

Parenting 'gifted and talented' children in urban areas: parents' voices

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Abstract

International evidence demonstrates the importance of engaging parents in the education of their 'high potential' children, yet limited research has focussed on the involvement of parents from differing economic strata/backgrounds. The current study explored the dilemmas of parenting academically high ability children from economically deprived urban areas in the UK. Data were gathered from a sample of parents whose children attended a University- based sustained intervention programme for designated 'gifted' pupils aged 12-16. Parental perceptions were sought in relation to a) the usefulness/impact of the intervention programme b) parents' aspirations for their children growing up in economically deprived urban areas and c) parents' views on the support provided by the extended family, peer groups and the wider community. The findings have significant implications for both policy and practice and, more specifically, for engaging parents in intervention programmes offered by Universities and schools to children in order to increase their access to Higher Education and for enhancing their life chances.

Key words

Parental perspectives, urban, economically deprived, 'gifted and talented', United Kingdom

Introduction

In 1999 the British government launched its '*gifted and talented*' education policy¹ (Department of Education and Employment, 1999) in response to concerns raised by voluntary agencies such as the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) as well as by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in England that the school curriculum was not appropriately matched for able pupils (1979, 1992). The policy was intended to improve the standard of education in urban schools with high levels of social and

¹ In the UK, the term 'gifted and talented' was used by the government to designate the top 10 % of more able pupils in every school. The term 'gifted' was used to indicate the academically able top 5%, whilst 'talented' was the term used to describe the top 5% of children showing ability in sport and the arts. This policy applied to every school: a register of these pupils was required to be kept and identification of these pupils was through teachers' assessment and the current achievement of the pupils. Parents were to be informed when their child was designate 'gifted' or 'talented'.

economic deprivation in England and was initially embedded in the *Excellence in Cities* programme which aimed to raise the standards of achievement of pupils aged 11-18 in urban schools. Subsequently it was extended to pupils aged 4-19 across England.

Fifteen years on, significant gaps remain in the published research in relation to the UK's 'gifted and talented' education policy (Koshy, Pinheiro-Torres, & Portman Smith, 2012). Notably, there is a lack of research exploring the role of parents in supporting their 'gifted and talented' children. This is surprising because there has been a plethora of policy and guidance documents focusing on the importance of good parenting in the achievement of educational success. Hence the study reported here set out to examine perspectives on parenting 'gifted and talented' children from lower income families.

The importance of good parenting on educational outcomes

Differences in parenting practices are strongly associated with differences in children's developmental and educational achievements. The seminal review of international evidence on parental involvement concluded that good parenting has a significant impact on children's achievement and adjustment, evident *across all social classes and all ethnic groups* (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). According to Gorard (2011) the link between parenting behaviours and children's educational attainment is strong and causal, whilst Desforges & Abouchar (2003) commented on the value of parental warmth and consistency in creating a favourable home learning environment for optimum development of the child.

The consensus that parental attitudes and behaviours significantly shape children's development of self-concept and resilience (e.g. Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011; Westmoreland, Rosenberg, Lopez & Weiss, 2009) has been reflected in policy discourse. For example, in 2011, the Allen report, a government-commissioned report intended to assess how children from disadvantaged backgrounds could be given the best start in life, called for a national parenting programme in the UK, designed to help parents understand how to build the social and emotional capability of their children. Allen (ibid) concluded 'give children abilities, then the taxpayer bails out of their lives'.

The prominent role of parents, long recognised in UK educational practice, has increasingly been reflected in educational policy. The UK Government White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (Department of Education and Employment, 1997) set out the Government strategy to provide parents with more information and encouraged parent partnerships within schools. The subsequent Act of Parliament (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) enhanced the role of parent governors, involved parents in the inspection process and required schools to provide annual reports and prospectuses for parents together with increased information on the school curriculum and performance outcomes.

Whilst education is made more effective by sustaining and increasing the role of parents at home, high ability students require special academic interventions (Robinson, Shore, & Enerson 2007). Callahan (2007) called for more interventions

which involve parents through the formation of a *master adult triad* of teacher, parent and mentor to support gifted students from low-income families. However, there is a paucity of empirically substantiated strategies to help parents in parenting their gifted children (Morawska and Sanders 2009), despite the international consensus that effective parenting makes important contributions to gifted children's achievement (Campbell & Verma, 2007). Campbell et al (2007) who conducted an international study *directly* with the families of gifted children in Scandinavia, Asia and the USA concluded that effective parents developed an Academic Home Climate (AHC) and possessed a series of beliefs, attitudes and motivations that led to their children's higher achievement.

Given the broad consensus regarding the need to devise effective strategies for parental involvement, the purpose of our study is to further our understanding of issues from their perspective. An effective intervention for supporting parents must seek their views on what support they need and how they perceive interventions; both of these aspects were addressed in the research reported here.

This aim of the research was to find out about parental perspectives, based on the view that parents and their parental practices are, in part, shaped by the broader family and community (St. Clair & Benjamin, 2011). The research was concerned with the parents of a group of children who had been identified as 'gifted and talented', by their schools, yet their teachers believed them to be at risk of educational underachievement because they lived in economically and socially challenging urban environments.

Context for the study: UK national policies

Between 1999 and 2010, the former UK Labour Government launched three major policy initiatives. Firstly, the introduction of a 'gifted and talented education' as part of the *Excellence in Cities* initiative (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) with a special focus on identifying and making provision for inner-city students whose gifts and talents lie submerged, in most cases, owing to their local environment of social and economic deprivation (Casey & Koshy, 2002). Secondly, a Widening Participation Policy, designed to encourage students from poorer families to join universities (Blunkett, 2000), was introduced, and still remains high on the agenda of the present UK Coalition Government; and finally, the government's efforts to improve access to professions such as medicine, law and the civil service which are currently dominated by affluent families (Cabinet Office, 2009).

The intervention programme (Casey, Koshy, & Portman Smith, 2011) was provided by a team led by the authors. The intervention programme was devised to address the issues outlined above, as well as to support the implementation of the government 'gifted and talented' education policy requirements with its associated aims of raising academic achievement and creating higher expectations and aspirations for the future.

Students selected for the programme were listed on their school's 'gifted and talented' register and were eligible for free school meals (FSM), an indicator used in the UK to indicate low family income. Teachers were encouraged to use their professional judgment in selecting the children for the programme. The selection process for the intervention programme was not exclusively based on the students'

academic achievement, as it was acknowledged that economic disadvantage may have impacted on their performance in academic tests.

The University based intervention programme

The students started a four-year intervention programme at the age of 12 and the programme was provided on nine Saturdays each year. The sessions were taught by University staff and others with particular specialist skills. The three broad strands of the program included:

- *Adult interaction and support* – parents' support days, involvement of undergraduate mentors, careers education and outside speakers;
- *Academically challenging activities* – with a focus on personal project work and peer group tasks;
- *Teaching specific skills* – gaps in basic subject knowledge and skills including literacy and numeracy were addressed as well as skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, study skills (including presentation skills) and time management.

Casey *et al* (2011) provide detailed descriptions of the components of the intervention programme and their impact. Working closely with parents was a key element throughout the programme.

We used Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) and the role of adults in scaffolding children's learning as a theoretical basis for our study.

Research design

The research aimed to gather first-hand data on how parents viewed various aspects of their children's attendance at the intervention programme. Interviewing parents was deemed to be a suitable approach to gather authentic data, given that some parents may lack the writing skills required to articulate their views in written form.

Interviews were conducted with a sample of 21 parents (out of total of 90): the majority were mothers, ($n = 19$) with one father ($n = 1$) and one responsible adult who was undertaking the child's care ($n = 1$). The ethnicity of the parent group (66% from ethnic minority groups) reflected the overall ethnic distribution (67%) within the total student group. The interviews were conducted by a professional interviewer rather than a member of the programme team, reflecting the belief that parents are more likely to be more at ease and open about their views when speaking to independent interviewers. Effort was made to ensure that the attending parents should not constitute a biased sample of those who had taken a greater interest in the programme. Hence, parents' names were randomly selected.

The data analysis was an iterative process. Initially each interview was analysed separately and then later revisited. The process of analysis began with the development of coding schemes that related to the specific interview aims and the questions designed to support that purpose, as well as those themes that emerged from the data.

Findings

The main findings from the research are presented under the following areas: parents' perceptions of the urban scholars intervention programme; the nature of parental aspirations, and parents' views on the role of their extended family, their children's peer group and the wider community. Evidence of the nature of the relationship between the parents and their children is also presented. Since a key research aim was to gather insights from the parents from disadvantaged, lower income families in order to add value to the existing literature on parenting gifted children, the essence of their thinking is captured through illustrative examples from the interviews which also serve to highlight the on-going needs of the participating families. As we wanted to reflect the real voices of the parents, we have not corrected their responses.

Parents' perceptions of the intervention programme

All 21 of the parents interviewed felt very positive about their children's attendance at the intervention programme and stressed the need for such projects. The interviews with the parents highlighted some key benefits for their children emerging from the programme, which indicate a continued need for interventions that support gifted children and their parents from families who live in challenging circumstances. Four benefits identified by the parents are now presented in detail.

Benefit 1: Giving their children an identity by recognizing their high ability

Parents commented that being selected for a University based programme was seen as a privilege by many of their children. One of the parents explained the *excitement* and *exuberance* displayed by her son when he was nominated - which she attributed to his way of viewing it as an acknowledgement of his high ability. Several of the parents expressed similar sentiments. One mother talked about how her son felt about being a member of the University programme:

I think the programme has actually helped his self-esteem. When they [the University team] gave him a Welcome Pack which had... University written on it, I think he was 12 or so then, you know holding the bag that had... University's name really was good for him, it basically, you know, his eyes were bright lit up, he was like oh gosh, I am going to the University and I am only 13.

Half of the parents specifically mentioned that the programme had given their children a much needed boost to their self-esteem. One parent explained:

He is really a clever boy and he used to be a quiet child. You never think he's clever or he's good at anything. He used to keep himself to himself at the time he started coming. One day he saw one of his mates in the Arabic school who said to him 'where are you going?' 'I go to University, one Saturday every month' and they say, 'you lying. I never seen a 13 year old go to university' and he said, 'no, I'm not lying. I've got my bag. Look my bag. This has got...University on it' and he said, 'oh you must be very clever to go to University of ...'. That time he was very happy and very proud. It really gives him a lot of boost and a lot of confidence from then.

One parent told the interviewer about her daughter's future plans and how being on a programme held on a University campus helped.

She's very bright, 'gifted and talented'. I've been very proud... she is going to university, and it might be Cambridge. I feel being here on this [programme] has given her experience of what a university is like, that she feels comfortable coming here and walking around a university and mixing with the students sometimes. I think she will try Cambridge.

Benefit 2: Providing positive role models

Listening to outside speakers was mentioned by half of the parents interviewed as a very useful component of the intervention program. The variety of inputs was welcomed – Critical Thinking sessions, motivational speakers, expert professionals or those giving career advice, and speakers from similar backgrounds to the children, were considered particularly relevant. Issues of ethnicity and race featured in many of the parents' responses, for example:

There was a guy and he was talking, Black guy, very good speech. He encouraged them [the children] how very important to study and why. He [child] was listening. Even though I put him these points... maybe bringing someone who already achieved something like is better.

Another parent explained the challenges facing families like hers living in London and how outside speakers motivated her son:

He was saying something about somebody who had been through the rough and obviously he had made it to the end and he was saying 'look I know what it's like growing up in London and having all the hordes against you but you can still succeed'. And in coming here and listening to other people, he realised that yes, maybe he can't be a doctor or a lawyer, but he could still be good at whatever he does and I think giving a young child that privilege, you know a Black British young boy needs that kind of thing because its almost like oh you know it's a very stereotypical world and they see you and they see your colour, and so that kind of gave him a boost.

Benefit 3: Supplementing schools' provision for gifted pupils

Four of the parents saw the programme as supplementing and supporting their children as schools in their neighbourhood had *problems*, as explained by one mother:

And that's it, teachers that can't control the class and he said to me 'Mum, it's ridiculous. There's like people fighting, there's people walking out of the class and the teacher's sitting in the corner doing nothing' and she feels, she said 'I have to deal with it Mum. What am I going to do? Sit there and watch the kids fight?'

Another parent made the following comments regarding provision for 'gifted and talented' students:

I think they're quite a lost cause to be honest. I think they've [schools] got bigger problems like getting children to stay in school and they just don't have the capacity to really focus on what is actually a minority of ['gifted and talented'] pupils.

Benefit 4: Developing motivation and self-confidence

Fourteen of the parents interviewed commented on the role of the programme in developing their children's motivation and self-confidence, illustrated by the following example:

I saw a lot of motivation. A lot of inspirational talk about the university students (under-graduates) that had a lot of successes in their ways, and there was information, giving out to the students how they can develop themselves, how they can improve themselves, how they can become grown into themselves, so something like that, and I thought ...wow. You need role models I suppose and this is what they were portraying, role models.

Self-confidence was manifested in several ways, one example was:

It has developed her self-confidence but I think when it comes to confidence...She's not a confident person. For her to be able to do a presentation in front of 10 people was daunting at first. It has all changed now.

Parents' aspirations for their children

A key aim of the intervention programme was to raise aspirations – an aim also rooted in government policies. Hence, the interviews with parents also explored the level of aspiration that the parents had for their children. 15 out of 21 parents interviewed said that they hoped their children would go to university and 16 out of the 21 hoped their children would follow a professional career. However, a substantial number also said that their own background made it difficult for them to support their children in turning these aspirations into reality. Only 3 out of the 21 parents felt able to help their children with their homework although 17 of them said they would help them emotionally. Some parents supported their children by searching the websites together for information about careers and universities.

Overall, parents were aware that their children were making important choices about subjects for public examinations. Parents who had not attended Higher Education were doubtful about their ability to give input into the decision-making process, but they said they could attend meetings at school to find out more about where their child could "go from here, what she needs to do, and what she doesn't need to do".

Most parents described a supportive, rather than directive, approach to their children's academic choices. As one parent explained:

Personally just giving her advice and when I say that, I do try to strike a balance between if I'm just emotionally telling her to do stuff ... so sometimes we do go through the Prospectus together.

Comments confirmed that most parents had high aspirations for their children:

She does know that we have got high hopes for her! [laughs] But she knows that the standard we've set for her is quite high, even though we her parents haven't been to university, we haven't been to college. We don't have that sort of background so we want our children to achieve better than us. So she knows that our standards are higher- not just for her but for her siblings as well.

Some parents expressed the hope that their children would join professions such as chartered accountants, lawyers and doctors, whilst one mother suggested that her daughter might attend Oxford or Cambridge Universities.

Parents' views on the role of the extended family, children's peer groups and the wider community

The research also aimed to learn about the community settings of the parents in order to better understand the amount of social support they had available and/or would like to have available. Hence, parents' perceptions of the role of the external constituents in their lives– the wider family, community and their children's peer groups were also gathered during the interviews. The results showed that the majority of participants (14 out of 21) had wider family in the UK. However, wider family involvement was not necessarily perceived to be positive.

One parent commented that involving the wider family in their children's education created tensions since their approach to education was "not helpful", as they did not have the same attitude towards education. However, some of the parents who did not have family in the UK (n = 7) experienced problems in parenting and support in part due to their sense of isolation. A mother, whose family lived in the Ukraine, described how hard she found it to bring up her son alone:

My relationship was broken, it was nightmare. It was too much. Laslow was two years old when this happened. I know he doesn't remember too much but things different like one parent family. So I was raising him and his father was not taking part at all.

However, as another mother explained, the support of the wider family could be an indirect source of support for her children's education by means of their support for her.

Parents' comments about the role of the community demonstrated some different interpretations of the notion of 'community'. Some parents commented on the role of the local church or religious activities, or mentioned the library. Others said that they

were not involved in the community in any way, whilst some saw it as a place to be avoided, due to safety concerns and the negative influences that abounded. Hence, the absence of a mutual definition of the community corresponded with a lack of consensus about whether it could help. Those parents who were active in the community (8 out of 21) and were involved in church groups or groups from their own ethnic background were inclined to view the wider community more positively.

Safety in the community was a repeated theme that emerged in relation to parents' perspectives on their community setting:

They're not involved in the community. The area from one side of the area we live is very good. The other side where the school is ...it's better not to be involved. I don't think there is a community. I would be very surprised if there is, I would just like to never go there. The area is not great and I don't know, we never ever tried to be in the community. I don't see the need.

Others felt that they were able to manage within the community although it was a difficult environment:

Our neighbours are elderly - who are very nice, so our community hasn't posed a problem yet. There are a few teenagers who have come to the area and started misbehaving. That is when it scares the children. I have confronted them a few times but the community is not supportive.

Some parents were more definite in their views of the community as a source of difficulties: "The community creates difficulties for everyone really." One parent explained the problem and its possible impact on both everyday life and on educational attainment:

Drunk people and crack heads about and can't walk around as you might wish to any time of day ... and you've got to watch everything and what you're doing and those kind of things. But beyond that I suppose not really. It's difficult. The community is difficult because it limits your choices, your educational choices.

Concerns about the wider community were also reflected in parents' responses to questions about their children's peers. Peer influence featured in all of the interviews with parents and was mainly seen as one of the problems that parents had to mitigate when living in an inner-city environment:

No I don't think your programme can help in that area because these are children who are smoking crack and weed, and, for them, that is their life because they have dropped out of school. Even their appearance cannot condone them because you can hear them swearing up there, and banging, and screaming. Even the community can't help. I have been to the police twice; I've been to the council so many times. The police can't solve these things so you have to be careful when confronting them. There is not much we can do; this is what I'm saying. Even the police cannot give me any support.

One parent explained, the influence of friends also created problems for learning:

She went through this phase of she doesn't have to necessarily study because some of her friends do not study. There's a lot of movies out there that everyone wants to watch and her friends want her to go out and watch and there's a lot of things, clubbing and all that stuff they want her to do but it doesn't really help them. There's nothing on the media that actually promotes time for this GCSE period ...study hard or revise. She's spent a lot of time on the computer as well, on the internet and I think some of those things, they just don't really help.

Six parents were concerned about their child's safety when they were with their peers, whilst one said that she feared that her son might be attacked at school, where the toilets were now an unsafe area.

Fears about local peer behaviour led some parents to limit their children's access to the community, "for simple reasons, I prefer him to stay in, rather than going to the library and I'm not sure what he's doing or where he is."

Parents' relationships with their children

Parenting styles were explored in an analysis of the parental interview data. Fourteen out of the 21 parents were seen to be very warm and supportive and 14 made specific reference to their role as motivators. Two-way communication between parent and child was a feature of both the supportive and motivational styles of parenting. One parent saw herself as a support and said that she was there to offer a "listening ear":

Basically make sure he doesn't have issues clouding the fact that what he wants to become can be a hindrance to what I want him to become, because that's a big thing isn't it? As a parent sometimes you want to shape them in a certain way, to be lawyers or bankers or, you know, so as a parent I am hoping to give him a listening ear, I am hoping to support him.

The motivational style of parenting emphasised that a positive attitude was key to overcoming any barriers that might arise since with the right attitude "you never know what can happen." Parents acknowledged the problematic environments in which their children were growing up. The motivational approach was concerned with emphasising that it was vital to make the right choices in order to negotiate difficult situations, for example, unhelpful peer pressure or the influence of gang culture. Two mothers commented in particular on the challenges faced by Black British boys, and how they guided their sons to make sensible decisions:

My children cannot go in the street and put a hood over their head if it's sunny, if it's hot. You don't have no need for that, so you don't wear that. I mean if it's raining and you're wearing a coat and it has a hood then you can put it on, but if you're walking in the street and it's hot like now and you have a hood and long sleeve, you are the first person the Police is going to stop on

the road so you give the Police a cause for them to stop you, do you understand what I'm saying? And then you can't say well it's because I'm Black why the Police stop me. No, you're wearing a hood in 30 degrees or something the Police have a reason to stop you. Do you understand? Why are you covering up your face? Do you understand what I'm getting at?

Demonstrating application and taking responsibility for influencing how others see you was a theme re-iterated by several parents, for example:

Don't think about "oh I'm not going to be there because I'm not bright enough" because too often I've heard people say, "Oh the colour of my skin has prevented me from doing this or doing that." What does that have to do with anything? It's how you apply yourself. It's how people see you. It's how people look at you.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of the research reported in this paper was to gain insights into parents' perspectives on parenting 'gifted and talented' children who live in urban areas with a high level of social deprivation. The context of the study was the children's attendance at a University-based intervention programme led by the authors. Three main themes were explored: parents' perceptions about the university intervention programme; the level of parental aspirations for their children and, how they perceived the role of community, peer group and the wider family, in supporting their children's education.

The study highlighted that the parents of 'gifted and talented' children from lower income families face some particular challenges. In keeping with the findings of Morawska and Sanders (2009), the parents reflected differences in terms of parental expectations and confidence and the ability to manage and assist their gifted child. Most of the parents felt that the intervention programme offered at the University compensated for their lack of knowledge and understanding of the education system and that some particular components of the programme, such as the use of outside speakers and the teaching of Critical Thinking, were vital for their children's progress. Many of the parents were concerned with the level of crime and the dangerous environment in which their children were growing up.

Findings also revealed some insights and issues that may have relevance to the policy and practice of supporting the parents of higher ability children. Firstly, it was the 'gifted and talented' education policy of the UK government which enabled the children from inner-city schools to be identified and selected for this programme. Stemming from the government's 1997 White Paper commitment to making effective provision for high ability pupils (Department of Education and Employment, 1997), schools were required to identify the top 5 to 10% of students as 'gifted and talented' and to provide support for them. Had the introduction of the policy been a good thing? Findings indicated that these parents felt it had helped their children to dispel the "uncool" image associated with being academically able. Attending the intervention programme also enabled greater recognition of their child's academic ability from both students themselves and from their families, since selection for the programme was a source of pride and motivation.

However, since 2011, the 'gifted and talented' education policy has been abandoned by the current UK government and the future of special educational programmes for able pupils in schools is uncertain because of competing school priorities for reduced funding (Koshy et al, 2012).

Most parents reported that the programme had provided their child with positive experiences and with influences that contrasted to those emanating from their local community. This enabled a process of transformation of outlook, thereby increasing self-confidence and self-belief amongst the student group at the same time as supporting academic goals and life-enhancing objectives.

In order to increase achievement and, ultimately, to lever 'gifted and talented' students into a successful learning trajectory, the programmes and services on offer need to take into account individual family circumstances and be of sufficient intensity and duration (Robinson et al. 2007). The evidence presented here suggests that a sustained University-based intervention programme had helped to address some of these issues.

Many policy documents in the UK relating to students from lower income families identify the need to raise the aspirations of both the children and parents (Cabinet Office, 2009; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). However, the majority of the parents in this study already had high expectations and aspirations for their children. This is consistent with the findings of a larger study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (St Clair, Kintrea, & Houston, 2011) which found that young people and their families living on lower incomes carry high aspirations but lack the knowledge and understanding of the pathways and required strategies necessary to realise these aspirations.

As discussed in the earlier sections of this paper, Campbell and Vernon (2007) identified 502 practices – what they called 'recipes' of what parents do to contribute to an Academic Home Climate (AHC). With regard to the top 5 categories – their high expectations (short and long term), work ethic, communication, homework and commitment – the parents in our sample clearly demonstrated high expectations and commitment. It can be speculated whether these factors contributed to their children being noticed and selected as having high potential so that the school would have a nominated group of 'gifted and talented' children.

In order to support parents, it was important to find out what support they perceived they needed and what they saw as the current barriers to their children achieving educational success. The notion of external support, such as the wider family, community and peers was explored. In general it was evident that parents had developed an insular attitude, wanting to protect their children and keep them safe from the neighbourhood and other external influences. The idea of the extended family acting as a means of support was refuted except in the sense of mitigating the isolation experienced by those parents who were alone in the UK. Commonly held assumptions about parents wanting external support and what the nature of this support might be were also challenged; most notably, the idea of the local community as a source of support was confounded. Many of the responses indicated that the community was not necessarily seen as a positive factor and was often linked to concerns about an unsafe environment. With regard to their children's peer

influences, they were seen by very few parents as positive. Most of the discussions around peers were negative. Concerns about safety in the community, the impact of gang culture and peers as a source of fear both within and outside of the school context were in evidence.

Final thoughts

The intention of this study was to highlight issues which may contribute to the literature on parenting 'gifted and talented' children from lower income families. Although the small sample size does not enable generalisations, many of the findings have significance for both practitioners and policy makers. Many of the aspects also warrant further research.

Interestingly, it has recently been concluded that the interests of highly able students have not been well served by recent policy and practice in English schools. Lampl (2012) argues that 'how schools support our most able students is of vital interest to us all. Ensuring that the brightest pupils fulfil their potential goes straight to the heart of social mobility, of basic fairness and economic efficiency'. Also, the Sutton Trust review concluded that, 'provision and policy for the highly able is 'littered by a hotch potch of abandoned initiatives and unclear priorities' (Smithers and Robinson, in Lampl, (2012, p.1). It raises the question as to whether these pupils are any better served by policy and practice in the area of parental engagement.

The whole question of identifying and providing for able pupils living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas raises a series of deep-seated issues:

Firstly, all schools should concentrate on providing an ongoing *curriculum of opportunity for all its pupils to discover their potential, without the necessity of 'labelling'*. Secondly, an enriched curriculum with personal and social support is essential for any child to develop self-confidence and motivation, particularly in areas of cultural and linguistic diversity and low socio-economic conditions. Thirdly, parents need on-going counselling and support over a long period of time. It is a huge task – requiring time, dedication and clear goals – not a 'hotchpotch of abandoned initiatives and unclear priorities' (ibid).

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