

## “Making the highly gifted child part of the group”

(Antoinette Gerichhausen)

Let's go back in time to around 15 years ago. Imagine, for the first time, you as a parent are confronted with 'intellectual giftedness'. Until that moment you had never even heard of the term. At the primary school that your child goes to, there is little knowledge about education specifically for highly intelligent children. What would you do...?



In my case, I gathered knowledge. I attended lectures about intellectual giftedness and I read and read and read as many books as possible about the subject: in relation to upbringing, school, sports, their thinking, emotions, perceptions, etc. I read about how they think, learn, gather information and wholeheartedly throw themselves into things, driven onwards by their inner engine, i.e. their motivation. After gathering all that knowledge, I discovered that very few people actually understand highly intelligent children. My child was shut out, bullied, stigmatised and his true 'self' remained concealed. I followed my heart and tried to convey the knowledge I had gained. When I realised that not everyone was receptive to it, I tried to think of a different way to create understanding for highly gifted children. And who could be a better guide than my highly intelligent child himself?

For me as a lover of 'learning new things' this was the moment that sparked my idea of developing a new teaching method for Spanish (a world language yet not a compulsory part of the curriculum in Dutch primary schools). This method would give highly intelligent children the chance to show their true selves and their capabilities to their teachers and classmates.

A learning method in which he would be able to make his own choices, either because he wants to learn faster or because he wishes to explore a subject in greater depth. Through this learning method, the gifted learner could show the class (and himself) how enjoyable his imagination can be, his creativity, and the way he learns. At the same time, others could show the gifted learner their own skills, their lines of thinking, and their knowledge. In this way, they could learn from one another, learn to truly see one another, and learn to understand each other. The learning method should be designed in such a way that it is suitable for every pupil, at every level.

I consulted leading experts in the field of giftedness and education to see whether the idea had a chance of succeeding. I then started learning Spanish myself and soon realized that a basic level of Spanish would be sufficient to develop a learning method, one that I would in any case have reviewed for linguistic accuracy by professors at university level.

While creating the learning method, I never lost sight for a single moment of the gifted learner, or of how he might respond to or think about the assignments. Through extensive reading and research, I came to understand the following:

- Choice is important in the learning process of gifted learners, indeed, it is essential if they are learning Spanish together with other pupils in the group. Each learner should be able to learn Spanish at their own pace and level. The learning method therefore includes moments of choice, allowing certain assignments to be completed or skipped.
- Some gifted learners wish to learn Spanish only at a minimal level; this option should be incorporated into the learning method. Nevertheless, they should also encounter assignments that cannot be avoided, because they appeal to creativity. Gifted learners sometimes

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need to be encouraged or challenged in this way. Such assignments appear in unexpected places throughout the learning method.

- The learning method must include assignments that engage the gifted learner's analytical abilities. Connections are made between assignments from previous and subsequent chapters, and the gifted learner is challenged to think independently about logical next steps in grammar.
- Gifted learners like to have a clear overview of what they are expected to learn. Therefore, from page one of each new chapter, it is made explicit to the learner what is expected of them.
- At times, gifted learners greatly enjoy working together as part of a larger group. In addition to individual assignments and small-group tasks, the learning method also includes assignments that challenge the group as a whole to collaborate, for example, performing a short play together, creating a song, and presenting it at school.
- Not every gifted learner enjoys learning an additional language; therefore, the learning process also needed to be playful. In a challenging way and with humor, closely connected to the lived experiences of young learners, I have attempted to convey the learning of this new language.

The first part of the learning method *Juan y Rosa* was born in 2005. It contains the elements that are necessary to stimulate gifted learners to engage in learning; the theory has been meticulously translated into practice within the method. Moreover, the learning method does not isolate the gifted learner from the group, but instead challenges them to collaborate, to present, and also to perform individually, allowing the gifted learner to express themselves in their own way.

The method offers every pupil in the group the opportunity to learn Spanish at their own level and at their own pace. In doing so, the learner is encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning process when acquiring this foreign language.

Convinced of the passion that shaped this learning method into what it is today, I continued my work and now, together with users from educational practice, experience that the method earns the status it deserves on its own merits. The learning method, now consisting of three parts, is currently being translated for the English market, where entire classes will be able to learn Spanish with *Juan y Rosa*.

It would be the ultimate crown on my work if gifted learners were not singled out, but fully included within the group, learning Spanish (and other subjects as well 😊) together, each in their own way, through the same learning method, one that adapts to individual needs and preferences. Because it is only through working together that every learner is given the opportunity to come to know themselves in relation to others. They need one another as mirrors in order to understand both themselves and others, to respect individuality, and to appreciate one another through interaction rather than through labels.



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