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The Elasticated Learner and the purpose of beyond curriculum learning opportunities in a Local Education Authority

Marie Huxtable Draft Aug 02

Summary

After one Saturday workshop, Chris (an 11 year old) told me he was becoming an 'elastically learner'. This seems to succinctly sum up the purpose of education in general and the APEX (Able Pupils Extending Opportunities) out of hours sessions in particular, with the emphasis being not only on flexible, increased capacity but also on the ownership by the learner of the process. How can we help more young people to become 'elastically learners'; high ability learners willing and able to seek out and profit from learning experiences which will challenge and extend them, take them to new and uncharted territory and contribute to their educational voyage?

Good curriculum teaching and school improvement are essential, but not sole, components of provision to meet the needs of high ability pupils. Children need to gain the competence, confidence and motivation to develop and achieve their ambitions as adults to their own and society's benefits. To this end it is argued that varied out of hours learning opportunities need to be developed in a variety of venues. It is proposed that Renzulli's Enrichment Triad model is used to develop coherent provision with the Saturday Workshops and Summer Schools, which form part of the APEX (Able Pupils Extending Opportunities) Project in Bath and North East Somerset, given as examples.

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The general context

Meeting the needs of pupils with abilities has become of continued national interest over recent years. There are a number of Government initiatives; for instance, an Education and Employment Committee on Highly Able Children have produced a report (1999); there is a national Advisory Group on Gifted and Talented Children; the Excellence in Cities initiative includes a strand on Gifted and Talented. OFSTED repeatedly refers to provision for very able pupils and have published a review of research compiled by Professor Freeman (1998); QCA and the DFES have produced guidance material for meeting the needs of high ability in the literacy and numeracy strategies. Alongside school related initiatives, sits Life Long Learning to give a perspective beyond the boundaries of school and the national curriculum into the adult world.

There is no unifying theory of high ability; no agreement as to what high or exceptional ability is (beyond a statistical description), what the precursors are, or what should be done with it. The argument surrounding 'g' still rages, the number of 'intelligences' varies with the writer and the battle of selective versus non-selective education continues unabated.

We recognise some of the correlates of high ability (although these are commonly afforded the status of causal relationships) and most often rely on personal experience rather than on research based evidence. Freeman (1998) puts forward a research based list. She proposes that pupils with a high ability often have many of the following characteristics:

- Memory and knowledge - excellent memory and use of information
- Self-regulation - they know how they learn best and can monitor their learning
- Speeds of thought - they may spend longer on planning but then reach decisions more speedily
- Dealing with problems - add to the information, spot what is irrelevant and get to the essentials more quickly
- Flexibility - although their thinking is usually more organised than other children's, they can see and adopt alternative solutions to learning and problem-solving
- Preference for complexity - they tend to make games and tasks more complex to increase interest
- They have an exceptional ability to concentrate at will and for long periods of time from a very early age
- Early symbolic activity - they may speak, read and write early

Although we do not know what constitutes good provision, specifications could be developed taking these characteristics into account, which would be consistent with planning from the top of a learning hierarchy. For example, adaptation is the top of a learning hierarchy described by Haring et al (1978) with the emphasis on adapted responses and the strategies

suggested include problem solving and simulations.

Identification and provision

Consideration of characteristics can therefore inform provision. In turn many writers use characteristics and provision in the identification process of high ability. For instance, Freeman (1998) proposes a 'sports approach' to identification and provision. Children are assessed through their progress and performance and directed to the next level of challenge or teaching, much as happens in sport. There children progress from school or sports club to, for instance, master classes in a specific sport and eventually specialist coaching and training in refined areas, depending on their identified ability, commitment and teaching needs.

I admit to having considerable sympathy with approaches that clearly acknowledge the interrelation of assessment and intervention. That is - identification and provision are inextricably linked; able is as able does, practice makes perfect, and variety is more than the spice of life, it is an essential ingredient if we are to cater for the variety that humans present. Taking this as the basis to build on, the focus of effort moves away from the search for correlates of high ability. Instead energy is devoted to identifying the hallmarks of successful learning opportunities for different levels of performance and the goodness of fit with the learner, at a given point in their development, from the struggling novice to the master. Whether the novice and master share the same teaching group for some or all the time and will depend on the nature of the learning to be targeted and the needs of the learner. The needs of the learner are here understood to include social, personal, educational, and instruction related to the area of ability.

Provision- what exists

The DFES and QCA have produced guidance on what they believe to be the hallmarks of successful learning opportunities for high ability to fit in with the literacy and numeracy strategy. Workers, such as Adey (1994) have developed curriculum-focused approaches such as CASE (Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education), which take pupils beyond the confines of learning curriculum. The impact is seen beyond improved attainments in the targeted curriculum area to apparently unrelated subjects such as GCSE English. Workers such as Wallace (2001) and Fisher (1995) have led the field in non-curriculum areas such as 'thinking skills' and metacognition.

The challenge in the curriculum and a whole school approach is crucial in ensuring the needs of pupils with abilities are met. However, while essential they are not alone sufficient. There is also a need to encourage purposeful leisure activities and 'beyond school learning' (Freeman 1998). Sternberg (1998) also clearly describes the other qualities that characterise the successful learner and which go well beyond class based learning. Delving into personal experience will no doubt remind the reader of acquaintances who shone in class but subsequently 'dropped out', or conversely, the person barely remembered, who later became a nationally recognised writer, a multimillionaire entrepreneur or world class scientist.

So, what else is needed? Many Local Education Authorities already make provision. For instance, the Summer University in Tower Hamlet, the University of the First Age in Birmingham, The Children's University in Swindon, the Saturday workshops in West Sussex. The Government is adding to this with the Excellence in Cities initiative, Study Support, Masterclasses, The National Centre of Excellence at Warwick University, and others. However there seems to be no underpinning rationale to what form provision should take, how to identify short falls and where to focus development.

Provision beyond school - a coherent approach

Learning occurs in a context, which includes social, skill and intellectual features, and is physically located. To widen a child or young person's base of confidence and competence, the experiences must go beyond the immediate vicinity of school and local neighbourhood. Children with parents who are successful in their own field, such as business or a profession, are commonly supported in that transition and deliberately exposed to a variety of experiences designed to increase their competence and confidence. Even then many find it unnerving to go somewhere new or join a new group without a friend. Children who are in the 'harder to reach' group (with indicators of disadvantage, disaffection and exclusion) are faced with an even more daunting prospect. They do not know what is available to inform their aspirations and their family and friends do not have the experience to help prepare them. Adults who work with the 'hard to reach' group, often comment on how young people who present as supremely confident and streetwise, quickly lose the façade even a short distance from their home territory.

Hutchings and Archer (2001) cites studies showing lower socio-economic groups to be under-represented in higher education and that this occurs in all industrialised countries.

The factors they identify as associated with underachievement are common to other studies

- Institutional - they estimate school characteristics account for around 10% of the variance in pupil staying-on rates

- Financial factors
- Low academic attainment
- Class aspirations and expectations of early entry to work
- Family influences
- Working class constructions of higher education

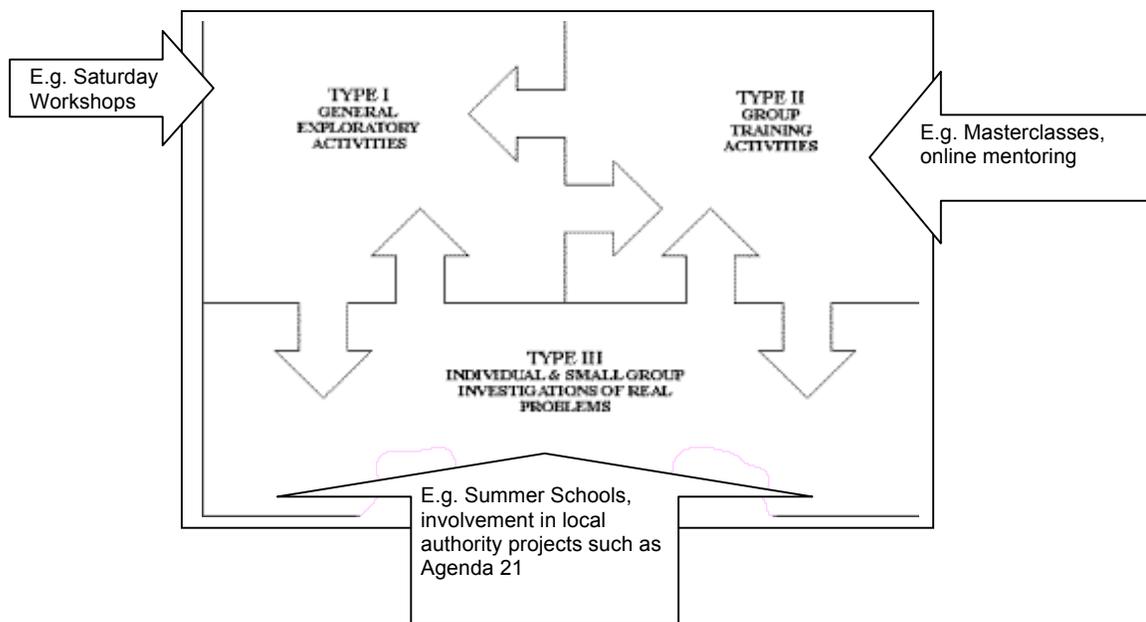
The study was interesting when it got behind the 'obvious'. For instance, they found the view of the 'working class' young people they interviewed was that only inferior institutions were open to them and they did not expect any pleasure for themselves at university. They saw the 'middle class' version of university as only feasible for those with qualifications 'higher than Einstein' and with secure financial support. The rejection of higher education was a rejection of what they believed to be second rate and unpleasurable. The study also explored further with the small group that planned to go on to higher education. They found many were from ethnic minority groups and had family traditions of 'bettering themselves'. There was, as might be expected, strong family encouragement to study, and family members or friends who had been at university.

For all children and young people to gain the competence, confidence and motivation to develop and achieve their ambitions as adults, to their own and society's benefit, opportunities have to be structured to enable them to move from the known of school and their neighbourhood, to the greater wealth of opportunity offered beyond. They need:

- experiences that will inform their ambitions so they can see themselves with high, achievable goals and rewarding, satisfying careers.
- opportunities to learn the expert skills required and
- the opportunities to behave as an expert, applying their skills and integrating them with other skills and abilities to tackle real life challenges alongside 'masters' to extend their competence and confidence.

What seems to be lacking is a model that will allow some rational base for development of such experiences. Renzulli's Enrichment Triad model (1977) presents an interesting possibility. If his model, even taken at its simplest, was repeated, not just at school level, but also at local cluster, local authority, national and even international level, then children could have access to a coherent suite of opportunities.

Renzulli's Enrichment Triad related to local authority wide provision



Authority level provision

The aims of authority level provision are to add an extra dimension to the neighbourhood provision, acting as a bridge between school and the world. For instances they would:

- Provide for the continuity and progression of demands from novice to master (type II opportunities). It is extremely difficult for small schools to provide for all pupils who have a high ability. For instance if you are not a mathematician or creative writer yourself it is very difficult to mentor a child who is rapidly outstripping your understanding of the subject. It becomes even more difficult when faced with a high ability learner with a penchant for something such as

astronomy, entomology or Chinese Brush Painting.

- Enable children and young people to make the links between different learning experiences both in terms of content and locality. The difficulty the disaffected have particularly highlights this as important. They often do not see the relevance of school to their lives, or that what they learn out of school can contribute to their class work.
- Encompass variety beyond the constraints of curriculum and allow learners to experiment, take learning risks, engage in activities, which are challenge rather than content driven, and have opportunities to take part in real life challenges (type III opportunities). If the learner is to be successful in going beyond the given they must be prepared to take chances, accept that in life there is not often a 'right answer' and that learning is an active process in their control.
- Provide role models (adult and peer) in the variety of areas of endeavour who a young person can relate to
- Give the opportunity for peer support and social learning in areas of endeavour not available in their own school or neighbourhood. Peers are particularly important to adolescents.
- Provide a greater variety of opportunities for the individual to 'know' themselves better, their strengths and their motivators. All three types of opportunities should afford this.
- Equip them with experience and confidence (types I and III opportunities), competence (type II and III) to inform ambition and enable them to take full advantage of adult learning provision.

Change is not immediate but this should lead over time to learners:

- Making better progress in the curriculum by extending their knowledge base and experiences to draw on. Freeman (1995) describes the children with high ability behaving more like a master learner, drawing on information beyond the given and making extensive links beyond the immediate.
- Being more motivating to succeed in school by making more connections between classroom based learning and the world for them and showing them the relevance of school to life learning. This is particularly an issue for pupils identified as at risk of disaffection and/or underachievement.
- Improving their performance in the area of focus and learn 'expert' skills. Freeman (1995) points out that leisure activity is often related to success. The inevitable increase of on-task time is related to level of performance. Mercer (1995) drawing, like many others on Vygotski's work, postulates that progress can be improved by a skilful mentor scaffolding the learner's current skill towards that of a master learner. The old adage 'nothing succeeds like success' is underpinned by confidence being needed to 'have a go' and the huge amount of incidental practice that is engaged in when someone is working in a domain where they feel confident, competent and motivated
- Having higher and wider aspirations by meeting and relating to different role models (peers and adults), 'boldly going' where they or family members had previously not gone before, and extending their experience of the world. How can you know what you want to do unless you know it's available and believe that it's within your grasp
- Having career plans and recognising the necessity for attaining high grades at every point. The 'underachievers' interviewed in a local inclusion project did not see the relevance of qualifications beyond the immediate next step. They worked on a 'good enough for now' model e.g. a GCSE grade C was what was needed to get on to an 'A' Level course but they did not appreciate that the grade could eventually affect the offer of a place from the University of choice.
- Having the confidence and knowledge to go beyond their immediate locality to identify and access learning opportunities.

Outcomes such as these could form the basis for developing informative evaluation approaches.

Translation into practice

In my own area prior to 1998, there were many opportunities for pupils wishing to extend their ability with musical instruments or develop their sporting prowess with others beyond school. Opportunities were far more limited for those with abilities in areas such as academic and intellectual, expressive and performing arts, visual, spatial and mechanical, design, technology and ICT. For instance, Bath University Maths Department provided the only local opportunity for able mathematicians through the master-classes offered to Year 8. To fill the gap the APEX (Able Pupils Extending Opportunities) Saturday Workshops and Summer Schools were developed.

The APEX out of hours opportunities are not intended to simply offer more of the general activities already available in holiday times at the museums, art gallery, library and so on, but to build on them. They are also not intended to replicate 'school', rather the contrary. Experiences in the project are focussed on building confidence and extending pupils from Year 1 to 9. The age range on any one workshop is usually one or two years to give the opportunity to socialise with peers. Meeting others of a similar age with similar and higher levels of ability is important for children if they are to acquire appropriate social skills. Social skills as with other skills need to be practised and applied in context; 11 year olds do not have the same emotional and social needs or interests as teenagers even when they may intellectually be at similar levels.

The overall aim of the APEX out of hour's sessions is to extend the opportunities for individual pupils to explore and develop areas of ability for their own and society's benefit.

The purposes are to extend the range of opportunities available for those of school age in the local authority schools to:

- Meet and work with others with similar interest and abilities
- Develop skills
- Increase their understanding of the variety of possible areas to explore
- Work with expert role models
- Have fun and feel a sense of accomplishment

It is considered very important that the children enjoy themselves so become ambassadors for the project and contribute to efforts by schools and others to engender a culture where 'it is cool to be a keener' in a variety of areas of achievement.

Workshop providers are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds e.g. poet, mathematician, juggler, artist, web developer, paper engineer, author, entrepreneur. Some are also teachers with a particular area of expertise such as Chinese Brush Painting, Philosophy, movement. Some work for the local authority in other capacities, such as Librarian, Ecologist, and Keeper of Collections. The key features for consideration when recruiting workshop or module providers are their area of expertise, passion for their subject, ability to communicate with children and young people and a desire to engage them in an activity related to their discipline rather than lecture at them.

Guidance for workshop providers

All workshop providers will obviously be trying to ensure that participants go away feeling they have taken part in a stimulating, exciting, and enjoyable experience. That said the following is intended to help in planning. Some points will be covered every time but of the rest, not everything can be done by everyone all the time but as many as possible of the following should be born in mind when designing the workshop.

- Is the activity challenging or demanding beyond the average? Is there an opportunity for the pupil to learn how to deal positively with less than 100% success?
- Are there clear learning outcomes indicating what understanding, skills or abilities the participant will have gained from the workshop?
- What skills, talents, abilities are expected from participants coming on the workshop?
- Is the activity different from that which would be offered as part of their normal school experience, introducing them to skills or ideas they probably will not have come across and novel ways of using or integrating them?
- Is problem solving involved? Is it possible for them to work with an 'expert' to tackle a real life problem? Can they be actively involved in learning and using the analysing, thinking and planning skills the expert uses?
- Are they required to use higher order thinking skill involved in analysing, synthesising, evaluating, researching, and communicating their ideas?
- Is there time and opportunity for the pupils to be creative and to explore and develop the ideas they come up with, independently, with others, and with the 'expert'?
- Is there an opportunity for collaborative work with peers and the expert?
- Can the pupils use resources, materials, equipment, facilities, which may be unfamiliar to them?
- Is there a product which the pupils can feel proud of, will help them remember what they have learnt and be useful to them when they try to tell others what the workshop was about?
- Are there some prompts or ideas, which might encourage the pupils to take ideas or skills further afterwards?

The Saturday workshops are 2 - 6 hours long and are 'one-offs' with hugely varied foci from learning to make pop-ups to learning how to be a Carnegie Book Award judge, or make a miniature anvil in a machine shop. I see them as primarily offering type I opportunities, tasters, extending experience and adding food for later thought. Many however, have aspects of type II opportunities giving training, although limited.

The Summer Schools comprises modules that run over a number of days. Providers are recruited to design modules in

their area of expertise, which will have a valued end product or enable participants to tackle a challenge. For example end products have included a website for tourists to the area, and a radio programme about a local museum. Sometimes participants have been given a challenge to tackle by the end of the 'course' such as cracking a code. All modules prepare 5 - 10 minute presentations for a reunion event, and design contributions to the APEX website and the newsheet. The providers recruit other professionals and organise trips to further broaden the basis of information and experiences available to the participants. The Summer Schools are gradually moving from primarily type I opportunities to type III.

Identification, recruitment, application and after for workshops and summer schools

There is no precise definition of 'high ability' and schools are encouraged to make reference to the guidance criteria for each workshop or module. Schools are also asked to particularly consider pupils with a high ability in the 'harder to reach' group e.g. those eligible for free school meals, at risk of disaffection or exclusion, looked after by the local authority, with a special educational need or those rurally disadvantaged. The workshop details are designed to enable pupils, with their teachers and parents, to decide whether the workshop is for them. For instance they can see if they have the entry skills required for the particular workshop, what they might expect to be doing and what it is anticipated they will learn.

Recruitment, application and most communication with pupils and parents about the allocation of places are through school. I see schools involvement in the process as crucial if the link is to be made between the classroom and beyond for children in general and particularly for those in the 'harder to reach' group. The size of schools in the area varies from less than 30 pupils to over 1200 and each school has its own individual difficulties with internal communication and demands on staff time. Approach to recruitment therefore varies. Some target individuals, some generally distribute information, some do both.

To encourage the children to make connections some schools present the attendance certificates as part of their celebration assemblies, others have participants give a class presentation. Some schools go further and not only help the children make the connection but enable them to generalise and adapt skills and ideas by working with the children who have participated to offer the workshop to other children. One school directly benefited from the children's newly acquired skills in desktop publishing when the children designed a fundraising leaflet and raised £300. What is appropriate and possible depends on the teachers and the age of the pupil.

Children have been introduced to a range of venues by holding the Saturday workshops in places such as Museums, the Art Gallery, Library and local Universities. Some have been held in schools with professionals that they might meet in a different setting, both to help them make the link but also because some children need to move from the known to the new in smaller steps.

The area comprises rural, town and city and can be crossed in about three-quarter of an hour by car. Bath is a Cultural Heritage City and has 2 universities and 2 colleges within easy distance. Efforts are made to introduce the participants to what the area has to offer.

Outcome

Outcomes need to be understood in terms of the problem posed. The vast majority of children enjoy the Saturday workshops and Summer School modules but the question is, do authority wide activities offer a dimension to the educational opportunities available to children that can not be met at neighbourhood or national level? I will answer with illustrative quotes from some of the participants I interviewed. I know children will often say the things they think you want to hear but these comments are examples of similar ones found in large numbers in the written evaluations and ones heard reported by parents and teachers.

- *Extending knowledge base* - "I know more about computers" "I found out about forensic science" "You learn things you don't realise" "Expands imagination and ideas" "Something different" "I liked the trips and learning about photography"
- *Making connections with curriculum based learning and the world* - "I know more about what science is - it's broader" "After '60 second science' I did something in a school test later" "I have got quicker on a P.C in school" "When a question comes up in class the answer's just sort of there"
- *Improving their performance in area of focus*. "I learnt something new about Excel from them (the pupils that attended a Saturday workshop) afterwards" (a teacher) Performance is also evidenced by the various products the participants have produced such as models, poems, pictures, garden trails
- *Extending experience of the world* - "I liked being treated like a grown up" "Good chance to make new friends and learn loads of new things" "I have more freedom to be with my own age - no brothers or sisters!"

- *Having career plans* - "I met a 'real' professor. I might go to university one day"
- *Having the confidence and knowledge to go beyond their immediate locality* - "I joined a drama club afterwards and I have my name down for a Theatre School" "I want to find out more about how to stop pollution" "I was worried about her going to secondary school, I thought she needed more time in the junior school, but I have seen her grown so much over summer school" (a parent) "I've never been to the museum before, it's really nice" (a Grandma)

Perhaps the best indication as to whether there is a place for authority wide learning opportunities comes from the majority of children and young people who want more "Without workshops Saturday would be boring". "I don't like stopping - I want to carry on" "It's not like school, you learn things in a fun way - we weren't forced to do everything. We had room to breathe."

Conclusion

I continue to believe that provision beyond school is important if children and young people are to gain the competence and confidence necessary for success and high achievement as adults. The variety they present in terms of demands on expertise and a peer group with a similar interest and ability is beyond an individual school to provide for. They require opportunities to go to new places and meet new people as a foundation for exploring, identifying, and accessing Life Long Learning opportunities. 'National' provision represents for most school children a rare, distant and inaccessible possibility, which does not easily translate back to their daily lives. The development of Local Education Authority provision offers the bridge, and my experience of the Saturday workshops and Summer School modules referred to above, give me evidence that it is a worthwhile and feasible endeavour.

Bath and North East Somerset, as described above has considerable variety within it but is compact. Other areas would present different challenges to organisation to give children access to provision without spending all their time travelling.

Does using Renzulli's Triad of Enrichment model help in making the provision coherent? I have found that looking at what I am developing with Renzulli's model in mind is refining my ideas of what the workshops and summer schools should offer and gives a focus for development - should funding allow. Type I opportunities, general exploratory activities, are provided for by the Saturday workshops. Using the areas of achievement and endeavour in the Bath and North East Somerset policy - Academic and Intellectual, Expressive and Performing Arts, Sports and Physical, Social, Leadership and Organisation, Visual, Spatial and Mechanical, Design, Technology and ICT it is easy to see where there is under representation. Type II opportunities, training activities, are to a limited extent provided by the Saturday workshops but if progression and continuity is to be offered then this should feed into masterclass courses and online mentoring. Type III opportunities are represented by Summer School modules in an embryonic form. Keying into authority developments and priorities such as customer access, Agenda 21, diversification of Libraries usage would enhance the possibilities for children and young people. They would be able to learn by contributing to work on real problems, alongside experts in the field and have an experience of making a real impact on their world.

Out of hours learning opportunities at area level, using Renzulli's model of enrichment for rational development, provides for the 'elasticated learner' in ways that other provision can not reach.

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