

# Chapter 7

## Policy Perceptions of Talent Activities Among Local Teachers



### Introduction

In this chapter, we analyse and discuss views on talent development among school teachers from different public schools in the local municipal 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. Thus, we aim to bring into the analysis the point from which they see the talent activities and how they become comprehensible and justified to the teachers (Bourdieu 1999, p. 615). We outline the substance in both their supportive and sceptical opinions of the talent classes, on what experiences this is based, and how this has led the teachers to very different views on the talent project. The teachers often refer to debates in local media and to their students' experiences. Finally, we discuss the discourses of public school teachers with those on talent development expressed in policy proposals on talent at the national level.

The chapter also draws on possibilities and limitations in terms of educational differentiation within the framework of the public school system, as demonstrated in analyses in Chap. 3. Regarding children with special needs, we discuss the nature of 'talented students', special needs and how such needs can be accommodated in or outside the framework of regular schooling. We sum up and discuss political conflicts between prioritisation of elite versus equality in the Danish public school, including pedagogic implications of a selective versus a comprehensive school system. We further discuss, how the public school's objectives – "to provide" the students with knowledge and skills, strengthen academic standards and the culture of evaluation – affect the framework of the school and the teaching for talent development.

## Support for Talent Development

The teachers presented in this section are positive about talent development. Each teacher and their background for commenting on the talent class are briefly introduced, and their statements are interpreted based on the relevant context.

JYTTE is a teacher at a medium-sized school with approx. 500 students in the principal town in the municipality. She is class teacher for Rasmus, an 8th-grade talent student, and she has several contacts with talent development. She has followed the debate about the talent project in the local paper, she is deputy chairwoman in a sports club for a sport that also has a talent team. In addition, her school has previously experimented with gathering “very talented children” in a special class because they “lacked social competence”. JYTTE does not think this applies to the students in the current project. She describes Rasmus as an “incredibly nice student”, and has heard from the math teacher that he is good at mathematics, but that several of his class mates are as good or better. She sums up her view of the talent class as follows:

*Well, in my opinion the benefits outweigh the costs – maybe also because Rasmus’ experience has been so positive. I know that there is a lot of debate about whether it’s right to pick some students and do something special for them. But, I mean, just like you take students out of a class if they have problems with something, you can take them out of the class and do something extra at the other end of the scale. (JYTTE)*

JYTTE sees talent classes as a positive form of special education. In principle, she does not see it as being different from special education for students who have trouble keeping up in school. Just like they need extra help, she finds it OK to take students “at the other end of the scale” out and give them extra help. In making this argument, JYTTE implicitly draws on the understanding that the distribution of talent in society follows the mathematical principle of the Gaussian distribution; i.e. the bell curve (Porter 2018). She also refers to “talent teams” in sports to illustrate the concept of talent. This analogy may be an attempt to legitimize talent development as something harmless and uncontroversial in a school context.

JANNE is a teacher at a large school in a smaller town in the municipality. The school has many rural students and receives a large number of students from small rural schools without 8th–10th grade. Four students from this school attend the talent class, but they are not from the same class. JANNE teaches two of them, one from each of her 9th grades. She describes these students, and especially one of them, as “very hungry” to learn. About the talent class she says:

*It adds to these children’s self-esteem, being among others who want what they want and understand them ... It is a great idea, and I think it is necessary to take it [the project] out of the public school and place it somewhere else. It could manifest itself in a negative way if it was placed here at the school; if you knew that all the talented students were in that class ... I think it’s curiosity rather than envy when it’s placed somewhere else. (JANNE)*

JANNE's assessment includes the social aspect that being with likeminded in a talent class may increase children's self-esteem. She emphasizes repeatedly during the interview that the talent class is a good idea, but in the quote, she also says that gathering talented students in a class may have negative social effects at a school. She mentions that students who are not in the class may be envious, but she does not talk about potentially negative effects of being in a talent class.

TRINE is a teacher at a free school in town, and one of her students, Sille, is in the talent class. The free school emphasizes the social aspect and receives quite a few students with special school-related problems. Sille is in a class with only six students. According to Trine, only three of them function at a normal level, but they are not going to high school. She therefore thinks it has been good for Sille to get away and build up an appetite, be stimulated and get ahead in terms of high school. She says:

*It is my impression that it is a really, really good idea, for I think that a link between public school and high school has been missing. I think we've been missing it for many years, because it's kind of been two worlds. Many students are shocked when they start in high school because it is a completely different culture ... It's kind of like a stepping stone, I mean that's kind of what they want, right ... attract more customers, right (laughs), and some more talented students who don't drop out ... (TRINE)*

TRINE's enthusiasm with the talent class is based mainly on the idea that it accommodates some social needs in Sille, who is academically strong and is going on to high school. She sees the talent class primarily as a good transition to high school, which, due to its "completely different culture", may be difficult to handle for many students. When she says that many students experience a culture shock, she is probably referring to the relatively large share of the students the free school sends on to high school. The difference between the two school cultures is probably greater than between high school and public school, which are more alike in terms of class sizes and discipline-oriented academic standards. Her statement also indicates that she sees the high school's role in the talent project as an element in a recruitment strategy to capture good students.

The three teachers express their satisfaction with the talent project in each their way, based on their individual background, and list different benefits. JYTTE compares the project with special needs education and see it as a good thing that talented students are challenged in a way that she thinks the regular public school cannot. Her assessment is primarily based on the fact that the student she knows is very enthusiastic about the talent class. JANNE emphasizes the positive aspect in the fact that the talent class is placed at the high school and not at the students' own schools where it might expose them and make the other students envious. TRINE sees the talent class as a bridge between public school and high school – a bridge that might benefit the participating student as well as the high school, which can strengthen its ties to the potential target group.

## Scepticism Towards Talent Development

At some schools, teachers' opposition to the project has been more prevalent. The teachers introduced below express more mixed attitudes and a certain scepticism towards talent development.

PER is vice-principal at a medium-sized school in a town with one other school. The school has one student, Benjamin, in the talent class, and Per is his math teacher. He describes Benjamin as "an incredibly clever mathematician" and thinks that he is perfectly capable of challenging him in his teaching. I asked him what he – and his colleagues – think about the talent project.

PER: *"Well, it's a little ambivalent. The first proposal was to take the students out one whole day, and that was a really poor model because it weakens the public school in order to strengthen something else. But I think the current model is perfect ... as a spare time offer, as something extra, because these students are smart enough to grasp it."*

Interviewer: *"What do you think about it taking place at the high school and at one specific public school?"*

PER: *"Initially, the teachers and actually also the leadership at the other schools were against it. They thought it was a kind of odious project, and it was ... But back then they implemented that model where we could see it in light of certain problems at the school ..."*

Interviewer: *"How do the teachers at this school see it?"*

PER: *"It's the same thing; many of the teachers think it's odious and unnecessary."*

Some of the resistance to the talent project among the local teachers seems to be associated with the original model with one weekly day's teaching per week. Even though this model was discarded, PER sees widespread scepticism towards the project among his colleagues. When they see it as odious, it is probably because it goes against the dominant self-image and moral in the public school culture. A prominent element in this culture is that the public school system performs a social-educational role that tend to put community above individual (Hermann 2007, p. 174).

MORTEN is a teacher at the same school as JANNE. He is a class teacher and biology teacher of two talent class students. Occasionally, the talent class biology curriculum overlaps with his classes, which complicates his teaching. He would like some coordination so that he knows who does what. He says about his view of the talent class:

*Well, it's somewhat dual. I can't deny that, and actually I've always been a fan of the comprehensive school and kind of still am. Of course, you can say that some students are very challenged academically and need support. But I think that support should be given in a class context, and those who are academically gifted should also be challenged in a class context instead of being split up. That can happen soon enough, but it is also clear to me that the two students I have, now have been challenged and have something to work with. The thing is, how good are we at differentiating? We have to admit that it's really hard ...; I actually think that we as a school should challenge them academically in all directions. But I know that in class, the less gifted occupy the teachers' attention a lot of the time, so the gifted maybe don't get it, but ... (MORTEN)*

MORTEN reflects on the need for differentiation of teaching, which he as a teacher struggles to meet. He acknowledges that it can be difficult to accommodate all students' needs for challenges in his teaching, but he does not think that picking out the talented students for further challenge is a good solution. He sees it as a step towards more ability-based teaching, which he opposes on principle.

BIRGIT is a teacher at a medium-sized school in a small town, which has two students in the talent class. She is math teacher for Magnus, one of the talent students, whom she describes as “a level above everyone else” in her class, where the level according to her is very varied. She says about the talent project:

*I actually think it's OK, I mean it's fine. Obviously, I miss that ... we could use some extra resources in the public schools for continued education. I mean so that we could do it there, you might say. I'm not crazy about the idea of removing something from the environment because I don't think it has the same effect. But if you could do something at the school, create some environments there, I think it would have a much better effect. Then I believe it would be “in” to go to school, to want to be good, which means that you could spread some rings in the water. (BIRGIT)*

BIRGIT outlines a dilemma between having special offers for gifted students and lacking resources to improve the environment for all students at the school.

Most teachers see advantages and disadvantages of the talent project in its current form. The two statements above represent the typical ambiguity when the teachers ask whether it is possible to implement sufficient teaching differentiation to accommodate both weak and gifted students. In the latter statement, the teacher argues for implementing talent development inside rather than outside the system.

The sceptical teachers especially emphasize that the talent project may make it even more difficult for teachers to differentiate their teaching, e.g.:

- “... another thing that happens, for instance in biology, is that they are one month ahead of us, and then you have to feed them something new or something different. That was a dilemma for me. It would be easier if they went ahead with something else than the topics we were planning ...” (MORTEN)
- “It sometimes seems to me that he is bored because they've just done that up there and so on. And I know at least from his physics teacher that it can be a little hard for him because he is so far ahead of the others. So, it's more like an extra review of known material for him ...” (BIRGIT)

The teachers may thus occasionally experience that the ability gap increases due to the talent classes. This raises the question which topics the talent classes should cover and how the teachers can give the students other challenges so that the teaching is not based on repetition of known material. This also raises the more basic question whether it is fair to offer some students more teaching than others:

*I have also been an external examiner in physics for many years, and I may see one physics class at one school that has two lessons per week, and a physics class at another that has three. It is obvious at the exam that they have been through more stuff and are more confident, so ... Somehow, I think that it's unfair that there are not equal conditions for everyone, because it means that the students who have three lessons get higher grades. That's the way it is, or at least it's a tendency ... (MORTEN)*

The question of fairness may seem irrelevant based on the view that differentiation in teaching is required by law. This means adapting teaching to the individual child's needs and that some may need more time. However, it seems relevant to discuss whether it is fair to give the extra gifted more teaching time based on the view that it is an even more biased allocation of the already very limited resource, time.

The scepticism expressed by these informants can be summed up as offensiveness in relation to the dominant school culture's image of the community school, resistance to a reintroduction of the ability-based school and a waste of resources. As far as allocation of resources, the view is that they would be better used at the individual schools instead of being removed and let the development activity take place elsewhere. Not having sufficient resources to accommodate this special group of students is presented as a problem because the teacher's attention during class to a large extent is directed at "the weak" students. Therefore, prioritizing talent development also becomes a question of allocation of limited resources, and in that connection, it is questioned whether it is fair to spend more resources on accommodating resourceful students.

## **Attitudes Towards Resources and Frameworks for Talent-Differentiated Teaching**

The talent report from the Ministry of Education (2011) claims that the population has a positive attitude towards talents. It refers to a survey (NIRAS 2010) that shows that 86% of the population agrees that it is acceptable to talk about other people as skilled and talented. It is much less acceptable to talk about oneself as skilled and talented. This is also true among talent class students, many of whom are hesitant to describe themselves as talented (see Chap. 5). However, the NIRAS survey also indicates that it is socially more acceptable to verbalize a talent the higher you advance in the educational system.

The talent report also indicates, again based on the NIRAS survey, that there are diverging attitudes to the allocation of resources between the academically weak and the academically gifted students in public school. In general, school actors believe to a higher extent than the population that specially gifted students can help raise the level in the entire class, and that the population to a lesser extent that school actors believe that the public school can strengthen talents. The survey leaves the overall impression that there is also room for the less gifted in the public school system. Both the population in general and public school teachers point to lack of resources as the most important barrier to talent development, and both groups also emphasize the public school's task to lift the masses (Ministry of Education 2011, p 23–24).

Lack of resources are not only seen as a barrier to talent development, but also to differentiated teaching (cf. EVA 2004, p. 71), maybe because "talent development" and differentiated teaching are seen as partially parallel phenomena, or because the former under the current conditions in the public school system is seen as conditioned by the latter.

According to Danish Psychological and Pedagogical Dictionary, differentiation in school can be understood in two ways: *student differentiation* and *teaching differentiation* (Hansen et al. 2005). Student differentiation represents an *external differentiation*, which is organizational, structural. It implies a *segregated form of teaching* where the students are distributed in classes based on knowledge, skills and interests. Teaching differentiation represents *internal differentiation*, which is didactic, pedagogical. It implies an *integrated form of teaching* where students with different preconditions are gathered in classes, and the teaching (in terms of objectives, payoff, content, effort, methods, time, teacher support, material etc.) is adapted to the students' different preconditions in terms of knowledge, skills and interests.

Student differentiation in the public schools was legally abolished in 1993 and teaching differentiation was introduced as the fundamental principle (see Chap. 3). However, a legal implementation is not synonymous with a practical implementation, and much public school teaching still seems to follow traditional patterns with one teacher, one class and extensive blackboard teaching. In addition, the past decade's wave of legal requirements and initiatives, including the spread of an individualized evaluation culture that challenges the principle of differentiation, makes it difficult for teachers to experiment with new teaching methods and trials. Especially the introduction of binding teaching plans in the form of "Common Goals" and the national tests in effect force teachers to stick to traditional methods. The centrally decided teaching plans and national tests represent a rigid framework (Bernstein 2000) that in many ways work against increased student activity and inclusion. The more predefined learning objectives are dictated from above, the less room there is to accommodate special student needs.

The diversity in student preconditions in integrated teaching has been said to be overwhelming for teachers (Gross 2006). It contains a strong incentive to focus on the weakest or the "slowest" when teachers have to practice differentiation in teaching. By focusing on this group, the teacher can potentially not only improve this group's performance level but also limit the differences in skill level between the students in general and thereby make the teaching task easier. The opposite is true with regard to "gifted" students. By focusing on and letting this group advance further, the teacher increases the gap between them and other students and thus the gap between levels within the integrated classroom (Gross 2006, p. 124). From a teacher's point of view, it will become even more difficult to "include" the gifted within the scope of teaching plans that are designed for specific grades.

As another argument for selecting gifted students for special talent classes, Australian scholar Gross claims that gifted students prefer to learn and socialize with other children at their own intellectual and mental level. She therefore advocates that they are taught part time in special classes with "other gifted children" or children who are a little older. If access to likeminded is limited, gifted students will supposedly either attempt to conceal their maturity and talent in order to be socially accepted by their classmates, or they will feel excluded and isolated and may prefer solitude rather than always having to integrate with classmates who are far less mature and have other interests (Gross 2006, p. 125).

However, special classes or teaching for gifted students do not eliminate the need for differentiated teaching. As LISE, a high school teacher in the talent class, points out, the students' preconditions are far less homogenous than she expected. Talents are divergent, as other talent studies conclude. It is possible to identify some common characteristics across talent domains, but talent development involves differentiation both in terms of abilities and in terms of which direction to develop them (Feldhusen 1998, p. 199).

Two Canadian scholars, Pyrut and Bosetti (2006), have argued that talented children's needs can just as well be accommodated within normal, integrated teaching. If the teacher lets the gifted students learn at a suitable speed, develop their critical and creative thinking, pursue their passions/interests, represent their knowledge in different ways and interact with likeminded, it should be possible to challenge them within the framework of regular teaching. The two scholars outline a model for talent-differentiated teaching, *Pyryt's P-model* (the name refers to its originator and its key components (*pace, process, passion, product* and *peers*)) (Pyrut and Bosetti 2006, p. 143). They maintain that this includes the significant preconditions for talent development within the framework of integrated teaching, and this to a large degree coincides with the qualities the students emphasize as talent-developing teaching (see Chap. 6).

*The pace component* implies that the specially gifted advance faster through the curriculum than other students. *The process component* points towards the problem-oriented teaching approach, which in a Danish context is also known as problem-oriented project work or pedagogy (however, there is a risk of confusion of concepts as the English literature in this context uses expressions like curriculum enrichment – p. 144). *The passion component* implies that the students are offered involvement and co-determination in the teaching, which can also be effectuated in relation to project pedagogy. *The product component* refers to the students' presentation of their project products or other learning, which in other words implies that they present their acquired knowledge to the other students in class. *The peer component* means giving the specially gifted a chance to interact with likeminded, and if there are no likeminded in the class, interacting with likeminded across classes and grades during school hours.

Pyrut and Bosetti see the teachers' inability to effectively differentiate their teaching as the biggest obstacle to integration and challenges to gifted students (2006, p. 150). Based on multiple studies, they claim that teachers who possess specialized, learning plan-related knowledge are better equipped to differentiate and be aware of gifted students' emotional needs.

As another barrier to giving gifted students with special needs suitable challenges within regular teaching, they mention the focus on measuring throughout the educational area. The accountability movement that has influenced practice throughout the system obstructs possibilities for talent-developing measures as the ones mentioned above. Teachers in a learning plan or curriculum-focused test culture are primarily focused on matching their teaching to the demands the students have to fulfil in the national tests and exams. Such conditions mean hard times for student- and problem-oriented projects because the teachers above all are focused on improving student performance within the same areas instead of differentiating their learning outcome based on abilities.



## Teachers' Competences and the Dual Function

Over the past few decades, a widespread mistrust in the Danish public school system has manifested itself in the media and among politicians. It is nourished via frequent references to international studies where Danish students show mediocre results. The legislation and the teachers have taken the blame for students not learning enough. Among the political responses to this criticism was a new school legislation in 2006 towards a more ability-focused school and the introduction of a new teacher education in 2007, which would equip the teachers "to provide the students with knowledge and skills". However, this latter aspect of the new objective for the school combined with the considerable external steering implied by the introduction of pedagogic "innovations" like tests and student plans, does not appeal to the teachers' professionalism in the form of authority and judgment, but rather to a "bureaucratization of the teacher in a service relation" (Hermann 2010).

The teachers in the talent class project studied here encounter recognition of their professional and pedagogic competences in one or more ways: They have been selected and asked to participate in the talent project, and their students characterize them as good teachers. But what characterizes these teachers and their teaching in relation to talent development?

The prospect of experiencing the students' reciprocal and voluntary interest in their subject is among the main justifications for participating in talent development (see Chap. 4). Especially public school teachers link this with the opportunity to develop their own professional competence, which is thus linked with some degree of reciprocity or teaching students who are almost at one's (the teacher's) own level. The simultaneous emphasis of this aspect and the opportunity to develop own professional competences indicates that the teachers condition their own professional challenge on reciprocity and interest among the students. In other words, they want to be challenged in their professional knowledge, i.e. the knowledge that relates to school subjects and is sometimes called subject specific knowledge. Several of the teachers also emphasize a social dimension, but not HOLGER (9th grade talent class science teacher), who, as mentioned in Chap. 4, considers talent class teaching "an external task", i.e., a primarily technical service in the form of knowledge dissemination.

It is important to keep in mind that public school teachers have a special, dual function. The school is not only tasked with communicating knowledge, but also with shaping human beings who are capable of functioning and contributing to social progress now and in the future. In addition to developing the students' academic skills, the school is also responsible for education and formation of personality, just as it has to create the foundation for a societal community (Carlgren and Marton 2002, p. 82). This is also known as the dilemma between formation and education. Even though the new objects clause and legislative wording has toned down the school's formative task, it remains an important element in the school's practical function, even though "general education" now to a larger extent resembles competition and logic of accommodation (Weber 2010).

Many of the teachers mention that they carry out and appreciate this dual function in the school. HANS (9th grade talent class science teacher), for example, wants *the students to experience a correlation between the subjects* and finds it important to participate in the social life of the class and cooperate with its other teachers. He thus moves beyond the purely subject-specific mindset and emphasizes that it is part of his role to contribute to a holistic approach and a positive fellowship among the students.

GITTE (8th grade talent class English teacher) is ambivalent about the fact that teaching a talent class may be perceived as cultivating the elite. She thinks that public school teachers in general are against this idea, which may indirectly express an implicit understanding that the school is also responsible for furthering community. However, the ambivalence between the subject-specific task and the formative task is also embedded in the school's practice via the selective function it exercises via its system of tests and exams. This duality is conceptualized as the school's *hidden curriculum* (Broady 1987) and implies an ambiguity or discrepancy between the school's official curriculum and its actual practice.

The hidden curriculum describes the situation that on the one hand, the school's objectives, which are "officially" described in the School Act, guide teachers in the teaching process. On the other hand, there are external frameworks without an "official" foundation that may not be written down or statutory, namely the demands the school situation places on students. These external frameworks and demands are defined outside the teaching process itself and are beyond the individual teacher's and student's control. They are the values, attitudes and norms that are implicitly passed on to the students and assumed to discipline them into accepting the authority structure of school and society.

The school-leaving exams are one example of an external authority structure as they in practical terms have proven to have a highly disciplining effect on both students' and teachers' behavior in the teaching process since they represent the last chance for students to pull themselves together before the final verdict (Rasmussen and Friche 2011). This disciplining is indirectly expressed in a statement by a talent class teacher who observes, with some surprise, that the students show up for talent class even though there is no final exam.

This leads to the question of what the most important role is for the school beyond communicating knowledge; to educate the students by teaching them community or to increase competition among them in order to select the most gifted? As mentioned earlier in this chapter, separating students based on ability can, according to the teacher MORTEN, "happen soon enough". This statement shows that this function is already contained in the school's sorting processes. The question is how early it should be effectuated.

Talent development, which involves selection based, first, on identification of talents, gives the teacher a powerful tool in relation to the individual student. This is true whether such a practice is based on tests, on personal assessment or on a combination of methods and types of IQ tests. IQ testing is a very powerful tool, and the IQ score often becomes very significant for the test subject, despite the ambiguity and uncertainties associated with the concept of intelligence (Bendixen 2009). The

powerful aspect applies to the intended objectivity in all tests, which despite statisticians' efforts will be biased in terms of culture and subject (Bendixen 2006, p. 33), and to the more personal assessment, which is based on how well the teacher knows the students and the chemistry between the teacher and the individual students. Both elements are thus ingrained in and interact with other sociocultural factors.

A qualitative study described by two British scholars, Ron Casey and Valsa Koshy, illustrates the dilemmas a teacher may face in terms of identifying talent. In the study, a teacher voices his reluctance to list talented students because such a list may easily become decisive and definitive and affect children's self-image and entire future whether they are on the list or not. Selecting a share of 5–10% as gifted, which the British system encourages, makes it even more difficult. As a student in the study pointed out to the teacher, he had been in the "talent group" at his former school, and he wanted to know why he wasn't now and whether it was possible, over time, to "lose one's intelligence" (Casey and Koshy 2006, p. 92). This shows that the student sees the designation as talent as something permanent, which once it has been achieved cannot be lost, but creates a certain amount of pressure. This is true for the nominee, who has to live up to the talent, and it is true for the student's teachers and surroundings, who may face expectations that talent is something special therefore requires special treatment.

## Competing Discourses on the Identification of Talent

In the talent classes, the students had signed up for participation; some with guidance from parents or teachers. This was the point of departure the first and the second year, but the first year did include entrance exams. The actors' own understanding of talent was thus decisive for the construction of talent in this context.

The students define their own "talents" in different ways. As the different talent type constructions in Chap. 5 show, the understanding of talent depends on the background of the "talent". Whether talent come easy or is it something one has to fight and work hard for depends, to a very large extent, on one's cultural capital in the form of educational resources and sociocultural environment. The outstanding and multiple talents have plenty of cultural capital and are comfortable with their talent, which they tend to describe as something inherent – "it has just always been like that".

In comparison, the quiet and industrious talents are more alien to talent and do not take it for granted like the two other talent types. They tend to describe their own talent as "a special interest" in subjects, which means that they do well in school. They feel and are therefore aware that it is not automatic but depends on a special personal effort and on a good learning environment that includes someone they can identify with. This is especially important for someone like Ida ("quiet talent"), who is interested in something that is not typical for her gender, or for someone like Khaled ("industrious talent"), who seeks social status and recognition, which he experiences as very difficult to achieve with his ethnic minority background.

The students clearly have reservations about widespread stereotypical perceptions of talent as especially clever children, nerds or someone who feels better than everyone else. Being associated with such versions of talent may result in dissociation from youth fellowships in and around their normal school and they do not want that. Some of the talent students have therefore developed special strategies to avoid the talent concept when they communicate with other youths about their participation in the talent class (see Chap. 5).

So, what did the students want with the talent class? Many of the students who wrote in their applications for the first year that they wanted bigger challenges. Perhaps because that is what you write in an application, and the expression reflects the formulation in the selection criteria. However, they also offer more strategic reasons concerning the possible advantages of participating in the talent class in terms of future studies. This demonstrates that the students are very aware of the importance and value of education. Even though both parents and the school in several instances have influenced the students to apply, most students emphasize that the decision was their own. This also demonstrates the level of self-determination and – management, which is emphasized as very valuable in educational contexts (Moos 2007).

Like the students, the talent class teachers have different understandings of talent and of whether the students have talent. The public school teachers emphasize talent as a special potential or special abilities that only a minority possesses. Some of the teachers see these abilities as congenital, others see them as acquired. However, there is widespread agreement that exercising them requires effort and will. Moreover, many of the teachers claim that they emphasize commitment, interest and motivation in addition to special academic skills.

The teachers' descriptions of the students in the talent class reflect two of the above-mentioned properties: special abilities within a specific field of knowledge or skill plus interest and motivation; i.e., a distinction between already acquired knowledge and an ambition about further knowledge, which is verbalized in descriptions of the students as quick to understand and apply knowledge and as eager to learn. The high school teachers are more moderate in their descriptions of the students in the talent classes. Their assessment is, to a larger extent, based on high school-level academic competences within the subject areas that are taught in the talent classes rather than the broader, general terms of the public school teachers. They saw the students in the talent class as interested students and "a few as bright and inquisitive", but "not as talents as such".

These different teacher perceptions and talent distinctions are related to the question of whether and how to identify talent. If talent is understood as an academic performance at a given point in time, it may make sense to use tests and measure the students' performance. If it is understood as a potential that has yet to be developed, then the question is how to identify it. This question is prominent in psychology-based talent research, which points out that standardized psychological and academic tests alone do not constitute a sufficient basis (Bendixen 2009; Casey and Koshy 2006; Feldhusen 1998). The fact that tests only measure a part of a child's potential in one specific context emphasizes the necessity of qualitative data and

information. Despite broad scepticism towards intelligence tests as the only identification factor, American schools predominantly use such tests to identify talent (Callahan and Hiatt 1998; Feldhusen 1998). One reason may be that using standardized tests appears less resource-demanding than other, more qualitative methods.

Another question is who performs the identification. The need for qualitative data and information gathered via pedagogic observation points to it being primarily a task for teachers. Some teachers find it challenging to have to pick out 5–10% of a cohort of students and saw many students as having potential talent that had not been expressed in their test performances. In addition, these teachers had to base their selection on own “impressions” and observations of students in class (Casey and Koshy 2006). Other British experiences show that identification of talent is the most problematic aspect of the talent development policy (Eyre and McClure 2012).

The understanding of talent as a potential is, in addition to the problem of identification, associated with another issue. Designating some children as talents creates a dichotomy in relation to the children who do not achieve that designation. If the objective is to designate some limited percentage of the students as talents, the large majority will indirectly be designated as “non-talents”. This raises questions about the expectations and motivations such a talent development practice will give rise to among the nominated and the non-nominated talents.

When you communicate to a group of students that they are intelligent, it implies a risk that they see their own abilities as a given whole rather than a potential that requires an effort to be developed. Moreover, it may trigger negative reactions from contemporaries when students are designated as intelligent or talented. Even though this is often described as a special Danish “who-do-you-think-you-are” mentality, such tendencies have also been shown in American studies (Feldhusen 1998). Likewise, it has been suggested that it may seem pedagogically incorrect to indirectly tell the large majority of students that they are not intelligent and *do not* have talent. Then again, it can be said that schools have already practiced this for many years (Feldhusen 1998, p. 195).

The distinction between the talented few and the large majority is thus to a large extent related to the issue of differentiation and the question of what the most important role for teachers and schools is and should be. It is thus fair to ask whether it is the teacher’s task, within the framework of the public school, to nominate students as talents and start a selection process. As far as differentiated teaching, the question is whether the school is required to guarantee suitable challenges for all students inside or outside the framework of the class fellowship. The Folkeskole Act formulates the section on differentiation in teaching as follows:

*The organisation of the teaching, including the choice of teaching and working methods, teaching materials and the selection of subject-matter, shall in each subject live up to the aims of the Folkeskole and shall be varied so that it corresponds to the needs and prerequisites of the individual pupil.*

*It shall be up to the headmaster to ensure that the class teacher and the other teachers of the class plan and organise the teaching in such a way that it offers challenges to all pupils.*

The act is in principle open to interpretation in both an individualistic and a more community-oriented direction, even though its wording unambiguously emphasizes the individual focus.

The legislation as well as school practice reflect a culture-political battle between two philosophies over the school's role in society (Nielsen 2006b). One emphasizes community, solidary and "soft values" like working together on common causes, democratic education, interdisciplinarity and undivided classes in the comprehensive school. The other emphasizes efficiency, economic growth, competition and individual ambition, expressed in an education policy that prioritizes subject-specific competences, tests, external evaluation and competition among students and among schools.

## **Concluding Discussion: The Talent Agenda and the Social Condition**

Many recent initiatives have reinforced the individuality trend, and especially the talent development initiative. The two overall philosophies for school and society – community versus individual competition – are also expressed by the external teachers in diverging attitudes towards talent development. Support for talent classes typically focuses on the individual student's outcome, and the scepticism focuses on the class fellowship. It is supposedly through this fellowship that education for the societal community should take place. The teachers still see the school's and their task as dual: They have to communicate subject-specific competences and they have to educate the students to participate in a societal community. The word "still" indicates that the individual aspect of the task is gaining ground these years, for example via initiatives for new methods or new ideas about separating the students, which to a higher extent encourages student differentiation than teaching differentiation.

The question about which form of differentiation is central in relation to the legal requirement that the schools provide all students with adequate challenges. The integrated classroom, which has room for highly diverging student competences, constitutes a large challenge in terms of teaching. An obvious logic for the teacher would be to seek to reduce this diversity by focusing on boosting the weakest students. Based on this logic, the teacher will increase the ability gap by focusing on the most gifted and thus make the teaching task for difficult (Gross 2006). However, there is no empirical evidence that this type of logic is guiding practice. Moreover, streaming based on skills would not eliminate the need for differentiated teaching. Even in a talent class, the diversity in skill levels may surprise the teacher.

Experiences from talent class teaching show that students prefer teaching based on student inclusion and co-determination. When some of the students state that they lack challenges in school, it may actually be this form of teaching that they lack. According to their public school teachers, the talented students also function well in regular class teaching; they do not see it as particularly difficult to include them.

The question about a selective versus a comprehensive school has not been considered relevant for the ordinary public school teacher. Even though teachers see the comprehensive school as incontestable, the 2011 Talent Report from the Ministry of Education recommends that public school students choose a track in 7th grade. The question about the selective school and student-differentiated teaching thus reappears on the political agenda.

Some teachers point out that talented students need offers like the talent classes that allow them to be around likeminded peers. However, they also mention that it may create problems if this takes place within the framework of the students' own school where it may cause envy among contemporaries. Identifying talent among students may have a two-way exclusionary effect, since children who are *selected* may risk social exclusion in relation to their class mates. Whether ability-based selection is voluntary or based on tests, our analyses indicate that talent identification implies a social selection. It is thus primarily students with cultural capital who enter talent classes.

Identifying talent is not unproblematic, rather the opposite. Such identification processes will, whether they are based on teachers' assessments or on "objective" tests, be subjectively influenced by culture and subject understandings. The teacher may become a crucial power factor in the selection of children with or without talent, which has been shown to be problematic in British and American studies (Callahan and Hiatt 1998; Casey and Koshy 2006; Feldhusen 1998). Identifying talent is somewhat unpleasant, both for teachers and students. For the teachers, it actualizes dilemmas in their role as communicators of formation and education, between talent as potential or performance, and the question of keeping the students motivated to take an education. If talent is seen as a potential, how is it possible to make an unambiguous identification? Who does not possess this potential? In terms of pedagogy, it may be problematic to identify talents because the nominated (and the non-nominated) may perceive it as something very definitive. Finally, there may be a cultural flipside in the sense that being identified and not being identified as a talent may have a two-way exclusionary effect.

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