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## Vocational giftedness: A helpful concept?

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### Background

For the past decade, provision for 'gifted & talented' learners has been a focus of policy, funding, intervention and, latterly, inspection, in the compulsory phases of education. In this contested and highly complex field, shifting debates around definitions of ability and the claims of social justice have resulted in an emerging reformulation of 'giftedness' (Balchin, Hymer and Matthews 2009). This new conception emphasises (inter alia) a wide variety of ability, the importance of motivation and dispositional issues such as resilience, and 'mastery over mystery'. The DCSF definition of 'talented' now encompasses vocational ability: 'ability or potential in one or more skills, whether artistic, sporting, interpersonal or vocational' (Ofsted 2009). With the increased permeability between secondary and FE provision in the 14-19 agenda and the introduction of specialist diplomas, the concept of 'giftedness' is now a live issue in vocational education and training.

### Research Questions

The focus of this paper is the question of whether, or to what extent, the ideas, vocabulary and educational approaches associated with contemporary gifted and talented education, are relevant and/or useful to vocational education. It considers the similarities, differences and tensions between the most 'academic' strand of academic education, and the world-of-work-facing arena of vocational education, and asks whether there can be a fruitful conversation between them.

### Methods

The paper is primarily theoretical and exploratory. However, it also draws on empirical research, funded by the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust, into the understandings and development of engineering talent among secondary, Further Education and Higher Education learners and teachers. Research methods for this study, conducted in 2008-2009, included an online survey with secondary and FE learners, and semi-structured interviews with secondary, FE and HE learners and teachers.

### Frame

Since the middle of the last century, an influential current in gifted education scholarship has been hospitable to the practical, applied and world-of-work aspects of high ability (Taylor 1969, Guilford 1977, Renzulli 1978, Sternberg 2001). Yet this view has co-existed uneasily with a more prevalent model that conceptualises 'giftedness' in academic (and psychological) terms. The relationship between the two stances has not been fully explored.

Empirical studies reveal a mixed picture. Shavinina (2008), for example, has analysed entrepreneurial talent in highly successful business people such as Michael Dell and Richard Branson and concluded that, in their school days, such individuals exhibited characteristics antithetical to traditional indicators of academic success. In a longitudinal study in Switzerland, Stamm (2005) has established that individuals of the highest cognitive ability are found in low- and middle-tier schools in that country's academic hierarchy, contrary to the expectations and intentions of its school system. Bals (1999) and Manstetten (2000) reveal that the German system of vocational education recognises, fosters and accords parity of esteem to vocational talent.

This complex picture is set against recent attempts in education policy to dismantle the entrenched divide between the 'academic' and the 'vocational' domains (for example the introduction of Specialist Diplomas) and wider developments in the world of work, such as the global competition for talent, the

efforts of Edge and the Talent Foundation to promote applied and work-based learning, and a recent call, on philosophical grounds, for the re-engagement with manual labour as a human good, in terms of its value in grounding human beings in the physical and natural (as opposed to virtual) world (Crawford 2009).

### **Research findings**

What it means to be very good at something fascinates us. The interest in public competitions such as Professional Masterchef and Apprentice of the Year attests to the fact that high performance and standards of excellence exist - and are compelling - in every sphere of human endeavour. Clow and Haight (2007) have posited a model of talent in vocational domains, the KAMIS model, which hypothesises that the range of abilities marshalled to produce high performance or potential in such areas is wider than that required in more purely 'academic' domains.

This paper considers these issues in the context of current educational developments and debates, and attempts to synthesise and draw connections between two strands of education that are often seen as antithetical.

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