

Five Years Talenta School for the Gifted: Empirical and Scientific Goals, Trends and Results



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In 1998, Xaver Heer, a well experienced teacher and father of a gifted son, and Jean-Jacques Bertschi, human resources specialist and member of parliament, founded the private elementary school Talenta for gifted children in the city of Zurich. Both were members of the small, non profit association Talenta. From the start, Ursula Hoyningen and her team from the department of special education of the university of Zurich were in charge of the supervision and the scientific evaluation of the demanding project.

The following remarks shall – on the one hand – inform a broad public about the ongoing research projects at the university of Zurich (though the results are not yet available in their final form and standard). On the other hand, the time is ready to inform in an overt and selfcritical manner about many – partly miscellaneous – empirical outcomes, that reflect an intensive pioneer phase of five years, shared between teachers, children, parents. Such pragmatical “insights” keep their provisional character during a long period of refinement and consolidation. The exchange, however, can reveal similar experiences made by different and mutually independent projects at an early stage. It is the aim of the following remarks to continue this rewarding exchange.

Talenta in Facts and Figures

Talenta elementary school addresses itself to gifted children in the age of six up to 12 years. It covers the school programme of the Zurich “Primarschule”, i.e. six grades after (usually) two years of Kindergarten. The “Primarschule” is followed by three compulsory grades on the secondary level. The resulting nine years build what is called the Swiss “Volksschule” which has to be fulfilled by any citizen. Whereas within the “Primarschule” children of all schoolish levels are taught together, the secondary level is highly segmented in Zurich: The highest level, the gymnasium, leads to the maturity exam and, as a next step, to the university.

Talenta started with nine pupils, but already after two years, it reached its final structure with thirty pupils, organized in three mixed groups that were put together according to the overall level of the respective child. The three groups meet at lunch and – in subjects like gymnastics, handicraft, music and drawing. So the children live and move within a relatively broad community – sometimes they are taught individually, but most of the time in groups of various sizes and compositions. Hence, one of the priorities of the pedagogical concept of Talenta, i.e. to strengthen the social competences of the children. Initially, Talenta has been conceived for the two percentiles of children who are highly gifted in the field of cognitive intelligence (with a G-factor distinctively above average). In every case, parents have to forward an independent, professional analysis of the child’s potential. The director is, then, leading interviews with people from the actual context of the child, and observing the child’s behaviour and reactions in the course of a trial day at Talenta. There is a trial period of three months – for both sides.

School takes place from nine to four on the five labour days with Wednesday afternoon off. The time table has to meet the public programme and objectives of the state of Zurich, which takes about two thirds of the time at Talenta’s disposal. Besides the (rather familiar) general methodical approaches of enrichment, acceleration and individualization, Talenta teaches three languages (German, English and French) and offers its pupils in the supplementary subject “Projects” demanding challenges in the field of physics, chemistry and biology. Referring to the specific needs of children in the age of elementary school, Talenta works in the spirit of the famous Swiss pedagogue Heinrich Pestalozzi, approaching the

children in a comprehensive way – with “Kopf, Herz und Hand” (mind, heart and hand). Nevertheless, terms like basic education, acceptable behaviour and manners, solid learning and working techniques play a big, sometimes dominant role in the daily life at Talenta.

The concept of Talenta may be only one among hundreds – but it is one that works well. And it is a concept for those gifted children who, very often, had become “unbearable” in regular classes – for many reasons. Although, the conceptual framework (sometimes rather “turbulences”) stabilized quickly after a very dynamic first year full of “trial and error”, the meanwhile 65 children (among whom only 22 girls) felt from the start and during all five years at ease and at home in the new surrounding – in spite of long ways to school (up to two hours!). The team of the five teachers (at work with a contract of about 60% each) could not lean back, however. It had to struggle hard to overcome the many difficult situations, because “There is always the unexpected.” All teachers do have a regular state diploma, but initially no specific education to teach gifted children - as there was none available at that time. Only an intensive internal and external process of continuing training, as well as the good team spirit of the team made it possible to work all the time successfully and with full classes - without spending one single penny on marketing, publicity and advertisements so far.

Current Focus of the University of Zurich on the Topic of Children Giftedness

It is not possible to circumscribe the activities of the department of special education of the university of Zurich (headed by professor Ursula Hoyningen) in a representative manner. Of course, its focus reaches far beyond Talenta school Zurich and comprises the whole field of public and private education. But Talenta is an interesting and important piece of the puzzle. There have been several specific and helpful standard forms of contact between the department and the school, i.e. regular interviews with parents and children (through a “third party”), methodical discussions among Talenta staff and university specialists, and systematic testing and re-testing of Talenta pupils in order to know more about their potential and motivation. In some cases, it was especially helpful to approach problems and conflicts via the neutral position of the scientific evaluation team (and not only through the “biased” staff of the school).

The focus of the department of special education’s specialists lies in the field of special needs in provision, education and training of teachers for the gifted, possibly discerning relevant clusters of pedagogical needs for defined situations or personalities. Gifted children are by no means a homogeneous group. Therefore, the department of special education of the university of Zurich has engaged itself in a comprehensive, broad long term project of the Swiss National Science Foundation in November 2001. The initial question was: What are the differences between gifted children in regular classes and gifted children that are taught in special programmes and classes with a focus on special education? Three hypotheses may serve as guidelines: 1. In many cases, the problems of gifted children at school are not primarily caused by their giftedness, but are a consequence of features of their personality and/or features of their environment. 2. These factors (in their personality and/or environment) that may cause an unfavourable development, can be identified or detected in a relatively early state. 3. Special measures in favour of gifted children should rather focus on elements of education and behaviour (“Erziehung”) than on intellectual and primarily schoolish measures (“Bildung”).

The project investigates the characteristics, features and conditions of three types of groups: a) one group that consists of 110 gifted children in regular classes (as a result of a screening of 2’118 children, b) a second group of 63 gifted children that are taught in special programmes (Talenta school Zurich, pull out programmes), and c) a third group of 130 children that represent an average group in the public Swiss setting of regular classes. These 303 children are interviewed regarding a variety of aspects of their personality (e.g. extroversion, motivation, neuroticism, attribution of success/failure, self concept, social competences). Their teachers and parents will be included into the investigation. Currently, there are first trends as to the meaning of specific aspects of the personality and the resulting needs in various school settings. But the study is conceived as a longitudinal project. Therefore, it would be premature to stick already to what might reveal as an accidental or temporary finding.

The Swiss project seems to be able to make a valuable contribution to the – so far - very few comparative studies in the field of giftedness. Five years of experience at Talenta suggest that the provision of gifted children needs to be differentiated according to the specific needs of the children. A more accurate approach to their provision might finally end the useless discussion about the outdated dichotomy “separation versus integration”.

Cooperation and Dividing Lines between Teaching Staff and Parents

Parents first. The sometimes turbulent start of Talenta did not seem to overstress the children, but their parents. It was not yet sufficiently clear who was in charge of the school and who had the (final) say. What was intended to be an open, constructive, selfcritical and synergetic communication turned out to be an undefined mix of competences in the eyes of some parents. As a consequence of this view, these parents worked out huge lists of demands in the field of subjects, timetable, growth, infrastructure, group mix, supervision, reporting, teacher profiles etc. If the association Talenta and its staff would have accepted the excessive demands at that time, there would be neither pioneer development nor financial survival.

Therefore, the association Talenta made a clear cut, and established rather sharp dividing lines between parents and teachers: The overall concept of Talenta lies merely within the responsibility of the school-side. You can take it or leave it. On the other hand, there are many forms of information, communication and cooperation (far more than in regular classes) that make sure that good ideas and necessary criticism are noticed and well received. Such forms are

- defined weekly consulting hours of the director at the school
- a counselling service over the phone that is used daily for at least one to two hours
- a reunion teaching staff and parents’ council every four to six weeks open days for parents and specialists
- direct contact between teacher and parents if it seems to be needed or helpful
- an individual booklet with every pupil that serves for written communications between teachers and parents
- short weekly information for the parents on the performance and behaviour of the child
- twice a year regular discussions of the performance and the overall development of the child

This very intensive contact between teaching staff (on various levels) and parents represents – in the eyes of the founders of Talenta – not only an absolutely essential key criterion for its success, but simply indispensable. At the same time, the established dividing lines, i.e. the unmistakable attribution of responsibilities and competences, form the second part of its success. Why is this so? Unfortunately, we do not know much about the interactions between gifted children and their parents during the first years of childhood. But it seems possible, taking into account some patterns of child-parent relations that have been frequent at Talenta, that there are distinct psychological developments that can lead to an over-concerned and overloading attitude towards the child and its context. It is not our job to judge or classify the reasons and results of such developments. But it seems to even lighten the load of these parents, if they are overtly confronted with the fact, that it is not their task to “rebuild Talenta school”.

Characteristics of the Talenta Teaching Team

There was no specific teaching training available in Switzerland, when Talenta was founded. Positive effect: Because Talenta had to undertake its start without well prepared and specialized teachers, and worked exclusively with very committed and involved regular teachers, we know by now, that this way is possible and can work well. Of course, it would be too simple, to underestimate the daily challenges, demanding a devoted and daring commitment, steady effort, energy and verve. But it underlines the old truth, that it is finally the basic pedagogical attitude, the full dedication to the well-being of the entrusted children, that makes it possible to bridge any kind of problem. Given the throughout positive feedbacks of

the children, they acknowledged and appreciated this steady, common search for more appropriate solutions.

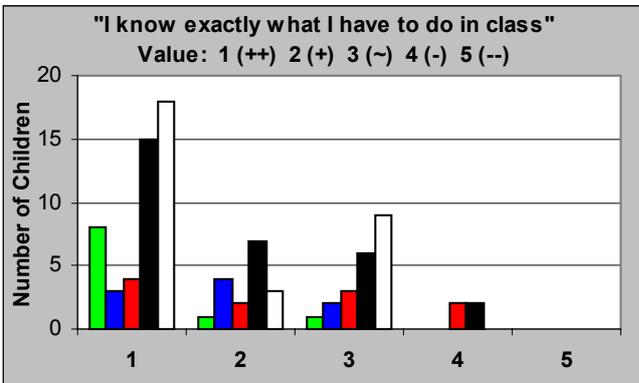
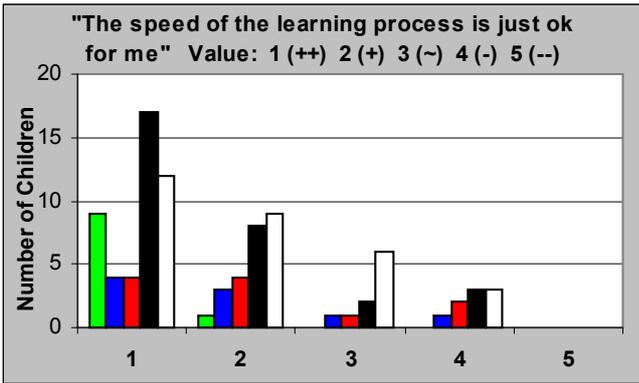
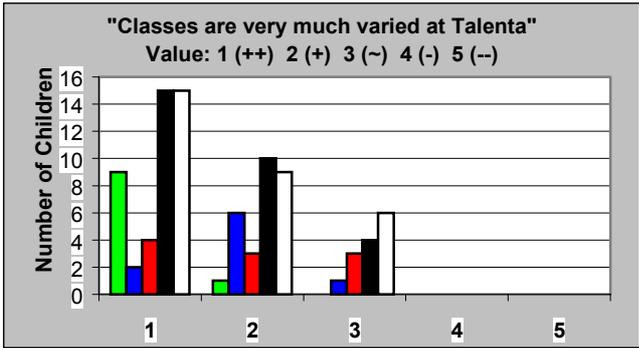
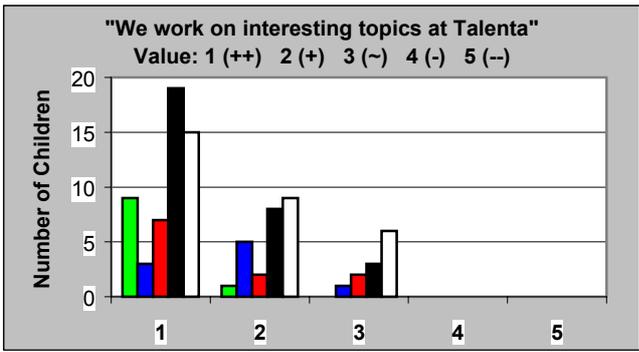
Nevertheless, it seems possible to make some remarks regarding teacher profiles after five years work with a team of five teachers (and a rather low fluctuation). The highest priority belongs to ...the team. What is true for all forms and settings of schools, is indispensable for a (pedagogically) heterogeneous group of more than two dozens of gifted children. Their proverbially comprehensive and strict perception of justice would smash to pieces any team of teachers who cooperate on a purely organizational level, and who see themselves as a "holding of mutually independent entrepreneurs", or who prefer "single combat" strategies rather than team synergy and team effort.

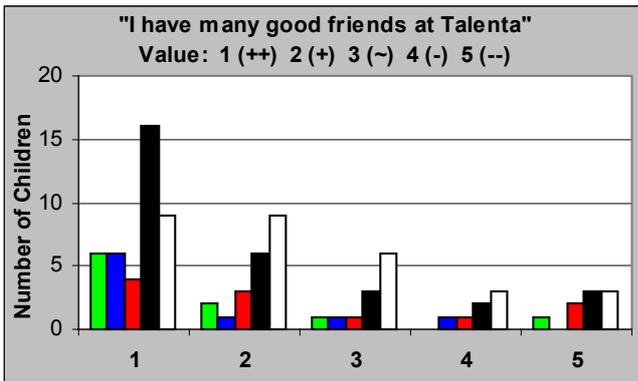
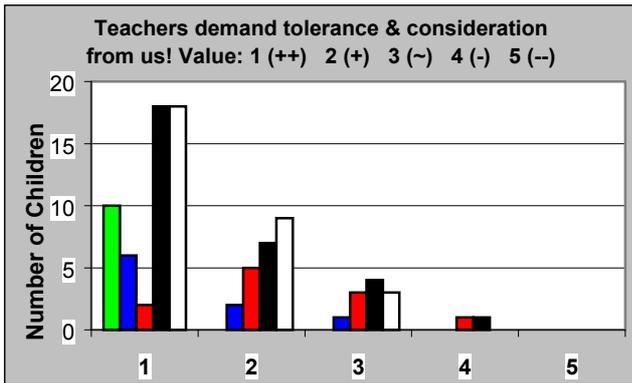
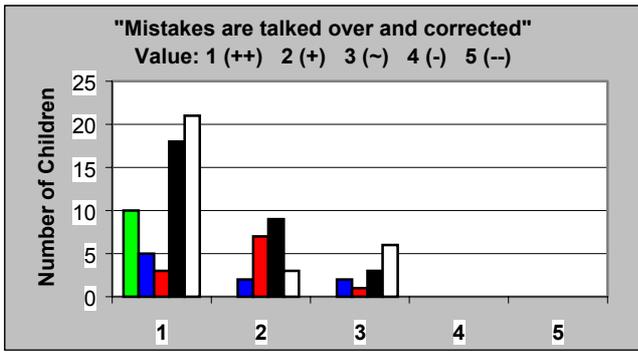
A second remark addresses to the well balanced combination of outstanding leadership skills and the mental openness towards the basically experimental character of Talenta's development. Conflicts among peers frequently escalate in a speed unknown in regular classes. Any teaching person, therefore, has to be capable to realize upcoming conflicts at an early stage, and to be willing to intervene without hesitation in an adequate and firm manner. The same high demand and priority applies to the daily, trustful cooperation among the teaching team.

Thirdly, a school for the gifted will be measured, besides its methodological and pedagogical performance, in relation to its ability to give valid answers to children who want to go forward with higher speed, more sophisticated ways and covering unexpected subjects. For the founders of Talenta, too, it was an important landmark to guarantee every single pupil that there would be no barrier of any kind to learning at Talenta. All teachers, of course, must have an acknowledged teaching diploma, but furthermore, it is preferable to be able to take hold of higher academic know-how in many fields of intellectual interest. Therefore, Talenta always disposes of at least two teachers who have successfully passed a higher grade at university in order to cover the specific needs of some of the children, and to support their colleagues.

The Quality of Talenta through the Eyes of the 30 Pupils

In May 2003, Talenta elaborated an internal questionnaire with 48 items covering the overall quality of Talenta. All 30 Talenta pupils, organized in three levels or groups (green: the younger ones, blue: the middle aged, red: the older ones) had to assess anonymously the presented statements, rating them from 1 (very high) down to 5 (very low) referring a) to the time before Talenta, and b) uttering their personal view about the *actual performance of Talenta school*. The diagrams in the following two sections are all conceived in the same manner: They show the aggregate for Talenta as a whole in black, a correspondent "female index" in white (girls aggregate multiplied with three) and the result of each of the three groups separately in green, blue and red. The reader will be able to take the necessary conclusions without any help. Generally speaking, the school setting "before Talenta" has been perceived by most children as little challenging, isolating, unspecific ...even boring. Although teachers at Talenta experience a great variety and diversity among the 30 pupils, the latter suggest through their ratings that Talenta shows typical features common to good schools. These criteria do not basically differ from regular classes, but they have to be met on the demanding level of Talenta pupils. In some instances, you will note a somewhat higher degree of adaptation with the girls, and a generally less enthusiastic rating by the red (the older) group. Of course, these pupils stood right ahead of their entrance exams at the gymnasium. Life was getting more demanding...



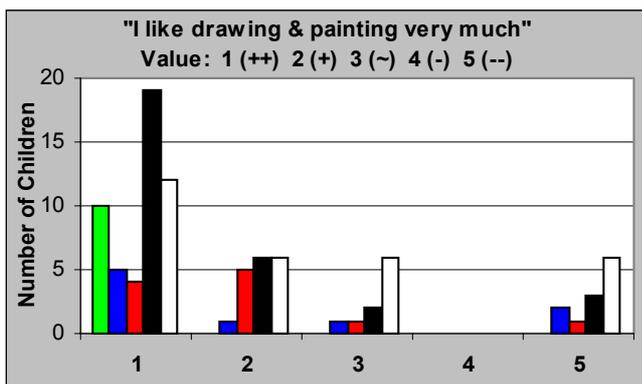
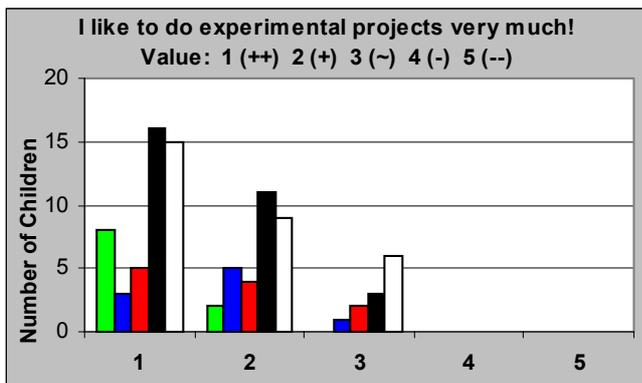
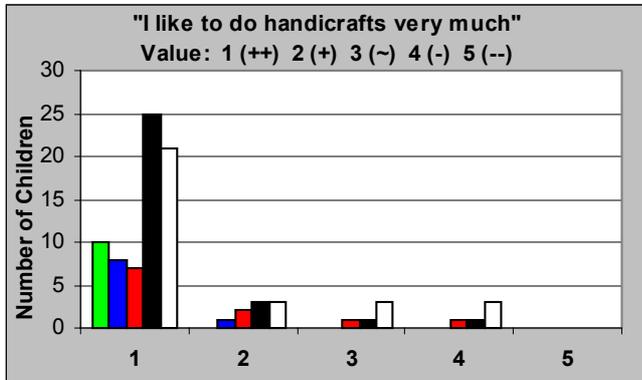


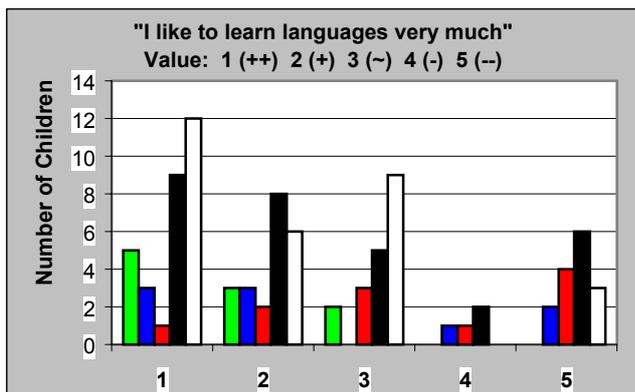
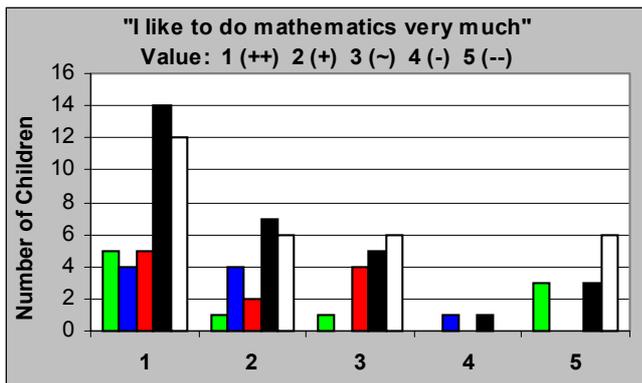
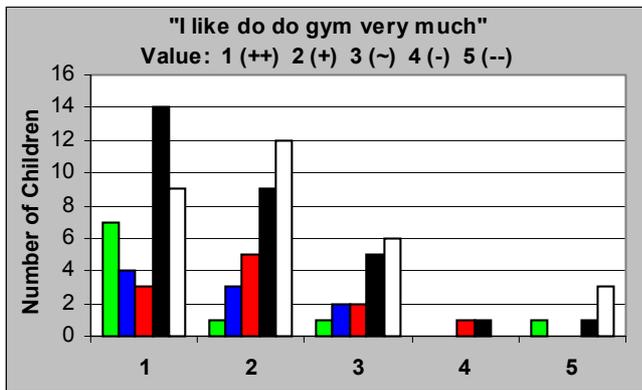
Of course, the interpretation of the diagrams is not always as obvious as above: The information about the optimal size of the learning groups is rather ambivalent: Most Talenta pupils like to work either on their own or in their classes of 10 children. The very useful form of small, autonomous groups consisting of two to four children is less popular. Because it is more demanding regarding social competences? The above findings, however, are speaking for themselves and show, that Talenta is “en route” in a good sense. Nobody is perfect...

Blockbusting Prejudices: the “Chart” of Favourite Subjects

Among other purposes, the questionnaire should try to establish a “chart of favourite subjects”. Certainly, there are many restrictions and doubts regarding this ranking: Preferences may change quickly according to age, teacher and interests. Nevertheless, it was worth while: One of the widest spread prejudice about gifted children is definitely smashed: They are not merely focussed on theoretical, purely abstract, rational and logic contents. There is much evidence, that gifted children prefer a comprehensive pedagogical approach, and that they learn in fact through “Kopf, Herz und Hand” as stated above. This result is astonishing in its clarity. As every teacher at Talenta covers several subjects (even crosswise in the three groups), it is unlikely that the shown preferences only reflect the outstanding abilities of one or

another teacher in a defined subject. But there are differences, too: Though the demanding intellectual strongholds of the Talenta concept – languages and mathematics – are appreciated as well, there is a small “opposition” among the Talenta kids. These are divergent inclinations, too. Sometimes (languages), there are even opposite results from group to group. By the way: Music (singing) is not among the favourites of the Talenta pupils. The reasons for the mediocre reception of this subject will be investigated as a consequence of the questionnaire.





PR for the Needs of the Gifted: Partial Success

The pioneer phase of Talenta is over, though its development goes on. The association Talenta mentions two distinctive goals in its minutes: create a school for gifted children and make the public sensitive to the needs of gifted children. All the way long, Swiss media accompanied and fostered the foundation and the first years of Talenta school Zurich. During the last two years, there was less publicity around Talenta: Good news is no news. Many local authorities subsidize the parents of Talenta pupils, because they have gained a positive impression about its daily work, though there still exists no indisputable legal obligation to offer an adequate provision to all (!) children in Switzerland.

The past ten years have brought forward a broad acceptance and consensus that children above average should be taken care of in a more professional way than before. The underlying prejudice that public schools were only responsible for “average middle class goals”, and that the promotion of the gifted was merely the private concern of ambitious parents, has weakened a lot. The many published case studies of (suffering) gifted children have also helped to spread the fact, that a brilliant intelligence does not

necessarily mean that children can make their way without any support.

So the situation and the mood with respect to giftedness has ameliorated. Most Swiss cantons plan or realize programmes on an integrative basis in order to enrich and accelerate the career of gifted children in regular classes. On the other hand, education authorities still adhere very much to the dogma that pull out programmes or schools for the gifted were “undemocratic”. Sometimes, it is - ironically - just the success and the familiarity with Talenta which serves as an excuse: This problem - authorities and teachers argue - has been solved by Talenta. Has it really?