

Secondary PGCE

Assignment 1(b)

Critically analyse the issue of appropriate provision for gifted and talented pupils in schools with reference to initial school experience in the primary school, professional placement experience and wider reading

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, the question of provision for gifted and talented students is considered from a whole-school perspective. Case studies of two schools are presented, and consideration is then given to the task of identification of these pupils. Also, there is a discussion of some aspects of appropriate whole-school policies, and a brief consideration of the acceleration versus enrichment question.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction	1
2. School-based observations	2
3. Identifying gifted and talented pupils	3
4. School-wide provision	3
5. Enrichment or acceleration?	5
6. Conclusion	6
References	6

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Curriculum (DfEE/QCA 1999) is quite explicit about the need to make adequate provision for our gifted and talented students. In its statement on inclusion, it says:

For pupils whose attainments significantly exceed the expected level of attainment within one or more subjects during a particular key stage, teachers will need to plan suitably challenging work. As well as drawing on materials from later key stages or higher levels of study, teachers may plan further differentiation by extending the breadth and depth of study within individual subjects or by planning work which draws on the content of different subjects.

In this essay, we examine different approaches to such provision as evidenced in school-based experience and wider reading.

The area of gifted and talented provision has several aspects. The first is, of course, defining the terms and then identifying students who fit the chosen criteria for giftedness and talent. The next is the development of policies at various organisational levels: at whole-school level and at subject level, and nationally at governmental and LEA levels. In addition to creating (and of course monitoring) policies, there needs to be provision made within the terms of these policies in the form of training and support, finances and resources. We will be able to touch upon some of these areas within the limits of this essay, but the interested reader is encouraged to read further; the references at the end provide a good starting point.

A brief note on terminology: There is debate as to how to refer to these students. Some use 'gifted and talented', others 'able', 'very able' or 'exceptionally able'. We have generally chosen to follow the current QCA choice of 'gifted and talented' throughout this essay, although we sometimes use the other terms. The QCA uses the term 'gifted' to refer to academic ability and 'talented' to refer to ability in sports, music, art and design and performing arts. The DFES Excellence in Cities initiative targets, in each case, the top 5–10% of achievers in that field within each school. It is also important to note that there is no mention of Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligence here: students are equally capable of being gifted in interpersonal skills, for example, and it is important that this, too, is recognised and supported.

2. SCHOOL-BASED OBSERVATIONS

My initial school placement was in a relatively small, single-form entry primary school, catering for nursery through to Year 6. The school had a SENCO, and one senior member of staff who was responsible for overseeing gifted and talented provision. Her expressed attitude was that 'I believe that all children are gifted and talented in their own way', and in her classroom endeavoured to engage all of her students at high levels of attainment. Notwithstanding this, I did observe her differentiating by outcome and sometimes by task as well for one particularly talented girl in her class. Nonetheless, I was not aware of the existence of any coherent gifted and talented policy within the school nor of any whole-school provision for such students. However, this may simply be due to my unfocused observations, as this assignment was set after the initial school experience had already been completed.

More interesting has been my professional placement experience. Although the QCA and Excellence in Cities guidelines (QCA undated, Roles and responsibilities: Gifted and talented coordinators) suggest that 'secondary schools should appoint a gifted and talented coordinator (preferably not the special educational needs coordinator)', my school has only one inclusion coordinator, who has responsibility for both SEN and Gifted and Talented students. By her own admission, she is so busy with her SEN students that she has little time for the G&T students. The school does have a gifted and talented register, though, and each subject takes responsibility

for provision in its own area. As examples, the mathematics department accelerates its top set for an early entry GCSE in Year 10; the science department works for a “science award” in KS3, and has provision for triple science GCSE; the art department offers early entry GCSE in Year 9; there are also twilight drama and music sessions provided by the school. Other projects also include the school newsletter, which is run by students on the gifted and talented register.

The maintenance of the Gifted and Talented Register is the responsibility of the Inclusion Coordinator. The identification is partially based on the KS2 SATs levels, as well as taking into consideration the results of CAT tests (taken at the beginning of Years 7 and 9) and individual departmental identification. This, to some extent at least, follows the governmental guidelines.

Unfortunately, with the duties of being SENCO in a school with a very significant proportion of the students on the special needs register, the Inclusion Coordinator simply does not appear to have the time, and possibly not even the remit, to fulfil the many responsibilities of a Gifted and Talented Coordinator as described by the QCA (QCA undated, *ibid*). It would not surprise me to learn that this is not uncommon across the country, especially as having a dedicated coordinator is not a statutory requirement and is a relatively recent recommendation with budgetary implications.

3. IDENTIFYING GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS

The identification of gifted and talented pupils is clearly an important step in providing adequate provision. As noted in the profession placement observations above, there are several approaches used, including test scores and teacher observation. Another two major sources of information are parental input and student input, both from the student themselves and from their peers (Eyre 2002). In addition to using formal test scores, other forms of assessment are also highly valuable, including looking at the student’s portfolio of work, and using gifted and talented checklists, which list various characteristics of these students. Examples of such checklists may be found on the QCA website (QCA undated) and in the works by Eyre (1998), Eyre (2002), Koshy and Casey (1997) and Tong (2002), Wallace (2000) to list just a few. It must be borne in mind, though, that such lists must be used with caution, as there is little research on what items should be included in such lists (Eyre 2002, p. 15). Also, there are both general and subject-specific checklists, which should both be consulted.

Another very important issue is raised in the context of identification. Are we aiming to identify existing demonstration of giftedness or are we endeavouring to uncover as-yet-untapped potential? The former might well be exhibited in forms of precociousness, whereas the latter may exhibit itself through non-conformance, through misbehaviour due to boredom, through focused enjoyment on the task at hand or easy mastery of presented material. Beyond this, potential can only be demonstrated when an opportunity is available to do so. Giftedness in mathematics, for example, can be exhibited through precocious behaviour throughout primary school, whereas

a talent in tennis or water sports may not begin to surface until an opportunity is provided to begin to play the game. We would therefore posit that a school's responsibility is to both identify and support those already displaying giftedness and talent, and also to provide a rich set of opportunities for all students to enable them to begin to discover other potentials which had been latent until that point; we will return to this point later.

4. SCHOOL-WIDE PROVISION

As the National Curriculum makes clear, it is part of a school's responsibility to make adequate provision for its gifted and talented students. There are several aspects to the possible nature of school-wide provision. The most obvious one is through subject studies within the traditional classroom or other appropriate setting (such as a sports field). This may involve enrichment and/or acceleration, and we will consider these below. In addition to this, there is opportunity for school-wide projects to engage and challenge the most able students. For example, as mentioned above, in my professional placement school, the school newsletter is produced by the students. Other opportunities could include school councils (which provide excellent interpersonal opportunities (Clay *et al* 2001)), drama or musical productions, giving a chance for pupils to get involved in any aspect of the production, from the on-stage performance through to the multiple technical aspects; running or participating in club and societies; competitions, both local, national and even international; providing access to experts, such as a poet-in-residence or visiting philosopher, and so on (Eyre 2002). These all allow students to develop their cross-curricular skills and other intelligences (using Gardner's (1983) multiple-intelligences model).

One reason why this is important becomes evident when we bear in mind that there is a significant difference between giftedness in children, where we are paying attention to potential, and giftedness in adults, where the criterion is primarily achievement-based. Gifted children may or may not become highly-achieving adults, but it seems that the crucial factors in the latter are highly dependent upon emotional literacy and the other personal skills and intelligences; one single area of expertise is usually inadequate for great achievement (Goleman 1996). We would then be failing to provide for the needs of the students if we did *not* provide such learning opportunities in our schools. In some senses, then, there is no difference between those identified as gifted and talented and those not in this matter. (In fact, until now, most gifted and talented students have not become gifted adults: see the OFSTED reviews of research in Freeman (1998, pp. 2–4). Maybe by focusing on these crucial personal intelligences, we can begin to change this.)

School-wide provision also needs to take into account the social and emotional needs of its gifted and talented students. There can be a significant potential for isolation, and these students can be quite intense thinkers, and might well need opportunities to talk to staff; there can be a temptation to ignore this need because they are bright and appear to be able to take care of themselves. As an example, one Year 6 student I know recently went to speak to a senior member of staff and arranged a meeting with him. At

the meeting, he queried an aspect of curriculum provision in the school, and queried why it was being done like this and not like that. The response was inadequate in the student's eyes, and he politely said so. The result of this conversation was that the school reconsidered the matter and have now changed their policy in this area.

Furthermore, it is not at all uncommon for gifted and talented students to hide this potential for a number of reasons. These may include boredom, or a fear of being teased. For these students to be identified and supported, at the very least the school needs to create an atmosphere where academic excellence is both encouraged and actively celebrated, allowing all children to feel safe expressing their talents.

5. ENRICHMENT OR ACCELERATION?

Within the subject areas, there is a long-standing debate over the relative advantages and disadvantages of enrichment (including extension work) and acceleration. The National Curriculum (as quoted in the Introduction above) and QCA guidelines both actively encourage some form of acceleration, as well as acknowledging the uses of enrichment. While not particularly common, it is possible to skip a year of school in the UK, but this can have a quite significant impact on students emotionally: their intellectual peers may be in a higher year group, but their emotional peers may not be. It is more common to be accelerated in a single subject area, as observed in my professional placement where a whole set was accelerated. However, even there, one is left with some potential disadvantages, for example 'the disadvantage of having pupils who have been accelerated, but whose grasp of key ideas remains fragile' (UK Mathematics Foundation 2000), as well as the question of whether everyone within the set was ready for this acceleration, or whether it might cause anxiety. Certainly, the evidence in the classroom was that many students felt that they did not have time to become comfortable with the material and that they were rushing through it. I would have been far more comfortable to have seen extension or enhancement work with this able top set. Although this is not in line with current governmental thinking, it might be argued that acceleration is evidence of a school's *failure* to provide adequately for its most able pupils (cf. Freeman 1998, p. 42). It is also unclear as to whether acceleration provides any long-term benefits for the students.

On the other hand, enrichment is another matter entirely. The aims of enrichment include improving students' ability to analyse situations and to problem-solve, to develop their interests and to stimulate initiative, originality, creativity and a sense of direction. (Originality and creativity, in particular, may be significantly incommensurate with an acceleration approach, which may not leave time for the open-ended investigations necessary for such essential developmental growth.) As with acceleration, there are many diverse approaches (QCA undated, Freeman 1998, Eyre 2002), including such things as competitions, extra-curricular activities, masterclasses, camps and summer schools, as well as the standard provision of extension materials in class time or the setting of differentiated tasks designed to enhance these

skills. Although there is a lack of formal research, having been a mentor-teacher on several mathematics summer camps for gifted students in North America, it appeared to me that these young people gained in several interesting ways from the experience, both in the increase of enthusiasm they experienced for their subject and also in their building of social relationships with their intellectual and emotional peers, an opportunity which many of them had never experienced before.

Enrichment has a further major advantage over acceleration, and this returns to the question of identification of gifted and students. By providing enrichment opportunities *for all learners*, some students begin to show their latent abilities, which would not have been the case had the identification been made only on the basis of test scores. This is known as ‘identification through provision’, and brings with it the further advantages of not alienating those traditionally identified as gifted and talented; of not removing opportunities from those who have not yet been identified, and of motivating all in the group. See (Hymer *et al* 2002, ch. 3) for further discussion on this matter. Nonetheless, there is still room for enhancement programmes focused on the identified students, as this will give them extra opportunities which they could not otherwise have, for example, of engaging in learning which is qualitatively different from what could be performed in a mixed-ability classroom, stretching them to higher levels of complexity, and also giving them an opportunity to interact with their intellectual peers—a very important matter.

Finally, this returns us to the question of whether mixed ability groups are of benefit even to gifted and talented students or whether ability-based setting is better in every way. We draw on the research of Freeman (1998) here. There is evidence of a tendency for the teacher to have lower expectations in a mixed-ability class, as their focus is usually on the middle-ability range. This can lead to underachievement in the most able in the group, and to a possible consequent lowered self-concept. However, there is some research indicating that even the top ability students can benefit from the interactions in mixed-ability groups, although the validity of this research has been contested. Gifted and talented students often benefit from a flexible approach, so there is the possibility of success in a mixed-ability group, assuming that the teacher is flexible enough to provide for their needs. Some practical suggestions are given there (*ibid*, p. 52).

6. CONCLUSION

We have considered some of the major issues related to the provision of adequate facilities for gifted and talented students. Informed by school experience, we explored the identification of such students, and then considered what school-wide policies would need to be in place to effectively support and include all such students. From there, we considered the thorny question of acceleration or enrichment: although there are several strong arguments for enrichment, there is still a place for a certain amount of appropriate acceleration within the school. Finally, awareness of the need for special provision for gifted and talented students is relatively recent. Ensuring that they are equally included within the school framework is an important goal,

but one that still requires a significant amount of work, both to implement to a decent level nationwide, and also to perform the research required to determine the most effective strategies to use.

(Wordcount: approx. 2750, excluding abstract and references)

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