

Chapter 1

Introduction: Studying the Cultivation of Excellence and Talent in Education



Introduction

Excellence in education has become a mantra that has yielded several hits on the Internet. There is, for instance, a Global Talent Index, which measures talent and ranks countries according to a number of excellence criteria (Global Talent Index 2015). The global competition between nation-states and their education systems and the ensuing focus on excellence in education are widely manifested at the national level in initiatives such as the establishment of talent centres, the allocation of resources and funds for talent development, and the organization of activities to identify and differentiate talent in school contexts. Thus, excellence and talent have entered the education political agenda at global, regional, and local levels.

The political agenda of cultivating excellence and talent in education can be seen as symptomatic of wider global education policies that coincide with performativity-oriented moves in education (Ball 2015; Jeffrey and Troman 2012; Rasmussen et al. 2014; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Tomlinson 2005; van Zanten 2009, 2015). These policies work to provide systems in which education becomes self-referential and reified for consumption, where individuals ‘want’ what the system needs in order to perform well (Lyotard 1984, p. 62) as they are encouraged to see their own development as linked to and provided for by the ‘growth’ of the institution and the nation.

Education policy analyses of shifts from egalitarian projects of schooling towards more elite-oriented strategies have centred on the increasingly hegemonic view that, in a world of global economic competitiveness, every national economy needs high levels of knowledge and skills, access to which is rationed among those regarded best able to benefit (Ball 2008; Sennett 2007; Tomlinson 2008). This shift is often visible in national policies that show more concern for the Programme for International Student Assessment’s results on the drop in numbers in the top categories than about the increase in social inequality in outcomes (Sellar and Lingard 2014). Increasingly, policy agendas seem to be more focused on catering to gifted

and talented students than on social justice and inclusion issues, although it is not at all clear what is meant by talent or how it is identified and developed.

Aim, Purpose, and Approach

This book takes a critical look at this policy, the space in which it operates, and its enactment by means of analyses based on national and transnational policy documents and studies of concrete talent programmes in local school contexts, including their agents and stakeholders. Thus, it examines the education policy background – globally, historically, nationally, and regionally – for specific talent activities via the following themes:

- International and historical discourses on talent and its interactions with education
- History of talent and educational differentiation in Denmark
- Talent class activities in a local Danish school context
- Different conceptions and types of talent and their linkage to social categories
- Differentiated teaching and didactical planning in talent classes
- Policy perceptions of talent class activities among local teachers
- Education and talent from a global perspective

The book focuses on analysing educational talent from an education policy perspective and the role of classification processes in education (Ball 2013). For educational systems to exert a symbolic reproduction of social order, specific forms of classification, segregation, and evaluation have been developed (Bourdieu 1989; van Zanten 2005). The underlying assumption of the book is that classification practices in education, including the identification of talent, correspond to elite tastes (consumption), associations, and dispositions that provide the bases of inequality (Bernstein 2000; Bourdieu 1984, 1997). Therefore, such practices represent selection processes in a wider sense, since the state imposes cognitive classifications of the social world that naturalize and encourage broad acceptance of the social order (Swartz 2013). Focusing on the cultivation of excellence and talent in education systems can yield important findings about the nature of inequality and its symbolic reproduction in education, which might be overlooked if only disadvantaged groups are considered (Khan 2012; Savage 2015). Thus, to understand and explain how inequality arises within an educational system, we need to study the student groups with good resources and study habits, as well as the institutions that develop and reproduce their social position.

Although special education has been the subject of much research, the education of the gifted and talented has not, or has been addressed mainly from pedagogical, psychological, and developmental perspectives (e.g. Gagné 2005; Heller 2004; Sternberg and Davidson 2005) and not from a sociological policy perspective. To contribute to a critical discussion on policy priorities in education, we consider it necessary to unfold and analyse expressions of excellence and talent from multiple

social and policy perspectives. In that sense, the book falls in line with the recent research endeavour launched by Helen Gunter (2018, p. 4) seeking to “(...) expose trends within governing strategies designed to depoliticise education policy” and to create awareness of the political dimensions of education policies in general and public services education in particular.

The academic basis of the book is the sociology of education, and its analyses and discussions draw pragmatically on the sociological lenses presented by Pierre Bourdieu, Basil Bernstein, and Richard Sennett. We further lean on the field of education policy studies, where we rely on the work of, among others, Stephen Ball, Bob Lingard, Gita Steinar-Khamsi, Robert Cowen, and Stephen Carney.

We conceptualize policy as both documents produced at the transnational and national levels and policy productions enacted at the regional and school levels. Therefore, the analysis involves multilevel processes of *interpreting* the meaning of documents and of *translating* texts into action (Ball et al. 2012). At the level of transnational policies, such analysis implies interpretation of the strategies for cultivating excellence in education, whereas, at the school level, it implies analysing the transfer, translation and transformation processes of creating local and institutional texts and practices, and embedding them within activities such as talent classes (Cowen 2006). This analytical lens offers mainly a vertical perspective ranging from the global space to the local context. But in order to avoid the perils of methodological nationalism (Marginson 2016) – i.e. the assumption “that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world.” (Wimmer and Schiller 2002 cited in Marginson 2016, p. 293) – we add the analytical concept of ‘policyscapes’, put forth by Stephen Carney (2009), offering a horizontal and topographical awareness of the global space in which education policies on excellence and talent operate (see Chap. 8).

At the transnational policy level, the analysis focuses empirically on policy documents from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in combination with other relevant policy documents such as documents from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). At the national level, the Danish case is based on government documents, funding schemes, and the establishment of local projects as markers for the enactment of policy in local school practices.

Based on empirical analyses of policy documents from the OECD archive and the Danish government, project organizations, and the teaching and participants in these organizations, the book analyses and discusses how talent is understood and practised in the Danish public education system as part of a global education space; what characterizes the ‘talented students’ (within the context); the students’ differing understandings of their own talent in relation to their school, social background, and motives; as well as their expected outcome from participation in talent class activities. The overall topic is how talent is understood and practised in education policies – globally, nationally, and locally – and possible social consequences of such cultivation of excellence in education.

Selecting a Case Study: The Case of Denmark in a Global Setting

As a vehicle for understanding the workings of education policies aiming to cultivate excellence and talent in education, Denmark serves as an exemplary case. It retains some of the features of the traditional universal welfare states found in the Scandinavian region. The Scandinavian welfare states are often highlighted – including in Scandinavian self-understanding – as model societies with high levels of happiness, social equality, and democratic commitment; low levels of corruption; and free education and health care for all (e.g. OECD Better Life Index; Ydesen and Buchardt 2020). In this sense, the Scandinavian welfare states are often treated as being in a league of their own (e.g. Wacquant 2008, 2013). This notion of the Scandinavian model being exemplary finds strong support in the widely used welfare state typologies developed by Gösta Esping-Andersen. These typologies define the Scandinavian welfare states as belonging to what the author calls the social-democratic regime type, characterized by principles of universalism and the de-commodification of social rights (Esping-Andersen 1990). The methodological benefit from using the case of Denmark in this context emerges in the contrast between the policy priorities of social equality found in the universal welfare state model and the elitist aims found in policies of excellence and talent in education. Over the last couple of decades, the Danish welfare state has been permeated by the general global competition between states, neoliberal reforms, and the cultivation of excellence in education in particular. Thus, the Danish case is highly contrasting and critical in illustrating how global policies aiming to cultivate excellence and talent in education are making transformations in a national context that has hitherto focused on social equality and in which the cultivation of talent has been controversial.

Fieldwork Background and Methods

The talent class study took place in a provincial town in Northern Jutland in Denmark. The talent class enjoyed financial support from a programme calling for experimental projects (by the Ministry of Education) supporting talented pupils and had the characteristics of an experiment. The initiators of the experiment (local municipal council and school management) wanted an evaluation of the project and contracted Aalborg University. Accordingly, research on the talent class was initiated and carried out as a process evaluation of the programme (Rasmussen and Rasmussen 2007, 2016). The research questions were as follows: How is the organisational framework behind the project constructed? What are the pedagogical practices of the talent class? And what are the characteristics of the talent class pupils and their talents?

Thus, aiming at an analysis of the programme in its political, pedagogical, and social contexts, the research was designed and conducted as an ethnographic field study, which was considered suitable for such broad and qualitative questions. This study was repeated the following year, when the project initiator reapplied and obtained financial support for an additional year, which also implied an extension of the project to include more talent classes and involve more educational institutions and actors. This project involved the same type of evaluation as the previous year, but it was reported separately (Rasmussen and Vilain 2008).

The talent classes were organized as after-school activities that the students attended in addition to their regular classes. Teaching activities took place in the afternoon once a week and at occasional ‘talent camps’ on weekends and were aimed at eighth- and ninth-grade students (aged 15–16 years) in public/municipal primary/lower secondary school who wanted extra school challenges. The location was the general upper secondary education school housing in the area. Most of the teachers also came from upper secondary schools.

The fieldwork involved a detailed examination of the talent classes in the context of municipal and national education policies. During both school years, from August to June, the research included studies of background documents, the observation of lessons, the framing of pedagogic practices (Bernstein 2000), and other activities in relation to the talent class programme, especially regarding the interactions of the students and their roles vis-à-vis the teachers, interviews with the students and teachers, and a subsequent Internet-based survey for the parents of the students.

Most teachers involved in the programme activities were interviewed to obtain their views on the classes and students. All four teachers involved in the first year were interviewed and nine of the 13 teachers (the nine most involved) in the second year were interviewed. A total of 38 students were interviewed: 21 out of 30 in the first year and 17 out of 53 in the second year. When we selected students for interviews in the first year, we wanted students from all municipal schools in the recruitment area, as well as representation from both classes that year. We allowed students to volunteer for the interviews, which an overwhelming number of them did. In the second year, the selection criteria for the student interviews included representation of all three programmes/classes that year, among both boys and girls, and representation of all home schools in the municipality. The interviews took place either in direct connection with the teaching activities in the programme or at the home school. Interviews were conducted at the end of the yearly programme, so that the talent programme activities could be referred to and constitute a natural perspective for the interview theme.

The interviews followed an open approach that gave ample opportunities for the students to elaborate on their school experiences. We asked what qualities they associated with the word *talent*, what talents they had, how they perceived themselves as talented, what made them participate in talent class activities, and how this participation related to other activities, friends, and family and to their school life in general. The students were introduced to and asked about the concept of talent in the context of school and naturally linked their answers to the particular educational context of the talent class. They could have had other associations had the interviews

been conducted elsewhere. Thus, they held preconceived notions of talent according to political categorizations and their answers and associations appeared to be elaborate reflections of talent with particular regard to the programme. This necessitated a break with preconceived categories, which could be obtained by combining the interview data with the other forms of data in the analysis.

Almost all of the students' parents completed the survey, with a response ratio of 81 out of a possible 83 (Rasmussen 2011). The purpose of this survey was to obtain information concerning the social background of the participants. The questionnaire asked about family and living conditions, the parents' education and occupation, and cultural and social orientations, including school choice and experience and leisure activities.

Narrative, Content, and Book Structure

The book's narrative moves from the perspective of general education policy to perspectives of local pedagogy and back. It starts with broad transnational and global perspectives on talent in education policy and then zooms in on concrete activities of talent classes, teaching, and students in the Danish context. It then zooms back out and offers analyses on a more general level and linking with the global context. The presentation thus also moves between the social and personal perspectives and between the contemporary and historical perspectives as it discusses how the development of talent affects the participants as well as the public school system (*Folkeskole*) as a societal institution. Some of the chapters have a mainly descriptive function, since the case study and ethnographic method precisely aim to achieve understanding through extensive description, analysis, and interpretation of the phenomenon in question. For this reason, the form and content of the chapters vary as they serve different purposes in the study and builds on different types of data analyses.

More specifically, the analytical journey of the book can best be described as an hourglass-shaped endeavour. The book takes its starting point at the international level. As such, Chap. 2 adopts an international policy perspective in outlining the diachronic characteristics of the concept of talent since the 1960s. The focus is on the various connotations of talent and the concept's interactions with education in a broad sense. The chapter draws on conceptual history to shed light on the relation between concepts and policy discourse. The focus is on the meanings of talent and their implications in terms of policy, including a brief discussion about discursive struggles with other prominent discourses in the international field of education. This type of analysis serves the purpose of understanding the main configurations of the global policy space associated with excellence and talent in education. The empirical base of this chapter is drawn mainly from the OECD Archives in Paris and research literature about UNESCO, the OECD and UNESCO being the key international organizations working in education in the second half of the twentieth century and that continue to do so with increased intensity.

The next analytical focus is at the national and regional levels. Chapter 3 examines talent and education in a Danish context, where the development of a comprehensive and undivided public school for all has marked education policy throughout most of the twentieth century. This vision was based on the view that talent is distributed equally throughout the population across social classes, and the cultivation of unexploited talent, especially in the lower grades, was therefore considered important. According to the Scandinavian welfare model, this was best accomplished via an education system that postponed definitive choices and ability grouping as much as possible and aimed for equality through education. The historical presentation of the approach to talent in Danish education policy ends with the new talent development philosophy currently manifested in Scandinavian countries, and it zeroes in on the talent policy in Denmark and in local, specific talent class activities.

The next step covers in-depth analysis of local talent class contexts over three chapters that broadly cover the organization, teachers, and students of the talent class case. Chapter 4 thus focuses on talent class activities in a local Danish context, especially their institutional and organizational structure. We analyse the framework and organization of talent classes in a particular public school context in Denmark. We consider the local context of setting up talent classes, the political background of the project, and the recruitment of students and teachers for the classes. We begin by outlining the relatively simple organization and division of labour behind the talent class project and then look at cooperative relations and cultures among the teachers in this project.

Chapter 5 deals with the identification and classification of the students who have participated in talent classes in the local context. It focuses on their arguments for participation and the importance of their support base. It examines how people close to the students – teachers, parents, and friends – have affected the students' decision to participate in talent activities. It also focuses on a basic understanding of who is considered talented and belonging to the target group for talent class activities and on the 'unfolding' of talent among the students in the talent classes. These focus areas serve as an approach to characterize the students in relation to social background and talent.

Chapter 6 looks at teaching in the talent classes based on different pedagogical dimensions: the practical and didactic planning and execution of the talent classes and the teaching in the classes. The analytical approach to pedagogic practices focuses especially on the significance of student codetermination and activities and includes the teachers' experiences from primary school and high school within a comparative perspective. The analysis also includes the significance of the relatively great homogeneity in the classes. Finally, the students' and teachers' reflections on their experiences from talent class are analysed in relation to their experiences of regular schooling.

Having looked at the specifics of the talent class case, we then start to shift from the local to the national level. Chapter 7 discusses views on talent development among school teachers in the local context. The empirical data include interviews with public school teachers who teach regular classes, that is, not talent classes, and

who recommended the students for the talent classes. We outline the substance in both their supportive and sceptical opinions of the talent classes and find very different views on the talent project. The teachers often refer to debates in the local media and to their students' experiences. Finally, we discuss the discourses of public school teachers with those on talent development expressed in later national policy proposals on talent at the national level.

The last analytical move explores talent as a globalized phenomenon. Chapter 8 considers findings from the Danish case and enters into dialogue with the international educational development in general and the Anglo-Saxon world in particular. The Anglo-Saxon world often serves as a source of inspiration for education systems across the world and, therefore, establishment of a perspective on the core features of this setting is very relevant. To complete an analytical full circle, the chapter also reaches back to Chaps. 2 and 3 to pick up the main themes in these chapters and connect them to a discussion on the situation and role of education research today.

Chapter 9 presents the conclusions and perspectives. We recap the questions posed in the introduction and new questions that emerged along the way. We discuss why the concept of talent is gaining ground in education policy, how talent in school is understood and practiced, alternative understandings of talent and school development that might be worth experimenting with, and possible limitations to the development of talent in contemporary Scandinavian comprehensive schools.

Overall, the fruits of this analytical journey will be the ability to show the relationship between the circulation of new ideas and normative frameworks at international level, and their transfer into national policies, while situating these developments in a socio-historical perspective. The background to support the analytical and conceptual work comes from concrete case studies with important empirical findings that demonstrate the reality and influence of this new policy in the daily work of teachers facing new challenges.

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