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Interview

Interview with Albert Ziegler about Gifted Education

ABSTRACT: Prof. Albert Ziegler is the chair of Educational Psychology and Research on Excellence at the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nurnberg and one of the most productive and cited academicians in gifted education in Europe and also all over the world. Prof. Ziegler has contributed different theories about gifted education and education in general. One of his well-known theories is The Actiotope Model of Giftedness and the 7-Step-Cycle of Self-Regulated Learning. Since last year I had the chance to be with him and his colleagues in Germany, thus I decided to share with you the interview that we had about his theories and his recommendations for Turkey.

Keywords: Actiotope model of giftedness, giftedness, gifted education

Marilena Z. Leana-
Tascilar, Istanbul
University, Special
Education
Department, Gifted
Teacher Training
Program, Turkey. E-
mail:
marilenaleana@yahoo.
com

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Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *Dear Albert, could you please tell me a bit about what is your conception of giftedness and talents?*

Prof. Dr. Ziegler: Traditionally gifts and talents were regarded as fixed attributes of a person that wouldn't change. For example if you identify a 6 year old as gifted it was previously expected that this person would be still gifted at 15 or 50. But being talented or being gifted simply means that someone has a chance to attain excellence in a domain, if the person learns effectively enough. But this also implies that you might lose your gift or your talent if you don't foster and use them. Indeed, one day you may have not the chance anymore to attain excellence, because you are simply too old. Then you have let slip away your gift or talent. But the lesson is obvious: We focus nowadays more on effective learning than on talents or gifts. Indeed, those who are able to learn effectively are the talented or the gifted. However, and this is good news, effective learning can be learned.

Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *Recently I published an article about The Actiotope Model of Giftedness and its adaptation to Turkey in the "Journal for the Education of the Young Scientists and Giftedness", as the owner of the model can you please summarize your model?*

Prof. Dr. Ziegler: The Actiotope Model of Giftedness is a special model in two regards. The first regard is that we include also the environment and we are for example talking also about gifted environment. Without an adaptive environment, no one has a chance to realize his/her potential. The second distinguishing attribute of the actiotope model is that it is a systems approach in which we do not only point out that the environment in addition to the individual is important, but we focus very strongly on the interaction of both components and the quality of this interaction.

In psychology, we had 3 Nobel Prize laureates. And one of these laureates, Herbert Simon, invented a wonderful metaphor for the interplay of the individuals and their environment. He used the metaphor of "scissors". If you just looked at one blade of a scissors you wouldn't understand what this instrument, and what this tool is for. Only when you see both blades you will understand the purpose of scissors. And this is also the case with giftedness. If only you look at the individual or at the environment you wouldn't understand what is going on. You have to see how the environment is fostering in a functional way the individual and how the individual makes

intelligent use of the environmental learning possibilities.

Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *What is the point of view of Germany as a country to the education or to the field of gifted students?*

Prof. Dr. Ziegler: In Germany we are lucky because we started very early with gifted education. All the main measures of gifted education like acceleration, enrichment, pull out programs or ability grouping like schools for the gifted and so on were enforced at around 1900 and there was also some empirical research on it. Later, gifted education was interrupted by World War II. We resumed in 1980 and what we did was at the one hand site that we used all the old measures, tried them again, and evaluated them once more. However, on the other hand we also invented new measures. The new measures included various forms of e-learning, mentoring systems and learning trainings.

Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *As you know Turkey just recently started to give importance to gifted education. What are your recommendations for us as beginners?*

Prof. Dr. Ziegler: My first recommendation to Turkey would be: Don't do what Germany did in the 1900s: pull out programs, acceleration, enrichments... These might help in some cases but there are other more important things to do, particularly in two fields. One field is we need to give the individuals individualized learning conditions. So there must be people around who specifically take care of the learning environment for the gifted. In Germany we use to this end mentoring programs, sometimes also e-mentoring programs which are internet based. Mentors are experts in learning or at least a person who has some domain-specific competence in domains like sciences, languages and so on. Although mentoring programs are promising ways to create individualized learning, there is a big problem with them: we don't have enough mentors so that every talent will have his or her own mentor. Thus, talents and gifted students must also study and learn by themselves what requires high learning competencies by them. So the second field we have to take care of is to help talents and gifted students to acquire skills in effective learning and especially skills in self-regulated learning. So my recommendation for gifted education in Turkey would be: Try to create highly individualized learning conditions for the talents and the gifted, most promising would be mentoring programs. But don't forget to teach

the talents and gifted learning competencies, especially self-regulated learning skills.

Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *I know that you have a model about self-regulated learning. May I ask you to give me more information about that model?*

Prof. Dr. Ziegler: There are several models on self-regulated learning and they all developed some kind of training programs. The good news is that the training programs work. Thus, it is not so important on which approach of self-regulated learning you base your gifted education. In my institute we have a seven-step-cycle of self-regulated learning. It starts with the ability to self-evaluate: what are your strengths, what are your interests, what do you don't like, what are your weaknesses. There are so many things you have to learn about your learning. For example, "Do you start your homework with things that more difficult, or the easier things?", "You start with mathematics or with languages?". So a proper self-assessment is the first important step for effective learning, the second step is goal-setting skills. We know that most of the students do not set any goals for themselves because teachers set most of the goals, for example to learn for a classroom test or they give the homework assignments. The third step is to pick the best strategy for the learning task at hand. So we teach our students learning strategies. The learning strategy approach was, by the way, previously considered as sufficient for effective learners. Nowadays we know that we also need the other six steps. The fourth step is already to teach the students to apply the learning strategy correctly since it doesn't help to know only a lot of strategies. Students must thoroughly learn to apply them and they have also to learn for which learning goal a certain learning strategy is suited. The fifth step is monitoring the application of the learning strategy. In the sixth step – if the strategy doesn't work well – one would have to adapt the learning strategy. So the three steps application of a learning strategy, monitoring of a learning strategy, and adapting a learning strategy help a student to gradually build a repertoire of effective leaning strategies. In the last step students have to evaluate their learning: Did they really attain the expected outcome. If they didn't attain the expected learning outcome,

they have then to find out how to improve their learning. If they did attain the expected learning outcome they have to get aware what contributed to their success. After that the cycle of self-regulated learning starts again the next day with a self-assessment that now includes the learning experiences from the day before.

Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *What are some of your projects that you are coordinating nowadays?*

Prof. Dr. Ziegler: We have many projects including one project together with a Turkish colleague Marilena Leana Taşçılar from Istanbul University. In my view this project is especially interesting and worthwhile. In Germany we have a huge Turkish population and of course there are as many gifted students among this population as among the German population. However, they are not so much involved in the gifted programs. One of the main reasons for their underrepresentation is that the parents just don't consider their kids as gifted. So what we did in some major cities in Germany is that we gave workshops for parents and also for teachers how to identify gifted Turkish students or students with Turkish immigration background. We also gave a lot of information to their parents how to help their kids to live up to their potential (For more information you can visit the webpage www.hotm.eu)

Another project is about mentoring of gifted girls in the STEM field. Every year 800 new gifted girls or interested girls in these fields are included. They receive one individual mentor for them; a woman who is successful in the specific field, like a professor in biology, a female engineer. The mentoring comprises at least one year. Indeed, this project has a wonderful output in terms of the number of girls who want to study in the STEM fields.

A last project I like to mention is about fostering self-regulated learning among our students with an e-portfolio. They have learning diaries and they can discuss the learning on the internet together. It is fantastic to observe how their learning competencies improve and how they even start to give students who enter later the program competent learning counseling.

Dr. Leana - Taşçılar: *Thank you for your time and sharing your knowledge with us Prof. Dr. Ziegler...*