EVALUATION OF 'ADVANCED LEARNING CENTRES' FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS

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1. Introduction

'Advanced Learning Centres' (ALCs) are special out-of-school classes for very able pupils, often (but not always) in their final year of primary schooling. The growth and development of these Centres has been coordinated by the Gifted and Talented Unit of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) through the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative, in partnership with a national charity, the National Primary Trust (NPT).

This evaluation stems from original research, designed to analyse equality of access to the provision, evaluate pupils' enjoyment, engagement and learning, and examine possible impact of that learning on achievement.

2. Background

Children typically meet for their Advanced Learning Centre for around two hours on Saturday mornings or after school. Centres operate differently with a common aim of providing study support to gifted and talented pupils. The great majority pursue a coursework or 'enrichment' curriculum, often working from guidelines and resources developed by the National Primary Trust.

In 2004-05 some Centres ran over much of the school year; rather more lasted for a term or eight weeks. Nearly all brought together pupils from a range of schools. Some geographical areas ran one Centre; some ran several, for different ages or in different subjects.

The majority of pupils were in Year 6 at school. In most cases schools were invited to select two or more of their pupils for the Centre, based on such criteria. At least 54 Centres, and possibly more, ran during 2004-05. The overall number of pupils starting ALC courses in 2004-05 was around 2,000, with a drop-out rate of around 20% as courses progressed.

3. Methodology

The main data-collection methods for this evaluation were a pupil survey and analysis of the results from their Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). Feedback from Centres and from pupils' schools also contributed to the data.
4. Analysis

A. Access
To what extent are Advanced Learning Centres accessible to a diverse range of more able pupils?

- Subjects of ALCs: Most ALCs served pupils with high ability in mathematics; those of high ability in English and science appeared less well served; in the last two years the number of Centres catering for pupils of high ability in ICT and in other subjects has grown.

- Year-groups: A majority of pupils at ALCs were in Year 6; pupils in other years had fewer opportunities to take part in ALCs.

- Month of birth: Most pupils at the surveyed ALCs were born in the first half of the school year. This imbalance applied to most Centres, all subjects and year groups, both genders, and to white and non-white pupils.

- Gender: Overall more boys attended the surveyed ALCs than girls. There was a bias towards boys in mathematics and ICT, and a bias towards girls in arts-subject ALCs. There was a strong bias towards girls in the surveyed English ALCs.

- Ethnicity: There was a range of ethnicities amongst ALC pupils; more than three-quarters of pupils at the surveyed ALCs gave their ethnicity as white; there were considerable differences between ethnic profiles of individual Centres.

- Home language: 94% of pupils spoke only English at home; 4% spoke only a language other than English; 2% spoke dual languages including English.

- Special educational needs: It was estimated that 1.13% of pupils on ALC registers had special educational needs.

- Means of travel: Nine out of ten pupils used a car to get to their ALC. There was some evidence of car-sharing among pupils and some lessening of car use as pupils got older; bus travel increased where special arrangements were made by an ALC.

B. Enjoyment
What is the extent and nature of pupils’ enjoyment and appreciation of their ALC?

- A large proportion of pupils – over four-fifths – indicated that they ‘always’ or ‘usually’ looked forward to their ALC sessions.

- Nine out of ten pupils indicated that they ‘always’ or ‘usually’ enjoyed their ALC sessions.

- Most pupils identified aspects of work and activity as sources of their appreciation: the subject of the ALC, specific aspects of curriculum, the difficulty of the work, aspects of teaching and learning.

- Working with other pupils, working with staff, and use of computers were strong sources of enjoyment for many.

- Some pupils identified more social and personal aspects such as being with friends and with staff as sources of their appreciation; break-time was especially enjoyed.

C. Engagement
What is the extent and nature of pupils’ engagement with their ALC work and its level of difficulty?

- More than half of surveyed pupils suggested they had missed just one ALC session in their course or none at all.

- Almost all pupils felt that they ‘always’ or ‘usually’ worked hard and concentrated well at their ALC.

- Most pupils felt that they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ found their ALC lessons boring; there was a small number who found them ‘usually’ or ‘always’ boring.

- Most pupils seemed to find ALC work generally manageable with areas or occasions of difficulty.

- Pupils had varied views about the extent to which ALC work was more difficult than school work - about half felt it was ‘always’ or ‘usually’ more difficult.

- Many pupils identified specific areas of their ALC curriculum which they found difficult.

- A few identified aspects of teaching and learning or social aspects as sources of difficulty.

- Eight out of ten pupils indicated that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ had difficulty understanding their work.

D. Learning
How do pupils perceive the extent and nature of their learning and personal development at their ALC?

- About eight out of ten pupils felt that they ‘always’ or ‘usually’ gained new knowledge, skills and understanding at their Centre.

- Many pupils identified general and specific gains in learning.

- Pupils were a little cautious in estimating the extent to which ALC work helped with school work. Most indicated that it ‘usually’ did so; maths and English pupils were the most likely to indicate this.
Pupils from maths and English Centres were confident that their ALC work helped them with their preparation for SATs. Around eight in ten of all pupils who responded felt that it 'always' or 'usually' did so.

About eight in ten pupils indicated that the ALC 'always' or 'usually' increased their interest in the subject of study.

Pupils were cautious in estimating the extent to which their ALC work helped them in their everyday life. The most common responses - from about one third - was that it 'sometimes' did so.

The extent to which the ALC subject related to pupils' career intentions was unclear.

E. Achievement
To what extent is pupils’ ALC learning evident in results of their Key Stage 2 SATs?

Year 6 ALC pupils demonstrated high levels of achievement before starting their ALC courses, in comparison with their peers.

These pupils continued to achieve well during their Year 6 when they were attending their ALCs.

There were indications that pupils at English ALCs found it more difficult to attain Level 5 in their Year 6 SATs than pupils at maths ALCs.

Separation of Level 5 attainments into notional ‘5c’, ‘5b’ and ‘5a’ sub-levels indicated that around half of surveyed pupils at maths ALCs who achieved Levels 3 or 4 in their optional Year 5 SATs seemed to progress by one national curriculum level or more during their Year 6, while attending their ALC course. This level of progress was beyond expectations that pupils will progress by half of one level each year.

This indication of special advancement during this year could not be confirmed by examination of age-standardised scores, which suggested that the progress of almost all ALC pupils during their Year 6 was within normal expectations.

The extent to which pupils’ ALC learning was evident in results of their Key Stage 2 SATs therefore remained unclear.

5. Review

Subjects: For maths pupils the difficulty of work was an important aspect of their ALC; English-Centre pupils most readily indicated the highest levels of enjoyment and engagement, especially of cooperative and social aspects of their ALC. Most ICT pupils enjoyed their individual (rather than shared) access to computers, the opportunity to use new computer programmes and to undertake new tasks; arts-subject pupils most readily expressed interest in their subject as a result of their ALC.

Year-groups: The youngest pupils showed their enthusiasm for their ALC work most readily. For Year 6 pupils, styles of learning - the different way of doing things at their ALC - was often most important. Cooperative and social aspects were important to pupils from Year 7. Amongst pupils from Year 8 and above there was an emerging clarity about the role of education and study and its separation from relaxation and leisure.

Gender: Overall girls showed themselves to be more ready to indicate more positive responses than boys. In end of Key Stage 2 maths SATs, ALC boys tended to achieve higher scores than girls.

Ethnicity and home language: ALC pupils of minority ethnic backgrounds and those speaking only a language other than English at home gained at least the same enjoyment, engagement and sense of learning from their participation at ALCs as their majority ethnic peers. In maths Year 6 SATs white ALC pupils outperformed non-white ALC pupils in the highest clusters at Level 5.

Attendance: Pupils indicating the most regular ALC attendance gave the most consistently positive responses. Pupils indicating irregular attendance were least likely to answer questions in the most positive way.

6. Recommendations
To strengthen equality of access to ALCs, the following points may be considered:

Encourage increase in number of Centres for English
Examine profile of ALC pupils in relation to their month of birth; consider action to address potential imbalance and disadvantage to pupils born later in the school-year.
Strengthen attendance of girls at maths Centres, boys at English Centres
Encourage attendance of younger pupils from minority ethnic communities
Consider means to strengthen access to ALCs for pupils with special educational needs
Investigate and consider means of providing alternative travel arrangement to car use
Consider collection of free school meal data as further indication of access to ALCs by pupils from a range of socio-economic groups.

In relation to the work of Advanced Learning Centres in general, the following points may be considered:

• Continue to strengthen ALC network as a positive and worthwhile way of stimulating enjoyment of and engagement in higher-level learning by able pupils and extending their learning
• Ensure full monitoring of pupil attendance as broad indicator of the nature of pupils’ relationship with their ALC learning
• Take into account the particular interest of some Year 6 pupils in styles of learning which are alternative to and more enjoyable than those which they may experience in school
• Consider special monitoring of the level of challenge presented by ALC work to Year 7 pupils
• Monitor and continue to strengthen cooperative and social aspects of out-of-school learning to meet needs of many pupils for whom this is an important aspect of their ALC experience
• Seek ways of establishing and maintaining close links with pupils’ schools
• Share best practice in ALCs as part of ongoing development: for example, high levels of challenge as at maths Centres; co-operative learning as at Centres for English; keen engagement with new technology as at ICT Centres; strong subject interest as at Centres for arts.

Specific areas deserving of further investigation include:

• Experiences and perceptions of pupils leaving ALC courses early
• Influences and imbalances in schools’ selection of pupils
• Indications from free school meal data of access to ALCs by pupils from a range of socio-economic groups
• Extent and nature of wider issues of access for disadvantaged pupils, including those with special educational needs
• Strategies for establishing and maintaining challenging work
• Social experiences of pupils attending ALCs
• Learning of Year 7 pupils attending ALCs
• Gendered perceptions of out-of-school learning
• Comparisons between ALC and school learning
• Transfer of learning between ALC and school
• Relationship between pupils’ ALC learning and their achievements in SATs.

Additional Information

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Further information about this research can be obtained from Aruna Mistry, 4E, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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