

## Giftedness and Swedish Exceptionalism? Gifted Pupils in Primary and Compulsory School, 1842–2022

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*Giftedness in school has in the twenty-first century grown as a field of research in Sweden. Some claim that giftedness and gifted children's needs were long ignored by the education system for historical and cultural reasons, and it is only in the past two decades that a slight change in view has occurred so talented pupils' learning has been highlighted. In this article, this often-reproduced image is questioned. Instead, taking a longer educational, historical perspective, is it argued that as early as the nineteenth century the authorities took some account of differences in talent; that giftedness received a great deal of attention from the state after the First World War; that the need to adapt education organizationally or pedagogically to pupils' different giftedness was extensively covered in the first two curricula of the new compulsory school system in the 1960s; that the authorities required schools to adapt their learning activities to the needs of gifted pupils; that these views and demands rested on contemporary research and school commissions; that the Swedish school system's growing segregation and decentralization since 1990 has meant that the curricula thereafter are now significantly vaguer than the earlier ones regarding giftedness; and finally, that there today is a significantly greater risk than in the 1960s–1980s that the needs of gifted pupils are forgotten.*

### Introduction

In Sweden, gifted children's education has received far greater attention – from researchers, school politicians, the National Agency for Education, teachers, and parents – in the last 25 years. A widespread perception among Swedish researchers in education is that gifted children for a long time went unnoticed in Swedish compulsory school or the school curriculum, and that it was only in the 2000s that the authorities finally recognized gifted pupils' needs. This long tradition of ignoring the gifted has been put down to Swedish society's focus on equality, and research has claimed that in Sweden it was historically considered ugly to be considered as more theoretically gifted or talented than others, or to request or receive teaching in school adapted to a particular gift.

In this article I apply a historical perspective to how the state – meaning the government and Parliament – reasoned about giftedness and gifted pupils' learning through the medium of the school curriculum from 1842 to 2022. The overall purpose is to increase the understanding of Swedish society's approach to giftedness in school, past and present. The research questions are what approaches

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to giftedness were evident in the elementary school curricula of 1842–2022 and what opportunities to adapt teaching have been demanded or made possible?

Beginning with a literature review and the Swedish state of the art, I consider the central theoretical concepts that guide the analysis of the official documents, setting out the methods and material. The empirical investigation is then presented chronologically. The results are presented by period – 1842–1919, 1919–1962, 1962–1994, and 1994–2022 – with the periodization marking significant changes in views, approaches, organization, and adaptation for gifted pupils. The results for all four periods are presented in the same way, with a presentation of the era and its curricula, a content analysis of the curricula, and a discussion to put the findings in context.

### Literature Review

There have been few scientific studies of giftedness in the Swedish education system; however, that interest has grown in recent years. Several researchers claim that the question of giftedness and gifted pupils' learning has never interested the Swedish authorities, researchers, or schools. Swedish society's ambitions for equality after the Second World War have been given as the reason (Persson, 1997, 2010, 2014, 2017, 2021; Persson et al. 2000; Edfeldt 1992; Wistedt & Edfeldt, 2009; Wikén Bonde, 2010; Wistedt & Sundström, 2011).

For example, Edfeldt (1992) claims that in Sweden it is considered undemocratic to be intellectually gifted and to receive or ask for teaching adaptations according to one's giftedness. Edfeldt relates this view to social-democratic egalitarian aspirations. The researcher who has contributed to the tenacity of this idea is Persson. In the past 25 years he has repeatedly emphasized, first in his thesis and then in several subsequent publications, that collectivism, egalitarian ambitions, and the unwillingness of those in charge to admit that some people may be more theoretically gifted than others, has seen gifted children's needs overlooked in Sweden, a country he therefore describes as 'Different' (Persson, 1997; see Persson 2010, 2014, 2017, 2021; Persson, et al. 2000). Persson (2017, p. 8) also claims it was the conservative government's amendment in 2010 to the Education Act that first made it 'legally possible for school to also include gifted children'.

Other researchers have put forward similar views. Both Wistedt (2005; Wistedt & Edfeldt, 2009; Wistedt & Raman, 2010) and Engström (2005) claim that the attitude too gifted children in mathematics changed for the better in the 2000s, which enabled schools specially to cater to gifted math pupils. Pettersson (2011) claims that researchers' lack of interest in giftedness should be understood in terms of culture. Melander (2021, p. 13) believes that in recent years it 'may have become less taboo to talk about giftedness in school' and the 1994 compulsory school curriculum's statements 'that all students should receive support at "their level"' was relatively new. Melander also claims that in the past there was solid

opposition against schools making adjustments for gifted pupils, ensuring it excelled at that in an international context, with Swedish politicians even making fun of gifted children.

However, there is some research, even if it does not primarily concern giftedness, which paints a slightly different picture. Vinterek (2006) has shown the compulsory school's first curricula were significantly more detailed on individualization than subsequent ones. Marklund (1985) and Lindensjö and Lundgren (2018) have shown that issues of differentiation were raised in the school reforms in the 1950s and 1960s. Axelsson (2006, 2007, 2012) has studied the education system's handling of giftedness in the first half of the twentieth century, finding not only that pupils were categorized and sorted by intelligence, but that opportunities for differentiation were numerous, and that intelligence tests and special classes were used. He also shows there were indeed academic and political discussions about how to educate high-achievers and gifted pupils, and the notion of giftedness in schools was still very much alive in the mid twentieth century. There is thus a research gap starting in the mid twentieth century, and especially for primary schools in the period 1962–1994. This article therefore focuses on that period.

International research of the history of giftedness relevant to the Swedish context shows the importance many countries placed on giftedness and intelligence, and how school officials and politicians tried their best to identify the gifted, talented pupils and move them on to higher studies (Tannenbaum, 2000; Gallagher, 2000; Wooldridge 1994, 2022). Margolin (1993, 1994) has applied a Foucauldian perspective to education systems' approaches to giftedness and discusses how researchers of gifted children have created groups of people designated as exceptional in various field. Margolin argues that advantaged parents and researchers have come together to secure special educational paths for children they perceive as gifted and talented – with financial resources redistributed to pupils who already are advantaged, at the expense of resource-poor parents and children. Probolus (2020) analyses discourses about giftedness from 1920 to 1960 and argues that various 'experts', usually psychologists, encouraged parents to become more involved in their children's education and to recognize that they indeed had special gifts. She also claims that universities spread the idea that gifted children were neglected in school, and that a particular subgenre of literature advised parents on how to raise their purportedly special children.

Broadly speaking, the international literature confirms the significance accorded to intelligence in the twentieth century. There was a felt societal need to identify exceptional children and educate them to be members of the economic, political, cultural, scientific, or military elite. This seems to have been a transnational development, and research-wise relatively well covered. Were Swedish views on giftedness – before the relatively recent steps taken by the government – so very different to other developed countries in the twentieth century? From a historical

perspective, questions about the education of gifted pupils in Swedish schools need further research, and the existing explanations and approaches outlined here require nuance. But first, what of the notion of giftedness itself?

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The concept of giftedness is controversial. To start with, there is no international, officially agreed definition. Under the influence of American research, the term 'gifted' is often used, and I have followed suit. However, similar or synonymous terms to capture giftedness or gifted people exist, such as high achievers or highly able, talented, exceptional individuals. What all these terms have in common is that they have been questioned, debated, and interpreted differently (Ziegler, 2010; Pettersson, 2011; Silverman, 2016; Sims, 2021).

Legislators and researchers have differing views on what giftedness means. Gifted pupils are sometimes mistaken for high achievers, or is the two terms, wrongly, seen as synonymous, as seen from the literature. A high achiever is often regarded as a pupil who easily achieves knowledge goals. It can be due to other factors than intelligence, for example hard work, stimulation, or well-being. A gifted pupil can be a high achiever but can also underachieve or be absent from school due to for example dislike or poor teaching. Giftedness is thus usually defined based on intelligence. The pupil is considered to have a special aptitude, talent, or gift, whether in music, mathematics, or languages (Westling Allodi, 2015; Melander, 2021; Sims, 2021). Where the boundaries are drawn between different levels of giftedness or intelligence obviously determines how many in an age group that will be described as gifted pupils. The group thus varies in size depending on the definition of the term.

Schools' adaptation for gifted pupils can be organizational or pedagogical. In the case of organizational differentiation, the school is organized in some part, largely, or wholly by giftedness. Examples are tracking, ability grouping, and coaching. Pedagogical differentiation can be understood as focusing on acceleration and enrichment. Acceleration means that pupils can take classes faster and finish their education sooner, use teaching materials and tasks intended for higher years, skip years, or start school early. Enrichment means that pupils broaden or immerse themselves in a subject they have a particular aptitude for (Dahllöf, 1967; Hadenius, 1990; Lundgren, 2002; Jahnke, 2015; Sims, 2021; Mellroth 2021; Margrain, 2021). The differentiation toolbox thus contains a variety of organizational and pedagogical tools. I will soon demonstrate the tools used historically and today in Sweden, but before the source material will be presented.

## Materials and Method

The Swedish state's perceptions of its schools can be found in several types of written source material. The single most important factor in regulating schools is the curriculum. Each usually presents an idea of reality in which the government states how schools should be and why. All curricula have a normative claim and an ideological dimension. It is the state that determines the approach, even if school practitioners share that view. The implementers – principals, teachers, and others – should at least outwardly be positive towards the values in the curriculum and should believe in the methods and recommendations it suggests or requires. This may be the universal view in society of how education should be organized and implemented, but it is rarely the case in reality. Instead, there are often competing views, and what was once questioned or perhaps not even stated may later become something taken for granted. Paradigm shifts occur, and a revised or wholly new approach can end in the development of a new curriculum (Alcoff, 1991; Pickering, 2001; Vallberg Roth, 2001; Wahlström, 2002; Folke-Fichtelius, 2008; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). Thus, to identify the state's approach to gifted pupils it is necessary to analyse curricula. Comparing curricula texts to show that changes, or even paradigm shifts, have occurred is one thing; explaining it is something qualitatively different. For that, the contemporary context must be included in the analysis, hence the extensive contextualization of my results here.

It is vital in historical research to grasp not only the contemporary context when a curriculum was written, but also a curriculum's intertextuality – was meant by a specific word or concept at that time (Marjanen, 2018). Language changes over time, and concepts in use today, such as gifted, differentiation, coaching, enrichment, or acceleration, will not necessarily be found in older governing documents, or even in today's curricula elsewhere in the world. Similar or synonymous terms may also have been used. This is why not just the existence of the ideas but their content must be discussed. For example, the state may not refer to gifted pupils, but instead to talented, intelligent, or extremely intelligent pupils, so it is necessary identify also such terms in the sources.

In this study, education acts and Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) are also considered, but the main sources are the official curricula from 1842–2022, which are analysed with qualitative content analysis, and the terms discussed above have been extracted from the source material for analysis.

Finally, a reminder about the limitations of the study: it is the long historical lines of giftedness, which have been analysed here, not what was actually done in school. How gifted pupils were taught and why; how gifted pupils, their parents, or teachers experienced the school's teaching; what teacher training schools said about giftedness: all this lies outside the scope of this article.

## Results

### 1842–1919: Ignorance and Segregation

In 1842, the *folkskola* (lit. people's school) or primary school was introduced to provide a basic education for Sweden's children. The first School Charter came the same year, replaced in 1882. The first curriculum was issued in 1878, followed by new curricula in 1889 and 1900.

For the first two decades primary schools were run by the local council for the parish, but with the 1862 local government reforms the church council took over the running, and it was only in 1930 that local school districts resumed responsibility for the primary schools. At first, the number of years schooling was not regulated, but in 1878 it was set at six or seven years. In practice it was not until the early twentieth century that the education system grew to the point where most children attended school for most of the year (Richardson, 2010).

There are no direct statements about giftedness in the nineteenth-century state schools' governing documents. Such few statements as might be said to concern talent in some ways are addressed here. The legislation of 1842 called on the new schools to encourage and reward pupil achievement, while 1882 allowed for acceleration (School Charter 1842; School Charter 1882). That possibility was also mentioned in the first two primary school curricula in 1878 and 1889: pupils could be moved to a higher class or leave school if they were considered to have met requirements (Normalplan 1878, 1889). Acceleration has remained an option under Swedish law since then. In the primary school curriculum issued in 1900, which pertained until 1919, some aspects of giftedness were introduced. The curriculum required teachers to adapt their teaching according to each pupil's progress, meaning schools were to differentiate their education for individual considerations. Individual work was recommended as a suitable method (Normalplan, 1900).

How then are these writings to be understood? Different levels of intelligence, and measurements thereof, had attracted attention in the later the nineteenth century, but interest soared after the turn of the century. Primary school was for the poor, with minimal opportunities for extra teaching for gifted children from the working class; better-off children went instead to private schools or secondary schools (*läroverk*). Neither did primary school give its pupils direct access to higher education. In reality, gifted working-class children had thus little opportunity to continue their studies. Improving the opportunities for poor but talented children was however not something that interested the authorities in the nineteenth century. The primary school existed mainly to discipline, inculcate Christian values, and teach basic reading, writing, and math skills. That was considered enough. Future politicians, civil servants, and business leaders continued to be recruited from other educational institutions. The limited opportunities for gifted working-class children upset some politicians, such as Fritjuf Berg, who launched radical

ideas for school reform. In 1883, he proposed that a joint lower school should be created and that pupils, regardless of background, should attend the same school, making it possible for poor but gifted pupils to get a good education. His ideas met stiff resistance along the rigid class lines of the time (Axelsson, 2006; Richardson, 2006, 2010). However, adapting the primary school's organization and teaching to accommodate pupils' gifts, needs, and talents was increasingly discussed in the decades after the turn of the century. Those thoughts came in to play in the next curriculum.

### 1919–1962: The Gifted but Poor

Starting in the later nineteenth century, Swedish society underwent radical change, economically, socially, scientifically, and politically, something which had a direct impact on educational policy. More children went to school and for longer, and more voices were raised about the need for a better education for gifted working-class children. These developments meant that aspects of giftedness were more prominently addressed in the 1919 curriculum, which had taken ten years to draft (Axelsson, 2006; Richardson, 2010). It was, by Swedish standards, very long-lived. It was not until 1955 that a new curriculum was introduced, although that only lasted a few years because in 1962 primary school was replaced by the compulsory school (*grundskola*).

The curriculum of 1919 noted the existence of different forms of giftedness. It also required schools to offer differentiated teaching and to adapt tasks for the gifted. Pupils' varying needs, levels of performance, and talents were to guide that adaptation. Enrichment, acceleration, and ability grouping were the methods it highlighted, with for example more demanding tasks and more courses. The possibility of leaving school by taking an exit test was retained (Undervisningsplan, 1919; Ekholm, 2006). Despite this, the school system in Sweden continued to be divided organizationally not according to differences in intelligence, gifts, or talent but by class and gender.

The 1955 curriculum said that differences in giftedness existed and that the most gifted pupils should be given the opportunity to enrich and accelerate their learning. There was far more detail than before, and it went over the importance of individual supervision, ability grouping, acceleration, and enrichment – as additional courses of varying scope and difficulty. The curriculum emphasized that all subjects should be 'highly individualized' to reflect 'differences in talent' (Undervisningsplan, 1955, pp. 18-19). More 'demanding tasks' were recommended for 'the better pupils' (Undervisningsplan, 1955, pp. 18-19). The needs of those children with mathematical talents were singled out. The talent for math was said to vary significantly between pupils, while there were good opportunities for individualization in the subject. According to the teaching instructions some pupils had 'an excellent aptitude for mathematics' and should be able to pass the course requirements set for the class (Undervisningsplan, 1955, pp. 18-19). About

grading, it said consideration should be given to differences in talent. The highest grade, 'A', should be a very exclusive grade reserved for pupils with a 'striking gift' – who usually made up less than 1 per cent of the 'student material' (Undervisningsplan, 1955, p. 21). When it came to homework, again the teacher should bear talent in mind. The authorities believed that very competent teachers were necessary if all the adaptations were to be successfully implemented (Undervisningsplan, 1955).

The aptitude-focused curriculum of 1955 can only be understood in a longer historical context. Around 1900, questions of talent and intelligence were increasingly discussed in Sweden and elsewhere. Axelsson (2006, 2007) has shown this was primarily under the influence of the scientific community. People wondered what consideration should be given to talent when pupils were divided into classes. Society's changing view on giftedness was evident in the 1919 curriculum, which marked the beginning of a paradigm shift in opportunities for gifted but poor children.

Criticism of the segregated school system by the political left continued to grow after 1919 and the introduction of political democracy in the early 1920s. Sweden was however to be democratized, not only politically, but also socially, economically, and culturally, several left-wing and liberal politicians argued, and they demanded that all pupils be given equal educational opportunities. The talents of the working class should thus benefit from the same advantages as the middle and upper classes. A joint elementary school for all children was seen as the answer. There, all talents, regardless of class, would be educated together. In this new democratic school, every child could learn according to their needs, interests, and talents, and pupils would not be shaped in the same way – far from it (Undervisningsplan 1919, 1955; Axelsson, 2006, 2007; Richardson 2006, 2010; Larsson & Westberg, 2019).

In addition to the political discussion, advances in educational and psychological research between 1920 and 1955 should be remembered if we are to understand the focus on giftedness and intelligence in schools during this particular period. The research grew exponentially after the First World War; academic aptitude was considered innate and intelligence tests became popular. The notion that the population's intelligence was distributed according to a standard curve caught on among politicians, teachers, and researchers. In many countries so-called talented classes were introduced – in Sweden there were attempts made in the late 1920s. According to school experts, researchers, teachers, politicians and others, differences in intellectual ability between pupils made it difficult, if not impossible, to teach all children in the same class. So, the discussion revolved around how the division should be organized and how talented working-class children were to be given the same opportunities as children from other social classes (Axelsson 2006, 2007). Several Parliamentary motions addressed the issue. At the same time, secondary school was considered by the majority of politicians to be the right place for gifted pupils. Many Social Democrats argued,



rather of dismantling the primary school as an institution, that talented working-class children should be sent to secondary school by using more secondary school scholarships for poor but gifted children (Lundgren 2002; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). From the 1920s to 1940s, the party remained divided between those who wanted to abolish the existing, divided school for a joint lower school and those who wanted to broaden secondary school recruitment. The influential social-democrat politicians Alva and Gunnar Myrdal presented their views on the issue in 1941, which although they had little immediate impact, eventually became ruling the Social Democratic Party line. They believed pupils should not be divided, but that individualization should instead be made possible within the framework of a cohesive school class in a new democratic school. They pushed for the abolition of secondary schools and private schools. Instead of an early organizational division, they recommended pedagogical differentiation in a future unified school. That would also suit the gifted children, it was argued. It should though be remembered that there still were many Social Democratic politicians who did not question organizational differentiation after intelligence, achievement, or giftedness (Lundgren, 2002; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018).

From the 1920s until the introduction of compulsory school in 1962, several Swedish Government Official Reports (SOU) also raised the question of how gifted pupils' needs should be met. The one published in 1926 discussed whether some pupils might finish school more quickly and proposed two ways of doing so, either by moving up a year or two or by having differentiated courses. In the latter case, if the politicians chose that route, some suggested that a special educational path would be created for gifted pupils. The report pointed out a specific problem with that solution, however, claiming that regardless giftedness, all pupils might need an education of a certain length for reasons of maturity (SOU 1926:5).

In 1940, a new school commission was appointed, and it too addressed organizational divisions by giftedness. Four professors of pedagogy and educational psychology were asked the age when such a division would be appropriate. Three said at the age of 11 it was possible to see the differences in pupils' giftedness and intelligence with some certainty, and they argued for organizational differentiation at that age; the fourth expert said it should come later (SOU 1943:19; Lundgren, 2002; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). After the Second World War, the discussion continued, and yet another governmental commission was appointed in 1946 (SOU 1948:27). The key issues in their reasoning about giftedness would later inform the curricula of 1955 and (above all) 1962, as will be seen.

### **1962–1994: Giftedness and Equality**

In 1962, after many decades of debate, Parliament decided on the introduction of the compulsory nine-year comprehensive school or *grundskola* (lit. basic school).

Under the new system, children were to receive education with equal opportunities regardless of their background. Compulsory school would give every pupil whose grades were good enough the opportunity to continue on to higher education. The segregated parallel school system was finally abolished. Also, in 1962, a new Education Act and curriculum were introduced. That curriculum was replaced only a few years later in 1969, which in turn was replaced in 1980. Each of the three had its approach to giftedness.

In the 1962 and 1969 curricula, the state took aspects of giftedness and differentiation into much account. To begin with the 1962 curriculum, there was a recurring demand that there should be adaptation according to each child's individuality and needs, with pupils described as a 'heterogeneous group of individuals, subject to constant development and representing the most diverse personalities and gifted types' (Lgr 62, p. 13). Furthermore, it stressed that 'tomorrow's society' would require greater cooperation between people of different gifts. Children, it was claimed, belonged to different talent types and school should not strive to shape them uniformly. High demands were placed on school on pedagogically differentiated teaching, and school was prohibited from planning activities according to imagined average levels – that was considered negative for all pupils, including the gifted (Lgr 62). Adaptation according to giftedness was thus required, and teachers, it said, should know their pupils' 'intellectual prerequisites' (Lgr 62, p. 32). Enrichment, in the form of deepening and widening the pupils' knowledge and skills, and acceleration were other measures that were advocated in the curriculum. Special courses, extra exercises, diagnostic materials, and ability grouping were also highlighted, and the curriculum said it was wise to put pupils into different study groups. Level-graded courses, named general and special, were started in English and Mathematics. A theoretical line, intended for theoretically gifted pupils, was created in Year 9, with eight other lines to select for the majority of pupils (Lgr 62). In upper school, the curriculum thus solved the issue of pupils' different giftedness by applying organizational differentiation to some extent. In lower and middle school, pedagogical adaptation within the class dominated.

In the 1969 curriculum, pupils were again spoken of in terms of intelligent and talented types. The importance of differentiated teaching returned in this curriculum. The curriculum demanded that all pupils be given the opportunity to develop according to their gifts, needs and intelligence. However, differentiation was primarily to occur within the framework of the class. The methods advocated were mainly the same as in the 1962 curriculum. In addition to enrichment and acceleration, the 1969 curriculum also allowed for organizational differentiation, but it was toned down compared to its predecessor. The choice between practical and theoretical lines in Year 9 was also gone. Contents-wise, the curriculum was divided into basic and advanced courses, and pupils would be able to study both different content and at different speeds (Lgr 69). According to Lindensjö and Lundgren (2018), this meant that ability grouping lived on in practice.

In 1980, another new curriculum was issued for the compulsory school. Like the two previous ones, the importance of differentiated teaching was again emphasized. In addition to the main course, it demanded that pupils had to a significant extent be given the opportunity to make their own subject choices. But the curriculum distanced itself more sharply than the 1969 curriculum from permanent organizational differentiation, since the state feared the long-term effects of it. Organizational differentiation could, however, be achieved by having more flexible group divisions, and pupils could also choose between some courses. Anyway, it was mainly pedagogical differentiation that was advocated. Content and working methods were to be individualized within the cohesive school class, and the usual methods of acceleration and enrichment – according to each pupil's needs, gifts, and interests – were advocated (Lgr 80). Thus, talent, achievement, and individualization is terms that characterized also this curriculum.

How best to understand the emphasis on giftedness and differentiation we encounter in the compulsory school three first governing documents? In Sweden in the 1940s–1960s, science and Government Official Reports had carefully dissected the issues of giftedness, and extensive, internationally cutting-edge research on school differentiation had been produced. The school reforms of the 1960s relied heavily on this research. (Dahllöf, 1967; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). The school commission, which had submitted its report in 1948, proposed abolishing the parallel school system and introducing a nine-year unitary school with a differentiated final year. There are discussions of giftedness in the report, and suitable alternatives are proposed for both practically and theoretically gifted children. The commission concluded that the latter's needs could be met through individualized teaching, various options, and an organizationally divided Year 9. The commission was emphatic that pupils should not be forced in the same mould, and as modern Swedish society required specialists, schools should ensure each pupil received the education suitable for them. Pupils' personalities would guide how the school worked, and individualized teaching was considered necessary for 'pronounced academic talents' (SOU 1948:27, p. 113). We encounter much of what later featured in the 1955, 1962 and 1969 curricula, in the commissions' findings, which thus had a significant impact on the legal framework for Swedish schools for a considerable period.

Even though the parliamentary parties were not in full agreement, a decision had been taken in 1950 to democratize the school system. One stated reason was that it still existed a sizeable 'reserve of talent' who due to socioeconomic or geographical obstacles did not have the same opportunities as others. The parliamentary majority intended to remedy this (Hadenius, 1990; Axelsson, 2006, 2007). First, though, the new school system was to be trialed before a final decision about compulsory school could be taken. As was usual in Sweden, the trial would be followed by a commission. Like the previous commissions, it too asked the scientific experts what age 'general giftedness and special giftedness could be distinguished' (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018, p. 54). The experts said giftedness

differed and could alter. One key question for the politicians was whether the new compulsory school should organizationally divide children by giftedness or whether gifted pupils should be taught in heterogeneous classes. The Social Democrats, supported by the Centre Party and the Communist Party of Sweden, advocated limited organizational differentiation and, instead, a high degree of educational differentiation. The Liberals wanted to see an organizational division after six years, while the Conservatives wanted to keep the parallel school system, at least in some form (Lundgren, 2002; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). The three parties of the left and centre won the vote. The minister of education advocated acceleration as a method, saying that 'the most gifted would be allowed to study faster and be able to skip a year' (Hadenius, 1990, p. 175).

Sweden's 1962 compulsory school was a compromise between the organizational differentiation and pedagogical differentiation camps. Lindensjö and Lundgren (2018) believe those who wanted an organizationally cohesive school won the debate, but that those who advocated pedagogical differentiation on a school-by-school basis instead won on the issue of content. The opportunities for the gifted for acceleration and enrichment, but also for ability grouping and line choice, were examples of that. Politicians also believed that the theoretically oriented line in Year 9 of compulsory school would be used only by 'a limited elite' (Richardson, 2010, p. 111). In full, this gives us a good understanding of why giftedness was given careful consideration when the compulsory school was organizationally and pedagogically designed.

The 1969 curriculum removed the choices in Year 9 since almost everyone – eight out of ten pupils – was choosing the theoretical line. Organizational and financial reasons thus lay behind the decision to remove the optional final school year. For gifted pupils, acceleration and enrichment continued to be advocated as methods. There was almost a consensus among Swedish researchers that there were good opportunities to adapt and individualize pupils' education in heterogeneous schools, and it was believed that new teaching material would make this adaption possible (Hadenius, 1990; Almqvist, 2006; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). Both the 1962 and the 1969 curricula, contrary to what has been claimed, thus took full account of the needs of gifted pupils.

The changes from the 1962 and 1969 curricula on the one hand and the 1980 curriculum on the other, warrant consideration from a couple of further perspectives. First, the 1980 curriculum was thinner and less detailed than the earlier ones. This was because the state no longer wished to control learning in school to the same extent as before. Decentralization was in fashion, and the strong, extensive state apparatus was increasingly under criticism in Sweden as elsewhere (Johansson, 2006; Börjesson, 2016; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). Second, the year after the 1969 curriculum was accepted, a new school commission began work. The directives from the Department of Education said school should adapt to different talent types but also that organizational divisions should be avoided as far as possible. The commission agreed, adding that permanent ability grouping

should be kept out of compulsory school (Hadenius, 1990; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018). The commission also pointed to schools' problems combining equality, heterogeneous classes, and group or individually differentiated teaching. Another commission concluded that, despite the regulations, Sweden's schools still broadly grouped pupils by giftedness and achievement, to the benefit of high-achieving pupils but leaving low achievers at a disadvantage because of how school was organized (Börjesson, 2016). Schools were primarily adapted to the gifted and high achievers, teachers claimed in evaluations in the 1970s. The growth of special classes for low achievers, which pupils were picked out of the classroom to attend, should be understood on that basis. Gifted pupils were thus by no means forgotten in the 1980 curriculum, and they also benefited from the school's pedagogy and organization (Vinterek, 2006).

The first three compulsory school curricula thus stated that pupils were differently gifted and that schools should adapt their activities accordingly. Soon new ideas followed and the Swedish school system would change – for gifted pupils, for the worse.

### **1994–2022: Giftedness and Growing Inequality**

Ideas of how society should be organized were changing by the late 1970s, putting the private good above the public good. The state should retreat and not intervene, as for much of the nineteenth century. This neoliberal approach hit Sweden with full force towards the end of the 1980s, and views on how education and the school system should be organization changed significantly. Privatization and decentralization were the watchwords. Schools were municipalized, and the number of independent non-fee-paying schools grew rapidly (Englund, 1996; Jönsson & Arnman, 1996; Börjesson, 2016). An essential part of the transformation of the Swedish school system in the early 1990s was the drafting of yet another curriculum.

In the period after 1994, three curricula have been used. The 1994 curriculum, in the decentralized spirit of the time, was very concise – and very vague. It almost included nothing about giftedness or organizational and pedagogical differentiation for the gifted. However, as in earlier curricula – though without the nuances of those – it mentioned that pupils should develop as individual. 'Teaching must be adapted to each pupil's conditions and needs', it was said, and there were 'different ways to reach the goals' (Lpo 94, p. 6). It also mentioned, almost in passing, that intellectual aspects should be considered when planning learning activities. There is a resemblance to earlier curricula, in other words. Where the 1994 curriculum to a great extent differs is in not providing guidelines on how schools were to meet the ambitious goals. Neither does it refer to the organization or methods that schools and teachers can or should use (Lpo 94). The 1994 curriculum is thus very different to the four previous ones, being vague, short, and almost silent on the question of giftedness.

In 2011, another school curriculum was introduced. Under the heading 'An equivalent education', it stated that 'Teaching should be adapted to each pupil's circumstances and needs. It should promote the pupils' further learning and acquisition of knowledge based on pupils' backgrounds, earlier experience, language and knowledge' (Lgr 11, p. 6). This did not mean that teaching should be designed the same way everywhere, it continued, but 'There are also different ways of attaining these goals' and 'Account should be taken of the varying circumstances and needs of pupils' (Lgr 11, p. 6).

The current 2022 curriculum is similar to the preceding curriculum. As before, the teacher must plan and organize learning activities after individual consideration (Lgr 22). However, the Education Act now emphasizes that high-achieving pupils must receive guidance and stimulation to attain more than otherwise possible in their development (Education Act 2010:800: ch. 3 § 2; Act 2022:146).

Overall, the unavoidable conclusion is that intelligence and giftedness have been almost completely lost from the three most recent compulsory school curricula, which are far less nuanced than those especially in the 1960s about the rights of gifted children to learn and develop at school.

Beyond the curricula, gifted pupils have gradually received more attention. As noted in the literature review, after the turn of the century 2000 there has been fresh research on giftedness in school, and the state is now paying greater attention to gifted pupils than it did in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2010, the centre-right coalition government made increased organizational differentiation possible and decided that advanced education should be trialed in the last years of compulsory school. Advanced education in the form of special schools or classes was also designed, using organizational separation to give certain pupils a far deeper or broader knowledge. According to the decision makers, it would provide 'talented pupils with sufficient challenges in the subject or subjects at which the advanced education is directed'. At the same time, test-based admissions to advanced education were allowed (U2010/4818/S).

In 2019, the government tasked the Swedish National Agency for Education with drawing up proposals for 'how schools work with students in the compulsory school who easily meet the knowledge requirements in one or more subjects, can be strengthened and supported' (Skolverket, 2019, p. 1). Part of the remit was to improve opportunities for pupils to be enriched and to accelerate their learning. In its response, the Agency proposed that pupils who 'have prerequisites for this' be able to take upper secondary school courses in compulsory school (Skolverket, 2019, p. 1). With the increased interest in giftedness, the Agency also developed support material for schools about teaching gifted pupils. In the summer of 2022, the government proposed changes to the latest curriculum, because it wanted pupils to be provided with 'better opportunities to read at a higher level and to progress at a faster pace of study'. That proposal specifically targeted gifted and high achievers (U2022/02568).

To understand developments in recent decades a couple of aspects should be highlighted. The first is decentralized government. The early compulsory school curricula were comprehensive and relied on state-of-the-art research. With the ideological shift after 1980, that accelerated in the 1990s, the curricula showed signs of the state having become a reluctant ruler, all the more willing to hand to schools the decisions about what should be done and how it should be organized. Second, it needs to be highlighted that the Swedish school system again has been heavily politicized. Even before the reforms of 1962 there had been visible cracks among the political parties about compulsory school and how it should be organized, but in the 1970s and 1980s those cracks became larger and larger. From the mid-1980s, it also became the Social Democrats' ambition that the freedom to choose schools should be extended, and there was talk of strengthening the user influence. A new heterogeneous school system, with many schools and profiles, was, towards the end of the 1980s, judged to be better suited to meet the individual wishes and needs, and a government commission from 1990 called for private influence in schools to increase. The centre-right government of 1991–94 agreed and launched several school reforms of great significance for the future. The 1994 curriculum was issued at the same time as other large-scale reforms of the school system, including municipalization and independent school reform. With the shift in education policy, the equal compulsory school system began to break down (Börjesson, 2016; Englund, 1996; Jönsson & Arnman, 1996; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018; Lundgren, 2002; Richardson, 2010). For school curricula, the shift meant that goal management superseded rule management, so that the curriculum texts that related to giftedness and differentiation became unclear.

Independent school reform should also be addressed. Past demands that parents should have greater freedom to choose schools and that children could be divided after perceived talents and achievements returned in the years around 1990. Some independent schools marketed themselves to attract the ostensibly high-achieving, gifted pupils. It was the middle and upper classes who took the opportunity to choose their children's schools, with the result that the school system is again significantly more segregated than during the 1960s–1980s (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2018; SOU 2020:28). Parents and researchers have also called for the opportunity for there to be organizational differentiation by giftedness. In response, the state has launched the measures reported above. Special educational paths and special schools for children whose parents believe them to be particularly talented or gifted, have, as Margolin (1993, 1994) and Probolus (2020) show for the US, again been created in Sweden as well.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The article shows the enduring interest on the part of the state in giftedness and differentiation in schools. The Swedish primary and compulsory school

system has never foremost been organized with giftedness in mind, but for over a century the curricula have demanded that school activities be adapted to reflect differences in gifts, talents, or intelligence.

Little consideration was given to giftedness in the primary school curricula until 1919. Primary school was a school for the poor, and gifted children from the working class were largely ignored by the state in the days before universal suffrage. However, some adaptations were possible. For example, a high achiever could finish school early if it was agreed they had met the knowledge requirements. In 1919 an important change regarding giftedness was made in the new curriculum. Enrichment, acceleration, and ability grouping were highlighted as appropriate methods for teaching the gifted. Giftedness continued to be a focus in the education debate. In 1955, shortly before the advent of compulsory school, the last primary school curriculum was issued. Aspects of giftedness now received more attention, and the governing document gave gifted pupils greater opportunities for educational enrichment and acceleration. The remarks about giftedness were far more extensive in this curriculum than in the previous ones.

Primary schools were soon to be abolished, though. The introduction of compulsory school in the early 1960s came when the measurement and sorting of pupils by intelligence and achievement had already interested politicians, educators, and the research community for several decades. Several school commissions had also carefully analysed the needs of gifted pupils. The first compulsory school curricula of 1962 and 1969 required schools to consider differences in pupils' giftedness and intelligence. Organizational differentiation was possible, with the 1962 curriculum being more positive than subsequent iterations. Methods such as identification, acceleration, enrichment, ability grouping, and coaching were highlighted. The 1980 curriculum was instead less detailed than its predecessors about giftedness and the question of organizational or pedagogical differentiation, but there were still clear demands for adaptation to individual needs. None of these criteria imposed limits on gifted pupils' opportunities for individual development.

Instead, gifted pupils' opportunities have been curtailed for the past thirty years. In the brief, vague curriculum of 1994, most mentions of intelligence and giftedness were dropped, and it was left to practitioners to decide how to conduct differentiated teaching. The next two curricula, 2011 and 2022, are marginally more explicit about giftedness (even if they confuse high achievers with gifted pupils) but not to the degree seen in the curricula issued in the 1950s and 1960s.

An analysis of the wording of Swedish school curricula shows that the conclusions of several researchers about giftedness in the last decades should be nuanced, and that the question of giftedness in school be put into historical context. If a specific Swedish egalitarian culture did exist, it did not mean gifted children were ignored or that pupils learning were to be uniform. On the contrary, for much of the twentieth century schools focused on talent and differentiated teaching. Gifted children were seen as a resource – something as true in Sweden



as in for example the UK or the US. The introduction of compulsory school brought a considerable improvement in gifted working-class children's opportunities for a good education, to the benefit of themselves and society.

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