

Book Review

Caroline Sims

From “the Genius” to ‘the Gifted’: The Conceptualisations of Giftedness in Educational Discourse in Sweden

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“**Y**ou must not think you are anything special,” reads the Danish-Norwegian author Axel Sandemose’s (1899–1965) description of the Law of Jante. The Jante Law is a literary critical description of rules of conduct that can be said to define the other side of the Scandinavian egalitarian mentality, where those with better abilities, finances or resources should not believe that they are better than the majority, but instead should show humility and restraint (Sandemose 1936 [orig. 1933]).

Caroline Sims’ PhD thesis *From ‘the Genius’ to ‘the Gifted’* can be read as a problematization of the dominance of the idea of equality in the school system, and an effort to promote giftedness and the gifted child as an important agenda in the Swedish school system. In an era that has focused on measuring student performance through international surveys conducted by operators such as OECD, PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS in recent decades, it may seem obvious to focus on the opportunities for the highly gifted in the school system. Given how much research has focused on testing, special education and inclusion, gifted students appear to be a somewhat overlooked issue. Against this background, Caroline Sims’ thesis is an important and necessary pioneer-work, internationally important and at the same time a partic-

ularly Swedish contribution to the analysis of the school system’s handling of the issue of giftedness in the Swedish welfare state that has historically been characterized by the ideal of equality.

Caroline Sims’ thesis is about how giftedness has been conceptualized in the educational reforms in Swedish education from 1820 until 2022. This is a period characterized by two parallel systems which was later integrated into a single school system for all (*grundskolan*), and Sims’ thesis explores giftedness in three different school settings: the Swedish national educational curriculum (*den nationella utbildningen*), the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, and three versions of Peak Program. The analysis in the thesis thus consists partly of a historical text study, and partly of a contemporary study based on interviews with teachers. This study examines how teachers are enacting giftedness in their practice.

The thesis is structured around four research questions: 1) How is giftedness conceptualised in a selection of significant policy documents? 2) How is giftedness conceptualised in a sample of enacted teaching practices? 3) What rationalities are these conceptualisations based on? 4) What tensions, if any, can be found in the conceptualization processes? The thesis is organized into four sections, which are further divided into 14 chapters. Researching giftedness is a complicated matter, partly because of the terminology. How should one, for example, translate the Swedish term *särbegåvning* [special giftedness]. This is translated in the thesis to *giftedness*, which has a slightly different and more

general meaning as it simply means to be gifted. Here we are not only dealing with a conceptual but also a methodological and analytical challenge, that Sims is managing in an original way.

Section 1 of the thesis describes the main problems of the analysis, the construction of the analysis and the research field itself to which the thesis positions itself. Through Sims' thorough analysis of the concept of giftedness, we understand that we are confronted with a concept that include different meanings depending on the historical context and the practice in which it is embedded. Therefore, Sims argues, the concept must be examined through discourse analysis that relates giftedness to the different *practices* through which the concept giftedness is articulated and attached with meaning. Sims methodologically approaches the complexity of the concept by applying a "cluster model" that contains eleven different meanings and associations to the concept of giftedness: some meanings are, for example, dominant in some periods, while others are predominant in other periods. This model provides the opportunity to both examine 200 years of Swedish school history vertically, but also horizontally in relation to three different contemporary school practices, and at the same time across different types of material such as historical documents and interviews with school professionals.

Sims' methodology can, consequently, be described as predominantly discourse analytical, constituted through an analytical position that is primarily based on Michel Foucault's concepts, but which is expanded with the use of related analytical positions such as Stephen J. Ball, Ian Hacking and Peter Conrad. Based on Ball et al, she argues that political

agendas are phenomena that cannot be reduced to policy seeping into practice. Instead, educational policy is a phenomenon that is enacted by different agents: policy makers, organization and teachers. This approach becomes particular important in the sections where Sims' analysis focuses on the contemporary school settings. The perspective inspired by Ball gives Sims the possibility to exemplify that giftedness is enacted through the school system and its professionals, thus materialized in school settings. This analysis points towards enabling as well as constraining factors in the teachers work with implementing giftedness in their practice.

In addition to the specific analysis of giftedness and the position of the highly gifted in the school system, the thesis thus provides insight into the fundamental and recurring question of how to differentiate between pupils in a school system. The question of how the school should differentiate is a thread throughout the thesis. For example, when it comes to how differentiation should be practically handled according to legislation, and whether differentiation of gifted students should preferably begin early or late in schooling.

Section 2 of the thesis is structured as a text analysis of educational reform documents to answer the research question: How is giftedness conceptualised in selecting significant policy documents? The section is organized into four separate chapters. Chapter 6 analyses documents from 1820 to 1928, researching the parallel Swedish school system covering both the grammar school (*läroverk*) and the early primary school (*folkskola*). Interestingly, the term 'genius' appears early in the investigated period, but disappears soon again from the official

documents after 1856. According to Sims, discipline was a more important issue in this period than giftedness. The latter hardly appears to be an issue in this period, although some very general categories appear like the students being competent and having extensive knowledge of different subjects.

Chapter 7 explores the period from 1940 to 1968. According to Sims, key elements in this period are integration and psychologization. Two major commissions were appointed in 1940 and 1946 to propose how the school system could be reformed. Four professors presented their views on the questions of differentiation in the school system. One of these professors, Rudolph Anderberg, argued for early identification of talented students as well as early differentiation so that these students' potentials were not wasted. Instead, it was another of the professors, John Elmgren, who, inspired by Jean Piaget, called for a late differentiation of students, whose viewpoints were included in the reform of the educational policy and the work of the next school commission. These processes of differentiation were also promoted through the general use of psychometric testing and a psychologization of the schooling system enhancing the possibilities of categorizing the students. According to Sims, this whole process of differentiation in these periods of school reform focused on students at risk, neglecting to address those particularly gifted. According to political documents of the period, teachers were encouraged not to set too high expectations towards student performances, avoiding the feeling of failure among students.

This development continued after the introduction of the nine-year comprehensive school in 1962. The discussion

concerning giftedness focused on those students with difficulties and neglected those specially gifted. The school system as such, nevertheless tended to benefit those who were gifted. The new development brings the question of differentiation even more into focus in the development of the Swedish school system in the modern era. Chapter 8 analyses this question of differentiation in policy documents from the period 1969 to 2022 with a focus on differentiation on special education and high performance. Key themes that Sims highlights are the ambition to avoid too abstract teaching, to secure the well-being of students, and the whole idea of individualization, which was connected mainly to students in difficulties rather than high performance students. The general student population and the students in difficulties were given priority.

More recent policy documents from 2009 and onwards seems to present a break with the existing understanding of "school for all" in the school system. This shift took place through the emergence of so-called cutting-edge education. In the Education Act of 2010, a new category of students was described: students who easily reach the minimum knowledge requirements. This was a recognition that some students needed a specific stimulating education to reach their full potential. This was without explicitly mentioning high performance students. The most recent curricula included in this PhD thesis (2022) still reflects typical Swedish values of democracy, diversity and participation, but also includes the ambition to give all student the conditions to "develop the full extent of their ability." Despite these indications of a greater focus on students' potential in the recent period, the specific focus on giftedness

and high ability is still quite absent from the curriculum and in the educational policy texts of the period.

In Chapter 9, which is the last chapter in the text analysis of the historical period (1820–2022), the analysis moves to a more horizontal analysis of giftedness in three key operators in contemporary Swedish educational policy: SNAE, (Swedish National Agency for Education, *Skolverket*), Swedish National School Inspectorate and the SPSM (the National Agency for Special Pedagogy). Generally, the documents from SNAE seem to include a comprehensive understanding of giftedness, with several positive attributions such as creative and fast learners. Still however, they are also related to problematic diagnostic descriptions like being at risk, sensitive or in need of care. The second operator, Swedish National School Inspectorate, reflects a gradually acceptance of giftedness in the selected documents, without applying giftedness explicitly, rather referring to students as highly able, fast in their learning. Contrary to SNAE, the Swedish National School Inspectorate appear more critical towards the lack of possibilities for high ability learners in the schooling system. This is not the case when it comes to the analysis of SPSM, since working with giftedness is not considered a task for special education, rather the focus of SPSM has been students at risk and related diagnostic issues.

The general impression of Sim's historical analysis gives a picture of a lack of focus on giftedness and gifted students. The period 2009–2015 seems to present a higher degree of acceptance of giftedness through categories of high performance and high ability, but still with scarce support for teachers working with gifted students. The documents of the three

different operators, with different valuations of giftedness leave, according to Sims, the schools and the teachers with a lack of clarity in the work with gifted students.

Section 3 in the thesis examines the second research questions about how giftedness is conceptualized in contemporary policy making and in different schooling practices, which is analysed through unstructured interviews with three types of teachers: teachers in the Swedish national system stating that they work with gifted students, teachers on the IB Diploma Program and teachers teaching in the Peak Program. The analysis in the section draws on Ball's theories of enacting. The first chapter in the section, chapter 10, examines the teachers' practices in relation to issues of factors enabling or constraining the teachers work with giftedness. The analysis of the interviews points hints at some common factors enabling the work with giftedness such as the importance of allocating resources to this and giving this priority through training, support, meetings etc. The teachers in the IB Diploma Program and those teaching in the Peak Program benefit from the existing structures in their educational policies. In the analysis Sims hints at a common constraint in the sample which "is an expectation of conformity or a force acting on initiatives that are helpful to gifted students to bring them back into line with the general curriculum" (Sims 2023, p. 182). The chapter gives the impression that making giftedness a priority in the school structure and policy as well as dedicated principals is key in making the work with giftedness successful in practice.

In chapter 11 Sims addresses the specific lesson strategies towards gifted students in the three different school

settings aiming to challenge the students. In the National Education, the teachers' main methods were acceleration of the learning processes, and enrichment, for example through motivating student's curiosity. In the sample from the IB Diploma Program, factors like acceleration, ability grouping and enrichment activities were built into the program, which Sims claims enhanced high expectations towards the students. Critical thinking and independent work in the program are other elements contributing to the high expectations, according to Sims. Some of these features also apply to the teachers in the Peak Program. Acceleration and leading students to the limits of their ability seems to be a common teacher strategy in challenging the students across the three different settings. The teachers' willingness to challenge the learning abilities is another key factor.

The following chapter 12 examines how categorization practices play into the identification of the students and the concept of being gifted, and whether teachers are teaching with a gifted perspective. In National Education, according to Sims, there seems to be a pattern of teachers categorizing gifted students in vulnerable categories rather than speaking about them as fast learners or highly able. Often special educational professionals are involved in the identification processes, and categorizing students as gifted often relates to special educational issues. According to Sims, the IB program presents a different picture, as teachers set high expectations, foster students' intellectual autonomy, and generally adopt a more positive approach to recognizing giftedness. Following Sims, there are low expectations in the ordinary municipal

schools, while the expectations in the IB program is high. Generally, the teachers succeed in categorizing the students through academic aspects of their learning, rather than through diagnostic terms. These practices have similarities with the teachers in the Peak Program; instead of directly articulating giftedness these appear through concepts like ambitious, interested or fast learners. According to the analysis the teachers in the national program connect giftedness with diagnosis, whereas the IB and the Peak program enacted giftedness in educational practices without directly applying the concept, thus redefining the concept in their professional practice through avoiding a diagnostic terminology in their practice. This underlines the point of Balls that teachers have agency to redefine educational practice, though still influenced by the policy.

Section 4 in the analysis consists of chapter 13 about giftedness in policy as discourse and the conclusion (chapter 14). In this section, Sims seeks to answer the last research question about the rationalities underpinning the current state of giftedness in schooling. The most important rationalities seem to be the balance between ideals of equity and excellence, which can be traced to the beginning of the Swedish school system. Simple equity seems to hinder the work with students' excellence, which has turned into a form of subjugated knowledge in the Foucauldian sense. This means that giftedness has been a sort of hidden knowledge. This manifests in the fact that the gifted subject has been invisible in educational policy and practice until recently. The invisibility has supported late differentiation in the Swedish school system. In some cases in the modern educational Swedish history,

giftedness has even been related to medicalization and observations, for example by being interpreted as autism or ADHD. The gifted subject thus risks becoming the diagnosed subject according to Sims' analysis.

Following Sims, the Swedish educational system still seems to suffer from the lack of will to accept the gifted subjects as *educational* rather than *medical* subjects. This was to do with the value of "sameness" in Swedish educational policy that paradoxically contains hiding dividing practices, excluding giftedness as a category challenging the culture of equity in the schooling system. False dichotomies are constructed when giftedness is positioned as part of a culture of elitism according to Sims. The teachers in the IB and Peak Programs provide a positive example of enacted practices for gifted students without applying the word gifted, thereby avoiding further categorization. This could also be enforced through an interpretation of inclusive education based on rights rather than needs. Individual potentiality should not be restrained by hidden rationalities of collective equity in the schooling system seems to be the message according to Sims. Teachers can play positive roles as gatekeepers for gifted students. Sims' application of the cluster-model points towards new pathways to study gifted subjects and, should I say, labelling of difference in general, by connecting the related meaning of a given concept across the historical context

In her examination of giftedness Sims several times refers to the differentiation question in educational policy: how, why and when to differentiate the gifted students. In this effort, the thesis crosses similar tracks compared to that of special education. Even though the

underpinning argument is that gifted students should not be an issue of special education. This may be true. However, both students classified as having special educational needs and those identified as gifted may be subject to biologicistic interpretations of student ability. In both cases, certain abilities—or the lack thereof—are often naturalized in their narratives. These naturalizations of differences may serve as important normalizations in the schooling system, and the handling of phenomena threatening the norms of being the right student or citizen in the Swedish welfare state. The Swedish school system may thus contain solid normalizing procedures securing that those termed risky or gifted do not shake the rationality of the system in general. Sims' work gives us an important lesson in the historical analysis of giftedness in the Swedish school system. Her analyses of the current practices in the school system provide key insights for all professionals in the school system when it comes to the necessary reflections on how to improve the learning possibilities for those theoretically gifted as well as for those more practically talented.

References

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