

AN EVALUATION OF PEDAGOGICAL AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTICAL MEASURES TAKEN FOR GIFTED CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

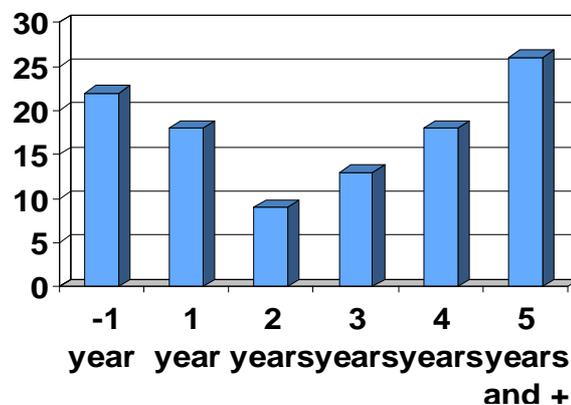
by Claudia Jankech, Swiss psychologists federation member (FSP), specialist in child and teenager psychology and psychotherapist - Lausanne - Switzerland

This presentation is a study over 106 children detected as gifted through a psychological (affective and cognitive) assessment. In this last field, the Wechsler test was used systematically (WPPSI III and WISC IV). This study concerns children having consulted for behavioural relation or school difficulties (88%).

But in 8% whose IQ was between 125 and 129, parents only had the wish to know the intellectual level of their child and to get advice for a better orientation as far as the education and the school were concerned. This was also the case for 10% of the children with an IQ of 130-144 and 12% with 145 and more. More girls (12%) were seen in consultation without presenting problems.

Chart 1: Gap between the IQ test and questionnaire

Distance AQ-AC in years



total: 106 childrens and teenagers from 3 to 18 years old

Based on 26% of the children whose questionnaire has been received within 5 years or more between the moment of the assessment and the evaluation questionnaire.

The aim of that study was to know the evolution of the children (I use the term « children » for teens and children) who benefited from our measures, namely:

- on pedagogical issue (90%)

- 1) skipped one class in primary class
- 2) specialized pedagogical help from 5th and 6th Secondary (France cm2, 6th) or private schools

- on therapeutical issue

- 1) individual psychotherapies 20%
- 2) group therapies 10%

Evaluation tools

We sent questionnaires to the parents. We kept the same questions as in 2001 but added some questions to evaluate precisely the school achievements of the children and teenagers concerned.

We shall show the impact of the measures taken (pedagogical and psychoterapeutical) on the evolution of the children.

Why pedagogical help for such gifted children?

Let the children speak:

« I work a lot but I learn nothing » a 2nd primary school boy (who will successfully skip the 3rd Primary).

« I'd like to go to school to learn something that I don't know » 1st Primary, reads Harry Potter, successfully skipped the 2nd preschool and will skip the 2nd Primary.

« ... too easy ! She (the teacher) even once said she was doing things for kindergarten » boy in 1st Primary, wants to skip a class.

First measure

Exhaustive psychological evaluation (intellectual and emotional)

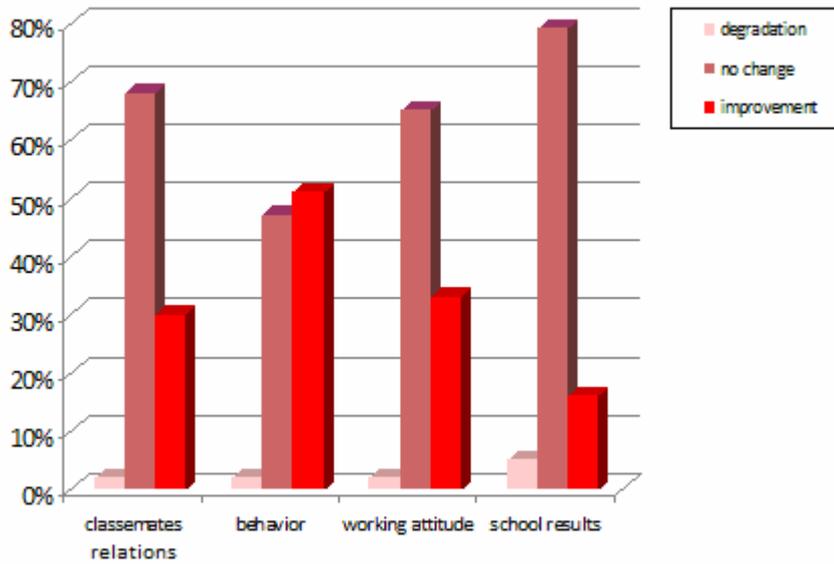
In this chart, we see that the psychological evaluation already improves the situation of the child.

Chart 2: Recognition impact

This chart shows the schools results improvements and that the child's behaviour gets better significantly. We observe a very small minority whose marks are degrading. The evaluation benefits are very important because we noticed either an improvement or no change. This should reassure the parents who are worried the tests could be painful.

Note that we have no control group and that only the population with high IQ is concerned.

Effect of the consultation, to the child



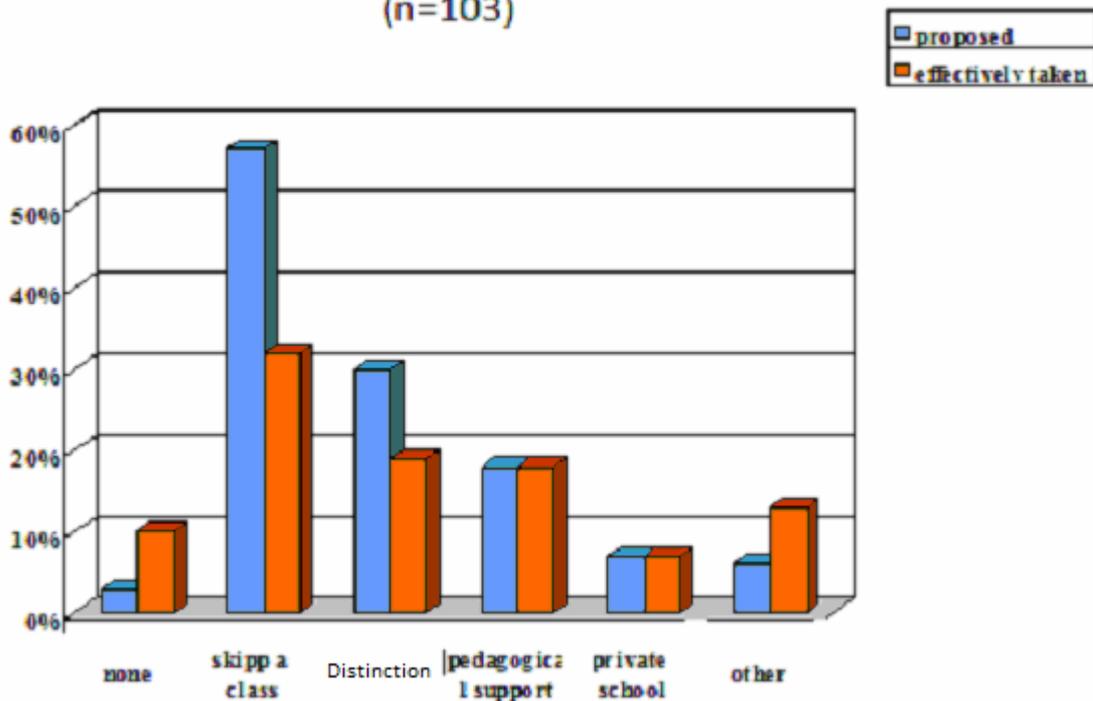
N = 103

What measures were proposed to those children?

The following chart shows that we stress on pedagogical and psychotherapeutical measures. Since the 2001 study, we have added group therapy.

Chart 3: Measures taken

educational measures proposed, effectively taken (n=103)



Pedagogical measures: Why are they so unavoidable for gifted children ?

The gifted child often finds the primary school boring but is at risk of failing in secondary school.

In our previous study, presented at the ASEP congress 2001*, we noted a 14% rate of failure on the whole of 90 children from 3 to 18 years. However we noticed a considerable increase from 11-12 years. It is this increase which shows the special problems of those children.

Gifted children encounter, against all odds, an obstacle, unexpected, given their great competences and the bore at the beginning of the teaching.

Indeed, why more failures when the teaching gets more complex, when they are bored by too simple learning process and they like complexity and challenges?

Following the 2001 study, we have:

- Improved the early detection of combined learning process disabilities (dyslexia, disorthography, adhd [attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder], motricity problems, dyspraxy and dysgraphy).

We must indeed look for these disorders since the school doesn't detect them in gifted children. The intelligence often hides the problems which can project the image of an average child whereas he (or she) has got a very high potential. Nobody is worried by an average student.

A child in 3rd primary said to her teacher « I don't understand what I read » and the teacher reassured her because her marks were medium to good. Her dyslexia/dysorthographia was only detected in 8th grade following a school phobia and a removal from school. As we showed during our meeting « Intelligence and dyslexia »*, the more gifted, the less (and/or later) the dyslexia will be detected (the same for others related disorders).

- Continue to propose to skip one grade for some children (39 in our sample). Indeed this measure, very profitable, cannot be generalised and must take into account the specific needs of the child, on the cognitive as well as emotional and social level. It was advised uniquely to the children who had a high school level (reading and maths) and who had succeeded in a 3 to 4 weeks probation test.
- Advise a pedagogical help from Jean-Claude Anthamatten*, autodidact teacher, particularly helpful to help gifted children. This help was introduced systematically in 5th and 6th grade for all the children who could not get results between 5 and 6 (6 being the maximum). Such results are essential to get into Bachelor section of Canton de Vaud. Those measures were undertaken by 58% of our sample, among the 24% in the group having benefit pedagogical help.

Psychotherapeutic measures

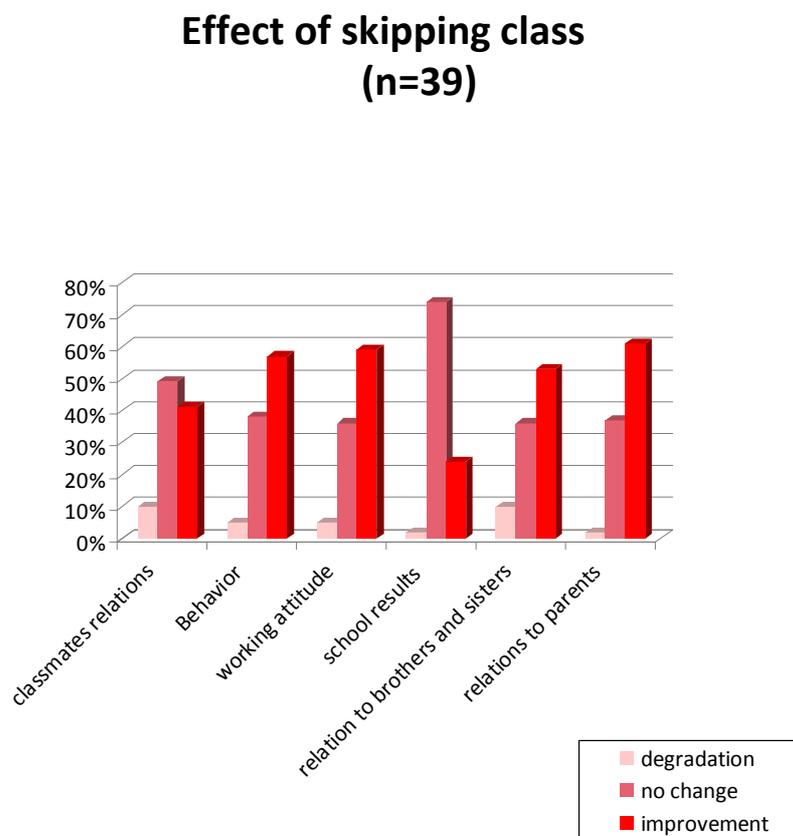
We rated the impact of the therapeutic groups on self-esteem and self-affirmation, behaviour and cognitive inspiration, in addition to individual psychotherapies, which concerned, according to the 2001 study, 20% of consulting children.

Study results

Pedagogical measures: impact of pedagogical measures on the school level

- 1) **Skipping a class:** the satisfaction of this measure is important in the parents point of view. School results don't change in 77% of the cases. They change positively for 22%. Relations with peers improve in 40% of the cases since they see children closer to their mental age whereas for 48% of the cases they don't change. This is the proof that skipping a class didn't worsen the social integration and it even improved it in half of the cases.

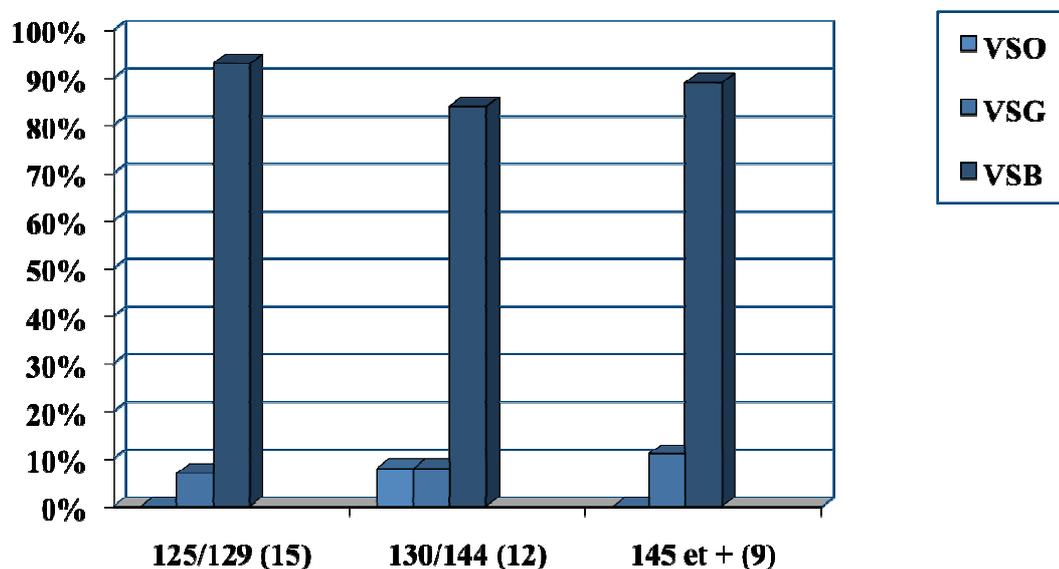
Chart 4: Illustrates the skipping class effect



We find a rather positive effect on school results, behaviour and attitude towards work. Relations with classmates, and brothers and sisters, sometimes worsened even if, for the majority of the children, we see either no change or an improvement. Schools results do not deteriorate or even improve for 21%.

- 2) **Lower failure rate:** the failure rate went from 14% to 11%. In absolute value, it concerns 12 children among whom 2/3 suffered from learning disorder: 5 are dyslexic, 3 have an adhd. The remaining three have anxiety-depressive problems. 90% are 11 years old and more. Our selected failure criteria: the repeating of a year because of school results inferior to 4 (over 6), but also orientation towards an inferior section such as VSG (general section) or VSO (optional section for children with weak marks). We already used that criteria in 2001. The bad orientation implies the necessity of repeating the year in order to join the Bachelor section (VSB - high school diploma (in French: baccalauréat)) and therefore looks like a failure for such gifted children. They live that as a personal failure.

Chart 5: Illustrates the orientation in 6th Secondary according to the IQ



91% of the children with an IQ between 125 and 129 go to VSB, the most demanding division. The percentage is unexpectedly higher than for the higher IQ (130/144 et 145 and more). This is due to the fact that we had seen more children with related disorder from 130. We see more children with related troubles than before (children with no problems are detected easily at school and they don't need to consult. This is a result of a better information and formation of school psychologists, a result to be welcomed).

=> That means that we have no gifted child, without related disorders, failing, thanks to the measures taken. Moreover, many children with dyslexia and/or suffering from ADHD succeeded in VSB thanks to M. Anthamatten's pedagogical help.

Secondary (level from 12 years)

Failure situation (marks below 4 whatever division taken (VSO, VSG, VSB)).

Chart 6: Marks related to the IQ

The following chart shows that the higher IQ are not in a zone lower than 4 and are more numerous between 5 and 6.

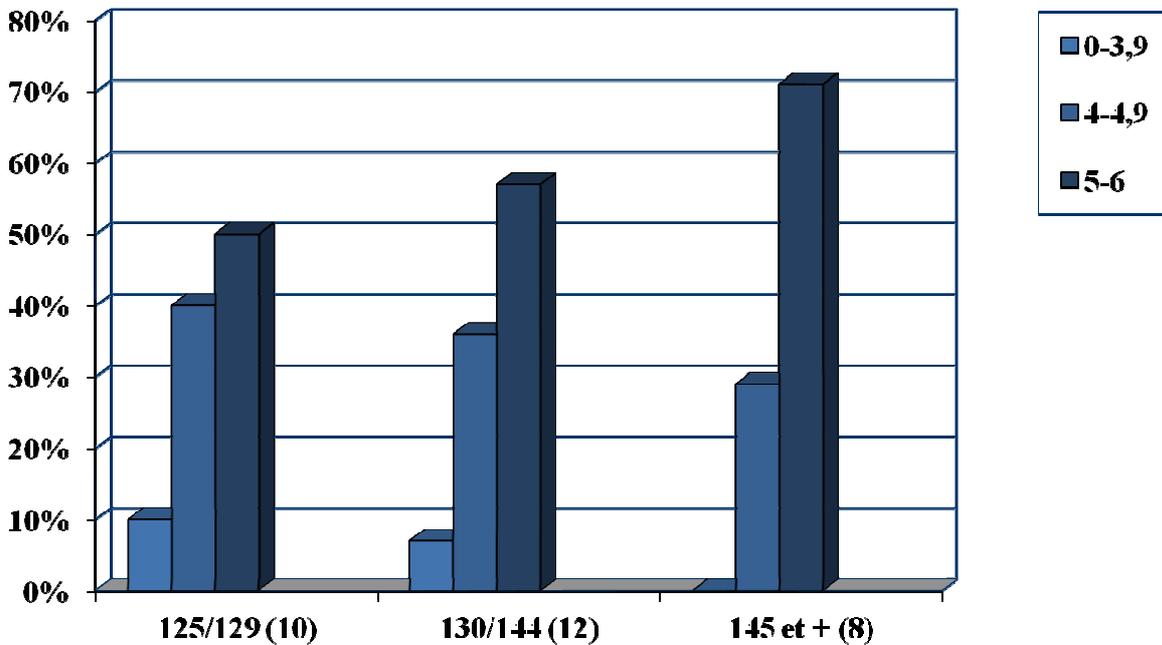
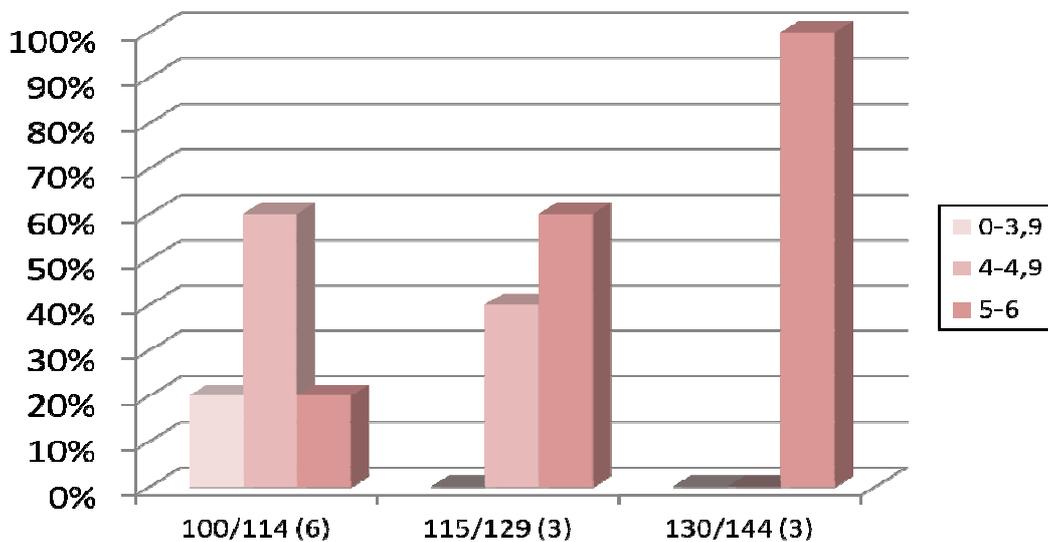


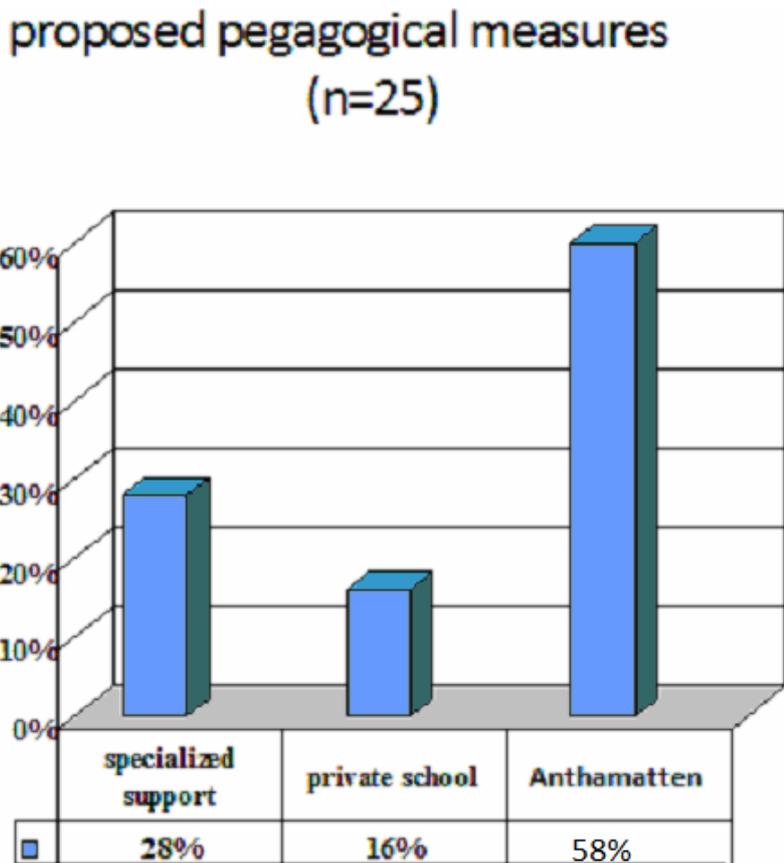
Chart 7: Success related to working memory score of WISC IV

However, the following chart shows that work memory is even more linked to the success at school than high global IQ because gifted children (130-144), with high working memory, have higher results at school.



Average working memory (100-114) is less linked to school success (18% have results below 4 whereas subjects having the highest working memory (between 115 and 144), who have no results below 4, thus avoid failure (4 is the limit to pass in secondary).

Charts 8: Measures distribution



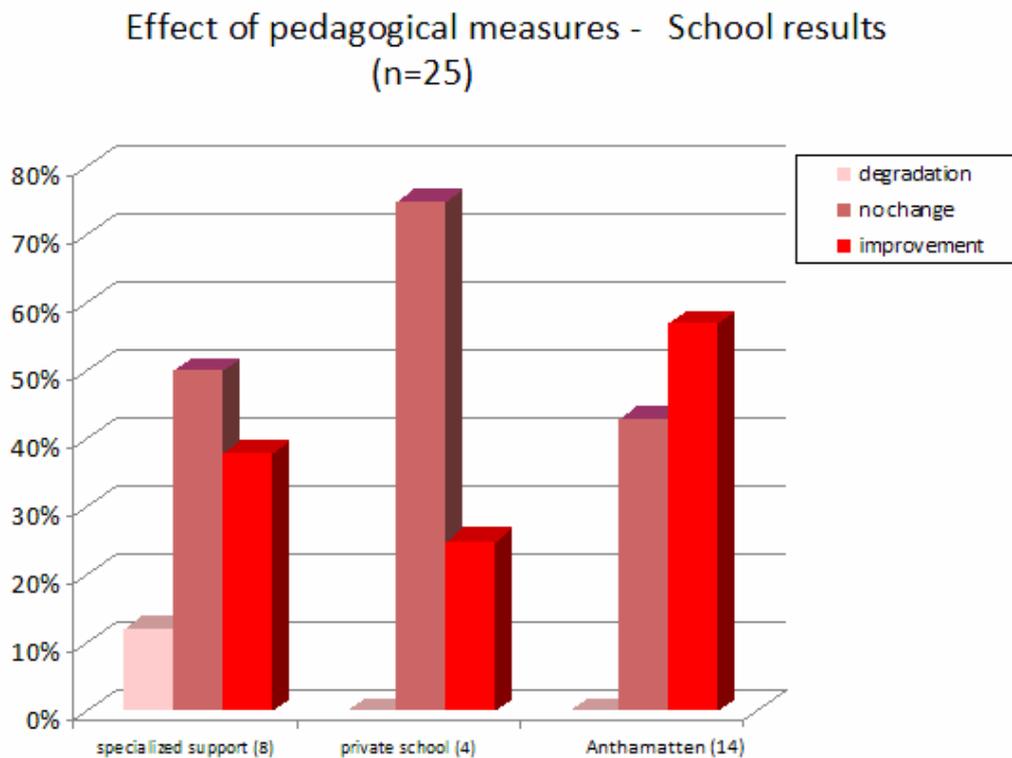
Mr Anthamatten support was proposed at 58%.

3) Very positive effect of Jean Claude Anthamatten pedagogical measures

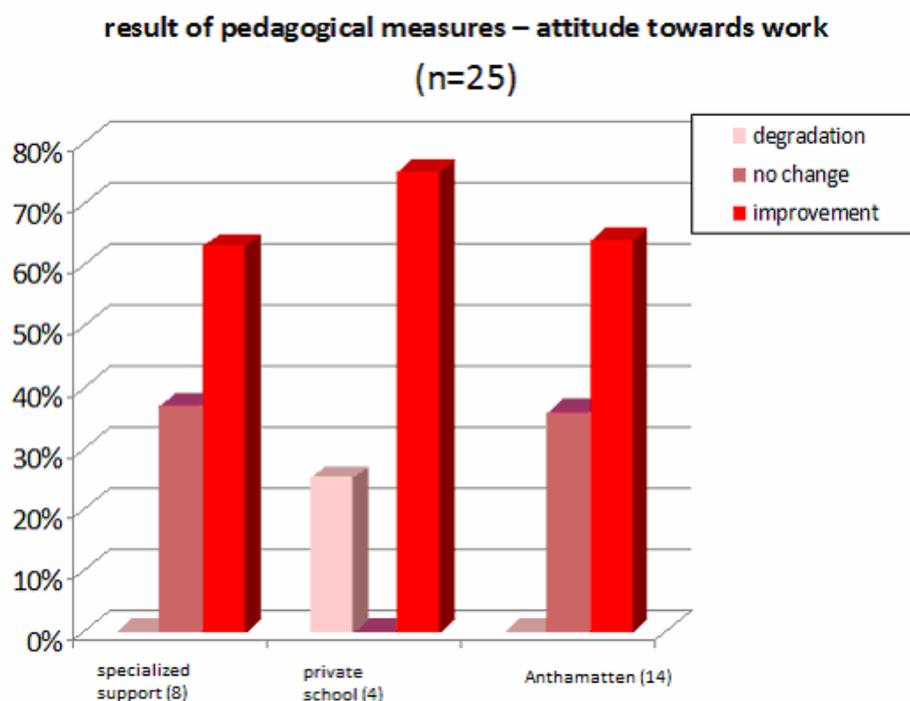
It implies the best percentage of improvement and we saw no worsening.

The situation of children sent to a private school didn't worsened, however the results improve in a smaller way. Besides, this measure is more expensive and the child must leave his environment.

Mr Jean Claude Anthamatten's help, based on school work, is not possible if the child has no challenge in class which compels him to work. It is not realistic for the parents to ask for that help before, even if the children are bored at school. In that way, the Swiss school system, with its selection requirement, is a good opportunity to confront the children to work whereas they lived all the primary school with the "illusion of power" which implies: I understand then I succeed. It is important to mention the significance of memory, the other pillar, with logic, of Mr Anthamatten's work.

Chart 9: Impact of the measures on school results

The effects of the pedagogical measures by Mr Anthamatten are important for the school results. Their progression is clear 55% for the marks against 22% in private school and 36% for the specialized training proposed by the school. Attitude towards work improves with the integration in a private school, even more whereas the marks don't follow the same path. Hence there is a better concordance between the two factors (55% in results improvements/62% attitude improvements) for Mr Anthamatten's help.

Chart 10: Measures impact on the attitude towards work

Why is Mr Anthamatten's pedagogical help necessary for the gifted child who weakens at school?

The gifted child is like the hare in Monsieur de la Fontaine fable: primary school is very easy. The child is bored or even sleeps. Then, in an unexpected way, he sometimes fails as the hare. The tortoise, constant and persevering, gathers the laurels of victory in the end.

This may happen for the gifted child who becomes underachiever if we don't help him/her towards the right path.

In the primary school, the child is under "automatic pilot", helped by his/her understanding which, until 11 years old (or even more, depending on the cases, the problem happening when the matter gets more complicated in quality and quantity), is enough to succeed at a good level. He or she doesn't need to learn, as Duyme* showed it: with no big efforts and especially without learning, he or she gets better results than the average child. This great easiness may sometimes act against him/her. However, as this study shows, this is not the rule, even if the number of children failing is still too frequent, given their competences. When they fail, destabilised, gifted children may develop penalizing behaviours.

The fear of failure may lead them to avoid learning techniques, escaping unexpectedly to their control. This flight will not allow them to enter a learning process. And that's precisely what they should start to do on the contrary: confront the failure, overtake it with the help of their intelligence but with work and effort too.

As a teenager, (failing in maths in 7th Secondary), told us: « I'm not good at maths. » and answering our perplexity, « it's not instinctive anymore, I must think. ».

This highlights they can be lost when their usual strategy (understand rapidly and succeed without working) doesn't work anymore.

The avoidance set up will prevent them to get into a learning process in many cases, particularly with the boys (4 boys failing for one girl) and fear will keep this avoidance working.

This lack of work becomes therefore in some cases what Grubar* calls an « acquired inaptitude » which we can call an incapacity to use competencies which are still present. Setting in a vicious circle (failure, shame, low self-esteem, fear, avoidance, bad results), we must help the young to get into a virtuous circle (understanding/work, mastering, success, improving self-esteem, recognition of his or her competences, understanding/work), which will translate into an improvement of school results.

The improvements obtained through Mr. Anthamatten's work show that those children improvement capacities are high and that the evolution is very quick given an appropriate help.

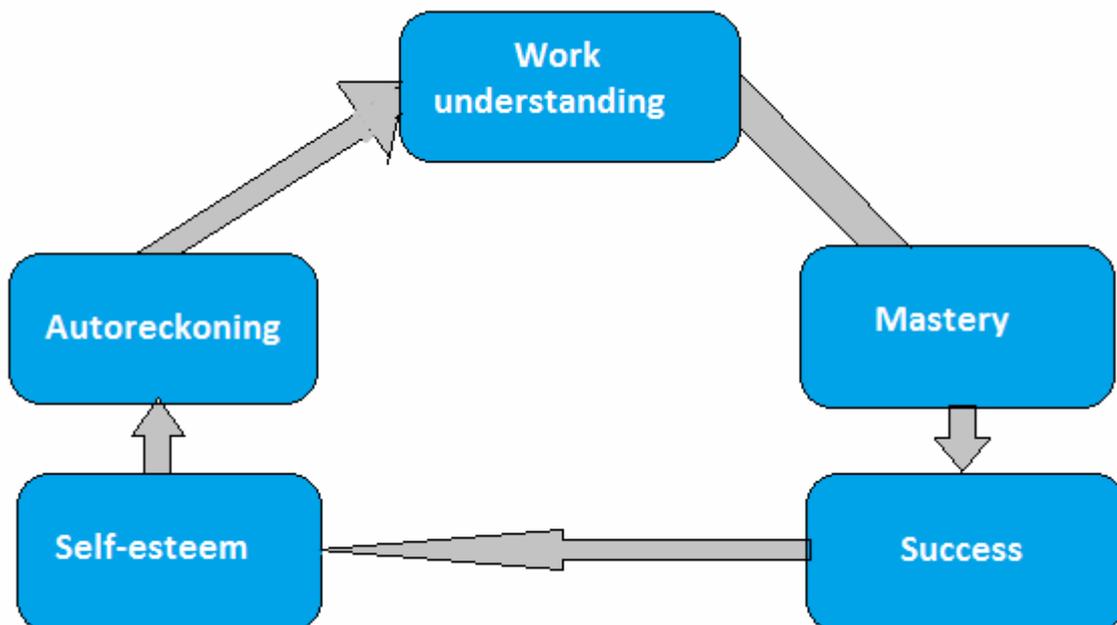
There are of course children who don't modify their attitude or their results.

A deeper analysis should allow us to understand the reasons. We can already think that children with related disorders are more concerned. We don't have statistics support to analyse more profoundly these data (being a private practice of psychologist and psychotherapist).

Chart 11: Exit the vicious circle



Chart 12: Enter the virtuous circle



Auto recognition is essential: the teenager sees himself/herself again as gifted because he/she fulfils him/herself in school work. With failure he/she had thought to have lost aptitudes.

Method used by Mr. Anthamatten

Using the very high logical competences of the gifted child, Mr. Anthamatten gives the children very clear explanations allowing them to recover the mastering of the subject by an “enlightening demonstration”.

They love those demonstrations. « Why didn't we get those explanations. » « Teachers should learn to teach like him. » « I'd like to go to his school. » say the children and even the teenagers who seemed disoriented and even disillusioned.

One of our patients saw his marks in German go from 2 to 6 in three weeks thanks to the understanding of the logic of this language. Because he couldn't master it without a logical understanding of the structure, this language became for him/her a lack of interest.

An « enlightened » comprehension satisfies them and attracts them back to the learning process. This is their favourite field. They always try to understand and are very destabilized if they can't.

But without work they won't succeed or not very long. This is when the memorisation work starts, unavoidable and often not very liked by the gifted children. This work will require effort or even pain, sometimes. But they will eventually do it because they will see their marks rise. This brings them comfort and allows them to see themselves as very gifted on the intellectual field.

This transition through effort is absolutely necessary and can be done through three very important Conditions, which underlie Mr. Anthamatten's pedagogical work:

- 1) The firmness, which the children accept because they see the results and because it is applied with kindness and **the acknowledgement either of their potential or their fear of failure.**
- 2) The parents collaboration, who must accept the proposed work and support the child in his efforts. Indeed this pedagogue is not a “coach” who helps. His aim is to put the child back on track able to follow the school way with his usual environment and not to create dependence towards the teacher. The fear of failure can urge the HP child not to abandon a relationship which provides him/her “crutches” while he/she has largely the skills to give them up.
- 3) Group pedagogical work, which implies a good identification to peers with high potential, in difficulties or not, with whom they can share experiences and feel less lonely.

This measure looks like a « cognitive reactivation » to the extent where the subject learns to use and value competences he has, but uses them rarely or not at all. His/her intelligence starts working again as if waking up from a lethargic state (bore, discouragement). In our opinion, this is not a failure of the gifted child but rather a real problem of the teaching unable to satisfy, from the beginning, the needs of those children. Their high potential allow them a minima functioning, without reaching an optimal threshold of activation of the brain (**state of Flow** described by Professor A. Ziv*, concept introduced by the Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihalyi). The gifted child knows the boredom all along his/her school career and his/her brain stays under stimulated. When it is intensely stimulated, it rediscovers his potential.

Those measures look like, for some children, an evolving restart. The recognition of their own capacities will lower the internal tensions linked to the gap between aptitude and results, tensions which send them into doubt and helplessness.

Psychotherapeutic measures: results

The psychotherapeutic measures bring a big improvement in the relation and behaviour field and are essentials for 30% of the children, even if they have little effect on the school field for which the improvement is 9% for the children in therapy.

Chart 13: Impact of individual therapy

impact of individual treatment on child's evolution (n=20)

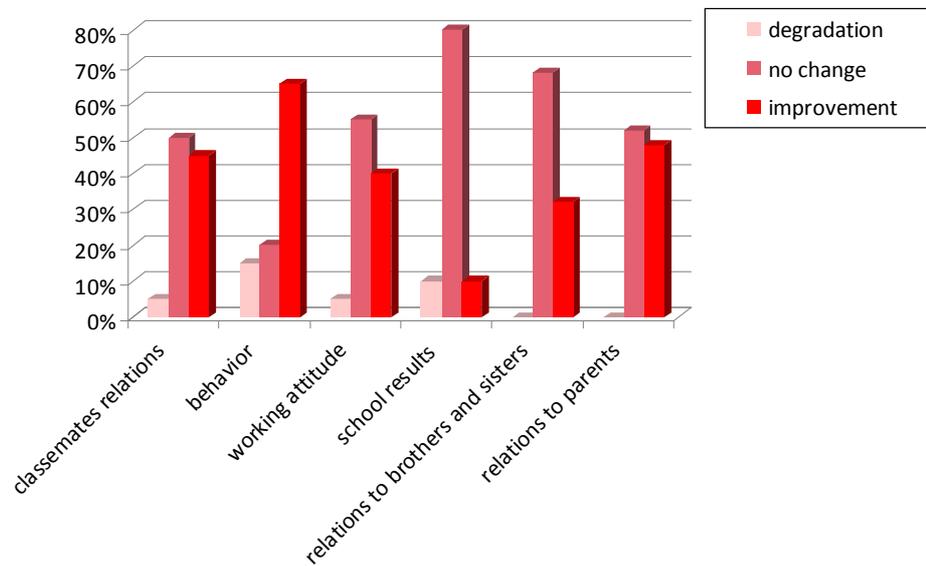
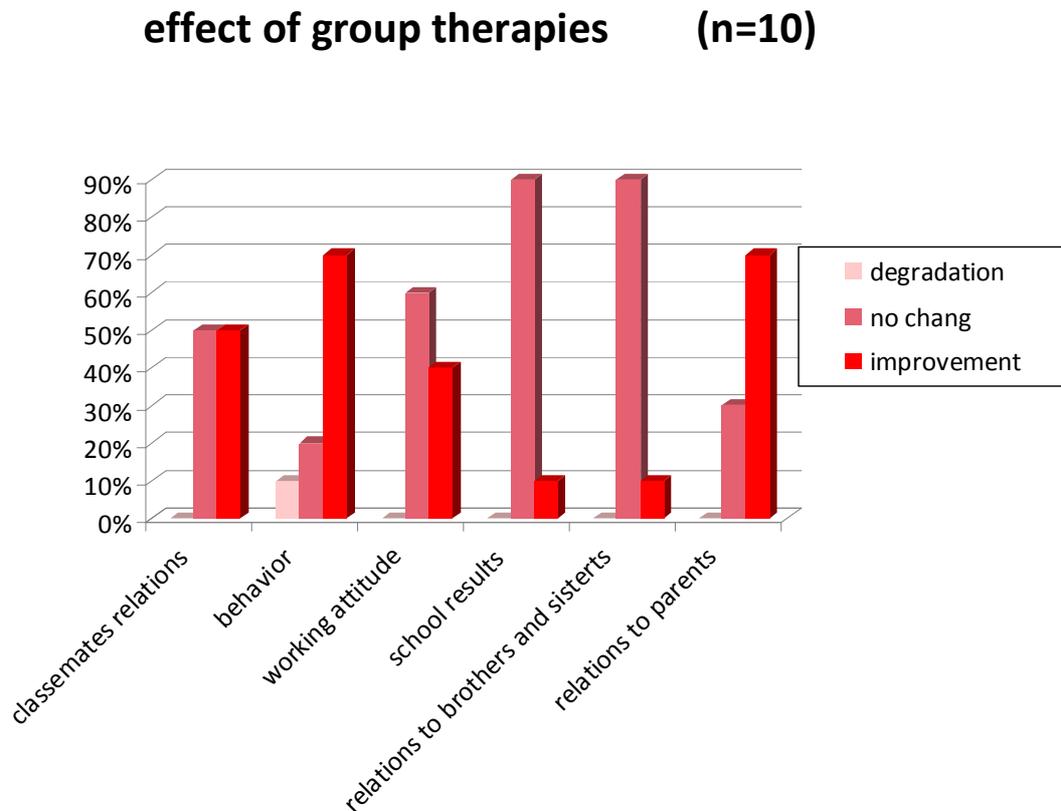


Chart 14: Impact on group therapy

The behaviour improves a lot (62% for individual and 69% for group). As far as relations with the classmates are concerned, although the improvement is less, we find 42% of children in progress. Group psychotherapies bring a great improvement in the relations with classmates with no degradation.

It is interesting to see the improvement of the relation with the parents (69%), which is higher than with the classmates when the child followed a group therapy (higher than with individual therapy). The improvement of the child's relations can be explained by the fact that he/she experiments the sharing of what is lived and his/her emotions with the other (his/her peers and the therapists). In the group, he/she finds identification models and gets out of the solitude that the gifted child can sometimes live when he/she feels different, particularly when he/she hasn't been able to establish satisfactory relations with his peers. This experience seems to give him a positive relational experience usable in social and family relations.

Regarding the children who have not been able to improve their relations with their peers, although having had a group therapy, we can formulate two hypotheses to be confirmed in a later study:

- 1) The group was too short in time (between 10 and 15 sessions). Indeed for some children adaptation is slower and results appear with more difficulty. We limit this work in time because children today have sometimes busy agendas or other priorities and this has to be regretted.
- 2) The nature of their relation problems would be different and to be studied.

The indication concerns different cases than individual psychotherapy but it is not only the pathology which is determining to recommend this treatment. It is indeed the difficulty to have relations with the others that allow us to propose the group. Some children strongly refuse that form of treatment whereas most prefer to participate at a group therapy with their peers. For some children, with a more invading pathology, group therapy is not to consider.

Conclusion

School failure of the gifted child is no fatality. It is for a large part the result of an inappropriate teaching in particular when children don't suffer from related troubles. Learning difficulties are indeed a frequent cause of failure in numerous classes. For gifted children, without this kind of problems, failure is avoidable and reversible in very important proportions thanks to measures which allow the child to stay in his school, which is the wish of most of the children we met. Those measures must be taken beforehand to prevent to enter into the vicious circle (failure/fear/lost of interest). It is therefore essential not to idealise their intelligence but to accompany and to help them to overcome their fear by giving them the means to go back to work waiting for the school system to adapt itself even more to their high neurocognitive efficiency. The HP children in failure could then avoid the incapacity acquired progressively during their school years.

As far as psychotherapies are concerned, they cannot replace the pedagogical help but they must accompany it in cases of pathologies and/or of difficulties of social integration. The fact that school results only improve through pedagogical help clearly shows that school under-realisation is before all a question of pedagogy.

Indeed the rate of failure of gifted children is significantly lowered when we prevent a lowering of the results by a targeted pedagogical intervention adapted to their needs.

Those children have an excellent neuropsychological tool in most cases (except for related troubles) and they appreciate when we help them to rediscover the pleasure and efficiency to work intellectually at school.

It appears clearly the importance to avoid letting them sink into failure and to take ways which separate them from higher school diploma (Bachelor). Those bad directions deprive them from a choice which, from their early age, would conduct them toward studies (according to the projects expressed by the children in interviews).

Psychotherapies improve relations and behaviour but have little effect on school results. They are therefore necessary for children with pathologies and/or socio-emotional difficulties. On the contrary, pedagogical help is unavoidable for the great majority of gifted children.

Finally, it would be sufficient to apply enrichment and deepening program, like the one implemented for the Octopus of Basel ZOO, to see the highly gifted children situation improve significantly. This zoo considers that these exercises (open boxes with meal inside) are a brain program to avoid boredom for the most intelligent sea animal.

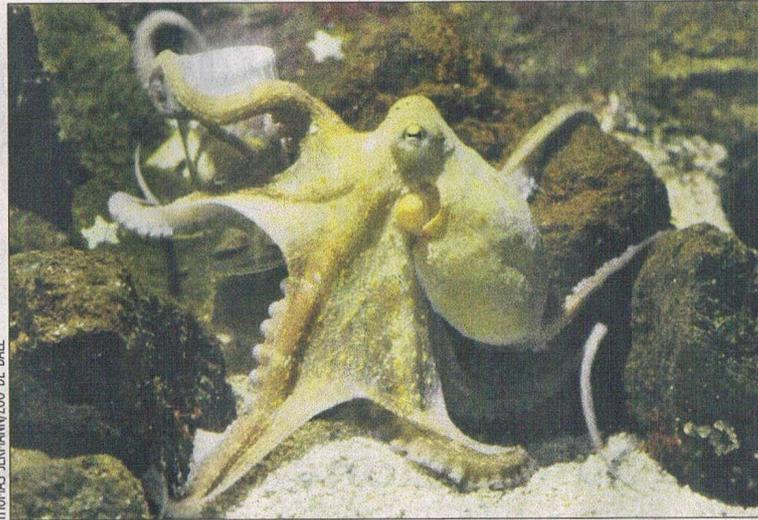
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Intelligente et habile, la pieuvre du zoo²⁶ de Bâle fait elle-même sa popote

INSOLITE

Le céphalopode ouvre des boîtes de conserve et des pots de yogourt.

Le repas de la pieuvre est une des nouvelles attractions du zoo de Bâle. Avec ses huit bras, l'animal ouvre boîtes de conserve et pots de yogourt renfermant ses menus préférés, moules, crevettes et poissons. Arrivée en juillet, la pieuvre passe à table à heures fixes, les lundis, mercredis et dimanches vers 15 h. Le zoo considère ces exercices comme un sport cérébral empêchant l'un des plus intelligents animaux sous-marins de s'ennuyer. **ATS**



THOMAS JERMAN/ZOO DE BÂLE

La pieuvre du zoo de Bâle ne se laisse pas démonter par une boîte de conserve et fait preuve d'une étonnante agilité.

Lausanne, 11.11.2013

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