

The Work and Impact of Potential Plus UK

November 2022



Images from Potential Plus UK's weekend events

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1. Purpose of the paper and summary

To provide information about Potential Plus UK's work and its impact on neurodivergent young people with high learning potential (previously described as 'gifted').

2. Background of the charity

In 1965 Margaret Branch, a psychiatric social work at Guys Hospital in London, recognised there was a lack of information and support for gifted children, who frequently had similar difficulties as those with special educational needs.

In 1967 The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) was formally constituted as a membership charity with signatories including lecturers, teachers, head teachers, housewives, musicians, child psychiatrists, engineers, bankers, architects, an MP, a Peer of the Realm, newspaper publisher David Astor, zoologist and writer Gerald Durrell, and Margaret Branch.

Following years of lobbying and consultation from NAGC, in 1998 The House of Commons Education and Employment Committee commissioned an inquiry into the needs of Highly Able Children, producing the report *Highly Able Children*¹. The New Labour government recognised the failure to provide for our most able young people, and the Department for Children, Schools and Families established the GTEU (Gifted and Talented Education Unit) devoted to developing education suited to highly able learners. However, this programme and support ended in 2010.

Provision for highly able children today is worse than it was 25 years ago **before** the introduction of the national programme. In Ofsted's 1996/7 annual report², Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of Schools reported that "*Very Able Pupils achieve less well than expected in about three in ten schools*" and yet Potential Plus UK's analysis of Ofsted reports³ from June 2018 and June 2019 revealed that 44% of schools needed change to their provision for 'more able' learners, with the vast majority requiring more challenge (60%+) and/or more progress (26%+)⁴. At the same time, Ofsted removed all mention of 'more able' from its framework.

At the charity's Annual General Meeting in October 2012 its membership voted to change the working name to Potential Plus UK. The charity consistently uses the term 'high learning potential' to describe the young people it supports.

¹ House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, *Highly Able Children* (third report Volume II), printed 20/04/1999

² The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Standards and Quality in Education 1996//97

³ <https://potentialplusuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Ofsted-Reporting-of-Provision-for-the-Most-Able-Pupils.pdf>

⁴ <https://potentialplusuk.org/index.php/2020/02/20/ofsted-reports-new-research-shows-44-of-schools-needed-change-to-more-able-provision/>

3. The young people we support

The charity supports neurodivergent young people with high learning potential, who experience isolation, anxiety and mental health issues due to the lack of appropriate academic and creative challenge in education and misunderstanding in society.

A defining characteristic of these young people is their asynchronous development⁵, whereby their cognitive ability is much more advanced than their physical, emotional and social development. This differentiates them from their age peers and is often accompanied by intensity, anxiety and sensitivity, and can result in isolation and bullying by their peers.

Many have special educational needs (SEND) and are doubly disadvantaged. Their SEND needs are not recognised because their abilities mask their difficulties (and vice versa). They miss out on essential support for both their high learning potential and their special educational needs, which affects their wellbeing and mental health.

There is stigma and stereotyping around high ability, which leads young people to hide their abilities or be misunderstood, frequently leading to a charge of 'behavioural' or 'social' problems which is then misdiagnosed. This in turn intensifies anxiety and impacts their self-identity.

In a survey we carried out over one week in June 2022 in response to the Department for Education's SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time, we revealed that **81%** of the young people supported by Potential Plus UK, who have been identified as having high learning potential, had suffered with high anxiety. In addition to this, **34%** of them had suffered from other mental health issues⁶. ***We estimate that there are over 35,000 high learning potential children in England who struggle with mental health issues, much of which is caused by inappropriate educational provision***⁷.

4. Strategic objectives

Our strategic objectives are:

1. To improve the quality and provision of support for young people with high learning potential.
2. To raise awareness about the needs of young people with high learning potential and advocate for improvements in policy and practice.
3. To create and sustain a community of mutual support amongst families with high learning potential young people.
4. To empower young people with high learning potential to develop self-understanding and lead change.

⁵ <https://potentialplusuk.org/index.php/characteristics/asynchronous-development/>

⁶ <https://potentialplusuk.org/index.php/2022/06/28/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time-potential-plus-uks-response-june-2022/>

⁷ The Children's Commissioner (for England) The Big Ask survey 2022 revealed 20% of children were not happy with their mental health, and conservatively there are 177,000 high learning potential children in England (2% of the population of children in England which is 9 million (ref: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>)

5. Our understanding of high learning potential

We subscribe to Pfeiffer's Tripartite Model of Giftedness⁸ in our identification of young people with high learning potential, which aligns with the inclusive practice favoured in the United Kingdom and recognises that children have varying levels of opportunity and support to enable them to demonstrate their potential.

We consider high learning potential through the lenses of:

- high intelligence,
- outstanding accomplishments, and the
- potential to excel.

However, we do not have any prerequisites for support.

6. The work that we do and its impact

We have a positive impact on the lives of more than 5,000 young people each year and for some of these the impact is literally life changing, avoiding the tragedies of failure and exclusion at school and even suicide.

To meet our objectives for direct delivery (strategic objectives 1, 3 and 4), we provide Advice and Assessment services to increase understanding, knowledge, and skills to meet complex needs that are often masked by the child's abilities and strengths.

Without any core funding in 2021-2022 our small team of staff and volunteers was able to:

- respond to over 4,500 enquiries (approx. 60% by phone and 40% by email),
- deliver 394 in-depth telephone advice appointments, and
- complete 162 educational assessments

The majority of advice calls deal with the mismatch between a child's ability and the school's provision, and the ensuing negative impacts on wellbeing and mental health. The assessment service provides recommendations for parents and schools to support the child's educational, social, and emotional needs. We frequently see that more appropriate school support radically improves outcomes for the children we support.

We also provide safe spaces online and in-person for young people and parents to socialise with like-minded peers, share experiences, and foster a sense of identity and belonging. Last year we were able to deliver:

- 230 hours of online support for young people and 229 for parents/carers, as well as 8 days of an online festival with 200+ participants,
- physical location-based activities to 216 participants (despite Covid impact),
- administration support for two online community groups comprising 5,000 parents.

⁸ [Tripartite-Model.pdf \(potentialplusuk.org\)](https://www.potentialplusuk.org/Tripartite-Model.pdf)

To make this possible the charity benefited from over 2,000 volunteer hours.

However, our capacity to build on this impact and increase our reach is limited by financial and socio-economic barriers. We are reliant on parents reaching out to us and being able to pay for support, and on individual donations that enable us to cross-subsidise services for families that are struggling financially. As a consequence, we are not effectively meeting the needs of many young people with high learning potential, and most especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

7. The need for change

Over recent years the charity has not advocated adequately with policy makers for the needs of this group of young people to be recognised and met within our education system. The impacts of Covid and the cost-of-living crisis have highlighted that the need for change in policy and practice is imperative. We aim to work together with other concerned parties to campaign for an inclusive, adaptive education policy, written into law, that helps rather than hinders this group of neurodivergent young people to reach their potential, regardless of circumstances.