

## **The Sparkle Project**

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### **Reason for and context of the study**

Educational Insights began as a study group of international researchers and educator/practitioners in the fields of gifted and twice-exceptional education. When Covid lockdown was declared in the spring of 2020, it quickly became clear that it would have a major impact on education. From one day to the next, schools and teachers were forced to teach in completely different ways. This had a direct impact on applied didactics and pedagogy and thus on how teachers could meet the educational needs of a wide range of students under uncertain, unusual circumstances.

In the Netherlands, home education and distance education for both primary and secondary education is rare. Home education may be provided only if there are weighty ideological reasons for parents not to allow their child to participate in regular education. Distance education occurs only in cases where parents take their children abroad for an extended period of time and they do not enroll their children in school within the destination country. In contrast, home schooling is not uncommon in the United States, and the rules for doing so are more flexible than in the Netherlands. Online education is also more common because there are regions where physically going to school is difficult, or students with learning challenges such as sensory overload are, by law, allowed to receive a virtual education.

In both countries, prior to 2020, the majority of educational options for children in the 4-18 age group was not provided virtually. Teaching practices that were dependent on personal, face-to-face teacher-student contact (such as creative, flexible instructional strategies, the building of personal relationships, observations of a student's developmental progress, etc.) were no longer possible in the same way. Covid abruptly changed the educational landscape.

As Covid spread around the world, the wake of disruption to all facets of society was devastating. Gaps in access to health care, community, and school resources were exposed as never before. Access to reliable internet disproportionately impacted rural and isolated populations. Education for students who were already struggling to be successful within regular schooling, such as gifted, highly gifted, and twice-exceptional students, became minimal.

Despite the many challenges, teachers continued to try to teach all their learners to the best of their abilities. Those who worked with gifted, highly gifted, and twice-exceptional students reported their growing frustration and noted that the so-called "regular education" programs had now taken precedence over students who needed different educational settings and responses. These teachers shared their disappointments, their concerns, and their frustrations because they had little or no time or space to offer what was needed to these overlooked students. In listening to the teacher comments, it was as if these professionals had lost the sparkle in their eyes.

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<sup>2</sup> Thank you Hernán Castillo Hermosilla for the translation of the questionnaire into Spanish.

## **Approach and design of the study**

The Sparkle Study focused on teachers and teaching, which brought a different perspective to the question of how Covid impacted education. Why do some teachers see their job as bringing joy and satisfaction into their lives? What about teachers whose sparkle has diminished or, for the moment, even disappeared? We designed the project to see if we might learn more about what brings sparkle in daily practice. The primary target group was educational professionals working in primary and secondary education (ages 4-18) in the Netherlands and the United States.

We based the theoretical framework on three theories: the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000); the Achievement Orientation Model (Siegle & McCoach, 2017); and the Reflection Theory (Korthagen, 2017). We believed that these three theories affected the teacher's motivation equally. Therefore, we expected core elements of these theories to be the explanation why teachers keep sparkling in their jobs. The concepts of competence, autonomy and relationship from Deci and Ryan's theory were the first elements we considered to be the basis for the teachers' motivation. To that we added the concepts of goal valuation, self-efficacy and the teacher's perception of how the ecological system in which they worked supported their chances for success. Finally we recognized the importance of Korthagen's concept of the ability to reflect *on* and *in* action.

The original research questions were operationalized in a questionnaire consisting of three parts: brief demographics; questions that provided insights into our original research question; and two specific questions about the effects of Covid on teachers' work. We designed closed questions for which the respondents in the study had to select three responses from several stems. There was also an option for each question in which respondents could respond with "other" and fill out their answer.

Next, 32 educators — from the Netherlands and the United States, who belonged to the target group of the study — validated the prepared questionnaire. To do so, they first completed the questionnaire as if they were participants. Then they completed a second questionnaire through which they provided feedback on the questions asked and the response categories. Finally, based on this feedback, we modified the questionnaire. In the meantime, a website was built so the questionnaires would be accessible. On this website a video was posted in which we, as researchers ourselves, described what motivates us in our work as teacher educators. Respondents were called upon via social media and direct mailing to participate in the study.

## **Early findings**

Initially, we looked to see if there was any indication in the data whether differences existed between teachers in the Netherlands and the U.S. regarding why and when they sparkle in their work and what motivates them. The analysis revealed that significant differences existed in only a few areas but that the effect size of the differences was so small they could be ignored. Therefore, the preliminary conclusion was that with regard to their professional motivation, there were no differences between the two groups of teachers.

## **Demographics**

Over 91% of respondents were women and over 63% of respondents were employed as teachers. In over 52% of cases, they worked with students who had been identified as gifted, in 59% of cases they indicated that some of their students had been identified as potentially twice-

exceptional students. In over 58% of the schools, the education of gifted students is offered as part of the regular classroom education. In only 10% of cases, other options such as pull out or special interventions were offered. In over 73.5% of the cases, there was a formal policy on teaching gifted students in the schools where the respondents worked. Over 70% of the respondents were working in primary education, and in 85% of the cases the respondents were involved in teaching only one age group.

### **Primary reasons for becoming a teacher**

Most educational professionals stated they originally became teachers because they wanted to work with children — helping them learn things they did not know before. Most respondents indicated that they wanted to become teachers from a young age. These responses can be interpreted as opportunities for teachers to play the role of a positive change agent where the focus is on the teacher as an individual and their individual professional needs.

### **The most value about teaching?**

For the participants, the three most valuable aspects about teaching were the opportunity to contribute to the happiness and well-being of their students; knowing they are making a difference to the student; and being able to be an important part of their students' learning process. These ratings can also be traced to the teacher's role as a positive change agent.

### **At their best in teaching**

Respondents indicated four different times when they feel they are functioning at their best when they are teaching: When they find the strategies to meet a student's individual educational needs; when they see their students having fun learning; when they see that all students are truly engaged; and when they see their students growing emotionally. So again, we recognized that the teacher's role as a positive change agent is an important aspect of teacher satisfaction. The individual needs of the respondents, as professionals, consistently appeared secondary to this. The teachers described their feelings during times when they are at their best as energized, motivated, and connected. These are three emotions that can, in turn, be radiated and impactful to their students and colleagues.

When asked what respondents do to make their eyes sparkle in their work, over 25% of teachers indicated that they learn with their students and leave room for their students' chance discoveries, i.e., offer a more open educational context in which that is possible. Again, this is another highly rated indication of the teacher's role as a positive change agent. What is striking, however, is that over 55% of all respondents indicated that in order to make their eyes sparkle for their profession, they make sure, above all, that they bond with their students on a personal level. In other words, investing in the pedagogical relationship with students is seen as the most important factor.

Finally, we asked participants two questions: What students open up your heart? and when do you experience the most professional satisfaction? These two questions had identical response stems. The highest selection rates were the same for both questions. They enjoyed students who challenged them to continue learning on their own, students for whom they had to puzzle to make meaningful interventions, and students who became enthusiastic during the learning process. All three stems are not about students needing their teacher, but rather describe situations in which the teacher becomes involved in a “partners in learning” process.

### **Initial conclusions**

The main conclusion of this study is that education is “personal.” Teachers want to make a difference in the lives of their students. Response categories that focused primarily on the pedagogical relationships between students and teachers and on the teacher's competencies to be attuned to the educational needs of their students were chosen most often. In addition, we saw that response categories focused on teacher self-actualization had high selection rates. Respondents consider it important to have sufficient opportunities to continue to develop as a professional. In this regard, situations that focused on the teacher's competencies scored very high, as did response categories in which the dynamics of the teaching profession came out strongly.

What was remarkable was that teachers participating in the study (as well as those who participated in the process of developing the questionnaire), experienced their involvement as a stand-alone intervention through which they naturally reflected on their professional motivation. This was named by many respondents as reminding them of the core values of their profession that made them once choose this profession.

### **The Original Theories Didn't Fit**

When we tried to make the connection between these initial findings and the original theoretical frameworks upon which we had formulated our questions, we concluded that the initial framework and the findings were not a match. On that basis, we started to see what could be a fresh theoretical framework for future study. In doing so, we found that the research identified eight actions for the educational professional: S = Self-actualizing ; P = Personalizing; A = Adapting; R = Relating; K = Knowing; L = Learning; E = Evolving; R = Reflecting. This shifted the emphasis from SPARKLE to SPARKLER. Each of the actions indicate that teacher motivation gains momentum when the teacher plays an active role in it.

### **Limitations and Recommendations.**

The study has a number of limitations. First, the number of respondents from the U.S. was relatively low. Statistically this does not prevent the first preliminary conclusion — namely that hardly any significant differences between countries were observable and that the effect size is limited. However, there are very large differences in the U.S. in how education is regulated by state. It would be interesting if, by expanding the number of respondents in the U.S., we could see whether differences between countries might then be observable.

Secondly, mainly descriptive statistics indicate where the results could give rise to further research. However, the research was conducted at a time when a rapidly spreading infectious disease worldwide led to extreme conditions and the disruption of society was unprecedented. Any form of follow-up research must thereby in some way account for the fact that those circumstances have now changed, potentially affecting a comparison of outcomes.

The third constraint is caused by the composition of the group of respondents. Although the call to participate was generalized, participating respondents were primarily involved in teaching gifted students. There was hardly any response from respondents who believed that they do not deal professionally with gifted students. Thus, we cannot say whether teachers who classify themselves under the latter category give similar answers and thus have similar reasons for being motivated for their work. This has implications for the extent to which the results found are generalizable to other groups of educational professionals.

In terms of recommendations, the eight identified actions (SPARKLER) and the conclusions drawn from them — that teachers themselves must take active actions to feel motivated and persevere in their role as professionals — require further research. This initial conclusion should thus be seen as a prelude to a more qualitative study in which in-depth interviews with educational professionals can provide a better view of the concept validity of the SPARKLER concept. Only when that is in place can possible interventions for emphases in teacher education and forms of ongoing professional development for teachers be better substantiated.

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