

# Gifted and talented pupils in schools

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Ofsted surveyed a small sample of 26 schools to evaluate their capacity to respond effectively to changes in policy in terms of making provision for gifted and talented pupils, and to identify good and less effective practice.

**Age group:** 5–18

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## Executive summary

During July 2009, Ofsted visited 17 secondary schools and nine primary schools to evaluate their capacity to provide for gifted and talented pupils, to identify good and less effective practice and to determine how best schools might be supported. The 26 schools were selected because their previous inspection had identified an improvement point in relation to their provision for this group of pupils.<sup>1</sup>

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has recently reviewed its national programme for gifted and talented pupils and concluded that it was not having sufficient impact on schools. As a result, provision is being scaled back to align it more closely with wider developments in personalising learning. Schools will be expected to do more themselves for these pupils.

Eight of the schools surveyed were well placed to respond to the proposed changes in policy. Their focus on improving provision for gifted and talented pupils had a positive impact on outcomes for all pupils. They had embraced key aspects of national programmes, not only Assessment for Learning and Assessing Pupils' Progress, but also the Institutional and Classroom Quality Standards.<sup>2</sup> The teachers had focused appropriately on matching their materials and activities in lessons to the needs of all pupils to make sure they were challenged.

The 14 schools where their capacity to improve was judged to be adequate had started to tackle the improvement points from their previous inspection, and all could show some improvement in outcomes for pupils. However, many of the developments in these schools were fragile and the changes had had limited success in helping gifted and talented pupils to make appropriate and sustained progress. Although most of these schools recognised that improving provision for gifted and talented pupils was important, it was not a priority. They had only just started to consider using the Institutional and Classroom Quality Standards for audit and evaluation. To build their capacity to improve provision, they would benefit from better guidance, support and resources from outside agencies and organisations.

In the four schools where the capacity to sustain improvements for these pupils was poorly developed, lead teachers and coordinators did not have sufficient status to influence strategic planning, and teachers had not been trained to meet the needs of their gifted and talented pupils effectively. Although they complied with basic expectations and requirements, for example, to identify such pupils and keep a register, developing provision was not a priority. These schools did not sufficiently

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<sup>1</sup> The Annex A provides definitions.

<sup>2</sup> Gifted and Talented Institutional Quality Standards (IQS); for further information, see <http://ygt.dcsf.gov.uk/Community/Content.aspx?contentId=347&contentType=3>

recognise their own responsibilities to meet the needs of their gifted and talented pupils.

Engagement with parents was inconsistent. Many teachers were not convinced about the importance of making differentiated provision for these pupils, either because they thought it would be at the expense of other pupils or because they felt there was insufficient support to help them do this properly. All the headteachers felt that their task of improving provision for gifted and talented pupils would be easier if there was a clearer and stronger message from the DCSF that this focus should be a high priority for all schools. Very few schools had accessed, or encouraged their pupils to access, the Learner Academy.<sup>3</sup> Gifted and talented pupils felt challenged in only some of their lessons because day-to-day lesson planning did not always reflect their needs. For many of the pupils, being identified as gifted and talented meant additional work and extra activities rather than an appropriate level of challenge within lessons, and their views were not adequately sought and listened to by their school.

## Key findings

- In the best schools surveyed, the needs of gifted and talented pupils were being met alongside those of all pupils. The schools which focused on progress for all pupils were more likely to plan lessons that challenged their gifted and talented pupils.
- All the schools visited had a policy for gifted and talented provision, but many of these policies were generic versions from other schools or the local authority, and were therefore not sufficiently effective in improving the performance of all pupils, and especially the gifted and talented.
- In 20 of the 26 schools visited, pupils said their views were either not sought or not taken sufficiently into account in planning tasks and curriculum provision to meet their interests. The pupils indicated that the level of challenge was inconsistent across their lessons, and some had requested more challenging work.
- All the schools indicated that they had not fully engaged with the parents of gifted and talented pupils to help them understand their children's needs or how to provide effective support.
- The eight schools that were well placed to respond to additional requirements were led by senior leaders who had involved everyone in developing a vision of what could be provided for gifted and talented pupils. The status of lead teachers and coordinators was sufficient to enable them to influence and implement policy.

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<sup>3</sup> The Young Gifted and Talented (YG&T) Learner Academy is to be discontinued on 31 March 2010. It succeeded the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), which was run by the University of Warwick under contract to the DCSF from 2002 to 2007.

- A common feature of the 14 schools where the capacity to improve was just adequate was that, although the senior staff shared their thinking with other teachers, they gave subject leaders too much flexibility to interpret school policy. The result was often inconsistency and a lack of coherence when subjects and curriculum areas were at different stages of readiness for establishing further provision.
- The four least responsive schools, faced with other competing priorities, lacked sufficient drive or commitment from senior leaders to develop or sustain provision for their gifted and talented pupils.
- Most of the schools said they needed further support to identify the most appropriate regional and national resources and training to meet their particular needs better. All those visited welcomed the DCSF's plan to produce a more accessible list or catalogue of opportunities available locally, regionally and nationally which staff, pupils and parents could use.
- Lead teachers and coordinators in all the schools felt the best way to improve challenge in lessons was for practical, subject-specific training for teachers to support them in refining planning and teaching for individuals and groups.
- All the schools visited felt they needed more support and guidance about how to judge what gifted and talented pupils at different ages should be achieving and how well they were making progress towards attaining their challenging targets across key stages.
- Most of the headteachers said their provision for gifted and talented pupils received little direct scrutiny from their School Improvement Partners.
- Some specialist secondary schools had established good partnerships with others to ensure that the needs of gifted and talented pupils were well met within their specialist areas, particularly in sport, where a national network has been established for several years.
- Just over half the schools visited said that, with support from coordinators for gifted and talented pupils in their local authority, they had established good links and collaborations with other local schools for enhancing provision. In the four primary schools and four secondary schools where such collaborations were weak, they cited the lack of such support as one of the main factors.
- All the schools visited had developed out-of-hours provision and programmes. However, the link between these and school-based provision was not always clear. The schools were not consistently evaluating their impact, although the specialist schools did so for their specialist subjects.
- There was little analysis of whether different groups of pupils on the gifted and talented register were progressing as well as they could.

## Recommendations

The DCSF should:

- ensure its planned catalogue of opportunities for improving national provision for gifted and talented education better meets the needs of all schools and parents, and helps local authorities to locate more easily the most appropriate training and materials for their schools
- ensure that local authorities, through dialogue between School Improvement Partners and schools, hold schools more rigorously to account for the impact of their provision for gifted and talented pupils.

Local authorities should:

- hold schools more rigorously to account for the impact of their provision for gifted and talented pupils
- encourage best practice, locally and regionally, by sharing directly with schools or groups of schools what works well and how schools can have access to appropriate resources, including practical training
- help schools to establish clearer indicators of what gifted and talented pupils at different ages should be achieving and expected rates of progress across key stages.

Schools should:

- focus on matching teaching to the individual needs of all pupils, including gifted and talented pupils
- elicit views from and listen more carefully to what pupils say about their learning, and act on the findings
- engage parents and carers more constructively by helping them to understand better the provision made for their gifted and talented children and how best they might support them
- use current funding to improve provision, especially through partnerships, collaborations and clusters of schools
- give lead teachers and coordinators sufficient status and responsibility to enable them to influence practice at a strategic level and explore fully the opportunities to improve provision
- ensure that processes for auditing and evaluating the impact of provision, including enriched curriculum activities, are sufficiently rigorous to inform planning and the improvement of teaching and learning.

## Inspection background and methodology

1. The DCSF commissioned a review of the direction of travel of its national programme for gifted and talented young people in 2006. Following the report of this review in 2009, the DCSF recommended scaling back some elements of the national programme and undertaking further work to support schools to improve their own provision for this group.<sup>4</sup> As a result, schools will now be expected to:
  - align their policies for gifted and talented pupils more clearly with other developments which focus on matching learning more closely to individual pupils' needs
  - provide more support for gifted and talented pupils in disadvantaged circumstances
  - narrow the gaps in outcomes between different groups of pupils while increasing the challenge across the curriculum for gifted and talented pupils
  - promote social mobility through entry to a wider range of universities.
2. The White Paper published in 2009 proposed pupil and parent guarantees to ensure that there are high aspirations for all pupils and that they are given the opportunity to do the best they can.<sup>5</sup> The 'pupil guarantee' and the 'parent guarantee' mean that pupils identified as gifted and talented (and their parents) can expect to receive written confirmation from their school of the extra challenge and support to be received by September 2010. If these elements become statutory, there will be heightened expectations of schools and local authorities to undertake more work themselves to improve their provision for these pupils.
3. Inspectors visited 17 secondary and nine primary schools, mostly selected because a recent inspection report by Ofsted had identified points for improvement relating to their provision for gifted or talented pupils. The survey was designed to evaluate the capacity of these schools to respond to the new, more localised policy and to identify any difficulties schools might encounter when they are to be required to do more for themselves. The survey also evaluated how these schools had responded to the improvement points from their previous inspection and the extent to which they had used the DCSF's national programme. Inspectors summarised each school's capacity to respond to new responsibilities as 'secure', 'adequate' or 'underdeveloped'.

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<sup>4</sup> ACL Consulting, *National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth - Evaluation* (Research Report DCSF-RW078), DCSF, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Your child, your schools, our future: building a 21st century schools system*, DCSF, 2009.

4. During the visits, inspectors held discussions with the headteacher, the school's lead teacher or coordinator for provision for gifted and talented pupils, a group of pupils on the school's register of such pupils, heads of department or subject leaders, and a number of parents of gifted and talented pupils. Inspectors also observed a small number of lessons and reviewed school policies and other key documents relating to provision for these pupils.

## Building capacity

5. The best schools surveyed were meeting the needs of gifted and talented pupils alongside those of all pupils. The schools committed to being inclusive demonstrated that their focus on improving provision for gifted and talented pupils was also having a positive impact on the outcomes for all pupils. Expectations and aspirations were raised at all levels through a commitment to let no pupil fall behind. A headteacher in one of the schools where improvements had been securely embedded said:

The focus on improving provision for these [gifted and talented] pupils brought about a culture change for teachers in their perceptions about 'giftedness', so that thinking more about the needs of this group, in terms of raising expectations and increasing the challenge for them, helped to add rigour to lesson planning and teaching for all pupils throughout the school.

6. The role and responsibilities of the lead teacher or coordinator were critical in decisions about whole-school improvement. When their status was sufficiently high, they had a significant influence on whole-school policies, processes and strategies for gifted and talented pupils. The best practice ensured that teachers were using national guidance consistently to identify gifted and talented pupils, and that the information was available and used by other staff in the school across subjects.

In one of the secondary schools visited, the lead teacher had translated the Quality Classroom Standards into language which Year 8 pupils could understand. He made sure that each subject used the main categories – creative thinker, reflective learner, effective participator, independent enquirer, self-manager and team worker – and identified what these meant for the individual subjects and what pupils might be expected to do as a result. For instance, in English, creative thinkers were expected to 'think creatively, making connections for themselves and with others' and pupils might expect to 'get to think creatively a lot', 'always be learning new terminology', 'undertake things they had not done before' and 'work out problems in groups'. The audit was valuable as it showed where some elements had not been addressed. For example, in one subject, under the heading of 'reflective learning', one pupil had written, 'I have not talked to my teacher at all about my work targets'. The lead teacher said that this process had made heads of departments much more conscious of the

needs of the gifted and talented pupils and what changes could be made in terms of planning and pedagogy to enable them to make faster progress. The school was planning to undertake similar audits in other year groups.

7. In the secondary schools visited, in subject departments where a member of staff acted as a link with the lead teacher, discussions about current national ideas about improving provision were more common. In these schools, the lead teachers said that teachers understood the critical importance of planning lessons so that work was matched to the needs of individuals and groups. The lessons observed during the survey confirmed this. The schools that had focused on progress for all pupils and had embraced initiatives such as Assessment for Learning<sup>6</sup> and Assessing Pupils' Progress<sup>7</sup> were more likely to plan lessons that challenged able pupils. Invariably, these developments built on good monitoring of progress that identified any possible underachievement and led to changes in teachers' planning and activities in lessons.

In one of the primary schools visited, all stakeholders had been involved in drawing up the policy for teaching and learning, and understood well what meeting individual learning needs meant. The policy stated: 'We do not believe that it is right to describe one group as "gifted and talented" but rather to see these pupils as the "most able" and try to meet their needs as best as we can, along with those of other groups of pupils'. The policy described how the school set about 'knowing our children' and included a clear approach to developing strong links with the local playgroup. It ensured high-quality induction to the Reception class, well-managed internal transition days before pupils moved to new classes, rigorous maintenance of records for individual pupils and classes, and the clear identification of the needs of different groups of pupils (ranging from the 'disaffected', through 'coasters' and 'underperformers' to the 'most able'). The policy set out how the National Quality Standards were to be used for:

- auditing and evaluating provision for teaching and learning
- reviewing and extending the curriculum
- supporting pupils in the most effective ways outside school
- setting targets and tracking progress, matched carefully to need
- showing the interventions available for different groups of pupils
- showing how parents might be involved.

Pupils were very positive about their lessons, enjoyed their activities and were making good progress.

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<sup>6</sup> Information on assessment for learning in primary and secondary schools is available at: <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/assessment/assessingpupilsprogressapp>

<sup>7</sup> *Getting to grips with assessing pupils' progress* (DCSF-00129-2009), DCSF, 2009.

8. Pupils benefited from productive local or regional partnerships, collaborations or clusters. These partnerships worked best when the coordinators for gifted and talented pupils in local authorities supported the schools well, giving good direction and guidance and enabling them to gain access to events and resources, not only across the local region but also nationally.
9. Pupils on schools' gifted and talented registers had few opportunities for discussing their needs with teachers. Their parents were mostly unaware of what was available and why the school was providing special activities for their children.

Gifted and talented sixth form students in one of the schools visited had been encouraged to create a 'student manifesto' after a day spent with students from other schools and colleges discussing what worked best and what should be avoided. The ideas and suggestions in the manifesto were to be discussed with leaders and teachers in their respective schools and colleges.

They agreed that, during the school day, they wanted strong mutual student-teacher relationships; universal free periods for one-to-one consultation between student and teacher; more opportunities for working with similarly gifted, talented and motivated students; optimised use of lesson time; something to be done about unenthusiastic teachers; avoidance of 'spoon feeding' and lack of variety in teaching approaches; and more stimulating ideas to think about when not in the classroom but linked closely to what they were doing. Beyond the school day, they wanted more educational trips that were planned specifically to extend work done in class and to meet interesting people; better access to a wide range of up-to-date resources with the opportunity to use these at home; more guidance on how to network with other students and organisations who might be able to help them extend their study, talent and interests; financial support to attend regional or national events. They did not like lack of coherence and cohesion in timetabling extra-curricular activities; being pushed 'for the sake of it'; unreasonable homework and coursework deadlines; and failure to recognise their need for personal time.

10. In the schools judged as secure, designated teachers liaised with other schools, or with teachers in the same school, to ensure a good range of quantitative and qualitative information about individual pupils, including information about the reasons why they were placed on the register for gifted and talented pupils. This was particularly important when pupils transferred to other schools. These records were monitored and reviewed regularly. Individual targets were set, which aimed to extend these pupils appropriately. All the schools visited rightly indicated that making the expected two levels of progress in the National Curriculum during a key stage was not challenging enough for their gifted and talented pupils.

## Aspects of good practice

11. Students in schools with sixth forms received independent advice and guidance about post-18 progression routes and choices of university. The schools monitored carefully the aspirations of the students who were gifted and talented and ensured that they made appropriate choices. The schools with sixth forms had developed active links with universities and other providers and had amended their curricula so that gifted and talented students could undertake more advanced work where suitable courses were available, for example through e-learning.
12. The schools saw the use of information and communication technology as important in enabling pupils to take more responsibility for their learning. However, three lead teachers interviewed during the survey expressed concerns that simply encouraging pupils to access websites and conduct further research on topics on their own would not lead necessarily to better quality work and thinking. The pupils needed to use the information gained by such research to solve problems or demonstrate their high-level thinking skills in reasoned responses, and more teachers needed help in bringing this about effectively for gifted and talented pupils.
13. While almost all of the schools visited had established links with other schools, either in partnerships or in clusters, these were generally to share ideas and keep abreast of national developments rather than to generate clear plans and strategies for improving provision for gifted and talented pupils. Links based on schools' specialist status were productive in developing clearer strategic plans for joint working and partnership work but were not necessarily enhancing provision outside the specialist areas for the gifted and talented pupils.
14. During the survey, it was clear that assessment for learning, as developed within the National Strategies, was improving teachers' questioning and pupils' thinking skills, but matching the work set to pupils' specific needs remained a challenge in almost three quarters of the schools visited. Headteachers welcomed any further training and guidance on improving this aspect of teaching and learning. The way teachers used assessment to monitor pupils' attainment and track their progress had improved, but senior leaders were aware that targets were not matched closely enough to individual pupils' aptitudes to enable them to achieve their potential.

In a secondary school visited, the departments used the school's rigorous procedures for assessment, monitoring and tracking to identify underachievement and plan suitable support for individual students or small groups. The process embraced all abilities and applied in all year groups, including the sixth form.

The intervention process started with a meeting between the student and the subject teacher (or teachers) to explore how far the student understood the nature of the underachievement and to agree a variety of ways of tackling the gap. Outcomes might include:

- teachers agreeing to adopt a new teaching approach
- students accepting the need to embrace a different style of learning more positively
- students focusing more on developing further their current work patterns and study habits.

New expectations lay at the heart of this process, a 'can do' approach leading to a 'will do' confidence and determination to overcome barriers.

The students were expected to keep evidence of their progress in portfolios, which were reviewed at further meetings. The essence of the school's approach was to encourage staff to tackle underachievement actively before it became difficult to turn around. The students said they felt their teachers were fully aware of how they were performing. They gave examples of how they had been supported and challenged to make better progress, even in areas where they were identified as 'gifted'.

15. In one of the primary schools visited, for an hour every Friday, pupils were stimulated by University Afternoon sessions, so called because the school thought this was a way of encouraging even young pupils to think of university as a stimulating and interesting place. Session plans identified clearly the more able, gifted and talented pupils and the extra challenge expected of them, depending on the nature of the topic.

The pupils could choose activities from a wide range of skills-based tasks, run by teachers who had special interests and expertise in these areas as well as by members of the local community. Each pupil's programme of activities was monitored and changed every so often. Topics included making books, learning Spanish, watercolour painting, investigating something of the pupil's own choice (but where staff had expertise to help), dance, craft, outdoor games, creating a newspaper, making music, cross-stitch, problem-solving in mathematics, aerobics and poetry (with a visiting poet).

The pupils worked in groups no larger than six, with others from across the year groups, to create or make something and presented their completed product to the rest. They said they really enjoyed these sessions, especially when they could see their work being presented or when they took part in small drama productions. They were proud to talk about their books of poetry entitled *Rainbow rhymes and sunny times*.

## Common barriers

16. All the schools visited had a policy for gifted and talented provision, but many of these policies were generic versions from other schools or the local authority, and were therefore not sufficiently tailored to the needs and interests of the particular school's own community. Most of the schools visited had only just started to consider using the Institutional or Classroom Quality Standards for auditing and evaluating their developments. Very few had used or had encouraged their pupils to use the Learner Academy (which is to be discontinued).
17. Capacity was weakest in the four schools visited where provision for the gifted and talented pupils was something additional to the school's main plans for improvement. The low status of the lead teacher was symptomatic of the low priority given to this group of pupils in terms of whole-school improvement. The staff in these schools were not trained how to meet the needs of these pupils.
18. All the schools visited had developed out-of-hours provision and programmes, but the link between these and the formal school-based curriculum and lesson activities was not always clear. It was also not always clear how far these activities benefited the gifted and talented pupils. The schools were not consistently evaluating the impact of such activities, although the specialist schools did so for their specialist subjects.
19. The majority of the schools visited rarely asked pupils on the gifted and talented register for their views. Of the 26 schools visited, there were only nine where all the pupils concerned were aware that they were on the school's register. In the remaining schools, some pupils knew while others did not. Pupils were confused about what their schools considered their gifts to be. Eight of the schools did not inform pupils or their parents about their inclusion on the register.
20. Gifted and talented pupils in all but the least effective schools said they felt suitably challenged in some of their lessons, but this was not consistently the case in all lessons. Some of the pupils said that extra work was set in some subjects if they completed work earlier than other pupils, but that this was often merely more of the same. They all valued being encouraged to carry out research on their own. Some felt they needed more guidance from teachers as to what resources and reading were available for them. A few of the pupils did not like being used constantly as mentors for other pupils, although most liked the opportunity to 'teach' another pupil from time to time. None said they had access to an identified mentor for gifted and talented pupils.
21. All the schools visited thought more training was required to enable teachers to understand better how to select materials and plan lessons to challenge gifted and talented pupils, and to recognise and build upon exceptionally good work.

All the schools hoped that changes to the national programme might provide further guidance for teachers on how to set appropriate targets for the most able. The schools also felt that further guidance and training were needed for teachers, not only to identify which pupils were able but underachieving but also to understand how to support them to make swifter progress. Twenty of the schools said that, in trying to tackle the point for improvement from their inspection report, they thought that there was a lack of appropriate training, beyond the generic training, for subject leads and coordinators. They wanted to explore further how to improve their provision for able, gifted and talented pupils, and especially to secure the help of other excellent providers, including universities and Excellence Hubs.<sup>8</sup>

22. Headteachers in seven of the schools visited said that many of their teachers remained to be convinced of the importance of provision for gifted and talented pupils in driving overall school improvement. These headteachers said the task of convincing teachers and making the necessary improvements would be easier if there were a clearer and stronger commitment to improving provision for these pupils, backed by appropriate support, guidance and challenge from the DCSF and School Improvement Partners.
23. In the four least effective schools, the progress of their gifted and talented pupils was not checked rigorously enough. In seven schools, headteachers and lead teachers thought that any additional requirement for them to focus more on their gifted and talented pupils would undermine the school's efforts to improve the attainment and progress of all other groups of pupils. There was little analysis of whether different groups of pupils on the gifted and talented register were progressing as well as they could. Expectations of what these pupils could achieve were not high enough and the pupils themselves indicated that lessons were often not challenging them. They said they often had to ask teachers for more to do.
24. Only two of the schools visited provided good support for parents to help them understand aspects of the work and provision for their gifted and talented children. In the other schools, the parents of such children said they were not engaged in such activities. The schools had not helped to form support groups or advised parents how to access suitable websites. Most of the parents welcomed the opportunity for better engagement with their child's school. However, a few of the parents did not want their children formally identified as being gifted and talented. Some were happy to leave it to the school to make the necessary decisions about their child's education and progress.

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<sup>8</sup> Further information on Excellence Hubs is available at:  
[www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/gandtpupils/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/gandtpupils/)

25. All the schools expressed concerns about their ability to develop and sustain further provision without additional funding. The schools perceived a lack of clarity about current funding arrangements, especially if they were required to form partnerships with other schools facing difficulties or to act as a lead school to a number of local schools.

## Annex. Definitions

The words 'gifted' and 'talented' can be used in different ways. The DCSF uses the following definitions:

**Gifted:** ability or potential in one or more academic subjects; the top five to 10% of pupils per school as measured by actual or potential achievement in English, mathematics, science, history, geography, modern foreign languages, religious education, information and communication technology, or design and technology.

**Talented:** ability or potential in one or more skills, whether artistic, sporting, interpersonal or vocational; the top five to 10% of pupils per school as measured by actual or potential achievement in the subjects of art, music or physical education. However, one element of the description should be emphasised: it is the top five to 10% of pupils *per school, regardless of the overall ability profile of pupils.*

**Gifted and talented:** pupils with one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop those abilities).