

Talent support in Ireland: Programmes of the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI)

I. Introduction

1. Ireland: Society and cultural heritage

Ireland is one of the most diverse countries; its history goes back to the Celtic era. The island state at the edge of Western Europe comprising four historical provinces is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the Celtic Sea and the Irish Sea. The Irish Republic is no longer among the laggards of Europe: its economic achievements in the 1990s earned it the title of Celtic Tiger. The works of Jonathan Swift, James Joyce and Oscar Wilde are organic parts of its cultural heritage, and it has bands of international fame such as U2, Sinéad O'Connor or The Corrs that are deservedly popular in every age group. The capital city of Dublin offers many cultural programmes and sights to visitors throughout the year. One of the best known relics of the town is the Book of Kells from the 2nd century housed in Trinity College, one of the oldest documents of Western Christianity. The attractive power of the town is enhanced by orchestras playing Irish folk music every night in the famous Temple Bar district. (Gauldie, 2000)

Dublin has several big universities. The Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI), the most significant talent support institution of the country is located at Dublin City University.

2. Emergence of the Irish educational system

The modern Irish school system was established under the rule of the British state, in 1931. Its developers strove primarily to integrate children with different religious backgrounds (Catholic, Protestant) into a single educational system. In those years, the Church of Ireland had a major influence on culture, politics and also education. However, by the end of the 19th century, the roles of the Catholic and the Protestant church had changed radically. (O’Buachalla, 1998)

At the time of the famine decimating the Irish population, the education of the Irish was an issue of secondary importance for the British government. In 1849, Cardinal Paul Cullen was appointed Archbishop of Dublin and by the end of his career, the Catholic Church had gained significant influence over educational policy. They built an educational system focusing on equality and giving special emphasis to the tuition of the Irish language and the Gaelic traditions. From 1923 on, Irish language became a mandatory subject and hence an organic part of the primary school curriculum, as opposed to the natural sciences, for example.

Consequently, in the early 20th century, the educational system was managed by the church and the state, with policy decisions taken by representatives delegated jointly by the two.

From the 1960s on, the Department of Education has played a much more prominent role in shaping educational policy. From 1967 on, secondary school education was offered free of charge. Until 1970, less than 30% of boys and less than 40% of girls had completed secondary education. There was little work, and the number of emigrants increased. In 1971 the Higher Education Authority responsible for the development of the universities and for planning higher education was set up. The crucial issue of talent support, however, has not been treated at national level at all; this topic did not appear on the agenda until as late as the nineties.

Debates and professional work in the early nineties have led to the new Education Act of 1998 stating that it was the statutory obligation of the Minister of Education to ensure that appropriate education be made available to every person. By the end of the nineties, the role of the church had diminished at national level, whereas the power and influence of teacher trade unions and government agencies have increased. (O’Reilly, 2013)

2.2. The present educational system

To date, the Irish educational system is directed by the Department of Education and Skills. The teachers themselves get their salary from the Department, but most schools are privately owned or managed by churches.¹

There are more than 3200 primary schools, 750 secondary schools, 7 universities, 14 Institutes of Technology and many other state-financed institutions of education. Most primary and secondary schools are private institutions enjoying state support. Half of primary schools have a small teaching staff of a few persons. The majority of secondary schools receives public support.

Irrespective of school type, students must adhere to the same curriculum and comply with the same centrally defined examination criteria. Although teachers receive their salary from the state, the schools are autonomous as far as appointments and dismissals and the school policy are concerned.

3. Talent support in Ireland

Currently, there is no official talent support legislation in Ireland; none of the acts makes an explicit reference to the teaching of talented/gifted children. The Education Act of 1998 states the following:

“[it is to be ensured that]each person resident in the State, including a person with disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs of that person citizens of Ireland, whether with special educational needs or living with disability, shall be provided access to education of adequate level and quality suiting their capabilities and needs ...”²

In a position statement dated 2000 regarding the education of students with extraordinary abilities, the Minister of Education stated that “in certain cases, if special educational needs occur in relation to a student with extraordinary gifts, the teacher in charge may be provided supplementary assistance.” Many considered this a major step forward in Irish talent support

¹ Most schools operate on lands owned by the church.

² [No 51 of 1998, Education Act, P.I.S.7 (1) a]

as many school managements were of the opinion that their technical and human infrastructure was not sufficient to satisfy the needs of such students in their institution. (Balogh, 2011)

In 2001, an act was passed on the education of students with special needs (EPSON Act), but the act mentioned specifically students struggling with dyslexia and other learning problems, without making any direct reference to talent education. In 2007, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), i.e. the official agency responsible for the development of the national curriculum, issued certain guidelines for the education of highly gifted children. (O'Reilly, 2013)

3.1. Parent organisations and other initiatives in talent support

To be able to choose the most suitable form of education, parents must be aware of the capabilities of their children. Talent support is always the joint responsibility of parents, schools and development professionals. The situation of gifted students is as difficult as that of their peers struggling with disadvantages and backlogs. Often, regular consultations and experience exchange sessions are needed for the primary school pupils to identify their specific talent fields and to orient in the right direction.

The various parent organisations operating with success in the United States (Parent Teacher Associations) offer a diverse range of programmes to talented students. Similar initiatives exist in many other countries as well, but they are but formal and have no truly beneficial function at most places for want of appropriate programme funding and voluntary work.

In Ireland, the National Parent Council created in the mid-eighties is a national organisation: parents may become members individually or in groups, and the Council strives to provide a forum giving the parents/caretakers active support to exercise their parental role and to carry out efficient co-operation with other educational partners and schools. NPC's objectives are the following:

- To have at least one efficient parent organisation in every school
- To support the parents in becoming active partners of school-based education
- To give the parents an opportunity to have an influence on the development of educational policy

- To establish strong partnership relations

(<http://www.npc.ie/>)

3.2. Networking

Networking is a crucial component of talent support as the enrichment and acceleration of children with above-average abilities/capabilities requires the joint activity of special experts. Information exchange between parents and professionals facilitates everyday work and makes it more efficient.

The Irish Gifted and Talented Network, i.e. the network of youth interest advocacy and assistance organisations, is a national non-profit society dedicated to the following objectives:

- assistance to the parental networks, experience exchange, delivery of expert opinion on the education of gifted children,
- encouragement of special teacher training matching the needs of the talented youth,
- lobbying to make the needs of talented children visible in the school regulations

Another, online, initiative was launched in February 2008. The creation of the Giftedkids.ie site helps the parents of the talented youth and the teachers working with them collect and share information. A group comprising parents and volunteer teachers edited a surface where they could share experience concerning the development of their children and their own development methods, and the members of the forum could offer their help to solve the problems of such children. According to the 2011 data, the site operated by more extensive collaboration already, attracts more than 180 000 visitors annually. (www.giftedkids.ie)

The Irish talent support institution offering one of the most successful and complex programmes of all is the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI) at Dublin City University. The Centre created in the nineties represented a major breakthrough in Irish talent support. Its leaders are setting up a national network that would make it possible to do effective and efficient talent support work also outside the capital.

II. Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI)

CTYI was established at Dublin City University to remedy a long-felt deficiency, i.e. to recognise and encourage talented students, to motivate them and help them accomplish their learning potential. The Centre has its roots in the US programme dating from the seventies that has been adapted in many countries.

1. Antecedents of the establishment of the Irish Centre

The foundations of what became one of the most successful and comprehensive talent support programmes globally were laid at John Hopkins University in the seventies. The story began with a boy from Baltimore, in the seventh form, who had exhausted every option offered to him by his own school in mathematics by the age of 13, and was then allowed to continue his scientific activity at John Hopkins University thanks to the personal intervention of Professor Julian Stanley. Dr. Stanley and John Hopkins University then set up a Centre to be able to satisfy similar needs, in order to “identify and develop the brightest minds of the world”. The Centre had such students as the co-founder of Google, the CEO of Facebook and other leading and prominent professionals of the scientific, artistic and political fields.

Since 1979, many talent support institutions modelled on this example have started operation globally. In 2012, the Centre for Talented Youth (CTY) provided enrichment programmes to more than 9450 students, and the number of online students was estimated at more than 13 thousand. The goal of CTY International is to deploy an international network covering the whole world. The United States has several active Centres for Talented Youth, and the bases of similar institutions have been laid also in other countries outside the US, in Spain, Malaysia, Thailand and on the Bermudas, and mention should be made also of a most successful centre set up in 2010 at Hong Kong University, Negotiations are underway with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan and the Czech Republic. The first and so far the most successful and biggest centre in Europe is the one in Ireland. The Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI) operates within the walls of Dublin City University, and offers a diversified programme to ensure the enrichment of primary and secondary school students and accelerate their studies. (John Hopkins CTY, 2013)

2. Establishment of the Irish Centre and key goals of the programme

The idea of creating a centre similar to the American one, dedicated to talent support, occurred in Ireland in the nineties. This need met with the American vision for John Hopkins University to roll out programmes modelled on the domestic best practice in other countries. In 1992, CTYI was created in Ireland with the support of DCU and John Hopkins University for the following purposes:

- To identify through national and international talent search the youth under undergraduate age showing extraordinary mathematical and verbal skills.
- To organise challenging courses and Saturday classes for the talented youth.
- To assist the parents of the talented youth; to ensure their access to the necessary pieces of information.
- To research and evaluate talent development and the programme and curricular opportunities.
- To provide teacher further training and supplementary assistance to schools participating in the CTYI programme.

First the Irish experts of CTYI organised the talent programmes for the participants of the summer camps held at Dublin City University. So far more than 45000 Irish students aged 6 to 17 have participated in the Talent Search rounds for the programme organised by the Talent Centre. According to a figure from 2012, 70 per cent of Irish schools has delegated a student already to the Search. (<http://www4.dcu.ie/ctyi/index.shtml>)

2.1. Admittance to the programme

Julian Stanley, the pioneer of talent research, compiled special talent identification tests representing a special challenge for the students.

The most efficient way of talent search takes place in two steps. First the performance of the students is measured by standard tests, then the students showing above-average results there are measured at a higher level, with the help of more difficult tests.

Since the students of Irish schools write literacy and mathematics tests at least twice during their primary education period, the institutions can rely on those for appointing kids to the programmes. This is the first step of talent search.

The experts of Dublin City University and John Hopkins University have agreed that, for Irish students, the SAT³ scholastic aptitude tests and the more advanced tests would be adequate for investigating the suitability of the candidates for the CTYI Programme. The results have shown similarities with the corresponding US surveys, and it has been demonstrated that the tests could be used also in the Irish schools. Participation at SAT is determined by one or several components of the following requirements:

- The student has attained at least 95% at a recent standardised competency or performance test in mathematics or verbal skills
- The student has shown outstanding results at a territorial or national mathematical, natural science or literature competition.
- A parental, subject inspector's or teacher's opinion is needed that states why the student concerned should be included in the uppermost 5% of students.

(O'Reilly, 2013)

After being selected, students are offered programmes of different durations and intensities by the Centre located at the University. The most popular among them are the Saturday development courses organised for primary school students during the school year.

2.2. Saturday development courses for primary school pupils

Pupils/students producing adequate results at the Talent Search rounds can then learn at the Saturday sessions organised not only in the capital, but throughout the country. Thus the families do not have to travel for hours during the weekend for a child to be provided extraordinary extra-curricular tuition.⁴

The Saturday development sessions provide the talents a supportive social environment where they meet children of their age, with similar interests and capabilities, and get acquainted with teachers and professionals doing research or scientific activity in the special field they have chosen themselves.

³ SAT: *Scholastic Aptitude Test*, a survey measuring the school aptitude of the students.

⁴ Centres offering programmes similar to those of the Centre at Dublin Town University exist in the towns of Cork, Limerick, Letterkenny, Wexford, Athlone, Galway, Tralee, Sligo and Dun Laoghaire, respectively.

High group headcounts sometimes hinder the fast processing of the training material at Irish primary schools. The CTYI centres have groups of 15 so children can proceed at their own speed.

2.2.1. Talent Search tests for primary school pupils

The Saturday sessions are open to children aged 6-7 and 8-13, respectively, whose scores at one of the tests measuring the abstract reasoning, mathematical or verbal skills warrant that. In the age group of 6-7 only the abstract reasoning and verbal skills are measured, and writing the tests takes an hour. Children aged 8-13 do a mathematics test as well, and the two-hour test-writing is interrupted by a break of 10 minutes. The tests can be done at the CTYI several times a year, on pre-announced dates.

2.2.2. Acceleration and enrichment

One goal of the development of talented children is that they should master in greater depth a larger quantity of material than they would at school and learn new research and independent learning techniques. Talent support professionals the world over agree that children with outstanding abilities should be given an opportunity for faster progress. The Saturday development sessions let students progress faster than their age peers and study their special field in more depth. Acceleration and enrichment are basic components of these programmes.⁵ (Feldhusen and Sokol, 1982)

Feldhusen and Ruckman (1988) are of the opinion that development lasting for several weeks is efficient if it lasts for 7-9 weeks, with two or three lessons a week.

Therefore, the Saturday programmes of CTYI also last for 9 weeks, in 2.5 hours a week. This is sufficient time for acquiring a deeper knowledge of the topic and processing it the scheduled material under more detailed projects.

⁵ Acceleration is the procedure whereby a student progresses at a faster pace than the normal one; this may be reflected in admittance to a higher form or in actual performance. (Ward, 1980)

2.2.3. Venue of the sessions and the teachers

CTYI organises Saturday development programmes for primary school students in several centres of the country (see the footnote on Page 9). The subjects being taught are not part of the school curriculum and provide an ideal opportunity for the development of the children's skills and for the expansion of their knowledge.

Feldhusen and Wyman (1980) say that the university campus is an ideal place for the Saturday development sessions. The professional environment is inspiring and promotes the mapping of the progress and the career opportunities of the pupils/students. The subject-specific classrooms of Dublin City University are an ideal place for the students of CTYI to master knowledge accessible in their respective fields.

The majority of CTYI's teachers are former students of the Centre putting to use knowledge acquired there as university teachers or undergraduates. The commitment and enthusiasm of the young teaching staff is exemplary. It is highly useful that former students are employed, since their successors can thus obtain first-hand information on the further education and career options.

At the Saturday development training sessions targeting the primary school generations the pupils/students may choose subjects they find interesting and challenging. (See 2.2.4)

2.2.4. The range of subjects

The Saturday sessions are open to children aged 6-7 who may take part in such sessions matching their lines of interest as e.g. Art Design where they get to know new fine arts techniques that help unfold their creativity. At the lessons on architecture they learn how the materials and blueprints "develop" into real buildings. Courses on the life of the dinosaurs and on the fauna and flora are also popular among the children.

The Centre offers much more subjects and development options to children aged 8-13 than to children in the first forms: they can choose from 10-14 different subjects on a training day including microbiology, photography, creative writing, UN modelling⁶, web design, chemistry, military conflicts, zoology or medicine. They get answers to how to make an App,

⁶ In UN modelling, children work in teams. They do role-playing games where they express their opinion on international politics as the representatives of various countries. This lesson is highly useful for developing their verbal skills.

what is the cause of diseases or they can test their communication skills against each other while getting to know international politics.

All in all, the sessions concerned often give them an experience for life that has a motivating effect on their studies and also expands their knowledge acquired at primary school.

2.2.5. Course costs, programme financing

The Saturday sessions cost EUR 230 for an eight-week period. This does not comprise the fee of the admission procedure. A three-week course costs EUR 90, and correspondence students must pay a sum of around EUR 100. The one-week summer course for children aged 6-7 costs EUR 150-170.

It is very difficult to finance the programmes without public support, based exclusively on money provided by the parents, so the Talent Centre nurtures close contacts and co-operates with large enterprises and entrepreneurs and finances the education of underprivileged children and the scholarships distributed under ceremonious circumstances every year from their support.⁷

2.3. Summer programmes for primary and secondary school students

The Centre for Talented Youth offers diverse enrichment programmes not only during the academic year, but also in the summer period, in the form of a wide array of interesting and exciting subjects designed for primary and secondary school children. Secondary school students who want to join the camp must pass a SAT exam, and they can participate on the basis of the results of that exam. If someone has bad results in a given year and is not included in the programme, he or she can repeat the tests the next year and will have another chance of participation in the CTYI programmes. If a student has already been chosen for participation in the Programme in one school year, no tests must be written on the next occasion, and the candidate will automatically qualify for training starting in the following year. Students often

⁷ The Dublin-based Centre organises an award delivery ceremony for children coming from all over the country in May every year. The best scholarship-holder students are provided recognition, and the diplomas certifying the completion of the courses are handed over there.

rewrite the tests to measure their own progress relative to the previous year. It may also happen that some candidates are admitted to the Programme by individual decision based on some other extraordinary achievement.

The camp courses are compiled by the professionals of the Centre so as to offer the students sufficient intellectual challenge. The pace of education is quite fast, and problems and assignments are treated in more depth and detail and more comprehensively than at school. Almost all of the more than 20 courses focus on topics that are not organic parts of the school curriculum.

2.3.1. The courses

The youth must choose one subject that they would then study for around 100 hours during the 3-week camp. In the camp, the class headcounts are rather low, at around 15. This group size warrants fast progress and efficient work. Work in each class is assisted by an assistant teacher and a resident helper (usually an undergraduate) in addition to the subject teacher. The selection criteria for the teaching staff include that the teacher active in the special field concerned should be excellently prepared in the given subject, have good communication skills and show enthusiasm and commitment to the task. Home-work is given every day during the summer training course, and that means another two hours of work for the students. Six weeks after the course the students receive a written evaluation of their study results.

2.3.2. Application for the courses

The applicants must choose the course they would like to complete in the summer semester with determination. Several courses may be indicated in the application, to raise the chance of admittance. There are often more applicants in certain subject fields than the number of places that the organisers can secure. In such cases former CTY students and applicants with higher scores at the Talent Search and SAT testing rounds are given priority. The application deadline of the summer courses is usually mid-April. After the application, the students receive a detailed description of the courses to facilitate their choice.

Tuition fee allowances are available to applicants who apply first, before 1 February.

2.3.3. Order of the day

In the camp, students have 5 lessons every week-day, usually from 9 in the morning to three in the afternoon, with a short break at 11. In the afternoon, recreation programmes are organised to give them an opportunity to relax, get to know each other, share experiences and be together. The afternoon activities include drama lessons, debate fora, sports, reading and team games. In the evening, students return to their classrooms and have a 2-hour preparation session for the lessons of the next day. The lights are turned off at 10.30; until then they can have informal talks with their mentors or discuss any problems that may come up.

During their time spent outside the classroom, students are supervised by the resident assistants (see 2.3.6.).

2.3.4. Week-ends

The week-end schedule is quite different from the regime of the weekdays. There are no lessons, nor evening learning sessions. Weekend programmes include shopping, sightseeing, movies and various sports activities. Furthermore, students organise talent searches within the camp, and make their leisure time more exciting by having quiz games. They can relax, have a party and practice their religion during the weekend. Of course, campers are provided full-scale teacher supervision also during the weekend.

2.3.5. Student life at the summer campus

Some 250 students have an opportunity to go to the summer camps over one summer period, and they are assisted and taught by a technical staff (teachers, supervisors, assistants) of 65. Some 50 of the 250 students come from abroad. Students are accommodated on the campus of DCU (Dublin City University), in apartments of two or six rooms. Students may indicate their preferences regarding accommodation on the application form. The leaders of the camp distribute the accommodations already before the commencement of the camp, in consideration of the age and chosen subjects of the students.⁸ Boys and girls are in separate buildings.

⁸ The distribution of the accommodations ensures that students with a similar line of interest and of the same age share the same room.

2.3.6. Resident personnel

The members of the resident personnel are undergraduates of Dublin City University who stay at the campus with the participating students for the time of the camp. They are responsible for organising the weekend leisure programmes, for administering the sports programmes, and for supervision outside the lessons. They develop a friendly and supportive atmosphere and they are accessible for the students at all times. Students can discuss problems, fears, concerns of any kind with them, whether in relation to the training material or any other topic.

Apart from the summer programmes, the Centre of Young Talents offers also other opportunities for student development.

Students who are unable to join work at the Centre personally during the year or in the summer may study by correspondence or online.

3. Online programmes, correspondence students

The correspondence programme gives students a chance to learn university-level subjects in a stimulating and inspiring environment. The course comprises tasks delivered by e-mail on six occasions. Correspondence training is an excellent opportunity to boost the skills of academic and professional writing. Indispensable for the students during their university studies, with assistance. After application, students receive the training materials, i.e. the so-called course textbooks including whatever is needed for the completion of the tasks, by e-mail. In the on-line programme, students are assisted by teachers in command of a thorough knowledge of the field who have ample experience and can thus help them in an adequate manner in processing the tasks/topic concerned,.

The correspondence semester lasts from January to May. Students are given new tasks approximately every three weeks, and the three weeks are sufficient for them to process the task series at hand.

The seven topics offered in on-line education are the following:

- Creative writing
- Medicine
- International relations and politics
- Journalism

- The most modern sciences
- Law
- Psychology

The application deadline is mid-November. Students are provided continuous feedback and evaluation concerning the works they submit and an opportunity to discuss certain problems personally with their trainers.

III. Summary

Owing to the stormy history and the slow formation of the educational policy of Ireland, the talent support issue was put on the agenda as late as the 1990s. By that time, parents, teachers and professionals active in talent support had felt an urging need for providing training and programmes securing faster progress to the talents in Ireland.

Besides from the networks being organised online, a major breakthrough occurred in the early nineties with the formation of the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI) at Dublin City University created first and foremost to identify talents and then to organise accelerated summer and Saturday courses for them, to assist colleagues active in talent support and to provide information to the parents of the youth concerned on the relevant training and further education options.

The subjects offered at the development sessions are not included in the school curriculum, but they offer the students an opportunity to dive deeper in their own field of interest and, last but not least, they challenge them. Small group sizes promote efficient learning and well-trained tutors pay attention to each and every student.

CTYI organises programmes of various types for the various age groups. The Saturday sessions during the academic year usually target the age groups of 6-7 and 8-13, respectively. The applicants of the summer programmes are mostly secondary school students who find it more difficult to go to special lessons during the year, but for whom the summer period is ideal for participation in development training.

The national network expanding steadily in recent years helps families living at a distance, in the countryside, join the Programme. Similar talent development and assistance work is pursued in many similar Centres in the country, so there is no need to travel to the capital for the children to be provided quality education.

Programme financing is not a simple issue: any kind of external support is welcome. The Centre showing exemplary results might be even more effective if state contribution to its budget increased.

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