



Highly able children in the early years

A report of practice in nurseries in Scotland

Scottish Network 
for Able Pupils



Foreword

Every nursery in Scotland will have children who are capable of high achievement in one or more areas. Identifying these children and fully meeting their needs can prove complex and challenging for parents and early years staff. This report highlights some of the issues facing early years educators in providing for this cohort of children. It explores questions relating to identification, acceleration and enrichment and provides examples from good practice from eight nurseries across Scotland.

'Building the Curriculum 3' provides the framework for planning a curriculum which meets the needs of all children and young people from 3 to 18, and consequently should offer amongst other things personalisation, enjoyment and depth. Many learners require additional support in order to fully access their entitlements under Curriculum for Excellence. This includes learners who demonstrate particularly high abilities in one or more areas. Discussing the needs of these children and young people helps us to ensure that through personalisation and appropriate input they are suitably challenged.

As with any label there is much debate about whether we should be thinking about high ability in the early years. Rightly staff and parents are worried about labelling a child as often that label can stick throughout their life. This report is not concerned with applying labels to children instead it is interested in identifying abilities children demonstrate and considering how early years settings can challenge them.

While it is recognised that no one term is ideal, throughout this report the term "highly able" is used, as this is the current terminology adopted within Scottish Education. For the purposes of this report, we have assumed that "highly able children" refers to children who are working or who could be working ahead of their age peers. We have also assumed that the term includes children who are "highly able" across the curriculum as well as those who are "highly able" in one or more particular areas. Underpinning the activities and suggestions is the idea that high ability is just one factor in school and life success.

SNAP gratefully acknowledges the financial support received from the Scottish Government, which made this project possible. SNAP would also like to thank the education authorities for allowing SNAP staff to work in the nurseries. Finally, SNAP would like to thank the staff and children in each of the nurseries who participated in the project.

This report will be of interest to those who seek to engage young learners in demanding and challenging activities. We hope that all who use it will find it valuable in their work with highly able children and their families.

Margaret Sutherland

Project Director

Scottish Network for Able Pupils

Niamh Stack

Development Director

Scottish Network for Able Pupils

In 2010-2011 The Scottish Network for Able Pupils (SNAP) received funding from the Scottish Government to consider the needs of highly able pupils in the early years. We worked with nurseries in four of our link authorities for this project. SNAP has been working closely with a number of local authorities in Scotland for some years. In partnership with these authorities we have established a network of Associate Tutors who coordinate and act as a focus for the expansion of staff development, policy and provision at a local level. These tutors are part of an ongoing and collaborative programme of staff development with SNAP staff at the University of Glasgow. Four local authorities were involved in the project: Edinburgh City Council, North Ayrshire Council, Stirling Council and West Dunbartonshire Council.

SNAP staff visited the nurseries over a period of three months. During this time they worked directly with staff and children and interviewed staff about the work carried out in each of the establishments.

This report offers examples of good practice for all children including highly able children, which we encountered in the nurseries. It also provides a series of anonymized case studies based on highly able children we worked with during the project, which may prove useful in thinking about identification in your own setting. We also provide some suggestions for addressing the needs of highly able children in this section. During our discussions with staff a number of common themes/concerns emerged, these are highlighted later in this report. And finally the report concludes with a series of resources and activities that SNAP has collated and developed in this, and previous, work which may be useful to early years practitioners.

Eight nurseries, two from each of the four authorities, were involved in the project. For the purposes of this work we focused on children aged 3-5 years. With the exception of one nursery, they were all local authority run nurseries and all buildings were located either in their associated primary schools or adjacent to them. One Nursery was located in a purpose-built nursery hall in the local parish church and was a Partnership Provider Pre-school. All the nurseries had outdoor areas, which were used for outdoor play purposes on a regular basis. Some of the nurseries were housed in new, purpose built buildings, some shared a hall with other organisations resulting in equipment having to be stored at the end of each session, some were in the grounds of primary schools and others were in older buildings within their own grounds. While it is acknowledged that architecture can impinge on learning space, each nursery used the space to the maximum and worked round any challenges that the physical space caused.

The capacity of each nursery varied, the largest we worked with were able to accommodate a 60/60 placement (60 children in the morning session, 60 children in the afternoon session) and the smallest was a morning session only nursery catering for twenty children. Staff across the nurseries reflected the wide variation in qualifications currently in evidence within early years care and education in Scotland. For example, some staff had gained the BA Early Childhood Studies; some held Professional Development Award (PDA) combined with either, Nursery Nurse Examination Board (NNEB), Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Scottish Nursery Nurses Examination Board (SNNEB).

Staff to child ratio ranged between 1:10 to 1:6. The nurseries were situated within a range of urban/rural and socio-economic communities.

All the nurseries were providing stimulating learning opportunities for the children and as expected they were developing practice in line with Curriculum for Excellence. The work detailed below offers some examples of the many activities that were part of the ongoing daily routine in the nurseries. While these activities were available to all children and not necessarily designed with highly able children in mind, they did offer particular opportunities for challenging highly able children.

PATHS - Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies

This approach was being used within West Dunbartonshire Education Authority and North Ayrshire Education Authority. West Dunbartonshire authority describes PATHS as 'a preventative and developmentally based programme which has been clearly shown to develop children's emotional literacy skills in five main areas:

1. self-awareness,
2. managing feelings,
3. motivation,
4. empathy and
5. social skills.'

The authorities chose this programme because it is an already well-established programme with a convincing evidence base for its effectiveness in addressing in a positive way the social and emotional needs of young children and because they believed it complemented the aims of Curriculum for Excellence. Further information on the specifics of this programme can be found here: <http://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/education-and-learning/psychological-service/news/>

In one of the nursery schools we visited these strategies were pervasive throughout all the activities and language within the nursery and the strategies very effectively embedded within the children's experience. These strategies were being utilised with all children in the nursery including highly able children. Highly able children can often require support in developing emotional literacy skills and PATHS provide a perfect example of how initiatives and strategies developed for one purpose can be used successfully to address the particular needs of highly able children. This example also emphasises the importance of adopting a holistic approach to provision for all children and the important interaction between care and education.

Bookbug

Bookbug is an initiative we saw in action in a North Ayrshire nursery. Bookbug is part of the Scottish Book Trust working in partnership with local authorities. The programme aims to encourage parents and children to share and enjoy books together. It hopes to inspire a lifelong love of books in every child by providing free books and guidance material for parents and carers. The emphasis is placed within the programme on the role of books in early language and reading development but perhaps even more importantly in engendering curiosity and a love of learning in young children. This is ideally suited to the needs of highly able children who need this kind of early stimulation and adult interaction. A key element of the programme is the shared experience of reading between adults and children and this provides an excellent opportunity for incorporating challenge and identifying next steps. Within the nursery where we saw book bugs in action, the programme was being embraced in its best form by dedicated nursery staff that used the initiative as a framework for activities, excitement and challenging learning experiences that were good for all children in the nursery but particularly met the needs of highly able young minds.

Across all the nurseries we visited we saw a wonderful variety of story corners and there was an understanding of the benefits which books can bring at an early age. The book/story corner was

cited by some of the highly able children we talked to during our visits as their favourite place and given one of the most easily identified traits of high ability at this age is early reading it is important that these corners hold a variety of challenging materials for young learners. Rather than just an opportunity for quiet time or a simple wind down activity, we observed staff in some of the nurseries using story time as a further opportunity for challenge, imagination and creativity, ideally suited to the needs of highly able young children. While story time is one of the most prominently adult led activities within the nursery it can still be child focused allowing opportunities for questions and tactile exploration of the texts before, and after, the story has been read.

Mathematics sacks

Following on from a series of highly successful story sacks one Nursery decided to develop mathematics sacks. Children and parents could select a maths sack to take home. Sacks contained a variety of games, puzzles and materials related to various concepts within mathematics. This approach offered great opportunities for developing personalized learning as children could investigate particular areas of interest e.g. Measurement. While each of the sacks contained suggestions on how to use the materials, parents and children were also encouraged to make up games and add these to the sack. Staff were able to talk to parents as they returned the sacks and this allowed them to learn more about how the children interacted with the materials outside of the nursery setting and extend learning between both contexts. Staff said that although it took time to develop the resource, once created, they were a great source of material for extending mathematical thinking and concepts. Forty-two maths sacks were produced and were very popular with children and their parents. This idea could easily be extended into other curricular areas e.g. science, music etc.

Individual Educational Plans

One nursery had developed an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) for a child who was showing particular abilities in reading and language. The Nursery wanted to ensure that they were planning appropriate learning experiences for the child and were also keen that this information would be passed to the associate primary school when the child made the transition to school. The authority planning documentation was used and in consultation with parents a learning plan was devised. Parents found it very useful in helping to begin conversation with the primary school. Without it they felt that they might again need to convince someone that their child had legitimate additional needs or that they might be viewed as a pushy parent. It should be noted that as with all situations relating to additional support for learning it might not always be appropriate or desirable to label a child so as with all other labels caution should be taken and each individual situation considered on its own merits.

Please note: different authorities have different terminology for documentation. In this particular authority the term IEP was in use. All authorities will have some form of staged intervention.

Forest Schools

Learning outdoors is not a new concept and Forest Schools are building on the good work taking place in many settings across the country. A member of staff from one Nursery had been to Norway to find out about the work being done there in relation to Forest Schools. The nursery was fortunate that their semi-rural location lent itself well to exploration out of door. The nursery worked closely with a near by forest and regularly visited to engage in projects. Links between outside activities and other curriculum areas provided wonderful examples of Curriculum for Excellence and offered opportunities for the cognitive conflict for developing learners e.g. a nature walk became a dynamic investigation of science (what makes things grow, importance of water – it

had been very wet weather), literacy (we encountered a bridge similar to the Billy Goats Gruff which stimulated extensive discussion and imaginative play) social and emotional development (shared experiences and shared packed lunches!). Another nursery was in the process of developing outdoor space to engage in Forest school activities. The opportunities here for developing high ability were endless. However the following ideas are examples of the kinds of activities that highly able children can engage in:

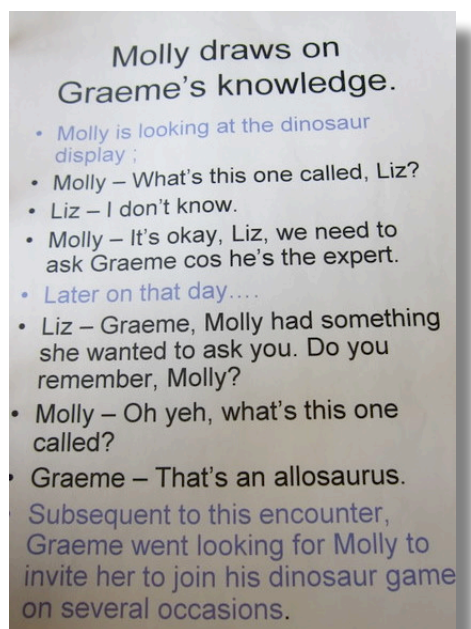
- Keeping a record of temperature, weather conditions and the impact of these on soil, plant growth, crops
- Longitudinal study of a particular plant or tree recoding it using various media including written text, photographs, videos, sketching
- Den building to encourage team work

The nurseries also brought the learning back into the nursery and activities were built around the interests and knowledge that the children gained from visiting the forest or working in the forest school area.

Learning Groups

One nursery uses the idea of learning groups quite extensively and had a range of the work produced by the learning groups recorded in book form. While learning groups were not necessarily designed with high ability in mind they nonetheless offered opportunities for children to engage in activities at their own level and thus appropriate challenge for high ability could be incorporated. The idea or provocation for a learning group comes from the children themselves or through an artifact introduced by staff. Learning conversations then follow the children's lead and so the learning group develops. There were rich language opportunities in evidence. Here is an

example from the Dinosaur Learning Group showing how the “dinosaur expert” supported the group as they developed the topic.



Clearly an approach such as this allows for opportunities for children to explore a range of cross curricular areas. It also allows children to experience depth of learning and thus highly able children can contribute to the topic at a level that is appropriate to them. For example, if a child has in depth knowledge about dinosaurs as we can see in the example above they can not only enhance the learning of the rest of the group but can be provided with opportunities to increase their knowledge base.

Utilising expertise

Some of the nurseries involved parents in the learning process. In discussion with parents nurseries found out what areas of expertise parents had and they then utilised these in the planning process. One parent was an art teacher and regularly worked with children. Another had

a keen interest in gardening and so was involved in that aspect of the nursery. Another worked in IT and provided disused PCs for the nursery to examine as part of their “how do things work?” topic. The parent was also available to act as a consultant when staff couldn’t answer questions asked by the children. One child volunteered their dad as an expert cardiologist and so dad spoke to the children and brought in model hearts for the children to examine. While these parents worked with all children in the nursery it meant that the nursery had someone with expert knowledge that they could draw on when children asked challenging questions.

Case Studies

This section provides a selection of case studies based on children with high ability whom we met in the nurseries (pseudonyms have been used in all cases to protect the anonymity of the children). These case studies demonstrate the diverse ways in which high ability may be encountered in the early years and some of the challenges which both children and educators face as they begin this phase of their learning journey. You may recognise similarities with children in your own setting. At the end of each case study we provide some suggestions for ways forward in provision, which may be helpful as you meet the needs of children in your nursery.

How to use the case studies

Aim – to consider different potential scenarios and to link these to practice

Activity - hold a staff development session to discuss key issues that arise when supporting highly able young children.

This activity has three steps. The first two steps are undertaken in small groups and the third should be undertaken as a whole school/centre/department. The minimum time required for this activity is two hours and twenty minutes. This can be done over twilight sessions or as part of an in-service day.

Key Issues

- This is a very complex area
- There is no one right way to support high ability
- High ability may present in different ways and in different contexts and across curricular areas
- Establishments need to reach agreement on how they will support highly able children

Preparation

- On pages 14 - 27 are 6 case studies developed from the issues raised by staff when we worked in nurseries
- Photocopy the case studies and questions and the suggestions for each case study onto cards.
- Make as many sets of the case studies and questions and suggestions as required.
- There should be one case study and questions for each group of four taking part in the workshop.
- Place each set of case study and questions in an envelope.

Materials required

- One case study and set of questions per group (i.e. each group should be discussing a different case study)
- One table per group

Group activity - Step one

- The group decides on a reader and a timekeeper
- The reader takes the case study and questions from the envelope and reads the first case study and questions aloud to the group.
- The group is given 10 minutes by the timekeeper to consider the questions.
- Each person takes a turn and is given two minutes to explain how they would deal with the issues raised by the case study
- Total time: 45 minutes

Group activity - Step Two

Once each question has been considered try to reach agreement on how the issues would be dealt with.

Total time: 20 minutes

Whole school/centre/department activity - step three

The groups should come together and discuss their case study and possible solutions. The groups should look out for common issues and responses.

Issue the suggestion cards. Each group should compare their ideas with the suggestions on the cards.

Total time: 30 minutes

Characteristics

Having considered the suggestions, what sorts of issues might you face in your setting as you seek to support highly able young children?

- 15 minute discussion about how the setting supports high ability in young children
- Feedback to larger group

Total time: 45 minutes

Total time for whole session: 2 hours 20 minutes

Case Study 1 - Sarah

Sarah started nursery at age three. She is the older of two children in her family. Soon after Sarah joined the nursery, staff were aware that Sarah was able to read but she was also incredibly shy and often had difficulty relating to her peers and to staff. She had difficulties with eye contact and although her language was quite advanced she rarely initiated conversation with others. When staff spoke to her parents they were keen that staff would support Sarah in developing her social skills as they were aware this was important to her all round development. Her parents already knew of her reading ability although they had not shared this information with the nursery when enrolling as they were anxious about how this may be perceived. They were really pleased with the nursery's proactive approach and encouraged that they had quickly and independently

identified these areas for development. Sarah's parents were providing language and reading stimulation at home and were confident that this aspect was already being well addressed but they were keen for the nursery to support Sarah's developing social skills.

When we met Sarah one year later she was a contented and confident child who appeared very willing to interact with her peers and was comfortable with, and securely attached to, adults in the setting. When engaged with SNAP staff in a reading task was she able to read at a high level with comprehension and intonation. Her social cues and ability to articulate her thoughts and engage in fluid conversation were also well in advance of her chronological age. During Sarah's first year at nursery, staff and parents had clearly provided Sarah with excellent support in progressing her social skills but staff expressed some anxiety at how to continue to support her accelerated cognitive and language development. As reading is not routinely part of the early years curriculum staff were particularly concerned about their ability/expertise in this area and were concerned that they might use the 'wrong' approach when developing her reading skills.

Questions

1. Is there a 'wrong' (or a right) reading approach?
2. Does Sarah's advanced reading and language also indicate that other aspects of her cognitive ability may need development e.g. problem solving?
3. As Sarah enters her second year will she require additional challenge to ensure she does not become bored and frustrated by activities offered in the setting?

Suggestions

1. There is no one approach to the teaching of reading so as such there is no right or wrong way to approach this. There are things we know are important to the reading process such as onset and rime, phonological awareness, exposure to print, and so there are many

things a nursery can do to support young children who show an interest in reading or who can already read. Primary schools do not hold the keys to teaching reading but it might be useful for Nurseries to talk to any associated primary schools about how they approach the development of reading. This way the nursery can develop activities that compliment the work done in primary school and this should mean that the child will not repeat activities when they go to school but instead the school can build on the work undertaken in nursery.

2. The fact that Sarah can access for herself texts that an eight year old would be reading suggests that her cognitive ability, reasoning skills and comprehension are well advanced. It is likely she will bring these advanced skills and abilities to other tasks. Nursery staff need to ensure that they then plan for opportunities across the curriculum that allows these advanced abilities to be used and developed. This is not just about considering reading material across the curriculum but is also about developing opportunities for advanced reasoning and critical thinking.
3. There is a danger that if the nursery continues to work on areas that require development in the assumption that the cognitive ability will develop unaided Sarah may indeed become bored and frustrated. It is acknowledged that children develop at different rates and will have peaks and troughs in their learning and may even appear to plateau at certain points, nonetheless, it is important that nurseries look at a learning profile for Sarah and then plan to progress learning at all points on that profile. It is a constant challenge for staff in nursery to think up innovative, engaging activities for children who have been in the setting for some time. These ideas may help you to get started:
 - Think about creative ways to use the materials on offer – don't always go for the obvious
 - Ask open ended questions

- Build in time to talk to the child and find out what they would be interested in learning more about
- Have the children make up games and puzzles for each other
- Make sure there are a variety of reading materials on offer – fiction, non-fiction, magazines, leaflets, dictionaries, encyclopaedias, notices. Use these materials to talk to the children about topics and interests
- Have a reporting back time when the child can share what they've been learning
- Use IT to enhance knowledge about areas of interest and to record the information they gather.

Case Study 2 - James

James started nursery at age three. He is the older of two children having recently become a big brother. He had adapted fairly well to this new role although he had a clear preference for adult company and so was having to become used to "sharing" his parents. James was often to be found in the library corner of the nursery looking at books. When involved in an activity he was often seen playing independently or in parallel with his peers. He knew the names of his peers and could work in groups but he appeared to prefer to play on his own, work with advanced peers or talk to adults. During the SNAP activities James presented as highly inquisitive, knowledgeable, articulate, used advanced vocabulary and in the story telling activities in particular he was very keen to examine the books and illustrations in detail. He was beginning to show an understanding of print and phonics. He had a strong general knowledge and could see relationships between aspects of the different activities, his own experiences, his knowledge about real life and his imagination. He was beginning to ask questions of a philosophical nature.

In planning their activities staff were clearly considering how to incorporate particular challenge for James. They identified books he was interested in and developed activities that extended his interests. While acknowledging that James was advanced in many areas of development, staff were concerned about his apparent dependency on adult interaction and how this would be supported within the primary classroom context. In addition they were concerned that the more formal setting of school might not allow James to work independently of others as much as he was choosing to in the nursery.

Questions

1. How do you ensure that James's social skills continue to flourish when he may begin to feel he has less in common with other children in the nursery
2. What does "being ready for school mean"?

Suggestions

1. As children grow and develop their knowledge, skills and abilities they can sometimes seem on another level from the children round about them. They have less and less in common with their age peers and often the highly able child has a number of complex thoughts in their head many of which their peers are not interested in. In this situation it is crucial that the child has opportunities to engage with "intellectual peers". In other words they need to play and learn together with others who are thinking in the same way they are. If your setting is adjacent to a primary school then, from time to time, it may be possible for them to work with children who are older than them. Nurseries could;
 - Have children work on a special project with someone who has the same interest as them and who is an intellectual peer
 - Have the child talk with an adult on a regular basis

- Have an adult work alongside groups of children on a task where the main objective is to support collaboration and understanding between the children thus helping the children to gain appropriate collaborative skills
 - Make sure the child has the opportunity to share information about something that is important to them with their age peers. The adults' role in this may be to mediate the information the child is sharing to ensure that everyone understands what is being said
 - Work in partnership with other authority nurseries bringing together children who share the same intellectual ability, interests and chronological age.
2. Traditionally being ready for school has meant that children know certain facts and can do certain things. For example, children are ready for school if they:
- Know all the names of the colours
 - Can write their name
 - Can count to ten (or more)
 - Can use scissors
 - Can colour within the lines
 - Can dress and undress themselves
 - Are confident and can relate well to their peers

While all of these things will help a child at school, and certainly primary one teachers everywhere will be pleased if a child can dress and undress themselves when going to gym, they are not a passport to success. Of equal importance is the development of learning dispositions. By nurturing learning dispositions we will become less concerned about what is deemed to be

appropriate behaviour for a learning situation and much more concerned with the learning that is taking place and how we ensure challenge. Staff in nurseries should consider:

- finding out what children already know, understand and can do
- discussing with children what the learning goals are for the activity
- discussing with children what they have done well and what they need to work on, and what they put their progress down to
- allowing children to experiment with resources
- looking for children who persist with a task
- encouraging children to express points of view and emotions.

(Sutherland, 2005)

In James' case seeking out adult interaction may not be sign of dependency but is in fact recognition that he needs like minded peers to communicate with – having assessed the situation James may consider that staff are best placed to offer the interactive experience he is looking for. Being ready for school becomes about learning and not just an acquired skills set.

Case Study 3 - Peter

Peter had just turned three and had a challenging home background with his parents' substance abuse having played a significant part in the first three years of his life. The family were receiving substantial support from social services. The open door policy of the nursery meant that they too were able to offer the family support and advice. Peter was physically small for his age and had quite a poor pallor. When in nursery staff worked with Peter to ensure he developed strong inter- and intrapersonal skills through a range of activities. Although not a child the nursery had identified as demonstrating high ability Peter gravitated towards SNAP staff each time they visited the nursery. Initially it was considered that this could be because Peter was seeking attention

from “visitors” however it became apparent that Peter was more interested in the activities on offer than the visitors. He was very quiet and did not participate in a hands-on fashion although he made relevant comments from time to time. Staff were anxious to ensure that he had developed resilience and life skills as life was likely to remain challenging for the foreseeable future. They were pleased to see him engaging in tasks and they started to think about his cognitive ability when planning. They were concerned that they had not really thought about his cognitive development in as much detail as his social and emotional development.

Questions

1. How can staff be sure they don't overlook the able underachiever, especially when there are other pressing issues to deal with?
2. Where should the focus be – social and emotional development or cognitive development?
3. How much do life experiences impact on the manifestation of ability?

Suggestions

1. Able underachievers would appear to be at an even greater risk of being overlooked by the education system. When talking with educators SNAP discovered that many felt confident about identifying less able children, including underachievers but that they still had difficulty in knowing how to identify highly able children and particularly highly able children who were underachieving. Added to this is the difficulty that the culture within some settings and communities does not accept or value high achievement in all areas of the curriculum. When we are thinking about ability it is important to recognise that we are often assessing the latent ability of an individual child. That means we need to identify children with the potential to achieve and not just those who are already "flying high". If we are adopting this model then it

is likely that there will be children who demonstrate significant discrepancies between their latent ability and their predicted performance.

2. The answer to this question is probably both! We cannot nurture one area at the expense of the other. They are also not mutually exclusive. Thus staff need to develop social and emotional competencies while at the same time challenging ability through learning. Scaffolding learning for children will allow the adult to demonstrate appropriate ways of dealing with situations and the task for the educator is to ensure that they:

- Offer appropriate and targeted support
- Support and develop the child's self concept
- Design tasks where children can work independently as well as together
- Help children to experience the joy that comes with experiencing learning

3. As we said above when we're thinking about ability it is important to recognise that we are often assessing the latent ability of an individual child. Ability has no regard for social status and so while life experiences can mask ability it is the educators' job to see beyond the issues and to look for ways of supporting and nurturing learning. Within the nursery setting this might mean ensuring that care and education work hand in hand thus meeting the holistic needs of children in their care. While settings cannot change life circumstances they can influence how children meet and engage with life circumstances.

Case Study 4 - Liam

Liam was almost five. He lived with his mother and was very close to his grandparents. He was a very lively boy who was always "on the move" and who had a great general knowledge. He and his grandfather had visited many places of interest such as museums and exhibitions outside of

nursery and Liam was keen to share what he had learned when he returned. The nursery offered opportunities for him to tell the other children where he had been and they tried to incorporate his interests into the learning in the nursery where possible. Liam could be quite boisterous and loud and was often in trouble for being aggressive or for not sharing but instead dominating group situations or for general misbehaviour. During the SNAP activities Liam was very keen to share his observations and ideas. He was articulate and highly interested in the activities and stayed focused throughout. Nursery staff were very concerned about how Liam would cope with the transition to school. Although they acknowledged he was bright they were worried about his ability to settle into the formal classroom routine without answering back or shouting out or generally getting into trouble. The nursery were attempting to support Liam as he made the transition to school and were helping him to think about his behaviour.

Questions

1. Will focusing on Liam's behaviour make the transition to school easier?
2. What is the best way to allow Liam to share his knowledge and interests with his peers?
3. How can Liam be helped to work alongside others without wanting to be first?

Suggestions

1. The short answer to this question is 'not necessarily'. Focusing on behavioural issues alone will not help Liam. Highly able children who have difficulty with the conventional rules of classroom life will often respond better when their academic and cognitive needs are considered alongside their behaviour. Getting behind the reason for the behaviour Liam demonstrates might help staff to cater for Liam. Often when highly able children are challenged cognitively then their behaviour settles – better learning will lead to better behaviour.

2. Using some kind of framework for learning such as Thinking Actively in a Social Context (Wallace, 2002) will allow Liam to increase his own knowledge but also to connect his knowledge to that of the groups thus the learning of the group develops.
3. Staff could scaffold his learning by playing alongside him and his peers and thus modelling good practice. Using the language of turn taking can be helpful rather than entering lengthy explanations for example saying "it's your turn next". In some circumstances using a visual reminder of time can be helpful so the child knows how much longer they have to wait.

Case Study Five - Philippe

Philippe was four. He was bilingual and could converse in both languages. He regularly returned to his home country for periods of time thus establishing his roots and identity. On returning from these extended visits there is deterioration in his English speaking for a while and there is a disruption to his peer relationships. Philippe is a quiet boy who likes to work independently as his games are often complex and of no interest to the other children. SNAP staff noticed he could play for sustained periods of time on his own developing complex plots. They also noticed he made real attempts to engage his peers in his games but his peers simply acknowledged him and moved on. Nursery staff were considering carefully how they could develop his language and social skills while ensuring he is challenged appropriately. Ideas were being developed in the knowledge that he is an interrupted learner and does not easily fit into a group with his peers.

Questions

1. How can staff work with parents to ensure that interruptions to his learning do not have a detrimental effect on relationships with peers?

2. How can language development be supported during Philippe's absences and on his return to Nursery?
3. Are there benefits for opportunities for extended independent play?

Suggestions

1. Staff could maintain home/nursery links through meetings (formal and informal) where information and pictures about the experiences he has in his home culture can be incorporated into the nursery. This will help Philippe to connect with his peers on his return. Philippe can also keep in touch with his peers while away through emails. This will increase the IT skills and geographical knowledge of others in the Nursery as well as build on developing relationships and fostering an understanding of other cultures.
2. Staff could work closely with parents to encourage the use of both languages whilst overseas. Parents could borrow books and language games from the Nursery for use at home.
3. For some highly able children it is crucial that they are given time to investigate and pursue areas of interest about which they are passionate. At times this interest may not be shared by their peers and this is okay. A balance between developing language and social skills and deeper knowledge about personal interests has to be struck.

Case Study Six - Iona

Iona was four and a half. She was a quiet girl who joined in activities with her peers. She had a speech impediment and although this did not stop her from interacting with her peers she would often be asked to repeat what she had said. When working as part of a group SNAP staff noticed that she would often start to respond but other more fluent children would take over and finish her sentences or just talk over the top of her. Some of the other children in the group were very

fluent and confident speakers. They were self assured and always had ideas to contribute. Of particular interest to SNAP staff was the fact that when allowed to speak Iona's ideas and thought processes were operating at a higher level than those of her peers thus suggesting this may be a case of multiple exceptionality. Multiple exceptionality arises where there is more than one additional support need in evidence for example in this case a speech impediment and high ability. In other words it is about meeting the needs of the pupil no matter what the barrier/s to learning might be. Staff were concerned that Iona's abilities might be over shadowed by her speech impediment when she goes to school. They were also concerned that she would lose confidence because of her peers.

Questions

1. How can staff meet all needs of learners?
2. How can staff address the concerns expressed about abilities being overlooked at school?

Suggestions

1. Within the Scottish legislation framework high ability is recognised as constituting an additional need. However the familiarity with other more prominent additional support needs can sometimes mean the identification of high ability remains hidden behind the more visible need. This returns to our earlier comment about labels and reaffirms the need to assess learning on a continuous basis rather than depending on a set of fixed assumptions associated with any one label.
2. This emphasises the importance of transition documentation and a responsive and flexible 3-18 curriculum. While information about the three main areas of Curriculum for Excellence - literacy, numeracy and Health and well-being - are important, information about a child's learning dispositions and learning needs are equally as important.

3. Settings might want to refer to the Health and Wellbeing wheel and consider SHANARI (Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included) to ensure that the needs of all children are being met.

Regular activities that could offer opportunities for challenge

All the nurseries were well equipped and had a wide variety of materials and resources covering the areas identified within the early level of Curriculum for Excellence. Catering effectively for highly able young children is dependent on **how** these resources are used. Here is a selection of materials we saw in the nurseries and which, with a bit of thought, can be used to offer challenge to children demonstrating high ability.

Regular building blocks – develop principles in physics, team building, and imagination.



Plasticine allowed one child to develop a story about dinosaurs drawing on his extensive knowledge about dinosaurs and where and when they lived,



Paint in a variety of colours allowed for development in art and language skills.



Mixed media offered opportunities to be creative. Number and language were also developed.

This is a “pretend” 6th birthday cake!



Programmable toys developed spatial awareness, directional skills, map reading.

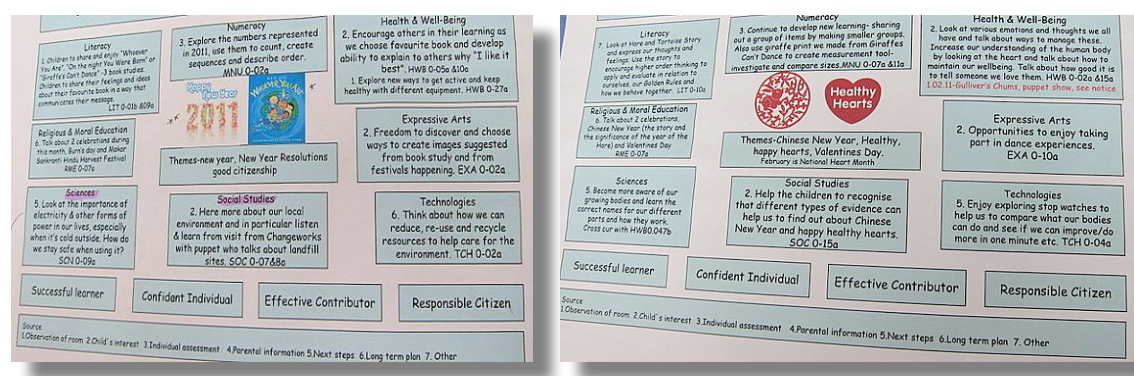


The amount and kind of available outside space varied tremendously across the nurseries but all used whatever space they had quite extensively. All were growing flowers, fruit and vegetables. This offered opportunities to develop science, health and well-being, enterprise etc. Learning

regularly took place outdoors and a variety of equipment was to be found. Learning took place across the curriculum and offered opportunities to develop abilities in all areas.



Planning was an integral part of nursery practice and all were developing close links within their documentation to Curriculum for Excellence. Careful deliberate planning for highly able young children is crucial. Providing a range of opportunities which allow abilities to emerge is also vital if young children are to engage in the voyage of discovery.



Emerging Issues for further investigation

There would appear to be a number of emerging issues which early years establishments need to keep in mind if they are considering how to meet the needs of highly able pupils.

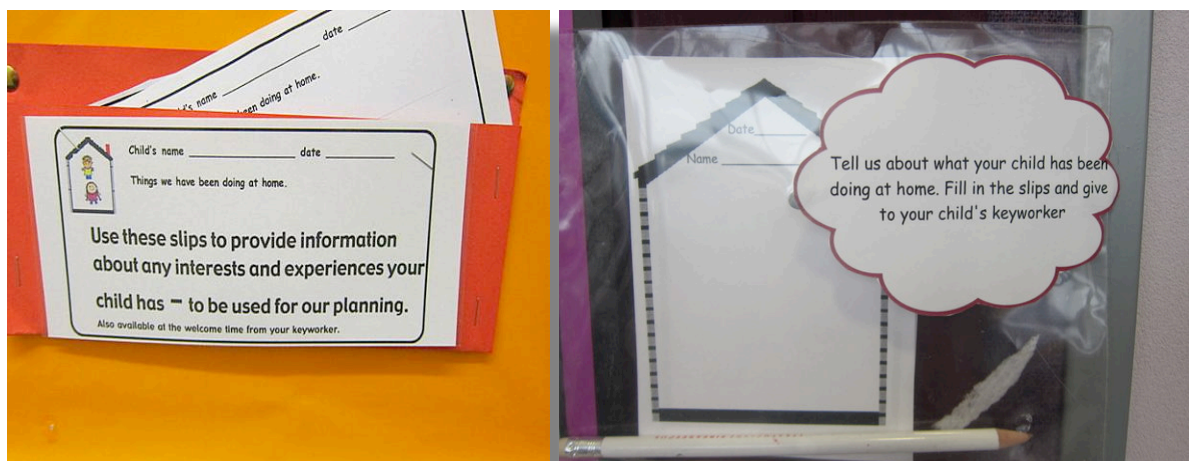
Transitions and partnerships with associated schools

It is crucial that nurseries continue to develop partnerships with their associated primary schools. All the nurseries had extensive programmes of transition in place. These offered children the opportunity to experience, among other things, being in a classroom, begin to understand routines and expectations and get to know older children and be with them.

In relation to highly able pupils these partnerships also provide the opportunity for interactions with intellectual peers and accelerated learning activities if appropriate. Varying amounts of information was exchanged and all nurseries and schools were developing ways of sharing information that linked to Curriculum for Excellence.

Involvement of parents

All nurseries sought to develop links with parents. Children will sometimes demonstrate abilities in one context and not in another. In relation to high ability listening to the information parents' offer about their child's abilities is crucial if nursery is to build up a holistic picture of the child. Nurseries had various ways of involving parents and all operated an open door policy where parents could speak to staff on a regular basis.



Confidence/Level of Qualification of Staff

The professionalization of early years staff is well documented in the literature. Many of the staff interviewed for this project had undertaken or were undertaking the BA in Early Childhood Studies. Nonetheless, there was concern among some staff about providing appropriate levels of challenge. Frequently this was linked to concerns about staff's own knowledge about pedagogy and the fact that they "were not teachers". However SNAP staff observed that this was more related to confidence of staff in their own ability and many staff who were worried were in fact providing excellent pedagogical opportunities for children.

Social Care vs. Education dilemma

Perhaps this tension is under particular scrutiny when we think about high ability. The nurseries in the project were all, rightly, concerned with the social, emotional development of the children in their care. Many had developed excellent ways of working to ensure the children were supported holistically. However in some cases this was at the expense of cognitive development. While

social and emotional development is important it cannot be to the exclusion of cognitive development.

Deferrals

Some highly able children were deferred as their emotional development was considered to be lagging behind their cognitive development. Staff had well developed plans for emotional development during the deferred year but again planning for cognitive development was as well considered. Planning should include planning for holistic development.

Final thoughts

This report offers a snapshot of practice across eight nurseries. From the evidence gathered there was much good practice that would support the needs of highly able young children. Staff were all working hard to meet the varying needs of the children in the nurseries. Good use was made of current documentation along with recent initiatives and developments in early years practice such as Forest Schools, Learning Groups etc.

Some key points emerged that will be helpful for future planning:

1. Actively planning for challenging high ability is crucial
2. Open ended activities and questions which allow children to develop their thinking and abilities are beneficial
3. Cognitive needs must be considered alongside social and emotional development
4. Working together with parents enriches the learning experience
5. High ability should be considered in the same way as other additional support needs
6. Many of the activities on offer for all children could be easily amended to provide high end challenge for young children with high ability.

Books

Koshy, V. (2001) *Teaching Mathematics to Able Children*. London: David Fulton Publications.

Koshy, V. and Chetser, M. (2006) *Mathematics for Gifted Younger Children* London: Elephas

Leyden, Susan (2002) *Supporting the child of exceptional ability at home and School* London: David Fulton Publications.

Sutherland, M. (2005) *Gifted and Talented in the Early Years* London: SAGE Publishing

Sutherland, M. (2008) *Developing the Young Gifted and Talented Learner* London: SAGE Publishing

Wallace, B. (2002) *Teaching Thinking Skills Across The Early Years – A Practical Approach for Children Aged 4-7* London: David Fulton Publishers

Available from SNAP

A Little Class Music by Angela Jaap

This booklet aims to provide information regarding the highly able musical child, from recognising to providing for their ability through accessible, practical ideas for lessons. The ideas are open-ended and flexible for a whole range of groups. Most importantly, the publication aims to demonstrate how teachers can encourage, enhance and develop the musical skills and experiences available for all children...and themselves!

Cost £5.00.

Able Pupils with Dyslexia by Georgina Gabor

This booklet looks at learning characteristics and personality traits of able pupils with dyslexia paying attention to characteristics that are observable by the teacher, and to those that are not immediately or easily observable. Ideas for supporting pupils who are able and dyslexic are explored.

Cost £5.00

Thinking Skills: Adding Challenge to the Curriculum by Professor Robert Fisher

Thinking Skills has remained an important focus in Scottish classrooms and will remain so as schools implement a Curriculum for Excellence. But what does this mean in practice? In 'Thinking Skills: Adding challenge to the curriculum' Robert Fisher outlines the rationale for introducing

thinking skills into the curriculum. He goes on to detail how this might be done so that we provide increased challenge not only for more able pupils but for all pupils in an inclusive classroom.
Cost £5.00

Useful websites

<http://www.ablepupils.com> - contains useful information and links for schools, parents and children. It has non-statutory guidelines for schools which can be downloaded and adapted for use. It has an FAQ section and highlights upcoming events in Scotland.

<http://nrich.maths.org/public/> - a superb website containing mathematics resources for children, parents and teachers to enrich learning. Check out the Scottish section too which links to Curriculum for Excellence

<http://www.edplace.co.uk/maths> - a comprehensive maths resource although it relates to the English education system but it can easily be adapted

<http://www.nace.co.uk/> - the NACE shop is particularly useful if you are looking for resources

<http://www.nasa.gov/audience/forkids/kidsclub/flash/index.html> - an interactive kids' club

<http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/pages/ed.gifted.html> - some interesting articles relating to educating highly able children

<http://www.londongt.org/> - a useful website for staff, in particular the Teacher Tools section has some interactive games some children might be interested in and some good items for use on a staff development day

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/> - a useful website for staff and parents. It is American so it has been written with a different education and culture system in mind

<http://www.beam.co.uk/> - leaders in Primary maths education, dedicated to promoting the teaching and learning of mathematics as interesting, challenging and enjoyable. It has useful ideas for your highly able mathematicians

<http://www.sapere.org.uk/> - contains information about Philosophy for Children (P4C)©

<http://enquire.org.uk/> - contains has useful information for parents. In particular it has lots of practical advice to help you find your way through the education and additional support needs system to make sure your child gets the most from their education.

