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## **Are we being de-gifted Miss?' Primary School Gifted and Talented Co-ordinators' responses to the Gifted and Talented Education Policy in England.**

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### **Abstract**

*Over a decade ago the UK Government launched its gifted and talented education policy in England yet there has been very little published research which considers how schools and teachers are interpreting and implementing the policy. By seeking the views of the gifted and talented co-ordinators\*<sup>1</sup> with responsibility for addressing the requirements of the policy, the study reported in this paper explored how primary schools in England responded to the policy. Drawing on data gathered using questionnaires with a national sample of primary schools as well as follow-up in-depth interviews with a sample of G&T co-ordinators, the authors report their findings. The study found that there was considerable unease about the concept of identifying and 'labelling' a group of pupils as 'gifted and talented'. G&T co-ordinators found it difficult to interpret the policy requirements and were responding pragmatically to what they considered to be required by the government. Curriculum provision for the selected group of gifted and talented pupils was patchy. The paper concludes by identifying a need for further professional development for teachers and by challenging the policy's over-emphasis on identifying and labelling gifted and talented pupils. We posit whether the gifted and talented education policy would have been better introduced and enjoyed greater success by leaving the identification of pupils to one side and by placing greater emphasis on developing effective learning and teaching strategies instead.*

Key words: Gifted education, policy, implementation, teachers

*\*1 For ease of reference, the term gifted and talented (G&T) co-ordinator is used throughout the paper as a generic shorthand for the research participants who were either designated school gifted and talented co-ordinators or teachers or head teachers with responsibility for policy implementation.*

## **Introduction**

'Are we being de-gifted, Miss?' enquires Adrian, a year 5 pupil (age 10), concerned that his future membership of the gifted and talented group in his school might be cancelled during a process of 'de-gifting' him. The first author, who regularly works with children and teachers in schools, heard Adrian talking to his teacher about his concern which eloquently highlights the possible consequences of what many teachers currently perceive to be policy abandonment. Adrian's query sets this paper in a policy context. Over the past ten years, the policy for gifted and talented education (DfEE, 1999) in England has generated lists of gifted and talented pupils in state schools. In response to the government's policy requirements, Adrian's school maintained a register of those pupils deemed gifted and talented. Adrian was amongst those pupils listed and he was considering the possibility of becoming 'de-gifted' in the light of a newspaper article (Maddern, 2009) that he had brought into school. The newspaper article discussed the uncertain future for the gifted and talented initiative, the successive changes to the policy and the possibility that provision for gifted and talented pupils could be sidelined. Adrian's teacher, who was aware of the changes and uncertainties, reassured Adrian that he will '*always be gifted*', a smile returned to Adrian's face and classroom life continued. The teacher's response to Adrian is open to interpretation according to her attitudes and beliefs about learners and gifted learners in particular. On one level, Adrian's teacher may believe that it is of paramount importance always to nurture the self esteem of learners hence Adrian '*will always be gifted*'. Alternatively, Adrian's teacher may firmly believe that, once identified, gifts are there for life. On the other hand, his teacher's reassurance may have been based on her belief that *all* children have gifts and talents and their potential simply needs to be realised. At this time, it was not possible to pursue the beliefs and practices underpinning Adrian's teacher's

responses but the beliefs of a sample of gifted and talented education co-ordinators are central to this paper.

This paper presents the findings of a study based on empirical evidence gathered through a questionnaire completed by a sample of primary schools in England together with a sample of follow-up in-depth interviews with gifted and talented co-ordinators about their views and practices relating to the implementation of the gifted and talented education policy in their schools. We critically examine the requirements of the policy and the way it has been implemented and provide suggestions on future directions.

## **Context of the study**

The consequences of the DfEE (1999) gifted and talented education policy on pupils such as 10-year old Adrian raises many questions. For example, what was on offer to pupils as a result of the policy? How were the pupils identified and registered as gifted and talented? How did teachers feel about identifying and labelling pupils as gifted and talented? What was the nature of classroom provision for this group of pupils? It is outside the scope of this paper to pursue all of the issues raised by Adrian's interaction with his teacher, nevertheless, the research carried out for this study explored some of the interconnecting variables which influenced the practice of the G&T co-ordinators and which subsequently affected the experiences of the gifted and talented pupils. In order to achieve as coherent a picture as possible, a set of multi-layered influencing factors were explored. Firstly, consideration was given to the various conceptions of ability as these informed the research questions and our field work. Secondly, the development of the policy needed to be considered including the possible reasons for its launch, time-line and outcomes. And finally, the gifted and talented co-ordinators' professional knowledge and their personal beliefs and attitudes were likely to impact on their interpretation of policy, both in terms of identifying groups of pupils as gifted

and talented and making curriculum provision for pupils and, therefore, needed to be taken into account during the research process. Each of these strands is presented.

### **Conceptions of ability**

There is agreement internationally that all children deserve to be educated in such a way as to enable them to realise their full potential. Lucas and Claxton (2010) argue that the mission should be to enable everyone, without exception, to develop all their talents to the full and to realise their creative potential. However, the concepts of 'developing potential', 'gifts' and 'talents' remain a complex challenge for many. One study carried out by Thomas *et al* (1996) and presented to a policy development group at the Department of Education prior to the launch of the 1999 policy (attended by the authors) had shown that teachers in England and Wales felt unease about the use of the term 'gifted' to label children Freeman (1998) also highlighted the *troublesome term 'gifted'* in her review of international gifted and talented education research. Freeman's own research (1991) identified the power of the image behind the word 'gifted' and warned that such labelling needs to be used with great care not only because it has an effect on the pupil's self-concept but also because it alters the attitudes and behaviours of others towards the pupil. Based on a -10 year longitudinal study, Freeman (2001) concluded that children labelled as 'gifted' had more emotional problems than other higher ability children who were not given that label.

There are various conceptions of 'giftedness' and 'talent' involving contrasting theoretical positions. On the one hand there is the notion that a percentage of a population can be identified to form the membership of a group of gifted and talented individuals who should then be provided with specific programmes. On the other hand, there are those who believe that we should focus on maximising opportunities for developing gifts and talents in *all* pupils by moving away from labelling a sub-group as 'gifted'. The research team felt it was

important to consider the different perspectives which exist around the concepts of 'gifts' and 'talents' as these may be reflected in the research participants' own views and practices.

For the research reported in this paper we considered four main perspectives on the education of gifted and talented pupils. The first of these assesses giftedness as a single dimensional measure. In the USA which has a long history of gifted education, early conceptions of giftedness and systems providing for these students centred on IQ tests and academic ability (Brody and Stanley, 2005; Freeman, 1998). In practice, this view involves teachers identifying gifted pupils using traditional tests to assess what Renzulli (2005) describes as *school house giftedness*. Similar systems also used in other states and zones such as Hong Kong and the Middle East.

A second and broader perspective on giftedness can be found in the work of Renzulli (2005), for example, in which his 'Three-Ring' model emphasises other indicators such as creativity, task-commitment and motivation as equally important as the level of ability in the realisation of giftedness. Gardner (1983; 1993) put forward his theory of Multiple Intelligences and, like VanTassel-Baska (2005), holds the view that giftedness is multi-dimensional. Renzulli also proposes that rather than relying on a single dimensional measure of ability, we should acknowledge that people possess several forms of specific intelligences which can exist in isolation or in clusters. Sternberg (2000) views giftedness not as a *fixed state*, but as *developing expertise* and modifiable and suggests a model (Sternberg, 2005) in which Wisdom, Intelligence and Creativity (the WICS model in Sternberg, 2009) interact as giftedness develops.

Borland (2005) provides a third perspective in that he argues that giftedness is a superfluous or outdated concept and that it is a social invention that serves divisions in society that have no constructive purpose. It is interesting to note that after many years of involvement in gifted education in the USA, Borland recommends that we should do away with the concept

of 'gifted children' and have 'gifted education' in which the techniques that have been developed could be used for all education. Borland's proposition that we move away from labelling pupils in a move towards making appropriate intellectual challenges for all learners makes him the vanguard of the paradigm shift toward giftedness as 'doing' rather than 'being'. Claxton and Meadows (2009, p.9) express similar sentiments establishing the standpoint that in education our job is to help children develop the 'zeal and hard work' that will enable them to emerge as 'gifted and talented' in their own unique ways. Commenting on the gifted and talented policy perspective in the UK, Claxton and Meadows argue that *'in ten years time the antiquated and dysfunctional idea that 'giftedness' is an 'innate', 'abiding' and 'situation-independent' quality of a fortunate minority of young people will have been removed from the discourse of educational practice and policy'*. Claxton and Meadows (2009) also argue that the label and distinction of 'gifted' or 'non-gifted' is damaging as it influences a teachers' perception of a pupil, as well as the child's own view of him/her self. The concept of giftedness is socially constructed according to James and Prout (1990) and O'Connor (2010) who maintain that the figure of the 'gifted child' is negatively viewed partly due to the images portrayed by the media. Based on extensive research at Stanford University, Dweck (2007) has also argued that gifted students can become restricted by their label and afraid of challenges which may endanger their status as a gifted student. Dweck proposes that there are two kinds of 'mindsets' and that those with a fixed 'mindset' believe that their ability is fixed hence they are likely to shy away from challenges and have a fear of making mistakes. On the other hand, people with a 'growth mindset' are more likely to enjoy challenges and push themselves. This theory has significant implications for the education of higher ability students.

A fourth perspective on giftedness held, for example, by Howe (1999) and Ericsson (1996) proposes that all children are born more or less equal regarding the specific abilities associated with any given domain of achievement and that, over time, children become differentiated according to the amount of domain-specific expertise they acquire. The

amount of practice and the more time the person has spent mastering domain specific knowledge and skills, the closer he or she will get to attaining world-class performance.

In this section, we presented a range of perspectives on ability and its development. This includes the views of those who believe that the concept of labelling a sub-group of learners as 'gifted' is outdated (Borland, 2005; Claxton and Meadows, 2009) and others who place the emphasis on the importance of enhanced provision in talent development (Renzulli, 2005). The view that gifts and talents are multi-dimensional and domain-specific (Gardner, 1983; VanTassel -Baska (2005) challenges the use of a single dimensional, quantitative measurement of ability.

### **The development of the 'gifted and talented' policy in England**

Concerns about the lack of provision for higher ability children have been highlighted for at least three decades by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in England (HMI, 1978; 1979). In 1992, HMI asserted that the needs of the very able were not being met in many schools and that such pupils were not sufficiently challenged. Further support highlighting the need for action came from Her Majesty's Inspector Mackintosh (1994, p. 13) at a national conference on gifted education:

*There is very clear evidence that focusing sharply on what the most able can achieve raises the expectations generally, because essentially it involved consideration of the organisation and management of teaching and learning.*

Amongst the substantial number of policy initiatives launched by the Labour government subsequent to election in 1997, was the introduction of a gifted and talented education policy which was to be followed by schools in England (DfEE, 1999). A discrete focus on gifted and talented education was unknown territory within the UK policy literature at the time and the paucity of research informing policy in this field was subsequently highlighted by the National

Forum for Educational Research (NFER, 2003) review which identified that there had been few empirical studies of gifted and talented education in the UK and that evidence-based policy and practice was scarce. The gifted and talented education policy may therefore, be one of the examples highlighted by Perry *et al* (2010) who identified a gap between evidence and policy making and the possibly adverse influence of the media on government in short term policy making. A careful analysis of expert commentaries on the development of the gifted and talented education policy suggests that its implementation was very rapid. What were the possible reasons for the rushed development of the policy in England? As Eyre (1997) pointed out, very little had been written about educating able pupils in the UK and the policy was in response to school inspection reports and the pressure exerted by interest groups such as NAGC (National Association for Gifted Children) and NACE (National Association for Able Children in Education). The policy was first launched as part of the Excellence in Cities (DfEE, 1999) 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 studies 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 (Koshy & Casey, 1998; Radnor *et al*, 2007). According to Radnor (2007) the generation of a register of gifted and talented students was happening within the culture of *performativity* which Ball (2004, p.143) describes as a *'technology, a culture and mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)'*. Nevertheless, one thing is very clear, the gifted and talented education policy was not only introduced in injudicious haste but also the practical implementation of the policy was subject to a succession of rapid changes.

Following an inquiry by the House of Commons (1999) the gifted and talented education policy was announced within the Excellence in Cities (EiC) agenda (DfEE, 1999), which



focused initially on the underachievement of able students in secondary schools in urban areas. 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);
- appoint a co-ordinator to be responsible for the education of gifted and talented pupils;
- implement a distinct teaching and learning programme for gifted and talented pupils.

In 2002 a National Academy was established with the brief of supporting the top 5 % ability group of pupils (11-18) in England and from 2003, the gifted and talented education remit was extended to all geographical regions and age groups (4-19). Government funding was granted for each Local Authority in England to appoint staff with responsibility for gifted and talented education. At the same time, all schools were encouraged to nominate a member of staff to implement the policy in their school and many schools created the role of gifted and talented co-ordinator. Schools were expected to identify and maintain a register of their gifted and talented pupil population (top 10% and to make appropriate provision for them.

Table 1 provides a time-line of the introduction and development of the gifted and talented, education policy including the establishment of national and regional bodies with responsibility for specific aspects of the policy implementation. It is evident that Local Authorities and practising teachers had to contend with significant changes within a very short time-frame. To take one example, between 2002 and 2010 the responsibility for supporting G&T pupils at national level changed from the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) hosted by Warwick University (2002-2007) to an on-line Learner Academy hosted by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) and known as Young, Gifted and Talented (YG&T, 2007-2010). NAGTY's provision focused on the top 5% of pupils nationally within the 11-18 age range whereas YG&T undertook a broader remit to be accessible to all

pupils within the top 10-15% nationally and across the 4-19 age range. The decision as to who would be selected for membership of this group was made initially by NAGTY in consultation with the Gifted and Talented Education Unit (GTEU) within the government education department. The team at the GTEU was then responsible for subsequent revisions to the identification process in consultation with YG&T and the National Strategies.

Table 1 here

**Table 1 Summary of significant milestones of the gifted and talented education policy.**

However, not only did schools have to accommodate to the changes in pupil support at national level but between 2006 and 2011 further successive changes also occurred in relation to the professional development and support available to schools, their G&T co-ordinators and G&T Leading Teachers (Leading Teachers were newly created roles to complement the role of G&T co-ordinators although in many schools the role of G&T co-ordinator and the role of G&T Leading Teacher was undertaken by the same teacher). In 2008, the National Strategies unit was assigned the responsibility for providing a national training programme for gifted and talented education at both primary and secondary level. Primarily delivered by Local Authorities (LAs), the training was intended to help schools identify gifted and talented pupils and to assist schools with the implementation of newly issued guidance - the Institutional Quality Standards (DfES, 2006). The IQS were designed as a self-evaluation tool to support schools in developing their practice in relation to 14 elements (Mouchel Parkman, 2005) which fit within five personalised education strands: effective teaching and learning strategies; enabling curriculum entitlement and choice; assessment for learning; school organisation and strong partnership beyond the school. The adoption of these guidelines and provision for gifted and talented pupils was expected of schools but was not mandatory.

A government select committee meeting to review progress in gifted and talented education was conducted with key players in early February 2010 (House of Commons, 2010) and the discussions focused around the 'inconsistency' of the policy and the impact in classrooms generally with regard to provision being 'patchy' (Evans, 2010). The select committee concluded that the best course of action was to allow schools to manage their implementation of the gifted and talented policy (Johnson, 2010).

Schools were left without support on all levels: nationally, the gifted and talented education policy co-ordinating team within the government department was no longer in place and the National Strategies unit was disbanded. Regionally, most LA advisory services for gifted and talented education were cut altogether or subsumed within other remits. Maddern (2011) pointed out that since the termination of the policy, the fragile cottage industry grown around gifted and talented education within Local Authorities was now dying and primary schools were paying from their often very small budgets to bring in external expertise to support them with classroom provision.

Given the speed at which responsibility for the implementation of the policy shifted between different agencies raises the question as to how the policy implementation was monitored. Although there have not been many evaluations of the effectiveness of the gifted and talented policy since its inception, one report based on the inspections of schools within the Excellence in Cities initiative (Ofsted, 2001), identified an increase in the amount of out-of-school activities for gifted and talented students but commented that more should be done inside the classroom. The report also highlighted that evidence of sustained impact on the attainment of students was limited hence the recommendation that schools needed to improve what is done for higher ability students through the teaching of the mainstream curriculum. Identification methods were described as generally rudimentary and it was pointed out that schools had not yet solved the problem of recognizing latent higher ability particularly among pupils who were underachieving generally. A second evaluation (Ofsted

2003, p.55) stated that 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 about the lack of co-ordination between enrichment activities offered to pupils outside the classroom and what happens within the mainstream classroom was also raised by the Ofsted inspectors.

In this section we have rehearsed some of the key factors influencing the introduction and implementation of the gifted and talented policy in England. With the benefit of hindsight it seems inevitable that tensions and conflicts would be likely to emerge from a centrally imposed strategy with foundations that were neither firmly rooted in the existing evidence from international research, nor based on sufficient consultation with the academic or practitioner communities. The expectation that a generously funded model originally devised to raise standards in urban secondary schools in deprived areas could transform with ease into a less well funded initiative for all schools with pupils across the 4-19 age range may have been naïve. Given that the policy proved to be difficult to manage at both school and national level and, more crucially, that school inspections were still highlighting gaps in the impact of the policy on classroom provision (Ofsted 2003), we can only speculate that it was politically more astute to move away from a co-ordinated English policy strategy rather than start again with a fresh canvas.

### **The influence of teachers' perceptions and beliefs on their practice**

Explicit national policy for gifted and talented education in England is a relatively new initiative and there is a paucity of published systematic research as to how the initiative has been received and implemented by teachers in schools since 2000. Some useful research papers on aspects of gifted education which have been available include Freeman's review of international research on gifted education (1998), her subsequent position papers (Freeman, 2001; 2005) and the occasional papers from the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth which include Neeland, *et al* (2006) and Robinson *et al*, (2006). Although no

specific conception of ability is recommended within the policy documents for English schools, the requirement of using a percentage - based identification strategy may be taken as an encouragement to use test-based, quantitative measurements for creating gifted and talented cohorts in schools.

Criticisms of the policy and its practical implications have been voiced. White (2006), for example, argues that the identification process in schools in England means that pupils are selected on the basis of their current attainment rather than their natural ability.

Consequently, those identified are not necessarily the true 'gifted' students, as middle class parents are able to coach their children to 'act' as high achievers. Robinson and Campbell (2010) also highlight the ideological debates relating to making special provision for gifted and talented pupils.

Concerns around teacher identification and the issues arising have been a focus of the wider research community for a number of years. In her early work in primary schools in England, Maltby (1984) also considered the role of the teacher in the process of identifying gifted pupils and the consequences of so doing. Maltby found that how teachers identified gifted pupils was influenced by their own knowledge and training and emphasised the need for caution, as teachers were often unwittingly affected by the pressures on them to identify groups of gifted pupils, their knowledge of pupils' backgrounds and the academic position of pupils within their classes. The inconsistencies in the identification process between head teachers and class teachers was also highlighted in that head teachers' judgements were relative to the knowledge they had of a larger number of pupils whereas the class teachers' identification was 'absolute' in nature and only took account of the pupils in their own classroom. Maltby issues a further cautionary note that the categorisation of pupils as gifted – especially based on objective measures - could lead to social isolation in the classroom and could in practice be detrimental to the pupil as peers could perceive them negatively.

The process of categorisation could also result in a 'depersonalisation' of gifted pupils as they are then viewed as part of a category and not as individuals.

Teachers' attitudes and conceptions of giftedness can also have significant effects on their classroom practice according to Oakes (1985; 2005) who theorized that the disproportionate placement of poor and minority pupils in low tracks (ability groups) did not reflect their actual learning abilities. Oakes also found that teachers who taught selected high ability groups became more enthusiastic in teaching, better at providing explanations and more organized than teachers of lower ability groups. Teachers who taught high ability groups often used course materials and taught concepts which require extensive critical thinking skills whereas teachers in low ability groups tended to draw heavily from work books and rarely assigned work that required critical thinking.

Research conducted in other countries indicates that teachers' views of high achieving pupils can have a significant influence on both the identification process and classroom provision for them (Geake & Gross, 2008). For example, a national survey of US primary teachers' conceptions of giftedness showed that, '*teachers believe that some degree of wealth is a necessary condition in order for academic giftedness to be manifest and recognized*' (Moon & Brighton, 2008). At the same time, there is also evidence that the quality of training and opportunities to discuss the complexities of the concept of giftedness can positively influence teachers' practice (Koshy & Casey, 1997).

Balchin (2009) undertook a survey of primary and secondary gifted and talented co-ordinators in 2005 and found that the co-ordinators considered the distinctions created by the government definition hindered day-to-day practice. 'Terminology' was cited as one of the most common factors which complicated the identification of gifted and talented pupils - ranked fourth out of 14 factors. The Office of Standards in Education in England (Ofsted, 2009) conducted a small survey of 17 secondary schools and 9 primary schools gathering

both teacher and pupil opinion. Their report states that many teachers were not convinced about the importance of making differentiated provision for gifted and talented pupils either because they thought it would be at the expense of other pupils or because they felt they had insufficient support to help them do this properly. Pupils were reported to be feeling bored and that lessons lacked challenge. Freeman's Sports Model (2002) offers a practical strategy for enhancing provision for gifted and talented students by adopting the approach taken by talented and highly motivated sports individuals who make use of sports facilities to pursue extra practice. Freeman suggests that this approach should be extended to a wider population of self-selecting talented individuals who would pursue their particular passion and interests across differing subject areas thereby expanding the proportion of children who reach a standard of excellence. Freeman maintains that the Sports Model avoids negative discrimination as selection is not by test or teacher/parent recommendation but by students identifying their own talents and interests. However, although Freeman claims that this approach is not expensive, there are clear cost implications for not only the availability of sufficient subject specialist teachers to provide the initial guidance and subsequent teaching (coaching) for pupils but also for the provision of facilities to support advanced level work in a range of subject areas.

## **Purpose of the study**

Our motivation for undertaking this study was the desire to delve deeper into the possible reasons for the abandonment of the policy by drawing on available theory and research. We wanted to find out how primary schools in England were implementing and meeting the requirements of the gifted and talented education policy (DfEE, 1999). We were also interested in exploring the beliefs and theoretical positions of gifted and talented co-ordinators as ultimately, the quality of education provided for higher ability children will depend on the co-ordinators interpretation of the policy, their beliefs and understanding of the key issues, and the level of support and guidance they receive from various sources.

## **Methodology**

This research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase an extensive questionnaire was sent to a sample of all the primary schools in England, and the second phase involved follow-up interviews with selected participants. The postal questionnaire sample was generated by the National Foundation for Education Research, an independent institution, and was sent to the Head Teacher requesting it to be passed on to be completed by the gifted and talented co-ordinator so that we would be able to gather information on how schools were responding to the policy. The sample consisted of 2800 primary schools in England and was representative in terms of school size, socio –economic status and geographical distribution. Our two main research questions were:

1. What are the views of the gifted and talented co-ordinators on the gifted and talented policy and how are they implementing it in their schools?
2. What are the theoretical views of the gifted and talented co-ordinators in relation to the concept of 'gifted and talented'?

At both stages of the empirical work the British Educational Research Association ethics code was followed. The purpose of the study was explained and anonymity was assured in that there would be no references to the participants' names, their schools or Local Authorities. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Interview transcripts were shared with the participants for accuracy.

The questionnaire included a mixture of open and closed questions within 3 main sections:

- a. Contextual information about the school and the person completing the questionnaire including their own professional training.



- b. The school's current approach to the gifted and talented initiative in terms of policy, practice and provision including how the school was using the Institutional Quality Standards for guidance.
- c. The gifted and talented co-ordinator's own thoughts about the concept of 'gifted and talented' children.

The questionnaires received a 10% response rate (n= 284) which, although disappointing, seems consistent with or higher than the number of responses to other national surveys with teachers exploring new government initiatives (Sebba *et al* 2007, for example) in the UK. In our survey, declared reasons for non-returns from schools included 'pressure of work', 'we don't have time to be involved in academic research' and 'we don't want to respond, unless it is statutory to do so'. We also speculate that many others did not respond due to a reluctance to reveal what was happening in their schools with regard to the gifted and talented policy, or had a lack of interest or commitment to the policy requirements. However, we can report that the returned completed questionnaires were demographically representative of the national sample.

We became aware of the limitations of the responses we received to the questionnaires, in several ways. The responses to most of the questions were brief and rather vague and lacked depth for us to enable us to explore the research questions. There was no opportunity for probing the respondents further, which we felt was important in view of the complexity of the topic of giftedness and talent. Even the open-ended questions we used were responded to with very short answers. In the end, the need for face to face interviews with a sample of teachers became clear. Our follow-up interviewees were recruited from those who had agreed to participate in further research with us as indicated on the completed questionnaire. They were representative of different geographical locations, socio-economic status and the number of pupils on roll.

We carried out semi-structured, in-depth interviews which were designed to probe key areas in more detail and to gain more detailed insights as we 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. The following aspects were explored during the interviews:

- issues relating to the identification of gifted and talented children including procedures, views on keeping a register, 'labelling' pupils and sharing of information with parents;
- issues relating to provision such as classroom practice, how government guidelines (IQS, for example), were used, and the use of resources. Teachers were asked about their 'wish list' with regard to nurturing pupils' gifts and talents;
- the teacher's own conception and images of gifted and talented pupils

### **Data Analysis**

Initially, the analysis of the questionnaires consisted of producing descriptive statistics and transcribing and coding open questions using a grounded theory approach to identify emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) using NVivo. Interviews were analysed using specific codes. Inter-rater reliability was achieved by the authors and an independent researcher coding the transcripts into categories. The process involved the researchers first reading a sample of transcripts and identifying themes in relation to the research questions and repeating the process with the rest of the transcripts.

### **Findings**

First, we present a list of the main findings from the questionnaire. The emerging themes from these are then discussed along with the qualitative evidence gathered during the

interviews. It was interesting to note that many of the respondents who had declared confidence in aspects of the policy requirements in their questionnaire responses became openly critical in their interviews about the processes they were expected to follow according to the national policy requirements. The interviews also provided useful commentary and additional insights which helped to gauge the difficulties being experienced by schools and therefore highlighted where further support was needed.

The questionnaires generated the following results about how primary school co-ordinators were responding to the gifted and talented education policy in England. An initial brief commentary is included for each of the findings and the themes are then discussed further along with the evidence based on the commentary from the interviews.

- 90% of those who responded have a school policy for gifted and talented education. This was a dramatic shift from 1996 when only 32% of schools kept records of their 'able' children (Thomas *et al*, 1996) and had school policies for gifted education. The Thomas study was conducted with primary schools prior to the introduction of the gifted and talented education policy in England, involved a similar sample of schools to the present study. Between 1996 and 1998, the findings from this study were disseminated to policy makers in the UK, special interest groups in gifted education in England and at the American Education Research Association conference. As the questionnaire items were similar to the ones used in the present study some comparisons are made in this paper.
- 96% of the respondents reported that they identified gifted and talented pupils and kept a record of this as a G&T register. The predominant method of identification (96%) was using the results of national or other standardized tests.
- 83% of the schools said that their pupils were placed on the gifted and talented register by the age of 6 and some as early as 5.

- 78% of schools did not have separate registers for 'gifted' and 'talented' students. It is of interest to explore how teachers resolved the problem of separating the two groups and whether provision in the classroom was influenced by this, bearing in mind the description in the government definition of gifted and talented for policy requirements. This aspect is discussed in the following section.
- Only 24% of schools monitored their register for students' socio-economic background and 35% monitored for ethnicity. 19% of schools did not monitor their registers for any vulnerable groups. This was interesting because one of the consistently declared aims of the government initiative was greater inclusion and closing the gap in achievement between pupils from different backgrounds - hence promoting social justice.
- A head-count of G&T co-ordinators' attitudes towards the terminology 'gifted and talented' showed that 54% of them were negative. An additional 8% of teachers also raised some unease about the terms but on the positive side acknowledged the need to focus on 'more able' children.
- 31% of the co-ordinators in the sample schools had not heard of the Institutional Quality Standards suggesting that these schools may have been implementing the initiative without taking note of what was offered as support documentation or had decided to ignore it.

## **Emerging themes and discussion**

In this section we discuss some significant themes that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires and interviews. The themes are presented and discussed under three broad headings:

- Selection and keeping a register of gifted and talented pupils.
- The implementation of the policy in practical terms through classroom provision.
- Teachers' own images and conceptions of gifted and talented pupils.

### **Selection of gifted and talented children and keeping a register**

It is noteworthy that compared to the findings of a previous national survey of primary schools (Thomas *et al*, 1996), there had been a significant shift in the way teachers were responding to the policy initiative. For example, 96% of the co-ordinators responding to our questionnaire said that they 'identified' and 'recorded' the names of their gifted and talented pupils and 90% of the schools had a school policy for gifted and talented education, compared to only 32% of schools keeping records of their 'able' children in 1996 or having a policy for teaching gifted and talented pupils. During the interviews, the gifted and talented co-ordinators were mainly positive (12 out of 14) about the focus on the needs of the 'more able' children (terminology 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 average levels in the national tests and get a higher position in the 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. Why do we need to select such a special group?"*

Among those who had positive things to say was Keith, a head teacher, who had responsibility for the gifted and talented policy in his school and who felt that the policy was a

positive thing for his school 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 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 have very bright children in the school and that we look after them."*

Although most teachers seemed to have engaged with the policy in some way, their *attitudes* to the process of selecting and labelling pupils as gifted and talented remained largely similar to those identified in the previous Thomas (1996) study. For example, Thomas found that 86% of teachers expressed their unease with the selection process and in the present survey 62% of the respondents felt uncomfortable about selecting a group of pupils as gifted and talented. This decrease of 24% may be due to the fact that teachers felt obliged to use the terminology required by government policy and accepted it. The responses to the follow-up interviews also revealed a number of difficulties experienced by schools. In particular, the government definition and explanation of the terms 'gifted' describing those who excelled academically and 'talented' to describe those who excelled in the practical skills of sport, and other applied skills seems to have confused many. Yvonne, one co-ordinator explained the difficulty:

*"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.”*

Others who were interviewed 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 declaring 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.”*

Concern about keeping a register arose for a number of reasons. The main cause of concern was the co-ordinators' objection to the idea of labelling and keeping a list of gifted and talented pupils combined with their belief that *all* pupils are entitled to effective provision. Co-ordinators commented that labelling and keeping a register was not enough to ensure appropriate provision for these pupils and they saw it merely as 'more paperwork' and the whole process as the politicians introducing this for 'newspaper headlines'. Another concern highlighted by the G&T co-ordinators was that the gifted and talented register could become a fixed entity and the requirement to identify the top 10% of the school meant there would not be a lot of flexibility once the groups had been selected.

A head-count of co-ordinators' comments about the terminology 'gifted and talented' in the questionnaire responses had shown that 54% of them were unhappy about the use of the

words 'gifted and talented'. Two out of 14 of the co-ordinators interviewed felt it worked within their school context but others stated that they preferred to use the terms 'more able'. Their unease with the terminology stemmed from the various, largely unhelpful, connotations associated with the 'gifted and talented' phraseology. The recurring theme which emerged was that the term 'gifted' suggested a very 'rare' person, 'a true genius'; 'an Einstein'. The co-ordinators felt that there were 'very bright' pupils in their school rather than the 'exceptional' or gifted. Comments included:

*"The definition itself is misleading, I think; a lot of the time we're talking about very able children, who might have the potential to be 'gifted' but I'm not sure whether we're necessarily identifying 'gifted' children, I think what most people understand as when you're talking about gifted is the Einstein's of the world. We don't have any in my school."*

*"Some people will think gifted and talented is way up there and you've got to be super duper clever, but it's not the case of that, it's recognising a special quality in the child...it's that spark which instinctively tells you there's something about this child."*

Carol, who had responsibility for gifted and talented education in her school articulated the unease and confusion:

*"As a school we do use the words G&T, but I don't like those words at all, I think they're both misleading. What we call our more able group is a kind of level below what we think as a true G&T group. Sometimes I wonder if we need the terms at all. If you went down the route of why are we identifying them, we're just labelling, so do you really need to use those words at all? But, yea, I don't know. Gifts and talents, they sound, well gift sounds like you've been given something, and talent I don't*



*know. I think of talent contests, talent shows, and it's all singing and all dancing and nothing very meaningful. Not for teaching my class."*

Similar views were expressed by Dot, another co-ordinator, who also found the whole process of classifying pupils as gifted and talented challenging because:

*"They're very rare, the true G&T child is very rare, there are quite a few able children, but actually talented it's probably a smattering. I think if anyone says there's any more than that, they're fibbing because actual G&Ts are up there, and you've got the next layer which is your able children in your class. True 'gifted and talented' children are rare. So how can you make up a register?"*

Dot went on to say that her image of a gifted child is that of a 'mad professor' and in her school they were rare. She was also worried about the *subjectivity of the decisions* she had to make and what effect it may have on the children – both the ones who are on the register and those who were excluded for the list and she queried if there was any research done on that aspect.

Another aspect which generated lengthy discussions was the issue of sharing the G&T register with the parents of the pupils. Responses to the questionnaires had shown that 42% of the schools shared their list of gifted and talented pupils with the parents. However, the interviews showed a very different story. All but one of the 14 schools was 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 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."*

G&T co-ordinator Tom explained the difficulty of sharing a list which labels pupils as gifted with parents as a 'nightmare' as "*our pushy parents, most are very highly educated and affluent, would want their children on that register. Selecting a fixed number as gifted and talented is impractical*".

The one exception to this view was Head Teacher Keith, who was prepared to share the list with the parents. He explained:

*"In many other schools this would create a problem, but our parents who are from very deprived areas either don't understand what it is all about or cannot really be bothered to complain."*

How did teachers select pupils for their gifted and talented list or register? Was it subject-specific or general ability? The predominant method of identification used by the teachers in the questionnaire sample was based on national or school test results. 96% of the respondents said they used Key Stage 1 test results (national tests taken at the age of 7) to help to identify their gifted and talented children for Key Stage 2. Responses from the follow-up Interviews confirmed that a range of tests – both statutory tests, commercial tests (for example NFER) as well as reading tests were used as a basis for including children on the gifted and talented register.

The G&T co-ordinators raised their concern at what they perceived to be a requirement to label pupils too early on in their school life. It emerged from both the responses to the questionnaire and during the interviews that practitioners compiled their lists of gifted and talented pupils from a very early age – normally by the age of 6 - and many were considering including children in the nursery age phase (age 3-5).

And finally, with regard to aspects of inclusion, the questionnaire responses showed that only 24% of schools monitored their register for pupils' socio-economic backgrounds and during the interviews we found that this aspect was not something teachers were particularly concerned with. Ten out of 14 of the interviewees said they believed that their gifted and talented group reflected the intake of their schools and that it was not something they were overly worried about.

### **Aspects of practical classroom provision**

Although both stages of the research study included an equal number of questions focusing on the selection of 'gifted' and 'talented' pupils and the nature of provision for them, the level of response to these two items was different. Whilst comments on the items in relation to the selection of pupils elicited strong and full responses, the items that explored the nature of practical provision prompted only short responses. The comments raised by Gwen 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. My colleagues in other schools who attended three day courses at a university in 2004 felt much more confident about provision for the more able but those courses were replaced with one or half-day training programmes which is far too short for something so complex as this."*

How did the co-ordinators feel about the Institutional Quality Standards (IQS) as a set of guidelines issued to schools for evaluating their gifted and talented practice? Although only ten co-ordinators had any knowledge of the availability of IQS, we were still interested in finding out more about their views and their level of understanding of its content.

Interestingly, we found that only 2 out of the 14 co-ordinators interviewed said that they had *used* the IQS and considered them useful as a framework. Overall, it was felt that the document was 'inaccessible'. 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'. Jane's thoughts were:

*"I think they're what we aspire to. There's certainly something that you can check and look and see what you're 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 came from, what research or evaluation was it based on?"*

It was also felt by one co-ordinator that the three achievement levels within the document – entry, developing and exemplary – '*contributed to the main complication, as there was no guidance as to how to achieve these*'.

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 the training was concerned with the identification section of the IQS document leaving them feeling overwhelmed by the other sections. Three of the co-ordinators suggested they would have preferred a far simpler document which listed the main requirements and gave some guidance as to how to achieve them.

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

Joanne 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 first of all, and we took some of our G&T children from year 2 and 3 over to that school where they had other children from other schools also working.”*

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

*“I bring them out so they’re 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. Use ‘brain boxes’ or something and, yes I’ve just been doing the philosophy for children with them, with the local adviser’s help.”*

Using teaching materials from the next phase of education was another strategy used for making provision for the gifted and talented students. The interviews also highlighted that provision was predominantly offered in mathematics. Mike 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 schools. 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 - in maths. In fact I haven't seen much in other subjects."*

### **Teachers' images of a gifted and talented child**

In both the questionnaire and interviews we asked the gifted and talented co-ordinators to describe their image of a gifted and talented pupil. The following descriptions show a few of the stereotypes which surround high ability:

*"My image of one with glasses, nerdy. Not popular with other children."*

*"I suppose you could say like the little mad professor... they are sometime different from the other children, as again, it goes back to that social side... a little bit isolated in some ways. But they shine out. And then you get the enthusiasm from them when you give them something that's challenging to them. But what is good for them should be available to all my children. If you don't expose them all to challenging work, how do you know who else would respond to it?"*

*"I think of a child who should be doing GCSEs at eight years old. We don't have that many in the 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."*

### **Discussion**

Some of the limitations of our research/study have been outlined earlier but it is worth exploring them a little more fully prior to the main discussion of our findings. Whilst those who responded to our questionnaire were representative of the initial population sample, the

low response rate is a concern (although consistent with the response rates of other postal questionnaires as discussed previously). The low response rate has implications for the level of bias in our sample. It is possible that the responses to our questionnaire could have been significantly different had larger numbers of gifted and talented co-ordinators responded. For example, apathy relating to the gifted and talented policy may be greater amongst the wider teaching population than that indicated by our respondents. The non-respondents to our questionnaire may not be engaging in the gifted and talented initiative at all and had not wished to admit to this fact. On the other hand, more positive support for the initiative may also have gone unreported.

Another limitation of the study was the professional understanding of the co-ordinators who took part in the survey and interviews. The length and nature of their training in gifted and talented education differed hence their awareness and understanding of the issues could have been affected (either enhanced or limited) which in turn would have been reflected in their responses. The interviews were conducted six months after the questionnaires were analysed and teachers' views and practices may have changed during that time. However, we feel that the interviews provided us with a clearer picture of the landscape in terms of policy implementation. Despite these limitations we feel the underlying feelings of practitioners about the gifted and talented education policy and its practical implications were highlighted by our study, helping us to raise some important issues and make some tentative conclusions which are presented in the following section.

It is evident that the G&T co-ordinators we interviewed were engaging with the gifted and talented education policy in pragmatic terms and making their own interpretations of the policy requirements. The majority of them ignored the requirement of having to select a percentage of pupils as gifted and talented and instead devised a system which focused on recording pupils' individual strengths and subsequently using this information for curriculum planning. By using this system the co-ordinators seem to have found a way of not

compromising their philosophical objections to labelling pupils and creating an exclusive group. Highlighting the special abilities of pupils also seems to have made it easier for schools to share the information with parents and avoid the difficulty of 'pushy' parents demanding that their children be included on the gifted and talented list.

Clearly, the selection of the gifted and talented pupil cohorts posed a number of challenges for the gifted and talented co-ordinators. First was the difficulty with the use of the terminology. Both the questionnaire responses and the interviews suggested that there was unease among teachers about labelling pupils as gifted and talented. One other problematic area for teachers seemed to be the separation of pupils into either 'gifted' or 'talented' groups. The UK government's policy definition of the phrase 'gifted and talented' (DfES, 2006) clustered the two terms – 'gifted' and 'talented' - together with the explanation: '**Gifted** describes learners who have the ability to excel academically in one or more subjects such as English, drama, technology. **Talented** describes learners who have the ability to excel in practical skills such as sport, leadership, artistic performance, or in an applied skill' seems to have confused practitioners. This definition created a subsequent dilemma for co-ordinators as to whether it meant that pupils who are good in academic areas such as mathematics and English also have to be good at creative or physical subjects to be included in the register and vice-versa. If this interpretation is adopted then it is likely that pupils who display exceptional abilities in the creative and physical areas may be missed altogether from the register. The inherent problem here is that the 'gifted' and the 'talented' consist of two disjoint sets with separate sets of criteria for membership which makes the practitioner's task of selection challenging. The gifted and talented co-ordinators in our study seemed to have solved this problem by listing the specific talents of *all* pupils. As the majority of schools are organised to teach different subjects and as there is strong support for the existence of domain-specific intelligences (Gardner, 1983; 1993; Van Tassel-Baska, 1998), it would seem that the co-ordinators were prudent in using subject-specific criteria for identifying their gifted and talented students instead of following policy requirements blindly.



Yet another dilemma emerged from the difficulties of selecting and keeping a register of gifted and talented pupils in relation to whether gifts and talents should be viewed as fixed or *developing expertise*. Sternberg (2000) asserts 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*. He maintains that this expertise is not an *end-state* but a process of continual development. Dweck's (2007) research also endorses this perspective. Further support for the *developing* nature of giftedness comes from Clarke (2001, p.5) who challenges the concept of the genetically inherited, immutable view of intelligence as no longer valid. Based on brain function research she declares:

*"Intelligence must be considered dynamic just as the growth of the functions of the brain is dynamic with higher levels of intelligence actualized only when appropriate challenge is provided."*

Both the questionnaire and interview responses showed that the G&T co-ordinators used national or school test results and other standardised tests to select their gifted and talented group. It is possible that the co-ordinators were relying on external tests as a self-protection mechanism as they were aware of the complexity and the fallibility of the selection process and were using tests in order to avoid the subjective nature of the selection process. It is equally possible that the co-ordinators had not been made aware that an over-reliance on test results may exclude pupils with creative abilities or those with lack of motivation or disabilities from membership of the gifted and talented cohort. Adopting a single-track (test results) approach to identification suggests that the co-ordinators needed further professional development. For example, 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; 2009). VanTassel-Baska (2005) highlights the fact that in the USA giftedness is mostly assessed using a combination

of criteria which includes student portfolios, performance-based assessment, subject criteria and teacher assessment alongside tests. Van Tassel-Baska maintains that the increased use of non-traditional tools is a result of the dissatisfaction felt by educators that traditional assessments have not provided opportunities for students of '*colour, students of lower socio-economic levels and students with uneven profiles*'. Casey and Koshy's UK study (2002; 2006) also documented that tests are not reliable indicators of giftedness in the case of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds where 'true ability' may be submerged.

The age at which pupils should be selected as gifted and talented also merits further consideration. A significant number of schools in this study said that their pupils were on the gifted and talented register by the age of 6 and some were planning to include children from yet younger age groups (3-5 years). Existing research has shown that children's cognitive development is uneven and 'asynchronous' in the first years of schooling (Koshy 2001) hence there are questions to be asked about any process that selects pupils as gifted and talented in the early years of schooling particularly as there is a serious shortage of research and guidance into aspects of the identification of gifted and talented younger children. Co-ordinators need to be clear as to the basis of their decision making or, for example, pupils who are not regarded as gifted and talented by the age of 6 could miss out on provision for the rest of their school years.

Whilst considering aspects of identification we found that in our survey, only 24% of schools monitored their register for the students' socio-economic backgrounds and the co-ordinators who were interviewed had not considered the issue of inclusion as important yet one of the core elements of the UK government gifted and talented education policy was 'narrowing the gap' between gifted pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from middle class or wealthier backgrounds. Our research found that primary schools were not adequately addressing inclusion even though this issue lay at the heart of the gifted and talented education policy. A lack of attention to inclusion can have significant implications for

the educational opportunities of vulnerable groups. For example, the issue of the underachievement and lack of aspirations amongst lower socio-economic groups has been highlighted in the last decade by various agencies in the UK (Office for Standards in Education 2001). Researchers Casey and Koshy (2002) have worked with high potential pupils in inner-cities for a number of years and have shown that there is submerged talent in inner-city schools in the UK, and that this talent may be submerged but not eradicated by disadvantage. If primary schools are not recognising or actively addressing the needs of this and other vulnerable groups then more pupils are in danger of missing out on appropriate curriculum provision.

With regard to provision for the selected gifted and talented cohorts, teachers felt they were not sufficiently supported in practical terms to address the requirements of the policy. Professional development courses were short and guidelines issued to schools were inaccessible. Teachers relied on their own individual approaches for making provision - withdrawal groups and interventions with no research base were used in most cases. Two of the evaluations of the gifted and talented education policy (Ofsted 2001; 2003) also highlighted that enrichment outside the classroom was the predominant way of addressing provision for gifted and talented pupils.

One of the aims of our study was to gain insights about G&T co-ordinators' beliefs and possible theoretical positioning with regard to the concept of giftedness and talent as in keeping with Maltby (1984), the research team believes that the co-ordinators' response to policy is likely to be influenced by these. From the responses to our survey and interviews it seems reasonable to assume that alongside an unease surrounding the 'gifted and talented' terminology, the concept of selecting a group of children for membership of an exclusive gifted and talented group remains problematic for some teachers. It would seem that Matthews and Folsom's (2009) proposal for a changed conceptualisation of giftedness and the adoption of a 'Mastery' model leading to a simple, practical, education-based definition of giftedness might be more acceptable to them. 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 co-ordinators in England were trying to use such a model. Also, based on the responses to several of the questions in the survey and interviews, the co-ordinators seemed likely to position themselves with the Borland view (2005) that the concept of the gifted child is a social construct of questionable validity. It must, however, be acknowledged that realisation of the aim of analyzing the co-ordinators' responses according to their theoretical positioning has been challenging as the different perspectives and conceptualisations of giftedness are not mutually exclusive. It was clear from the evidence gathered that they believed in being creative and flexible in their outlook and practice. Only classroom observations of teaching and learning styles would throw significant light on this aspect. A follow-up study would be desirable.

## **Concluding remarks**

By conducting the study reported in this paper, efforts have been made to gain insights into how gifted and talented co-ordinators in primary schools in England were responding to the UK government's gifted and talented education policy which was launched in 1999.

Practitioners were creative in their interpretations and practices relating to the policy. During the interviews we asked the co-ordinators to tell us their 'wish list' for addressing the needs of higher ability pupils. Based on their wish list responses, we propose some strategies as a way forward. Firstly, there is a need for longer, sustained professional development programmes to support co-ordinators in primary schools. We believe that the quality of what is offered to pupils will, to a great extent, depend on the practitioner's own level of understanding and expertise hence there is a need for them not only to construct their own understanding of the issues on the basis of authoritative research-based foundations but also to support colleagues in the same process. They need to create their own intelligible map of the different conceptions of ability and apply their awareness to their own practice.

Secondly, we need to explore the best possible ways of developing the potential talents of all pupils. At present, there is only a very small body of research evidence available to practitioners on different models of provision and their effectiveness. It is only right that our pupils are not subjected to models of provision which have not been tried and evaluated. Teachers, like Adrian's whose example was quoted at the start of this paper, are confused by the mixed messages they are receiving. On the one hand they believe that the policy has been abandoned yet, on the other hand, schools are expected to provide cognitively challenging experiences for children. One critical issue to be explored further is the effect the process of being identified as gifted and talented has on pupils' social, emotional and educational lives.

The purpose of our research was to explore how gifted and talented co-ordinators were responding to the gifted and talented education policy. At this point a fundamental question needs to be raised. Has the introduction of the policy been a good thing? There are a number of issues that need to be considered here. In spite of the pressure exerted by interests groups and Schools Inspectors (HMI, 1992) highlighting the need to address the needs of higher ability children, it was the launch of the gifted and talented education policy – although rushed and launched without consultation with the teaching profession - which resulted in schools being made more fully aware of the existence of higher ability children, the existence of domain-specific and multiple talents, and the need to make appropriate provision for them both within and outside the classroom. Our empirical data along with school inspection reports and evaluations (Ofsted, 2003; 2009) bear testimony to this. In this respect we can say that the policy has been a good thing. However, it also needs to be said that most gifted and talented co-ordinators felt they had not received an adequate level of professional training since the policy was extended to all age groups in 2005. Instead of a total abandonment of policy, it may have been better to offer more focused professional development, for example, strategies for enhancing classroom provision and promoting

higher order thinking, creativity and critical thinking thereby enabling teachers to support their gifted and talented pupils in realising their potential and specific talents.

Intellectual capital is important for any country; nurtured, it will benefit both the individual and the whole population. Recently, the new government Schools Minister Nick Gibb (2011) highlighted that a significant number of classroom lessons lacked challenge and are boring. Ofsted inspectors continue to gather evidence of effective classroom provision for higher ability children (G&T Update, 2010). Where do we go from here and what will happen to children like Adrian whose quote provided the title of this paper remains to be seen.

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