

Unit 3, Section 1

Curriculum Organisation

Key Issues

- Gifted and talented pupils need appropriate curricular opportunities if they are to excel and to fulfil their aspirations
- The curriculum structure needs to accommodate pupils with specific as well as general abilities and talents
- Gifted and talented pupils may show excellence through rapid progress within the curriculum, by taking additional curriculum subjects, or through specialisation in some curriculum areas
- Curriculum flexibility offers an opportunity for the school to tailor provision to the needs of its gifted and talented pupils and to its own specific context.

Background

In order for pupils to achieve highly they need access to appropriate curriculum opportunities. These will include the range of subjects on offer, the examination syllabuses chosen, the flexibility of choice, and the possibility of progressing through the curriculum at different rates.

The curriculum of a comprehensive school cannot be, and should not be, constructed to work to the advantage of the gifted and talented at the expense of other pupils, but it should actively promote opportunities for them. All schools will want to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum. Within the framework of the National Curriculum and the context of an increasingly diverse range of schools in the state system there are, however, many opportunities for schools to be flexible and innovative.

When organising the curriculum for their gifted and talented pupils, schools will need to consider what constitutes effective provision, and therefore the underlying principles which will guide the range and choice of opportunities. For example, volume of activity is not in itself a characteristic of effective provision. Schools will be looking for opportunities for independent study, personal research, rapid progress, and capitalising on the particular skills of individual teachers and pupils.

Flexibility in the Curriculum

The National Curriculum contains within it opportunities for schools to match provision to learners' needs. These may take several forms. For example, there is the possibility of placing particular emphasis on some subjects or approaches, or of developing different emphases at different key stages. There can be flexible organisation of learning within and across curriculum areas, and within the key stage. It is also possible for programmes of study to be completed early to allow for study within later key stages. Illustrations of such practice are given in 'Flexibility in the secondary curriculum' (QCA, 1999). One example is that of the talented musician who has already attained grade 8 in her music examinations and has taken French at the end of Year 8, achieving a B. 'During key stage 4 she will study A level music with 12 students at the time when other key stage 4 pupils will study a modern foreign language.'

Schools have the advantage that although programmes of study at key stages 3 and 4 have been developed against 'notional' times, there are no prescribed time allocations as such for particular subjects.

The following are examples of flexibility open to schools:

- Time built into the normal curriculum/timetable as an addition to the normal school day
- Additional subjects made available which particularly suit your school, for example to take advantage of available resources, or to meet the needs of a cohort
- Acceleration of gifted and talented pupils, for example early entry to GCSE, A/S, or A level. Some subjects will lend themselves to this more easily than others, by virtue of the volume of course content, or the nature of the subject itself. This practice has implications for the provision the school can make for these pupils once they have completed the programme of study and taken the examination.

It has to be remembered that OFSTED inspections look closely at the use of time. Schools which modify their time allocations will, therefore, need to be able to produce a clear rationale for them. Similarly, when schools engineer such opportunities for pupils they should ensure that the take-up of subjects is not skewed in a manner that will exclude certain groups of pupils, e.g. girls from science subjects.

Selection of syllabuses

The amalgamation of examination boards has had the effect of restricting the number of syllabuses from which a selection can be made. Within the range, however, there is still considerable choice. There is the option of single/dual subjects, the possibility of assessment primarily by course work or primarily by examination, and the opportunity for independent research. The choice of syllabus and of related options should be guided by the extent to which they offer challenge. A different syllabus might be chosen for upper sets, or different selections could be made within a syllabus for different groups of pupils. For example, particular texts might be decided upon within English, or different topics in the case of modern foreign languages. Decisions on choices within syllabuses will ideally involve the pupils themselves, and not simply be made on their behalf by the staff.

Selection of examinations and choice of qualifications

In selecting examinations, schools have a number of questions to consider. What is to be the number of subjects a pupil takes? As we noted above, volume is not all. Does the school have a policy on what is to be offered? For example, is triple science to be available, and what of the range of modern foreign languages? Is media studies to be made available within English without the allocation of extra time? What combinations of subjects are to be open to individuals, without prohibition? At what point in the year might pupils be entered for examinations, for instance January or June in the case of AS and A level? Are there to be opportunities for individual entry to examinations, for example in the mother tongue; in sports and music; to achieve alternative certification, such as RSA; and to obtain leadership qualifications? Schools will also need to consider the contribution all these choices make towards ensuring balance in the Record of Achievement for individual pupils.

Since September 2000, schools have been able to disapply design and technology and modern foreign languages at key stage 4. Disapplication is usually brought into play where pupils are making significantly poorer progress than their peers. However, the process also offers unique opportunities for gifted and talented pupils, who will be able to build on their strengths and talents by exchanging a subject for a further course in a particular curriculum area.

The opening up of more individual "learning pathways" is strongly urged by the 14-19 Consultation Paper. The paper also proposes the ending of the need for disapplication given a more flexible structure and greater pupil choice. In addition, it sets out a more flexible framework for qualification and accreditation.

Key Skills

The learning of explicit key skills places emphasis on process rather than on outcomes. Students have to reflect on their own performance and take responsibility for their own learning, and the self-assessment models for higher level key skills at AS & A level can be used at key stage 4 for gifted and talented pupils. Among other advantages, key skills offer unique possibilities for those with talents in leadership.

Conclusion

The creative use of the curriculum is clearly an important instrument for meeting the needs of gifted and talented pupils and enabling them to fulfil their potential. They will benefit both from the sharing of common experiences with their peers and from specific opportunities to give full expression to their ability and/or talents. It will be evident from the above analysis that shaping the curriculum to the best advantage can be a demanding task, and one that calls for imagination and meticulous organisation. It is nevertheless an activity which can produce great advantages for the school as a whole, and for gifted and talented pupils within that context.

Activity 3.1

Activity

Consider the following statements.

- φ 'I don't like pupils going faster than their year group. It causes all sorts of organisational problems, and the kids in the fast track groups get big-headed.'
- φ 'I don't see why we need to change the syllabus to suit gifted and talented pupils. If they're that clever they'll make the best of what we offer.'
- φ 'We don't have in our gifted and talented cohort the type of youngsters who need to do additional subjects or enter exams early.'
- φ 'If they are good at music or sport, there are plenty of out-of-school clubs for them to join.'

Reflection

To what extent do you think these statements might reflect views held by staff in your own school? If you believe that the prevailing attitude in your school is more positive than the one they represent, what are the factors which have contributed to creating it? How can you build on this? If, on the other hand, such views do prevail in your school what, as a co-ordinator, can you do to influence them?

Learning Outcomes

- Become familiar with the extensive range of options available to schools, and with the critical factors to consider for gifted and talented pupils.
- Form a view of what might be the right kind of curricular organisation for gifted and talented pupils within your school
- Consider strategies by which changes in curricular organisation might be implemented in your school.

References

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