WORKSHOPS: POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING THE TALENTED YOUTH IN TECHNICAL FIELD

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ABSTRACT. Supporting talented youth is an important condition for both the professional development of this special population and the economic development of the host country. This paper aims to explore the scholars' and students' opinions on the involvement of various institutions in supporting talented youth in technical by implementing different educational policies and strategies. On this purpose we organized two workshops involving professors and PhD Students from the Technical University of Iaşi, Romania. The collected data were processed according the requirements of the qualitative analyzes. The results show a general distrust of the participants in state institutions or non-governmental organizations, while the university is to be seen as the one supporting the youth showing a talent in the technical.

Key words: giftedness, talent, technical talent, workshop

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Die Nachwuchsförderung ist eine wichtige Voraussetzung für die berufliche Entwicklung dieses speziellen Bevölkerung einerseits, und für den wirtschaftliche Fortschritt des Gastlandes, andererseits. Dieses Papier zielt darauf ab, die Ansichten der Lehrkraft und der Studierende zu erkunden, über die Beteiligung der verschiedenen Institutionen in der Unterstützung der talentierten Jugendliche in technischen Bereiche, mithilfe verschiedener Bildungspolitik und Strategien. Zu diesem Zweck organisierten wir zwei Workshops, an derer die Lehrkräfte und die DoktorandInnen der Technischen Universität in Iaşi teilgenommen haben. Die erhaltene Daten waren gemäß den Anforderungen der qualitative Analysen bearbeitet. Die Ergebnisse drehen sich um das generelle Misstrauen der Teilnehmer in die staatlichen Institutionen und NROs. Die Universität ist als die Institution gesehen, die die Nachwuchsförderung im technischen Bereich hilft.

Schlüsselwörter: Hochbegabung, Talent, technische Begabung, Werkstatt

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I. Educational policies as public policies

Defining public policies, J. Anderson argues that it presents "a relatively stable and intended course of action, followed by an actor or set of actors, in order to solve a problem of concern" (Anderson, J., 1997, p.9, quote Stoica, V., 2000, p.17). We deal with a generic definition, but due Anderson's understanding of public policy only as one is being produced by a governmental institution, many authors keep the root concept by extending the list of "policy makers" beyond the governmental decision makers.

The concept of "policy" is frequently joined in the literature to the one of "strategy", regardless of the sector it appears: economic development and finance, social development, education, etc. But the relation between the concepts "policies" and "strategies" sometimes concerns mutual coordination or subordination, and sometimes are semantic overlapped. Both policies and strategies require a decision act with a higher or lower character of generality and therefore there are often used as synonymous. When public policies are expression of a general purpose or a national/global desirable status, then on may speak on strategies, e.g. Sustainable Development Strategy of Romania, European Commission Strategy for the Development of Higher education, etc. In this context, some authors use the concepts of policies and strategies as synonyms (Dascălu, N., 2011) during others distinguish between the two, by considering policies as subordinated to strategies (Macmillan, H., 2000, Căprioară, 2007).

Education is one of the fundamental areas of public policies at the same time determined and determinant for the specificity of the society to which it relates. According to C. Crețu, the subject of educational policy situates "at the intersection between the reactivity and proactivity valences of the educational action: the education policy studies both the purposes, methods and consequences of different adaptation strategies of the education to social realities and of those strategies determining social realities through education" (C., Crețu, 2004, p.73)

The educational policies as sector of public policies will be understood in the present paper as political decisions on establishing priorities, aims, resource allocation, formulation of criteria for measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the process, - all these in relation to public or specific educational issues of general interest. Educational strategies will be also considered as decision documents, related to educational policies in what concerns the choice of necessary objectives, contents, methods, means and resources in solving an educational problem of public interest.

Being preoccupied about the issues of the supporting and promoting of the talented youth in technical field, we have investigated the intervention and

participation of the technical universities in Romania in this sector of education policy. Some results have already been published in 2013 (Anghel, 2013, b.). On that occasion we could show that technical universities in Romania possess in varying degrees also directions of institutional policy to support the students' academic performance, but they have no explicit policy in this sense. However universities, among other institutions are involved in supporting young people with technical talent in various proportions.

II. Methodology

The aim of the present study is to collect empirical data regarding the support of youth with technical talent through educational policies and strategies by exploring the opinions of some students and academics. On this purpose we have organized and conducted two exploratory workshop activities.

All students of the 2nd Module of psycho-pedagogical formation, organized by the Didactic Personal Training Department at "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iaşi, at the same time and academics or PhD Students at different faculties of the University (23 individuals) were invited at the workshop "Supporting youth with technical talent through targeted strategies on professional aspirations". A number of 13 persons have accepted our invitation. We have organized two different events, in order to get information from two homogeneous groups of subjects: academics (a group of 6 persons) and PhD students (7 persons). The participants were asked to undersign an agreement for participation and dissemination of workshop produced data.

The two workshops (with academics and doctoral students as participants) were designed and developed after focus-group scenarios (Krueger, R., Casey, M.-A., 2005, Agrabian, M., 2004; Bulai, A., 2000; Chelcea, S., 2004; Iluţ., P., 1997; Morgan, D., L., 1998; Vaughn, S., Shay Schumm, J., Sinagub, J., 1996). Before starting the debate, the participants have been given theoretical information concerning the concept of "technical talent" - as "superior endowment in different areas of the technical, expressed as proven excellence by outstanding performance in this field, or as proven potential for excellence by results of various forms of assessment" (Anghel., O., 2013, 84) - and concerning the concept of " educational policies and strategies".

III. Data processing

Data recorded at the two workshops were transcribed and then processed through the technique of thematic cuts (Bulai, A., 2000, Krueger, R., Casey, M.-A., 2005). The following themes and sub-themes have been outlined by us following discussions with the two groups of subjects.

III. 1. PhD Students Workshop

a) Identification of students with technical talent is priority to their supporting and promoting:
- Absence of the concern how to identify students with hidden talent;
- Responsibility of identification lies with the university through its academics;
- Special training staff to deal with the identification;
- Establishment of a center/department to support the interests of those talented.

b) Support and promotion of the students with technical talent:
- Support is mainly through scholarships and it is desirable to exist also a moral support;
- University is the responsible main institution in supporting and promoting talented students;
- Nongovernmental organizations are involving far too less in this process, eventually only in supporting its own members;
- Students shall involve in promoting themselves;
- In lack of support, the talented either migrate to occupations below their level or migrate to other countries. This leads on the one hand to the loss of talent and on the other hand to country's economic decline.

III. 2. Academics Workshop

a) Supporting and promoting students with technical talent:
- Professors' support offer is bigger than students' ability to capitalize on it;
- Professors believe they offer support to talented, admitting that they do so especially to those affirmation-willing, these being very few;
- In order to be supported and promoted, the student shall be not only talented in the technical, but to prove the so called "soft skills", as in the Anglo-Saxon literature;
- It is raised the question if there is the need of finding a formal way to identify and promote students talented in the technical (head hunter, counseling center);
- The main consequences of deprivation young talented from support and promotion is that they are not hired in a job matching their talents or that they migrate to another country in searching a job. Both situations lead to a serious problem for the country, i.e. economic decline;
- The academics have difficulties in identifying talented students among their peers without talent.

b) Proposed programs and charged institutions:
- Types of support: programs of collaboration with the economic environment (offered by the example in which faculties facilitate the recruitment of talented by a company, in the Netherlands), scientific circles;
- Other institutions which should be involved in supporting young technical talent: companies/corporations having branches in university towns; Ministry of Education, even if its present involvement is more detrimental to everything that happens in academia; Local administration, through scholarships and facilitating the presence of corporations in the near; NGOs, even if their work is perceived as questionable.

IV. Interpretation of data

Supporting and promoting youth talented in the technical, as a general discussion, *is perceived by participants as existing in institutional practice.* Their involvement is different, from both the perspective of the proven facts and that of desirability for future interventions. The university is regarded as the one who should and do offer the most support to the talented, as being closest to them through their professors. Along with this, the involvement of different companies - even if opportunistic – is to be appreciated: the companies organize activities of supporting and promoting young students, primarily in order to have opportunities in identifying future employees. State institutions, through the ministries of education and of labor, are perceived as minimal involved and negative experiences caused by them on several occasions raise mistrust in possible future interventions. NGOs activities are less visible to the public, so that their action in supporting young people with technical talent is seen as too small. In this case, unlike governmental institutions, their work is required and considered as extremely important especially in moderating the relationship between students on the one hand, and university - economic environment, on the other.

Interpreting the data in depth, we identify some *particularities in the perceptions of the two groups of participants.* A first important aspect is that besides the themes proposed in workshops (supporting and promoting talented students in the technical and supporting strategies, oriented on professional expectations) the PhD students bring out a new theme: that of identifying students with technical talent. They believe that this is an issue prior of supporting and promoting, because talented students are not always identified and therefore, on may not even talk about supporting and promoting.

During the workshop, the PhD students counted a number of causes hindering the process of identifying, some due to students – who either have a

talent which even they are not aware, or they do not know how to make themselves visible to the professors - other due to professors - either they do not have time for this issue, due the large number of students allocated to them, or they are not prepared (in terms of theoretical issues) in identifying gifted people, others of those knowing how to make themselves visible. They have suggested several ways in which the identification process would be easier: organizing training programs in psycho-pedagogy of gifted and talented persons, addressed to academics and/or the establishment of a body - within the university - specialized in this issue. During the academics workshop, one of the participants invoked the usefulness of such a body, as having at least one representative from each faculty, whom he called "head-hunter" and whose role would be to identify talented people and direct them to different programs to be suitable for everyone.

Once clarified the issue of identification, we could appreciate the PhD students' point of view on supporting talented youth. The data shows that they perceive especially the support of university/faculty, objectified in various forms of scholarship. This form of support is laudable, but the financial support - which does not necessarily encounter those talented – should be doubled of emotional support. Talented students especially need guidance and moral support than material, as the PhD Students in our workshop assert.

If students believe that sometimes the talented are not identified, professors believe that the training level of their students is so low, that they rarely meet talented and often they treat them in the same way as the mass of students.

Only those that require help and those expressing their wish of being visible during courses and applications – which represent a small number of students - receive a differential treatment. The difference between the support offered and support demanded is proven to be big. It is true that many faculties organize extracurricular programs – the participants cited the case of weekend clubs or thematic circles initiated in partnership with a Dutch company - but these are addressed to all students, regardless of their talent. Students with technical talent may affirm among others only in situations of competition and the only activities where they cooperate are those where they are members of the same team in a competition.

There are also *points of convergence in the opinions of the two categories of participants*. The fact that all believe that talented students shall involve in their own promotion may be associated (and solved) with another matter to which all participants agree: there are invoked both the need to develop the technical skills (also known as "hard skills") and those in the category of "soft skills". In this way it is recognized the radical role of this category of skills in the

career success of the talented in technical, both on short term (partaking in contests and being team members) and on long term (acquiring the best job, effective working with colleagues, function advancing). Organization of "soft skills" training courses, regardless of whom might be the bidder - university, an NGO, firm/company - would be a benefit for those talented, so that they would have the opportunity to be together in other contexts than of specialists, moreover it would bring together valuable persons with different specialties.

V. Conclusions

Our objective was to explore the opinion of PhD students and professors of "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași, participants to our workshops, regarding the involvement of various institutions in supporting and promoting students with technical talent from the Romanian technical universities.

The empirical data have revealed us the general distrust of the participants in state institutions, concretely, concerning the work of the Ministry of Education, seen as unable to develop any strategies to support young people with technical talent. Furthermore, it is considered that the safest support the Ministry can offer might be its complete absence from this environment. Its involvement would rather break any initiatives of the universities or economic institutions interested to engage themselves in supporting the young people's performance in the technical. On the other side, the university has, through its teachers, the highest level of confidence in the potential of supporting and promoting talented students, even if the PhD students believe that this involvement is achieved mainly through the financial aid given to the best with a minimum moral support. Not too many academics are willing to devote a part of their time to activities for the talented, because the university does not motivate them in any way for such achievements, which remain a matter of personal choice. The economic institutions are also invested with high, especially the large, transnational companies, having local offices in the university centers. Having their own interest in highly qualified human resources and especially in performance, these carry increasingly more frequent activities dedicated to the talented - competitions, workshops, company presentations, etc., but also scholarships and practice offers - most of them developed in partnership with the university. Sometimes NGOs are members in these partnerships, but their work is perceived as minimal.

Information collected from PhD students (technically talented proved by their research work) and professors who meet daily talented students, can suggest various starting point in establishing authentic policies and strategies to support young talented by various institutions responsible.

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