

## **The ‘Gifted and Talented’ Initiative**

Mention ‘G&T’ in the staff-room of any school a few years ago and the response might well have been “make mine a large one”, especially if the response came from a teacher who had just been attempting to expand upon the finer points of Euclidean geometry to the bottom maths set in Year 11 at the end of a wet Friday afternoon.

However ‘G&T’ nowadays represents a rather different element in the life of any school. The ‘Gifted and Talented’ initiative is a fairly recent scheme to try to extend those students who rank amongst the most able in the school community. The Government took the view that those same most able students were not receiving sufficient challenge and that more needed to be done in order to provide this country with a ready supply of well-developed and highly gifted individuals who will include many of tomorrow’s leaders and innovators. In turn, they have passed on, to every local authority, and therefore to every school in the country, the responsibility for doing something constructive about the problem.

Firstly, the word ‘gifted’ refers specifically to academically gifted and to approximately the top ten per cent of the cohort in all schools. Likewise ‘talented’ identifies a further five per cent who show particular abilities in music, in sports, in creative arts and so on. The figures serve only as a rule of thumb and they are not meant to be followed slavishly.

Every school is expected to provide a “Gifted and Talented” register, a list of those pupils who have been identified as having particular abilities. Equally well, every school should have a “Gifted and Talented” Co-ordinator, a member of staff with specific responsibility for creating and maintaining such a register, and also for initiating (or co-ordinating) activities designed to enrich pupils’ studies. There is an important difference to be noted however between ‘differentiation’ as it is used in the classroom and ‘enrichment’ in the G&T context.

Differentiation involves ensuring that, within class-work (and home-work) teachers provide work best suited to the varying needs of the individual groups of students within their classes. Simplistically this may involve providing more challenging tasks for those with the higher levels of academic ability and more straight-forward work for the less able; however the focus is still going to be very much directed at the curriculum being followed within the school, the demands of the SATs and of the GCSE syllabi etc.

Enrichment is not bounded by the syllabus and is frequently provided outside the standard school day. It involves providing a wide variety of experiences to allow individuals to explore avenues that may not necessarily relate to the formal curriculum at all. There are no clearly defined sets of enrichment activity but only a number of possible exemplars that typify what is being done now and what could be done in the future. The opportunity for pupils to take part in debates and in debating competitions might well be something that an individual school might wish to promote, especially if there is a member of staff who is interested in fostering such an activity. This member of staff does not need to be the G&T Co-ordinator but simply has the enthusiasm and knowledge to assist with the activity.

Although archaeology is unlikely to rank within the curriculum of most schools, this does not mean that a group of young people might not develop an interest in it – whether this is then fostered by a member of staff or possibly is linked to the activities of a local archaeological society is not prescribed. It is simply a matter of “what works” for a particular community.

Within the Borough a number of initiatives have been developed during the course of the last year or two. There are Summer schools arranged for Secondary School students (and for a large number of Y6 pupils) and these have been extremely successful. Some secondary schools have arranged activities for their feeder primaries such as a regular after-school maths club, and, quite often, using ex-pupils of those same primary schools as participants who can assist by working with their younger colleagues. Visits to Oxford University have taken place to allow 14 year olds to see what studying there might be like and to inspire them to aim ‘that much higher’; this has included both day-trips and also residential opportunities. Other initiatives are being developed and their selection and execution rests entirely upon the circumstances of individual schools.

The Authority has appointed Dilwyn Hunt (based at Saltwells) to have an overview of the provision within the Borough and he holds termly meetings with both Primary and Secondary G&T Co-ordinators. This, coupled with production of the Gifted and Talented Newsletter, provides opportunities for schools to exchange ideas and to develop collaborative projects. Last Summer a Conference was held at Saltwells, attended by some 120 local delegates, who were fortunate enough to hear Professor Deborah Eyre, Director of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY), speak on how schools could make an effective provision for the enrichment of their G&T youngsters.

The National Academy itself offers another dimension for those who rank within the top 5%, academically, in the country. Those who register with the Academy (itself based within the University of Warwick) have additional opportunities, including attendance at Summer Schools, Saturday Master-classes, University-based weekend conferences and an online community with like students. Within a Borough the size of Dudley we should have potentially some 1000 students (predominantly, at the moment, from the Secondary sector) capable of satisfying the enrolment criteria. One important element in all this is that, because of the status of NAGTY, it can attract some of the most distinguished speakers at its events; imagine what it must have been like, for example, for youngsters to have sessions on creative writing with the likes of Terry Pratchett, the internationally-known author of the Discworld books.

Clearly this is a potentially exciting development which should be encouraged by governors and, possibly, governing bodies might consider it appropriate to nominate one of their number within each school as a G&T Governor. Dilwyn Hunt spoke on the G&T theme at a DAGB Area meeting last Summer to give governors some insight into ‘what it was all about’.

When schools are inspected by Ofsted, they are now expected to demonstrate what has been done to meet the issues of Gifted and Talented as they relate to their pupils. Furthermore it is self-evident that schools can use their success stories in their own

promotional material, such as in school prospectuses. If they can point to there being a number of their students registered with the National Academy as well, then so much the better – it is all part of the marketing strategy for the school.

Although the emphasis has been heavily into the secondary sector so far, there is also a lot that can be done within primary schools. As the national picture becomes clearer so too it can be expected that a role for post-16 Gifted and Talented will also begin to emerge.

The foregoing gives an outline of the initiative, both locally and nationally, but it is realistic to expect that the picture will change over the next year or two as developments take place. What is vitally important is that Governing Bodies become aware of the situation in their own schools and how it is operating across the Borough and, indeed, throughout the rest of the country, so that they can ensure the best possible provision for every child within their school, as may be most appropriate for their individual needs.