The English Model of Gifted and Talented Education: Policy, Context and Challenges

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1. Policy background and social context

The English education system's response to the educational needs of gifted pupils has been characterised by a long trend, stretching back at least to 1978, of low expectations at the classroom and school level, (DES 1978, HMI 1992, OFSTED 2003) and, until recently, absence of strategic policy at the national level (Eyre 1997, House of Commons 1999). This trend was reinforced by unenthusiastic attitudes in the teaching profession and LEAs, either on the grounds that they lacked confidence about how to challenge such students through heir teaching (HMI 1992, para 3) or that meeting their educational needs had lower priority than managing the behaviour and learning of other pupils in busy and challenging classrooms, or both (Eyre 1997, p.vi, House of Commons 1999, para 43, para 50).

As recently as 2003, gifted and talented students' progress in secondary schools was judged by inspectors from the government's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) to be good or better in fewer than half the schools and unsatisfactory in one in twelve, with common weaknesses being the identification of such students and the assessment of their progress (OFSTED 2003, para 108). Inspectors judged that, in general, practice at a fairly basic level was unsatisfactory.

'Consistently high quality provision across subjects for gifted and talented pupils remains the exception. Many schools need to make sure that schemes of work set out what is meant by a high level of challenge and to provide guidance on ways of enriching and extending work for higher attainers. While activities outside normal lessons are often stimulating…they do not generally link well with mainstream work'

(OFSTED 2003, para 126)

Ideology has played a part also, in that making special provision for gifted and talented pupils is commonly constructed as elitist in academic discourse (eg Bourdieu 1998, Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1996), reinforcing the advantages that already advantaged professional classes might gain in the competition for admission to high status universities (Power et al 2003). It may be thought problematic, though understandable in the context of a socially differentiated school system such as that in England, that these egalitarian analyses appeared to accept that giftedness is unequally distributed in society, an issue to which we return below.

To these problems there was added a complex set of distinctively English social pressures. Parental anxiety about provision in mainstream schools led to high demand from the professional classes for private schooling, as Adonis and Pollard (1998) have argued (see also Fox, 1984), and, where it was available, for selective secondary schooling. Parental anxiety appeared to hold firm, even when it became clear that the advantages to the middle class (though not lower socio-economic groups), in terms of educational attainment, from attending a selective school were dubious or small, especially for the most able pupils. (Crook, Power and Whitty 1999, Schagen and Schagen, 2001).

Schagen and Schagen's review for the National Foundation for Educational research reported that selection effect varied by the level of ability of pupils. They found:

'The most able pupils perform just as well, if not better, in comprehensive schools
The least able pupils perform slightly better in secondary modern schools
The impact of different school types is most strongly felt in the overlapping ability range (average to above-average).

*It seems therefore that selective systems obtain good results, particularly at key stage 3, because the grammar schools are remarkably successful in enhancing the performance of their **least** able pupils – the ones who gain their grammar school places by a relatively narrow margin.'*

The parental anxiety, however, was not restricted to school performance since it was also to a large extent future-oriented, reflected in ambitions for their children's access to prestigious universities.

Finally it is worth noting that even when the state provided financial support for differentiated provision through specially targeted schemes, it had been disproportionately accessed by those with high levels of social and intellectual capital, mainly the professional classes and those in genteel poverty, according to Edwards, Fitz and Whitty (1989).

2. The policy framework

From this context of policy drift and socially skewed parental ambition, a step change in policy came about towards the end of the twentieth century, driven primarily by the New Labour government's agenda for social inclusion. Quasi-official interest had been reflected in a survey of provision by HM Inspectorate, and a review of research for OFSTED (HMI 1992, Freeman,1998). More officially, in direct policy terms, the government's initiative to improve the quality of education in urban areas, the Excellence in Cities initiative, (DfES 2002) included specific targeting of gifted and talented pupils. Moreover, in a Green Paper, *Schools: achieving success*, the DfES committed itself to including support for gifted and talented students in all its school education strategies. (DfES 2001).

The platform for this policy change had been framed in a House of Commons Select Committee (1999) which had examined issues associated with 'highly able children', and had made a coherent and integrated set of recommendations about policy and practice. It recommended amongst other things, that:

Funding to support the education of gifted children should be incorporated into the generic funding of schools;
all national initiatives should incorporate a gifted and talented component, clearly specified; The Office for Standards in Education should include data on provision for gifted and talented in its inspection of schools and of LEAs, and should conduct a second survey of provision, following up it survey in 1992;
Initial teacher training should be required to give higher priority to the education of gifted and talented pupils; and :All schools should be required to appoint a named person as the school's coordinator for gifted and talented education.

Enrichment and extension of the normal curriculum, partnerships between schools and other agencies, such as universities, out of school provision, and improved use of ICT were also recommended to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

(It is worth noting that the generic funding model, whilst eventually becoming the norm, did not always operate in particular initiatives, including the innovative Excellence in Cities initiative, where there was targeted funding)

The Select Committee thus laid the foundations of a clear policy, national in scope, with pupil entitlement at its heart, and embedded in mainstream schooling. The establishment of a National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) at the University of Warwick in 2002 provided the organisational mechanism for leading,

delivering, and supporting the delivery of, the policy into the system. Its distinctive feature was to integrate three dimensions of its work – services for students, services for teachers and research - into a unified academy. Its work was supported by the government through an expanded Gifted and Talented Unit at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

3. The English model

Underlying rationale and values

The policy was unusual in its explicit commitment to being embedded in the mainstream school system, a feature driven by the generic funding proposed by the Select Committee referred to earlier. The rationale and values underlying the English model were outlined by the director of NAGTY (Eyre 2004a) as follows:

'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. 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.'

Deconstructed, this statement resolves itself into a three part rationale: an *educational* policy, about the mainstream system catering for the needs of all pupils; an *economic* argument about realising potential to drive up performance in the knowledge economy; and a commitment to *equity*, with an ambition to counter those social and economic factors shown to have had a restrictive influence on educational achievement. It appeared to challenge the idea that giftedness was unequally distributed among social groupings, stressing the need to identify giftedness in hitherto unrepresented groups. In this sense it was palpably part of the social inclusion agenda of New Labour. However, the challenge implicit in this agenda is substantial, since the social bias in high educational achievement reflects a particularly long-standing English disease, as large-scale longitudinal studies in England have demonstrated (Douglas 1964, Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980).

4. The model in practice

These three dimensions were combined into a coherent policy consonant with the English government's 'personalisation' policy in public services generally (Leadbetter 2004, DfES 2004). How it was designed to reform practice in provision for the education of gifted and talented students has been elaborated by Eyre (Eyre 2004b) and is summarised below. According to her account, which we paraphrase below, this had five elements: integration, quality in the basic system, diversity, equality of opportunity, and globalism.

Integration.

The approach used to deliver gifted education in England is intended to be integrated in two ways; gifted education is an integral part of general education policy, and the approach used integrates pupils with their peers as much as is possible. This approach 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. When specialist provision is needed then it is to be made available, and lack of availability in school should not be a barrier to the progress of the individual.

High quality basic system

The core of gifted education is intended to be delivered through day-to-day classroom provision. Gifted children and students should spend most of their time with the regular school group, especially in the 5 –11 age range. This means schools should routinely plan to meet the needs of both their most able as well as their least able. School flexibility for the gifted should include the ability to progress more rapidly than others in the peer group, including taking external examinations early.

As the child becomes older, and more advanced in some areas, then the mix between normal class, cross-school and out-of-school provision will change. By 14-19 years the emphasis on personal pathways to meet personal needs is intended to pervade the whole education system. The school is the core provider but is envisaged as working in conjunction with a range of other providers to ensure optimum match between needs and opportunities.

In this model teachers 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.

A major benefit claimed for this approach is its potential for raising systemic performance. By focusing sharply on nurturing strengths, as well as mitigating weaknesses, the achievements of all children may be raised.

Diversity of provision

The English model for gifted education attempts to build on a general recognition of the need for diversity and exploits it in relation to the gifted and talented in three forms in particular. These are: diversity in schools, with the system developing organisationally distinctive characteristics to cater for differences in aptitude and interest; personalised learning pathways, through which students are enabled to give voice to their individual needs and have them catered for, eventually beginning to shape and influence their own pathways; wider schooling, with the host school being only part provider and seeking to broker learning opportunities from other partners, including the National Academy. This final characteristic, the brokering of learning according to the identification of learning needs by both learners and providers, is at the deep end of personalisation as Leadbetter (2004) saw it, with users of the education system treated as 'co-producers' rather than consumers.

Equality, social justice, meritocracy

The model attempts to balance equality and meritocracy. Whilst it is concerned with meritocracy, it recognises that the creation of better opportunities will not in itself ensure that gifted children from under-represented groups rise through the system. In the English model, special attention is paid to those from under-represented groups. This is to be achieved in part by working through the school system to improve the general education offered, but also by each school using data to identify individual gifted students from under-represented groups and intervening to offer them access to the high quality opportunities, including membership of NAGTY, and generating the support they need to help them realise their potential.

A global perspective for the 21st century

A major reason for a dedicated educational 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 and collaborate with the best. This is a joint endeavour between educationalists and the wider business and voluntary community. The English model aims to work across boundaries in pursuit of expertise, mobilising all sectors to support education.

5. The nature of giftedness and its assessment in the English model

The nature of 'giftedness', and indeed the language used to theorise, and even define it, is highly contested (House of Commons, 1999). In addition to theoretical arguments about extent of heritability and measurement of ability, there are somewhat more practical debates about the extent of giftedness in the population, and therefore the size of the group on which education policy and practice should focus. In respect of the last of these, the English model took its brief largely from the Select Committee report, which argued that about 5% of the population might be considered 'very able', but included a view that 2% might be thought of as exceptionally able. The former threshold would involve some 680000 members of the school age population, the latter some 250000, according to the Select Committee.

As for the nature of giftedness, the English model has adopted a modernised theory of multiple intelligences, rather than a generic model reflected in a single measured intelligence quotient (IQ). It has invoked at different times the ideas of Cropley (1995) Freeman (1995) Gardner (1983, 1999) Krechevsky and Gardner (1990) Gagne (1994) Guilford (1950) Renzulli (1977) Sternberg (1985) and others. In Freeman's terms, the English model adopted 'identification by provision' rather than ' the medical model of diagnose and treat' (Freeman 1998).

There were two very significant consequences for policy and practice, of using these modern theories. First, they enabled the English model to justify the adoption of a broad conception of ability, so as to include not only cognitive ability but also 'creativity' and 'talent' in dance, drama, music and sport, and perhaps more controversially in Renzulli's (1997) and Urban's (1990) models, task effort and motivation. Second, this conception of ability provided the justification for multi-modal assessment of student ability rather than a uni-dimensional measurement of it. When the National Academy recruited students, it did so using an array of evidence, including test data, recommendations from teachers, parents and peers, portfolios of achievement, and other evidence. An important feature of this process was its emphasis on evidence of potential, as well as actual, achievement, where appropriate provision and support for students was made available.

Discussion: barriers to implementation.

This discussion is organised around two of the three themes identified in Section 3 above, namely those concerned with the implementation of the educational policy and with social equity. It is, of course, too early to consider the economic leadership issue.

Educational policy

The English model presents itself as radical in that it is *systemic*; it is embedded in the national system and therefore dependent for effective implementation on the involvement of the whole education profession. This might be thought to be both its strength and its Achilles heel. Some levers for change have already been installed in the system; most notably the requirement to appoint coordinators for gifted and

talented education in every school, and the possibility that OFSTED will inspect the quality of gifted and talented education in schools and LEAs as it scrutinises the extent to which all pupils' needs are being met. There is also pressure on initial teacher training providers to include training on teaching gifted and talented pupils, and for this aspect to be part of the inspection of teacher training also. The new national Primary Strategy encourages schools to consider the needs of gifted and talented pupils (DfES 2003). These levers are relatively weak, however, when set against a professional culture, which has been antagonistic or indifferent. The Excellence in Cities initiative appears to have been effective in identifying and supporting gifted and talented pupils, partly because of the high level of targeted funding (£208.1 million in 1999-01 and £303.1 million in 2001-02, for just under 1.5 million pupils involved), but that initiative is being closed down as a separately funded activity. Even under EiC it was difficult to demonstrate 'measurable impact in terms of attainment' (DfES 2002, p35).

By contrast, the use of school-based coordinators to deliver substantial elements of national policy has been resorted to by the government when it seeks a generalised, low cost, implementation strategy, as Campbell (2004) has argued. It will be especially weak as a delivery mechanism in primary (elementary) schools, where most teachers have at least two other coordination roles already. The recent survey by NAGTY (Hewston et al 2005) of school-based gifted and talented coordinators in secondary schools showed that most had two, and some had five, other coordination/management roles, in addition the responsibility for gifted and talented students. Not surprisingly they identified lack of time and lack of support as obstacles to effective implementation of the role. A more direct, statutory, element in the inspection of schools and teacher training has in the past changed practice, though not ideological resistance, and might have been effective in the implementation here also. Under the current arrangements, therefore, the professional culture, or to put it more provocatively, the inertia or reform fatigue in the schools is likely to remain the strongest driver on priorities at the school level.

The National Academy, perhaps in anticipation of the above argument, has a strong focus on professional development of teachers, but there are two possible limitations on its effectiveness in this respect. The relationship of the schools to the academy is a voluntary one, so that it will, in its early stages, be engaging with those schools and teachers where there is little cultural resistance. The second problem is that, again from the point of view of schools and teachers, the gifted and talented provision is one of many players in their market–place and the competition for teacher development time and funding in other areas of school improvement is fierce. Both these factors suggest that the Academy will not be adequately empowered to work with those schools and teachers opposed to developing effective teaching of gifted students or those for whom it has relatively low priority. Preaching to the converted is gratifying, but does not by itself lead more souls to salvation. The Academy's strategy, however, has been to identify leading edge schools and to use them to bring about change through partnering other schools and universities. This is showing some early outcomes but the number of leading schools (eighteen) is relatively small for the scope needed. Research to identify and disseminate innovation in these schools is currently underway at NAGTY, and should help support professional development.

A second strategy at NAGTY is to link schools into networks and partnerships, either with other schools, LEAs and regional groupings to mobilise support for the school coordinators and thereby increase support for them. This is an important task since the NAGTY survey referred to above (Hewston et al 2005) showed a tendency for school coordinators to be inward looking, concentrating on in-school policy development and to be less outward-looking to partnerships, LEAs and other external sources.

The model also challenges the notion of the school as the single education provider of student learning. The wider schooling element assumes a brokering role for the school so as to tap into expertise that matches the learning needs of students. As initial evidence from NAGTY indicates, there has been some effective partnerships developing in the leading edge schools, called Ambassador schools (NAGTY 2004).This wider schooling concept also includes learning by individual students through sources such as the Internet, on line forums, summer schools and outreach activities. To be effective there will have to be a major shift in conceptions of pedagogy, with a strong commitment to independent learning and an active role for student voice to exercise choice in content, source, pace and direction of learning. The role of the school as brokering this learning is clear in relation to formally provided resources such as summer schools or online forums or outreach activities, but independent learning from informally acquired knowledge is different, implying a shift from visible to invisible pedagogies (Bernstein 1973), with control over pace, direction and even content of learning having to be ceded by the school to the student. This would be a palpable example of how the personalisation agenda for the public sector might be realised in teaching and learning. The extent to which the teaching profession, in general, is culturally or institutionally prepared for these two demands upon it is problematic at the current time. It can not be assumed that the cultural change required will happen on its own; there is a major task here for the professional development side of the National Academy.

Social equity

On social equity there are also some problematic aspects and three are particularly salient. The first is that the professional and middle class elite groups have been shown in the past to manipulate the schooling system to increase the chances of their children benefiting disproportionately from perceived advantages on offer. The study by Power et al (2003) involving analysis of the Oxford Mobility Study combined with interviews with a large cohort of 300 'academically promising' middle class students, is only the most recent of a long line of studies demonstrating the power of cultural capital in accessing public service benefits. Early analysis of the National Academy student membership profile (Campbell et al 2004) suggests that this syndrome was initially at work in the field of gifted and talented education also, as might be predicted.

If so, it suggests the need for a targeted initiative on schools in disadvantaged areas to support the identification, and most importantly since identification is only the first step, the development of gifted and talented students in them.

Power and her colleagues make a further point, about the market responsiveness of the prestigious schools in the independent sector (the so-called 'public' schools). They show how as demand for places grew, the elite schools in the sector began to specialise, creating a market niche for themselves by providing the assurance of high academic standards reflected in strong performance in national examinations and admission to top universities. They were able to do this by resisting the market pressure to increase in size, and instead creating a strong academic selection process for entry to them.

'Between 1951 and 1981, private sector numbers remained fairly steady…Its market share then rose over the next ten years..to 8.1% of 11-15 year olds, and has remained since at roughly that level. Protected by their charitable status from the full force of market pressures, popular private schools appear to have chosen not to expand but to become more selective, which is a rational strategy for schools marketing academic excellence'

(Power et al 2003, p18)

It must be assumed that these schools will continue to operate in this niche until it becomes not in their interest to do so, and it is difficult to see how the English model of gifted and talented education can enable mainstream schools to compete against the track record and privilege of these schools in attracting disproportionate numbers of the gifted and talented students. This may be thought to be true not only of the obvious power of the most prestigious schools, like Eton and Westminster, to attract and teach students of high ability, but also of the substantial number of prestigious schools catering for creativity, the arts and sports, such as Dartington Hall and Millfield. Moreover, alongside the state system is a growing number of lower status schools catering for ethnic minorities and religious groups which may also increase the difficulties in delivering a national policy based on mainstreaming. This is not an argument against mainstreaming, so much as a recognition of the limitations that socially exclusive influences may place upon the implementation of the English model. However, it is possible to overstate these limitations. After all, it remains the case that the most prestigious independent schools are too expensive for the majority of the professional classes, being mainly restricted to what Power et al call the 'super elite.'

The social equity agenda may be being served by the recruitment processes at the National Academy, since the processes rely upon a range of evidence, including teacher and parental nomination, rather than one norm-referenced standardised test score. This allows for a broad, and to some extent flexible, recruitment process linking potential with opportunity to develop. However, and perversely, this may itself be part of the problem, since middle class parents may be enabled through this procedure, to make a case for their children when more objective test data might have excluded them. This is something similar to what happened when intelligence testing was abandoned in most local authorities in the 1960s, and access to selective tracks in comprehensive schools came to rely more on teacher recommendation. The evidence then showed that as testing was abandoned, children of middle class parents increased their representation in selective tracks to the disadvantage of children from the working class (Ford 1969, Floud and Halsey, 1957).

The academy might seek to establish a more objective basis for recruitment, though it should be remembered that standardised tests attract widespread coaching from those parents able to afford it.

However, a more effective strategy might be the extension of the targeted initiative referred to above, focused on schools with relevant postcodes, in which it is made financially in the schools' interest to identify and support the development of gifted and talented students. This would require funding levels that only government, charitable foundations or business could provide, though pilot studies should not wait upon this. Such an approach would, to some extent, run counter to the generic funding model recommended by the Select Committee.

The above factors are daunting, though a counteracting influence may emerge from the substantial support among the elite universities for the current forms of widening participation. This might lead to increased interest in schools in disadvantaged areas in identifying and supporting their able students. However, according to Macaro and Wingate (2004), the problem lies not in the structures for access so much as in the preparedness and self-confidence of working class students. Citing McCrum, Brundin and Halsey (2003) they argue that that the more general factor in state school students' admission to Oxford, resides 'not in a lack of (the university's) willingness to admit state school applicants but, "the apparently intractable problem of low state school application rate."' This might be thought defensive special pleading by Oxbridge representatives, were it not the case that it is supported by the

interpretation in a Sutton Trust (2001) research paper that overwhelmingly teachers and college principals thought that 'students from families with low socio-economic status lacked confidence to apply to Oxbridge.' It is not known whether the somewhat narrow focus on admission to Oxford and Cambridge might be leading to an unduly pessimistic picture, (as well as relatively small samples), of working class ambition, compared to the picture that might emerge from the data on a wider group of high status universities, such as the Russell Group of 19 research intensive universities, several of which are located in urban areas close to inner city locations, unlike Oxford and Cambridge.

The Academy has attracted grants to support wider access to universities, and for projects to support disadvantaged able students through mentoring to raise self confidence and through targeted scholarships, and it remains to be seen how far these activities can contribute to countering both any remaining social bias in the selection procedures of the most powerful educational institutions in the country and the working class reluctance to apply to them. Part of the solution for the Academy must lie in finding ways to understand the motivation and sense of self efficacy existing among the small number of those socially disadvantaged students who are either identified as gifted and talented or awarded places at prestigious universities.

Conclusion

To identify problems and challenges is not to be pessimistic or deterministic. The purpose of this paper, and especially of the discussion section, is to analyse the aims and nature of the national policy in England, a policy that is highly distinctive, very ambitious and socially inclusive, and to attempt to see where further action might be necessary to support it. The further action is in effect an extension of the policy initiative, but taking account of some of the known factors, educational and social, that might hinder, or prove resistant to, its effective implementation.

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