

## Section 3

# Identifying the Gifted and Talented

### Key issues

- No one method of identification can be entirely accurate
- Some types of ability may be easier to recognise than others
- Ability and educational achievement are not the same thing
- There is a range of strategies aimed at helping to identify gifted and talented pupils; there are strengths and weaknesses associated with all methods

### Background

The identification of gifted and talented pupils is a crucial part of ensuring that the needs of all pupils in a school are recognised, and that the right kind of provision and guidance is in place to meet those needs. Research and inspection evidence has largely discredited the long-held belief that a child's ability will always translate into educational achievement and successful schooling whatever the circumstances. Research evidence has also undermined the assumption that teachers will automatically identify the child with high ability and talents (Denton and Postlethwaite, 1985).

When beginning the process of identifying gifted and talented pupils it is important to examine definitions of high ability and talent, which were considered in Section 1. Section 3 assumes that your school has reached consensus on a 'working definition', which may be subject to on-going revision and refinement.

### Identification methods and processes

As already discussed, identifying gifted and talented pupils is by no means an exact science. Over recent years, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has issued advice, both generic and subject-specific, on recognising gifted pupils. Helpful guidance on methods and procedures, much of it derived from the work with EiC schools, is available on the G&TWISE and the QCA and London Gifted and Talented websites, whose web addresses are given in the Additional Readings and Information at the end of the section. The guidance is broad enough to give individual schools the discretion – within the recommended framework – to devise the identification procedure that works best in their circumstances.

In recent years, schools and partnerships have learned much about the practical issues involved in identifying able cohorts, and, over time, have increasingly developed effective practices. In 2001, Ofsted noted that identification was still a key area for improvement. By 2003, HMI were

able to conclude that 'Almost all schools have improved their identification of gifted pupils and developed accordingly the provision made for them....Most schools have also improved their identification of talented pupils, although this aspect is less advanced.' (HMI 2003)

The National Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education give benchmark descriptors of identification practices at 'Entry', 'Developing' and 'Exemplary' level. In addition, a number of other models are available for self-evaluation in the use of identification procedures, along with other aspects of provision (**Mouchel Parkman 2005: 53-60**).

## Purpose

In any school there are key issues which must be taken into account. These include:

- the purpose of identifying the cohort
- the accuracy and range of the data used
- equal opportunities issues
- a consideration of performance v potential
- the effect of the process on pupils both within and outside the cohort.

The point has often been made that assessment of any kind is not an end in itself. In reference to identifying able children in particular, Welding (1998) reminds us that 'if the process does not bring about a measurable improvement in the achievement of able children then it has been futile.' Guidance developed for the EiC Gifted and Talented strand emphasised that 'the focus of [a school's] identification strategy should be on improving school-based provision for the most able rather than on creating an academic elite' (2000). A key implication of this is that the main emphasis of provision for the gifted and talented should be effective classroom practice rather than out-of-hours enrichment activities. Schools often find that an important consequence of this is that the benefits of improvement are not confined to the identified cohort.

Broadly speaking, there are two models of identification, which could be described as:

- Identifying pupils by a recognised means, and then providing for them
- Providing pupils with challenging opportunities that will then reveal their ability.

Both of these approaches have their strengths and limitations, and a good identification policy will incorporate a blend of the two.

## Range of indicators

There is a range of information that can be of value when a school is looking into the process of identification. This may include:

- information when pupils transfer from primary/middle schools

- results of NC tests/SATs
- results of standardised tests eg NFER, CATS, MIDRIS, YELLIS
- results of internal school tests and exams
- teacher assessment and nomination
- information from English as an Additional Language and Ethnic Minority Achievement co-ordinators, and from learning mentors
- classroom observation
- peer-nomination and self-nomination
- parental nomination
- nomination from outside sources such as sports coaches, music teachers or providers of enrichment activities

Teachers' professional judgement can be developed through departmental discussions on the nature of ability in specific subject areas. This should lead to a shared understanding, and to agreeing a set of identification criteria that relate both to the curriculum area and to the character of the school's population. It can also encourage a departmental focus on improved classroom provision.

For schools establishing identification systems for the first time, it is important to recognise that a system incorporating several sources of evidence will be more accurate and fair than one employing just one indicator. Schools are making increasing use of a range of information on pupils' performance, such as Autumn Package and Fischer Family Trust data. This may be used in conjunction with other information to help in identifying able pupils. The identification process itself should be subjected to critical evaluation to consider how best it can be incorporated into existing school procedures and systems.

*'If identification strategies are to be effective, and are to improve the quality of teaching and learning, they must be integrated into the school's existing procedures. It is only in schools where the identification is embedded in school-based systems that it has significant impact on classroom practice. Otherwise the link between identification and provision is tenuous.'* **Eyre 1997**

## Equal opportunities

When a school sets about identifying its gifted and talented pupils it needs to take into account not only its own characteristics as a school but also the pupil cohort. There has been much work in recent years, at the levels both of research and practice in school, on the relationship between gender, ethnicity and schooling. If we are to achieve equity for all, then this principle should operate when it comes to identifying gifted and talented pupils. Part of the co-ordinator's role is to monitor the composition of the cohort to see whether it is representative of the school population in terms of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic

indicators and special educational needs.

All these factors underline the need for a school to be confident of reliability in the steps it takes to identify these pupils. It has to be certain that no individual escapes notice because some feature or circumstance is masking his or her true ability. The school will also need to evaluate the extent to which curriculum provision enables certain groups of children to show what they can achieve, or how far it works against them.

## Potential or performance?

It is important to recognise that gifted and talented pupils may also be underachieving pupils. Understanding the characteristics of underachievement, and the reasons which may underlie it, is important in ensuring that identification methods are as flexible as possible and draw on a range of sources of information. Studies of gifted and talented children who are underachieving show that they may exhibit some of the following characteristics:

- Large gap between quality of oral and written work
- Failure to complete daily school work
- Poor execution of work
- Persistent dissatisfaction with accomplishments
- Avoidance of new activities
- Low self image
- Aggressive behaviour
- Not functioning well in group situations
- Lack of concentration
- Setting unrealistic goals – too high or too low
- Difficulty in peer relations
- Poor attitude to school
- Dislike of drill and memorisation.

**Montgomery, 1996**

The Secondary School Self-Evaluation Form directs schools to highlight any underachieving groups, and it is vital to ensure that any approach to identification takes account of possible underachievers.

## Effects on pupils

No process of identification can be valid if it does not take into account the effect upon the pupils themselves. Clearly, categorisation of some kind is needed if we are to ensure appropriate targets and the provision that goes with them, but the potential dangers of labelling are evident to teachers. Research findings are inconclusive about the impact on the social and emotional well-being of pupils labelled 'gifted', and it will depend upon the context. According to an evaluation of the impact of the EiC Gifted and Talented strand, there appears to be a beneficial effect on the performance of pupils who are designated gifted and talented. However, an earlier study by Freeman concluded that children labelled as gifted by their parents were more likely to have behaviour problems (**Freeman**

1998: 22-30; Morris et al 2004: 15-6).

To label and segregate pupils as gifted and talented may also have negative and detrimental effects upon those other pupils (and their parents) who see themselves as excluded and neglected as a result. The power of the self-fulfilling prophecy needs to be borne in mind. Without constant vigilance, the pupil who is not selected for the cohort may by that very fact never become a part of it. Schools and individual teachers need to make sure that the identification of particular pupils as gifted and talented is handled with the utmost sensitivity, and with the needs and aspirations of all children in mind.

## Activity 1.3

### Reflection

- What do you consider to be the strengths and limitations of each of these forms of identification in assessing and recognising high ability and high achievement across the whole pupil cohort?
- Are talented pupils equally well served by these models of identification?
- What do you conclude about these identification processes in relation to your own school?
- What range of information does your school have available to support the identification of gifted and talented pupils?.

## Learning outcomes

- Understand the major issues and dilemmas relating to processes and methods of identification
- Understand the guidance on identification and the rationale behind it
- Evaluate critically the elements of the identification process that your school has already embarked upon, in order to inform future planning
- Analyse your role as co-ordinator in the identification process, and in helping to effect changes that arise from that process.

## References

- Denton, C. and Postlethwaite, K. (1985).** *Able Children: identifying them in the classroom.* Windsor: NFER/Nelson.
- Eyre, D. (1997)** *Able Children in Ordinary Schools.* London: Fulton
- Freeman, J. (1998)** *Educating the Very Able: current international research.* London: Stationery Office
- HMI 1399 (2003)** *Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones: management and impact* London: DfES.
- Montgomery, D. (1996)** *Educating the Able* London: Cassell
- Morris, M., Rutt, S., and Eggers, M. (2004)** *Pupil Outcomes: the impact of EiC* (Paper 24/2003) Slough: NFER
- Mouchel Parkman (2005)** *National Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education: Draft User Guide* (London:

Mouchel Parkman and London Gifted and Talented)  
**Tilsley, P. (1995)** 'The Use of Tests and Test Data in Identification or Recognition of High Ability' in *Flying High, Journal of the National Association for Able Children in Education*, Issue 2

**Welding, J. (1998)** 'The Identification of Able Children in a Comprehensive School. a study of the issues involved and their practical implications' in *Educating Able Children*, Issue 2.

**Ofsted (2001)** *Providing for gifted and talented pupils: an evaluation of Excellence in Cities and other grant funded programmes* <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/public/index.htm>

## Additional readings/ information

Guidance on identification of gifted and talented pupils is available from G&TWISE:

<http://www2.teachernet.gov.uk/gat/website/staticpages/gtBasicsContent.aspx?MenuId=ASdGZ000z+U=#identify>

from the QCA website:

<http://www.nc.uk.net/qt/general/index.htm>

and from the London Gifted And Talented website:

<http://www.londongt.org/local/teacherTools/identification.htm>

For an international perspective, visit the "Discover" website of Dr. June Maker, University of Arizona, for information about different forms of assessment of ability within cross-cultural settings.

<http://info-center.ccit.arizona.edu/~discover/>