

Gifted and Talented Education: The English Policy Highway at a Crossroads?

*Ronald Casey and Valsa Koshy
Brunel University, UK*

Ronald Casey and Valsa Koshy
The Brunel Able Children's Education Centre
Brunel University,
Kingston Lane
Uxbridge UB8 3PH

Corresponding author: valsa.koshy@brunel.ac.uk

Abstract

In 1999, the British government launched an education programme for gifted and talented pupils as part of its Excellence in Cities initiative (EiC) which was initially designed to raise the educational achievement of very able pupils in state maintained secondary schools in inner-city areas. Although some activities targeting gifted children had already been initiated by various voluntary organizations over several previous decades, it was the first time that the topic of improved provision for these pupils had been placed firmly within the national agenda. This paper provides the background to the English gifted and talented policy 'highway' and provides an overview of what was expected of schools. How practitioners responded to the policy, their beliefs and attitudes towards identifying gifted and talented pupils and the opportunities and challenges that arose along the way to the current crossroads are explored. The need to empower teachers to feel more confident in classroom provision for gifted and talented pupils is identified along with the potentially pivotal role of action research and 'pupil voice' in the process of continued professional development and support.

Following the introduction of the gifted and talented education policy by the British government (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) the English landscape of gifted education changed. Although not mandatory, for the first time in the history of UK education, teachers were expected to select gifted and talented pupils and, by making appropriate educational provision, steer them along the gifted education highway. The newly elected Labour government launched the policy as part of an agenda to tackle 'disadvantage' via educational social mobility. Particular emphasis was given to enhancing the country's human capital by encouraging more children from poorer backgrounds towards Higher Education and, potentially, a more fulfilling adult life. This policy initiative was just one in a series of milestones within the education system marking the need to make appropriate provision for gifted and talented pupils in order to support their personal fulfilment and the potential for social mobility.

This particular series of educational milestones began in 1944 with an Education Act that created the possibility for post-war children to enter newly formed Grammar Schools and to receive academic training steering them towards university and a

professional career regardless of their backgrounds. All children took an 11-plus examination consisting of a series of tests and, on the basis of their performance, children were separated into those destined for the professions and those destined, at best, for qualification as trade practitioners. In the 1960s, the 11-plus examination was deemed to have invalid psychological justification (Koshy & Casey, 1998) and Local Education Authorities were encouraged to close their Grammar Schools and establish a Comprehensive School education system instead. However, some Local Authorities resisted this move (and continue to do so today) hence some Grammar schools remained alongside a significant number of fee paying independent schools - some very prestigious for the 'social elite' (Persson, Joswig & Balogh, 2000). And so the perpetuation of privilege based on a distinctive education system persisted providing the middle classes with a source of social protection and privilege (Casey & Koshy, 1999).

Another educational milestone involved standardising the curriculum on offer to all pupils in State schools via the introduction of a National Curriculum (DES, 1989). The National Curriculum (NC) was designed to establish the content and thinking strategies across 10 subjects to be offered to pupils age 5-16 with benchmark level descriptions of what pupils should be able to achieve by the end of the Key Stages of their school life (originally at 7,11,14, and 16 years of age). The National Curriculum suggested that, for a small number of pupils, materials could be selected from higher benchmark levels so that individuals could progress at different rates (Freeman, 1998). National testing and public examinations based on the content of the NC were standardised hence advancement towards Higher Education required the same evidence of attainment from all children regardless of their background or other circumstances. However, a study carried out by Koshy & Casey (1998) found that the majority of teachers did not find the National Curriculum particularly helpful in supporting provision for higher ability pupils.

The foundations of the new gifted education policy.

Over time, sufficient statistical evidence accumulated indicating that a significant number of children in socially and economically deprived urban areas were performing less well in the public examinations compared to those in more affluent areas including the 'leafy suburbs'. Hence the *gifted and talented* milestone was

erected by the Labour government within the “Excellence in Cities” initiative (DfEE, 1999) an initiative described by Whitty (2001) as a programme that attempted to address social inclusion as well as boost standards in inner-city state schools. Several educationalists have suggested that underpinning the introduction of the gifted and talented education policy was a need to retain middle class children in state Comprehensive Schools and to stop their leakage into [schools in more affluent areas as well as into the](#) independent sector (Koshy & Casey, 1998; Radnor, Koshy & Taylor, 2007).

Owing to the dominance of politically egalitarian convictions, resistance to focusing on gifted education as a discrete issue in the English education system – irrespective of the existence of traditional elite schools - had been formidable (Young & Tyre, 1992). At the same time, the need for provision for gifted and talented children in schools had been highlighted in many official reports (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate, 1978, 1979, 1992; Freeman, 1998). As Freeman (1995) points out, teachers and parents as well as organisations such as the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) played an important role in prompting a move towards special provision for gifted children. In this way, interest and developments in gifted education began growing steadily in the UK until in 1998 a Parliamentary Select Committee Hearing was set up to investigate provision for higher ability pupils which [proved to be the forerunner of a set of](#) rapid developments in gifted and talented education (House of Commons, 1999).

The English national gifted and talented education policy 1999-2011.

Although not mandatory, as part of government policy (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) teachers in state schools in England (schools in Scotland and Wales followed their own guidelines) were [expected](#) to select gifted and talented pupils and create registers. The first recorded commitment from a Labour government Minister to making effective provision for gifted children stated:

The government is committed to improving educational standards for all children....we fail to identify many of our most able children and we don’t challenge them enough. We owe it to these children to help them realize their potential. That means working with schools, parents and local authorities to establish practice. We must celebrate the abilities of our most able children

and encourage them to achieve at the highest level. The attitude that gifted children can cope for themselves has let down too many young people.

(Department for Education and Employment Circular 413/98)

Radnor, Koshy & Taylor (2007) maintain that the gifted and talented education initiative was at the heart of the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair's vision of a meritocratic society which concentrated virtually exclusively on an investment in cognitive ability, validating the idea of equality of opportunity and the distribution of rewards according to merit. Following the launch of the gifted and talented education policy, two further initiatives were announced: the Widening Participation policy (Blunkett, 2000) and Aim Higher (2012). Both initiatives were designed to support bright young people from low income families in raising their aspirations and entering University education.

The British government provided generous funding in order to put its policy agenda into practice and to ensure the development of strategies for meeting the needs of gifted children. For example, [within the Excellence in Cities initiative \(Department for Education and Employment, 1999\)](#) schools were given resources to extend provision for gifted and talented pupils who might have been marking time or getting bored at school. The EiC gifted and talented strand also encouraged schools to consider more carefully the variety of gifts and talents demonstrated by pupils and to find ways of ensuring that pupils realised their full potential (Ofsted, 2003). From 2003, the gifted and talented education policy was extended beyond the EiC programme to include all primary and secondary schools in all Local Authorities in England. Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators were appointed at both Local Authority and school levels to take responsibility for implementing the requirements of the policy.

In order to address the complex requirements of the gifted and talented policy, a National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) was set up in 2003 based at Warwick University. NAGTY's remit was to provide support for the top 5% of pupils nationally [aged between 11 and 18. NAGTY offered a range of opportunities for its pupil membership including summer schools, on-line discussion forums and, via collaboration with the Regional Partnerships for Gifted and Talented Education, one and two day subject workshops. NAGTY also supported teachers with professional development materials and funding for school based action research projects. After 5 years NAGTY was closed and the responsibility for the national co-ordination of the gifted and talented education programme was transferred to CfBT \(Centre for British](#)

Teachers). The remit for their Young Gifted and Talented academy was extended to the top 10% of pupils aged between 4 and 19.

The gifted and talented policy expected schools to identify a gifted and talented population, consisting of 5 to 10% of the top ability pupils within their school, and to introduce a distinct and discernibly different teaching and learning programme to address the needs of the selected groups of pupils. Schools were also expected to draw up policies outlining how their identification, provision and monitoring systems would operate and how targets would be set for these pupils with the aim of enhancing the quality of classroom teaching for more able pupils. [At the same time, schools were able to direct their pupils towards the opportunities available not only from the national providers \(NAGTY and subsequently YG&T\) but also the nine Regional Partnerships for Gifted and Talented Education \(geographically delineated according to government identified boundaries\) and the nine Excellence Hubs centred around one or more universities. The Regional Partnerships and Excellence Hubs offered enrichment programmes for gifted and talented pupils including summer schools, on-line activities and one or two day workshops led by subject experts.](#)

A national newspaper article “The Scandalous Neglect of Gifted and Talented Pupils” (The Guardian, 2010) described the government policy on gifted and talented education as “money wasted” and as a “disaster”. It outlined the succession of changes in policy, including the final decision to bring to an end the contract held by the Centre for British Teachers and to entrust the National Strategies team with the responsibility for providing national training for all teachers in both primary and secondary schools. A set of self-evaluation guidelines, the Institutional Quality Standards for Gifted and Talented Education (IQS) was circulated to all schools in England, providing a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of the school’s provision for gifted and talented pupils (Department for Education and Skills/Mouchel Parkman, 2006). Further details of the IQS framework are provided later in this paper.

[Subsequent to the IQS, a set of Classroom Quality Standards \(CQS\) for Gifted and Talented Education \(DfES, 2007\) were devised with the aim of enabling classroom practitioners to evaluate their teaching practices in relation to the quality of classroom provision for gifted and talented pupils. In-house support for teaching staff came through the appointment of a Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator and/or a Leading Teacher either within each school or within a cluster of schools. Additional](#)

support was available from advisory staff in most Local Education Authorities who also devised a set of Local Authority Quality Standards for Gifted and Talented Education (LAQs) using the draft guidelines provided by the National Strategies (2008).

Some radical changes had been announced in 2009 which precipitated major changes at a national and regional level in 2011. For example, the National Strategies team, responsible for training teachers and providing support with professional development materials, was disbanded in March 2011. At the same time, the remit for the development of national policy was subsumed within an alternative government department and the original government co-ordinating team for gifted and talented education ceased to exist. Funding for the Excellence Hubs was withdrawn in 2010 followed by the withdrawal of funding for the Regional Partnerships for Gifted and Talented education in March 2011. A government select committee conducted discussions with key players within gifted and talented education which raised concerns about the quality of what was on offer to children (House of Commons, 2010). The experts acknowledged that the gifted and talented policy had prompted some good work but at the same time, the national gifted and talented programme was also described as “inconsistent” and “incoherent” and the impact in classrooms with regard to provision was “patchy” (G&T Update, 2010). A national newspaper announced that “gifted and talented face further reform – yet again” (Maddern, 2009) and went on to express concern that provision for the “gifted and talented could be sidelined”.

By April 2011, most Local Authority advisory services for gifted and talented education had been cut altogether or subsumed within other remits. The press (Maddern, 2011) reported that since the termination of the national policy, the “fragile cottage industry” grown around gifted and talented education within Local Authorities was now dying and that it was necessary for schools to use their own, often very small, budgets to bring in external expertise to support them with classroom provision. Meanwhile, school inspections continued to monitor the effectiveness of provision for the most able pupils and the new Coalition government Schools Minister has expressed concern that a significant number of school lessons lack challenge and are “boring” for pupils (Gibb, 2011). After many rapid policy changes and rushed new developments along the way, the gifted and talented education highway arrived

at a crossroads and the possibilities for the future direction of travel were significantly reduced.

The practitioners' journey along the gifted and talented education policy highway.

This section of the paper explores the nature of the journey along the gifted and talented education highway undertaken by practitioners – Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators and teachers in state schools – who have the ultimate responsibility for making provision for higher ability students in response to government policy. In this context, practitioners include Local Education Authority advisory staff, school Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators, Leading Teachers and teachers. An analysis of policy documents over the past decade shows that schools were required to:

- Identify 5 to 10% of their pupils as gifted and talented and place them on a register (the percentage refers to each school's population).
- implement a distinct teaching and learning programme for gifted and talented pupils.

In order to make an appraisal of how schools achieved these objectives a range of sources has been analysed to explore how practitioners responded to the national gifted and talented education policy including what they perceived to be the opportunities and the challenges for their classroom practice.

Data sources

Although the gifted and talented education policy was launched over a decade ago, there is very little published research or evaluative data focussing on how schools interpreted and implemented the policy. [What follows is an exploration of some of the common themes arising from an analysis of different kinds of data sets including policy documents, teacher support materials and data from four previous research studies undertaken by the authors which have been denoted as Study A, B, C & D for ease of reference throughout this paper.](#)

[Although a small sample, Study A](#) (Radnor, Koshy & Taylor, 2007) involved in-depth interviews with Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators in secondary schools (for pupils age 12-16 years), drawn from 19 urban Local Authorities who were working on a

University intervention programme for gifted and talented students (Casey, Portman Smith & Koshy, 2011).

[Study B \(Koshy, Pinheiro-Torres & Portman Smith 2012; Koshy & Pinheiro-Torres, in press\)](#) and [Study C \(unpublished\)](#) are based on extensive data gathered by the authors over the past five years. Study B explored the views of the Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators in English primary schools (for pupils age 5-11 years) who had responsibility for addressing the requirements of the national policy. Data were gathered using questionnaires completed by a national stratified sample of 3,500 primary schools out of a total of 15,000 state schools, as well as follow-up in-depth interviews with a sample of Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators. Some of the results have been published (Koshy, Pinheiro-Torres & Portman Smith, 2012) and the rest are being analysed and prepared for publication.

Study C consisted of evidence from reflective diary-based evaluations and short interviews gathered from 1500 teachers, who participated in professional development courses offered by a teaching team led by the authors during 1999-2009 on aspects of provision for gifted pupils. In order to gauge the progress of gifted education in the UK in the past 14 years, the findings of [Study D](#) (Thomas, Casey & Koshy, 1996) carried out *prior* to the introduction of the gifted and talented policy [are used as a comparator](#). Illustrative examples of extracts from interviews, where appropriate, are used to capture the essence of teachers' thinking and the various strategies they used in order to meet the requirements of the policy.

Schools' engagement with gifted and talented education.

It may be said that teachers started their journey on the gifted education highway with enthusiasm and commitment. In general terms, [Studies A, B and C](#) showed that compared to the findings of the previous national survey of primary schools ([Study D](#)) there had been a significant shift in practice as reflected in teachers' implementation of the new policy initiative. For example, 96% of the schools which responded to [Study B](#), said they identified and kept a record of their gifted and talented pupils and 90% had a written school policy for gifted and talented education. This contrasts to only 32% of schools keeping records of their 'able' or having a policy for teaching gifted and talented pupils in the earlier [Study D \(1996\)](#). 67% of the respondents in [Studies B and C](#) also said that they had access to a school-based leader to consult on gifted and talented issues and 84% had attended some sort of nationally funded short training course compared to less than 15% of schools having

a school-based co-ordinator and just 20% having attended any training on gifted education in [Study D](#). The more recent [Studies A-C](#) highlighted that schools were responding to policy recommendations with a higher degree of commitment and perseverance since the introduction of the national gifted and talented policy and that teachers were moving along the gifted and talented education policy highway with a degree of enthusiasm.

[One of the positive outcomes of the introduction of the gifted and talented policy was that it provided a framework for schools to select and support socially and economically disadvantaged bright pupils as well as those pupils who had potential for high achievement.](#) Interventions to support such students included activities [provided by universities as part of their Widening Participation \(WP\) remit which aimed to address the under-representation of particular groups in Higher Education.](#) WP provision for pupils ranged from local and university-based summer schools to university visits, talks from university admission tutors and professional organisations. According to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2009 report, more students from socially deprived areas were joining University education. Membership of the gifted and talented register also provided pupils from areas of deprivation with access to the Aim Higher initiative (Aim Higher, 2012) which was launched in 2002 with the aim of raising pupils' achievement and aspirations through outreach activities. The opportunities provided by these two initiatives are set to continue with support from the UK Coalition government via a system of targeted funding for access to Universities and the professions for pupils from poorer areas.

The next section of this paper considers how the two main strands of the gifted and talented education policy were addressed by schools under the following two [internationally applicable](#) headings: Identifying gifted and talented pupils and practical provision for gifted and talented students. [Extracts from in-depth individual interviews with gifted and talented co-ordinators will be presented. The interviews were designed to probe key areas and gain detailed insights into the co-ordinators' perspectives as it was felt that participants](#) were more likely to share their personal views and practices during face to face interviews. The interviews were completed with 14 gifted and talented co-ordinators and lasted between 42 minutes and 60 minutes. All of the interviews were transcribed and shared with the interviewees. A picture of the teachers' own beliefs and conceptions of giftedness and talent will be constructed from the evidence presented.

Identifying gifted and talented pupils

Although the majority of school co-ordinators were making efforts to create registers of gifted and talented students, some aspects relating to the identification of gifted and talented pupils remained as the most challenging for schools and presented serious barriers along the gifted education policy highway. Nevertheless, many of the practitioners felt that the government policy had helped them to focus on a neglected group of high ability children.

There were some class teachers and co-ordinators who considered that being forced to identify groups as gifted and talented had benefits although they disliked the labelling aspect of the process, as reported by one secondary school co-ordinator:

The official view has made people wake up, to look and to consider the more able students and although I don't particularly like the terminology of "gifted and talented" if it makes people think about who the able students are, I don't think it really matters what the terminology is.

12 out of the 14 primary school gifted and talented co-ordinators interviewed were mainly positive about the focus on the needs of the "more able" children (terminology mostly used by the co-ordinators) although they had misgivings about the processes and procedures that they were expected to follow in implementing the policy.

One co-ordinator explained:

It is about time we started thinking about our higher ability children; I would say that they have been largely neglected, say, with the pressure on pushing children at the lower end to achieve at least average levels in the national tests and get a higher position in the schools' league tables. Children have very special talents and these need to be spotted and developed. I would say that the problem has been the elitist connotations of having to produce a "gifted and talented" group, not about having to make provision for bright children

Among those who made positive comments about the introduction of the national policy was one Head Teacher, Keith, who had responsibility for the gifted and talented policy in his school and who felt that the policy was a positive thing as it meant teachers "were accountable for the progress of all pupils". This was thought to

be especially important for his school which was situated in a socially deprived area in the South West of England. Keith explained:

This is because we take the children in our school that no one else wants. We're a town school where all the children can walk to, but around us there are 5 village primary schools which are all the way through from 3-11, so we tend to get the children that no one else wants, or can't get into a leafy village school. We need to show that we too have very bright children in the school and that we look after them.

Difficulties with the terminology of “gifted and talented”.

Studies A-C found that teachers' attitudes to using the terms gifted and talented had not changed much since the earlier Study D when 86% of teachers felt uncomfortable about labelling children as gifted. Study B showed that there was still considerable unease felt (62% of respondents) about labelling children as gifted and that they preferred the use of *more able* to describe these pupils. One problem highlighted by the teachers was that the definitions provided within English national policy created serious barriers for them. The government definition of the phrase *gifted and talented* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) clustered the two terms *gifted* and *talented* together with an explanation that *gifted* describes learners who have the ability to excel academically in one or more subjects such as English, drama, technology whilst *talented* describes learners who have the ability to excel in practical skills such as sport, leadership, artistic performance, or in an applied skill. This confused practitioners and Study B provided evidence that 78% of schools did not keep separate registers for those students deemed *gifted* and those identified as *talented* as teachers found it difficult to identify and create a register using the policy document definition. One question the definition raised was whether it meant that students who were good in academic areas such as Mathematics and English also had to be good at creative or physical subjects if they were to be included in the register. Many teachers felt that children who displayed exceptional abilities in the creative and physical areas were excluded altogether from the registers. The problem was inherent to the national policy definition which implied that the gifted and the talented consisted of two disjointed sets which required separate sets of criteria for membership which, in turn, made the teachers' task of selection challenging.

The issue of identification of a cohort of children, consisting of 5 to 10% of each annual intake into a school in order to place them on a gifted and talented register posed the greatest challenge to the teaching profession and to the schools involved in [Studies A-C](#). This had already been highlighted by the School Inspectorate in their evaluation of the gifted and talented strand of the Excellence in Cities programme, (Office for Standards in Education, 2001) which described identification issues as presenting the most concern for schools. Similarly, Eyre (2001) maintained that although the gifted and talented programme had enjoyed a good deal of success in raising awareness of the need for enhanced curriculum provision, the identification of a gifted and talented pupil cohort had proved to be problematic.

Significantly, in a government commissioned report published just before the launch of the gifted and talented policy, Freeman (1998) had used the title “Educating the Very Able”. In her report she throws some light on the nature of the complexity by stating that there are over 100 definitions to describe these pupils such as *very able*, *high ability* and the *troublesome word gifted* but she goes on to acknowledge that as almost all international researchers use the term gifted *it would be verging on the deviant to avoid using it*. [Study A](#) found that many teachers had philosophical difficulties with aligning themselves to a policy which labels children as gifted and talented and making special provision for them. The same study showed that an elitist conception of the label made some co-ordinators anxious. Stefani, a Local Education Authority adviser observed:

I think many teachers feel it is elitist in that perceptions are that you are going to be targeting already privileged children who are your more able children. This is an elitist argument because more able children are coming from more privileged backgrounds and it seems to be about giving more to those who already have a lot

Amanda, a secondary school teacher of a Year 7 class (12 years old) articulated her concern about the implications of labelling pupils:

I am reluctant to make a list of gifted and talented children and give it to our gifted and talented co-ordinator and publish it to the parents, because that seems so final and fixed. I cannot make that kind of decision which may affect some children's perceptions of themselves and may affect their whole future. The percentage divide makes it even more difficult. How do you select 5 – 10% as gifted - as if the concept is uniform in all the schools in this Local Education Authority? A comment from one of my students made me feel particularly uncomfortable. Darren, my student, asked me why he was not

being included in the gifted and talented group. He said he was puzzled because he was in the gifted and talented group in his primary school. He wanted to know whether children could be de-gifted after a while.

Similar views were expressed by other pupils as reported by their teachers, for example, Charlie, a 13 year old pupil with an excellent record of achievement in Sports but who was not listed as gifted and talented had this to say:

I don't understand this. I mean how to get picked for the gifted and talented group. In my class all the gifted and talented group went to the science museum. I would have liked to have gone with them and I think I am gifted in sports. I have won 13 medals and have loads of certificates. No one seems to think I am gifted or talented.

Using tests for the selection of gifted and talented children.

Study B found that the predominant method of identification used by the teachers in their national sample, was based on national or school test results. 96% of the respondents said that they used the national Key Stage 1 test results (test taken at the age of 7) to help to identify their gifted and talented children. This raises many questions, firstly, since teachers were aware of the complexity and fallibility of the selection process, was it possible that they had decided to use the national tests (part of the government's monitoring system for assessing the performance of children in schools) as a self-protection mechanism? It is possible that teachers had not been made aware that by over-reliance on test results they risked excluding children with creative abilities and those with a lack of motivation or disabilities from membership of the gifted and talented cohort. There is extensive research literature which has shown that traditional testing which assesses *school house giftedness* (Renzulli, 2005) often overlooks potential ability (Gardner, 1993; Sternberg, 2000). VanTassel-Baska (2005) highlights the fact that in the USA, where gifted education has been established for several decades, giftedness is assessed using a combination of approaches including student portfolios, performance-based assessments, subject criteria and teacher assessment *alongside* tests.

Pragmatic strategies for generating a register of gifted and talented pupils.

In Studies B and C there was evidence that many of the practitioners were interpreting the expectations of the policy pragmatically. One school co-ordinator told us:

We just ignore the definition and the requirement of placing children on a gifted and talented register. The difficulty is that it is highly unlikely in my experience to have children who excel in all subjects and especially both in academic and practical subjects. The government definition does not work in practice. What we tend to do is to have a register, but only for inspection purposes and to think of practical ways of identifying the strengths of all children.

Other teachers were also not happy to use the terms gifted and talented globally to describe pupils. Most had decided to ignore the policy requirement of making a percentage list of gifted and talented pupils and opted to use a strategy which focused on recording individual pupil's specific abilities and interests in different areas.

Nick, a deputy head teacher of a high attaining school, explained his school's response to keeping a register:

Ours is not really a gifted and talented register as such. It is a list of children and what particular abilities they have so that we can flag up opportunities for them, in terms of enrichment and take account of these in planning lessons for them. It makes sense to follow this procedure as our curriculum is taught in discrete subjects and I don't think any child is globally gifted.

Another aspect which generated lengthy discussions from the teachers was the issue of sharing the gifted and talented register with the parents of the pupils. Responses to the questionnaires in Study B showed that 42% of the schools shared their list of gifted and talented pupils with parents. However, the interviews in Study C showed a very different story. All but one of the 14 schools were reluctant to share the names on the gifted and talented register with parents. The difficulty was articulated by Nick from a high achieving school:

Sometimes there will be unrealistic expectations, which cannot always be met, um, because parents will assume if their children are in our particular

school they will therefore be at that level of giftedness, um, and some will articulate that and say so, and be rather surprised when they're not. Another reason is that if you tell one family that their child is on the register, parents will talk and they'll say why isn't mine? That's the reason. I'm not sure that's a good reason, and I'm glad we keep it confidential.

Practical provision for gifted and talented pupils

Making appropriate provision for gifted and talented pupils seemed to be the most uncomfortable and uncertain part of the journey for practitioners along the gifted education policy highway. Studies A-D included an equal number of questions focusing on the selection of gifted and talented pupils and the nature of provision for them but the level of responses to these two aspects differed significantly. Whilst the comments elicited from the teachers on the items in relation to the selection of pupils were strong and fulsome, the items that explored the nature of practical provision prompted only short responses or long silences. The concerns raised by Gwen, a primary school teacher, were representative:

I think there has been too much emphasis on identification and listing of children as gifted and talented and very little focus on what we should be doing with them which would have been useful. A half-day's training programme is far too short for something so complex as this.

Participants were invited to share their strategies for teaching the gifted and talented pupils in their school and in the questionnaires in Studies B and C, they were given options to select from a list of strategies which are commonly found in the international literature. The following section presents a list of the strategies identified by the participating schools.

Using acceleration as a teaching strategy.

None of the participating primary schools adopted acceleration as a teaching strategy for their gifted and talented pupils neither in terms of early entry or grade-skipping. One of the strategies used for providing advanced content knowledge was to import teaching materials from the next level of the National Curriculum in order to make provision for the gifted and talented pupils. The interviews in Study C also highlighted

that this kind of provision was predominantly offered in mathematics. Mike, a primary school co-ordinator, explained:

In the absence of any specific guidance, we resort to our own strategies. One way we are doing this is to use materials from secondary school text books. I know this is not ideal but the material is much harder and will keep them busy. I use commercially produced materials too; these are mainly – almost exclusively – again, in maths. In fact I haven't seen any suitable materials in any other subjects.

In the secondary schools, brighter pupils are quite often entered for some of their subject GCSEs (16 plus public examination) one or two years early as a strategy to release pressure on pupils by reducing the number of GCSE subjects taken during the same examination time-frame. Although the term *acceleration* was not often used by teachers, many schools do provide accelerated content for their higher ability pupils as well as early entry to some examinations. Interestingly, the term *acceleration* was most commonly used by teachers to reveal an apparent consensus that it was socially and emotionally damaging to children. Given that research carried out by Kulik (2004) and Rogers (2004) sends strong messages about the effectiveness of acceleration as an education strategy, it appeared that the different models and outcomes of acceleration as a strategy for making provision for gifted and talented pupils had not yet received serious consideration in English schools. Colangelo and Assouline (2009) encourage colleagues everywhere to analyse their own acceleration practices and hope that acceleration will no longer carry the burden of ambiguity and misunderstandings but instead be seen as an effective curricular intervention for gifted students as evidenced from a robust research base.

Teaching approaches in the classroom.

In Studies B and C, the responses to the interview schedule question inviting teachers to share their teaching strategies for the gifted and talented pupils, suggested that teachers were experimenting with whatever was available without necessarily considering the suitability of such strategies! For example, one teacher explained:

We have done thinking skills, mind-mapping, brain gym, accelerated learning and we are about to look at some other programmes next year.

When asked how these approaches were used for planning for the gifted and talented group the reply was illuminating:

I don't really know. They were all that was on offer and they sounded good.

Studies B and C also invited co-ordinators to share their thinking with regard to the usefulness of the Institutional Quality Standards (Department for Education and Skills, 2006) as a set of guidelines for evaluating the school's gifted and talented practice. The IQS User Guide (Mouchel Parkman, 2005) delineates the 14 elements of the Quality Standards which dovetail with 5 Personalised Education components (A-E) as follows:

A. Effective Teaching and Learning Strategies

1. Identification
2. Effective Provision in the Classroom
3. Standards

B. Enabling Curriculum Entitlement and Choice

4. Enabling Curriculum Entitlement and Choice

C. Assessment for Learning

5. Assessment for Learning
6. Transfer and Transition

D. School Organisation

7. Leadership
8. Policy
9. School/College Ethos and Pastoral Care
10. Staff Development
11. Resources
12. Monitoring and Evaluation

E. Strong Partnership beyond the School

13. Engaging with the Community, Families and Beyond
14. Learning beyond the Classroom

Schools can evaluate their performance under three levels of practice within the IQS. Level 1 is an '**Entry**' level which indicates a baseline standard of practice with scope for improvement. Level 2 is described as '**Developing**' which indicates that the school is effective in meeting pupils' needs and has scope within its practice for

reinforcement, development and further improvement whilst Level 3 describes ‘**Exemplary**’ performance and indicates exceptional and sustained practice.

Only 3 out of the 14 co-ordinators interviewed during Study C had any knowledge of the availability of the IQS, but the authors were still interested in finding out more about the three co-ordinators’ views and their level of understanding of its content. Two of the co-ordinators had actually used the IQS and considered them useful as a framework. Overall, it was felt that the document was ‘inaccessible’ and was simply stating what high quality provision should be. One co-ordinator argued that the IQS were “too wordy and long-winded” and another described the standards as a “meaningless list of idealistic rhetoric”. Primary school co-ordinator, Jane, commented:

I think they’re what we aspire to. There’s certainly something that you can check and look and see what you’re up against. It’s just, let’s be honest, there’s only so much you can read and take in and work with at one time. I am interested to know where the content of these documents came from, what research or evaluation was it based on?

It was generally felt that guidance materials such as the IQS were not useful unless good professional development with practical workshops was also available to support their implementation. During the interviews, 8 of the 14 co-ordinators spoke about their own professional development with regards to gifted and talented education. They stated that the majority of training time was concerned with IQS 1 (identification) leaving them feeling overwhelmed by the other elements. Classroom strategies were not part of most of the training sessions. Three of the co-ordinators suggested they would have preferred a far simpler document which listed the main requirements and gave more guidance with worked examples on to how to actually achieve the standards.

Curriculum enrichment sessions.

When asked about curriculum provision for their gifted and talented pupils, it became apparent that the main opportunities consisted of withdrawing pupils from the classroom for outings and special activities as well as extra-curricular clubs.

Joanne, from one primary school explained:

We've had like a couple of days out. We've had some expert people in, um, thinking of next term we are getting a G&T maths club up and running, maybe at lunchtime or after school or something. We've had...um, we have had, I'm trying to think who they were, we had, I think a maths lady that came in and did some G&T bits a kind of workshop, um, we had a maths puzzle people in, they were actually at another school nearby first of all, and we took some of our gifted and talented children over to that school where they had other children from other schools also working too.

In common with four other co-ordinators, Jane described her school's approach:

I bring them out of the class when they are not doing anything special within the classroom, so it's sort of like a withdrawal thing, so for them it feels quite special to come out and do something with somebody totally different. I use 'brain boxes' or something and, yes I've just been doing the philosophy for children with them, with a local adviser's help

The co-ordinators' highlighted that one of the most common strategies for making differentiated provision for gifted and talented pupils in secondary schools was to ensure the availability of enrichment opportunities. These consisted of master classes, University-based interventions, museum visits and setting up of various out-of-school extra-curricular clubs. It should be noted that in two early national evaluations of what was being offered to gifted and talented pupils, School Inspectors (Office for Standards in Education, 2001, 2003) reported that more attention needed to be given to enhancing the impact of *classroom provision*. The latter of the two reports (Office for Standards in Education, 2003, p55) stated that the additional work planned for gifted and talented pupils was often "inadequately planned so that pupils were given simply more work rather than more challenging work". Concern was also raised by the inspectors about the lack of co-ordination between the enrichment activities offered to pupils outside the classroom and the curriculum provision within the classroom. [Study C confirmed that](#) very little seemed to have changed since 2003.

Grouping pupils into ability sets.

Both secondary and primary schools used grouping or setting pupils by ability as a strategy for providing differentiated content and teaching although some schools adopted flexible grouping strategies for some subjects. Gifted and talented children were often taught in what is described as 'top sets'. However, setting was only available in the core subjects, mostly for Mathematics in primary schools and for Mathematics, English and Science in secondary schools.

Practitioners' beliefs and attitudes

Over the past few decades there have been many debates about the different definitions and conceptions of giftedness and talent. In [Studies B and C](#), practitioners were asked about their image and conceptions of gifted and talented pupils. The research team felt that the attitudes and beliefs of the people who teach these pupils would influence the way they both identify and make provision for them. Many of the practitioners held stereotypical images of gifted and talented pupils as can be seen in the following comments:

*My image of one with glasses, nerdy. Not popular with other children.
I suppose you could say like the little mad professor... they are different from the other children.*

I think of a child who should be doing GCSEs at eight years old instead of at 16. We don't have many of them in our school to put the effort in to plan for them, for that exclusive group, if you ask me. We have 30 other children in the class.

A very rare person, a true genius, an Einstein.

These responses representing a conception that gifted pupils are 'rare' may have contributed to the hostility demonstrated by practitioners towards labelling and creating exclusive gifted and talented cohorts of pupils in their schools.

Many of the practitioners seemed to have resolved their [unease](#) about labelling pupils as gifted or talented in a global sense by listing the specific attributes and talents of *all* pupils. They were prudent in using subject-specific criteria for identifying

their gifted and talented pupils instead of following policy requirements blindly. After all, schools are organised to teach different subjects and there is strong support for the existence of domain-specific intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1993; VanTassel-Baska, 1998, 2005).

Instead of using what is described as a mystery model which considers gifted pupils as special and superior to others in an innate, categorical, global way, the adoption of a “Mastery” model leading to a simple, practical, education-based definition of giftedness (Matthews & Foster, 2009) may be more acceptable to teachers in English schools. The Mastery model defines giftedness as exceptionally advanced subject - specific ability at a particular point in time such that a pupil’s learning needs cannot be well met without significant modification of the curriculum. [The teachers in England seemed to be trying to use the Matthew and Foster’s \(2008\) model.](#) At the same time, based on the responses to several of the research questions in [Studies A-C](#), the practitioners [were reflecting](#) Borland’s view (2005) that we should focus on gifted education rather than on the concept of gifted children.

One factor which teachers needed to confront in selecting and keeping a register of gifted and talented pupils was their own awareness of the fallibility of the process of identification. They were reluctant to accept an *absolute* and *inflexible* view of ability and instead, their views [reflected](#) Sternberg’s (2000) stance that gifts and talents should not be viewed as fixed but as *developing expertise*. Sternberg maintains that gifted individuals continually need to be developing the kinds of expertise that render them gifted and that if they do not, they stop being identified as gifted or become *gifted has-beens*. It would seem that the practitioners in England would feel more at ease with this vision of giftedness and talent. At the same time, practitioners in English schools have also been particularly influenced by Gardner’s (1983, 1993) concept of Multiple Intelligences and Renzulli’s (2005) emphasis on creativity and task-commitment for the realisation of giftedness and talent alongside Van Tassel-Baska’s models for practical provision in the classroom (2005).

Arriving at the crossroads.

Overall, practitioners in English schools embraced the need to travel along the gifted education policy highway and did so with enthusiasm and commitment despite the obstacles of terminology and a lack of supportive professional development for

particular aspects of the journey. Practitioners reported that sufficient support was not being provided to help them deliver a distinct teaching programme for their gifted and talented pupils. [And so, teachers had arrived at a crossroads whereby funding for support mechanisms at national and regional level had been withdrawn \(not only for teachers' professional development but also for pupil outreach activities\) yet the gifted and talented policy expectations were still on the agenda for school inspections. Teachers needed to identify new directions for their continuing professional development in order to enhance their understanding of effective approaches classroom provision for their gifted and talented pupils.](#)

Discussion

In general, the introduction of the gifted and talented education policy initiative in England has been a welcome development despite the complex questions it raises in its practical application. From the authors' experience of working with policy makers, teachers and higher ability children, the existence of a central government policy has created a real opportunity to continue with a dialogue about giftedness and how it can be actualized. This has been of particular significance within the context of many inner-city schools where the authors found particular resistance from many teachers to the concept of talent recognition [as evidenced in comments from Studies B and C](#), for example, "we don't have any gifted pupils in our schools"; "they go to schools in more affluent areas or to independent or selective schools". However, the idea of identifying 5 to 10% of students in every school and labelling them as *gifted and talented* has created tension amongst some practitioners who found the process of identification and selection particularly challenging. Perhaps raising teachers' awareness of the more recent developments in redefining the concept of giftedness as *emerging* rather than being a *fixed state* and the view of giftedness and talent as *domain-specific* would ease their concerns at the same time as offering some practical support and redirection for practitioners.

So what are the ways forward? We propose two strategies within the English context [but which may have international resonance](#) for enhancing provision for gifted and talented pupils. First is the need for a greater level of professional development than there is at present [in relation to curriculum provision](#). Ultimately, the quality of what is offered to these pupils will to a great extent depend on the teachers' own level of understanding and expertise. There is a need for practitioners to construct their own

understanding of the key issues on the basis of authoritative research-based foundations. Teachers need to create their own intelligible map of the different conceptions of ability and apply their own understanding to their practice. It is only by engaging in debates and discussion about different models and approaches to provision and how these relate to their own contexts that teachers can make a significant contribution to the new and challenging task of educating our most able pupils. [Teachers undertaking classroom based action research to explore the applicability of established models \(for example, Gardner, 1983, 1993; Koshy, Mitchell & Williams, 2006; Renzulli, 2005; Sternberg, 2005; vanTassel- Baska, 2005\) in their own setting would be one means of empowering teachers to feel more confident in gifted and talented educational provision.](#)

The second area of concern is the need for [large scale, longitudinal](#) research carried out within the [English](#) educational context. At present, there is only a very small body of research available for practitioners to draw on. One of the areas that needs investigation is the effectiveness of alternative approaches in relation to curriculum provision. It is only right that pupils are not subjected to models of provision which have been not tried and evaluated. [Consulting with pupils and utilising the well established body of pupil or student voice in gifted and talented education research as a springboard for further research and evaluation would be one option \(Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Robinson, 2006; Rudduck, Brown & Hendy, 2006; South West Gifted and Talented Education, 2009\).](#)

Twelve years ago, Monks, Heller & Passow (2000) in *The International Handbook of Giftedness and Talent* highlighted a basic problem in building a theory about giftedness because it is a multi-faceted phenomenon. They asked whether a single theory could account for the appearance of precocity in 4-year olds who play chess or who write publishable poems or 10-year olds who are concert performers or children who perform well in academic tasks or school age children who develop patentable inventions. Practitioners in England are trying to construct their own [theories of what works, based on practice, for example, moving beyond a generic labelling of giftedness and embracing domain or subject specific identification and provision \(Van Tassel-Baska, 2005\).](#) Having begun the journey along the gifted and talented education policy highway, practitioners in England find themselves at a crossroads whereby central government policy has been abandoned in relation to direct funding and support yet schools are still expected to provide School Inspectors with evidence of appropriate provision for their higher ability students. One route

forward would be to take a stand against the former pace of rapid change in gifted and talented education and take a fresh look at some of the established guidance alongside the emergent classroom practice with a view to generating some hypotheses and pursuing some sustained school-based development and research.

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