

Making Gifted Education work: A gifted dimension to national policy

In many countries initiatives to improve education for gifted and talented children exist, but they are seldom comprehensive. Initiatives tend only to be available to certain ages of student, or to be found in certain regions of the country, or be restricted to specific activities operated outside of normal schooling. Special provision for gifted and talented children/students is seldom an educational entitlement enshrined within the education system. Since 1999 England has made such provision an entitlement and its government has created a National Academy to drive forward work in this field.

The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth

The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) was been established by government to co-ordinate the improvement of educational provision for gifted and talented young people up to the age of 19 years.

- Established in 2002
- Headquarters based at University of Warwick
- Working on three key functions – expertise centre, professional academy, student academy

NAGTY's work

NAGTY focuses on children/students up to the age of nineteen and works on all aspects of education provision. The National Academy has three strands to its work:

- The Expertise Centre – co-ordinating access to expertise in this field and commissioning new work and research
- The Professional Academy – supporting teachers in improving school-based provision through training, advice and guidance
- The Student Academy – increasing opportunities for individuals in and beyond their school through the use of a dual-schooling approach.

Rationale for a national structure to deliver education for the gifted and talented

Traditionally gifted education has been seen as divorced from the general education system, yet if a country's education system seeks to provide appropriate education for all its children, then the education of the most able (gifted) should be seen as just one part of a larger whole. This, in itself, should provide a compelling case for a nationally coherent and integrated approach to the education of the gifted. However, there are reasons that transcend education policy that suggest that a country would be well-advised to give gifted education a more central location. Today's gifted pupils are tomorrow's social, intellectual, economic and cultural leaders and their development cannot be left to chance. Where it is left to chance, evidence from England and elsewhere indicates that educational progress is not so much a question of intellectual merit but rather a question of affluence, with the most affluent receiving the best education and therefore achieving most highly. This suggests significant intellectual ability being untapped and unnoticed. Finally, education research in England suggests that where schools integrate provision for the gifted as part of their overall provision general education standards rise. Surely, a perfect reason for a more co-ordinated approach.

What does the UK government say about this?

"New Labour is committed to meritocracy. We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or advantages of privilege. We understand that people are not all born into equal circumstances, so one role of state education is to open up opportunities for all, regardless of their background. This means we need to provide high standards of basics for all, but also recognise the different abilities of different children, and tailor education to meet their needs and develop their potential." (Tony Blair, 1996)

An integrated approach to gifted education

The approach used to deliver gifted education in England is an integrated approach with a variety of strands. It is integrated in two ways. Firstly, gifted education is an integral part of general education policy. Secondly, the actual approach used integrates pupils with their peers as much as is possible. This approach to gifted education builds on general education rather than placing gifted education outside the general education structure. However integrated education does not suggest that all provision for gifted pupils should be delivered in the regular classroom or indeed in the regular school. Just most of it. When specialist provision is needed then it must be made available, and lack of availability in school should not be a barrier to the progress of the individual.

What does integrated provision for gifted and talented look like?

1. A high quality basic system

The core of gifted education in the integrated model is through day to day classroom provision as part of a high aspiration and high attaining education system. Gifted children and students should spend most of their time with the regular school group, especially in the 5 –11 age range. The standard school system should recognise individual differences and every school should plan on the basis of meeting a variety of needs. This means schools should routinely plan to meet the needs of both their most able and their least able. All schools should deploy a range of pupil grouping approaches that reflect the needs of their pupils. Sometimes pupils will be grouped by ability and sometimes in mixed ability classes.

Within all lessons, regardless of whether the pupils are in a lesson with pupils of similar ability or in a lesson where pupils have a wide range of abilities, lessons reflect a differentiated approach. This should be evidenced in the lesson planning, the tasks set and the questions asked as part of teaching. With young children almost all provision for the gifted will be as part of normal classroom provision with a small amount of cross-school and out-of-school opportunities. As the child becomes older and more advanced in some areas then the mix between normal class, cross-school and out of school will change.

NAGTY has a key role in supporting the education profession at all levels to ensure that every teacher is equipped to teach the full ability range. Every teacher in this integrated approach must be a teacher of the gifted. In this model teachers not only think about how to plan for their gifted pupils they also have a key role in deciding who might be considered gifted. Every school is required to identify its gifted pupils and to specify the ways in which the school meets their needs.

2. Fulfilment of individual potential through diversity of provision

Post 1970's it has become clear that proliferation of lifestyles coupled with a more culturally pluralistic society is creating ever greater individualism. In education this is one of the key influences on modern education policy – **diversity** of opportunity to meet a wide range of needs. This is tackled in three ways:

- a) Different types of schools meeting different types of needs. This could be seen as a case for special schools for the gifted, but, if giftedness is, as Sternberg suggests, “expertise in development”, (Sternberg 2004) then pathways to different expertise might themselves look different. Maybe this is case for some schools where the facilities exist to help to support your needs if you have a specific aptitude in a given area. In England this is already part of the education system. The Specialist Schools Movement which began in 1988 with just 1 school had by 1997 increased to 245 schools and in August 2004, 75% secondary schools were specialist in nature and the number is set to increase.
- b) Different pathways for individuals within the general school enable students to develop areas of strength. English gifted education policy in the 11-18 age range foregrounds flexible curriculum provision with an emphasis on both developing mechanisms to enable students to voice their requests and mechanisms to track their individual progress and needs.
- c) A focus on wider-schooling with the host school is only one part of the education process. Here schools have a role in ‘shopping’ for the provision that will help their students make the most of their expertise. NAGTY’s Student Academy is playing a leading role here. We have a student community of over 30,000 students who see themselves as being educated in their ‘home’ school and through NAGTY. ‘My school friends and my NAGTY friends’. This second group comprise of friends from all over England and from a variety of different backgrounds. For NAGTY students education is not only locally based it is regional, national and international and individuals become more mobile in pursuit of the specialist provision that will enable them to fulfil their potential.

3. Equality, social justice, meritocracy

Gifted education policy in England balances equality and meritocracy. Giddens (2002) describes meritocracy and equality as ‘difficult trade-offs’. He sees it as important for the centre-left to develop a dynamic, life-chances approach to inequality - one that reconciles equality with cultural and lifestyle diversity.

He is clear on his stance on this:

“No meritocracy without social protection.” He sees meritocracy without social protection as likely to increase inequality rather than negate it.

One reason for this hard line view is the importance of education to the individual. Woolf (2002) in her book ‘Does Education Matter?’ is unequivocal regarding the importance of education in securing life chances for individuals.

“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.”

Fifty years after the introduction of universal secondary education in England the stark truth is that the formal education system in England, like most others (OECD 1995), has failed the disadvantaged. ‘Those who have most to gain from education have .. been .. least able to do so.’ (Mortimore & Whitty *ibid.*, 157). In higher education in England despite substantial increases in overall participation rates only 19% of students come from manual or unskilled backgrounds. Yet half of the population describe themselves as being in these groups.

Gifted and talented school students from under-represented groups are not immune to this, we are no closer to achieving a meritocracy for them.

Although gifted education in England is bringing around a steady improvement we still have some way to go before every child has the provision they need. In his Annual Report, published April 2004, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools stated:

“Consistently high-quality provision for gifted and talented pupils, for example in secondary schools, remains the exception rather than the rule. In Excellence Clusters, enrichment activities have raised aspirations and involvement. But they have not yet had a marked effect on improving practice.”

(HMCI Annual Report, Feb 2004)

When provision is poor, children from affluent families supplement provision by private schooling, private coaching and family help. Poorer families are not in a position to compensate.

A key role for NAGTY in driving forward the gifted education policy is to intervene to make meritocracy a reality for gifted and talented pupils from under-represented groups. This is achieved by working through the school system to improve the general education offer but also by using data to identify individual students from under-represented groups, and offer them access to the high quality opportunities and the support they need to help them realise their potential. This is done through the NAGTY Student Academy. Merely gaining admission to the NAGTY Student Academy raises aspirations. In a study undertaken in Summer 2003 we found that 98% of NAGTY students expected to go to top universities and the usual lower expectations from under-represented groups was not in evidence. NAGTY Student Academy is a significant development in offering an innovative solution to a systemic problem.

4. A global perspective for the 21st century

A major reason for a dedicated focus on gifted and talented pupils is their potential to play a leading role in their adult lives. If England is to be successful in a globalized world then it will need to produce leaders who can compete with the best. This cannot be left to chance. The gifted education policy is the catalyst that makes sure that this generation of gifted young people have the opportunity to develop their talents.

The globalized world will also need leaders who are outward looking and internationally aware. Therefore a key part of the gifted policy is to work internationally. This is evidenced in a variety of ways. Teachers are able to go on study visits to look at practice in other countries and set up international links. Pupils are encouraged to study on-line as part of an international community and NAGTY itself is required to become an international centre of expertise. NAGTY's Student Academy has a formal link with the Centre for Talented Youth (CTY) at Johns' Hopkins University (USA). CTY is itself linked to a variety of centres in other parts of the world so extending this link. NAGTY generally is an outward looking organisation and already works with a variety of universities and groups across the world. We are looking to help England become more outward looking in its gifted education work. This international dimension will grow with time.

Summary

England is making a bold move to integrate gifted education into general education policy. The country needs the gifted and talented from all backgrounds to fulfil their potential if England is to:

- Meet the challenge of globalization
- Tackle inequality in the education system
- Reflect social and cultural diversity.

The potential offered by this kind of approach is considerable:

- It is a relatively inexpensive option
- It can be a lever to help raise standards in education generally
- It supports the vulnerable especially the intelligent from under-represented groups
- It provides a way to innovate in teaching and learning
- It addresses the 'geographical lottery' of provision.

Potential problems in this kind of approach

- Traditionally some teachers have been hostile to a focus on the gifted so success is dependent on a shift in attitude
- This is a radical educational approach and in conflict with mono versions of schooling so requires considerable culture change
- Some elements of the policy are deeply embedded and so likely to be sustainable, others are more vulnerable and will need to prove themselves

Conclusion

This approach has much to commend it. It is radical, gives a much better deal for gifted and talented generally and at the same time tackles the social justice agenda and makes equality more of a reality. There have always been gifted education enthusiasts in the education system but, in the past, they have been in the minority and have had limited impact. Now some parts of the educational profession, beyond the traditional enthusiasts, have accepted gifted education as being important and have begun to advocate for it. This is making a considerable difference. But without doubt the strongest support for this national approach for gifted education comes from gifted pupils and their parents, given a national voice through the NAGTY Student Academy. Their voice is influencing politicians and policy-makers, because, at its heart, education is a political question and happy parents make happy voters.

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31/07/04

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