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Review Article

Golden Age or Harmful Obsession? Policy and Practice of Gifted and Talented Education in England 1997-2008

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Abstract

In 1997 a ‘New Labour’ government was elected in the United Kingdom, under the leadership of Tony Blair. In the decade which followed, educational policy and practice in England included active intervention to promote learning and achievement of the most able children in state schools, under the label of ‘gifted and talented’. This review recalls developments in provision for these children during that time, in relation both to an inclusive school curriculum and to separate out-of-school learning. The differing ways in which this period of activity and development in gifted and talented education in England can be viewed are critically appraised.

Keywords

gifted and talented children, gifted learners, education in England, out-of-school education

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Introduction

Over several post-war decades, the needs of higher-achieving school-aged students in England were the basis for a differentiated system, the 'grammar-school system', which divided children according to tested ability at the age of 11 and devoted most attention and resources to those regarded as the most academically able. In the 1970s and 80s extensive structural intervention and the establishment of 'comprehensive education' removed much of this separation, and entitlement to a common curriculum became a principal concern. In general, children of all kinds were taught together, and making distinctive provision for different kinds, including those with high attainment levels, in many situations became something of a taboo (Stevens, 1980; Weeks, 1986; Judge, 2006).

A new agenda in the late 1990s started to stress – in forceful rhetoric at least – the raising of educational standards for all, specifically through differentiated learning within inclusive school environments (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). This agenda, accompanied by growing accountability of educational agencies, schools and teachers themselves, produced a keen focus on output measures, "a discourse rooted in a rationalist vocabulary of scientific measurement – of standards and scales; of objective judgements and comparisons" (Broadfoot et al, 2000, p.3). Assessment activity was viewed as "the key mechanism for both monitoring and indeed enhancing quality at every level" (p.4).

Accompanying this agenda, albeit with considerable tension, was the discourse of 'inclusion'. Originally associated with the move of children with disabilities from segregated special to generalized mainstream provision, the concept widened to encompass all those seen for one reason or another not to be achieving as well as they might. Potentially underachieving groups came to include boys, 11 and 12-year-old children at the start of their secondary education and, politically most critical of all, those growing up in areas of social and economic deprivation.

The government's five-year strategy for children's services claimed a 'personalisation' agenda, "so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system" (Clarke, 2004, p.4) and one intended to "genuinely give high standards for all" (p.3). Part of this performance-oriented inclusion programme was also the 'gifted and talented' child. The intention, if not yet the terminology, had been set in the Government's White Paper, 'Excellence in Schools': "We plan to develop a strategy for the early identification and support of particularly able and talented children ... All schools should seek to create an atmosphere in which to excel is not only acceptable but desirable" (Department for Education and Employment, 1997, p.39).

Gifted and Talented

The label, 'gifted and talented', emerged from a range of terminology ('able', 'highly able', 'gifted') used over previous years and decades. Official and professional usage of the dual term was adopted in the Government's flagship

'Excellence in Cities' programme and in a national strategy developed for the education of such students (Dracup, 2003). However, not all were at ease with this: "There is something odd being confronted with a group of 14-year-old students who solemnly tell you that they are 'gifted and talented'" (Fletcher-Campbell, 2003, p.4), and its use was never widely taken up in the academic literature (Lambert, 2010).

Definition largely ignored more sophisticated debates over the nature of 'giftedness' (Terman, 1925-9; Renzulli, 1977; Tannenbaum, 1983) and even 'talentness' (Gagné, 1985) and took a much more pragmatic approach. 'Gifted' was defined as academic ability and 'talented' as vocational ability (Office for Standards in Education, 2001). 'Identification' of such children was based for the most part on localized contexts, involving selection of children performing "at a level significantly in advance of the average for their year group in their school" (Department for Education and Employment Excellence in Cities Phase 2 – Paper 11:39, quoted in Kennard, 2002, p.42), rather than in relation to the average for the national population. The ratio usually proposed was five or ten per cent of any school setting. This devolved system suggested that distinctive efforts for the most able should be a concern and responsibility for all schools, not just those with the most able of students nationally (Fletcher-Campbell, 2003). It also meant that those children selected for separate, out-of-school programmes could come from a balanced range of schools, not just from those with high numbers of the most able students.

However, a national strategy for gifted and talented education, initially described by Dracup (2003), promoted provision for both overlapping populations: those seen as gifted and talented nationally and the percentage of highest performers in each school. The latter populations were to be provided for by school and inter-school programmes; the needs of the former, absolute population were to be met by programmes of a newly established 'National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth', based at the University of Warwick.

Concern for numerical identification remained prominent in development of a register of gifted and talented students associated with this two-strand programme. This idea was announced in the White Paper (Her Majesty's Government, 2005), with a requirement placed on the National Academy to recruit 200,000 children to it – number 100,000 signed up in July 2006 (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006b). Wider criteria for identification, incorporation of primary (age up to 11) as well as secondary-school (age 11-18) students, and use of the thrice-yearly census data from schools, resulted in a greatly increased registration figure in January 2008 of 780,000 (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008c) and an aim of one million by 2012 (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008b).

Policy and Programmes

Even during the period of grammar-school separation at the age of 11, the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council..., 1967) had expressed concern about the ability of the system to meet adequately the particular needs of higher-attaining school students. Subsequent reports over the next three

decades had raised the same concerns, culminating in an internal report of the Government's inspection agency, Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), in 1997, cited in the report of the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee (1999a), which claimed that provision for very able children was a significant weakness in one third of maintained primary schools and about 30 per cent of maintained secondary schools.

The Select Committee's report (House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, 1999a), together with the specific focus on 'gifted and talented' children described above, informed rapid development and a plethora of initiatives in the field. All local education authorities were required to have a policy for gifted education and each school a coordinator for provision. Guidance was included in national strategies for the teaching of numeracy and literacy in primary schools (Department for Education and Employment, 1998; 1999b). Inspection frameworks charged inspection teams to examine schools' provision in this area (Office for Standards in Education, 1999). One strand of the Government's three-year seminal 'Excellence in Cities' scheme, which sought to address poor performance in areas of social disadvantage, dealt with gifted and talented education, setting "a challenge for teachers to design a more demanding programme for the pupils to achieve high levels, delivered through imaginative and sometimes new approaches planned to engage them" (Office for Standards in Education, 2001, p.31).

These and other developments coalesced into the 'National Strategy for Gifted and Talented Education', not published as a discrete document, but described by leading Government figures such as Morris (2002) and Dracup (2002, 2003). The main policy document, 'Excellence and Enjoyment' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), reinforced a national-curriculum recommendation that programmes of study should be used flexibly so that very able children could work at levels designed for older children. It emphasized the need for "effective classroom differentiation" (p.41) and asked that provision for gifted and talented children be built into all subject strategies.

Also among the initiatives within the Strategy was the establishment in 2002 of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), mentioned above. Supported with a large core Government grant, its role was "to drive forward improvements in gifted and talented education in England" (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006a, p. 4). Aims included identifying gifted and talented students, ensuring a range of in-school and out-of-school provision, informing policy, and extending and deepening knowledge and skills in this field (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006a). The Academy's clientele were students aged 11-19 "who are working in, or who have the potential to work in, the national top 5% of the ability range" (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006c, para.2).

Over several years the Academy became the source of much published material and practical activity. Nevertheless, in 2007 NAGTY services were transferred to the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT), a private educational agency (Dracup, 2008). A revised and broader national programme for gifted and talented education was promoted under the label, 'Young Gifted and

Talented' (YG&T), "for learners in England aged between 4 and 19 years who attend maintained primary and secondary schools and colleges, and those who support them" (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008b, 'Who's it for?', para.1). With material now increasingly provided online, the portal provided opportunities and materials for learners, teachers, schools and wider agencies, "a self-sustaining market for the provision for G&T services" (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008b, Vision and values of YG&T, para.3). In turn the University of Warwick, former home of the National Academy, founded its own new organization for learners aged 11-19, the International Gateway for Gifted Youth (IGGY). This aimed "to give [members] increasing access to a wide range of opportunities unavailable elsewhere" (University of Warwick, 2008, para.1) and the chance to "communicate, collaborate and learn alongside bright people from around the world" (para.4).

In School

Among such policies and programmes, within a predominantly comprehensive, mixed-ability system, and against the background of Government rhetoric on inclusion, considerable debate was focused on the extent to which, in practice, the needs of very able school students could or should be met together with other children, and the extent to which they required separated teaching. An idealized 'English model', set out by Eyre (2004) and Campbell et al (2004), reflected the general inclination towards principles of inclusive learning in ordinary school settings as a principal concern. It saw provision for very able children in England as an integral part of general educational policy, embedded in a high-quality mainstream system – "Every teacher ... must be a teacher of the gifted" (Eyre, 2004, p.2) – and reflecting commitment to give special attention to under-represented groups. It proposed integration with peers as much as possible: "Gifted children should spend most of their time with the regular school group" (Campbell et al, 2004, p.5), with schools routinely planning to meet the needs of the most able students, so they could progress more rapidly than others in the peer group of which they were a part.

A survey of 1,057 NAGTY student members (Campbell et al, 2006) suggested, however, that differentiated provision in schools was limited, with "strongly diverging individual patterns" (p.7). Under one third of respondents had special activities in their school; under a quarter were given more challenging work; 17% had opportunity to take exams early; 15% had special classes. The survey's conclusion was that the English model "is beginning to work through though there is obviously still a long developmental path to travel" (p.35).

Calls either for the setting of children according to ability within a class or for more specialist, separate school provision were, however, lacking in conviction. Few commentators went as far as to suggest total segregation, although most urged some opportunities of this kind. Whybra (2000), for instance, recommended homogeneous grouping for at least part of the time, suggesting that this would offer reassurance to gifted students that there were others as able or more able than themselves. Freeman (2001) concurred, but

for other reasons: “It is true that when highly able children are grouped together for teaching, they do make better progress in their school work” (p.215).

Some writers, however, such as Eyre and Fuller (1993), had already cited difficulties for teachers trying to meet the knowledge demands of high-ability children within a primary-school system which required those teachers to teach all subjects in the curriculum. Ian McNiff, a headteacher, told the House of Commons Select Committee: “My experience is that teachers are not coming out with the language of challenge, the language of extension and the language of meeting the needs of the more able” (House of Commons... 1999b, p.22). Freeman (1998) summarized the issue: “Adjustments have to be made in methods of learning and teaching to take account of thinking differences. There is now ample scientific evidence which shows that in order to learn by themselves the very able need some guidance from their teachers” (p.23). An important development in this respect was the formulation of frameworks of standards for institutions (National Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education, 2006), designed to “help schools analyse and improve their provision for gifted and talented pupils” (p.1). These were then enhanced in relation to subjects of the curriculum (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a; 2008b).

Out of School

Under these new policy and practical frameworks, separate provision for gifted and talented students was not absent, but became largely situated beyond traditional school timetables: after the school day, at weekends or in the holidays, reflecting new national policy on so-called ‘out-of-school’ learning as a whole (Department for Education and Employment, 1999a). It was a prime activity of NAGTY, and was expanded under the YG&T national programme, with, it was claimed, nearly 22,000 places on out-of-school programmes available in 2008, compared with an average of 5,500 in the previous three years (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008a).

Amongst the many different out-of-school initiatives for gifted and talented school students, two particular strands stood out. The first was a network of ‘Advanced Learning Centres’ (ALCs), which started with a focus on the advanced teaching of mathematics in the late 1990s; the other was summer-school provision organized by the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth.

Advanced Learning Centres

The concept of ‘Advanced Learning Centres’ stemmed from an initiative in 1996 when children aged 10 and 11 started to attend Saturday-morning classes in advanced mathematics at a primary school in Birmingham. Children at this ‘Advanced Maths Centre’ followed an accelerated learning programme which saw them sitting the state examination normally taken by 16-year-olds at the end of the year. Development and co-ordination of similar Centres was taken up by a national charity, the National Primary Trust, with the aim “to generate a variety of ideas and approaches that can then be made available to all

participating areas” (National Primary Trust, c2001). The then Department for Education and Employment established a partnership with the charity to replicate the model for mathematics across the country. Common frameworks for the Centres’ work were established and agreed by a network steering group (Dracup, 2002).

The number and focus of the Centres subsequently grew. ‘Pilot’ Centres were created to introduce new curricular subjects under the umbrella term of ‘Advanced Learning Centres’ (ALCs). However, while the first Advanced Maths Centres helped students towards an early state examination (Matty and Taylor, 2004), almost all of the later ALCs instead followed a coursework or ‘enrichment’ curriculum, often working from subject-based guidelines, assessment instruments and other resources developed by the National Primary Trust (for example, National Primary Trust, 2002).

There was a good deal of variety within the ALC concept. Most Centres ran on Saturdays; in a few, children met after school during the week. Some ran over much of the school year; rather more lasted for several weeks only. All but one Centre brought together students from a range of schools, typically inviting them to select two or more of their children for attendance. Some geographical areas ran one Centre; some ran several, for different ages or in different subjects. A few developed a series of Centres in one chosen subject so that children could attend and advance from year to year. Some had more than 40 students; others had fewer than 20. This range made it difficult to define what exactly made an ‘Advanced Learning Centre’, but the data in 2004-05 suggested that at least 54, and possibly more, ran under that name during that year, with around 2,000 students taking part and a drop-out rate of around 20% as courses progressed (Lambert, 2006).

NAGTY Summer Schools

Out-of-school activities attracted the highest public profile amongst the various initiatives of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth. There were two principal elements to this programme: short courses known as ‘outreach’, and longer, residential summer schools. These latter, described as the Academy’s “flagship events” (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006d), were held each summer, offering opportunities for students aged 12 to 16 to explore their favourite subjects in depth. They started with pilot schemes in 2002, involving 100 students and held at a single venue, the University of Warwick. The programme grew each year (Frost, 2005); in 2005-06 1,050 students took part in 56 courses at eight universities (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006a). All courses lasted two continuous weeks, including the weekend, and were taught by university lecturers or professional teachers, assisted by PhD students and classroom assistants. Evaluations of each yearly programme (Lindsay et al, 2002; Hartras et al, 2003; M-A. Cullen et al, 2005; Cullen and Lindsay, 2006; Cullen et al, 2006) highlighted the very high level of student satisfaction with their summer-school experiences; a further report (S. Cullen et al, 2005) presented case-study exemplars of high-quality teaching on the programme.

“The courses are designed to stretch everyone, so you will be challenged, but no one will be left behind”, the website advised prospective students (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006d). The programme itself was diverse, and in theme at least often well removed from the usual school curriculum (Frost, 2005). The programme for 2007 (National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, 2006d) included courses on biosciences, anthropology, law and legal issues, creative writing and the “mathematics of space science and astronomy”.

In 2007 management of such summer-school provision became part of the National Programme (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008b) with claims for greatly expanded provision (Young Gifted and Talented, 2008a). The new IGGY provision developed at the University of Warwick similarly promised “face to face learning and development opportunities ... through international partners (universities and employers)” (University of Warwick, 2008, para.5), a plan reminiscent of, but more ambitious than, the earlier NAGTY summer-school programme.

Appraisal

It was perhaps only under a revisionist ‘New Labour’ party – branded in the 1990s as such by Tony Blair and his infamous ‘spin doctors’ – that educational programmes for the most able students could have been an area of such strong attention. Motivations for such development were varied: Porter (1999) highlighted a “national-resources rationale” (p.1) focused on the potential contribution of well-educated gifted and talented children to society, as well as the claim that these children were often neglected and for this reason needed special provision; Fletcher-Campbell (2003) took up the raising-standards and improvement agenda, suggesting how all students needed to fulfil potential for progress, “not accepting outcomes which were satisfactory in terms of the average but unacceptable in terms of what might be” (p.1).

Overall developments – including the crude definition of ‘gifted’ as academic and ‘talented’ as vocational – reflected a pragmatic approach designed to cut through extravagance in debate. The ‘golden age’ of developing provision which followed also reflected popular theories of the time, most notably Gardner’s concept of multiple intelligences, and a later discredited notion of ‘learning styles’ (Sharp et al, 2008). The idea of ‘identification’ fitted usefully with the project-oriented nature of provision, providing boundaries by which those who might take part could be selected, and outcomes generalizable to others identified in a similar way elsewhere. Together with the other groups defined and focused upon at that time, such as children speaking English as an additional language, those in care (‘looked-after children’) and those belonging to travelling families, this represented a laudable, if over-catalogued and increasingly data-driven attempt to take into account the needs of many differentiated, underachieving groups and thereby raise the educational achievement of all.

The ‘gifted and talented’ notion could also be seen as one manifestation amongst many of a harmful obsession with categorizing and labelling children

according to socially and culturally determined concepts (Hart et al, 2004). One aspect of this was the ease under the system by which high ability or potential might not be recognized or not have opportunity to develop. The evaluation of early selection procedures for programmes of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth in England by Lindsay et al (2002) highlighted difficulties securing diversity within chosen cohorts; Campbell et al (2005) noted the Academy's concern to "recognise giftedness irrespective of its social location" (p.6). Lambert (2006) noted favouritism in selection for the Advanced Learning Centres towards students born early in the school year.

More generally, while the presumption of a definable and countable population of very able school students may have been helpful in planning and organising educational work, it had – as Renzulli (1982) warned early on – inflexible and restrictive implications too: "We are likely to view "the gifted" as a fixed population, one that always can be pre-selected for special services" (p.11). Many commentators were indeed circumspect about acknowledgement of total difference for this group. At the time, Eyre (1997), Freeman (1998), Wallace (2000) and others emphasized the need for good, open-ended and challenging education for all students; Fletcher-Campbell (2003) summarized concern for an enhanced curriculum for class or school as a whole:

The easy answer here is to assume that "G & T" are a group apart and need something special. A more fruitful way forward is to consider how the specialness can be embodied in all activities, using the widest repertoire at our disposal, developing through constant sharing of practice and reflection and whether the enhancement, whatever it looks like, ought not to apply to all pupils (p.5).

Postscript

In 2008 Tony Blair gave way to a new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, formerly Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose focus was forced away from education towards economic fallout from a world-wide financial crisis. The Government's public face altered too, with a series of errors eagerly highlighted in the media, creating a picture of incompetence and decline. A change of government followed in 2010, not however to a single other party, but to an odd-looking coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. A key concern for this partnership was to rid the country of 'New-Labour speak', so a host of labels, if not the concepts themselves, were consciously dropped or simply ignored. Among these was the 'gifted and talented' category. Website material (including many referenced in this article) disappeared, was archived or incorporated into redesigned Government online texts.

NAGTY ceased operation in 2010, handing its remaining responsibilities to Young Gifted and Talented, which then too disappeared, never reaching its register target of one million. Hardly any 'Advanced Learning Centres' for gifted children now exist; summer schools for very able school students occur without national coordination.

Interestingly, a review of the Blair-Brown decade by Smithers and Robinson (2012), while negative about both its processes and outcomes – the gifted and

talented term was “a flawed description”, and each of the period’s many initiatives “barely begun before it was ended” – was hardly less critical of what followed: “The [coalition] government ... has had little to say on provision for those capable of excellence” (p.i). The report pointed out the persistently poor performance of England’s highly able students in comparison with their OECD counterparts. The title of Koshy and Pinheiro-Torres’ (2013) report: ‘Are we being de-gifted, Miss?’ summed up the confusion for schools, teachers and learners themselves.

While still sometimes heard amongst practitioners, the ‘gifted and talented’ terminology itself is now barely evident in official discourse. Ofsted’s last report using the term, a review of good practice in schools (Office for Standards in Education, 2009), was archived, and more general terms, in particular ‘most able’ and ‘high-attaining’ students, took its place (Office for Standards in Education 2013). Critical debate on the issue became most commonly incorporated into discussion about organization of an increasingly diverse school system of ‘academies’ and ‘free schools’, a perplexing dichotomy between diversity and increased elitist authority examined by Gunter and McGinity (2014).

The question of whether the decade from 1997 was better or worse than what came before and after, an overall plus or minus in the education of very able children and students, is unresolved. With a newly-elected Conservative-majority government now in energized sway, and an opposition Labour party in precarious radical revival, the period looks likely slowly to fade from memory, and its enthusiastically promoted, if not overly successful policies and practices remain unrepeated.

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