

"There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people."

T. Jefferson

Gifted Education in Slovakia According to the Programme APROGEN



JOLANA LAZNIBATOVÁ, SLOVAKIA

The care and nurturing of gifted students varies with each specific country in which teaching occurs, and it also evolves over time as the experience of a particular programme grows. The outcomes of gifted education vary with such factors as the country's history of education, its culture, people, economy and the overall level of the country's educational system.

Why is it necessary to care for the gifted? There are at least two reasons why it is necessary to support gifted students and programmes aimed specifically at their growth:

- **Individual** – gifted education provides the opportunity for each person to achieve full development of their personality, abilities and talents, thus realizing their potential.
- **Social** – although talent is individual, it is a strategic human resource and an important component of a country's wealth. Gifted education benefits all citizens.

Since the future prosperity of any society depends on the development of its youth, no public or private organization can afford to waste the talent of gifted individuals. We are of the opinion that gifted education will thrive and be most effective only when it receives support on these four levels:

1. **Political** – governments, parliament, and the Ministry of Education are well-informed of the benefits of gifted education and have a positive attitude toward its implementation
2. **Economical** – approval and allocation of funds for the gifted
3. **Social** – overcoming the barriers and negative views on gifted education in public schools
4. **Teaching** – development of textbooks, teacher training, programmes, etc. for gifted students

Views on the number of gifted individuals in a population vary widely. Traditional statistical data, according to Gaussian distribution, indicate the population of gifted individuals is 2-3%. However, psychologists report, "We have as many gifted as we can identify and diagnose." Economists and politicians

argue, "We have as many gifted as we can secure financially." The European Council in the *Declaration of 1248* states that one in five children in Europe is gifted. This means that the gifted make up about 20% of the population (this includes those gifted intellectually, artistically, and children with sporting abilities, as well as other types of giftedness). Educational experts in this field believe that if enough favorable conditions were created to promote and develop students' gifts and abilities, 20-25% of the population would be able to demonstrate exceptional performance in their area of giftedness, as a result of gifted education, in any type of human activity (Freeman 1996).

Psychologists stress that it is necessary to identify and support gifted children as soon as possible and at an early age. This may be compared to the principle in medicine: the sooner you start, the better and more efficient care is implemented. Despite this, professionals, as well as the general public in Slovakia, continue to debate fundamental options regarding the education of gifted students. Which path will best serve this population:

integration, inclusion
vs.
differentiation, exclusion

The parents of gifted children are keenly aware of the problems of gifted pupils' education in mainstream schools. First, there is the fact that they receive relatively little attention and thus they lack development of their intellectual potential. Second, students do not need to take full advantage of their capabilities to achieve very good or excellent results compared to average students. The reason that teachers don't dedicate much time to highly gifted children is because

>>> page 14

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they are usually a small percentage of the overall class size. Slovakia, or rather, the former Czechoslovakia, was the first in Europe to begin addressing the issue of gifted children. This was based on the decision of the Ministry of Education to ask professionals – psychologists from the Research Institute of Child Psychology in Bratislava – to define the word “gifted”. A team was then created to compare different types of talents: math, intellect, sports, arts, languages and more. In practice, this meant that the Ministry of Education required us to quantify levels of children’s abilities in school, across various disciplines. At the same time, pupils were selected to participate in specialized classes at their schools.

This initial activity influenced scientific circles to intensively analyze the problems of gifted and talented children. In 1981, I presented and defended the first professional doctoral thesis on gifted education titled, “The Development of Mathematically Gifted Children”. Summarized research results on different types of giftedness followed, and were compiled in “Psychology of Giftedness”, published in 1987. This book became a real springboard for further work with gifted children in Slovakia.

In 1991, fellow Czech and Slovak psychologists and I founded the *Czechoslovak Society for Gifted Children*. At this time, the parents of preschool children who noticed unusual abilities in their offspring began to approach us. These parents of 4-5 year-old children asked us for counseling services because they didn’t know what to do with children who could already read, write, count, recognize continents, countries of the world and their capitals and flags of states. The children were interested in many animals and their way of life, especially dinosaurs, knew a lot about the human body, about cars, and could recognize negative numbers. Many were curious about religion or philosophical questions and so on. It was parents who asked whether there was a school for such gifted children. They were an inspiration, and encouraged us to develop an alternative education programme for gifted children (Laznibatová 1993). The Ministry of Education agreed to validate alternative forms of education for gifted children.

Accordingly, it was on 1st Sept. 1993 when the pilot programme began in Bratislava, and the first classroom for gifted children opened. In 1996, this initial group of intellectually gifted students completed

the entire first 4 years of primary education, in only 3 years’ time. It was clearly confirmed that these children were developmentally ahead of their peers, and it was imperative to create other forms of work with and for them. Thanks to great interest from the parents to start educating gifted children, on 1st Jan 1998 the Ministry of Education set up a separate school for very gifted children, which was officially included in the network of Slovak schools at that time. In 2001, I published a comprehensive monograph about the experience of working with these children: “Gifted Pupils, Their Development, Education and Support” (Laznibatová 2001).

Next, an important milestone during this period was the gradual opening of classes for gifted children in various major cities of Slovakia, which worked under the same principle of applying alternative approaches and methods to working with gifted pupils. Official verification of such alternative forms of education of gifted children, under the heading *The Project of Alternative Care for Gifted Children*, was completed in 2007. This became the longest-running pilot programme in the history of the Slovak school system, comprising 14 years of study. The success and efficiency of working with intellectually gifted pupils resulted in a critical change in the country’s educational system. For the first time, the education of gifted children was written into legislation, as outlined in the *School Act. 245/2008 Coll., paragraphs 103-109*.

In addition to this differentiated form of gifted education, the issue of “individualized approach” in an integrated classroom was addressed during this time. However, teachers in Slovakia were not generally prepared to work with or support gifted students; therefore, these practices with gifted children in the form of integration have not been altogether successful and effective. It was confirmed that it is not possible to work with gifted students by focusing solely on their performance in school and competitions. It is necessary to also address various aspects of their personality, emotional and social peculiarities, and other specifics of the development of gifted children.

Our philosophy and the concept of gifted education within *The Project on Alternative Care for Gifted Children* (1993-2007), was

based on the notion that gifted pupils should receive specific support and care, first by identifying them and then offering them a quality educational programme, prepared so that none will be denied the chance of developing his/hers potential at the highest possible level (within the Convention of the Rights of the Child). The aim of our work with the gifted had the following aspects applied:

- Individually differentiated approaches for every gifted child
- Expanding, deepening and enriching the standard curriculum
- Increased psychological care in the educational process
- Taking into consideration the particularities and specificities of each individual gifted child

Additionally, psychologists and educators tried to create adequate conditions in an accepting school environment for the development of intellectually gifted children, the goal being to stimulate and develop higher levels of thinking and encourage their development in personal, emotional and social capacities. Together, the team of professionals working with gifted children gradually formed new ways and methods of teaching and interacting with their students. The final output was a separate educational programme for gifted children – APROGEN Programme (*Alternative Programme of Education for the*

Gifted, Laznibatová 2014), which provides educationally complex conditions for the continuous development of gifted students from age 5 to 18 years.

During our entire experience of working with gifted children, we noticed certain behaviors of gifted students, which can occur in either increased or decreased levels in the general population of children. They are:

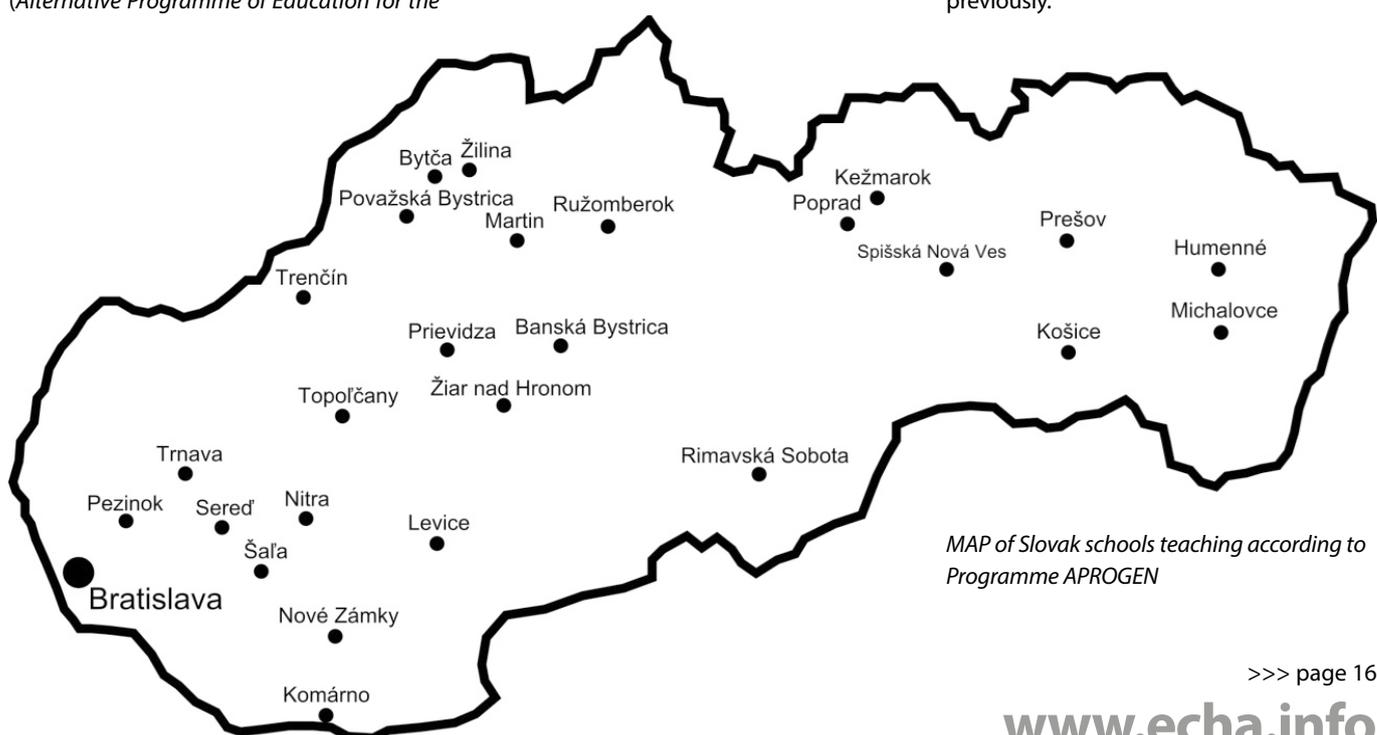
- Reduced adaptability in the environment (adaptability)
- Reduced ability to communicate (communication)
- Reduced level of social contacts (sociability)
- Increased activity (hyperactivity)
- Increased sensation and perception (overexcitability)
- Increased imagination (imagination)
- Increased emotional sensitivity (over-sensitivity)
- Increased affectivity, explosiveness (impulsivity)
- Increased anxiety (anxiety)
- Increased maladjustment, closeness (individualism)
- Increased refusal of authorities (nonconformity)
- Increased need to be the first to stand out (ambition)

- Increased effort for perfection, fear of failure, the need to avoid failure (perfectionism)

Such reactions, traits and characteristics do not occur in each gifted child or equally in every child, but in the educational process it is necessary to take into account the incidence of the individual personality. Our work is characterized by three basic levels of practice in the educational process:

- Acceptance of their personalities
- Acceptance and tolerance of their differences
- Non-directive, non-authoritative approach to them.

From 1996-1997, with agreement from the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, with the support of mayors and school councils, as well as the cooperation of local psychological counseling centres, schools started opening additional classes for gifted children at the primary level. The new programmes applied the same methods of selection and diagnosis of gifted children as the APROGEN programme, with the same principles of work and educational processes. The Slovak Republic now has an entire network of primary schools with classes for gifted children and a separate school for gifted children, all within the state school system. These schools apply the methodological approaches outlined previously.



MAP of Slovak schools teaching according to Programme APROGEN

Because artistic and sporting talent can be developed through other institutions (sports schools, sports clubs or art schools and conservatories), we believe that the education of intellectually gifted students must be provided by primary schools. The APROGEN programme provides an educational programme for gifted children age 5 to 18 years old, available all day from 7 am to 5 pm in the school environment. There is before-school and after-school care, where children have the opportunity to develop their abilities, skills and creativity in a variety of hobby groups. We strive to ensure not only the development of a student's intellect and performance (knowledge, expertise, ability to process and retain information), but also each individual's personality (emotional health, sociability, communication, empathy, etc.).

After a relatively long period of intensive work in the area of gifted education (nearly a quarter of a century), we have confirmed that certain factors should be taken into account to avoid common mistakes:

1. It is not true that a gifted child must master double or triple the amount of curriculum compared to other children.
2. It is not true that every gifted child is equally gifted in all subjects, and that they must handle them all perfectly. Many gifted students are disharmonious or disproportionate, and there are only a few individuals who are multi-potential.
3. It is not true that a gifted child has no behavioural problems – quite the opposite. Many gifted children are dealing with issues such as hypersensitivity, maladjustment, perfectionism, communication problems, etc.

At our school for the gifted, the SPMNDaG, we apply different educational methods and approaches as appropriate for each student. This means that children are not pushed to perform all at the same level. We respect each individual's interests and the personality of the child, and we encourage and support the involvement of parents. The school also plays an important role in the child's psychological development through everyday psychological services. These services support personal

competences and individual development through expert assistance in solving the day-to-day problems of gifted children.

To help each student develop good habits and a good attitude toward learning, we provide special programmes. These include early morning community classroom sessions for younger students to cultivate a positive atmosphere for teaching. For older students, we offer consultation as a learning aid, which is a specific part of the educational programme. We also include mentoring for high school students as a sort of bonus to help develop personal competences and coping strategies, such as building stability and personal integrity in order to realize their potential and talents. At the weekends we organize meetings for parents and their preschool age children where we prepare some fun and educational activities. In the meantime the parents are offered consultation services with a psychologist or seminars on different topics about gifted children. These and many other innovative elements form the foundation that we have developed within the APROGEN programme. The goal is to provide continuous education and training for intellectually gifted children from the first grade of primary school to the last grade of secondary school.

It should be noted that the educational process of gifted pupils is, of course, primarily in the hands of well-trained teachers. Slovakia's experience highlights the issue of the importance of quality teacher training for educators who work with gifted children. This issue remains unsolved. The readiness of teachers working with gifted students is at an unsatisfactory level. Even during the years of the pilot programme, teachers were not trained systematically. Another pending issue is the lack of pre-school education for younger gifted children. But the most urgent issue is the absence of specialized psychological centres. We cannot seem to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles that hinder the creation of such specialized centres in Slovakia (proposed *Centre for Gifted and Talented Children*). In the absence of these services, psychologists from the School for Gifted Children assist in this work; however, they provide these services without the official certificate that would have ensured the establishment of the *Centre for Gifted and Talented Children*.

Obstacles aside, at this point in our 22-year history of working with gifted students in Slovakia, we can speak of the specific results of our work. The unique benefits of the APROGEN Programme are seen in the following areas:

1. The development of new educational/training practices and a new psychological / educational approach for working with gifted children
2. The development of new forms and methods of work in the education of gifted pupils
3. The creation of alternative teaching materials, textbooks, worksheets and supplementary textbooks for gifted pupils
4. The development of new curricula for gifted children – children identified as having special educational needs (State Educational Programme for Intellectually Gifted Children)
5. The adoption of legislative documents which elaborate and define adequate educational conditions for the development of gifted students
6. The continued progress in overcoming social barriers and improving public attitudes toward the need for gifted education

Additionally, the School for Gifted Children in Bratislava organized seven specialized international conferences to broaden the knowledge of issues related to gifted education, supplement professional competencies for teachers, and to improve the level of awareness for parents. Topics of these conferences were as follows:

- 1999 Realization of the Gifted Child's Potential
- 2001 Identification and Recognition of Gifted Children
- 2003 Gifts and Talents for the 3rd Millennium
- 2005 Specifics of Development and Development of Potential for the Gifted
- 2008 Differentiation, Individualization and Personalization in Education
- 2011 Innovative Forms and Methods of Work with Gifted Children
- 2014 The Synergy of Talents, Gifts and Creativity as a Factor in the Successful Development of Society

The real and lasting measure of the effectiveness of our work with gifted students, however, lies with the students themselves, and is demonstrated by their results at various competitions and on school exit examinations. However, it is particularly evident in the percentage of our graduates who are successful in their studies not only at universities in Slovakia, but especially at universities abroad. These results are documented in the publication *Gifted Students in Elementary, Middle and High School* (Laznibatová 2012). In conclusion, we believe that in the near future we can resolve the unsolved issues in caring for gifted children, most tangibly through the establishment of the Centre for Gifted and Talented Children. Our hope is to continually foster greater support of gifted individuals in Slovakia.

Jolana Laznibatová, PhD, CSc., has been working in the field of psychology of giftedness for more than 30 years. She is involved as an expert in teacher education for gifted children, both in Slovakia and the Czech Republic as well as Poland and she organized several international conferences on gifted children in Slovakia.

Contact: laznibatova@centrum.sk

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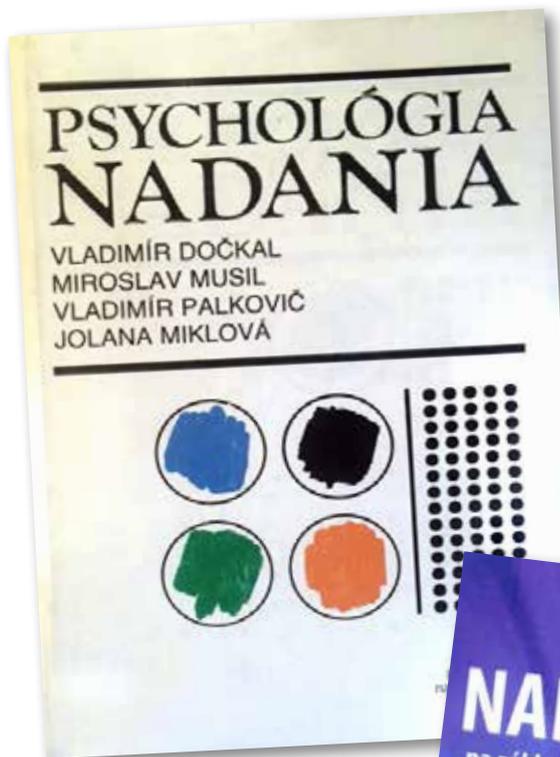
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² <http://www.cty-greece.gr/el>

³ <http://gifted.mensa.org.gr/lang=en>

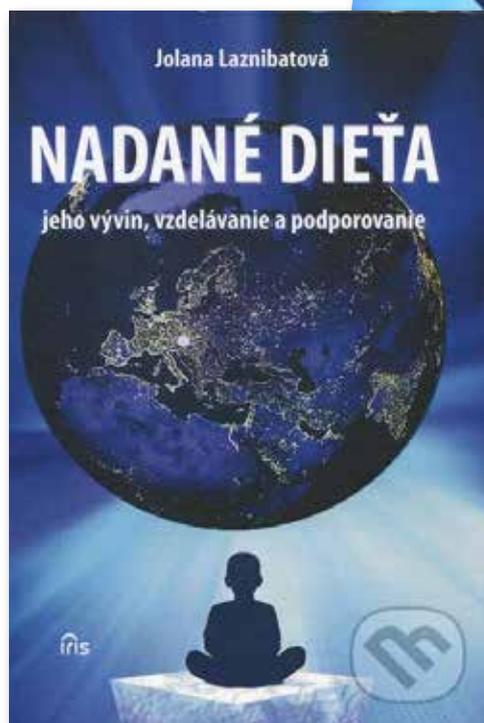
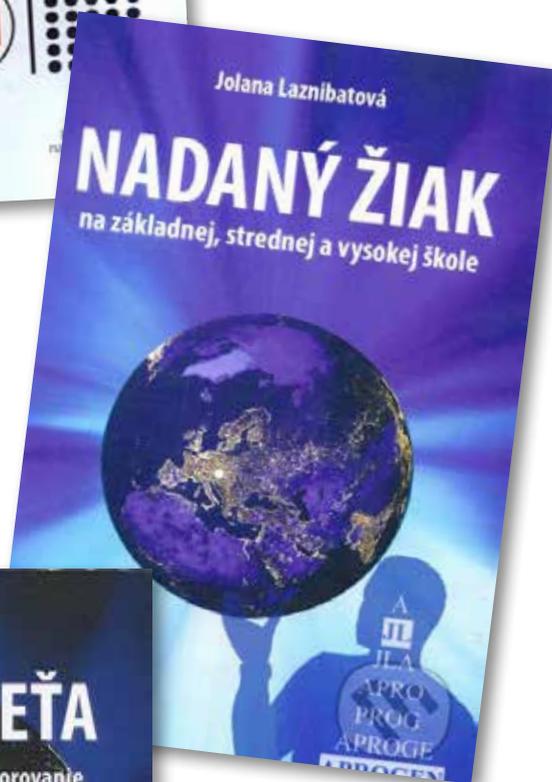
⁴ <http://www.gifted.gr>

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