

A response as to how my involvement with the Gifted and Talented programme initiated by Bath and North East Somerset has made me re-assess my living educational values and beliefs, thus influencing my delivery and provision for the SEBD students with whom I work.

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As I consider the issues implicit within the above statement I am aware that many will be bewildered by any connection between Gifted and Talented and SEBD students. I too, find it hard to think in terms of highly motivated able, gifted and talented students when I look around the SEBD provision within which I spend on average ten hours five days a week!

However “Higher Standards, Better Schools for all” [White Paper 2005] clearly sets out the government’s ambition for every student – they should have the right personalised support to reach the limits of their capabilities and later states, “We will legislate to prescribe curriculum entitlements for learners aged 14-19.”

My methodology for this enquiry is a narrative style of methodology [Clandinin 2007] I feel strongly that in shaping and telling my story I am continuing to understand and learn from my own educational journey as well as clarifying it to readers. “Constructing the story turns tension into attention, and telling the recognised narrative expresses intention” [Maree 2007, p.2]

Children with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties cover the range of ability found in mainstream schools, but generally behave unusually or in an extreme and sometimes violent fashion to a variety of social, personal, emotional or physical circumstances. [Nicholson 2005]

Their behaviour may be evident at the personal level through:

- Low self image, anxiety
- Depression, withdrawal
- Resentment, defiance, vindictiveness

Their behaviour may be evident at the verbal level through:

- Silence or threats
- Interrupting or arguing
- Swearing a great deal and other forms of verbal abuse

Their behaviour may be evident at the non verbal level through:

- Clinging,
- Truancy
- Failure to observe rules
- Disruptiveness, aggression, violence

Their behaviour may be evident at work skills level through:

- An inability or unwillingness to work without direct supervision

- Concentration, completion of tasks, following instructions

Emotional behaviour disorders lie on the continuum between behaviour which challenges teachers but is within normal, albeit unacceptable, bounds and that which is indicative of serious mental illness.

Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties range from social maladaptation to abnormal emotional stresses. They are persistent, though not necessarily permanent, and constitute learning difficulties. They may be multiple and may manifest themselves in many different forms and severities. They may have single or a number of causes, they may be associated with school, family, other environments or physical or sensory impairments.

Whether or not a child is judged to have social, emotional or behavioural difficulties will depend on the nature, frequency, persistence, severity or abnormality and the cumulative effect of the behaviour, compared to our normal expectations for a child of the age concerned. Many such children are unable to trust or to form relationships with peers and adults. [Farmer and Hollowell, 1994]

Many of our students come from severely disadvantage backgrounds and yet, “Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are just as likely to be gifted and talented as those from the middle class; they may need greater support to fulfil their potential.” [Higher Standards, Better schools for All. 2005]

These are the students with whom I work on a daily basis and who I see, unlike in mainstream provision for almost every lesson of every day!

These are the students who have been permanently excluded from secondary schools throughout Bath and North East Somerset and have come, usually reluctantly to The Link School as their last chance to gain skills and accreditation before they leave education for good.

These are the students who as well as their EBD issues have incredibly low social, literacy and numeracy skills.

These are the students who resent the education system which so far has failed them and are determined to resist all our efforts at teaching!

The question I have to ask myself is how anything I have learned from my experiences working with Gifted and Talented students can possibly relate to my work with these 14 to 16 year old SEBD students. In this enquiry I am seeking to show a valid representation of my educational influence in the development of my students’ gifts and talents as well as my own.

How did my involvement with and interest in Gifted and Talented provision begin?

My first introduction to the Gifted and Talented programme in Bath and North East Somerset came about when I was asked to help out in a workshop organised by Marie Huxtable, a Senior Educational Psychologist from Bath.

A colleague was delivering a session on “The Tempest” by Shakespeare. The intention was to increase the student’s knowledge of the life and times of Shakespeare and improve awareness of the language used in his plays, this was in addition to the work which takes place within the National Curriculum which is delivered in schools. There was an emphasis on social and historical context, parts of the play were to be acted out using “modern speak” as well as the original text and there was an in depth analysis of Shakespeare’s prose and poetry with particular attention paid to the iambic pentameter. Throughout the sessions there was always an enormous element of fun, challenge and discovery present in the delivery and expectations of the teacher. I was amazed at how willingly these students happily gave up a couple of days of their summer holiday to work on a play written over four hundred years ago and approach their work with such raw enthusiasm.

The difference seemed to be in the fact that 100% of the students were engaged and interested even before the session started! They were actually asking us what they would be doing and keen on getting started. They were not put off by the didactic approach first thing in the morning when we were talking about Shakespeare the playwright and the times in which he lived. They soaked up the information and bombarded us with questions about Elizabethan times, Shakespeare’s histories, comedies, tragedies, his poetry and his contemporaries. These were not just Gifted and Talented students, they were interested, articulate, witty and demanding learners – or maybe these attributes are intrinsic to the whole Gifted and Talented descriptors?

As the days progressed my colleague and I came to realise that group instructions, apart from the basic housekeeping details, were falling on deaf ears. These students all required individual attention and personalised educational packages. The very fact that they were extremely able students meant that they were working at their own individual levels and progressing at different speeds dependent on the amount of detail and interest they were putting into each stage of the given task.

As my involvement with the Gifted and Talented Programme developed I continued to be amazed by the comments I was hearing,

“That was brilliant Miss, what are we doing next”

“Can I do that again Miss but can you make it more difficult this time?” and even

“How can I do this but make it even better because then it will be more fun?”

These comments were unbelievable to the ears of a teacher working in an SEBD setting despite the fact that there are very occasional times when our students are obviously enjoying what they are doing and there are times when they experience a real sense of achievement.

Gordon Brown in setting out his vision for education in a speech at the University of Greenwich 31 October 2007 says,

“I believe that each young person has talent and potential, each some gift to develop, each something to give to the good of the community.” and later,

“School mottos are a declaration of faith in the future. They embody ideals and aspiration; they speak to a guiding belief that every child has a talent, every child can learn, and so we must nurture and fulfil the potential of all.” [Teaching Today 2008]

What have I learned from my involvement with the Gifted and Talented Scheme that has made me re-assess my educational values and beliefs and what is the impact on my teaching in a SEBD setting?

When did I begin to be aware of a shift in my educational views and beliefs?

In April 2005 I was fortunate enough to be selected to take part in a British Council funded fact finding trip to the old Soviet Union. The focus of the trip was to attempt to establish how Russia was consistently producing gifted and talented students who excelled in maths, literature, sport, modern foreign languages, science and the arts. Ten teachers from Bath and North East Somerset spent ten days visiting schools and talking with staff in Yekaterinburg, Siberia.

What we saw was impressive but highly controlled and manipulated. Most schools were basic in terms of construction and facilities and most staff female. Students attended either in the morning or in the afternoon when lessons were repeated by the staff. Discipline seemed tight, students more than acquiescent and we were made to feel incredibly welcome and were treated like visiting royalty!

Students were all assessed at an early age and those who showed promise and were developing talents were sent to the best schools with the highest success levels and expected to attend another specialist gymnasium [school/academy] either in the morning or the afternoon. We were able to visit some of these “hot houses” and were mesmerised by the intensity of work being undertaken. We watched advanced maths sessions, aeronautical science, modern foreign languages, ballet, music and literature lessons. These students were quite obviously talented but were being driven hard by their own belief in their success and incredibly high targets set by the teachers. There was a fundamental belief amongst the students we were able to speak with that education, and only education, would lead to personal happiness, was the financial route forward and for some a way out of the barren wastes of Siberia to the unknown luxuries of Moscow and St Petersburg.

Throughout the trip we were aware that we were only seeing the showcase schools that were [quite rightly] enormously proud of their students and their achievements. They had literally laid out the red carpet for us and had obviously been preparing for months in advance of our visit. What we saw was spectacular, not just in terms of the gifted and talented students but in the way their enthusiasm and pride pulled the whole school along.

The differences in teaching were huge from the beginning. As each new topic was introduced the class was taught in a didactic manner almost like a university master class or lecture. The teacher delivered from the front using only her voice, books and

the blackboard, no where did we see interactive technology at work in the classroom. The class seemed to move along as a whole with little time for questions other than those generated by the teacher. After this the following lesson reinforced the initial session and then seemed to be entirely individualised/personalised lesson plans, each student working at their own level and constantly being stretched and challenged by the teacher. There was no coasting; students who had completed their work were accelerated through the curriculum. The pressure on the teachers must have been phenomenal yet ask any teacher what makes their job rewarding and top of the list is likely to be seeing students progress academically and making a difference to their life chances.

The teachers seemed dedicated and passionate about their vocation despite being paid what amounted to a pittance! They had in educational terms, minds that were completely open, desperate to know how we operated in the UK and if there was anything they could learn from us. Despite the fact that there were political no go areas [Yekaterinburg had only been open to foreigners for ten years before our arrival] these teachers wanted to learn as much as they could from our visit and constantly encouraged the students to do the same. This enthusiasm and dedication can not but have had an impact on their students to reach out further than they had ever reached before.

Discussions which took place in restaurants in the evening amongst the westerners went along the lines of what was the criteria for the initial assessment, what about late developers, what happened to the students who were not singled out for the “excellence gymnasium” and what would happen to them if they too had the chance of this intense tuition?

It was at this point that I made the connection with my own SEBD students who quite understandably because of their emotional and behavioural difficulties, received an educational package which we as educators believed appropriate to their needs. What if we, like the system we had observed in Yekaterinburg were providing educational loopholes through which some of our students would sink? What if we gave our students the opportunities and encouragement I had seen present in the teaching of gifted and able students, would this increase the life chances of SEBD students?

How has this experience made me re-consider our existing educational provision for SEBD students?

It is well known that white working-class boys form the majority of students excluded from school [Parsons. 1999, Munn *et al* 2000] and with statements of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. [Daniels *et al.*, 1999] This is certainly true in my place of work. What is also true is that many of my students are also involved with drugs and criminality. We try to provide alternative programmes for those

students who are caught up in the local drug culture; many are addicted not just to the effects of the drugs but also to the lifestyle surrounding the drugs. As the prospect of qualifications and a job do not have sufficient force for these students to engage in our provision we offer a locally-cohesive, multi-agency joint action approach involving the school, local employers, colleges, training organisations, the drugs agency and the police.

But not all of our students are “unreachable” in this sense. Traditionally I have always tried to provide these students with what they have left behind in their mainstream settings. The curriculum and our delivery has been similar to that found in majority of the other Bath and North East Somerset schools with a heavier emphasis on core skills, PSHE/SEAL and vocational subjects. In providing the students with this curriculum I reasoned that that I was placing them on the same “launching pad” to the world of work as their contemporaries. I now have to ask myself if I have been providing the equality of opportunity for these students

In Gifted and Talented Policies it is recognised that many students have particular strengths in one or more areas of ability, endeavour or talent. Areas that have been identified include:

- Academic and Intellectual
- Expressive and Performing Arts
- Sports and Physical
- Social, Leadership and Organisation
- Visual, Spatial and Mechanical
- Design, Technology and ICT

In the past I have looked at this list and only infrequently have I been able to identify a student from my SEBD school who has shown real talent in one of these categories. Occasionally we produce a student who is talented enough to be able to go on to Art College or join a Theatre Company. Many become mechanics but are not what could be described as talented.

What I now have to ask myself is just because these students are not what we mean by Gifted and Talented does not mean to say that they would not benefit from the delivery styles and processes used to challenge more able students. This is where I have had to reassess my own values and beliefs and consider how in adapting my delivery and provision I can better meet the needs and aspirations of the students.

Changes I need to consider if I wish to move forward.

It seems to me that the enthusiasm and dedication of the teachers I observed whilst in Russia is what underpins and supports students aiming for and achieving their aspirations. There has to be some sort of conviction which the students can recognise that these opportunities are real and are there. [Gordon Brown at the University of Greenwich Oct 2007]

“We have to

- expand opportunity – not just one chance but second, third, fourth and lifelong chances;
- raise the aspirations people have to grasp those opportunities – the key to unlocking talents; and to develop people’s capabilities to participate in shaping the future, so that services are personal to all and shaped by all.”

I also need to consider whether my belief that I am providing my students with what I believe they need means that I am providing them with a similar package of equal opportunities they would encounter in another setting.

Finally I have to consider the extraordinary benefits of personalised/individualised learning which I observed whilst in Russia on student progress and the development of self esteem.

Do we at The Link offer educational equality and opportunity?

Fundamental to the philosophy of The Link SEBD School is educational opportunity and equality. Our traditional ways of assessing needs and abilities in order to provide the framework for a way forward are not always precise in a SEBD setting [Mackintosh and Mascie-Taylor. 1985] There are two different issues here, the opportunity to acquire talent and the opportunity to show it to good effect. [Wood.1987] The only way our students will ever be able to compete with their mainstream counterparts is if they can display similar literacy, numeracy and social skills. Observing gifted and talented students both in the UK and Russia I am aware that these abilities are fundamental as a launching pad to future success. If our provision does not address these issues we are not providing our students with equal opportunities.

Next arises the question of subjects such as modern foreign languages. Our curriculum does not have the capacity for these because of our heavy vocational input, are we inadvertently disadvantaging our students by denying them the opportunity to acquire a second language in today’s world? I believe that our vocational provision is appropriate for our students but I am acutely aware that we may have a forever undiscovered potential linguist amongst our present cohort.

Assessment of any kind and examinations in particular are hugely stressful to our students who often vote with their feet and simply walk out at the first obstacle or hard to understand word. In the 2007 GCSE English Literature Examination which should last for two hours no student stayed in the room longer than 20 minutes despite intense encouragement to, “Give it a go” by staff present! In the Maths exam one student walked out because he, “needed a fag!” whereupon two others joined him and simply refused to return. Providing the students with equal opportunities can sometimes mean driving to their homes on the exam morning when they have failed to show up, persuading them to get out of bed and literally dragging them into school!

Another problem is the background of the children and the fact that many assessment tasks are culturally alien to them, and example of this is this reading test:

Jimmy ----- tea, because he was our guest.

- washed the dishes after
- was late for
- got the best cake at
- could not eat his

Researchers found that virtually all English-speaking middle class children answered this correctly, while 60% of both the English-speaking working class sample and the bi-lingual group did not. [Hannon and McNally 1986]

My assessment of whether we at The Link are delivering an educational package which provides educational opportunity is that alongside the entitlement curriculum we offer relevant, stimulating, creative, vocational and challenging subjects. The nature of our students means that not all will take full advantage of what is on offer, the point however is that the offer is there with the enthusiasm and support of staff prepared to deliver.

How good are we at delivering a personalised learning package to our students?

“Planning learning experiences and matching teaching approaches to learning needs is at the heart of personalised learning and is inclusive of all learners.” [Pedagogy and Personalisation 2007]

If we hope to achieve inclusion of all students we have to overcome the barriers to learning and assessment, set suitable challenges and respond to learners’ diverse needs.

The DFES guidance also states that there are specific approaches supportive to SEN learners:

- using access strategies to ensure that difficulty in one curriculum area does not hold the learner back in another
- ensuring the provision of special means of access such as communication systems like Braille, British Sign Language or Makaton
- providing examples for children with difficulties of cognition and learning, to enable them to apply a concept, more practice in applying the concept and more opportunities to generalise the concept from one context to another.

My understanding of Personalised Learning mirrors that of John McBeath, Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Cambridge who states it is that it is not something that can be “done” to pupils by teachers. Sir Winston Churchill famously stated,

“I am always ready to learn, but I do not always like being taught.”

This involves a more structured planning of each child’s learning in order to enhance progress, achievement and participation. [Prashig 2006] This demands active commitment from pupils, responsiveness from teachers and engagement from parents/carers. The support and challenge is tailored to their needs, interests and abilities. We merely facilitate, guide and provide as students enjoy a range of opportunities to test themselves, to explore their talents and cultivate new interests.

This is what I observed during my visit to Russia, the master class was delivered to introduce the enquiry and then the students with the support of staff embarked on the challenges of their educational journey.

In an SEBD setting we are dealing with the sort of numbers which should make it relatively easy to provide a personalised learning package to all of our students in all of their subject areas. How well we use our assessment methods and listen to pupil voice to inform this package remains to be seen. This however, would seem to be the way to drive standards, to stimulate and challenge all of our students.

How has my involvement with the Gifted and talented Programme made me re-assess my values and educational beliefs?

When we were deciding on the curriculum for the Key Stage 4 students at The Link our aim was to provide them with what we knew they needed; literacy, numeracy and social skills; creative subjects; PSHE and SEAL; vocational subjects and Work Experience. What I value in educational terms has not altered, I remain convinced that these were the right decisions. However my involvement with the Gifted and Talented programme has made me examine the delivery of these subjects and consider adopting some of the methods I use when teaching highly motivated students in my SEBD setting. I need to be wary of assessment and what it is telling me and consider the impact of highly individualised educational learning packages for all of our students.

My belief remains the same; that gifts and talents are in evidence within all ability levels. However, whether we take the time to identify these gifts and talents and encourage students to rise to the challenge and develop them lies with individual, dedicated, passionate teachers.

“We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or advantages of privilege.” Tony Blair 1996

These students deserve such practitioners and those of us who work “at the chalk face” should aim for nothing less!

In using this narrative form of methodology to analyse the impact of my involvement with the Gifted and Talented programme on my teaching of SEBD students I feel that I have become more aware of the processes which I have undergone and I wonder if a similar approach with my students will allow them to become more aware of important educational and social issues. [Clandinin 2007] discusses how this narrative inquiry is used in different professional fields and discusses the complexities of narrative inquiry with groups of people including child participants. Also [Connelly and Clandinin 1999] state,

“Increasingly as our work progressed, we came to see teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life history, as storied life compositions.”

What I have learned from my life stories must have some relevance to the learning of my students and this narrative method of discovery needs to be another tool in my educational tool box.

I am also very much aware that I am something of a pioneer in using this narrative form of methodology and completing an enquiry which attempts to assess the impact of my involvement with the Gifted and Talented programme on my teaching of SEBD students.

Although this particular account has concluded the journey for knowledge and educational influence continues and will continue throughout my life.

The story will continue!

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