

CONSTRUCTIONS OF  
HIGHER ABILITY IN  
TWO MAINTAINED AND  
TWO INDEPENDENT  
SCHOOLS

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*For my dear dad and my beloved daughter Katie*

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## ABSTRACT

This research is an exploration of constructions of ability, especially 'greater ability' within four Maintained and Independent case study schools in Scotland, from a variety of group perspectives. It seeks to illuminate the commonalities and differences between and within schools in individuals' implicit theories of ability and explores the possible implications of such constructs.

An analysis of policy and political debate provided the starting point for this research. This led into the empirical work in four case study schools. Data were gathered from semi structured interviews with headteachers, principal teachers of English, Maths, Art and music, class teachers, parents and pupils. In addition, non-participant observation took place for each subject area and class. Multiple perspectives helped to create meaningful layers of perceptions of ability while also making it possible to analyse the complexity of values and beliefs within each class and school.

The research found that there were distinctions to be made between schools in both sectors which reflected contrasting viewpoints, echoing 'communitarian concerns' and the 'culture of self interest' (Ball, 1997). However, the experiences, judgements and choices of individuals presented a more complex pattern in which contradictory beliefs could lead to experiences of dissonance in maintained schools and highlighted the importance of the negotiated ability constructs being brought to bear by individuals within institutions.



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# Introduction

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## Research Aims

This research was initiated as a result of the researcher's interest in the ongoing political debate concerning the perceived superiority of independent school provision for the very able and the supposed inferiority of the 'state' system (Ball, 1990). Consequently, the aim of this study was to begin to explore varied perspectives within Maintained and Independent schools in relation to ability. This was in order to illuminate differences and similarities within and across schools and to begin to understand the ways in which ability construction in such schools might reflect or contradict traditional policy and societal views of system difference.

## Significance of Research

The traditional view of an 'egalitarian' state system and an 'elitist' independent sector promotes particular views of ability and the form that provision in schools should take in relation to individual differences. This polarisation of views on ability is reflected in the policy struggles, which have taken place since the 60s in the UK. Although there have been conflicting perspectives on ability within each of the major parties (Salter & Tapper, 1985), this study makes use of Giddens' distinction (1998) between the two main political philosophies underpinning the old left and new right (ie egalitarianism / acceptance of inequality).

However, policy struggles are not only present in the explicit debates of political rhetoric or in the implicit messages about ability within the documentation emerging from various parties. Ball (1994) suggests that policy is not the simple imposition of ideas on schools and individuals but instead is a problem posed which will find resolution of some kind in



the minds of individuals participating in it. Or indeed, it may produce an ongoing 'struggle' which may not be capable of resolution. This struggle may be seen between 'schools' and policy makers in greater or lesser degrees of discord and congruity in relation to ability. It may also be highlighted in administrative and organisational aspects within schools as well as in the teachers, pupils and parents within individual classrooms.

In this study, ability is seen as a multidimensional construct, mediated by individual identities. For those participating in schools, ability is a 'significant component of their identity,' (Mugny & Carugati, 1989), an important element in everyday experiences. Jenkins (1996) supports a notion of there being an ongoing 'synthesis' of internal and external definitions of self. This should be seen as posing the potential for internal and external ability constructs creating potential contradictions in individuals' identities (Mugny & Carugati, 1989). I would argue that in exploring the narratives of teachers, pupils and parents, it is the nature of the tension at the boundary between internal and external worlds of each that we may begin to understand the nature of ability construction within the worlds of particular subjects and schools.

### *The Political Arena and Educational Policy*

The political struggle of the last 35 years in the United Kingdom, concerning the purpose and role of different forms of schooling and the conceptualisation of ability inherent in such views generated polarised views (Giddens, 1998) based on an egalitarian (old left) philosophy and acceptance of inequality (new right). The development of a comprehensive, all-comer, system, in the 60s emphasised the potential of the individual being achieved through equalising access to educational opportunities. This brought with it an attempt to move away from the measurement of 'ability' of previous policy, which had tended to bring with it ideas of fixed capacity. In addition, such



measurement tended to fix that capacity at an early age through selective provision. Instead comprehensivisation promoted a vision of 'potential' which could be met and developed within schools. It was argued that this could provide access to a wide variety of educational experiences and would not preclude individuals from making choices and progress at different rates (Benn & Chitty, 1996). However, the 19 years of Conservative party rule in the UK from 1978 to 1997 saw a government in power which was promoting hostility toward the fluid model of potential and instead considered a measurable 'ability' to be of greater efficacy in managing educational provision (Pring & Walford, 1997). Along with this perceived need to measure ability came the Assisted Places Scheme which encouraged the belief that, 'private provision was superior to that of the state,' (Walford, 1990, p 107). Through this scheme more able children from 'poorer' families were to be given the chance to participate in the 'superior' Independent system. Thus the conceptualisation of ability in politics continued to emphasise not only the divide over the nature of ability but also the way in which the state might interact with ability within policy and schools and impact upon individuals.

Scotland is unusual as an educational subsystem within the UK in the coherence of its state system provision since all state high schools are comprehensive schools. A popular self-view of Scottish education as a high quality and equality promoting system (McCrone, 1992; Paterson, 1997b) encourages confidence in the efficacy of that system for all 'abilities.' It is against this particular Scottish context that UK led right wing reform has established a discourse of marketisation through such strategies as parental choice, school league tables and encouragement for increased performance through selection within schools when organising learning (i.e. setting HMI, 1997). In addition, what Ball (1990) terms a discourse of derision, set out to denigrate the possibility that comprehensive education could be effective for all children. The ongoing policy

discourses relating to ability continued to focus on structures and organisation of learning rather than questioning the nature of ability within educational contexts.

### *Teaching and the problem of ability*

However, research over the last 30 years, into teacher identification of very able children has pointed to problems of unreliability, discrepancy and bias: from the work of Pagnato and Birch (cited in Gear, 1976) carried out in the 60s, in which they question teachers' fundamental understanding of the nature of intelligence, to the work carried out in the 70s by Tempest (1974) and Gear (1976) which highlighted unreliable teacher judgement as the sole basis for identification of very able children. Discrepancies between individual teachers were also brought to the fore in Maltby (1984) and Eyre (1997a). Schack and Starko (1990) and Maker (1994) confirmed a tendency for teachers to concentrate on narrow definitions and identification measures despite the developments made by theorists with regard to intelligence (Gardner, 1985; Sternberg, 1990).

In Scotland, within the context of an egalitarian state system of education (maintained), where comprehensive, all-comer high schools deal with more than 96% of secondary school age children, research carried out by Thomson et al (1995) and Hamilton (1999) into teacher views of the very able, has begun to explore the nature of these personal conceptions of ability. The former research alludes to the lack of identification of very able children and the reasons put forward as potential justification. 'Teachers are frightened to commit themselves now because they are frightened they are making the wrong judgement,' (Thomson et al, p 37,1995). The latter noted contextualised high confidence in teacher judgement. This led to a reinforcement of particular assumptions about the nature of different kinds of ability and subsequent provision and classroom judgements resulting from these.



Freeman (1998), reviewing current international research with regard to teachers and the identification of the very able, noted the ongoing nature of these problems. She suggested that there is a need for research which considers how teachers' 'personal conceptions of ability or stereotypes of giftedness affect his or her teaching,' (p8). In seeking to investigate the complexity of ability construction, both from a teaching perspective but also from the views of others such as pupils, parents, headteachers and principal teachers, our understanding of ability constructs may serve to provide much needed illumination for an area darkened by assumption.

### Methodology

Scotland's education system is organised separately from that in England and Wales. Around 96% of children attend government funded state schools (Maintained) while about 4% attend private schools (Independent). While the state system is dominated by the comprehensive system and is perceived to support an egalitarian ideology with regard to pupils, schools in the Independent sector may often be selective in terms of ability or simply financially selective. With a background of political and policy debate and development which reflected polarised views of ability, an analysis of policy was to be the starting point for this research. This led into the main body of the empirical work which took the form of case studies of four schools, two within each of the sectors alluded to above, with a view to understanding policy and provision in relation to very able children through observation and interviews. The case study schools were chosen for the following characteristics:

#### Maintained - Comprehensive

- one serving very mixed socio-economic areas with seeming lack of 'success' in exam league tables with around 800 pupils (M1)
- one serving mainly high socio-economic areas with public 'success' in exam league tables with around 800 pupils (M2)

## Independent

- one school using only informal selection by interview with around 300 pupils in total across Nursery and up to S6 in high school (Ind 1)
- one long established school with selection by ability with around 1700 pupils from Nursery to S6 (Ind 2)

Within each school a range of semi structured interviews took place as well as classroom observation connected to four subject areas: English, Maths, Art and Music. Interviews with each headteacher and each subject head of department in relation to the very able, their learning experiences and the values and beliefs underpinning the organisation of learning were undertaken. There then followed teacher interviews and classroom observation in each subject for each of two age groups: (i) around 12 years old and (ii) around 15 years old and about to sit external examinations for the first time. Teachers were interviewed initially briefly and asked to nominate children considered to be 'very able' in their class and those considered to be good middle of the class. Observation of lessons occurred subsequently and teachers were asked to reflect on what went well during their lesson. Finally they were interviewed and any areas arising from observations were included. Both sets of children were then interviewed and the parents of able children contacted by telephone. The use of multiple perspectives was helpful in creating meaningful layers of perceptions of ability while also making it possible to analyse the complexity of values and beliefs being brought to bear within each class and school.

### Research Aims and Questions

The research aims are as follows:

- To explore the ways in which practitioners and participants in the independent and maintained sectors interpret the category of very able pupil
- To investigate beliefs and perceptions with regard to the nature of provision for such children and how it is believed they are manifested in social, organisational and curricular areas
- To consider prevailing beliefs and practices indicative of support for particular social and political ideologies and values

These in turn have led to the following research questions:

1. *How do teachers working within particular schools perceive the category of 'very able' and 'average' pupil?*
2. *In what ways do teachers in different schools consider that they may have a role to play in the identification and development of the 'very able' / 'average' pupil? How do they perceive such processes to operate within their institution?*
3. *How do pupils in different institutions perceive the construction of their own and 'greater ability' and the possibility that experiences and interactions within school may play a part in this?*
4. *How do the parents of 'very able' pupils perceive their position within school and their learning experiences and expectations within society?*



## Structure of thesis

This research was envisaged in response to an interest in the conflicting conceptualisations of ability present within political debate. This led to a consideration of the contexts within which ability is discussed and debated and to schools where 'ability' conceptualisation would play an important role in the ways in which individuals might deal with and experience teaching and learning. Chapter 1 deals with the political struggles over the last 20 years and the ways in which they reflect greater and lesser eras of policy discord over the nature of ability. In chapter 2, the relationship between differing forms of school provision and perceived notions of ability are explored as an extension of the political debate established in the first chapter. In the next chapter, chapter 3, the 'struggles' within research on intelligence/ability are discussed. The nature of their impact upon educational contexts, as well as the implicit theories or constructs of individuals within schools are explored.

Chapter 4 considers the research methodology, the tensions arising from the focus of the research, problems faced when participants refuse 'to play the game' and the iterative analysis carried out.

Chapter 5 deals with the administrative and organisational areas of ability 'struggle' from the perspectives of headteachers and principal Teachers of English, Maths, Art and Music. Principal teachers outlined their personal and professional notions of ability while headteachers delineated the ways in which interior and exterior issues with regard to ability provision were reconciled. Chapters 6 and 7 consider teacher constructions of ability within and across case study schools. Chapter 6 deals with these in the two Maintained schools while chapter 7 considers the two Independent schools.



Chapter 8 looks at the ways in which parents of nominated 'very able' pupils construed ability in relation to their child in a specific subject area as well as their views on school and ability. In addition, parental choice and ability is explored.

There is a recognition of the uniqueness of pupil constructs in Chapter 9 in that they in particular are the focal point of ability 'judgements.' This chapter utilises a framework which serves to highlight strands of ability construction which allow the researcher to identify distinctive tensions or congruities in pupil constructs, within and across schools.

Subsequently, chapter 10 explores the nature and potential interactions between institutional and individual dissonance and institutional consensus and individual consonance. Chapter 11, firstly draws attention to the ways in which this research has answered the research questions. Finally, conclusions are considered with regard to broader issues raised by this study.

# Chapter 1 Policy and Ability

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## *Introduction*

This chapter is concerned with the ways in which ability is represented in political ideology and documentation in what is called policy discourse. In order to begin to establish the ways in which the maintenance and shifts of policy over the last 20 years have demonstrated particular beliefs about ability and consequently the nature of schooling, this chapter considers firstly, the distinctiveness of the Scottish policy context and the importance of policy discourses in attempts to shape educational structures and values. Secondly, the politics of ability is explored within Conservative educational reform and as part of the education agenda established in the 1997 general election. This is then followed by an examination of post election policy development and ability. Finally, Scotland's ability agenda is investigated and its continued independence considered, in light of the changing perspectives on ability and Maintained and Independent schools emerging from Westminster.

## *The Scottish Context*

It is not possible to begin to approach issues of ability identification and teacher perception without first addressing the nature of the Scottish context. Both the school system in place and the policy documents of the 90s are reflective of a tension implicit in a society where comprehensive education is dominant. Ninety-six per cent of high school age children attend such schools (Clark & Munn, 1997) and therefore unlike other parts of the UK, Scotland does not present parents and pupils with a variety of choices in schooling. Superficially at least, we have a system which in adopting comprehensive education so willingly, has promoted the view that

equality of opportunity is the predominant theme and where selection by ability (for entry) occurs within the independent system but not within the maintained sector.

Consequently, discussion of very able children deals not only with a group of children who are already perceived as successful but also initiates debate over the nature of provision within schools, especially when the schools concerned are supposedly capable of providing for a range of abilities. A popular self-view of Scottish education as a high quality and equity promoting system (McCrone, 1992), may lead to questions over the need for any developments for this particular group of children who may be deemed to be achieving success through this type of schooling. It is against this particular Scottish context that UK led right wing reform has established a discourse of marketisation through such strategies as parental choice, league tables and increasing encouragement for increased performance i.e. quality of output, through selection within schools when organising learning e.g. setting (HMI, 1997).

The need to consider the nature of this discourse is discussed in the following pages. Subsequently an exploration of the policy documentation of major parties is made prior to and after the GE of 1<sup>st</sup> May 1997. The effects of this development of educational policy within a Scottish context are then considered in greater detail.

### *Policy and Politics*

Ball (1994) puts forward the view that policy is not something which is done to people but instead that policies pose problems which are then solved in context. In order to gain an understanding of this we need to look at the policy context to gain an understanding of the struggle which ensues. He argues that a lot of research



about education or schooling which does take place, is not about policy at all, that it is a kind of 'significant present absence,' (Ball, 1997).

Policy is ignored or theorised 'out of the picture'. This is particularly the case in research about classrooms, about teachers and about schools which treats them as free-standing and self-determining, as 'out of context.' (op cit, p 265, 1997)

It is considered essential in this study that an assessment of educational policy is made an integral facet of the research, both at national and institutional level as well as at the point of 'struggle' in the 'classroom', in teacher, pupil and parent discourse.

Questions over the interpretation, measurement and provision for differing forms of ability have been the backbone of much educational policy over the last half-century. From the tripartition of provision and ability in the 40s and 50s, to the right wing policies of the 80s and 90s, individuals or groups of individuals have sought to outline a view of educational systems, curricula and organisation of learning which have made assumptions about interpretations of ability in relation to schooling (Wooldridge, 1994; Foster et al, 1996; Walford, 1997). The values inherent in these interpretations and judgements gain authority in the guise of educational policy (Kogan, 1985) and may condition teacher based value setting.

There is a need then to investigate educational policy in relation to the theme of this research, ability, and to establish the ways in which attempts have been made to 'pose problems' for schools in connection with ability, the assumptions about ability and the diffuse value systems and subsystems which have been created. This involves considering the development of education policy in Scotland as a subsystem of UK

policy (Humes & McKenzie, 1994) through an interrogation of the policy discourse in evidence within party manifestos and education papers and documents. The consideration of policy is also of particular significance in relation to the Scottish self-perception of a system representing egalitarian educational values. These values have been at odds with the educational reforms emerging from Westminster which have continued to promote an adherence to specific views of ability.

### *Policy, Politics and Values*

In the following pages, ability within the policies of the Conservative Party and Old Labour are viewed as polarised views. While it is accepted that there have been conflicting views of ability and ability provision within parties (Salter & Tapper, 1985; Ball, 1990) over the years, consideration is given to the broad emphatic brushstrokes of the political philosophies supporting the new right and old left perspectives. Giddens (1998) focuses on the key characteristics of old left and new right philosophies. The important elements of these concerning ability, are the old left's strong support for egalitarianism and new right's persistence in accepting inequality as fundamental to decisions made in education. The advent of New Labour has brought with it, attempts to move away from educational policies driven by ideological stances (Power and Whitty, 1999). Instead, a pragmatic third way has been sought which, it will be argued, has shifted ability discourse from within the traditional philosophies of old left or new right while presenting distinct continuities with Thatcherite reform.

In this next section, the ways in which Conservative Party policy has encouraged educational reform, which has reinforced structural and conceptual inequality within schools in relation to ability, are examined first. Next Old Labour support for an



egalitarian philosophy and the shifting stance of New Labour on the approach to the General Election in 1997 are considered. The education debate in major party manifestos is then examined. Subsequently, the ability discourse generated in the light of a New Labour victory is discussed.

### *Conservative Government*

The new right focus on a notion of easily identifiable and distinct abilities and segregated provision between and within schools, highlighted a tendency to revive conceptions of ability as innate and measurable. The acceptance of inequality inherent in these views, has in the past, led to a denial of equal opportunities for certain groups because of social class (Foster et al, 1996) or minority membership (Gillborn, 1998).

This revival of what Gillborn and Youdell (2000) term the new IQ-ism, has gained some ground in the 90s with the support of some academics (Hernstein and Murray, 1994). However, ability for such major researchers on intelligence as Sternberg (1996) and Gardner (1985) remains a contested and complex concept which cannot be reduced to hereditarian perspective. Conservative policy, nonetheless, was to embrace ability as measurable through performance and their policies were to reflect a rejection of the egalitarianism symbolised by the old left.

### *Education, Education, Education*

After 18 years in power the Conservative Party had had the opportunity to influence in a major way the route that education would take (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). The announcement of the General Election in 1997, was supposed to create a platform for debate on an issue which had already been such an important element of



Parliamentary confrontation over policy and the perceived inequities of the Government as Labour focused on, ' Education! Education! Education!'

Since the early seventies when policy was driven and educational agendas largely set by Local Authorities and trade unions, Conservative Government policies had seen a reversal of this situation. Major structural changes in curriculum and school character had come about through the increasing dominance of central government in what was deemed a national service and national concern (Walford, 1994). This led to an increasingly traditionalist approach to education and an emphasis on results and discipline as a remedy for the perceived influx of progressive teaching and learning ideas. For the Conservatives, these represented not only a failing system but also one that reflected left wing ideology and therefore automatically involved values at odds with those of the traditionalism of the Conservative right (Power & Whitty, 1999). However, it has really been in the last ten years that this impetus for radical reformation of the education system has taken hold as a major method of promoting a particular value system and also as a major area of concern to voters and their children (Ball, 1990; Ball, 1994; Pring & Walford, 1997).

### *Selection and Segregation*

The perceived superiority of the private system in terms of high performance, value for money and traditional approaches to teaching, learning and educational goals, was seen as an importable infrastructure for a state system which was to be encouraged to emulate the success of the private sector (Salter & Tapper, 1985). This was to come about by a move away from educational opportunity for all through the comprehensive system, to a diversity of provision for particular skills and abilities and selection for entry to specific schools.

In addition to selection and diversity of provision, schools were to be encouraged to compete for children by attracting parents to them through success in exam results. The market ideology of the independent system was thought to be able to encourage higher achievement while highlighting 'failing schools'. However there was also a distrust of the Local Authorities and their influence on schooling and so gradually their responsibility for and effect on education was eroded. Meanwhile, centralisation of control through a National Curriculum in England and 5-14 guidelines in Scotland and policy domination conjoined with increased budgetary control of institutions by individual headteachers, sought to loosen the local government connections with educational development. This was a way of attempting to gradually avoid the filtration of policy by potentially hostile LAs and a further decrease in Local Authority control would have been a major element of Conservative efforts if they had won the '97 election.

Conservative Policy, then, has been marked by the domination of Central Government policy generation; an attempt to dissolve Local Authority control through centralisation of policy development and individualisation of finance and administration; attacks on progressive education and consequently the Labour Party. For the Conservatives such ideologies were synonymous with this party and also with failing schools and falling standards. Eagleton (1991) comments on the tendency for right wing politicians to avoid locating their own educational policies within ideological frameworks since to do so 'would be to risk turning them into objects of contestation,' (Eagleton, p6, 1991). Conversely the Conservative Party saw itself as representative of 'traditional' and, by implication, effective methods. In order to



bring a return to such traditional methods and values, the Conservatives sought to encourage a change in the emphasis on Teacher Training courses from the theoretical to almost entirely practical, so encouraging a skill based profession with direct government support of whole class teaching but avoiding the 'contamination' of discussion and debate within specific Training institutions.

### *Standards and Competition*

An over riding theme of all policy had been a perceived need to raise standards in the face of the supposed lack of success of the Comprehensive system (Ball, 1990). Recent attempts to compare achievement in various subjects on a global scale had exacerbated a preoccupation with achievement - Britain did not do very well in this ultimate League table. This only served to add impetus to the need for a system which would allow the educational capabilities of children to be enhanced. For the Conservative Party this could be achieved through the use of the market forces themes of competition and accountability in order to force up standards and consequently achievement.

This emphasis on a fiercely 'competitive learning society' (Benn & Chitty, 1996) and performance orientated school culture led to new right support for ability segregation between schools and within schools through the use of setting and selection (the latter in England). Despite research evidence which found that there was little indication that such organisation of learning was enabling for the very able child (Harlen and Malcolm, 1997) and the quantity of work done which suggested that it would actually lead to division and injustice (Foster et al, 1996; Gillborn, 1998), it was a major aspect of educational policy. The policies of the Conservatives sought to undermine comprehensive schools, which represented, for them, a failed system

(Benn & Chitty, 1996) despite evidence, in Scotland at least, that comprehensive schooling had raised pupil attainment (McPherson and Willms, 1987).

### *The Labour Party*

The Labour Party had instigated the comprehensive system and with it the premise that all children should have the opportunity to have access to educational provision which would allow them to achieve to the best of their ability. There had also been an instinctive reaction against a private system which was perceived as promoting a form of education which sought to exclude those without the funding or in the case of the grammar schools, those without perceived ability in particular fields. Elitism was the pejorative term applied to education within these systems where money and social class were important elements in school experiences and opportunities. Traditionally, Old Labour had been interested in the abolition of such avenues of escape for pupils in the belief that such segregation sustained class difference and privilege for a few. A universal form of education for all which sought to present society in all its variety within a comprehensive school was thought to be a way of doing away with such divisiveness and encouraging achievement for all (Wooldridge, 1994; Benn & Chitty, 1996).

As comprehensive education had developed, varied interpretations of the nature of such schools led to different kinds of comprehensive in England. However, in Scotland, a more coherent system was generated in which comprehensive schools were dominant, selection for entry was absent and setting within schools gradually waned. Attainment for all children rose (Mcpherson & Willms, 1987) and ability was no longer the explicit focal point for structural inequality in Scotland.



The Old Labour support for comprehensivisation had, at an ideological level, encouraged a minimisation of perceived ability difference as the focal point of educational experience.

### *New Labour*

With the advent, in the nineties, of a new Labour leader, Tony Blair, came a move by this party to attempt to create New Labour which was to move away from many of its more traditional views on education. The Comprehensive system was perceived to have problems which had to be addressed but a number of Conservative policies were in fact to be accepted as established elements of the educational system from which Labour would work (Power & Whitty, 1999; Webster & Parsons, 1999). Therefore Independent schools were no longer to be attacked or abolished but instead were to be encouraged to become more involved in their immediate communities. Assessment and accountability of teaching and learning were to continue and specialist schools for particular types of high ability such as music were to be further developed. Increasingly New Labour was to be perceived as a party, which was closing the gap between the Main parties in terms of the policies and strategies being brought to the education arena. However the rhetoric of educational aims was to remain very different and while the Conservatives held onto the market and management language of the previous ten years, New Labour stated that they sought to show education as a tool to help achieve social justice.

### *Approach to the General Election 1997*

Education, it was thought, in the run up to the General Election, was to be one of the most exciting debates and relevant to the concerns of the electorate but many political journalists felt that there was a lack of emphasis on this area due to the similarity of perspective across political parties.

Most parties are broadly sympathetic to existing Tory education policy. Labour and the Lib Dems plan to tinker with the details but not the principles of testing, standards, and, to some extent, selection. (GE,97)

Certainly it was suggested in the Economist (GE,p1,97) that contrary to the usual pattern of innovative ideas from those in opposition and consolidation of work achieved while in office by those in power, the major party manifestos showed the reverse. While the Conservatives seemed to search for additional educational strategies to attract voters, the Labour party was considered to be resting on established ideas. This was thought to be because of a lack of financial impetus for any new strategy (GE 97).

### *Conservative Party Manifesto*

A good education is the birthright of every child.

While suggesting that good education is necessary for each child the Conservative Party sought to provide differentiated education experiences within particular structures such as a selective system and setting within schools as well as through a return to traditional teaching and learning strategies. An emphasis on external appraisal of achievement in testing and league tables was also to place an emphasis on performance and, in particular, an emphasis on specific types of achievement, measurable in examinations.

In proposing a need to emphasise the literacy and numeracy thrust of future education initiatives, the Conservative Manifesto attacked 'mistaken' initiatives of the



past, 'mistaken, progressive education in the 1960s and 1970s [which] denied these precious skills to too many children (Conservative Manifesto, p1, 1997).

Since Conservative rhetoric focused attention on progressive education as representative of left wing Labour ideology, this inevitably attempted to associate perceived failure not only with particular strategies but also with the Labour Party and any potential policies. For the Conservatives this seemed a logical conclusion as the so-called progressive education of 60s and 70s had been nurtured under the control of LEAs and Trade Unions.

Their policies since then, including the move away from local control of education by the LAs, had in fact been an attempt to 'put that right', (Con Man, p1, 1997).

Sometimes...schools are failing because the local education authority, which runs them, is failing. The authorities with the worst GCSE results at Key Stage 2...are run by Labour. Those children need our help. (Con.Man,p3,1997)

In equating Local Authorities and the Labour Party with problems and failing standards, an attempt was made to set up a comparison between educational value systems and methodology and to see each party as personifying within its particular framework views which could not be separated from the party identity. This continued to give credence to the traditional notions of old left and new right polarisation.

In basic content the educational strategies outlined in the Conservative Manifesto continued to reinforce the underlying principles of the market forces ideology so prevalent in previous policy.

- **extension of Nursery provision but through the use of vouchers and private and state provision**
- **the use of league tables in primary schools to encourage competition**
- **the increase in selection and also specialisation of schools leading to competition not only between schools but also between parents for entry to particular schools**
- **compulsory loans for Higher education financed by private capital**

The increasing private and public partnership in financing and providing for education was also a major feature coupled with increasing support for the dismantling of the comprehensive system through the encouragement of GM status, selection and specialist schools. Existing comprehensives were to be allowed to have grammar streams and were to find it easier to transform themselves into grammar schools. Interestingly, while the above strategies were having some effect through existing policy in England and Wales, Scotland was still quite overwhelmingly producing children from Comprehensives.

### *Labour Party Manifesto*

While New Labour in its manifesto echoed the theme of a need to raise standards and to compete on a global level, there was a great deal spoken about using education as a tool to bring about social justice. Education was to be a method of empowering the weak and ameliorating social condition by developing strategies in individuals to bring about change in individual conditions and ultimately change for the better in

society. Michael Barber, an influential educationalist associated with the Labour Party saw the election as being about, 'social justice and the role of education in bringing it about. Nothing more, nothing less. (TES, p128, 25/4/97)

He develops the argument in the following way:

Better-educated people are more likely to live life to the full, to enjoy the benefits of civilisation and to resolve their differences with others peacefully and respectfully. In short, education, in addition to promoting economic growth, also helps to put in place the values and attitudes on which democracy is based. (op cit)

The implicit values underpinning the Conservative Party policies in education, reflected a management and market forces perception of the world in which competition and standards were necessary tools in order to improve achievement in schooling and in wider society (Walford, 1997; Ball, 1997). The Labour Party suggested that education was in itself a vital tool for achieving a more far reaching and deeply felt change in the nature of society itself and its priorities and values.

### *Moving Toward a Third Way?*

Within the manifesto of the Labour Party, however, there was an uncanny correlation with Conservative Party policies. Nursery provision was an important element and intended for implementation by the abolition of the Voucher system set up by the Conservatives. This was followed by emphasis being placed on the basic literacy and numeracy, which both parties perceived as a problem. The implementation of assessment of children entering school had already been suggested and welcomed by the Conservatives on information provided by the SCAA. Despite the fact that old Labour was against the idea of selection because of its divisiveness, New Labour seemed to bow to the difficulty inherent in attempting to change such policies



wholly. Rules were set out for selection controlled by Local Authorities but with appeals possible and Grammar schools were to be allowed to continue if a ballot of parents supported such a decision.

Grant maintained schools would also be allowed to continue but were to be renamed as Foundation schools with greater accountability to Local Authorities. Labour was suggesting a move back towards the involvement of Local Authorities in the ways in which policy might be implemented in schools. This contradicted the rather hostile and negative attitude of the Conservative Party to the Local Authorities but political commentators doubted whether Local Authorities would ever regain the responsibility and power in policy, implementation and financial control of previous years.

Like the Conservatives, New Labour suggested that setting by ability would be a way of addressing the needs of the very able, with the brightest students able to accelerate (bbc, p2, www, election 97). In addition Labour was increasingly interested in private and public partnership in education, involving potential university development, private and public schools working with each other in the use of facilities and future self financing of higher education through loans to be paid back over a working life. The only real element of proposed policy which directly opposed and intended to abolish a much-prized aim of the Conservatives was the Labour intention of ridding the government of the expense of subsidising the private sector through the Assisted Places Scheme. The Labour party had been ideologically against this extreme form of segregation of the brightest and their placement in the private system and intended to make use of any money saved through its phasing out to reduce class sizes in

lower primary school. However Labour's traditional hostility to the private system was gradually changing over the twelve months prior to the General Election.

[There had been] a distinct shift of labour attitudes to the old chestnuts of removing charitable status, imposing VAT on school fees, subjecting Independent schools to state inspection and the national curriculum. (Williams, TES, 1997)

Instead there was a proposal for co-operation and partnership in which there could be co-operation on various issues.

[These included] staff training, resources, special needs, curriculum development and flexibility in the curriculum, community support, building up centres of excellence and value-added league tables. (op cit)

### *Liberal Democrats and SNP*

The other two main parties involved in this election battle, presented manifestos which reflected or linked ideas seen in the Conservative and Labour Party documents. The **Liberal Democrats** placed an emphasis on providing Nursery education for all 3/4 year olds but also proposed tax relief on childcare for parents who were working or in training. They proposed to continue the independent working of schools with only the lightest of touches from the LAs which echoed the Conservatives' stance. However, they took up the Labour view on the Assisted Places Scheme by suggesting that it would be gradually withdrawn and while being similarly against selection they agreed to let existing communities decide upon the retention of Grammar schools. Higher Education funded for students through a loan system echoed both the Labour and Conservative views on an alternative method of funding those in Higher education, especially with the high numbers who



have increasingly become involved in it. However, the main feature which set this particular manifesto apart from any of the others was that it ventured to propose increased income tax as a means of raising much needed cash for the education sector.

The Scottish National Party also proposed Nursery provision for all 3/4 year olds but like the Labour Party wished to abolish the voucher scheme started by the Conservatives. They also proposed getting rid of opted out status for schools (affecting only two schools in Scotland) and phasing out the Assisted Places Scheme which seemed to find favour only with the Conservatives. Their only unusual difference was in stating that student loans would not only be abolished but that the student grant would be reinstated.

Within the policy discourse generated at this point, it seemed that a form of consensus over the need for differentiated treatment of different forms of perceived ability was reached. The three main parties represented in Scotland, Labour, Scottish Nationalists and Liberal Democrats agreed on the nature of such differentiated provision – that it should take the form of limited selection within schools for setted subjects and controlled segregated provision for certain specialist areas such as expressive arts and modern languages. The Conservative Party maintained support for selection between and by schools, encouraging a fuller segregation of ‘ability’ groups.

The empowerment of parents through choice and representation on school boards seemed to be accepted as established. The accountability of schools to society

generally and parents in particular was to be encouraged but the Labour party was to suggest that the nature of the measurement should become one of progress rather than one of performance. However, the nature of that progress was still to be determined through assessed performance.

### *Post Election Policies*

The Labour Party, after achieving a large majority in the General Election, seemed to possess the parliamentary strength to move forward quickly to achieve its educational aims. During the first few months of power they set in motion the abolition of The Assisted Places Scheme, in order to begin to raise funds for a future reduction in class sizes in early primary. Assessment of P1 children was to be initiated and literacy and numeracy were to be given precedence at classroom level with a focus time emphasising basic skills each school day. One of the most important documents to appear, was a White Paper (DfEE, 1997), Excellence in Schools, which seemed superficially to return to the egalitarian principles of the old left. However, these continuities were, ‘ rhetorical and symbolic rather than substantive and substantial,’ (Power & Whitty, p 538, 1999). Instead, New Labour were to reflect strong tones of new right philosophy in support for the market and acceptance of inequality (Power & Whitty, 1999; Webster & Parsons, 1999). The return to a meritocratic vision where ability should be identified, measured and segregated provision continued, lent weight to Gillborn and Youdell’s (2000) observations about a new IQ-ism coming to the fore.



### *Excellence in schools*

In January 97 the Conservative government had released a white paper on education and skills development in Scotland. It served as a eulogy for what was soon to be a deceased government. In it great use was made of the language of achievement and progress both in local and national terms as a result of government strategy. After the May election victory of the Labour party, the first education paper from a Labour government in 18 years entitled *Excellence in Schools* appeared in July 1997 (DfEE, 1997). Much of the Conservative rhetoric appeared to be sustained in talk of early assessment of ability, the raising of standards and the need for accountability and high standards. However, significantly, the Labour party took this opportunity to begin to suggest a need to modernise the 'comprehensive principle' while maintaining that they retained a commitment to equality of opportunity. It is interesting to note that the reform language of the Conservative party was largely embraced by New Labour (Gillborn, 1999; Power and Whitty, 1999) although disparaging comments suggested that while many Conservative reforms were necessary they came later rather than sooner or that the method of implementation was through forced imposition rather than partnership

Partnership was one of the buzzwords of New Labour's education policy principles. Partnership between government, parents, teachers, business and schools in conjunction with an 'unrelenting pressure' on teachers and schools to improve standards were proposed. But within this partnership, there was needed a constant pressure in order to maintain constant improvement since without such pressure, it was claimed, there would not be the impetus for raising standards. If we consider the nature of the pressure to be applied, it is strikingly similar to that of Conservative Party policy.



- Comparison of school results
- Assessment of teaching
- Assessment of performance

In fact the development of education policy was depicted as a crusade with overtones of religious fervour and moral superiority but the question was how was it superior? Where right wing reform was seen as tackling the need to raise standards through diverse attempts to manipulate structure and organisation, New Labour maintained an interest in standards rather than structures although it is argued that it is not possible to disentangle two such interconnected elements (Webster & Parsons, 1999) They insisted this could be achieved through target setting for schools, an assessment of performance and a focus on early intervention. There was a need, it was stated, to

create a climate in which schools are constantly challenged to compare themselves to other similar schools and adopt proven ways of raising their performance (DfEE, p12, 1997)

This confidence in ‘proven ways of raising performance’ and the assertion that, ‘we know what it takes to create a good school,’ (op cit, p12) reinforced the market view. The emphasis on competitiveness further reflected a previous right wing agenda while suggesting that this competitiveness was not to do with the marketisation of education but instead with the pressure needed to ensure higher standards.

*‘New’ ways of looking at ability, ‘new’ ways of dealing with ability*

How then did New Labour attempt to deal with ability? Comprehensive education, it was argued (DfEE, 1997), was a good idea but unfortunately foundered because of the tendency to equate equality of opportunity with imposed uniformity where ability

was concerned. Having stipulated that structures were not to be the focus of attention, as it was during Conservative government, New Labour began to outline an acceptance of different models of schooling as well as the modernisation of the 'comprehensive principle' in order to ensure that schools improved. However, they did in fact encourage the continuation of diversification and specialisation for particular talents or abilities. This initiative would bring about structural change and development if sufficient numbers were created. While encouraging inclusion, then, seemingly 'positive' forms of segregated learning, linked to perceived ability were to be encouraged, although at present Scotland only has a few of these schools.

In addition to this diversification of provision in relation to the types of institutions becoming available, the organisation of learning within comprehensives was challenged. Mixed ability classes were condemned as unsuccessful in all but a small number of situations where teachers were capable of teaching competently. The norm was expected to be setting in secondary education and any debate over mixed ability versus setting was considered sterile, providing 'no solutions,' (DfEE, 1997, p 38).

The focus on specialisation as well as setted provision within comprehensive schools seemed to be following the previous agenda set by the Conservatives but was at odds with prior old left rhetoric. A meritocratic vision of ability and schooling was coming to the fore. Although it was envisioned that all pupils would achieve a high standard, individual difference in terms of ability were consistently highlighted.

We must modernise comprehensive secondary education  
for the new century – recognising that different children move



at different speeds and have different abilities (DfEE,p 13, 1997)

They also suggested that ability differences had not been identified in the past and that children had not been provided with appropriate provision across the ability spectrum (p 25). They perceived an emphasis on uniformity rather than on equality of opportunity in previous years. So a variety of forms of grouping and teaching and learning interactions were being considered as well as the development of strategies for the identification and support of particularly able pupils. This support could involve cross-institutional activities (primary pupils in Secondary and secondary pupils working on OU courses).

A consideration of policy discourse in 1997 provided a view of a narrowing of the polarisation with regard to ability between Conservative and Labour parties but an attempt to maintain a political and ideological distance through a manipulation of discourse to include and build on right wing rhetoric (Power & Whitty, 1999)

### *The 'very able' and 'New' Labour*

However, additional policy developments in 1998 and 1999 with regard to able children, were to reflect a further shift in ideological stance by the Labour party. Not only was ability difference to be recognised but high ability was to be considered in some detail. In 1998, a Working Committee on Gifted and Talented children met with the intention of ensuring a focus on the needs of gifted and talented children in national policy; the development of identification measures and provision; and the uptake and use of the above in each school and LA.

Subsequently an initiative in England focused on measured high ability in areas of deprivation such as inner cities. The Excellence in Cities (EiC) (DfEE, 1999)



initiative proposed a programme lasting three years, to improve the education of able inner city children. Within this, an emphasis upon setting by subject ability was given added weight. This programme also entailed partnership with Independent schools which were now described not as elitist or divisive but as partners in a joint venture, enabling the most able to reach their potential. This scheme was to mimic elements of the disparaged Assisted Places Scheme (Power & Whitty, 1999).

It might be argued that New Labour was attempting to synthesise a new ability discourse which amalgamated elements of an earlier meritocratic vision with a desire for social inclusion and justice. Emphasis here was on the identification of ability difference, segregated provision through setting within schools and widened access to Higher Education through intervention for pupils with perceived high ability in deprived areas. Importantly, this development has not occurred in Scotland as yet. On contacting the Scottish Executive about their responses to and involvement in EiC, the researcher was informed that , ‘As yet the Department has no set policy on ‘Able Pupils’ but we hope in the near future to start work on this area,’ (Finlayson, on behalf of SEED, 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2000).

### *Scotland and Policy*

A popular, contemporary view in Scotland, and a seemingly supportive historical perspective (Paterson, 1997a) which together promote a view of Scottish education as egalitarian, serve to reinforce a belief in the inherent equity and quality of the education system. Paterson (1997b) argues that within this context, reform in education such as the implementation of comprehensive education, has encouraged individual freedom.

Comprehensive education might be the way of counteracting collective disadvantage, but the terms in which it could be established and developed were about individual talent and individual opportunity.  
(Paterson, p 319, 1997b)

This individualisation, it was suggested could be seen in the development of the curricular changes such as standard grade, the development of the guidance system and the language of equal citizenship, combating other forms of exclusion.

However, it could be argued that despite this adherence to individualisation, any attempt to deal with individual differences concerning ability might be seen as ‘ a meritocratic reinvention of social inequalities,’ (op cit, p323). This assumes that for ability difference to be recognised, disadvantage would ensue. The identification of ability as connected with social class and consequently with material advantage for some and disadvantage for others meant that any attempt to consider the assumptions concerning differing forms of ability would be at odds with the system. This education system had at its heart the eradication of oppression such as social class or gender bias. If an education system is to succeed in minimising difference and inequality while still adhering to fulfilling the needs of the individual, what happens to concepts such as ability which have been so strongly linked with the material advantages of social class?

Paterson (1997b) suggests the rise of Conservative Party education policies during the 80s and 90s, were also indicative of a desire to encourage a climate of ‘individualisation’. Therefore, he argued that the strengthening of individual agency had been an aim of both Conservative and progressive politics. He argues that the



rhetoric of the Conservative party could have suggested conflict with the Scottish perspective. Instead the reforms had been accepted in Scotland because, 'although rhetorically hostile to some of the main tenets of comprehensive education, [they] have been used by the comprehensive system to further the ideals on which it was based,' (op cit, p 322).

The maintenance of comprehensive ideology is partly to do with the structures and curriculum in place through which participants in the system, both teachers and pupils and parents, experience the comprehensive philosophy but this is also importantly experienced in the language of policy both national and institutional and in the language used to conceptualise school experiences within education contexts. The hostile rhetoric referred to by Paterson cannot be dismissed as the origins of policy, which may then become 'diffuse in practice.' Policies are not only statements of intent but also, 'operational statements of values', (Ball, 1990). The introduction of values conflicting with those dominating the system, is of just as much importance as the potential structural changes to be brought about. Paterson (1997b) argues that either policy is adapted to fit within the system or that certain developments have in fact carried with them encouragement for the kind of popular participation in the democratic development of policy which is intrinsic to the predominant ideology of Scotland thus avoiding the potential problem of conflicting values.

Ball (1997) talks about the 'transformation of values and cultures of the public sector and the concomitant formation of new subjectivities.' The linkage between the



restructuring of education and the revaluing of education lies in the rhetoric alluded to by Paterson. It is in the

[it is in the] discourses of excellence, effectiveness and quality and quality and logics and culture of new managerialism in which they are embedded. (Ball, p259, 1997)

The changes brought about through the policy discourses prevalent in Conservative Party rhetoric have brought about greater regulation and control more easily seen previously in the private sector.

Professionalism is replaced by accountability, collegiality by competition and interpersonal performative comparison. These are forms of power which are realised and reproduced through social interaction within the everyday life of institutions ...They do not so much bear down upon but take shape within the practices of the institution itself and construct individuals and their social relations through direct interaction. (op cit., p261)

It is acknowledged that the quality and quantity of change within any institution or system will vary and that conflicting messages might be at work or that change may be merely superficial rather than real structural or values change. However, the 'power of language in determining perceptions and actions should not be downplayed,' (Humes, p25, 1997). Humes argues that words are contextualised, embedded in the social world and interwoven with ideas of class and power. Those who control this language are capable of influencing and steering the world of educational ideas.

Those who control the imposition of this language may find some policy developments amended to serve an ideological cause such as the comprehensive system (Paterson, 1997b) but it is difficult to measure the ways in which educational values may or may not be imbibed and utilised at the same time. The importation of Conservative party rhetoric into the world of the school is not value free but value laden and carries with it the implicit messages of marketisation, measurement and accountability. Humes (1997) comments on this change of discourse.

Michael Forsyth brought about a change of discourse whereby language of choice, quality, standards and achievement has become part of educational currency. (p 79)

During the growth years of the comprehensive system, the language of policy discourse had moved away eventually from the language of ability and ability difference since to do so was to encourage the social disadvantage associated with material wealth and middle class advantage. But with the development of New Labour policy, the party appropriated the language of choice, quality and standards of achievement for its own and claimed the moral high ground in modernising the comprehensive principle. Yet this modernisation involved a restructuring of the values underpinning it and the constructions of ability permeating it. That this was done while attempts were made within government policy to suggest an avoidance of ideology associated with old left or new right and claims for social justice, is of particular concern. It can be argued that it is not possible to create policy, which is free of ideology and values. Giddens (1998) third way, a move away from the dualism of old left and new right has, in New Labour policy, provided a new hybrid with strong new right leanings rather than a new way and far from having left the old philosophies behind, has reinvigorated the ideological arena.



It has to be remembered, here, that the Scottish context, both historically and ideologically in terms of education (Devine, 1999) is an important element in the evolution and development of policy. Educational structures have provided a 'badge of identity, a potent symbol of Scottishness and one of the ways in which nationhood was preserved' (op cit, p 389). It is argued that there is an enduring loyalty to an idea of community in Scotland and in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the values of egalitarianism as an essential component of perceived national identity and collective reproduction (Nairn, 2000). This in turn may help to defend the community against the perceived threat of an ideological stance which rejects the essential components of that identity.

### *Able Children, Comprehensive Values and Policy*

In this section consideration is given to the development of policies for the very able in Scotland in the 90s while trying to reconcile identification of distinct abilities within the comprehensive system. HMI (1996 & 1997) and a LA document (Able Pupils Group, 1997) have attempted to use the concept of ability and in particular high ability, in order to carry forward identification of the able, provision and the organisation of learning within schools. This has created discussion and debate within schools as the paradox of comprehensivism has come to the fore, reconciling commonality and difference (Benn, 1997; Clark et al, 1999).

In the 90s in Scotland, government, both at Scottish Office level and at local level began to evolve policies to encourage achievement for all children while at the same time highlighting the needs of very able children. This took the form of regional and SCCC documents (1993) which began to suggest that there was a legitimate category



of pupil whose needs were not necessarily being met by the general aims or structures already in existence and who were not seen as a legitimate part of SEN provision. The way forward was to be through individualisation of provision aided by the curricular guidelines coming into schools at that point.

An important development then occurred in the production of an HMI (1993) booklet looking at able pupils in P6 - S2. This was to outline areas for development while pinpointing a shift in cultural values in schools as a major underlying necessity if appropriate provision for able children was to be achieved. This search for an ethos of achievement was to be the foundation for future documents and organisations concerned with able children.

However subsequent documents, HMI (1996,1997), also began to shift away from the emphasis on individualisation of provision for very able children and instead began to move towards support for institutional and organisational methods of support for different ability levels. This was outlined in the former document as an endorsement of setting, despite misgivings in the research community over its benefits especially for those children in lower sets.

A subtle policy shift was evident in a movement away from the 1993 booklet's support for identification of high ability individuals, very specific teacher training and school development for this group of children. Instead there was, firstly, support for segregated learning through setting as a way of providing suitably for all abilities, (1996), and then subsequently, (1997), raising achievement for all children in S1 and S2, with very able children as a sub-group within this category of pupil. This latter

document, one of the first under a Labour government, picked up themes of previous documents in considering learning groups and the full implementation of the curricular guidelines but also dealt in the language of accountability for the institution and the education system as a whole : curriculum monitoring, assessment and target setting and monitoring.

At local levels, individual councils have seen this recognition of a sub-group of children as a legitimisation of interest and some have begun to develop informal strategies involving the use of learning support staff. One council has published a document, which it hopes might interest others. In it, it draws upon the notions of high ability proposed by the HMI (1993) and relies heavily on it for its strategies in approaching identification and provision. While reinforcing the equality of opportunity, which it sees as inherent in the comprehensive system, it is suggested that specific attention has to be given to this particular category of pupil in order to ensure that all are given appropriate opportunities. Much of its contents reflect the 1993 HMI document but two facets of this EA document are of particular interest.

Firstly, its reinforcement of the definition of high ability through observation of performance, either over subjects generally, or in specific connected subjects such as science or in a particular subject area. Other kinds of creative and social intelligence are included, too but it is the emphasis on observation of performance that plays the strongest role in the identification of able children. A variety of strategies are suggested as tools for identification purposes but the greatest trust is placed on teacher experience and observation, 'The identification of more able pupils will be



determined largely by their teachers' professional experience and impressions of their abilities. (Able Pupils Group, p 2, 1997).

The basis for such judgement , 'should stem [from] knowledge of the learner's previous educational achievement and interest. Evidence of this nature is generally an accurate indicator of the child's ability (Able Pupil Group, p 6,1997). Consequently assumptions are being made about the ways in which teachers identify and conceptualise the idea of ability and in particular high ability and the reliance that can be placed on prior attainment and teacher observation.

Secondly, there is great concern over the need to generate a positive ethos within institutions in order to make high achievement as acceptable as other forms of attainment . However, the focus for such a culture change is seen as lying with the children in each school who are considered to be generators of negative perceptions of high achievement partly as a result of an adolescent counter-culture, a 'negative adolescent pursuit of anonymity and inevitable mediocrity' (p 1, op cit).

Again this would seem to make assumptions about the nature of high ability perceptions by certain school sub-cultures without questioning other participants in the institution. After all, if an institution and some of its members look to high achievement for proof of success, an unwitting emphasis at school level and in individual classrooms on particular forms of attainment may help to engender or at least reinforce negative cultures. Perhaps this emphasis on pupil perceptions is too simplistic in attempting to nominate the origin of negative views of high ability within schools.



The more recent developments in England and Wales (EiC) with regard to high ability have as yet no counterpart in Scottish policy although consideration is being given to the question of ability by the Scottish Executive. The overwhelming movement towards ability as a measured quality within policy from both Conservative and Labour governments has provided the impetus for a return to an overtly meritocratic view of both children and schools. An attempt by the Labour party to withdraw such policy developments from the ideological arena, further adds weight to a view of ability as an uncontested aspect of teaching and learning and segregated provision as inevitable.

### *Summary*

This chapter has explored the importance of policy and in particular policy discourse in relation to ability and educational values. Consideration has been given to the distinctiveness of Scotland's filtration of education policy but at the same time, a broader contextualisation for ability construction across political parties and historically through the Conservative years (1979-1997), the General Election (1997) and the emerging policies of 'New' Labour has been given.

In chapter 2, the distinctiveness of the Scottish comprehensive system is examined within the wider political context. Comparison is made with the modelled Independent school as the 'good school' and the place of parental choice in the validating of such schools is investigated.

# Chapter 2      Systems, Schools and Policy

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## *Introduction*

In chapter 1 the nature of policy discourse in relation to ability was investigated. The ongoing challenge viewed by political parties of raising standards in education had a backdrop of a conceptualisation of ability, which hovered uncertainly between a fluid and fixed perspective. While UK policy in the Conservative years sought to develop different forms of schooling for different forms of ability, including measured academic ability, the predominantly comprehensive Scottish system ostensibly minimised difference and provided intervention at the structural level at odds with the diversity of schooling envisioned by the Conservatives. Here comprehensive schooling was, at once, an individualised provision, and at the same time, downplayed the need to recognise difference especially ability difference since this was likely to subvert the essence of the supposedly egalitarian state system (Paterson, 1997b). In this chapter the distinctiveness and coherence of the Scottish comprehensive system is explored and its position within the context of a performance culture and standards agenda is investigated. Next, the importance of Independent schools as models of the 'good school' is discussed. Finally, parental choice is located within the 'effective' school debate in relation to choice within and across systems and in the impact that such choice may potentially have on schools.

## *Systems, schools and policies*

The promotion of particular forms of schooling as being more beneficial for specific children was an important facet of educational policy over the years that the



Conservative Party were in office (Walford, 1994; Glatter, 1997). As part of this Conservative government policy determinedly promoted an increase in the Assisted Places Scheme, which channelled funds into the private sector. The educational opportunities this provided were mooted as being of great benefit to those from working class homes and possessed of some form of high ability. Rhodes Boyson showed enthusiasm for this approach.

[It would allow very able children] from our poorest homes...once again [to] have the opportunity of attending academically excellent schools.(Edwards et al, p3, 1989)

This argument would thus seem to propose that such schools are providing an effective and efficacious educational process, which might be of particular benefit to those perceived to be academically adept. Edwards and Whitty (1995) and Salter and Tapper (1985) suggest that this is an aspect of school marketing, which has evolved as the private, and state systems have evolved. This has led to competition between state and private systems as the change in society's construction and class structures has led to the private system needing to develop strategies for survival. A decline in its traditional client base led to a need to attract children from a wider area and to achieve some form of Government support for such schools via the Assisted Places Scheme. An important factor in such support has been the perpetuation of a belief in the, 'causal relationship between independence and educational excellence (Edwards & Whitty, p1, 1995).

However Edwards et al (1989) point out that it is only the relatively small number of market leaders within the private sector which are academically selective while a number attempting to join the Assisted Places Scheme were judged to be academically inadequate. Therefore a private school identity does not necessarily imply academic success while selective entry might suggest that the schools play little



part in the educational attainments of pupils already chosen on the basis of ability to achieve within the school system. Moreover it has been suggested that a context of schooling has been generated where private schools provide the dominant model against which all other schools are judged (Edwards and Whitty, 1995).

Both Public and Private systems are associated with particular values and outlooks socially and educationally. The private system is increasingly linked by supporters and the schools themselves to academic success in terms of exam results and exam league tables (Salter & Tapper, 1985). They have also been suggested as a potential avenue for parents, thus apparently increasing parental choice in terms of quantity and type of institution available especially in certain areas. However opponents of such a system would tend to point to these schools as exemplifying privilege for a small minority, with an unfair share of resources and so a system which by its very nature reinforces inequity already present within society (Pring & Walford, 1997)

Within Scotland and the UK, the independent sector deals with only a small percentage of children. However, it is because of this 'modelling' of the independent system as a form of schooling to aim for, the importance placed upon the private system in political rhetoric that it is necessary to consider both the nature of independent education in Scotland and the form of comprehensive education prevailing. The latter forms the dominant model of schooling for around 96% of the school population.

### *Policy and Comprehensive schooling*

Paterson (1997b) has outlined the intertwining of a comprehensive philosophy and civil society in Scotland which have supported each other throughout the years of a Conservative government intent on denigrating the comprehensive principle generated in right wing reform. In Ball's work (1981) in England on comprehensive education, he suggests that such schooling only ever existed in the 'rhetoric of education debate.' The reality, he argues is that there were three forms of ideologies supporting different purposes for comprehensive schooling and that different forms of such ideologies could be in existence within the same school. The discourse of 60s reform developing comprehensive education was conflictual and indecisive.

Remained a focus of conflict and indecision. The discourse of reform was fractured, incoherent and often contradictory. Several ideological models, in effect a set of contesting discourses, were invested in aspects of practice in schools...and in the arenas of policy formation. (Ball, p30, 1990)

The popular belief in Scotland in the egalitarian nature of the educational system is at odds with this view of the system in England, which highlights the contradictions, and fragmented nature of comprehensive innovation there. The egalitarian comprehensive, Ball (1981) suggests, is rare and for it to succeed, it must stress 'the importance of changes in educational ethos and the structure of the learning process.' Ball (op cit) argues that in England most of the comprehensives created were more likely to be meritocratic in nature, 'streamed academically and socially, and competing with grammar schools by entering large numbers of pupils for public examinations.'

In comparison, up until the late 80s and 90s streaming and setting were not prevalent in Scottish comprehensive schools and, it could be argued, that the schools were upholding the egalitarian principles within the organisation of learning in schools which Ball (1981) sees as almost absent within the English system. With the advent



of right wing reform came changes in policy which utilised independent schools as successful models for the marketisation of state schools through parental choice and an emphasis on the performance of schools and students within them (Salter & Tapper, 1985). The discourses of the concerned parent and the themes of excellence and standards generated in these reforms (Ball, 1990; Walford, 1997) worked to encourage competition in the education marketplace and to encourage a view of ability, which would seek to manipulate its achievement in order to enhance perceived performance.

In the midst of Conservative party reforms, the encouragement of a return to selection within schools when organising learning was encouraged by an HMI document (1997). This would of necessity bring about explicit decisions about the nature of ability and specific forms of organisation in providing for ability differences within the comprehensive system in Scotland. Already this was attacking the roots of the egalitarian principles which it was said were the foundation for the Scottish system. However, negative responses in some schools meant that the use of setting or banding was limited to a few subject areas and only for particular year groups. Since then of course, there has been a gradual movement toward a greater consensus in education policy discourse in relation to the organisation of learning in comprehensive schooling (DfEE, 1997) and the promotion of a form of segregation within schools for those of perceived differing ability. This has promoted a modernisation of the comprehensive principle, which would seem to be at odds with that traditionally viewed as intrinsic to the Scottish system.



The maintenance of parental choice and the excellence and standards discourse within new Labour rhetoric, is noticeable but within policy language which attempts to shift away from the empowerment of a parent group and instead toward a 'partnership' between all those with an interest in education and for all those interested in reaching successful performances for individuals and for UK society within a global league table (DfEE, 1997).

Political discourse is attempting to shift in a way that will maintain a relationship with a comprehensive principle and yet at the same time, is continuing to develop the policies initiated by the Conservatives: parental choice, standards and league tables, national and international and the organisation of learning within schools (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Parental choice is to be seen as partnership with schools, rather than an empowered group at odds with the education professionals. Standards and league tables are to be necessary markers of institutional and individual success in performance within tests and exams. Finally, the organisation of learning in setted groups is to improve teaching and learning since only a small number of teachers have shown themselves to be capable of working effectively within mixed ability classrooms according to New Labour (DfEE, 1997). At the heart of the latter there are explicit decisions being made about the reliability of judgements of the nature of ability and the appropriate provision necessary and an emphasis is being placed upon an acceptance of inequality within policy (Power & Whitty, 1999; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Assessed performance of ability is fundamental to a competitive context engendered first by Conservative policy and now by New Labour.

In the following pages, a consideration of those elements of policy discourse outlined above are considered in greater detail. Firstly, the development of the performance culture in relation to measured ability and segregated learning within schools is examined and any justification for such responses considered. Secondly, the ways in which parental choice has attempted to imbue parents with a role, which encourages the seeking of 'individual betterment and competition,' (Ball, 1990) is discussed.

### *Performance and organisation of learning*

The adoption of the comprehensive system in Scotland brought with it the hope that all children regardless of social background or ability would have equal opportunity for success. Moreover, the integration of a mixture of social backgrounds might in turn lead to a less divisive society, providing an egalitarian and socially integrative model (Paterson, 1997b). However the social mix that was envisaged has not always come to pass with some schools with predominantly middle class children, especially as parental choice has made it easier for parents to choose schools outside their immediate area. (Willms, 1996).

A constant theme of right wing discourse has been the marking of achievement and performance within an educational system as a way to judge the quality of learning and teaching going on within it (Pring & Walford, 1997). In conjunction with this, an ongoing attack on the mixed ability, all comer comprehensive suggested that both the structural and organisational components of such schools were failing to deal with the achievement of high standards and that consequently children were not learning effectively. However within school effectiveness research, Reynolds (1987) has related findings, which seem to suggest that in comparing the public and state



systems in terms of academic success, there was little difference between the two systems. In addition, further support for academic success occurring within the state sector comes from research by McPherson and Willms (1987) in which it has been suggested that all children have benefited from the system, particularly those of low socio-economic status.

On the other hand, a common theme in political discourse now addresses a competitive comparison of institutional exam results and seeks to affect those results through the segregation of learning within schools for certain subject areas according to the perceived ability of the pupils. Prior to a 1997 HMI document, advocating setting as one of a variety of organisational methods to be attempted to encourage 'achievement for all,' the Scottish Office commissioned a review of work (Harlen & Malcolm, 1997) on the merits or disadvantages of different forms of organisation of learning. The findings suggested that it was difficult to come to a definitive conclusion but the government document was subsequently published with little heed being paid to the findings of their own commissioned review. Streaming and setting according to Harlen's review of research in this area do not seem to have any particular effect on pupil achievement and in fact it is called into question whether organisation within the classroom plays any role in pupil outcomes.

Research findings would seem to present such contradictory and inconclusive results that it is difficult to ascertain what benefits or disadvantages might accrue as the result of varying forms of grouping in classes and within schools. However, some research findings have suggested that ability grouping may result in consequences on



a social and behavioural level within schools (Harlen & Malcolm, 1997; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996).

reinforced social class divisions, increased likelihood of delinquent behaviour in later school years, lowered teacher expectations of the less able, bias and in allocating pupils to ability groups, anxiety for pupils struggling to keep up with the pace of the class (Harlen & Malcolm, 1997,p 27)

This form of within school organisation involves a degree of segregation with potential effects on the nature of individual and social interaction. An extended and more extreme version of such ability grouping and to some extent social grouping occurs between state and private sectors.

New Labour's rejection of such extreme segregation of learning based on measured ability was seen in their abandonment of the Assisted Places Scheme and their attempts to discourage selection in state schools. However, it is noticeable that there is continued support for the previously strongly held right wing view that ability could and should be assessed within schools and that setting is a legitimate method of improving teaching and learning (DfEE, 1997; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). This is at odds with the traditional egalitarian comprehensive model supposedly dominating the Scottish education system but in line with the modernisation of comprehensive education envisaged by New Labour. However, it tends to then maximise the importance of a particular perceived individual difference among pupils rather than to minimise difference, which provides a sharp contradiction with the ideology underpinning the system (Paterson, 1997b). Whether, this movement to encourage a particular view of ability is successful will depend on the existing, perhaps contradictory views of comprehensive education present within individuals in individual schools. Ball (1981) highlights the existence of just such conflicting

ideologies and also points to this level of conflict as potentially being part of the policy struggle that is ongoing in any school (Ball, 1997).

Comprehensive schooling, within Scottish society, is dominant and seems to have the support of civil society (McCrone, 1992; Paterson, 1997b). However, at policy level, there has been a sustained attack on the values represented by this system by the emphasis placed upon the marketisation of education; parental choice; institutional and individual performance and competition within and between schools. It is perhaps within individual institutions and individual constructions that it may be possible to understand the impact of such contradictory elements.

### *Model of 'Private' schools*

An important element of this piece of research is the way in which the two major political parties perceive the independent sector. The use of the term independent school or sector is used generally in this thesis, although it has been argued elsewhere that this is not a very accurate descriptor (Roker, 1992), because schools in this area have increasingly been given financial support or benefit of some kind from the state. The tendency for schools within this sector to prefer Independent as an appellation is one element in choosing to utilise that word. However, it is also legitimate if it is considered that those schools within this sector retain choice over their involvement in policy and education developments within the maintained sector, so encouraging a form of independence other than financial.

Although the Independent sector is comprised of a variety of schools, there would seem to be a view of such schools promoted by the Conservatives, that

- the curriculum is wide ranging



- high standards are achieved and maintained
- accountability to clients
- efficiency imperative

Such a view places an emphasis on the success of private education and the positive effect of 'competition' (Salter & Tapper, 1985; Walford, 1994; Ball, 1997). The marketing ideology of Conservative rhetoric would seem to have been imported from this sector in order to create similar 'success' in the state sector. The main thrust of the transformation of the state sector has been toward public accountability through the use of league tables and reporting of individual achievement and National Curriculum Guidelines. The use of Parental Choice as a means to stimulate further efforts at efficiency and achievement also reflects the nature of the private sector relationship with parents where increased numbers are supposed to infer greater satisfaction with the service received (Walford, 1994).

It is the very use of independent schools as a source of educational modelling and as a subject of political debate that has ensured it lies within much of the reform occurring in the 80s and 90s (Roker, 1992; Walford, 1987; Walford, 1989). However, perhaps because of its associations with a financial and social elite, little research has been carried out in the independent sector (Walford, 1984; Walford, 1989). In addition, its relatively small population of school pupils in comparison with the state sector both in the UK generally and Scotland in particular might suggest that there is little need to investigate the world of the independent school.

### *Importance of independent schools*

The relative smallness of the independent sector in Scotland however, does not in itself suggest a reason not to research in this area. If this were the case, specialist



## *Choice and systems*

### *Schools making a difference*

The assumptions underlying the modelling of the Independent system are that schools do make a difference to the quality of learning taking place as well as to the assessed performance of individuals. This belief in the 'good school' as typified by the Independent system was an essential element in parental choice legislation. Once criteria for the successful school were established, it was seen as necessary to employ and encourage competition in order to ensure a continual striving towards optimum performance. How then does the issue of parental choice affect the question of perceived ability within schools? Does parental choice encourage a competitive edge to the assessment of ability and the performance of individual schools through Ball's (1990) view of the selfish individualism, which seeks individual betterment?

The emergence of parent 'power' began in the late 1980s. The legislation of 1981 was ostensibly an attempt to suggest to parents that they were to begin to achieve some control over their child's schooling and that they were to gain the opportunity to potentially affect schools themselves. This meant that their choices were to allow them to play an important role in the population profile of schools and in some cases the character of the school itself via the opted out status which could be achieved through parent votes (Walford, 1994). This was essentially to provide parents with greater opportunity to determine the educational future, not only of their own child, but also the character of local schooling (Benn & Chitty, 1996).

In Scotland, there did not seem to be the same unrest over parental choices and rights as in England, and other elements of parental involvement in schooling have not developed in the same way as in other parts of the UK. For example the

possibility of schools opting out in order to acquire autonomy from local councils had been taken up by only two schools in Scotland and latterly one has returned to Local Authority control and debate continues over the return of the second. School Board Membership has not had the same prominence in many schools in comparison with England and Wales. Nonetheless, parental empowerment through choice and board membership has, through the 90s, encouraged a more active parental involvement in pupil movement and in the administration of aspects of schools (Paterson, 1997b) although not necessarily as empowered members of the educational community.

In the following pages , consideration is given to the nature of choice in the UK and in Scotland in particular, as well as to the emerging impact of choice on school populations and profiles.

### *The Nature of Parental Choice*

While both main political parties have at different times supported a notion of parental choice, it was the Conservative government, which was to employ choice as part of its drive to marketise the education system (Ball et al, 1994). One of the views underpinning choice was that competition between schools would lead to school improvement. This view has since been supported in a Labour party document (DfEE, 1997). However, it is argued that choice is a social construct, value laden and with differing meanings and resonances for different families (Walford, 1994). The potential discriminatory effects for particular families (Ball, 1993) as well as the encouragement of value shifts hostile to the comprehensive system (Ball, 1997) have the capability of transforming the educational environment.



These policies in complex interrelationship with such concepts as excellence, quality, effectiveness and methods of entrepreneurial managerialism, are part of a political crusade and transformational process intended to create a new moral environment, a new kind of citizenship (Ball, p 69, 1997)

The importance of such an attempted transformation within Scotland is particularly significant because of its coherent comprehensive system and the belief that civil society is committed to those ideals associated with an egalitarian system. So firstly, in Scotland, there may be ideological hostility to the mechanism of choice but also choice itself is distinctively different where diversity is unavailable. Scotland has developed a strong comprehensive system and certain clusters of independent schools. Consequently, for Scottish parents there is a lack of diversity and due to the geographical concentration of Independent schools, parents are left often with a choice not between systems or types of school but between local comprehensives. Limited or competitive choice, then, is a feature of Scottish parental choice (Adler, 1997).

If choice itself is limited and competitive, it is important to consider which parents are making choices, the nature of the choices and whether a notion of the 'good school' or the successful school in terms of pupil performance are having an impact within the Scottish context.

Conflicting evidence is provided about which parents are prepared to make choices in Scotland. Macbeth et al (1986) and Adler et al (1989) suggested that requests were being made across all social groups but Echols et al (1990) argued that it was better-educated parents who were more likely to choose schools. Certainly, there is evidence, which shows that there are distinctions to be made about the nature of



### *Summary*

In this chapter, the coherence and distinctiveness of the Scottish comprehensive system has been discussed and consideration given to its place within a hostile policy discourse. The use of Independent schools as models of the 'good school' and the importance of investigating schools within this system has also been examined. Finally, the ways in which parental choice legislation has sought to encourage an emphasis upon the good school reflected in political policy and rhetoric have been considered.

In the following chapter, ability research is discussed and the importance of explicit and implicit theories of ability within education and individual constructions of ability.

*Introduction*

In chapters 1 and 2 the policy and system contexts and areas of ideological struggle concerning ability have been examined. Chapter 3 investigates the 'struggle' within research on ability and intelligence and within educational institutions. The ways in which ability is defined and understood in explicit theories and how these may be imported into educational contexts is considered first. Next, the implicit theories or in other words, constructs of ability which individuals bring to bear are located in relation to pupils and teachers.

*Ability and Education*

That ability and education are inextricably linked is suggested by the ways in which the identification and development of ability are fundamental to the aims of education policies and institutions. Ball (1990) describes the development and implementation of policy as a continuing ideological struggle at various policy levels including classrooms and schools. The additional twist to the struggle in a Scottish context comes from the accepted popular view (McCrone, 1992; Devine, 1999) of a societal desire for equal educational opportunity at the same time as individual ability differences in pupils are increasingly being considered explicitly at national, local and institutional levels. It is within these educational contexts that ability is defined through, 'observing differences in educability or differences in education result or both,' (Snow and Yalow, p 513, 1985). It is at the level of the school and classroom where individuals are formally obliged to build and interact with constructions of ability that the empirical work of this study focuses. In order to do so, it is important to consider the nature of ability within

research and theoretical frameworks. In the following pages, consideration will be given to the latter. Subsequently consideration is given to the ways in which individuals construct ability, especially within educational settings. This includes an examination of the role of the socialisation process in presenting particular forms of ability conceptualisation through a consideration of work on teacher perceptions of pupil ability and pupil constructions of ability.

### Researching Ability

In order to consider the ways in which researchers have attempted to deal with ability, it's also necessary to look at intelligence research since in creating any useful definition of intelligence, ability is used to describe the quality and nature of intelligence (Sternberg, 1990; Gardner, 1985). It might be argued that intelligence research is the primary theoretical base for any work on ability, presenting an abstract term which is then developed and defined in relation to the ability to carry out certain tasks or work or think in a specific way in particular contexts.

If we work from the view that ability is a fundamental part of intelligence definition, any research or theoretical work on intelligence must impinge upon ability as a construable subject. Research into intelligence falls into three categories: first, theorising about the nature of intelligence, secondly, measuring operations carried out in relation to potential intelligence and thirdly attempting to understand the nature of individual implicit theories of intelligence (Sternberg, 1990). While Sternberg places the first two of these within the realms of explicit theories about the nature of intelligence, individual constructions are seen as presenting implicit theories about intelligence.

[They] reside in the minds of these individuals, whether as definitions or otherwise. Such theories need to be discovered rather than invented because they already exist, in some form, in people's heads.  
(Sternberg, p 54, 1990)



And it is these implicit theories or constructs which are of concern within this study.

Firstly, however, it is important to consider the nature of the explicit theories, which have developed, and the ways in which they have been reflected in educational policy and institutions.

### *Explicit theories of ability*

Over a number of years, debate and discussion has focused on the nature of ability in children and in what way educational provision may best be developed in the light of the differing concepts involved (Wooldridge, 1994; Gould, 1997). The reflection of particular perspectives in educational provision has shown the ways in which explicit theories of intelligence or ability have influenced the structures and organisation for teaching and learning that children have experienced in schools.

### *Fixed Intelligence*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a view of 'intelligence' as fixed and hereditary was prominent and through the work of Darwin it was argued that selection within a species in order to reproduce led to the survival of particular variations in succeeding generations. This contains the implicit assumption that the characteristics of living things are determined by their genetic makeup. This particular foundation underlying the premise of a fixed and innate intelligence began to influence the thinking of influential psychologists and initially seemed to be substantiated by, test-retest reliabilities. These seemed to suggest that the positions of individuals in a group remained fairly constant, and there also seemed to be an element of prediction with regard to future school success. Such results added weight to the view that intelligence, as an innate characteristic of a human being, would predetermine subsequent achievement (Wooldridge, 1994).

## *Measurement and Definition development*

### *General intelligence*

This view of intelligence encouraged the development of measurement as a means of assessing quantitatively such a characteristic, which was deemed to be an overall general ability distinct from specific, specialised abilities. This concept of general intelligence had had its roots in the evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century and in the work of such men as Galton and Spencer. This led to the generation of measurement scales by such as Simon and Binet which seemed to provide extensive statistical evidence for a general ability or intelligence (Butcher, 1968). Such methods were based on an assumption of a general factor of intellectual ability (Butcher, 1972) and the quantitative nature of such a quality.

However as research became more extensive and sophisticated, earlier conclusions began to be questioned. Not only was the role of intelligence to be challenged but also the very nature and existence of such a quality or set of qualities. These attempts to quantify and define intelligence led to increasingly complex initiatives to determine what intelligence might be as well as the nature of such a quality. In attempting to define intelligence, theories were developed concerning proposed attributes of the person in possession of such a general ability. It was considered that a determinant of intelligence might be speed of mental functioning or the ability to learn new material (Eysenck, 1972). However while this might have been an observable aspect of particular individuals who seemed to be in possession of this general ability, it was found that it was not possible to generalise such findings. To suggest that mental reaction times were concomitant with intelligence or that there was a necessary link between learning tasks and level of intelligence was not feasible. In defining intelligence, it seems that these



particular characteristics failed to provide an objective and generalisable description of perceived behaviour in individuals which might act as indicators of high general ability.

### *Dismembering intelligence*

In time there was a movement towards dismembering the concept of intelligence into component parts. Here increasingly complex analytic factors were utilised in order to establish the existence of such parts and reflected a return to an umbrella concept of intelligence with a variety of mental faculties, which had been suggested by Binet. However this attempt to increase understanding of intelligence failed to produce a workable and relevant view of the nature of intelligence or its future development and once instigated led to the realisation that in detailing the many parts of intelligence this would lead to infinite and unhelpful subdivision (Eysenck, 1972).

Measurement and description predominated this work. This led to increasingly complex models of intellectual structure (Wooldridge, 1994) and disagreement over the nature of the information achieved via such elements as intelligence testing. Intelligence testing was limited, it was argued, by cultural bias toward western, literate societies on one level and by the lack of differentiation in scoring for test items involving different forms of activities and skills on the other.

Reliance on such measures to further understand the nature of intelligence and its importance in the development of individuals within society was limited by the fact that such theorising relied upon a belief in the existence of an element called intelligence, perceivable via achievement or description and measurable on the basis of its fixed potential within testing. However assumptions were maintained with regard to the relationship between intelligence and the process of learning in that learning supposedly occurred due to the presence of intelligence rather than intelligence developing as a



result of learning processes taking place or even the contribution of something other than intelligence.

This perception of intelligence either as a general factor or as a combination of elements and its relationship with learning as seen via results or attainments within the system, generated debate and further theories concerning the nature of intelligence at different stages in life and indeed different forms of intelligence. Hebb and Cattell individually attempted to distinguish distinct forms of intelligence and presented the concept of potential and realised intelligence with different titles but essentially similar ideas. Cattell's Fluid and Crystallized intelligence terms representing the two forms of intelligence seem to have been the most durable and suggest that Fluid Intelligence is a form of general capacity independent of education and experience and which may reach a maximum level in the teens and thereafter wane. This suggests an innate potential and yet not a fixed or wholly predetermined capacity. Crystallized Intelligence, on the other hand, is about acquired knowledge and developed intellectual skills (Jensen, 1969) which might increase as an individual learns and develops his experiences.

This seems to attempt to combine an innate and acquired capacity view by allowing for the possibility of a quality of intelligence independent of external factors and capable of change as the individual matures, while also suggesting that there may be an intelligence reliant upon external factors and therefore capable of being altered and improved. It is not clear however in what way if any such intelligences might combine or interact and so create a third entity as a result. Vernon(1969) suggested a tripartite intelligence structure in which Intelligence A is similar to the Fluid intelligence of Cattell in that it is a form of genetic potential. Thereafter, Intelligence B represented cognitive abilities in interaction with Intelligence A and the environment. There then followed a third

intelligence, termed Intelligence C which reflected the limited manifestation of intelligence B in observable behaviour.

This form of description of differing forms of intelligence in turn generating variants in conjunction with the environment, maintains an important genetic element similar to that of Cattell but works on an assumption that such innate intelligence would be a necessary factor in the development of other forms of intelligence.

### *Environment and Achievement*

Views based on a belief in intelligence and its role in the education process were however increasingly being challenged by the idea of environmental influence on academic achievement. The effects of class were increasingly considered to have a substantial impact upon children's intelligence and achievement. However it was suggested that the most important factor of all seemed to be the culture present in the home and parental interest and aspirations (Wiseman, 1972).

The initial idea of modifiable variables distinct from intelligence which might allow manipulation in order to increase achievement in schools, was of great importance. This also led to heated debate over whether intelligence was an inherited and fixed trait which determined achievement or a small factor in a more complex picture of environmental influences both material and also attitudinal which might be altered through societal intervention. Although the form such intervention might take and how successful it might be could be debatable, especially in trying to change attitudes and lifestyles.

### *Innate /Environment Debate*

Jensen, in the 1960s, was a proponent of high genetic influence on measurable IQ and on scholastic achievement and felt that too much prominence had been given to



environmental factors in order to encourage equality (Jensen, 1969). He suggests that the influence of the quality of environment is not a linear function and that below a particular level of environmental provision, extreme deprivation can have a depressant effect upon intelligence but that above this level variations in environment have relatively little effect on intelligence. However he does suggest that in order to optimise the inherent ability in individuals, it is necessary to provide within schools a variety of 'educational methods, programs and goals' appropriate to abilities.

Accordingly, the ideal of equality of educational opportunity should not be interpreted as uniformity of facilities, instructional techniques, and educational aims for all children. Diversity rather than uniformity of approaches and aims would seem to be the key to making education rewarding for children of different patterns of ability (Jensen, p117, 1969)

Bloom, writing in the 70s, presents a contradictory view of potential learning capacity of individuals but similar views on the variety of instruction and methodology. However the differing scholastic aims for different pupils which Jensen proposed would seem to clash with Bloom's view.

Bloom (1976) pursued a notion of equality of potential whereby all children were considered to possess the requisite aptitude for learning subjects to a high degree of learning. This was considered to be to mastery level via the recognition of the need for particular behaviours to be developed in interaction with a form of instruction which was to address any inadequacies in these desired behaviours. At the same time, this was to begin to build upon them through a variety of teaching methods, appropriate to the individual, and involving continual evaluation and consolidation of learning.

Bloom does not entirely discount the presence of hereditary factors altogether but suggests that environmental factors have an overwhelming influence upon scholastic



achievement. He puts forward the hypothesis that three variables are required in order for individuals to achieve some degree of mastery. These are -

*Cognitive Entry Behaviours*

*Affective Entry Characteristics*

*Quality of Instruction (Bloom, 1976)*

Bloom discusses the interaction of these variables.

The interactive effect of these three variables should increase the student's level of learning and reduce the final variability of the student's achievement. (Bloom, p 162, 1976)

This was to be a method of minimising individual differences in school attainment and if successful could be used to support the theory that the normal distribution of intelligence assumed could be altered in the light of success within the frame of mastery learning. This last might be debatable, however, since it is achievement that is being measured specifically in Bloom's study and not any amelioration in intelligence as a quality. Bloom argues that in moving away from the fixedness of some hereditary and static variable, he was attempting to move towards alterable variables which could be affected by external influences.

### *Alterable Variables*

there is growing evidence that much of what we have termed individual differences in school is the affect of particular school conditions rather than of basic differences in the capabilities of our students. (Bloom, p 18, 1981)

Bloom's emphasis on the alterability of the three prerequisites for effective learning would be of benefit within education as it would pose a solution to low achievement both immediate and in subsequent schooling (Bloom, 1981).

In order to facilitate the ongoing adequacy of such behaviours, Bloom looks to feedback corrective procedures within the realm of instruction. The quality of instruction is considered to be an important element and something which can be manipulated and structured, he suggests, to enhance the quality of learning. Affective Entry Characteristics, on the other hand, deal with character and motivational factors and personality development which are alterable in some respects but not in others.

Although Bloom outlines potentially alterable variables which he hopes will provide a causal link with the learning process, it is not perhaps possible to determine to what extent any genetic quality may play a part. For instance, it might be that intelligence may have an effect on the quantity and quality of the CEBs acquired on entry to instruction and on the quality of mastery achieved.

Bloom does admit that for some children the achievement of mastery may take years rather than several months so ultimate attainment may minimise differences, but the effect may be reduced by the time needed by some pupils. In addition, mastery level itself may cover a comparatively wide attainment level which suggests some form of individual difference maintenance. In fact Bloom makes an interesting point with regard to very able.

Even when the curriculum is inadequate or outdated and teachers provide only mediocre instruction, these students(top 5%) would do well.(Bloom, p46, 1981)

Quality of instruction, he had stated was an important factor in the learning process but the more able he seems to feel would continue to achieve a good standard with poor instruction. The question then, might arise as to whether a high degree of appropriate



and varied instruction might increase the level of mastery attained by such individuals and so maintain some aspects of individual differences yet further.

Both Bloom and Jensen had contrasting views of what learners brought to the learning process but seemed to feel that final achievement could be altered to varying degrees through a variety of instructional methods and consolidation.

More recently Gardner(1985) would seem to argue that while there may be a genetic predisposition towards intelligence, the environment is a formative influence on it and that cognitive skills in themselves are not sufficient to enhance learning. He concurs with the idea of suiting instruction to the individual as do Bloom and Jensen but seems to cast doubt on the possible development in this area since the wider complexities of society, its institutions and interactions may succeed in thwarting any such movements in this direction.

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences reflects a movement towards greater emphasis in intelligence theory upon the interaction of environment/culture and the individual (Sternberg, 1990). It was also reflected in emerging educational documents of the 90s in Scotland (HMI, 1997; Able Pupils Group, 1997) as well as in other countries. This enthusiasm in Scotland for Gardner's work is perhaps because of recognition of intelligences other than traditional academic abilities, while at the same time imbuing other characteristics with the cultural value and superiority of an intelligence. In addition, the importance placed on the interaction between the environment and person leads to the possibility that educational provision can make a difference in the quality of each intelligence. Gardner contends that it is necessary to move away from the laboratory style experiment on 'manifested' intelligence and that the focus of study needs to be



within the interactions in the everyday environment of the individual if we are truly to begin to develop an understanding of intelligences. The danger of such theories as Gardner's, lies in the readiness of schools to adopt a superficially broad spectrum of intelligences at a policy or institutional level without changing the underlying, potentially, meritocratic structure of schools or subjects.

At odds with the development of complex theories of intelligence/ability prevalent amongst mainstream psychologists such as Sternberg (1990) and Gardner (1985) and the tendency in education for ability to become a term to be avoided (Bourne & Moon, 1995) has been the rise of the hereditarian supporters. These latter (Hernstein and Murray, 1994) have attempted to return to intelligence as an innate quality which leads to views concomitant with measured and fixed provision for distinct abilities as seen in new right and New Labour policy documents.

### *Implicit theories*

The data to be collected in order to begin to conceptualise people's informal theories of intelligence derives from their articulation of ideas about the nature of intelligence. In this research the latter is derived from interview data collected from four institutional sources, from three main groups: parents, pupils and teachers. Sternberg sees such work as useful in helping us to understand behaviour motivated by these theories in their, 'everyday lives' and for determining differences and similarities across various groups. However this view is perhaps limited in its notion of the potential ramifications for society of implicit theories of intelligence. Judgements made by individuals in their everyday lives can impact upon the lives of others in many different ways. An extreme example might be the effect of implicit theories of intelligence on the judgements made by politicians. The development of educational policy carries within it the effects of ability constructs and these in turn affect the ways in which individuals experience

schooling, develop their own constructs and interact with others. The cascade effect of such implicit theories from individual to society and vice versa, means that implicit theories are, at times, much more than helpful and interesting definitions affecting minor aspects of life but instead are capable of substantial impact.

Previous work into implicit theories by Bruner et al (1958) focused on the attributes of intelligent people while Sternberg et al (1981) looked at the cognitive factors which made up people's notions of intelligence. In the former research, attributes were described in relation to cleverness, deliberateness, efficiency and energy. In Sternberg's research cognitive factors highlighted were reasoning and problem solving and verbal comprehension skills and these were given greater weight than non-cognitive factors. He also came to the conclusion that the use of implicit theories of intelligence was used to evaluate our own and others' intelligence. This has particular significance in the classroom, where teachers' utilisation of implicit theories may have an important impact upon decisions made concerning teaching and learning.

All respondents in previous research were making decisions about their potential implicit theories based on choices from researcher lists or highly structured questionnaire type interview schedules. The view taken in this research is that while structure was given through semi structured interviews, participants were able to articulate their notions of intelligence without unnecessary researcher input which potentially could bring with it the researcher's own implicit theories at the point of data collection.

In seeking to avoid the imposition of structured behaviours or attributes within the research instruments, this empirical work does not seek to create the foundations of individual constructs in any highly prescriptive way. This, then, is not making



assumptions about possible intelligences and attempting to define attributes or skills to each (Sternberg, 1981) nor does it begin to encourage respondents to consider intelligence with regard to current issues such as qualities and visible signs of intelligence, malleability and durability (Yussen and Kane, 1985).

Research into the ways in which implicit theories might be understood in children such as work by Siegler and Richards (1982) and Fry (1984) considered the adult view of children's intelligence. Yussen and Kane (1985), however, focused on children themselves as the respondents. They dealt with younger children in first, third and sixth grades and asked question about any visible signs of intelligence, the qualities they associated with it, the constancy and malleability of intelligence and definitions. Children from the older age range tended to characterise intelligence in terms of an internalised quality and were less likely to accept overt signs as indicative of intelligence but they did tend to focus on academic skills.

The nature of this work into implicit theories of ability is concerned with the construction of an 'ideal' quality or person: the smart or clever person, or a type of ability. Thus, individuals' ideas about this entity called intelligence or person described as intelligent is dealt with and emphasis is not placed on the individual and his interactions with these constructions. By contrast, in this work, three main groups are encouraged to attempt to not only conceptualise ability but also their responses and reactions to that construed ability. The pupil group in particular, as the focus of ability identification and assessment are in an interesting focal position as they attempt to deal with personal and family constructs of ability and also school and societal constructs.



## *Identity and Ability Constructions*

Work carried out by Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) suggests the development of ability construction within pupils should be seen as 'ability formation'. They believe that it is possible to identify an institutionalised conception of ability and that certain classroom organisational patterns facilitate a tendency for pupils' perceptions regarding ability to reflect that conceptualisation. This comes about because of the obligation on the school to define ability. Socialisation, by which individuals grow to accept 'institutional realities, as their own is the main thrust of their argument. Pupils then take part in an ability formation process dependent upon the consistent modelling of institutional conceptualisation which they see as being isomorphic with a wider society view e.g. ability as general, stable consensual fact. However, difficulties lie in the view of societal, institutional views and the possible socialisation which they suggest brings about this particular formation of ability. Wider society does not necessarily reflect a consensual view of ability.

In Scotland, policy can reflect a conflicting and contradictory perspective both across time but also within a single policy document (Able Pupils Group, 1997). Institutional constructs may be made explicit in elements of organisation and recognition of individual pupils but are also composed of individuals who themselves may present competing and conflictual conceptions of ability (Ball, 1981). This casts some doubt on the consistency of possible modelling but there is also some consideration to be given to the importation of institutional constructs so wholeheartedly by pupils. Berger and Luckmann (1966) in discussing this secondary form of socialisation highlight the comparatively temporary nature of schooling in comparison with family life and primary socialisation.

This makes it possible to detach a part of the self and its concomitant reality as relevant only to the role-specific situation in question. The individual then establishes distance between his total self and its reality on one hand and the role-specific

Thus in construing ability, individuals are able to deal with differing forms of ability reality and work expediently within whichever partial reality is significant. What is of interest is the ways in which pupils or others participating in institutional contexts, might choose to deal with these perhaps competing or complementary constructions of ability. Jenkins (p20, 1996) argues for an understanding of self as, 'an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self- definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others.'

However, where he alludes to a tendency for external definitions to take precedence when supported by aspects of power and/or control of some kind, I would look to this as creating a tension at the boundary between the external/ internal worlds of the individual. That this tension might result in partial acceptance of for example institutional/exam related definitions of ability, as necessitated by elements of a specific role (Berger and Luckman, 1969). This is a dynamic relationship which allows individuals to represent and work with seemingly contradictory or conflicting constructions of ability.

### *Pupil constructs of ability*

Pupil constructions of ability are integral to how they see themselves and how institutions and individuals such as teachers attempt to define them. Pupil ability identity has been seen as one which is constructed through the assessment process (Skeggs, 1997). Broadfoot (1996) argues that those in power impact upon pupil identify through an internalisation of institutional and teacher criteria. Other work by Ball (1981); Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) and Reay and Wiliam (1999) reports on the impact of institutional modelling of ability and the constraints placed on potential social identities by the nature of the organisation of learning. In this research, it is considered



that pupil ability identity may be a more dynamic and negotiated construct. In order to begin to establish the nature of the former, it is necessary to allow pupils to talk about ability in a way that separates out understanding of institutional messages, personal concepts of ability and self perceptions. The nature of pupil construction is likely to be one of lesser or greater conflict or tension at the point of 'transaction' or boundary between pupil and institutional and teacher conceptualisations of ability

The development of implicit theories of intelligence, in this research, is generated through individual constructs within specific contexts and specific subject areas. The individual has beliefs about himself: this helps us to understand the ways in which pupil choose to define themselves in terms of ability. Pupils have a distinct view of the world from their position in it: this helps to describe the views of contextualised high ability. Finally, they are in an environment full of messages (beliefs) about them and their ability: here pupil perceptions of teacher judgements of them provide additional information about the nature of ability definitions being employed by others concerning them. The ways in which each reflects or contradicts the neighbouring strands may begin to suggest ways in which individual pupils experience and construe ability in a complex and differentiated way depending on internal perspective being taken. However, it also allows the researcher to view discord or congruity between perceptions of internal/external constructions. This might also challenge the nature of the importance of institutional modelling.

### *Teachers and Constructions of Ability*

Located within the seemingly contradictory contexts of maintained and independent systems, classroom teachers provide a perspective on ability which may reflect simple mediation of institutional modelling of ability (Rosenholtz and Simpson, 1984). Or instead there may be a more complex mediation of ability tempered by individual teacher



identity, notions of self efficacy within the classroom, responses to wider societal and political views as well as those perpetuated or negotiated within each institution and system. Certainly, attempts to look at teachers 'identifying ability' have tended to focus on the decision and its degree of correctness rather than on the decision-maker and her contexts and the nature of her conceptualisation.

The work carried out over the last 30 years, has pointed to problems of unreliability, discrepancy and bias in teacher identification of ability. From the work of Pagnato and Birch (cited in Gear, 1976) carried out in the 60s, in which they question teachers' fundamental understanding of the nature of intelligence, to the work carried out in the 70s by Tempest (1974) and Gear (1976) which highlighted unreliable teacher judgement as the sole basis for identification of very able children. Discrepancies between individual teachers were also brought to the fore in Maltby (1984) and Eyre (1997). Schack and Starko (1990) and Maker (1994) confirmed a tendency for teachers to concentrate on narrow definitions and identification measures despite the developments made by theorists with regard to intelligence

Simon (1995) argues that individuals have an inbuilt concept of high ability which is brought to bear in their decisions and actions. Persson (1998) highlights the tendency for teachers to rely on stereotypical models of the very able, especially in societies where ability is subsumed within the more important system ideology of egalitarianism. However, there has been a tendency, in recent times, for there to be a movement away from ability construction in education and towards a focus on attainment (Bourne & Moon, 1995). The presence of implicit personal constructs of ability while at the same time educational practice has moved away explicitly from consideration of conceptions of ability suggests the potential for conflict.

Hany (1993) suggests that teachers have dealt with specific features of the individual, which have acted as triggers for teachers to identify very able pupils and that this has been related to constructs in long term memory. However, the difficulty lies in understanding how these ability constructs can operate within educational communities where ability is avoided and attainment becomes the focus.

In Scotland, within the context of a perceived egalitarian state system, research carried out by Thomson et al (1995) and Hamilton (1999) into teacher views of the very able, has begun to explore the nature of these personal conceptions of ability. The former research alludes to the lack of identification of very able children and the reasons put forward as potential justification. 'Teachers are frightened to commit themselves now because they are frightened they are making the wrong judgement,' (Thomson et al, p 37, 1995). The latter noted contextualised high confidence in teacher judgement, leading to a reinforcement of particular assumptions about the nature of different kinds of ability and subsequent provision and classroom interaction judgements resulting from these.

Freeman (1998), reviewing current international research with regard to teachers and the identification of the very able, noted the ongoing nature of these problems and suggested that there is a need for research which considers how teachers', 'personal conceptions of ability or stereotypes of giftedness affect his or her teaching,' (p8).

As with pupils, teachers are viewed as participating in the construction of a potentially multidimensional ability rather than a unidimensional and uniform construct. They too are dealing with internal and external conceptualisations of ability as an integral part of

their personal and professional identities. Utilising Jenkins' notion of an ongoing dialectic between the internal and external worlds of the individual, teachers may provide ability constructions which at times present discord or congruity of some kind at the boundary of individual and institutional or wider societal conceptualisations. The ways in which teachers within different subject areas and in varied institutional contexts construe ability as part of this dynamic relationship is of particular interest here.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, the importance of ability as a construct in education and within explicit and implicit theories of intelligence has been discussed. Individual constructs have been examined within research into implicit theories of intelligence. Additionally, it has been suggested that ability should be considered as a negotiated construct with potential contradictions within individuals.

In chapter 4, the approach taken to the empirical work is presented and discussion of ethical issues given prominence.



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*Introduction*

In Chapter 3, the nature of individual perspectives within schools was investigated. In seeking to understand the nature of individual constructs within different institutional and policy contexts research questions were generated and four case studies developed. Chapter 4 reports on this research design and its implementation as well as the researcher's role and the schools' and participants' resistance towards a study in the contentious area of ability across Maintained and Independent systems.

*Research questions*

The purpose of this study was to begin to investigate ability construction in Maintained and Independent schools through the perspectives of a variety of individuals. This general focus then led to the development of the following research questions.

- 1. How do teachers working within particular schools perceive the category of the 'very able' and 'average' pupil?*
- 2. In what ways do teachers in different schools consider that they may have a role to play in the identification and development of the 'very able' / 'average' pupil? How do they perceive such processes to operate within their institutions?*
- 3. How do pupils in different institutions, perceive the construction of their own and 'greater ability' and the possibility that experiences and interactions within schooling may play a part in this?*
- 4. How do the parents of 'very able' pupils perceive their position within school and their learning experiences and expectations within society?*

### Contextualising the researcher

The importance of the researcher's experiences, values and beliefs in qualitative research where he/she operates as the primary research instrument (Merriam, 1988; Walford, 1991) highlights the need for reflection. The qualitative researcher is no longer seen as the objective scientist (Walford, 1991; Foster et al, 1996). Instead there is a need for an acknowledgement of the researcher's life experiences in relation to the study's focus (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997) as the research is seen as:

an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting (Denzin & Lincoln, p 4, 1998)

The following pages seek to locate the researcher in relation to the highly political and contentious issue of ability and Maintained and Independent schools, through a contextualisation of her past experiences and an insight into her value system. This serves to further underpin the reasons for this study's initiation, as well as encouraging the researcher to strive for an active and critical appreciation of any biases present.

In this study, emphasis is placed not only on two systems of education, the Maintained and Independent, but also on the political rhetoric and societal beliefs about the nature of a democratic and egalitarian Scottish society (McCrone, 1992; Devine, 1999). As an ex comprehensive school pupil in Scotland, I had experienced the early days of the system when setting was common in subjects such as English and Maths and my memories portrayed school as a highly meritocratic institution but with a breadth of social and geographic variety in its pupil intake. Indeed the early days of comprehensive education provided equality of opportunity but could be seen in retrospect as anything but egalitarian, since it did not promote a view of all men being equal but instead was highly meritocratic still (McCrone, op cit).



In my own family, political awareness was almost obligatory and an adherence to a belief in an education system which would benefit the many rather than a select few was similarly encouraged. My mother in later life was to attend university as a mature student and was to become an English teacher and she never ceased to strive to champion what she saw as the inequalities related to social class and to the supposed inferiority of the culture and language of the working class Scot. However, while this support for a comprehensive system and the belief in the 'lad o' pairts philosophy underpinning the meritocratic comprehensive (McCrone, 1992) was predominant in my school years and family value system, there was still recognition of difference in ability and potential.

Despite this meritocratic tendency, my values demanded support for a state system which encouraged all children to strive for success, and criticism of an Independent system which relied on money and privilege. The gradual movement towards, and popular civil belief in, an egalitarian comprehensive system (McCrone, 1992; Paterson, 1997b) was in itself contrasting with my own experiences and views of ability promoted in a meritocratic school system.

In beginning to investigate the nature of ability constructs in both Independent and Maintained schools, I was faced with my own assumptions and at times ambivalence about the nature of ability and the Independent system. This awareness was in many ways to provide a strong foundation for this research, as my own, at times, conflicting experiences and beliefs helped to encourage a critical appreciation of both systems.



## Research Design and Issues

### *Case study*

In order to begin to address the nature of ability construction, a case study approach was selected. In choosing this design, a conscious attempt was being made to avoid the simplistic comparative nature of political and media rhetoric which reduced ability in schools within each system to results on league tables (chapter 1). Underpinning case study research is a belief in the complexities of the social units under investigation, that there is not a single objective reality but instead multiple interpretations of reality (Merriam, 1988) and that an understanding of the bounded system (Stake, 1988) is the aim. Thus, in this research emphasis is placed upon the perspectives of individuals from varied groups as they articulate their constructions of ability within each of four case study schools.

Case study definition is 'not unambiguous' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1988) and it might be argued that each new case study is a renegotiation of definition (Stake, 1995) in relation to existing debate. Usually case study is perceived as a way of beginning to understand complex social phenomena in a holistic way (Merriam, 1988, Stake, 1995) and great importance is then placed on the unity or wholeness of the case to be studied. However, it is also possible to maintain that unity of focus i.e. an institution while at the same time confining attention to a particular research problem (Stake, 1988). Stake has variously described this as a delimited (1988) or instrumental case study (1995) where the issues are dominant and it is not simply an understanding of the case for its own sake which is undertaken. However, it is important to reinforce the significance of the issues while reaffirming the pertinence of the case as a 'localised boundary of space and time' (Bassegy, p30, 1999) which provides not only distinctive contexts but also a holistic perspective of the schools under study.

It is a unity but with groups within it, 'a concatenation of domains,' (Stake, p 86, 1998). In this empirical work, the case study approach reflects a perception of the uniqueness of each bounded system, in this instance, the school (Merrriam,1988; Stake, 1998; Cresswell, 1998; Bassey,1999). It also provides contexts for exploring ability constructs from many perspectives rather than the suggested objective reality of ability proposed by exam results while focusing on the issue of ability.

Often case study relies upon interviews, documentary analysis and observation as forms of data collection. In this study all three are used. This research relies upon multiple sources of information (Yin, 1989; Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) in terms of perspectives on ability (headteachers, principal teachers, teachers, parents and pupils) as well as techniques of data collection (analysis of institutional literature, semi-structured interviews and observation).

Semi structured interviews were the main mode of data collection as a way of exploring the issue of ability through the words and perspectives of each of the groups mentioned above. The interview as a conversation with purpose and structure (Patton, 1980; Kvale, 1996) reflecting a growing emphasis, in research, on participants' narratives as a way into understanding the world of the individual was considered to be the main focus of the study but at the same time it was supported by textual analysis of institutional documents and non participant observation. In addition, an assessment of national policy documents related to ability which had appeared over the final 22 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were to add a broader political and historical view to further enrich and contextualise individual institutions (Ball, 1990).



The use of non participant observation in conjunction with qualitative interviewing, placed emphasis on 'depth, complexity and roundedness' of the data (Mason, p 67, 1996) as well as the importance placed on the researcher's involvement in contexts and experiences of the participants. Although, this form of observation is limited, it did form the basis for an additional perspective on classroom experiences, which were subsequently discussed in interviews. Classroom observations provided potential questions for teacher post lesson interviews. They were also useful in contributing an additional perspective (researcher) on classroom events and interactions. These observations occurred while visiting schools over a combined period of roughly two months in each institution and two to three hours of lessons were observed in four subject areas (English, Maths, Music and Art) and in both year groups to be studied (First and Fourth year).

The four case studies themselves comprised 2 maintained and 2 independent schools which were chosen in order to provide varied institutional profiles. This purposeful sampling (Bassegy, 1999) led to the following selected cases:

#### **Maintained - Comprehensive**

- one serving very mixed socio-economic areas with seeming lack of 'success' in exam league tables with around 800 pupils (**Maintained school 1 - M1**)
- one serving mainly high socio-economic areas with public 'success' in exam league tables with around 800 pupils (**Maintained school 2 - M2**)

#### **Independent**

- one school using only informal selection by interview with around 300 pupils in total across nursery to S6 high school (**Independent school 1 - Ind 1**)
- one long established school with selection by ability with around 1700 pupils from nursery to S6 (**Independent school 2 - Ind 2**)



## Participants

There was a need to limit the scope of the study for practical reasons of time, however rich multiple data sources were sought. Consequently, the limitation took the form of choosing four subject areas to work within: English, Mathematics, Music and Art. These provided two traditional academic subjects where ability had often been measured and ability grouping employed and two expressive areas associated with innate qualities. Two year groups were also chosen: 1<sup>st</sup> year (around 12 years old) and 4<sup>th</sup> year (around 16 years old and preparing for external examinations). Thus, although it wasn't possible to view pupil ability constructs through a longitudinal study, this use of two separate year groups at distinct points in pupil interaction with high school was to provide data representing pupil perspectives at distinct moments in their school lives. This could potentially highlight the changing nature of ability constructs or indeed their maintenance.

The following groups provided varied perspectives on ability constructs within the case study schools: headteachers, principal teachers of English, Maths, Music and Art, class teachers (1 from each subject) in first and fourth year, parents of nominated 'very able' pupils and 'very able' and 'average' pupils nominated by teachers.

### *Headteachers, principal teachers and class teachers*

The headteachers of each school and the principal teachers of each subject area considered, participated in semi structured interviews (Appendices 4.1 and 4.2). The focus was on personal and professional constructions of ability and the organisational and administrative responses that might be made in relation to these. Headteacher interviews lasted about an hour and principal teacher interviews around 45 minutes. Subsequently, four classes in first and fourth year were chosen by the school for researcher observation and teacher interviews (Appendix 4.3) with the proviso that

where any setting or streaming occurred, the top set should be chosen. Semi structured interviews with teachers took place in 3 stages. A preliminary interview established the pupils to be nominated and the teacher's description of his/her approach to teaching that specific class. After each observation, teachers were interviewed briefly about the lesson and subsequently took part in a final interview of around 45 minutes. Teachers were provided with a basic framework for nominating pupils. They were asked to consider their class in terms of particularly able pupils and good middle. The difficulty of course had been in how to research high ability without asking the teachers to consider the children in terms of ability. In chapter 3 previous work on implicit theories of ability were had used lists of attributes from which respondents could make choices. In this study, since individual constructions were sought, this was avoided. However, it was impossible to avoid some form of framework completely. To help balance the need for such a starting point, teachers were asked to reflect on this categorisation task.

### *Pupils*

Children participated in interviews from 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of high school (Appendices 4.4 and 4.5) and across four subject areas: Mathematics, English, Music and Art. These particular year groups were chosen specifically because of their different experiences of each school in terms of time but also in relation to the different forms of curriculum faced by each year group. In first year, there is generally a tendency for children to be in mixed ability learning groups for all or almost all subject areas. There may also be distinct variations in the ways in which the curriculum is approached and whether, for example the 5-14 curriculum is fully or partially utilised over a variety of subject areas. In fourth year, however, children have opted into specific subjects for examination and have to deal with specific syllabuses. It is also more likely that there will be greater variation in the organisation of learning groups from third year onwards.



In each school, in each year group, children were teacher-nominated. Teacher nomination as a valid way of identifying 'able children' has been criticised over the last 26 years by Pegnato and Birch (cited in Gear, 1976), Tempest (1974), Gear (1976), Maltby (1984), Schack and Starko (1990), Maker (1994), Hany (1997) and Eyre (1997) in terms of unreliability, discrepancy and bias. This was problematic in research which set out to deal with measurement and confirmation of particular forms of ability or intelligence. However, it was possible to use teacher nomination in this research because of the focus on constructions of ability and the need to avoid bringing to bear as far as possible, researcher constructions or potential identification summaries generated elsewhere. The importance of the perceived ability levels and the consequent implicit theories of ability i.e. constructions, being applied meant that teacher nomination was an integral part of this research strategy.

Teachers were asked to think of their class in terms of ability and then if possible to nominate three or four children that they considered to be particularly good and a similar number who could be thought of as good, middle of the class. From these names, two from each category were chosen. Firstly, they were invited to participate if they had been nominated in more than one subject category and secondly the remaining names were chosen at random. This in effect meant that a small number of children were interviewed over more than one subject area and over more than one ability grouping. This meant that in each school 16 responses were sought in each year group in relation to the four subject areas: in each subject this involved two 'very able' pupils and two 'average' pupils. Pupils in the following pages will be described as 'very able' or 'average'. These refer to an assessment of ability within the class according to the judgement of the class teacher. Only the small independent institution, Ind 1, did



not contain the 32 responses. This arose because of the very small numbers within Music and Art classes in S4. Consequently, 1 very able pupil and 2 average pupils were nominated in Music and 1 very able and 1 average pupil in Art in that year group.

### *Parents*

The parents of very able pupils were asked to participate in semi structured telephone interviews (Appendix 4.6). Since parents were spread geographically quite widely, a telephone interview was considered the most feasible mode of interaction. This obviously curtailed the non-verbal communication which is an intrinsic part of the face to face interview (Kvale, 1996). However, expediency meant that this was the only practical way to proceed not only because of lack of time but also because the limited intrusion into participants' homes was convenient for participants. Parents were to provide an important perspective on ability construction in relation to the family, subjects and their expectations of institutions. Parents were not told about teacher judgements of pupil ability. This was in part to avoid the pupils being given such information in line with the ethical stance taken by the researcher (see P95) and to ensure that participants were reflecting on their own ability constructs, rather than responding to data generated by the research.

### *Research implementation*

#### *Processes of data collection*

Data collection took place over 9 months and across 2 distinct phases. Phase one involved initial contact with headteachers and principal teachers (Appendix 4.7) within each of the four subject areas. Semi structured interviews were conducted with each to investigate the organisational responses made to perceived ability. Fourth year classes were chosen for participation by the Principal teacher and a series of observations providing between 2 and 3 hours for each class was negotiated. A preliminary semi

structured interview with all four fourth year teachers took place in which pupil nominations were made. Short post lesson interviews occurred after each observed class or at least within 24 hours of any observation. A final longer interview gave teachers the opportunity to speak of ability in depth. Permission was sought from parents for pupils to participate in interviews and for parents of the very able to participate in telephone interviews (Appendices 4.8 and 4.9). Phase two repeated the pattern of interviewing in relation to teachers, pupils and parents connected with first year classes and in 2 to 3 hours of observation.

### *Reporting the case studies*

Typically, case study data is presented first as individual cases and then consideration is given to a horizontal cross case analysis (Creswell, 1998). However, I have chosen to begin in chapters 5 to 9 with an exploration across cases from within each specific perspective or group. This mode of reporting allows each group to be discussed in depth as distinctive perspectives but always as groups within specific institutional cases. Each chapter builds a portrait of the case from each perspective and in the spirit of Stenhouse's portraiture reporting (1988) of case study encourages an acknowledgement of the individual nature of each institution.

### *Generalisation and case study*

The uniqueness of each bounded unit for study brings with it the problem of generalisation in case study research. Bassey (1999) calls for a consideration of a qualitative generalisation that he terms 'fuzzy generalisation' (op cit, p12). Here there is recognition of the particularity of the case while at the same time, there is an acknowledgement of the possible relevance to similar cases.

The fuzzy generalisation arises from studies of singularities and typically claims that it is possible or likely or unlikely that what was found in the singularity will be found in similar situations elsewhere

Stake (1995) would argue that this is a kind of modified generalisation.



Seldom is an entirely new understanding reached but refinement of understanding is. (op cit, p7)

It is this refinement of understanding that is sought within this case study research and it may in turn provide an insight into other particularities.

### Gaining Access

Walford (1998) highlights the difficulties that can face the researcher when trying to gain entry to schools and Independent schools in particular. In his case prior research carried out in such schools had left respondents and those connected with them feeling vulnerable and possibly betrayed by the researcher's subsequent portrayal of these schools. In this research, I believe that the legacy of political debate (chapter 1) and a belief in the wider societal support for egalitarianism in Scotland meant that any attempt to investigate ability across these systems was a sensitive one which could potentially lead to defensiveness and avoidance.

Access to each school in the Independent sector was through the headteacher while initial permission to contact maintained schools was through an application to a Local Authority. The difficulty in attempting to gain entry to schools in both systems arose on contacting individual schools.

In trying to ensure that institutions were aware of the nature of the research (Verma and Beard, 1981) and so were able to make an informed decision about their participation in it, they were also provided with the opportunity to refuse to participate. This study had as its focus, ability, which was and continues to be a contentious issue but, in addition, it was proposing to juxtapose maintained and Independent schools. This latter positioning was of course reflected in political debate and consequently the study was probing a sensitive ideological subject. A number of schools refused to



participate despite written and personal contact. Some schools cited an overload of researchers in the past, but others alluded to a reluctance to participate in 'this kind of research' or in the case of one comprehensive, 'this research is not appropriate for this institution.' In the end, much reassurance was necessary in order to convince respondents that, despite the political overtones of the study, this was not research which sought to reinforce assumptions or prejudices but instead was composed of exploratory case studies which had the aim of investigating and understanding ability within each school.

### *Ethical issues*

There are three main areas of concern when considering the ethical imperatives of this research: issues of choice and resistance, ability and children and the nature of confidentiality and anonymity (Verma & Beard, 1981; Bell, 1987; Walford, 1989; Greig, 1999). The first of these has already been touched on when considering respondents reactions to research participation. However, it is also an important aspect of the ethical stance of the researcher. It is perhaps rather easy to affirm a commitment to respondents' choice while at the same time assuming that little or no resistance of any kind will actually occur. The presence of this kind of resistance (Walford, 1990) then ensures that the researcher actively explores the nature of that choice and the ethical response to be taken. In this case, it highlighted the need to consider what such a commitment meant for both the researcher and the researched and a more rigorous and thorough appreciation of the nature of choice and resistance was developed.

### *Research resistance*

During data collection, teachers were wary of the research and sought reassurance. One teacher in particular (Maintained school 1 -M1) saw the research as some form of assessment and felt both defensive of her own teaching, her department and her school and was to some extent hostile toward the advantages possessed by children and

teachers in the independent sector. However, since the headteacher had agreed with staff to participate in this work she felt obliged to co-operate. Subsequent resistance to participation was exhibited in continual postponement of interviews and mix-ups over dates for observation. Interviews when they finally occurred, were not to be recorded, although no particular reason could be elicited so that it was not possible to allay her worries. It was necessary then to write her answers by hand but the respondent wished to self - edit through a form of dictation, pausing to allow the researcher to write down replies and reading over text in order to contradict a comment or sentence. Traditional notions of interview dominance lying in the hands of the researcher (Kvale, 1996) were turned on their head. Here the participant worked strenuously to regain control over the nature of her participation.

Another example of individual resistance arose in Ind 2 where the fourth year Art teacher objected, not to the research process in general but to the categorisation of pupils according to ability for the purposes of the research. This overt resistance only began to occur during the preliminary interview but it would have been extremely difficult to negotiate and gain entry to a new class at this point. With perseverance, the teacher might have been persuaded to 'play the game' of ability categorisation but for two reasons this step was not taken. Firstly, when the teacher was so strongly against such an undertaking, it would have been ethically highly doubtful to try and persuade her to participate in a way which was contrary to her own principles. Secondly, the research was generated in order to explore the views of individuals within institutions. In order to remain faithful to that focus, it was not only necessary to accept this response but also to consider that although it created practical difficulties, it was also interesting because of its distinctiveness within this particular school. In addition, it served to puncture the researcher's assumptions. While adhering to a belief in the need



to ensure that participants were able to make choices, when confronted with a respondent actively making that choice during the research process itself, the researcher felt some ambivalence.

It was a reminder that there can be too much reliance on the compliance of participants once initial entry through gatekeepers has been achieved. It also raises the questions with regard to participants' rights during the research process itself. The 'rebellion' of a small number of respondents made me question the nature of participant choice and whether I had fairly adhered to encouraging active choices or whether I was merely thankful to receive gatekeepers' assertions that participants' had agreed to take part with a clear knowledge of the nature of the research. An initial response to respondents regaining 'control' and actively renegotiating the nature of the engagement, was one of disquiet at the disruption of the data collection. However, a recognition that renegotiation and resistance at both institutional and individual level can encourage an active and dynamic research process in which the researcher is 'encouraged' to reflect on her own assumptions and ethical considerations, can lead to a richer and more self critical appraisal of the researcher and the researched.

### *Children and research*

An area requiring additional thought and sensitivity was in relation to children as participants. Two elements were of particular concern: teacher ability judgements and the nature of choice for young people. In dealing with research into ability where teachers were making judgements of pupils in order to nominate them, it was important that no such sense of judgement was perceived in the interview process or within the classroom. Consequently, children were not told of any categorisation of ability and interviews were not focused on one nominated ability group. Choice for children in research is a slightly grey area. The researcher was obliged by regulations to

seek the authorisation of a pupil's parents and therefore assumed that parents would seek in turn the informed consent of the pupil. In addition, however, pupils were given positive reassurances concerning the general focus of the interview and their anonymity in the reporting of the study.

Nonetheless, the renegotiation of engagement that some adults brought to the research process was not present and highly unlikely to be, considering the greater asymmetrical power relations between the adult researcher and the child respondent. It is notable, however, that on speaking briefly to children afterwards about their views on being interviewed, all were positive. Whether participation was of interest for its own sake or as a break in the routine of the school day, students dealt with the interview as an interesting experience.

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity was as usual an important aspect of the assurances given to those participating and it was made clear that the names of institutions and respondents would be disguised or omitted in order to avoid any disclosure of individual views and subsequent consequences for any participants.

## *Data analysis*

### *Method for analysing data*

Research questions had been generated and used as the focus for interview schedules (Patton, 1990). Using the threefold structure for an iterative analysis of data suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification, the initial approach to the data was a holistic one in which tapes of interviews were listened to and fieldwork notes read and some initial notes made. Transcripts were made as a way of beginning to deal with the raw data but in the spirit of an iterative analysis, as part of a cyclical and reflexive process in which the original



tapes would be visited again as categorisation of data proceeded to verify or otherwise emerging themes.

As these transcripts were considered, notes were made (Patton, 1990) using the words of respondents. This allowed indigenous labels (Patton, 1990; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) (i.e. words and phrases from the data) to emerge. These could be listed for individuals and viewed across year groups allowing recurring regularities to be seen. For example within the strand concerned with how pupils construed their own ability, a number of pupils used the terms connected with assessment within the class.

**I get good grades**

**I'm a credit 1**

**I'm only a level D**

This created a category within this strand, of grading, but there was as with all categories, a toing and froing between data and the classification system to 'verify meaningfulness and the accuracy of the categories,' (Patton, 1990). This allowed categories to begin to be defined and tested through a return to the data. Each school for each of the two year groups was done in the same way. Thus individual labels were created and wider category labels developed. It was possible to see in the process that labels and potential categories were echoed across schools. The process of analysis could be summarised in the following way:

- 1. Familiarisation with data - audio tapes and field notes, some initial notes made*
- 2. Transcription of audio tapes*

3. *Review of a small number of transcriptions looking for recurring ideas/phrases*
4. *This provided 'raw' labels which were then used to consider other transcripts in that school. Any additional labels occurring were noted.*
5. *Similar process carried out for other three schools. Labels across schools echoed each other*
6. *Labels were gradually refined into a smaller number of categories and clearer definition of categories was sought. Returning to data a number of times to determine the efficacy of the categories and definitions - considering overlap and lack of clarity.*
7. *Tabulation of categories and at the same time verifying a coherent and consistent use of categories*

With the defining of categories came formal displays of tabulated information showing categories and groups and subject areas.

This summarised the way in which refined categories were occurring across groups and subjects. It also involved a reappraisal of transcripts in relation to working definitions in order to verify their usefulness or the need to refine them. Thus categories were applied 'systematically and consistently to the data,' (Mason, 1996) and where items did not fit, a reappraisal of categories and the need for additional categories or refinement of categories was considered.



## *Headteachers and Principal teachers and consensus and dissonance*

Ball (1987) has argued that traditional organisational theory is inappropriate when applied to the school as an institution and that conflict and dominance are instead the key to understanding such organisations. In beginning to analyse data from the four case study schools, it became clear that while conflict was potentially a part of school definition in relation to ability, it did not adequately reflect the disharmony or consensus which emerged in dealing with ability constructs. Notions of dissonance and consensus became central to a consideration of ability constructs within headteacher and principal teacher data. In Festinger's original Cognitive dissonance (1957), he suggests that where tension exists between two cognitive elements, for example knowledge of one's own opinions and of other people's, the individual experiences dissonance. In this study, dissonance concerning ability construction is judged to be manifested within the individual when either another's constructs are at odds with one's own or where professional and personal constructs create a contradictory relationship. The opposite of this may be deemed to be consonance, which implies agreement between cognitive elements. However, I have chosen to also make use of the term consensus as a refined form of consonance at a broader institutional level. Consensus, as defined by Moscovici and Doise (1994) involves a process of consent in which the individual makes a choice over association with others and acceptance of their values system (op cit p3). This does not negate the possibility of dissonance occurring but since choice is an essential element of the process, is less likely to emerge.

Two other groups (teachers and pupils) gave rise to complex analytical frameworks. The categories developed and definitions generated as a result of this analysis are outlined in the following pages.

### *Teacher conceptualisations of pupil ability, teaching responses and reflections*

Teacher constructions of ability in relation to nominated pupils are explored through the emergent categories of **position, motivation and skills/attributes**. Secondly, **Teacher Actions**, are considered in light of teacher responses to ability needs and the application of strategies to differing ability classifications. Here, Teacher Actions have emerged as instrumental in terms of short-term tactics, usually in relation to specific individuals or long term strategies reflecting potential provision for differing ability groups. These two forms of action are termed **Tactical and Strategic**.

Thirdly, teacher **Expectations** of pupils in relation to ability highlight the perceived nature of pupil progress when considering ability. These have emerged as the following categories – (1) **Predictive *progress*** or achievement (2) **Limited *progress*** for a perceived ability group (3) **Similar *progress*** for all individuals/groups. Finally, **Reflections** on the task itself were considered. Teachers dealt with this through discussing the nature of ability, their sources of judgement, the nature of an ability identity in relation to very able children and possible contradictions arising from what one teacher termed ‘the balancing act’ of mediating personal, professional and institutional notions of ability.

#### *Teachers’ descriptions of pupils in relation to ability*

1. **Position** – teachers used global or local positioning in terms of ability. Global positioning (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996) involved placement on a general ability



continuum e.g. exceptionally gifted, very good, average, middle of the road. On the other hand, local positioning related to comparative utterances in which children were located in ability 'groups' through a comparison of successful and unsuccessful learning as observed by the teacher. The latter meant teachers making comparisons between pupils within the 'local' context of the classroom.

2. Motivation – teachers employed positive and negative descriptions of pupil motivation. Often this resulted in 'very able' pupils being described as showing interest, enjoyment and commitment to learning and the subject. On the other hand 'average' pupils were depicted at times as lacking consistent interest and possessing insufficient or selective motivation when participating in learning.

3. Skills and attributes - The possession or lack of specific subject skills as well as personal attributes was used by teachers to help define ability

### *Teacher expectations of pupils*

Teachers reflected expectations which suggested either a distinctively predictive element or limited progress or similar progress.

1. Predictive progress/achievement
2. Limited progress
3. Similar progress

### *Teacher actions*

Teachers spoke of their responses to particular needs. These were either distinctive to specific abilities or uniform across abilities – Tactical. They also outlined specific

strategies, which would be applied as part of a broader teacher outlook concerning approaches to teaching when considering ability – **Strategic**.

1. **Tactical** - Teacher responding to perceived ability needs - e.g. attention, encouragement, target setting, evaluation
2. **Strategic** - Teacher applying longer term strategies to ability groups - extension, p-t interaction, differentiation through materials or through teaching

### *Reflections on categorisation task*

The teachers were asked for their opinion of the above task.

1. The 'balancing act' – attempts to reconcile conflicting ability constructs
2. Malleability of ability - (enduring / fixed or capable of change)
2. Sources of judgement - e.g. first hand observation of performance and/ or prior information
3. Ability identity - the typing of pupils within ability grouping – ease/difficulty  
Burden of label

### *Pupils and ability*

Pupil individual constructions of ability were structured through three strands mediated by the individual: self-definition, perceptions of high ability and perceptions of teacher judgements of pupil ability. The basis for this tripartite view of pupil constructions of ability is related to Harre's (1998) outline of the person as containing three selves which mediate different aspects of the world. His definition of Self 1 is the self embedded in the environment occupying a space from which to perceive and/or act upon the world. This has become the contextualised self, the second strand (B) in this research where the pupils outlined perceptions of the nature of high ability. Self 2 is the attributes of the individual and their beliefs about him or herself. This alludes to



the first strand (A) concentrating on the nature of pupil self definition in terms of ability. The last of these is the self as seen by others which is reflected in the third strand (C ) considering the ways in which pupils perceived the nature of teacher judgements of ability. In this way ability was not seen as unidimensional but instead was to be seen as experienced and perceived by the self from differing perspectives within the individual.

The nature of any relationships between pupil and institutional conceptions of ability, it was thought might begin to emerge within and across strands. Thus pupils in this study were engaging with ability across three strands which related to aspects of person but which also reflected different degrees of contiguity with the institutional model at different times within the child's school life. Strand A dealt with the fundamental beliefs of the individual about their own ability. Strand B was concerned with the conceptualisation of high ability and Strand C represented a notion of pupil understanding of a possible institutional model of ability as mediated by the teacher. Each was defined in relation to three categories: **Assessment, Comparison and Evaluation.** The first two may be considered to be the external references for definition of ability supported and reinforced by institutional modelling. Assessment can be seen as most closely and explicitly relating to institutional structures and activities, comparison remains an external but slightly less explicit reference. Evaluation by contrast is defined from the internal world of the individual and brings with it implicit judgements about the nature of ability.

At this point, then, the three strands of ( A ) Self definition - How able am I? (B) Pupil perceptions of High ability and ( C ) Pupil perceptions of how teachers communicated judgements of ability contained refined categories of Assessment,

**Comparison and Evaluation.** Difficulties arose over the need to consider more than one category for an item e.g. if a child had mentioned placement in a setted group as an indication of ability should this be placed in category 1 assessment or category 2 comparison or should the overlap be accepted as a legitimate representation of the duality of the terms being applied by the children. Once again it was necessary to return to the data to attempt to ascertain what would most clearly represent the data. On reconsidering, it was necessary to conclude that the children concerned were referring to a form of comparison created by school assessment and organisation. However, they did not describe assessment as leading to placement but instead focused on the placement as indicative of ability status. This seemed to confirm that while the researcher might conjecture about the background to such a self - definition decision, the children themselves were using the organisational feature as a reference point rather than acknowledging the underlying decision making process.

Strands A, B and C, then contained three categories which were defined in the following way.

***Self-definition - How able am I?***

1. **Assessment** - grading or verbal or written comment
2. **Comparison** - pupil to pupil comparison: individual to individual or across groups
3. **Evaluation** - a self evaluation suggesting particular strengths/ weaknesses in subject

***Pupil constructions of high ability***

1. **Assessment** - Grades achieved and/or teacher comments
2. **Comparison** - pupil to pupil



3. Evaluation - an evaluation of classroom behaviour and performance signifying high ability e.g. behaviours such as putting hand up, performance quality (as in Art - quality of finished product) or quantity (as in Mathematics - amount of work covered)

### *Pupil perceptions of teacher judgements on ability*

This strand contains the same categories of Assessment, Comparison and Evaluation but within each category there are sub categories, perhaps representing a more fragmented view because it involves children's perceptions of teacher judgements. It is encouraging children to articulate their views of another person's ability construct, the teacher. Thus it provides a perspective on a construct utilised by an important adult within the classroom context which comprises part of children's experiences of ability.

#### 1. Assessment

(a) Direct communication - e.g. through written or spoken comments or grades given to the pupil

(b) Indirect communication - e.g. through parents or others

2. Comparison - teaching strategies e.g. giving more or less attention to children with different kinds of ability or displaying talking about the work of children of differing ability

#### 3. Evaluation -

(a) child evaluation of teacher /child constructions of ability

(b) child evaluation of teacher/pupil interaction

### *Summary*

In this chapter the characteristics of the empirical work have been described and, in particular, the 'negotiated' case study outlined. The importance of the values of the researcher have been highlighted as well as engagement with choice, resistance and

renegotiation over participation discussed. In the following chapters (5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) the group perspectives within each case study school are considered in turn; headteachers and principal teachers; teachers; parents; and pupils.



*Introduction*

Headteachers and principal teachers of the four subject areas (English, Maths, Music and Art) were interviewed in order to begin to understand the ways in which decision making and policy reflected views of ability in these four case study schools. Consideration was also given to school handbooks, documents and informal observations. In addition, the contradictions or congruity of such views provided insights into the institutional contexts for teachers, parents and pupils and highlighted the distinctive nature of Maintained and Independent schools at this level.

*Schools and Policy Contexts*

The juxtaposing of schools from Maintained and Independent systems presented organisations which lay within distinctively different political and policy contexts and raised questions of institutional autonomy and definition (See chapter 2). The two Maintained schools possessed a limited but negotiable autonomy from Local Authority and national government and were also defined to a limited extent by their description within the system as comprehensive secondary schools. However, they were also subject to ongoing redefinition in terms of the organisation of learning and this was often seen to be dependent upon the educational and professional views of their headteachers. The construction of ability within these Maintained schools was headteacher led in relation to the ways in which they made decisions and defined boundaries for changes in the organisation of learning. As representative, not only of a school, but also of a system, with its coherent philosophy of educational purpose, they dominated any discord which arose to challenge their own constructs from external and internal sources.

In contrast, the two independent schools were closer to the notion of an organisation maintained as a single abstraction through the belief of those participating in it in the historical qualities and characteristics which provided an ongoing definition of educational purpose and outlook. This reflects Johnson's (1990) view of the emphasis in Independent systems on the school as having a unique institutional identity and *raison d'être*. In the two Independent schools, institutional definition was created from historical grounding, tradition, continuity and consistency and the willingness of those interacting within them and with them to consent to support and maintain that definition. External policy developments were to be considered only in so far as they would reinforce and enhance school aims and objectives according to headteachers of these schools.

It is within these distinctive policy contexts and organisational profiles that data from headteachers and principal teachers combined to suggest that within Maintained schools, the prevalence of dissonance in relation to ability constructs created a dynamic ongoing redefinition of ability. This could be seen historically within the schools as a result of changing administration, externally and internally in relation to policy and departmental distinctions, and across stages in terms of individual pupils.

On the other hand, both Independent schools relied upon a consistent perceived congruity of educational outlook, not reliant on headteacher persona and beliefs. There was a perception of continuity of institutional definition, a collective presentation of 'self' as a coherent and ongoing organisation seeking educational achievement. There was an integral congruity of purpose and no 'system' as such, that they were obliged to reflect in their structures and organisation and no awareness then



of external/internal policy conflicts. Instead, Ind 1 presented policy development by consensus and staff ownership within the constraints of a small school. In Ind 2, the autonomy of principal teachers was possible with a reliance on the congruence of their beliefs and potential actions linked to congruent aims of high academic achievement.

The following pages develop portraits of each school in turn and highlight the dissonance or congruity of ability constructs at headteacher and principal teacher levels.

### *Maintained School 1 (M1)*

#### *First Impressions*

Well-worn but well cared for externally, there was a similarity of physical appearance when compared with other state schools in its large utilitarian blocks and its battle to maintain buildings in the face of budget cuts. Inside is where the personalisation of the school really began. A sense of the immediate and distant past in photographic stories of past events and certificates of triumphs in debating and academic and sporting success in awards ceremonies hung on the wall of the administrative corridor. In addition, evidence of letters and certificates of gratitude for support for others in far off lands in desperate circumstances. (Bosnia/Croatia) promoted a view of a caring school. A sense of historic roots engendered by early 20th century black and white photographs suggested historical foundation but also continuity of existence. As the bell sounded children in a variety of clothes, semi uniform of school, or teenage 'uniform' of trainers and tracksuits, leather satchels bumping against BhS bags appeared, some starting to run yet catching sight of an adult face, myself, their pace altered and adjusted to walk on slowly, at least while in view.



### *Ability Construction*

In this school, ability constructs varied over time in terms of policy, with variation in headteacher outlook. The latter dominated the decision making with regard to departmental responses to ability in English and Maths in M1 but did not overtly control these in relation to Music and Art where lack of numbers affected potential organisation. In addition, these subjects were considered to be separate from the formal curriculum.

### *Historical Discord in M1*

Despite the imagery of continuity of physical existence, the ideology underpinning current policy had become distinctively different with the arrival of a new headteacher several months before. This headteacher was intent on changing and redirecting structures within the school, obviously possessed of strong views but suggesting a desire to empower those already in the school.

The advent of a new headteacher had brought with it a strong belief in the need for change in basic structures (flexible timetabling), in the organisation of learning (abandoning setting, except in Maths), and in teachers' perceptions and beliefs (the need to move them from subject-focused to child-centred in their approach to learning and ability).

My attitude is to see every child as capable. There are some teachers in this school at the moment who think some children cannot be taught, what are they doing in this school? My point is that teachers teach children not courses. They have to get out of their head their subject qualification as a barrier to communicating with pupils. The lead has got to come from them, so that's where I am just now. The school has got to take a lead because the expectations of the teachers and the pupils and the parents have to be synchronised in some way, the child is someone for whom the school exists and not the other way round. (headteacher, M1)

This movement away from previous policy and decision making disrupted the notion of historical continuity at an educational and ideological level, although the Christian principles underpinning this Catholic school encouraged a sense of continuity of values.

### *Negotiated Discord and the Organisation of Learning in M1*

In attempting to bring about policy changes within this school, the headteacher faced contradictory perspectives from those who felt torn by conflicting feelings about the proposed changes (pt English) to those who were at odds with the changes and who were able to use subject distinctions and educational 'success' to perpetuate a setted organisation of learning (pt Maths). The headteacher then set out his view of the negative effects of setting on children's self esteem.

The policy focus of the school is to keep a consistency across departments and to keep structures open and flexible, in a school where the ethos is for positive self esteem. This thing about setting, most schools don't run courses with enough numbers for setting anyway, the benefits are far outweighed by the disadvantages lowering self esteem, institutionalising in S1 and S2 low expectations for perhaps 50% or more of pupils. If you're not in the top set, you're not achieving, it's developed in every school I've been in that did it, even amongst very good teachers if you get section 10 your expectations are going to be low. It's a very pernicious thing to overcome and I think you have to be careful about that culture. I'm very keen on peer group pressure being positive, I'm very keen on groupings that work, I'm not opposed to setting, setting on the basis of ability might work given other contexts. I avoid allowing departments to see themselves as little islands separate from each other and I don't compare departments or use results to do so. The key to setting in subjects is flexibility. In Maths they're setting but there's fluidity and they have a very high level of results. (headteacher, M1)

The headteacher's experience of dissonance in relation to setting comes through in his criticism of it as a form of organisation because of its negative effect on self-esteem, while also accepting its use in Maths, which was in part linked to departmental exam success. It also undermined the hoped for consistency across departments. Despite this support for flexible setting in Mathematics, he insisted on a different form of organisation in English where broad banding was allowed but setting was prohibited.



Moreover, while comparison across departments was not to be encouraged, the Maths department's success in external examinations was cited in support of continuing setting.

There was a lack of negotiation over dissonant views in English where up until the arrival of the new headteacher setting had been utilised, with 'noble aims.'

They were set from second year onwards and in 3<sup>rd</sup> year and fourth year as well and the idea was that that would maximise our resources and we'd be able to stretch the most able and give a lot of time and help to the least able and these are noble aims, I think. We changed in February, Mr N. was appointed the previous year and he made it clear that he was against setting because he felt that it discouraged everybody except the very best and I would accept that.. Now with broad banding I do find myself having to keep making allowances and I keep having to qualify things and supply supplementary help to the ones that are not the highest of fliers, it's been a problem in our department, there's much resistance to this I think, not for educational reasons. There was something wrong with the old system, the amount of disaffection further down the rank so to speak. We should have better results and I think this is something to do with discouragement further down.  
(pt English, M1)

While willing to accept the notion of problems arising from setting, he faced internal conflict (dissonance) over the nature of teaching within a broad ability context as well as facing departmental resistance to a new form of organisation. The argument given for setted learning in Mathematics concerned the nature of ability identification early on in secondary school,

I would have to say that we are aware before half way through first year who the most able pupils are and then that follows them all the way through, it doesn't happen that you suddenly discover them in 3<sup>rd</sup> year. (pt Maths, M1)

But, in addition, the fact that maths was a subject which needed to differentiate through course content rather than response allowed the argument to be put forward for whole class teaching which could only be accomplished with sets of children, assessed on ability. Music and Art had insufficient numbers for any form of setting and used mixed ability teaching.

### *Subjects and Ability in M1*

While all Principal teachers felt the need to promote their view of the need for equality of opportunity for all children in their subject, this had to be reconciled with their understanding of subject ability as well as the potential conflict at senior management level over the best form of class grouping. English was seen as a subject in which identification of ability might be problematic and which might alter with maturity but it was also presented as more than an academic subject where success could not be measured in terms of exam results.

I find that colleagues from senior management don't appreciate that we are a freak subject as I call it, maybe I'm quoting someone else. We are unusual in that we are not a fact subject, we are a skilled subject but we are much more an affective subject than any other subject in the curriculum and that aspect which is to some people, who perhaps aren't English or are not sympathetic towards English teachers, seem nebulous, airy fairy. How do you measure that how can you show that? Exam results are one thing but how can you show that affective side? Differentiation at any level with that affective side in mind is difficult. I think much of the problem lies in the fact that we do much of the differentiation in the actual dialogue, interaction between teacher and pupil, a lot of that is going on, has gone on for some time, but having to record that, having to set that down for people that are not familiar with English is something I find very difficult. For the most able, I don't find it too onerous to think up tasks for them or to mark, I quite enjoy that but recording, explaining, justifying it. It's a skills based subject in many ways but somewhere buried in that also is its capacity to make better human beings. It's something that if it's taught well, alters people's perceptions, it makes people think for themselves, it's so linked in with a sense of somebody's being and things like moral choices and attitudes and empathising with others and analysing yourself. (pt English, M1)

Maths by contrast was marked by early identification and content differentiation with a variety of resources. It was the subject which dealt with correct answers and could be assessed in terms of departmental and pupil success by results. There was a perceived need for class teaching through focusing on groups with similar ability. However, a preparedness to accept movement between groups allowed for changes in performance although this was considered more likely to occur in first or second year groupings (ability groupings within class and broad banding respectively) and unlikely in 3<sup>d</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year when course plans were in place. Moreover, any movement was limited.



You wouldn't suddenly get somebody being brilliant who hadn't been perceived as being brilliant but you quite often get pupils forcing their way into top sets when earlier on they hadn't (pt Maths, M1)

In Music classes, ability was most likely to have been noted prior to high school because of the pupil's participation in private instrumental tuition. In dealing with different ability levels the intensely individual nature of pupil responses meant that differentiation by response was claimed rather than differentiated content. However, the principal teacher didn't perceive Music as limited in appeal to those children who had shown a propensity to take part in it outwith school. Those who showed 'dedication and tenacity' could achieve success. The success of her department was seen in the number of children opting for Standard Grade exams and in the quest for good results. She was very wary of the research especially as it dealt with schools in different systems and therefore implicitly, at least, set up comparisons across schools. She was concerned that she might say the wrong thing and sought to discover if there were 'right' answers.

I always support the underdog and try to do a good job, get good results and a high number of children interested in taking the subject. What have you found in other schools? What do they say about ability and the very able? Independent schools have got the money, of course, and the children have advantages. (pt Music, M1)

In Art a similar form of differentiation could be seen because of the nature of artistic ability and exam performance together with a self-perception of that ability which suggested an artistic self-knowledge. Yet a different form of expressive ability could focus attention for a short time on something different.

In our subject it's obvious because it's immediately visual and you can tell. There's another side to our subject where you can get this expressive, I don't like to use the word childlike, but a piece of work where the child doesn't like it and is not really aware of what they've done but we like it and we can associate it with being Picassoesque or something. And that does happen but I always find that strange because the child can't see how well they've done, they'll maybe appreciate it being put up on the wall but they'll see a representative or natural looking drawing and say, 'that's

what I want to do (pt Art, M1)

However, in the main it was the representational drawings, which marked out individuals as particularly, able although different kinds of ability could be encouraged and improved.

Drawing ability is very obvious, where you can see sensitivity in observation and accuracy. Drawing is really our guideline. Nine times out of ten if they're very good at drawing, this observational drawing, then they are very good in other areas as well but I'm glad to say, quite proud to say actually, that average ability can be improved, people think it's a gift, a talent one or other which is true but there's a whole area in the middle there where children do improve and become more satisfied with their results. (pt Art, M1)

In both Music and Art departments, negotiation over policy demands or changes did not seem to impinge on responses to ability. As departments, a focus on individual attainment was considered sufficient to ensure progress and attainment.

### *Recategorisation of Ability: Contradictory Perceptions in M1*

Recategorisation of pupils (Maltby, 1984; Hamilton, 1999) where students are moved in or out of ability categories was noted in relation to stage differences (primary/secondary or across year groups) as well as in external exams and internal perceptions. The recategorisation which occurred between primary and secondary was noted first of all by the department which seemed to make the most consistent and full use of primary information in organising ability groups within S1 mixed ability classes (Maths). It is interesting that such recategorisation was seen to be the failure of the primary perceptions to match those in High school.

We do monitor very carefully because the pupils are coming from 6 different primaries and while we're looking for consistency, it's never the case that every primary teacher will report using exactly the same standards and levels and all the rest of it. They send back to the primary school at about Christmas each year, a note of what group the children went into and whether they had moved up or down because that gives good feedback to the primary to see, oh that's interesting, maybe we're reporting too low or too high or they're using it the wrong way.  
(pt Maths, M1)



In English, this recategorisation was raised as a problematic aspect of identifying ability both between primary and secondary but also across year groups.

In the main you can spot bright kids but I think it's very easy to pigeonhole kids very quickly and very early on. I see it in the 5-14 judgements that sometimes come up from the primary, I'm glad to get this information from primaries but sometimes I choose to ignore it. One of my really good debaters from 2<sup>nd</sup> year came up with a C in talking and level C for reading and writing. Now he does have some problems but this is a laddie who last year against opposition from 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year won a school wide public speaking competition. it's funny, there was a spark there, okay he's mischievous but somewhere he had been pigeonholed, you're not a high flier. What if that had gone with him right through school? I've seen children who've been labelled as 4s at Standard Grade, go on to get a 2 at Standard Grade and go on to get a B at Higher. Now there's something wrong there. It certainly happens and it's something you have to be wary of and it's easy to be smug and say I've got it right. (pt English, M1)

The headteacher spoke of the lack of 'real ability' in this particular school and the need to look at Standard grade performance to find the very able in English and Maths while Art and Music were outside the curriculum ('not strictly speaking in the curriculum') and so presented very able pupils through extra curricular activities. However he then went on to make a distinction between examined ability and real ability.

There are so few children in this school who have real ability, that they do tend to stand out. It's often unassociated with what's assessed in exams. In my experience the pupils that I would have considered to be the most able have never achieved the highest grades in exams. I think it's to do with the way it's assessed. Someone with real ability can read a passage and read too much into it and over elaborate. They think too much about the questions and you have to hammer into them that the obvious answer is correct, always state the obvious, then develop it or whatever. Music is easy to define because there's an objective technical aspect which combines with interpretation and creativity. You can objectively assess the skills elements without which one couldn't be considered very able. I think that's probably true of Art as well. (headteacher, M1)

### *Ability in M1 - Summary*

Ability in Maintained School 1 was marked by dissonance within individuals and contradictions across departments. Measured attainment as representative of successful learning in English and Maths was used to support continuity or change of

learning organisation while Music and Art presented observable skills, which could be assessed in performance or competition with others. However, the questioning of ability perception and the nature of ability measurement remained unresolved when the overall wider discourse of attainment and target setting permeated the decision making with regard to what should count as ability.

### *Maintained School 2 (M2)*

#### *First Impressions*

On the surface this seemed to be a small school. However, it had become a popular and growing school and required a number of huts in the grounds to accommodate all of the pupil population. This reflected both the movement of commuters to outlying areas, away from the cities and an increase in parental choice. Both of these elements played a part in the pupil intake and make up of many other schools, especially those within commuting distance of the main centres of employment. This was a crowded comprehensive with a generally high SES intake. An open hallway allowed access to the school for visitors and I was ushered along a number of corridors towards the hushed quiet of the headteacher's office. En route, the clarion call of the bell reduced the corridors to ordered chaos as uniformed pupils surged from classrooms into a network of passageways.

#### *Historical Discord in Maintained School 2*

This headteacher was comparatively well established but once again presented contrasting views with the previous headteacher, in his sense of school identity and ability construction. He was perceived by parents as a catalyst for change, who had encouraged a positive environment for learning, irrespective of ability. This parental perspective reflected the stated aims of the headteacher who projected a view of



education in general and this institution in particular as an arena for the support of equality of opportunity and a caring community for the learner to inhabit.

The headteacher was obviously already interested in the idea of responses to the needs of all children but was also interested in the ways in which research in the school might highlight particular pupil categories. He considered that this might indirectly allow the school the opportunity to evaluate perceptions of ability provision. He was concerned with performance indicators and in what way the research might be linked with these. He seemed to have a very strong sense of a need for self-assessment and self-evaluation for the institution. An investment in research through the time given for this project was considered useful within this context as part of a long-term and ongoing critical appreciation of school practices.

### *Negotiation, Discord and the Organisation of Learning in M2*

The headteacher presented the very able as a legitimate subset for policy development and teacher attention. Departments did not possess autonomy in their decision making but had the opportunity to negotiate with him with regard to the organisation of learning. His awareness of the very able came from informal conversation or performance but became particularly noticeable only at the point of attainment in external examination. He noted that at times the informal information could give a misleading picture of who was or was not able.

From those fairly informal contacts, I find I can get quite wrong impressions about who is able and not able. And when I do find out in terms of their actual attainment levels, it's usually when S.C.E. exam results come in or when I'm interviewing pupils who have applied for university or college, it's only then that I become I would say, clearly aware of students that are performing best in those subject areas  
(headteacher, M2)

Music and Art however gave greater scope for ability recognition.

I think it's probably easier for me to identify them in Music and Art because the public demonstration of that level of attainment is more obvious. I've got for instance drawings and paintings on the wall from students one can see at a glance which students are clearly very talented in that area Equally in music, because of their performance in school activities. (headteacher, M2)

Consideration was given to the ways in which external policy influences might jar with the headteacher's view of the most appropriate form of organisation. Here, the latter had to deal with tensions between national and local policy and in fact used this tension to give him greater autonomy.

There are various constraints on me as well as on the subject heads. The first constraint probably is the guidance, more than guidance, yes I suppose guidance is the best word, of the Local Authority and indeed the HMI at national level. You're probably aware that in the last few years, there has been a strong move towards setting by HMI and that has not been well received by Local Authority, within that I do have to make decisions, for instance the decision to set in S2 Maths. There is no obligation to do that and the reason why it was done was because the Principal teacher made a very strong case that all sorts of recent research studies and practice in other schools suggest that pupils do better if they are set at an early stage in Maths. I have to say that I'm not completely convinced by that. (headteacher, M2)

And the fact that there was 'tension and lack of consensus' at times in the wider policy community made it easier to 'exercise a degree of autonomy,' in relation to this local decision-making. The principal teacher of Maths was aware of the headteacher's misgivings but used a knowledge of the HMI document to support her view that setting was the way to allow the kind of targeted teaching that the she felt the Maths syllabus demanded.

The Rector was not happy with setting. I don't think deep down that he's happy yet but there's been a publication from HMI that basically says, if you're not setting, you're not doing the best by your kids.. Unfortunately in this council, the head of schools is dead against setting, in fact she would rather not even have setting from the 3<sup>d</sup> year up, that's something we fight about all the time but the statistics



are there now as far as I'm concerned. (pt Maths, M2)

Maths was the only subject area where such conflict occurred. In English, the Principal teacher highlighted the near homogeneity of ability profile within classes at times which allowed for class teaching to take place. Where diversity of ability was noticeable, he favoured within class ability grouping but left any such organisation up to individual teachers. Setting was not considered an 'appropriate' form of grouping as he favoured a flexible organisational approach. In Music and Art, there had been no history of setting as numbers were never viable but in addition, the possibility of differentiation by response allowed Principal teachers to perceive setting as unnecessary. It was also seen as undesirable in terms of educational outlook i.e. as promoting inflexible and elitist working environments.

### *Subjects and Ability in M 2*

This distinction between Maths and the other three subject areas was further highlighted in terms of ability constructs within subjects. Maths was seen as a subject where early identification was feasible and where content and conceptual development supported learning which was stratified and targeted on particular ability groups. In each of the other three areas, an interpretative, creative and affective component in children's interaction with the subject meant that individualisation by response was promoted. In Art, this was overlaid with problems of societal perception of the subject as being reserved for those with some form of 'innate' talent and therefore restricted in focus. The need to encourage wider involvement from a broad pupil base meant that there was a need for mixed ability classes, especially as it was thought that artistic ability could develop at various stages in a child's school career.

From the beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> year you began to see that she was good. tremendous observed drawing skills, very highly developed, she'd obviously done a lot of practising, very high quality and very receptive to ideas. Another pupil was not very good in 4<sup>th</sup> year but suddenly developed in 5<sup>th</sup> year. You can see some children are excellent in 1<sup>st</sup>

year but then others come on with maturity. I think in the past people were put off our subject because it was linked with inherent ability.  
(pt Art, M2)

In Music, the principal teacher's educational philosophy was such that he felt the targeting of high fliers would undermine that.

So all the individual pupils may be working at different places. Again it's part of the philosophy, not targeting high fliers. It's a case of trying to provide a mechanism that allows every pupil to do as well as they can (pt Music, M2)

### *Recategorisation of Ability: contradictory perceptions in M2*

Recategorisation of ability identity was utilised by the principal teacher of Art only, in relation to perceived changes in performance over time linked to artistic development and personal maturity. No other discord in identification of ability was noted or gave rise to questions with regard to the nature of ability. This confidence in ability identification contrasted with the presence of recategorisation apparent in M1 discourse.

### *Maintained School 1 and 2*

Ostensibly M2 was similar to M1 in its reliance on the headteacher to define or redefine aspects of policy related to ability. M2 seemed to reflect a similar space for negotiation over this definition, but as with M1 that negotiation was, at that point, only occurring within one subject area, Maths. There were, however, distinctions between these two state schools. In M1 subject differences were highlighted and there was a questioning of the nature of individual ability difference in subject areas as well as changing perceptions of ability and recategorisation. On the other hand, principal teachers in M2 did have distinctive views of ability within each subject but their responses were linked to beliefs in the egalitarian philosophy of the system. This suggested a greater focus on perceived minimisation of difference and the individualisation of learning rather than subject distinction to these respondents.



## *Independent School 1 (Ind 1)*

### *First Impressions*

This was a school for a small number of pupils, just over two hundred, ranging in age from 3 to 18. It was set in a quiet residential area and benefited from tranquil surroundings. However, in addition, the grounds of the school were not only well kept but were very pleasant with tubs of flowers and plants and flowers in abundance. The school buildings varied in age and ranged from the established early twentieth century buildings showing signs of being well used over the years, to attractive purpose built blocks. Such a blend of architecture and pleasant grounds contrived to avoid the sometimes impersonal institutionalised uniformity of large schools dealing with great numbers and built on utilitarian grounds.

Stunning photographs of small groups of children involved in a variety of activities were found in abundance at the entrance to the school. This was different from the state schools visited where photos showed successes of individuals and groups in sport and academia. These photos were focused in on children engaged in activities that it was possible to enjoy in the school. Did this present a different marketing outlook, or perception of the nature of the school or perhaps an element of both? The school had a non-selective policy so academically there was mixed ability.

The data collected from this school was distinctive because the exceedingly small number of staff meant that 1<sup>st</sup> year, 4<sup>th</sup> year and principal teachers were one and the same person. Moreover, the additional duties each had and the lack of free time meant that a compromise was reached over principal teacher interviews and they were conducted jointly rather than individually i.e. all principal teachers together but class

teacher interviews were, of course, conducted separately in conjunction with specific class observations.

### *Historical continuity in Ind1*

In this school, institutional identity and ability construction was formed through a consistent self-image and congruent aims, which the headteacher and principal teachers chose to work towards reinforcing. The self perpetuation of institutional identity as a caring community dealing with individuals learning within mixed ability classes was echoed in parental perceptions (see chapter 8). The headteacher noted that there was a lack of very able children within the school and this was also noted by principal teachers but children were considered in ongoing discussion throughout their school career in terms of their ability and progress.

We have a series of staff meetings which cover academic progress and the whole range of activities that we have in the school, and we take particular care to look at new people as they come into the school. We quite quickly get a feel for how children are performing, whether they have any problems or they need support, learning support or whether they're very able  
(headteacher, Ind 1)

### *Practicality, Consensus and the Organisation of Learning*

Principal teachers and the headteacher were involved in consensual policy development and it was seen as important that staff had a sense of ownership of any changes that might occur.

Eng PT - I think we're all involved in policy here because of management style

Art PT - I think it's just good practice, if your school is small enough, so that you're able to have everybody mucking in, then surely you should capitalise on that. I think it's just good practice that we're all consulted or concerned about how to push our more able children on

Maths PT - in other schools I've been in, an awful lot comes from the top but in this school there's a sense of ownership for all the staff.

Music Pt - Policies in a sense are important giving us aims and targets but progress is really down to individual teaching



But as in M1, where mixed ability involved a real diversity of individual differences, the headteacher felt that there were very few very able children. He was therefore keen to deal with ability difference in mixed ability groupings as a reflection of a commitment to individualised learning as well as for social reasons when pupils were younger. The small numbers in school also made this a necessity but where there was an opportunity for separation of learners in upper high school, attempts were made to do so in the belief that it would serve to maximise learning as they worked for different exams. Setting was then seen as a potential form of grouping for older children as a way of providing appropriate teaching and learning opportunities but for practical reasons was little used.

If we have an opportunity to separate the two out (Foundation and Credit) then we would take that because I feel that ultimately we are able to cater for the needs of both by dealing with them separately at that stage. Lower down the school we think it's important that they all grow up together.  
(headteacher, Ind 1)

This was echoed by principal teachers who saw social advantages to mixed ability but felt that the very able in particular would benefit from setted learning.

### *Subject and Ability in Ind 1*

Principal teachers found that real differences arose in relation to perceived subject abilities and the age at which such abilities could confidently be identified. Maths as in M1 and M2 was seen as distinct from other subjects.

An able child in Maths, they can see the connections quickly and you can be very proficient at an early age. You talk about interpersonal skills in English. Maths is a very lonely activity, it's an introverted child perhaps or an only child who's parents have brought him on in the early stages who'll be really gifted. (pt Maths, Ind 1)

It was a subject where ability was thought to develop at an early stage and was seen as an isolated activity where individual teacher-pupil contact was particularly valuable. By

contrast, English, Music and Art required communication of ideas, co-operative activities or evaluative comment in order for children to develop. Teaching stimulus could be general and pupil response created differentiation. There was confidence in the nature of identification and responses to ability differences were linked to beliefs in the need for individualisation of provision.

### *Recategorisation in Ind 1*

Ability identification was not then questioned within the school but could be seen on occasion between school and parents: 'it's more of a problem dealing with parents who think their children are more able than they really are.' Quite clearly school perception of ability was seen as having validity in these cases.

The parents of children we would regard as being in the upper ability bracket I think I find on the whole that they are less demanding than many parents whose children are less able. It's more of a problem dealing with parents who think their children are more able than they really are (heateacher, Ind 1)

### *Ind 1 - Summary*

In this school institutional identity and aims formed a coherent foundation for ability identification and responses. These were confidently and unquestioningly focused on subject specific characteristics and required individualised responses. Contextual constraints, such as the small numbers available made setting unlikely although all principal teachers and the headteacher saw it as desirable. This was because it was thought that within setting it was possible to more fully target learning appropriately. This was with the proviso that if such separation occurred, it would do so only in upper secondary when Standard Grades led to particular exam syllabuses being followed. Policy developments were built on a very small staff working together with the headteacher to achieve maximum success for individuals within a caring school community.



## *Independent school 2 (Ind 2)*

### *First Impressions*

This school was a well established and large Independent school situated in a city. Its historical links with provision for poorer children were perhaps seen as being reflected in modern society by its commitment to the Assisted Places Scheme (now discontinued) which ostensibly allowed it to draw on a wider background mix than its entrance requirements and fees might otherwise engender. At the point of primary-secondary transfer, places were established for those children from its associated primary school situated a short distance away, who wished to continue their education in Ind 2. Those wishing to enter the school at this point, however, were required to undertake three exams, one in Maths, one in English and one in verbal reasoning. These together with reports from primary formed the basis for decision-making on a child's acceptance.

At S1 then, classes had two main components: children from within this school's established system of learning and assessment and those from a variety of state or independent primaries who had not as yet been socialised into the culture of the school but who had passed the initial hurdle of exam success and willingness to participate in this evaluation of performance. Interaction with the high school for those at its associated primary was an ongoing and well-established one with high school teachers teaching specialisms in the primary school and primary children regularly visiting and engaging in activities in their prospective secondary. S1 was then a transition period in which children from these two groups were to begin to work together and any problems were to be ironed out. For example, these included a potential lack of experience of foreign language tuition for those from other primaries and a lack of experience of this particular exam culture for external entrants. In order to promote a

sense of stability, children in this year were given a form room and teacher. This seemed to be thought to encourage a sense of control for the pupils and a place which belonged specifically to them. Bags and belongings could be left in this room and a number of subjects were taught here, negating the need for a constant displacement to different parts of the school at the end of periods.

### *Historical Continuity in Ind 2*

This school had been in existence over hundreds of years and marketed itself in terms of its enduring qualities and its educational values. As with Ind 1, it was not defined by the person who was headteacher but instead by its projected profile, maintained over many years. While the school was perceived to have a historical continuity, the nature of ability and high ability, in particular, was observed to have changed in political and societal terms.

Recently the Scottish Inspectorate have begun to talk about the very able in a way they didn't 5 or 10 years ago. It means something very different now. It means just very good rather than outstandingly different  
(headteacher, Ind 2)

In the face of definition changes of the very able this school maintained a continuity of outlook through measurement of performance but also made distinction between different kinds of high ability i.e. between an inclusive and exclusive definition.

However, it was felt that the institutional success, which had once achieved societal respect, was now matched by changing societal perceptions of such schools.

We were not seen as a distinctly different school from the state system one has to remember that S and T (two cities) had fee-paying local authority owned schools, very low fees but they were owned by the corporation and I think we were seen like that and I think the school itself saw itself like that, the difference was that we weren't controlled by a corporation, we had our own governing body. (headteacher, Ind 2)



The Principal teacher of English echoed this theme of changing perceptions and highlighted the hostility towards such schools.

No one wants to learn about the successes. Back in the 60s that wasn't the case, this school was very much a part of S.'s educational structure. It was effectively a Senior secondary among others and fees were small. It was also used as a training ground, people would come here from their training college, do their two years and go shooting off into S.'s schools. There was no perception then in the local authority schools that places like this were anathema, instead there was interaction. It seems to me there's a lot to be said for continuity, for things not changing, instead of this ceaseless quest for novelty. (pt English, Ind 2)

The enduring qualities of the school were contrasted with the changing nature of education within society and society's changing perception of this school and its values.

### *Congruent Aims and Ethos in Ind 2*

Principal teachers in Ind 2 were given autonomy over departmental decisions but with the knowledge that they shared mutual aims and perspectives. This autonomy was also seen as a respect for professional capability in attempting to achieve these mutual aims.

Here everything is focused on leaving people like me to get on with providing the rest of the department with the context for teaching English and the rest of it is just kept out of our hair. In circumstances like that, you do have time to think about what you're doing in the classroom you have time to do some 'door handle' lessons, you've also got a context in which you can talk fruitfully to your colleagues. One of the things that makes this possible here is people do not have such cluttered timetables. It's maybe a case of resources, maybe a case of attitudes, but the sad thing is that no one wants to learn from places like this.. and every year we're up there at the top of the league tables but they'll not look at how places like this do that because they've got this interference that comes up in their mind about elitism. (pt English, Ind 2)

The Principal teacher of Maths highlighted the independence of subject heads.

I am head of the Maths department, I teach Maths and I make sure that the children here achieve. I don't have a line manager, I'm given respect, whatever I want to do is perceived to be appropriate and I'll do what is best for the children. I'm given complete autonomy. I don't feel any constraints at all, absolutely no boundaries. This is the way schools should be run and I just wish more people were aware of that because it works. (pt Maths, Ind 2)

The school was not only seen as an example of good practice but also as a positive society for learning with a shared ethos and values.

I think the most important element in the school is the ethos of the pupils, it is basically a society which believes in achievement, provided people don't get cast down because they're less good than others, that's what we have to work at rather than trying to push people to work, is to try and pick up the kind of people who may underestimate themselves. Of course we hope that the teachers are very good and the way things are run but in the end you're trying to foster and keep going this belief that achievement matters (pt English, Ind 2)

In Maths this was seen too in both students and teachers and the progress of the less able.

The atmosphere that's created by the teachers and for the teachers is extremely positive, as far as I know there's no stress on any teacher, you're given tremendous support. Secondly, there's absolutely no problem of discipline or disharmony or children not being willing to work, the minute they come in. There's a very positive ethos all the time, a will to achieve, even among the children of lesser ability, shall I say. They want to achieve, they will do their homework, they will work in class, they will talk to the teacher and ask for help and very few children are distracted from their work (pt Maths, Ind 2)

Within the English department, ethos was again seen as critical and the importance of achievement as fundamental to such an ethos.

I think the critical thing is this business of ethos, the greater strengths of this place is that kids do not feel ashamed to be seen to be trying and as a result, people with high intelligence and an aptitude for writing make astonishing progress and this is part of the problem with the current political mantra that structures don't matter, they do! You can't have the kind of fruitful interaction that I'm talking about in a context which does not continually support that interaction (pt English, Ind 2)

### *The Organisation of Learning in Ind 2 - A Ruthless Meritocracy?*

Both English and Maths provided set classes by the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Setting was not negotiated but an integral part of the school's focus on differentiation through assessed ability and segregation of learning in order to target the needs of individuals. Children were perceived to earn their place in sets on merit but principal teachers then



relied upon teachers to operate differentiated learning with a focus on individual needs. This 'ruthless meritocracy' the PT English referred to was seen as a fair mode of targeting learning.

What I believe in, is a context which allows people to achieve their maximum level of their potential and I believe here they are set on the basis of examination and you are operating, if you like, a ruthless meritocracy and the spirit and the endeavour that gets the very able into the top section is all he needs really. If it wasn't working, if one had the feeling of dissatisfaction, then you'd find that out very quickly. (pt English, Ind 2)

In Art and Music, students were not set, once again because of numbers but also because these subjects were not seen as requiring such structures. The principal teacher of Art saw mixed ability classrooms as a strength for the subject.

Basically I think it's better for them to be together because the better ones help the other ones to say, maybe I can do that. (pt Art, Ind 2)

In Music, the Principal teacher was interested in the possibilities of setting because of the diversity of musical ability evident from 1<sup>st</sup> year. However, both in Art and Music, it was evident that both Principal teachers were conscious of the changing nature of ability and the possibility of ability becoming evident where previously there seemed to be a lack.

Some people develop at different stages. Sometimes there's latent talent that doesn't come through till quite a late period (pt Music, Ind 2)

And in Art

Some pupils develop quickly, they have the ability at quite an early age but others gain that ability as they progress through secondary school in that a pupil can be genuinely good at drawing in 4<sup>th</sup> year and they were not noticeably good in 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year (pt Art, Ind 2)

This perceived potential for a form of recategorisation where it was not the adult's perception which changed but pupil ability, was only evident in Music and Art.

### *Subjects and Ability in Ind 2*

The varied attitudes towards organisation were not related to ability specifically but rather to the efficiency of learning and the acceleration of learning through the omission of Standard grade exams. However, high ability was distinctive within each subject area. The headteacher linked Maths and Music together and then English and Art suggesting that there were similarities between each of the pairings. He believed that ability in the first two would be observed clearly and quickly at an early stage. By contrast, Art and English could emerge at various stages.

Ability in Art emerges at all sorts of ages, it can even appear post school age, you can have people who are doing Art in school and they're not seen as particularly distinguished but who are good artists. I think of all things, Art's the thing where talent emerges quite late, the complete opposite of Maths. English, there's a kind of maturity, an intuitive understanding emerge from people (headteacher, Ind 2)

### *Very Able and Distinctive Context: the Average Pupil and Distinctive Input*

While the school was seen as providing a distinctive context for the very able, it was also seen as enhancing the potential progress of the 'average' pupil. The distinctive context was presented by the headteacher in the following way.

For the really clever ones, I think we provide 3 things. We have a number of them and that's vital to have a number together, to spark off, to compete to push, to realise that you aren't a huge fish in a small pond, you're part of a bigger pond. We do that. Secondly, I think we have a number of people teaching in the school who can recognise that these are very able, they know what they are, they're used to this, so therefore they can assume and expect much more from them, and these people won't be easily allowed to get away with being pretty good. Thirdly, I think because we're a big school and have more of them, we can offer a variety of opportunities which a smaller school or a school with a lesser number of able pupils in it couldn't do (headteacher, Ind 2)

The average pupil was also considered to be an important participant in school because the school was considered capable of bringing about real improvement and achievement for those pupils (headteacher, pt English and pt Maths). The schools



input and their 'return' on this investment in people was described as greatest for such children.

I think for the middling or just above middling people, I think they're offered much more direction or help, much more belief in what they can do and push and I think we turn up a lot of people here who are not much above average and get them well above average results, obviously in exam subjects but also in all sorts of ways and that allows them the chance to get on to the next, a launching pad for the next stage.. on an actual return basis, the actual school puts more in and gets more from those people.  
(headteacher, Ind 2)

### *Ind 2 - Summary*

In Independent school 2, institutional identity and ability were inextricably linked since assessed ability was considered an integral part of the selection process for entry and of the organisation of learning within the school. There were perceptions of historical continuity/institutional identity with regard to high ability in the face of changing notions of ability in society and policy development. Individual principal teachers saw themselves as autonomous but this was within the constraint of an agreed understanding of mutual aims, perspectives and values. Ability was an overt construct and consensus was sought at all levels.

### *Headteacher Perceptions of Parents in M1 and M2*

Although both comprehensives, these schools presented distinctive profiles. M1 was a Catholic high school which had not been particularly successful in 'league tables' of exam results and had a highly varied SES intake. M2 on the other hand was a school with success in external exams as well as a high SES intake.

The headteacher of M1 did not believe that parental views of ability or school ability responses were important in determining parental choice. Instead parents were believed to be making a moral choice, with the intention of entering a school community with very specific values and ethics, underpinned by the Catholic faith.

Having said that, parental choice, he felt had been affected by other elements prior to his own entry.

We had fewer pupils over the last 3 years intake. They may have chosen other schools on the basis of the school underperforming and the discipline wasn't what it should have been but statistically the vast majority of parents are very moral. The choice of a school on moral grounds is a 100% endorsed the values the children encounter, the curriculum. (headteacher, M1)

M2 parents, it was believed, chose this school firstly for social reasons such as discipline and expectations of pupils after school but secondly for academic reasons in the form of institutional performance in exams.

They do so for reasons other than the academic. They do so for social reasons. It's to do with discipline and expectations of pupils who leave here. Now having said that, there were also these others, and I could think of quite a number who had more specific academic reasons but it was by no means the most common reason at all (headteacher, M2)

The parents of very able children were perceived as potentially making a choice based on these academic reasons: 'they do tend to look at results, academic results and the league tables, the notorious league tables.' However, at times there was a small minority of parents who were seen by teachers as 'over involved.'

Some are possible perceived by teachers as being over involved or at least overanxious possibly. There are always comments made about the number of parents whose children have got no problems whatsoever but who turn up at every parent night and almost expect pats on the back because their children are obviously doing very well. when teachers have a general expectation of parents' evening as mainly designed to discuss and sort out learning problems rather than to congratulate pupils' success. I think in terms of the teachers' perception (that's not necessarily the right one) but I think sometimes that the parents would be seen as being possibly pushing in that sort of sense but that's not them all, that would apply to a small minority (headteacher, M2)

The perceived view that certain parents were seeking a dialogue unnecessarily with the school and that parental interaction would be more likely to be seen as valuable when obvious learning problems were to the fore, is echoed to a limited extent by the



headteacher of M1 who acknowledged that it was the parents of children with a record of needs who would have a 'higher level of dialogue' with the school.

### *Headteacher Perceptions of Parents in Ind 1 and Ind 2*

Schools in the independent system present varied kinds of institutions with different kinds of structures in place to administer and organise policy and learning. They did not project the seeming coherence of the maintained system. Yet, there was a kind of coherent ethos of independent education, which enticed parents according to these two headteachers. In Ind 1 it was believed that parents projected a holistic view of a system founded on particular values.

I suspect that they have a perception about the Independent system as a whole. I think that parents do believe that sending them to an Independent school, the ethos they'll be looking for will be high standards in everything that we do and we certainly work hard to establish that in the school. I think it's the sector as a whole that they see as representing that and we obviously have to make sure that we don't do anything that damages that. (headteacher, Ind 1)

In Ind 2, while ability was a potential consideration in terms of parental choice it wasn't considered to be the most important element. Here, once again an underlying ethos was expected.

I suppose if it's known that the school has able pupils who go on to be successful in exams or in other ways, I suppose that people think that if that's what can happen, then if we have a child that we think is clever then probably that's a good place for that child to go. I think there must be some of that. But one of the factors that comes out is not to do with ability at all, one factor that comes out is the idea of a disciplined organised environment for children, that's very important apparently. where they think their children will be in a very calm, ordered atmosphere. (headteacher, Ind 2)

### *The Assisted Places scheme and M1 and M2*

Both headteachers viewed the Assisted Places Scheme as unacceptable within a society attempting to encourage inclusiveness through an egalitarian state system. In M1, the headteacher pointed to the common view of popular and historical support for such a

system as well as the notion of such segregation of educational provision as being 'alien' to the coherence of an inclusionist education system.

The government was trying to graft something onto Scottish education and it didn't work. There's a tradition of egalitarianism massively supported by the Church of Scotland historically, It seems to me that the people who use it, their children are already at private schools. It deprives some schools of able children perhaps, we suffer from it in this area. It's an irritation as a symbol of something that state education is not good enough for my children. Whose children is it good enough for? I think if we're talking about society's preparation for the future, to encourage people to be educated in any kind of way that sets them apart from the mainstream of society as it were I'm not opposed to specialist schools of one kind or another for particular purposes but to introduce a system where they're creaming off an elite, we need to return to a stoutness of education, away from the Anglicisation of the last 18 years, there's a coherence to the Scottish system. (headteacher, M1)

The criticism of segregation outwith the system but an acceptance of different forms of segregation within the system, highlight the contradictions within this discourse. If specialism is to be allowed, who is to decide what these specialist schools might be and why is that they do not perpetrate the kind of injustice and segregation from wider society envisioned by the Assisted Places Scheme. In M2, the headteacher presented a similar criticism of the scheme while recognising his own favourable position within the Maintained sector as head of a school with a high SES intake.

Well, I was completely against it. I am very strongly committed to the State education system. I think for the health of our society and the future I think it is very important that there is a strong and well-resourced and high quality state education system and I think that for the cohesion of society communities should be educated together not hived off to some other institution. Now, I know that is an ideal and it's easy for me to sit in W. where there is a very favourable catchment area and a very strongly motivated pupil body supported by parents with aspirations and it would be quite different if I was sitting elsewhere and my child was going to a school which was not going to provide the kind of education that I wanted, but I do feel that the Assisted Places Scheme and indeed the placing request arrangements further weaken the possibilities of schools developing in positive sorts of ways serving the whole community, providing the high quality of education that they should be doing. I think there's a tendency that these schemes create more ghetto type situations and therefore are most unhealthy. (headteacher, M2)



## *Headteachers Perceptions of The Assisted Places Scheme in Ind 1 and Ind 2*

Both headteachers felt that aspects of the scheme led to anomalies where those who might have already considered sending children to Independent schools took advantage of the opportunity. They highlighted the fact that it hadn't been intended for 'relief of the middle classes' but for children from 'housing schemes' and from the 'poorest backgrounds.' In the face of a lack of expectations and potentially negative peer pressure, children were given the opportunity to move in to a new learning environment.

I'd like to think we've had far more spectacular successes than we've had failures. For the failures, where someone finds it so difficult to be put into what's an alien world that they don't blossom. However, we also have just the opposite. I'm thinking of a family who came from F. The head of the primary said, if he goes to the local secondary he won't do anything. He needs to be taken out of that environment completely. He came here and he did very well. Now that is because he was put into a different environment where suddenly it was expected people would be certain things, do electronics as he was doing (headteacher, Ind 2)

For the headteacher of Ind 1, it was a reaction against inadequacies in other schools which made the scheme an opportunity to opt into a service compensating for perceived problems in state schools and not necessarily for 'very able' pupils but for 'average' pupils.

I have no axe to grind as far as the state sector is concerned at all. In an ideal world, independent schools would not exist. After some considerable years of experience in the Independent sector and not a few years ahead now, I have found that a lot of children come to us because there are real concerns about discipline in state schools. There are real concerns about bullying. There are real concerns about motivation particularly for children who are not high fliers, a good solid average child who is not being stretched.  
(headteacher, Ind 1)

### *Summary*

An initial distinction between Maintained and Independent schools was that the ethos and perceived character of the Maintained schools was strongly linked to the

headteacher, his outlook and decisions and educational perspective as well as to the type of school i.e. comprehensive. On the other hand, both independent schools possessed a character and ethos, which was characterised by a lack of dependence on any particular individual. The 'definition' of the school (Ball, 1987) was capable of being challenged by a change in headteacher but also by the discord which shifted the boundaries of that definition in maintained schools. On the other hand the congruence built into the institutional identity of the independent schools provided a sense of continuity and coherence at least at an organisational level. This led to view of these maintained schools as institutions where dissonance over ability constructs was more likely to occur. On the other hand, Ind 1 and Ind 2 represented educational communities striving for consensus.

In the next chapter, teacher interviews from M1 and M2 have been analysed and consideration given to their ability constructs and the decisions and judgements made within the classroom in relation to these constructs.



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*Introduction*

The prominence of ability categorisation in the pupil attributes most often heeded by teachers (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996) underscored the need to investigate teacher constructions of ability. In this chapter, data collected from 16 high school teachers in the maintained system will be discussed in relation to teacher constructions of the 'very able' and 'average' child and how these were to influence teacher thinking concerning classroom interactions. Each set of eight teachers within each of the first two case study schools, four teaching 1<sup>st</sup> year pupils and four teaching 4<sup>th</sup> year pupils, will be considered in turn. Finally, a discussion of teacher constructions across institutions will examine the differences and commonalties appearing in the data and the congruity or dissonance within teacher constructs and across individual constructs.

*Teachers and ability*

Brown and McIntyre's (1993) empirical framework, reflecting the conceptual thinking of teachers with regard to their classroom teaching proved a starting point for considering teacher data. The emphasis placed by teachers on pupil conditions as impinging strongly on their actions and potential pupil progress suggested that an investigation of an aspect of pupil conditions i.e. ability would provide fruitful. Subsequent work by Cooper and McIntyre (1996) into individual pupil differences as perceived in teacher thinking, served to underline the importance of ability as a construct for teachers when attempting to describe their pupils. In this chapter, the ways in which teachers attempted to construe 'high' and 'average' ability in relation to individual pupils and also in terms of their own teaching actions and expectations

of individuals are explored. In addition, teachers' reflections on the very nature of the research task, being asked to consider pupils in terms of subject ability are considered and the potential tensions which arise in teachers' accounts of ability constructs.

Initially, teacher constructs are explored (within each school) in relation to pupil descriptions (see chapter 4). Accounts across schools focused on three elements: position (either global or local)(Cooper & McIntyre, 1996) motivation and skills and attributes (see chapter 3). Subsequently, the nature of teacher expectations of different pupils and the tactics or strategies employed to deal with perceived ability differences, if any are explored. Finally, teacher reflections on the research task of categorisation are discussed.

### *Maintained School 1 (M1)*

This was a catholic comprehensive with a wide SES intake. Teachers were interviewed across four subject areas: English, Maths, Art and Music. Only one teacher refused to be audio taped and remained defensive about the potential purpose of the research (discussed in chapter 4 in greater detail): this was the Principal teacher of Music who also taught the fourth year class observed by the researcher. Taking each subject area in turn, the following pages relate the nature of ability constructs from the perspective of teachers of first and fourth year classes in each school.

#### *English teachers – S1 and S4 in M1*

##### *Pupils and ability*

In first year pupils were placed in classes of mixed ability but by third year in English, they were broadbanded. The fourth year class was composed of pupils aiming for Credit/General papers in Standard Grade and so was supposed to contain pupils



with perceived success in English. Both English teachers used **global and local positioning** in considering the nature of pupil ability. The latter reflected a notion of position within an ability spectrum where pupils were 'very bright' or 'high fliers' or just 'middle of the road.' However, there was occasional use of local positioning especially from the S4 teacher who was dealing with a broadbanded class. He highlighted the sophistication and maturity of 'very able' pupils in comparison with most other 15 and 16 year olds around them. Motivational qualities were not applied to 'very able' pupils but were used in dealing with the nature of 'average' ability. In S1 these pupils considered to be 'average' were described as hard workers but this was mentioned in tandem with the idea that through hard work an average attainment was achieved but not more and that there was an absence of what the teacher termed 'flair.' A strong work ethic was noted by the fourth year teacher in relation to a female 'average' pupil who was highly motivated to do well but this was contrasted with the male pupil nominated in this same category. He was seen as lacking the motivation to achieve his potential since he was 'prepared to settle for being second or third best in the middle group.' However, the teacher also highlighted the notion that this boy was bored by the work and didn't realise how 'able' he actually was.

Comprising the third element of pupil definition, were the **skills or personal attributes** possessed by the pupils as indicators of a particular form of ability. 'Very able' pupils in first year were described as possessing technical language skills, good vocabulary and were capable of writing accurately. Emphasis was placed on cognitive attributes such as not only having specific knowledge but also being able to apply it; being able to work quickly and respond quickly; able to reason and problem solve as learners. But in addition, they were considered to possess some kind of

'flair' which could be observed in the 'maturity of style' employed and the 'sophistication of expression,' in written work as well as the ability to respond to 'sophisticated texts.' In fourth year the teacher focused on personal attributes in the main and suggested that such pupils showed a shrewdness and perceptiveness in dealing with ideas and texts, that they could deal with the implications in literature, 'the words behind the words.' This idea of flair seemed to encapsulate a variety of attributes, personal, social and cognitive as well as a notion of precocity in the sense of a particular form of expertise. These attributes were to be echoed across subjects, stages and schools. The attempt to synthesise a conception of high ability over and above this as flair, again across subjects, stages and schools, seemed to stress an innate quality. High ability was not then merely a formulaic combination of attributes but a unique synthesis of these with importance placed on the interaction of combined attributes with the subject studied.

By contrast, those pupils considered to be 'average' in S1 were described in terms of presentation skills (neat and meticulous) and subsequently as having technical problems with regard to spelling or speed or achieving the necessary length in written work. It was also emphasised that they lacked the 'flair' perceived in very able pupils and 'had to work really hard at it,' to succeed and 'They're struggling but really trying hard.' At S4 level pupils again didn't interact with ideas and text in the same way as 'very able' pupils. It is interesting to note that there is considered to be a lack of improvement in ability for these 'average' pupils despite the effort they applied. Instead of effort enhancing perceived ability, it seemed to reinforce teachers' perceptions of these pupils as lower attainers. The presence of obvious effort seemed to suggest a lack of the 'flair' considered to be part of high ability.



### *Teacher expectations of pupils in S1 and S4 (M1)*

These views were reinforced by the ways in which the English teachers dealt with their expectations of different pupils. 'Average' pupils in S1 and S4 were working at a lower level of competency in the subject and so expectations were to do with achieving 'basic soundness and competence,' and then 'working from there,' (S1 teacher). In bringing about change in 'very able' pupils, teachers were concerned with honing existing skills and a sophistication of interaction with the subject and they expected such pupils to be interested in looking at characterisation and giving insightful opinions. They had 'a more serious approach to the subject' than other pupils did (S4) and while others struggled to understand, 'they'll see it instantly,' (S1). This notion of 'very able' pupils possessing a different kind of relationship with the subject and able to 'see' what to other pupils remains hidden or difficult to discern is a theme which emerges within many teachers' discourses in this chapter.

### *Teacher responses to pupils in S1 and S4 English (M1)*

Teachers recounted the ways in which they responded to different ability levels within the English classroom. Teacher responses were categorised as tactical i.e. responses in the immediacy of classroom interactions, dealing with individual pupils and strategic i.e. general strategies for dealing with ability group differences (see chapter 4). Both English teachers spoke of using strategic responses to deal with group ability differences. In first year this took the form of planned explanations being given at different levels, differentiated worksheets and differentiated reading provided. However, both highlighted the differentiation by response (tactical) that was to be expected most often in English. This entailed responding differentially to pupil answers and interacting according to perceived understanding or need. These

were included by the teachers as an aspect of their differentiation. Both also suggested the need to deal with different groups in terms of greater or lesser support or guidance, 'very able' pupils requiring less. However, the S1 teacher did allude to specific tactics employed with particular 'very able' pupils in order to facilitate learning. These included the need to encourage the 'very able' pupils to stretch themselves and to seek ways to improve through discussion with the teacher and the fostering of a next steps movement, setting a new target such as A+ rather than A.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 English (M1)*

Reflecting on the task of ability categorisation, both teachers were unhappy with an outside agent (the researcher) requiring ability categorisation of pupils since this was at odds with their support for the comprehensive system and a belief in the importance of background on performance. However, the S4 teacher pointed out what he saw as the 'unavoidable' nature of categorisation within the classroom since after all, these pupils had been assessed for broadbanding and were carefully assessed for potential grading in Standard Grade exams. In S1 the teacher pointed out that all pupils were 'equal but different' but that differences of ability were too great in a mixed ability class like hers for teachers to deal with pupils effectively. She was, she said, trying, 'to make them all feel equal,' when she was then, 'very obviously differentiating, yet we're obliged to differentiate and it just seems like none of it makes sense.' She supported an assessment that would lead to setting so giving in her mind, greater similarity of ability but she knew that this wasn't 'politically correct,' so they broadbanded so that, 'the boundaries are blurred a bit.' The S4 teacher emphasised the flexible nature of ability and maintained that the rigid stratification of ability was an 'artificial' one. However, he then went on to insist on a view of ability which suggested a lack of flexibility,



Ability is either there or not there, there are always things you can teach a child to become more able at, you can teach a child to become more able at punctuating a sentence but there's no big movement in terms of ability. I think it's impossible to improve ability

He maintained that it was possible to change attitudes and aspects of performance but not ability. Interestingly, he considered that another teacher's perception of a child's ability could be wrong in order to justify a changing performance for a pupil who had moved into his class in fourth year. The struggle between the acknowledged political and institutional projection of ability and the personal support for the system with individual notions of ability is highlighted here.

### *Maths teachers in S1 and S4 in M1*

#### *Pupil ability*

Maths as a subject stood out as distinct from the others both in the way in which it was perceived by those in an administrative role but also in the ways in which pupils and teachers dealt with it. Maths was the silent subject for me as a researcher. Pupils would always conform to silent individual working within these classrooms and there seemed to be an almost palpable isolation surrounding each individual head. Teacher pupil interactions seemed to be very controlled in terms of the nature and the frequency of any interaction. Generally, these were class lessons, expositions of concepts interspersed with teacher questions to ensure understanding of the topic in fourth year lessons where pupils had been placed in setted groups. First year classes were very different as they consisted of mixed ability but within this the principal teacher had organised four 'ability' groups (based originally on primary school information) for whom teachers were expected to differentiate. This happened as a result of both teacher generated resources/activities but also through such schemes as SMP which allowed pupils to work through mathematical concepts at their own

rate and supposedly at the most appropriate level of difficulty. In addition, these pupils would, once a week, meet with other Group 4s, 3s, 2s and 1s, to have the equivalent of a setted class with others of similar perceived ability. This in effect created an unusual mixture of internal and external 'setting' for ability differences.

Pupil ability was seen in terms of position, global in S1 and local in S4. In first year, the teacher employed the idea of a broader continuum to explain why he was unable to pinpoint pupils who were 'particularly able mathematicians,' and who 'didn't shine,' mathematically or were just 'average'. By contrast fourth year pupils were compared with each other to highlight differences between 'very able' and 'average' pupils. This then meant that the first year pupils who participated within the research category of 'very able' were considered by the teacher to be 'above average' but not 'very able.' Consequently discussion of their skills or attributes concentrated on pedestrian success such as 'classwork well-done, homework good, well-set out and organised' but 'they hadn't shone,' and they were 'good without shining.' Fourth year pupils were highlighted as 'very able' and were considered to be very good and well grounded in the basics but also confident, rarely asking questions and rarely unsure. However, he did make distinctions between the male 'very able' pupil and the female. He pinpointed the 'extraordinary problem solving skills' of the former and the way in which this set him apart from other pupils

He doesn't do things the norm, the way the rest of the pupils may and he tends to think up other methods of solving problems which makes me think his investigative skills are superb, they really are excellent.

The other very able pupil was 'not as good as L.' She knew what she had to do and in the only allusion to motivation for the 'very able' in this subject, she achieved results through 'dogged hard work.' Internal motivation was used again in S1 to describe a



girl nominated as 'average.' She was placed in Group 3 rather than group 4 because she, 'makes the odd mistake in her assessments,' and 'she has to ask some questions which makes me think she's in the right group.' The boy nominated here was seen as 'untidy and scrappy but good at reasoning.' Within the fourth year class, 'average' pupils were seen as lacking confidence but once they understood, they were okay. It was the gap between the initial teaching and the required understanding to carry out the task that highlighted for this teacher the distinctiveness of 'average' pupils.

Once they know how to do a question, they can do it okay but it's getting them started on particular questions. They'll often put their hand up, unsure what to do or they can't do it and they won't have done anything on the question at all

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Maths (M1)*

Teacher expectations of 'very able' and 'average' pupils in Maths contrasted quite sharply between first and fourth year. In S1, the teacher emphasised his pleasure at being able to talk about this aspect of the pupils rather than ability, which he felt uncomfortable with, 'I'm much happier talking about my expectations than the ability issue.' He then went on to make use of the idea of similar progress for all pupils through having high expectations for pupils irrespective of perceived ability. This was made more concrete through his use of flexibility of group membership and a willingness to allow pupils to try work from other groups to help them progress. However, he also made use of an image of limited capability, 'I push kids into levels which are the very upper limit of what they are capable.' In addition there was a perceived distinction in expectations of 'very able' pupils, which he felt, had not been met in this particular class.

I would expect to see a wee bit more initiative in entering competitions, I would expect there to be a real urgency about completion of blocks of work so that they could get to the next thing and get to something a bit more difficult

This highlights the teacher's notion of the nature of the pupil's relationship with the subject itself which perhaps reflects the teacher's own interaction with Maths. Here, being very able entails a commitment to the subject over and above that of successfully completing the work. By contrast, the fourth year maths teacher highlighted the difference between what he believed his expectations should be and what they really were.

Technically, I should have the highest expectations of all pupils, so that would be the technical answer. I possibly have more expectations of more able pupils, I know they're going on to do higher and they're going to be very successful at Higher and probably get an A and I'd be pushing them not just to get an A but to get a 1 for the A grade higher, just to push themselves as much as possible and then to go on to 6<sup>th</sup> year studies. So I have extremely high expectations of the very able ones.

The strong predictive element when talking about 'very able' pupils came through here and he continued to use the notion of a predictive element for 'average' pupils but he limited the prediction and limited the form of progress that would be made. The targets for the 'very able' were seen as predictive a year or two ahead while for the 'average' pupil, 'the targets are a bit closer, you can't move that far ahead.'

You break down the task a bit, get them to achieve Standard Grade Credit, get a 1 or a 2. Then get them into Higher, get them confident with it. Make sure they pass higher, get a good grade.

It was interesting to note the way in which the teacher used language to describe the two groups of pupils. For the 'very able' he expected success and 'pushed' them on for further success or encouraged them to push themselves but the 'average' pupils he had to 'get' them to progress, 'get' them to become more confident and to achieve exam results. The 'very able' provided their own impetus which seemed to require minimal intervention while the teacher had to provide the impetus for 'average' pupils' progress and achievement.



### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Maths (M1)*

In terms of teacher responses to ability groupings, this was managed at a strategic level, developed by the principal teacher. In S1 this involved structured groupings, differentiated group lessons and individual programmes of work (SMP). In S4, where pupils were set, a very structured programme covering the syllabus through a core textbook and supplementary materials, timetabled for the year, day by day, provided within it, additional problem solving or brainstorming activities for those who were finished first. There was an allusion to some tactical responses to pupil ability in terms of the teacher going round to talk to individuals to highlight any difficulties being faced. However, on the whole a departmentally strategic response had been generated which was applied to classes in a very structured way.

### *Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Maths (M1)*

Two distinctive responses were made as a result of asking both Maths teachers to reflect on being asked to talk about ability and ability categorisation in particular. While the S1 teacher spoke of his discomfort at being asked to categorise pupils, in S4 the teacher was happy to participate and saw it as a normal part of teaching his subject but both highlighted tensions in terms of doing so. The former spoke of the 'need' to feel that all pupils can improve and of having equal aspirations for everyone while also seeing distinctions in ability and maintaining that teacher observation was capable of identifying the 'very able.' He also made the distinction between changing achievement and changing ability and how changing perceptions of achievement might not be seen as changes in ability.

If someone was coping particularly well within a group, I have to say that I probably wouldn't take the view that they suddenly, they had increased in ability. I would probably take the view that we had

misread the primary, their recommendations maybe interpreted wrongly, sometimes they can mature of course and respond differently and suddenly be doing a bit better

The S4 teacher had earlier made the distinction between his professional (technical) obligations, which he felt, demanded a view of similarity of expectations of all pupils and his personal view which involved varied expectations of different abilities. He also highlighted the meritocratic nature of the subject, leading to a top set of pupils who had 'earned' their places there and who could, 'achieve what they want to achieve with less teacher input than the rest.'

### *Music teachers in S1 and S4 in M1*

#### *Pupil ability*

As with most Music departments there were only two full time members of staff, although there were also visiting instrumental teachers. The Principal teacher highlighted the success of the Music department in the quality of its productions as well as the large uptake for Standard Grade. Pupils were usually working on their own with a keyboard and headphones at both S1 and S4 levels when the researcher was present. This had been the most difficult department to work in as a researcher as defensiveness about the nature of the research permeated any discussions including those at the end of observation periods. The latter and the last minute cancellations of interview times served to make the 'relationship' between teacher and researcher one of perpetual conciliation and reassurance on my part. The Fourth year teacher who was also the principal teacher of Music also decided not to be audio taped and wished to self edit as the interviews progressed.

Within this slightly hostile research environment, teachers were given the opportunity to talk about the nature of pupil ability in the Music classroom. In Music no pupils were considered to be 'very able' or 'gifted' but they were nominated as pupils who



were 'above average' or 'ahead of the others' but as the S1 teacher noted there were no 'stars' musically. So **positioning** (global and local) was utilised to a limited extent by these teachers in describing nominated pupils while an awareness of a global continuum consisting of a 'very able' or 'gifted' category was noted but pupils within these two classes did not possess what the S1 teacher termed the 'it' factor. This latter is perhaps similar to the English teacher's use of 'flair' to describe those most adept in Language.

In terms of **motivation**, both teachers considered enthusiasm and hard work to be essential in the pupils nominated as 'above average.' The nature of the subject, as perceived by the teachers, as one which required practice and concentration meant that internal motivation to succeed or progress was necessary within individual pupils in order for them to be seen as 'above average.' Only The S1 teacher suggested a certain kind of motivation was present in 'average' pupils but this took the form of a work ethic despite the fact that it didn't reflect easy success but instead highlighted the need to work hard 'to get there eventually.'

In S1, pupils nominated as 'above average' were not highlighted in terms of specific musical skills, instead they were defined in terms of the co-ordination and concentration applied to the subject and were seen as lacking the 'it' factor. By contrast, a child nominated as 'average' gave the teacher pause since he was seen as an exceptional singer who was 'innately musical' and had a 'good sense of phrasing.' However, he had problems with the technical side of Music since he had a lack of co-ordination and this work did not come easily to him. The variation in performance within Music seemed to preclude him from the 'above average' or 'very able' categories. The idea of a high overall performance as indicative of higher ability

of some kind came from the fourth year teacher who looked for 'good responses in all areas' from the pupils nominated. In addition she had an expectation arising from knowledge of private tuition being received that such pupils would be likely to do well. Exam results were discounted as having little significance in determining teacher judgements in Music and she placed great emphasis on her own classroom observations and questioning as a means of defining ability. Again no specific Music skills were highlighted for the 'above average' child or the 'average' pupils who were noted as, 'followers, not leaders with a need to build up confidence in their musical ability.'

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Music (M1)*

Turning toward teacher expectations of pupils, both teachers first of all noted that they expected high standards of all pupils and that all had to be treated as individuals, without placing a limit on their potential. However in S1, it was suggested that it was 'more natural to have higher expectations of very able pupils,' while an 'average' nominated pupil was, 'efficient but I don't know if there'll ever be anything wonderful from her.. some only ever do single finger chords.' In S4, 'very able' pupils were expected to, 'strive for high standards, Minel' as well as to exhibit good behaviour and politeness.

#### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Music (M1)*

Both Music teachers used general strategies of differentiation which sought to encourage pupils to set their own pace through activities. In S4 a more active teacher form of differentiation was suggested in which the teacher could provide differentiated tasks in relation to Standard Grade formats or note and respond to differentiated responses from pupils. She also noted, 'there is a distinction at



concept levels but I try to make them believe they're aiming for the highest levels.' So while making judgements about which musical concepts different pupils would deal with she was aware of a tendency to encourage a belief in the same high standards being applied to all. Tactically, they looked to personal interaction with 'above average' pupils to facilitate learning either through highlighting 'unusual features' (S1) of the music being learned or through 'pushing them on,' (S4)

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Music (M1)*

Reflections on the research task resulted in statements concerning the changing nature of perceived ability and the possibilities for all pupils to achieve in Music. However, these statements also contained qualifications. The S1 teacher didn't mind taking part in the categorisation of pupils but gave an example of 'changing ability' in Music.

This child seemed mediocre, after about three years it was like a switch going on. Something just happened to her, she just took off and she's absolutely superb

She went on to emphasise this potential for all pupils but then qualified it by suggesting a limited success for pupils of particular abilities.

I really do think that Music is, at any level, achievable by everybody I really do mean everybody, I think that the less able pupils can achieve something, even if it's just being able to play a tune on a glockenspiel or something like that

There was also a view of some form of innate musicianship which might be present in a 'gifted' pupil.

The ability to, phrasing is the thing in Music and you're either born with it or you're not. You can teach it but the real musical people have it naturally and it's a very difficult thing to define, real musicianship, but it's the 'it' factor. It's very difficult to say precisely what it is about a gifted child, apart from the obvious things like being able to learn the notes quickly, you know, but you can get lots of people who can do that but they are not particularly musically gifted

In S4, all pupils were thought to improve with training from the teacher and that they would be given knowledge by the teacher who would then be able to help them develop and improve their achievements. A distinction was made in relation to 'average' pupils who would, 'take longer and find it more difficult,' but who could be brought up to the level of the very able. It was noted that it wasn't possible through teacher intervention to improve the 'very able.' 'You can't get higher than an A, you can't get a better mark.'

### *Art teachers in S1 and S4 in M1*

#### *Pupil ability*

Art as a subject was slightly foreign to me since I had never been a successful artist myself and had followed only the first few years of mandatory art lessons in high school. The department was quietly industrious as pupils bent over caricatures of famous people in S1 or detailed drawing in S4. With very little knowledge of Art, it seemed to me that there was great variation in the 'quality' of the work being produced but I was interested to find out how the teachers perceived pupils and their artistic abilities.

What was noticeable initially was that **positioning** was not used at first to denote artistic quality, although the S1 teacher did go on to suggest that it was pupils who might be considered generally 'very bright' and 'advanced for their age' who would be very able in Art. **Motivation** was once again the province of very able pupils and was associated with the positive relationship such pupils were considered to have with the subject, exhibited in their keenness and enthusiasm.



In constructing pupil ability, Art teachers focused on skills especially in S1, such as observation, co-ordination, extrapolation, technical drawing skills and general draughtsmanship. For such pupils, these skills formed a cohort of natural talent and were 'nothing to do with teaching.' In S4 the teacher extended the notion of natural talent involving certain skills to suggest that personal attributes would be brought to bear which would imbue the artistic activities with a more in-depth interaction between artist and product. These took the form of, 'creativity, imagination and introducing aspects of his life into his art.'

By contrast, to be average in art entailed a lack of, 'observation skills and an inability to control the pencil or colour and they don't have as much imagination,' (S1). While in S4 'average' nominated pupils were contrasted with the 'very able' in terms of their responses to teaching and activities they were asked to take part in. These pupils,

don't always understand what you're asking of them, they're a bit more vague. They have to ask 2 or 3 times and you have to go over it. They don't have the same talent in it, perhaps their line is not so sensitive, or they'll put the shading in but they'll put it in harshly whereas these other people are a bit more sensitive in their approach, a slight visual difference in understanding

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Art (M1)*

Teacher expectations varied between predictive and limited in S1 to similar expectations in S4. In S1 expectations were that the 'very able' would be likely to develop and undertake higher exams while those considered 'average,' 'I couldn't even imagine them even attempting higher.' Not only was the achievement of such pupils seen as limited but it was also related to much greater teacher effort to help them achieve that.

My hardest work is with the middle of the road kids, bringing them up one grade or two grades, where the more able child would do very well

regardless of whether I was around.

In S4 pupils were described as all equally capable of improving but with the distinction that,

I don't think you can make a person who really can't draw a sensitive drawing into a sensitive artist but I certainly think you can improve on their standards. They could definitely get better with observation and thought

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Art (M1)*

In responding to pupils in relation to ability, an emphasis was placed on the use of tactical teaching responses. This involved the immediacy of interpersonal interactions over the quality of work and potential avenues for development. In S4 the teacher termed this a kind of ongoing 'negotiation' at a very personal level. Strategic responses were minimal at S1 level, where the teacher spoke of the need to be aware of the necessity for challenges of various kinds to be provided for 'very able' pupils whose 'minds were working faster than the middle group.' But these challenges would be worked out at a tactical level in the immediacy of the classroom interaction. In S4 there was a perceived need for strategy but not in relation to the actual artwork. Here, strategy was employed in relation to the written critical work, which forms part of the Standard Grade syllabus through the provision of differentiated help sheets for the writing of essays.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 (M1)*

Finally, when reflecting on being asked to contemplate ability and the categorisation of pupils in these terms, it became clear that system ideology, the professional demands of assessment as well as personal views provided an at times contradictory picture of teacher notions of ability. The S1 teacher had previously outlined sharp distinctions between the 'very able' and the 'average' pupil and she spoke of the fact



that some pupils, 'were definitely foundation while others were automatically ones they were outstanding.' She highlighted the nature of subject assessment in a variety of artistic dimensions which allowed some pupils to appear as if they were similar in ability to those she considered to be superior artists. The distinction here was between curricular development allowing puppet making to become a part of the syllabus and the notion of ability in the mind of the teacher which was to do with the ability to draw. However, she then maintained that she didn't categorise pupils in the sense that,

I would never say that was the level the kid was at and he was never going to be different, never. There are sometimes late developers,

The S4 teacher acknowledged that categorisation for this research merely entailed the use of professional judgements that were made in relation to the Standard grade syllabus and so were not requiring her to think about the pupils in a different way. Ability however for her was not fixed but could be improved in Art through the teaching of techniques and observational skills. It was possible to enhance achievement and she felt consequently ability but she had also highlighted the presence of some quality within the individual, a sensitivity, which she felt, could not be taught.

### *Maintained School 2 Teachers*

In contrast with the mixed SES intake in Maintained School 1, this second comprehensive drew pupils from an often middle class range. However, the headteacher was staunchly in favour of a system which represented fairness of treatment for all pupils. It was within this context that teachers were constructing notions of ability and teacher responses to individual ability difference.

## *S1 and S4 English Teachers in M2*

### *Pupil ability*

**Local positioning** was used within the S1 class (mixed ability) as an initial way of locating pupils in terms of ability. The pupils identified were described as, 'the best' or 'one of the top' and 'the high flyers.' In S4, positioning was not used. This was a broadbanded class and was described by the teacher as 'almost homogenous group' perhaps providing less opportunity for mental comparison across the class and no use at all was made of global positioning.

'Very able' pupils in S1 were located, first in their position then in terms of positive **motivational** components which reflected a strong internal motivation and also what the S1 teacher mooted as commitment to and interaction with the subject beyond the normal sense of instrumental interaction, resulting in positive grades. This was reflected too in the **skills and attributes**, which such pupils were thought to bring to the subject. Here teachers used notions of technical skills or knowledge possessed by the very able such as an extended vocabulary, the accuracy of written work and the complexity of sentences used. However, there was in addition, an acknowledgement of techniques used by the very able, which underscored the sophistication, and complexity of their relationship with language. These included the use of complex imagery or personification and subtlety and variety of tone and style, depending on the type of language required. Personal attributes were cited only briefly in identifying a 'very able' child. In S4 this took the form of a commanding and confident interaction between nominated pupils and English while in S1 the teacher alluded to the 'good ear' that such pupils can have which underpinned their ability to utilise techniques and technical knowledge appropriately.



The 'average' pupil was 'difficult to pinpoint' and somehow much more difficult for teachers to begin to construe in any detail. They opted for a notion of a lack or absence of qualities which were present in 'very able pupils.' This led to 'average' pupils in S1 being described as lacking motivation or interest or inconsistent and lazy. The 'average' pupils of S4 who were seen as close in ability to those chosen as very able were by contrast viewed in terms not of motivation but of missing something in their interaction with the subject. They were, 'sound but not inspired,' and 'couldn't develop ideas in the same way.'

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 English (M2)*

Expectations of pupils tended to focus on the very able who were seen in terms of predicted performance and achievement in exams and at S4 level in both exams and in terms of future career prospects and leadership roles. Since the S4 teacher saw his 'top' group as an 'almost homogenous group' he felt that there was no need for differentiation when teaching at that kind of 'top level.' This meant that he envisaged a general approach of 'whole class exposition' as he 'wouldn't leave anyone behind.' In addition there was an inbuilt peer group pressure to perform which encouraged individuals to perform as well as outside opportunities through the department for participation in debates or competitions of some kind.

#### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 English (M2)*

At a strategic level in S1, teacher responses were limited to 'aiming for the middle generally to get the majority,' with the added notion of, 'stretching both ends,' through additional support of some kind for the less able and, 'half the instruction,' for the 'very able.' However, there was a distinctive kind of tactical intervention between teacher and 'very able' pupils. Teacher 'conversations' with the 'very able'

would 'help them discover ways of doing something,' to advance their understanding of language. This was said with the proviso that teachers had to be careful in doing this. If it was obvious that they were identifying pupils as 'very able' it would serve to set them apart from the others. It was considered that this would undermine what the teachers saw as a pupil need to be part of the whole class rather than distinct from it.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 English (M2)*

Reflecting on the categorisation of pupils, both teachers saw it as an inevitable part of their job and could be confidently engaged with, if the teacher had had sufficient experience of and interaction with pupils in the classroom (S1). In S4 this led the teacher to the conclusion that while,

any child's abilities can be built up and they can develop language skills; being absolutely honest with you, you are going to find it harder, the development is going to be less in less able pupils.

However, they both had reservations about showing in some way within the classroom that some pupils were perceived as being 'very able,' since this was seen as creating potential emotional problems for these pupils. 'Pupils don't like being singled out, even in a class like that,' (S4) and in S1 this was seen as a need to be apart from the whole (the class). This was not similarly equated with identification of any other form of ability. So here to be 'very able' was to be separate from other pupils and because of the undesirability of this, teacher identification of such pupils had to be unobtrusive.



## *S1 and S4 Maths in M2*

### *Pupil ability*

The theme of quiet isolation in the Maths classroom was to continue in this school. Classrooms were based in small huts, which were filled with desks and pupils and consequently slightly claustrophobic. The highly structured programme established in Maintained school 1 was not present and teachers had greater autonomy on a day to day basis. However, there were set textbooks to be covered which contained differentiated exercises.

'Very able' pupils were considered absent from the fourth year class when the teacher utilised a notion of a wide ability spectrum, 'I don't have any in the class who are really high fliers.' The pupils nominated were those who were the best within the Credit class but they didn't fit into the broader concept of high ability that the teacher brought to bear as particularly able. In first year the categorisation of pupils was possible when they were considered in relation to others in the class: if they were faster and more sophisticated in their interactions with the subject. All the pupils nominated whether 'very able' or 'average' were seen as motivated. However, the 'average' pupils were motivated despite the difficulties they faced and with the purpose of improving their understanding through sheer determination. Those considered 'very able' were assumed to be motivated and successful.

The idea of pupils possessing some quality which approached the teacher's template of subject specific high ability was reinforced by the S1 teacher who emphasised the 'mathematical brain, this boy has. He's imaginative but he has a mathematical way of solving problems.' This in conjunction with other common aspects such as speed and ease of interaction formed the basis for high ability. 'Average' pupils in contrast

showed an absence of these and were also likely to seek interaction with the teacher because of a lack of understanding. They were also drawn to the teacher's attention because of impulsive mistakes in their work causing them to score less well and so reinforcing their positioning within the class.

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Maths (M2)*

In light of this, it is perhaps to be expected that their expectations of pupils would be differentiated. However both teachers emphasised the need to avoid limiting expectations of pupils. Having said this, in S1 this was qualified so that pupils were seen to have, 'not greater expectations but different expectations,' and this was highlighted by the predictive aspect of high ability pupils' future performance in Standard grade and Highers.

#### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Maths (M2)*

**Teacher actions** were mainly **strategic** in nature, through the use of differentiated textbook exercises, there was also an attempt to describe the **tactical** interactions with 'very able' and 'average' pupils in terms of specific dialogues with divergent aims for each kind of child. While the 'very able' would be encouraged to develop an understanding of complex concepts and skills and helped to discover their own errors, those 'average' pupils would work at a more basic didactic level of correction and simplification of material.

#### *Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Maths (M2)*

**Reflecting** on the need for categorisation of some kind as part of this study, it was stated that it was an inevitable aspect of teaching, 'you have to be aware of these things,' (S1) or a necessary part of determining strategies for those, 'who will maybe



need a little bit more attention than other people and to encourage the best and push them as far as ability allows.'

### *S1 and S4 Music in M2*

#### *Pupil ability*

All pupils had individual booklets to work through in Music in each year group in this school. In S1 pupils were working on different instruments, utilising graded workbooks to help them fulfil the requirements of the instrumental section in their notebook. As each child felt they had achieved a high enough standard on the instrument they were on, the teacher would be asked by the child to come and assess their work and a grade would be awarded and written down in their booklet. The class was consequently a noisy one as pupils attempted to play guitars or xylophones etc. Only those attempting success on the keyboards had the privacy of headphones. The class was mixed ability with some pupils having considerable experience of instrumental playing, others little or none at all. A similar mixed ability class with ongoing independent activities characterised the fourth year class.

**Local positioning** was used by both teachers to establish pupils in relation to their classmates. This was at times in relation to grade levels in musical instrument playing but was also described in terms of musical 'maturity,' and the extent to which pupils seemed to be in advance of their fellow pupils. Success in Music required a strong degree of personal motivation according to the teachers and consequently those considered most able were those thought to be the most highly motivated. Moreover, 'very able' pupils were technically competent in playing an instrument and in sight reading of Music. However by fourth year an added distinction was made alluding to a factor which was unquantifiable.

There's a kind of unquantifiable aspect to her ability. There's a flair. there's an extra something there that you would define as flair or talent rather than just the ability to do the work.

'Average' pupils were characterised by a lack of technical or academic expertise to put in to operation the imaginative ideas they might have (S1) or a lack of understanding in how to utilise existing musical ability other than through the help and guidance of the teacher.

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Music (M2)*

Teacher expectations at both S1 and S4 reflected each other in that they both suggested a similarity of expectation i.e. high expectations for all but this was qualified.

I expect them all to reach the level of ability that they are capable of reaching so if that means that S. M. and C. are way beyond everyone else then that's the level I want them to reach, not the same level as everybody else (S1)

And in S4 this was outlined in the following way,

As part of my philosophy, I don't have particular expectations. I try to have expectations for each pupil that are realistic for that pupil so it's individual expectations, now that's me being idealistic there. Maybe deep down, gut reaction do you expect more from the able pupil, then yes you do. You do expect them to produce work of a higher standard

The need to acknowledge a particular form of expectation i.e. similar expectations as part of a system philosophy is contradicted by the personal notion of ability and its link with future performance.

#### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Music (M2)*

In both Music classrooms, the teachers were keen to highlight the tactical aspects of their interactions with pupils with 'average' or 'high' ability. In S1, such tactical interventions as constant attention and encouragement as well as suggestions for



development and teacher feedback were seen as important elements in dealing with very able pupils. By contrast, in S4, this became the tactical strategy for 'average' pupils and 'very able' pupils required an independence from the teacher. Additionally, as the S4 teacher was also the Principal teacher of Music, he commented on the general strategic approach to pupil learning employed in the department. This took the form of individual record sheets allowing pupils to move through work at their own pace and a bank of resources and extension materials which they had access to.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Music (M2)*

Reflecting on the research task in S1, the teacher avowed that it was easy to categorise pupils quite quickly in terms of their 'position' but that it didn't matter what position they were since they would all have the 'same treatment.' The S4 teacher felt that it 'wasn't appropriate to compare,' and that this was particularly true because of the potential for a fragmented ability identity.

I never use the word 'average' simply because I fundamentally don't agree with comparing one with another. I don't see ability as being fixed, okay sometimes I see pupils who will not move far for one reason or another. I don't like the idea of it, I'm very aware particularly with a subject like Music which involves all kinds of different skills that you can quite easily find someone who has an exceptional flair in one area but is very poor in another area

Having said this, he returned to the notion of a coherent musical ability identity and made the distinction between what is achieved and the process, which occurs en route.

There's what you achieve, which is obviously quite an important element of education but I think the process of how you achieve it, is equally if not more important at times and I think that someone who needs very little support to achieve something is actually seeing something different to someone who needs an awful lot of support.

Indeed when considering teacher views of high ability, teachers generally drew on characteristics representing the nature of process rather than achievement when defining pupils, although achievement played a confirmatory role.

### *S1 and S4 Art in M2*

#### *Pupil ability*

Both Art teachers suggested a use of **global positioning** for pupils and highlighted natural ability and technical and observational skills. The natural ability mentioned again reflected that referred to in Maintained school 1 where 'very able' pupils could 'see' what the 'average' pupil needed pointed out and exaggerated by the teacher. The ease with which the very able dealt with work was contrasted with the way in which 'average' pupils had to work hard, to get where they were. Here the process of moving toward achievement for both groups and the limited achievement of the 'average' group helped to construct the pupil profiles.

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Art (M2)*

**Expectations** of pupils followed a similar pattern to that found in other subject areas. Teachers had similar expectations for all pupils but these took the form of expectations of some kind of improvement but,

'The average child will not produce as good a piece of work as the exceptionally talented child (S1)

In S4, there was a tendency to have expectations of future performance, in the higher exam while explaining the need to accept that in the Standard Grade exam, 'you can only achieve an A band 1 pass. You can't get something off the record.'



### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Art (M2)*

In terms of teacher responses to different forms of ability, S1 pupils were accorded a great deal of tactical intervention but strategic elements were not present. The teacher distinguished between 'very able' pupils and those considered to be 'average' in her responses. The former pupils required very little input but what little there was, was at a more subtle level than for others as the teacher highlighted aspects of tone and shading. For the 'average' pupil this intervention was more frequent and at a more basic level in terms of exaggerating tones and shading to help them see and continually repeating this because they didn't 'really see it.' The 'very able' 'see what the teacher sees and they understand,' while the 'average' pupil had to be shown what the teacher saw. In S4 a strategic stance was taken towards ability difference and came in the form of differentiated materials for written work - simplified materials for those with difficulties and additional resources such as books and CD roms for the 'very able.'

### *Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Art (M2)*

**Reflecting** on the ability categorisation required by the research, both teachers averred a belief in a changeable ability, that ability should never be seen as a fixed quality. However, they both made similar categorisations as part of their observation and assessment of pupils. The S4 teacher made a distinction between **looking** at a class and **deciding** where the top, middle and bottom were and **perceiving** pupils as 'high fliers,' those who 'need support,' and the 'broad middle,' allowing she seemed to believe a less stratified labelling system which did not confine pupils to particular levels of achievement.

## *Constructing ability in M1 and M2*

### *Pupil Ability across M1 and M2*

Constructing pupil ability through the use of **Global or Local positioning** was an initial response of most teachers (14/16) in both maintained schools. This tended to be a mixture of both Global and Local. The former implied the use of a broader comparative sense of Linguistic, Mathematical, Musical and Artistic abilities but was intangible and slightly nebulous and yet for each teacher seemed to imply a validity and legitimacy as a measurement of ability. It was used in talking about both the 'very able' and the 'average' child but was noticeably different in allowing teachers to explain the absence of the existence of 'very able' pupils within a specific class. **Local positioning** was used as a more concrete comparative measure of ability placement within the immediacy of the classroom context. It was found in mixed ability as well as setted classes.

**Motivation** was an integral aspect of being very able for some and was mentioned in connection with 'very able' pupils by most (11/16) teachers. Motivation was also used in the description of 'average' pupils (6/16). Here motivation was highlighted in one of two ways: as an explanatory device for a lack of success or as an attribute of the individual which was present, helping to bring about achievement despite the difficulties faced by these pupils in trying to make progress.

**Skills and attributes** mentioned reflected the work on teacher conceptualisations of pupil ability carried out by those such as Persson (1998) and Hany (1993) in terms of specific skills and personal attributes. However, these represented the presence of elements within the child or exhibited within work produced, they did not deal so readily with the nature of the **process** of pupil interaction with each individual



subject area. At this point teachers (13/16) noted the distinctive aspect of their observation of the 'very able' which led them to recognise high ability. The notion of 'flair' or an 'it' factor was exhibited by 'very able' pupils in the particular processes of interaction with their subject which set them apart from others. The belief in a form of ability template that was present in the 'very able' pupil and allowed a particular form of response and interaction within the medium they were working in, meant that teachers were able to distinguish such pupils. This was recognition of something close to their own interactions with their subject or perhaps at times surpassing or surprising them.

### *Teacher Expectations across M1 and M2*

Teacher Expectations of pupils were initially distinctive because of the perceived focus of all teachers (16/16) in the two maintained schools on a similarity of expectation irrespective of ability. However, this was always qualified in some way to maintain a distinction between expectations of 'very able' pupils and those nominated as 'average.' Similarity of expectation was seen as a way of suggesting that a teacher held high expectations of all pupils and by doing so could avoid to some extent the imposition of limitations. Nonetheless, in the ensuing discourse teachers outlined varying degrees of limitation for the 'average' pupil. This took the form of 'upper' limits or 'closer' targets for such pupils. Even those teachers who felt strongly that 'average' pupils could achieve similar progress to that of 'very able' pupils would qualify this in some way. In M1 Art (S4) this took the form of the improvement of technical skills to achieve some form of parity with the 'very able.' However, 'average' pupils were faced with being unable to achieve the 'sensitivity' as an artist that the 'very able' possessed. 'Very able' pupils on the other hand faced 'the sky's the limit' or the limitation of grading. The former included predictive elements in the form of future exam grades or at fourth year level even potential

career paths. The latter was encapsulated by a Music teacher in M1 who pointed out that pupils in her 4<sup>th</sup> year class could only go so far as 'you can't get better than an A.' Another teacher highlighted an added grade to provide pupils with a next step which involved aiming for an A+ in M2 English. It is noticeable that expectations were highly contextualised and related to attainment markers such as exam grades/performance and so confined to achievement within a syllabus and exam schedule.

### *Teacher Responses across M1 and M2*

Teacher actions formed into two categories of **Tactical** and **Strategic**. The reliance placed, in teacher discourse, on the strategic elements as a response to ability difference perhaps underlines the nature of much policy and development work on the subject of differentiation which has originated from a strategic intervention stance i.e. the use of differentiated exercises within textbooks and across textbooks as well as worksheets. In S1, there was little evidence in the observed classrooms of this form of differentiation strategy except in M1 Mathematics department where the highly structured nature of the Principal teacher's organisation meant that this strategic response to ability was strongly in place. By S4 in a setted grouping, both strategic and tactical teaching of ability was noted by the teacher but it was a tactical teacher-pupil interaction which formed the basis for ability responses during lessons observed. In fourth year classes, across both schools, while strategic responses were posited by all but one teacher (M2 English who spoke of the near homogeneity of the class), tactical teaching was very much to the fore during observation. It is interesting to note that in fact, pupils interviewed and asked about potential differentiation in the form of worksheets etc. were generally unlikely to have experienced it and were not enthusiastic about it, preferring to avoid what was seen as yet more work.



A distinction made by a small number of teachers (5/16) was the nature of tactical intervention for 'very able' and 'average' pupils. For the 'very able,' tactical intervention was usually for the purpose of a more sophisticated kind of interaction. This involved helping them to discover their way forward to a deeper understanding of ideas or techniques. Moreover, they were usually generated by the teacher because such pupils didn't usually ask for help. On the other hand, tactical intervention with 'average' pupils was usually instigated by the pupils themselves and came about because of the need for the simplification of instructions or a need to see where corrections might be needed.

### *Teacher Reflections on Task across M1 and M2*

Reflecting on the task of categorisation, teachers either implicitly or explicitly spoke of a form of 'balancing act' which entailed reconciling at times contradictory elements of a philosophical, professional and personal system of beliefs. This led to most teachers (10/16) in the two maintained system feeling uncomfortable with an exercise which they saw as at odds with the 'system' philosophy of equal treatment for all pupils. Nonetheless, there was an acceptance of a professional need to utilise assessment with its ability implications and exam syllabuses with their subsequent stratifying of achievement and linkage with ability. In addition personal beliefs which adhered to a traditional notion of varying ability levels and limitations led to confusion. In S1 English (M1) the need to see pupils as 'different but equal' in line with her understanding of the underpinning philosophy of the school created a difficulty when trying to reconcile her view of the distinctiveness of ability.

In M2, there was less overt dislike of the actual task and a greater emphasis placed on the need to adhere to professional expectations, which entailed assessment and thereby suggested ability identification. However, one teacher (S4 Music) did highlight explicitly the contrasting nature of his educational beliefs and his personal ones.

### *'Averageness' as Deficit*

'Very able' and 'average' pupils were distinctive for teachers both in terms of their interaction with the subject and in the ways in which the teachers considered potential intervention occurring. 'Very able' pupils possessed a very specific mode of interaction with the subject which provided a distinctively effective process of development. 'Average' pupils lacked this 'flair' which meant that success was marked by hard work rather than a 'natural' understanding or way of 'seeing.' It is of particular concern that 'average' pupils tended to be perceived in terms of lack of attributes and limited achievement. Despite often being portrayed as strongly motivated to achieve, this was seen as a perpetual struggle to attain only an 'average' grade, a limited potential.

### *Ability versus Achievement*

Within both schools, teachers made use of expectation of achievement to propose an equal perception of potential in all pupils. However, the nature of progress made and the quality of achievement attained was perceived in terms of ability difference. Ability difference was located both within a hierarchical ability continuum (Global) and one which was reliant on local comparison. This was a point of tension between personal constructs of ability and teachers' interpretations of the ideological position required by membership of the comprehensive system and it was here that dissonance occurred.



### *Subjects and ability*

It is particularly striking that rather than distinctive elements across subjects and stages, teachers were similar in their view of the very able. It has been recognised that teachers tend to look for triggers (attributes) which they use to identify the 'very able' (Hany, 1993) as well as referring to concepts of the very able in their long term memory as a basis for identification of high ability. However, it was significant that here, teachers emphasised a synthesis of pupil qualities and the subject in a distinctive way in order to legitimise high ability while avoiding locating ability explicitly within personal constructs.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, teacher data from M1 and M2 dealt with the contradictions between ideological position and personal beliefs and experienced dissonance as a result. The ways in which this impinged upon their expectations and responses to ability difference have also been highlighted.

In the following chapter, the perspectives of teachers from Independent schools are considered.

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*Introduction*

In Chapter 8, the constructions of ability prevailing within the two maintained schools participating in this research were examined in some detail. The dissonance between professional and personal views highlighted the internal struggle faced by individual teachers, especially within a system which is perceived to have a coherent educational philosophy. This chapter seeks to begin to look at those teachers working within the independent system which is united by the fee paying nature of attendance but which then contains schools which may represent very different educational philosophies. Each case study school is taken in turn and the teacher constructs of ability, expectations of pupils, responses to ability difference and reflections on ability in each subject area are examined. Subsequently, cross case discussion illuminates the differences and commonalties between these two independent schools.

*Independent School 1*

This school was atypical in the sense that it did not reflect the stereotypical media image of an independent school as selective and setted for learning. It did not select on the basis of ability or set for learning and its projected profile was that of a school as a small community with a focus on the needs of the individual within that community. However, it was also important to the school that it showed that pupils could achieve success in external exams.



As this was a very small school, it was also distinctive in that each department only comprised one full time teacher who was also Principal teacher of the subject. There was also some part time support in English and Maths. There was little space for departmental autonomy and each worked within the confines of a whole school policy with regard to the organisation of learning.

### *English teacher - S1 and S4*

#### *Pupil ability*

The classroom was rather small but full of pupils of mixed abilities. They had built up a relationship with this teacher over a number of years as she taught pupils both at transition (upper primary) and throughout high school years. Lessons were lively but always well controlled, aided by the teacher's in-depth knowledge of the pupils in terms of personality and learning needs.

Construction of pupil ability, however, was not based on contextualised observation initially but instead was linked very strongly to IQ. This was used as a way of pinpointing a general intelligence level. This **global positioning** was a way of establishing a level for a child but was then combined with the teacher's need to see this interacting with an emotional and linguistic maturity. This continued the view of a wide comparative measure but suggested a tripartite construct.

In S1 this **positioning** was located in relation more particularly to a sense of general ability (IQ). As the child grew older and became more deeply involved in the complexities of the subject, general ability was considered to be insufficient and it was at this point (in S4) that the teacher drew on the idea of additional elements of specific linguistic abilities and emotional maturity. Linguistic ability was highlighted

in particular skills e.g. accuracy in written work and the ability to deal with complex language and ideas. However, as with teachers in others schools there was a need to differentiate the 'very able' from the 'average' child through a distinctive interaction with the subject.

He (va pupil) obviously enjoys playing with language and it's that flair and that desire to play with language which is going to make him an English student, whereas S. who has a similar IQ is not going to take to a lot of the more subtle things in English because it doesn't excite him and he doesn't therefore see an awful lot of it. (S1)

So the 'average' child lacked the ability to interact with language on a subtle level and didn't 'see' the relationships within language that the 'very able' child did. This was also compounded for some pupils considered 'average' by a perceived lower IQ and the need to utilise 'sheer hard work' in order to achieve some form of success.

*Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 English (Ind 1)*

Expectations of pupils were similarly high for all pupils but there was a need to set individual goals based on the teacher's knowledge of the child. This in turn meant that pupils were being given differentiated goals based on teacher observation.

It would be wrong of me to let R. and S. away with the level of work, that for a weaker child I might praise them to the skies.

She also noted, however, that she didn't believe that there were any very able pupils presently in the S4 class when considering expectations.

There's nobody who's got a particularly high IQ. They're very competent, they'll be good university students but they're not outstanding, there are no Oxbridge people there

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 English (Ind 1)*

Teacher Actions in these two mixed ability classes were mainly tactical. She worked from a whole class teaching stance aimed at the middle with subtle differentiation built in for different ability groups or whole class teaching aimed at a complex or



simple level. This latter strategy meant that sometimes the lesson might be too difficult for less able pupils or too simple for the more able. This was considered unsatisfactory but necessary from the teacher's point of view. Intervention was present for the 'brighter ones' through teacher-pupil interaction, which sought to 'get them to look, to think, to experiment with the language and that's really got to be done on an individual basis.'

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 (Ind 1)*

This English teacher was concerned with the need to ensure that professionally she was flexible in her perception of pupils. Reflecting on the request to categorise pupils in terms of ability, she noted that,

I cast nothing in stone, ever, and I think it's very important as a teacher that you don't. Many of them will change as they grow up.

She felt that ability could be improved especially when pupils were younger but she also made a distinction between improvement and the possibility of an 'average' (R) pupil attaining the level of a 'very able' child (C) 'R. doesn't have the innate qualities, she hasn't the intellect and she hasn't the sensitivity to language.'

*Maths - S1 and S4*

*Pupil ability*

The classroom was again very small but pupils were sitting in small ability groups.

The teacher had worked until very recently in a large comprehensive and was having to make an adjustment to a very small school where pupils and teachers knew each other very well.

This teacher drew on **Global positioning** too to help place pupils in terms of ability.

However, he didn't focus on IQ but instead used a general notion of ability to talk

about those above and below average as well as those considered to be very bright in S1. By S4 he categorised pupils according to potential examination grading. So some pupils were obviously Credit 1s or Credit /Generals but within this he felt that he had a sense of a national level of high attainment which allowed him to comment,

I would say the brightest ones here aren't the brightest nationally  
but I would say overall they would be quite bright

While 'very able' pupils were all seen as highly motivated, the 'average' pupil 'worked really hard to achieve, to get by through hard work alone.' For the 'very able' child, a quick grasp of concepts, accuracy and neatness were also indicators of high ability. Their interactions with the subject were distinctive too. 'Average' pupils lacked a natural talent but 'very able' pupils, by contrast, had a special insight into mathematical work which led them to ask 'meaningful' questions.

One of the things in Mathematics is not just to see in straight  
lines but to try and see connections and pathways connecting  
things

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Maths (Ind 1)*

In considering his expectations of pupils he adhered to a notion of similarity of expectation for all pupils but this was qualified by the need to have them achieve a teacher-conceived potential.

I try not to have different expectations and I wouldn't let them  
see that I was expecting more from some and not from others  
but I could rank order in terms of predicted results in exams

This also meant that in fact he had predictive views of the 'able' child, 'Higher is my main aim for them.'

#### *Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Maths (Ind 1)*

In approaching the teaching of differing ability, an emphasis was placed wholly on Strategic aspects, mainly through the provision of differentiated materials such as



SMP to provide routes through a topic. By S4, a differentiated syllabus with most teacher time spent on direct teaching of the Credit group took over.

The Credit by their very nature must get most of my attention. There's a focus on exam syllabus and preparation. You impart all your knowledge. It really is a transfer of knowledge.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Maths (Ind 1)*

Reflections on categorisation, led him to highlight the need he felt to provide evidence through exam performance of pupil ability in order to place people into categories. But he felt that ability was something which could be improved and was not fixed since, 'people mature at different rates, a lot of people are late developers.'

Despite this, he also stated that,

Some kids reach their ceiling and that's it, for some the ceiling is very low, there are some people in this world for whom the ceiling is very, very low.

This was not seen as a contradiction but consistent with his views. It was feasible that ability could change but that there would be a limit to the amount of change possible.

*Music - S1 and S4*

*Pupil ability*

Music took place in a small hut and at S4 the class comprised only three pupils. This meant that informality characterised the classroom as the pupils and teacher played music as a quartet. This informal approach to the learning of music also permeated other aspects of S1 and S4 lessons as musical concepts were learned in context rather than as components of a course and stretching the more able could involve improvisation in Jazz style.

Positioning was used again to place pupils in terms of ability and a similar use of a general notion of intelligence meant that pupils were considered in relation to IQ first

and in terms of subject ability second. This global positioning was prevalent with some supportive use of local positioning in relation to others in the class. Motivation played a part once again in bringing out the nature of certain individuals defined as 'average' where success in the subject could be claimed but only as the result of hard work rather than the presence of high ability.

Perceptive musicality, a good ear and co-ordination linked with the ease and speed with which 'very able' pupils understood concepts began to describe such pupils. However, in addition, they were capable of seeing relationships across activities and contexts, which helped them to interact with the subject at a more complex level than other pupils.

*Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Music (Ind 1)*

The teacher felt that despite differences in ability there was a similarity of expectation for all pupils. Nonetheless, this similarity was tempered by a knowledge of each child being able to reach a personal 'peak level,' and the possibility that some 'average' pupils could approach this level of achievement through hard work and determination but the process of reaching this would be different for them. The 'very able' would do so quickly, showing an 'intuitive' grasp of what was required without asking questions while the 'average' child would continually be asking questions, needing instructions simplified and repeated. Any changes in achievement for the 'average' pupil would also be noticeable or more measurable because they would be much larger steps forward for them than they would be for 'very able' pupils.

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Music (Ind 1)*

In responding to ability differences, she focused on a strategic stance. Lessons were generally whole class with possible individual or small group work. Within this



pupils could be stretched through differentiated pieces of music being used or the open-ended nature of the activities allowing pupils to go as far as they wanted to.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Music (Ind 1)*

The categorisation of pupils, as part of this research was considered to be a necessary part of the job of teaching. On reflecting on this categorisation, this teacher noted that she felt that within this activity, it was necessary to remember that ability could be improved but it would be improved 'differently for different pupils.' An improvement in ability was to do with the improvement of specific skills rather than trying to bring about a fundamental change in the musicality of the individual. She also highlighted the need to avoid making explicit any categorisation since, 'peer group pressure is very important and to be seen as being different or too special can bring problems.'

*Art - S1 and S4*

*Pupil ability*

The Art classroom was in a hut in the school grounds. All available space was used to the full and it was noticeable that the pupils were used to working independently and to a great extent, especially in S4, on their own initiative. There was always a pervading odour of paints and clay and other art materials hanging in the air, giving the classroom a distinctive character even on first entry to it.

Positioning was used to place pupils in relation to global sense of artistic ability. So an S1 pupil became a child, 'moving into the top range, he's not an absolutely brilliant artist, he's good, the upper level,' and at S4 this was seen in a pupil who was, 'naturally gifted.' 'Average pupils were then seen as, 'middle of the range,' or 'mediocre.' Motivation only then came to the fore in relation to 'average' pupils

where a lack of motivation was found or where motivation was important because the child only achieved, 'through hard work.' 'Very able pupils' were distinct from other pupils not only because of the drawing skills they possessed but also because of a more intangible quality, which highlighted the nature of their relationship with Art. Her words such as 'intuitive' and 'instinctive feel' for the subject come to the fore and the way this is manifested in 'creative' or 'sensitive' work. This involved the child in 'seeing' certain complexities in the work that other pupils didn't. 'He'll naturally put perspective into drawing. 'He'll see that naturally and he'll understand the concept of perspective.' The average pupil by contrast lacked consistency and maturity and wasn't able to transfer ideas and skills from one activity to another and those skills themselves were not as good as those of the 'very able' child.

*Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Art (Ind 1)*

Teacher expectations provided a notion of similar but different expectations. She felt that she held similar high expectations for all pupils but this was linked to the best that she as a teacher considered they were capable of. This led on to ideas of limitation for certain pupils.

I think I want them all to progress but they will never all come out equal at the end, they're not all going to go over the finishing line as it were but I think as far as my expectations are concerned, I think I want them all to progress to quite a high standard.

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Art (Ind 1)*

This teacher had a clear notion of a strategic stance in terms of dealing with ability differences. This involved a general sense of differing aims and agendas for different ability groups but this was then largely targeted to individual pupils as she scanned the class for where tactical intervention might be necessary. This was slightly different for pupils of differing abilities. For the 'very able', this took the form of teacher - pupil interaction instigated by the teacher about advanced ideas in painting



or opening 'their eyes up to things they've never thought of, a constant opening of the next door.' 'Average' pupils on the other hand sought interaction at a much simpler level, requesting assistance or seeking reassurance that what they were doing was correct.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Art (Ind 1)*

Reflections on categorising pupils according to ability was seen as a part of the job in that pupils had to be assessed in order to plan responses to their perceived needs. It was considered important to retain a flexible approach to any form of categorisation while understanding that there were limitations.

Overall, if a child's good, they're just good and if a child's weak they're never going to be, they'll get better, learn tricks, they'll learn ways round a difficulty, but at the end of the day, they're never going to be a great artist.

*Independent School 2*

This school most closely approached the profile of a successful Independent school. It had selection based on assessment of mathematical, linguistic and reasoning ability for those entering at S1 and learning, after 1<sup>st</sup> year, was highly structured in relation to exam results. Those pupils in the top sets in 4<sup>th</sup> year were beginning to work towards higher exams and would not bother with Standard Grade exams in English and Maths.

*English - S1 and S4*

*Pupil ability*

What made these classrooms particularly interesting was the way in which very able pupils were not presumed to have some innate knowledge of textual analysis but instead were explicitly given analytical tools and potential ways of approaching texts. In addition, pupils were encouraged to think about texts in depth, to try and

understand the complexities of concepts and themes both at S1 and S4. The S1 class was made up of, what for Ind 2, was mixed ability. The S4 class was the top 'set'.

**Positioning** was very rarely used throughout this school. In S4 English, an allusion to a 'very able' child as being, 'incredibly bright' suggested the teacher was using Global positioning but no other use of positioning was made. **Motivation** was used only in S1 by the teacher who distinguished between the positive attitudes towards the subject in 'very able' pupils and the laziness and lack of focus of one of the 'average' pupils. Where both teachers focused almost all their attention was on the **skills and attributes** of pupils. 'Very able' pupils were distinctive in the nature of their relationship with the subject and the consistency with which this was manifested. In S4, the teacher highlighted the creativity and originality of the work produced by these pupils. Their written work offered fresh insights into the literature that the teacher hadn't seen before.

'Average' pupils were described by the S1 English teacher as lacking consistency and showing a need to ask questions because of a lack of understanding. In addition both teachers pinpointed the lack of originality in the work of the 'average' pupil. 'I can hear my voice coming through their work which I don't feel with the others,' (S1) and 'in critical essays, they've a more predictable line of thought,' (S4).

#### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 English (Ind 2)*

Expectations were set equally high for all pupils and it was considered that there should be no limitations for any individual child. However, this did not mean that there would not be variation in marks produced.

They must achieve their own potential and if they don't get as high marks, it doesn't matter. Expectations always have to be high so I always expect the best each one can do (S1)



This was reflected too at S4 level, where the teacher stated that pupils performed to expectations and so it was necessary to set them high. Here, the differentiation in performance wasn't seen so much in grade, as most pupils would be expected to get an A, but in the different ways in which they might achieve it.

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 English (Ind 2)*

A tactical approach to teaching different types of pupils meant that these two English classrooms were similar to the others discussed so far. Differentiation was considered to occur at a more subtle level than differentiated worksheets. Instead, it was part of teacher approaches to questioning and potential avenues for development in relation to a topic or in the development of different forms of reading.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 English (Ind 2)*

Reflections on the task of categorisation provided two slightly different views. While the S1 teacher found the task itself easy because she saw it as part of her professional judgements, she was unhappy about making such categorisation explicit.

I don't like to categorise kids into these sorts of areas so I'm forced to think like that although I'm aware who needs more help than others, I don't consciously do it.

The other teacher had no problem with the task as it reflected her own way of thinking but she felt that that there was a need to qualify this.

I don't mind that at all because I think that's the way I think myself I always like to think though that I'm flexible and, really, waiting to see when they're going to move up

*Maths in S1 and S4*

*Pupil ability*

In these classrooms, position and motivation did not play a part in constructing pupil ability. Emphasis, instead, was placed on attributes. 'Very able' pupils were

'intuitive' possessing an extra 'spark' which could be seen in their ability to 'adapt' mathematical knowledge from one situation to another. 'Average' pupils, however, didn't possess this adaptive quality to any extent and were more likely to be able to use knowledge where repetition was involved. Moreover, they didn't ask the right kind of questions, reflecting a lack of understanding of a Mathematical way of thinking and so couldn't 'see through questions.'

*Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Maths (Ind 2)*

Teacher expectations reflected a view of limited progress for 'average' pupils and a different kind of progress for the 'very able.' The former would entail a coverage at a more basic level of mathematical knowledge but there was greater scope the S1 teacher felt for an obvious and noticeable kind of improvement for such pupils. For 'very able' pupils, it was not that there was noticeable improvement in performance but there was considered to be a small but significant increase beyond an already high standard.

There's a saturation point that everyone meets and what tends to happen is the very able start at a higher point and you give them the ability to increase there. (S4)

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Maths (Ind 2)*

In talking about teacher actions, both teachers dealt with this through a strategic response to ability. In S1 this was done through a use of text book extension materials for the 'very able' and concentration on the basics for the others, bearing in mind that the basics in this school would be in advance of those in other schools. The text book being used in S1 was the equivalent of a second year book elsewhere. In the 4<sup>th</sup> year setted class, the teacher emphasised the need to use whole class teaching, although such teaching would involve a more difficult style of worked example than that used in a mixed ability class. This form of lecture style teaching with some interactive elements was what was needed he believed because,



Mathematically, they're very able, intuitively, I believe able pupils need to be told how things are set out, the right way to do things and I believe that's what they want.

This would be followed by less straightforward work and extension material when required. However, according to their teacher, such pupils would be unlikely to seek extension work or ask for help because of their own self-perception of themselves as very able. This teacher believed that such a view of themselves as learners meant that they did not see requests for help as part of being able.

#### *Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 maths (Ind 2)*

Reflecting on the categorisation task itself, both teachers were happy to participate while adhering to a need for flexibility and a belief in the possibility of improvement. Despite this perceived flexibility of ability, there was an awareness of distinct types of pupil ability.

#### *Music in S1 and S4*

##### *Pupil ability*

Once more positioning was not used to build up a view of very able pupils. Instead pupils were described in terms of technical and creative musical skills which included sight-reading of music, mastery of an instrument, a good ear and good co-ordination. This led the teachers to describe these pupils as possessing 'musicianship' and an 'innate sense of rhythm.' 'Average' pupils responded more slowly, were less accurate, not quite in tune and were limited in the styles they could cope with as well as lacking the motivation to develop any other styles. However, there was an unusual element to this seemingly unproblematic defining of high ability. One pupil (John) in S4 possessed many of the characteristics looked for in a 'very able' pupil. But he had learned to play the piano through an unusual method: the Russian

method involved memorising passages by ear and gradually putting these together to create a larger piece. This meant that he had an incredibly mature and sophisticated technique and advanced listening skills but he could barely read music and so lacked a basic skill that his teacher saw as necessary for musical development.

*Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Music (Ind 2)*

Teacher expectations were high for all pupils and they set high standards for everyone irrespective of ability but there were qualifications.

There does come a point I think there must be some innate, built-in talent for it for them to go any further (S1 Music)

Once again, there were limitations linked to perceived ability.

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Music (Ind 2)*

In catering for pupils of varying ability, teachers in both S1 and S4 were committed at a strategic level to customising the musical arrangements to be used and so there was a strong emphasis on teacher generated materials and individualised programmes. However, there was also a strong emphasis on tactical intervention for individual pupils in the classroom.

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Music (Ind 2)*

Reflecting on the task of categorisation, both teachers took part with ease as it already formed part of their professional judgement of the pupils concerned. Ability was an overt construct and created no obvious ambivalence or dissonance for these teachers. However, an underlying disquiet and individual dissonance for the S4 teacher lay in her judgement of John who adhered to her concept of high ability in many ways but in his lack of music reading skills also challenged her.



## *Art in S1 and S4*

### *Pupil ability*

The Art classrooms were large and well - resourced with very busy pupils, focused on activities with an interesting degree of interaction between pupils concerning requests for evaluation of pictures and designs and ideas for improving work. This department presented two very distinctive views on ability in the perspectives of the two teachers. The S4 teacher in particular refused to participate in the categorisation of pupils according to ability as she suggested no such distinction could be made and all art work produced had worth and validity. In S1, however, the contrast with the latter view was apparent. This particular teacher used positioning briefly to establish the lack of 'very able' pupils within the class. This reference to global positioning led her to the conclusion that none of the pupils were 'exceptional' and most were in fact 'mediocre' in terms of artistic ability. This meant that pupils nominated as 'very able' for this study were considered to be able within the class but not 'very able' in a global sense. Motivation was not raised as an aspect of the pupils nominated.

However, speed of understanding and consistency marked out pupils who were placed within the 'very able ' category. Such pupils were capable of 'seeing' what 'average' pupils could not.

If I give an object for them to draw, you don't have to point out the tones and lines, the shapes and spaces, they just see it.

By contrast, the 'average ' pupil didn't 'see' things properly and their drawing skills were limited.

### *Teacher expectations in S1 and S4 Art (Ind 2)*

Both teachers had similar high expectations of all pupils. Nevertheless, where in S1 there were distinctions made between the achievements and independent working of able and average pupils, in S4 the teacher averred that similar expectations entailed all

pupils achieving Grade 1 in Standard Grade exams. The higher achievements and independence of the 'very able' in S1 and perceived lack of variation in performance in S4 provides sharp contrast in teacher expectations.

*Teacher responses in S1 and S4 Art (Ind 2)*

**Teacher actions** were similarly tactical in both classrooms but with diverse reasons.

In S4 the teacher saw it as a necessary part of teaching Art and dealing with each pupil as an individual. This involved her in discussing a child's aims and ideas with them and questioning them over aspects of their drawing or design. In S1, this tactical interaction varied according to ability. 'Average' pupils required a lot of one to one teaching in order to try and help them to acquire basic skills. On the other hand, 'very able' pupils could manage quite well without teacher intervention but through talking to them, you could, 'help them to go into greater depth, explore different elements, similar to the rest of the class but at a much higher level.'

*Teacher reflections on categorisation task in S1 and S4 Art (Ind 2)*

Finally in turning to reflections on the task of categorisation, the S1 teacher was content to deal with this but wanted to be seen as flexible while having confidence in her assessment.

I don't write anyone off but I assess as I see them but I do think the very good ones stand out right from the start.

In this class she did not recognise any child as particularly able. However, she felt that this distinction lay in a way of 'seeing'. For the 'average' pupil,

Once it's pointed out to them, it's obvious, but they don't grasp that themselves, I've always been able to see it and it took me a long time to accept that people didn't see things the same as me. I thought everybody saw things like that but they don't.



By contrast, the S4 teacher insisted that this kind of categorisation made her very uncomfortable.

I'm not going to answer directly. I hate this idea of labels, I actually feel incredibly uncomfortable talking about labels.

She had also suggested a uniformity of performance from pupils who would all get Grade 1 in the exam. However, within her own discourse she made distinctions of performance between pupils and suggested that part of her difficulty was in perhaps allowing the pupils to see that she had colluded in a categorisation activity.

There might have been pupils who continually do something that might get a 'wow'. So if I pick out that child to give you and it's a constant 'wow' child, they'd know that Miss has only picked out so and so, I'd rather that wasn't the case.

### *Constructing ability in Ind 1 and Ind 2*

While both these schools ostensibly belonged to the same school system, the contrasting entry requirements and organisation of learning highlighted the superficial nature of this relationship. Instead of the 'system' providing a coherent philosophy or outlook with regard to pupil experiences and the structure of learning within it, each school distinctively generated a specific outlook which underpinned its ethos as well as the administration and organisation of learning.

Thus these two schools presented very different profiles: the mixed ability community (Ind 1) and the highly meritocratic high school selecting around half its S1 population on exam results.

### *Constructing Pupil Ability In Ind 1 and Ind 2*

An immediate divergence becomes obvious when considering teachers' constructions of ability across these two independent schools. The mixed ability school (Ind 1) presented teachers who relied on positioning very strongly in establishing pupil

ability. This echoed M1 and M2 but at the same time varied in the nature of the positioning called upon. Where the teachers in the two comprehensives used personal notions of Global or local positioning, the teachers in Ind 1 alluded to IQ score as a seemingly objective external measure of general ability as a starting point for distinguishing pupils. It might have been expected that some form of positioning would be a strong element of construed ability within Ind 2 when an essential part of participation within the school involved assessment and placement. Surprisingly, very little positioning occurred at all. Two teachers used Global positioning in relation to linguistic (S4 English) and Artistic (S1 Art) ability.

A lack of motivation was evident in only a few pupils in each of these schools. In Ind 2, it was suggested as an absence in particular individuals who happened to be 'average' and this lack affected their performance but it was not used as an indicator of 'average' pupils in general. In Ind 1, motivation was actually more often used to describe the work ethic of 'average' pupils who 'succeeded' in attaining achievements despite a lack of 'high ability.'

Both schools reflected the Maintained schools in highlighting the 'very able' interaction with the subject and the ways in which a lack of this illuminated those who were perceived as 'average.' This underpinned a specific process of development within the subject for 'very able' pupils which relied on a quality allowing them to work at a more complex level. In English, this took the form of originality and creativity, a lack of predictability. In Mathematics this was perceived in pupils who worked on Maths at an intuitive level, presenting an insight into a 'mathematical way of thinking.' Musically, this entailed a form of musicianship, with an innate ability to see and hear relationships or patterns that others couldn't. In Art,



a 'way of seeing' emerged yet again as a descriptor of the distinctive way in which the 'very able' had an awareness of the complexities of what they viewed and attempted to interpret in their artwork.

### *Teacher expectations in Ind 1 and Ind 2*

Teachers in both Independent schools once again reflected those in maintained schools in the way in which they considered their expectations of 'very able' and 'average' pupils. Here, they used the notion of similar high standards for all pupils but with qualifications. These qualifications, however, were not presented as limited progression for the 'average' pupil. Instead those in Ind 1 highlighted personal or individual targets or goals as well as different forms of progress irrespective of goals achieved.

In the second Independent school, a similar sense of high expectations was put forward by teachers for all pupils in English, Music and one of the Art classes but this was qualified by a recognition of differences in achievement or in the grades achieved.

In 4<sup>th</sup> year Art, there was an explicit avowal of belief in the 'sameness' of expectation and achievement while at the same time there was implicit recognition of some kind of differentiated achievement within the class. Maths was the only subject where teachers specified differentiated expectations from the beginning. This consisted of limited progress for the 'average' pupil contrasted with a different kind of advanced progress in the 'very able.'

### *Teacher responses to ability differences*

Teachers within both schools alluded to strategic responses to ability differences. However, tactical intervention was most frequently used and observed by the researcher. In English, teachers described their input in terms of adjusting content to focus on the needs of particular groups (Ind 1) or in developing a subtlety and depth in questioning to encourage, 'potential avenues for development,' (Ind 2).

A high degree of teacher input at the planning stage in Music, meant that there was a great deal of customisation of resources to suit instruments being played and the strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils. A view of each child as following an 'individual programme whether explicit or implicit in the planning was mooted based on a general assessment of class ability and needs and curricular demands. In addition, a strong tactical response was integral to class activities. In Art, teachers used tactical responses in working with each pupil as an individual. In Ind 1, the teacher did suggest a need to have isolated general aims and agendas which then had to be translated into specific tactical intervention with individual pupils. Tactical intervention was highlighted by all Art teachers, emphasising at once the individual and unique nature of the activity itself and the collaborative nature of teacher intervention in acting as both audience and critic. For those considered 'average', such collaboration tended to be supportive mindful of a need for the acquisition of basic skills. On the other hand pupils perceived as 'very able' were involved in extension of their work through critical discussion.

Only in Mathematics was most emphasis placed upon strategic responses. Text book extension work and other similar resources were in place and actively used as



provision in Ind 1 and used as an integral aspect of lessons in Ind 2 (S4) for a specific high ability class.

### *Reflecting on categorisation in Ind 1 and Ind 2*

For almost all teachers (10/12) across both schools the use of categorisation was seen as a necessary part of the job and a natural way of considering pupil ability. However, it was felt that any use of categorisation had to be flexible in order to ensure that pupils were not defined and confined within it but could be seen to move within and across categories. Those teachers in Ind 1 also noted that while there was an acknowledgement of the need for flexibility, there was also an acceptance of limitations for this flexibility. These limitations took the form of a 'ceiling' for individuals in Maths beyond which it would be difficult for them to move. In English, Music and Art there was a distinction made between improvement for different pupils and the distinction was made between making some improvement and actually gaining parity of achievement with a 'very able' pupil, the latter being considered highly unlikely.

As well as most teachers retaining a need for flexibility in Ind 2, two teachers (S1 English and S4 Art) were hostile to the need for explicit categorisation which was seen as highly simplistic by the English teacher. In Art (S4) labelling of any kind was highly divisive according to the teacher, although it was evident that while explicit categorisation was unwelcome, there was a degree of judgement of worth taking place at an implicit level in the classroom itself.

### *Achievement and ability*

Both of these schools made use of measurement but where Ind 1 focused on a measurement of ability (IQ), Ind 2 stressed measurement of achievement. In light of

this, teachers in Ind 1 considered potential achievement in relation to their location on an explicit ability continuum, with limitations placed on progress. However, importance was also placed on individual target setting. In Ind 2, measured achievement was important in placing children within classes. Teachers in this school did not use positionality but instead emphasised the malleability of ability and the ways the school and teachers with the child could enhance progress although there was still a limit on 'average' progress

### *Summary*

Despite the use of measured ability at school level (Ind 2) and within individual teacher constructs (Ind 1), teachers constructed ability in distinctive ways across these Independent schools. The focus on attainment in Ind 2, in particular, highlights the current emphasis in education on an avoidance of ability concepts (Bourne & Moon, 1995) despite the fact that this was occurring within an institution which at an organisational level seemed to reflect explicit judgements about ability.

In chapter 8, the views of parents on ability construction, and the possible ways in which they and/or schools might help to develop ability are examined.



*Introduction*

In the previous three chapters the nature of institutional and classroom constructs have been explored through a consideration of headteacher, principal teacher and class teacher conceptualisation of ability. In this chapter, parents' perspectives on ability and schools are investigated. As 'stakeholders' in the educational process, they had been given the opportunity, in the UK, to begin to make choices concerning which school their children were to attend. It had been argued that such an initiative empowered parents who would support the 'good' school (Walford, 1994). In the following pages, as each group of parents is considered in turn, the ways in which ability is construed by parents, their perspectives on schools and ability and the distinctiveness of choices made across schools will be examined in detail.

*Parental perspectives*

Parents were important sources of information over the four case studies as they provided an additional perspective on their children and their abilities while also adding depth to the portraits of children's abilities created by teachers and pupils themselves. Interviews were carried out by telephone with parents of children who had been nominated by the school as very able within one or more subject areas. The interviews were semi - structured and encouraged parents to talk about their children historically in terms of ability and in relation to their family context. This included the perceived role of the parent in the child's ability development; the parent view of ability both as distinctive from school contextualised ability and also as a reflection of school ability and parent views on schooling and its interaction with ability. The use of four very different school contexts and systems meant that it was also feasible to begin to make interesting comparisons not only within schools but also across schools and systems.

### ***Parents and pupil nominations***

Teachers in each of the subject areas: Mathematics, English, Art and Music, were asked to nominate children whom they considered to be at the top of any high ability group in relation to their curricular area at S1 and S4. Children who were nominated in more than one subject were chosen first of all to take part in interviews, followed by one other high ability child from this category in each subject. As a result the number of children interviewed varied and the number of parents interviewed also varied from year group to year group and also between schools. Only parents of very able children participated in this part of the research.

Parental discourses were framed by questions seeking to understand their conceptualisations of ability; perceptions of parental and institutional role in ability development; and parental outlooks on choice and ability.

- **Ability and their child** - historical/ familial view on ability manifestation in the child's life and school interactions in connection with ability
- **Parental role** - ways in which the parents see themselves as playing a part in their child's development
- **School and child development/influence** - (a) how parents perceive the school as affecting children's progress, and (b) what influence it is possible for school to have on the development of children's abilities
- **Choice of school** - parental views of schooling, ability and the making of decisions about high school



In this chapter each group of parents from each case study school will be reported in turn beginning with the two maintained schools. Subsequently, a horizontal cross case analysis of parent groups will explore the distinctiveness of parental perspectives across schools and systems.

### *Parents in Maintained School 1 (M1)*

#### *Context*

This was a comprehensive Catholic school. It drew children from a comparatively broad geographical base as well as a broad socio-economic one. Over a number of years it was described as having gone through a difficult period of failing reputation, in general terms but also in relation to its relative position on school league tables. However, in the few years prior to this research taking place, a new headteacher had taken over and was perceived by parents to be improving the school. So this was a school, which was truly comprehensive in the fullest sense of the word, which was attempting to reinvent itself while adhering to principles of religion and educational equality.

#### *Overview*

Consideration of parental perspectives in M1, gave rise to a profile which was particularly distinctive, in comparison with other schools. This may have been because of its broader social mix where the other institutions had predominantly middle class parent groups. In this school, parents tended not be actively involved in ability construction and instead usually located ability construction and validation within the confines of the school. Where exceptions occurred, the superiority of school constructs dominated. Consequently parental involvement in a child's ability development was confined to support for emotional well being and in the perceived cultural quality of family experiences. The school, however, was perceived as having

an impact upon pupil progress, while parents were unable to define the nature of the school's role in doing so. It was generally felt that positive personal relationships between teachers and pupils and an individualisation of provision was an essential foundation for any change that might come about in children's learning.

Parental choice seemed at first not to involve any real choice making in the sense of using criteria to choose between schools. Instead parents tended to defer to the child's wishes and preferences. This might be interpreted as an absence of the consumer led choice advocated by the Conservative party. However, it is arguable that the choice being made by these parents was a negotiated choice between parent and child and did not need to be justified in terms of the marketisation discourse encouraged in UK parental choice legislation.

### *Family, Ability and the child in M1*

Emphasis was placed upon the construction of ability within the school and the lack of parental expertise or knowledge of the subject area especially in Art, Music and Mathematics. Parent 4, saw his child's artistic ability being manifested in primary school initially and commented on the fact that there was no family background in Art and suggested both a positive view of his daughter's ability and a questioning of its origin.

Art! Where she gets that from I don't know. I think she's going to be quite an artist but then I'm not an artist.

Music was a more contentious ability construct but was ultimately dominated by the institutional model of musical ability. Musical activities initiated by families from an early age meant that pupils could be musically experienced and deemed adept but in areas not recognised by the school as necessarily having the same worth as music occurring within the curriculum. Parent 3, spoke of her daughter's talent in out of



school activities, but contrasted this with a lack of family background in Music and a lack, too, of parental skill. However she then described her daughter's ability in terms of musical 'competencies,'

- She's got a very good ear, she's very good with rhythm and things, very, very good vocally, she's always been really good and I mean really good.

Her daughter had regularly been involved in concerts and shows outside of school and had won competitions for singing. This reinforced a very positive image of her Musical ability. This was contrasted by her parent with her Music teacher's assessment.

The teacher says she has an attitude problem and she (daughter) just thinks they encourage particular things, things that are 'dead posh'. She can't understand why her voice has got to be trained. There's no rapport. The headteacher says her voice has got to be trained and I know this. She likes lots of different kinds of music Pop, jazz, blues but they're [school] not into that and as she says, 'It's all dead posh.' Other than getting trained properly I don't think they encourage other things. (M1, Parent 3, S4)

Parent 3 had requested a conversation with the school over what she saw as contradictory perceptions of her daughter's ability but finally accepted that it was necessary to subscribe to Music in school as distinctive and superior to the informality of Music outside of school. Conflicting types of Musical perspective were brought to bear here as the teacher contextualised Music not only as a school-based subject but also as one which had a particular musical focus and an adherence to technical and formal aspects of singing which, it was insisted to the parent were needed for musical development.

English was the only subject where it was noted that there was greater awareness of ability prior to school entry to a limited extent but that an understanding of potential high ability was recognised within school. Parent 7 noted that ability in English,

came to the fore in P6 and P7, but most obviously since she started secondary school, maybe because she's getting an English teacher instead of a primary teacher who has to cover everything  
(M1, Parent 7, S1)

The importance of teacher expertise in construing ability was very much to the fore in parent discourse as well as the importance of grading in representing ability. However, one parent, a teacher himself was the exception in emphasising his own observation and judgement of ability.

I don't bother about school reports. I see what he can do, know what he can do and that's a better indicator to me than anything I can read in a report. Reports tell you more about the teacher than anything else. He enjoys it and has lots of motor skills, also creativity and soul. It involves spatial awareness and motor skills and a capacity to reproduce which I've never showed. (M1, Parent 1, S4)

### *Parental Role in M1*

Parental influence was seen as significant in the ways in which they provided support and encouragement for their children and in practical terms in providing art supplies or musical instruments or books.

We listen to her, about how she's getting on, how she thinks she's done. other than that, it's down to the school, neither of us has musical ability.  
(M1, Parent 2, S4)

Well, supportive only. We can only assist her, we can't teach or influence her. We'd discipline her if she required it but she doesn't.  
(M1, Parent 4, S4)

We're an articulate, well -educated family. There have always been opportunities to play on instruments or doodle on things. I don't look to further his ability in any area unless there's a snag. The way things are going at the moment, I don't think I'll need to.  
(M1, Parent 1, S4)

Involvement in the learning process itself was possible if there were a problem, although this was deemed unlikely, and would usually take the form of engaging a tutor:



[M1] is quite a positive school and hopefully they would contact us if they needed any help. I would get him a tutor if the school wasn't coping or he fell behind.' (M1, Parent 5, S1)

Parents tended to see themselves as lacking immediate impact upon the learning process: 'You can't really teach or influence them,' (Parent 4) and 'I don't think it's possible to help her to do well, it's really up to her. If she asks any questions, I'd try to keep her right,' (Parent 6). Progress and achievement were the province of the school and only where there was a perceived deficiency would parents see a need to become involved in the learning process, usually by providing an alternative kind of expertise.

### *School and Ability in M1*

There was uncertainty over the school's role in relation to ability. Nonetheless, all parents pinpointed teachers and their capacity to develop positive interpersonal relationships with children and a commitment to learning as particularly important.

Enthusiasm.. I trust their ability, I'm more interested in their capacity as individuals to relate to kids. (M1, Parent 1, S4)

At the end of the day, it will come down to personalities in teaching staff. If there is a teacher at school with an open-minded willingness to co operate, to go that extra length, that's going to influence the child. (M1, Parent 4, S4)

Meanwhile parent 4 felt that he didn't know and didn't need to know what the school did to encourage his child's development.

I don't know. I've never really explored that because the performance of the school has been such that I've never had the need to find out. If there was slippage , I would perhaps seek some information but at the moment. They're the experts not me. (M1, Parent 4, S4)

Two S4 and all S1 parents (5/7 in total) felt that there was nothing else the school could do to help their children, although two of these parents (S1 - 5,6) suggested that

this might change in the next few years as they approached exam choices and presentation.

At S1 parents (5,6) pointed to individualisation as the main method of influencing their child's development. The former suggesting that this occurred through individualised homework while the latter parent suggested that it was only when individualisation occurred in the classroom and children were not taught as a class group that school could be effective.

### *Parental Choice in M1*

Choice of school was not a complex issue for the parents. Five parents (2,3,5,6 and 7) mentioned a natural progression from primary school with friends and/or a sibling's attendance at the school as the reason for their child attending school A. Discussion between parent and child had taken place over the future high school. Two of these parents qualified their comments, both first year parents. Parent 5 had looked at other schools and had assessed the positive personality of the Headteacher, the changing reputation of the school and the quality of the teachers as well as taking into account her son's desire to move on to the school that his friends would be going to.

But I'm not really convinced that it's the best school for the children before I sent him to [M1] I phoned other schools and I got all of their brochures at the tail end of P6. I did a wee bit of research on the schools and felt that the headteacher has quite a lot of motivation. He's got five kids of his own, he's still in touch with reality I think. A few years ago [M1] had a dreadful name but they seem to be trying to pull it up. (M1, Parent 5, S1)

Parent 7 said that she was more aware of having a choice to make with her younger daughter than she had been with her older daughter who had now left M1. However, the choice was usually related to which of the various Catholic high schools would be chosen and so presented an implicit ethical judgement. Two parents at S4 (1,4)



suggested that they had made a decision to send their children to this school based on certain beliefs. For parent 4, these were related to religious principles.

From a Catholic perspective, I think that we've come from the same sort of backgrounds and the same sorts of beliefs. There's perhaps a greater moral undertaking in Catholic education than there is in normal education. Being a Catholic school is the most important element in choice. In fact, there's no choice, I would only ever always go for Catholic secondary. (M1, Parent 4, S4)

Parent 1, on the other hand, had made a decision related to his support for the comprehensive system and a Christian environment.

I'm totally against selection or grammar schools or anything like that. And I'm against streaming or anything like that inside the comprehensive system. I support the comprehensive system and a Christian ethos, not a disciplinarian ethos. (M1, Parent 1, S4)

### *Parents in Maintained School 2 (M2)*

#### *Context*

School B was a state comprehensive. It was situated in a semi - rural location where a great deal of private building had served to alter the socio-economic make up of the school. The town itself was within easy commuting distance of major cities and consequently had attracted many commuters. Its very positive performance in school league table results was well known and there had been a large number of parents seeking placements; whether these two occurrences were related is difficult to ascertain. Its main aims were to help all children to realise their potential within the comprehensive system.

#### *Overview*

There were elements of family involvement in ability construction especially where language was concerned. It was often described as innate or instinctive. However, ability was confirmed within school and validated through grading. Parents were not

actively involved in school learning but commented on the richness of family culture and the opportunities provided by the family to participate in discussions and outings. In addition, they perceived themselves as playing an important supportive role affecting the emotional well being of their children.

School was considered important but parents were unsure how they might articulate what it actually did or could do to develop ability and encourage progress. On the other hand they did isolate teachers and their personal qualities as important in developing good interpersonal relationships between teachers and pupils and thus affecting the quality of learning. In addition, they made assumptions about the individualised nature of learning available in school. Parents engaged with choice in terms of an ethical stance and also by reflecting a growing awareness of institutional reputation and performance.

### *Family, Ability and the Child in M2*

English development was described in terms of parental observation of children's interactions with books and self-expression. Children were seen as 'always' having been very capable in 'English' activities such as reading and talking. S1 parents spoke of a talent or tendency towards activities in English :

She has a talent in English, a natural flair. She was interested in reading and writing even before primary, she's always expressed herself well. (Parent 7)

And

He's always been literate, he read before going to school, he wanted to learn, not because he was taught. He's always been good at it, and all the way through primary. (Parent 8)

Also

She was noticeably good all through primary and before that she was always keen to read. (Parent 5)



While English was an area developing and observed within the home, Mathematics was more readily recognised within the context of school, first primary and then secondary. However similar language was used to describe the child's ability in the subject : ease of interaction, interest, always found easy, natural ability.

Music and Art reflected similar ideas of ability being an enduring characteristic of the child but seemed to imply an additional element affecting the child's performance in each. At S4 one parent spoke of the presence of musical ability in her child,

She's always had a good ear and then her primary teacher noted it and picked up on it very quickly. She's got a bit of a gift. (Parent 3)

Another parent made a distinction between ability and giftedness,

She's always found it easy, but she's not particularly talented or gifted. (Parent 2)

At S1 one parent was surprised that her son had become interested in music at high school,

He had no interest before high school . He's taken to it easily but I'm surprised he has the ability because there's no family background in music. (Parent 8)

The idea of family talent rises again in Art where a mother suggests that her child has an 'instinct' for Art. (Parent 4)

An understanding of the success achieved in high school is seen in the child relating marks and enthusiasm for particular subjects as well as in reports received annually. Ability is described as being present in parental observation and subsequently confirmed by school assessment and success.

### *Parental Role in M2*

The parent 's role for both S1 and s4 is described in strikingly similar language in putting forward the parent as encourager and supporter and responding if help is needed and where they may have requisite knowledge to do so. They are also providers of opportunities and sounding boards for any discussion the child may wish to have.

S4 parents all spoke of this need for encouragement. Two suggested they would play a more active role if a problem arose, although this hadn't happened as yet.

Mathematics, there are no problems so far. If she did, I'd encourage her to ask the teacher, failing that I'd go up myself. (M2, Parent 3)

and for Art

If there was a problem, we'd try to find a way to help.(M2, Parent 4)

In S1 parents also spoke of the need for emotional support, praise and encouragement to help children do their best. One parent attempted to explain, 'You have to let her develop, if she needs help she will ask.' (Parent 9). There was notable emphasis placed upon the child leading and defining needs and the parent as a responder to these articulated needs.

It's led by him. If he's interested in something, we'll help him, we'll listen to him, provide things, books. If we don't have something we'll go and get it. (M2, Parent 8)

### *School and Ability in M2*

In looking first of all at what parents believe school is doing for their child in different subject areas , it was noticeable that not all parents were sure what school might be doing to help their child to develop. The English classroom was seen as a place of encouragement with attempts being made to focus children's attention on particular aspects of the subject and to guide them in the direction of learning new skills, such as



research and discussion techniques. In Music, extra curricular activities such as orchestra and choir were seen as particularly valuable ways for children to develop musical skills while individualisation of learning encouraged parents to believe that children were working at their own pace. In Art at S4 however, while one parent focused on the emotional encouragement and positive feedback received (parent 4), another commented that she, 'didn't know and wouldn't expect to know as this was for the school to deal with,' (Parent 6). Mathematics was an area which parents felt they were very uncertain about the nature of the school's effect on their child's development at S4 level, 'uncertain, unsure, she enjoys it (Parent 1) and, ' Well I'm not sure, I suppose there's the Maths Challenge,' (Parent 3). In S1, parents were critical of the individualisation of learning, that 'they all seem to go at the same pace', (Parent 9) and that the children were 'not being pushed sufficiently,' (Parent 11).

More than half the parents (6/11) didn't feel that they could think of any way in which the school could help their child to develop, over and above existing practice, in these areas but the remaining parents, covering all four subject categories described the need for 'more challenges', (Parent 9), 'more opportunities to use talents,' (Parent 2) and the need to try and help children to develop better links and work experience with 'companies' which were related to their area of interest. (Parent 4). It was suggested that better use could be made of school connections with the wider world to make work experience more meaningful and related to subject of interest to the child. The greater challenges sought were found particularly at S1 level.

More challenges are needed. School can be a strong influence. (Parent 9)

and

In English they need more homework and generally some more reading. I don't think the school's pushing it at all. In Maths, they're not doing nearly enough work. (Parent 10)

When asked about the nature of the school's influence some parents felt there was an influence but they were uncertain what it might be or described it as developing skills or steering a child in a particular direction.

Haven't reached where they are just through school but I don't know how it influences... (Parent 2)

they're steered but I don't know to what extent

(Parent 6)

and one parent suggested that it was more important that there wasn't a negative influence from the school rather than that there was a positive one.

It can exercise a hugely negative influence if they get it wrong and I think that's permanent and destructive, more important than a positive influence, because as long as they're not completely turned off, they'll give it a chance. (M2, Parent 8)

However most parents (7/11) pinpointed individual teachers as the way in which school affected children. This happened through the teacher personality : his or her personality and relationships with children and the enthusiasm, motivation, support and mutual respect engendered by their behaviour. One parent (Parent 1) mentioned additionally that the, 'ways of teaching,' employed were important, while another (Parent 4) was concerned that 'teaching ability,' should be assessed.

It depends on teachers' attitudes and ways of teaching and ways of dealing with children. (M2, Parent 1)

Teachers play a big part ..their enthusiasm, respect and positive teacher - pupil relationships, but I would like to see some assessment of teaching ability. (M2, Parent 4)

and also

Teachers have an influential part, the personality of the teacher and the teacher writing comments on work. (Parent 7)



These reflect an emphasis on the teacher as the focus for influence on individual children rather than on institutional effects. Parents talked in terms of aspects of teacher qualities such as positive attitude, enthusiasm, motivator, interactions and relationships with children.

### *Parental Choice in M2*

Parents were asked to discuss whether their child's ability was a factor in their choice of school and thereafter to mention any other elements that played a part in the decision to send their child to school B. Most parents had geographical closeness to the school (7/11) and in some cases historical connections, since one or more parents had attended the school in the past. However, there was frequent allusion (9/11) to the reputation of the school and in particular the changing reputation of the school in relation to the current headteacher (5/11).

The reputation of the school, of the Headteacher came from the headteacher of the Primary school. The headteacher [of school B] pulled up the reputation of the school and marks and also improved attitudes. Before attitudes to school, uniform..and behaviour was lax.  
(Parent 2)

He was pinpointed as a major aspect of positive change and credited with a very positive view of pupils as individuals. Indicators connected with a good reputation were the ethos of the school, shown in the ways in which children related to others and to teachers, the happy and caring environment and the support for the development of the whole person rather than just academic success.

The Headteacher has a good reputation for the way he runs the school and deals with children and parents. The Headteacher takes an interest in the children, whatever the level, not just the academic. (Parent 5)

I didn't want a harsh academic environment as in some public schools. School B has a caring environment..education should be more about expressing yourself properly and being happy.

Many parents (6/11) at both S1 and S4, mentioned league tables or exam results apologetically :

I looked at league tables although I know you're not supposed to be able to use those as a guide but when trying to decide, they come in handy. (Parent 6)

or suggested their use in setting up comparisons of performance with other state schools.

Among state schools, it has a good reputation, if they're going to succeed they can certainly do it there. (M2, Parent 9)

However almost half the parents (5/11) made explicit their support for the comprehensive system and their deliberate avoidance of the private sector for ethical but also financial reasons. Despite the ideological support for this system from these parents, this particular comprehensive has a limited socio-economic mix, has a high proportion of children from middle class backgrounds and value systems and is likely to deal with a narrower band of ability differences than that of a comprehensive with a fully 'comprehensive' mix. This is highlighted by some parents who were aware that 'children who disrupt because of a lack of social skills are not a problem here,' (Parent 4) and it's a 'privileged school,' where children are working with others of, 'similar ability,' (Parent 1). Parent 4 articulates both support for the system and a recognition of its limited nature.

I agree with comprehensive schools but it's disruptive if children without the necessary social skills are there. It's not a problem here, the teachers are quite good and the children are reasonable. people have the same view of life. (M2, Parent 4)

### *Parents in Independent School 1 (Ind 1)*

#### *Context*

School C is a small independent school situate on the edge of a small town with many commuters to larger cities. Entry is by interview but ability is not supposed to play a



role in gaining or not gaining entry. Classes start with nursery and in the last few years have included S5 and S6 pupils. There are some academically selective independent schools within travelling distance but this particular school has set out to take in children from a range of abilities. Since the school, from nursery to S6, is quite small, classes are by default arranged in mixed ability groups. Differentiation is a major strategy for use within such classrooms. An emphasis is placed on the small scale of the institution and the caring community possible within it.

### *Overview*

For parents of children attending this small independent school, ability was constructed within the family through observation and interaction with the child and was often seen in the ease with which children could work in activities. This was particularly noticeable for parents in language. Ability was also often considered to have an innate component. School therefore was able to confirm children's ability after it had first been observed to appear but parental influence was considered to be particularly important.

Once again, parents were supporters of their children's emotional well being and provided opportunities for involvement in rich assortment of cultural activities, which were also perceived to have the potential to promote learning connected with school. School itself was considered to have a strong impact upon ability and a child's development. However, unlike the two previous maintained schools, emphasis was placed upon institutional characteristics and the explicit understanding given, by the school, of teaching and learning styles adopted within it. Parental choice subsequently involved a knowledge of the school, its ethos and teaching and learning occurring, as well as a deficit model of state schools. This deficit model was not indicative of

competing models of education for parents to choose between but instead highlighted the ways in which state schools were perceived to be deficient.

### *Family, Ability and Child in Ind 1*

Both S1 and S4 parents (7/8) spoke of ability as appearing early, shown by the ease with which they could understand, work and learn in Mathematics, English, Art or Music. Some parents went so far as to suggest their child had a natural gift or talent in Music and English.

She had a natural gift in some aspects of English, in writing, noticeable at an early age. (Ind 1, Parent 7)

and in Music

he has a natural gift (Ind 1, Parent 6).

English was particularly singled out as an area where ability was observable from an early age.

He loves English, always has done, he reads without any prompting, I was aware of it before he went to school, he was reading comfortably by the age of 3 or 4 so he was always ahead of the bunch on that one. (Ind 1, Parent 5)

Maths was alluded to as similar in early observable ability for S4 parents but was first recognised through Nursery school (Parent 8) or Primary school (Parent 5) for S1 parents. In Music there were 2 contrasting descriptions of musical recognition. One child at S4 started learning an instrument in school was identified by school as showing an aptitude and subsequently encouraged by his family. Another at S1 had musical ability recognised by staff at Nursery school, yet another child in S1 was described by his parent in this way :

He had a marvellous ear right from when he started saying Nursery rhymes, he has a natural gift and he's a very good singer. (Parent 6)



In Art only one parent spoke of a natural ability and he happened to be a parent with a strong Art background who had provided artistic challenges for his son as the need seemed to arise. S1 parents either felt a judgement wasn't possible because of parent lack of knowledge,

he enjoys it..I don't know..I don't have ability in Art at all. (Parent 8)

or related artistic ability to school performance and spoke of limited potential in the subject,

He was good in primary but he's not going to be an artist or anything but he's quite good. (Parent 5)

### *Parental Role in Ind 1*

All parents generally saw their role as a supportive and encouraging one in all subject areas. However they also noted their role in providing the materials or facilities which allowed their children to progress : perhaps through private music lessons or providing materials for artwork or access to libraries or cultural activities. Teaching as a form of direct input came only from a parent with an artistic background who gave some input if required. English was also a subject which parents felt happy to contribute to in terms of discussion, reasoning and providing books. Mathematics , however, was an area where parents either couldn't give much help,

Maths I can't help much with but English is different, talking reasoning, encouraging to read. (Parent 1)

or where help might be forthcoming from the father if the child asked,(Parent 8).

### *School and Ability in Ind1*

The positive ethos of the school and its high expectations of pupils, along with structuring development and learning were detailed as elements of importance on children. Through such structuring, children were perceived by parents to be

stretched and encouraged to achieve high standards in an environment where it was considered acceptable to be high achieving.

There was a problem with G. tending to be quite bright in the other school, he tended not to want to push ahead because he would be out of place with the other children. Within this particular working arrangement that doesn't happen. Everyone's working to an individual level, so some of that recedes. (Ind 1, Parent 5)

Teachers were mentioned as factors with regard to the variety of teaching styles adopted to facilitate learning and in terms of the persona of the teacher allowing them to take on board a role of authority and influence over learning which the parent couldn't emulate

and

getting them to do things that they don't initially want to do, it's not as easy for me to do that. For the teacher in a position of authority and respect from the child's point of view, they'll try things. (Parent 5)

Two parents also mentioned the school as a way of structuring learning and the development of subjects.

It keeps the interest going and gives structure. As parents we wouldn't have pushed him, school can. (Parent 3)

and parent 5 who highlights the nature of the learning,

stretching, putting new things in front of them, structuring development.

For S1 parents while negative teacher influence was again mentioned, they were more concerned with institutional effects, both in terms of ethos and in terms of organisation of learning. Children were seen to be working within an encouraging environment in which many different kinds of achievement were valued, guidance given and time taken to build the 'whole person,' (Ind 1, Parent 5).



The encouragement of achievement, not meaning academic achievement, being top of the tree or anything, achievement to your own level. (Ind 1, Parent 5)

They approach the student as an individual You achieve your level rather than a level. (Ind 1, Parent 5)

In fourth year, parents described teacher character and support. Teachers were seen as helping a child to progress through encouragement and enthusiasm (Parents 1,2,4). Where a teacher was seen as having a lack of these characteristics, it was considered that in this a negative influence was being brought to bear which was balanced by parental support and private lessons (Parent 3).

### *Parental Choice in Ind 1*

Parents of children in both year groups were concerned with learning, progress and achievement and mentioned these as elements in their choice of school (3 out of 4 at S4 and all parents in S1). One S4 parent (2) had experienced problems with a lack of challenge within a state primary school and had been directed to school C by a teacher at the latter school. She was looking for interesting work which would keep her child happy and fulfilled. Other parents (6/8) continued the theme of a positive learning environment and individual attention as important aspects of the school. Two more parents (5,6) at S1 level made comparison with state schools in relation to the latter and to the variety of activities, which could be experienced within this small school. One parent specifically referred to a need for children who might be considered to have high ability to have provision which it was felt might not be forthcoming in large maintained schools.

For a child at the brighter end of the range, you need to find a school where he can achieve his potential. Top and bottom streams tend to get lost in bigger schools. There's a need for individual attention and help to achieve potential. (Ind 2, Parent )

Three out of four S4 parents and 2 out of four S1 parents drew attention to their appreciation of the ethos of the school. It was thought of as a small 'family' school where an emphasis was placed on caring for the individual.

### *Parents in Independent 2 (Ind 2)*

#### *Context*

This school is a fee paying and selective independent school, located in a city. Selection at S1 is by tested ability in Mathematics, English and reasoning skills in conjunction with Primary school reports as a supplementary source of information about the perceived ability of children in these areas. Children are also interviewed. Much emphasis is placed upon the history of academic success achieved by the school and contrasts are made between the continuity and traditions underlying this historical perspective and the many changes going on in education generally. However it is also acknowledged that the personal development of pupils is an important part of the institutional aims and the nurturing of particular types of characteristic e.g. perseverance, commitment and integrity are some of the desired qualities to be developed. Finally, it sees itself as a supportive community, which works in conjunction with parents to help children to progress. As a school which has charitable origins, the headteacher suggests that the tradition of encouraging the participation of children from a wide variety of backgrounds continues and so keeps faith with the wishes of the founders of the school more than 300 years before. Against a wider context of change and uncertainty, the school handbook reinforces the durable, dependable nature of the school with its consistency in academic results and its adherence to traditional qualities and values.



### *Overview*

Ability was constructed in the main as a family construct, especially in English and Maths. It was considered to be a mixture of innate qualities, the child's hard work and parental encouragement and involvement in learning activities. Comparison with other children in school provided a certain amount of validation for some parents but the institution itself was not seen as the place where ability was constructed and validated. Instead, school was a strong agent for change in the quality of progress that children could achieve.

Parental role mirrored that of the other schools at least initially in that parents provided emotional support and encouragement and learning opportunities through cultural activities. However, there was, in addition, a very specific role for parents in conjunction with the school in relation to children's learning and achievement. A distinction in the nature of parental role was evident between first year and fourth year parents.

Moreover, the role of the school was depicted as complex and changing between first year pupils and fourth year pupils in the eyes of the parents. In parental choice, once again, a deficit model of state schools appeared but in more detail than that established in Ind 1. Parents also had a long term view of their child's progress and success in education and in life as a result, in part, of the school experience but also because of the reputation of the school within the wider community. Membership of this school community was considered to be synonymous with certain qualities and academic strength. Additionally, parents were assured that they were entering into membership of school where the nature of the curriculum and the teaching and learning were made transparent for them.

### *Family, Ability and Child in Ind 2*

In this first area, preliminary analysis of parent interviews, suggested a strong sense of some form of ability present in the child, 'a natural ability', 'always having been present,' upon which school was seen as major agent of change for both those in S4 and S1. It was also a facet of these parental interviews that ability was not discussed as the determiner of achievement but an element, which conjoined with hard work, and opportunities could lead to success.

Across the subject areas, some subtle differences arose in the ways in which parents described their children. Firstly, the subject of English is one, which had in previous schools often been an acknowledged ability, observed by the parent prior to school entry. At S4 in school D, this inherent quality of linguistic ability seemed to continue as parents talked about the continuing presence of language skills.

He's always had a good imagination and a way of putting things across.. original. He's always been good with language, even before he went to school (Ind 2, Parent 1)

she's always been good across the board (Ind 2, Parent 4)

At S1 while one parent spoke of her awareness of her child's language ability through attainment in primary school, the other highlighted her own appraisal of such an ability prior to school and the 'translation' of this into school achievement.

I think her creative writing has always been quite good. I suppose she's quite verbal, she talks a lot and I suppose she's always talked a lot and made up stories and been quite imaginative. I didn't quite twig that it would turn itself into school's English. (Ind 2, Parent 10)

In Music a natural ability or aptitude was suggested by parents but two parents also pointed out that it needed to be conjoined with hard work.

She has a natural ability but there's also her family background in Music and it has to be worked at. (Ind 2, Parent 2)



Parent 9 was aware of her son's musical ability through school activities and said,

I don't know where he gets it from...he's very talented musically. His music teacher assumed he came from a musical background because he could turn his hand to anything.

Parent 3 had chosen to have her son study piano privately, using an unusual methodology, which did not encourage reading music but instead taught by ear. The musical ability exhibited was seen by both parent and the school music teacher to be exceptional. However, it was difficult for the teacher and the school to deal with a child who was capable of such mature and technically skilled performance in a particular aspect of the subject but who was finding other, comparatively basic aspects of the syllabus, quite difficult.

Art was a subject in which few parents over the four case studies felt much confidence in judging in relation to home activities or school performance unless the parent had a form of artistic ability. In this particular school two parents mentioned the existence of some form of artistic talent,

he has a natural talent but it's up to the school to develop it. (Ind 2, Parent 5)  
and

she's always been quite talented (Ind 2, Parent 10)

Parent 9 had a positive view of her son's artistic ability but noticed that the Art teacher didn't hold the same view. She did not consider that she knew what was 'right or wrong in Art' and so tended to accept the teacher's judgement that he was nothing 'outstanding'.

Interestingly Mathematics was a subject which was recognised outwith school and was seen as always having been present but it was within school, through tests, reports, comparison of grading and the curriculum that children were seen to progress.

I knew he understood numbers before he went to school...but it was really when he went to school and he hardly ever got anything wrong (Ind 2, Parent 7)

Parent 8 related the integral part of family life played by mathematics because of his business and financial interests as well as 'playing and shops' and similar activities so that, ' Maths has never been a problem.' Parents 4 and 6 although noting the presence of ability in their children did not consider their children to be gifted but did note success in comparison with peers in school.

She gets good marks....I don't think she has any particular feeling for it but I would say that she seems capable. She's always been good across the board. (Ind 2, Parent 4)

He's really very good at maths, we heard yesterday that he got 100/100 [S4 school exam]...He finds Maths easy but he's become better rather than being a kind of gifted child. I mean sometimes you know as soon as they start working that they are brighter than the majority of people but D. has developed over a number of years. He's very conscientious, very hardworking. (Ind 2, Parent 6)

Generally, all parents spoke of an awareness of ability being present in the child, that such ability was affected by family interactions, hard work and, significantly for them, the school. The utilisation of parental observation was a vital part of ability description in a child's early years while school performance and comparison became an important aspect of subsequent views of ability.

### *Parental Role in Ind 2*

At both S1 and S4 level parents focused on the need for support and encouragement as well as providing positive learning experiences through an appreciation of literature,



the theatre and art galleries etc. Parents of first year children were keen to be involved in monitoring, helping with problems and organising aspects of study.

We show an interest and organise time to listen and support her  
(Ind 2, Parent 8)

Parents should do their part by always looking at homework, keeping up with what they're doing, asking to see anything at all that is handed back and helping where possible. (Ind 2, Parent 9)

Those with children in S4 still saw themselves as playing an important role in conjunction with the school but now placed greater emphasis on the individual child as having responsibility for managing their learning.

I suspect most of that's past now, that she takes most of that on herself  
(Ind 2, Parent 4)

I feel my role is to look after him healthwise or if he needs any motivating rather than sitting physically and helping him.  
(Ind 2, Parent 6)

This was also reflected in the ways in which parents perceived the role of the school in their child's life and the life of the family.

### *School and Ability in Ind 2*

Parents in first year reflected a view of school, which focused on curriculum content and academic emphasis, teaching methodology and learning strategies.

I think the course and the guidance they have is incredibly structured in terms of telling them how to do things like reviewing essays, it gives you a set way of doing things. (Ind 2, Parent 10)

They take him through the curriculum... he really looks to the teachers in the subjects to take him further. (Ind 2, Parent 7)

Curriculum content was specified both to parents and children and the ways in which it was to be taught and the skills to be acquired were also made explicit. The school was to take on board a leadership role determining the nature of learning. This was very much a traditional outlook concerned with academic emphasis, direct class teaching, and the prescription of texts and syllabus. This meant that an explicit understanding was in place between parent and school and teacher over the agreed nature of learning experiences and teaching behaviours.

One of the reasons that we sent...them both to [Ind 2] was to teach what I call the old-fashioned way, which is like the three Rs... that to me includes pure grammar for a start and reading decent books. (Ind 2, Parent )

In English,

he does a book review steadily, they finish one and then they go on to another. Grammar is a very strong part of it and that's what we want..I just consider they teach in a very traditional way which to me is the best way. (Ind 2, Parent 9)

Those parents of S4 children did not put emphasise these aspects of the school but instead related the pivotal role of the school as a preparatory agent for life in wider society. Specific characteristics of the school such as competitiveness, links with a variety of outside agencies, the reputation of the school for academic excellence, high standards and a strong work ethic constituted the positive background created for the child in seeking to move out into the wider world.

These slightly different perceptions of school were also reflected in the ways in which parents at S1 and S4 conceived of the school's role in their lives. While S1 parents focused on the leadership role of school in the education of their children, S4 parents emphasised the partnership of school, child and parent, although not taking equal or



similar roles. Where both sets of parents overlapped in their view of the school it was in the following aspects:

- School as an agent for change in child's progress and potential achievement
- Focus for discipline
- A monitor of progress and behaviour
- A communicator of information , maintaining relationships between school, child and home
- Provider of additional opportunities - extra curricular and in terms of learning opportunities

Within this relationship were expectations of teachers. At S1, parents were concerned with notions of teaching style and were keen to be able to rely on the perceived efficacy of a traditional form of teaching and on the personality of the teacher, working together to encourage their child's development. By S4, parents were interested in the ways in which teachers showed a strong commitment to the life of the school, that they were aware that they were shaping young lives. Children and parents had high expectations of teacher performance and expected a high level of knowledge and believed that they would work particularly hard at their job. This brings with it a particularly strong form of teacher accountability and responsibility to parents, pupils and the institution.

### *Parental Choice in Ind 2*

The parents taking part in this research had had a variety of experiences with schooling: some had attended state schools, others had sent siblings to state schools or had sent the child taking part in this research to state schools at primary level for all or part of their primary education. Others did not have direct experience of the maintained system but held particular views of its efficacy. A negative aspect of choice made for these children was in not utilising a state school. This was associated with

three main perceived problems in state schools; lack of appropriate challenge for able children; lack of ethos of achievement and the lack of finance, lack of facilities and opportunities. The positive aspect of choosing selective and academic schooling within the independent system was seen not only in seeking the presence of the latter but also in relation to their views on the nature of the school's role in the life of the family and its effect on future aspirations. Choice of this kind also seemed to confer on parents, control and power over aspects of their child's education, which would be difficult to achieve in a state school. Choosing this particular school meant purchasing a specific form of curriculum, assessment and progress through secondary education. It also brought with it knowledge of teaching and learning strategies and teacher commitment, which was detailed, specific and explicit.

### *Cross Case Analysis of Parental Groups*

#### *Ability construction across case study schools*

In the schools which had predominantly middle class intakes (M2, Ind 1, Ind 2), it was noticeable that ability was a negotiated construct between family and school but to differing degrees. In M2, parents were comparatively active in ability construction especially that of language early on in their child's development. However, with the child's entry into school, ability construction shifted focus to achievement and grades within the school environment and institutional constructs were powerful in the authority they carried. In Ind 1, parents were actively involved in determining ability and saw performance as an important element of that. This in conjunction with institutional assessment of performance encouraged a mutual reinforcement of ability. Ability was a strongly articulated concept for parents in Ind 2, especially in English and Maths and school was seen as an agent for change upon ability in relation to the progress and achievement, which could be attained.



M1 was distinctive both in the diversity of SES within its intake and in the emphasis placed upon ability as constructed in school. This suggested a dominance of the institutional model and a potential lack of confidence in the family constructs. However, this might also highlight a different form of relationship between parents and school. The asymmetrical nature of the power relationship between school and parent is well - documented and this school perhaps could be seen as representing a particularly dominant institution. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily the ceding of power to the school, which is important, but also the trust and reliance placed upon the school to deal with what were seen as school matters.

A distinction can also be made here between subject areas. The construction of ability in school was at times a narrow, curriculum based and exam-focused construct while parental constructs suggested the possibility of a broader more inclusive conceptualisation of ability (e.g. Music M1). In addition, Maths was particularly different in the way that parents believed that it was located and validated almost entirely within the institution rather than within the family and/or community. This made it less likely that there would be any challenges to institutional modelling

### *Parental Role across Case Study schools*

This distinctive profile of parent groups across the four case study schools continued as parental role school role and choice were explored. Since, in M1, ability was generally constructed and validated in school, parents perceived their role as actively encouraging and supporting a child emotionally but not in terms of engaging with the learning process itself. Those in school were the experts and parents didn't expect to know about the nature of learning in the classroom. In M2 and Ind 2, parents were similarly concerned with ensuring the affective well -being of their children but were

also aware that the family could obliquely encourage learning through cultural activities organised by the family. Those parents in Ind 2 on the other hand demonstrated a much more proactive role for the parent in interaction with child and in conjunction with school in encouraging development and monitoring and organising aspects of study.

### *Parental Perceptions of School Role across Case Study Schools*

School role in ability development was distinctive between systems. Parents with children in maintained schools were unsure of the nature of the school role in developing ability and achieving progress but put their trust in teachers' positive relationships with pupils for 'effective' learning to come about. Those parents in Independent schools had clear views on the nature of the institution and the teaching and learning styles adopted within them as well as the commitment of teachers to their pupils' success.

### *Parental Choice across Case Study Schools*

Surprisingly, in light of the emphasis placed on the market led model of choice encouraged by the perceived competitive nature of Independent schooling, Parents dealing with Independent schools did not conceptualise choice predominantly in favour of institutional reputation and performance. Instead they focused on institutional *raison d'être* (Johnson, 1990), the transparency with regard to structures and the structured nature of learning and in Ind 2 the strength of the parental role, through retaining an element of control within the partnership. In M1, choice was child centred in that the wishes and preferences of the child were of particular importance. There were glimpses of the competitive market choice beginning to impinge but the child's wishes still were prominent as parents negotiated the potential routes to be taken. A few explicitly referred to an ethical stance in relation to



comprehensive and catholic education but most did not. This could perhaps be because a decision about catholic schooling itself would have been taken initially at primary entry level and so would not necessarily have been considered an aspect of choice for entry to high school. Parents in M2 by contrast combined notions of an ethical choice limited by the school's profile with an increasing use of institutional reputation and performance.

### *Summary*

Parents with children in maintained schools saw ability, learning and progress as the province of the school and to some extent trusted in the efficacy of the school. However, underlying this was the increasing awareness of choice as related to reputation and performance despite a wish to retain an ethical stance concerning educational provision or a child centred negotiation. In Independent schools parents had established a more active role in conjunction with the school and defined their role and the school's role very clearly. The importance of the institutional profile and teaching and learning styles promoted was an important consideration, as ability was considered amenable to change with a particular form of input.

In the following chapter, consideration is given to the pupils themselves as they attempted to deal with their constructions of personal ability and high ability.

*Introduction*

Pupils provided an important dataset in considering ability construction within schools. They represented a bridge between parent and teacher participants as well as an additional perspective on ability. Analysis of pupil interviews was structured around three strands: self-definition and ability, contextualised self and high ability and finally perceptions of the ways in which teachers communicated judgements of the pupils' abilities. This tripartite organisation of pupil data was chosen in order to attempt to understand the ways in which pupils experienced and perceived ability. In doing so, it was hoped that any relationship between perspectives might be highlighted. Subsequently the maintenance or shifting nature of such contrasts and reflections across year groups, schools and systems was investigated. This was to provide evidence of distinctive profiles of pupil ability constructions within individual schools.

*Categories and perceived ability*

Pupil interviews had been created in light of ability identity being considered as a potentially negotiated construct at the boundary between internal and external models of ability. In addition, it was argued that ability could be experienced as multi dimensional. Consequently pupils were asked to speak about their views of their own ability and about high ability and finally their ideas about teacher judgements of ability. Subsequently, Harre's (1998) tripartite personhood was used to establish a frame for the data. These three aspects of pupil ability identity were reflected in three strands. **Strand A** dealt with the fundamental beliefs of the individual about their own ability. **Strand B** was concerned with the conceptualisation of high ability



and Strand C represented a notion of pupil understanding of possible institutional models of ability as mediated by the teacher. Each was defined in relation to three categories: **Assessment, Comparison and Evaluation**. The first two may be considered to be the external references for definition of ability, supported and reinforced by institutional modelling. Assessment was most closely and explicitly related to institutional structures and activities. Comparison remained an external but slightly less explicit reference, concerned with local comparison. Evaluation by contrast was defined from the internal world of the individual and brought with it implicit judgements about the nature of ability.

Pupils are described throughout as 'av' (average) or 'va' (very able). This alludes to teacher nominated ability of pupils in relation to each curricular area and does not reflect researcher categorisation other than in the unusual case of the S4 Art teacher in Independent School 2. This teacher refused to nominate children in relation to ability and the researcher then had to choose four children to participate.

In the following pages, the four case study schools will be described in terms of their characteristics and the organisation of learning. Subsequently, each case study school will be considered in turn in relation to each strand and across categories within each strand. Finally, an across case consideration of the pupil data will be discussed.

### *The Four Case Study Schools*

Maintained school 1 (M1) was a school supportive of comprehensive ideology which encouraged the development of all children to achieve their highest potential. It was also a school underpinned by a Christian ethos which echoed the claim of the individual to be the best that they could be. The headteacher emphasised an

atmosphere of valuing the individual pupil and supporting them in a structured support network where progress and attainment as well as affective issues could be monitored. According to Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) such a school was not interested in promoting what they considered to be a traditional and popular notion of a stable and fixed ability.

At the level of policy and rhetoric ability was not to be seen as stable and fixed but instead was likely to change and improve with school input. However as Clark et al (1999) noted, these principles could be undermined by practices justified within the school but seemingly at odds with the underlying ideology of the school. Thus setting within Mathematics and a slightly wider category of broadbanding in English from 3<sup>rd</sup> year was evident as well as the use of ability groups and specific classes for ability groups in Mathematics from first year. Setting within Mathematics was allowed by the headteacher in part because of the highly successful exam results of the department but also because of the perceived nature of the subject requiring similar ability groupings for effective learning. In addition the defining of children within performative language was highly developed especially in S4. This would undermine the consistency of the institutional model of ability as fluid and malleable and throw up alternatives to the stated comprehensive ideology underlying it.

**Maintained school 2 (M2)** again was a comprehensive school and was described by the headteacher as a school which valued the individual and their varied achievements and did not just focus on the traditional academic ones. However, it also reflected the organisation of learning set up in school A with setting in Mathematics and broadbanding in English from S3. The major difference between



these two state schools lay in the composition of their intakes. While M1 worked with pupils from a broad socio-economic base, M2 had a strong middle class profile.

**Independent school 1 (Ind 1)** was a small independent school which at the level of policy echoed the principles underpinning the larger state schools but was affected in terms of intake by the self selection for intake which involved the ability to pay for education. However, in part because of small numbers, they were unable to set or otherwise group children for learning in stratified ways. Consequently, children were taught in mixed ability classes. So at the level of institutional policy and learning organisation, Ind 1 presented a consistent model of ability which suggested that the institutional role was one of facilitator ready to help enhance ability and achievement.

**Independent school 2 (Ind 2)** was the final independent school. It used an informal assessment if pupils entered at the primary stage and a more structured testing for entry at S1. The latter involved Linguistic, Mathematical and problem solving abilities as well as reports from primary schools. While on the one hand a similar philosophy of developing the individual and helping them to achieve the best they could was prevalent as in the other schools, this was to be brought about through the adherence to promoting traditional and enduring values of integrity and perseverance as well as the consistency, continuity and durability of the school and its success in academic terms. From the start the institutional notion of ability was made clear in its entry procedures which sought an assessment of performance. Subsequently, regular testing and setting from S2 in English and mathematics suggested a strong consistency of views on ability and a support for assessment of performance as indicative of ability. However, unlike the other schools S3/4 pupils in top sets did not need to take part in Standard grade exams. Instead they were

moved forward along the higher syllabus from around the middle of S4. This meant that although performance was related to setted ability groups for learning, the defining language of standard grade exams was not present in these groups as it was in the other three schools.

### *Maintained school 1 – within case analysis*

#### *Self definition in M1*

Strand A considered the ways in which pupils began to construe ability in relation to their beliefs about themselves: self- definition. In M1, first year pupils used all three categories of Assessment, Comparison and Evaluation. Although Evaluation was referenced most often, the external referencing with regard to Assessment and Comparison followed closely. From the pupil who looked to teachers to help define his ability through Assessment:

I'm all right cause fae review sheets, assignments and tests 'n' that and when you find out the answers and the score you've got, they can work out how well you've done (pupil9, 'av' Maths, M1)

To the pupil who saw ability in an evaluatory way linked in with future aspirations,

I think I'm quite good at it because I like reading and writing stories and I'd like to be an English Teacher (pupil 2, 'va' English, M1)

These provided a sense of a varied self-definition rather than one which was focused on either internal or external referencing. However fourth year pupils did not reflect a similar picture. Instead, self-definition was highly focused on the category of Assessment. So at least in this particular aspect of ability construction, pupils represented a shift from varied referencing in S1 to a more institutionally based definition in fourth year. This shift from an internal evaluation of strengths and weaknesses within S1 pupils to assessment in S4 highlighted the lack of parental



influence on ability construction since it was perceived by them (see chapter 8) as a construct which was located and validated within the school.

### *High ability in M1*

It was of interest then to look at the ways in which pupils might maintain or shift their ideas concerning high ability construction (strand B). It was noticeable that there was a greater degree of agreement over the ways in which high ability would be determined in both S1 and S4. Here, both year groups heavily pinpointed evaluation, although there was some increased use of Assessment in S4. This maintenance of construction in comparison with a shifting self-definition between first and fourth year pupils suggested that pupils might have a strongly construed sense of high ability, internally referenced which continued relatively independently of any institutional messages. On the other hand, self-definition seemed to be strongly influenced by the increasing institutional emphasis on greater use of stratified learning and pupil and class definitions in relation to the performative based language of standard grade exams.

### *Pupil perceptions of teacher judgements in M1*

In the next strand, C, pupil perceptions of how teachers communicate judgements about pupils' ability, a shift was made away from the evaluative aspect focused on by most pupils in the previous strand and towards a focus on assessment as the teachers' way of relating notions of ability. This emphasis on assessment held true across ability groupings and year groups. The only diversion from this came from two pupils who also used a comparison of teacher strategies. This involved a description of strategies applied to different children depending upon their perceived ability.

There are a few pupils in the class who have problems and he'll go round

and help them specially, but if you're good. he just bypasses you.  
(Pupil 24, 'av' Mathematics)

This pupil perceived himself as belonging in that category of the 'good' pupil in terms of mathematical ability and saw this as validated by the lack of teacher intervention for those doing well while interacting with others whom he perceived as having problems. In addition, a small number of children commented on the conflict perceived between the teacher's view of ability and the child's view or in the difficulty of making any legitimate judgement of ability. Two children, one in S1 ('va') talked about Art and questioned the nature of Art and whether it was possible to determine what was 'good'.

the things I think are good, the teacher doesn't like, well she does like them but she doesn't think they're my best pieces, the things I don't like, the teacher thinks are really good. (Pupil 2, 'va' Art)

This presented the pupil with a problem concerning her own judgement of art and artistic ability when faced with the conflicting views of the teacher. The pupil did not question the validity of the teacher's judgement as much as she highlighted the inherent difficulty in making aesthetic judgements especially within a school environment, where the question of aesthetics was overlaid with notions of assessment in relation to grading systems. By contrast, an S4 pupil in Mathematics found himself confronting a teacher's view of ability and a 'correct' route to learning in the subject. He felt that his independence as a learner affected the way in which the teacher perceived his ability.

See, I like to be independent and work on things myself but he says you shouldn't do that, 'do it by the book, do it my way'.  
(Pupil 24, 'av' Mathematics)

For this pupil, mathematics was not about correct routes but instead was unexplored territory for which he could use a map with prescribed paths (the teacher's route) or



generate his own method of exploring further. This represented a view of mathematics that was not restricted by prescription but instead, for this pupil, was a more exciting prospect. The pupil charted the tension present when such a contradictory view arose between teacher and pupil.

One pupil alluded to the confusion that could arise even when the teacher explicitly applied assessment.

She'll say that's a General/Credit piece or that's general or whatever but then it seems kinda weird cos she'll say that's a General credit piece and she'll say you're getting on really well and then all of a sudden she'll be saying you're never going to pass and you're like, what's happening?  
(Pupil 19, 'av' Music, M1)

This last comment showed a pupil who had been prepared to accept the recognition of ability through assessment of performance. However, she then found that the inconsistency of teacher commentary with maintenance of a seemingly objective grading system served to confuse even when pupil and teacher accepted the performative language applied.

These comments served to highlight the issues which might underlie an acknowledgement of the nature of teacher judgement: lack of intervention for the very able, conflicting ideas about ability, narrow conceptions of ability and finally the shifting sands underneath the seemingly 'objective measure' of assessment. Interestingly, when looking across these strands, pupils were affected by institutional focuses within beliefs about self but maintained a degree of resistance to changing notions of high ability and institutionally mediated judgements.

### *Summary - M1*

M1, then, presented ability grouping as a less distinctive factor in ability conceptualisation than year groups. In S1, strand A responses reflected a use of both external and internal referencing but a narrowing of ability conceptualisation in S4 appeared when assessment was used most strongly in defining personal ability.

High ability (Strand B) was a slightly different construction. Pupils used an almost undiluted evaluatory element in S1 and maintained this presence in S4 despite an increase in institutional referencing i.e. assessment.

There was an agreement in children's voices at both stages with regard to the nature of institutional/teacher judgements and notions of ability. However, it was only as teacher judgements, syllabuses and external exams with the corresponding language of performance played an increasingly prominent role that this impinged upon self definition but had a more limited effect on pupil notions of high ability.

### *Implications for pupil perceptions of the very able and the construction of 'greater' ability in M1*

The nature of high ability in Maintained School 1 and consequently the nature of the very able pupil was considered in relation to pupil emphases when questioned about high ability. Pupils presented an internalised, evaluatory notion of high ability which became slightly modified by an increasing use of assessment in fourth year but which maintained a strong focus on internal referencing. This highlighted the possibility of a well-established notion of high ability modified but not altered by school experiences of ability modelling and teacher mediated judgements of ability. It was of particular concern in a school determined to avoid the concept of ability, that a focus on attainment in both the structures of learning and in implicit and explicit



messages, contributed to a narrow hierarchical ability model being reinforced. This was illustrated, in particular, by the ways in which a small number of pupils questioned the validity of teacher judgements but in the end accepted them.

However the changing quality of self-definition and ability suggested that while the contextualised view of high ability did not rely on institutional ideas of ability, self-definition could be affected by the school emphases. The possibility that children might perceive high ability in a particular way while experiencing it in terms of self in a contradictory manner, which was more readily affected by school organisation and activities meant that pupils were mediating and applying varied constructions of ability in relation to different perspectives.

When generating constructions of high ability pupils by other pupils, children in M1 were using an internalised referencing system to define and describe such a group. The modified maintenance of this construct within fourth year pupils served to highlight the continued strength of that internalised view while recognising the increasing influence of the school's increasingly pervasive use of assessment. However, this was indicative of high ability in others and did not reflect the perceived nature of ability within the self which was initially diverse but subsequently within fourth year provided a narrower and a more highly institutionalised focus.

### *Maintained School 2 – within case analysis*

#### *Self definition in M2*

In this school there was agreement across ability groupings with regard to self-definition of ability. In S1, this meant that evaluation was the main focus for considering personal ability. This changed in S4 to the use of assessment as the most

frequent reference point although both very able and average groups made mention of comparison as a useful way of defining ability. Pupil 15 'va Maths pointed out,

I'm pretty good, I'm in the top maths class so that sort of shows

Interestingly this use of perceived achievement through placement in relation to grading was used by a pupil nominated as very able in Art.

I should think I'm better than most people because I'm in the Credit class and I've got good marks for most of my work (pupil 18)

However Art had comparatively small numbers and had not been broadbanded or set so this pupil's perception of the organisation of learning on ability grounds was on the surface not justified by the mixed ability nature of the classroom. Other children used grading to define their ability but used it in a restrictive sense,

A few girls at my desk they're continually getting 1s where I'm more the 2 and 3 kind of grades, we always know that some people will always get 1s whereas I'm only going to get a 2 or a 3 for what I do (Pupil 21, 'av English)

The prescriptive and at times restrictive nature of grading highlighted the importance placed on teachers and school in defining ability but was also recognised by one pupil as not necessarily objective.

I used to get better grades and with my new teacher my grades have dropped. I don't know whether it's because he likes different things from the last teacher (pupil 12, 'va' English)

### *High ability in M2*

Strand B, dealing with constructions of high ability, showed very able and average pupils in S1 and also those within S4 as reflecting a use of very similar emphasis. In first year, pupils referenced evaluation most often followed by comparison but did not utilise assessment at all. Evaluation involved outlining the nature of high ability within different subjects, 'the way they play, the rhythm and the way it flows, (pupil



11, 'va' Music) or in Mathematics the speed and accuracy and quality of oral and written responses. High ability in English was similarly connected with speed and quality but also with enjoyment and interest in the subject. Art was a subject in which differences were minimised and the difficulty of determining ability at all argued by pupil 4 ('va' Art),

If it doesn't work out you can't say you're rubbish at Art because the last thing they might have done it might be brilliant, it's just on how well the idea works out

In S4, while evaluation continued to be the most important element in pupil descriptions, assessment was also utilised followed by comparison. This emerging use of assessment was clearly seen in pupil 16 ('va' Music) who stated,

You can have a false illusion because you get people who know the popular tunes, I suppose it means they're a good musician but it doesn't mean that they get good marks, it's all about marks really

This showed the distinction being made between musicianship and contextualised high ability in school with increasing use of school referencing.

#### *Pupil perceptions of teacher judgements in M2*

Strand C saw a similarity of clustering of references for both 'very able' and 'average' pupils in the category of assessment. This was also reflected between year groups as both S1 and S4 pupils coincided in their perceptions of teachers and ability in their focus on assessment. The emphasis given to assessed performance and consequent position within school was illustrated by the following comment by pupil 15 ('va' Mathematics).

We get our grades back and he'll say, 'oh you're needing to try a bit better, get another 1 and that's you got a 1 for standard grade investigating' or 'You need to try a lot harder or you'll end up getting put down a class.'

Only two in S1 and two in S4 noted a comparison of teaching strategy for different ability groups as a way to understand teacher ideas about ability or through suggestions for alternative and more advanced reading in English. However one child did question just how accurate this judgement might be in relation to choosing appropriate teaching strategies.

The people who play Music, she just leaves them to get on on their own and thinks that because they play the clarinet that they can do everything, but that might not be true. (pupil 4, 'av' Music)

### *Summary – M2*

In M2, the major shift in terms of locating themselves in self-definition was from the strongly evaluative stance in S1 to an equally strong emphasis on assessment and to some extent comparison in S4. Again pupils were seen to shift towards an institutionally brokered self-definition across age groups. High ability maintained its strong evaluative character between year groups but again saw an increase in the use of assessment in support of a high ability profile. While strand C remained comparatively static.

### *Implications for pupil perceptions of the very able and the construction of 'higher ability' in M2*

The importance of school and its assessment process in construing ability was highlighted by shifts in both self-definition and high ability. The increasing dependence on assessment in S4 self-definition rather than the internal referencing utilised in S1 highlighted once again the impact of the institutional modelling of ability. This was reinforced by the changing shift in emphases between S1 and S4 from the perspective on high ability. While assessment had been absent in first year views, it was emerging as a component of ability construction in S4. This was an



underlying shift, only, as evaluation and its internal referencing continued to hold sway.

High ability was construed in relation to a strongly internalised notion of the very able but this faced a changing profile within S4 when institutional activities and language brought about a less independent view. Instead an increasingly performative culture impacted on the underlying nature of pupil perceptions of high ability. At the same time, self-definition was transformed from an internally determined construct to a strongly and predominantly institutionally biased construct.

### *Independent School 1 – within case analysis*

#### *Self definition in Ind 1*

In S1 both comparison and evaluation were equally emphasised when pupils attempted to define their own ability (Strand A), with a small number referring to assessment. Pupils used local comparison with other children in their class or at times in relation to their ability within the school. The main shift between S1 and S4 lay in the decrease in references to evaluation when asked to self define although this might have been affected by the smaller number of pupils taking part in this year group in Ind 1. Responses were spread over all three categories.

#### *High ability in Ind 1*

In strand B, only one average pupil across both year groups mentioned comparison in describing high ability. Instead, use was made of evaluation in S1 and S4 in the main with a small number of children alluding to assessment. Evaluation of high ability was related to elements of classroom behaviour such as speed and quality of answers within Mathematics and English although one pupil suggested,

They don't really stick their hands up to answer the questions all the time. It's more they're understanding it better. (Pupil 17, 'av' Maths)

Within Music and Art performance skills and the quality of the finished product were described. One pupil made a distinction however between skills and technique and an additional quality in interacting with the music.

The way they stand when they play, the way the body flows with the music, like on the piano, they might not be fantastically brilliant at the piece they're playing but they're absorbing all the music into their body and letting it pass through. (pupil 15, 'va' Music)

*Pupil perceptions of teacher judgements in Ind 1*

**Strand C** again was reflective of an emphasis on teachers using assessment to communicate judgements about ability. Only in S1 were there a small number of pupils who commented on the different teaching strategies employed with pupils of differing abilities and most of these were very able pupils.

He tends to ask the people who are less able for them to figure it out and he doesn't really ask the people who are more able or good at it. I think he knows we can do it so he doesn't ask us all the time (Pupil \*, 'va' Mathematics)

Once again, as in M1, an allusion was made to a lack of interaction between teachers and the very able as a result of teacher strategies chosen.

Pupils in this school, showed an awareness of assessment from first year in self-definition but this time instead of focusing on evaluation, pupils used both internal and external referencing in relation to ability in S1. Evaluation and comparison were almost equally prominent. In S4 instead of gravitating towards assessment, responses were clustered across all three categories although with slightly more use being made of comparison. High ability was construed through a strong evaluative mechanism in both S1 and S4 although in both cases an underlying use of assessment was made.



*Implications for pupil perceptions of the very able and the construction of 'higher ability' in Independent school 1*

Ind 1, with its mixture of mixed ability teaching but self selective entry, a commitment to the progress of the individual but at the same time an investment in performance within exams, was a school which could not be easily polarised into the patterns of comprehensive ideology or academically selected and stratified institution. Pupils did not cluster their replies particularly strongly within a particular category but instead showed a wider use of categories and also a balance of internal and external referencing.

In considering high ability, pupils projected a strong use of internal referencing with an underlying use of explicit externally defined assessment. Pupils maintained this focus in both year groups. It was noticeable that in this third case study school, self definition and ability mirrored the strong emphasis on internal referencing of ability in S1 but unlike both maintained schools, Ind 1 pupils balanced their internal evaluation and external referencing via comparison in construing ability in relation to the self. By S4 pupils spread use of referencing over all three categories.

*Independent School 2 within case analysis*

*Self definition in Ind 2*

Pupils in both year groups and across ability groups echoed each other in the ways in which self-definition (strand A) was generated. A small number of references were focused on Assessment, but Evaluation and Comparison were where greatest weight was placed. Comparison was usually in the form of locating themselves in relation to others in class and year group. So pupils attempted to place themselves on some kind of ability continuum.

I think I'm sort of average, usually there's always someone better than you, unless you're exceptional  
(pupil 3, 'va' English)

and in Mathematics,

I wouldn't say I'm one of the best but I'd say maybe in the top ten or something because there are always a few people who're definitely better than me (pupil 4, 'va' Mathematics)

It was of particular interest that in S4 Art where the teacher had refused to identify pupils in terms of ability because of a dislike of assessing pupils in this way, that children also attempted to suggest that there was a lack of difference in ability and performance across class members. However, one pupil represented the clash between this form of ability construction and the internalised evaluation of ability,

All our class is quite talented ...so we should all get ones. Certainly I'm not the best, I'm not really able to come up with solutions, just things you're taught. Like the other day, G. came out with an answer the teacher hadn't thought of but I can't do those kinds of things. (pupil 15 Art)

Evaluative comments were often clearly thought out commentaries on ability within a subject.

When the teacher's talking about what the author means, I can understand why and offer answers. I'm a bit of an all rounder but I really don't like poetry criticism. I like the more creative side, where I use my own imagination (pupil 12, 'va' English)

### *High ability in Ind 2*

There was a distinct shift in emphasis when children were asked to consider the nature of high ability (strand B) in their subject classrooms. Evaluation dominated the referencing in S1 and this was maintained in S4. However, S4 pupils also began to utilise assessment increasingly as an underlying factor. This was the only school which showed such a major shift in high ability construction rather than in self-definition. Evaluation of high ability was again focused on the speed, accuracy and



quality of work produced. This led to straightforward connections being made between classroom performance and the nature of ability.

Usually a few put up their hands and usually they get the right answers. If it's the same people who keep putting their hands up all the time and they keep getting them right, they're quite good at Maths  
(pupil 1, 'va', maths)

Most pupils made connections of this kind but some highlighted the potential problem with this kind of evaluation. Pupil 3 ('va' English) pointed out that her partner in Maths was very clever but that his 'performance' was poor as he didn't answer questions and that moreover even if 'performance' was considered to be good, pupils might have strengths and weaknesses within subjects which might not show. Pupil 19 ('av Maths) spoke of the difficulties in making a decision based on a view of individuals in the classroom.

S. got 100% twice last year for maths, but she doesn't do a thing in class at all, just sits there and talks and gets moved to the front.

#### *Pupil perceptions of teacher judgements*

In the following strand (C), considering teacher judgements of ability, children reflected an emphatic referral to assessment as the main means of describing the ways in which they built their perceptions of their own ability in terms of teacher decisions. Only a few references were made to comparison and these were made by S1 pupils who were all nominated as 'average.'

If the teacher tends to help you a little bit more and gives you tips, that means that she thinks, you need a little bit of help, but if she just leaves you to do your own thing, then that probably means your work's better (Pupil 5, 'av' Art)

Again at S1, both 'very able' and 'average' pupils made references to evaluation of pupil/teacher interaction. Here children noted an absence of negative interaction between themselves and the teacher and saw this as indicative of a positive teacher

view of their ability. One child combined comparison and evaluation through considering teaching strategy, teacher-pupil relationship and ability.

I think that if he likes you he's not as cold, like he's quite friendly towards you and he always wants to hear you play well, if he doesn't, if he's not so sure of you, then he'll like, be watching you closely and like seeing how you're doing (Pupil 9, 'av' Music)

An unusual contradiction was inherent in the nature of teacher judgement in S4 Art. This teacher had stated that all art was worthwhile and therefore she did not feel happy about categorising children for the purposes of this study within ability groups. This was further complicated by not only school based assessment but also by the fact that pupils were preparing for Standard grade exams which relied on a stringent grading system. Pupils attempted to reflect their knowledge of the teacher's egalitarian principles while making a judgement about the existence of 'good' and 'better.'

She talks about everyone the same. She would never acknowledge anyone if they're not good or if they're good. (pupil 15 Art)

However, another pupil while sustaining this view of the teacher's approach also highlighted the difficulties in attempting to maintain it.

She doesn't really mind how good you are at Art, like if you've got a lot of talent. It's just if you work hard at it to get grades, she has subtle ways of saying it's not so good. (pupil 14, Art)

So although this teacher tried strenuously to avoid categorisation, it was a fundamental part of her transactions with pupils and there was an awareness of judgements being made, albeit subtly. This left one pupil wondering, 'I'm not sure she's quite honest about what she thinks about what you do,' (Pupil 25, Art)



### *Summary – Ind 2*

Pupils' maintenance of self-definition as evaluatory across both year groups contrasted with the other case study schools. Evaluation was the most prominent element in both S1 and S4, although this was tempered by an underlying commitment to comparison. It was in strand B, considering high ability that although evaluation was strongly maintained, a shift towards an increasing emphasis (though lesser) on assessment came about. Teacher judgements were recognised as belonging within the language of assessment but some children highlighted a use of comparison or evaluation.

### *Implications for pupil perceptions of the very able and the construction of 'higher ability' in Ind 2*

This provided a contrasting view of high ability in a school which presented a selection system and stratification of learning which might have been expected to encourage an assessment based construction of ability generally and high ability in particular.

Instead, pupils showed that in terms of high ability, an evaluation of the nature of greater ability was confidently used to build on their ideas concerning ability in S1. This was underpinned by external referencing (comparison). However it was noticeable that where pupils in other schools had maintained similar high ability profiles between year groups, on the whole, and presented shifts within self definition, pupils in this selective school showed the opposite: self definition was maintained but high ability began to alter.

### *Across schools and systems*

In Maintained school 1, an initial consideration of ability conceptualisation at policy and organisational levels suggested an inherent inconsistency in the model being

presented. Pupils were aware of the performance assessment when articulating their thoughts on both personal ability and their ideas about high ability. However, it was noticeable that while self definition and ability seemed to become more closely identified with external referencing associated with institutional and societal exam priorities, pupils were still consistent in using internal referencing most often when considering high ability. There is a need to question whether the shift in self-definition reflected a permanent change or whether it represented an expedient but temporary shift.

In Maintained school 2, a similar indication of the shifting nature of self definition between first and fourth year pupils, highlighted the increasing importance of assessment and the movement away from an evaluative stance. As in School A, there was maintenance of high ability conceptualisation through internal referencing in both year groups. Within these two comprehensive schools, pupils promoted an independent, internalised notion of high ability but children faced shifts in relation to their self-definitions of ability.

In Independent school 1, a similar pattern of shift within self definition could be seen but this time, S1 pupils had placed equal emphasis on internal (evaluation) and external referencing (comparison) while S4 pupils were spread across the three categories. Pupils once again maintained their ideas of high ability, which reflected evaluation with an underlying use of assessment.

In Independent school 2, however, the strong consistency of views on ability in policy, rhetoric and in practical expressions of those beliefs in the organisation of learning did not seem to be reflected directly in the pupils' self-definition of ability



and their notions of high ability. It might have been anticipated that pupils would be likely to utilise the institutionally refined mechanism of assessment as the major focus for ability definition. On the contrary, the independence from this overt compliance with the institutional language of achievement was marked. However, the consistency of outlook among pupils and across strands did reflect the coherence of the school model. Self-definition was strongly evaluatory with an underlying foundation of comparison. This was consistently maintained in both year groups. There was, however, a strong shift in the referencing underlying notions of high ability. While evaluation was maintained, an increasing use of assessment emerged. Unlike the other three case study schools, it was the contextualised perceptions of ability and not self-definition of ability which shifted its main focus and then only within a supportive role not as the main referencing point.

### *Pupils' constructions of ability across schools*

Since pupil constructions within the three established strands did not reflect in any of the schools uniformity with regard to ability, this would confirm the independence of perspectives and the potential for varying types of engagement with institutionally brokered models which pupils experienced. The flexibility of strands A and B across year groups and also between schools suggested that pupils could be affected by aspects of institutional language and organisation of learning but of course the short or long term nature of such shifts couldn't be determined from this data.

The static nature of Strand C suggested an ongoing awareness of the ways in which teachers' judgements were communicated and how this reflected an emphasis on assessment of performance as indicative of ability. It was only in the two maintained schools that self-definition was seen to echo the third strand at the level of fourth

year pupils i.e. a focus on assessment. This had implications for pupil experiences and constructions of ability within institutions and systems. When institutional modelling focused strongly on assessment and consequently effected a shift in pupil self perception with regard to ability this implied two things – that their own personal beliefs about self and ability were not sufficiently internalised to withstand the dominance of the institutional emphasis and that the malleable notion of ability that the schools believed they were promoting was not impacting on pupils in the way in which those supporting the comprehensive ideology would have wished.

That pupils within these two schools maintained an evaluatory perspective on high ability suggested that a more resilient and well-established notion of high ability was present for pupils in these schools. But then it was necessary to question why it was that Ind 2, which focused consistently on grading and setting contained pupils who did not similarly shift to an institutionally brokered construct in S4 in self definition but instead maintained a balance between internal and external referencing. In the latter, pupils made use of local situated comparison rather than Assessment. This contrast was further distinguished by the shift in the nature of high ability referencing, suggesting the increasing effect of institutional views on high ability, the only school in which this happened.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, pupil constructions of ability have highlighted the potential importance of parental constructs and their perceptions of schooling on the strength of pupil ability identity. Pupil consideration of teacher judgements concerning ability illuminates contradictory aspects of teacher messages about ability and the difficulty



of attempting to minimise categorisation according to ability. It also raises questions over the nature of the 'dialogue' between teachers and pupils.

In chapter 10, dissonance at an institutional and individual level is explored and the contrasting consensual impetus in independent schools investigated.

# Chapter 10      Dissonance & Consensus

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## *Introduction*

In the preceding 5 chapters, each group perspective was explored horizontally across case study schools. Commonalties and differences were sought and the ways in which this led to distinctive group characteristics highlighted. In chapters 4 and 5, it was suggested that concepts of dissonance and consensus might be helpful in beginning to understand ability constructions and institutional and individual identity. In this chapter, these are considered in greater detail and the potential interactions between institutional and individual dissonance, institutional consensus and individual consonance are explored. An important caveat in dealing with dissonance and consensus should be that dissonance must not be seen as a negative concept and consensus should not be regarded as intrinsically valuable.

## *Dissonance in Individuals and Institutions*

Festinger's (1957) original theory of cognitive dissonance focused on the conflict experienced by the individual when dealing with two contradictory cognitive elements. Dissonance in individuals (headteachers, principal teachers, teachers, parents or pupils) in this study was characterised by the discordant experiences of participants as they deal with contradictory aspects of ability construction. Festinger highlighted the struggle for consistency within any individual but he reflected on the existence of inconsistencies or dissonance, which were rarely acknowledged. Greater consonance, he argued is inevitably striven for but not necessarily achieved. Participants' constructs reflected, at times, the discomfort felt when dissonance was acknowledged. In M2 this was evident in the narrative of the principal teacher of



Music who attempted to reduce his sense of dissonance by distinguishing between ideals and reality.

As part of my philosophy, I don't have particular expectations. I try to have expectations for each pupil that are realistic for that pupil so it's individual expectations, now that's me being idealistic there. Maybe deep down, gut reaction, do you expect more from the able pupil, then yes you do. You do expect them to produce work of a higher standard.  
(PT Music, M2)

However, often dissonance was an unacknowledged aspect of individuals' ability constructs. It lay in the contradictory beliefs and judgements experienced and described by teachers (including principal teachers and headteachers), parents and pupils.

Dissonance as a concept was then adapted and extended to help conceptualise the dynamic process of change, negotiation and renegotiation in institutional ability identity. How then can institutional and individual dissonance be defined and are they distinct or intertwined? In the following pages, consideration is first of all given to institutional dissonance.

### *Institutional dissonance and institutional identity*

In chapter 4, Ball's work (1987) on organisational theory related to schools was discussed briefly. It has particular importance as a starting point for work on dissonance in this study. Ball (op cit) argued for a new form of organisational theory which could deal with the distinctive aspects of schools and suggested that the route which should be taken involved consideration of conflict and contradiction. He rejected previous organisational theorists who linked membership of an organisation with consensus. This traditional organisational framework was also considered

inadequate for dealing with conflict and the ideological struggle which Ball perceived as integral to schools. Instead he focused upon the perceptions of individuals who he believed were involved in an ongoing struggle to control the definition of the school. At the same time, he rejected the concept of school as an abstract entity and focused on the headteacher as the pivotal figure in the struggle for power.

While accepting and building on his ideas of conflict and ideological struggle in investigating maintained institutions, an exploration of case study schools led to consideration of a special kind of internal conflict (individual dissonance) and specific manifestations of interpersonal conflict within an institutional ability identity (institutional dissonance). Institutions are regarded as holistic and dynamic, constructed and shaped by their historical and political contexts and by the people within them (Fullan, 1991). Institutional dissonance, then, is created across time and space in the interpersonal conflicts which redefine, negotiate or challenge institutional ability identity. Dissonance as a way of thinking about institutional identity and flux and the dynamics of change within schools is located across (10.1) four elements of temporal shifts, policy and organisation, recategorisation and challenges to the modelling of ability prevalent in the institution

### **Institutional Dissonance**

*Temporal shifts and dissonance* – change in headteacher/ redefining and renegotiation over institutional ability identity

*Negotiation and dissonance* – policy, structures and organisation of learning occurring usually between headteacher and principal teachers

*Recategorisation and dissonance* - changes in the categorisation of pupils

*Challenges and dissonance* – challenges to school models of ability by parents, pupils or potentially teachers

**Table 10.1 Institutional Dissonance**



### *Temporal shifts and Dissonance*

The first of these involves *temporal shifts* in institutional identity. A temporal shift involves redefinition and renegotiation over institutional ability identity as a result of a major change such as the arrival of a new headteacher. This was highlighted in M1 where the headteacher had been in post for less than 2 years at the time the study was being carried out. At a broad level, this led to potential temporal dissonance within institutional ability identity as the headteacher actively sought to redefine and renegotiate institutional identity. He sought to change individuals' perspectives on teaching and learning but also to challenge and negotiate with principal teachers over the organisation of learning. In M2 this was illustrated by the perceived shift in institutional identity with the advent of the current headteacher who was thought to have changed the school's profile towards a caring educational community which valued different kinds of ability. Shifts in institutional identity were not highlighted by those in the independent sector schools. It was important for these institutions that individuals such as headteachers did not define the school but joined an established and ongoing organisation which to all intents and purposes was an abstract entity.

### *Negotiation and Dissonance*

Linked to this temporal shift and dissonance is the negotiation which occurs as headteacher and principal teachers and potentially outside agencies such as LAs and HMI, attempted to reach an agreement over policy development and organisational features of the school. Through this negotiation, individuals might experience dissonance but it is through the conflicting decisions made across subject areas and between school and LA or HMI that institutional dissonance could be considered to be taking place. In M2 the headteacher made use of conflict between HMI and the

**TEXT BOUND INTO  
THE SPINE**



be changeable but in M1 where  
isation, it raised questions of the  
questioning the malleability of  
institutional dissonance may be a  
files. In order to try and reduce  
transfer, attempts were made to  
constructs by promoting a greater  
Maths.

level because of *challenges* being  
these challenges emerged from  
challenges were rare in the data but  
covert challenges with possible  
within classrooms. In M1, a parent  
particularly successful background of  
y. The pupil's unhappiness in  
subject provided her mother with  
the teacher's and her own. This  
concerns. This could be seen as  
being used in school and so is no  
onal.

pupil nominated as 'average' by his  
working style. He sought new

LA concerning the organis  
(setting and mixed ability).

The organisation of learning  
egalitarianism in the conflic  
learning groups. Temporal  
advent of each new headteac  
and also encouraged indivi  
dissonance. The latter could  
level in the contradictory m  
perhaps best illustrated by t  
who saw setting as having 'no  
to specific ability groups.

headteacher's perspective. T  
favour of broadbanding b  
disaffection of pupils in lowe  
of setting within Maths and a  
with Maths as a distinctive  
institutional ability identity a  
M2, a similar form of institu  
and English classes were bro

### *Recategorisation and disso*

Recategorisation of pupils er  
primary and secondary or be

ways of finding answers but his teacher seemed to recognise only particular routes to Maths success. This challenge struck me as particularly insightful but created a dilemma for the pupil. To conform and accept the view of the teacher was the most likely way to make positive progress but his creative approach to learning made him attempt to challenge the teacher's way of working. However, the teacher's response was, 'do it by the book, do it my way,' ('av' pupil 24, S4). It raises the question of whether Maths in school should be about finding the 'correct' route or pattern and whether this affected the teacher's judgement of this pupil's ability as an 'av' pupil?

In Ind 2, a pupil in fourth year was very unusual. He had learned to play the piano using a 'Russian method.' This involved listening to phrases from a piece of Music and gradually bringing them together. The result was that he was perceived to be an exceptional and mature piano player but he could barely read Music. His existence in the Music classroom was a challenge to his teacher who was unsure how to define him. She had nominated him as 'very able' but admitted that she would have been unlikely to do so if it had been a bigger class with pupils possessing traditional musical skills. The ability to read Music was seen as a necessary skill in order to develop musically. That this pupil had developed exceptionally through an alternative method created conflict and uncertainty as to the nature of his musical ability. This fourth year pupil's ability created not only individual dissonance for the teacher and possibly for the pupil himself, but also created a challenge to the departmental aims and definition of musicality.



Finally, the dissonance felt by the Art teacher in S4 (Ind 2) was evident in her challenge to the research. She refused to participate in any form of ability definition and highlighted her unusual stance within this selective school. The compelling nature of this meritocracy was not focused on subjects such as Art and so she was able to maintain teaching and learning activities which accentuated her determination to avoid comparison of ability. This was commented on by pupils as a particularly salient aspect of this teacher's work with them and so could be said to have become a challenge to institutional ability identity.

### Individual dissonance

Individual dissonance may not directly and explicitly impinge on institutional dissonance. It may remain internal to the individual but have implications for subsequent judgements and so may have a subtle impact upon the institution and the explicit dissonance experienced at different levels. This internal conflict caused by contradictory elements of knowledge was distinctive for different groups. Teachers were significant because of the ways in which they found themselves trying to deal with personal beliefs about ability and their principles concerning the nature of the educational system.

#### **Individual dissonance**

*Teachers* – beliefs about ability/principles comprehensive system

*Pupils* – ability perception/self perception/judgement about teacher ability concepts

*Parents* – personal ability constructs/ school constructs

**Table 10.2 Individual dissonance**

The tendency for teachers in maintained schools to experience dissonance in constructing ability highlighted the struggle to reconcile a striving after commonality while recognising difference. This was particularly the case for the school which represented the broadest range of abilities and SES groups (M1). Teachers struggled to deal with issues of equality of opportunity and outcome while also utilising concepts of hierarchical ability and limitation. In M2 dissonance was not experienced to the same extent perhaps because teachers were often faced with a much narrower ability range.

Pupils at times were puzzled by teacher perceptions of their own ability. Pupil 2 ('va' Art, M1) had to deal with the contradictory views of her work which in turn made her question what it meant to be 'good' at Art. What was it that was being judged and how was it being judged? She and the teacher came to different conclusions but she did not challenge the teacher's view overtly despite being aware of the contradictions.

In Ind 2 Parent 9 (S1, Art) experienced dissonance when she tried to reconcile her view of her son's artistic ability and that of the Art teacher. As a family, they had believed that he had a talent for drawing and that he was creative and imaginative in his work. However, when parent 9 had spoken to the teacher after the first parent-teacher meeting, she was told that he was not particularly good, 'nothing special.' According to his teacher he was capable of copying pictures but he was not very artistic. This created dissonance for his mother but she tried to reduce this by referring to her own lack of knowledge in this area. She didn't know what the 'right things' were in Art and she tried to accept what she saw as the superiority of the specialist's view.



### *Research resistance and dissonance*

There were two teachers who felt some resistance to the study of ability (see chapter 4). One of these teachers was from M1. She was a principal teacher of Music who provided evidence of her own dissonance concerning expectations and her ability construct. Her resistance to the research took the form of avoidance of interviews or the careful monitoring of her own discourse for inconsistencies. She was also conscious of the juxtapositioning of schools from Maintained and Independent sectors and felt strongly that this would provide unfair comparison. She was suspicious of the research and the possible negative comparisons that might be made. Perhaps negotiating control of parts of the research process were ways of reducing the conflict that she obviously felt in taking part. Her discourse reflected a similar dissonance to that of other teachers in M1 but was overlaid with conflict concerning the purpose of the research. This meant that she was a much more self-conscious respondent but having regained control over the interviews she was prepared to deal with ability constructs openly.

For the S4 Art teacher in Ind 2, dissonance was created in the very first activity associated with the research - the nomination and categorisation of pupils' artistic ability. In negotiating the nature of her involvement, she was in effect reducing her discomfort at taking part in ability research. However, it was noticeable that she avoided any suggestion of difference in both her teaching and in relation to standard grade exams. For her, all S4 pupils would achieve the highest grade (1). Her pupils acknowledged, nonetheless, that there was differentiated performance in the classroom (their perceptions of teacher judgements) despite her avoidance of explicit

comparison. Dissonance was already present for this teacher and the research activity would have increased her sense of dissonance. Her negotiated participation also meant that pupil and researcher perspectives were even more important in trying to understand ability construction within this classroom.

### *Institutional Consensus and Individual Consonance*

For both Independent schools, institutional identity was an important aspect of the marketisation of such organisations. An explicit fluctuation in institutional identity would have been regarded as a negative characteristic. Ind 1 was represented as a caring community concerned with the enhancement of the individual. Ind 2 was the 'still point in the turning world,' (T. S. Eliot). It symbolised constancy and enduring educational values in the face of societal change and shifts concerning ability. High ability in the past had meant someone 'outstandingly different' but in Scottish society and within the inspectorate it had come to mean 'just very good,' (headteacher Ind 2).

Membership of such an educational community entails more than internal individual consonance but an active participation in institutional ability identity. The nature of school experience, the nature of teaching and learning in the institution are inextricably bound up with institutional identity. Individuals are making an active choice to participate in these schools. However, in addition, there is an institutional consensus established through temporal and structural constancy which carries with it a strong compulsion for consensual participation in the values and ability beliefs underpinning the organisation. Membership of the organisation especially for teachers was reliant upon joining this consensus and adhering to the values and aims of the institution in the organisation of learning and teaching. Little or no space is allowed for dissonance, although it is still possible it may occur, especially at an



individual level. This was seen in examples of individual dissonance cited earlier in this chapter.

### *Dissonance, ideological struggle and orthodoxy*

In chapter 1, a discussion of political developments in relation to ability constructions and school structures and organisation of learning, highlighted the movement toward a third way (Giddens, 1998) in New Labour's policy rhetoric. It was suggested that this orthodoxy was in effect a way of removing education from the ideological arena. In doing so an attempt was made to avoid it becoming an 'object of contestation' (Eagleton, p6, 1991).

In a sense, when schools operate within consensual parameters (Ind 1 & Ind 2) where institutional ability identity both defines and compels, the institution is reliant upon a particular view of educational orthodoxy in order to avoid dissonance. This encourages and perhaps even compels consensus and removes institutional identity, structures and models of ability as a focus for debate. Consonance and consensus are explicit requirements, restricting membership and compelling adherence. The two maintained case study schools, by contrast, belonged within a system and societal consensus. However, this consensus was underpinned by an ideological framework which could be contested and redefined at an institutional level. Consequently, dissonance at both an institutional and individual level was an inevitable aspect of institutions which were open to dynamic change and redefinition.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, the importance of dissonance at institutional and individual levels has been highlighted. Dissonance has been used to conceptualise ability construction in relation to institutional ability identity and within individuals. This has helped to

develop a greater understanding of the renegotiation and redefinition which occurs at an institutional level and the ways in which individuals deal with conflict.

In the following chapter, consideration is given to the ways in which the findings of this study relate to the research questions. Finally, the research is recontextualised within a wider political and societal framework.



*Introduction*

In this final chapter, the findings of the study are considered in relation to the research questions. Consideration is then given to the political and social context for the study and the ways in which these case study schools illuminate constructions of ability within Maintained and Independent schools, across subject areas and participants.

*Construing ability in Maintained and Independent schools*

The aims of this study were to explore the ways in which individuals in Maintained and Independent schools interpreted ability; their beliefs and perceptions with regard to children with different perceived abilities; and to consider the nature of individuals' beliefs and values concerning ability. The findings are summarised in the following pages in relation to the research questions which were generated.

*1. How do teachers working within particular schools perceive the category of 'very able' and 'average' pupil?*

Teachers' perceptions of ability were affected by a belief in a hierarchical ability continuum on which pupils' ability could be located (M1, M2 and Ind 1). This led to notions of rarity (infrequent identification of the 'very able') and a deficit model of 'averageness.' In addition, the quality of interaction that the 'very able' enjoyed within subject areas, was considered unattainable for other pupils although it was believed that all pupils could make considerable progress.

*Positioning and the Rarity of the 'very able'*

Positioning is used to describe teachers' placement of pupils, according to ability, on a global (general) or local (comparison within the classroom) scale or continuum. The 'very able' pupil was at times a very rare entity (M1, M2, Ind 1) and in three of the schools teachers commented on the relative high ability of nominated pupils while

suggesting that a 'very able' child could not be found. This occurred in both Maintained schools and in Ind 1. It was possible for teachers to deal with comparative notions of ability by use of an ability continuum providing notional placement in regard to ability (M1 and M2). On the other hand, in Ind 1 ability was perceived in terms of a general measurable quality such as IQ and subsequently in subject specific terms where it was regarded as part of a continuum (Ind 1). It is possible to suggest that these continua or scales which teachers used, consisted of past experiences used as a 'model of reality' (Geertz cited by Cohen, 1985) which Cohen argues helps us to orient ourselves to the phenomenon requiring interpretation (op cit, p 99).

The use of positioning to locate pupils in terms of ability difference could lead to the very limitations subsequently to be found when teachers described their expectations of particular 'average' pupils. Although teachers believed that they had similar high expectations for all pupils, their own personal beliefs about the nature of ability led them to the conclusion that distinctions had to be made. Only in Ind 2, a highly selective school, was positioning scarcely evident. This might have been because positioning in relation to measured ability was occurring explicitly at an administrative level but was actively discouraged by staff in conversations between pupils. The avoidance of an explicit discussion of attainment was important as teachers focused on the skills and attributes of individuals in order to bring about progress and an improvement in performance within the classroom.

### *The 'very able' and the 'average' pupil*

However, across all schools, when teachers observed the 'very able,' there was a belief in an unusual process of interaction with the subject. A similarity of description was observed across subject areas. The intangible nature of this process and its distinctiveness meant that it provided evidence for teachers of difference between the



'very able' and the 'average' pupil and reinforced the gap which was perceived to exist between improved 'average' performance and high ability. For the 'average' pupil the deficit model of 'averageness' provided a kind of anonymity (Waterhouse, 1995). In the perceptions of teachers the ability identity of average pupils consisted of a lack or absence of those skills and attributes which 'very able' pupils possessed. Where 'average' pupils were seen to possess a positive attribute such as motivation, it was observed that they exhibited this enthusiasm and work ethic despite their lack of attainment in comparison with the 'able' pupil.

*2. In what ways do teachers in different schools consider that they may have a role to play in the identification and development of the 'very able/average' pupil? How do they perceive such processes to operate within their institutions?*

Identification of ability was either implicit (M1 or M2) or explicit (Ind 1 and Ind 2).

Where ability was implicit in judgements made, teachers had specific expectations of pupils who were identified as belonging to ability groups. In Ind 1 and Ind 2, where judgements of ability were explicit, an emphasis was placed upon the expectations of individuals. Finally, judgements of ability were reinforced in some schools by the nature of teacher pupil interaction in the classroom.

### *Implicit and explicit identification of ability*

Ability was an integral part of maintained school experience. The 'very able' pupil was implicitly identified through personal teacher constructs of ability. The implicit nature of ability judgement was necessary because of teachers' interpretation of a system, which was perceived to require an avoidance of ability recognition. This was highlighted in the discourses of headteachers and principal teachers where discussion of the organisation of learning focused on attempts to ensure that explicit acknowledgement or judgement of ability should not be used to limit potential attainment through setting. However, there was also the potential for consideration of

a limited use of this organisation when arguments concerning subject specific ability were used to support the implementation of setted classes.

Ability within both Independent schools was explicitly constructed at an administrative and organisational level. Entry to such schools involved the need for an overt declaration to families of institutional character and purpose which in turn, entailed making explicit, notions of ability, the organisation of learning and the nature of teaching.

### *Expectations of ability – Expectations of individuals*

Teachers in Maintained schools viewed 'very able' pupils as capable of attainment without limitation while their positioning of 'average' pupils meant that such young people had reduced or limited expectations in comparison with the 'very able.' Initially teachers had alluded to similar or same expectations for all pupils but then qualified this to highlight the differentiated attainment possible between the 'very able' and the 'average' pupil.

In both Independent schools high expectations were proposed for every pupil but subsequent qualification also occurred in which individual target setting implied a highly individualised set of expectations. Measurement of attainment was an essential part of the culture of Ind 2 while a notion of IQ underpinned conceptions of ability in Ind 1 and these reinforced judgements of ability difference. Differentiation of expectation for these Independent school teachers was a natural progression after consideration of assessed attainment. Emphasis was then placed upon the ways in which attainment might be improved and some teachers in Ind 2 highlighted the impact and efficacy of their institution on 'average' pupils in particular in terms of increased and visible progress. In the two Maintained schools, however, recognition



of ability difference was avoided and teachers' utilisation of personal ability continua seemed to encourage notions of limited attainment.

### *Teaching and ability*

A deficit model of 'averageness' was reinforced by some teachers in Maintained schools in relation to their interactions with pupils. While teacher initiated intervention with 'very able' pupils entailed a discussion of developing more sophisticated interactions with the subject, 'average' pupils were perceived to be instigators of teacher-pupil contact. In doing so, they reinforced the concept of 'averageness' through requests for simplification or support because of uncertainty. This was mentioned by teachers in maintained schools and was of importance for the potential impact it could have on 'able' and 'average' pupils' learning experiences.

### *3. How do pupils in different institutions perceive the construction of their own and 'greater ability' and the possibility that experiences and interactions within schooling may play a part in this?*

The aim of this aspect of the empirical work was to begin to consider the potentially distinctive nature of pupils' ability constructions within different school environments. Roker (1992) cites Himmelweit and Swift who proposed that school type could play an important role in a young person's development and argued that the strength of the school as a socialising agent was dependent on the strength or weakness of other agents such as the family. Here, the pupils and their constructions of ability are considered within the context of the four case study schools and in question 4 consideration is given to parental constructs and their potential impact upon pupil conceptions.

Pupils were given the opportunity to talk about ability from a tripartite starting point (Chapter 4) which encouraged them to consider their concept of personal ability; the

character of high ability within a subject area; and the institutional model of ability. This allowed the researcher to explore possible differences between pupils' perspectives on ability. The strength of the school as a socialising agent would be expected to be observed if pupils were seen to reflect institutional modelling across perspectives.

All pupils in first year, after a comparatively brief time in each institution, showed an awareness of the messages given about ability through school assessment of attainment and subsequent grading. This thoroughly grounded institutional constructs of ability in measured attainment. However, pupils were most likely to conceptualise high ability and personal ability in relation to an evaluative characterisation, which highlighted strengths and weaknesses.

It was in fourth year when pupils had been attending schools for more than 3 years, that shifts in ability construction could be observed in high ability and in self definition, suggesting the potential impact of the school upon young people. It is at this point that distinct differences began to appear across groups. Those pupils in Maintained schools were affected by the school emphasis on assessment of performance in the way in which their personal notions of ability (self definition) moved away from the evaluative stance and began to reflect gradings and comparative positions in setted or broadbanded classes. However, they continued to maintain their concept of high ability which was construed in terms of internal referencing and evaluation of characteristics.

In Independent school 1, ability construction was more evenly spread across internal and external referencing both in relation to self-definition and high ability in first year.



Greater use of explicit assessment of performance became apparent in fourth year in pupils' concepts of personal ability but a balance of evaluation with an underlying use of assessment maintained perspectives on high ability.

Independent school 2 seemed to present the most consistent and explicit ability modelling in policy, rhetoric and the organisation of learning. However, despite this, pupils presented self and ability as a highly evaluative model and this was maintained in both year groups. Institutional assessment began to emerge as potentially significant as an important underlying aspect of high ability in fourth year.

The shifts in emphasis across year groups and also between schools suggests that pupils were being affected by aspects of institutional language and the organisation of learning at least in the short term. The strength of the institutional model of assessed performance in both maintained schools and its impact upon pupils' self definitions of ability implied that there was not a correspondingly strong personal belief and that the schools themselves were interpreted as reflecting a model of ability as attainment. The strength of the pupils' internal referencing of ability especially in Ind 2 despite the coherence and consistency of the institutional model, suggests a particularly strong basis for pupil articulation of ability.

#### *4. How do the parents of 'very able' pupils perceive their position within school, their learning experiences and expectations within society?*

Parental acceptance of school ability constructs or active participation in ability construction was explored within the four case study schools. This reflected a tendency towards a passive role for Maintained school parents especially where there was a mixed SES intake (M1) and a strong participatory aspect of ability construction for those parents in the selective independent school (Ind 2). A tendency for parents

to assume passive/active roles was echoed in their views of the development of ability and their perceptions of the school's impact upon ability. Finally, parental choice demonstrated that where parents saw ability construction as located within the institution, choice of school was pupil centred and/or a matter of ethical decision-making. In a school such as Ind 2, parents made choices about entry to this institution because of an articulated parental view of ability and the impact of the school and the family upon future progress.

### *Ability construction – active or passive involvement*

The importance of the school in construing and validating ability was particularly pertinent for parents in both Maintained schools. Although there were recognised elements of linguistic and musical ability at times within family life, it was in school that 'ability' in these areas was identified and validated. In M2 and Ind 1 with their narrower band of SES intake (mainly middle class), there was a perceived connection between family constructs of language ability and language ability in school but generally school was the location for engagement with ability construction. Parents from Ind 2, although similarly middle class, saw family constructs and school as connected but distinctive, representing a particular kind of 'educational family' (Whitty et al, 1989) active in making a choice of school but also active in constructing the nature of educational experiences.

The importance of school as the location for ability identification and validation within the focus of curricular areas was then significant for all parents. However, it was of interest to explore the ways in which parents perceived the development of ability.

### *Parents, schools and learning*

At the level of parental interaction, those parents in Maintained schools were likely to focus on their capacity to provide emotional support and security as a foundation for



pupil ability development. In Ind 1 this became both emotional support and the provision of learning experiences to enrich aspects of school curricular areas. First year parents from Ind 2 were particularly active and believed that they needed to be involved in supporting learning and monitoring progress.

Parents in Maintained schools focused on the school as a supportive community. Within this community, each child would be provided with individualised teaching but there was uncertainty over the nature of the school effect on pupils. In Ind 1 a similar sense of community was perceived in which support for the individual was highlighted but with slightly more specific intent. Here individualised attention was to encourage specific challenge for the more able in a way that would be lacking in larger more impersonal institutions.

The final case study school, Ind 2, was perceived to have a very strong role in affecting the quality of achievement for individual pupils. Parents expected the school to take a leadership role in encouraging progress and high attainment but this was to be achieved through agreed structures and methods. This took the form of a traditional and explicit approach to curriculum, teaching methodology, learning strategies and the organisation of learning. Parents felt confident that the school would have an impact upon ability development and fourth year parents also believed that this view of the school was held widely within society and so would reflect well upon any pupils attending it.

### *Parental choice and ability*

Parental choice took place within the context of ethical and individualistic beliefs about the nature of education. Within the two Maintained schools, principles concerned with support for a system encouraging some form of educational equity

played a part although there were distinctions to be made across both schools. The two Independent schools on the other hand focused on individual pupil needs and institutional character and ethos.

In Maintained school 1(a Catholic comprehensive), for a small number of parents, the ethical choice was made not only in terms of system but in relation to joining a 'moral community,' but for many more, it was a negotiated choice. Often movement to high school was seen in terms of sibling or friends attendance and the wishes of the pupil. It could be argued that this was choice, which was child centred, involving parents in negotiation with their child over school entry (Edwards & Whitty, 1989). Despite criticism of this form of choice (Walford, 1994) because of its short-sightedness, it is choice which is legitimate within the worlds of these parents and should not be judged against the middle class notion of choice which has dominated policy and literature (Reay & Ball, 1997).

An emerging discourse of choice by some parents however, highlighted choice within the system. School reputation and headteacher character were important components and 'league tables' as observed in newspapers were seen as impacting upon their views of institutions despite their 'legitimacy being questioned.

A limited ethical choice was recognised by parents in Maintained school 2, as they supported a system ideology but they were aware of this particular school's favourable context and intake. Increasingly, they too were utilising school reputation, including 'league table position' and headteacher character in order to confirm their choice.



The view of state education as a deficit model of education (chapter 6) was present for some parents in Ind 1 and to a greater extent in Ind 2. Their perception of the inadequacies of the maintained sector encouraged them to look to the coherence of institutional character in the Independent system. Nevertheless, it was also an active choice in relation to a customised educational experience for the individual. An appraisal of institutional character, aims and ethos could be matched to the needs of the individual. In the case of Ind 2 this entailed a very specific search for an ethos of educational achievement and challenge.

### *Institutions, subjects and groups – ability and dissonance*

My starting point lay in the supposed differences between systems. In some ways this research has served to reinforce thinking about the distinctions between schools in Maintained and Independent sectors, but instead of reducing those distinctions to quantitative measures it has portrayed a more complex and interesting perspective, especially at the level of institutional dissonance and consensus. However, what can be said about these research findings? Stake (1995) suggests that, 'The function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it' (op cit, p43). It is this refining of generalisation which was sought in this study.

The rest of this chapter is concerned with outlining the nature of the refining of generalisation accomplished through this research and considers in turn: dissonance and consensus and how individuals negotiate and renegotiate aspects of ability construction and wrestle with principles and personal beliefs; high ability and subject differences; the perspectives of parents, pupils and teachers and finally the researcher's reflections upon the research process.

- *Maintained and Independent schools – Dissonance & Consensus*

Maintained comprehensives are the embodiment of a national identity associated with communitarian concerns and moral issues (Devine, 1999). Independent schools although linked to aspects of a meritocratic Scottish past (McCrone, 1992; Nairn, 2000) have increasingly become identified with the values of the Conservative educational reform of the 80s and 90s, in which competition and privatisation have been prominent. In this research, an exploration of the perspectives of individuals within these systems was sought in order to ascertain the nature of ability within institutions separated by conflicting ideologies and values.

The most significant difference between schools in each 'system' lay in consensus or dissonance concerning ability construction. The two Independent schools were able to create institutional characters, which made explicit what ability was considered to be and how it would be dealt with at an organisational and teaching level. Moreover, membership of this kind of school community involved a need for individuals consciously to give consent to join and participate in a value system with specific aims and methods (Moscovici & Doise, 1994). In making ability an explicit, overt and agreed construct, teaching and learning strategies were important in determining the ways in which individual performance might be enhanced within this framework. Part of the appeal of schools such as these was that parents were consenting not only to participate in an institution but also choosing very specific methods of teaching and learning. Here, it was important not only to know what was being taught but also how it was being taught. The utilisation of overt ability constructs might have suggested that pupils would be faced with a consistent ability construct located within grading and attainment. However, in Ind 2 where selection on entry occurred and setted



classes were encouraged at an early stage, pupils were more likely to perceive their own ability in self-evaluative terms.

Those schools from the Maintained sector were part of a system whose structures symbolised a particular form of national identity (Devine, 1999). Ability was considered unhelpful and instead prominence was given to attainment. However, ability remained as an implicit aspect of teaching judgements and learning experiences (see chapters 6 & 7) and resulted in teachers experiencing dissonance as professional views of the system and personal beliefs about ability clashed. The limitations placed upon pupil attainment as a result, despite teachers' determination to assume similar high expectations for all pupils, was of concern because of the potential impact upon teaching and learning. Within an egalitarian system, where equality of opportunity and a striving for equality of outcome is desirable, the tendency for teachers to use concepts of ability which limit expectations, creates conflict within the individual (dissonance). It may also affect the learning experiences of pupils. Moreover, pupils themselves readily internalised their graded attainments within these schools as reflections of ability. Implicit messages about ability from teachers were perceived by pupils to take the form of grades and movement into or out of setted classes. In avoiding the ability issue, a 'dialogue' which was limited to assessment of attainment between teachers and pupils was believed by pupils to carry information about teacher perceptions of pupil ability.

At an institutional level it is possible to make distinctions between schools and systems. It is feasible to build upon notions of dissonance and consensus at the level of administration and organisation of learning as well as at classroom level. In the following diagram (11.1) schools are located towards greater dissonance or consensus

in ability construction. Parents tended to be engaged in either a passive or active involvement with ability construction and with schools. Finally the strengths of family or institutional constructs are displayed in relation to pupil ability identities.

<b>Maintained Sector</b>		<b>Independent Sector</b>	
<u>Dissonance</u>		<u>Consensus</u>	
M1	M2	Ind 1	Ind 2
<b>Headteachers/Teachers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Covert/implicit ability construction</li> <li>• Personal/professional dissonance</li> </ul>		<b>Headteachers/Teachers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overt /explicit ability</li> <li>• Personal/professional consensus</li> </ul>	
<u>Acceptance</u>		<u>Active construction</u>	
<b>Parents</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance of school role in learning but unsure of its nature</li> <li>• Emphasis on affective impact through individual relationships</li> <li>• Limited interaction</li> <li>• Default or ethical communitarian choice</li> </ul>		<b>Parents</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice of school as it relates to ideas of learning</li> <li>• Agent for change</li> <li>• Customised provision</li> <li>• moral choice of individualism</li> </ul>	
<u>Strength of school construct</u>		<u>Strength of family construct</u>	
<b>Pupils</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing use of ability judgement presented by school</li> </ul>		<b>Pupils</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater maintenance of internal evaluation of self and ability</li> </ul>	

**Table 11.1 Constructing ability across groups and systems**

Maintained schools in this study provided evidence of dissonance at both an institutional and individual level. This was manifested at an institutional level in the interpersonal conflicts. Because of the covert or implicit ability constructions taking place in Maintained schools, teachers tended to interpret system values concerning ability as requiring an avoidance of explicit ability categorisation. This reflected the



importance of the system in informing the values of headteachers, principal teachers and teachers (Richert, 1991) and in colouring ability construction. However, this encouraged the possibility of dissonance occurring because of individual contradictions and conflicts across groups (Ball, 1981; Ball, 1987). It has been argued (chapter 10) that the possibility of dissonance occurring was greatest in those schools where school ability identity was contestable and conflict was a necessary part of renegotiation and redefinition of institutional ability identity. In addition, where the ability intake is broad, there may be greater scope for dissonance as the potential inequities associated with different forms of ability organisation may be magnified.

Independent schools on the other hand, in focusing on institutional definition as a constant, were able to remove institutional ability identity from debate. Membership of the organisation also involved a recognition and acceptance of institutional values and so dissonance at an individual level was less likely to occur and more likely perhaps to be covert.

Again, it is important to remember that contrary to traditional organisational theory, dissonance is not seen as aberrant but as an important way of understanding institutions where changing identity and negotiation are part of a dynamic process. This should also be seen against the challenges of broad ability and mixed SES intakes as in M1. Additionally, consensus is not conceptualised as unproblematic or even desirable and valuable in its own right. Indeed, the compelling nature of consensus within certain institutions may not allow space ideologically for dissension and is perhaps most likely to be present when school is constructed as an abstract entity in which the narrowness of ability intake does not provide the same challenges for ideological struggle.

- *High ability in English, Maths, Art and Music*

Teacher constructions of high ability in their individual subject areas were united by a common belief. This was that while individual pupils could be identified through a judgement of ability position (M1, M2 and Ind 1) and specific skills and attributes (M1, M2, Ind 1 and Ind 2), there was a particular aspect of high ability which was particularly significant. There was a distinctive way of interacting with the subject, which set 'very able' pupils apart from others. The possession of the 'key' to understanding complex ideas, recognising mathematical patterns, seeing and interpreting line and colour and hearing what others couldn't appreciate in Music was what teachers looked for when considering high ability.

However, there were distinctions to be made across subject areas. These had been chosen to give two subjects which were seen as traditionally academic (English and Maths) and two which in popular perception were most likely to require an 'innate' quality (Art and Music).

English was perceived as much more than just an academic subject and yet it was constrained by the need to produce good exam results. However, for teachers success in English was not only to be seen in exam performance but in its effect upon the thought processes of the individual and in the shaping of that person through the discussion of ideas. Differentiation then tended to be a subtle manipulation of dialogue within classrooms rather than through differentiated worksheets.

Maths, on the other hand, was highly structured in teaching and in differentiation through textbooks and worksheets. High ability was seen in the ways in which pupils



saw the connections and patterns and built upon that knowledge. Attainment and progression were strong indicators of ability.

Surprisingly, in Art, most teachers did not adhere to a notion of innate talent being necessary or dominant. Art was believed to be something which could be taught and was not restricted to a small number of 'natural' artists. There was evidence of the potential for dissonance when the subjectivity of artistic judgement was called into question (see chapter 10) but generally, it was suggested that artistic ability definition was unproblematic. Differentiation was an integral part of classroom life as teachers responded to individual pupils' perceived needs.

Finally, Music was capable of being learned to a high standard for most pupils but there were tensions between Music as a school subject and Music within the community and family. If pupils were successful in their own terms in community activities but these were then disparaged or at least discounted when considering high ability in the classroom, there could be discord between teacher and pupil (M1). This resulted in individual and subsequently institutional dissonance. Similarly, a young pianist had learned to play using a very unusual method. He was judged to be an exceptional musician by his teacher but could barely read music (Ind 2). This created problems for his teacher when she attempted to consider how he could be defined in terms of musical ability. The possibility of dissonance once again arose; this time questioning the supremacy of a curricular/technical biased construct and highlighting the narrowness of the school-based construct for both the teacher and the department.

were not concerned with child-centred negotiation or in taking a broad ethical stance but instead stressed a kind of negotiation between parent and school where schooling became a customised provision.

### *Pupil ability identity*

The strength of parental belief in the articulation of the needs of the individual and the responses of the school, encouraged pupils especially within Ind 2 to maintain a sense of ability identity distinct from simple internalisation of grading. However, in Maintained schools, pupils were more likely in fourth year to have succumbed to an ability identity defined by school structures such as setting and graded performance. It was interesting that all pupils across all four case study schools in first year displayed a strong evaluative notion of themselves in relation to ability. In fourth year despite an avoidance of overt ability definition in both Maintained schools pupils were using grades and set position/membership to signify their self-perceptions.

Pupil perspectives have not been prominent in educational research although pupils have increasingly been the focus of policy and educational reform (Rudduck et al, 1996). In this study, consideration was given to pupil perceptions of themselves and of their perceptions of teacher judgements of ability.

The impact of assessment or structures such as setting (Ball, 1981; Broadfoot, 1996; Reay & Wiliam, 1999) has been considered to be particularly effective in imposing narrow ability identities on pupils reliant on messages about achievement, encouraging social comparative standards (Augoustinos, 1995). This would have suggested that the overt and consistent assessment of ability of Ind 2 would have most strongly been manifested in pupil views of self and ability. However, this was not borne out in this research. This study has found that the nature of the negotiation between external and



internal constructs and the emerging sense of ability conceptualisation in pupils should be seen as a dynamic process where ability identity can be negotiated.

### *Teachers constructing ability*

Teachers in these two maintained schools were concerned with the ways in which they could support an egalitarian school system and the beliefs and values which sustained this. It was part of their professional identity as teachers within the system and as members of a community identifying with particular school structures (Devine, 1999). Personal beliefs about ability were at odds with professional beliefs and created dissonance. On the other hand, teachers working within Ind 1 and Ind 2 were operating within the confines of their own personal beliefs about ability, in agreement with institutional modelling of ability.

The importance of teacher judgements of ability in affecting the teaching and learning process are well-documented (Ball, 1981; Prawat, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Benn, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000) but the nature of those ability constructions brought to bear in different institutional contexts needed to be explored (Freeman, 1998). The particular problem faced by teachers in comprehensives is seen in the paradox of such a system, the striving after commonality and difference (Clark et al, 1999). Here, teachers found that they had to cope with dissonant experiences as they attempted to deal with beliefs and values about educational principles and personal constructs of ability. The difficulty of dealing with ability construction as located in personal continuums (M1 and M2) or as located on a measured continuum (IQ in Ind 1) creates problems when attempting to improve performance, as ability location has the potential to constrain perceptions of progress.

Dissonant beliefs in Maintained school teachers were particularly significant in relation to their expectations of individual pupils. Their perceptions of differentiated potential, as dependent on perceived ability had major implications for subsequent learning experiences for pupils. Sternberg (1993) argues that it is perceived potential rather than attainment which can affect judgements of children. Teachers' tendency to seek confirmation of their beliefs about pupil potential might influence their teaching and this, in turn, might lead to a reinforcement of their original beliefs (Pajares, p 317, 1992).

The co – existence of contradictory beliefs and values are located deep within the schooling process (Bullough & Bauman, 1997). The contradictory beliefs and values held were exhibited in the dissonance experienced by individual teachers in this study. The beliefs and values were held in tension at the boundary between internal and external ability constructs i.e. between personal and professional aspects of the self. An ongoing 'negotiation' (Jenkins, 1996) at the boundary, allowed teachers to lend greater weight to one or the other, especially since personal constructs reflected implicit theories of ability. These contradictions perhaps encouraged a level of engagement in what Bullough & Bauman (1997) suggest is a necessary, but not always acknowledged, compromise in order to encourage a sense of personal coherence. Institutional coherence, it could be argued within dissonant institutions relies upon a similar engagement in 'compromise.' Dissonance, then, is not a destructive but a dynamic process allowing shifts in structures/organisation of learning and negotiation over constructs.



*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time  
T. S. Eliot (Little Gidding)*

### ***Reflection***

Returning to the beginning of this research, I find that my own perspective on this study has changed, that in Eliot's words there is a new kind of knowing concerning an activity which has become so very familiar. This was, in retrospect, an ambitious study for one researcher and a tremendous amount of data was generated. This in turn had to be collated, analysed and discussed.

During the research, my ambivalence about ability and the pull of meritocratic regimes, was tempered by my own self-knowledge, the sharp eyes of my supervisors and my own experience as a teacher in schools with low SES intakes and very broad ability ranges. My own sense of dissonance, my belief in a comprehensive system and yet the appeal of a meritocracy challenged me. However it also made me sympathetic to and yet capable of critical consideration of, the nature of dissonance in individuals and schools and the implications for teaching and learning. Indeed, I believe it is this self-awareness and personal experience which have helped to maintain the rigour of the research.

In the midst of this analytical journey, I attempted to balance the tension between issue and case (Stake, 1995) by reporting each group in turn while trying to maintain the integrity of each case study. This at times led to fragmentation rather than coherence but I had hoped that the holistic nature of the case could be retained through a thorough grounding of each chapter in a description of context and the

maintenance of group identity within the case study schools. I now realise that the retention of coherent case study schools *in which the issues* could be highlighted would have been a more effective mode of reporting and would have lent emphasis to the most important themes. This self-knowledge emphasises PhD study as a process of professionalisation and reflection rather than as a product. The following quotation from Proust reflects the necessary struggle and journey undergone to reach a new kind of self-knowledge and professional expertise. It is perhaps only at certain critical reflexive points that the journey itself can be more clearly perceived.

We do not receive wisdom, we must discover it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness, which no-one else can make for us, which no-one can spare us, for the wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world.



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## Appendix 4.1

### **Headteacher**

1. I 'm interested in the notion of ability and in particular those children who might be very able. Could you tell me about any pupils you have known recently that you would consider to be very able?

*When did you first notice him/her?*

*What brought them to your attention?(performance,  
interaction with others,  
age/achievement,  
teacher observation,  
other?)*

2. What then helped you to confirm that these children were very able?

*Sustained achievement  
assessment*

*Personal observation*

*overall performance*

*noticeable ability in particular area?*

3. Were there any implications for you as a Head Teacher in identifying children as very able?

*Policy(whole school,departmental)*

*Inservice priority*

4. What does your school do to help such children to develop?  
(Curricular,social organisational?)

*Who would be involved in this??*

*How do staff work with each other for this purpose?*

5. When the parents of very able children send their children to this school, what do you believe they feel their children will gain from attending here?

6. In what way do they differ from other parents in the way they interact with the school?

*In their interactions with teachers?*

*Frequency of visits ?*

*Requests for information and form of provision?*

7. In what way do you believe your school contributes to the development of children on the Assisted Places Scheme? (Independent School)

*Identification and provision of very able*

*Families that might not otherwise attend but children are considered very able*

*Alternative provision? In what way?*

- What do you think of the Assisted Places Scheme as a way of directing provision for the very able? (Maintained School)

*How can the needs of the very able be best met?*

## Appendix 4.2

### **Principal Teacher**

1. Can you tell me about one or two very able pupils you've known?

*What made you first notice him/her?*

*Primary school profile?*

*Teacher referral?*

*Exam performance?*

*social interaction with others?*

*At what age?*

2. What helped you to decide that they were very able?

*Sustained achievement?*

*Personal observation/assessment?*

*Teacher assessment*

3. In what way do you organise grouping for children in 1st year?.....4th year?

• *Setting?*

*Streaming?*

*Mixed ability?*

*Age any bearing on use of grouping?*

• *Can you tell me how this form of grouping helps when considering learning and teaching strategies?*

*Differentiation?*

*Peer teaching?*

*Organisational problems?*

4. What are any particular difficulties you might face in trying to develop very able children in your subject area?

*Identification?*

*Exam constraints?*

*Resources?*

*Timetabling?*

*Differentiation difficulties peculiar to subject?*

5. As Principal Teacher, how do you perceive your own role in the provision for and development of very able children?

*In developing policy and provision?*

*In developing teaching strategies?*



## Appendix 4.3

### **Preliminary teacher interview**

1. I'd like you to look at this class list for a few minutes and think about placing children into three main ability groupings for me. A top group, middle and lower (ie above average, average and below average).  
*Could you look again at the children you've placed in the top group? Can you point out 4 or 5 you might consider to be the most able?*
2. Could you tell me a little bit about your thoughts on having to categorise the children for me in this way?
3. Could you tell me about how you go about organising a lesson for this class?

### **Post lesson interviews**

1. Can you tell me about the lesson-what went well?  
*Differentiation?*  
*Organisation?*  
*Pupil - pupil interaction*  
*Pupil - teacher interaction*

### **Final Interview**

1. I'd like to know a little bit more about ..... and..... You put them into your very able category. Can you me about them and why you feel they are very able?  
*Previous teacher report?*  
*Exam results?*  
*Class work?*  
*Pupil interaction with pupils and teacher?*
2. What about..... and ..... You've placed them in this.....category. Tell me about them and how you decided on this.  
*Previous teacher report?*  
*Exam results?*  
*Class work?*  
*Pupil interaction with pupils and teacher?*
3. How did this mixture of ability affect your approach to class organisation?  
*Grouping?*  
*Peer teaching?*  
*Differentiation?*  
*Teaching strategies?*  
*Materials?*  
*Different levels and/or extension/enrichment activities?*
4. How did the very able children respond to these strategies?  
*Working in ability group with other very able children?*  
*Working independently?*  
*Working on diferent/more difficult activities within class?*

5. Were there any particular ways in which very able children seemed to need particular help and guidance?

*Limitations?*

*Interactions with others?*

6. Did you have particular expectations of very able children that you didn't have of those of average ability?

*Behaviour?*

*Achievements?*

*Effort?*

7. Did you see children's abilities as being fixed or did you think it was possible to improve ability?

*Average ability?*

*Very able?*

8. What about progress in your subject? In what way do you think you affected pupil achievement in the average pupil? The very able?

*Maintain?*

*Extend?*



## Appendix 4.4

### **Pupil - very able**

1. How good do you think you are at .....?

*How do you know that?*

*self*

*comparison with other people*

*teacher*

*test results*

*Can you tell me about a particular time when you did well?*

2. Tell me about the way you work in the .....class?

*Do you get the chance to work on your own on different activities?*

*Does the teacher teach you in small groups ?*

*Does the teacher ask you to help other children ?*

*Do you prefer working on your own or with others ? What was particularly good about this?*

3. What about worksheets and books? Is there different work for different groups?

*Same- Do you find the work quite easy?*

*What do you do when you finish?*

*Different- How is it different?*

*How difficult is it ?*

*What do you do when you finish it?*

*Do you enjoy working on something more difficult than the others in the class?*

*Could you give me an example and explain what helped you to enjoy it?*

4. What do other children in your class think about those people who seem to be very good at \*\*\*\*\*?

*How do you know this?*

*How do you feel about that?*

5. What do you think the teacher thinks of your work ?

*Comments in jotter?*

*Reports?*

*Via parents?*

1

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<sup>1</sup> The above interview schedule varies very slightly from that used with 'average' pupils. This reflects the focus of the study on higher ability and the fact that pupils are asked to speak about ability from the perspective of a nominated 'very able' or 'average' pupil

## Appendix 4.5

### **Pupil - average**

1. How good do you think you are at .....?

*How do you know that?*

*self*

*comparison with others*

*teacher*

*exam results*

2. How do you know if someone's really good at .....?

*comparison*

*what teacher says/does*

*exam results*

*observation*

3. How do you know what the teacher thinks of other children's work/ your work?

*Praise*

*Different work*

*More work*

4. Do some children get different work from others? Why is that?

*No- do some people finish more quickly than others?*

*What*



## Appendix 4.6

### **Parent (very able child)**

1. What do you think \*\*\*\*\*'s strongest subjects are in school?  
*What about.....?*  
*How do you think he/she is doing in this subject?*  
*What makes you feel that he/she is doing well at .....?*  
*exam results ?*  
*report cards ?*  
*jotters?*  
*teacher comments?*  
*child comments about school?*
2. Did \*\*\*\*\*'s abilities in these areas affect your choice of school? In what way?  
*If not, what did affect your choice of school?*
3. When did you become aware of your child's ability in.....?  
*In primary?*  
*In this school?*
4. How did you become aware of it?  
*Exam results?*  
*Report cards?*  
*Jotters?*  
*Teacher comments?*  
*Child comments about school?*
5. As a parent do you think you can help ..... to do well in.....?  
*In what way?*
6. What do you think school does to help him/her to do well in this subject?  
*Are there any other ways you think that school could help him/her to develop in .....?*
7. How strong an influence do you believe the school can be in developing your child's ability in .....?  
*In the classroom?*  
*In other activities in school?*  
*For the future ?*

## Appendix 4.7

From; Lorna Hamilton  
PhD student at Stirling University

### Information with regard to proposed research

Title of research    **The Construction of 'Greater Ability' in  
Maintained  
and Independent schools**

#### **AIMS**

The research intends to explore ways in which people interact with the very able child in a range of secondary schools within the Maintained and Independent sectors through the perceptions of those working within and with schools.

#### **Methodology**

An initial interview with the Head Teacher is suggested, for about 45mins/1 hour which will be followed by interviews with Principal teachers of English, Maths , Art and music during subsequent weeks, for a slightly shorter time.

One class from each of the following subject areas will be chosen at both first year and fourth year level: English, Maths, Art and Music. If setting occurs, then the top set should be chosen, otherwise a class should be nominated from within that year group.

Approximately three observations of each class will be made and short 10 minute post lesson interviews with the class teacher carried out as soon after each lesson as possible. A brief preliminary interview with the class teacher of approximately 15 minutes will be necessary before any observations and a concluding interview of approximately 45 minutes after the observations have been completed.

At this point permission will be sought from parents to undertake short 20 minute interviews with four children from each class. Some will also be asked if they will consent to participate in interviews themselves





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Department of Education

Head of Department  
Professor Richard M Johnstone

## Appendix 4.8

Dear Parent/ Guardian

I am a research student in the Department of Education at Stirling University carrying out research in your child's school, asking questions about the work children do and how they feel about it. I would very much like to be able to interview your son/ daughter during school hours for around 15 minutes and I would also like to interview you for about 20 minutes by telephone. It would be very helpful if you would agree to the interviews being recorded. This allows both those taking part and myself as researcher to know that the data collected will be reported accurately but anonymity will be maintained and tapes will not be made available to anyone other than the researcher.

The information gathered will be used for my thesis but no one participating in the research will be named. Both the Local Authority and your child's school support this work and I would be very grateful for your help.

Please complete the form below and return it to your child's Tutor Group teacher before

Yours sincerely

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Delete where necessary

1. I agree/do not agree to my child participating in the above research.
2. I agree/do not agree to participate in the above research. I would prefer to participate during the day / in the evening.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name(Block capitals) \_\_\_\_\_

Pupil's name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

**Tutor Group teacher-** please send this slip to the Rector's office for the attention of Ms Hamilton.



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Appendix 4.9

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The information gathered will be used for my thesis but no one participating in the research will be named. Both the Local Authority and your child's school support this work and I would be very grateful for your help.

Please return the form below only if you do not agree to your child participating, to your child's Pupil Support Teacher by Monday 22nd September.

Yours sincerely

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I do not agree to my child participating in the above research.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Name(Block capitals) \_\_\_\_\_  
Pupil's name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_

Pupil Support Teacher please send this slip to the office for the attention of Ms Hamilton.