

gifted and talented

WHAT REALLY WORKS?

What Really Works in
Gifted and Talented Education
by Professor Deborah Eyre



What really works in G&T?

When a school starts to look at what really works in G&T education it is tempting to look for a quick fix or a set of requirements which, if implemented, will magically lead to effective provision for G&T.

In reality schools that are really effective in meeting the needs of their gifted and talented students start one step back from this and take, as their starting point, the purposes of education generally, the role of their school in achieving those and how that relates to this particular cohort.

What's it all about?

Education in developed countries is no longer confined to the traditional territory of ensuring that every child gains enough education to equip him/her for some kind of effective adult life. The aspirations for education are now far greater and so they should be for every school.

Every *family* now expects that their child should be given the bespoke opportunities that will enable them to achieve at the limits of their capabilities. They will accept nothing less – simply 'doing OK' is not enough.

Governments, meanwhile, look to use education as a mechanism for ensuring that their country develops the kinds of intellectual capital that will enable it to compete in a more global world. Employability has become a key outcome for most education systems.

In an increasingly competitive economic world a highly educated workforce is the key to a country's success. Having more young people educated to higher levels is critical.

Finally, individual pupils themselves recognise the role of education in delivering wealth and happiness in adult life. Education matters, as Alison Woolf puts it (Woolf 2002), and it matters more than it has ever done.

Gifted and talented education is about making exceptional performance a reality for those children and young people who have the ability to excel. This 'really works' when schools realise that encouraging and expecting exceptional performance is an on-going concern that pervades the whole school, its structures and its culture. *It is an approach applied to all pupils but realised in its most complete form by the most gifted and talented.*

Is it a level playing field?

Every teacher knows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do not achieve as highly in our education system as their more wealthy peers. The gap starts to be evidenced very early and continues to grow. (Schwartz et al 2004). So it is not possible to separate ideas around the nature of giftedness and talent from the conditions that allow it to flourish. Crudely stated, education is not a meritocracy. Gifted children from poor backgrounds who succeed are the exception rather than the rule. This is because high achievement is only reached when the right opportunities are in place and when the individual is confident and motivated enough to respond to them.



“ The lesson of the last century must be that, for individuals, it matters more than ever before in history. And not just any education: the right qualifications, in the right subjects, from the right institutions, is of ever-growing importance. ”

Alison Woolf (2002)

So what works for these particular pupils is very specific intervention. Giving an extra helping hand at every stage. Firstly, these pupils need to know they are capable of achieving highly and what that means.

So formal identification and recognition is vital. The school makes clear to the pupil and their family what might be possible if the child works hard. When a school gets G&T provision right they usually have a general system for close monitoring of the academic progress of individuals. They do not wait for KS assessments to show when a pupil is slipping back but rather check on a termly or even more frequent basis. As part of this process they pay particular attention to G&T pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to make sure they stay on track at every stage, that they access opportunities appropriate to G&T pupils and make good options choices. These pupils are seen as potentially at risk of underachievement.

Groups at risk of underachieving:

1. Those suffering socio-economic deprivation
2. Those from BME groups that have a record of underperformance* (including Black African, Black Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Mixed)
3. Looked after children and traveller children
4. Children with a mismatch between their cognitive ability and their basic skills
5. Children with multiple exceptionalities i.e. defined as having a SEN
6. Children with low aspirations and/or motivation
7. Children performing below expectations of their peers in similar circumstances

* as referred to in the National Curriculum Assessment, GCSE and Equivalent Attainment and Post16

Starting from the basics – A high quality school education

Gifted and talented provision only really works where the entire school is aiming for excellence. The overall school agenda has moved away from making firm judgements about who has the capability to do well and towards a focus on everyone striving to achieve (everyone may have the potential to be a winner). In this climate demanding learning opportunities are offered widely and pupils are invited to strive to conquer them. Rewards are given for ‘trying’ and for taking intellectual risks as well as for getting the right answer. Small failures are an expected aspect of learning in this high challenge model and pupils come to see them as a part of the overall learning process rather than a personal disaster.

The basic curriculum must be specifically designed to anticipate excellence if the needs of the G&T are to be properly catered for. Rather than the school or class-teacher offering a core curriculum aimed at the middle ability point and then extending it for those pupils who exceed the base requirements, this model requires the school/teacher to design an expectation that some pupils will achieve the more demanding requirements without knowing precisely who will achieve them. Higher level and higher tier opportunities must always be on offer and the numbers of pupils accessing them year on year increasing.

Pupils should begin to identify themselves as G&T through their response to the high challenge curriculum. By demonstrating their capacity to achieve the high challenge targets on a regular basis, either generally, or in specific domains, children begin to define themselves as gifted or talented. This is a natural development of self-identity with individual pupils becoming aware of their areas of strength and weakness, and their preferred styles of learning, as well as their overall ability. This approach to identification through ‘doing’ is similar in nature to the way in which we traditionally assess sporting prowess or musical ability and a first step in the identification process.

Leading from the top

Leadership, co-ordination and management

G&T really works when the school leadership understands the G&T agenda and plays a key role in driving it forward. Then the needs of gifted and talented pupils are factored into all aspects of the school's policy making – curriculum, school resourcing, school quality, professional development for teachers, systems for classroom planning and delivery, assessment for learning, pupil grouping arrangements, identification processes, school-wide co-ordination of provision, arrangements to accommodate individual needs. Most crucially at the school level there are accountability structures that monitor the impact of provision on the cohort generally and on individuals within it.

The Leading Teacher or School G&T Co-ordinator is a key player in schools where this really works. Their role is clearly defined, wide ranging and linked to pedagogy. But they cannot achieve miracles alone; this is a team effort involving the whole school community and in particular heads of subject departments in secondary schools who make the day to day provision a reality.

G&T provision is really working when a visitor to the school can ask any teacher or member of the wider workforce about the school's provision for G&T and get a coherent answer.

It's every teacher's responsibility to be a teacher of the gifted

Teaching gifted and talented pupils is merely a part of the overall teaching lexicon not a separate and 'mysterious' activity. Gifted and talented pupils are simply the most effective learners not a specific, clearly defined, sub-set of the population with learning needs so unique that they cannot be accommodated through normal, recognised teaching approaches. Therefore every teacher should see themselves as a teacher of the gifted. However there are some 'golden rules' for teaching the gifted and provision really works when teachers exploit them.

- **Create a classroom climate that supports the development of high achievement – risk taking, high flying**
- **Approach lessons as part of an apprenticeship in a subject not just learning to the knowledge and skills needed to pass the exam – a community of learners**
- **Focus on the needs of individuals, make use of their strengths and recognise their weaknesses – empowered learners**
- **Design tasks that ensure intellectual challenge – higher order thinking**
- **Focus on high quality teacher/pupil interaction with both teacher and pupils playing a range of roles – questioning, explaining, challenging**

What really works in day to day provision are lessons where teachers have the knowledge, skills and confidence to play this role and where it is an integral part of the teaching and learning offering. There is a clear professional development requirement here. Where this works schools make sure their staff have access to the training and guidance required to make this a reality – especially new teachers. All teachers need a basic understanding of the issues surrounding the creation of effective provision and some teachers need advanced skills to lead work on this agenda in their schools.

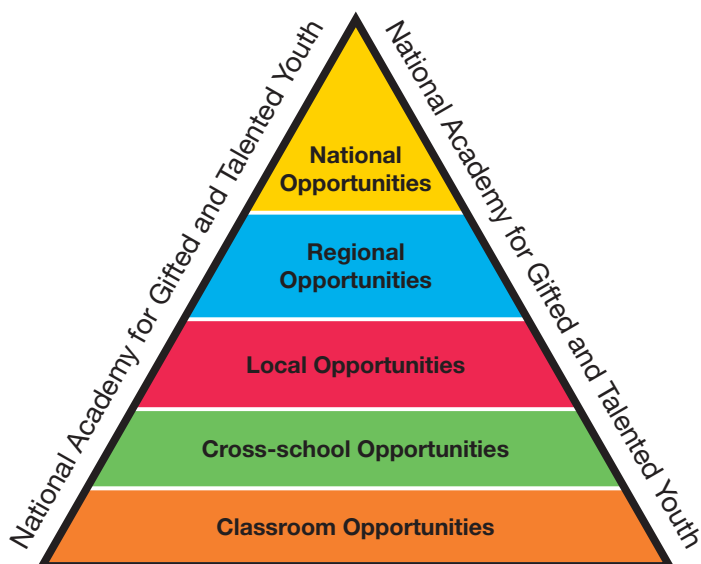
While classroom teachers have a central role to play they are not the only providers, and where G&T education works, leadership teams and teachers alike recognise that whilst teachers may be central, there is a limit to what might reasonably be seen as the teacher's responsibility. So classroom provision is the core provision but not the only provision. It is also expected that pupils will benefit from cross-school opportunities and out-of-school opportunities and that classroom teachers will recognise the merits of this more integrated approach.

The Opportunity Pyramid

G&T education only really works where the opportunities match the pupil's needs, and where each part of the system plays to its strengths and enables pupils to reach increasingly sophisticated outcomes.

This means a blend of normal class, cross-school and out-of-school provision. Most provision occurs as part of the day to day classroom with all *teachers* routinely planning to meet the needs of their most able through a differentiated classroom approach.

Schools also offer a range of supplementary cross-school opportunities aimed at creating a rich curriculum offer and enrichment opportunities. Schools also identify the gifted and talented and offer flexibilities to accommodate the needs of that cohort.



These should include the ability to progress more rapidly than others in the peer group, including taking external examinations early. Within the school pupils are placed in ability-groups for some aspects of their work.

The wider system offers specialist out-of-hours provision that can help to provide the bespoke educational experiences that are difficult to achieve in school. These can help to develop intellectual confidence as well as learning new skills.



In the opportunity pyramid the main task of school-based activity is to secure relevant knowledge, skills and concepts whilst at the same time inducting the pupil into the ways of thinking, learning and behaviours associated with exceptional performance within particular subject domains. This approach brings pupils into contact with various forms of 'higher order' thinking needed for exceptional performance on a regular basis.

The out-of-school opportunities, by contrast, focus more strongly on this second element – development of expertise – with pupil groups being apprenticed to experts and experiencing advanced learning not for assessment or of the school curriculum but for the sheer joy of participation. Out-of-hours opportunities that really work are therefore characterised by the use of experts as teachers and access to sophisticated ideas, techniques and/or equipment.

A key role for out-of-hours programmes

Out-of-hours gifted programmes have the advantage of being free of the traditional school constraints such as timetables, examination curriculum and formal assessment processes. They offer an optimal environment for certain forms of learning. They are also expensive to offer and are usually offered on a piece meal, ad-hoc basis. What really works is when out-of-hours provision is seen by the school as being a recognised part of the overall offer. Out-of-hours learning is seen as enhancing but not replacing school based learning. Pupils themselves are then able to view in-school and out-of-school learning as being two aspects of their learning rather than totally different activities.

A measure of the success of the out-of-hours provision should be its ability to empower the learner. Gifted programmes should help the pupil to become a more confident and sophisticated learner. The success of individual out-of-hours programmes is judged by their ability to increase aspiration, motivation, self-esteem and, in the long term, attainment of individuals.

Advice for out-of-hours providers

1. Gifted and talented pupils display most of the personality characteristics typical of children or young people of their age.

Some may have high levels of concentration whilst others lose interest quickly. Some will be confident in their abilities and keen to put forward their opinions. Others will be shy, unsure and in need of encouragement and reinforcement. Some will be good team players, sensitive to the needs of the group. Others may be arrogant and dismissive of the contributions of others. Some will like to work independently, others will not.

2. Gifted and talented pupils are embryonic experts.

Induct pupils into the ways of thinking and the valued behaviours of individual subject domains. They do not need to be encouraged to engage with learning or entertained, although, as with all of us, they appreciate elements of fun. They particularly like working with experts and particularly dislike being patronised.

3. Course content should make best use of the teacher's interests and expertise.

Almost any content area is relevant provided the engagement is set at an appropriate level. Passion and enthusiasm for a subject is a great motivator and working on something the 'teacher' finds fascinating will automatically convey that to others.

4. Choose a style that suits the subject.

Aim for a collegiate style with pupils encouraged to participate, to put forward their own opinions without fear of ridicule, to respect the views of others and to challenge the tutor's views if they wish.

5. Make use of peer teaching.

One of the key benefits of out-of-hours provision is that pupils have the opportunity to work with others of like ability. Some pupils do not have this opportunity regularly at school.

6. Consider a final product or presentation.

The end of course product is rewarding for pupils and is also useful in helping students to record their out-of-hours learning back in school.

Pupil voice and pupil engagement

G&T pupils are amongst the most articulate in any school.

They have views on their own learning and can help to shape the overall learning offer. When G&T really works pupils are at the centre of the learning process taking responsibility for their learning. This is a personalised approach and in sharp contrast to the type of cohort led provision in which the G&T cohort are seen as being a homogeneous group with common needs and common issues.

The overall requirements for the cohort which underpin this personalised approach are:

- **Formal recognition for the cohort**
- **Planned learning opportunities offering high levels of challenge on a daily basis**
- **Progress in learning in a way that reflects the stage of learning rather than the age of the pupil**
- **Access to enhanced learning opportunities offered outside of normal classroom provision**
- **To be seen as a child with social and emotional as well as intellectual needs**

Overlaying these general cohort needs are the needs of the individual.

For G&T to operate optimally pupils must come to know themselves, their strengths and weaknesses and, eventually, be able to determine their learning needs. Where G&T really works the school actively encourages this development and puts in place the structures that make it a reality.

- **Useful advice for G&T pupils.**
- **Know yourself and how you learn best.**
- **Aim high. Don't be afraid to 'have a go'. It's OK to fail and then learn from it.**
- **Stick at it when it isn't easy. No-one succeeds without effort.**
- **Don't wait for the teacher. If you want to know, ask a question.**
- **Remember not all learning happens in school. You can find out for yourself, use the internet, ask a friend or an interested adult.**
- **Think about what you are doing. What did I learn today?**
- **Ask yourself how what you have just learnt fits with what you already knew – make connections.**
- **Enjoy your learning. Have fun.**

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