ENABLING THE MORE ABLE: MEETING THE NEEDS OF HIGHER ABILITY CHILDREN IN 2 PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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Background/Context

This research emerges from a professional role of School Improvement Advisory/Intervention Officer. Within the context of supporting schools with raising achievement for different groups as well as more generally, there is increasing demand for supporting schools in meeting the learning needs of the more able especially children from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds. This applies to the 2 schools at the heart of this study. What is not so typical is that this study is concerned with primary schools.

Even Ofsted's (2013) survey on “The Most Able Students: Are they doing as well as they should in our non-selective secondary schools?” emphasises the situation at the end of primary schools with no focus on the pupils’ experience in primary schools.

Research questions/focus of the enquiry

Over the years the terminology has changed to include: Gifted and Talented; highly able and most recently, the ‘more able.’ (Ofsted:2013) The challenge remains and provides the focus of this enquiry: how to challenge and motivate higher ability children to achieve their high potential. Initial questions were subdivided into the 3 different components and reframed during the iterative process of the action research enquiry with the schools.

Research methods

This collaborative, iterative process is in the tradition of ‘doing research for school improvement' action research style espoused by Durrant and Holden (2006). Data collection relied on observations of lessons, participant observations of meetings, pupil performance data, analysis of documents such as Ofsted and governor reports and interviews with school leaders, teachers, children, parents and Local Authority representatives. Reflective logs were maintained by the researcher.

Analytical and/or theoretical framework

Given the School Improvement role, some of the more interventionist methods are suited to the ‘Educational Design Research’ approach described by McKenney and Reeves (2012). This combines ‘iterative development of solutions' with theory building and practical innovation. Central to theory building is a process of reflection and reasoning toward theoretical understanding. The analytical process comprises blending reductionist and systems perspectives, with a balance between ‘analytic and creative perspectives.’ (p20).

Research findings and/or contribution to knowledge

A benefit of this approach is the combination of practitioner knowledge with generating theory. From the initial stages of clarifying the research questions to currently, the knowledge generated on meeting the needs of the more able has been used in the classroom, with children and their parents, by school leaders and is informing the school’s improvement strategies. Moreover, it offers timely insights for policy and theories on pedagogy, social mobility and equalities.