

Summary

This advice sheet provides an overview of how High Learning Potential (HLP) is supported within the UK education system. It highlights variations in policy and provision across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland and covers definitions, government policies, school provisions, existing challenges, and the legal framework. This advice sheet is aimed at parents, carers, teachers and other professionals supporting HLP learners.

What is High Learning Potential?

High Learning Potential exists across all demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds, manifesting in diverse ways. Whilst some HLP learners excel academically, others demonstrate exceptional creativity, problem-solving, or leadership skills. HLP also exists across different neurotypes, including those who are dual or multiple exceptional (DME); learners who have both high ability and additional educational needs through a learning difference, disability or mental health condition such as dyslexia, autism, or ADHD etc.

Without appropriate challenge, HLP and DME learners may disengage or underachieve. Research shows that due to barriers such as limited access to enrichment opportunities, lower teacher expectations, and a lack of targeted policies, disadvantaged high-ability students often experience an attainment gap.

Additionally, HLP and DME learners may face social and emotional challenges. Some may experience perfectionism, heightened sensitivity, or asynchronous development (where their cognitive abilities develop at a different rate to their emotional or social abilities). A holistic understanding of HLP recognises these variations and ensures that provision is tailored to the individual strengths and needs of each learner.

Research about High Learning Potential

In academic research, there are many models of giftedness, each offering a different perspective on how HLP can be understood.

Potential Plus UK subscribes to Pfeiffer's Tripartite Model of Giftedness in our **identification** of young people with high learning potential. We consider high learning potential through the lenses of high intelligence, outstanding accomplishments and the potential to excel. It is important to recognise that children have varying levels of opportunity and support to enable them to demonstrate their potential.

Potential Plus UK subscribes to Gagné's Expanded Model of Talent Developmentⁱ in our understanding of the **development** of high learning potential. High learning potential is not a fixed trait, instead it is developed through the life span. Outstanding achievement requires environmental catalysts as well as motivation, drive, persistence, resilience, passion and creativity.

Legal framework supporting High Learning Potential

Whilst there is not currently a specific policy aimed at supporting HLP and DME learners in most UK educational policy, there are several laws and policies that underpin the educational rights of HLP and DME students in the UK:

Education Act 1996 (England and Wales)

- Section 7: Parents are required to ensure their child receives an efficient, full-time education suitable to their age, ability, aptitude, and any special educational needs. This applies to both school education and home education.ⁱⁱ

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

- Article 29: Governments agree that education should focus on "the development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential."ⁱⁱⁱ
- General Comment (2001): Education should not only focus on literacy and numeracy but also on life skills such as decision-making, conflict resolution, critical thinking, and creative talents.^{iv}

Department for Education (DfE) Teachers' Standards (2011)

Teachers in England^v are expected to:

- Set high expectations that inspire, motivate, and challenge all pupils.
- Set goals that stretch and challenge pupils of all backgrounds, abilities, and dispositions.
- Adapt teaching to the strengths and needs of all pupils, including those of high ability.
- Differentiate appropriately, ensuring effective teaching for all learners.

National Curriculum England – Section 4: Inclusion

- 4.1 Setting Suitable Challenges: Teachers should set high expectations for every pupil and plan stretching work for pupils whose attainment is significantly above the expected standard.^{vi}

High Learning Potential in UK education policy

Since education is a devolved matter, HLP provision varies across the UK, leading to inconsistencies in policy, identification, and support. In statutory legislation and policy within the UK education system, there is no consensus on a single definition of giftedness or High Learning Potential. Each devolved nation approaches HLP differently.

England:

- No national gifted education strategy since the Young Gifted and Talented Programme ended in 2010 and no national definition; schools use varied criteria but are not obliged to use any definition in policies.

- Ofsted reports have identified inconsistencies in how schools support HLP learners. Reviews on "more able" students indicate that many schools fail to provide sufficient challenge or structured guidance, with provision often dependent on individual school leadership rather than embedded in national policy.^{vii}
- Schools rely on measures such as Progress 8 and Pupil Premium to support high-achieving disadvantaged students, but these initiatives do not specifically address HLP or DME learners' needs.

Wales:

- Schools are required to identify and support More Able and Talented (MAT) pupils through individual learning pathways.
- The term "more able and talented" (MAT) applies to the top 20% of students.
- The Seren Network provides targeted support for high-achieving students preparing for competitive university entry.
- The 2022 Curriculum for Wales promotes personalised learning but lacks a distinct HLP policy.

Scotland:

- The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act recognises "particularly able or talented" students as requiring additional support conferring a legal duty on schools to support highly able learners.
- No dedicated national HLP programme exists, but differentiation is incorporated within the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) framework.

Northern Ireland:

- Schools identify "gifted and talented" pupils who may need enhanced learning opportunities and provide enriched learning experiences.
- Strategies include early entry to secondary school and participation in specialist programmes.

Supporting High Learning Potential Children in Education

Successful advocacy for high learning potential learners requires a collaborative approach between schools and parents. Open communication and shared goals are crucial for ensuring that HLP and DME learners receive the necessary support to thrive both academically, socially and emotionally.

Actions for parents:

- Work closely with school staff to advocate for personalised learning approaches, differentiation, and enrichment opportunities.
- Seek out extracurricular and extension opportunities, such as STEM clubs, music academies, and university outreach programmes.

- Encourage a balance between challenge and emotional well-being, helping children develop resilience and a positive attitude towards learning through the use of strategies such as positive reinforcement and purposeful praise rather than solely recognising achievement and outcomes.
- Access resources and networking opportunities through Potential Plus UK.

Actions for schools:

- Provide regular access to advanced curriculum options, relevant and appropriate differentiation, and inquiry-based learning.
- Recognise the emotional and social needs of HLP learners, supporting them in areas such as perfectionism, peer relationships, and asynchronous development.
- Offer mentoring and peer networking opportunities to foster a sense of belonging and intellectual stimulation.
- Engage parents in regular discussions on their child's progress, strengths, and needs to create a unified approach to their education.

By working together, parents and schools can advocate effectively for the strengths and needs of HLP and DME children, ensuring that they receive an education that nurtures both their potential and their well-being.

Further Information

UK Department for Education https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education	Website for the UK ministerial Department for Education; responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England,
Estyn (Wales education inspectorate) https://estyn.gov.wales/	Welsh education inspectorate website with reviews, policies and resources for families and educational professionals. Estyn is funded by but works independently of the Welsh Government.
Education Scotland https://education.gov.scot/	Website for Education Scotland, the national body for supporting quality and improvement of learning and teaching in Scottish education.
Northern Ireland Department of Education https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/	Website for the Northern Ireland Department of Education, outlining the education within Northern Ireland and their duty to ensure the effective implementation of education policy.
Potential Plus UK https://www.potentialplusuk.org	Independent national charity established in 1967, supporting families of HLP and DME children through specialised assessments, consultation services and events
<i>Serving the Gifted: Evidence-Based Clinical and Psychoeducational Practice</i> by Steven I. Pfeiffer	Book written for professionals which covers how to identify HLP learners and provides information on supporting HLP individuals and understanding their specific needs.

ⁱ Gagné, F. (2018). Academic talent development. In Pfeiffer, Shaunessy-Dedrick, & Foley-Nicpon (Eds.), APA handbook of giftedness and talent (pp. 163–183). American Psychological Association

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- ii Education Act 1996, Section 7. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/7>
- iii United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 29. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- iv General Comment No. 1 (2001) on the aims of education. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-1-2001-aims-education>
- v Department for Education (2011). Teachers' Standards. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards>
- vi National Curriculum in England – Framework Document. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4>
- vii Ofsted Reports on More Able Students. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report>