Talent development in physical education: a national survey of policy and practice in England

Richard Bailey\textsuperscript{a}, David Morley\textsuperscript{b} and Harriet Dismore\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Roehampton University, UK; \textsuperscript{b}Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK; \textsuperscript{c}Higher Education Learning Partnership, University of Plymouth, UK

\textit{Background}: Although there has been a great deal of research on talent development in sport and education, there has been a distinct lack of research on developing talent specifically in a curricular physical education context. Yet, all schools in England are expected to identify and support their talented pupils.

\textit{Purpose}: In order to investigate the ways in which schools identify and support talented pupils in physical education, a national (English) survey was conducted. The survey aimed to establish a clear picture of current policy and practice in secondary school curricular physical education by obtaining specific information concerning talent identification, provision and support of very able pupils.

\textit{Participants and setting}: A questionnaire was administered to a large sample of physical education subject leaders, which resulted in an unusually representative achieved sample (\(N = 535\)).

\textit{Data collection}: Data were collected using a questionnaire, from which broad generalisations could be made about talent development practices. The questionnaire sought both quantitative and qualitative data related to school and department policies, identification and provision strategies, department staff expertise and professional development experiences.

\textit{Data analysis}: Analyses of quantitative data were conducted using a data analysis software package (SPSS 12.0 for Windows) and qualitative analyses used a quasi-statistical approach. Employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis tools ensured that patterns and trends could be identified and allowed the opportunity for individual schools to illustrate specific examples relating to their own experiences and circumstances.

\textit{Findings}: The findings reveal that schools draw on an extremely varied range of strategies to identify and develop their talented pupils in physical education. Although the majority of schools appear to have developed a whole school and departmental policy for developing talent, there was a strong indication that a whole school policy was a significant driving force for designing a policy at department level. The majority of subject leaders claimed to identify talented pupils according to their current levels of achievement, whilst only a small percentage based identification upon students’ potential to achieve. The most common criteria for assessment were reported to be performance in school sport and club sport. A key finding was that the majority of subject leaders indicated that the main area of expertise for staff was games activities, which may have significance if teachers feel better able to identify talented pupils in areas in which they themselves have expertise. Overall, the findings suggest that the effectiveness and equity of these strategies may be compromised by a lack of policy direction, an uneven distribution.
of staff expertise (in favour of games activities) and a lack of focused professional
development.

**Conclusion:** The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings,
suggesting that instances of good practice need to be highlighted and widely
disseminated, and detailed guidance should be made available to all schools, if
effective and equitable talent development practices are to be properly adopted within
physical education departments.

**Keywords:** talent; physical education; sport; gifted and talented; survey; PESSCL

**Background**
The UK government has made clear its expectation that schools identify and develop
‘Gifted and Talented’ pupils in all curriculum subjects, including ‘Physical Education
and Sport’ (DfEE 2000). However, early findings suggest considerable variation in the
quality and character of current practice (Bailey, Tan, and Morley 2004; OfSTED 2001).
The two main initiatives that have impacted on the development of talented pupils in
physical education are the Excellence in Cities (EiC) scheme, and associated initiatives,
such as ‘Excellence in Cities Primary Pilot’, ‘Excellence Challenge’, and the ‘Physical Education,
School Sport and Club Links’ scheme (PESSCL).

The EiC scheme was introduced in March 1999, and encompassed a series of strategies
focused on raising educational attainment for young people in urban areas, including
specialist support for underachieving pupils, specialist schools (including sports colleges),
and Gifted and Talented Education (DfES 2005). Originally covering 25 Local Authorities
(LAs), at the time of writing (19 March 2007), partnerships were running in 57 LAs, with a
further 34 LAs involved in Excellence Clusters (DfES 2005). The EiC scheme was delivered
over a series of phases, determined by the size and economic deprivation of different
urban areas. Two points are worth noting with regard to the EiC programme: first, that it was
explicitly associated with an inclusive agenda (DFEE 2000), presented in terms of provision
designed to meet the educational needs of all children (DFEE 1997); second, that
physical education, alone amongst curriculum subjects, is paired with a non-curricular
activity, namely sport (Bailey and Morley 2002).

The PESSCL strategy was launched in 2003 with a committed investment of £1 billion,
primarily delivered through the network of Sports Colleges and School Sport Partnerships
(DfES 2003). Like EiC, PESSCL includes a distinct Gifted and Talented strand, serving a
number of functions, including the profiling and tracking of talented sports players, elite
disability sport, multi-skill camps, and talent development, or the process of identifying,
providing for, and supporting talented pupils, in physical education. Talent development
in physical education has an interesting role within this discourse. To some extent, physical
education can be seen as a bridge between the domains of education and sport (DCMS
2000; Kirk and Gorely 2000). The precise nature of the relative relationships – physical
education/sport and physical education/education – is a contested and highly contentious
one (Murdoch 1990), and nowhere is this more apparent than in discussions concerning
development of high ability in these areas (Penney 2000). An apparent inability to articulate
these relationships and draw consensus seems to have resulted in a great deal of uncertainty
regarding the aims, methods and foci of talent development in physical education (Bailey,
Tan, and Morley 2004). Guidance is readily available on identifying and developing
talented pupils within an educational domain, including the importance of recognising
potential ability, as well as current performance (Freeman 1998), the value of seeking
out and supporting under-achieving students (Montgomery 2002) and the need to
provide enriching activities both after school and during the school day as part of good, differentiated practice (Eyre and Lowe 2002). However, this has been in danger of being overshadowed by apparently contradictory practices associated with elite sport (Abbott et al. 2002; Bailey, Tan, and Morley 2004). Indeed, conventional thought seems to have settled on the assumption that talent development in physical education and sport are synonymous and that similar processes are used in both areas (Beashel 2002; Fisher 1996).

Although there has been a great deal of research on talent development in sport (Abbott et al. 2002; Geron 1978; Regnier, Salmela, and Russell 1993; Williams and Reilly 2000), and gifted and talented education (Freeman 1998; Heller et al. 2000; Marland 1972; Tannenbaum 1983), there is a distinct lack of research on developing talent specifically in a curricular physical education context (see Bailey, Tan, and Morley (2004) for a discussion of this situation).

To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a national survey of talent development practices in physical education in any country. This paper presents the results of a survey of practices in England, and aims to establish a clear picture of talent development in secondary curricular physical education by obtaining specific information concerning talent identification, provision and support.

**Method**

All data were collected by means of a self-administered postal questionnaire, which was sent to physical education subject leaders in secondary schools (children aged 11–16). Subject leaders were chosen as earlier research (Bailey, Tan, and Morley 2004) had suggested that this post holder was best located to act as a shared point of contact for a host of key stakeholders, such as Partnership Development Manager, Gifted and Talented Coordinator and Director of Sport. The questionnaire was sent to a large sample of secondary schools across the country over a period of several months. This process resulted in an unusually representative sample.

**Sample**

The sample target was a minimum number of 400 schools, so that all percentages calculated from the sample would serve as national estimates (with confidence intervals of at least ± 5%). Previous research in the area of talent development in physical education and sport (Holt and Morley 2004; Bailey, Tan, and Morley 2004; Bailey and Morley 2002, 2005) has highlighted various factors that influence the development of talent in PE. These influencing factors are primarily related to the socio-economic environment in which the child is located, as well as the role of gender in the development of their potential. Therefore, the intended sample was designed to be proportionately representative of secondary (not middle) schools across England in terms of:

- Local Authorities (LAs);
- pupil gender: <13% boys, >87% boys, others;
- school role: <800; >1200, others;
- proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals: <6%, >23%, others.

An over-representation of specialist sports colleges was intended; these schools form the centre of a range of initiatives in their local area, and together stand at the forefront of national developments in physical education and school sport.
Some 500 schools, selected at random within these groupings, were approached, of which 176 responded by April 2004 (35.2% response rate). Subsequently, an unstructured random sample of 1258 schools was approached. Of these 345 responded (27.4%). The slightly lower response rate can be attributed to less vigorous follow-up procedure. Overall, responses from 535 schools had been received by December 2004 and were analysed for this study.

The representativeness of the achieved sample can be judged from Table 1. This is an unusually representative sample and leads us to conclude that it is possible to make broader generalisations from these data about talent development practices in the country.

Of the schools in this sample, 33% were part of the Excellence in Cities initiative (EiC), and this was considered as a relevant variable within some of the analyses, since it indicated schools that had received dedicated funding and support. The EiC scheme was delivered over a series of phases, determined by the size and economic deprivation of different urban areas, beginning in 1999 (five years before the survey). Other areas, previously not covered by the scheme, were later added as clusters of schools. This information is displayed in Table 2.

**Questionnaire**

A draft questionnaire was circulated for critique among a number of teachers, academics and other members of the advisory group. Several questions were omitted because the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% of schools in England</th>
<th>% of schools in achieved sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>North East</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North West</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yorks &amp; Humberside</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East Midlands</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>West Midlands</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>East of England</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South East</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South West</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>London</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA type</td>
<td>London Borough</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metro. Borough</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unitary</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>County</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>&lt;13% boys</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;87% boys</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School roll</td>
<td>&lt;800</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>50.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;1200</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility for free school meals</td>
<td>&lt;6%</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;23%</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist sports colleges</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
information could be accessed elsewhere (e.g. sports college status). Other questions were rephrased to allow for more precise data collection and reordered so as to ensure a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. One suggestion was to include a question that allowed for data to be collected on individual talented pupils using Unique Personal Numbers (UPNs), but there were difficulties surrounding the analysis of such information. The final questionnaire, which covered two pages of double-sided A4 paper, contained quantitative and qualitative questions divided into six sections, inviting physical education subject leaders to answer questions relating to:

- school policies for Gifted and Talented;
- talent identification procedures used in physical education;
- departmental funding for talented pupils in physical education;
- impact of current Gifted and Talented provision on talented pupils in physical education;
- departmental staff; and
- future talent development practices.

Analysis and discussion
The results of the questionnaires were analysed quantitatively using a quantitative data analysis software package (SPSS 12.0 for Windows) and are reported using descriptive statistics. The open questions were analysed qualitatively by coding the data into categories and developing and sorting them into key themes. In this way simple description of the data and statistical analysis were possible. Thus, the qualitative results are presented according to these themes using a quasi-statistical approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

School policies
Subject leaders were invited to provide information regarding any whole school policy for the development of Gifted and Talented pupils and any departmental policy for the development of talented pupils. The findings are presented below in Figure 1, which shows that whilst 90.2% of schools reported possessing a whole school policy, only 73.4% of physical education departments stated that they had created their own policies.
A cross-tabulation calculation presented in Table 3 shows that 70.7% of responding schools possessed both a whole school Gifted and Talented policy and a departmental policy, whilst 6.5% of schools owned neither types of policy. A small number (3.4%) possessed a departmental policy even though there was no whole school policy in existence and 19.4% of departments with a whole school policy did not have a departmental policy.

In general the factors reported here suggest that, although guidelines for developing talent may seem scant, a large percentage of schools (70.7%) have actually developed a whole school and departmental policy. Of course, the dynamic application of such policies remains questionable, and further investigation into the application of policy into practice in a systematic way is still required, but it could be assumed that where such a large percentage of schools have a policy, at least some aspects will filter through to implementation. Also, it is interesting to note at this stage that a relatively small number of departments had a policy where a school policy was not in place (3.4%). This quite clearly indicates the significant driving force a school policy has on the cascading of policy down into departmental level policy design.

Schools in Excellence in Cities areas were more likely to have a whole school policy (97–100%) and departmental policy (83.6–95.7%) than their non-EiC counterparts (90.2% and 73.4%, respectively). Reasons for the increase of Phase 1 schools through to Phase 3 schools could be attributed to earlier phase schools trialling policies with the results of modifications and refinements. It is possible that this is leading to the more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Departmental policy</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole school policy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70.7%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
widespread availability of exemplar policies for Phase 3 schools where 100% and 95.7% of responding schools reportedly own a whole school and departmental policy, respectively.

Table 4 displays the percentages of those schools involved in each stage of the EiC initiative and that have (a) a whole school policy and (b) a departmental policy.

Talent identification procedures

Information was sought regarding identification procedures and whether departments primarily identified talented pupils in terms of current achievement or potential achievement. This question was included to assess the extent to which schools adhered to inspectors’ reports (OfSTED 2004) and other guidance (www.talentmatters.org) that best practice did not rely on exhibitions of current performance (such as representation in school or region teams), but sought also to identify those pupils who seemed to have the potential to achieve a high ability, given appropriate provision and support (Bailey and Morley 2005). Some 63.5% of subject leaders reported that they identify talented pupils primarily in terms of their current levels of achievement; only 20.2% claimed to identify pupils in terms of potential achievement. A number of subject leaders (16.3% of the sample) indicated that they used both current and potential performance as an indicator for identifying pupils.

A second question focused upon the specific criteria used to identify pupils. Unlike the previous question, respondents were invited to offer multiple answers, where appropriate, as this promised a more comprehensive portrayal of current practices. Figure 2 shows that the most commonly used criteria for identifying talented pupils were performance in school sport (94.6%) and performance in club sport (72.9%). Only a minority of subject leaders claimed to use criteria based on National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) content, with 31.6% stating that they used NCPE levels and 26% using General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results. Testing for physical abilities (26.2%) and Key Stage 2/3 transfer information (data related to pupils that is passed from primary to secondary schools) (22.2%) was also only used by a small number of departments in the sample. The criteria least used by departments was testing for non-physical abilities (3.4%). This final figure may not be surprising, but it should be acknowledged that recent documentation for schools have included a specific recommendation that the identification of talent in physical education is not restricted to physical performance, but is inclusive of wider elements of subject content, including cognitive, personal, interpersonal and creative aspects of the subject (Bailey and Morley 2005).
Successful talent development strategies

An open question invited comments from subject leaders concerning the success of the talent development strategies. Judging by the qualitative responses provided by participants it was clear that a number of departments were in the early stages of developing talent strategies and, therefore, found it difficult to comment on the efficacy of strategies that they had not yet used. Of those departments that had strategies in place, 151 comments were made with reference to the links made with clubs and the coaching made available to the talented pupils. School-based activities were often noted as being successful, especially extra-curricular activities (48), multi-skills sessions (seven), workshops (10) and visits (e.g. to further and higher education institutions) (five). Mentoring (16), fitness tests (14), baseline assessment (e.g. fitness, coordination, dance, games and gymnastics) (12) and utilising Key Stage 2/3 transfer information (11) were also claimed to be particularly useful strategies. Some schools were already engaged in other programmes such as the Junior Athlete Education Programme (JAE) (17), and these were also cited as useful strategies. It is noteworthy that the number of schools that employed mentoring as a talent development strategy differs significantly from recent school inspection reports, suggesting that three quarters of schools adopted mentoring (OfSTED 2004). This difference may be attributed to the fact that OfSTED’s report only involved specialist sports colleges, who are more likely to include mentoring within their Junior Athlete Education (JAE) programme. Nevertheless, even this allowance fails to account for the great difference between the two sets of findings. Further research would seem to be necessary to understand the situation more adequately.

It is also interesting to note that whilst curricular-based activities are mentioned as useful approaches to talent development, the specific use of extra-curricular activities is represented as the most common strategy. Obvious in their omission are references to everyday pedagogical strategies, such as differentiation, adapted curriculum design, grouping, and the use of different teaching styles. This does seem to endorse concerns that the development of talented pupils remains primarily rooted in opportunities that fail to have an impact on mainstream curriculum provision, and are generally not available for all pupils (Bailey and Morley 2003; OfSTED 2004).

On the whole the departments that were using a broad range of talent development strategies appeared to be tailoring their strategies to suit the specific needs of the pupils and the

Figure 2. Identification of talented pupils.
school. For instance, one department had found that their mentoring programme had helped talented pupils balance their education and training commitments effectively:

As the programme is embedded, it will have a positive impact on the students. This is particularly in the area of life balance and supporting students in managing their coursework. (T2458)

Other teachers were conscious that they needed to use several strategies for developing talent across a range of abilities. For example, one subject leader commented that:

I have found all of the above strategies are needed so that identification process is accessible to pupils involved in all sports. It is important that we use all methods above not only to identify but to review. (T2309)

**Impact of current provision**

Subject leaders were asked about the impact they believed the Gifted and Talented provision had on talented pupils in physical education at their school. The results are displayed in Figure 3. As illustrated, only a small percentage of subject leaders perceived the impact of provision to be significant. Instead, subject leaders were more likely to rate the impact as moderate or to a lesser extent, little.

A further question invited the subject leaders to agree or disagree on whether the talented cohort had benefited. A majority (58.8%) reported that the cohort had benefited, whilst a large minority (41.2%) stated that there had been no benefit. When asked to expand on this answer in their own words a range of benefits were described. For instance, some talented cohorts were said to benefit from improved motivation, confidence and

![Figure 3. Impact of provision on pupils.](image-url)
self-esteem. However, whilst the improvement of personal qualities exhibited by talented pupils lies at the heart of policy directives and evaluation (DfEE 2001; OfSTED 2004), the quantifiable tracking of improvement is not so clear-cut. As a result of the lack of quantifiable success criteria related to the improvement of such personal qualities, it is plausible to suggest that, in some cases, teachers may opt for more tangible criteria in order to enhance regulation of their tracking processes. Where transparency was an integral feature of the identification process, this was perceived to be a positive element of talent development, with one subject leader commenting that, as a result of being ‘upfront’ with the pupils, they were more motivated to achieve (T2154). It is also interesting to note comments from a Muslim girls’ school that talent development in physical education was having a growing impact on girls taking part in sport and helping to break down barriers to participation (T608). For some departments, the provision was having more far-reaching effects. One subject leader stated:

It’s still in the early stages but the talented pupils are developing a broad range of generic skills and strategies that they transfer into their specialist areas as well as into lessons and to help other pupils. (T2653)

It has been suggested that talent development programmes can contribute to wider educational aspirations. In Renzulli’s (1998) phrase, ‘a rising tide lifts all ships’. Whilst this was not a focus of questioning in this study, comments from some subject leaders do lend support to this notion.

Departmental expertise and experience

It seems reasonable to suppose that departmental staff are integral to effective talent development procedures; it is, after all, their responsibility to select and manage the cohort of pupils to receive additional and/or differentiated provision. As is shown in Figure 4 below, responses suggest that physical education teachers feel in need of more support in relation to talent development, with the most frequent responses to a question about their professional development in this area being ‘satisfactory’ and ‘unsatisfactory’ (35.5% and 32.2%, respectively). A quarter rated their development as ‘good’ (25.8%), whilst only 3.5% recorded that it was excellent. Whilst not surprising in light of the fact that policy-driven Gifted and Talented education is still a relatively recent phenomenon within the UK educational system, these figures do highlight a cause for concern. Earlier qualitative research (Bailey, Tan, and Morley 2004) has suggested that many teachers lack confidence and competence in identifying and providing for talented pupils, and feel forced to rely upon traditional selection strategies, and upon their own predictably narrow ranges of experience of performance at high levels.

Figure 5 displays the reported areas of expertise for each member of departmental staff. The area of expertise for the majority of staff (85.7%) was Games. Some 45.3% claimed to be specialists in Athletic Activities (AA), 31.3% specialised in Gymnastics. Swimming, Dance and Outdoor Adventurous Activities (OAA) were areas in which the least number of staff had expertise. The general assessment of levels of expertise within physical education departments was not equivocal. Furthermore, there appeared to be neither a comprehensive nor an evenly distributed spread of expertise within schools.

The clear dominance of games within these findings might not be surprising in light of frequent reports of this activity area’s pre-eminent position within physical education in the UK (Lockwood 2000). But this finding takes on particular significance when related to the
earlier qualitative studies, cited above (Lockwood 2000), indicating that teachers feel better qualified to identify talented pupils within areas in which they, themselves, have developed expertise. A corollary of this finding may be that talented games players are more likely to be recognised as such (so long as they play a relatively mainstream game) than their equally able peers who happen to excel in other activities. Indeed, a testable hypothesis, awaiting

![Figure 4. Level of professional development.](image)

![Figure 5. Areas of expertise.](image)
the next stage of data-collection, is that games players will appear on talent cohorts in schools far more frequently than performers of other activities.

**Future talent development**

According to many subject leaders, one of the most important ways to improve talent development would be to ensure that funding is channelled directly to schools’ physical education department. For many departments, the ability to obtain funding did depend to a certain extent upon the status of physical education and the support that is received from other areas of the school. It was felt that more funding could allow talented cohorts to benefit from better facilities, transport, staff training and more time in which to develop their talents. This was particularly the case for schools in rural areas or that were not already linked to another existing programme. Conversely, one subject leader claimed that as theirs was a school in a middle class area with good examination results, they did not have access to the majority of funding available (T378).

Certain suggestions were made to improve strategies already in existence, such as links with clubs and national governing bodies. A number of subject leaders wanted to see ‘clear exit routes to clubs’ (T108) or ‘more clearly defined pathways to excellence’ (T213). Other suggested ways to improve the development of talented pupils was to identify pupils at an earlier stage and to identify greater numbers of pupils to justify coaching sessions. Another subject leader called for more emphasis upon planning, evaluation and leadership skills (T535).

The issue of policies and guidelines was frequently mentioned by subject leaders. Several subject leaders specifically stressed that they required a coherent policy with guidelines in place so that they could be better informed about the talent development process and their roles within it. For instance, one subject leader said that in order to improve talent development in physical education, they needed, ‘a fully comprehensive G[ifted] and T[alented] programme from K[ey] S[tage] 1 to K[ey] S[tage] 5’ (T676).

**Conclusion**

Reports spanning the last 30 years of education continue to raise concerns related to the accurate, equitable and consistent identification of talented pupils in physical education expressing the apparent hardship encountered by teachers when differentiating between potential and current achievement within the identification process (Freeman 1998; OfSTED 2004; Thomson 1992). Findings from this survey echo the most recent report on talent development in physical education (OfSTED 2004), which suggests the assessment of potential remains a difficult task for teachers in physical education, with only one in five of responding teachers identifying talented pupils primarily in terms of their potential. One possible cause for this low figure is that the teachers are only just becoming familiar with issues surrounding the correct identification of current achievement and when this exercise has been satisfactorily completed, departments may look beyond the boundaries of current achievement and begin to identify potential more readily. There is an apparent need, therefore, for more explicit and practical information to be provided for teachers to use within a physical education environment in order to allow teachers the opportunity to reveal and explore potential more effectively.

The National Curriculum for Physical Education (DfES/QCA 2000) purports to support a broad, balanced, differentiated curriculum for all pupils and has an exceptional performance level that can be used to describe a child performing at the very height of
their potential. Where such a statutory document has been introduced and progressively refined over a period of more than 10 years one might expect the use of a document and in particular the exceptional performance levels to be readily used in the identification process. This was not the case as only a third of departments claimed to use the levels as criteria for identifying talented pupils. This low reported figure may be attributable to a number of factors, such as the inherent complexity of the National Curriculum, with its four core strands and six activity areas to assess, or this finding could reflect on-going concerns with assessment in physical education that have been apparent since the inception of the National Curriculum (OfSTED 2003).

It was clear that most departments were identifying pupils according to current performance and not necessarily potential performance. If, as one subject leader noted, ‘those talented at years 4, 5 and 6 are not those who will be talented at years 9 and 10’ (T585), then the risk is that departments will exclude many pupils from talent identification. Furthermore, the criteria which are being used by most schools to identify pupils are performance in school sports and school clubs. However, if a school is only using these criteria, it does mean that any talented pupils who might not excel in the specific activities available to them in school sport or that may not participate in club sport for a variety of reasons (e.g. cost of participating, lack of transport) will be overlooked and potentially excluded from appropriate provision.

On the whole, the results of this study provide a broad overview of existing talent development practices. Details have been provided by those who are directly contributing, of the strategies in place at schools, the benefits that they can provide and the ways in which they can be improved. These issues raised by subject leaders should be explored further and the information shared between schools. The fact that 65% of the departments involved in this National Audit expressed an interest in participating in the project further is evidence that departments are enthusiastic about moving talent development forward.

References

Freeman, J. 1998. Educating the very able – OfSTED report. London: HMSO.


Renzulli, J. 1998. A rising tide lifts all ships: Developing the gifts and talents of all students. Phi Delta Kappa 80, no. 2: 104–11.


