

Section 1

Definitions of Ability

Key issues

- this is a very complex area
- no single simple definition exists
- identifying ability presents a challenge when no single definition exists
- schools need to reach agreement on a working definition in order to make progress

Background

Educating gifted and talented pupils seems, at first glance, a relatively straightforward issue: identify the cohort and provide for their needs. This assumes, however, that identifying the cohort is easily achieved. In reality, it is difficult. The House of Commons Inquiry into Highly Able Children stated:

"The identification of the target group proved the most complex aspect of our inquiry." It also said: *'Some evidence suggested that the search for a precise definition might distract schools from finding ways to meet the needs of their most able children.'*
(House of Commons Select Committee 1999)

There are two key aspects of this complex picture. The first is anecdotal evidence about the characteristics of gifted and talented pupils, and the possible effects of this evidence. It may, for example, lead to confused, inaccurate or stereotyped views of ability, which in themselves can have an unfortunate impact on the process of identification. The second aspect is the manner in which opinions about the nature of ability are influenced, at least in part, by the view of education which social science researchers generally hold.

Ideas of ability are linked to cultural values, which change over time. Consequently, views of ability are constantly changing, and no single definition exists as to what constitutes ability.

Within the literature, there are important debates about definitions of ability, particularly about the role of IQ and creativity as indicators. These have been grouped into two main paradigms of giftedness: the 'reductionist' and the 'emergentist' (Dai 2005). Some psychologists maintain that ability is static and measurable; others consider it to be changeable and influenced by such factors as environment, opportunity, and personality. Discussions over the relative roles of nature and nurture continue. On the one hand there are those who favour a quantitative interpretation, which seeks to define in numerical terms the cohort of highly able children. On the other, there are those who favour a qualitative approach, in which ability is uncovered, at least in part, when pupils are given access to appropriate opportunities.

The first and obvious need in introducing provision for gifted and

talented pupils is to identify those pupils who should receive targeted provision. This process can be seriously hampered if staff are using a range of personal definitions of ability which conflict with one another.

Although schools can not be expected to resolve longstanding dilemmas about definition, they can arrive at a working definition that, on the one hand, is informed by the debate in the field and, on the other, reflects the school ethos. Establishing a working definition is not an end in itself, but rather the first step in creating a broad, workable consensus that leads to effective provision for gifted and talented pupils. Indeed, the process of discussion is arguably as important as the final definition, if the aim is to raise staff awareness and bring about professional development and confidence in providing for these pupils.

A school-wide definition is also an essential management and monitoring tool that enables resources to be equitably assigned and progress efficiently tracked. The co-ordinator's role is to facilitate the debate, to act as the school's 'resident expert' and to enable the school to reach its own answer to the question 'Who are the gifted and talented in our school?'

Studies have shown that many schools experience a 'gifted and talented journey' in which the definition and identification of high ability becomes increasingly sophisticated and broad-based. (Ofsted 2001: Nord Anglia Research Project 2001: HMI 2003). This is also borne out by research from Oxford Brookes University (Haight 2005).

Examples of definitions

Below are eight definitions taken from the literature. You may wish to reflect on them and then carry out the boxed task at the end of this section.

'Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally.' (The Columbus Group, 1991)

'A gifted pupil is one who demonstrates a significantly higher level of ability than most pupils of the same age in one or more curriculum areas or in any of the following:

- physical talent
- artistic talent
- mechanical ingenuity
- leadership
- high intelligence
- creativity

(Eric Ogilvie, 1973)'

(Marston Middle School policy, quoted in Eyre, 1997: 145)

'We will always have several conceptions (and therefore definitions) of giftedness...Schoolhouse giftedness might also be called test-taking or lesson-learning giftedness....Creative-productive giftedness describes those aspects of human activity and involvement where a premium is placed on the development of original material and products that are purposefully designed to have an impact on one or more target audiences.' (Renzulli, 2003: 9-10)

'Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in the intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. . . Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural backgrounds, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavour.' (US Department of Education, 1993)

The pentagonal theory of giftedness identifies five criteria that are 'individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a student to be identified as gifted':

- Excellence: superior in some dimension or set of dimensions
- Rarity: the excellence must be relative to peers
- Demonstrability: shown through at least one valid test
- Productivity: the dimension must lead to or potentially lead to productivity
- Value: the superior performance must be valued by the student's society. (adapted from Zhang and Hui, 2001: 78, paraphrasing Sternberg and Zhang, 1995)

'[T]he cohort of highly able children equates roughly to the top 2 per cent of children as measured by standardised tests. That is to say that children with a measured cognitive ability two standard deviations above the mean (approximately IQ 130 and above) might be considered highly able.' (One of many definitions considered by the House of Commons, 1999: 69-70)

'Intelligence in this context is defined as being the ability to comprehend, absorb and manipulate knowledge in both modes (ie synthesis and analysis). It does not have to be, of necessity, evident in a purely academic form.' (House of Commons, 1999: 58)

'Multiple Intelligences:

- logical-mathematical: the ability to detect patterns, think logically, reason deductively and carry out mathematical operations
- linguistic: mastery of spoken or written language to express oneself or remember things
- spatial: the potential for recognizing and manipulating patterns of both wide spaces (pilots, navigators) and confined spaces (sculptors, architects, chess players)

- musical: the capacity to recognize and compose musical pitches, tones, rhythms, and patterns and use them for performance or composition
- bodily-kinaesthetic: using parts of the body or the whole body to solve problems or create products
- interpersonal: the ability to recognize the intentions, feelings and motivations of others
- intrapersonal: the ability to understand oneself and use that information to regulate one's own life
- naturalistic: the ability to recognize and classify the numerous species – the flora and fauna – in the environment' (adapted from Plucker, 2001, paraphrasing Gardner, 1999).

Activity 1.1

Either

- Choose a small sample from the set of definitions above.
- Use them in school to seek reactions from your colleagues.
- Try to arrive at a working definition for your school, drawn from elements within these (or other descriptions of giftedness you have encountered). Many co-ordinators have found it useful to form a working party to steer the whole-school discussion. This is particularly effective where each subject department is represented in its membership.
- Are your 'talented' pupils catered for in your working definition?
- Or:
- Consider how you will refine/amend your definition in the light of experience or changing needs. Take notes that will help you achieve this.

Learning outcomes

- Recognise that no single definition of ability exists
- Establish a working definition for your school which is shared by the whole school community
- Reflect on your role as co-ordinator in this process

References

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**Additional
reading**

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