

School Leadership for Highly Able Pupils Project (supported through Scottish Government Funding)

In considering the ways in which highly able students' needs may be met, the role of the school head has rarely been considered in the literature in relationship to "gifted education". Most references to leadership concern general programme development issues. A few specific studies exist, for example. Weber, Colarulli-Daniels & Leinhauser (2003) conducted a study in the USA. Two principal teachers were interviewed. One was head of a private school for gifted students and one was a principal of a public magnet school for academically gifted pupils. They were asked to respond to a series of questions about the skills, competencies and characteristics necessary for a good school principal of gifted education. Lewis, Cruzeiro, & Hall (2007) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed two school heads in remote and rural areas known to be supportive of gifted education in their schools.

Oswald, Marietjie; de Villiers, Jeanne-Marie (2013) undertook research in South Africa. They interviewed 8 principals and 16 teachers from differing socio economic and first language areas. The study was based on the premise that the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding education for gifted learners needed attention before clear guidelines for their optimal education could be formulated. These studies helped to shape and inform the project. In particular SNAP was keen to gain a more nuanced understanding of Head Teachers' perceptions attitudes and knowledge of this group of learners.

From SNAP's previous work we knew there was increasing evidence that the profile of highly able pupils was becoming more visible in Local Authorities and schools in Scotland.

However, there is still a lack of understanding as to how schools manage learning for highly able pupils. SNAP visited a range of schools and talked with school managers and other staff as appropriate in order to better understand the criteria schools use, including any formal tests, and other more informal and embedded mechanisms when identifying and providing for high end challenge.

Indicative questions that were used to explore Head Teachers' understanding of this group of learners included:

1. Describe the location and demographics of your school.
2. How would you describe your leadership style?
3. What leadership and management practices are essential to quality education?
4. How is high ability challenged within Curriculum for Excellence?
5. How do you challenge highly able pupils within your school?
6. What is your knowledge level about the educational and affective needs of highly able pupils?
7. In what ways do you offer appropriate learning opportunities to highly able pupils in your school?
8. In these standards-driven times, it is a strong and forward-looking head teacher who
9. recognises that all students need to learn something new each day. Please discuss your philosophy regarding this and how you share your beliefs with staff?
10. What support are teachers offered as they seek to meet the needs of highly able pupils?
11. How do you support your teachers regarding the education of highly able pupils?
12. How do you respond to parent concerns about their child who is highly able or has the potential to be highly able?
13. What resources are available to you to support highly able pupils?
14. What is something you would like to do for your highly able learners, but have been unable to do so far? How will you bring this idea to fruition?
15. Do you have any other comments about the head teacher's role in supporting highly able learners?

From responses to these questions key themes began to emerge (Figure 1):

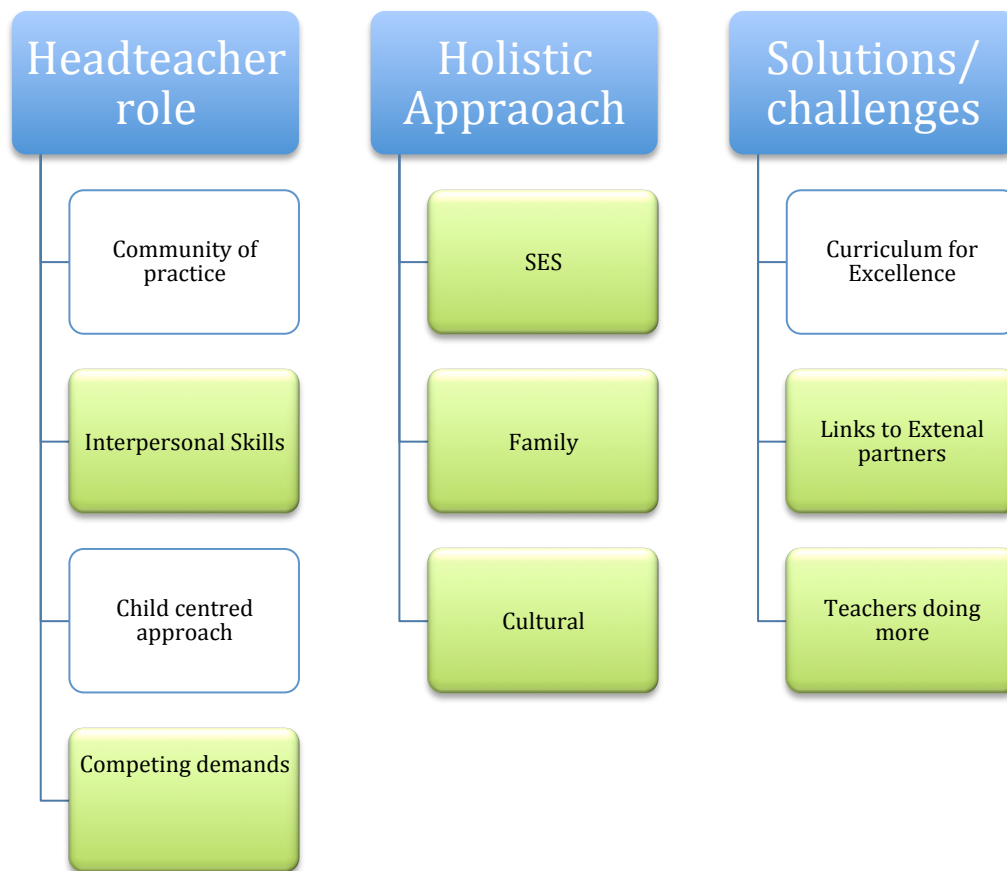


Figure 1. Key themes from interviews

Interestingly, the highlighted sections denote similar themes emerging from a cross-country study into the role of leaders in providing for gifted education. The white boxes denote where slightly different themes emerge. Other countries involved were Ireland and the USA. In our study, Head Teachers' felt it was important that they were part of a community of practice rather than just modeling good practice and that they needed to listen and hear staff's ideas. There was also a real focus on personalisation and seeing learning from the child's perspective. Not unsurprisingly, Curriculum for Excellence loomed large and was seen as both a solution for highly able pupils in Scotland and also as a challenge for teachers. Principles of inclusion were in evidence and there was some understanding that what is good for highly able pupils within Curriculum for Excellence, will be good for all learners. Head Teachers felt that they were able to make decisions about how to manage the learning experiences of highly able pupils. The predominant style of leadership was deemed to be "democratic". One Head Teacher reported "*a solution orientated approach in which this is everybody's school and so it's not for me to dictate*". This approach is consistent with developments in Scottish education following on from policies and guidance such as

Teaching Scotland's Future. However, it further underlines the need to consider how individual's understanding of and beliefs about ability, for example, shape practice. This idea is picked up in the National Framework for Inclusion and thus schools that engage in this kind of debate and discussion will be well placed to consider the needs of this group of learners.

A holistic approach to supporting highly able learners was of importance to staff. This was seen from several viewpoints including that of the parent and pupil. Communication was seen as key when explaining things to parents. For example, a child had been receiving one to one support and this had changed to group support. The Head Teacher reported that *trying to communicate to her father was very difficult because he thought that we had just stopped supporting her*. The Head Teacher went on to argue that *in actual fact this is a better provision.....she's with another group of children they can bounce ideas off each other*. Another Head Teacher was clear that the child had to be at the centre - *I think that it is absolutely essential to see things through a child's eyes.....we are not here to just put structures in place to keep them compliant and under control we're actually here to help them develop as people*. This child centred approach is valuable for all learners and in the case of highly able learners, many are able to articulate their feelings in quite complex and detailed ways. This too links to staff views and beliefs about ability as anecdotal evidence from previous work would suggest that teachers who have not thought about this in any detail may well interpret pupils' answers as being "cheeky" or "forward".

Explicitly encouraged within Curriculum for Excellence is inter-agency and cross-sector working. Head teachers identified this as *a fabulous way of meeting the needs of highly able children*. Head teachers also considered that *Curriculum for Excellence removed a lot of the ceilings so you know it does give them freedom to plan out with limits*. While this along with the personalized nature of Curriculum for Excellence was seen as being advantageous for highly able learners, Head teachers did think *it's horrendously hard for teachers*.

Head Teachers reported using a variety of tools and approaches when identifying this group of learners. Good tracking and monitoring processes that involved parents were seen as essential to the identification process. Children profiles were also helpful particularly as they took account of health and well-being as well as academic subjects. Many establishments were developing personal learning plans and these were seen as contributing to identification. In one nursery personal learning plans could be added to by staff, parents and children and again this was seen as contributing to a holistic view of the child's learning. Transition times were noted as important and these documents were seen

as contributing to as seamless a transition as possible. However transition also gave rise for pupils to “slip through the net” and this was considered to be a particular issue if the nursery/primary school or primary school/secondary school had differing views as to who the highly able were and to how you identify them.

Across establishments, no one definition for this group of learners existed. Given there is no one definition within the literature this is perhaps not surprising. Once again this took us back to the issue of staff understandings and belief about ability with one Head Teacher reporting some staff still have a “she’s very cute” attitude or “rote learning is still regarded as high ability rather than concept of number”. This particular Head Teacher also discussed the possibility of staff still looking for “all round high ability” in order for a child to be identified. The Head Teacher was aware that when children have to demonstrate their high ability in order to be recognised that this has implications for underachieving highly able learners. To ameliorate this situation the Head Teacher was developing a team approach. This was beneficial to all learners as sharing information was seen as key to providing appropriate learning opportunities for all.

Looking across the snapshot of evidence and at preliminary evidence from the cross-country study, four key things emerge:

- Head Teachers were strongly motivated to lead by example, but also to be part of their communities of practice
- Head Teachers were concerned for the holistic rather than merely academic development of learners
- There was a need for CLPD to support both Head Teachers and teaching staff
- Higher Education and wider external partners were considered important in providing challenging experiences and resources.