ISSN: 3066-7194
Research Article
Novel Journal of Applied Sciences Research

Comparison of Gifted Education in the Netherlands and in the Czech Republic

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Submitted: 25 June 2026 **Accepted:** 06 August 2026 **Published:** 12 August 2026

Citation: *Wills, N. (2026). Comparison of Gifted Education in the Netherlands and in the Czech Republic. Nov Joun of Appl Sci Res, 3(4), 01-05.*

Abstract

This study compares approaches to the education of gifted pupils in primary schools in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. Its aim is to identify key differences in support systems, teaching practices, and professional roles involved in gifted education in both contexts. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through document analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews conducted in selected Czech and Dutch schools representing comparable educational levels. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that Dutch schools provide systematic and coordinated support for gifted pupils through specialized giftedness coordinators working in collaboration with external experts, with an emphasis on individually tailored projects addressing both academic and socio-emotional needs. In contrast, support in the Czech schools examined is less structured and relies mainly on enrichment of standard instruction, with limited individual differentiation. Differences were also identified in teacher professional development and parental involvement. The results highlight structural and organizational factors influencing gifted education and offer implications for the development of more systematic support strategies within the Czech educational context.

Keywords: Comparison, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Support for Gifted Pupils.

Introduction

Education of gifted pupils is a complex and contemporary area of pedagogical research that requires a targeted and systematic approach. Although the topic of giftedness and exceptional ability has received increasing attention in recent years, significant differences persist between countries, affecting the effectiveness of support provided to these pupils. The Netherlands and the Czech Republic present an interesting contrast in terms of the organization and conceptual approach to supporting gifted pupils. The Netherlands offers a model of a sophisticated and systematically integrated system that can serve as inspiration and a source of examples of good practice, while the Czech Republic still lacks a comprehensive systemic framework and coordinated support for these pupils.

The very view of giftedness differs. The traditional idea of innate and unchangeable giftedness is only marginally held in the Netherlands; experts tend to rely on modern developmental models that emphasize the interaction between innate abilities and personality or environmental factors [1]. According to Czech Decree 27/2016, a gifted pupil is one who, with adequate support, demonstrates significantly higher abilities than their peers in one or more areas, such as intellectual, physical, manual, artistic, or social. An exceptionally gifted pupil excels in several areas at the same time [2].

In recent years, the Netherlands has shifted away from relying primarily on IQ tests for identifying gifted pupils, favoring a more holistic approach that incorporates observations and interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of each individual [3]. In contrast, gifted identification in the Czech Republic continues to depend largely on teacher nominations and intelligence testing, resulting in a very small proportion of the estimated gifted population being formally recognized [4]. In the Czech Republic, the formal assessment of gifted pupils is carried out in public counselling services, specifically pedagogical-psychological counselling centers, which are part of a broader network of public educational support institutions, also including special education centers [5]. In the Netherlands, external educational guidance is largely provided through the private sector, which offers specialized support across various educational areas [6]. Additionally, Dutch schools often have counsellors for gifted pupils on-site, who provide individualized guidance and, when needed, supplementary sessions [7].

The school systems in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands both provide opportunities to support gifted pupils, although the approaches differ in scope and structure. In the Czech Republic, schools typically offer competitions and extracurricular activities [8], the content of which is determined by the school rather than prescribed by the curriculum. These activities are generally traditional and easy to implement, but they often lack a deeper conceptual framework for gifted education [9]. In contrast, the Netherlands offers a broader range of programs specifically designed for gifted pupils. These include accelerated and individualized programs, pull-out sessions, full-time gifted education, specialized classes, as well as access to summer schools and universities for children. Such initiatives provide more tailored and diverse opportunities to develop pupils' abilities beyond the standard curriculum.

This situation may be partly explained by the fact that teachers in the Czech Republic report having received insufficient training, which forces them to improvise, and they also consider it challenging to educate gifted pupils within regular classroom settings. In addition to this lack of specialized preparation, there is often a shortage of appropriate teaching materials and adequate conditions necessary for the effective education of these pupils [10].

Regarding teacher education in the Netherlands, educators have the opportunity to enhance their skills and better prepare for teaching gifted and talented pupils through training programs offered by the European Council for High Ability (ECHA).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, which allows for in-depth exploration of a few selected cases [11]. This approach was chosen for its ability to capture the complexity and uniqueness of the phenomenon, providing flexibility in data collection, and revealing connections that other methods might overlook. The empirical aim was to compare approaches to the education of gifted pupils in primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, focusing on instructional methods and support. Four schools were purposefully selected, as they were considered likely to provide valuable and relevant insights. In each country, two schools were chosen to represent typical cases within their respective educational systems. In the Czech Republic, the sample included a regular primary school and the lower stage of an eight-year grammar school, while in the Netherlands equivalent schools were selected. These schools were selected based on the Dutch education system, which specifies that primary and lower secondary education are separate, with a transition between institutions. Data collection combined observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observation allowed direct study of pupils' behavior and interactions, beginning with broad descriptive observation and followed by focused observation informed by interviews. Interviews provided deeper insights into respondents' perspectives, with participants purposefully selected from school counselling staff and teachers directly involved with gifted pupils. Document analysis offered supplementary, unbiased information. Data was analyzed using open coding, with text segments labelled, categorized, and thematically examined to identify recurring patterns and insights.

Finding

Substantial differences emerge in the approach to gifted pupils in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. In the examined Dutch schools, gifted education is based on individualization, autonomy, and flexibility, enabling pupils to adapt their learning environment, manage their learning pace independently, and transfer between schools or programs when their needs change. Assessment and educational practices emphasize not only academic achievement but also pupils' overall development, psychological well-being, and social skills. Parental expectations in the Dutch context similarly extend beyond academic success and focus on the child's holistic development, with parents actively involved in shaping their children's educational pathways. In contrast, the analyzed Czech schools operate within a more structured and selective system characterized by standardized instruction, fixed schedules, and limited opportunities for individualization. Gifted pupils are primarily educated in selective classes or specialized schools with a strong emphasis on academic performance and formal admission procedures, while parental interaction with schools is largely limited to consultations regarding pupils' academic achievement.

Table 1: School Culture

School	Results
Secondary education NL	The school enables pupils to design their own working environment according to individual needs and provides both open spaces and specialized studios for the realization of their projects.
Primary education NL	School culture is founded on a flexible and individualized approach to education, where pupils of different age groups share common classrooms and learn at their own pace. Educators are specialized in working with gifted pupils and continuously engage in professional development to effectively support both them academic and social growth.
Secondary education CZ	The school regards all its pupils as gifted, and does not employ formal diagnostics, but offers IQ testing through Mensa. It emphasizes a supportive environment and preparation for the final examination.
Primary education CZ	The school opens four first-year groups: two general classes, one music class, and one bilingual English class. Pupils in the selective classes are not considered exceptionally gifted but rather as having potential for the specific program focus.

Table 2: Pupils Admissions

School	Results
Secondary education NL	A key criterion for admission to the school is a recommendation from the primary education institution. Based on this recommendation, pupils compile a list of preferred schools, from which one is subsequently selected through a lottery system. The school also allows pupils to transfer during their studies if them current educational setting does not adequately meet their individual needs.
Primary education NL	Admission to the Socrates group is based on an intelligence assessment (IQ above 130), questionnaires completed by both parents and teachers, and an analysis of the pupils' academic performance conducted by a special education professional. Pupils subsequently undergo a two-week trial period to evaluate their adaptation and the suitability of the educational environment. When necessary, the school provides support in identifying alternative educational options.
Secondary education CZ	Placement in the first year is determined through centrally administered SCIO entrance examinations.
Primary education CZ	Admission to the first grade is determined by school catchment areas, whereas entry into selective classes is subject to specialized entrance examinations. Applicants for the music class are required to pass a talent-based audition, while admission to the English class involves an assessment of school readiness and an interview with a psychologist.

Notable differences appear in the instructional methods and forms used in the education of gifted pupils in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. In the examined Dutch schools, teaching is highly flexible and individualized, with a strong emphasis on project-based learning. This approach is facilitated by a reduction of regular classroom instruction to approximately one third of the time, creating space for in-depth exploration and independent inquiry. Pupils select their own topics, design individual schedules, and actively connect theory with practice, while teachers act as mentors and subject experts providing personalized support.

Table 3: School–Parent Collaboration and Parental Expectations

School	**Results**
Secondary education NL	Parents of gifted children primarily emphasize their children's well-being; therefore, schools promote close cooperation and strive to create an environment in which pupils receive appropriate recognition for their abilities.
Primary education NL	Cooperation between the school and parents involves seeking a balance between parental expectations and the pupil's actual capacities. While some parents primarily aim for their children to rediscover enjoyment in learning, others hold high ambitions related to academic achievement, which may result in unrealistic expectations that the school must moderate in consideration of the pupil's overall development.
Secondary education CZ	Parental expectations are primarily focused on the academic quality of education, successful completion of the final examination, and the future professional prospects of them children.
Primary education CZ	Parents hold diverse expectations regarding the education of children in selective classes, often underestimating the necessity of home study and sometimes overestimating their children's abilities. In the case of exceptionally gifted children, parents frequently choose an alternative school.

In contrast, the observed Czech schools predominantly apply an enrichment model, in which the standard curriculum is expanded through additional tasks and activities designed to deepen pupils' knowledge in their specific areas of interest within a fixed instructional framework. Although this model allows differentiation, opportunities for pupils' autonomy, flexible planning, and self-directed learning remain limited, resulting in a less adaptable system in terms of responding to individual educational needs.

Table 4: Teaching Methods and Approaches

School	Results
Secondary education NL	The school enables pupils to design their own working environment according to individual needs and provides both open spaces and specialized studios for the realization of their projects.
Primary education NL	School culture is founded on a flexible and individualized approach to education, where pupils of different age groups share common classrooms and learn at their own pace. Educators are specialized in working with gifted pupils and continuously engage in professional development to effectively support both them academic and social growth.
Secondary education CZ	The school regards all its pupils as gifted, and does not employ formal diagnostics, but offers IQ testing through Mensa. It emphasizes a supportive environment and preparation for the final examination.
Primary education CZ	The school opens four first-year groups: two general classes, one music class, and one bilingual English class. Pupils in the selective classes are not considered exceptionally gifted but rather as having potential for the specific program focus.

Table 5: Educational Activities Offered

School	Results
Secondary education NL	The school provides pupils with access to a broad network of experts who assist them in the development of individual projects and regularly organizes inspirational sessions led by both school- based and external specialists on a variety of topics.
Primary education NL	The school emphasizes an individualized approach and the adaptation of instruction to the needs of gifted pupils, including shortened regular lessons and a focus on more complex tasks such as mathematics, programming, and chess. The curriculum also incorporates psychoeducation, concentrating on understanding brain functioning and effective learning strategies. However, the school lacks sufficient support for hands-on activities and physical exercise.
Secondary education CZ	Specialized courses for gifted pupils have not been established. The school offers optional robotics and mathematics clubs, as well as an unconventional subject in environmental education, but lacks hands-on instruction.
Primary education CZ	In the fourth grade, pupils select an optional subject. After school, they may participate in various extracurricular activities. However, the availability of these activities is not evenly distributed across all age groups; older pupils have a wider range of options, whereas younger pupils face a more limited selection.

In contrast, support for gifted pupils in the observed Czech schools is often insufficiently structured and limited by the overload of existing counselling services, which primarily focus on pupils with learning difficulties. Identification of giftedness is sporadic, support is usually restricted to subject-specific enrichment recommendations, and a comprehensive coordination mechanism is largely absent. External counselling services are accessed through a lengthy referral process and are further underutilized due to the prevailing perception that such services are intended mainly for pupils with difficulties, while limited teacher training and awareness further constrain the systematic recognition and development of gifted pupils' potential.

Significant differences exist in the ways pedagogical staff support gifted pupils in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. In the examined Dutch schools, support for gifted pupils is systematic and well-integrated, based on continuous identification of pupils' abilities and needs during instruction, followed by the development of individualized education plans that address both academic and psychological aspects of development. Support is coordinated by specialized giftedness coordinators and multidisciplinary counselling teams, with active collaboration with private external experts, allowing for timely, flexible, and holistic interventions. Teachers are continuously trained in gifted education through regular

Table 6: Pupils Support and Counselling Services

School	Results
Secondary education NL	The school provides extensive support to pupils through the Aandacht team, an external psychologist, individualized education plans (OPP), specialized facilities, and a giftedness coordinator.
Primary education NL	Support and coordination are ensured by a coordinator for gifted pupils, while direct support is provided by an intern begeleider. External counselling services are arranged and funded either by the school or by parents, depending on whether the issue affects the child's functioning at school. Parents also have the option to use state-funded low-threshold counselling support for parents and children.
Secondary education CZ	The school employs only two staff members: one serves as a prevention specialist and the other as an educational counsellor; the primary support body is the subject committee. Pupils generally, do not make use of external counselling services.
Primary education CZ	Within the school program, cooperation between gifted pupils and a psychologist is formally included; however, in practice, support for this group of pupils is provided primarily by a special education teacher. The identification of gifted pupils is currently insufficient, with only a very small number of pupils undergoing formal diagnostic assessment. Support for gifted pupils is often neglected, particularly due to the overload of a system primarily focused on pupils with special educational needs. The greatest attention is given to gifted pupils in mathematics, while the option of grade acceleration is difficult to implement in practice.

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