

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING

Volume 10, 2003

Article: LC03-0069-2003

Measure beyond Pleasure

Evaluating the Impact on Learning of Out-of-School
Programmes for Able and Gifted Pupils in England

Mike Lambert

WHAT LEARNING MEANS: Proceedings of the Learning Conference 2003



Edited by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope

International Journal of Learning
Volume 10, 2003

This journal and individual papers published at <http://LearningConference.Publisher-Site.com/>
a series imprint of theUniversityPress.com

First published in Australia in 2004 by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd at
<http://LearningConference.Publisher-Site.com/>

Selection and editorial matter copyright © Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope 2003/2004
Individual chapters copyright © individual contributors 2003/2004

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted
under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced by any process without written permission
from the publisher.

ISSN 1447-9494 (Print)
ISSN 1447-9540 (Online)

The International Journal of Learning is a peer-refereed journal which is published annually. Full papers submitted for publication
are refereed by the Associate Editors through an anonymous referee process.

Papers presented at the Tenth International Literacy and Education Research Network Conference on Learning.
Institute of Education, University of London 15-18 July 2003

Editors

Mary Kalantzis, Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Bill Cope, Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture, Australia.

Editorial Advisory Board of the International Journal of Learning

Michael Apple, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.

David Barton, Director, Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University, UK.

Ruth Finnegan, Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, UK.

James Paul Gee, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.

Kris Gutierrez, University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

Roz Ivanic, Lancaster University, UK.

Carey Jewitt, Institute of Education, University of London, UK.

Andreas Kazamias, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.

Gunther Kress, Institute of Education, University of London.

Sarah Michaels, Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education, Clark University, Massachusetts, USA.

Denise Newfield, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Ambigapathy Pandian, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.

Miguel A. Pereyra, University of Granada, Spain.

Scott Poynting, University of Western Sydney, Australia.

Michel Singh, University of Western Sydney, Australia.

Pippa Stein, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Brian Street, King's College, University of London, UK.

Gella Varnava-Skoura, Department of Early Childhood Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

Nicola Yelland, Head, Department of School and Early Childhood Education, RMIT University, Australia.

Wang Yingjie, School of Education, Beijing Normal University, China.

Zhou Zuoyu, School of Education, Beijing Normal University, China.

Measure beyond Pleasure

Evaluating the Impact on Learning of Out-of-School Programmes for Able and Gifted Pupils in England

Mike Lambert

Abstract

School-education in England is replete with new projects and initiatives of various kinds. Many require formal evaluation of their impact and effectiveness, often carried out by researchers from higher education.

One of these initiatives has been the development in recent years of 'Advanced Learning Centres' – out-of-school programmes for school-pupils. The author of this paper is now undertaking a three-year national evaluation of the impact on learning of pupils' attendance at these Centres.

This paper presents and analyses some of the issues and obstacles of doing this evaluation. These include facing the 'Hawthorne effect' of initial enthusiasm, the need to identify the historical context of out-of-school learning for able pupils, the difficulties of measuring against goals and intended outcomes, and tensions between the need for measurement and the ethos of the Centres themselves.

The paper identifies ways forward for the evaluation process and relates this to evaluation of other similar projects elsewhere.

Introduction

'Creativity Partnerships', 'Education Action Zones', 'Networked Learning Communities', 'Beacon Schools' – it seems that wherever one looks in England, a new education project or initiative lifts an attention-seeking head. They are fixed-term, often resource-rich and high-status, they attract high levels of attention and exude enthusiasm and a keenness to succeed.

Most are apparently there to stimulate development of particular educational practice – clustering, teaching creative arts, models of leadership. They may aim to test out possible practice, perhaps offering models which others are subsequently encouraged to follow. Most are required to report back to sponsoring bodies or to others on their success. How effective was the work? What outcomes did it produce? How can the project inform practice more widely? Benefits need to be shown, funding and effort needs justifying, reasons for continuation or expansion need some kind of rationale.

Higher education is often very much involved in this evaluation process. We may be called upon to do the evaluating. Or we mentor or guide others who are doing it, often professionals who are involved in the project itself. In the School of Education of my own University, a good number of academic staff have played, or are playing, a part in such evaluations and more such tasks are likely to follow.

This paper

My own current research is this kind of evaluation. The task is to examine the impact on learning of 'advanced learning centres'. These are out-of-school teaching programmes for more able school-pupils. They provide learning at high levels in various subjects of the curriculum, mostly but not exclusively for pupils in the last two years of their primary schooling (age 10-11). The evaluation is commissioned by the Government's Department for Education and Skills.

Note the vital phrase in the brief – 'impact on learning'. The task is not to assess broad success, not the pleasure the centres give or enthusiasm they generate, but the extent to which they help pupils to learn and develop in measurable ways. This task started in January this year. It is due to last three years, involving review of a few studies already carried out by practitioners themselves, and a free-standing examination of original design.

This paper has no conclusions to reveal about the process chosen for the evaluation, let alone any findings. It is too early for that. It is a report on some emerging ideas and concerns, a sharing of issues which are part of the developing plans for evaluative work. This may involve a hint of navel-gazing, but for those charged with project evaluation, or suspect it may be part of their professional prospects, it may interest and inform.

Hawthorne effect

The first issue is an easily recognised characteristic of project culture. Dealing with it is less than straightforward. Weiss (1972) described how between 1927 and 1932 studies were made at the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company in the USA. Researchers found that when management paid attention of any kind to workers, their output increased. In relation to education therefore the Hawthorne effect is the idea that pupils do well simply because they are in a new and special programme, picked out for special attention, with staff who are similarly enthused by the special nature of the work.

The 'advanced learning centres' are likely to be as prone to the effects of such enthusiasm as other types of educational project. They take place out of school time, they rely on extra effort and enthusiasm, although funding is usually available to pay the teachers and others involved. More significantly perhaps the centres have grown from a movement to promote the educational needs of able and gifted pupils which has something of an evangelical history. As Freeman (2001) has warned: 'Things that adults do for and with the gifted, giving their time with good heart and the very best of intentions, may have no effect at all, though they do often give pleasure to everyone concerned both adults and children' (p.194).

The issue for any evaluation concerned with impact on learning is working out some understanding of the extent to which pleasure, satisfaction and reward is linked to learning and development. Evaluation which assesses levels of enthusiasm amongst coordinators, teachers and participants may reflect the drive and effort they have given to make it all happen, but not any specific educational benefit which has been gained. On the other hand, pleasure, satisfaction and reward are good feelings to have about education, and likely to be associated with learning and progress.

Perhaps the specific difficulty for an evaluation is if special enthusiasm is a temporary phenomenon. Most centres are new – the brief however is to assess their

usefulness for the longer term. If participants' feelings of pleasure and motivation, and indeed their success, derive from this newness, this 'special-ness', these are likely to diminish as such provision becomes less new and more run-of-the-mill. Positive evaluation produced early on may be found to have proclaimed something of a false dawn.

There may also be an associated hazard which is little mentioned in the literature – the evaluator's equivalent of the Hawthorne effect. If the initial enthusiasm of project practitioners and participants can make the initiative more effective than it would normally be, can the evaluator's work also be affected by her or his enthusiasm for the task? Could the evaluator's early keenness in some way unduly influence processes and findings which result?

Historical context

If initial enthusiasm clouds the picture, the evaluator at least needs to stand clear and view things with a more balanced perspective. One way of doing this is to set the project in its historical and social context, to see that everything is not necessarily new and exciting, but has grown out of what went before.

In this field for instance, we find a long history of out-of-school advanced learning in North America, Germany and Israel (Freeman, 1998). In the UK itself the concept can be traced right back to the Plowden Report (Department of Education and Science, 1967), which discussed attendance for more able pupils at special centres on a part-time voluntary basis. In the 1970s an enquiry of the Schools' Council (Ogilvie, 1973) described Saturday morning classes of some local educational authorities. There were well-reported projects in London at Brentwood (Hoyle and Wilks, 1975), and Millfield (Bridges, 1975), when highly able pupils from primary schools attended college for advanced academic and creative activities. A report of Her Majesty's Inspectorate on gifted pupils in 1992 found a gradual increase in such schemes (HMI, 1992).

The late 1990s saw the coordinated development of such provision under a major Government initiative called 'Excellence in Cities'. This involved 24 local education authorities in six major conurbations. One of its strands was for gifted and talented pupils, identified as the top 5-10 per cent of pupils in any school (Office for Standards in Education, 2001).

Advanced learning centres are part of this strand, building on the earlier work of a national charity, the National Primary Trust (Department for Education and Skills, 2002). The Trust started an advanced maths centre at the Grove School in Birmingham in 1997 (which still runs), followed by Moat Farm School in nearby Sandwell. With Excellence in Cities funding, other centres have now been established elsewhere, in maths, then in art, drama, English, information technology, modern foreign languages and science. They have become what the Department of Education and Skills (2002) has described as 'test beds for innovative practice in primary gifted and talented education.'

Need for evaluation and research

This understanding that out-of-school advanced learning is not wholly a new concept or even new practice in England may helpfully sober the mind of the

evaluator at least. Another type of assistance in this respect is to study what researchers have said about the need for evaluation itself.

Warnings about the need for research in this area are long-standing. For instance Sisk (1987) wrote extensively on this theme in the USA. 'To continue their vital growth and development, programmes for the gifted must include ways and means to answer these questions [of effectiveness and efficiency]' (p.207).

A study to compare effects of full-time and part-time educational programmes for gifted pupils in Israel by Zeidner and Schleyer (1999) emphasised the persisting international paucity of evaluation research - 'one of the most neglected areas in gifted education'. Decisions about education of the gifted were being made, they claimed, not on the basis of identified benefits, but of logistical, economic, or philosophical considerations, or as a response to 'current educational fad'.

Of particular interest in this country are the proceedings of a Government Select Committee on able and gifted pupils in 1999 (House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, 1999). This committee heard several witnesses consider the benefits of special projects for more able pupils. The director of one of the major voluntary organizations, which was organising out-of-school programmes could not provide any specific information on their effects. Professor Joan Freeman complained that little was known about the long-term effects of initiatives for gifted and talented pupils, what had been found out was generalised from individual examples, a more scientific approach was needed. A member of the committee, Caroline Flint, concluded 'what we need to look for is a more firm research base for ... defining the impact of various approaches to supporting these children' (p.23).

Measurement against goals and intended outcomes

Such calls for systematic evaluation do not make any easier the choice of how to go about it. The most straightforward and pertinent approach should be this – to measure a project's success against its own goals and anticipated outcomes. With this approach, if the aim of a project is to improve pupils' attendance at school, measure that attendance. If the desired outcome is for pupils to achieve a higher level of achievement in mathematics in Government tests at the end of primary schooling, then count those who achieve it.

There are plenty obstacles to using this approach for this task. Firstly the goals and intended outcomes of the advanced learning centres are not clearly expressed in plans or programmes. For most specific aims beyond that of making special provision for able pupils are not formulated, there is little in the way of formal goals or objectives to measure against.

In others specific goals are designated, but may not survive beyond the initial stages of the project. For instance one centre aimed to increase the number of pupils taking the higher Government test at the end of their primary schooling. The aim was abandoned after a few weeks when staff found it was having too much influence, causing more teaching of programmes of the formal national curriculum and leading them away from the wider enrichment ideal they wished to follow.

Put simply, the aims of the centres do not easily match the focus of the evaluation. While the evaluation is charged with measuring impact on learning, most centres have more amorphous aims – to enrich pupils' learning, to give them opportunity to work at greater pace, at higher levels of thinking, with peers of

similar high ability. Pursuing measurable progress along a formalised curriculum is in nearly all cases not a specific aim of the centres.

Freeman (2002) advised: 'There needs to be stated aims and objectives, a description of why and how provision is to be run, and a built-in system of evaluation as to its effectiveness'. Little is evident of this coordinated approach in these centres - assessment against goals is not a straightforward option for this evaluation.

Treating 'measurement' with care

Measurement against goals may not be a clear possibility, but still some kind of measurement needs to be made. This term 'measurement' is seductive, however. It can assume many things and needs to be treated with care.

It can imply that what you choose to measure is the aspect of the project by which that project can be judged. For instance if I pre-test and post-test pupils' performance against aspects of their advanced-centre curriculum, how can I be wholly sure that what is tested is where their learning lies? What if – in the flexible and experimental atmosphere of the centre – that which pupils have really learnt is not what was tested? The results may be disappointing and the project evaluated as not very successful, when in fact the opposite may be case.

Measurement can easily presume too that what you measure is the effects of the project and not the effects of other influences which play on the situation at the same time. Even if the evaluation finds progress and learning in learners, are the advanced learning centres – once a week – the real reason for it? This complexity may be particularly problematic for these able pupils. They learn rapidly, from a wide range of sources, sometimes imperceptibly and in unorthodox ways. Isolating their sources of learning may be all but impossible. As Freeman (1998) has pointed out: 'How much of their ... improvement can then be said to be due to the special treatment, and how much to the fact that the best predictor of future success is present success?' (p.21).

Measurement implies too that progress made can be identified and quantified. Again this may be problematical for this evaluation. Tests can be inappropriate for assessing performance of very able pupils, they may not have a high enough 'ceiling' (Sisk, 1987), high intelligence itself is rarely fully exercised and may not be observed in action.

Finally measurement may imply that there is a shared view of what it should entail. In this case, the presumption could be made that the perceptions of those sponsoring the evaluation – the Department for Education and Skills – match perceptions of the practitioners at the centres. But what does the Government Department mean by 'impact on learning'? – national tests and examinations, one suspects, which are the key measure of achievement, standards and effectiveness in schools in England. One can imagine the Department's main evaluation question might be: 'To what extent do the advanced learning centres contribute to raising standards and meeting targets?' However I have yet to find a centre which puts this as a relevant measure for the effectiveness of their work. Many centres have been set up to broaden learning, often as an antidote to the measurement and testing culture of national requirements in schools. The atmosphere at the centres is relaxed, flexible, even experimental. Goals, as we have seen, are unspecific. In many ways the centres are islands of respite from the 'teach and test' regimes of

formal schooling. The professionals involved are loathe to infect this with testing routines, or with the possibility of being pushed to 'teach to a test'.

To what extent should the evaluation be tailored to blend inconspicuously with this enrichment rationale? Or should it discount the centres' philosophies and impose examination based on what is likely to produce specific and measured findings? Keeping a distance, looking for clues, delving for impressions and perceptions from participants – or intruding, testing, so as to pin things down?

Ways forward

This paper has been largely about obstacles and hazards, rather problematical in tone. Yet the evaluation must still be done. Finally we look more positively at some ways forward so that progress can be made.

Historical context and the need for evaluation and research

Keeping history in mind, examining calls for research and a scientific basis to evaluation, will encourage a balanced perspective.

Get beyond the newness and special-ness

Luckily not all centres are wholly new, two have been running for several years. Their staff at least are likely to have adopted a long-term viewpoint of what they do. Other centres are looking to repeat their centres, some with the same pupils for another year – it could be another chance to evaluate the extent to which enthusiasm plays a part in progress longer term. Part of this evaluation needs to focus on these rather more experienced centres and their pupils.

Go beyond pleasure and satisfaction, find ways of identifying change and development

It is a temptation to take an easy way and assess the extent of satisfaction and motivation. But it seems a small step to try and find out more. If the methods are questionnaires and interviews, then ask pupils what they have learnt, ask the teachers what they see has been learnt, ask the other teachers back in the pupils' own schools what learning they see their pupils have gained. Observe and identify the new skills and new knowledge pupils demonstrate in their project activity. Examine their work, compare work at the beginning with work at the end. With 'impact on learning' part of the evaluation brief, these processes – measuring beyond pleasure – are likely to be significant parts of the task.

Take goals into account

In this instance evaluation against stated goals will be difficult, as we have seen. But those goals cannot simply be ignored (see Zeidner and Schleyer, 1999). Part of the investigation should involve looking to see if centres have achieved any stated outcomes. If that is insufficient to fulfil the brief, then the evaluation will need to move further and assess aspects which they may not have been specifically seeking to achieve – advancement in tests, increased levels in national tests, higher-than-

anticipated performance in later examinations. It will be important to chart that move into areas outside the project's stated aims, and to share it through discussion and agreement with those who run the centres and teach its children.

Find a range of measurements

Freeman (2001), in her long-term study of gifted children growing up, concluded that dependence on specific measures was rather too problematical and decided to focus on what she called more 'naturalistic' assessments. This evaluation cannot enjoy this luxury – some specific measurement there will have to be. The 87 tests which children in England have to undergo in their school lives (McMahon, 2003) may be useful in this respect. 'Panda' reports and 'Autumn packages', the bundles of achievement data which go to schools each year, could be useful too – they make it possible to compare the progress of groups of pupils with others throughout England. With these it may be possible to compare attainments of pupils who attend advanced learning centre with the overall attainments of pupils of this level of ability in general. To move beyond the standard Government agenda, a natural choice might be World Class Tests or assessment tools being developed for the centres by the coordinating charity, National Primary Trust, itself.

Freeman's 'naturalistic' methods have a role too. Examining pupils' and teachers' perceptions of learning will add to the data, observing changes in pupils' skills and their overt knowledge also. Perhaps too it will be possible to evaluate aspects of provision which are likely to influence learning, for instance the quality of teaching, the extent to which motivation and interest are promoted, the quality of interaction with a peer group of similar high ability. If these are found to be of high quality, can other research be found which confirms the link with probable impact on learning?

The problem of isolating the factors in change remains. To what extent can the effects of pupils' work at advanced learning centres be separated from their learning at their school and their other social activity? Sisk's (1987) words provide a little reassurance: 'When evaluation procedures are well designed they provide comparisons and controls for other possible causes of observed effects'.

Learn from what others have done

One final way forward for this evaluation, and perhaps others in similar situations, is to learn from what others have already done. While there has been no in-depth evaluation of the advanced learning centres themselves, there have been evaluations of other out-of-school schemes for pupils in general.

Tower Hamlets Summer University (1999) reviewed 14 summer schools. Their report exemplified how a range of evaluation processes can be used – pupil and professional feedback, assessment, enrolment and attendance data, examination results – then brought together in an overall meta-evaluation of effectiveness and impact.

Two evaluations of out-of-school learning by Education Extra demonstrated two of the ways forward mentioned above. The first (Education Extra, 1998) identified academic improvements from national tests, informal assessments, predicted examination grades and acquisition of specific skills. The second (Education Extra,

2002) assessed changes in pupil attitude and behaviour, and examined the quality and nature of teaching, then used these findings to support and strengthen specific evidence of the actual progress which pupils made.

Finally two studies show the opposite end of the 'measurement against goals and outcomes' spectrum. Sainsbury et al (1998), evaluating the work of summer schools, enviably showed how, when programme aims are clear and specific, the aims of evaluation could be designed in close correspondence. Conversely an evaluation of the Excellence in Cities schools programme (Office for Standards in Education, 2001) found that schools had given little consideration to relating aims to systematic monitoring systems and had little basis for evaluating the effectiveness of their special provision.

Conclusion

This paper has raised some issues which affect this evaluation, and may be relevant to evaluations which others are involved in. The ways forward give optimism for this study, and may provide some useful guidance for others.

Bibliography

- Bridges, S.A. (1975) *Gifted children and the Millfield experiment*. London: Pitman Press.
- Department Of Education And Science (1967) *Children and their primary schools* (The Plowden Report). London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- Department For Education And Skills (2003). *Identifying the gifted and talented cohort*. London: Department of Education and Skills <<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented>> (Accessed 11 February 2003).
- Education Extra (1998?) *Succeeding at Study Support: An evaluation of twelve model projects in primary and secondary schools*. London: Education Extra.
- Education Extra (2002) *Outcomes of out-of-school hours learning: a framework for analysis*. London: Education: Extra.
- Freeman, J. (1998) *Educating the very able: current international research*. London: Office for Standards in Education.
- Freeman, J. (2001) *Gifted children grown up*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Freeman, J. (2002) Out-of-school activities for the gifted and talented around the world. In Department for Education and Skills (2002) *National conference on gifted and talented education*. London: Department of Education and Skills.
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate (1992) *The education of very able children in maintained schools*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.
- House Of Commons Education And Employment Committee (1999) *Highly able children: third report, volume II, minutes of evidence and appendices*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Hoyle, E. and Wilks, J. (1975) *Gifted children and their education*. London: Department of Education and Science.
- Mcmahon, M. (2003) A generation of the hunched and slumped. *Independent on Sunday*, 27 April 2003, p.25.
- Office For Standards In Education (2001) *Providing for gifted and talented pupils: an evaluation of Excellence in Cities and other grant-funded programmes*. London: Office for Standards in Education.
- Ogilvie, E. (1973) *Gifted children in primary schools*. London: Macmillan Education.
- Sainsbury, M., Caspall, L., McDonald, A. and Ravenscroft, L. (1998) *The evaluation of the 1998 summer school programme: summary report*. Slough, England: National Foundation for Educational Research.

- Sisk, D. (1987) *Creative teaching of the gifted*. USA: McGraw Hill.
- Tower Hamlets Summer University (1999) *Good practice report on summer universities*.
Tower Hamlets: Summer Education UK.
- Zeidner M. and Schleyer E.J. (1999) Evaluating the effects of full-time vs part-time educational programs for the gifted: affective outcomes and policy considerations. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, November 1999, 22(4) pp.413-427.

Bionote

Mike Lambert, B.Ed, M.Ed, is principal lecturer in teacher training at the School of Education of the University of Wolverhampton, England, also Director of the School's Regional Primary Centre, working on best-practice projects with primary schools in the region. Previous work includes teaching in primary and special education, and development work with voluntary educational organizations, in the UK, Germany, Hungary, the USA and elsewhere. Professional interests include special needs education, teacher research and future developments in learning and teaching.