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# Teachers' Attitude towards Educating Talented Students

## ABSTRACT

Teachers have a significant impact on students' achievements and development of their talents. Attitudes of teachers help understand relationships with talented students and explain the work undertaken for their development. They are also important for professional development and culture of school. If they are not conscious, they become a part of the hidden school curriculum, including the source of limitations in thinking and professional action. The article presents the results of the research on teachers' attitude towards educating talented students. A five-point scale was used. The statements were divided into five fields of gifted education: teachers' attitudes towards selecting students by their talents; identification; school support; support from outside school; and their own competencies. The statements of early education teachers (NEW, N = 37) and senior class teachers (NKS, N = 69) were compared. From the perspective of talent development, students need different teachers and different types of support at these two stages of education. An early education teacher should help students "to fall in love" with the field of their talents. A teacher of older students is responsible for teaching techniques required to gain specific competencies within the frame of a particular talent. The differences between both researched groups confirm that teachers of young and older students represent slightly different approaches in educating gifted students.

## KEYWORDS

education, talented student, teacher, talent development, attitudes

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Teachers exert the greatest and real influence on students' achievements and development of their talents (Salcher 2009). Gary A. Davis and Sylvia B. Rimm (2004) believe that the first question teachers should ask before they start working with gifted and creative students is: what is your attitude to talented students? When such attitudes are not conscious, they become a part of the hidden school curriculum and a source of limitations in thinking and professional action. Teachers' attitudes towards talented students are also important for pedagogues' professional development and school culture (Clark 2002). The attitudes of teachers help them understand relationships with talented students and explain work aimed at the development of talents (Bégin, Gagné 1994). It is important to, first, get to know and understand the basis, and later—implement efficient training curricula.

The author of the article presented the results of the studies carried out among early education teachers (Polish abbreviation: NEW) and teachers working in senior classes (Polish abbreviation: NKS). The research was related to their attitudes towards teaching talented students. The occurrence of differences in evaluations was assumed. Such differences result from different tasks in working with talented children.

## Teaching gifted students: developmental approach

The nature of talents is developmental, which means that they are subject to changes within the cycle of the whole human life and that, at particular stages, we experience different ranges of a talent and different opportunities to use it. At the preschool and early school age, gifted children present high general cognitive skills (recognised as potentials), uniqueness of the activity they undertake, and fast

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learning of school subjects. In senior classes, talented children's level of development in a given area is higher than that of other students. Also, they have some creative achievements in a socially selected and appreciated field of knowledge, and they are deeply involved in the actions they undertake (Cross, Coleman 2005).

From the perspective of developmental trajectories at further stages of education, students need different teachers (Bloom 1985) and different kinds of educational actions (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, Worrell 2015; Ziegler 2005). There is not only one model of supporting students' talents or one model of a teacher who works with a gifted child. The scope of competences and work depends on the current possibilities and needs of children and youth.

The qualitative research carried out by Benjamin Bloom among 120 brilliant people shows that their success was the result of huge involvement of parents and the selection of proper teachers (Eby, Smutny 1998: 32–34). Many people are gifted, but the lack of support, high expectations and proper education result in the fact that their talents cannot be developed. Failure to develop potentials is the indicator of ineffective support/teaching (Eby, Smutny 1998: 33). Bloom (1985) pointed to a certain model of selecting teachers for gifted students who managed to achieve success. The first teacher is usually the one from school or from the surrounding area. After some time, his/her competences turn out to be too narrow, but his/her role is very important. It is him/her who arouses the child's interests, motivates the child, shapes the student's willingness to work hard and be ambitious. It is him/her who ensures the child's multidirectional development. This period is a stage at which we can discover talents that need development. The second teacher is a specialist; he/she teaches the student's technique. He/she is rigorous and requires subordination. Such a teacher ensures systematic training in a given field. The third teacher is a master. A master opens the door to success, makes the student familiar with the secrets of his/her discipline and requires a very high involvement of the student. According to Bloom, most Noble prize winners were taught by Nobel prize winners (Eby, Smutny 1998: 33).

Rena F. Subotnik, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank C. Worrell (2015), authors of the Talent-Development Mega-Model (TDMM), refer to the research carried out by Bloom. They adopt the

developmental approach. The first stage of talent development, the early school stage, should make it possible to fall in love with an area of knowledge—this is a phase of romance. This is the beginning of talent development, as well as shaping competences and first achievements. An early school teacher is to arouse children's interests, inspire their first creative works, and motivate them to make effort. At the second stage, the phase of precision, systematic studying and practicing techniques important for a given talent are introduced. According to the authors, at this stage we move "from playing tennis to a tennis player" (*ibidem*). At the third stage (in adulthood), the combination of talent development and creativity results in success in selected domains.

The third of important competences that explain diversity of teacher's competences is the Actiotope Model of Giftedness (AMG), prepared by Albert Ziegler (2005). In this model, an individual's greatness is not related to particular personality traits, but to a person's activity and his/her functioning in the environment. The author assumed that, in order to understand the development of extraordinary talents, first we have to get to know the social system in which the talent was revealed. Only then we can ask about the elements of the structure of the talent. Success in a given area is not only the result of individual talents and efforts of people, but also the consequence of their collective support: a favourable set of the environment properties adjusted to the changing needs of gifted people, as well as their own involvement in development. According to Ziegler, supporting talents should be a systemic approach that includes all social-emotional potentials of children and youth. Teachers must recognize themselves as a part of a developing actiotope of the gifted, and they must get involved in helping students to effectively use changing inner and educational resources. According to the AMG assumptions, people's achievements increase where social subsystems cooperate with one another. The objective of teaching gifted students is extending their available educational capital and making it easier for them to move to more and more complex sociotopes due to which they develop their potentials.

## Teachers' roles in educating gifted students

Teachers' attitudes towards talents, gifted students and their education are important for at least two reasons.

First, teachers' subjective assessment is the most frequent manner of identifying talents. Joan Freeman (2015) says that this refers to 80% of students. Each decision: to refuse to treat someone as gifted or to overestimate his/her talents, has certain social and individual consequences. Identification does not only depend on what is culturally acceptable, but also on the scope of the previous support the child had received. The strongest and the most popular criterion that teachers take into account are students' achievements usually related to school activity. They hardly ever recognize potentials, which results in "losing" children who are doubly unique and those who are brought up in unfavorable social and cultural conditions. According to Freeman (2015), although teachers are credible, they still recognize the same categories of gifted students, i.e. children who had already achieved school success. This conclusion was confirmed by Eva Reid and Heiner Boettger (2015) who analysed educational systems in Europe (Great Britain, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark, Finland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia). The authors came to the conclusion that the curricula for talented people used in European countries mainly include ambitious students who already achieve good results at school. The opinions of teachers shape the way in which parents perceive their children. Thus, a student who has been identified as gifted at school is more likely to obtain his/her parents' support in developing the child's talent. The strongest single factor that influences high achievements is sex (Freeman 2015). This is also confirmed in teacher's assessments. According to Freeman (2015), in many countries all around the world twice as many boys as girls are recognized as talented although exam results from all subjects obtained by girls are higher than those of boys.

Second, teachers as specialists play the leading role in organizing and supporting talented people at school. Working with talented students includes motivating them and choosing proper forms, methods, teaching aids, educational contents, etc., as well as taking care of them and bringing them up. The quality of these activities depends on many personal and professional factors: knowledge,

beliefs, motivation, commitment, work style, educational law, available resources, responses from the school's social environment, as well school culture and atmosphere. Rena F. Subotnik, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank C. Worrell (2015: 26) concluded that none of the elements of a talent can be developed at school only. Purposeful educational processes, including focusing on methods and forms of work, are insufficient to reveal and develop talents, and to achieve creative results. However, for many students school still is the first, if not the main place of revealing and supporting predispositions. School should also give students advice on extending their development and help them find support in external institutions.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of gifted education, it is important to get to know teachers' attitudes towards talented students. This also makes it possible to evaluate to which extent these attitudes are shaped by prejudice, stereotypes and common opinions, and to which extent they are justified by theory.

### Methodological assumptions of the author's own research

The studies on the opinions of teachers towards teaching gifted people are dominated by the issues related to the perception of talents and talented students (e.g. Giza 2006; Cieřlikowska, Limont 2010). They make it possible to get to know school reality indirectly, in the perception of teachers. Cognitive perspectives that are broader than surveying can be achieved by scaling, due to which we can evaluate both the research subject and the teachers.

In foreign research, two scales are often used: Attitudes toward Gifted Education (ATGE) and Opinions toward Gifted Education (OGE), prepared by François Gagné (Gagné 2018; Perković Križan, Borić 2015; Lassig 2009). The ATGE questionnaire includes 34 statements that make it possible to evaluate six dimensions of working with gifted students: gifted students' needs, resistance to supporting gifted students at school, social value of talents, opinions toward the social isolation of gifted students, opinion on the selection of students according to talents, and opinion on the opportunity to accelerate the education of gifted students. However, applying ATGE in Polish conditions would require cultural adaptation of some statements related to the areas that are not very well known in our school

practice. Thus, the author of the research prepared her own questionnaire. The presented results constitute a piece of broader studies on the cultural contexts of teachers' attitudes towards gifted students.

The subject of the research was comparing the attitudes of two groups of teachers towards educating gifted students. The objective of the research was getting to know the differences in the evaluation of five areas of gifted education between early education teachers and senior class teachers. The practical objective was formulating recommendations related to teachers' supplementary education.

The main research question for the analysed issue was as follows: What is the attitude of early education teachers and senior class teachers to educating gifted students? The detailed issues were related to the opinions on the selection, identification, support at school, support outside school, and competences related to working with talented students. It was assumed that the educational stage will determine the respondents' replies, because, on both levels, the objectives of working with gifted students are different. An early education teacher is to make it possible for a student to "fall in love" with the area related to the talent the child reveals. In senior classes, a teacher becomes responsible for teaching skills (getting to know the tools) necessary within the area of a given talent.

The opinions on 16 statements were analysed. A five-grade scale was used (1–5, where 1 meant "I definitely disagree," and 5: "I definitely agree"). The results were presented in the form of an arithmetic means. Average results were those within the range 2.5–3.5; high: above 3.5 to 4.5; very high: above 4.5. Low results were those below 2.5–1.5; and very low: below 1.5. The statements were selected purposefully and they referred to five areas of gifted education:

- A. Teacher's attitude towards the selection of students according to their talents.
- B. Assessment of identifying students' talents.
- C. Assessment of the basic areas of working with talented students at school—school support.
- D. Assessment of external support for talented students.
- E. Assessment of one's own competences in working with talented students.

The researched group included 106 students from Kielce and surrounding towns/villages. Thirty-seven of them were early school

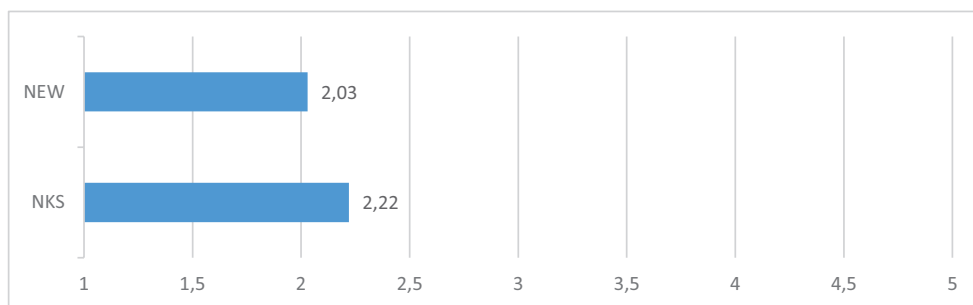
teachers (NEW), and sixty-nine of them were classified as senior class teachers (NKS, mainly teachers of Polish and Maths). This group included forty-seven primary school teachers (Polish abbreviation: SP) and twenty-two junior high school teachers (Polish abbreviation: G). The research was carried out before the structural reform of the educational system. It was assumed that senior class students in primary schools and junior high schools require similar support: practicing technique within the areas of the talents they reveal.

## Analysis and interpretation of the empirical research

A. Teacher's attitude towards the selection of students according to their talents.

The issue of selecting students is still a valid problem, and the number of arguments provided by the supporters and opponents of pedagogical selection is increasing (Giza 2019b). Proper decisions are, obviously, made by those who work on the educational policy, but a teacher's personal opinion on a selective or integrative model of teaching influences his/her motivation and scope of work. Two theses were formulated. One of them referred to selections of students before they are admitted to a given school, and the other one referred to selections carried out within schools. The results were presented in Charts 1 and 2.

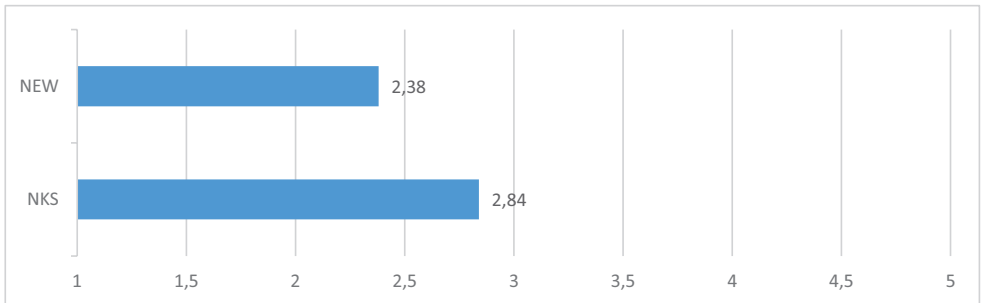
**Chart 1:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "Talented students should be educated in separate schools"



**Source:** the author's own research; all the charts present data from the author's own sources.



**Chart 2:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "In public schools there should be separate classes for talented students"

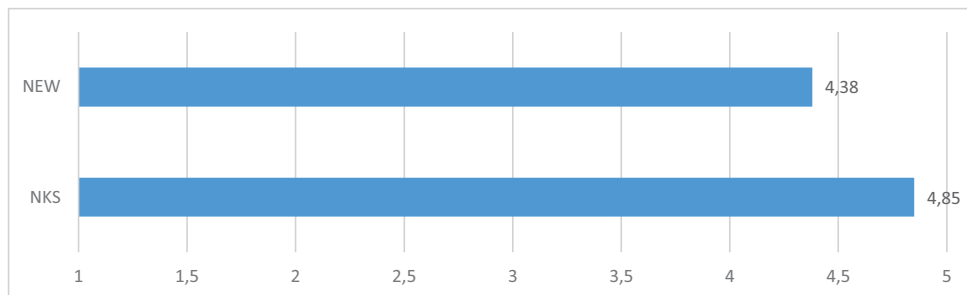


All teachers are against creating separate schools for talented students. However, as the educational level increases, there are more and more teachers who are not sure whether gifted students should be segregated within the school (response: "it is hard to say"). The difference between NEW and NKS may be explained by different experiences of teachers: in senior classes they often need to individualize teaching, which, in practice, is focused on students with educational problems. Teachers may believe that making classes uniform in terms of cognitive skills will facilitate teaching. However, the research proves that it is not true. Moreover, selecting students according to their talents is neither favourable for themselves nor for their less talented peers (Giza 2019b). Teachers' opinions indirectly show their approval of the valid non-segregation education of children in Polish schools. In consequence, they mean the approval of supporting talented students in the existing school reality.

#### B. Assessment of identifying students' talents.

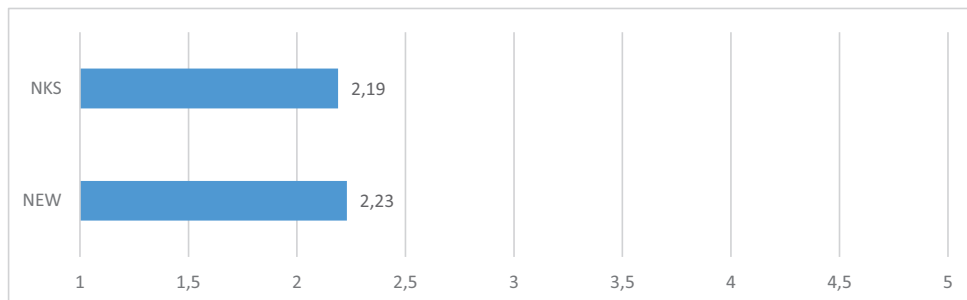
The process of teaching talented students should be preceded with the phase of diagnosis. As a result of such diagnosis, the scope of work should be planned according to the recognized potentials and needs of students. The data in charts 3 and 4 indicates a high evaluation of teachers' own competences in identifying talents by the teachers.

**Chart 3:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "We can recognize talented students at school"



Teachers' self-evaluation is very high and it increases at higher educational levels. However, it is not reflected in practice, in using professional diagnostic tools. The sets of standardized and normalized tests (Multiple Talent Tests), prepared for teachers within the project: "A Talented Student," have not been broadly applied (Giza 2016). According to the report of the Supreme Audit Office (Polish name: Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, hereafter: NIK), entitled: *Wspieranie uczniów uzdolnionych w województwie dolnośląskim* [Supporting Talented Students in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship] (2016), only a half of audited schools have some procedures for recognizing gifted students. An American research proves that only 9.5% of teachers evaluate their ability to identify talented students as high (Pfeiffer 2020). The teachers analysed by the author of this article probably mean identifying talents on the basis of school achievements. The higher self-evaluation in the NKS group results from greater opportunities to evaluate the achievements of elder students.

**Chart 4:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "Experts are needed to recognize talents at school"

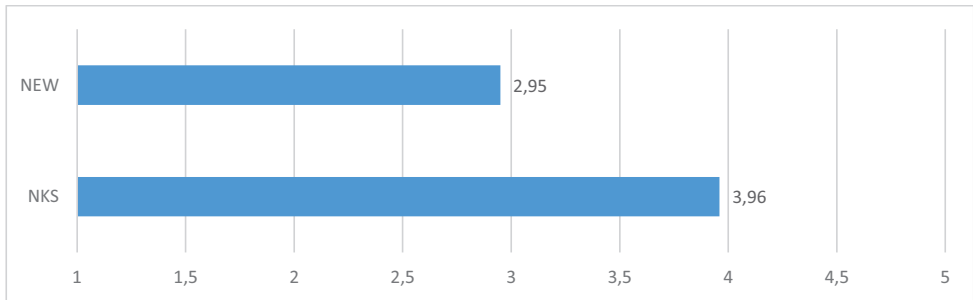


Teachers from all subgroups do not feel the need to use the services of specialists in recognizing talents among students. In practice, using specialist diagnoses in psychological-pedagogical counselling centres is very rare (Giza 2006).

### C. Assessment of the basic areas of working with talented students at school—school support.

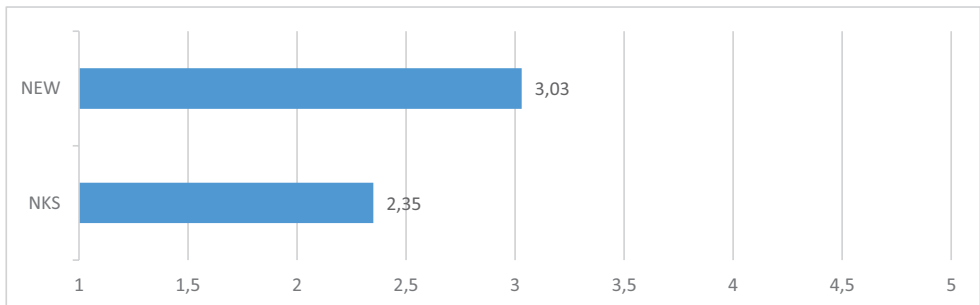
The next seven statements were directly related to working with talented students at school. The first two of them referred to legal-organisational issues—Charts 5 and 6.

**Chart 5:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "We have clear procedures related to working with talented students"



At higher educational levels, teachers' opinions on the procedures for working with gifted students are better. It means that teachers are aware of the number of obligations and the way of working with gifted children. At the early school level, the assessment is average; in senior classes—it is high.

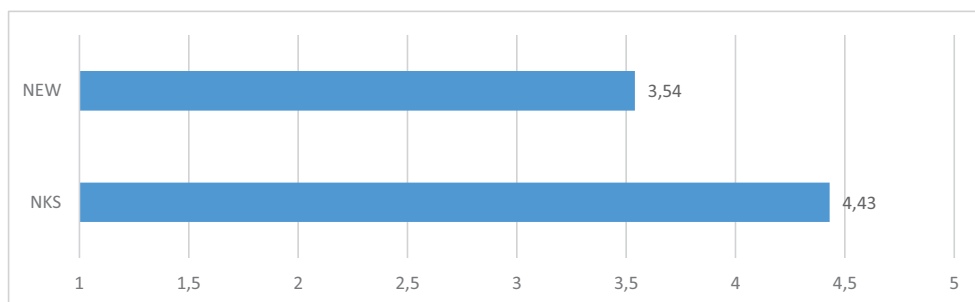
**Chart 6:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "Working with talented children at school is bureaucratized"



At higher educational levels, the opinion on the bureaucratization of work with talented students is more positive (from average to low). This can probably be explained with students' greater independence and responsibility. Also, it is possible that, with age, less students are qualified for groups with special educational needs, so there are less documents to prepare at school.

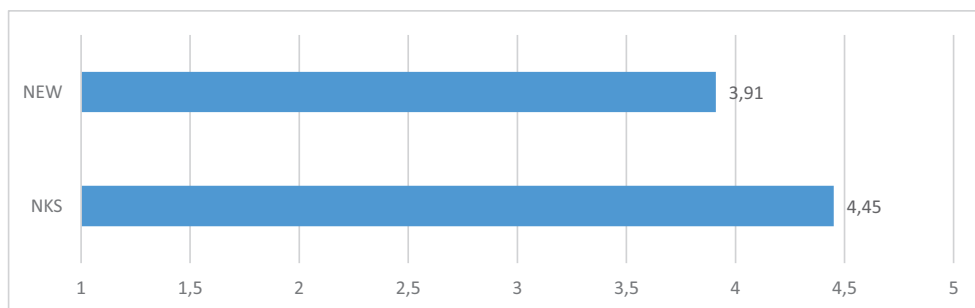
Further statements refer to practical activities: charts 7–11.

**Chart 7:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "Each gifted student has the chance to develop his/her talents during afternoon classes"



As the educational level increases, the assessment of the ability to develop one's talents during afternoon classes is higher. At the early school stage, the assessment is above average; in senior classes—above high. Starting from class 4, afternoon classes on particular school subjects are organised, which significantly extends the school's offer for gifted children. That is why, the NKS group evaluated it higher.

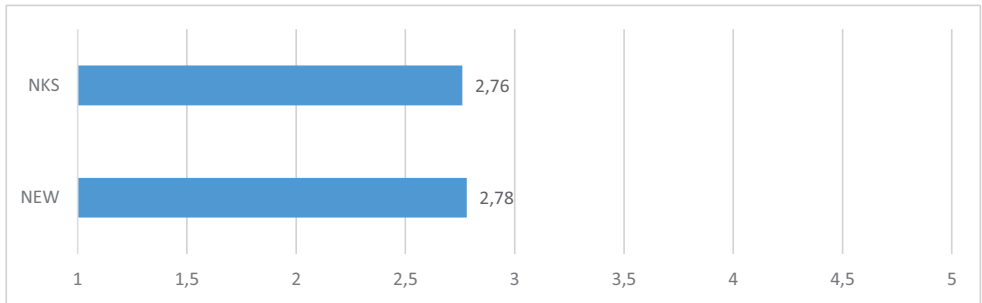
**Chart 8:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "In my school we use various forms of working with talented students"



In early education, teachers evaluated the use of various forms of working with talented students as high; in senior classes—more than high. These opinions correspond with the assessments concerning

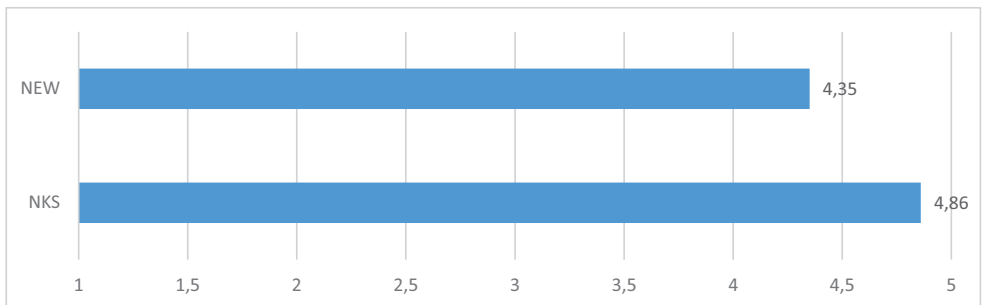
the availability of afternoon classes. In the NEW group we could see the increase in the assessments, which shows the presence of specific forms of working with gifted students typical of this educational stage. However, those assessments are not confirmed in practice. According to the above-mentioned NIK report (*Wspieranie...* 2016), none of the schools used the opportunity to organise special classes or a scientific camp. “In the audited schools, only 4 students (out of the general number of 2234), were included in an individualized curriculum, and none of the students were following an individual course of studying” (ibidem: 9).

**Chart 9:** Teachers’ opinion on the statement: “There are not enough methodological solutions for working with gifted students”



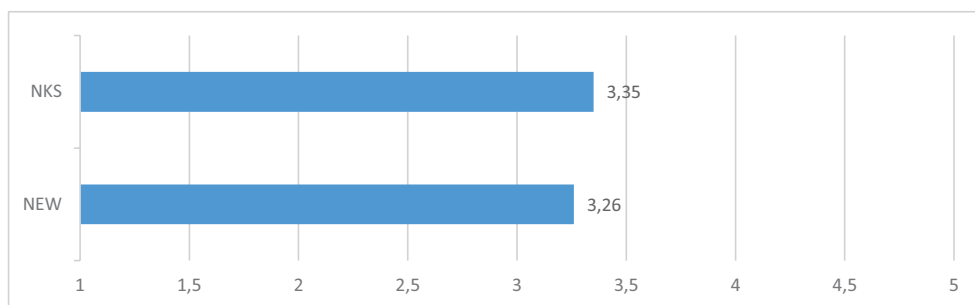
Teachers disagree (assessment: below average) with the statement that there are not enough methodological solutions for working with gifted students. In fact, we can speak about the abundance of methodological materials. Their low quality and inconsistency with theory is, however, another problem (Giza 2019a).

**Chart 10:** Teachers’ opinion on the statement: “Gifted students are given the opportunity to participate in competitions and contests in particular school subjects”



As students grow older, their opportunity to participate in competitions and contests concerning particular schools' subjects increases. In early education, teachers describe this opportunity as high, and in senior classes—very high. Competitions in various subjects are the most appreciated form of working with gifted students. They have their own legal-organisational formula and tradition. At the same time, such competitions are criticised for promoting the mechanisms of rivalry in education and the pressure for success (Giza 2019a).

**Chart 11:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "The quality of working with gifted students depends on the access to new technologies"

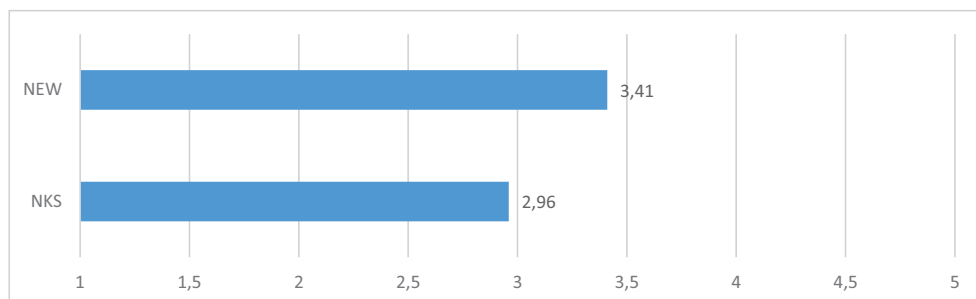


The thesis on the dependence of the quality of working with talented people on the access to new technologies is getting more and more popular. Possible explanations are as follows: teachers have some observations related to the negative influence of technologies; teachers cannot use new technologies in teaching gifted students, or they treat them as a "supplement" to education. It is worth mentioning that many competitions that are so much appreciated by teachers include stages at which students work online.

#### D. Assessment of external support for talented students.

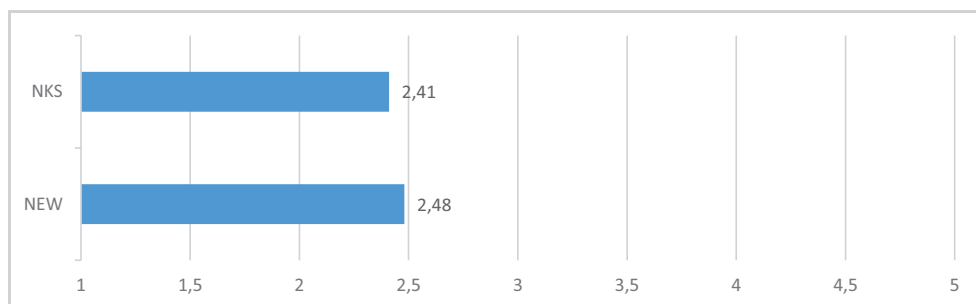
As we have already mentioned, school is not the only environment that facilitates the development of talents. A teacher's obligations include counselling and supporting the child with the obtainment of help from outside school (scholarships, foundations, institutions, etc.). The below two statements were related to those issues:

**Chart 12:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "Talented students have access to institutions other than the school (cultural centres, youth support institutions, etc.)"



According to teachers, the access to activities offered outside the school is average in case of older students, and close to high in case of younger children. These assessments are contrary to the evaluation of the offer of afternoon classes at school. It is true that, due to their parents' commitment, younger children participate in many classes offered outside school, especially artistic ones. In this part, these are leisure activities. In senior classes, students have to be more focused on learning, and extra activities are more related to school subjects.

**Chart 13:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "Talented students often receive financial support that helps them develop their talents"

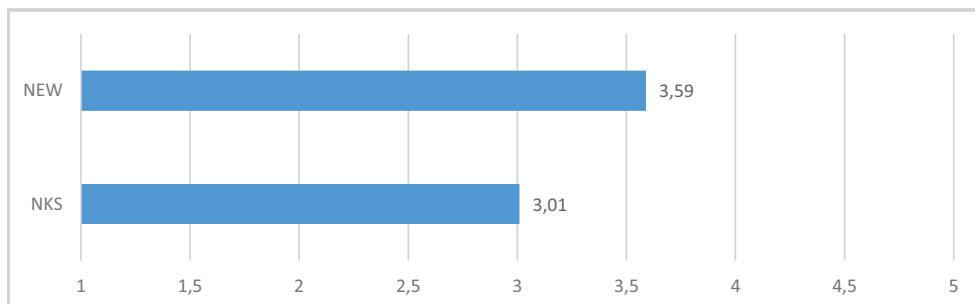


The evaluation of financial support for gifted students is situated on the level between low and average, and it is not diversified. However, this is quite surprising because, as children grow older, they are given a better access to various forms of scholarships. The problem is the fact that teachers do not know this and that they fail to become involved in helping students obtain such support. This is confirmed by the NIK report (*Wspieranie...* 2016).

E. Evaluation of one's own competences in working with talented students.

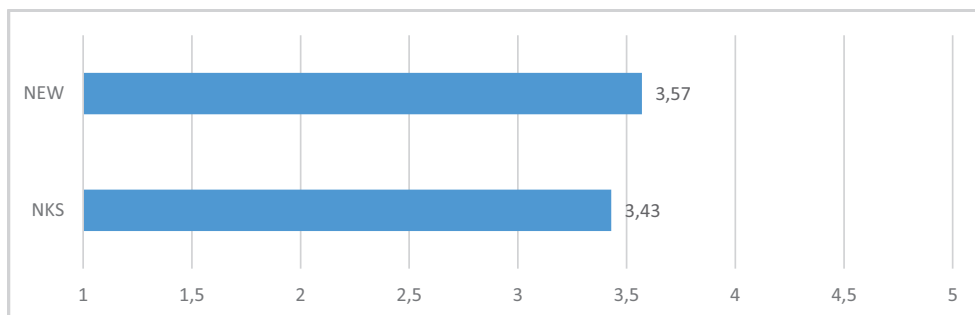
The last analysed area refers to teachers' competences related to teaching gifted students. First, they were asked about their knowledge of talents (chart 14).

**Chart 14:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "The knowledge of talents was taught during my studies or professional courses"



On the basis of the evaluation of the knowledge of students' talents, obtained during studies or additional courses, we may conclude that teachers of early education were educated better (between average and high) than senior class teachers (average). These differences result from different standards of education, and from early education teachers' higher commitment to supplementary education.

**Chart 15:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "A teacher's experience is more important in working with gifted students than a teacher's knowledge"



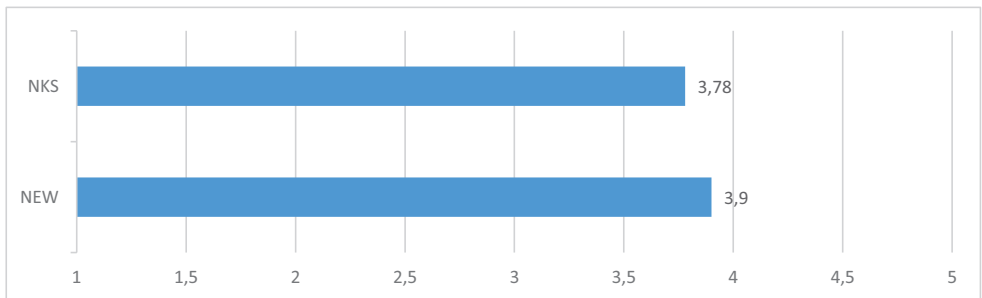
To a more than average degree, teachers are convinced that the quality of working with talented children depend more on pedagogues' experience than knowledge. The average knowledge gained during the studies may, in practice, mean insufficient knowledge of



talents, which is why experience is appreciated more in working with talented children. This corresponds with teachers' expectations concerning professional improvement which mainly refer to methodological solutions (i.e. methodological models useful in practice, Giza 2016).

The last statement was related to the meaning of teachers' own work with gifted students.

**Chart 16:** Teachers' opinion on the statement: "I believe that gifted students' achievements depend on my work"



The assessment of teachers' own influence on students' achievements is high. This is related to the fact that teachers like to be identified with students' achievements, treating them as their own pedagogical successes (Giza 2016).

## Summary and conclusions

The above-mentioned data is an empirical illustration of the issue of different approaches of teachers to educating gifted students. Such differences result from the changing developmental needs of students. On the basis of the research, we can conclude that teachers overestimate the assessments related to diagnostic and methodological competences, and to the use of school and external forms of supporting talents. Also, we can say that there are small and not specific differences in the opinions of early education teachers and senior class teachers. The opinions of teachers on educating gifted students reflects pedagogues' stereotypical thinking about teaching such children.

In the light of the data from the analyses, we have to conclude that teachers do not approve of selecting students according to their talents, or of providing gifted children with special education, both at the early school level and in higher classes. Specialists in diagnosing gifted students are not necessary because teachers believe they can recognize talents themselves. This identification is mainly based on achievements: the same categories of gifted students who obtain more than average school results are recognized all the time.

School support for talented students is evaluated as high and it increases along with the level of teaching in terms of procedures, the availability of afternoon classes and the differentiation of forms of work. This correlation is a good developmental phenomenon. The role of technology is evaluated as average. All teachers have good opinions on available methodological solutions. Working with talented children is not bureaucratized. The highest assessment was given to the participation of gifted children in competitions and contests concerning particular subjects. It means that teachers mainly support those children who are motivated by rivalry and achieve school successes. A gifted student's success becomes a teacher's success. However, if a teacher aims at making the student successful, the student's talent may not be developed in a sufficient manner. This is because the student's dominant motivation may be cognitive or perfectionist one, or perhaps he/she will not be willing to rival others because of his/her personality traits.

As the educational level increases, school provides children with a broader offer of afternoon classes (clubs in which extra lessons on particular subject are given), which is why students are not much interested in the offer of institutions from outside school. Low assessment of material support for gifted students results from teachers' low commitment to such support. If a teacher's role includes enriching a gifted student's educational environment (sociotope), this is a weak point in supporting gifted children.

Early education teachers know more on talents than senior class teachers. Both groups of teachers believe that experience is more important than knowledge in working with talented students. Experience means referring to what is known and sure, to old schemes, common practices and myths. The system elaborated at schools does

not enrich students' sociotopes. On the contrary, it still focuses on narrow resources of support.

Teachers declare high assessments as for their abilities, experience, existing procedures and school support, which indicates that the system of educating gifted students is fixed and it has not been changed for years (e.g. Limont 2018). This stagnation may only be changed through distributing new knowledge concerning skills (definitions, theoretical models—especially developmental and systemic ones, as well as educational projects). There are not universal curricula for educating gifted students. Teachers' training should be adjusted to varied objectives, educational levels and available resources. It is necessary to carry out a critical analysis of the existing practices of working with talented children which were reflected in teachers' high assessments.

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