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Policy Intersections on Education for the Gifted and Talented in China and Denmark

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Abstract

Inclusion and excellence are keywords in global education policies, which are widely aimed at both. Sometimes these aims are even combined, when policies aim to cater to the needs of those considered excluded because they are particularly talented. This is due in Denmark since 2011, when talent development in the educational system was launched as an explicit policy objective. While setting up special programs for the gifted and talented is a recent phenomenon in the Nordic countries with their strong traditions for an un-streamed comprehensive school, China has had middle school gifted education classes for more than three decades. This chapter explores what assumptions about excellence in education are expressed in such curricular provisions for the 'gifted and talented'. By focusing on selected programs and policies for gifted and talented students in China and Denmark, it aims to understand what terms of giftedness and talents are implied, when policy makers aim to identify and develop the talents of particular student groups. The general aim of the chapter is to identify policy intersections on education policies for the gifted and talented in China and Denmark and understand their local particularities. National practices of 'gifted and talented' policies are widely departing in and relating to global policies, but they also remain national and localized, reflecting and affecting differing dispositions. The analysis applies distinctions on talent from different talent models and distinguishes between potentials and achievement, critical states versus exceptional performances, nature versus nurture, between identifying by subjecting individuals to objective measurement versus normative judgment shaped by culture and approaches of segregation versus inclusion.

Keywords: Gifted and talented; education policy; dispositions

Introduction

Global education policies are widely aimed at both inclusion and excellence; sometimes these aims are combined in catering to the needs of those considered particularly talented. In Denmark the latter has come about as an explicit policy objective since 2011, when a government-requested report on talent development in the educational system was published. Its recommendations include an enhancement of teachers' competences in terms of 'upward differentiation' and that teachers should work actively to 'spot and develop students with special learning potentials' (Ministry of Education, 2011). This can be seen in relation to political interest in attending to excellence in education on a global scale (Ball, 2015; OECD, 2009). Since the turn of the century there has been increased educational focus on the segregation of supposed higher ability students, as reflected for instance in programmes for the 'gifted and talented' to attend summer schools, take more extra-curricular activities and study for 'world class tests' (Tomlinson, 2008 and 2005, p. 125).

While setting up special programmes for the gifted and talented is a very recent phenomenon in the Nordic countries with their strong traditions for a comprehensive school without ranking and streaming (Rasmussen & Moos, 2014), China has had special 'gifted children's' programmes, schools and classes for more than thirty years (Yu-feng, 2012; Wen, 2004). Thus, in modern day China it is considered important to design educational programmes that cater to the needs of individual children, serve the interests of society and develop 'a continuing source of national pride'. The country's education system has become a high-priority area for the government (Chan, 2007; KPMG, 2010).

The chapter focuses on policies and programmes for gifted and talented students in Denmark and China, and the general purpose is to understand *what terms of giftedness and talents are implied in the national policies, when they aim to identify and develop the talents of particular*

student groups. National practices of gifted and talented education depart in and relate to global policies of education in this area, but they also remain national and localized, reflecting and affecting differing dispositions (Rizwi & Lingard, 2010; Lingard et al., 2005). The analysis will focus on answering the question, *how do the talent policies of the two countries intersect and contribute to globalising education policy in this field?*

The chapter proceeds as follows: an outline of a conceptual framework for understanding the notion of the 'gifted and talented' in education and educational provisions for this group followed by an analysis of the policy aims (target groups) and organisation of programmes (types of provision) in China and Denmark. On the basis of the local particularities found in such programmes, the chapter will conclude on differences between the two countries and finally discuss the intersections on education for the gifted and talented as they appear here and are accelerated in education policies globally.

Providing education for the gifted and talented – why, for whom and in which ways?

The United States is a pioneer in education for the gifted and talented and has set up provisions at first local and later national levels. From the late 1800s, gifted education was practiced as 'special education for high ability students' in individual schools, until the National Defence Education Act of 1958, following the 'Sputnik Moment', became the first national level policy in the field. While the United States is known for its historical pre-eminence in setting up provisions for the gifted and talented, in comparison with Asian countries it is now considered in decline, missing out in the 'race to the future', and suffering from 'brain drain' to Asia (Ibata-Arens, 2012; Ornstein, 2015).

The need to provide education for the gifted and talented was considered important to develop the young American nation. Widespread use of IQ tests and special arrangements for the highest scoring students characterized the American educational system from its early days, where

tests were conducted at all levels to identify specially gifted students (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2007). American bureaucrats and businessmen, facing a rapidly growing and heterogeneous population, saw the IQ tests as a means to develop society and create economic wealth. In 1957, the launch of the Russian Sputnik satellite triggered a flood of criticism of the American educational system. A high-ranking admiral in the American Navy warned that if the USA wanted to compete on equal terms with other countries, it had to focus more on selecting and offering the gifted special opportunities in school; it became a common assumption in the early years of the Cold War that the talent mass in science could guarantee national security.

Identification of the target group of special educational provisions – in the United States and elsewhere – was accompanied by much psychological debate and research concerning relevant testing measures and conceptions of giftedness (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 2008). Qualities and distinctions vary across cultures and socio-economic contexts as do criteria for excellence (Philipson & McCann, 2007).

One distinction has been conceptualized as schoolhouse giftedness (being an excellent consumer of knowledge) versus creative-productive giftedness (being an excellent producer of knowledge) (Renzulli, 2005). In this definition, giftedness develops in certain people, at certain times and under certain circumstances; but the socio-economic context of the factors and the behaviour is not visible. In other contributions to the research literature the understanding of talent concerns the origin of talent, i.e. nature vs. nurture. Used synonymously with giftedness, talent might communicate the conception that certain children have ‘it’ while others do not, that it was a gift, not something you worked for (Feldhusen, 1998). Commenting on the words ‘gifted’ and ‘talented’, Winstanley (2004) writes that they may sometimes be understood as respectively raw ability and developed power, but also notes that sometimes the reverse meanings are found.

Another distinction concerning the identification of talent is whether it is conceptualised as individual performances or potentials, also modelled as critical states and exceptional performances (Ziegler &Heller, 2000). This raises the question if talent should be subject to objective measurement or, as conceptualised by Ferrari (2003), judged against a normative standard shaped by the cultural-normative dynamic. Considering the distinction between performance and potential, Sennett criticises an emphasis on potential for undermining dedication and hard work. He describes the talent needed in modern economies as 'an ability to think prospectively about what might be done by breaking context and reference', which 'cuts reference to experience and chains of circumstance, and penalises digging deep', and which reflects a state of living in pure process and a focus on potential rather than achievement (Sennett, 2006, p. 121).

Focusing on student *potential* can be seen as an individualising move which obscures the social conditions of student *achievement*. In contrast to focusing on achievement, which compounds social and economic circumstances, fortune and chance, with self, potential ability focuses only on the self and makes a more fundamental claim about who you are. Lacking potential conveys uselessness in a more profound sense than messing up performances (Sennett, 2006, p. 123). In this way, the identification of talent becomes linked to the person in question rather than to the skills that the person has achieved and to the hard work involved in this; it becomes a judgement of person rather than a judgement of achievement. Additionally, assessment procedures used to identify talents in school can be considered exclusionary, as they indirectly create a mass that could be labelled 'untalented'.

Worldwide, a wide variety of provision types cater to the gifted and talented (Moltzen, 2006). They can basically be divided into either *segregation* or *inclusion* approaches, and special programmes are set up either outside or inside the ordinary school system. Additionally, *acceleration* may be approached in both ways (ibid.). But schools do not necessarily pursue just one

of the approaches in a pure form; in practice different approaches might be and often are combined. In addition to designating practical approaches to the organization of differentiated education for the gifted and talented, they represent the different positions held in debates about whether gifted and talented students should be educated with age peers or intellectual peers. This issue touches on broader philosophical, political, social and cultural values, influences on which might be similar throughout the globe, but which result in practices that have a vernacular character as they build incrementally on what has gone before within the specific educational systems (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010, p. 97). Such distinctions of approaches and values will be framing the closer studies of the Chinese and Danish systems in the following parts of the chapter.

Education for the gifted and talented in China

Generally, education for gifted and talented students in China did not receive much attention before the late 1970s. Until then, educators and government officials de-emphasised the importance of individual differences in achievement, which was not considered in line with socialist philosophy. The disorder caused by the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, disrupting educational efforts, further contributed to this (Stevenson et al., 1994). But with the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, in 1978, a ‘Reforms and Openness’ program was initiated that entailed modernisation policies, triggering major economic growth and growing expenditure on education. Investment in education was seen as an investment in future generations of human capital to fuel further economic growth (Chiang et al., 2015). Even so, the education system was characterised by scarcity of places and hence has always relied heavily on examinations to regulate admission and graduation (Chan, 2007).

Especially after the Cultural Revolution, China was considered in need of talented people to rebuild the country. Hence, it was seen as essential to identify gifted students and invest in

education so that their talents could be turned into human resources. Both parents and educators therefore strongly encourage children to participate in extracurricular activities to facilitate their academic achievements. This has given rise to tutorial centres in the most prosperous areas, such as Beijing, Hong Kong and SAR, and to a culture, where students experience increasingly high pressure to perform above average (Chan, 2007).

Since 1978, Chinese psychologists from the Cooperative Research Group of Supernormal Children have used the term 'supernormal children' to define gifted children (Wen, 2004). Some reasons for employing this term are:

1. To avoid the term 'gifted' which in Chinese means 'the God's bestowal', and
2. To indicate that supernormal children are not to be seen as separate from other children, but as relatively superior to most normal children (Wen, 2004)

The term further indicates a statistical significance, as children whose performances do not follow the normal distribution on the Bell curve but are above average are 'supernormal'. Thus the term is used as equivalent to the term 'gifted and talented', which is commonly used in English to describe this group (Kwok & Harris, 1991). As mentioned, the term 'giftedness' in China connotes a heavenly endowment and thus reflects the belief that it is an inborn quality. Even so, according to Chan (2007), there is a Chinese thinking that everybody is gifted in some way and that perseverance and industriousness can compensate for incompetence. Similar to the proposition of multiple intelligences in the US they have a saying that 'there will always be a number one for every trade' (Chan, 2007, p. 45). Thus, giftedness is seen as a product of both nature and nurture, of both a unique and general appearance, and as domain specific.

Gifted children are estimated to count for one to three per cent of the total children population in China (Ibata-Arens, 2012). From the sheer number of Chinese people, it has been

estimated that there should be between seven and ten million gifted and talented children (Wen, 2004; Ibata-Arens, 2012). On this background there is a broad potential for recruitment for special provisions within this area. This potential or demand for gifted education is further exacerbated by the 'one child policy', which has made parents put increasingly more time, energy, and money into raising and educating their child (Wen, 2004).

Provisions of gifted education in China are practiced in three general modes: advancement, enrichment, and pull-out (Ibata-Arens, 2012). *Advancement* is practiced as early admission or grade skipping, which means that gifted children can begin primary school earlier than age six to seven, or that they can be allowed to skip grades and thus accelerate their schooling. *Enrichment* is a process that extends instruction beyond the bounds of curriculum and offers students the opportunity to undertake original research and solve problems which are considered beyond the interests and abilities of students in general (O'Reilly, 2006). *Pull-out* implies that the provisions take place at other locations and outside regular school classes; sometimes as extra-curricular activities, sometimes in separate schools or classes. Gifted education in China thus includes many approaches that are commonly known and used elsewhere in the world.

Oympic Schools are one of the best known extra-curricular programmes for gifted students, most of which focus on mathematics, physics, and chemistry (Chang, 2007; Wen, 2004). The special classes here are often affiliated with universities, and students usually follow them for about 10 hours a week in addition to their regular school activities.

Youth Classes at Universities are considered the most competitive and difficult among the programmes for gifted students. The first Youth Class at University was set up at the University of Science and Technology in China in 1978, and since then several others have been set up at key

universities in the country. They admit youth at age 15 or 16, i.e. three years earlier than other students enter universities.

Key Point Schools and *Experimental Classes* constitute other pull-out options for gifted students that have also existed since 1978. They are characterized as 'schools that meet the needs of the gifted', are set up in most provinces and municipalities, and are better funded than regular schools (Wen, 2004). Some of these schools offer 'experimental classes' for the very elite achievers, held to be 'key students' at the Key Point Schools. Such students are supposed to finish schooling two to four years earlier than students who are not considered gifted, but as a rule they receive more teacher attention. Some regular schools also have key classes where the best teachers are chosen for the key students (Wen, 2004).

Special Schools and *Children's Palaces* are aimed at children who are gifted and talented or have a particular interest in a special domain, such as athletics, painting, music, dance or foreign languages. The programmes take place as after-school programmes or in some cases at weekends; special public athletic schools offer both athletic training and a regular academic curriculum at elementary and middle school level. *Children's Palaces* offer enrichment programmes that any student in primary or secondary school may apply for and they usually take place at weekends. There are thousands of special schools and more than one thousand Children's Palaces all over China. Summer Camps are organized around different interests and take place at different places.

Such special provisions have strong appeals to parents who care about the fierce competition for the scarce spots in top classes, schools and universities in China. Chinese people value education highly, but according to critics 'mainly out of necessity and to cope with an authoritarian and hierarchical system' (Zhao, 2014). Thus, many practices flow from a hierarchical

model, which includes that the educational system is highly reliant on ranking. Schools are ranked by governments and given resources according to their ranking status. When people protested against the inequality, officials stopped designating key schools and called them ‘demonstration schools’ instead, which however had no practical consequences. People know that if they are ranked at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, such ‘good’ primary schools will still provide their students with better chances to enter a stronger middle school, an even stronger high school, and of entering one of the ‘985’ or ‘211 universities’ (Zhao, 2014, p. 127).

In the very competitive Chinese system, there is one gateway to universities: the national examinations at the end of the upper secondary school. Marc Tucker, leader of the standards-driven education reform movement in the US, considers this system advantageous in numerous ways, especially in relation to PISA, because in high-performing countries like China ‘with gateway exam systems of this sort, every student has a very strong incentive to take tough courses and to work hard in school’ (as cited in Zhao, 2014, p. 131). But according to Zhao (2014), students work hard to prepare for exams, *not* to meet a high standard. The system produces similar skills in a narrow spectrum of talents, which is why China has been a top-performer in PISA surveys right from the beginning and will continue to be so. Although the opposite is maintained, this system of massive tests results in cheating, disruption and distortion. Awarding bonus points to students who demonstrate talents in creative fields puts poor and rural students without access to expensive opportunities at a disadvantage (Zhao, 2014, p. 148).

The exam and test focused system produces great pressures on students and has paved the way for an education market with ‘new’ devices. Thus activities for gifted and talented such as for instance Math Olympiad and other science and technology competitions also serve as means of gaining extra credit or bonus points that can improve chances of being admitted to prestigious schools and top universities. As such, education for the gifted and talented can be seen as a device

for legitimising that the more advantageous students are given even more advantages and thus as something that contributes to increased inequality in the education system.

Education for the gifted and talented in Denmark

In the Nordic countries, education for the gifted and talented as a special target group was considered subordinate to the development of an undivided comprehensive school up through the 20th century. The 'school for all' vision was dominating and political majorities gradually amended legislation to describe a school for all with no streaming, which in Denmark was institutionalized in the Folkeskole – the municipal primary and lower secondary school (Rasmussen & Moos, 2014). Academic gifts, intelligence, or talent, it was believed, were evenly distributed in the population across all social groups and constituted unexploited 'talent reserves' (Hansen, 2003; Husén, 1968). Thus the dominant idea was that the school would have to cultivate unexploited talent from all social groups, including the lower societal strata, more efficiently (Olsen, 1986; Husén, 1968). This was seen to require a flexible educational system in which the definitive choice between different educational lines was postponed as long as possible rather than a system with early selection, which was largely dependent on social background.

The aim to give all students adequate challenges was, in principle, adopted in the school's requirement of differentiated teaching, which was gradually implemented legally in Denmark during the prosperous 1960s-1970s and fully implemented with the Primary Education Act of 1993.The development of this school system paralleled other democratization initiatives in society and followed similar paths in the other Nordic countries (Antikainen, 2006; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Telhaug et al., 2006), where massive investments in education assured an increasingly high educational level in the population.

From the 1980s, however, economic austerity set in, and accountability and differentiation gained increased importance in the Nordic education policies because of a political desire to increase the competitive strength of the education system (Blossing et al., 2014). It was claimed that many gifted and talented children were not sufficiently challenged in this school system, where the allocation of resources primarily considered the needs of less able children, it was alleged (Baltzer et al., 2006). Since the turn of the millennium, changing ministers of education in Denmark have competed to put talent on the political agenda in a different sense.

At the annual education political meeting in 2004, the Danish minister of education said that 'plenty of talent has been hushed up in the Danish primary schools and raised the question whether it is not up to the school system to create stars' (Tørnæs, 2004). Addressing the elementary school system, the minister defined the task that potentials in special talents be better exploited.

In the years to follow, talent manifested itself on the education policy agenda in the below initiatives:

- 2005: Talent Camp 05
- 2006-2007: Talent Fund established by the Ministry of Education
- 2008: Talent report to the parliament
- 2009: Establishment of a knowledge centre for talent management, Maersk Science Centre
- 2011: Report on talent development in the education system, commissioned by the Ministry of Education
- 2014: Reform of the Danish elementary school

Talent Camp 05 was a 48-hour 'innovation camp' organized by the Ministry of Education to gather ideas for better talent management in Danish education. The participants were representatives from different educational institutions, research, businesses and sports. After the 48-hour camp, a

working group was formed to look at project proposals and discuss their implementation. The Ministry of Education in the 'Talent Camp 05' defined talents as 'children and young people with special abilities in one or more areas who attend regular schools and institutions. A talent is a person who is good at something and has the potential to be one of the best if talents are stimulated' (Kyed, 2005). In this definition talent is associated with abilities and potential. It is thus described as something inherent that can be developed and places a person among 'the best'; as a personal inherent quality that contributes to personal or individual competitive advantages. However, the potential has to be stimulated for a person to benefit from these advantages. In other words, something exterior is added to the inner quality in order for the talent to unfold.

The *Talent Fund* was established in the following year and consolidated the political focus on developing and incorporating talent development in the Danish educational system. It was established to help ensure that differentiated teaching would also benefit the so-called gifted students. DKK 5 million were allocated annually for 2006 and 2007 to support talent development in the schools. The special allocation and the funded projects followed in the wake of Talent Camp 05, where many of them had been presented as project ideas. The fund secured resources for such talent development projects. The Ministry of Education's justification for the talent fund was that 'differentiated teaching should also benefit gifted children and young people (EMU, 2008). The special allocation funds targeted primary school, high school, vocational and higher education. The largest share of the funds went to the primary school where the projects typically focused on up-skilling teachers to be able to spot talents and to develop educational offers, especially in science, targeted at gifted students.

A report on talent development to the parliamentary committee on education in 2008 explained the talent initiative in the following way:

> *In recent years, we have seen an increasing focus on making an extra effort for talents in the Danish educational system so that we can maintain and develop Denmark as a society in continued growth and prosperity. We cannot afford that young people with the will and talent to make a special effort lack challenges in our educational system and perhaps lose interest in taking an education. Denmark's competitiveness in the global knowledge society depends on our ability to develop talents. We therefore have to give the most gifted room to perform so that they can exploit their potential to the benefit of society and their own future. (Haarder, 2008)*

Thus, talent development was justified as benefiting young people with will and talent, economic growth, international competitiveness and the nation's development as knowledge society.

The Maersk Science Centre for talent development in science was established in 2009 as collaboration between the Danish government and shipping magnate Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller. It was financed by an A.P. Møller Fond donation of DKK 130 million, and the Ministry of Education subsidizes its operations. According to the centre's vision and strategy, the objective is: '… to make extra curricula provisions for the talented pupils in science between 12 and 20 years'. The centre defines itself as the physical framework for national talent development in sciences. It offers activities for young talents and their teachers in primary school and high school. It defines science talents as 'students who are good at science and have potential to be among the best if that potential is stimulated' and talent development as 'giving gifted students more challenges and developing their potential'. It further assumes that 'talents can contribute to improving the academic environment at the schools' (Science Talenter, n.d.).

In the 2011 talent report, the parliamentary committee justifies the increased focus on talent as 'necessary in order to increase Danish competitiveness and thus preserve and develop the country's prosperity and welfare; because the gifted students inspire classmates, fellow students and teachers; and because too many gifted students, who have the right skills, have become demotivated and tired of school' and so concluded that 'a greater focus on talents will benefit all' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 5).

For the primary school, the report recommends:

- A broad lift in teachers' competences and education with a view to mastering talent activities and differentiating upwards
- One talent counsellor at all schools, as a main rule, by 2016
- Full line organization in 7th-9th grade within the framework of the comprehensive school where the students are grouped according to interests and subsequently according to pedagogic and academic criteria
- Fewer teaching objectives than now and with talent focus as a natural element.

The recommendation that the teachers' competences in terms of 'upward differentiation' need to be enhanced, especially in relation to gifted students, builds on the general assumption that teachers do not master differentiation, at least not in an upwards sense. It is further recommended that differentiation in teaching is transferred to talent development projects in the daily teaching and that teachers work actively to 'spot and develop students with special learning potentials' (Ministry of Education, 2011, Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 58), which is also supposed to be a task for the recommended talent counsellor at each municipal school.

One rationale behind the recommendations is that 'a greater focus on talents will benefit all' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 5). Pointing to the common good supports the idea of a comprehensive school for all. But in other ways, though maintaining reference to the framework of the comprehensive school, the recommended reform represents a break with its basic idea of un-streamed schooling. This goes for its recommendation of 'line organization in 7th-9th grade', with students being grouped primarily according to interests and subsequently according to pedagogic and academic criteria. An obvious interpretation of the line organisation or 'specialisation' is to see it as a reintroduction of streaming in the oldest grades in primary school. The specialisation will be

based on ‘continuous evaluation of the students’, implying that the massive introduction of test systems in recent years will have direct consequences for the students’ ranking and grouping according to performance.

The last recommendation challenges efforts in Danish education policies over the last two decennia – with inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon world – to define a series of, often detailed, teaching or learning objectives. On this background, the report states fewer objectives as an aim and later describes the necessity for an ‘enriched curriculum’, which extends instruction beyond the bounds of curriculum and allows children to work at their own speed with more challenging problems (Baltzer & Kyed, 2008; Wallace 2006).

The impetus to recommend an enriched curriculum thus follows from the recent education policy reforms of defining curricular objectives, detailing the subject and academic skills to be achieved, which has been a general tendency and formed part of the Danish education reforms since 2006. This represents another rupture with a Nordic tradition, which in addition to developing academic skills emphasised the school’s responsibility for general education and formation of the student’s personality, thereby creating the foundation for citizenship (Carlgren & Marton, 2002). In the didactic tradition, instruction was guided more by the needs of the particular student group and context than by nationally defined learning objectives, and so in principle established a framework of differentiated instruction.

In the agreement behind the recent Danish school reform, like in the earlier policy documents, the discourse on the academically gifted students being let down by the Danish school system continues: ‘Denmark has a small number of academically gifted students relatively. If the students’ academic level and the academic level in the public school are to be improved, then it is

crucial for all students to get the opportunity to unfold their potential fully and for Denmark to be able to compete successfully on the increasingly international market'. (Agreement, 2013, p. 1)

There is a duality in this statement. It points to the 'small number of academically gifted students' and indirectly states that this number has to be increased. It also points to the importance of 'all students' unfolding their potential fully, and thus seems to maintain a 'school for all' approach, which should cater to the needs of all children. Similarly, the reform of standards states as the first of three main objectives that, 'the Folkeskole must challenge all students to reach their fullest potential' (Undervisningsministeriet, 2014, p. 17). And while earlier the main task of the school in Denmark appeared to be education for democracy, it is now seen to be education for an international market competition.

Discussion and conclusion

Differentiation and focus on children considered gifted and talented reflect an individualization trend in various ways. This goes for the education policies to make provisions for the gifted and talented in both China and Denmark, and this links to wider, underlying globalisation issues. But before the discussion of the link to such global policies, some differences between China and Denmark in their pursuance of talent need to be located and highlighted. Both countries are pursuing individualisation and market-oriented strategies in their education policies, but they are embedded in different traditions and have different outcomes.

In the Chinese education system, policies and programmes that cater to the needs of the gifted and talented appear to have assumed a function of equipping students with competitive advantages when they apply to highly ranked educational institutions. This system has developed on a background of economic scarcity, which in spite of increasing investments in education still means that there are not enough places to cater to the growing needs for education. This again has

been conducive to an extremely competitive and standardised educational system, which is effective in eliminating individual differences, transmitting a narrow band of predetermined content and skills, and imposing conformity (Zhao, 2014).

In Denmark, talent development was not an explicit issue on the education political agenda until the late 1990s. Education policies were generally aimed at assuring equality in education and therefore followed a tradition of postponing grading and streaming for as long as possible. The Danish policies were dominated by visions of equality and democracy, with an education for all as the main focus. But increased economic austerity, internationalisation and accountability pressures in the late 1990s gave rise to a push for specific initiatives aimed at talented students. This put talent development on the education political agenda and in 2011, it was developed into an official strategy. The public comprehensive school was indirectly blamed for promoting mediocrity rather than talent, which opened up for funding of specific talent initiatives and programmes.

The Danish report on Talent Development in the Education System and the various papers on this issue in a Chinese context all state the needs for special provisions for gifted and talented and endorse an education political vision of global competition and talent development as the driving forces for economic growth and development (cf. OECD, 2012). Such policies are a response to local political pressure from neoliberal policy-makers and to external, global pressures that advocate for the educational imperative of globalization in a normative sense. In other words, this refers to an economic policy aimed at unifying the economic field by a whole set of measures, designed to remove all the limits to that unification (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 224; Ball, 2008).

The claim that certain student groups are neglected in the comprehensive, mainstream system is politically appealing to expectations of anxious middleclass parents to provide

identification and selection of their children for the intellectual elite in an increasingly competitive education market. This results in pressures to differentiate provision in schools and to create selective schools of various kinds. Further arguments for making special provisions for the gifted and talented are based on assumptions of an unexploited intellectual potential in the student population that, if properly realized, would benefit the nations' educational standard and competitiveness on the global market. Proponents contend that in the regular, comprehensive school system the best performing students are prevented from developing and performing to their full potential because instruction and resources are primarily aimed at the needs of low-achieving students while the 'gifted and talented' tend to adapt their achievement level to their lower-achieving peers in order to be socially accepted.

In the contemporary discourses in China and Denmark, talent primarily points in the direction of increased individualisation coupled with economic growth. But the coupling of competitive individualisation supported by massive testing with the development of talent and economic competitiveness is neither uniquely logical nor unambiguous. Test-oriented systems that seek to fix students' deficits according to externally prescribed standards and rank them accordingly can also be seen as detrimental to the development of individual strengths and talents in education (cf. Zhao, 2014). Further, there are no indications that the focus on and development of a strong comprehensive school culture in Scandinavia has reduced these countries' international competitiveness. In contrast, comparisons with countries with selective and divided school systems document that the former countries are characterized by higher social equality and cohesiveness (Green et al. 2006; Wiborg 2009) and thereby more conducive to economic growth.

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