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Giftedness in the Finnish educational culture

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Abstract

Giftedness in the Finnish educational culture is seen as taboo, and it is easier to talk about talent development. We need to widen the concept in the ways that would address both excellence and ethics. The definition of transformational giftedness includes a beyond-the-self orientation and implies that the purpose of giftedness is to help to make the world a better place. This kind of definition might be the key in using the term “giftedness” in egalitarian and inclusive cultures like Finland.

Keywords

Inclusive education, Finnish educational culture, transformational giftedness, excellence and ethics, teacher education

In this topical discussion, I will discuss the term “giftedness” in the Finnish educational culture based on recent developments and empirical research concerning gifted education in my country. I will present some arguments that the definition of giftedness we use makes the difference if we want to continue using this term in educational settings. In Finland, the word “gifted” is taboo and it is easier to talk about talent development than giftedness. Inclusion and uniformity in education are encouraged and it is unfashionable to “stand out” in any other school subject except in music and sports (Tirri & Laine, 2017). The Finnish educational system can be best described as highly egalitarian. Since the 1970s, the main principle has been to maintain equality, which is manifested in the care given to the weakest students, such as children with learning difficulties (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2013). Today, students are educated in inclusive classrooms and teachers are expected to tailor their teaching practices in a way that considers students’ individual characteristics,

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needs, and interests. In this respect, the system is highly developed, regarding gifted education (Laine, Hotulainen & Tirri, 2019). Moreover, teachers have a lot of freedom to select their teaching practices and majority of Finnish elementary school teachers identified differentiation to take gifted students' needs into account (Laine & Tirri, 2016). The most usual way to differentiate was to give differentiated assignments and materials to gifted students. These include more difficult and challenging tasks and problem-solving assignments. The Finnish teachers also allowed and promoted independence of their gifted learners by letting them make choices in the learning assignments (Laine & Tirri, 2016, p. 7–8). Other options for gifted students to develop their talents include enrichment opportunities, for example, summer camps, and competitions in certain subjects and clubs in their schools where they can practice their interests with their peers.

The development of the child is emphasized, and individually personalized student support is provided in Finnish schools. However, inclusion is often connected more to children with disabilities and special education. Giftedness is also seen too often as a fixed quality especially by Finnish students. This means that only those who are fast learners by nature are considered gifted (Laine & Tirri, 2021). In Finland, meeting the needs of gifted students has depended on individual teachers since neither the educational system nor teacher education programs have addressed the topic (Laine & Tirri, 2016; Tirri & Uusikylä, 1994). In this kind of a culture, it would be much more beneficial to use some other word than “gifted” regarding students with high abilities. Another option is to widen the concept to include both excellence and ethics and to emphasize the beyond-the-self aspect of giftedness.

Sternberg defines transformational giftedness as “exceptional ability or talent that can enable or has enabled an individual to make one or more extraordinary and meaningful contributions that help to make the world a better place” (Sternberg, 2020a, p. 205). The concept of transformational giftedness adheres very well to the educational philosophy, the German *Bildung* tradition, on which education in Finland and in the Nordic countries is based. This philosophy aims at educating individuals to become competent citizens who actualize their individual talents and benefit society with their competences. The emphasis is on individual and societal transformation through education (Tirri & Toom, 2020), the goals of which include both excellence and ethics. Academic achievement is not seen as the only aim of schooling and should be complemented with life-long learning to promote wisdom and a moral lifestyle. The aspiration to contribute to matters larger than the self, a beyond-the-self orientation, is also similar in both these frameworks.

The aim in Finland is to update teaching and learning in schools for the 21st century, which has set new expectations for the acquisition of competence in areas such as creativity and ethical sensitivity. Twenty-first-century competences could be defined as the integrated knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are required of young people. Students should be educated to face challenges and mistakes and to use them as opportunities to grow as better learners and human beings. If we want to use the term “giftedness” in the Finnish context, we need to make clear that we understand giftedness as developmental and domain-specific quality that can be educated. We should also include the transformational nature into our definition as suggested by Sternberg (2020a, 2020b). Transformational nature of giftedness makes it possible to emphasize the social

and moral aspects in giftedness. Gifted students should be educated not only to serve their own interests but also the others and society with their talents. In inclusive and egalitarian cultures, this kind of beyond-the-self orientation might provide arguments for gifted education. Transformational giftedness will also take more into account different domains of giftedness, for example, social intelligence, and provide teachers wider perspectives to identify gifted students. If we decide to continue talking about “fast learners” or “students’ strengths” in Finnish schools, it is very likely that those strengths are easier to identify in certain school subjects than in others, for example, in music and sports and not in academic or other creative domains. The national value of equality prevents teachers from identifying all kinds of talents in their students. Moreover, the lack of teacher education related to gifted students guides teachers to pay more attention to students with learning difficulties. Teachers are the key agents in identifying and nurturing all kinds of talent. The Finnish teachers are ethical professionals who have the freedom to design their classroom curricula and their students’ learning environment. We need to take care that both pre-service and in-service teachers in Finland receive research-based education related to the current definitions of giftedness to understand their important role in identification and support of gifted students (Tirri, 2017).

In this discussion, I have argued that a definition of giftedness that takes a holistic approach to student learning and includes a beyond-the-self orientation to make the world a better place has the potential to suit the Finnish culture and the context of inclusive education. Transformational giftedness with the emphasis on making the world a better place could be the key in using the term “giftedness” in egalitarian and inclusive cultures like Finland.

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Dr. Kirsi Tirri is a Professor of Education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland and a visiting Professor at St. John's University, New York, USA. Her research interests include school pedagogy, moral and religious education, gifted education, teacher education and cross-cultural studies. She has published widely on gifted education in international journals and book chapters.