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'Gifted and Talented': a label too far?

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ABSTRACT 'Gifted and talented' has become the official way of referring to high-achieving, able school pupils. The author questions the validity and appropriateness of this label and calls for a more sophisticated and inclusive framework.

The notion of a child being 'gifted and talented', popularised in recent years in Government policy and the resulting discourse and practice of teachers and others, can be seen as one manifestation amongst many of a harmful obsession with categorising and labelling children according to socially and culturally determined concepts (Hart et al, 2004). Yet the idea that such pupils exist, together with a search for clarity about the kind of curriculum and teaching which might be appropriate for them, has long been claimed, often as part of professional and parental efforts to enhance their educational provision.

A range of terminology for this perceived pupil group has been used over the years. Government and professional literature over the last three decades has 'able', 'highly able', 'very able' and 'exceptionally able'; 'gifted' on its own has been common too. Barry Teare claimed to an ultimately influential House of Commons Select Committee 'some 120 definitions and titles used worldwide' (House of Commons… 1999, p. 66). Professor Joan Freeman indicated similarly: 'Perhaps 100', and highlighted one of the reasons for the variety: 'The way a very able child is defined depends on what is being looked for' (House of Commons… 1999, p. 2). The terminological dilemma remains, fuelled perhaps by desire to reach multiple audiences, for example 'able, gifted and talented' (Bates & Munday, 2005; Montgomery, 2009).

Despite (or because of) this variety, recent official and professional usage has been more uniform: the two-stranded 'gifted and talented', adopted in the Government's 'Excellence in Cities' programme of a decade ago (Ofsted, 2001), reinforced in a national strategy for the education of such pupils (Dracup, 2003), and continuing as standard, official educational parlance (Young, Gifted

& Talented 2009). The term (particularly its 'gifted' half) has long-standing popularity in American academic literature (e.g. Reis & Renzulli, 1991), but is used more guardedly by academia in the UK (e.g. Bailey et al, 2008).

There are varying interpretations of what the two strands of the 'gifted and talented' label mean individually. Sophisticated scrutiny was made by Gagné (1985), who, in noting the 'conceptual ambiguity of giftedness and talent' (p. 80), argued that 'giftedness' is associated with 'domains' of ability which foster and explain exceptional performance in varied 'fields' of activities, i.e. 'talents'. Therefore one can be gifted (have exceptional ability) without being talented (showing exceptional performance) but not *vice versa*.

The definition in the Government's 'Excellence in Cities' programme was much simpler and more pragmatic. 'Gifted' was equated with academic ability; 'talented' with vocational. This dual designation remains in use (DCSF, 2009), and forms the basis for localised identification of gifted and talented pupils, advocated under England's 'National Programme for Gifted and Talented Education' (Dracup, 2008). This system obliges all schools to identify around five or ten per cent of pupils as 'gifted and talented' (two thirds of these 'gifted', one third of them 'talented' according to Ofsted, 2001), and is meant to ensure that differentiation of learning for more able pupils is a concern and responsibility of all schools, not just those with the most able of pupils nationally. It also encourages selection of pupils for discrete, out-of-school gifted-and-talented programmes from a range of schools, not just from those with high numbers of the most able learners.

Yet in educational contexts, 'gifted and talented' is a curious term. It appears rather crudely to stand at the other end of an ability spectrum to the term 'special educational needs' (SEN), leaving a rather amorphous proportion of pupils, largely unlabelled – although Renzulli (1975) wrote of 'average learners' (p. 327); Winstanley (2006) of 'conventional pupils' (p. 38) – in between. This is erroneous of course, not least because there is no reason why a pupil with special educational needs – a need for behavioural support, an enhanced physical environment, or other special resource – may not also be high-achieving and thoroughly deserving of a gifted and talented label (Montgomery, 2003).

Contrast with the SEN term is nevertheless informative. The origins of this phrase are in Warnock's famous tripartite delineation of special educational needs as the need for 'one or more of the following … modification of the physical environment or specialist teaching techniques … a special or modified curriculum …[and] attention to the social structure and emotional climate in which educational takes place' (Committee of Enquiry… 1978, Section 3:19). The more recent SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) muddled this focus on need, combining in its definition the nature of the child ('…if they have a learning difficulty…') with what that pupil requires, extra to and above that which is normally provided in schools ('…which calls for special educational provision to be made for them') (Section 1:3). Sadly now, in practical usage, the important perspective of 'need' has all but been lost, and even the writing of

academic commentators invariably gives the impression that 'special educational needs' relate solely to the child's difficulties or disabilities – 'Young people in this group had a range of special educational needs including communication and interaction difficulties and cognition and learning disabilities' (Keil, Miller & Cobb 2006, p. 170) – rather than what he or she might require in the way of social adaptation and additional support. In principle the SEN term should be indicative of a continuum of socially determined *need*, from minor and temporary to extensive and continuous – needs which should be responded to, by teachers and others, and not the nature or level of learners' abilities or disabilities *per se*.

The 'gifted and talented' term, however, refers directly and unashamedly to the perceived nature of the learners themselves. It carries no implication of need, nor the suggestion of a continuum or of the possibility of temporary status – only a learner's inherent and undeviating condition.

A 'gift' is something granted rather than gained, in relation to children something conferred at birth or during upbringing. A 'talent' is something for which there seems to be no clear origin or cause – it is mysteriously present, derived (one can only surmise) from ancestry, deity or fate. Neither suggests children have worked harder, had more parental support, enjoyed a stimulating environment or had competent teachers. Bias is very much towards nature, rather than nurture as their source.

Moreover, the qualities of giftedness and 'talent-ness' seem ingrained and unchanging, rather than developing, shifting and impermanent. The child itself is 'gifted' or is 'talented' or is both – is, was and (it seems) always will be. If, that is, we can see it – for while certain attributes may be present, they may also be difficult to perceive. We can spot them if we look hard enough – the so-called 'identification' of gifted and talented pupils, much advocated by the official literature (e.g. DCSF, 2008) and another example of the bias towards nature in common educational discourse. Given that pupils are chosen from whole cohorts on the basis of factors designed and determined primarily by those controlling or coordinating the provision, the term 'selection' may be seen as a more accurate articulation of what in fact takes place (Lambert, 2009).

'Gifted and talented' does little to foreground teaching or learning in the educational process. It refers not to levels of learning or achievement (as would 'high achievers' or 'high attainers'), nor to potential for rapid or extensive learning ('learners with potential for high achievement'). It does not indicate needs for differentiated or distinctive provision or that the affected learners may need support to make the most of their education ('learners with advanced educational needs').

Neither of the two strands of the term sound like a deficit or liability, or indeed anything unwelcome (who would refuse a 'gift'?). On the contrary, they imply distinct advantage and benefit – by intimation it is others, the 'non-gifted' and 'non-talented', the 'average', 'conventional' and the even less-so, who have the deficit. This aspect may of course be felt by the teacher, particularly non-

specialist teachers in primary schools, who are easily cast as a result in a dependent, even inferior position.

Neither does the term encourage teachers to adopt strong and active roles in the instruction of their most rapid learners, or indeed of those who might, with hard and imaginative work, achieve this status. The term can be seen as part of pathological view which sees ability as intrinsic to the whole essence of an individual, either as a debit or a benefit. If it is (as it sounds) a benefit, why – and how – should teachers do a great deal about it? Overall the term does teachers and pupils few favours. As Fletcher-Campbell (2003) so pertinently confessed: 'There is something odd being confronted with a group of 14-year-old students who solemnly tell you that they are 'gifted and talented'' (p. 4).

No doubt many pupils (and their parents) gain satisfaction and self-esteem from allocation of the term (what happens if it has to be taken away again is another matter). There may be other advantages, the following adapted from Ho's (2004) examination of the labelling of pupils with learning disabilities: it may help children, parents and teachers to understand the educational needs of some pupils; may help to secure specialised help for them; may help teachers to segregate and group pupils together for economies of scale; and may establish eligibility for extra educational opportunities, for instance those offered outside the normal school day.

We should however recognise that despite the benign nature of the label, difficulties apply, in particular those of misconception, generalisation and over-reliance. Labels are not objective truths, but are useful or less useful ideas constructed by professionals (Gillman et al, 2000). They may lead to 'oversight of the contradictions and complexities of … lives' (Asher, 2001, p. 76). 'Labels which appear benevolent, positive, and affirming can be seductive even for those labelled, and thus present subtler challenges' (Asher, 2001, p. 76); 'High achievers have the right to be stretched just as much as anyone else. But if we're not careful, the language of G and T can lead us astray' (Claxton, 2005, quoted in McLure, 2006, p. 73).

As Hart et al (2004) pointed out, no labelling is problem-free, and in a system dependent on categorisation of pupil groups for its data- and standards-driven approach, it is hard to see what the alternatives to 'gifted and talented' might be. Other options may be just as critically deconstructed, and as Freeman (1998) stated in her international review, the term 'gifted' is so commonly used 'it would be verging on the deviant to avoid using it' (p. 1). Ultimately the problem may be conceptually much more deep-seated: the finality and absoluteness implied in English by the concept of 'ability' has been highlighted by Alexander (2005), and this – so evident in the 'gifted and talented' label – may be what hinders more flexible, inclusive and potential-oriented views of learning processes most of all.

Educationalists should, at the very least, be keenly aware that the gifted and talented label is a gross, misleading over-simplification of learners' abilities and potential. There are many other differences between learners which find no place in this, or indeed in other categorisations – personality, background,

preference and propensity among them. More important too may be differences in the social environment of learning – the cultural context, the physical environment, the teacher's perspective – which influence (or determine) how any pupil responds to and is or is not challenged by the teaching and learning process at any one time. We might also take the perspective of Simon (1981) that '...to start from the standpoint of individual differences is to start from the wrong position' (p. 141). This perspective sees the similarities between children as greater and of more importance than the differences between them – collective pedagogies should therefore be the basis of our thinking, rather than an immediate rush to separate pupils conceptually from each other.

Only closer awareness and understanding of the qualities which pupils share, the diversity and fluidity of their differences, and their interaction within the social and cultural context of their learning, can lead to a less divisive and educationally positive approach for each and every learner. Fletcher-Campbell (2003) summed it up well:

'It can be argued that if we are clear about the curriculum and have an intimate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the vast resource represented by the pupil group, then categorisations such as 'gifted and talented' and 'special educational needs' pale into insignificance ... A more fruitful way forward is to consider how the specialness can be embodied in all activities, using the widest repertoire at our disposal, developing through constant sharing of practice and reflection and whether the enhancement, whatever it looks like, ought not to apply to all pupils (p. 5).

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