

## Who's Able Now?

Two recently published reports make an interesting pair. They deserve to be read alongside each other.

Published on 29 November 2018,

[Research to understand successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils](#)

was commissioned by the DfE from the University of Warwick.

*Dual and Multiple Exceptionality: The Current State of Play* was launched by **nasen** (National Association of Special Educational Needs) on 4 December 2018:

 **DME The Current State of Play**

### Defining the “able disadvantaged” pupil

Before the Warwick report can be downloaded from the DfE website, it is introduced with this statement:

"This research took place in the spring and summer terms of 2017 to 2018. It aimed to identify what secondary schools were doing to support disadvantaged high attaining pupils from key stage 2 to key stage 4."

which provides a pointer to the report's starting assumptions: if a pupil arrives at secondary school in the "high attaining" category as judged by English schools' current methods of assessment of primary school attainment, then he or she is "academically able".

The DfE report quotes research from the Sutton Trust which found:

'There is currently little evidence on how best to support highly able students, and even less on how to support students who are capable of high attainment who are from disadvantaged backgrounds.'

This Sutton Trust statement is helpful, because the phrases “highly able” and “capable of high attainment” offer broader, more open categories than "high attaining" and "academically able". However, in commenting on the Sutton Trust finding, the DfE report again seems to move to the assumption that the “highly able” are “the most academically able”:

“This finding, published during the present study, underlines the importance of our focus: understanding successful approaches to supporting the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.”

Keeping the Sutton Trust's emphasis on those pupils “from disadvantaged backgrounds,” the DfE report confirms that its meaning of the phrase “most academically able disadvantaged pupils” is those “most academically able” pupils who come from the socio-economic circumstances which qualify for Pupil Premium status.

After exploring how schools support the “most academically able disadvantaged”, the DfE report’s unsurprising “key finding” is that:

“successful support for the most academically able disadvantaged pupils was not about a single intervention.”

It recommends that schools support the individuals in this group by providing:

- a named senior leader driving and reviewing the impact of the school’s practice in this area
- whole-school professional development focused on their needs
- lesson planning which identifies their needs
- pastoral support, such as mentoring
- opportunities to develop wider skills and interests through cultural visits, clubs or societies.

Many of the suggestions made by teachers interviewed in the course of this research might also offer significant benefits to any “disadvantaged” pupil, whether “academically able” or not. For instance, one ‘risk factor’ cited for the “disadvantaged academically able” is having “nowhere quiet to study at home”. This risk would presumably apply equally to the least able, who would also be helped by “after school homework clubs”. A number of teachers interviewed had suggestions like:

“I think it’s very simple: it’s just listening to them: giving them some time.”

“The quality of the teacher in front of them is the biggest thing that makes a difference.” (School 11 Interviewee 20).

“It comes down to good teaching and staff. Where kids have made the most progress it has been because of teaching.” (School 12 Interviewee 28)

“It’s all about teaching and learning.” (School 21 Interviewee 32)

Some schools did emphasise that what is really needed is careful attention to the needs of all pupils:

“What we do is, we look at the whole class; we look at the whole group of students. The teaching in the classroom needs to cater for the need of every single student. Our ethos in the school is, underachievers: we intervene, regardless of who they are.” (School 25 Interviewee 3) P31

However, schools also stressed how difficult it is to attend to the needs of “every single student” in schools’ current circumstances, where both teacher time and resources are in increasingly short supply.

## **“Dual and multiple exceptionality” (DME) - another group of the “able disadvantaged”?**

However, the DfE report pays little attention to the possibility that there may be “highly able students” who have not been identified as “high attaining” in primary school, because their disadvantage is that they have learning difficulties which exist side by side with high learning potential. Such pupils may or may not be in the Pupil Premium cohort. Either way, they too are “able disadvantaged” and neither their learning difficulties, nor their high learning potential, may have been recognised – or, if recognised, been addressed.

It is the needs of these children who are the subject of the **nasen** report.

In 2008, the then government published a report on “helping to find and support children with dual or multiple exceptionalities”<sup>1</sup>. Since then the phenomenon seems to have slipped below the radar of all but specialist organisations like **nasen**.

The DfE report does note that some of the schools consulted were aware:

“that underachievement among potentially very able pupils could be overlooked during primary school and that different pupils might flourish in the new environment of secondary school – and as they grew older during secondary school.”

but does not focus on how or why that “underachievement” might be overlooked, nor does it raise the possibility that some secondary schools “could” also “overlook” the “highly able”.

In focussing specifically on the phenomenon of “dual and multiple exceptionality”, the **nasen** report seeks to bring DME back to the attention of policymakers and to establish greater awareness in the minds and practice of education professionals. It also wishes to work towards a more informed public awareness. This is a daunting task. The phenomenon is complex and under-researched in the UK. As the **nasen** report points out:

“This complexity is further complicated by the current educational context which includes a narrowed curriculum, the growth of on-the-job training for teachers, increased workload and the diminution of local support services, including access to educational psychologists, health and social care teams.”

The **nasen** report also explains that, with these children, it is most likely that the parents will be the first to spot the mismatch between aspects of the child’s abilities and his or her overall achievements, academic attainments and emotional behaviour. Parents will then be, most often, the key advocates for pupils with “dual and multiple exceptionality”, but they will be faced with the problem that:

“As the literature search makes clear, there is no “public” language that adequately describes DME

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families. 2008: Gifted and Talented Education, helping to find and support children with dual or multiple exceptionalities.

and many teachers, who are very much at the front line in identifying pupils with DME, are not familiar with the term.”

Even parents with practised advocacy skills report that they find it difficult to persuade their school that specialist help is needed – and, for many schools, given dwindling local authority resources, such help may not be accessible. “Disadvantaged” parents are probably less likely to identify DME or to have the advocacy power to push for support, so here we return to the agenda of the DfE report – to what extent are schools equipped to identify and support the most able?

In summary, the **nasen** report proposes a range of measures to establish wide recognition of DME. It suggests that an expert group be convened to agree a common definition of DME and a vision for its wider recognition. It argues the need for a plain English explanation of DME, which is accessible, both in language and availability, to parents, teachers, education professionals and other professionals who work with children and young people. It recommends a national training strategy for ITE and CPD for school staff, teachers, education psychologists, parents/carers and other stakeholders to improve DME identification and provision and an All-Party Parliamentary Group to promote and maintain the visibility of DME.

These two reports both present challenges to the ways in which we currently identify and support pupils who are “disadvantaged”, children who are “highly able” and children who are both. If schools in England are to serve the needs of all our pupils, we need to acknowledge the complexity of that task, the multiple elements it contains and the informed attention it requires.