

Acceleration and Enrichment for Gifted Students – From the Perspective of Swedish Principals

*By Lena Ivarsson**

This study identified and discussed principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment for gifted students. These areas have proven significant for the teaching of the gifted. The research questions included questions about perceptions of giftedness and how principals organize to allow gifted students to develop and learn based on their conditions and needs. The empirical material consisted of open questions where the informants freely could describe their knowledge and perceptions about gifted students and their education. The principals' mission statement formed the theoretical basis for analysis. The method used was content analysis. Previous research has shown that acceleration and enrichment are significant for teaching and learning for gifted students. It is therefore of importance that principals, responsible for the activities of the schools they are responsible for, are aware of these and enable the teachers to work with acceleration and enrichment based on the different needs of the gifted students. The results showed that the principals in the study believed that (a) acceleration should primarily take place in the gifted students' age-appropriate class, (b) second by studying subjects or courses with higher classes, (c) third, that the teachers enable enrichment for gifted students in their age-appropriate class, (d) fourth, grade skipping is complicated and should be avoided.

Keywords: acceleration, differentiation, enrichment, gifted students, inclusion, principals

Introduction

This paper concerns principals' perceptions of adaptations in teaching gifted students in a Swedish context. The Swedish compulsory school consists of K-9 and is divided into an autumn and spring term. In Sweden, the state governs the school through laws, regulations, curricula, and syllabuses that set goals and guidelines for the work. The principals design the education and are responsible for the students reaching the goals. The government decides what students should learn at school. They set goals and frameworks for education in various laws and regulations. The School Act is the backbone of the rules surrounding the education field. Today's education system faces significant challenges, not least when adapting teaching and learning based on the variety of students in the classroom. The inclusive classroom means that instruction must be differentiated to enable good education for all students. In the case of gifted students, acceleration and enrichment have been shown to be critical to their development and learning. Gifted students are described in this paper as students who "continuously amaze both in knowledge and application through their unusual ability in one or more behaviors"

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(Persson, 1997, p. 25). In short, acceleration means that the student is allowed to work faster within one or more subjects, where this is considered appropriate, to meet the student's need for challenges. Enrichment refers to the opportunity for the student to explore a subject or subject area broadly or in-depth to meet the demand for challenges in learning. In Swedish schools, the principal is responsible for the activities in the school in that the principal is responsible for how the finances are distributed and leads and distributes the work at his school. This means that the principal needs to have knowledge of the different needs of students and how these can best be met for the most favorable development and learning possible for all students. In the inclusive classroom, there are many students, and each student has unique needs. The principal, who is responsible for the activities, needs to have knowledge of the students' various conditions in order to make the correct decisions possible. The inclusive classroom includes many students with different needs, and gifted students are among them. However, they have not always been seen as a group with needs but rather as a group of students who can manage their learning independently. The present study identifies and discusses principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment as tools for differentiating teaching for gifted students based on their mission as defined in the Swedish Educational Act (Skollagen, 2010).

The following section deals with a literature review and a description of essential concepts for the study. Section three discusses the methodology, and section four discusses the results. Section five provides a general discussion with didactical implications, followed by limitations, future directions, and concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Inclusion

Inclusive education implies the right to education for all students, independent of their needs. This means that all students are in the same classrooms and schools. Student differences should be seen as an asset rather than a problem, and teaching and learning should be adapted to students' different conditions and needs (Nilholm & Göransson, 2014; Thomas, 2013).

The learning environment in the inclusive classroom should strive to create conditions for all students' participation and thereby make education accessible to all students, regardless of conditions and needs. This means a learning environment where everyone does not have to do the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. It means a learning environment where students learn from and with each other and where differences are seen as entirely natural and as an asset (Gerland, 2014).

To make this possible, the quality of education in the classrooms needs to be developed so that all students can benefit from inclusive teaching. Here both principals' and teachers' competence in teaching, learning, and organization of activities is decisive (Haug, 2017; Skott, 2014).

For gifted students, inclusion means that students who easily reach their goals should receive support to develop further in the regular classroom (Skolverket, 2023). Teaching and learning for gifted students have often focused on cognitive abilities and omitted social and emotional abilities (Versteynen, 2001). These areas have received greater attention in contemporary Swedish research on giftedness (Sims, 2021). Principals' ability to create social relationships and build community in school becomes essential for an inclusive school (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

Differentiation

In order to meet students in the inclusive school, teaching and learning need to be differentiated. Differentiation in learning refers to the practice of tailoring instruction and support to meet the individual needs, interests, and abilities of each learner in a group. This approach acknowledges that learners have different backgrounds, experiences, learning styles, strengths, and challenges and, therefore, require different types and levels of assistance to achieve their learning goals. Teaching should be adjusted to each student, and teachers must have expectations of and believe in their students (Håkansson & Sundberg, 2016; Kreger Silverman, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017).

The school's governing documents, such as the school law, curricula, and course- and subject plans, allow the principal and teachers to organize teaching based on different conditions. To meet the needs of gifted students, cooperation between several teachers and several different professions and school forms is often required (Jahnke, 2023).

A distinction is made between organizational and educational differentiation. One type of organizational differentiation is that the gifted students form their own class followed throughout an entire upper secondary education, so-called advanced education. Another example of organizational differentiation is tracking, which means that the gifted students follow their regular class but meet each other and a teacher with special responsibility for these students only when teaching the specific subject. Further examples of organizational differentiation are to offer deepening and breadth or to offer extra stimulation through leisure activities. Another way is for students to be supported by a mentor with competence and interest in the subject (Jahnke, 2023; Håkansson & Sundberg, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017).

Two main concepts in educational differentiation are acceleration and enrichment. Acceleration means that the pace of study is adapted to the student's needs. This can be done in part by allowing the student in his class to work with tasks from higher grades, in part by allowing the student in specific subjects to read together with students in higher grades, but also by allowing the student to move up to a higher grade than is appropriate for his age. Acceleration, in the form of the student being allowed to move up to a higher class, usually has a good effect on the student's knowledge development. The promotion should occur as early as possible and requires acceptance to mix different ages in the class. The students also appreciate promotion to a higher class, although the promotion can quickly become insufficient in many cases (Kreger Silverman, 2016; Liljedahl, 2017;

Sims, 2021). The student should be offered teaching at the grade level he/she needs. A partial movement where one retains one's class affiliation can be significant. Full promotion may also be relevant upon careful consideration and is strengthened by the School Act, where it is clearly stated that the student's knowledge forms the basis for grades, not the scheduled length of the course or the student's age (Liljedahl, 2017). A thorough impact analysis must form the basis of the decision whether a child should be moved up entirely because it can easily result in a performance requirement for the student but also entail social or emotional difficulties (Kreger Silverman, 2016; Liljedahl, 2017; Sims, 2021). Adaptations in the original teaching environment should be tested before promotion to a higher grade (Liljedahl, 2017).

Enrichment is a strategy to diversify educational opportunities and curriculum and extend education beyond general education content. Thus, enrichment will help meet the needs of specially gifted students. Enrichment means the student can broaden and deepen within one or more subjects. The student must feel that the learning is meaningful, significant, influential, and enjoyable. Various enrichment models and programs have been developed and implemented to facilitate and reinforce gifted students' academic, social, creative, and thinking skills (Van Tassel-Baska & Brown, 2007).

Difficulty, Depth, Diversity, and Density are examples of enrichment which means that the student gets the opportunity to work with more complex material, go deeper into details, do something outside the course or subject plan, or compress the course content to avoid unnecessary repetition of content which the student has already consolidated. Compression frees up time for other knowledge content and is a way to prevent the student from becoming bored. This way, enrichment can occur within regular teaching or in groups outside school hours (Sims, 2021).

For gifted students, it has been shown that, among other things, acceleration and enrichment are differentiations that work well for their social and cognitive development and learning (Kreger Silverman, 2016).

Gifted Education

In Sweden, research on teaching and learning for gifted students has been challenging to conduct because giftedness, in principle, has been a taboo area in Swedish pedagogical research. It was not until 2015 that the Swedish National Agency for Education drew attention to teaching and learning for gifted students on its national website (Skolverket, 2023). On the other hand, the national curricula for Swedish schools through the ages contain writings that have made it possible to focus on gifted students in school, even if other concepts were used. The latest revision of the Swedish Education Act (Skollagen, 2010) states that students who easily meet the grade criteria should be given opportunities through guidance and stimulation to develop their knowledge further.

Research on attitudes toward gifted education shows a significant variation, ranging from strong support for gifted education to strong opposition (Cross et al., 2013; Cross et al., 2018). The system for identifying gifted students in Sweden is

neither uniform nor well-defined, which can affect the attitudes towards gifted students and adaptations for them. A common way to measure giftedness is via results on standardized IQ tests. Swedish researchers, for example, Sims, suggest that instead of IQ tests, we should observe how students tackle complex tasks. These observations need to take place over a more extended period of time. Many gifted students have become accustomed to underachieving to fit in, and some have lost confidence in school. Therefore, it is not a given that they get top results on exams or tests (Sims, 2021).

Purpose and Research Questions

The present study aims to identify and analyze principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment as possible tools for differentiation to meet the instructional needs of gifted students. The research questions are the following:

- What perceptions do principals express regarding acceleration for gifted students?
- What perceptions do principals express regarding enrichment for gifted students?
- How do the principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment for gifted students correspond to their task according to the School Act (2010)?

Theory

The empirical data will be analyzed and discussed based on the principals' mission description in the national educational act (Skollagen, 2010). Inclusion and differentiation for gifted students are comprehensive, focusing on acceleration and enrichment.

In Sweden, the principal organizes and coordinates the pedagogical work at schools, decides how to manage the school, and distributes resources according to the students' various conditions and needs (Skollagen, 2010). The school's activities must be developed to align with the goals in the national curriculum (Lgr22, 2022); here, the principal has a special responsibility. The principal's pedagogical management of the school and the teachers' professional responsibility are prerequisites for the effective development of the school's activities. Therefore, school activities are a significant responsibility of the principals. Teaching must adapt to each student's conditions and needs and promote learning and knowledge development based on their background, experiences, language, and knowledge. The work in the school should take place in such a way that the students are stimulated to acquire and develop understanding and strive to be a living social community that creates security and the will and desire to learn. Every student has the right to develop in school according to their conditions. Their goal fulfillment is clearly stated in the Education Act (Skollagen, 2010), and it is stated that principals must work towards goal fulfillment and determine how this work is to be carried out. Goal-oriented work involves all levels of command and is part of the systematic, quality work, which is of great importance for school development and quality (Skollagen, 2010; Skott, 2014).

Principals are responsible for their schools and for achieving the goals they and the state set. While principals have great demand for themselves, they also have ample maneuvering space based on the allocated budget. The power chain between the state, the principal, and the various governing documents leads to various conditions and challenges for the principals and is subject to multiple interpretations and priorities. This affects, among other things, the adaptations that are decided on for gifted students and students who easily achieve the goals for passing (Jervik Steen, 2014; Lgr22, 2015).

Methodology

Data for this study was gathered through a web-based survey with open questions to identify and analyze principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment as possible tools for differentiation to meet the instructional needs of gifted students, as stated in the Swedish Educational Act, Skollagen (2010).

Informants

The informants consisted of 71 principals in preschool, elementary school, and high school in a region in the northern part of Sweden. The informants participated in the national principal education program, at one specific university, during the implementation of the study. Of the 71 informants, 52 were women, 16 were men, two did not state their gender, and one chose not to answer the question. The informants fell into the following age groups: 12 were 31–40 years old, 35 were 41–50 years old, 21 were 51–60 years old, and three were over 60 years old. The number of years in the profession varied from less than one year to 25 years. Of the 71 principals, 57 (80 percent) had a teacher's education as a basic education. The idea of choosing informants from the principal national program was twofold. Firstly, the principal's program is mandatory for principals, which means that all principals undergo the program. Secondly, it was a convenient way to contact many principals of varying ages, years in the profession, and basic education. Informants were not asked if they had particular knowledge about giftedness or their understanding of research in the field. However, the primary responsibility for the gifted students in the school rests with the principal. However, it can be assumed that the principals' knowledge of gifted students and their education was shallow since gifted education is rarely discussed in a Swedish context. However, principals' overall understanding of inclusion, differentiation, acceleration, and enrichment is also unknown. As the principals in the present study have different educational backgrounds and proven experiences, one can assume that their knowledge varies. This, in turn, enriches the study's results as the informants were not specifically selected for their knowledge about gifted students and gifted education.

Survey

The web-based survey contained four background questions about gender, age, primary education, and years in the profession, as well as six open questions (Table 1) with a focus on inclusion and differentiation and adjustments for gifted students. The questionnaire was constructed in the tool called “Form.” This article discusses and analyzes the descriptive empirical data based on the principal's assignment outlined in the Swedish School Act (2010).

Table 1. Examples of Open-Ended Questions and Responses

Examples of open-ended questions	Examples of responses
Describe how you, as a principal, work to ensure gifted students develop based on their different conditions and needs!	We try to normalize all talents and talk openly about obstacles, opportunities, similarities, and differences between us people/students.
	We make adjustments in the existing class and, if necessary, make contact with teachers at other stages to give the gifted students more challenges.
How do you define giftedness?	I cannot define this further, but a student who quickly assimilates new areas and is far ahead of the expected level of knowledge in relation to his age.
	Those who do not need to read their homework but learn everything during the lesson, but the problem may be that they are lacking in other things, eg the social aspect which is also an important part of the education.
How do teachers, in the schools you are responsible for work with teaching for gifted students?	We include all students in school, regardless of their needs. We meet all students regardless of conditions.
	We do not carry out special work for gifted students.

The informants were informed orally and in writing about the study. The web-based survey was distributed digitally to all 230 National Principal Education Program participants at a specific Swedish university. A reminder was sent to the participants digitally to increase the response rate. Of the 230 principals invited to participate in the study, 71 responses were received, giving a response rate of 31 percent, sufficient as the survey was distributed digitally.

Analyze

The data from the survey have been read through several times, and statements that describe the informant's perceptions of inclusion and differentiation with a focus on acceleration and enrichment have been noted, compared, and

analyzed based on the rector's assignment.

Ethical Considerations

The informants have been promised anonymity in such a way that the results are reported at the group level, and quotes are of such a nature that they cannot be traced to a single individual. The informants were also informed that they could cancel their participation in the study.

Results

The findings describe principals' perceptions of acceleration for gifted students, followed by their perceptions of enrichment as part of differentiated instruction for gifted students. Finally, principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment for exceptionally talented students are described and analyzed in relation to their duties as principals.

Acceleration

The principals in the present study express different perceptions regarding the possibility of acceleration for specially gifted students. There are both opinions that students should be allowed to skip a class or more, where it is possible and where the need exists. At the same time, the principals express various concerns concerning grade acceleration, such as that it may become problematic for the student to adapt to the older students socially. Several principals also believe that problems can arise if a student skips one class and it soon turns out that more is needed, and the student would therefore have to skip one or more classes again. It could cause significant problems both in teaching and learning, but also socially and relationally for the student. Instead, many of the principals propose acceleration within their class through differentiation. The type of acceleration suggested is the division into different groups according to the subject and the student's needs, but not fixed groups, so-called level grouping, but more based on the need at the time. Investigating and surveying the student, thereby identifying conditions and needs as a basis for acceleration in one's class, is also highlighted as significant. The principals who mention investigation and mapping believe it is a prerequisite for adequate support and stimulation. This aligns well with the principal's mission and the school law, which advocates inclusion. Many principals express that the starting point should be that the student should be in his class and that teaching should be adapted to all students, even the gifted. Finally, acceleration is also proposed in the form of gifted students being allowed to study certain subjects or specific courses with higher grade levels in order thus to have the opportunity for meaningful and developmental learning. Here, the principals highlight the advantage that the gifted student can belong to his regular class with age-appropriate peers. At the same time, they get the opportunity for adequate teaching and learning in the area(s) where the student performs at a significantly higher level than their age-

appropriate peers. Since many principals have expressed concern regarding social adaptation if a student skips one or more classes, they believe this is an advantageous way to give the gifted student access to peers and higher-level teaching.

Enrichment

The principals express great confidence in the teachers' skills regarding the concrete work in the classroom. Based on that, the principals describe how the teachers work with differentiation rather than their perception of enrichment as part of differentiation. The principals describe themselves as having a supportive role and are naturally also the ones who distribute personal and financial resources based on identified needs. About enrichment, the principals highlight differentiated teaching and the opportunities, but also challenges, that exist with differentiation in particular. Education must be adapted to the needs of all students, including the gifted. This is done, among other things, through challenges and stimulation in different ways in the regular class. However, several principals believe that it is difficult to stimulate gifted students. They learn quickly and constantly want to progress, which can sometimes be challenging to manage in a class with many students with different individual needs. Other principals believe it is easy to challenge gifted students but considerably more difficult to limit. It is, of course, fantastic to have students who want to learn a lot in one area, while at the same time, the principals express a concern that these students risk working way too much and thus feel bad because of it. Therefore, they believe it is essential to map needs and adapt teaching and learning for gifted and all students in the class.

The Principal's Assignment

Based on the above description and analysis of the principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment for gifted students, it is interesting to reason how these perceptions correspond to the principals' task according to the School Act (2010).

From the principals' perceptions of acceleration and enrichment and how that work is carried out at their schools, it appears that the inclusive school with differentiated teaching provides suitable conditions for gifted students to develop and learn in their class, i.e., together with children of the same age. The principals believe that their mission includes including all students of the same age in a class and then adapting, or differentiating, teaching based on the students. The principals express great confidence in the teachers regarding inclusion and differentiation, as well as adaptations for specially gifted students in the form of, among other things, acceleration and enrichment.

Discussion

The principals show great faith in the teachers' ability to include all students in a class and to differentiate the teaching for them. Previous research (Kreger Silverman, 2016; Liljedahl, 2017; Sims, 2021) shows that grade skipping has a good effect on gifted students' knowledge development but also shows the importance of thorough preparatory work and impact analysis as a basis for a possible promotion. The principals in the present study express concern about grade skipping and indicate difficulties in social adjustment. That is the only reason for being restrained with grade skipping that the principals raise. They instead agree that the best thing for gifted students is to remain in the regular class with peers of the same age, where acceleration is offered in the form of a faster pace of study and reading relevant subjects with higher grade levels and enrichment. Liljedahl (2017) believes that adaptations in one's class should be tested before promotion to a higher grade. This fits well with the principals' expression that inclusion is preferable to acceleration, meaning grade skipping. My interpretation is that the principals in the present study harbor an uncertainty, perhaps ignorance, about gifted education and thus need more experience with grade skipping. By advocating that gifted students should remain in the class where peers go, many principals believe that social development is beneficial; at the same time, research (Kreger Silverman, 2016; Liljedahl, 2017; Sims, 2021) shows that knowledge development benefited by grade skipping. This pits knowledge development against social development and is a problem that has yet to be discussed but identified in the present study as relevant empirical evidence for such a discussion is not available. The principals in the study relate to gifted students in the same way as they relate to other students. They believe their needs should and can be met in the regular class through differentiated teaching through enrichment and other needs-based individual adaptations. This aligns well with the principal's duties as described in the Swedish School Act, Skollagen (2010).

It is essential to highlight that the results from this study are based on survey responses from 71 principals, which means that the results cannot be generalized but can only say something about these respondents' perceptions. A study with many more informants is needed to give a broader picture of principals' perceptions of and knowledge about gifted students. However, this study indicates that the principals could benefit from professional learning in gifted education research as their role is essential for influencing teachers' attitudes in their schools. Somehow, some of the answers appear to be naïve, and it seems as if the principals do not fully know the specific challenges gifted students face. These are specific challenges that the principal and the teachers must know about to offer adequate support and stimulation (Kreger Silverman, 2016; Liljedahl, 2017). I also want to highlight that the field of research on giftedness is emerging in Sweden and that, therefore, at the moment, there are few studies to relate to. That makes this study essential even if it is not generalizable.

Didactic Implications

This study contributes knowledge about 71 Swedish principals' perceptions of gifted students and teaching and learning for them. The principals believe gifted students should primarily be offered teaching in their class with peers of the same age. This aligns with the guidelines within the Swedish school, namely that it should be inclusive. Suppose offering adequate instruction for gifted students in the regular class is impossible. In that case, attempts should be made, in the first instance, to offer the student to study certain subjects or courses with higher grade levels, and secondarily, promotion to a higher class should be considered. The principals express great confidence in the teachers' skills in differentiating teaching, not only for the gifted students but for all students in the class. However, it still needs to be determined, and also not something that the present study studied, whether the teachers possess sufficient knowledge of giftedness to differentiate the teaching for these students.

In summary, the principals in the study believe that (a) acceleration should primarily take place in the gifted students' age-appropriate class, (b) second by studying subjects or courses with higher classes, (c) third, that the teachers enable enrichment for gifted students in their age-appropriate class, (d) fourth, grade skipping is complicated and should be avoided.

Limitations

It is essential to highlight that the results from this study are based on survey responses from 71 principals, which means that the results cannot be generalized but can only say something about these respondents' perceptions. A study with many more informants is needed to give a broader picture of principals' perceptions of and knowledge about gifted students. However, this study indicates that the principals could benefit from professional learning in gifted education research as their role is essential for influencing teachers' attitudes in their schools. Somehow, some of the answers appear to be naïve, and it seems as if the principals do not fully know the specific challenges gifted students face. These are specific challenges that both principal and teacher must know to offer adequate support and stimulation (Kreger Silverman, 2016; Liljedahl, 2017). I also want to highlight that the field of research on giftedness is emerging in Sweden and that, therefore, at the moment, there are few studies to relate to. That makes this study essential even if it is not generalizable.

Overall, the respondents in the study were primarily optimistic about gifted students and their education. However, their answers gave a picture of uncertainty and lack of knowledge, which shows the need to bring Swedish research about gifted students and their education to the forefront.

Future Directions

Based on the results from this study, the following recommendations for future studies are proposed: (a) a larger sample is necessary to enable generalizations; (b)

a similar study with other actors, such as school managers, administrators, and teachers, would allow for exciting and valuable comparisons of various actors' perceptions; and (c) in-depth studies on inclusion and differentiation with a focus on specially gifted students.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the principals in the study believe that (a) acceleration should primarily take place in the gifted students' age-appropriate class, (b) second by studying subjects or courses with higher classes, (c) third, that the teachers enable enrichment for gifted students in their age-appropriate class, (d) fourth, grade skipping is complicated and should be avoided.

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