

Chapter 5

Identification and Classification of the Talented Students



Introduction

This chapter deals with the identification and classification of so-called talented students. It focuses on the basic understanding of whom 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. In the analyses, we address the questions how students are selected for the talent classes, and what characterises the students in relation to social background and talent.¹

First, we outline the selection procedure for entering the talent classes. We analyse how students come to be seen as qualified for a place in a talent class and how they are identified as being talented. The admission process serves as a first analytical step. It consisted of students’ written applications, the content of which we analyse as having contributed to an initial screening and selection. In this selection process, the talent development project and the education system as such also stand as the students’ prior points of reference. This means that the performativity and classificatory processes taking place in schools unfold as desired or prescribed appearances of social identity (Jeffrey and Troman 2011).

Then, we focus on the interviews with talent class students and analyse what talent in their experience implies and what these primary actors in the talent development project understand by talent more generally. Their perceptions appear to link to the framework of the talent development project and to the way and degree to which they see themselves as talents. Their self-concepts are the overarching views of themselves, which can be seen as a working compromise between the desired appearances and the imputed social identities; between the individual and the social

¹Parts of this chapter were previously published in the articles Rasmussen, A. (2012). The use of talent classes to reproduce differentiated education. *Ethnography and Education*, 7(1), 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2012.661590> and Rasmussen, A. and Rasmussen, P. (2015). Conceptions of student talent in the context of talent development. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(4), 476–495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916013>

(Jenkins 1996). Based on the students' interpretations and self-concepts, we outline some categories of qualities associated with the talent concept.

Drawing on the concepts of capital (Bourdieu 1997), we analyse the students' social backgrounds. Based on the social differences among them and on the earlier outlined categories of qualities; we construct four types of talents that we portray through students that differ in terms of capital resources and gender. By this, we illustrate that the talent concept has a different content and meaning for different students from different backgrounds. Social background is seen to have a decisive influence on the understanding and perception of students' own talent.

The construction of the typology of talent results from an empirical triangulation of data obtained from the observations, survey, and interviews and an analysis inspired by Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In our interpretation of this approach, the first step is to locate the objective structures – the resources and backgrounds for joining the talent classes, and the second step is to integrate the expressions of the student experiences of the talent class in relation to school and other circumstances of their lives.

Application Statements

The students' written applications for admission to the talent classes showed different types of reasoning, e.g., *challenge, bridge building, community, study trip, parent and teacher encouragement*. There was a widespread tendency to use words from the selection criteria that appeared in the project application sent to the Ministry of Education. Many students used the term "major challenges" about their motivation for applying. In a way, it is not surprising that the students used this particular term, as it also occurred twice in the selection criteria mentioned in the application.

Thus, some students stated that they lacked challenges in the daily teaching, e.g.

- *"I feel that I do not have enough challenges at my school, and if this continues, I believe that it will hurt my desire to get involved."*
- *"Especially in scientific subjects and mathematics I have for some time not had the challenges that I would like to face, for example assignments and more substantial written tasks where I would have an opportunity to thoroughly get engaged in a certain field."*

Other students expressed a more general desire for major challenges, such as being "interested in learning more and looking for new challenges in class" and "hoping to be admitted and having more and bigger challenges, both academically and personally." Here the desire for challenges was not solely related to the professional standards at school and the level of the teaching, but also to the students' personal ambitions about something more or something different.

Some student answers reflected more strategic reasons:

- *“The project will provide new and exciting challenges and facilitate the transition from primary school to high school or other youth education programs.”*
- *“It would also be an advantage for me to be able to prepare for high school as I have already decided to go to high school – and from there to higher education.”*

In giving these reasons, the students regard the talent class as bridge building between primary school and high school. It is seen as a program that may facilitate the transition of the individual student, provide options or otherwise be an advantage in the student’s further education.

There are also one or more personal or social reasons in the applications, such as “looking for bigger challenges and looking for friends who share the same interests in school which I have”. Such social conditions as the desire to meet like-minded young people and form new communities are also some of the things that the students choose retrospectively (in the interviews) to justify their participation:

- *“I am not sure; I probably also just wanted to meet some people who shared my interests (...).”*
- *“Well, more challenges and trying something new. So, I am very open to new things and getting out of the old framework and meeting new people. It just sounded kind of overall exciting.”*

In sum, however, it is a tendency that the most widely used formulations in the applications are close to the formulated selection criteria. This is to a particular extent illustrated in the example with “major challenges”. When the students or their parents – who in some cases are the ones who wrote the application – motivate their application by a lack of challenges in primary school, it should also be seen in the given context. The application was thus designed to provide for the fact that there would be a selection process where the parties have an interest in indicating that they are among the best within their field, which might for example be done by creating a distance to the field.

Admission Tests and Self-Selection

Prior to the admission tests, the request for written applications had involved a high degree of self-selection among the students. In one way or the other, the students had to decide whether they could even identify with the talent development project and considered it worthwhile to apply. As it appears from applications, they might have had assistance in this process by parents or teachers.

The target groups of parents and teachers of next year’s eighth- and ninth-grade students had been informed of the project by their school, which had received a letter describing the project from the project steering group. The local school politician and principal of the upper secondary school had signed this information letter,

which was addressed to “all parents and students in the coming eighth and ninth grades in the Municipality”. It was then up to the students or their parents to submit a written application to an admission committee comprised of the school management and the teachers involved in the talent development project. Selected students (based on their application) were meant to participate in an interview conducted by the admission committee. The committee would then decide who would be offered a place in the project.

However, with more than 90 applicants, admission interviews became too overwhelming a task, and the admission committee instead decided to conduct talent development admission tests. The students who had already applied were invited to an introductory meeting at the upper secondary school. They were informed that the admission tests would take place the following Friday after school hours from 4 to 8 p.m., and the future talent students would be selected on the basis of the admission tests only. It was stressed that admission tests were “considered the most objective basis”.

The admission tests were conducted as planned and consisted of written tests in the following subjects: Danish: 60 min, mathematics: 60 min, physics/chemistry: 30 min, biology: 30 min and English: 15 min. Except for the English test, all tests had previously been used at the GCSE examination. In the English test, the students had to substantiate in English why they were applying for admission to a talent class. Out of the original 91 applicants, 66 students completed the admission tests and 32 were admitted: 18 students for the ninth-grade talent class and 14 students for the eighth-grade talent class. The students who had not turned up for the admission tests were asked to clarify in writing why they did not want to participate after all. Most explained that they would not be able to participate Tuesday afternoons due to leisure activities.

Of the 66 participants in the admission tests, 35 were girls and 31 were boys. Slightly more girls than boys applied for admission to the ninth-grade talent class: 17 girls and 13 boys. 18 girls and 18 boys applied for admission to the eighth-grade talent class. The 18 students who were accepted in the ninth-grade talent class counted 10 girls and 8 boys, while the gender distribution of students in the eighth-grade group was equal with seven girls and seven boys. The original group of 91 applicants represented 18 schools from all over the municipality, but most came from the municipality’s main town and schools located here. The admission process still resulted in some polarization, as the accepted students represented a total of 10 schools in the municipality of which five were located in the main town. 19 students came from this town, and the remaining 13 students came from schools outside the main town. Thus, the share of students coming from the town was larger than the share that came from the countryside, but gender distribution among the students was almost equal.

For the second year’s talent class project, there was no admission test. As the number of applicants did not exceed the number of places available, all students who applied were accepted for one of the talent classes. Like in the previous year however, it was anticipated in the project plan that they had in one way or the other been encouraged to apply by one of the teachers at their home schools.

Self-Concept of Talent

In research interviews, students gave a slightly more varied representation of their reasons for participating than in the written applications. This is naturally related to the reflective process that takes place in the interview situation when they reconstruct and consider what made them apply. Some respond broadly that they viewed the talent class as an opportunity for new experiences, like this answer:

(...) You could attend an information meeting and hear how it would take place and stuff like that. And when we got there, it sounded interesting. It was just something that had to be tested to see what it was, and then we were also going to London. We also got information about that, how it would take place and such things. We are allowed to try a little bit of everything. (Talent class student)

Another student mentioned in the same spirit that it was the trip to London that was attractive. The talent class was marketed and seen as an opportunity for exciting experiences, including a study trip to London. Other students explained that they participated because the school or their parents encouraged them to apply.

There are different examples that the parents had a decisive impact on their children's knowledge about and interest in the project. A student said:

My dad, well, he is a member of the school board, so he came home with a paper which they were going to distribute some days later. So, he showed it to me and said jokingly – I think – if I didn't think it was exactly my cup of tea. So, I read it and just really felt great about the idea and thought it was just up my alley. When the paper was distributed a week later or so, I immediately applied. (Talent class student)

As the example illustrates, the parents' support is of great importance in several aspects: the student discovered the offer, was inspired to sign up and convinced to participate. In several cases, the parents wrote the application. In these cases, the motivation is mostly described as the student lacking challenges or standing out as the best in his class.

However, most students emphasize they wanted to participate in the talent class. The parents have been a contributing and, in some cases, a decisive factor in the decision. One student summarizes his decision to participate as follows:

It was probably a lack of challenges and I wanted to prove to myself if I was good. That is, grades ... that is one thing ... to prove to yourself that it is not just a matter of a grade on a piece of paper. I am kind of hoping a bit for that. (...) Especially, my dad, he is very competitive, so he was just like ... He wanted me to do it, thought I should try. And he also believed it would be good for me. (Talent class student)

On one hand, the student wanted to prove to himself that he could do it. On the other hand, he acknowledges that the father is (also) very competitive, so maybe he is trying to prove something to *him*. In a somewhat similar situation, a girl justifies her application as follows:

In the beginning, I actually did not really feel like it. But then I thought, well, it might be fun just to try and see if I could be admitted. And then I talked to my mom about it, and then I applied. (Talent class student)

From a somewhat reluctant position, the girl decides to go for it and apply for the talent class. It seems that the competitive element of ‘trying out’ is also a driving force, which entails that she can prove (to herself) that she can.

Like the parents, the students’ teachers or schools may have been the external driving force and in some cases the decisive factor that made a student apply for admission to the talent class. The following statements demonstrate this point:

- *“It was ... We received that slip of paper and then there was a teacher from the class next door, who also told me to apply. And my parents told me the same thing. (...) They thought it was great, that it was just what I needed, to have some more challenges at my school and maybe feel better about going to school again.”*
- *“Well, so ... naturally the teachers ... When this new thing about the talent class came up, they pretty much encouraged me to do it. So I actually think they have done pretty well trying to get us to attend and stuff like that – those who wanted to.”*

The school’s support may also have been decisive for the student’s decision to apply. In the above case, where one or more teachers encouraged the students to apply, this is given as an essential reason.

Talent Is Relative to Context

In evaluation research interviews students from the talent classes were asked: “How would you define talent?” In principle, it is a very open question, but it was asked in connection with the students’ participation in a talent class and during interviews that took place at the school. It is therefore not surprising that almost all answers focus on talent in an educational context. The answers are often brief, possibly because the question was perceived as abstract.

Some students define talent as an indication that the talented person is smarter than most others within some disciplines. Here are some examples:

- *“I think mostly about something you are good at, that is, something you are better at than anything else (...) yes, something you are better at than others (...) I also believe that essentially talents are about something that you are simply interested in and where you want to go in-depth ...”*
- *“It sounds kind of sports-related I think, but overall, yes, someone who is at a slightly higher level than ‘average’, that’s how it is, and then class, yes, a class for those who are a little above average.”*

Several students define talent as something relative. In the first statement, talent is understood as something definite, like “you are better at something than something else”, meaning something the individual masters better than something else. However, it is also seen relative to other people’s competences within the discipline, as you have to be “better than others”.

In the second statement, talent is also defined in relation to others (students) and classes, where it is considered crucial to be “above average”. Thus, the use of the term

“talent” is also connected to other things that you master, what others master, and what in certain contexts is considered average. *Whether, what and when* something or someone is considered a talent depends, to a great extent, on contexts and relations.

When talent is defined as being a little better than the majority, it raises the question whether and how much the talented students stand out compared to other students. They were therefore explicitly asked if they feel different from students in their regular class or school. The students who commented on this found the differences to be very minor. Some students point out that talent is not reserved for specific individuals, but that *“It is someone who is better than others at something, or not necessarily better, but can become better than others because it [talent, ed.] is something that can be trained.”*

These statements imply that talent is not an exclusive quality. You do not necessarily stand out by being better than others in a discipline, but you can become better than others through training. Talent is equated with any capability that can be trained – also in disciplines that are not academic. However, the students indicate that in the actual interaction with other students at the regular school, they do not experience big differences.

In summary, the various statements emphasize that talent is a relative quality that may be developed. Whether or not someone in a certain context is perceived as talented thus depends on the capabilities others in the same context possess (see Philipson and McCann 2007, p. 479). The perception of talent as *something that can be developed* emphasizes that it should be seen as a potential rather than an already completed accomplishment.

Talent as an expression of being or becoming better than most people does not say anything about the qualities that are a condition for this extra capability or the acquisition of it. However, some students point out such qualities, which we have grouped into different categories below.

Potentials or Performances

In the following statements, the students discuss possible preconditions for talent:

- *“... it is those who can figure things out and put the time into doing things.”*
- *“It is probably somebody who is smart and also wants to learn stuff, or at least that is what we want to do.”*
- *“... Want to try a bit harder, challenge ourselves a bit more.”*
- *“Talent, well, the first time I heard about it, it had something to do with good students and something about ambitions to really develop someone.”*

In these statements, a precondition for talent is being particularly interested in and willing to devote effort and time to something. As in previous statements, talent is pointed out as something that requires an effort to develop, which is in accordance with a developmental approach (Feldhusen 1998).

In the last statements, it is difficult to pinpoint whether the student is expressing his own or others' opinion. In other statements, some students more explicitly distinguish between common perceptions of talent and their own perceptions. This is further discussed below.

Another type of quality is expressed as the ease with which the talented person performs. Only a couple of students mention this type of quality, but it appears when they describe their own talent.

- *“Talent ... it is probably that things come easy, that things come kind of naturally, that you do not have to think a lot about it, but it is easy to understand.”*
- *“... it is about people who have the ability to develop quickly and well and move forward, get a good future or something like that”.*

Talent as an expression of finding “things easy” suggests something naturally inherent rather than something cultivated. At any rate, it is not associated with lengthy toil and trouble because it is also a prerequisite that you do not have to “think so much about it” and “can develop very quickly”. The last statement also indicates that talent is associated with a good future.

As mentioned, most of the students will naturally speak about talent in an educational context. Some explicitly mention that it is about talent for the kind of knowledge and activities that are associated with school.

- *“Actually, I believe that it is for students who have more of an academic interest or something like that.”*
- *“Well, it shows that you so to speak enjoy being taught and having these extra four lessons after school.”*

However, a single student also points out that talent may be defined in many different contexts.

I'm not sure – it is probably that you have something that you are somehow good at, and that may be anything from handball to school work to home sciences ... I believe it may be all of that.

The most common understanding among the students is that talent is an indication that you are a little better than the majority, that talent is seen as an interest, commitment and effort and that talent is especially displayed at school.

The students were also asked to describe their own talents. In some cases, the talent class was mentioned in the question, but even when it was not, most students instinctively understood that it was about the qualities that put them in the talent class. Most answers therefore include references to different school subjects. Many students hesitate to “praise themselves”, but their responses were more telling than the answers to the general question of talent perception.

The students' descriptions of their own qualities include, as above, special interest and effort, and “finding it easy”.

Talent understood as a special “interest and effort” is illustrated by the following statement.

Well ... that's a good question, my talent ... I am not sure ... It has something to do with work ethics, I believe ... that I may be willing to make an extra effort when I need to work and am willing to spend more time on school work as I am doing now, more than almost everyone else (...) When you look at it in terms of grades you can see that it is often reflected in the grades how much time people use, and how much it means to people if they want to be good at it or not(Talent class student)

Talent understood as “finding it easy” was mentioned only by one student in connection with the general question regarding the talent concept, however, in the description of their own talent, this type of talent is seen in several students.

- *“I don't know, I am just able to figure everything out, or many things (...) Yes, I would say that something with numbers, that's what I am best at.”*
- *“I mostly applied just because I thought that it is easy for me to go to school. I do not mean to say that I have a special talent. But I think that what we did at primary school, that was easy for me, and then I thought that it might present some new challenges ...”*
- *“The lessons seem very easy here [at the primary school], it is really no problem, so, well, it just comes easy to me.”*

The two categories of talent that are primarily conditioned on “interest and effort” or “finding it easy” may also be summed up as a *development potential* and an *easily accessible accomplishment* or *performance*. In the first case, emphasis is on talent as a potential that depends on an effort – a learning achievement – in order to develop. In the second case, emphasis is on talent as an accomplishment or performance that comes easily and therefore may seem as a natural gift. In this way, the categories applied by the students seem to follow the disputes of psychology of considering talent as a matter of nurture or nature (Feldhusen 1998; Winstanley 2004).

School Positive Values

In the description of their own talent, almost all students refer to one or more school subjects at which they excel. These references fall into two fairly equal groups. The first group consists of students who only or primarily indicate that they are good at mathematics. The second group consists of students who indicate that they are good at a wide range of subjects and at schoolwork in general. Below are two statements from each group:

- *“What I myself believe I am best at is mathematics, but academically I do pretty well also in the other subjects.”*
- *“I believe that somehow I have only been able to attend due to the mathematics ... that is the only thing I am kind of really good at. But when you come here, you actually find out that you are able to do a lot of other things (...).”*

Both students emphasize that while mathematics is their special interest and strength, the teaching in the talent class benefits them more broadly.

- *“Well, I am not sure if it is true that I am a lot better than the others. But I believe that I do very well in most subjects, actually. You might say that at least there is no subject where I am behind (...) there is really no subject that I hate.”*
- *“I have always been good at the academic subjects and things like that (...) I have always been pretty good kind of all-round, but I do best in the scientific subjects and things like Danish and English (...) It has just always ... things have always come easy to me.”*

Several other students refer to the school’s ratings and grades if they are asked how they became aware of their talent.

Although almost all students describe their own qualities in relation to specific school subjects, a few students emphasize other types of qualities, i.e., more general competences in relation to the school and competences in completely different fields.

Well, I am not sure ... socially for instance (...) it has always been easy for me to be part of groups and to function socially when I’m introduced to a new group of people, and it has also worked smoothly in this talent class.

Reservations About Talent

I am not that pleased with myself, but I am good at horseback riding. (...) But I am not sure if it is kind of a direct talent, because it is more of a broad talent that extends to several subjects ...

The comment that the student is not “that pleased with herself” is an example of the reservations that many of the students have about describing their own positive qualities.

Many of the students distinguished more or less clearly between broad perceptions and their own perceptions of talent. Common perceptions of talent are found in their surroundings – family, friends, school, mass media – and in themselves, but participation in the talent project has made them question whether this broad talent concept applies to them. Some of the students mention this and have reservations about this use of the talent concept, like this one:

Well, actually I believe that it is described a bit wrong because I feel a little bad that it is called ‘talent’. It makes me feel – when other people hear it – that I’m somehow a little better than them. Actually, I believe that it should be used about students who have a more academic interest or something like that. (...) Yes, and then they write articles about ‘the smart children’. That makes me feel totally ... I find it kind of embarrassing because I don’t feel it is that way. At least not in connection with myself (...) No, well ... it is not that I feel stupid, but ... None of us are totally ‘brainy’ children. So it is more about the things that interest you, and then I somehow feel like we are better than everyone else just because we do it, and then this thing about ‘the smart children’ ... (Talent class student)

This student refers to the fact that the common perceptions of talent contain some stereotypes that she would rather not be identified with. She would prefer not to be perceived as a “smart child”, as “brainy” or as someone who feels that she is

better than others because she attends a talent class. She would risk distancing herself from the community with others, perhaps especially her regular friends and classmates.

Danish culture and values have a particularly strong emphasis on equality and community. Reference is often made to the Law of Jante (see Chap. 4), which allegedly makes it more difficult to recognize outstanding accomplishments and persons. According to Jenkins (2012) this observation has appeared as a general theme that nobody should get above themselves, which in the Law of Jante can be summed up as 'Do not get too big for your boots... if you do we will cut you down to size' (p. 186).

Also, in this life stage (the end of primary school), the community offered by groups of friends is of pivotal importance to young people. Adolescents are personally and culturally becoming independent from their parents, and fellowship with other young people plays a central role. They are also heading for differentiation, for example different choices of youth education. Students who are associated with the talent concept risk expressing some distance to their existing youth community, and they do not want that:

Yes, well, I believe that it sounds a little too ... how to say it ... distinguished, or what can you say? I don't like telling the others that I am attending a talent class because then they will think: 'well, ok, that kind of person!' (Talent class student)

The students' reservations about the current talent concept in particular relate to their experiences from the participation in the talent class. They have discovered that neither they nor the other students in the talent class correspond to any stereotype images of "talents".

Well, in the beginning it was kind of very nerdy I thought when I first heard about this talent class. (...) But it is not that way at all when you actually meet the people. Then it is not that way at all, and then you realize that talent is a totally different way to see it, that it is about those who can figure things out and are willing to spend time doing things. (Talent class student)

Some students mention that they think the project should have a different name. However, the name is talent class, and therefore they have developed strategies to refer to the project when they are together with their classmates on a daily basis:

- *"If I have to talk about it to someone then I am not going to say: 'that talent project', then I say: 'at the high school' or something like that because I am feeling a bit ..."*
- *"Yes, well, sometimes people ask 'if we are those kids from the talent class' or 'Are you those nerds?' So, it has turned into kind of a joke for us to call ourselves the nerds. Once in a while, when we have a social event night, we will say: 'We are going to hang out with the nerds tonight'. We kind of tease each other that way."*
- *"We have actually discussed it in the talent class and at some camps. It is a bit like when you say it during class, then it is understood a bit negatively, as if you are better than the others and stuff like that. And we thought that was annoying (...) so we got used to saying: 'well, I'll be over at the high school or something like that (...)."*

None of these statements and none of the impressions from the observations indicate that the students perceive this as a major problem. It is a dilemma that they detect and then develop coping strategies. Most of them appeared to have a good framework in the groups of friends at their regular school and at the same time appreciated their participation in the talent class.

Resources and Background of the Talent Class Students

The social background conditions of the talent class students were generally more privileged than the conditions for peer students on a national scale in Denmark. The education levels of the talent class students' parents in a local (same region) comparative perspective show that compared with the equivalent peer group in the region, the parents of talent class students generally had more years of education. The percentage of parents with vocational education was lower (25% of the talent class parents as compared to 47% of the equivalent peer group), whereas the percentages with a higher education (especially long) were much higher (10%, 30%, and 29% of the talent class parents versus 5%, 14%, and 4% of the peer group). Also, in relation to their economic situation, the majority represented stable conditions with one family owner-houses, and many of them owning high positions of employment.

In terms of education, the talent class students thus proved to be a group with relatively high cultural capital. Linking talent to the concept of cultural capital is in line with Bourdieu, who contends that talent is the product of an investment of time and cultural capital in an embodied state. The work of acquiring this is work on oneself (self-improvement), which is an effort that presupposes personal investment and can be, 'easily accumulated only for the off-spring of families endowed with strong cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1997, p. 49). Talent is, thus, not mainly a question of being gifted with psychological qualities such as independence and reflexivity or of being motivated to invest time and effort; it is a question of having access to a set of social and cultural resources, having learned to mobilise these and being in a setting where such mobilisation is possible.

The acquisition of other types of cultural capital than education takes place in arenas outside of school but can be mobilised within the school setting. The talent class students had acquired such additional cultural capital, as they typically attended many after-school activities, including sports, scouting and music. Some of them were engaged in organised music or sports activities at a highly competitive level. Such activities seem to resemble the competitive endeavours applied to their schoolwork to gain and maintain superior positions at school. In that way, social position, as shaped by the possession of social capital, is seen to shape the contours of the students' daily life and thus provide them with social advantages in their texture of school socialisation.

On the same note, Annette Lareau (2000, 2011) contends that childhood experiences are likely to differ in the potential advantages they offer in the long-range process of social stratification. In her studies, comparing middle-class and working-

class children, she found that the middle-class children through their many and varied leisure-time activities had been in a wider variety of situations, often with more opportunities to perform and gain experience and practice, which provided them with different repertoires to draw on as they moved into other spheres of life.

Classification of Talent Relative to Resources

On the basis of the considerations students (and teachers) apply to talent, four types of talent can be constructed, the *distinguished* talent, representing students whom the teachers point to as special talents; the *quiet* talent, representing students who are exclusively interested in one particular thing or field; the *versatile* talent, representing students who manage to embrace interests in school and social life and thus appear as outgoing and socially active; and finally the *industrious* talent, representing students who are goal-oriented and work to acquire a high position in a specific area.

In the following type descriptions, it is important to remember that the individual type of talent arises from a typology. It represents an analytical construction and does not complete the picture of a particular student. Nevertheless, we have chosen to describe the types of talents with reference to specific students (in anonymized form), as we wish to portray the type as a human being in its social entirety and not just in relation to the concept of talent. This does not mean that the talented student is essentially equal to a particular type of talent. On the contrary, the individual student will probably be able to identify and be identified with several of the mentioned types, which may overlap.

Here is a description of the individual type, finalised with a summary of the characteristics of the individual types, i.e. a further development of the theoretical construction of the four different types of talents.

The Distinguished Talent

In the following, we exemplify the distinguished student through Gertrud, who grew up as an only child in a family with plenty of resources. Her parents have high occupational status and academic educations, and her leisure time activities include scouting and modern dance at competition level.

Gertrud has always done remarkably well at school, which has been noticed by her teachers, as well as by herself, stating that,

I've always been good at the school subjects generally. I've always been very good at them generally, but I'm doing best in natural sciences and subjects like Danish and English.
(Talent class student, Gertrud)

As displayed in this statement, Gertrud has a sense of naturalness in connection to the school subjects. This may be interpreted as a result of an unusual level of potential or giftedness, which she probably possesses. But it is also very probable

that her family's cultural capital has helped her develop a habitus relevant to excellence in educational settings. The notion of 'always' indicates that she has had an advantage already from an early age in relation to school.

She tells us that she has attended the same school throughout her life, which is thus characterised by stability. In her reflections on school life, she draws a rather positive picture, describing that there is quite a big variety of people – “from someone who absolutely can't work it out to someone who's really good at it; it's not that someone is being bullied because they're either clever or not clever. There's room for everyone”.

Her relations with schoolmates appear to be very positive. She has no experiences of exclusion, which may be due to her natural mode of excellence and not having to compete. For Gertrud, competition connects with another sphere, the one of modern dance, which however still might give her an advantage in school. Thus, the flair for competition and performance that follows from a concerted cultivation of such leisure time activities appears to transmit to her a differential school advantage (Lareau 2011).

In the main, the distinguished talents perceived themselves and were perceived as generally proficient in school – in the humanities as well as the natural sciences. Thus, they did not doubt their own talent and explained their talent as finding things easy or being quick to learn in school. In addition to having a talent for school, they seemed to have a lot of energy to orient themselves broadly outside the school – pursuing leisure activities and looking for non-academic challenges. They came from homes with abundant resources in terms of knowledge (education) and social status, and their relationship with the school and their friends appeared straightforward and uncomplicated. They indicated that they knew there are big differences in the students' competences at school, but that they, despite their own academic merits, found it easy to socialize and communicate with other students who did not possess these qualities. Even though they did not feel excluded from their primary school communities, they experienced the talent class community as much more socially enriching than the school because they were with likeminded people in the talent class.

For the distinguished talents, talent appears to be rather inherent: They have simply always had a talent for the academic field, for the school, and they do not consider that strange.

The Quiet Talent

Ida represents the type we call the quiet student. She comes from a family of parents and two children, of whom she is the older. Her parents have long and middle-range higher education and both work in health care, which Ida also is aiming for. She expects to pursue education and training as a veterinarian or a medical doctor. In

addition to school and participation in the talent class activities, she is active in sports and has a leisure time job, which keeps her busy most days of the week. She stands out as someone who is ‘silencing’ herself as talented, by saying,

Well I don't know whether I'm decisively talented. But I really like science subjects, I think they are fun and feel that I understand them better than the linguistic subjects. (Talent class student, Ida)

She adds that she does not regard herself as different from her classmates, as “we’re all talented – it’s just in different ways.” She appears modest about her own ‘talents’ and downplays that she is doing well at school, perhaps to avoid distancing herself from her classmates and confirm her belonging to the community of students in her ordinary class.

On the reasons for her participation in the talent class, she comments, “I was probably the one who had the time and interest”. Her approach to talent is that it should not turn you into someone special that makes you stand out from all the others. When further commenting on her decision to participate in the talent class, it also seems very important for her that she is not on her own.

It generally appears important to Ida that she does not stand out and has to do things on her own. She is very aware of doing things as part of a group and in this way emphasises the social element in a learning identity. This becomes legitimate by the social representation of school peers (cf. Osborn 2003, p. 149). This kind of social learner identity leads students to emphasise being ‘interested’ in a subject rather than being an outstanding student, has been noticed as common among Danish students, because the national culture is claimed to have a strong egalitarian dimension (Osborn 2003, p. 173–74).

Generally, the quiet talents were reluctant to describe themselves as talented. They came from average families in terms of education (medium term educations) and status (wage earners). They did not consider their talent as particularly important; they did not regard themselves as outright talents and they did not express to believe that they were more talented than their fellow students at school. Either they had a strong urge to not stand out from the crowd and therefore played down their talent for school – or for any of the school subjects – or they ascribed a possible experience of being different from their classmates to things that were not purely school-related. They expressed a strong interest in certain school subjects, but did not generally regard themselves as talented, rather as oriented towards certain disciplines rather than others. They saw talent as an enjoyable interest in school and ascribed this interest to the school itself or the social communities they were or had been part of. It was important for them to identify with their teachers (that is, teachers of the same gender) and classmates (common interests) to be able to maintain their interest in the school.

In many ways, the quiet talent was driven by social factors and expressed the belief that the social environment is very important for their own talent development.

The Versatile Talent

The boy Mikkel is our example of the versatile student, who is characterised by moving within a large social circle outside of school. His ‘talents’ take several directions, of which “being good at writing assignments in school and playing football at a fairly high level” he considers the most important.

Mikkel comes from a large family comprising father, mother and four children, of whom he is the second oldest. The parents have middle-range higher education as nurse and teacher, have managerial positions in the fields of health and education, and are politically and socially involved in community affairs. His father was very active in applying for and setting up the talent class activities, which is an example of the high amount of social capital in this type of family.

While in his ordinary school life he has had an experience of being considered a ‘nerd’, the talent class has meant more recognition of his interest in school as,

(...), it's accepted that I'm into school work. Where football among the talent students is just a minor thing, it's seen as the prestigious thing in my normal class. (...) But as I see it, it helps me so that I can work with those students too, because they're the 'football types'. I play football with five or six of them, and I'm also part of that environment, so I'm used to hanging out with those types too. (Talent class student, Mikkel)

Although he points out that he can talk with ‘those types’ too, the football team sometimes may find it hard to accept his talent class activities because moving between the different spheres of football and school and giving priority to school does not leave him as much time for football training as his mates spend on it. Through this priority, he experiences a clash of interests, which however he has been able to handle by continuing to play football at a high level, which provides him with a privilege of social capital (Bourdieu 1997; Ball 2003). The provision of social capital is activated through participation in social networks, which displays the relationship between school and other spheres of life (work and leisure time) as a process and series of moves.

Overall, the versatile talents viewed talent as something that must be worked on and which they were willing to work on. They connected talent with originality (nerdiness) and the risk of being a nerd. They and their environment attached high prestige to being talented at school. They did not mind standing out as the most gifted at school, which they acknowledged and for which they found acknowledgement. Their background was especially characterized by social capital, as many of the parents were heavily engaged in the children’s schooling and in other social or political activities. These talents were upstarts in the sense that they did not have parents with long academic educations. However, like their parents, they were broadly oriented and engaged in non-academic spheres, and they recognized the social importance of versatility, which could provide them with social capital in the sense of durable networks of institutionalised relationships of mutual recognition (Bourdieu 1997, p. 51). For instance, they practiced sports, maybe even at elite level, music or other leisure activities, but there was no doubt for them that school also had top priority.

The versatile talent was aware of the importance of being broadly oriented and simultaneously completing a high-level education to achieve a good position in society.

The Industrious Talent

Our example of the industrious student is Khaled, who came to Denmark as a refugee some 8 years ago. His family includes his mother (his father has passed away) and three children, of whom he is the middle child. Besides school and talent class activities, he has a leisure time job, plays football, badminton, does weight lifting, swims, and enjoys the company of friends and family.

He tells us about his ‘talents’ that,

I've always experienced mathematics as the subject that I was particularly good at. But now that we're being graded, I've noticed that I'm at almost the same [high] level in all subjects (...). (Talent class student, Khaled)

It is very much a matter of doing well in school, which means performing well and getting high grades.

From his classmates he has experienced both positive and negative reactions to his talent and to the talent class. He reckons that most of his “real friends” “are happy about it”. But he also experiences jealousy. “But that’s rare and I’m also quite indifferent to it,” he says. Although he does not express that he feels lonely in class, where he finds several school minded students like himself with whom he can and prefers to associate.

He describes it as a somewhat negative experience to come from another country and have a non-Danish background. He experiences that every time he is introduced to new persons, they look at the colour of his skin, his hair, and his eyes and they build a barrier and look at him in a negative way. His strategy is to turn it into something positive by “trying his best to make a good impression, so that their first hand impression may change”.

Khaled experiences that being a talented student demands an effort that presupposes a personal cost (Bourdieu 1997). His accumulation of educational capital entails the obstacles that follow from arriving as a refugee and not speaking the native language from the outset. He still finds that he must struggle against prejudices about his ‘non-Danish’ appearance, and he prioritises an identity as a successful learner even though it may limit relations with part of the peer group in his daily class.

In the main, the industrious talents strived for higher educations and higher social positions than their parents. Their parents did not have long educations, and therefore to them school stood as a meeting place of different socio-cultural worlds. However, their cultural background (more peripheral compared to the school’s dominant culture) did not lower their school ambitions. On the contrary, many of them aimed at and targeted specific educations and careers and were – in their instrumental behav-

your, using education as a deliberate strategy for social mobility – guided by a desire to advance up socially and achieve good positions and better than those of their parents. This means that from this position, an element of deprivation was associated with the pursuit of the talent. You renounce something in your roots or in yourself, you compete with the others (and yourself) and you alienate some people. You must fight to not be knocked out by loneliness or opposition from others. Thus, the industrious talent also appeared to have the ability to give things up.² Competition and criticism appeared to be essential components of the aspirations of this type of talent, for which the school was seen as the most important guarantor.

The industrious talent was acutely aware that talent did not come by itself but was something that had to be worked on and fought for. It was equalled to and implying intense competition and accepted as part of the game in order to advance within the education system.

Concluding Discussion: The Talent Agenda and the Student Condition

The students tended to use comparative terms in their definitions of talent. They spoke of talent as “being a little better than others”, “better than average”, “knowing a bit more”, “knowing a little more than the others,” “being at a higher level than others” or “being above average”. They compared themselves with other students in the class at their regular school. Talent thus emerged as a relative quality that implied and turned up in comparison with others. Many of the students had experienced their own talent (at school) by obtaining good grades in certain subjects or in general, which is an indication of the school’s recognition of the talent.

There were also descriptions of talent such as “finding things easy” or “learning quickly”. One student defined talent as being “naturally good at something without practicing a lot”. Being curious, having a good memory, knowing the rules and having a logical sense are also qualities associated with talent. Such perceptions seem to indicate that talent is inherent, a natural quality. The phenomenon is of a biological nature as talent is perceived as innate.

Others described talent as something you are particularly good at compared to something else. It follows from this that everyone is good at something – you just need to find out what. Thus, expressing talent as a “special interest” in something does not necessarily mean that you are better than the others are. However, you pursue your interest in a certain field and by virtue of your interest, curiosity or inquisitive mind; you have the potential to develop a talent within that field. The students’ descriptions of their own talents are especially within the framework of

²In a Danish novel, *The Quiet Girl*, the author Peter Høeg writes, “Talent is the ability to give things up. He (the main character in the novel, who is extremely talented) had twenty-five years of experience in rightly choosing to part with things.”

the school and with reference to special school subjects, while some referred a wide range of subjects. Here, rather than inheritance (biology), there is an indirect emphasis on the environment, which is projected as essential to cultivate and work for the talent.

These considerations shift focus from accomplishments to potentials. The extent to which the students weigh one rather than the other depends on how they see their own talent. They thus relate differently to the talent concept, which is also true for their view on their own talent and its development.

The social background of the students in the talent classes was characterised by high amounts of social, cultural, especially educational, and economic capital (Bourdieu 1997). The parents generally had considerably higher levels of education than most people did in this provincial region. In comparison with other parents in the local area, fewer of the parents had a secondary vocational degree while more had higher education, especially university degrees. Some were very involved in social and political work, and generally, they took strong interest in the school. The families for the most part lived in owner-occupied housing, had high status occupations and thus belonged to social groups of high status in society (Nærvig Petersen and Nielsen 2008, p. 110). Additionally, the students were characterised by attending many after school activities such as music and sports.

Viewing the different understandings of talent in relation to social backgrounds, the analysis produced four overall types of talents: the distinguished talent, the quiet talent, the versatile talent and the industrious talent. The distinguished talent expresses an almost inherent talent and a feeling of always finding learning easy – it just seems natural. The quiet talent is primarily driven by being social and attaches great importance to the social conditions in connection with learning/talent development. The versatile talent is aware of the importance of being broadly oriented while pursuing education at a high level and thus achieving a good position in society. The industrious talent experienced talent as something that requires effort and struggle, for which reason this type stands out as particularly competitive.

In some ways, these perceptions reflect the way talent is discussed as well as the criteria and methods to identify talents are developed in psychology. They involve conceptual distinctions such as talented by nature versus nurture; genetic heritage versus social environment; one-dimensional versus multidimensional talent; and talent as judged by potential versus performance. However, adding a sociological perspective emphasises how they also relate to socio-economic background and circumstances – how the point of view depends on the viewpoint (Bourdieu 1999). The distinguished student, who is equipped with cultural capital and presents herself ‘comfortably’ in relation to talent, tends to describe and understand learning as something natural and innate that ‘has always come easy’. In direct contrast, the industrious student, who does not have the same ‘natural’ or rather socially hereditary conditions for education, and whose approach to talent is less subtle (see also Ulriksen et al. 2009), tends to describe his talent as a ‘special interest’ and as achievements that do not come easy but demand hard work, effort, and social support.

References

- Ball, S. J. (2003). *Class strategies and the education market: The middle classes and social advantage*. London/New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, economy and society* (pp. 241–258). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999). Understanding. In P. Bourdieu et al. (Eds.), *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society* (pp. 607–626). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. C. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Feldhusen, J. F. (1998). A conception of talent and talent development. In R. C. Friedman & K. B. Rogers (Red.), *Talent in context: Historical and social perspectives on giftedness* (s. 193–209). Washington: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10297-010>.
- Høeg, P. (2006). *Den stille pige* [The quiet girl, own transl.], novel (1st ed.). Copenhagen: Rosinante.
- Jeffrey, B., & Troman, G. (2011). The construction of performative identities. *European Education Research Journal*, 11(4), 484–501.
- Jenkins, R. (1996). *Social identity*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, R. (2012). *Being Danish: Paradoxes of identity in everyday life*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum.
- Lareau, A. (2000). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education* (2nd ed.). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2nd ed., with an update a decade later). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nærvig Petersen, A., & Nielsen, T. M. (2008). *Børns familier*. København: Danmarks Statistik.
- Osborn, M. (Ed.). (2003). *A world of difference? Comparing learners across Europe*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Phillipson, S. N., & McCann, M. (2007). Meta-theoretical conceptions of giftedness. In S. N. Phillipson & M. McCann (Eds.), *Conceptions of giftedness: Sociocultural perspectives* (pp. 477–493). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rasmussen, A. (2012). The use of talent classes to reproduce differentiated education. *Ethnography and Education*, 7(1), 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457823.2012.661590>.
- Rasmussen, A., & Rasmussen, P. (2015). Conceptions of student talent in the context of talent development. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 28(4), 476–495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916013>.
- Ulriksen, L., Murning, S., & Ebbensgaard, A. B. (2009). *Når gymnasiet er en fremmed verden. Eleverfaringer – social baggrund – fagligt udbytte*. Copenhagen: Samfundslitteratur.
- Winstanley, C. (2004). *Too clever by half: A fair deal for gifted children*. Stoke-on-Trent/Sterling: Trentham.