

Further reading

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HMI. *A review by HMI: The Education of Very Able Children in Maintained Schools*, HMSO, 1992.

Kerry, Trevor, *Teaching Bright Pupils in Mixed Ability Classes*, Macmillan Education, 1981.

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Denton and Postlethwaite, *Able Children: Identifying them in the Classroom*, NFER-NELSON, 1985.

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Fostering ability

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AIM

To identify more able students, develop teaching methods that encourage them to reach their full potential, and examine whether identifying the more able students enables teachers to be more effective in meeting their needs.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Teachers' judgements alone are not sufficient to ensure all very able pupils are identified.
- ★ Over-reliance on written assessments has the potential to obscure the existence of very able students.
- ★ Development work following the identification of more able pupils led teachers to focus on carefully planned, probing questions as tools for meeting their needs.
- ★ Questions that meet the needs of very able pupils need to be planned in advance to ensure they demand analysis, problem solving, synthesis or evaluation.

A research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/97

Background

Crown Hills Community College is an inner-city comprehensive school for 11–16 year olds. It is a multicultural school, with about 90 per cent of its intake speaking English as a second language. My research has been carried out in response to the school development plan and my own interest in working with very able students.

Explanation of findings

Teachers' judgements alone are not sufficient to ensure all very able pupils are identified.

When teachers were asked to identify the more able students in their teaching groups, using their own judgement, very few were highlighted in each group. The identification did not match the information received from the primary schools, including reading ages, E2L needs analysis and Key Stage 2 SAT results.

A non-verbal reasoning test was used in school to try to eliminate the language factor when assessing the students. When all the data was assembled and teachers were given INSET time to review it, more

students were highlighted as more able. The information on the students was used to identify under-achievers too.

“The initial identification by teachers showed that more able girls were more likely to be overlooked.”

The initial identification by teachers showed that more able girls were more likely to be overlooked. Those students with low reading ages, but good scores in other assessments, were rarely identified as more able. This appeared to be why many boys

were not identified as more able. Those with reading ages equal to or above their chronological age were often identified as more able, but these findings were not always supported by other results.

Over-reliance on written assessments has the potential to obscure the existence of very able students.

I tracked two Year 7 tutor groups for three days to observe the students' experience across the whole curriculum. The classroom experience for most students was based on reading information and writing. The significant numbers of students still acquiring spoken English are disadvantaged by the amount of reading they are expected to do.

Those with poor literacy skills but high scores in the SATs and the non-verbal reasoning test were not spotted by teachers as potentially more able, except in subjects such as art, drama, music, PE and some modern languages, including Punjabi and Gujarati. The poor quality of pupils' written work can mask their potential.

“The poor quality of pupils' written work can mask their potential.”

Development work following the identification of more able pupils led teachers to focus on carefully planned, probing questions as tools for meeting their needs.

Much of the teaching in the lessons was based on questioning. Many of the questions teachers asked involved recall and comprehension. Questions requiring application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation were rarely noted. Use of such questions is a way of differentiating and catering for the needs of all pupils. Teachers found questions of these types difficult to think of and ask in the classroom without preparation. The questioning was used for a variety of purposes: establishing prior knowledge, shaping learning, monitoring and reviewing progress.

Teachers made some interesting observations on their work with questioning techniques: more boys answered questions than girls; boys didn't worry about answering incorrectly; less confident teachers worried about their classroom management; more able pupils answered more questions; not all pupils were involved in the lesson when volunteers were asked for answers.

Questions that meet the needs of very able pupils need to be planned in advance to ensure they demand analysis, problem solving, synthesis or evaluation.

The responses from teachers and pupils to the planned use of questioning were positive. Planning was essential, as teachers found it extremely difficult to think of questions requiring complex thinking skills. The planned questions, sometimes in the form of an outline script, had very positive outcomes in the lesson:

- ★ more pupils were involved in answering questions;
- ★ the more able and the weaker students participated;
- ★ more pupils concentrated and were involved;
- ★ unexpectedly, classes were able to concentrate on the questioning for up to 45 minutes.

The teachers found the key to successful questioning was planning. Pupils enjoyed the lessons prepared by teachers and reported a feeling of success, which promoted a sense of belonging to the class.

The research

The research lasted two terms and is part of an ongoing initiative to raise achievement.

In the summer term of 1996:

- ★ all the data on Year 7 pupils was collated and disseminated to teachers;
- ★ two tutor groups were tracked over three days each to monitor the experience and achievement of the more able pupils.

In the autumn term of 1996:

- ★ a teacher-day was set aside to identify ways in which teachers and faculties could ensure the more able would fulfil their potential;
- ★ a faculty and whole-school policy on meeting the learning needs of the more able started to take shape;
- ★ a group of teachers worked on developing questioning techniques as a way of enhancing pupils' learning.

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