial education in the United States and abroad. He has been involved in certification trainings in Chirophonetics, Extra Lesson, and Remedial Education. He regularly teaches in continuing education programs sponsored by AHE (Association for a Healing Education) and has served as Advisory Board member. He has received awards for his contributions to autism research and special education.*