

## HIGH ABILITIES / GIFTEDNESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF BRAZILIAN THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to review Brazilian dissertations and theses on High Ability / Giftedness (HA / G) in higher education. For this, we searched the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations. The theses and dissertations were categorized according to the frequency of publication over the years, the universities of origin, the type of study, the objectives, the number of participants and the main results. Forty-seven researches were found and, from reading the abstracts, those that did not specifically address the issue of HA / G in the university context and / or that were repeated were excluded, resulting in a total of seven, five of which were master's and two doctoral degrees between 2011 and 2017. It was concluded that the topics most addressed in the research related to identification. It is a topic of recent interest and lacking studies that investigate broader issues related to college students with HA/ G.

**Keywords:** Literature review; higher education; intellectual giftedness.

### Altas habilidades/superdotación en la enseñanza universitaria: análisis de tesinas y tesis brasileñas

#### RESUMEN

Se pretendió realizar un estudio de revisión de tesis y tesis brasileñas sobre Altas Habilidades/Superdotación (AH/SD) en la enseñanza universitaria. Para ello, se efectuó una búsqueda en la Biblioteca Digital Brasileña de Tesis y Tesinas. Se categorizó las tesis y tesinas cuanto a la frecuencia de la publicación a lo largo de los años, las universidades de origen, el tipo de estudio, los objetivos, el número de participantes y los principales resultados. Se encontraron 47 investigaciones y, a partir de la lectura de los resúmenes, se excluyeron las que no abordaban específicamente la temática de AH/SD en el contexto universitario y/o que se repitieron, resultando al total siete, siendo cinco de maestría y dos doctorales realizadas entre 2011 a 2017. Se concluyó que los temas más abordados en las investigaciones se relacionaron a la identificación. Es una temática de interés reciente y carente de estudios que investiguen problemáticas más amplias relativas a los estudiantes universitarios con AH/SD.

**Palabras clave:** Revisión de literatura; enseñanza universitaria; superdotados.

### Altas habilidades/superdotação no ensino superior: análise de dissertações e teses brasileiras

#### RESUMO

Pretendeu-se realizar um estudo de revisão de dissertações e teses brasileiras sobre Altas Habilidades/Superdotação (AH/SD) no ensino superior. Para isso, efetuou-se uma busca na Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações. As teses e dissertações foram categorizadas quanto à frequência da publicação ao longo dos anos, as universidades de origem, o tipo de estudo, os objetivos, o número de participantes e os principais resultados. Foram encontradas 47 pesquisas e, a partir da leitura dos resumos, foram excluídas as que não abordavam especificamente a temática de AH/SD no contexto universitário e/ou que se repetiram, resultando no total sete, sendo cinco de mestrado e duas de doutorado realizadas entre 2011 a 2017. Concluiu-se que os temas mais abordados nas pesquisas relacionaram-se à identificação. É uma temática de interesse recente e carente de estudos que investiguem problemáticas mais amplas relativas aos estudantes universitários com AH/SD.

**Palavras-chave:** Revisão de literatura; ensino superior; superdotados

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## INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian legislation defines people with High Abilities / Giftedness as individuals who “display high potential in at least one of the following areas: intellect, academy, leadership, arts, psychomotricity and so on” (Brasil, 2008, p. 15). According to the National Policy of Special Education from a Perspective of Inclusive Education (Brasil, 2008) these people also present “intense creativity, deep engagement with learning and commitment in the realization of tasks in areas of their interest” (p. 15).

Renzulli (1977), based on his theory of the Three Rings, defines HA/G: higher than average skills, commitment to task, and creativity. The interplay of these three components is the thing that characterizes the behavior of someone with intellectual giftedness. Renzulli (1998) argues that, in addition to the Three Rings, other factors must be taken into consideration because they might explain why some people display behaviors of intellectual giftedness at certain moments or under certain circumstances depending on a few environmental or family-related factors. Some of these factors are the characteristics of their parents or family, socio-economic levels, school education and stimulating environments since early childhood. According to Renzulli (1977, 1998), the formal educational environment to which a child is exposed determines the manifestation and development of HA/G.

Renzulli (2014) presents two categories of intellectual giftedness: “school, or academic giftedness” and “creative-productive giftedness.” Academic giftedness is more easily measured by tests on intelligence and/or on cognitive skills. For that reason, it is more frequently used for identification. Concerning, creative-productive giftedness, emphasis is placed on the “development of thoughts, solutions, and original products and materials, which are purposefully developed in order to produce an impact on one or more audiences” (p. 231). It might be present in any human activity. Individuals with this type of giftedness are led to use their thoughts in order to produce new ideas and make a transition from simple consumer to producer of knowledge.

The Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC), in accordance with the guidelines of the National Policy of Special Education and the perspective of Inclusive Education (Brasil, 2008), defends the importance of identifying this contingent within the education system by arguing that all managing organs of education, at all levels of the federation, must promote actions, programs and projects in order to provide support to Special Education necessities. Such premise is confirmed by the change in the legislation by means of Law Project nº. 4.700, of 2012, which regulates the identification, registration and support of students with HS / IG in

elementary and higher education. The deadline for accomplishing the task was four years since the date of publication.

According to Brandão (2010), there is a blank space when it comes to scientific exploration for the establishment of a process of such identification in Brazil, especially regarding children and young people, in order to provide adequate recognition, orientation and development. Among the resources used for supporting such demand there are acceleration, curricular enrichment and the availability of specialized services and special programs that take place out of normal classroom schedules. All these practices are very efficient strategies in order to satisfy learning necessities of students with HA/G. However, the offering of such services to the HA/G public is quite restricted. There are very few types of available services and qualified professionals for the realization of this work. Advertisement in the area is still small and does not reach the whole educational community as a means to produce awareness of the urgent need to think of this public (Martelli, Lima, & Moreira, 2016).

Decree n. 7.611, of November 17, 2011, which regulates Special Education and special pedagogical/educational services, considers that the target for Special Education are people with special necessities, with global development disorders and for people with HA/G. Thus, when necessary, these individuals have the right to Special Education in order to promote development and as effective measures for individual support in environments that maximize academic as well as social development.

The legislation is in consonance with literature in the area. There is a consensus regarding the need to provide this type of service in order to satisfy the specific necessities of these students (Alencar, 2001; Fleith, 2007; Cupertino, 2008). In order to make it really democratic, Special Education needs to be provided to all levels of the education system, including higher education. Nowadays, the most commonly provided assistance services are multifunctional resource rooms and centers for activities for students with HA/G. However, higher education students do not get that kind of support (Martelli et al., 2016).

Pedro et al. (2016) conducted a survey on Brazilian theses and dissertations produced between 1987 and 2014 in the area of HA/G. The authors identified a total sum of 126 productions, out of which 110 were dissertations and 16 were theses. They came up with 17 topic categories: service, assessment, social context, creativity, double exceptionality, inclusion, survey, playfulness, public policies, precociousness, social representation and adult intellectual giftedness. In the identification category, the authors found

18 productions and, concerning adult intellectual giftedness, only two.

Martins, Pedro and Ogeda (2016) reviewed Brazilian theses and dissertations produced between 2005 and 2014 approaching the theme of identification of people with HA/G. Results show that, out of 91 listed publications, 18 were of identification and only one had been realized in a university environment with university teachers as participants and possible indicators of students with potential for HA/G.

Although individuals with HA/G are part of the target for Special Education, they do not get enough attention from the government's education policies and even less attention in the academic community. However, it is possible to observe a tendency for growth in studies on that theme and an increasing level of commitment by educators and psychologists (Chacon & Martins, 2014).

The theme of identification and development of adult individuals with characteristics of HA/G does not occur very often in public or private education systems (Pereira & Barbosa, 2011; Cianca & Marquezine, 2014). Rinn and Bishop (2015) argue that studies with intellectually gifted adults are rare. Besides, these studies frequently make methodological mistakes such as inaccurate, unclear definitions of intellectual giftedness, insufficient samples and lack of groups for comparison. By making it clear that the adult phase represents the greatest part of an individual's life, the authors argue that intellectual giftedness in this phase must be investigated and denounce the fact that studies most often focus on the intellectually gifted only while they are still children. Freitas and Pérez (2010) validate these data with their statement that, in general, specialized literature tends to analyze the characteristics of children and adolescents while rarely approaching adults.

According to Cianca and Marquezine (2014), the university environment, despite the tradition of sending students out to projects and more specific studies, as an attempt to satisfy the necessities of those considered to be intellectually gifted, seems to remain an inefficient solution to the problem. University students with HA/G who were not identified in the previous years, should now have the opportunity to experience different proposals in order to develop their skills as a means to avoid invisibility, according to Pérez (2003), meet their own expectations and feel successful.

Wechsler and Suarez (2016) identified in 170 university students in graduation courses (Languages, Arts, History or Pedagogy) the presence or absence of knowledge on HA/G. These undergraduates were also asked how they would be able to identify HA/G students when they became teachers. In order to do that, the teachers employed a questionnaire containing six open

answer questions regarding HA/G. Results show that the future teachers have a lot of questions concerning the HA/G phenomenon. They even question themselves whether such responsibility belongs to them or to the administration. The research produced evidence that these future teachers were not ready to identify and handle HA/G students.

The objective of this paper was to produce a review on Brazilian dissertations and theses on HS/ IG in higher education by categorizing researches in terms of frequency of publication throughout the years, university of origin, authors, type of research, study objectives, number of participants and most relevant results.

## METHOD

Because it is a bibliographical research, the search for mastering and doctoring research papers was conducted at the Brazilian Digital Library of Dissertations and Theses, or "Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações" (BDTD) in order to investigate existing researches on HA/G in higher education in all years until January/2018. Terms such as "high abilities", "intellectual giftedness", "giftedness", "higher education", "university", and "university student(s)" were used. The established exclusion criteria were: bibliographical researches, researches that did not specifically approach the HA/G theme and researches in which the participants were not in higher education. There was a reading of the selected abstracts and, afterwards, of the whole articles in order to assess the frequency of publication throughout the years, university of origin, type of research, objective of the studies, number of participants and most relevant results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey realized at the data base resulted in a total sum of 47 productions. 11 were repetitions according to the combination or terms. 29 did not specifically approach the theme. Therefore, the total number of analyzed researches was seven.

Five of the productions were in the area of education, one was from the area of Special Education and one was from the area of psychology. Most of them

(3) were from the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). All productions were from public universities as demonstrated by Table 1.

According to Chacon and Martins (2014), there has been an increase in the number of studies related to HA/G in the past few years, especially in the areas of Education and Psychology. Studies related to this public in higher education are also present in these two areas, most often in education. It is important to emphasize that the three researches realized at the

**Table 1** - Institution, quantity, area of the program, type of research

Institution	N	Post-graduation Program	Type of Research
Federal University of Paraná (UFPR)	1	Education	Cognition, learning and human development
Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM)	3	Education	Special Education
State University of Londrina (UEL)	1	Education	No specifications
Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar)	1	Special Education	Special Education
Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF)	1	Psychology	No specifications

Source: the authors.

Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) belong to an education program and deal with Special Education. Also, the research realized at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) is the only one in the program that deals with Special Education.

Table 2 shows the year of publication, the amount produced in each year and the type of research. Although there were no restrictions concerning the year, it is possible to observe that more researches were produced in 2012 and 2016 while the most frequent were dissertations for master's degrees (five) and only two were theses for doctor's degrees. In 2014 and 2015, there were no records of researches related to HA/G in higher education.

**Table 2** - Year of publication, number of researches in each year and type of research

Year	N	Type of research
2011	1	Master's degree
2012	2	Master's degree
2013	1	Doctor's degree
2016	2	Master's and Doctor's degree
2017	1	Master's degree

Source: the authors.

Considering that the search in the platform was realized without a deadline, this result is in agreement with authors who argued that the HA/G theme is recent in higher education (Pereira & Barbosa, 2011). The first dissertation on this theme was only published in 2011 while the first thesis was published in 2013.

Table 3 presents the author, type of research, theme/objective of research and number of participants. It is possible to observe that the search/identification theme was the most frequently approached in the four analyzed researches. The theme concerning professionals (university teachers, course coordinators and future teachers) was present in three researches and the theme of academic performance by university students with HA/G was approached in one research.

It can be observed that the number of participants was small in most of the researches, less than 14, which is in accordance with Rinn and Bishop (2015) when they point out that researches involving adults with HA/G are realized with small samples. However, there were two exceptions: the research by Oliveira (2016) because it involved a large number of university students from different courses in search of the ones with HA/G and the one by Souza (2017) because it involved students from three institutions.

In the review of theses and dissertations on HS/IG, realized by Pedro et al. (2016), the identification category was the one with the third greatest number of researches by presenting 18 productions. In the present review on higher education, the identification of people with HA/G was the most frequent theme, present in four researches (Lima, 2011; Peranzoni, 2013; Costa, 2016; Oliveira, 2016). Three researches brought descriptions of how professionals that deal or will have to deal with people with HA/G feel about the theme and about people with this condition (Lima, 2011; Cianca, 2012; Souza, 2017).

Another piece of information that draws our attention is the focus on elderly people with HA/G described in the mastering and doctoring research by Costa (2012, 2016). In the research for her master's degree, she approached the characteristics and, in the research for her doctor's degree, she approached the identification of elderly students with HA/G.

The dissertation by Lima (2011) intended to investigate, by means of an open-response interview, whether nine university teachers at a federal university were able to recognize students with HA/G, how they do it and what methodological strategies they adopt in order to promote the educational inclusion of these students. According to the author, most teachers disagree on their conceptions of Special Educational needs. They demonstrate uncertainty concerning the inclusion of intellectually gifted students as a target for Special Education. Concerning their conceptions of HA/G, most teachers rely on common sense and

**Table 3 - Author, year, typo, theme/objective of research and number of participants**

Author and year	Type	Theme/objective	N
Lima, D. M. M. P. (2011)	Dissertation	University teachers and strategies of identification and support for HS/IG	9
Cianca, F. S. C. (2012)	Dissertation	The Perceptions of graduation coordinators on HS/IG	14
Costa, L. L. (2012)	Dissertation	Characteristics of elderly university students with HS/IG	5
Peranzoni, V. C. (2013)	Thesis	Identification of university students with HS/IG in the physical education course	14
Costa, L. L. (2016)	Thesis	Identification of HS/IG in elderly university students	8
Oliveira, A. M. (2016)	Dissertation	Search for HS/IG concerning student engagement and academic performance	749
Souza, A. R. de (2017)	Dissertation	Formation of university students in pedagogy courses in order to work with individuals with HS/IG	118

Source: the authors.

the ones that do try to provide these students with pedagogical support and different strategies do so informally without a focus on the characteristics of HA/G or the specific need for curricular enhancements these students present.

The research by Cianca (2012) had the objective to investigate, by means of a semi-structured interview, the perceptions of 144 teachers in higher education on the HA/G theme. These teachers were coordinators in the graduation courses at a federal university. Results indicate that the teachers rely on common sense when it comes to intellectual giftedness and do not recognize, among their students, anyone with potential for HS/IG. However, the teachers pointed at several indicators presented by some of their students in graduation courses that are common signs that a person has HA/G.

The objective of Costa (2012) was to discuss the continuity of the education of five elderly students enrolled at a federal university by means of the investigation of the characteristics of HA/G and a semi-structured interview. Results pointed at the presence of elderly HA/G students in the university environment and the five participants fit into the profile of HA/G described by Renzulli.

Peranzoni (2013) identified signs of HA/G in students of the physical education course in a university. Among the 14 participants, it was possible to identify seven indicators of HA/G by means of the application and analysis of questionnaires, info sheets and school records.

Costa (2016) intended to identify HA/G in elderly university students at a federal university located in Rio Grande do Sul. Many signs listed in studies realized with adults were observed in the eight elderly participants such as curiosity, creativity, leadership, persistence, sharp sense of humor, autonomy and a preference

for challenge. These characteristics were observed by means of a questionnaire, personal info sheets and a semi-structured interview.

Oliveira (2016) realized an initial evaluation in order to identify intellectual giftedness in undergraduates and linked it to academic performance and student engagement. The research was realized with 749 university students. Two psychological tests and a socio-demographic questionnaire were employed, one for searching (Cube Test) and another one was for confirmation (WAIS). The searching test identified 263 students, out of which 66 took the WAIS. HA/G was confirmed in 34 university students. The author concluded that the instruments were adequate for the identification of HA/G in university students.

Souza (2017) verified and analyzed the existence of knowledge concerning the theme of intellectual giftedness and talent in 118 undergraduates in the last year of their pedagogy courses from three institutions, one federal university, one state university and a private university. In order to do that, a questionnaire was used in which open-response and objective questions were asked with the objective of getting to know the students' profiles, their conceptions and whether they felt ready to deal with students with intellectual giftedness and talent. In addition, the author checked the curricular disciplines in pedagogy courses from three institutions as well as their course plans in order to observe any content related to the theme of Special Education, intellectual giftedness and talent. Results obtained from participants' testimonies demonstrate that their pedagogy courses did not put any emphasis on the theme of intellectual giftedness and talent and that the knowledge of the university students concerning this theme shows that most of them did not feel ready to work with high-potential students.

Similar data were found in the research of Wechsler and Suarez (2016), where undergraduates mentioned that they did not feel ready to work with students with HA/G. Concerning curricula and course plans, Souza (2017) observed that the three institutions presented very similar characteristics. Courses provide at least one compulsory discipline on the area of Special Education and superficially tackle the theme of intellectual giftedness and talent among university students.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this research was to realize a review on dissertations and theses on HA/G in higher education. Results show that studies on the theme are still recent and emerging (seven productions). The first research was concluded in 2011. There are more researches for master's degrees with small samples and the most frequent themes are the identification of people with HA/G and the perceptions of professionals concerning HA/G. Although Psychology significantly contributes to the theme of HA/G, Special Education and Inclusive Education, it is possible to notice that only one research came from a program in this area. Thus, there is emphasis on the need for important researches produced in Psychology programs for the benefit of production of knowledge on the themes of Special Education, Inclusion and HA/G.

Public policies of an inclusive perspective provide support for students in elementary education but they do not present guidelines for pedagogical support for intellectually gifted students in higher education (Martelli et al. 2016). According to the authors, special support to students with HA/G aims at the development of their potential and is based on their right to an education that satisfies their learning needs and provides them with the conditions for healthy socio-emotional relationships, which makes it even more important that these students get further support in higher education.

Rinn and Bishop (2015) argue that most of the realized studies with intellectually gifted individuals focus on their childhoods and very few studies examine their necessities for therapy or counselling. The authors recommend that more researches be realized on the actual lives and experiences of adults with intellectual giftedness in order to identify them and obtain more information concerning their careers, families, life goals and levels of satisfaction and well-being. That is the best way to help them reach their goals and full potential. Psychology can contribute to this investigation by approaching socio-emotional characteristics and proposing interventions when necessary.

Researches on HA/G are not frequent, especially in the context of higher education. Although this review was based on few studies, it covers all productions until

2018. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature in the area by pointing at the theme of HA/G in higher education.

We come to the conclusion that it is necessary to go further and expand studies on HA/G. It is also necessary to realize researches that produce fresh knowledge on this theme in higher education.

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This paper was translated from Portuguese by Régis Lima.

Received: April 08, 2018  
Approved: November 26, 2019