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Shifting discourses on giftedness in Swedish newspaper media – what’s the problem represented to be?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to explore how public discussions on giftedness and gifted students are framed in two of Sweden’s leading newspapers over a 25-year period (1995-2019). We explored discourse within 72 articles, using a time-sensitive analysis combined with a ‘What’s the problem represented to be?’ approach. The results show that the concept of giftedness became established during the period, although there were also counter-discourses questioning what ‘giftedness’ means and how schools should be organised. There is a lack of more in-depth discussions about how social class, ethnicity, or gender can affect how students are regarded in school, or how teaching can affect intellectual development. Instead, there is a strong stance in favour of individualised teaching.

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Introduction

Recent Swedish newspaper reports have presented a specific group of students, the so-called intellectually gifted, as ‘suffering’. We are told that these are students who get bored because they are insufficiently challenged in ordinary schools and classrooms. This sparked our interest about how the notion of ‘the gifted student’ came to be, as newspapers and other media seem to accept it without question. We traced the ‘gifted’ back in time and found that they have been evident in the press for more than 25 years, which stands in contrast to their lack of visibility in the recent curriculum and school laws and regulations, as if this group of students does not exist in the Swedish context.

There are some signs in current policy texts, however, that indicate a more open attitude towards giftedness. One such sign is an update of the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800), with a paragraph highlighting a need to offer guidance and stimulation to those who ‘easily reach the knowledge requirements’ (chapter 3, §2). This can be read as referring to gifted students, although it is a rather vague formulation (cf. Magnússon & Sims, 2021). Another sign comes from the Swedish National Agency for Education’s (SNAE) home page, linking to a study guide for teaching gifted students (SNAE, 2015).

Since gifted students are scarcely evident in policy, we have turned to newspaper media to explore how the understanding of giftedness has changed over time. An advantage of studying newspapers is that they generally follow political debates as well as public opinion and journalistic interpretations of what is happening in society (Carvalho, 2000). By studying newspaper media over

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time, we have thus been able to track how discussion of giftedness has changed and how this can relate to (re)organisation of the school system.

Although special schools or courses for gifted students are common in other parts of the world, they are rare in Sweden. Yet discussions about schools for ‘the talented’ are not new. For instance, there was a debate among professionals in Sweden during the first half of the twentieth century which had two central aspects: the utilisation of good talent and the counteracting of low talent (Axelsson, 2007, 2022). In the decades that followed, the discussions among researchers and other professionals focused on how a reorganisation of schools could use the ‘talent reserve’ coming from the lower classes in society (cf. Husén, 1963; Husén & Tuijnman, 1991). The political idea in Sweden of ‘a school for all’ (i.e., a cohesive nine-year school) was fully implemented in 1972 and was at that time seen as an instrument against class society (Richardson, 1977).

The overarching political discourse in the Swedish school system is still ‘a school for all’, and policies more generally express a strong egalitarian ideal, with education aiming to develop the talents and gifts of *all* individuals, emphasising inclusiveness, equality, and citizen education (Imsen et al., 2017). However, in their study about changes in the Nordic comprehensive school model since the millennium, Imsen et al. (2017) point out that there have been major changes in education on the transnational level. They write:

[T]ransnational agencies have drawn education from the realm of politics into a global market place by advocating strategies such as efficiency, competition, decentralisation, governing by detailed objectives, control, privatisation, and profile schools. (p. 568)

They further argue that these new ‘technologies’, which follow a neoliberal ideology, are striving to increase the efficiency of teaching and learning and are thus transforming the ideology of ‘a school for all’ towards a more competitive school system. One example of how new reforms are trying to change schooling in Sweden is highlighted in Dodillet’s research (2019). She reports from an implementation of a reform (SOU 2008:27, p. 529-530), which entailed upper secondary school students a chance at advanced learning in special ‘top’ classes focusing on mathematics, science, and language. She compared the official aim of promoting highly gifted students to the policy’s actual implementation but found that: “... Swedish excellence programs are riven with contradictions, satisfying neither the elitist ambitions / ... / nor the egalitarian convictions of educational practitioners.” (Dodillet, 2019, p. 258).

Yet, during the time period for which we examined the two nationwide daily newspapers (1995-2019), the political governance in the Nordic countries brought about major changes to schools and schooling, not least through decentralisation and marketisation of education, with direct consequences for classroom practice in the form of school choice, independent schools, new grading systems, increased student testing, and inspections of school operations (with reference to Sweden, see e.g. Lundahl, 2002; Lundahl et al., 2013. For the other Nordic countries, see e.g. Dovemark et al., 2018; Simula et al., 2002). The newspaper debate we explore are often linked to the Swedish (re)organisations of school practices. In our attempt to create new knowledge based on present debate, we draw on Carvalho (2020), who argues that media discourse is a specifically important form of social, political, and cultural action that can make visible underlying understandings of how a society is looked upon and what consequences this may have. The aim of the article is to explore how discourses of ‘giftedness’ are framed and portrayed in daily newspaper debates. We consider how the meaning of giftedness has shifted, its educational consequences, which subjects are created, and what issues remain unproblematised.

Research on public debates on giftedness and gifted education

According to Lewis and Karnes, newspapers are one channel for ‘disseminating information and for influencing public attitudes and policy’ (1996, 4). There are, however, not many recent newspaper media studies related to giftedness in the Nordic countries, which could be an indication of the rising

prevalence of other forms of media (e.g., certain websites). Yet we have found some studies. A Finnish study explored the public discussions on as well as conceptions of giftedness and gifted children (Laine, 2010). Laine found that giftedness was seen as multidimensional, occurring in different areas. Giftedness was connected to both individual achievement and environmental impact. In the public discussion, misunderstandings, and problems among gifted children in Finnish school settings were more often discussed than how to define the concept of giftedness. Laine also points out some areas the discussions did not address, such as how disability, economic disadvantage, and minority status related to giftedness, and we will look for similar patterns as we analyse our data. Laine also points out the need for researchers in the field to engage in public discussions. This is in line with Bergold et al.'s (2021) study on intellectual giftedness in a German context. They investigated whether stereotypical representations in newspaper articles contribute to the stigmatisation of gifted individuals and whether non-stereotypic, evidence-based representations might help to destigmatise gifted individuals. The results showed that people who learned about giftedness based on research rather than media gained a broader and less stereotypical understanding of the phenomenon. The researchers, therefore, emphasised how important it is for media journalists to understand how their reports on intellectual giftedness can influence people's attitudes and perceptions, and for researchers in the field of giftedness to engage more actively in public debates. While Bergold et al. (2021) used a strict experimental method, O'Connor (2012) took a discursive approach. O'Connor's analysis of British newspaper stories on giftedness revealed that conceptions of intellectual giftedness in children were often portrayed in a more negative way than those of giftedness in music or sports (O'Connor, 2012). These conceptions also coincide with research on teachers' attitudes towards giftedness and gifted education in England, Scotland, and Australia, where intellectual giftedness was related to selfish ambition whereas giftedness in music or sports was related to more positive and social behaviours (Geake & Gross, 2008). In our study, we have chosen to include only newspaper articles about intellectual giftedness since special classes for students gifted in other fields are common in Sweden and are generally seen as an unproblematic positioning and division of students. We conclude that, among the studies described above, O'Connor's is theoretically and methodologically closest to our study. Her findings suggest that 'it would be socially desirable to move on from constraining definitions of what is "normal" and what is not, which permeate both institutional and cultural discourses', and limit individuality and creativity (O'Connor, 2012, p. 302).

Theoretical and methodological approach

A theoretical starting point for us in this article is Foucault's proposal that discourse is about knowledge production through language (Foucault, 1971/1993). Interpreting discourse as language (or text) in use, our focus is on what 'knowledge' the discourses within the articles we explore constitute, that is, what are the discourses 'doing'? In exploring discourses in our media texts, we draw on the 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach developed by Bacchi (2009). The WPR approach is inspired by a Foucauldian understanding of power, including the close relation between power and knowledge, and can be understood as a form of discourse analysis where subjects are produced in discourse and simultaneously take part in producing discourse. Although Bacchi's work concerns critical policy analysis, she highlights the impact of media as a 'political player', and she writes that media 'do not simply "report" news or "reflect" audience preferences. Rather they are active in the creation of problem representations and influencing citizens' subjectivities' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 242). With Bacchi's help, we therefore argue not only of the importance of analysing media but also for the usefulness of her approach in our analysis. WPR can be used to question assumptions, in our case within the media texts, 'by interrogating (problematizing) the problem representation it uncovers within them' (Bacchi, 2009, p. xv). The main difference between the WPR approach and more conventional policy studies is that, while a conventional policy approach is interested in how school improvements/reorganisations are used to solve problems in educational settings, the WPR approach focuses on how school improvements/reorganisations are produced in

newspaper media. Applying this approach makes it possible to focus on how arguments concerning school improvements/reorganisations assign different 'subject positions'. By assigning subject positions, we mean that discourses are 'shaping what is possible for people to become' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 50). This means that we understand people as provisional and in process, rather than unchanging and essential.

Methods

The different steps, from choosing and processing articles to a more theoretically driven analysis, are described in the following sections.

Choice of newspapers and articles

We chose the two leading newspapers in Sweden for our exploration. Both are daily newspapers with many subscribers country-wide, and each has a different political position. The liberal *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) has approximately 1 100 000 readers/day, and the conservative *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) has about 800 000 readers/day (ORVESTO Konsument, 2022:2). To find articles of interest for our exploration, we used two different electronic archives hosted at Umeå University Library: 'Artikelsök' and 'Mediearkivet', with the key words *gifted*, *gifted children**, *gifted students**, *talent**, *intelligence**, *education*, and *genius**. We probed for a 'start year' and found that articles about giftedness and gifted students in the field began to appear in 1995¹ so we set the timeline between 1995 and 2019. During this period Sweden was governed by both the Social Democratic Party (1994-2006, a minority government) and a coalition government with a right-wing prime minister (2006-2014). In October 2014, the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party formed a minority coalition with a Social Democratic prime minister in government (until 2022).

We chose the final articles based on the criteria that they should relate to 'giftedness', but we excluded any that were targeted towards sports, music, or other arts, since being gifted in those areas seems quite unproblematic given that special schools or classes in these fields are common in Sweden. That is, the focus in this article is on intellectual giftedness. However, we also excluded articles about famous people (e.g., Einstein or Marie Curie) in favour of narratives of 'unknown' students in Sweden. Identified articles were then verified to ensure they met the requirements by checking titles and reading the texts once more.

Organisation and initial processing of the articles

After counting the articles, we clustered them into five-year periods, which seemed reasonable given the number of articles identified. The chosen periods also gave a good overlap with the shifts in government during this time. In a second step, we constructed a table for each five-year period's articles with the following information: newspaper/publication date, author, section of the newspaper (editorial, debate, news, reports)/page number, and article headline (see example in Table 1). Following Carvalho (2000), we interpret an article's position in the newspaper as an indication of type of discussion, and its headline as an indication of the contents of the whole article. This structural organisation gave us a good overview of the whole data set.

The continued analysis included a content analysis, a time-sensitive analysis (Carvalho, 2000) and an analysis based on Bacchi's WPR approach, where the two later steps took place more in parallel rather than separately.

Analysis methods

The further analysis consisted of three steps. *First*, we conducted a content analysis to construct empirically based themes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion, we identified

¹The terms 'special talent' and 'elite' first appeared in 1995, in an editorial in SvD.

Table 1. An example of how we organised the articles.

Newspaper/date	Author	Section/page	Headline
SvD/ 1995, Jan 2	Guest writer: Ivan Östholm	Editorial/46	Sport has a lot to teach us
SvD/ 1995, June 8	Teacher: Maria Krizan	Debate/4	Level-divided group provides better education
SvD/ 1995, June 12	Letter to ed: Anna-Lisa Näsmark	Debate/4	Sweden needs a talented elite

meaning-making sentences, i.e., sentences were selected to be the units of analysis (see also Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). We read and organised the sentences individually, then we compared our analyses and came up with a common understanding. The original sentences were then reduced to simplified statements, which we clustered into themes.

In the *second* step, we followed Bacchi's WPR recommendation to 'work backwards from concrete proposals to reveal what is represented to be the "problem" within those proposals' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 3). An easy way to find discourse, Bacchi argues, is to start with 'stated solutions' to problems. We therefore went back and reread the articles, theme by theme to pinpoint the problems and their stated solutions asking the following questions:

- How are the proposed solutions argued and framed?
- What subject positions are produced within the discourses?
- What is not said – what are the silences?

In a *third* step, we condensed the article data into shorter texts (one per time period), highlighting each period's main discussions and shifts. Thereafter we focused on whether and how the discourses and silences changed over the whole time period (1995-2019). That is, we combined our Bacchi analysis with what Carvalho (2000, p. 27) calls, a 'time sensitive contextual analysis'.

Discussion on limitations

A limitation of the study is that we only explored newspapers, and only articles from two. An alternative idea would have been to include reports and other articles from, e.g. the biggest teacher magazines in Sweden. Although we believe that such an approach would have broadened and maybe also deepened our knowledge of the issue, we were limited by the time we had available for the study. We are also aware that our interpretations are not objective and that there may be other ways of understanding the article data.

Findings

This section starts by showing when and where in the two newspapers we found articles on giftedness, followed by a content analysis that points out the themes we constructed. We then present our time-sensitive analysis that, using the WPR approach, shows how discourses and arguments have shifted over time and what subject positions these constitute. We also point out things that are invisible in the texts and discuss their effects.

Presentation of the articles over time

In total, we found 72 articles: 46 in SvD (conservative) and 26 in DN (liberal). SvD had a more even distribution, although there were more articles at the beginning than at the end of the period. In contrast, almost all DN's articles were published at the end of the period. On average, fewer than three articles per year were published over the 25-year period. In comparison with Laine's (2010) similar study, giftedness was not much discussed in Sweden until 2019. In her Finnish

SvD & DN

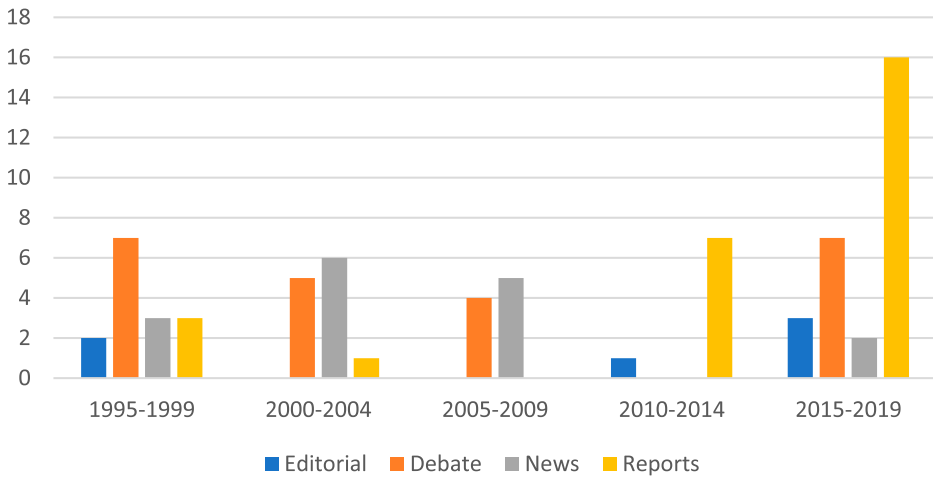


Figure 1. Shows the numbers of articles divided into Editorial, Debate, News, and Reports from SvD and DN published between 1995 and 2019 within five-year periods.

study on giftedness, Laine found 193 articles from the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* between 1992 and 2007, which is roughly 12 articles per year.

Looking at the entire study period, the articles are more numerous at the beginning and the end. The larger number of articles at the beginning might be explained by the government proposal in 1992 (Prop., 1992/93:230) about the independent school reform. With the establishment of more independent schools, competition and comparisons between schools grew and made it possible for schools to profile themselves, for example, based on students' test results, which might explain the increase in public debates. The increase in articles on giftedness at the end of the period could be related to the updated Education Act (SFS, 2010:800), with a stronger focus on supporting individuals in need of educational challenges.

After categorising the articles into *editorial*, *debate*, *news*, and *reports*, we found that most were *reports* ($n = 27$), closely followed by *debates* ($n = 23$); 16 were *news* articles and six were *editorials*. Most of the *reports* ($n = 16$) were published during the last time period (2015-2019), whereas the *debate* articles are fairly evenly distributed over the whole period, apart from 2010-2014, which lacked debate articles. Figure 1 shows the distribution of articles during the five time periods.

In the following sections, we analyse the content of the articles more in-depth.

Article debates on three levels of society

We found that the overarching theme of the texts, whether discussing giftedness or gifted students, deals with how to improve schooling and that they are directed towards different levels of the society. This finding about 'levels' is in line with Imsen et al.'s (2017) study about how the Nordic comprehensive school model has been reshaped since the millennium, and how the reshaping can be studied on both a system level and a local school level. In our study we found three levels to explore. For example, on a macro level, articles discuss how Sweden could become a strong player in a 'global market'. On a meso level, articles argue for or against a cohesive school system (i.e., 'a school for all') and about how to individualise the classroom, whereas micro-level articles target gifted individuals and their problematic situation. See Table 2 for examples of article quotes, our constructed themes, and how we linked these to different societal levels. In the next section we turn to the time-sensitive analysis.

Table 2. Examples of how we categorised different quotes from the articles into themes.

SOCIETAL LEVEL	THEME	STATEMENT	Examples of QUOTES from articles	JOURNAL/DATE
Macro	Invest in the best	<i>Competition creates better outcomes</i>	'Sweden suffers immensely from its "Jante mentality" and that talent and ambition is something that should be suppressed, [which] will lead to an even worse development for the country. /—/ Regarding gaps, that is exactly what is required to motivate students.'	SvD Debate (2002) August 3
		<i>A potential for growth</i>	'Because the proportion of high-achieving students seems to be so important for growth, school policy should aim for gifted children to reach their full potential and not just focus on everyone achieving the basic goals.'	SvD Editorial (2019) May 13
Meso	A school for all	<i>Sorting is unfair</i>	'The idea [with profile classes] is completely absurd and goes against the basic values that most people agree on. [It is not right to] select some students who are called the most talented and also give them the best teachers.'	SvD News (1999) April 2
		<i>Students need each other</i>	'Segregated schools do not benefit our society. We need our talented students, otherwise we risk brain drain and it is a loss to society. And the students need each other, gifted as well as more gifted. In addition, intellectual aptitude does not always mean being socially gifted, which is also important.'	DN Debate (2015) November 18
		<i>Students need different things</i> <i>Equity creates obstacles</i>	'[T]he school should help develop each student to their individual maximum.' 'At school, the endeavour for equity has prevented talented and intelligent students from believing in themselves.'	DN Debate (2008) May 27 SvD Editorial (2011) October 23
Individual	At risk	<i>Misdiagnosing children</i>	'The behaviour of particularly gifted students who encounter an incomprehensible environment can be misinterpreted as an expression of attention difficulties or hyperactivity, as difficulties with social interaction, or as defiance or behavioural disorders. The particularly gifted students who do not receive appropriate teaching and support risk being under-stimulated, ending up in exclusion or being misdiagnosed with, for example, ADHD.'	DN Debate (2015) May 28
		<i>Producing home-sitters</i>	'Life as gifted is not always a dance on roses. /—/ Before, it was handled as a luxury problem, but school can be very difficult for these children. /—/ These children easily fall between the cracks and refuse school.' ²	DN Report (2019) March 18

The 'problem' with Swedish schooling discussed in relation to giftedness

Findings from the time-sensitive analysis consist of condensed texts from the articles, one text for each time period. Within these we point out when and how the problems are discussed and, following Bacchi (2009), we highlight proposed solutions and how these are framed. However, to guide the reader we first give an overview of our identified problems, stated solutions, how these are framed, and what subject positions we interpret as produced within them (Table 3).

1995–1999 Positive voices for fostering an elite but also some resistance

One thread in the newspaper debate during the period 1995–1999 is about talent and giftedness as something needed. It focuses on the importance of investing in gifted students. Discussions highlight the need for 'an elite' due to the 'international competition' (SvD Ed. 2/1 1995). For example,

²In Swedish: 'blir hemmasittare'.

Table 3. Identified problems, their solutions, framing, discourse, and subject positions.

PROBLEMS	SOLUTIONS	FRAMING AND DISCOURSE	SUBJECT POSITIONS
Untapped talent Failing education system	Elite schools, profile schools: divide students according to talent	Sweden needs talented people Competition between countries <i>Economic discourse</i>	Bad and 'blind' teachers Talented and less talented students
Segregation between groups of students	A school for all, civic education	Segregation does not benefit society Students need each other <i>Equity discourse</i>	Social students Asocial students
A school for all Equity Too much focus on weak students limiting gifted students' learning	Individualisation	A school for all creates obstacles for gifted students Unfair school that does not care for gifted students <i>Individualisation discourse</i>	Weak students as 'braking blocks'
Gifted students are stored, misinterpreted, and not challenged enough	Support the 'gifted' Individualise education	Gifted students suffer: seen as black sheep and low performers with diagnoses <i>Precariousness discourse</i>	Weak students as obstacles for gifted
Giftedness is not clearly defined	Support everyone	Giftedness is an empty definition <i>Questioning giftedness discourse</i>	Parents as exaggerating their children's talents

'If we want to have an economically strong country, we must make use of those who will form the engines of the future' (SvD Deb. 8/6 1995). Problems raised include the 'failing' Swedish education system and the consequent need to divide students according to talent:

There is everything to be gained from such a [elite] system; the students get a more individually tailored education, the teachers get more opportunities to do a good job, and economically we get a bigger dividend per invested tax krona. (SvD Deb. 8/6 1995).

We interpret this economically framed argument of 'untapped talent' as the problem. Within this 'economic discourse', elite schools become the solution. Other voices argue that the failing school happens 'in the name of equity' (SvD Deb. 26/10 1997) and that 'the Swedish equity reform is only on paper' (SvD Deb. 27/1 1997). This blaming positions 'weak students' as 'obstacles for "stronger" students' (SvD Deb. 26/10 1997) and teachers as 'blind to the gifted' (SvD Rep. 17/12 1997). Individualised teaching and grouping students based on their potential rather than age is the solution within this 'individualisation discourse'.

At the end of this period we found news articles about the Liberal Party (L) of the municipality of Stockholm suggesting an investment in so-called profile schools oriented towards gifted students. This suggestion is challenged by the Social Democrats (S), however, who were leading the municipality at the time: 'this is completely absurd and goes against the basic values that most people agree on' (SvD News, 24/4 1999). This counter-discourse, which we have called the 'equity discourse', is framed by the Swedish ideology of 'a school for all', which includes students' social upbringing and values such as caring for each other as important.

2000–2004 Increased political agreement on the organisation of schools

During this period, the newspapers include many reports about organisational changes in schooling in the Stockholm area proposed by Jan Björklund, the leader of the Liberal Party at the time. In this period there is also a shift within the Social-Democrats' (S) arguments about schooling. At the beginning of the period, the party is still critical of the Liberals' idea that gifted 13- to 14-year-old students should be allowed to study courses at the upper-secondary level but have 'no principled objections to highlighting talented students as well' (SvD News, 7/3 2000). Yet the SNAE's general counsel argues a year later in an article that everyone must be treated equally according to the Municipal Act, and therefore he questions the idea of selecting certain students for so-called profile classes. Björklund's (L) comment on this is:

The schooling must be able to vary according to the students' abilities. Some need more help while others can progress faster. If the school board or the education minister want to jail me because gifted students get extra tuition in mathematics, they can do so. (SvD News 15/3 2001)

Two years later, the current minister of education, Thomas Östros (S), declares that he supports the idea of allowing gifted students to study at the upper-secondary level while still in primary school since he does not want 'the education system [to] limit the individual's learning'. Also, the chair of the National Teachers' Union (Metta Fjelkner) finds the proposal 'absolutely excellent' (SvD News 1/6 2002). We conclude that there are now signs of a shift in attitude among politicians towards a different form of school organisation for gifted students.

The framing of care for the individual student is part of the individualisation discourse already seen during the first period. However, politicians are still negotiating about, for example, admission tests to these schools, proposed by the Liberal Party. Both the SNAE and the minister of education are critical towards such tests. For example, Östros, who now claims that the so-called profile classes are generally 'very good', says that Björklund should 'be careful about building a system that sorts students all the way through' (SvD News, 31/7 2002). This objection to 'sorting' students is also voiced in the public debate about profile schools and is, as we interpret it, part of the equity discourse. For example, it is argued that profile schools favour certain groups of students (SvD Deb. 3/8 2002). Yet in other articles/posts we found more positive approaches towards profile classes. For example, it is said that gaps between students can motivate: 'Why strive for a matriculation degree when everyone can get one?' (SvD Deb. 3/8 2002), and 'What is it about entrance exams for "elite classes" that can have a negative effect on the "weaker" students?' (SvD Deb. 3/8 2002). Thus, we argue that although the equity discourse is still articulated during this period, it is simultaneously weakened in the political discourse as the notions of the 'gifted student' and the 'weak student' are becoming more naturalised.

2005–2009 Schools are viewed as too focused on helping weak pupils

There are a few published articles during this period, most of which are positive towards profile schools. It is argued that schooling is too focused on weak pupils and their needs, which leads to a 'downward spiral'; the school becomes 'a storage place', and talented students 'lose their spark and are viewed by teachers and others as 'black sheep' (SvD Deb. 27/5 2005). We see this as another example of how students are portrayed as fitting into specific groups labelled 'gifted' or 'weak'. We argue further that the positioning of 'weak' students as problems (taking up all the teachers' time so there is none left to support the 'gifted' students) constructs the two groups as dichotomous – if one group gets help, the other gets none. The problem with 'gifted' students missing out on support, which in earlier debates was framed as unfair, gets its solution in the individualisation discourse seen in a DN article (Deb. 27/5, 2008):

the school should help develop each student to their individual maximum, instead of making everyone into an average student.

That is, the solution and arguments are framed around individualising education without mentioning citizen education, which is one of the goals within the ideology of 'a school for all'.

2010–2014 The concept of giftedness established: gifted students' problems in focus

During this period, the newspapers report from other parts of the world about educational initiatives towards gifted students. One article (SvD Rep. 22/10 2012) takes a historical look back at 'IQ trends' and how students have been 'sorted' over the years. Giftedness appears to be established and no longer questioned. For instance, it is argued that gifted children can be 'discovered' (SvD Rep. 26/10 2011). Several articles contain personal descriptions of what it 'is' to be gifted along with accounts of the difficulties giftedness entails, such as being regarded as social misfits. They say that, in their schools, people think they should be diagnosed with a neuropsychiatric diagnosis,

when instead all they want is more challenges and stimulation. A problem put forward is thus the individual's suffering and the general misdiagnosing of gifted students. Arguments like those made in earlier periods about schooling and what it does to the gifted student reappear here, such as that schooling contributes to turning the 'highly gifted' students into 'low performers' (SvD Rep. 18/10 2011). An editorial (SvD 23/10 2011) argues that the Swedish 'equity efforts' during the 1960s and 1970s led to (a negative) equalisation of the students, meaning that talented students would be reprimanded and instead of learning more and faster they had to help their classmates. This is argumentation we recognise from the individualisation discourse. However, we interpret the framing and argumentation that position the individual gifted student as 'suffering' as a 'precariousness discourse'.

2015–2019 A period of 'witnessing' to the experience of individual 'gifted' students

This period is characterised by a continuation of reports describing gifted persons' tough lives (e.g. DN Rep. 26/4 2016; 5/5 2016; 10/5 2016). For instance, gifted students are often overlooked when it comes to getting support from teachers:

In theory, everyone should receive stimulation. But in practice, the teaching is for the majority in the middle. The extra time the teacher has only goes to those who need special support.

This precariousness discourse comes up also at the end of the time period (SvD Deb. 20/2 2019) and, supported by the individualisation discourse, it argues for adapting the school's teaching to each individual student because students have different problems and needs.

The society's loss of competence is another strong theme during this period, often connected to the failing school. For example, 'the school failed to give us the same challenges that other children got' (DN Deb. 6/6 2016). Articles also report that gifted students end up underemployed, in 'easy jobs' where their talent is not used. These arguments also draw from a precariousness discourse.

Several articles give voice to 'experts on giftedness' (including people who are gifted themselves or have gifted children, as well as special education teachers, psychologists, and researchers). These experts describe the phenomenon of giftedness and how gifted children 'are'. For example, it is said that it is common for gifted students to be under-stimulated and therefore to show symptoms that can be confused with neuropsychiatric disabilities (NPF) (DN Rep. 17/5 2016). One journalist (DN Rep. 23/5 2016) asks why talent is such a 'hot potato', and R.S. Persson, a well-known researcher in the field, answers:

Because Swedish cultural and political values strongly emphasize equity. What shows the opposite – that we are different – is sometimes seen as unjust and undesirable even though it is unavoidable.

The argument here is that equity values blind people to differences between people. However, there are also a few articles that question giftedness. One, for example, says that giftedness 'mean[s] nothing' since there is no clear definition. It argues that it is often the parents themselves who 'know that the child is gifted' because all parents (want) to see the fantastic in their child (DN Deb. 12/12 2019). Another article argues that we do not need

a special school for a fuzzy, unverifiable condition, but for schools to take their statutory responsibility to give all students the right support and stimulation – including the gifted' (SvD Ed. 13/5 2019).

Although we found only a few examples of this counter-discourse, it shows that parents of 'gifted' students can meet resistance when they claim that their children should also be treated based on their own circumstances.

Trends and shifts over the years

Within the economic discourse, the arguments are framed around the idea that the society needs talent and elites to build economic growth and future development. Thus, they call for more

competition between students in school and for grouping students based on talent in order to avoid losing this 'capital'. Arguments within the equity discourse instead frame segregation of students into different groups as breaking with the values of 'a school for all', while the individualisation discourse highlights that individual teaching in classrooms is necessary for 'fixing' the school problem. Thus, within these two discourses, equity is used as an argument both for a cohesive school and for sorting students, although the sorting can be within the classroom. Within the discourse of precariousness, arguments bear witness to students' suffering, for example, because they are not sufficiently challenged and therefore, they become bored and depressed and leave school. The equity discourse and the discourse questioning giftedness are counter-discourses to the other three.

Conclusions

Considering the trends over the entire period, we see that articles at the start highlighted economic motives for the introduction of the elite school. For example, it was suggested that it is good to have a knowledge gap because it motivates competition between students, which can spur on talented students. The trend then turned into a clash between arguments touting 'a school for all' as an egalitarian ideal and those presenting it as detrimental to Swedish education. Although the subject of elite schools has since fallen into the background, the trend of the debate has moved towards a kind of unification around the need for Swedish schools to individualise teaching rather than segregate students into different groups. It is unclear how teachers can accomplish such individualisation in classrooms with up to 30 students. The educational consequence of individualisation is something research needs to follow up on. We found that students, teachers, and parents are positioned differently according to the discursive framing. In line with O'Connor (2012), we conclude that these positionings are limiting and tend to dichotomise students as either gifted or not gifted. The concept of intelligence, and what is seen as 'normal' or not, is indeed unproblematised in the articles. We have also found, in line with Laine's (2010) study, silences in the articles about connections between giftedness and students' backgrounds, which produce notions of the gifted student as more of an inherent disposition than anything else. Even though one report tries to sort out what IQ is, the question of whether intelligence, whatever it is, can be developed does not come up in any further discussions. We see this as a major problem in times when the trend in society is towards individualisation, although we know that students come to school with different forms of capital.

Discussion

During the years we have investigated, it appears that giftedness has been little questioned in the Swedish media debate. Of the five discourses we found in our data, two of them (the economic and the precariousness) produce subject positions that take giftedness for granted. Two other discourses (the equity and the individualisation) are less clear about giftedness but do not challenge it either. Only one of the discourses (questioning giftedness) challenges the concept. Thus, we conclude that it has become increasingly accepted. Giftedness tends to be perceived as an essential characteristic rather than something socially constructed in specific historical times and cultural contexts. There is a risk that discourses that naturalize giftedness position both students, teachers and parents in subject positions that reproduce gaps between people. Our results point out a lack of more in-depth discussions about how students' background or social class, ethnicity, or gender can affect how they are regarded in school, or how teaching can affect intellectual development. Instead, there is a strong stance in favour of individualised teaching. The giftedness debate is close to how inclusion is debated in the Swedish context (see Magnússon & Sims, 2021). For instance, we perceive giftedness as related to the idea of 'a school for all' and thus to questions about 'who is entitled to which education and where it should take place', as Bagger and Lillvist (2021, p. 66) put it in their article on the Swedish media debate on inclusion. In relation to democracy and inclusion, we see a

tension between inclusion as giving ‘gifted’ students more challenges and inclusion as giving ‘weak students’ the help they need. When the Swedish school system was reorganised to create a nine-year cohesive school for all students, it was partly because there was a need to include the ‘reserve of intelligence’ that was found among the so-called lower classes. So, the solution was to have ‘a school for all’. Today, arguments point to a need to segregate the ‘talented students’ into a separate education form. As Axelsson (2022) notes, these ideas might confuse democracy with meritocracy, which is also enforced by a societal trend to put individuals and their skills and achievements at the forefront (Imsen et al., 2017).

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