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Authored article

HMCI's monthly commentary: June 2016

From: [Ofsted and Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, comments on the most able pupils, saying that there is still too much talent going to waste.



Read about the [methodology and findings that informed this commentary](#).

Of all the important issues I have put under the spotlight during my time as Chief Inspector, arguably none is as critical to the nation's success and economic fortunes as the performance of the most able children in our non-selective state schools.

The question of how well our brightest pupils are supported and challenged to achieve high academic results after they transfer to secondary school has been the subject of 2 high profile Ofsted

studies in recent years.

Both these surveys found that thousands of pupils who achieved well at primary school, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, were failing to reach their full potential after the age of 11. The reasons for this were:

- poor transition arrangements with feeder primary schools that left many academically gifted pupils treading water in their first few years of secondary school, rather than building on the gains made at key stage 2
- a culture of low expectations and a failure to nurture high ambition and scholastic excellence
- few checks being made on whether the teaching of mixed ability groups was challenging the brightest children sufficiently
- disproportionate effort being spent in many schools on getting pupils over the GCSE D/C borderline rather than supporting the most able to secure the top A/A* grades

Since these surveys were published in 2013 and 2015, the performance of the most able pupils and the quality of the teaching they receive have become a central part of Ofsted inspections. Our [common inspection framework](#), introduced at the start of this academic year, explicitly highlights the need for schools to provide effective teaching, learning and assessment for the most academically able pupils.

How well the brightest children are doing will usually be among the very first questions an inspector asks the school leadership team at the start of the visit. This is because inspectors know that if provision for this group is good, it is likely that other groups of pupils are also being well served. Conversely, if the most able pupils are not being stretched, that will alert inspectors to the possibility that things may be going wrong elsewhere.

It is, therefore, dispiriting to learn that in spite of Ofsted's sharpened focus in recent years, little progress seems to have been made since I first reported on this important issue.

The most recent statistics paint a bleak picture of under-

achievement and unfulfilled potential. Thousands of our most able secondary-age children are still not doing as well as they should in the non-selective state sector where the vast majority of them are educated.

Last year, 68% of non-selective secondary school pupils who had achieved a level 5 or above in both English and mathematics at the end of primary school failed to attain A* or A grades in these subjects at GCSE. Indeed, 27% of previously high-attaining pupils failed to even achieve the minimum expected progress – a grade B in both these key subjects at GCSE.

These figures reflect the lack of ambition our inspectors still find in many secondary schools. To illustrate the point, here is a sample of comments lifted from recent inspection reports of schools that have dropped from good or outstanding.

From an inspection of a large comprehensive school in the east Midlands:

“ Work set by teachers is not always challenging enough, especially for the most able. Pupils are not given sufficient opportunities to apply their learning in a range of situations. This is especially true in lower school mathematics and science. Teachers do not have consistently high expectations about pupils’ work.”

This from the inspection of a secondary school in West Yorkshire:

“ Expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low. The academy’s academic targets are too modest and more able pupils, in particular, are not challenged enough to make faster progress. As a result, few pupils make the progress expected of them across a range of subjects, including in mathematics, English and in science. Many pupils underachieve because expectations of them are too low and leaders and teachers have not supported or challenged them well enough to succeed. The proportion of more able pupils attaining high GCSE grades is low in most subjects and in several subjects no pupils achieve higher grades. In too many lessons, higher-ability pupils are insufficiently challenged by their teachers or

the curriculum provided for them.”

Finally, this from an inspection of a school in the north-west:

“ Some teaching does not take sufficient account of the different abilities within the class. For example, the most able pupils sometimes ‘mark time’ rather than moving rapidly on to more challenging work. The academy’s leaders have identified that not all teaching does enough to challenge the most able pupils.

“ Unvalidated GCSE results for 2015 show that, from their various starting points, fewer pupils make or exceed the expected progress in English and mathematics than is the case nationally. This was particularly evident for the most able pupils.”

When it comes to the performance of the most able pupils, regional divisions are as stark as they are for the attainment of children more generally. Pupils in the east Midlands and the north-west fare particularly badly. Of the 10 worst performing local authority areas, measured by the proportion of most able pupils achieving a grade B or above in GCSE English and maths, all but one are in the north or the Midlands. Most of the top performing local authorities are in London.

While geographic location counts for a great deal, it makes little difference whether these pupils attend an academy or a local authority maintained school. In local authority schools, 72% of the most able children achieved a grade B or above in English and maths at key stage 4, compared with 76% of the most able pupils in academy converters and 65% in sponsor-led academies.

What is most depressing is that the brightest children from disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely not to achieve their full potential. The most able children in receipt of pupil premium funding still lag well behind their more advantaged peers. They are also less likely to be entered for the English baccalaureate (EBacc) than other bright pupils and when they are entered, are less likely to achieve it.

The statistics tell an all too familiar story. Of the disadvantaged most able children who attend a non-selective secondary school, only:

- 60% go on to take the EBacc, and only 44% achieve it, compared with 73% and 62% respectively of those who are not disadvantaged
- 64% get a grade B or above in mathematics GCSE, compared with 81% of those who are not disadvantaged
- 31% get a grade A or A* in mathematics GCSE, compared with 49% of those who are not disadvantaged
- 66% get a grade B or above in English GCSE, compared with 79% of those who are not disadvantaged
- 26% get a grade A or A* in English GCSE, compared with 39% of those who are not disadvantaged

Achieving these higher GCSE grades is a key predictor of success at A-level and progression to the best universities. Non-free school meal (non-FSM) children are twice as likely to go to one of the top third universities (and more than twice as likely to go to one of the Russell Group of universities) than children eligible for free school meals. This disparity risks perpetuating inequality in our society, as the elite professions continue to be disproportionately filled by graduates from these institutions.

As Chief Inspector, I have consistently lamented the failure of too many secondary schools to stretch our most able children, particularly the poorest. If our nation is serious about improving social mobility then our secondary schools have got to start delivering for these children.

Our nation's economic prosperity depends on harnessing the talent of all our young people but especially those who have the potential to be the next generation of business leaders, wealth generators and job creators.

As a nation, we have a problem with low productivity. The fact that so many of our poorer bright children are being deprived of the opportunity to fulfil their early promise must surely be one of the underlying causes of this.

The government understands that this is a serious and pressing issue for our country. It is taking steps to reform those parts of the system that have been putting a brake on high aspirations.

Ministers are bringing in a more stretching grading structure for pupils taking GCSE examinations as well as new performance measures that will more clearly recognise those schools that are prepared to push their brightest pupils to fulfil their potential.

Most importantly of all, they have introduced more rigorous testing in primary schools at key stage 1 and national tests at key stage 2.

There can be little doubt, in my view, that these tests have contributed greatly to the recent narrowing of the attainment gap in primary schools between poorer pupils – including the most able – and their peers. They help teachers to identify where children may be falling behind in literacy and numeracy in order that remedial action can be taken as quickly as possible. Those who indulge in moaning and whinging about national testing need to remember that when standards decline, it is the most disadvantaged pupils who suffer the most.

It is surely no coincidence that the attainment gap starts to widen again during the secondary school phase. Indeed, it is a national scandal that the 28 percentage point gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils at age 16 has barely shifted in 10 years. I believe that one of the principal reasons for this gap at secondary school is the absence of any formal testing between the ages of 11 and 16. This means that many bright children, especially from poorer homes, are allowed to drift through their first few years of secondary school. Their progress and early promise are stifled from this point onwards. By the time these pupils have reached key stage 4, when closer tracking begins, many have been left to flounder during the [‘wasted years’ of key stage 3](#) as we found in our report.

I urge the government to consider bringing back external national testing at key stage 3. I firmly believe that it was a mistake to abolish these tests in the first place. If we are serious about helping all disadvantaged children, but especially the most able,

to learn well and unlock their full potential, we need to know how they are doing at 14 as well as at 7, 11 and 16.

We know that there are non-selective schools across the country that act as beacons of excellence when it comes to meeting the needs of their most able pupils. Unfortunately, there are not enough of them.

We have to muster all our efforts to challenge the underperformance of our brightest children. Ofsted will continue to play its part by ensuring that the progress and attainment of the most able pupils is front and centre of all school inspections. Schools that fail to get this right will be marked down.

As this issue is so important to the nation, I believe that policy-makers should consider whether there ought to be further sanctions applied to schools that consistently fail their brightest children. For example, should schools that fail to meet their responsibilities towards their most able pupils be allowed to set up an academy trust?

This might seem draconian but unless we get this right as a nation, we will not only continue to let down thousands of our most able pupils but also thwart any ambition to match the productivity levels of our international competitors.

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Ofsted

Sir Michael Wilshaw

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