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Teacher as the Creator of Educational Space of Support and Development of Students' Abilities and Talents

Nauczyciel jako twórca edukacyjnej przestrzeni wspierającej rozwój zdolności i uzdolnień uczniów

Abstract: The article considers categories of abilities and giftedness. The characteristic of gifted students is presented. The question of creating conditions for the development of abilities and talents is revealed, and the role of the teacher as the creator of the space of support and development of students' abilities and talents is pointed out. The basic elements of didactic system are described, i.e. goals and tasks of education, content, methods, means, organizational forms of educational space training, which promotes the development of abilities and talents. Moreover, the role of a teacher and a student in the process of teaching and learning is depicted.

Keywords: abilities; giftedness; gifted student; support of student's development; education; teacher; student

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Abstrakt: W artykule podjęto namysł nad kategorią zdolności i uzdolnień, przedstawiono charakterystykę ucznia zdolnego oraz przybliżono zagadnienie uwarunkowań rozwoju zdolności i uzdolnień, wskazując na rolę nauczyciela jako twórcy przestrzeni wspierającej rozwój zdolności i uzdolnień uczniów. Ponadto scharakteryzowano istotne elementy systemu dydaktycznego, tj. cele i zadania nauczania, treści, metody, środki i formy organizacyjne kształcenia jako edukacyjną przestrzeń wspierania rozwoju zdolności i uzdolnień wraz z opisem oczekiwanych w procesie nauczania-uczenia się ról nauczyciela i ucznia.

Słowa kluczowe: zdolności; uzdolnienia; uczeń zdolny; wspieranie rozwoju ucznia; kształcenie; nauczyciel; uczeń

INTRODUCTION

Teaching gifted students has become a challenge for teachers in the 21st century. The dynamics of developing new technologies, threats to the environment, searching for new sources of energy, fighting poverty and hunger are issues for creative and talented professionals who possess broad and deep knowledge. Almost all countries constantly face complex problems that require urgent comprehensive solutions that would accelerate the development of new technologies to a level comparable to that of leading countries. The organization and effectiveness of teaching gifted students in schools reflect the peculiarities of society, its values, interests, attitude towards gifted students, and the role of gifted people in society. On the one hand, special education laws are necessary for teaching gifted students, which would allow for the creation of appropriate institutions, including specialized schools, programs that provide opportunities for individual learning of gifted children, and on the other hand, well-educated teachers who possess deep knowledge are also needed. It is the personality of the teacher that is one of the most important factors that influences the development of students' talents, and very high demands are placed on him. As Cieślikowska (2005) rightly points out, the importance of teachers is noted both in educational practice (educational biographies of gifted people) and in theoretical concepts. Teachers are expected to possess certain personal character traits and high levels of intelligence, professional competencies: subject competencies related to deep knowledge of the subject being taught, didactic competencies that determine teaching skills, as well as social, communicative, creative, research, and developing competencies that will lead to success in working with gifted students. The successes of students in international Olympiads testify to the pedagogical mastery of teachers. However, very often teacher's actions are based only on his/her intuition. Teachers obtain knowledge about giftedness mainly through self-education and independently develop effective working methods.

Most studies suggest that teachers have a positive attitude towards gifted students (Beacham, Rouse, 2012; Goddard, Evans, 2018). Others show that teachers have a negative relationship (Collins et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2004; Giza, 2023) or ambivalent and stereotypical views of them. Negative attitudes of teachers may be

associated with inadequate educational resources and accelerated cognitive development in children (Laine et al., 2019) that they cannot satisfy. Teachers also often point out the social-emotional development of gifted students, which they cannot always control (Gallagher et al., 2011). As mentioned above, teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards gifted students are usually shaped by experience or the lack of it. Beliefs and attitudes may be related to initial professional training, further education (Bangel et al., 2010). Neumeister et al. (2007) have shown that teachers usually have their own concepts of giftedness, which can differ (Kaya, 2015). Each teacher emphasizes some aspect, e.g. innate abilities, motivation, exceptional productivity (Lee, 1999).

According to the "Theory of Planned Behaviour" by Ajzen (2012), in the absence of any unforeseen circumstances, people will behave according to their formulated intentions. Griffiths (2007) believes that teachers' attitudes and beliefs are directly related to their practical activity in the classroom. For example, teachers will not use teaching methods they do not understand or do not consider effective. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to teachers' perceptions of giftedness, and how they work with gifted students, what methods, and forms are used.

WORKING WITH GIFTED STUDENTS IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY

For many years, gifted students were not included in the interests of researchers. The situation began to change when the main questions related to the education of gifted students were regulated by the Law of September 7, 1991 on the system of education and other regulatory acts. These documents provided assistance to gifted students, primarily in the form of providing individual learning plans or a shortened period of study in each type of school.

As part of the preparation for the education system reform, which was carried out in the 1999/2000 academic year, tasks related to the education of gifted students and the development of student abilities in school were included (MEN, 1999, p. 3). The activation of activities for gifted students in Poland occurred with the launch of the European Social Fund (ESF), the funds of which were allocated for this purpose for the years 2007–2013, as well as under the influence of educational policies implemented in other EU countries. Supporting talents was one of the recommendations for the education systems of EU countries, formulated in the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 and Recommendation No. 1248 Education for gifted students, developed by the EU Committee on Culture and Education in 1994 (Limont, 2010, pp. 35–36). The 2010/2011 academic year was the Year of Talent Discovery in Poland. At the same time, the Ministry of National Education launched a three-year project "De-

velopment and Implementation of a Comprehensive System for Working with Gifted Students", which is co-financed by the European Social Fund.

A new directive from the Minister of National Education of November 17, 2010 on the principles of providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in state kindergartens, schools, and institutions, imposes on all teachers the duty to recognize and meet the individual developmental and educational needs of the student, as well as to recognize their individual psycho-physical abilities. Recommended forms of psychological and pedagogical support included activities to develop giftedness, which are organized "for especially gifted students and conducted using active teaching methods; the number of participants is no more than 8 people" (Dz.U. 2010, Nr 228, poz. 1487).

Thanks to this regulation and five other normative acts signed by the Minister of Education in 2010, the legislative basis for working with gifted students in schools has significantly improved. At the same time, attention was paid to the preparation of future teachers and educators to work with students with special educational needs. The Minister of Science and Higher Education directive of January 17, 2012 on pedagogical education standards (Dz.U. 2012, poz. 131) provides that every university graduate should have at least basic pedagogical and psychological knowledge necessary for working with students with special educational needs.

TERMINOLOGY: ABILITIES, GIFTEDNESS, GIFTED STUDENT

For over a century, researchers have been trying to better understand and explain giftedness. Numerous studies have been conducted and a range of theoretical approaches and models have been developed, proposing different conceptualizations and definitions of giftedness. Due to the multitude of existing theoretical models for defining giftedness, it is a difficult task and a true challenge. There is still a lack of clarity on how to conceptualize or identify giftedness. In the literature of psychology and pedagogy, it is given different meanings. Limont (2010, p. 17) notes that the multiplicity of terms is due to historical, cultural, and social contexts. The most commonly used words are "innate abilities", "specific abilities", "creative abilities", "giftedness", "talent", or "genius". In an attempt to analyze and classify the definitions of abilities in psychological literature, Ledzińska (2010, p. 68) identified four approaches. Firstly, abilities are understood as mastery or skill in action. Secondly – as actual or potential ability to perform something, achieving the highest level of attainment. Thirdly – as relatively stable characteristics of cognitive processes that determine an individual's high level of productivity. Finally – as individual characteristics of personality that allow habits, skills, and abilities to be formed.

Psychologists tend to associate abilities with high intelligence, while educators link them with high achievements, which is why two diagnostic criteria are often used in educational practice: psychological, which refers to the results of intelligence and special ability tests, and pedagogical, which takes into account the academic and extracurricular achievements of students (Stańczak, 2018, p. 16). In characterizing abilities, Okoń (2007) considers general abilities (such as intelligence, perceptiveness, imagination, memory, attention, and motor skills) as necessary for achieving expected results in performing various types of activities, and special abilities (talents, innate abilities) as those that enable one to achieve above-average results in certain areas (such as musical, artistic, linguistic, and mathematical abilities). Similar distinctions between abilities and giftedness can be found in the works of other authors (Limont, 2010; Popek, 2001; Lewowicki, 1980; Dykcik, 1997; Giza, 2006, 2020; Boczarowa, 2013).

It is worth mentioning the model of interaction of abilities and talents by Popek (2001), which is based on the triad of intellectual abilities, special abilities, and creative abilities. As the author emphasizes, all components interact with each other with varying intensity, and the qualitatively differentiated level of each is developmentally stimulated by the environment (family, school, peer groups, ecological environment). Under favorable conditions, an individual's abilities are realized through the motivational and emotional sphere of the personality (Popek, 2016, p. 16). Thus, it can be said that abilities develop depending on the subject's previous experience (cognitive, social, practical) and the current social context in which he or she operates. Another concept that interests us and is defined differently in the literature is "gifted student". A gifted student is someone who has great potential, resources, and opportunities and based on them can develop and function in various areas, under favorable conditions. According to Lewowicki, gifted students are characterized by at least one of the following properties: 1) they achieve high results in tests of general intelligence, 2) they achieve a high level of specifically directed abilities (special abilities, talents), 3) they achieve high results in education or activities related to participation in educational events, 4) they exhibit specific talents of a creative nature (Lewowicki, 1980). Babenko (2010) states in her work titled "The Models of Giftedness in the American and Domestic Scientists' Researches", that giftedness as a system consists of several factors, among which motivation is the most significant, as it involves cognitive needs that form the basis of cognitive motivation, which, in turn, dominates in a gifted child.

Presenting the profile of a gifted student, Limont (2010), referring to the studies of many authors, points out a number of characteristics that distinguish them from an early age. "Gifted children (...) are characterized by good health, start walking and talking earlier, most of them can already read before school, they have high

curiosity, fast thinking, great knowledge, good memory, rich vocabulary, and an interest in numbers" (Limont, 2010, p. 90). Gifted students have a well-developed, rich imagination, high intuition, they are sharp observers of reality, are interested in everything, curious, open to what is happening around them, see problems where others do not, and they are characterized by abstract, analytical, and logical thinking. In an unfamiliar situation, they use their existing knowledge, think creatively, adapt better to new conditions, persistently pursue the set goal, focus on the task at hand, often exercise self-control and self-assessment (although not always adequately), and take responsibility for their actions. Adequate motivation (autonomous cognitive motivation, internal motivation, instrumental motivation) allows them to act and work persistently for a long time (Limont, 2010). According to Babenko (2010), skills and abilities of any gifted child begin to develop in the definite social medium. It is crucial to establish a gifted identification process to ensure that no child is overlooked, as the progression of a child's skills is closely linked to whether they have been recognized as gifted. Gifted students often receive recognition from their peers and hold a high status in the school class. They become leaders, are valued and realize their potential in various situations. However, this is not always the case, as sometimes originality of thought, a sense of uniqueness, a desire to stand out among peers, constant striving for success or the struggle with their own hyper-sensitivity or hyper-activity lead to conflicts with their surroundings. Such students do not identify themselves with the group, over-exert themselves, become isolated, distanced or excluded. Piotrowski (2005, p. 280) notes that "it happens that they are not accepted or they feel alienated, especially in those groups where knowledge or other competencies are not significant values".

Analyzing attempts to define the concepts of ability and giftedness, it is important to emphasize that gifted students differ from their peers. In addition to their intellectual abilities, which can be noticed quickly, they often possess a vivid imagination and potential for discovering new things. Some of them are also characterized by precision in a narrow field (special talents). Difficulties in the emotional and social sphere are also noted by Limont (2013, p. 127), who emphasizes that exceptionally gifted children are characterized by increased emotional sensitivity and a noticeable lack of emotional and social balance in their development. They tend to be withdrawn and inaccessible, distorted and overly critical of themselves and their own activities, and have difficulties in adapting to social demands.

Teaching gifted children, youth, and adults and supporting them in the development of their abilities and talents, is an important educational challenge. Schools should become a place where all students can develop their general and special abilities under appropriate conditions. An important task is the diagnosis of students with special abilities, the determination of their special educational needs, and the

implementation of measures aimed at satisfying these needs. "It is important to understand that talents that gifted, talented, or creative students possess do not guarantee success in and of themselves. Their motivation, understanding, and support in the areas where they need it are equally important" (Kosiak, 2021, p. 187).

DETERMINANTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTEDNESS AND TALENT

Although much depends on the individual, their resources, and constraints, the educational space in which they operate is difficult to overestimate. In this space, there may be factors that hinder (block, slow down) the development of abilities and talents, so-called inhibitors, as well as factors that support their development (stimulators). Factors in the school environment, which can be both stimulators and inhibitors of abilities, are noted by many authors (Dyrda, 2012; Limont, 2010; Szmidt, 2007; Stańczak, 2018; Knopik, Oszwa, 2022). Researchers emphasize that much depends on the educational environment in which the gifted student operates, which can include both inhibiting and stimulating factors. Many authors have identified school climate (Karwowski, 2009; Popławska, 2003), student–peer relationships (Sękowski, 2001), student–teacher relationships (Cieślikowska, Limont, 2010; Bardzińska, 2013), and the organization and conduct of education (Popławska, 2007, 2013) as factors that can affect the functioning of gifted students.

According to Giza (2006), in order to talk about opportunities for developing students' abilities at school, it is necessary to conduct an assessment: of the stage of their identification and to determine the student as gifted; the situations in which students can have the opportunity to reveal their potential; and the learning strategies used in the school. It should be noted that only in a properly organized educational process do students have a chance to reveal their potential, develop their abilities and talents. The school environment, the system of support for gifted students, even if it is the most ideal, means little if it is not implemented properly. The development of abilities and talents depends, to a large extent, on how it is directed by the educator, mentor, teacher (Boczarowa, 2011).

EDUCATION THAT DEVELOPS STUDENTS' ABILITIES AND TALENTS

This section of the text presents a description of the relevant elements of the didactic system, including the goals and objectives of learning, content, methods, means, and organizational forms of education as a space for supporting the development of abilities and talents, as well as highlighting the role of the teacher and the student. The aim of teaching should be to create situations that encour-

age active involvement of students in the process of constructing knowledge. By relying on a child's natural curiosity, a teacher can awaken the student's internal motivation and encourage their personal participation in learning. As Robinson notes, "children are naturally curious. Stimulating learning means sustaining that curiosity. That's why practical and problem-based learning can lead to such great results" (Robinson, Aronica, 2015, p. 143). Orientation towards the interests and abilities of the student in the learning process can be achieved through pre-diagnosis. Accurate diagnosis of gifted students, although a challenging task, should be mandatory (Magda-Adamowicz, 2011).

A positive emotional climate in class, built on positive emotions that strengthen a student's belief in their own abilities and create the prospect of success, are additional determinants of student engagement in learning. The teacher's actions enable students to feel a sense of purposeful learning. Motivation fosters the desire to learn and to be active. Karwowski (2009) emphasizes that a synergy of internal (personal) and purposeful (external) motivation is necessary for maximum potential realization. In such an environment, the student sees opportunities for the development of abilities, interests, and needs, believes in their own abilities and the possibility of achieving success. Knowing what they want to achieve and what they aspire to, they can take responsibility for their own learning, consciously plan their activities, and ensure their realization. The development of talents and abilities is also facilitated by the proper choice of educational content. The content of education should relate to ideas, concepts, and problems of the modern world, be diverse in terms of themes, skills, and level of complexity. Therefore, in working with gifted students, it is worth expanding the content of education by including questions that interest the students; selecting questions that combine knowledge from many subjects, making it more interesting and comprehensive. Ausubel, defining the content of education as a non-random set of knowledge, indicates that in the process of learning, it takes the form of an individual and unique composition (according to Piotrowski, 2009).

It is known that teachers have the greatest real impact on the success of students and the development of their talents. Research has shown that there is a correlation between the type of support provided and the concepts of giftedness preferred by teachers (Knopik, Oszwa, 2022). A teacher who works with gifted students should allow them to jointly determine the content of their education, explore it in different ways, create situations that promote the discovery of knowledge and experience they already possess, and give them the opportunity to use different sources of information. The content of education should be enriched with tasks that require prediction, justification, experimentation, and the combination of knowledge from different disciplines. Under favorable conditions, the student can jointly determine the content of their education according to their interests,

abilities, and talents, discuss subjects and sources of information, become aware of what they already know, can do, and would like to learn. In this situation, there is a need to introduce additional content (a spectrum of knowledge and experience) into educational programs, which expands and makes educational standards more attractive. Individualization of teaching content involves not only expanding or narrowing the scope of material, but also special organization of the educational material (structural, functional, causal), offering optional subjects in addition to mandatory ones, and creating individual programs (Lewowicki, 1980; Muchacka et al., 2012). Real support for student development, as emphasized by Klus-Stańska (2009, p. 17), occurs when the following conditions are met: 1) condition of diversity: creating a wealth of diverse social situations in the classroom, which serve as a basis for students to gain varied experiences, 2) condition of relevance: compatibility of the information provided with reality outside of school, 3) condition of dialogue: openness of the school and teacher to students' extracurricular experiences and their stories about them.

To support the development of abilities and talents in school, it is worth using teaching methods that encourage independent thinking and actions by students. Among such methods are activating methods that promote learning through problem-solving, action, experience, and collaboration with others. By using activation methods, such as independent search methods (classical problem-based, case-based, situational, modeling, staging, brainstorming, didactic games) or discussions, dialogues, project-based methods, explanatory methods (impressionistic and expressive), practical methods (Okoń, 2003), the teacher creates situations that encourage independent problem-solving, divergent thinking, and creativity among students.

According to educators, problem-based methods are one of the most effective ways to work with students, as they develop their inventiveness and creativity (Puślecki, 1999). By introducing students to the world of contradictions and cognitive situations, the teacher allows them to ask questions, make mistakes, test various solutions in theory and practice. Multilevel education becomes very important, meaning the diversification of the complexity of tasks and adapting them to the potential and capabilities of students.

In an organized learning process like this, students are encouraged to search and research independently, and they demonstrate various activities, express their own thoughts and opinions, exchange experiences with others. They have the opportunity to solve theoretical and practical tasks, experiment and discover. Students learn in a multifaceted way, formulating and solving problems, analyzing, explaining, comparing, evaluating, and drawing conclusions. In addition, they give meaning to their own experiences, interact with the teacher and peers, negotiate, and self-evaluate.

Using a holistic approach, a teacher aims to provide students with not only intellectual but also emotional and social experiences. Students become emotionally and socially engaged in activities, demonstrating sensitivity to their own feelings and the feelings of others, working with peers, showing interest in the affairs of others, helping those in need, exploring the world of culture, and creating things such as plays, dramas, and artistic or musical works. Through these activities, they develop imagination, improve self-expression, and by researching, evaluating, and assimilating aesthetic, moral, and social values, they create their own system of values. Puślecki (1999) emphasizes that the creative activity of students leads to both intellectual-functional development (the child acquires a corresponding amount of knowledge, skills, and experience) and emotional-volitional development (development of interests, feelings, beliefs, system of values, and attitudes). In addition to its developmental, educational, and expressive functions, the author also attributes socializing (playing and adopting various social roles) and therapeutic functions (reducing tension and fears, resolving conflicts and problems peacefully) to creative activity. It should be emphasized that in education for gifted students, organizational forms of work that promote personal involvement of students and their interaction with others are appropriate. The teacher should create situations that promote the interaction of students with themselves, others, and the world. This means that students should be given the opportunity to work individually, in pairs, in groups, and collectively. Thanks to the actions of the teacher, students have the opportunity to communicate with others in various ways, engage in dialogue with teachers and peers, and learn by interacting and cooperating with different participants while working individually, in pairs, in groups, and with others. Individual and group work can be differentiated. Differentiated group work involves teams of several people (permanent or temporary) simultaneously solving different tasks that make up a certain whole; after completing the task, the groups present the results of their work (Okoń, 2003). It can also be work in teams, where homogeneous groups or groups differentiated by type and level of ability are formed according to the purpose and tasks that need to be performed, which allows for individualization of work. Thus, students have the opportunity to learn from each other, and each of them can work relying on their strengths.

Schaffer (2009) characterizes peer interaction in cognitive situations as having two forms: 1) cooperative learning – "when students at the same level work together in pairs or groups, and through active discussion and exchange of ideas and attempts to solve the problem, they eventually reach a solution that they could not have achieved individually" (p. 139), 2) peer tutoring – "when more experienced children begin to give instructions and advice to other children to bring them to a level of competence similar to their own" (p. 233).

In working with gifted children, a variety of didactic tools, both natural and technological, should be used. "Their richness and diversity make learning more attractive, prevent boredom and fatigue, and allow for a deeper understanding of the content being conveyed" (Marek, 2016, p. 246). Thus, the teacher provides students with information from primary sources; uses illustrations, photographs, sound, graphics, animation, modeling, and film; facilitates and supports experiments in the natural environment; and allows students to use modern media. As educators (Bednarek, 2006; Skibska, 2014; Strykowski, 2003) assert, multimedia allows teachers to reproduce and create existing reality, make knowledge accessible and contemporary, enable multi-channel, multisensory, and multifaceted student learning, diagnose students, support and stimulate their development, individualize and adapt educational requirements, optimize work with students, and communicate using auxiliary and alternative communication methods.

Thanks to the use of various teaching tools in the educational process, including multimedia, students can perceive processes and phenomena as accurately as possible, independently use multiple sources of knowledge, such as texts, films, digital learning materials, websites, manipulate various objects and materials, create graphs, diagrams, models, simulations, and films. Therefore, multimedia encourages students to make intellectual efforts, arouses interests, allows students to be versatile and active learners, and at the same time is an effective tool to combat school boredom (Bednarek, 2006; Bigaj, 2005; Skibska, 2014; Marek, 2016). Teachers who create a space to support the development of abilities and talents should start their activity by getting to know the student well (their interests, needs, abilities, potential), because only then do they have a chance to create adequate conditions for them. As Fechner-Sędzicka (2013, p. 27) rightly claims, student diagnosis should be comprehensive, covering many areas, namely: interests, inclinations, passions of the child, types and levels of abilities, strengths, opportunities, and potential of the child, weaknesses, difficulties, and limitations, motivation and engagement in task completion, needs, environmental conditions (family and peers), quality of communication, preferred learning style, and personal factors of the student.

It is important not to forget that, in addition to achieving a certain level of knowledge and skills, the younger generation also has a very important task – to achieve a specific wisdom that manifests itself in the ability to make an accurate existential choice based on recognition of the moral difference, the difference between good and evil. A significant challenge is to create a community of teachers and students who find themselves in the world of values, learn together, and strive for truth, goodness, and beauty. In this situation, it is appropriate to talk about axiological competence – knowledge, skills, experience, and beliefs regarding the values that characterize the functioning of a person in the axiological space, filled with the search, interpretation, and implementation of values.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of the teacher in "educating values" is to support students in creating their lives in accordance with values and to encourage the realization of values. It is important for the student to participate in axiological situations in which they can recognize, understand, accept/reject, include/exclude certain values in their own structure – value system. The dimension of value education includes: 1) axiological needs (the need to create values, interact with values, and orient oneself in life according to values), 2) axiological sensitivity (the ability to perceive and recognize values), 3) axiological attitude (a way of adequately responding to values when they become a principle of one's own life and urge others to accept this principle) (Chałas, 2003, p. 48). The attitude of the teacher plays a significant role, as they can become an authority figure, protector, and guide. The teacher is expected to be an expert in axiology, a practitioner in the axiological space, and an expert in moral issues. Only the unity of the teacher's behavior and daily actions with what they declare in their pedagogical message will ensure the expected results. The transmission of values should take place in direct personal contact between the teacher and the student. It is important to build a dialogue based on openness to others, openness to their experiences, their world, their truth, and the shared experience of certain values. Such interpersonal relationships are characterized by mutual respect, trust, kindness, warmth, and independence of the teacher and the student (Popławska, Oniskevich, 2017). Therefore, the teacher, creating a space that supports the development of the student's abilities and talents, should create situations in which students, referring to what is valuable and significant: actively engage in problems and tasks that are interesting and important to them; discuss with colleagues and the teacher, creatively search for answers to questions and problems, implement individual and group projects, skillfully use modern technologies, have enough time for reflection, have the opportunity to check and evaluate their achievements, and take responsibility for their own development. It is essential to recognize the natural diversity of human potential and systematically build an attractive educational space for mutual learning, for the joint construction of knowledge, where students with different levels of talents and abilities can develop.

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