

Jasna ARRIGONI:
Interview with Taisir Subhi Yamin

1. How did you start your career in education of gifted since you are a physicist?

I got my B.A. and M.A. in physics. I realized that I couldn't make any contribution to this field, because I felt my knowledge and capability are not strong enough to continue. One day I was thinking of how I could find another profession. I started thinking about gifted education. At that time it was very difficult to find somebody in that area. I contacted the British Council because I was very poor and I didn't have any money to study abroad. I secured this scholarship in the British Council to study in England, at the Lancaster University. At this university there wasn't a department of gifted education. They put me in the education research where I could do my research in both : computer system learning and gifted education. Then I started to connect with people in this field, trying to build my network with people, starting reading everything related to the field. In 1994 I graduated from the Lancaster University in England and then started my career in gifted education. When I was in school, I used to see students who were more intelligent than me and more intelligent than other students but worked as taxi drivers or in a grocery shop because teachers were unable to notice their abilities. These people were not given an opportunity to fulfill their needs or to develop their abilities. This also challenged me and drew me in this direction and I felt that I have to find out how we can handle the issue of the gifted people.

2. You have acquired your doctoral thesis in this field in cooperation with prof. J. Renzulli. Can you tell us something about your experiences of working with one of the best - known authorities in the field of gifted, creativity, and innovation in the world?

First of all, when I studied in England, I was under supervision of Peter Goodier, who is now a professor of education and technology. He was my main supervisor. At that time I got in touch with Renzulli and he became something like my father in this field because he was the only person who provided me with all the literature I needed to do my thesis and to communicate with him. After that, when I graduated, I got Fullbright and Fullbright enabled me to spend one year at the Connecticut University with Renzulli. I started working with him and other colleagues from the Department as my counterparts. We were talking about different issues related to education and technology and I came to an idea of a learning system with a platform in which you can offer activities for gifted people. I have learned many things from Renzulli. First of all he is willing to work with diverse people, from different countries, regardless of any criteria. Second, it is his commitment. He is highly committed to work. I have learned from him a lot about things from this area. He has plans specially for the teachers. For example, he created what we call Confratute and this is that made me something similar later on when I was doing conferences or in capacity building programs. You can say Renzulli is the most successful one in the field. Why? When he devised his theory, he made a definition and he was talking about programming and how we can translate definition and the methodology. He made and researched tools and identification tools and after that based programs on the identification and profile, while other researchers didn't manage to go from theory to practice. When you interview Renzulli and ask him why he is successful, he will tell you it is because he started from practice and went to theory. I go to the school, I work with teachers, I see teachers and base my experiences with teachers. I devise a theory and then the theory works, there is no other way. So this is why I like him. I have other colleagues who have had impact on my life but he has had the strongest impact on my life. I learn from

him and I also learn from other people like Sally Reis, Joan Freeman, Ken Mcklusky and others.

3. What is the current situation in the world of education of potentially gifted children and youth? At the conference in Portorož you said that there are no new original theories, new approaches....

I think you are right. What is drawing me to this conclusion? Inertia? Inertia in gifted education means we are moving in the same place and not making **new place**. As you know in psychics you have to make work if you move from a to b, there is a distance you pass and you make a contribution. In gifted education, unfortunately, we are just repeating the story over and over again, we are repeating the story from Louis Terman up to date. We are still fighting each other concerning the definition. Everyone comes with a definition. If you ask what is the right definition for giftedness, you find that up to now there have been more than 100 definitions and we are not able to combine them and find the right definition. For that reason, if we start investigating gifted education, we say what contribution we have made. And we will find that our contribution is really limited. Of course, we have a very big number of teachers and professors who advocate gifted education but the contribution is limited.

For that reason we started to move from what we call gifted education to the potentially gifted education, from creativity to potential creativity etc. Why? We can extend an umbrella, we can have more customers, we can also have freedom to deal with high achievers even if they are not gifted. For that reason we are talking about teaching for thinking within the new trend.

Teaching for thinking means we can find people with a potential and based on that we can offer services. Maybe in the future gifted education will become much better. It is only the beginners who are just repeating all the time and it is only the newcomers that have no platform.

This is the situation. If we compare Croatia with Europe, Croatia is not behind any other country, it is not behind Europe or whatever. There is some quality education here, some quality education in

Europe, like in Germany and other countries, but gifted education is not in the right place. Why? We don't have legislation, we don't have the politicians who support such programmes. You have associations, you have the parents and teachers who are supporting them, but you need funding. This funding should come because this is what people should invest in. Many countries don't invest in gifted education. Now at universities we are just doing things, but we are not contributing on that level. Second, when we publish, we have limited impact on the field. Practices in the field are far away from what we are expecting from gifted education. This is the strange thing about gifted education. Our contribution is moving very slowly and has a very limited impact. Why? In other fields it is different. If you listen to Korado, he will tell you about many advances in astronomy, technology, etc. This is going on very fast, in a very limited period of time. In gifted education you can find somebody who is in 2018 just making a little modification of the model which was published in the 1980s. This is how I understand inertia. We are just repeating without making any advancement.

4. What does it mean for Croatia, where there is no organized system of gifted education. Where can we start, how should we start to improve our educational system?

To find a local organization caring for the gifted would be a good thing. We have some people who are an umbrella, who have the name.

Secondly, to have local universities who start offering courses in gifted education or courses in creativity.

Thirdly, to raise public awareness so that people start hearing in the media, in schools, in public lectures about the importance of gifted education, why we need gifted education in Croatia, why now.

Fourthly, justification. We have to tell the people in politics, in public why we need gifted education. First of all, it is investment in human beings, we are a small country, but we have these people who are the top, who can be problem solvers in the future. They are good practitioners, good teachers, the best medical doctors. We need to grow, we need to make the country stronger in the economy. Who are the people who will do this? It is only the gifted people. They will find different fields of work, they will contribute more, they will

make the country smarter....

For **political stability**. The gifted ones have wisdom, they have the vision, they have planning. When they work for a country, then they help the economy and the political stability and contribute in a humanist way. Whole products will be good for the whole educational system because what you offer is higher quality for the gifted but also for the whole educational system because they will have an example how to deal with high achievers, how to deal with all students in the classroom. Instead of teaching people to become knowledge consumers, you should teach them to become knowledge producers. And those knowledge producers will be problem solvers, and those problem solvers will be the producers with ideas, products and everything. Today some of the people were telling the Mayor of Rijeka that they used to have industry, shipyards. OK, we can come back if we just bring the right people. We keep the brains instead of having brain drain. Gifted education is another method to prevent brain drain. There are many intellectuals who left the country to live in other countries just because of the salary or just because of better facilities or advantages in another country. I need these people. There are indications that gifted education is growing. When you come to Rijeka, to the University, we have now courses, we have people who research, we have workshops, publicity, a journal is coming. All in all things are going in the right direction. If you compare Croatia with the France, up to now they have moved in the same way, at the same speed.

5. Can you tell us something about trends in higher education of future teachers of gifted children? Can you compare the American experience in this field with European experience?

Your question is addressing the issue at three levels. First of all at the local level, second at the European level, and third at the international level including the US. Now, traditionally, you remember, we used to bring people with low grades in education, those who were not able to become medical doctors or engineers. So the only thing they could find was the teaching profession. We have to change the trend. How can we change it? We can insist that entrance criteria for teaching

should be higher. Then we will get student teachers who are the best. Second, we can also change the content we are teaching the future teachers. They should learn about social issues, planning, teaching for the thinking, teaching for the gifted and especially about needs.

Then we have to work with legislators. If you want to have teachers who are highly qualified, who are able to teach with high commitment in school and put a lot of effort into their work, you have to raise the salary. So if you raise the status of the teachers, everybody will think “Why I should not opt for the teaching profession?”. We have to work on different parallel tracks. We have to work with politicians and legislators, they have to raise the status of the teachers, the salaries. We also have to change the content of teaching at their universities, we have to change the entrance criteria. Those who come should be qualified enough to do this. In Europe, there are still problems with teaching. It is the same trend. Only teachers who do not enter other professions come. Now, the private sector is investing in a different way. For example, I need a physicist. I will not take a teacher who just has a degree in teaching. I will go to those who graduated in physics, whatever, I’ll make them qualified through capacity building, I’ll give them a high salary and I am sure about their teaching profession. Or I can get an astronomer, or people from other fields, I qualify them from the pedagogical point of view and then they are able to teach.

They manage to do that after they raise the status of the teacher. Teachers’ salaries in the US are higher than in many other professions. So they don’t have this problem. Thus you will find a teacher who is already highly committed. I will give you one simple example. Jordan is very similar to Croatia, a very small country, teachers are not qualified enough. Queen Noor, the Queen of Jordan, wants to establish a school for the gifted. We are in trouble, where to find these teachers who are able to spend 24 hours daily 7 days in week to work with such people? OK, we will go to university professors, we will talk to the university professors who are the best physicists, mathematicians, chemists, engineers, bring them, interview them to see their personality, and then we offer them 30% more than any other salary in teaching. Then we manage to bring a highest number of people for these schools. We can do a similar thing in gifted education:

just raise the salary, raise the status, give them more respect and then you will have these people. You see, we have to work on many tracks. We have to work at the content level, at the social level, and then by the end of the day you will have an army of good people. I don't mean that teachers who are now in the field are not good, but we mainly accept the average, maybe not qualified enough. This is what they can do, this is what we are getting.

For Croatia, priority education leads to a good economy.

6. How to develop partnerships between all stakeholders in the system that is focused on the child?

You have to work on the local level, with all partners who are concerned about the quality education first, about gifted education second, then about the region, i.e. the countries around us, and then about the international level.

First of all, you need a strong core team at the local level. A strong core team means people who are specialists like you, like your colleagues, who are able to attract people, plan for them. The core team - they are the brain for the whole thing, they are planning, they are communicating, they are doing projects. This **think thank** is the people who are planning everything. This is one thing.

The other thing you have to do is create **ownership**. We are all the owners of these things, it is not only me, not only Jasna, it is all of us. Why? Because we are working together as owners of this project, and this ownership can be created by cooperation, communication, reliable communication, and then we are all planning the thing, we are all executing the thing. You want me to do this limited task. Who will specify the tasks? You will as a think thank, as a core team. I can do only a part and another person will integrate my work. This is what we can do, we can have the right groups, it means you have to create, first of all, the **local core team**.

Then we have to think about **other cities**. We have to do projects where we can join other people and sometimes it is just for publicity of this project. Also, we need to make documentation, something to document outcomes because then we can share the knowledge with other people. This is done at the regional level.

At the international level, well, you've already started. You can continue with ICIE, with ECHA, with WCGTC, with other groups, in other countries. How? You can share writing, publishing, doing conferences together, doing capacity building programs, doing different types of project, applying funding and doing projects together, doing research visits, visiting foreign universities for a few months. You can go to the ICIE in Germany for a few weeks or whatever. You can share resources and do these things. You need tools to do this networking, in particular group sites and the journal. These become your tools for sharing knowledge and expertise. I am optimistic but it takes time, you know, to develop these things.

7. Why don't educational systems dedicate enough attention to the development of creative and innovative education?(27:09)

Because the educational system is originally designed for average people. When you see the curricula, when you see examinations, when you see public exams, when you see teacher qualifications, you notice they are created for the average. Why? Sometimes they say we don't go for elitism because they consider gifted education as a sort of elitism and this is not true.

They always talk about education democracy and there is no education democracy. Because in order to improve the quality of the education system you should believe, first of all, in education democracy, you should believe in differences and diversity of students, you should believe that you have the average, high achievers and the below average. For that reason the structure of the educational system is not improving and for that reason we see suffering in public schools. It is all designed around average people. In this context there are very limited experiences for creative people. Some schools now believe in teaching for thinking, teaching for creativity, but we have to be careful. We cannot say that creative activities are suitable for every student. No, they are for a limited number of students. Also, at the international level, for example the OECD people are now searching how we can improve the educational system while introducing creative activities, while introducing teaching for thinking, productive thinking and so on. They have encountered a problem here. You are teaching

the students but the outcomes are very limited. Why? Because we don't care about knowledge producers or the gifted students in the educational system, which implies that we need educational reforms in different countries in order to change all structures to make it possible for the gifted to be accommodated.

8. What does innovative education mean to you?

Innovative education means I will go beyond the traditional system, I will employ up-to-date knowledge, I will concentrate on skills rather than content, I will give students more responsibility and not only learning. Only then a student will become more responsible for his learning process. I will give the teacher more freedom to learn and to educate himself, and I will also use the technology in order to help the teacher and to facilitate the teaching and learning process. So, in this way innovation education means that we are dealing with all components of the education system in a different way. Instead of the teacher, who is delivering all the materials, it is the students who have access to all the materials. Instead of teaching for the exam we are teaching for products, we are teaching students to think and then the content becomes more flexible. We change the environment of the instruction. For example differentiation - we have content differentiation, outcomes differentiation, environment differentiation, etc. Differentiation becomes a must for innovation education, we make it more dynamic so the educational system becomes more dynamic.

When I become an innovative university professor, I will never go to the classroom or the lectures with my notes. I will go with issues. I go there, of course I have to train the students before, how to handle issues, how to make observations, how to compare and contrast, how to deal with the data we are collecting, then will my students be capable. I will only go there and just give the title, the subtitle, the items, then the students will be like this. When I become a university professor who is a thinker, a planner, a leader, a person who is careful about society issues, then I can consider university innovative. Why? Sometimes there are students who are suffering from asthma, health problems, then university professionals go to their houses, they visit them, they spend some time there, they collect data,

they come to the university, they go to the street, they find people who are homeless. One of the professors who presented was homeless, she was a drug addict. They took her from the street, and they started working with her, and now she has become very nice, a very beautiful woman who is working at the university. She has a lot of energy. This is innovative education. I am not just teaching knowledge. I just go to the street to find where are these issues. The university should be modern. It is a research institution but also a practical institution. As I told you, Renzulli was successful because he started from practice. As goes for the university - don't ask me for how many articles I have published, ask me how many issues I have solved, how much time I have dedicated to make it a better place for students, ask me how many teachers I'm mentoring. So if I'm mentoring teachers from different schools, I am giving them my knowledge, I am giving them my expertise, I am planning for them.

Before you think about innovation education in the school, think about innovation education at the university. Think about how we can change the whole education system starting from higher education and ending with basic education.

9. The goal of every educational system should be an excellence of every child. How to achieve excellence in education?

It is a very tough question because when we talk about excellence, it means we have certain criteria and standards. We put a benchmark high and if you reach there, then you are excellent. If we have curricula and instructional materials and it is up-to-date, we take into consideration the latest developments in each discipline. If it is dynamic and meets the students' needs, and we need to talk about emotional, psychological, social and whatever types of needs, it means it is excellent curricula and instructions, practices, set up, and school organization, and we are talking about talent management and school organization or creativity organizing educational settings. If we have all these components, we are reaching excellence. But excellence means we have the right components, we have the right funding, we have the right tools, we have the right environment, and also we have the right plans. For example, ten years from now how

would I like to see Croatia? Where are we now and where should we be? There should be a plan. You should plan to have the task force, to qualify them in order to achieve excellence ten years from now. You have students who are the target. OK, you are dealing with them for curricula, for values, for attitudes, you prepare them for the future. You have to work on all of these components and then you can say that you are ready to be an example of excellence in the future. I will give one single example. India has many mathematically gifted students. We would like to invest in these people in order to make the economy better. These students start with computer engineering, software engineering. And now billions of dollars are coming out from software engineering in India and they are now leading many countries. There are people who are valuable in Croatia also, we have 10 percent of the gifted Croatian students who we can identify. We can plan them, we can prepare them for the future and they will end top people in this field. If we achieve these things, it means we are in an excellent situation. But now you can see, excellence in education is a polite expression which we use instead of talking about gifted education, instead of talking about high quality education. To achieve excellence in service you need to have quality services. We have excellence in medicine. When you go to the hospital, you can say “Yes, I will get the best service in the country because this hospital reaches all the standards I need in this“. The same goes for education.

10. You work very hard to disseminate relevant information about giftedness, creativity, innovation between different cultures, through Europe, the Middle East, America etc. Through the conferences of your organization.

What impact have your your conferences had in certain countries, from your point of view?

Thank you for this question, but I can say I belong to these countries. For example, a Dean in Rijeka, a Dean in Croatia, considered myself belonging to this country. I visited other countries and I made our conferences in these countries. There is a reason for a conference in each country. First of all, it is not only scientific, we also learn from the people we are working with. For example, when

I work with you and with your colleagues here, we learn about your culture, about your contribution, about your university and this is valuable for our knowledge. Secondly, we have the right platform because we are working like a catalyst. The catalyst means that we have a platform and bring people together, we provide all the required information, arrangements, everything that can work together. Once they start, our contribution is to bring people together. Here we try to introduce latest developments. Before every conference we make sure that we have a new volume of the journal, that we have new literature available. The fourth thing, when we bring keynotes, we try to bring the old generation and the new generation. Then we can see how the keynotes are moving because it is also our responsibility to introduce the new generation in order to see how they are thinking, how they can contribute and so on.

Fifth, we believe strongly in our association and that we belong to one globe. It is my duty to serve Croatian people exactly like American people or German people or French people. These are human beings and we exist to serve these people. Our organisation strongly believes that it is our duty to help these people. For that reason, you can see, since 2005 up to now we have managed to complete many international projects with many countries because of this attitude. Why? Because in our community most of the people have the same attitude. I like to work with Croatians, Serbians, Slovenes, Germans, whatever. Why? Because we would like to benefit from each other. As an evidence, I can tell you that there are now many groups working together and most of them meet at our conferences. This makes us happy and encourages us to continue in the same direction. It is our duty to introduce, to publish, to teach. So, I can say we have succeeded in this area. We try all the time to make quality conferences. Our conferences are different because of the contribution of everybody.

11. You have been in Croatia a few times. What do you think about our educational system, scientists and other professionals? Do you have any advice for them?

I have visited Croatia several times. I have met with teachers, professionals like you, like Korado, like the Mayor of Rijeka, the ex- minister of Education, your Dean and so on. I feel that people are ambitious, they are honest, they would like to do something, whenever they have an opportunity. In public I am sure they are supported, because they need something better for the country. But I don't know much about what is going on in Croatia and thus I should not judge. I should say I am optimistic because you have people who are much better than me. They have enough information, they know the trend in the country, they understand politics and everything. I know that I have limited knowledge of Croatia. I am optimistic. Why? Because there are many indications you have enough people who have knowledge, positive attitudes, the capability to do something good for the country and they are willing to cooperate at the international level. Like you, like others who have communicated with people from different parts of the world. For that reason I say I am optimistic.

Moreover, I am emotionally involved. If somebody asks me about Croatia, even if I see something, I pretend I don't see it. Even if it is negative. For that reason maybe somebody can say that I'm in favour of this country. Yes, I am. But I say I am optimistic from the scientific point of view. I think that the future will be much better. This is my point of view.