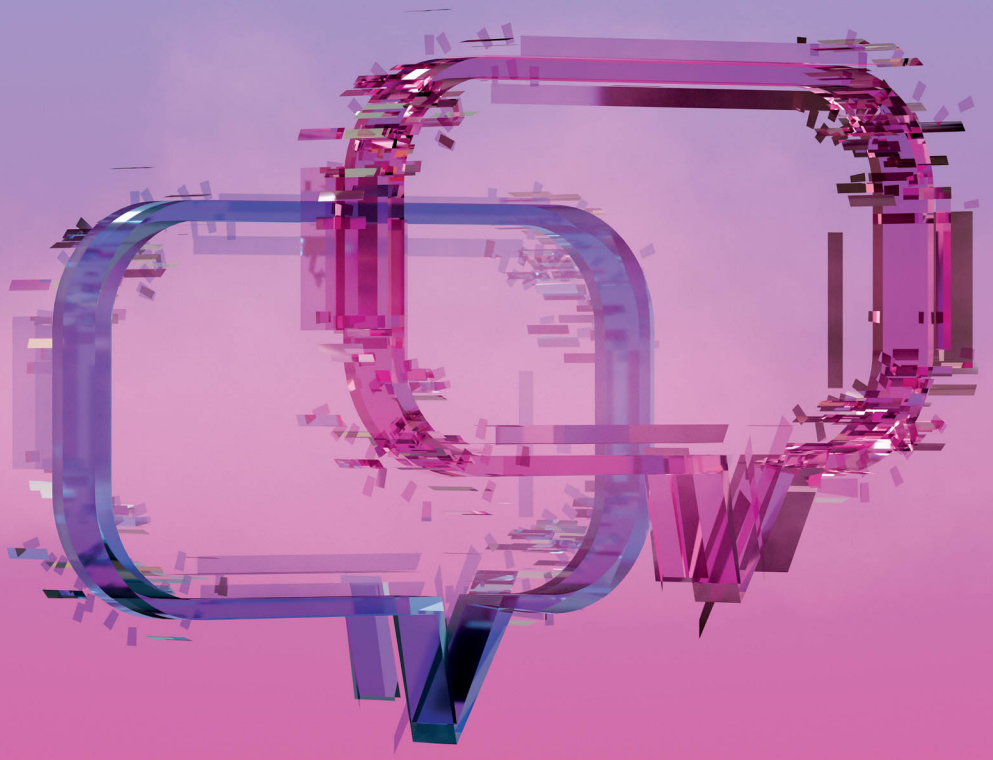
AMPLIFYING STUDENT VOICE

Elevating the School Experience for More Able Learners



CARL LYON

A **Prufrock Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Amplifying Student Voice

Amplifying Student Voice outlines how to create an environment where high-achieving student feedback has a direct and productive effect on the school and classroom environment.

Covering topics such as identification, talent hiding, peer collaboration, community relations, the process of creativity, and more, chapters provide real student insights, methods that focus on listening to the needs of learners and guidance on how to respond in a way that nurtures potential and creates an environment where students can thrive and demonstrate creativity.

With a focus on the value of dialogue between learners and educators, this book is a must-have resource for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers interested in creating an environment where achievement, potential, and well-being are crucial focuses of the educational experience.

Carl Lyon is Co-Head of the King's School International College in Canterbury, with responsibility for leading staff and students and developing the strategic vision to enhance the overall student experience. He has been teaching for over 25 years and has held many key posts, including Housemaster, Head of Department, and Head of Year. He is the co-author of two A Level ICT textbooks and an update to *The Oxford Revision Guide*.

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For Matthew

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About the Author

Dr Carl Lyon graduated with a Doctorate in Education in September 2025, specialising in the educational experience of More Able children. Based in the UK, he brings almost 30 years of global teaching experience and currently serves as Co-Head at a secondary school in the UK. Since joining the profession, Carl has co-authored textbooks, served as an examiner, been Lead teacher in numerous departments, and held pastoral posts supporting the academic and emotional development of students.

Excited at the prospect of schools designing their own More Able policies, Carl enjoys discussing and dissecting specific terms associated with More Able learners. For example, one school's interpretation of "teaching to the top" can look entirely different from another's. Although the phrase seems straightforward at first glance, it actually opens the door to rich discussion, diverse perspectives, and a wide variety of actions that may follow. Furthermore, developing ideas to suit this specific cohort that encourages genuinely unique, creative, and original initiatives are strongly advocated.

This kind of ongoing educational dialogue is not only healthy but essential. We are not trying to reinvent the wheel, but looking to reinforce the supporting spokes that keep it strong and ensure that the journey is shared, purposeful, and moving in an interesting direction; wherever that may be.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the teachers and students that gave up their time and were part of the sample during my research and who talked to me about the reality of teaching More Able students or about being one. You taught me a lot, thank you! Without you, this book would not have been possible.

I especially want to acknowledge all of the colleagues I have worked with recently who have given their time to listen to my ideas and engage in dialogue relating to the theme of this research. It has been exceptionally valuable having access to and the support of such a fantastically qualified and valiant group of educators.

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Finally, I would like to thank my doctoral supervisors, Nicola Kemp and Sue Soan, for all their encouragement, wisdom, and patience. Nicola brought clarity and wisdom without which I would not have been able to even start this work. I am particularly

grateful for her continued support during our regular meetings where she was always able to rally me and keep me on track. I feel particularly fortunate to have had access to Nicola's calm and positive approach to conducting research and providing the feedback that has developed this work into something of which I am incredibly proud. Sue provided an exceptional level of enthusiasm and interest from her own personal background, where her expertise and knowledge were a driving force throughout the entire process.

Introduction

In 2017, I began an Education Doctorate program at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK. After completing six modules that focused on topics such as school leadership and educational theory, the cohort was tasked in the seventh module with designing and submitting individual major research proposals. This was an exciting opportunity, as we were free to concentrate on a specific area of education, providing a chance to examine in detail the pertinent issues relating to a topic of genuine personal interest. From the early stages of my education career, I have been a keen and curious observer of those referred to in this book as the "More Able". It was, therefore, a natural decision to undertake research into this particular group.

Anyone who has embarked on a similar area of study will understand that the process is a rollercoaster of emotions. Often, the original trajectory is disrupted, leading to an entirely unexpected path. Initially, I was eager to explore why students who were expected to score high marks and achieve good grades in national exams were underachieving. At the time, I was reviewing successive Ofsted reports that raised similar concerns:

- the most able were not doing so well because schools failed to challenge them sufficiently from the beginning (2013)
- the opening years at secondary schools were not challenging at all for the most able (2015a)

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- students in non-selective schools who are more able are still not being challenged enough (2015b)
- extension work given to the More Able was to fill time and was too easy (2015c) and work is still not challenging enough

To examine this problem, I decided the best way to understand it was to speak directly with the students and teachers involved. I contacted several schools representing different socio-economic contexts, including a grammar school, an independent school, and an academy, all based in the South of England. I was granted access to multiple groups of More Able Year 10 students from each school and conducted focus group-style research with them.

The data-gathering stage took place after schools were beginning to reopen after closures due to COVID-19 lockdowns. The teachers who formed the sample were all willing and enthusiastic participants and were interviewed individually using online meeting tools. This approach proved to be both convenient and manageable, as we had all been teaching online for several months and had developed the skills and confidence to use these tools effectively.

The meetings with the students and teachers were transcribed and shared with my supervisor, Dr Nicola Kemp. She immediately recognised the value of the data and played a pivotal role in redirecting my focus away from the issue of underachievement towards understanding the school experience of the More Able. This view was affirmed by Dr Sue Soan, my other supervisor, who has a wealth of practical knowledge in this particular field. While the teachers provided valuable insights, Dr Kemp emphasised how my data could inform policies and procedures, suggesting ways schools could better address the needs of More Able learners by genuinely listening to their concerns.

By the summer of 2024, after navigating a global pandemic and a two-year interruption, I submitted my thesis and was invited to attend the Viva shortly afterward. Thankfully, my examiner, Dr Carrie Winstanley, a prominent and published academic in this field, informed me that I could now "use the credentials: Dr". I am incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to engage with the

students in the schools where I learned so much and to have had Dr Kemp's wisdom and Dr Soan's guidance in encouraging me towards a change in focus that ultimately resulted in this book. I hope the following pages prove both interesting and compelling, generating useful ideas and initiatives that can be implemented in schools.

About This Book

The aim of *Amplifying Student Voice* is to encourage senior leaders and teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue. By acknowledging that the student voice should be central and recognising the needs of More Able students, schools can provide the attention and challenge these students desire in a format that is accessible, interesting, and stimulating, and that elevates their experience.

This book looks at the issues and barriers to learning faced by More Able students and provides a wealth of thoughts directly from the students themselves. Many insightful comments are given by students and teachers that not only clarify and confirm findings by other researchers but also brings into focus the perspective of a group who can often feel under-represented, misunderstood, or ignored. The purpose of this book is to provide teachers and schools with strategies that can be considered in the classroom alongside methods from which to develop resources that complement a school's own ethos and ambitions.

The opening chapter explores previous national policy and provides a justification for various terms used and why a focus on the More Able is morally justified, important, and worthwhile. The important question relating to the role of schools is discussed, and the student voice is partially introduced. Details then follow about how and why schools should audit their provisions to ascertain where they can build upon what is already effective, and modify or remove areas that are less so. The content of this book acknowledges the range of complexities associated with the More Able, particularly issues of identification and the varying contexts in which schools operate, including their priorities, the constraints imposed by limited resources, and the skills and willingness of the teachers responsible for educating them.

The central theme of this book is the voice of the students themselves. This is presented across the three aforementioned schools and demonstrates how context can influence outcomes, but also draws together some interesting similarities from each school regardless of privileges or lack thereof. A broad range of actions are then proposed to support the More Able, based on what the students have said, which is followed by the importance of policy and how it can be developed. The teacher's role is clearly crucial in the process of elevating the school experience and how advocating for the More Able can be achieved is outlined. Although the sample may be considered small, the thoughts provided are powerful and show that there is hope in terms of original thinking, also shown in various case studies, and a will to foster systems that not only benefit the cohort under discussion, but will benefit all students.

The book concludes with a short research piece carried out with a fresh sample of More Able students in 2025, days after completing their GCSE exams. The focus was on artificial intelligence and how it was infiltrating schools and what it means for students who are striving to secure the grades. The findings on this occasion are striking and force meaningful debate into an area that is moving fast. Not only was this process a learning experience for the author, but it also demonstrated precisely why the student voice is so valuable and how it can provide rich and interesting feedback from which to launch new and exciting initiatives.

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Empowering the More Able

Before exploring and promoting the merits of the student voice of More Able students, it seems fitting to first examine how we arrived at our current position regarding education policy in relation to the More Able.

Post-War Education Policy and the More Able

Prior to the end of the Second World War, politicians tended, according to Chitty (2014), to view the aims of education in terms of individual fulfilment and the acquisition of skills and attitudes deemed necessary for a successful working life. In 1944, the Labour government introduced a system aimed at providing education tailored to the skills and abilities of individual children. These changes were based on recommendations made in 1938 by Sir William Spens, whose reasoning was as follows:

> *It is becoming more and more evident that a single liberal or general education for all is impracticable, and that varying forms both of general and quasi-vocational education have to be evolved in order to meet the needs of boys and girls differing widely in intellectual and emotional capacity.*
>
> Spens Report, 1938, p. 2, cited in Chitty, 2014

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As part of the implementation process, children transitioning from primary to secondary education sat the 11+ test. This test was used to determine which of the three types of schools they would attend. Those who scored above a predetermined threshold were admitted to grammar schools, where they received a more academic education aimed at university preparation. The remainder were placed in secondary modern or technical schools, which focused on vocational or practical education. This system clearly categorised students based on their perceived academic ability or likely vocational career paths, as determined by the test outcome.

However, Eyre (1997) explained that grammar school numbers were significantly reduced during the 1970s after the system was criticised for being unfair and unsuccessful. A major issue was related to funding disparities, with grammar schools receiving a disproportionate share of resources. Additionally, the accuracy of the 11+ test came under scrutiny. There were cases of students who failed the test but later achieved advanced academic qualifications, including doctorates, which challenged the validity of the selection process.

Despite these criticisms, the grammar school system was not entirely abolished and continues to exist in some areas of the UK. Research by Allen and Bartley (2017) found that grammar schools could yield a grade improvement of one to two-thirds of a grade per subject, while non-selective schools were associated with outcomes one-tenth of a grade lower.

Lord Alexander, as cited in Chitty (2009), remarked during a debate in the House of Lords in September 1982 that the state education system was incapable of adequately providing for the most able children. Students were often divided into fixed ability groups for teaching, which typically remained unchanged from Year 7 to Year 11. In a 1992 government HMI paper, Koshy, Pinheiro-Torres, and Portman-Smith (2012) cited that "in the majority of schools the expectations for very able were not sufficiently high. The provision for these students was patchy and often not seen as a priority". Several years later, the third report of the House of Commons Select Committee (1999) and successive Ofsted reports reinforced these concerns. They found that the needs of highly able students were not prioritised,

teachers lacked the skills to identify them, expectations were low, and effective teaching methods for this group were poorly understood (Radnor, Koshy, and Taylor, 2007). Eyre (1997) noted that limited training and support were available to help schools develop provision for able children, emphasising the need for extensive staff development to achieve meaningful progress. Similarly, Berman, Schultz, and Weber (2012) stressed that gifted students require specialised teachers to help them better understand their abilities, address social challenges, and set appropriate goals.

New Labour's Gifted and Talented Initiatives (1997–2010)

In response to these concerns, the newly elected New Labour government launched several policy initiatives in 1997 to support the needs of the More Able, referred to at the time as "Gifted and Talented". The initial aim was to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds had access to opportunities that could address underachievement and enhance their life chances, enabling them to achieve better grades and gain university places. The government also advocated for more subject-specific ability grouping, including "express sets" in early secondary years, to allow gifted and talented students to progress further than the existing system allowed. This marked a significant acknowledgement of the specific needs of these learners and their value to the education system.

One of the first actions was the introduction of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) program, which targeted underachievement among students from poorer backgrounds, with a particular focus on those identified as "gifted and talented". Initially adopted by 25 local authorities (Bailey et al., 2009), the program included initiatives such as the National Summer Schools Programme for gifted and talented children aged 10 to 14. Piloted in 1999, the summer schools ran annually until 2005 (Kendall et al., 2005).

In 2002, the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) was established under a contract with the Department for Education and based at Warwick University (Kendall et al., 2005; Brady and Koshy, 2013). Schools were encouraged to cultivate a positive ethos, with guidance to "pay particular attention

to their ethos, ensuring that they consistently celebrate excellence so that unhelpful peer pressure is countered and it becomes 'cool to be clever'" (Dracup, 2003, p. 114). Warwick University, in partnership with Oxford Brookes University, provided summer schools and other forms of support for secondary students. Kendall et al. (2005) reported a noticeable increase in schools offering additional study opportunities at this stage, including homework clubs, summer schools, and literacy and numeracy activities.

The change in strategy aimed to support children aged 4 to 19, with funding directed towards localised initiatives in over 80 local education authorities, more than 1,000 secondary schools, and over 500 primary schools. Funding was also intended to create a "distinct and discernibly different teaching and learning programme for these pupils" (Dracup, 2003, p. 113). Additionally, schools were expected to implement or revise a whole-school policy for gifted and talented education. Hilary Lowe (2003), Senior Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University and Director of the EiC strategy, emphasised that school policies should explicitly promote high expectations for all students and foster an intolerance of underachievement.

A key feature of this strategy was the requirement for schools to create a register identifying 5–10% of their students as gifted and talented. These students were to receive additional support and provisions to encourage their academic development and increase their chances of pursuing higher education. By 2006, all schools were required to report their identified gifted and talented students to the Department for Education as part of their annual January census.

In 2007, the NAGTY contract with Warwick University was replaced by the Young Gifted and Talented Learner Academy (YG&T) under the National Strategy for Gifted and Talented. The new YG&T contract was awarded to the CfBT Education Trust and took the form of an online interactive virtual academy offering resources, workshops, and courses for gifted and talented learners, teachers, and providers. Additionally, "excellence hubs" were established in higher education institutions across nine regions. These hubs collaborated with local authorities and

schools to offer out-of-school masterclasses, residential summer schools, workshops, and university visits.

As part of the City Challenge Programme, the CfBT introduced "City GATES", focusing on breaking the cycle of disadvantage and underachievement. Notably, schools received a £400 grant for each student eligible for free school meals who was identified as gifted and talented.

The Decline of National Initiatives and the Shift to School Autonomy

In 2010, the CfBT contract was terminated, excellence hubs were discontinued, and the requirement for schools to maintain gifted and talented registers was abolished. The government shifted to Capita's National Strategies 11 programme, a separate initiative with one year left to run. This transition, occurring just before the Conservatives were elected in 2010, emphasised bright children from low-income families who were underperforming. The core objectives were "to strengthen personalised education, social mobility, and our strategy for narrowing achievement gaps" (Smithers and Robinson, 2012, p. 4). After *National Strategies 11* ran its course, the gifted and talented materials were archived online in the National Archive. From that point, schools were left to decide independently what additional or tailored support, if any, was appropriate for their gifted and talented students.

Within a decade, several initiatives were introduced, including EiC with the NAGTY, followed by the Young Gifted and Talented (YG&T) programme from the CfBT Education Trust. These efforts encompassed various components, such as the City Challenge Programme, Excellence Hubs, and virtual academies. Each strand of these strategies required schools to navigate complex demands, including maintaining registers, providing coordinator training, demonstrating evidence of impact, and submitting funding requests.

The rapid pace of change and adaptation caused frustration among staff, who often struggled to embed and respond to one initiative before it was amended or replaced with a new version.

This frequent overhaul created challenges for schools, which faced the dilemma of either aligning with the evolving demands to secure funding or risking the loss of vital financial support.

Eventually, the responsibility for teaching and learning provision for gifted and talented students was handed over to schools after the programme was deemed "patchy, incoherent, and inconsistent" (Casey and Koshy, 2012, p. 48). These sentiments were echoed by the Sutton Trust, which described the policy and provision for the highly able as "littered by a hotchpotch of abandoned initiatives and unclear priorities". Teachers expressed concerns that the highly able had become a neglected group (Smithers and Robinson, 2012, p. 3).

The Current Landscape

Since 2010, there has been no direct government-driven policy specifically targeting More Able learners. However, some provisions have been incorporated into existing frameworks. For example, the *Ofsted Inspection Handbook* (2018) instructs schools to "provide effective teaching to the most academically able". The most recent policy update came in December 2021, appearing in the "Teachers' Standards" document under Standard 5: "Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils". This guidance states that teachers should "have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs; those of high ability; those with English as an additional language; those with disabilities; and be able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them".

The "More Able" Label

Labelling learners can be problematic, but to discuss a particular group, it is necessary to establish a method of reference. Attempts to categorise them have included designations such as "gifted and talented". For teachers, this label proved unpopular

and contentious, contributing to the challenges faced by the government in implementing its policy. Expressions like "gifted and talented" or "high achievers" were found to fall short as accurate descriptions of the group in question (Brady and Koshy, 2013, p. 258). Did children need to be gifted, talented, or both? How was such a determination to be made? Some schools nominated all their students to the Gifted and Talented register, while others either claimed they had none or failed to complete the necessary census data.

Other terms that have been cited include "accelerated learners", but the association with rapid learning was somewhat off-putting. Learning in detail and depth requires time to explore, ask questions, research, and discuss findings. The notion of moving through this process at a quicker pace is not appropriate. Another option, "High Capacity" students, may hold some credibility, but it raises debates about what constitutes capacity and how it varies from one student to the next. This brings us back to the problem of everyone or no one fitting the criteria. Carrie Winstanley (2004) used the term "Highly Able" in her work, which focused on similar groups of students and exemplified the importance of amplifying learners' voices. Another possibility, "Exceptionally Skilled", might imply mastery within a particular field or subject. However, such a grand proclamation risks attracting unwanted attention and placing pressure and stress on students to always be exceptional.

Beyond the Label

Regardless of the label used, there is always likely to be debate over the semantics involved. Most children are able to perform tasks at some level that exceed the expectations of typical schooling. Reading, writing, working with numbers, taking part in discussions, creating some form of artwork, researching, and presenting their ideas are some of the basics promoted in classrooms across the UK. As students' progress through school, these skills are usually incorporated into subject-specific areas and are used to convey what students are or have been learning.

Children should be given opportunities to select appropriate materials, argue, rank, rate, and justify their choices, alongside a whole host of other skills to demonstrate learning. Those who regularly and consistently score high marks in assessments, show understanding of complex procedures, can articulate them clearly, and apply their knowledge are, in this book, referred to as "More Able" learners. It is vital to highlight that such learners do not have to be More Able in every subject, but their skills are recognised in subjects where they manifest themselves clearly, consistently, and over a sustained period of time, such as an academic year, rather than the duration of short-term, one-off projects.

In my original thesis, which explored the educational experiences of the More Able, the focus was narrowed down to only the Academically More Able for pragmatic reasons and to set sensible research parameters at that time. However, by simply removing the "Academically" part of the expression, it appears to suit learners in all subjects, not just those where skills like critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, information gathering, and presentation are more prevalent. Retaining the "Academically" part from previous research would exclude subjects where great creativity and skill should be recognised, celebrated, and given further credence.

The Rationale for Focusing on More Able Learners

In schools, many learners receive some form of attention. Those with particular learning requirements are catered for by the SEND department, which provides support for children with dyslexia, ADHD, autism, social and emotional needs, as well as physical disabilities. It would be hard to dispute that these areas should not receive additional attention. Within a school's cohort, it is typical, due to government benchmarks and performance data, that students who are judged to be achieving at a Level 3 GCSE grade will attract extra support in an attempt to raise the grade to a 4, a recognised pass grade. Students who excel in sports or music often find themselves allocated additional tuition or coaching by specialists to enhance their skills in these