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## **The impact of practical and applied learning on 13-15 year olds of high ability in England and Wales.**

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### **Background**

While there is a very substantial literature on development projects relating to school-age applied and practical learning in the UK, only a very small proportion of this concentrates specifically on the impact of such learning among 'academically-able' young people.

Only occasionally have young people with high prior attainment been singled out for study (e.g. Pearson, 1985) and when the research programme of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth was established in 2002, an absence of relevant studies on practical and applied education in its area of interest was revealed (communication from Prof. Wendy Robinson). Compounding this, most of the voluminous literature on the work-related curriculum generated up to the mid-1990s was 'focused on implementation rather than impact' (Saunders et al., 1996), a situation that appears not to have altered significantly in the subsequent decade. Similarly, there is, as yet, little quality research linking student guidance in schools operating among students aged 13-14 to their experience of different forms of learning.

### **Research Questions**

The research reported in this paper concerns evidence as to the effect of practical / applied learning at school on 13-15 year-olds of above-average attainment. Attention in the project is focussed on students' motivation, their choice of post-14 and post-16 learning routes and links they perceive between experience of different forms of learning and their potential career options.

This one-year project (October 2009-September 2010) has two comparative strands. First, there is an Anglo-Welsh dimension related to the potential impact of the Welsh Baccalaureate and Diplomas on students with high prior attainment; second, it compares the experience of students in selective and non-selective secondary schools. In light of the historic dualism in England and Wales of higher-ability students pursuing traditional subject study and lower-ability students finding their way into practical / applied learning programmes, the study also seeks to understand the extent to which such polarity endures, including how students aged 13-15 are guided within their schools with respect to choice of programmes post-14 and post-16.

### **Methods**

Initial energy in developing a more practical curriculum was concentrated after 1945 in England and Wales in the development of a non-examined secondary modern school experience (Taylor, 1963), before being carried forward into reforms of the subject curriculum first sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation (from 1962) and later taken up by the Schools Council (1964-84). However, even within the comprehensive schools which were by then gaining ground, at the close of the 1960s commentators noted that the emergent practical curriculum, influenced from America, co-existed as a junior partner and poor relation alongside 'revered academic traditions' (Goodson, 1983: 23). Although contemporary course syllabuses have considerably up-dated the traditional 'grammar school curriculum', it remains recognisable in form - and in public perception - in the contemporary GCSE subject timetable experienced by most 11-16 year olds in England and Wales. This continues to dominate culturally and ensures that the form of externally-assessed school learning that is most highly prized and rewarded remains conceptual rather than applied.

The study was undertaken with samples of Year 9 and Year 11 students and their teachers in six schools: two in Wales and four in England, including two selective grammar schools. The research participants in each school were groups of students of above-average prior attainment, along with selected teachers included for their insights into the overall curriculum strategy of the school and the way the school selects / targets / guides its students onto courses during the 14-16 phase (or 13-15, if following an accelerated curriculum).

Two-day field visits were carried out in each school. Visits comprised: face-to-face interviews with the Head of Year 9 and Year 11 (and, if separate, the teacher(s) responsible for student information, advice and guidance), the Deputy head teacher/ principal responsible for the curriculum, individual questionnaires for the Year 9 and Year 11 participants, follow-up focus group sessions, and a telephone interview with the head teacher of each school.

## **Frame**

The questionnaires yielded structured, formally-analysed data (via closed and open question responses), explored both quantitatively and also qualitatively. The focus group data along with the semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently analysed qualitatively.

The impact of the research will rest on the richness of the case studies, the amount of complementary analysis they allow, faithful portrayal of the distinctive settings in which applied / practical learning occurs in these schools and the impact this has on the experience and outlook of the high-attaining teenager.

## **Research findings**

By setting the findings from the six case study schools in the context of:

- a paucity of previous research on the topic; and
- longstanding and unfulfilled policy goals in this area

the project aims to provide a significant contribution to knowledge, with the potential to influence policy and practice. To achieve this, it will be necessary to exercise caution in terms of the generalisability of findings from a small-scale study of this kind. Nevertheless, this limitation is compensated by the novelty of the specific focus of the research and methods deployed.

In particular, it is anticipated that worthwhile conclusions will be drawn as to:

- the range of learning at school that high-attaining teenagers find enjoyable and motivating;
- the specific impact of practical and applied learning on their self-image and sense of potential;
- the value they place on different types of learning and how this, combined with enjoyment and motivation, relates to their subsequent options choices; and

the implications of these findings for the structure of the Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 curriculum in England and Wales and patterns of participation.

## **References**

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