Life Experiences of Gifted Adolescents in Sweden
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Abstract

In Sweden having a high degree of intelligence is controversial and giftedness is not always seen as an asset. Twenty-four gifted adolescents from the high-IQ organization Mensa Sweden responded to questions about their sense of coherence as well as to open-ended questions about how their intelligence affected their lives in the contexts of school, friends, and family. A thematic analysis of the open-ended questions was performed. Most of the participants wrote about school being under-stimulating and not fitting them. In the cases where school was seen as stimulating, this was due to individual teachers or school systems other than the traditional Swedish school. In the context of friends, the adolescents felt support and viewed their friends as an important part of their lives, although good friends were hard to find, especially before secondary school. Like friends, the family was mostly seen as a positive context where the adolescents could find support. A majority of the participants felt they had trouble fitting in with people in general, with the exceptions of close friends and family. The implications of these results are that the Swedish school system needs to be more flexible and that despite school being seen as negative in many cases, friends and family act as buffers to promote adolescents' well-being.

Keywords: intelligence, giftedness, adolescents, gifted youth, school, friends, family, thematic analysis, Mensa, sense of coherence
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Life Experiences of Gifted Adolescents in Sweden

Gifted youth in Sweden are not mentioned in the school law and communities have virtually no programs, camps nor anything else to make sure these adolescents get a chance to flourish and become the best they can in life. This is a sharp contrast to countries like Russia, where there are "enrichment programs" for gifted children, and the education of these children is seen as a necessary investment for the nation. Youth spend most of their time in school, with family, and with friends, which makes these important contexts for their well-being. For a long time, the Swedish school system has been characterized as egalitarian (Persson, 2010), where everyone is supposed to be seen as equals. This seems to work fine for the masses, but what happens to those who do not fit the norm? There is special education for those who fall far behind and abundant possibilities for getting help to reach the minimum level of education, including special schools. So far so good, but what happens if the child is more talented, more gifted or more intelligent than others? There is no special education, no special schools, and no possibilities for extra help to maximize their potential. If a child reaches the minimum level of education, it is hard to get any attention at all.

Some researchers have looked into how the Swedish school affects the children (Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2007; Stålnacke & Smedler, 2011). However, these studies are few, and they are retrospective where adults have been asked to talk about their time in school. The picture that these studies draw is anything but a happy one. Most of the interviewed adults agree that the school years affected them in a negative way, and some of them dropped out of school and probably never reached their full potential. There is also an implication that gifted youth have a lower sense of coherence, which is supposed to correlate with general well-being, than other persons their age (Stålnacke & Smedler, 2011). The present study aims to find out how gifted youth really feel about their lives in, and outside, of school, and how they believe that their intelligence is affecting them in different contexts.

Giftedness and Intelligence

Defining who is gifted is not easy as there are many definitions for the terms giftedness and intelligence. Passer and Smith (2003) state that the nature of intelligence is disagreed upon, as well as defined, described and operationalized differently. There is the theory of multiple intelligences, as constructed by Gardner, where intelligence is explained as a special ability within a certain area, for example musical, linguistic, and spatial (Cooper, 1999). The most common way of viewing intelligence, however, is as a general mental ability, which is measured by a number of different tests concerning reasoning, mathematical ability, vocabulary and other similar capabilities. These are summed up in a factor called the g-factor. The scale is relative to the population and is expressed as intelligence quotient (IQ), where 100 is the most commonly used mean (Cooper, 1999). Similar arguments are used in the discussion of what giftedness is, where some see giftedness as the potential to achieve and some see it as actually being a high achiever in combination with having high intelligence (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrel, 2011). Although it is difficult to draw the line as to who is gifted and who is not is not, gifted is commonly operationalized as the top few percentages on the IQ-scale. The discussion as to what intelligence and giftedness really is, however, outside the scope of this thesis. For practical reasons, in this thesis, giftedness is operationalized as having an IQ-score higher than 98 percent of the population, the same as the international organization Mensa uses as their limit for membership. Regardless of how the definition is made, on a group level, these adolescents seem to have an experience of their time in school that differs from the average student.
Educating Gifted Youth Worldwide

To be able to interpret international studies, it is crucial to know a bit about how different educational systems handle gifted youth. Different countries have different policies and this affects the way that gifted youth experience their education and their lives in general.

In the U.S., schools are administered on a local level, with school districts determining how to handle gifted youth (P. Freeburg, personal communication, April 23, 2012). This is done through enrichment programs, special schools, (French, Walker & Shore, 2011) accelerated teaching, and summer camps for gifted and talented children (P. Freeburg, personal communication, April 23, 2012). Therefore in the U.S., support that gifted youth receive, if any, depends upon where they live. There are, however, training and doctoral degrees in teaching and training of gifted children in U.S. (Freeman, 1992).

Persson (2009) argues that Europe is divided into two factions: those who believe in the gifted student's right to be different, and those who believe in the student's right to be similar. Both factions are saying that their alternative is for the common good. Persson follows with a description of various countries, saying that in the UK, in southeast Europe, and in the eastern part of central Europe, there are programs and legislation to support gifted children, helping them achieve more than other children through special tracks and schools. Persson continues by saying that in western, southern, and the western part of central Europe, the school systems are inclusive, which means that there is legislation for all children to have right to adequate education. The gifted children sometimes, but not always, get to skip grades or move faster through the school system, or get enrichments in schooling, providing them with deeper knowledge and skills than their classmates. With the exception of Finland, Scandinavian schools are inclusive and egalitarian and there are basically no policies for gifted children (Persson, 2009).

A country with a very different system from Sweden is Australia. A study was made there where children who went to special schools for gifted got to say what they feel about it (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, Rogers & McCormick, 2010). These children go to schools that have a very limited admission and only admit the most gifted. The children commented on being more challenged and more motivated and interested in learning, since coming to the new school. They said that they experienced academic growth as a result of being among other children who were also gifted in many different ways. However, they also described stressors like lack of time for homework and high expectations from their families. Some also described the new school as more competitive, which was seen as both positive and negative. Also in Australia, Gross (2006) studied 60 highly gifted children longitudinally, and concluded that those children that had acceleration of at least two grades in their school years, more often took research degrees at university level, had professional careers, reported higher life satisfaction in general, and higher self-esteem, than those who were only accelerated by one year or not at all.

The Swedish School System and Gifted Youth

The Swedish school system is divided into three levels: primary school (year 1-9) secondary school (year 10-12), and tertiary education, which is equivalent to college or university. For secondary school, adolescents can choose between different programs, some of which are vocationally oriented (e.g., providing training to become a mechanic, chef, or hairdresser) whereas others are preparation for tertiary education. Primary and secondary school are regulated by the Swedish school law (SL) (Svensk Författningssamling; SFS, 2010). In SL it is stated that children begin school the year they turn 7, or in specific cases from the age of 6, and that primary school is mandatory for everyone. It is considered a
felony to prevent a child from attending school. Secondary school is voluntary but most adolescents attend this level. In the fall of 2010, 92% of the 16-year olds attended secondary school, as did 95% of the 17-year olds (Statistiska Centralbyrå; SCB, 2009). SL also regulates what kind of values the school is to promote, what kind of support the school must provide, how to grade the courses, and so forth (SFS, 2010). In the beginning of the SL it is stated that every child has a right to go to school and that school is supposed to help the child:

. . . obtain and develop knowledge and values . . . and to promote . . . growth and education, and a lifelong desire of learning.

In the education, the different needs of the children and pupils must be regarded . . . give support and stimulation so that they can develop as far as possible. (chap. 1 §4)

Further, there are several paragraphs that regulate that those with learning disabilities have a right to knowledge and how to help them reach this knowledge. However for those who have learning abilities higher than the norm, there is not a single paragraph to guide the schools in helping these children and supporting these gifts. The only paragraphs referring to these children and adolescents are those that say that it is possible to skip a grade and to finish school earlier, if the right knowledge is acquired and permission is obtained (SFS, 2010).

Experiences of the Swedish School System

Being gifted is not always an advantage in Sweden. There are some difficulties that average adolescents do not have to deal with to the same extent. Gifted adolescents frequently get frustrated with not having any real challenges in school (Persson, 2005) and often have trouble fitting in with the rest of their peers. Stålnacke (2007) also found that they get bored, feel different from their peers, and feel that their school years were a waste of time. They also said that they were unhappy with how they were treated, both by teachers and by their fellow students. When asked about how they, adult members of Mensa, had experienced school, 92% had a negative experience of primary school, where they had received little or no support, and some were even bullied because of their intelligence (Persson, 2010). When they were asked about secondary school, 77% had a negative experience, and the bullying and alienation usually continued. Moving on to tertiary education, 209 out of the 287 participants kept studying, and of them 65% continued to have a negative experience. Some of the participants reported that because primary and secondary school had not presented a challenge to them, they never did homework, nor learned any study skills. This lack of study skills became a problem during higher education, where some students believed that they failed because of this.

Teachers View on Gifted Youth

In the Swedish research studies it is clear that how the teacher sees the gifted youth has a great impact on the child's experience of school. Swedish teachers were asked to characterize gifted children and the results were that they saw the gifted children as being independent, taking their own initiatives, being adaptable, versatile, achievement oriented, highly motivated, active, eager to learn, hardworking, impatient, inquisitive, and always seeking new challenges (Persson, 1998). Geake and Goss (2008) measured how teachers felt about gifted students and a variety of negative emotions appeared, such as that they are elitist and disrespectful of authority. As can also be seen, the teachers assumed that gifted children are independent and prefer to work alone in school, instead of in groups. When this issue was studied by French, Walker, and Shore (2011), they found that this was only partially true.
Their results suggest that the reason for the gifted children wanting to work alone probably had to do with them feeling slowed down by their peers, and that they would prefer to work together with peers who were on the same level as they were. Bailey (2001) studied adolescents in USA with the theory that gifted students had a higher level of resilience, and found support for this, even though she points out that these scores are from the teacher’s point of view, and that the students still can have experienced some psychological challenges.

**Being Different**

There are many reasons why gifted youth may have different life experiences than others. There is a hypothesis that gifted children are more sensitive to stimuli and have so called overexcitabilities (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011; Piirto & Fraas, 2012). This means that they may experience the world in a more vivid way than others do, which could also indicate that they experience disturbances more severely than other children, for example in the classroom. The overexcitabilities have also been found to correlate with fear of the unknown and insomnia (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). This does not mean that these children in any way have more psychological problems because of their intelligence. When 567 gifted adolescents in USA were tested with the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-Adolescent (MMPI-A), the results showed that the gifted adolescents did not differ much in regard to psychological disorders from a general sample (Cross, Cassady, Dixon & Adams, 2008). This result implies that the gifted adolescents do not have higher levels of psychological or personality deviance as a result of being gifted.

Being similar to their peers seems crucial to adolescents and they can go far in their pursuit of being "like everyone else". Persson (2005) describes how a man he counseled actually inhaled solvent fumes to damage his own brain so that he would be less intelligent. Less dramatic solutions seem to be more common, like holding back on learning and keeping achievements low to fit in socially (Persson, 2010).

**Social Support**

Having support from family and friends should play a major role in how one feels about life. Persson (2010) asked how much support some gifted adults had experienced during their time in school. About half of the participants had experienced support from their family, and the other half had no support, indifferent parents or had even been ridiculed within their family. When measuring social support, Rinn, Reynolds, and McQueen (2011) found that a group of gifted children, that they measured, experienced low levels of support from classmates and teachers. All in all, studies suggest that support is not always as high as one would wish.

**Sense of Coherence**

One way of measuring psychological well-being, in both adolescents and adults, is to determine the level of their sense of coherence. Antonovsky (1987) found that individuals with a higher sense of coherence were better able to survive life's hardships and trials and live a happy life despite them. Antonovsky created a life orientation questionnaire (the sense of coherence scale) to try and measure the sense of coherence in people. On a conceptual level, Antonovsky divided the sense of coherence into three aspects: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. He did, however, say that the results from the sense of coherence scale should not be used to study the internal differences between these three aspects since the questionnaire was not constructed in such a manner as to make this possible. Studies have shown that having a strong sense of coherence is related to experiencing less anxiety and depression, being more optimistic, having better self esteem, and perceiving a high quality of life (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005). Studies also suggest that most gifted in
Sweden argue that school was mainly a negative experience and that they felt different from their peers (Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2007). Measuring their sense of coherence is a possible route to see if they actually differ from their peers. An earlier study has shown that gifted young adults, 18-25 years old, have a significantly lower sense of coherence than a sample of the Swedish population at the same age (Stålnacke & Smedler, 2011). Stålnacke and Smedler (2011) also determined that the sense of coherence correlates positively with age.

Limitations and Solutions to Past Research

The results of research on gifted adolescents from other countries are possibly not very relevant to the situation in Sweden. The culture and the school system are different. Sweden even has a frequently mentioned expression “The law of Jante” (Appendix A) which is a list of implicit rules that refer to Scandinavian cultural beliefs that people should not think, express, or act in a way that suggests that they are better than anyone else in any way, which were written down by Sandemose (1977). These are cultural beliefs that go back as far as the 1400’s, and represents aspects of jealousy and envy that are believed to be a part of the temperament of Swedish people (Adelswärd, 2003). This culture may negatively affect gifted adolescents in Sweden.

The research on gifted adolescents in Sweden is limited. We have found no Swedish studies about gifted adolescents that took into account that contexts other than school affected their well-being in relation to their giftedness. The few studies that have been made have been interviews and questionnaires to adult members of the organization Mensa. Although researchers have made some valuable findings, there are some limitations to them. First, the generalizability can be questioned as there may be something that distinguishes members of Mensa from the rest of the high-IQ population. Also, it is problematic asking adults about their youth for at least two reasons: the first is that the school might have changed and the current youth might have a different experience. Second, research has shown that memory can be influenced by a number of things (Passer & Smith, 2003) which should lead to caution when interpreting retrospective reports.

Aim

The present study is mostly qualitative and allows gifted youth to describe how they experience their lives in school, with family, and with friends. More specifically, these gifted adolescents were asked how they believe that their high intelligence affects their lives and health. This is important to be able to capture a more complete image of their thoughts and feelings, and to find nuances that would be lost in a more quantitative study. This study also measures the adolescents’ level of sense of coherence, to see if it is lower than in the general population.

We expect that in this study there will be indicators of the school not functioning and that the support from the family and friends will be less than what the adolescents need, in accordance with previous research (Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2007)

Method

Because few studies of gifted adolescents in Sweden exist, a mostly qualitative design has been selected for this study. There is hardly enough research to make a quantitative operationalization of how gifted adolescents experience their lives, and the qualitative design has the advantage of going deep into how, and why, they feel the way they do. Qualitative analyses provide the opportunity to find phenomena that a quantitative design might miss. In this study the sense of coherence is also measured, to attempt a quantitative comparison to earlier research.
Participants
The participants were recruited through the high-IQ organization Mensa Sweden. Membership in Mensa is open to persons who have attained a score within the upper two percent of the general population on an approved intelligence test that has been properly administered and supervised. The survey was sent to all 43 members of Mensa Sweden who were born in the years 1993-1998. Thirty six of these were of the age where one usually attends secondary school and seven were of the age for grades 7-9 in primary school. No payment was given for participation. Fifty-six percent (n = 24) returned the survey, of these 16 were boys and eight were girls. There was little age difference between the respondents, one was born in 1996 and the rest in 1993-1994, with a mean age of 18.79 years (SD = 0.66). The female participants, excluding the participant born in 1996, had a mean of 54.86 (SD=12.92) and the male participants had a mean of 59.94 (SD=12.96) on the sense of coherence scale. Most of the respondents (87.5 %) went to secondary school, one (4.2 %) only worked, one (4.2 %) went to primary school, and one (4.2 %) went to university. Two participants (8.3 %) were not living with their parents, 75% of the participants lived with both their parents, and the other 17 % lived with one biological parent, divided their time between their parents, or had at least one step parent.

The participants had all done IQ-tests. Three participants (12.5 %) had done their IQ-test within the psychiatry, one (4.2 %) at a school psychologist, two (8.3 %) at a private psychologist, and the rest (75 %) had done theirs through Mensa. Mensa Sweden used the Figure Reasoning Test (FRT) of J. C. Daniels. It is a non-verbal intelligence test consisting of 45 questions designed to measure the g-factor (Booth & Horn, 2004). The questions consist of three by three matrices, where the lower right corner is empty and the answer that correctly completes the logic of the matrix should be selected from six response alternatives. Most of the participants in the current study took the test because they were interested in seeing the result and it was “a fun thing to do”.

Questionnaire
The data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of demographic questions, open-ended questions, and the sense of coherence scale. The entire questionnaire was written in Swedish.

Open-ended questions. The qualitative portion of the questionnaire addressed the respondent’s view of their life in the contexts of family, friends, and school. The open-ended questions were also aimed at finding out how the respondents felt that their intelligence affected their lives.

Sense of coherence. In this study, we measured the adolescents’ sense of coherence using the 13-item adaptation of Antonovsky’s (1987) Sense of Coherence scale (Antonovsky, 1991) in its original, translated, form. Participants responded with a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (very often), and items were summed to provide scores ranging from 13 and 91, with higher values indicating a stronger sense of coherence. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale in the present sample was 0.85. The face validity of the SOC scale is acceptable and there are only a few exceptions where individuals have found the questionnaire difficult to complete (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005). These exceptions all seem to be in collectivistic cultures where they find some questions hard because the questions reflect an egocentric orientation. Persons as young as 14 years old saw no major problems with the questionnaire (Myrin & Lagerström, 2008). Also, no significant difference in sense of coherence between vocational and study programs have been found (Kristensson & Öhlund 2005). On the other hand, studies do show a significant difference between adolescent boys and girls, with boys

**Procedures**

The questionnaire was piloted using a think-aloud technique. Think-aloud techniques are used to describe and analyze the thoughts of the participant (O’Donohue & Fisher, 2009). In this study a version of the technique was used to find how the reader reacted to and thought of the questionnaire. Two adult members of Mensa (female, 27 years and male, 32 years) separately read the questionnaire aloud to one of the researchers. They were asked to report their thoughts about the text and questions as they read. This generated information about spelling errors, which questions were hard to understand, or interesting, etc. From the think-aloud sessions information was gathered that resulted in some questions being altered and some additional information being added to the cover letter. Following the think-aloud sessions, the online questionnaire was sent to three other adult members who were to answer them and then comment back to us. They were satisfied with the questionnaire and reported that it worked.

Following piloting, an e-mail was sent to potential participants with information that a questionnaire was coming within the next few days. The e-mail was sent only to the 35 young members of Mensa who had an e-mail address registered with the organization. The e-mail asked if the participant would prefer an online or a paper version of the questionnaire. Ten persons answered that they preferred the online-version and were sent only that. Eight persons in the sample did not have a registered e-mail address and were sent only a paper questionnaire. The other 25 young members were sent both versions with instructions saying only to answer one. Sending the questionnaire in two different manners was a way to make sure it reached everyone.

The online link was sent five days after the first e-mail and the paper version was sent three days after that. The paper version itself served as a reminder to the persons who had already received the online link and another reminder was sent via e-mail eight days after the paper version should have reached the participants. Of the 24 respondents 87.5 % (n = 21) responded to the online-version and 12.5 % (n = 3) answered the paper-version.

Several steps were taken to assure the anonymity of the participants. First, only the researcher who was also a member of Mensa was allowed to see the send list and wrote the names and addresses on the envelopes, the co-researcher did not see any names. Second, there was no way to identify who in the target sample answered the questionnaire and who did not. Third, all names of persons or schools, that were mentioned by the respondents in their questionnaire (n = 3), was removed from the material.

Participation in the study was encouraged, but voluntary. As we could not know who had not answered the questionnaire, we presume that no one felt they were pressured into participating. Writing about one’s well-being can be sensitive but most of the questions were open and it was up to each participant how much of their thoughts they shared.

**Plan of Analysis**

**Thematic analysis.** The qualitative data was collected using five questions: “How do you think that intelligence affects your life? (if it does)”, “How do you think that school affects your well-being and does/did the school give you support and stimulation?”, “How do you think that your home affects your well-being and does/did your home give you support and stimulation?”, “How do you think that your friends affect your well-being and give you support and stimulation?”, and “To what extent do you experience that you fit in at school, at home and among your friends?”. We used thematic analysis as described in Langemar (2008)
to analyze the qualitative data in the first four of these questions. Langemar suggests thematic analysis as a method suitable for inexperienced researchers. In this study, an inductive approach was used, where themes were created from the material. We conducted the analysis through the following steps for each question analyzed.

The two analysts read through all of the answers to the questions twice and, on the second read through, each analyst began creating themes. The analysts then continued working the material to find themes for all the data. When each analyst had covered all of the material with themes, the two set of themes was compared. Where they differed a discussion took place until there was a consensus in themes. Both analysts divided all the material into the set of agreed upon themes. The analysts then came together again and compared to result. Where the results differed a discussion took place, with each analyst describing their thoughts until consensus was reached. In all cases, consensus was reached. A suitable title and a description with examples of each theme was created.

The last of the five analyzed questions generated very diverse answers, which made deriving themes difficult. For this question a different approach was used where the participants’ answers were categorized as; I generally fit in, I generally do not fit in, or I fit differently depending on the context.

Statistical analysis. The statistics were calculated by using the computer program SPSS version 19 for Windows. For the participants’ sense of coherence, an independent t-test was calculated, comparing boys and girls. Means and standard deviations were also calculated to describe the sample. When calculating the descriptive statistics for the sense of coherence, the 16-year-old female was excluded because she was younger than the remaining group.

Results

Thematic Analysis

The results are presented for each question separately, starting with a presentation of the question, the answer rate and other information. The introduction is followed by a presentation of each theme separately. All quotations from the answers have been translated from Swedish to English.

How the adolescents believe that their intelligence affects their lives. Following are the themes derived from the question: How do you think that intelligence affects your life? (if it does). All participants answered this question and some of them wrote a considerable amount, covering several pages with their thoughts and feelings. The material has been divided into seven themes which are presented in the order of how many mentioned something about it (see Table 1 for a summary).
Table 1  
*How do you think that intelligence affects your life? (if it does)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To what extent intelligence affects life</td>
<td>“Not very much”</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My intelligence is of central importance”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to learn and to understand</td>
<td>“It is very easy for me to learn and understand things”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“In school it is easy most of the time.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social life can be complicated</td>
<td>“I have never felt like I don’t fit in”</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“When I was little I didn’t have many friends. . .”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating and solving the equation that is life</td>
<td>“I can sit for weeks and think about what could happen, both dream and nightmare scenarios and in the end you stand there and haven’t done anything because of the fear of the unknown”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The will to get stimulation and challenges when there are none</td>
<td>“In the beginning of primary school I did my older siblings’ homework etc.”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacking the discipline to study</td>
<td>“Then I just quit doing anything at school . . .”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“. . . I never study for subjects where you don’t really need to know any facts . . .”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being treated differently by uncomprehending adults</td>
<td>“Many adults treated me harder than other children . . .”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“No encouragement from more than 1 teacher but only pressure to perform better.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = number of participants who presented information that fit within the theme.

**Theme: To what extent intelligence affects life.** The participants had different views on how their intelligence affected their life both when it came to the magnitude and direction of it. A few tended to diminish the importance of intelligence and answered things like “Not very much”. We did notice however, that every single participant, including those who said intelligence had little of no effect, could describe at least one way in which it did matter, for example one participant claimed that “maybe it is easier to understand things otherwise no”. A few claimed that high intelligence had major effects on their lives:

My intelligence is of central importance. It is among the most important things I have.

Some claimed high intelligence was mostly positive:

I think it makes things much easier in school, and makes it easier for me to get high grades and even a job.

Some wrote that it had mostly been causing problems:

This is a hard question as I cannot with certainty track my sorrows (and joys, even if those have been fewer) to my intelligence and I hesitate to attribute it too much
influence. But that it has been at least a part in the problems I have had with school and friends during my teenage years, that, I am fairly certain of.

Others give a varied view and thought that high intelligence is “sometimes to my advantage, but often also to my disadvantage”. One participant highlighted that it may differ with age:

I believe that as a child it is hard to be intelligent, but that in adult life it gives many advantages.

In the following themes the question as to how intelligence affects their lives will be answered.

**Theme: Easy to learn and to understand.** Almost all participants mentioned that “it is very easy for me to learn and understand things”. Most of them referring to school, saying that “in school it is easy most of the time”, but some claiming that they have developed earlier as children and have had easier times in other areas as well:

. . . I learned to walk early, I learned to talk early . . . It was ridiculously easy in primary school.

Several mentioned that subjects such as math and physics are logical and easy to learn. Also that it is easier for them to learn new concepts:

I want to believe that intelligence makes it easier to understand and adapt new concepts.

Although some claim their intelligence helps them in most areas of life some say it does not help them in social aspects:

I am very verbal & good at debating. People see me as superior due to advanced language & high ability to speak. I understand problems but not social problems related to me.

**Theme: Social life can be complicated.** The participants had very different views on how intelligence has affected their social life. A few said they have no problems and wrote that “I have never felt like I don’t fit in” but more participants wrote that it does make a difference for them. There are several examples where they have had trouble:

When I was little I didn’t have many friends... I was a troublemaker and I got into fights with my so-called friends and was mainly known as a troublemaker and a so-called “DAMP-kid”, and similar insults. [DAMP is a, not very wide-spread, Swedish psychiatric diagnosis, in this case used as a word of abuse similar to idiot or retard]

I feel like I often make other and faster associations than others I talk to. Sometimes to my advantage, but often also to my disadvantage as I sometimes don’t at all understand a (often “simpler” in my view) association that someone else has made and that everyone else seems to understand. (The association appears “simple” once I get an explanation) I have to ask for explanations from them, and they have to ask for explanations from me since they haven’t understood my connection.

People get irritated that I am a know-it-all (when I answer questions)
Communication seemed to create problems. Some mentioned that “Sometimes it can probably be hard to understand me”, and some mentioned that it is hard to understand others:

[as a child] I couldn’t understand others, I couldn’t understand what they expected from me or how they could think in such weird ways.

As the last example shows, some of the participants mentioned their way of thinking, not always as faster, but rather completely different, from people around them. Some of the gifted adolescents were happy that they had found friends on their own level that had similar thought patterns as they had:

I don’t feel alone as I have equivalent or more intelligent friends to spend time with that is satisfactory.

**Theme: Creating and solving the equation that is life.** It is noteworthy that many of these adolescents seemed to be thinking and analyzing a lot. Many showed that they were trying to figure out their lives and how things such as intelligence and school affected them:

It is a question that I have started thinking more about lately. I have actually gotten more confidence in myself since I got confirmation that I have a high IQ, but that isn’t really the answer to your question . . .

They analyzed things:

[I] tend to think one time too much. Like analyzing details that other can see as unnecessary.

and some had trouble seeing the point of school:

Now I’m in the last year of high school and fighting to get up in the morning to read worthless and uninteresting subjects, all because I have the ability to question things. What a waste of time...

It seemed important for some of these gifted adolescents to be able to understand and solve everything in life. They also felt a need to tell when something seemed wrong:

When I thought that something wasn’t right [unjust] I just had to say something, even if it for my own good would have been better to stay quiet.

and for some it seemed to create a problem when it wasn’t just hard solving the equation, it was hard to figure out what the equation was:

I can sit for weeks and think about what could happen, both dream and nightmare scenarios and in the end you stand there and haven’t done anything because of the fear of the unknown; what you do not know and cannot figure out... Damn intelligence... sometimes I guess I wish I didn’t have the ability to question things... Ignorance is bliss [stated in English] a wise man once said.

**Theme: The will to get stimulation and challenges when there are none.** A theme of wanting more stimulation and more challenges went through many of the answers from the gifted adolescents. Some tried to find their own challenges if they did not get enough in school or at home:

In the beginning of primary school I did my older siblings’ homework etc.
When it comes to school I have to some extent been able to compensate on my own, by taking private initiatives, e.g. by reading more advanced books in my spare time than I was offered in school.

When they did not find the stimulation they need, some got bored or restless:

If a lesson at school is too slow it can happen that I lose interest and start thinking about other things

It could be troubling to always want more stimulation, as one girl put it:

I also believe that my intelligence makes me restless faster. My brain always has to have something to bite into, which makes it harder for me to just sit down and relax.

It could also make them feel different from other adolescents:

I seem to be the only one in my class that can see the charm in a difficult test in school. Sure, it can feel a bit hopeless if you are presented with a problem you have never seen before, but I see it as a challenging task to set about.

Some of them also wrote about other effects of being without stimulation in school:

It is easy for me in school, which through many years of not getting enough stimulation has made me lazy and almost never study and can not really bother to keep up and pay attention to the lectures.

**Theme: Lacking the discipline to study.** As a direct result of the lack of stimulation, a few adolescents wrote about them developing poor study skills, or none at all. They simply did not study at home and some of them did not even work when they were at school. One adolescent described this clearly:

It has always been easy for me in school, I never study for subjects where you don’t really need to know any facts and often do very well on different tests. I do believe, however, that this has affected me negatively in me having an extremely poor self-discipline, it is very hard for me to begin working on things and really do them as I have the attitude “I’m sure it will work out anyways”.

Another gave an unhappy comment:

[In primary school I] was never challenged. Then I just quit doing anything at school and thought that everything that had to do with school sucked.

**Theme: Being treated differently by uncomprehending adults.** A few of the participants wrote quite a lot about how they had been treated by adults who did not understand them. This had led to a feeling of being treated more harshly than others, as one participant wrote:

. . . many adults treated me harder than other children . . . if a person that is seen as highly intelligent does something bad - then those around has the notion that you did it on purpose and that you are evil. If a person who is seen as around or below average does something bad - then those around has the notion that it wasn’t on purpose and that the person didn’t know better, and one downright feels sorry about that person instead.
The participants who wrote about this also wrote about higher expectations from adults, and that they never felt like they did enough:

> It makes both me and my teachers have very high demands on me, which can make me feel bad sometimes. Even today a teacher ‘warned’ me that I might get less than an MVG [top grade] in a course, which hasn’t happened to me in high school before.

and someone else wrote:

> No encouragement from more than 1 teacher but only pressure to perform better.

**The effect of the school environment.** Following are the themes derived from the question: How do you think that school affects your well-being and does/did the school give you support and stimulation? All participants but one answered this question and some of them wrote a considerable amount, covering several pages with their thoughts and feelings. The material has been divided into seven themes which are presented in the order of how many mentioned something about it (see Table 2 for a summary).

**Table 2**

*How do you think that school affects your well-being and does/did the school give you support and stimulation?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenges, stimulation and support</td>
<td>“I get the support I need.”</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“[I] often experienced school as not stimulating and not challenging.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I think about school and how it affects my feelings</td>
<td>“School affects my well-being positively.”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“School was HELL”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school system and the individual teacher is very important</td>
<td>“When starting the Swedish high school, school definitely made me feel worse.”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“. . . there have been teachers making good exceptions from this rule . . .”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It changes with time</td>
<td>“All of primary school I felt superior to my classmates . . . In high school it was completely different.”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way school works and how I think it should be</td>
<td>“[I] think it is extremely bad that the school focus on helping the ones with learning disabilities while they don’t give a crap about the ones with special talents.”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demands for perfection</td>
<td>“Usually manage everything but hate it when it’s not perfect.”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m the extra teacher</td>
<td>“Very often got to go around and help the ones that didn’t understand”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = number of participants who presented information that fit within the theme.*
**Theme: Challenges, stimulation, and support.** The gifted adolescents’ stories about school mostly gave a negative picture with hardly anyone writing that school was stimulating. There were exceptions though:

I have certainly gotten stimulation when it comes to my intellect and it has always been like that [at my school]

and one adolescent saw it as something to see to on your own:

It [school] gives stimulation, I think it’s what you make of it, how much you go about it. The stimulation I don’t get at school I can find on my own.

Most of the participants agreed though, school had not been stimulating enough:

[1] often experienced school as not stimulating and not challenging.

I think the teaching in primary school was slowed down and was very slow because of students in the class being unruly. That made it very boring for us few who were serious.

Some have noticed a difference in secondary education:

In high school it got completely different. Classmates are smart. . . . The subjects are hard. . . . Have gotten the opportunity to study linear algebra at a college parallel to high school and that has gone really well.

One participant had accepted school for what it was and made the best of it:

School is only a step to reach the goal. I am seldom intellectually challenged except in elements where the limitations are individual.

A few pointed out that the social part was important:

I get to express my social side and spend time with friends.

It is fun to see friends but some subjects are really bad at stimulating me.

and some say they got support:

I guess I always got support, eventually, even if it took time in some cases.

I get the support I need.

**Theme: What I think about school and how it affects my feelings.** Even though almost all agreed that school lacks stimulation for them the participants had very different views on how school affected them. The experience ranged from:

School affects my well-being positively. I get to learn things and knowledge is something I value a lot.

I have always liked school, and now in high school I think it is more fun than ever!

to:

School was HELL

The school is what has made me suicidal since I was 8.
There were many answers covering the scale in between. A couple of participants wrote that “school can both improve and worsen well-being.”

**Theme: The school system and the individual teacher are very important.** Several of the participants mentioned that the teacher has a very important role. Some of them had also switched between different school systems and noticed a difference. Where they happened to go to school seemed to have been of vital importance in many aspects. Unfortunately, the ordinary Swedish school system came in last:

. . . the Montessori-inspired pedagogy simply suited me very well. When I changed to an ordinary school in grade three I thought it was very negative.

When starting the Swedish high school, school definitely made me feel worse.

School was worthless until grade seven when I got the possibility to work at my own pace [in Kunskapsskolan]. Now I go to an ordinary school again and lack the motivation to invest in school again but still have friends and get at least vg [Second highest grade out of three] in almost all subjects.

When it came down to it though, the teacher had the power to make a difference:

[I] often experienced school as not stimulating and not challenging. However, there have been teachers making good exceptions from this rule - teachers that gave me challenges from several grades above the one I was in.

Regarding stimulation I say that it has mostly been due to the teacher if it has been sufficient or inadequate. I have noticed several times, in very different subjects and grades, that the possibility to stimulating work has changed - sometimes to the better, sometimes to the worse, because of teachers being switched.

Some teachers had also had a very negative influence:

. . . I supported the other students who didn’t get on well because they had difficulty learning and the teachers didn’t help them properly. Often the students came and ask me about things first, which made the teachers even more angry with me.

The new teacher at the school where I ended up in sixth grade refused to believe that I had already done the math book for that grade. He seemed lazy and probably thought it would be troublesome to deal with me. As a protest, I worked through the sixth grade math books over a weekend, and the teacher eventually agreed to let me work ahead.

**Theme: It changes with time.** About half of the participants described a change over time. Some mentioned that in secondary school the subjects got harder.

All of primary school I felt superior to my classmates. . . . In high school it was completely different.

A few were happy about this and found it stimulating, they wrote that “it got better in high school compared to junior high”, and a few had trouble because they lacked study skills. A few of the participants also described the first years of school as fun but the joy disappeared over time:
In the beginning I thought that school was fun . . . now I guess it’s like everyone else.

Like I said, school was fun when I was smaller . . . The biggest turning point was when I no longer could learn everything from class but had to sacrifice my spare time to try and understand something that I really didn’t think was interesting at all. Other friends had learned to study in grade six while I played my way through primary school.

**Theme: The way school works and how I think it should be.** Some of the participants had strong opinions about the way the school worked and how they wished it would work. Here follows a couple of examples of how they experienced it:

Overall I feel that the school puts a lot of effort on the students that have a hard time with subjects. There should be more energy put on the students that are eager and want to learn more.

[I] think it is extremely bad that the school focus on helping the ones with learning disabilities while they don’t give a crap about the ones with special talents.

And a couple of examples of what they liked:

Generally speaking I can say that the work becomes more stimulating the looser reins one is given, since then you can easier use your full potential.

When I was younger and went to a Montessori-inspired class I got a lot of freedom to work on my own and loved it . . . I really want time to learn how things work from the basics and up, I am not satisfied with knowing that it just is that way, which I almost always have to make due with because of the lack of time that I personally feel when studying so many subjects at the same time.

**Theme: Demands for perfection.** A few of the participants wrote about demands and stress:

School often gives a little too much pressure when it comes to assignments. Too much at once. Usually manage everything but hate it when it’s not perfect.

It is not until now in high school that I have started feeling that it gets too much and that I cannot really take all the demands. Because I put a lot of time on school, at the same time as I exercise a lot and want to see friends, and that doesn’t always work.

But it is very stressful, in many cases because I put high demands on myself to really do a good job in all subjects, but also because it puts stress on me to keep up the standard that I haven’t had to work as much for earlier. . . . I would say that the stress sometimes overflow the cup, and since I (and everyone else around me) am used to me handling most things I tend to react strongly when the stress is to high.

It seems the stress often originated in themselves but sometimes had to do with the expectations that they thought the surroundings had.

**Theme: I’m the extra teacher.** A couple of participants mentioned that they would help other kids that did not understand. Because the teacher asked them to or because the others came to them:
[I] very often got to go around and help the ones that didn’t understand.

**The effect of the home environment.** Following are the themes derived from the question: How do you think that your home affects your well-being and does/did your home give you support and stimulation? All participants but one answered this question. The material was divided into five themes which are presented in the order of how many mentioned something about it (see Table 3 for a summary).

### Table 3
*How do you think that your home affects your well-being and does/did your home give you support and stimulation?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support and encouragement</td>
<td>“. . . and they are always there for me”</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Especially mom, but also dad really encourages me.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being in relation to family</td>
<td>“My happiness has been their top priority”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“some fights affect me”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I love my family and they are wonderful!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>“My father taught me quite advanced mathematics already at a young age.”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>”. . . it’s something very subtle, a lack of stimulation, ambition, or a will to get more out of life, that can drive me crazy”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents response to intelligence</td>
<td>“My parents have never really acknowledged this, . . .”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“. . . they have become more interested in intelligence and giftedness, but almost on the border of them having too great expectations on me”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On my own</td>
<td>“Have managed to get myself to deal with schoolwork and get myself good study skills when I need to”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = number of participants who presented information that fit within the theme.*

**Theme: Support and encouragement.** A lot of the participants wrote about the support and encouragement they received, or did not receive, from their families. Most of them referred to support as only emotional, but others included more practical support as well. The majority of the participants seemed to be getting a lot of support. They described a close and loving relation to their families. Two of them wrote:

. . . and they are always there for me.

Especially mom, but also dad really encourages me. They encourage me to study even though dad hasn’t even gone to high school. Have been getting, and am getting, a lot of support

It was not always uncomplicated however, some wrote about the support sometimes being misdirected, like this one:
Often she [mother] was afraid of me doing too much, so she tried to stop me, which only stressed me out and made me push myself even harder.

Even though most seemed to experience a great deal of support, there was a downside to being very talented and always doing well in school. A couple of the participants reported their parents as being numbed, not giving the same support as earlier:

They are used to me always doing well so I don’t get as much encouragement as I might wish I got.

The adolescents were well aware that this was due to them always doing well, but it could pose a problem to them:

If I do something and am proud of it, it can often be just an “Oh” for an answer, which I can understand is something positive in the way that they are not surprised, but at the same time I too want to get encouragement.

A few have gotten no way near the support they would like to get and one reported a complete absence of support from her father, partly due to cultural reasons:

My dad just suppressed me because he saw me as a threat and because he has grown up with the norm that women should be quiet and not take any space - which I was the opposite of.

**Theme: Well-being in relation to family.** This was a major theme in the answers we got, how the family affects the adolescents’ mental health. It seemed that most of the participants experienced their family as a source of happiness. They were affected in a positive way, and some even saw their family as the reason to why they coped with life. Participants wrote:

My happiness has been their top priority.

My family is the only thing keeping me healthy, mentally and physically. Without my parents I would not have been in the highly intellectual position that I am today.

Naturally not all of the participants felt good about their family: “some fights affect me”, some had serious problems and some experienced stress when they felt that there were problems in communication. One participant wrote:

Since I was 14 I have not been feeling so well at home, and since then have been trying to live on my own.

However, the main message that these adolescents sent us, was that they felt good about their home environment, and that they felt that their families affected them in a positive way: “I love my family and they are wonderful!”

**Theme: Stimulation.** Although most of the respondents got much support from home, the amount of stimulation was a different issue. Those who wrote about this were divided almost in half, were one half got the stimulation they needed, and the other half did not. Stimulation was seen as mostly academic and intellectual. Those who got stimulation were very happy with it, and it seemed to them as a good level of stimulation, like this one:

My father taught me quite advanced mathematics already at a young age. He stopped when I was in late primary school [year 7-9] when he couldn’t help me anymore.
Those that did not get the stimulation that they needed expressed this as influencing them in the daily life:

It’s not that it’s particularly bad at home or that it’s a bad home. Rather, it’s something very subtle, a lack of stimulation, ambition, or a will to get more out of life, that can drive me crazy.

**Theme: My parent’s response to intelligence.** Some of the answers by the participants reflected that their parents in some way had shown a specific response to them having a high IQ. How the participants experienced this varied, they wrote:

. . . they have become more interested in intelligence and giftedness, but almost on the border of them having too great expectations on me.

They encourage me to take advantage of my intelligence and have always been very helpful.

Another wrote about the difficulties of knowing that he was different, but not being seen by his parents:

I have always known that I have an intelligence that is far above average. My parents have never really acknowledged this, even though they have always been aware that I am doing extremely well in school.

One of the respondents even reported that her father felt threatened of her intelligence:

My father only suppressed me because he saw me as a threat . . . [he] has always thought, and still thinks that it is troublesome that I am so intelligent.

**Theme: On my own.** A couple of the participants had found ways to get the stimulation they need even if the parents could not provide it, by getting it on their own and a couple just did things on their own anyhow. They had written things like:

Have managed to get myself to deal with schoolwork and get myself good study skills when I need to.

I do most of my work/school projects etc. on my own, so they [parents] don’t influence me especially.

Another one had even gone to a boarding school just to be able to manage on his own. One person also expressed worry about their siblings who do not manage on their own, and still did not get help and stimulation from their parents.

**The effect of friends.** Following are the themes derived from the question: How do you think that your friends affect your well-being and give you support and stimulation? All participants but two answered this question. The material has been divided into five themes which are presented in the order of how many mentioned something about it (see Table 4 for a summary). Just as with their family, it was expected that friends would be an important part of these adolescents’ lives.
Table 4

How do you think that your friends affect your well-being and give you support and stimulation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-being in relation to my friends</td>
<td>“I feel good around my friends”</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I have really good friends these days and that I am happy about.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding good friends is difficult</td>
<td>“I have rarely met people my own age that understands me”</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Until this day I still have not found a friend that matches my achievements and my intellect”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>“We don’t really have the same interests, which leads to it being hard to have discussions or talking about things in depth.”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“… the ones you can discuss philosophy and deeper things with.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>“they are my real support”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I don’t know if I had been able to cope with school if I hadn’t had so many people I know around me, it’s they who really get me to cope.”</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = number of participants who presented information that fit within the theme.

**Theme: Well-being in relation to my friends.** Most of the adolescents seemed to be happy with the relation to their friends and it affected their well-being in mostly a positive way. They have written things like:

- I feel good around my friends.
- My friends are absolutely necessary for me to feel good.

Some of the respondents were well aware of how they were affected by social situations and by how their friends felt:

- If they are disappointed or angry about something it is easy to get caught up in it and feel the same.

Some were a bit bothered about friends that did not have the same level of giftedness, one wrote that he “… can feel superior to them. It is a bit troublesome”. In general the adolescents seemed to have a good relation to their friends and were affected positively by them: “I have really good friends these days and that I am happy about.”

**Theme: Finding good friends is difficult.** Even though their friends were appreciated, a theme that ran through the entire survey was that good friends were hard to find and that it had taken quite some time to find them. This had involved finding equally intelligent friends or people who were on the same level as themselves. The respondents pointed out how hard it had been to find friends that match them:

- I have rarely met people my own age that understands me.
Until high school I knew basically no one who was intelligent, but when I got into a school with a high entrance level I met many ambitious and more or less intelligent people.

Sometimes they had found friends in adults or older peers, and almost everyone wrote that it became better when they began secondary school:

It’s not until recent years (high school) that I have met friends who I in general find generally stimulating, with very few exceptions.

Some of the respondents had still not found a match:

Until this day I still have not found a friend that matches my achievements and my intellect.

Almost every one of the respondents wrote, in one way or another, that socializing with equally intelligent people was important to them. For many this had to do with finding others that could understand them as they were and with whom they do not have to change themselves to fit in. It was also noteworthy that the choice of friends seemed to have been deliberate for most of the ones that were happy with their friend relationships:

I spend time with like-minded people.
They are also smart and loving people.
I spend time with people that make me feel good.

**Theme: Stimulation.** The participants had more or less divided the stimulation from friends into two categories; social and intellectual stimulation. Some of them appreciated their friends as being socially stimulating, even if they did not provide a source of intellectual stimulation. One of the respondents wrote:

Stimulation, . . . I have gotten by spending time with them and having incredibly fun together but solving any mental [intellectual] problems has not been possible with them before I started high school.

The lack of intellectual stimulation bothered some of the participants though, making them feel superior or just getting tired of their friends. They had written things like:

We don’t really have the same interests, which leads to it being hard to have discussions or talking about things in depth. If we are to do an assignment together, especially such that includes larger research it doesn’t work at all, so no stimulation there.

Have trouble finding friends I don’t get tired of.

Those who had found friends of equal intellect wrote about this in a positive way, one likes “. . . the ones you can discuss philosophy and deeper things with”.

**Theme: Support.** As with family, friends were a major source of emotional and practical support. Half of the participants wrote about support from friends. Most reported that their friends were very supportive and caring and said “they are my real support”. Sometimes the friends were what they needed to cope with school:

I don’t know if I had been able to cope with school if I hadn’t had so many people I know around me, it’s they who really get me to cope.
The support was sometimes complicated with friends who did not understand their giftedness and that did not understand that school could be hard even if one was intelligent, one of the respondents wrote:

> It happens that I am excluded from discussions on how hard an assignment is since I “get an MVG (highest grade) anyway.” That affects me very much of course. On the other hand I have a few very good friends . . . they are supporting just as I am as supporting to them, they understand the way I think and my associations very well.

**Fitting in different contexts.** The following was derived from the question: To what extent do you experience that you fit in at school, at home and among your friends? This question generated very diverse answers that were boiled down to three categories: Those who felt they generally fit in, those who felt they generally did not fit in, and those who found it contextual. All participants but one answered this question. Most participants found that if they fit in or not was contextual, the general idea being that they fit in among family and a few close friends whilst it was harder to fit in school and with people in general.

> I think this only depends on what kind of company you end up in. I ended up in a certain company in school where I think I fit in well, and where I still think I fit in very well. In the broad masses I fit in half decent. I also feel very safe and comfortable at home.

Three participants felt it was hard to find a match anywhere:

> Seldom fit in when growing up as I, despite my father being intelligent, never felt I was on the same level mentally as anyone in my surroundings.

and a few more found they had no trouble fitting in and wrote they “fit in like any other person”. Quite a few also mentioned that they would hide their intelligence or otherwise change themselves to fit in:

> . . . sometimes I have concealed my giftedness a little because it makes others see me it in a different way, and I don't only want to be seen for how smart I am.

**Statistical Analysis**

Regarding the adolescents’ reports of their sense of coherence, the mean was 58.39, out of 91 possible (SD = 12.88), with a minimum value of 30 and a maximum value of 78. The female respondents had a mean of 54.86 (SD = 12.92) and the male respondents had a mean of 59.94 (SD = 12.96). Due to the small sample size there were small possibilities of getting significant differences and there was no statistically significant difference found between genders, t(21) = 0.87, p = .40, with a noteworthy risk of a TYPE II error. This represented a small effect size, r = 0.19. We chose to present this information even though we did not use it further as other researchers might be interested in the numbers.

**Discussion**

The aim of the current study was to overcome some of the limitations of past research and let gifted youth describe how high intelligence affected their life. When beginning this study, we expected to find that high intelligence affects the adolescents’ lives and that the school would pose a major problem. In accordance with Persson (2010) and Stålnacke (2007), we also expected that the adolescents would have a hard time finding friends and that their families might give less support than what the participants needed.
We learned that many experiences depend on the context and that gifted adolescents indeed have an interesting story to tell about school often being under-stimulating whereas family and a few close friends have a positive effect that allowed many of them to be content with their lives. We found that even though high intelligence affected their lives, it was not always to as great an extent as we expected.

This study supports some of the past Swedish research (Persson, 2005; Persson, 2010; Stålnacke, 2007; Stålnacke & Smedler, 2011) as well as adds new perspectives. Some things were not as bad as earlier research suggested, even though some things are still far from satisfying. Not surprisingly, the gifted adolescents experienced that they had an easier time learning new things than most of their classmates. Other things were not as obvious. Gifted youth in our study were not in agreement on how important intelligence was, but all participants mentioned at least one way in which their high intelligence affected their lives. Some even wrote that it was central and of utmost importance. It appears safe to say that intelligence does matter. It was not unexpected to find that some adolescents felt they needed to hide their intelligence to be able to fit in and seen as an equal. Being good at things like sports or games seems to be a merit, but being good with logic's has been, and remains, a two-sided matter.

We found that experiences are contextual with regards to many aspects. Regarding friends many argued that they were happy with their close friends, but did not always fit in with the social surroundings as a whole. A recurrent story was that of gifted children having a hard time finding friends of equal intellect. Some were lucky and ended up with friends similar to themselves early, but many did not find any good friends until high school and some still had not found their match. Even though many described their friends as mostly being supportive, it seems clear to us that even if they did not mainly discuss intellectual problems it was very important that their friends had the capacity to understand them, and other adolescents who are also gifted are the most likely to understand their way of thinking.

In school there was a good deal of variation in their experiences and these differences depended on what school system they were in and most of all, depended on the individual teachers. However, almost all agreed that school did not provide much stimulation and many of them wished for more challenges and looked for it elsewhere. An interesting find was that all of the participants that had been in at least two different school systems found that the ordinary Swedish school was the worst. Kunskapsskolan (a Swedish private school), Montessori-inspired schools, and schools abroad were all regarded as more stimulating. They claimed it was mostly because in the other school systems they had the opportunity to work more freely on their own level and were not held back.

A few of the answers were hard to code at first because they did not fit into the themes we derived. We did find a common denominator though, as they were all deep reflections of how they themselves, as well as life, worked. Several of them would analyze things in detail and then reflect upon the fact that they analyzed a lot compared to people around them. We called the theme: creating and solving the equation that is life. Most adolescents are surely occupied with finding their place, but we think there is a difference. These adolescents seemed to take it one step further. They wanted to understand things thoroughly and there was a lot of meta-cognition. In their answers, the participants would reflect upon what is just, what school is like and how it affected them, and how their way of thinking worked compared to others. Cognition was important to them and it seemed to be important to them to be able to understand and foresee how things work; to solve the equation. Some had trouble when they could not understand and solve, partly because they were used to understanding everything in school and they were not used to not being able to...
figure things out. Sometimes it would be even more problematic though, for example with feelings that are hard to predict, as other people’s reactions to emotional matters are hard to foresee. Feelings do not always follow a rational, logical pattern. How can one expect to solve the equation when you cannot even define it in the first place?

**Unexpected Findings**

Earlier research has indicated that about half of gifted adolescents got little or no support from family (Persson, 2010). This was not true in our sample, where about half said they did not get extensive stimulation, but most of them did say that they got support from home. Only a couple of participants said they mostly mind their own business and only one person mentioned her father being threatened by her high intelligence. A possible explanation for this difference is that people that join Mensa as adolescents are different from those who join as adults, as Persson’s (2010) study was retrospective with adult members. Another, perhaps more plausible explanation for this is that times may have changed. Persson’s (2010) study was conducted on adults and it is possible that support of gifted adolescents is better now than when the adults in Persson’s research were adolescents. Maybe parents these days are not ashamed that their children are different and instead are proud that they are intelligent and support them to make the most of it.

Regarding school, even though most of the gifted youth agreed that it lacked an appropriate level of stimulation, what they actually felt about school differed enormously. The spectrum was almost as wide as it could be. Some really liked school, because they had the opportunity to learn and because they had friends there. On the other hand, some described it as the worst place they knew, writing that it was hell and made them feel suicidal. It was a bit surprising that for some the lack of stimulation did not seem to have an effect on their experiences of well-being. A possible explanation to this might be that friends and family work as buffers that help them cope with school. If parents help by giving stimulation and support at home, or giving the view that school is just a way to reach somewhere else, or that all knowledge is great no matter the level, this may have kept school from having a negative effect. Friends can also be a buffer by being something good that is found in school. Further research is needed to conclude mediators of schools affect on the well-being of gifted youth.

**Limitations**

Due to lack of time, unfortunately, we have not coded all the material quantitatively and compared the answers from the open-ended questions with the sense of coherence scale. Earlier research (Stålnacke & Smedler, 2011) has found that gifted young adults have a lower sense of coherence than the general population, but we have not confirmed nor disconfirmed this. It could also be considered a concern that the sample was not randomly selected from among the population of gifted Swedish adolescents and that Mensa members are over-represented. However, because the study was mainly qualitative, the lack of quantitative generalizability is not a focal issue.

All studies have the risk of researchers having a preconception of the subject that causes a bias in analyzing (Langemar, 2008). One of us is a member of Mensa and has heard many stories of how school has not been good. Her preconceptions, for the most part, coincide with the previous research presented in the review of gifted students’ perceptions of their schools. The other researcher is not a member of Mensa, but has children with similar experiences as the adolescents in the sample. We attempted to avoid our preconceptions having a major effect on the result by, several times during the analysis, stopping to discuss
whether or not an idea come from how we thought things were or if it was fair to interpret the text in that way.

That the questions were asked via a questionnaire was both a limitation and a strength. The obvious limitation being that we could not ask for clarification nor ask for more exhaustive answers when desirable. On the other hand, not being present in the room may have let the participants answer more freely as well as the interviewer not being able to control the answers by steering the participants’ answers in the direction of their personal beliefs.

Just over half of those who were asked to participate did. Part of the sample not answering could have a number of causes. For example, the ones not answering could have had a less problematic youth and because of this did not find this study as important as those who answered it, or maybe those with the most problems did not have the strength or the motivation to write about how they feel. There could be other reasons too; possibly they felt that they had neither the time nor the energy to write about their lives. In addition, they may have felt that their experience could not contribute anything to this study. There could also be reasons that we did not think of that could have influenced the result in some manner.

**Strengths**

Because international studies, due to mentioned reasons, may not be valid in Sweden it is of importance to Swedish implications that this study is done within the country. The greatest strength of this study compared to other Swedish research is that the questions were asked to the adolescents directly. This dramatically lowers the risk of memory distortions and also describes the school as it is today and not how it was several years ago. Another strength of this study is that the participants are spread all over the country, from Skåne in the south to far up in Norrland in the north. There are not many adolescent members in Mensa, which means that due to anonymity reasons we will not mention more exactly where they live, but the participants were found in both urban centers and small rural communities. Due to this fact the sample is very diverse, which is seen as a strength in qualitative research.

Even though the quantitative generalizability may be low in this study, the qualitative generalizability is a different matter. According to Langemar (2008) qualitative generalizability can be seen as having two parts. One, did the collected data give a good picture of the area, and two, did the properties and phenomena that exist within the population show in the study. It is important both that the results presented really do exist and that all the relevant phenomena’s within the sample are covered. Within Mensa we chose to ask all the members of the target age, which makes the sample selection exhaustive, there are no groups within that population that have not been asked. Also we have taken care to analyze the answers from all the participants and not skip any material within the parts that we used for qualitative analysis.

With very few exceptions the participants of this study wrote extensively and with very good language. We could hardly find any spelling errors. This made the material a pleasure to read and easy to understand. Several of the adolescents in the study have shown interest in the results and a few have even thanked us for doing a study that feels important to them. This makes us believe that the participants wrote willingly and truthfully as they were motivated to provide valid results.

We did not interpret all the answers the same at first. In accordance to Langemar (2008) we did not try to decide who was wrong or right when we had coded something differently in the first run through the qualitative material, but instead saw the different views as a source to analyze different possibilities in interpreting the text. After each discussion we
reached consensus on how to interpret the text based on our research question. Our discussions on how to interpret answers from participants, and on how our preconceptions have affected our interpretation, increase the qualitative generalizability.

**Implications of This Study**

The stories from these adolescents’ suggest that the Swedish school system still seems to have the word “equality” confused with “being the same”. The school system fails to reach the goal of the school law to “give support and stimulation so that they can develop as far as possible” (SFS, 2010, chap. 1 §4). It is not farfetched to believe that this may be true not only for the top two percent that we have questioned in our study but probably to other adolescents, who work faster and have easier to learn than the average student, as well. The participants seem to prefer to at least not be held back, but preferably be encouraged to go deeper into the subjects at a level higher than the grade requires. If those who work in school would listen to these youth when they say what they need instead of trying to get them to be and act “normal” it would probably make them more satisfied with school. Many know how they prefer to learn, and most do indeed want to, and long to, learn more. Adults just need to ask them.

To all the parents of gifted adolescents out there we say, keep up the good work. Gifted youth need and appreciate the support from their family. Mostly they need the support and freedom to be who they are and many also appreciate the opportunity to get more stimulating tasks than in school. If parents want to go the extra mile for their children, trying to find places where they can find equals seem to help their feeling of belonging and gives them a chance to find good friends earlier in life. Being involved with their school work and helping them expressing their needs and wants is probably a good idea too, because some teachers might feel it is easier if an adult describes to them what the child needs and also it takes some of the difficult responsibility of creating a good school away from the children. Most teachers are not “bad” persons, they mostly want what is best for the children, but do not always know how to do this on an individual level.

Future research needs to move from this more qualitative study, to quantifying our findings and studying gifted Swedish youths in a larger, quantitative study, perhaps including a random sample of gifted children and youth. Working from this, school personnel could then be advised about what strategies to use when working with gifted children. Clearly, our initial findings suggest that this would be worthwhile.
References


Appendix A

**Jantelagen av Aksel Sandemose**

1. Du skall inte tro att du är något
2. Du skall inte tro att du är lika god som vi
3. Du skall inte tro att du är klokare än vi
4. Du skall inte inbilla dig att du är bättre än vi
5. Du skall inte tro att du vet mera än vi
6. Du skall inte tro att du är förmer än vi
7. Du ska inte tro att du duger till något
8. Du skall inte skratta åt oss
9. Du skall inte tro att någon bryr sig om dig
10. Du skall inte tro att du kan lära oss något

"The Law of Jante" by Aksel Sandemose
as translated by Beatrice Lindberg and Karin Kaill

1. You shall not think that you are something
2. You shall not think that you are as good as we are
3. You shall not think that you are wiser than we are
4. You shall not fool yourself that you are better than we are
5. You shall not think that you know more than we do
6. You shall not think that you are superior to us
7. You shall not think that you are good for anything
8. You shall not laugh at us
9. You shall not think that anyone cares about you
10. You shall not think that you can teach us anything
Denna enkäten har skickats till dig för att jag, och många andra, vill ha fakta om hur begåvade ungdomar upplever sin vardag. I vår gemensamma förening, Mensa, har vi hört många berättelser om skolan och ungdomstiden och studier med äldre Mensamedlemmar tyder på att skolan ofta inte passade dem. Det finns dock ingen tidigare svensk forskning som faktiskt har frågat er ungdomar hur ni upplever livet. Det är verkligen på tiden att det görs!

Den här enkäten finns även på Internet. Har du fått båda versionerna ska du bara svara på en enkät. Har du inte fått en länk till webbenkäten och hellre vill skriva på datorn kan du skicka ett e-post till proxy@mensa.se eller manuellt skriva följande adress i webbläsaren: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dFNNcFZMejJBUWZCUUtYVVhrY0QzLXc6MQ


Om du vill ha en kopia på den färdiga studien så skicka ett e-post till proxy@mensa.se så skriver Karin upp er på utskickslistan. En del resultat kommer även att publiceras i Legatus Mensae.

Tack för att du hjälper oss förstå så att vi i förlängningen kan jobba för att de begåvade barnen och ungdomarna inte glöms bort i debatten.

Med hälsningar från,

Jenny Åkerman
Ordförande, Mensa Sverige
orfordande@mensa.se

Karin Kaill
Psykologstudent och Mensamedlem
proxy@mensa.se

Beatrice Lindberg
Psykologstudent (med egna begåvade barn)
bea.lindberg.79@gmail.com
1. Jag är
   □ tjejer
   □ killar

2. Jag är född år: ___________

3. Jag
   □ studerar på högstadiet
   □ studerar på gymnasiet, program: __________________________
   □ arbetar, med: __________________________
   □ är arbetssökande
   □ annat, nämligen: __________________________

4. Mitt postnummer är: ___________

5. Jag bor
   □ ensam
   □ med partner
   □ med vän
   □ med min mamma
   □ med min pappa
   □ med två föräldrar
   □ annat boende, nämligen: __________________________

6. Jag har så här många bröder: Jag har så här många systrar:
   □ 0   0
   □ 1   1
   □ 2   2
   □ 3 eller fler   3 eller fler

7. Min pappa har:
   □ grundskoleutbildning (årskurs 1-9)
   □ gymnasieutbildning
   □ universitetsutbildning
   □ jag träffar inte min pappa
   □ annat, nämligen: __________________________

8. Min mamma har:
   □ grundskoleutbildning (årskurs 1-9)
   □ gymnasieutbildning
   □ universitetsutbildning
   □ jag träffar inte min mamma
   □ annat, nämligen: __________________________

9. a) Jag gjorde IQ-test via:
   □ Mensas inträdestest
   □ skolpsykolog
   □ privat psykolog
   □ psykiatriin
   □ annan, nämligen: __________________________

   b) Anledning till att jag gjorde IQ-test:
10. Har du en känsla av att du inte riktigt bryr dig om vad som händer runt omkring dig?

   Mycket sållan eller aldrig 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket ofta

11. Har det hänt att du blev överraskad av beteendet hos personer som du trodde du kände väl?

   Har aldrig hänt 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Har ofta hänt

12. Har det hänt att människor som du litade på har gjort dig besviken?

   Har aldrig hänt 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Har ofta hänt

13. Hittills har ditt liv:

   Helt saknat mål och mening 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Genomgående haft mål och mening

14. Känner du dig orättvist behandlad?

   Mycket ofta 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket sållan eller aldrig

15. Har du en känsla av att du befinner dig i en obekant situation och inte vet vad du skall göra?

   Mycket ofta 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket sållan eller aldrig

16. År dina dagliga sysslor en källa till:

   Glädje och djup tillfredsställelse 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Smärta och leda

17. Har du mycket motstridiga känslor och tankar?

   Mycket ofta 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket sållan eller aldrig

18. Händer det att du har känslor inom dig som du helst inte vill känna?

   Mycket ofta 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket sållan eller aldrig

19. Även en människa med stark självkänsla kan ibland känna sig som en "olycksfågel". Hur ofta har du känt det så?

   Aldrig 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket ofta

20. När något har hänt, har du vanligtvis funnit att:

   Du över- eller under-värderade dess betydelse 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Du såg saken i dess rätta perspektiv

21. Hur ofta känner du att det inte är någon mening med de saker du gör i ditt dagliga liv?

   Mycket ofta 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket sållan eller aldrig

22. Hur ofta har du känslor som du inte är säker på att du kan kontrollera?

   Mycket ofta 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Mycket sållan eller aldrig

The questions on this page are from Hälsans mysterium (p. 247-253), by A. Antonovsky, 1991, Stockholm, Sweden: Natur och kultur. Copyright by the executor of the estate of Aaron Antonovsky. Reprinted with permission.
23. Hur upplever du din fysiska och psykiska hälsa, och vad påverkar den till det bättre och till det sämre?

24. Hur tror du att din intelligens påverkar ditt liv? (Om den gör det)

_Denna fråga är jätteviktig för oss. Svara gärna detaljrikt och med reflektioner. Om du till exempel känner att du inte passar in så skriv gärna på vilket sätt du inte gör det. Eller om du har lätt eller svårt att förstå i skolan._

25. I vilken mån upplever du att du passar/passade in i skolan, i ditt föräldrahem och bland dina vänner?
26. Hur tycker du att skolan påverkar ditt mående och ger/gav skolan dig stöd och stimulans?  
_Hur har det förändrats med tiden?_

27. Hur tycker du att ditt föräldrahem påverkar ditt mående och ger/gav ditt föräldrahem dig stöd och stimulans?  
_Hur har det förändrats med tiden?_

28. Hur tycker du att dina vänner påverkar ditt mående och ger dina vänner dig stöd och stimulans?  
_Hur har det förändrats med tiden?_
29. Beskriv din relation till dina närmaste vänner, vilka de är och vad ni gör tillsammans (inkludera ålder och kön, men inte namn, på vänerna).

30. Vilken, om någon, ytterligare information om din bakgrund, din hälsa eller din skola tror att det är viktigt att vi vet för att förstå hur du upplever livet?

31. Hur kommer det sig att du valde att bli medlem i föreningen Mensa och har det påverkat ditt liv på något vis?
Tack så oerhört mycket för att du tog dig tid att hjälpa till med forskningen. Om du har kommentarer till oss om enkäten får du gärna skriva dem här. _T.ex. om du tyckte någon fråga hade flera tolkningar eller om du saknade ett svarsalternativ._