



Aneta Kamińska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4612-6464>

Ignatianum University in Cracow, Poland

aneta.kaminska@ignatianum.edu.pl

Teachers of Preschool and Early School Education Facing the Challenge of Working With Talented Young Learners – a Study Based on Qualitative and Quantitative Research

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Abstract

Research objective: The main goal of this article is to portray the challenges that early education and preschool teachers encounter when working with talented young learners in public preschools and kindergartens.

Problem and research methods: The author investigates the complexities of working with talented young learners, utilizing quantitative methods such as standardized surveys and interviews with early education and preschool teachers.

The process of argumentation: The introduction outlines the topic, followed by a brief description of the challenges in teaching talented learners. The research method is then discussed. Finally, the findings and recommendations for practice are presented.

Research results: The findings indicate that early education and preschool teachers face some challenges in teaching talented learners, mostly connected with recognition, diagnosis, and individualized instruction. Many

teachers feel unprepared, lack sufficient time, and receive little support from colleagues and administrators. They also seldom seek help from specialists.

Conclusions, innovations, and recommendations: There is a need for comprehensive political regulation in Poland to enhance the individualization of education for talented young learners. Support for teachers through collaboration with headmasters, parents, and specialists is vital. Teamwork and assistance are essential to effectively meet the needs of these learners.

Keywords: young talented learners, challenges of teaching talented learners, diagnosis, teaching methods, individualization

Introduction

Talented learners are a unique group that requires a special approach. They learn quickly, retain knowledge well, and apply it properly when needed. They tend to have exceptional memory, vivid imagination, and deep sensitivity. Their cognitive functions are highly efficient. One of their most important skills is the ability to connect facts, generate new ideas, solve difficult tasks, and use a rich vocabulary (Kamińska, 2021). However, some talented learners do not achieve their full potential due to various factors such as emotional difficulties, social inadequacy, excessive nervous tension, and perfectionism (Dyrda, 2007).

In Poland, since 2011, talented learners have been recognized as having Special Educational Needs, and there are laws in place to support their individual learning, according to their current and personal needs. They can receive special pedagogical and psychological assistance, which includes diagnosing their environment, recognizing their abilities, and enabling them to fully participate in public schools. That support can consist of various didactic and special activities that develop their aptitudes, therapeutic classes, consultations, and advice (Ministry of Education Regulation, 2017).

The challenges of teaching talented learners

Generally, talented learners are recognized for achieving the highest scores and having outstanding IQ levels (Pfeiffer, 2015). They tend to have more biologically advanced brains and possess greater innate abilities. These abilities can manifest in various spheres of their activities, such as learning foreign languages, including English (Clark, 2002).

Most talented learners are creative and can generate brilliant and original ideas, sometimes even beneficial to others, like their community or classmates. They are open-minded and capable of reflective thinking. Talented learners perceive the world in a non-standard way, differently compared to so called average students. Most of them are individualists and non-conformists, who find it challenging to adhere to standard expectations. In terms of cognitive development, they easily grasp cause-and-effect correlation, which enables them to find excellent solutions to problems (Kerr, 2009).

Teaching talented learners is a challenge for all teachers, especially in early education and preschool, as they need to provide appropriate education for these young and sensitive individuals. This often means extending the curriculum or even creating a personalized program (Goodhew, 2009). At the very least, these students need more challenging tasks, not just a greater quantity of tasks. Teachers should adopt a suitable approach towards talented learners and use active methods such as drama or project-based learning to foster independence and engagement (Todd, 2022). Such learners, particularly in the early stages of their education, need social interaction with peers to become emotionally and socially adjusted and personally fulfilled (Ingram, 2008).

Some talented learners are recognized as twice-exceptional and require additional support from specialists, so supervising teachers have to work with them (Robinson & Campbell, 2010). Another significant area is collaboration with the parents of these learners (Stambaugh & Mofield, 2022). In Poland, teachers are responsible for all these aspects, which makes it a very demanding task. The country lacks a standardized system for identifying gifted students across schools, so teachers must individually

shape their approaches, select tools, and vary in their knowledge and experience with gifted education. Most rely on observation and discussions with parents to identify talented students.

There are various methods to support the development of talented learners, including acceleration (such as skipping grades or taking higher-level classes) and enrichment (expanding the curriculum with relevant, engaging content). These approaches can be combined, with teachers creating individualized curricula or learning paths. Gifted students may also participate in extracurricular activities, competitions, or special classes. Polish schools are gradually implementing individualization, particularly through differentiating content and pace. Some gifted students may even assist teachers in explaining concepts to peers. Additionally, special art and music schools cater to talented students, and summer camps offer further opportunities. Individualized programs are typically devised by subject teachers, who may consult specialists and colleagues before gaining approval from school authorities (Limont, 2012).

Research method

In this article, quantitative methods are employed, including a standardized survey with 327 teachers and a supplementary standardized interview with six early education teachers. The author does not compare the two groups of interviewers and interviewees; instead, the perspectives of the narrators are considered supplementary. The main group was studied using quantitative methods, with participants for both types of research selected randomly. Early education and preschool teachers were asked about various demanding aspects of their work with talented learners. The article aims to depict the challenges of teaching talented learners.

The primary research question was: “What challenges do you face when working with a gifted student?” Additional specific questions related to this main question were: 1. How do you recognize talented learners? 2. How do you work with them? 3. What aspects are difficult for you? 4. How do you manage to overcome some demanding tasks/situations

while teaching talented learners? Non-standardized interviews were used for qualitative research, while a standardized survey was utilized for quantitative research.

Results and conclusions

Table 1. Teachers' training for educating talented young learners

Training for educating talented young learners					
Preschool teachers			Early education teachers		
Training	Number	Percentage	Training	Number	Percentage
Formal education at universities, high schools, etc.	138	69%	Formal education at universities, high schools, etc.	51	25.5%
Additional training: courses and reading resources	177	88.5%	Additional training: courses and reading resources	150	75%

The table shows that most preschool teachers, 138 (69%), feel prepared to work with talented learners through formal studies. However, only 51 (25.5%) of early education teachers claim to be similarly prepared. Regarding additional education, which includes various courses and reading, both groups are active. Preschool teachers engage slightly more in this area, with 177 (88.5%) participating in courses and reading about the subject. Early education teachers also show significant involvement, with 150 (75%) taking part in these activities.

Table 2. Additional factors facilitating work with talented learners

Additional factors facilitating work with talented learners					
Preschool teachers			Early education teachers		
Factor	Number	Percentage	Factor	Number	Percentage
Possessing talents and passions	66	33%	Possessing talents and passions	47	23.5%
Being open to new methods of teaching	51	25.5%	Being open to new methods of teaching	79	39.5%

As shown above, some preschool teachers, 66 (33%) believe that having their own talents and passions, sometimes similar to the hobbies of talented learners, helps them teach these students and steer them to success. Fewer early education teachers share this opinion, with only 47 (23.5%) acknowledging that their talents and passions play an important role in developing the talents of gifted learners. However, a larger proportion of early education teachers, 79 (39.5%) emphasized the significance of being open to new teaching methods. In comparison, 51 (25.5%) of preschool teachers recognize that receptivity to new teaching methods is beneficial.

Table 3. Methods used for identifying talented learners

Methods used for identifying talented learners					
Preschool teachers			Early Education teachers		
Method	Number	Percentage	Method	Number	Percentage
Observation	200	100%	Observation	177	88.5%
Diagnostic tools for teachers. esp. tests	–	–	Diagnostic tools for teachers, esp. tests	84	42%
Consultation with a Psychology and Pedagogy Clinic	19	9.5%	Consultation with a Psychology and Pedagogy Clinic	51	25.5%
Opinion of the parents of the talented child	50	25%	Opinion of the parents of the talented child	26	13%

According to the table above, all preschool teachers identify talented learners through observation and do not use any tests to detect talents. Fifty of them consult with the parents of talented learners to learn more about them. A significant number consult specialists, such as psychologists or counsellors at the Psychology and Pedagogy Clinic. Early education teachers also rely heavily on observation, with 177 (88.5%) using this method. They seek help from specialists for diagnosis more frequently than preschool teachers, though it is still only 51 teachers (25%). They rarely discuss the matters of talented learners with parents.

Table 4. Traits attributed to gifted students by teachers

Traits of gifted students according to teachers					
Preschool teachers			Early Education teachers		
Trait	Number	Percentage	Trait	Number	Percentage
Above-average level of mental development	77	38.5	Above-average level of mental development	150	75%
Curiosity about the world	–	–	Curiosity about the world	105	52.5%
High motivation to learn	49	24.5	High motivation to learn	108	54%
Independence	–	–	Independence	86	43%
Creativity	77	38.5	Creativity	36	18%

Many early education teachers, 150 (75%), recognize talented learners as mentally well-developed, highly motivated (108, 54%), and curious about the world (105, 52.2%). Another feature that many of them, 86 (43%) observe is independence. However, fewer respondents, 36 (18%), find these students to be creative learners. Preschool teachers, on the other hand, acknowledge that talented learners are intelligent (77, 38.5%) and highly motivated (49, 24.5%). Contrary to early education teachers, preschool teachers consider creativity as another prominent feature of these students (77, 38.5%).

Table 5a. Preschool teachers' work with talented learners

Examples preschool teachers' work with talented learners		
Example of work	Number	Percentage
Meetings with interesting experts	61	30.5%
Fun activities and exercises based on interests	58	29%
Competitions	72	36%
Thematic days/weeks	70	35%
Well-equipped thematic corners	73	36.5%
Encouraging children to be creative	74	37.5
Assigning more difficult tasks	60	30%
Encouraging children to showcase their skills	25	12.5
Encouraging the use of sophisticated materials	44	22%

Firstly, 74 preschool teachers (37.5%) encourage talented learners to be creative. Many of them, 73 teachers (36.5%), create well-equipped thematic corners in the classroom for these learners. Seventy-two teachers (36%) organize competitions, while 70 teachers (35%) arrange thematic days and weeks. Additionally, 61 preschool teachers (30.5%) invite job experts to meet with the preschoolers. A similar number, 60 teachers (30%), prepare more difficult tasks for these learners to solve, and 58 of them (29%) provide activities and exercises that match the learners' interests. Forty-four preschool teachers (22%) encourage talented learners to use sophisticated materials. Only 25 teachers (12.5%) encourage them to showcase their skills in different ways.

Table 5b. Early education teachers' work with talented learners

Examples of early education teachers' work with talented learners		
Example of work	Number	Percentage
Oral motivation	102	51%
Extracurricular activities	59	29.5%
Encouraging participation in competitions	127	63.5%
Motivating to learn more	22	11%
Preparing individual programs	7	3.5%
Encouraging the display of extended knowledge	44	22%
Using active methods and projects	39	19.5%
Allowing children to choose the topic of educational activities	35	17.5%
Adjusting the educational process to special needs	100	100%

Regarding early education teachers, many of them, 127 (63%), encourage talented learners to participate in thematic competitions. A substantial number, 102 teachers (51%), talk to these learners to boost their motivation. Half of the teachers, 100 (50%), claim to adjust the educational process to meet the special needs of these learners. Some teachers, 59 (29.5%), prepare extracurricular activities, and 44 (22%) encourage these learners to demonstrate their extended knowledge. Not many, 39 teachers (19.5%), use active methods, and 35 (17.5%) allow the students

to choose topics for educational activities. Twenty-two teachers (11%) encourage these learners to pursue additional learning. Only seven respondents (3.5%) have prepared individual programs.

Table 6 a. Difficulties in working with talented learners according to preschool teachers

Difficulties in working with the talented learners according to preschool teachers		
Challenge	Number	Percentage
Large class sizes	75	37.5%
Lack of financial resources	47	23.5%
Insufficient time and space	57	28.5%
Developmental asymmetry	38	19%
Preparing more difficult tasks	56	28%

According to many preschool teachers, 75 (37.5%), the most significant obstacle to effectively working with talented learners is the large class sizes. They specify that they do not have enough time and space 57 respondents (28.5%) to help these learners fully develop, nor can they prepare more challenging tasks for them 56 teachers (28%). Some teachers, 47 (23.5%), mentioned a shortage of funds for purchasing additional didactic devices. Thirty-eight teachers (19%) admit that fulfilling the special needs of talented learners is challenging due to developmental asymmetry, which means that the children excel in one area but struggle in another.

Table 6 b. Difficulties in working with talented learners according to early education teachers

Difficulties in working with talented learners according to early education teachers		
Challenge	Number	Percentage
Reluctant cooperation of a gifted student with a teacher	63	31.5%
Lack of interest of the student in a given educational area	55	27.5%
Lack or low acceptance of the teacher by the gifted student	48	24%
Student-teacher rivalry	18	9%

Difficulties in working with talented learners according to early education teachers		
Challenge	Number	Percentage
Lack of support from the school management	1	0.5%
The need to take care of weaker students	85	42.5%
Too many learners in the class	59	29.5%
Lack of proper resources and tools	46	23%

Many early education teachers, 85 (42.5%), claim that they cannot devote enough time and attention to talented learners because they have to care for weaker students in the classroom. Additionally, 59 teachers (29.5%) state that their groups are too large. Many teachers, 63 (31.5%), admit that talented learners are often unwilling to work together with them, and 48 (24%) feel unaccepted by gifted students. Some teachers, 18 (9%), mentioned experiencing rivalry with their talented learners. Furthermore, many teachers, 55 (27.5%), observe a lack of interest among talented learners in specific educational areas, such as mathematics or the Polish language. Only one teacher (1%) reported a lack of support from school management.

Tabela 7. Prevention of difficulties in working with gifted students according to early education teachers

Prevention of difficulties in working with gifted students		
Type of prevention measure	Number	Percentage
Establishing proper relationships with gifted students	55	27.5%
Empathetic approach	54	27%
Encouraging talented learners to work in groups	41	20.5%
Expanding teachers' knowledge in psychology and pedagogy of creativity	80	40%
Utilizing technological innovations	66	33%
Creating teacher support teams	51	25.5%
Collaborating with high schools and universities	39	19.5%

The table outlines some solutions to the difficulties of teaching talented learners as suggested by early education teachers. Firstly, 80 teachers (40%) emphasize that educators' knowledge in psychology and pedagogy of creativity should be expanded. Some of them – 66 teachers (33%) – believe that incorporating technological innovations can make the educational process more enjoyable. Fifty-five teachers (27.5%) recognize the importance of maintaining good relationships with talented learners, with 54 respondents (27%) stressing an empathetic approach. They also claim that they need support from a team of teachers (51 respondents, 25.5%) and from higher educational institutions, such as universities.

In conclusion, early education teachers do not feel fully prepared to work with talented learners based on their formal education from universities, academies, and high schools. Preschool teachers, however, claim that they are mostly prepared thanks to their university studies. Both groups attend special courses to properly teach talented learners and most of them frequently read about the subject. Respondents from both groups are not entirely convinced that their own resources, such as talents and passions, are significant when teaching talented learners. Generally, teachers from both groups do not consult their observations of talents with parents and specialists. They are familiar with only a few easily observable features of talented learners, mostly connected to intellectual development, such as fast learning. When describing talented learners, they do not mention character traits such as receptivity and vulnerability.

There is a noticeable difference in how preschool and early education teachers approach working with talented learners. Preschool teachers try to make their learners creative by preparing well-equipped areas that allow children to explore and manipulate exciting equipment. They also organize thematic days or weeks and invite experts to discuss their hobbies and jobs. Early education teachers, on the other hand, encourage talented learners to take part in competitions but do not prepare individual programs themselves. Neither group fully enables these learners to showcase their skills.

Both groups perceive some difficulties in teaching talented learners, but their challenges differ. Preschool teachers emphasize the large group

sizes, while early education teachers mention the need to prioritize weaker learners. They often do not seek solutions when talented learners are uncooperative and fail to recognize that these students need more interesting and challenging tasks. Talented learners require dedicated teachers who understand their needs. There may be a misunderstanding regarding the rivalry between teachers and talented learners, which implies that the relationship might not be friendly. This issue needs further research as talented learners tend to be unwilling to study and listen when they are bored and their needs are unmet.

To provide a better education for talented learners, teachers are willing to implement improvements. Early education teachers acknowledge a lack of knowledge in the pedagogy and psychology of giftedness and creativity and express a desire to extend this knowledge. Preschool teachers want to use technology to enhance teaching, establish better relationships with these students, and seek support from other teachers.

In the interviews, the respondents first addressed the recognition of talented learners. According to the interviewees, all talented learners have a high ability to quickly and effectively absorb new information (K1, K2, K3, K6), exhibit cognitive curiosity (K1, K2, K6), are eager to take on new and more difficult activities (K1, K2, K3, K4), have a constant desire to expand their knowledge (K1, K2), and show perseverance and ambition (K1, D2, K3, K4). *Talented students easily assimilate new knowledge and skills, ask a lot of questions, are curious about the world, and are active and eager to learn more (K1); These children learn quickly and understand a variety of topics. They, have a rich vocabulary, think logically, and can solve difficult problems and complex tasks (K2) I notice their ease in assimilating content, ambitions, and skills that go beyond the core curriculum (K3).*

When asked how they effectively work with talented learners, respondents highlighted several attitudes conducive to stimulating students' creativity. These include incentives to take risks and independently search for non-standard solutions (K1, K2, K3, K4). The teachers use active methods, which help integrate the group, develop learners' imagination and perception, and enhance their problem-solving skills (K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, K6). They employ varied, additional, and valuable teaching aids that

stimulate creative thinking (K1, K2, K3, K5, K6): *I allow learners to take action independently through active methods like dramas and projects (K1)... I use a variety of aids, including multimedia (K2); I encourage children to use modern multimedia, I promote group work using brainstorming, and allow every child the freedom to express themselves (K3); I prepare interesting, supplementary worksheets to spark students' imagination (K5).*

In diagnosing talented students, the teachers primarily rely on observation (K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, K6), which helps them tailor techniques and tools to work effectively with gifted learners and understand their strengths and weaknesses. Recognition of talent is also facilitated by insights from parents (K1, K2, K3, K6), who observe their children daily, as well as by conversations with the students about their predispositions (K1, K2, K6). Three teachers assess students' creative abilities through the analysis of their work (K1, K2, K3). One teacher mentioned involving a school counselor in the diagnostic process, using standardized diagnostic sheets (K4). *Diagnosis is carried out mainly through observation, but also through conversations with children, discussions with parents, and analysis of students' work (K1).*

When working with talented pupils in early childhood education, teachers note the need to stimulate the students' abilities by providing open-ended tasks of varying difficulty, tailored to their intellectual capabilities, to foster their creative predispositions (K2, K3, K4). Teachers also encourage capable students to participate in extracurricular activities and demonstrate to parents the benefits of these activities, such as broadening knowledge and skills and promoting self-determination, which is important for motivating students to take action (K2, K3, K4). There is also a tendency to treat the needs of gifted children individually. Respondents support talented students during both successes and failures, by praising their progress to build internal motivation (K1, K5, K6). *During classes I assign additional work and open-ended tasks, encourage participation in competitions and interest groups, and talk to parents about enrolling students in extracurricular activities outside of school; (K2) I give gifted students more challenging open-ended tasks and presenting opportunities for participating in extracurricular activities (K4); I focus*

on meeting the needs of talented students and praising every initiative they take (K5).

When asked about the difficulties faced by teachers in early school education in working with talented pupils, they most often pointed to the challenges these students have in functioning within peer groups (K2, K5, K6) due to difficulties in socializing with peers, who have differing goals and values. Most talented learners exhibit perfectionism and self-criticism, making it difficult for them to undertake further attempts and challenges after experiencing educational failures (K1, K3). One teacher highlighted the obstacle of insufficient time to devote to talented individuals and communication barriers with their parents (K4). *Talented students are generally very ambitious and it is difficult for them to accept failures (K1); Sometimes they have problems functioning in a peer group because they stand out due to their higher intelligence and skills (K2); I notice difficulties due to not having enough time to work with gifted students, and there are also communication and cooperation challenges with their parents (K4); The biggest problem for talented students is functioning in peer groups. They are often perceived as "nerds" and find it harder to socialize with their peers (K6).*

As for the ways to deal with obstacles when working with talented learners, teachers emphasized the importance of an individual approach. This involves conversations with the learner about their motivation, goals, interests, and failures (K4, K6). They aim to help students see failures as valuable lessons that provide new experiences (K1). One educator sought the assistance of a school psychologist due to a student's emotional problems (K5). Moreover, talking with both the learner and their parents is beneficial (K6). *In the classroom, we celebrate failures because a talented learner's failure does not mean they haven't learned anything (K1). I try to maintain an individual approach towards talented learners (K4); At the moment, I am working with a talented child who can't cope with emotions, so I referred him to a psychologist (K5); If there are any difficulties, I try to talk to the child individually and, if necessary, with their parents (K6).*

In conclusion, interviews indicate that talented learners quickly absorb and effectively use knowledge. They are interested in learning and the world around them, can learn independently, and remember extensive

content. They are also determined to achieve high scores. These observations correlate with survey research results. Most narratives recognize talented learners through observation. Teachers strive to be creative and encourage learners to be self-motivated, independent, active, and imaginative. They are encouraged to find original solutions and cooperate with their peers rather than compete with them. The most significant problem talented learners face is social difficulties. They struggle to assimilate with peers who are average learners and do not understand their ambitions, experiences, and knowledge. Additionally, they often do not show resilience after educational failures, largely due to their perfectionism. The narratives suggest treating talented learners individually.

Recommendations for future research

More content about how to teach talented learners should be included in academic courses, especially for early education teachers. Early education is more complex than preschool education and requires a deeper understanding of the psychology and pedagogy of giftedness, among other critical areas, to effectively teach talented learners. Teachers should discuss their findings regarding students' talents especially with parents and other specialists to confirm and expand on these observations. They should also be able to provide a comprehensive characterization of talented learners, covering both cognitive and social-emotional areas.

Early education teachers should prepare more additional, challenging exercises and even develop individualized programs for talented learners. Teachers should recognize that their own interests, passions, and natural gifts are important in working with and nurturing talented learners and developing them more. One of the most important matters is that class sizes should be much smaller, which would allow teachers to dedicate more time and attention to talented students.

Moreover, Poland needs teacher assistants specifically for talented learners, who could be termed coaches or special teachers. These assistants would be specially trained to work with talented students, either

individually or in small groups. Increasing teachers' awareness of the special needs of talented learners and their eagerness to meet these needs is key. Individualization, a modern and useful educational approach, should be fully implemented in our educational system. Otherwise, our education for talented learners will remain insufficient and old-fashioned and we will risk losing the potential contributions of brilliant individuals to our political, social, and economic sectors.

Improvement requires collective effort, involving all stakeholders in the educational process from policymakers, parents, teachers, school and kindergarten principals, to the talented learners themselves. We need more formal, systematic solutions for these students, implemented through policy. Principals should be obliged to form teams of specialists to raise the standards of education for talented learners. Classroom teachers should not bear the sole responsibility for this type of education; they need better conditions and support to nurture both the talented learners and their own professional development. Currently, they are unable to meet the diverse personal needs of talented learners. Collaboration with psychologists should be expanded to improve the social functioning of these students.

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