

Summary of Gifted and Talented Education in Brazil

The purpose of this report, written by Denise de Souza Fleith, University of Brasilia, Brazil, is to present an overview of current trends in gifted education in Brazil. It will first give a brief description of the Brazilian culture and the history of the gifted education in the country. Second, it will describe the identification processes and programmes for the gifted, including programmes for special populations and services for parents of gifted children implemented in Brazil. Then it will provide a review of Brazilian studies on giftedness. The report concludes with problems and perspectives on gifted education in Brazil.

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Brazilian Culture

Brazil is the largest and only Portuguese speaking country in South America. It was colonized by Portugal from 1500 to 1822, when the country became independent. In this regard, Brazilian people have been erroneously considered Hispanic. The Brazilian nation is formed of European immigrants, African slaves and descendants, and natives. It is not, therefore, a homogeneous culture. The Brazilian culture is also marked by the strong influence of the Catholic Church, which was present from the beginning of the Portuguese colonization. Nowadays nearly 88% of the inhabitants are Catholic.

According to Torres and Dessen (2002), Brazilians emphasize conformity and adaptation to social rules; social hierarchy is accepted. Brazilian people are also characterized by their focus on the collective. Beyond the fact that Brazilian people are group-oriented, they are also able to demonstrate their emotions and can be considered extroverted. The Brazilian family can be described as supportive, protective and responsible for the maintenance of relationship links. As a consequence independence in children is not encouraged (Fleith, 2002).

History

The movement towards gifted education in Brazil started more than five decades ago under the influence of the Russian teacher Helena Antipoff, who published several articles calling attention to the need of early identification and educational services for the gifted in the 1930s and 40s. A

national law for education of the gifted was established by the federal government in 1971 (Alencar, Blumen-Pardo & Castellanos-Simons, 2000).

In 1995 the Secretary of Special Education of the Ministry of Education in Brazil produced a document containing governmental educational policies on the education of the gifted. It used the expression high ability to refer to the gifted student. According to this document, gifted children demonstrate achievement and/or potential in any of the following areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, music, visual and performance arts, and psychomotor abilities. This definition was based on the U.S. Office of Education definition of gifted and talented (Davis & Rimm, 1994).

However, this definition was reviewed by the Brazilian authorities. According to the Resolution of the National Council of Education (Ministério da Educação, 2001), high ability/gifted students are those who learn easily and master concepts and procedures fast. This resolution also recommended flexibility regarding curricular adaptations, teaching methods, resources and evaluation procedures for the gifted. As a consequence, the Brazilian government elaborated a document for teachers containing pedagogical strategies and guidelines to teach gifted students from kindergarten to 8th grade (Ministério da Educação, 2002).

Although the Brazilian government has been investing in the education of the gifted, the resources and the number of students attending are still limited. Many people question the need for programmes and services for high ability students, arguing that they are already privileged and the programmes are elitist (Alencar & Fleith, 2001). Consequently, in 2005 the Ministry of Education implemented a Center of Activities of High Abilities/Giftedness (Ministério da Educação, 2005a) in 27 Brazilian states. The intention was to increase the number of gifted students identified and to provide education consistent with their needs and abilities. The purpose of the centre is therefore to provide educational conditions for meeting the needs of gifted students, in-service training for teachers (in order to prepare them to work with the gifted), support to the family, educational resources and technological equipment. It includes a Teacher's Attending Unit, a Student's Attending Unit, and a Family Support Unit.

Identification Process

Multiple criteria are used to identify students for participation in the gifted programmes. The process of identification in the public school system usually involves observation by teachers on the basis of a list of characteristics, nomination by parents and teachers, school performance as well as psychological evaluation.

The Objetivo Education Center recently changed its identification procedures. From 1972 to 1998 it used the results of intelligence tests (95% or more) and one teacher nomination for each child. Since 1999 any student who perceives him/her self as presenting talents has been allowed to attend the extra-curricular activities supplied by the programme. However, only those students who demonstrate motivation, creativity and high achievement besides special abilities may continue in the more advanced level of the programme (Alencar, Fleith & Blumen, 2002). The identification process used by the Center for Talent Development is, similarly, conducted in different stages, as described by Alencar et al. (2000). It starts with a teacher's nomination on the basis of a list of

characteristics and finishes with data about the children collected by different teachers working with the child during the school year.

Programmes for Gifted Students

Special provisions for the gifted have been initiated in different states of the country. However, the most well known programmes include: those offered by the Educational Office of the Federal District; one implemented by the Center for Talent Development in Minas Gerais; and a programme provided by the Objetivo Education Center, which is a private educational complex in São Paulo. Different formats of enrichment activities are provided for gifted students.

The enrichment programme for gifted and talented students was established by the Secretary of Education of the Federal District in 1975 and now approximately 1,000 primary and secondary school students are enrolled. In the past it served kindergarten students as well. The programme offers students opportunities to optimally develop their potential and talents. It also promotes their social and school adjustment, and exposes students to experiences, materials, and information outside the bounds of the regular curriculum with more in-depth content (Alencar, Blumen-Pardo & Castellanos-Simons, 2000). The programme is implemented in resources rooms, where enrichment activities are developed in different academic domains, such as science, mathematics, literature and computer science, under the supervision of a trained teacher. Visits to museums, exhibitions and libraries are also arranged and there are provisions for special talents in music and visual arts. The activities are developed once or twice a week out of regular school time (Magalhães, 2001). The Schoolwide Enrichment Model by Renzulli (1986, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1997) guides the programme.

The Center for Talent Development was founded in 1993 in Lavras, Minas Gerais. Its goals are:

1. To identify the special interests and educational needs of talented children and adolescents and to provide assistance toward meeting their needs and interests
2. To offer support to gifted children in their personal and emotional developmental needs
3. To ensure proper stimulation of youth so as to develop specific abilities and talents (Guenther, 1995)

In the centre, each gifted child has an individual work plan organized around three types of enrichment activities: projects, interest groups and general encounters. The individual projects are developed under the supervision of a mentor (most of them are volunteers). Interest groups are formed of children with common interests who meet outside of regular school time for a two-hour period each week. Generally these are large sessions of about 100 children from different schools. Approximately 700 primary and secondary school students are members of the centre.

Other programmes are offered by the Brazilian Association for the Gifted in association with the Secretary of Education in some Brazilian states (Pérez-Barrera & Lima, 2001; Simonetti, 2001). The Project to Orient and Identify Talents, provided by the Objetivo Education Center, a private institution, was initiated in the 1980s. The programme adopts the format of extra-curricular courses and there are three different kinds at present: general courses that help students to identify their abilities and interests; specific courses which focus on selected topics; and personal relationship

courses which aim to help the gifted students to relate better with themselves and their peers, as well as to accept their personal differences. Last year 440 students attended the project (Cupertino, personal communication).

In 1998 the Institute for Learning Optimization was founded with the aim of providing opportunities for gifted, talented and potentially gifted individuals to develop more fully. This Institute also has a programme for supporting gifted children's parents, and it encourages parents, educators and concerned professionals to be involved and support educational opportunities for the gifted (Beker, Franke, & Sabatella, 2001). Initially 648 were served by the institute and nowadays, 138 students attend. In addition, a large number of schools for talented students in music, ballet, sports, and visual arts are available in many cities all throughout Brazilian states.

ACERTA is another private institution, in Rio de Janeiro. It caters for gifted students and their families with an after school programme and a parent programme. The after school programme aims at offering the students opportunities for: studying more elaborate and complex ideas than they do at school; applying productive thinking to solving everyday problems; developing self initiated and self directed learning; developing global awareness and an attitude of interdependence among people; and developing positive social actions. The parent programme aims to help parents understand their children's proclivities, find the best academic opportunities for their children and develop coping strategies. The programme is based on Gardner's conception of multiple intelligences, Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence, Bloom's Taxonomy and Kohlberg's conception of moral development. The students meet once or twice a week in groups of three to six individuals. In two hours they play mind challenging games, read books of their choice, write, build structures, play number games, research themes of their interest, discuss ideas and participate in special workshops (Sodré, personal communication).

Provisions for the gifted at college level are made available through a national programme, the Tutorial Education Program. It was initiated in 1979 by the Department of Improvement of Graduate Personnel of the Ministry of Education. The programme aims:

1. To provide an excellent and interdisciplinary academic preparation to those students who demonstrate an outstanding performance in their academic activities
2. To supply those students with opportunities to further develop higher level thinking abilities and communication skills
3. To stimulate new pedagogical experiences to improve college education

Undergraduate students are selected for this programme during their second, third or fourth semester at the university. The main criteria for the selection are high academic achievement and high interest and motivation in carrying out their studies. In each department a professor is chosen as the mentor and is responsible for planning the activities and supervising the students. The mentor is selected from among the institute professors who demonstrate real interest in the programme, high academic productivity, and a good relationship with colleagues and students. Every mentor is responsible for 12 students. The programme is evaluated each year. The students receive a scholarship and remain in the programme throughout their undergraduate years (Alencar, Blumen-

Pardo & Castellanos-Simons, 2000). To date, 3,117 university students from different regions of Brazil have participated in the programme (Ministério da Educação, 2005b).

Programmes for Special Populations

Concerns for the disadvantaged gifted have arisen in several programmes in Brazil since the 1940s. At this time Helena Antipoff started a programme for gifted children in Rio de Janeiro and continued in Minas Gerais with groups of disadvantaged gifted children from the rural areas (Alencar, 1993). Nowadays most students admitted to the programme for gifted students by the public system in the Federal District, as one example, are from poor families and receive little environmental or parental stimulus (Magalhães, 2001). This is also true of the programmes implemented in other states, such as Pará and Espírito Santos. On the other hand, at the Center for Talent Development children from different socio-economic classes are enrolled in the enrichment programme.

In the past there were also excellent provisions for the high school disadvantaged gifted. Most of these programmes were discontinued for several reasons, such as lack of financial support on the part of the government, financial difficulties by the private organizations which support the programme, or lack of adequate direction and leadership. New initiatives in this direction are starting again, such as ISMART (Maria Telles Social Institute), created in 1999. ISMART is a philanthropic organization funded by the Telles Family as a result of its long-term commitment to fostering social and economic development in Brazil. The Institute's mission is to prepare a new and more diverse generation of leaders, identifying and nurturing gifted students from underrepresented communities through educational opportunities that lead them to attend selective colleges and succeed in demanding careers.

At ISMART high-potential young people are considered plentiful in every facet of population - disregarding ethnic, social or economic backgrounds. According to ISMART the course of these children's lives can be defined by quality education and access to the right development opportunities. Considering the strategic value these talents have to the country, it has created three different programmes to guarantee that Brazil's future intellectual elite truly reflect the diversity of its population. The programmes are:

- Space for Talent: Offers scholarships and extracurricular activities (that are held at its headquarters in Rio de Janeiro) to promote the cognitive, moral, ethic and professional development of 130 youngsters
- Alicerce Project: Implemented in partnership with private schools of excellence in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, this programme targets 7th grade students. It is divided into two segments: the first is a two-year course run by these schools to prepare students for its admission exams; the second provides those who pass the exams with full scholarships and material support (to cover study-related expenses such as transportation, textbooks and meals), and a mentor who offers professional and personal guidance
- Talent Scholarship: Selects students from public schools across the entire country. Any student with outstanding academic performance, from 7th grade to their first year of college, is eligible for this scholarships programme. A recommendation from school principals and some of the student's teachers is mandatory and constitutes the first phase of

its selection process. Apart from the scholarships, they receive material support to cover study-related expenses and benefit from the same mentoring system applied to Alicerce Project. They are also encouraged to join research projects in their area of choice.

The selection processes are conducted individually to each project, but they follow a common structure which evaluates intellectual potential through an internationally standardized test, maths and language (reading and essay) tests, an individual interview, a group interview, and a family interview involving a home visit. ISMART selects only the students that:

- Score in the 75th percentile or above on the internationally standardized test
- Score seven or above on both maths and language tests, and show a high level of commitment to studies and to an academic and professional future
- Have the support of their families to dedicate themselves exclusively to studies (World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, 2005)

Services for Parents of Gifted children

In Brazil there are very few counselling services for parents of the gifted (Alencar & Fleith, 2001). One of them is implemented at the Institute for Optimizing Learning, located at the southern region of the country. Families of gifted children receive information about giftedness and have opportunities to discuss significant educational concerns, in order to foster positive and stable family relationships. As a result, parents become confident in supporting their children's intellectual, social, and emotional development (Sabatella & Beker, 2001).

Another counselling service for parents of the gifted recently implemented in Brazil is the Psychoeducational Service for Parents of Gifted and Talented Students, created in 2002 at the University of Brasilia. Its main purpose is to enhance and cultivate children's abilities by providing parents with information on giftedness and with opportunities to share experiences with other families and to discuss strategies to be implemented in the familial context. The specific objectives of the service are:

- Present and discuss topics with parents that relate to giftedness and the enrichment programme attended by their children
- Offer opportunities for parents to share their doubts, difficulties and successes related to the education of their gifted child
- Discuss with parents strategies that stimulate their children's potential
- Make parents aware of the need to follow the school performance of their children

A parent group is organized each semester with nine meetings of two hours held on one evening every week. The meetings are coordinated by two psychologists. The topics discussed in the meetings are social and emotional development of gifted children, myths about giftedness, parental expectations regarding children's school performance and future career, self-concept of gifted children, and family-child relationships and dynamics. A lecturing approach is avoided and instead the methodology involves reading, discussion, group dynamics, and videos.

Review of Brazilian Research on Giftedness

Although educational policies related to gifted education were proposed 30 years ago, little research on giftedness and talent has been conducted in Brazil since. From 1970 to 1990 most of the studies focused on creativity and ways for fostering creative abilities in the classroom. There was a proliferation of studies investigating the affects of creativity training programmes on students' divergent thinking abilities, school performance, interests, and self-concept. Teachers and students from different grade levels were trained. The results suggest a positive impact of creativity programmes on creative thinking abilities and school achievement, but no significant changes related to affective variables were reported.

In the last decade the focus of creativity studies has switched from enhancing student's creativity to identifying factors that stimulate or inhibit creative talents in the educational setting, as well as factors associated with high creative achievement. An increasing number of research investigations on giftedness, although sparse, can also be observed, especially since 1998 when the III Ibero-American Conference on Giftedness was held in Brazil. This conference called the attention of educators, psychologists, and parents to the importance of attending the needs of gifted and talent students and implementing programmes and services for this group.

Most Brazilian studies have been conducted regarding students' perceptions on giftedness. Costa (2001) investigated the perceptions of gifted adolescents from the south region on family, school, and peers. The results indicated that society needs to rethink its values, especially those related to individual differences, allowing gifted students to conduct their projects. Also, Ferreira and Souza (2000) examined the social representation of southeast gifted students, from elementary to middle school grades. The results of this study pointed out that students found the school satisfactory.

Likewise, Virgolim (2005) found that gifted and talented students, from ages nine to 17, who were attending an enrichment programme in Brasilia, perceived themselves as both creative and intelligent. However, the ideal student profile described by those students was the schoolhouse type of giftedness (Renzulli, 1986). The students also evaluated the enrichment programme. They reported that the programme offered an opportunity for them to learn more and in more depth; that it fulfilled their academic and emotional needs. The programme teachers were perceived in a favourable way, the teaching method was seen as different from the traditional one, and they felt that their learning style was respected. The students also emphasized that the lack of physical resources and equipment was a barrier to the full development of their potentialities.

Maia-Pinto (2002) also conducted research to evaluate the impact of a programme designed to meet the needs of gifted and talented students on the academic performance and creativity of its participants. It also investigated teachers', students' and parents' perception of activities and strategies implemented in the programme, and examined the extent to which activities and educational strategies adopted in the programme differed from the ones used in the regular classes. The participants were 77 students from primary and secondary schools who attended a programme designed for gifted and talented students, 11 teachers who worked in the programme, six teachers from regular classes and six parents of students who attended a special programme. The perception of teachers, students and parents about activities and strategies adopted in the programme was, in general, positive. However, parents and regular teachers lacked information about the objectives and the work developed in the programme. It was also observed that, in spite of the teachers'

theoretical background about giftedness, they found it difficult to transfer this knowledge to the teaching practice.

Maia-Pinto and Fleith (2002) investigated how elementary school teachers perceived gifted students. The findings suggest that both private and public school teachers believe that the school participation in the gifted student educational process is important. However, neither public nor private schools in Brasilia, whose teachers participated in the study, adopted any kind of student identification instrument or had a special programme for those students. The teachers also stated that they had never had a gifted student in their classes. It was observed that teachers had a superficial knowledge concerning giftedness definition and identification process, and they did not have specific orientation about the implementation of educational practices that could attend gifted students' needs.

Some studies have been conducted with respect to the profile of the gifted. Fortes (2004), for example, analyzed how morality and pro-social morality were constructed by gifted adolescents. Five secondary school students who attended a programme for gifted students participated in the study. The conclusions of the study were that:

- Morality cannot be evaluated solely as a function of the cognitive level of each student
- Morality cannot be considered under a structuralist perspective (invariable, hierarchical or universal stages)
- Motivation, values, virtues are connected with moral acts

Ourofino (2005) compared gifted students, hyperactive students and those presenting giftedness/hyperactivity in relation to intelligence, self-concept, creativity, attention deficit, hyperactivity/impulsivity, antisocial behaviour and learning difficulties. The study involved 114 students. Among these, there were 52 gifted students taken from a programme for the gifted and talented, 43 ADHD students attending regular schools and 19 gifted /hyperactive students. A set of instruments was used to access the variables investigated such as psychometric tests, scales of characteristics, documental analysis and a demographic questionnaire. The results indicated that the gifted students had a significantly higher performance in relation to intelligence, self-concept (in the academic competence, physical appearance, behaviour, conduct and global self-esteem dimensions) and creativity (in the verbal originality aspect) when compared to the other groups. On the other hand, the hyperactive students achieved higher scores on the lack of attention and hyperactivity/impulsivity measures in comparison to the other groups. The results also revealed that the hyperactive students presented higher scores in both anti-social behaviour and learning difficulty measures when compared to the gifted students.

Also Moreira (2005) investigated the perception of perfectionist gifted adolescents in relation to perfectionism and the consequences of it on their school performance. Fifty-one students, who were attending a programme for the gifted, participated in the study. In general, these students, who were in Grades 5 to 8, regarded perfectionism as positive. They also considered this trait as an attribute that helps the completion of academic tasks.

With the purpose of describing the social profile of students who attended a gifted programme in Rio de Janeiro, Delou (2001) interviewed students and analyzed school documents. She found that

the students were from low socio-economic classes and they were nominated for the programme because of their school performance. Few attempts have been made to adapt instruments designed in other cultures to the Brazilian context.

Camara (1999) investigated the relationship between precocious literacy and giftedness in 34 children from five to eight years old. Data was collected through parent interview, observation, and testing. The results indicated that children obtained high scores on intelligence tests. The familial environment was very stimulating for the children. The study concluded that precocious reading children may not be considered gifted.

Few studies regarding the family of the gifted have been implemented. In one of them, Aspesi (2003) investigated the family processes as a context for the development of giftedness, considering giftedness as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. The participants were 12 pre-school children, who were attending the gifted programme held by the Federal District public educational network, and their parents (12 mothers and nine fathers). The bio-ecological approach was adopted as the theoretical-methodological reference. The children were observed by behavioural scale at school (SRBCSS-R). Their parents answered an inventory on parental attitudes (PAAT) and a semi-structured questionnaire, as well as attending interviews. Quantitative and qualitative procedures were used. Results indicate that there are physical, psychological and support networks incentives in the family environment. The study proposes that gifted children families have a main role in the development of giftedness, and so require support services.

In another study, Chagas (2003) examined the characteristics relating to the development of gifted behaviours in families with or without gifted children from socio-economically disadvantaged environments. The sample was constituted of 14 gifted students and their parents, 14 non-gifted and their parents, four educational managers, four teachers and two psychologists. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. The results indicated that:

- Participants perceived giftedness as a set of factors relating to superior cognitive and academic abilities, besides affective and innate characteristics
- Gifted students occupied a special family position, either as a first-born or only-child
- More than half of the students presented a gap between the age and grade
- Gifted students were involved in more activities during their free time when compared to their non-gifted peers

Although the theoretical approach of the studies varied, Renzulli's (1986, 1994) and Gardner's (1993, 1994) models were the ones most mentioned. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that research projects relating to giftedness are not integrated. Most of them are results of masters or doctoral dissertations elaborated in special education or school psychology graduate programmes, and are conducted because of students' interests in the field. In Brazil, there are no graduate programmes in gifted and talented education. Therefore, it is urgent to set a research agenda centred on specific themes regarding giftedness, based on need assessment from experts, educators, parents, and policy makers.

Problems and Perspectives

Despite the increasing interest in nurturing gifted students in Brazil, several barriers to the development of talents have been identified. Misconceptions or lack of information regarding giftedness are still the prominent problems in the education of the gifted. As a consequence, there are noticeable difficulties in providing a learning environment with attention to both the affective and cognitive aspects of talent development, as well as in altering expectations regarding the gifted and talented especially from disadvantaged populations. Moreover, because of the lack of information on the gifted, many talented students have been diagnosed as learning disabled or autistic. Likewise, parents feel immobilized because they do not know how to deal with a gifted child. In addition, the Portuguese word for gifted, *superdotado*, carries a strong valence in the image it conveys; misleading Brazilian people to associate giftedness with genius or an exceptionally bright person, who has an innate ability and an excellent performance in all areas. Also successful programmes for the gifted are frequently interrupted due to lack of financial support as well as common prejudices and misconceptions in society about the gifted students (Alencar, Fleith & Blumen, 2002).

It is also observed that there is a lack of programmes at university level which prepare teachers for work with gifted and talented children. Most of their training is conducted when they are already dealing with these students (Alencar et al., 2000). Thus, a discrepancy between theoretical approach and instructional strategies implemented in the programmes for the gifted can be noticed. As a result, the activities developed in these programmes are not totally different from those carried out in the regular classroom.

Another problem is the discontinuity of gifted education policies due to changes in the government. It is not unusual that entire educational plans for gifted and talented are replaced by new ones when a co-ordinator is superseded. It is also noticed that there are few services for gifted people, especially in terms of counselling, because the focus has been on their academic and cognitive development.

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