



## HIGHLY ABLE PUPILS IN SCOTLAND: MAKING A CURRICULUM CHANGE COUNT

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*Abstract.* In line with many countries Scotland is seeking to develop citizens fit to deal with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*Scottish Executive*, 2006). It also wants to ensure that children's abilities and talents are recognised and extended. One way it has sought to do this is to develop a new curriculum framework – Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). CfE endeavors to provide a coordinated approach to curriculum reform for the age range 3-18. It seeks to move away from a prescriptive model towards a more teacher centred model which relies on teacher educators adapting national guidelines to meet local needs. This paper will outline the legislative context for highly able pupils in Scotland and then consider the relative merits of the new curriculum framework for this cohort of pupils. It will examine what is considered optimal curriculum provision for highly able pupils in relation to the process model of curriculum development (Stenhouse, 1975).

*Key words:* inclusion, highly able, curriculum, legislation, policy, process model of curriculum.

### *Introduction*

Scotland is a formerly independent kingdom located in the northern one third of the United Kingdom (UK). The population of Scotland is 5.062.011 with an average population density of 65.6 inhabitants per square kilometre (Scotland's Census Results online, 2001). Around 70% of the country's population lives in the Central Lowlands. The 1998 Scotland Act provided "for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament" and in 1999 the UK Parliament at Westminster devolved certain powers to the Scottish Parliament. However Scotland has always had "devolved" control of its education and legal systems and thus Scotland's education system and educational legislation are unique within the UK.

The national approach to the education of highly able pupils is an integral part of the drive towards a more inclusive education system in Scotland.

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This approach is built on a suite of international legislation such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education (1994), Education for All, Jomtien (1990) and The Dakar Framework for Action (2000). This suite has provided an overarching framework for subsequent legislation and documentation that have been fashioned within Scotland.

Scotland, as part of the UK, ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. Building on this foundation, Scotland sought to move education towards a more inclusive paradigm. Government documents such as *Every Child Is Special* (Strathclyde Regional Council, 1992) were influential in reshaping the concept of special education by calling into question the hitherto accepted conceptualisation of “special needs”. Within this developing inclusive approach Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) report, *The Education of Able Pupils Primary 6 – Secondary 2* (Scottish Office Education and Industry Department, 1993), focused on the needs of the highly able and concluded that schools did not offer sufficient challenge to able pupils and that there was a clear need for the development of policies and management responsibilities to ensure that the needs of highly able pupils were met.

Successive legislation reflected the growing move towards inclusion. For example, while the needs of highly able pupils were not mentioned specifically as a group, their needs were alluded to in *The Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000* which stated that it is ‘...the duty of the authority to secure that the education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential’.

The crucial piece of legislation, however, came in 2004 in the form of the *Additional Support for Learning (Scotland) Act*. This Act sought to move Scotland away from a deficit driven special educational needs (SEN) model of support towards a philosophically different and more holistic and socially constructed understanding of support for learning and special educational needs. The Act built upon the laudable aim of the 2000 Education Act in relation to the development of personality, talents etc. It laid out a number of instances where pupils might be deemed to have additional needs in terms of their learning and included groups who had never before been included within the SEN framework such as those for whom English was an additional language and the highly able. For the first time the needs of highly able pupils were enshrined in law and specifically referred to in the accompanying *Code of Practice* (Scottish Government, 2005). This reconceptualisation of special needs as additional support need in the legislation and documentation offered opportunities for education authorities and schools to

consider how to best meet the needs of all pupils in their care. Subsequent policy initiatives such as Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Government, 2008a), seek to bring together the support available to a young person in the family, community or through universal services, and has focused the attention of authorities on how needs might be met in practice. The needs of highly able pupils are part of this inclusive process. It was within this legislative context that the new curriculum framework was developed.

#### *Developing a Curriculum Framework*

Education in Scotland has a long and distinguished history. Three universities (St Andrew's, 1411; Glasgow, 1451; and Aberdeen, 1495) were established by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Schools were run by the church in the Middle Ages but by the 16<sup>th</sup> century burghs (towns) had also established schools (Scottish Parliament, 2000). In 1560 the protestant reformer John Knox called for establishment of elementary schools in every church parish. The Education Act of 1696 is believed to be the first national education Act in the world and provided a school in every parish in the country, a fixed salary for the teacher and financial arrangements to cover the costs (Scottish Parliament, 2000). Out of this organic education system emerged a number of eminent scientists such as Sir William Ramsay (chemist); Sir Alexander Fleming (biologist and pharmacologist) and Sir John Boyd Orr, (scientist and authority on nutrition). While not all Scots went on to achieve Nobel prizes or gain high academic results (Gow & McPherson, 1980) the provision of high quality education for all remained an important goal for Scotland. Identifying, valuing and celebrating excellence remains at the forefront of the current curriculum developments in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2006). In spite of this Priestly and Humes (2010: 346) argue that 'recent curriculum developments in Scotland have largely ignored research in the field of curriculum development' (Dewey, 1938; Taba, 1962; Stenhouse, 1975; Kelly, 1986, 1999). They postulate that that 'the resultant curriculum is problematic as a result' (Priestly & Humes, 2010: 346).

CfE has been described as 'one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2008b: 8). The core tenets of CfE are derived from the words engraved on the mace of the Scottish Parliament — *wisdom, justice, compassion* and *integrity*. There is an assumption made that these are universal ideals to which all will adhere. There is little recognition that the concept of justice, to take only one of the values, can be conceived in different ways, by different people, in different factions of society and while everyone may agree justice is a

good thing, there may be great variation in how people believe it should be meted out. In addition, four key capacities are outlined in the new documentation: “successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors” (Scottish Executive, 2004b). On some level these four capacities could be construed as individualistic and therefore about personal growth. However, they could also be argued to link to the process model of curriculum (Stenhouse, 1975) where independent thought is valued and pupils are encouraged to be active citizens and to develop an awareness of self (Kelly, 1999; Biesta, 2006) thus embracing universal ideals.

In order to support staff and help them to develop the skills set needed to implement CfE the Scottish Government published a series of documents called *Building the Curriculum*. Whole documents were devoted to topics such as active learning (Scottish Executive, 2007), interdisciplinary learning and planning across the curriculum (Scottish Government, 2008b). Seven principles (challenge and enjoyment, breadth, progression, depth, personalisation and choice, coherence and relevance) were developed to ‘aid teachers and schools in their practice and as a basis for continuing review, evaluation and improvement’ (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009a). Kelly (1999) believes curriculum model principles to be important, however, within the *Building the Curriculum* documents there is little illumination as to what these seven principles might mean or indeed what they might look like in terms of pedagogy. The rhetoric is strong but the lack of clarification, guidance and debate as to what it looks like in practice means highly able learners and indeed all learners may be at the mercy of various interpretations of what these principles mean in practice. In addition to 4 values, 4 capacities and 7 principles, a series of experiences and outcomes have been developed which aim to ‘recognise the importance of the quality and nature of the learning experience in developing attributes and capabilities and in achieving active engagement, motivation and depth of learning. An outcome represents what is to be achieved’ (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009a: 3) but the outcomes are vague in nature and so pose difficulties for schools as they seek to achieve them. Crucially for highly able pupils, they ‘do not have ceilings, to enable staff to extend the development of skills, attributes, knowledge and understanding into more challenging areas and higher levels of performance’ (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009a: 4). While this appears open and flexible no indication is given as to how the levels might equate to other aspects of learning. Neither is there indication as to how a learner is judged to have achieved a level. Enmeshed in this debate is the role of assessment. Lack of agreement about assessment and the absence of robust assessment procedures are likely to generate mistrust in achievement of

the learning outcomes. This may result in teachers creating false ceilings by crafting linear learning opportunities in an effort to ensure all learners achieve the outcomes. This could potentially result in the removal of opportunities for highly able learners to 'engage in more challenging areas and higher levels of performance' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009a: 4).

These outcomes are centred round eight curricular areas. The areas identified as an important and familiar structure for knowledge are: health and well being, language, mathematics, science, social studies, expressive arts, technologies, religious and moral education. These subject areas reflect the broad and balanced curriculum Scotland has always sought to develop with the teaching of health and well being, language and numeracy now the responsibility of all teachers alongside other specific subject areas. In 1977 The Munn Report (Scottish Education Department, 1977) presented the findings of the Munn Committee. It recommended a restructuring of the curriculum in Scotland to be followed in Standard 3 (15 years of age) and Standard 4 (16 years of age) to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities; the introduction of teaching and learning methods which reflected pupils' needs and circumstances; and the development of new courses which crossed traditional subject boundaries. The Munn Report (Scottish Education Department, 1977) outlined eight modes of delivery: (1) language and communication; (2) mathematical studies; (3) scientific studies; (4) creative and aesthetic activities; (5) technological activities; (6) social and environmental studies; (7) religious and moral education; (8) physical education. Direct comparisons can be made between the new curricular areas and those outlined above and it would seem little has changed. It is not clear from the current documentation whether a content based model (Hirst, 1974) or process based model of curriculum underpins the changes taking place. Priestly and Humes (2010) argue it 'is an uneasy mixture of the three archetypal models, being essentially a mastery curriculum dressed up in the language of the process model' (pp. 358). Kelly (1999) suggests that although content cannot be ignored there are starting points within curriculum development which may be of greater consequence such as the process of learning. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Scottish teachers are concerned that CfE is process orientated with knowledge and content being tangential. For highly able pupils, advanced subject knowledge is often something that sets them apart from their peers (Freeman, 1998). However, discrete subject areas are not at odds with a process curriculum model. Indeed Dewey (1907), an exponent of the process curriculum, argued against the artificial divide between knowledge and process. Before becoming independent, autonomous creative thinkers perhaps learners need a period of being knowledge absorbers and mimics, thus, the

new curriculum while promising may in fact inhibit highly able learners, and all learners, if the focus is on process alone. When catering for highly able pupils, as indeed all pupils, it is, Dewey suggests, the melding of process and content that may be crucial.

Five levels for learning have been created with the first four levels described in more detail in a series of “experiences and outcomes” (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009a). The fifth level relates to qualifications. Suggested ages are outlined for each of the stages:

- Early – the pre-school years and Primary 1 (5 years of age), or later for some;
- First – to the end of Primary 4 (8 years of age), but earlier or later for some;
- Second – to the end of Primary 7 (11/12 years of age), but earlier or later for some;
- Third and fourth – Secondary 1 (12/13 years of age) to Secondary 3 (15 years of age), but earlier for some. The fourth level broadly equates to Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level 4;
- Senior phase – Secondary 4 (16 years) to Secondary 6 (17 years), and college or other means of study. The fourth level experiences and outcomes are intended to provide possibilities for choice and young people’s programmes will not include all of the fourth level.

The wording within these levels indicates that pupils may achieve some of the levels sooner than their chronological age might suggest. If we accept at face value the apparent flexibility within the framework then it is a particular strength when considering the needs of highly able pupils as it would appear staff, in principle, is no longer bound by age and stage. However stating age and stage suggests it is age and stage dependant. Once again the implementation of this in practice is crucial. While pupils can be presented for external, national examinations early, anecdotal evidence suggests schools often choose not to do this. Universities often require prospective students to gain the entry qualifications within one exam diet. Being able to demonstrate that a learner can achieve high level study earlier than their chronological age suggests may in fact mitigate against them as they seek entry into higher education. These apparent inconsistencies call into question the assessment procedures for each of the levels and how they are regarded beyond school. In relation to curriculum models, these levels may mitigate against the process model as teachers begin to ‘teach to the test’ or to the outcomes which appear as a series of “I can...” statements. There is also a danger that the flexibility within the curriculum will see staff concentrating on breadth and

depth of experience at the exclusion of progression. Once again, all three components are required to ensure learners are challenged appropriately. Learning development may be narrowed and opportunities for the learning development of highly able pupils may be stunted if progression is not an integrated part of the learning process.

The new curriculum does however shy away from pre-determined outcomes (although there is a whole suite of outcomes for each level) and offers significantly increased opportunities for open ended and flexible enquiry. The curriculum may allow highly able pupils to engage in learning at a level commensurate with their ability and in the longer term, if successful, allow them to go on to contribute to the economy and wider society. This may allow pupils to respond to the unknown demands of the future. 'Wider trends, particularly an increasingly competitive global economy and greater social diversity, are having a considerable impact on education and what is expected of learners and teachers' (McMahon *et al.*, 2010: 5) consequently impacting on the symbiotic relationship between curriculum and society. It is the fundamental change towards open ended, flexible enquiry that makes the new curriculum so well suited to the needs of highly able learners. And yet it is this very aspect that could lead to its downfall. Stenhouse (1975) warns that implementation of such a curriculum model will depend on the quality of the teacher. He concedes that 'it is far more demanding on teachers and thus far more difficult to implement in practice' further suggesting that 'in particular circumstances it may well prove too demanding' (pp. 96-97). The question is "are Scottish teachers good enough and well supported enough to implement it?" Many are but if we are truthful we may have to admit, not all.

The implementation of this new curriculum framework has not been unproblematic. The apparent flexibility that it offers combined with documents that were slow to appear at first and when they did sought to guide rather than direct have left some teachers nervous and uncertain as to how to proceed (Priestly & Humes, 2010). Moreover, the introduction of this new curriculum has come at a time of recession resulting in severe funding cuts across education (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011) and so it remains to be seen how successful the implementation is. Nonetheless, the framework does offer opportunities to consider how we can best present appropriate educational opportunities to all, including the highly able, through the emphasis on cross curricular learning and flexibility within planning and delivery.

*Curriculum and Highly Able Pupils*

Designing an appropriate educational curriculum for highly able pupils has been the focus of much research over a period of many years. As countries consider how and if they will support highly able pupils 'it is important to recognise the role of culture, particularly when 'globalisation means cultures are not static or geographically limited' (Stack & Sutherland, 2010: 114). Bruner (1996), Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and Bronfenbrenner (1981) all acknowledge the importance afforded to culture as individuals strive to make sense of the world around them. This group of students are as diverse as any other group of learners therefore it is perhaps not surprising that no single way of challenging this group of learners has emerged from the field (Bailey *et al.*, 2008). CfE purports to be a framework that is applicable to all learners from 3-18 years, including the highly able. The seven principles outlined in the section above would seem to serve learners, including highly able learners well. Breadth, progression, depth and personalisation and choice all feature in the literature relating to gifted education (Passow, 1982; Van Tassel-Baska, 1992; Van Tassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). The concept of challenge and enjoyment, coherence and relevance feature in learning theory literature (Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner 1996). Curriculum models within the gifted literature have been discussed and developed. Bett's autonomous learning model (1985) places emphasis on meeting individualized needs of learners through divergent and convergent thinking as well as developing social and emotional needs of learners. This model for gifted education resonates with aspects of CfE where encouraging greater autonomy in learning is a key component of 'assessment as part of learning and teaching' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009b). The Renzulli and Reis (1985) model of schoolwide enrichment dovetails with the concept outlined in CfE of scholars developing their own unique programmes based on resources, demographics and dynamics. Renzulli and Reis (1985) want to see engaged and independent learners as a result of learning and teaching and this reflects Scotland's desire to see all Scotland's young people achieve the four capacities (Scottish Executive, 2006). Treffinger (1975) picks up on this idea of independent learners where students set and achieve self initiated goals. Again this resonates CfE which is firmly rooted in assessment methodologies that result in 'conversations about learning' that 'may take place between teachers and young people or among the learners themselves, and should be part of the planned activity or experience' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009a). The eight subject areas covered within CfE are 'the organisers for ensuring that learning takes place across a broad range of contexts' (Learn-



ing and Teaching Scotland, 2009b). Offering challenging learning experiences across the subjects will allow opportunities for identification of highly able pupils through the provision (Freeman, 1998) and for the linking of new knowledge to old (Roger, 2007). The broad based curriculum in Scotland has been related to ideas of social justice (Croxford, 1994) and if the national aspiration for every pupil to realise the four capacities was achieved, this may go some way to bring about social justice. Consequently it could be argued that CfE is a model for inclusive mainstream education and as such allows for aspects of models of curriculum provision for gifted education to be incorporated as they too are concerned with delivery of curriculum.

There is general acceptance in Scotland that in education high ability refers to children who are working or are capable of working in advance of their chronological peers in one or more curricular areas (Scottish Network for Able Pupils, 2009). There is acknowledgement within CfE that pupils may attain the levels of learning earlier than their chronological age would suggest. Teachers, should they choose, can tailor the curriculum to a pupils' need rather than age thus highly able pupils can be challenged according to the level of learning and not the level of learning expected for their age. Although as argued previously, linking ages to levels may be in direct opposition to this.

Legislation and a flexible curriculum framework go some way to offering the optimum milieu for catering for high ability. Within the Scottish context, the development of inclusive pedagogies may also offer some understanding of the idiosyncratic nature of learning and learners and thus cater for high ability. Florian and Kershner (2009: 173) suggest that 'inclusive education is distinguished by an acceptance of differences between students as ordinary aspects of human development'. Schools that start to view highly able learners within this discourse would start to cater for all abilities rather than seeking to sift and sort those deemed to be different in ways 'reminiscent of nineteenth-century debates over gradations of mental retardation' (Tomlinson, 2008: 60).

### *Conclusion*

Consideration of how to best support and nurture highly able learners within the Scottish context has to be an integral part of the planning process. It would appear that CfE has much in common with models developed for gifted education and accordingly, on paper, the needs of this group of learners can be met appropriately. However, as a curriculum it has flaws and has been beset with problems in terms of implementation. From the outset, the

fundamental tenets on which the curriculum has been built have never been subject to interrogation and debate. The tacit assumption that there are shared understandings about the elemental terminology leaves the curriculum open to criticism and accusations of the curriculum being built on an unstable foundation. The lack of clarity in relation to its theoretical roots – is it process or content driven – alongside apparently open and flexible guidance allows for wide and varied interpretation in practice. Assessment is a key component of learning and teaching and the lack of clarity of how the assessment system will operate or how levels will be measured may also result in eclectic interpretation and a possible narrowing of attainment for highly able pupils.

Notwithstanding these considerable issues, CfE in the hands of an experienced and knowledgeable pedagogue would have much to offer the highly able learner. Curriculum developments in the field of gifted education resonate with an inclusive framework such as CfE allowing for the needs of individual learners to be met. At the heart of CfE and curriculum models of delivery from the field of gifted education would appear to be effective teachers. CfE is attempting to create a more teacher centred methodology. This may well require the application of the same blending of process and content theory as advocated for pupils.

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Маргарет Сатерланд  
УЧЕНИЦИ СА ВИСОКИМ СПОСОБНОСТИМА У ШКОТСКОЈ:  
КАКО НАЈБОЉЕ ИСКОРИСТИТИ ПРОМЕНУ  
НАСТАВНОГ ПЛАНА И ПРОГРАМА

*Анстракт*

Као и многе друге земље, Шкотска чини напоре да подстакне развој грађана способних да се изборе са изазовима 21. века (*Scottish Executive*, 2006). Такође се настоји да се осигура препознавање и подстицање способности и талента код деце. Један од начина да се то постигне јесте развој новог оквира наставних планова и програма – Курикулума за изванредност (CfE). CfE настоји да обезбеди координирани приступ реформи наставних планова и програма намењених деци и младима узраста од 3 до 18 година. Овај приступ удаљава се од прескриптивног модела према моделу који је више усмерен ка наставницима и који се ослања на едукаторе који ће прилагодити националне смернице потребама локалне средине. У раду ће укратко бити изложен законски оквир за ученике високих способности у Шкотској, а затим ће бити размотрене релативне заслуге новог оквира наставних планова и програма за ову кохорту ученика. Дискутује се шта се подразумева под оптималним доприносом курикулума за ученике високих способности у односу на процесни модел развоја наставног плана и програма (Stenhouse, 1975).

*Кључне речи:* инклузија, ученици високих способности, наставни план и програм, законодавство, политика, процесни модел наставног плана и програма.

Маргарет Садерланд  
УЧАЩИЕСЯ С НЕЗАУРЯДНЫМИ СПОСОБНОСТЯМИ В ШОТЛАНДИИ:  
КАК НАИЛУЧШИМ ОБРАЗОМ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАТЬ ИЗМЕНЕНИЕ  
УЧЕБНОГО ПЛАНА И ПРОГРАММЫ

*Резюме*

Подобно многим другим странам, Шотландия прилагает усилия к тому, чтобы поощрить развитие граждан, способных ответить на вызовы 21-го века (*Scottish Executive*, 2006). В частности, поощряется выявление и стимулирование талантов у детей. Один из способов добиться данной цели – развитие новой рамки учебных планов и программ: Куррикулума незаурядности (CfE). CfE старается обеспечить скоординированный подход к реформе учебных планов и программ в возрастных рамках от 3 до 18 лет. Данная модель удаляется от прескриптивной модели и приближается к модели, которая больше ориентируется на учителя, модели, опирающейся на реализаторов курсов обучения, способных приспособить национальные установки к удовлетворением местных потребностей. В работе вкратце будет изложена юридическая рамка для учащихся с незаурядными способностями в Шотландии, а потом будут рассмотрены сравнительные заслуги новой рамки учебных планов и программ для данного контингента учащихся. Особое внимание уделяется вопросу о том, что подразумевается под оптимальным вкладом куррикулума в образование учащихся с незаурядными способностями по сравнению с процессной моделью развития учебного плана и программы (Stenhouse, 1975).

*Ключевые слова:* включенное обучение, учащиеся с незаурядными способностями, учебный план и программа, законодательство, политика, процессная модель учебного плана и программы.