Gifted and talented education from the students' point of view
Robert Seddon

Abstract: *Educating able secondary-school students is an important issue, both politically and within the study of Education. Stemming from a personal dissatisfaction with provision for more able students that I encountered, both as a student and as a trainee teacher, I conducted research into students' opinions on the subject during my teacher training. As I present below, it emerges that able students are not academically satisfied with "normal" schooling and can often put forward their own, quite feasible, suggestions of how they can be better catered for.*

Introduction

The main route into secondary-school teaching in the UK is the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), a course offered by the University of Oxford's Department of Education. I recently completed the Physics PGCE offered by the department, which involved on-the-job training in Oxfordshire comprehensive schools as well as academic work delivered by the department.

A major part of the academic side of the course is the production of a dissertation on an aspect of Education of the student's choice. I chose to study gifted and talented students' perceptions of the provision they receive. My interest in this topic was due to two factors. Firstly, I was identified as gifted and talented while at secondary school and received extra provision ranging from after-school talks to extended pieces of homework. However, I often found that after-school activities did not match my interests and I resented being given extra work that ate into my free time. In retrospect it seems that if someone had asked me what kind of extra provision I would have liked I might have been more enthusiastic and engaged. Secondly, when the problem of catering for our more able students arises in general conversation the solution frequently offered is to group students by ability, either through a grammar-school style system or ability grouping within comprehensives. Before I entered teaching I also saw this as the "obvious" answer, although it is not something I spent much time thinking about as a student.

For both these reasons I was keen to see what the students themselves suggested as possible solutions. Although we will see that grouping by ability commands strong support among students their comments reveal a slightly more complicated picture.

Who are gifted and talented students, and why should we care about them?

The now-defunct Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) defines gifted students as "students who have the ability to excel academically in one or more subjects such as English, Drama, Technology" and talented students as "students who have the ability to excel in practical skills such as sport, leadership, artistic performance", adding that "the DCSF assumes a norm of around 10% of pupils per school/college population [will be gifted and talented]" (DCSF,

2007). This definition has the potential to include over a hundred students in an average-sized comprehensive school and is only a relative measure - a student in the top 10% of one school might find themselves outside it in another, a problem noted by the Council of Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA, 2006). The DCSF therefore also defines "exceptionally able" students as those in "the top 2% nationally for one or more academic and talent areas" (DCSF, 2008). While we have rather well-defined categories for UK students, research in the area of gifted and talented education often originates overseas and authors often give imprecise descriptions of the abilities of students in their studies. Consequently, students in the studies mentioned below will not necessarily match DCSF criteria and many would probably be defined as exceptionally able.

Adequate provision for our more able students is clearly important given their potential to become the leaders and contributors of tomorrow (Boyd, 1984; DCSF, 2007) and inadequate provision can lead to boredom and frustration with lessons, a problem reported by students themselves (Fai, 2000). Furthermore, DCSF asserts that unless able children are challenged their abilities may not become apparent (DCSF, 2007, 2008). This latter point was brought home quite clearly to me when an able student in one of my classes appeared unengaged with the lesson. When I challenged him he complained that the lesson was pointless and that he wasn't learning anything; he therefore elected not to do the work that had been set. Although I argued that there was a purpose to the lesson, I had to admit to myself that the student had a point - the work was better suited to the less able students in the class and was not challenging enough for him.

What do the students think?
More able students are, on the whole, not satisfied with their normal lessons. Both Adams-Byers et al. (2004) and Fai (2000) found that students in their studies complained of low levels of challenge, slow place, repetition of work and resulting boredom. Both these sets of students had, however, attended out-of-school provision and some stated that normal schooling suffered by comparison (Fai, 2000), yet even when students receive special provision in school similar complaints emerge (Gallagher et al., 1997). A case for grouping students by ability emerges strongly when we see that all three sets of students complained specifically about having to wait for less able classmates to catch up.

The case for grouping by ability is reinforced by students in Adams-Byers et al.'s (2004) study. When asked for advantages of mixed-ability grouping they said that there was a slower, more relaxed place, the work was easier and repetition reduced the chances of failure. The desirability of these "advantages", though, is questionable to say the least and the students themselves admitted that they led to decreased motivation.

Student dissatisfaction leads to a range of coping strategies. Disruptive or unproductive behaviour is, unsurprisingly, reported by both Fai (2000) and Plucker & McIntyre (1996). However, students in both studies also reported that they sought to increase the intellectual challenge themselves either through adding extra tasks or depth to their work or taking part in extra-curricular activities. It may therefore be tempting to say that we can use mixed-ability grouping and simply let the more able look after themselves. The Office for Standards in Education, though, states that more able students "have as much of an entitlement to have their needs addressed as do other children" (Ofsted, 2001), an assertion supported by Renzulli &

Gable's (1976) who report that a third of students in their study desired more support in their classwork.

One issue which split students is that of helping their classmates in mixed-ability lessons. While Plucker & McIntyre (1996) report that students in their study were quite willing to help less-able classmates those in Adams-Byers et al.'s (2004) study were divided. Although DCSF asserts that more able students should not surrender their learning for the benefit of the less able (DCSF, 2007) they also note that helping others is good practice for life after school (DCSF 2008), something anecdotally acknowledged by students (DCSF, 2008; Adams-Byers et al., 2004).

Confirming much of the above, students are largely positive about specialised provision for more-able students, specifically praising increased pace and challenge, more discussion and not having to wait for less-able classmates (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Fai, 2000; Gallagher et al., 1997). Such provision is not without its disadvantages though. The main academic complaints from students centre around too much pressure and too high a workload (Adams-Byers et al., 2004; Ford, 1978), dangers highlighted by DCSF (2008). A concerning disadvantage is also highlighted by Hertzog (2003). In her study of college students who had been in gifted and talented programmes while in school many commented on the negative social effects that ability grouping had had on them.

Conclusion

Students' comments provide a clear indication that they want to be intellectually challenged. Questions of implementation, however, are not as straightforward.

The use of grouping by ability appears to be an obvious and straightforward solution, although it is not without its disadvantages (both academic and social). Furthermore it can be politically difficult (e.g. in the case of grammar schools) or create significant organisational challenges for comprehensive schools (e.g. where students can be in different ability groups for different subjects).

The solution for mixed-ability classes which is drilled into all trainee teachers is differentiation, where the teacher challenges all students simultaneously, e.g. through giving different or modified pieces of work depending on ability. This, unsurprisingly, is not an easy task, a difficulty appreciated even by students (Fai, 2000; Gallagher et al., 1997; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). In answer to these complications Fai (2000) reports that some students expressed a willingness to attend after-school sessions. Although it is perhaps a manifestation of students creating their own intellectual challenge, the phenomenon of bright students attending lunchtime or after-school academic clubs is something any recent school-leaver (or trainee teacher) will be familiar with.

Students' views on implementation of provision for the more able is certainly an area that deserves more attention. Even if no immediate and acceptable solution offers itself, I believe that able students are able to offer mature, rational and practicable suggestions that I think we would be foolish to ignore. The need to cater for our most able students is clear, as are their educational ambitions and desires. Implementation, however, is likely to remain a difficult and polarising subject. Perhaps we should ask the kids.

References

Adams-Byers J, Whitsell SS, Moon SM (2004). Gifted students' perceptions of the academic and social/emotional effects of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 48 (1), 7-20.

Boyd R (1984). Academically talented students; opinions of school: a comparison between the end of year 7 and the end of year 10. In: Australian Association for Research in Education, *Australian Association for Research in Education National Conference.* Perth, November 1984.

Council of Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (2006). *Gifted and talented children in (and out) of the classroom*. [Online] Belfast: Council of Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. Available at: http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/docs/inclusion_and_sen/ gifted/gifted_children_060306.pdf [accessed 19 October 2010]

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007). *Effective provision for gifted and talented students in secondary education*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008). *Gifted and talented education guidance on preventing underachievement: a focus on exceptionally able pupils*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.

Fai PM (2000). Supporting gifted students in Hong Kong secondary schools: school policies and students' perspectives. *Gifted Education International*, 14 (3), 80-96.

Ford B (1978). Student attitudes toward special programming and identification. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 22 (4), 489-97.

Gallagher J, Harradine CC, Coleman MR (1997). Challenge or boredom? Gifted students' views on their schooling. *Roeper Review*, 19 (3), 132-6.

Hertzog NB (2003). Impact of gifted programs from the students' perspectives. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 47 (2), 131-43.

Kanevsky L, Keighley T (2003). To produce or not to produce? Understanding boredom and the honor in underachievement. *Roeper Review*, 26 (1), 20-8.

Office for Standards in Education (2001). *Providing for gifted and talented pupils: an evaluation of Excellence in Cities and other grant-funded programmes*. London: Office for Standards in Education.

Renzulli JS, Gable RK (1976). A factorial study of the attitudes of gifted students toward independent study. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 20 (1), 91-8.