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**Ungifted, Untalented and Not Even Special: the implications for “widening participation” of socio-spatial unevenness in educational labelling (0201)**

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Using National Pupil Database records for Year 11 pupils, we identify that the majority of children in England (65%) are not labelled either as Gifted and Talented (G&T) or as Special Educational Needs (SEN) and are therefore Ungifted, Untalented and Not Even Special. We present maps of the locations of G&T pupils, who are concentrated in less deprived areas, of SEN pupils, who are concentrated in deprived areas, and of the Ungifted, Untalented and Not Even Special residual majority. We go on to analyse the GCSE results of these categories of pupils, an important determinant of entry to HE in late teens. We discuss the implications of the locational patterns for “widening participation” strategies.

Ungifted, Untalented and Not Even Special: the implications for “widening participation” of socio-spatial unevenness in educational labelling

In 2008 90,329 of the 596,291 Year 11 state-maintained school pupils in England were identified by their schools as “Gifted and Talented” (G&T). Of these, some were presumably thought to be gifted, some talented and a few both, but these distinctions are not recorded in the National Pupil Database, the data source we draw on in this paper. In the same year, 10,058 Year 11s were pupils in special schools and 2,629 in special units within mainstream schools. Of pupils in all kinds of maintained schools, 70,535 had Special Educational Needs (SEN) School Action, 35,066 SEN School Action Plus, and 23,300 a Statement of SEN.

It is possible to be both G&T and SEN, but the majority of children, 389,955 (65 per cent), are neither. They are therefore Ungifted and Untalented and Not Special. Of course this label is not applied explicitly but children, even average children, are not stupid most of the time. They realise that those not Gifted are Ungifted, those not Talented are Untalented and those not Special are Not Special.

Schools are under pressure to identify at least 10% of their pupils as G&T. Apparently, Providence has scattered gifts and talents upon England’s maternity wards to the same number of favoured few everywhere, irrespective of health, housing, parents’ education and occupations or other factors that affect educational outcomes. In fact, the percentages of G&T are changing from year to year as schools respond to the pressure. If in 2008 all schools had followed instructions there would be no difference in the average index of deprivation of the G&T compared to other pupils. We show in this paper in the form of maps that this was not the case, and the G&T were more often resident in less deprived areas. One small part of the reason is that a few grammar schools identified 100% of their pupils as G&T. Perhaps sometimes Providence is especially undiscerning.

Education in the 2000s likes to see itself as more inclusive than it was in 1971 when Bernard Coard worked out *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System*. The Warnock Report of 1978 marked a genuine step forward, replacing the ESN (educationally subnormal) with its anagram SEN. Children were no longer regarded as “ineducable”. Handicaps (soon to become “disabilities”) might be either physical or mental. They were still assumed to arise within the individual child, but they were “needs” that the schooling system could and should respond to. Although stigma reattached itself to the SEN designation, “special” is still a much nicer label than the early 20<sup>th</sup> century eugenicist categories of “idiot”, “imbecile” or “moron”. It was readily applied to “slow learners” who in the 1960s would have been called “remedial”. Pressure on the SEN statementing system led to the introduction of further categories (“School Action” and “School Action Plus”) so that children could be labelled and taught “specially” (i.e. separately, in a separate space in the classroom, a separate space in the school, or in a separate school) without overwhelming the public purse.

Learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) are simultaneously socially constructed and real, as we both know from our own experiences as learners and parents. A diagnosis of LDD removes responsibility for “underachievement” from both parents and child, shifting it onto a medical condition that is nobody’s fault. Yet it can also still stigmatise a child for life. French sociologists Baudelot & Establet argued as early as 1970 that “dyslexia”<sup>\*</sup> played an important role in the reproduction of class difference through education. They said it was unscientific, citing research showing the difficulties “dyslexic” children had in reading were no different in kind to the difficulties other children had. The scientific debate has not moved on much since then, but the implications of a diagnosis of dyslexia have. It no longer stamps working-class children as ineducable but (among other things) provides a rationale for why some middle class children “underachieve” at school despite the “good” parenting they receive at home.

We present maps illustrating the concentration of children labelled SEN in areas of social deprivation. The effect is greatest for the School Action Plus, slightly less for School Action and slightly less again for Statemented children. There are also differences by ethnicity, especially for gypsy and traveller children. It might be thought that the Statemented group, including those with profound disabilities identified from birth, would be evenly spread across the country, but this is not the case. Health inequality research shows that the distribution of children born with fatal congenital defects of the central nervous system or heart varies a little spatially, but not to the extent that we show for SEN.

We go on to map the GCSE results for the G&T, for the SEN in different categories and for the Ungifted, Untalented and Not Even Special residual majority. These indicate whether these children will be expected to obtain Level 3 qualifications in their late teens and move directly into higher education. Finally we discuss implications for “widening participation” strategies, looking forward to a time when even education policy-makers recognise that all children have gifts and talents, and they

are not just all educable but are all very special and really matter. The continuing exclusion from academic spaces of whole categories of young people is surely the greatest challenge for higher education.

\* "Dislexia" in the first draft of this outline because one of us suffers from that condition while the other suffers equally from hyperlexia (a precocious ability to read words). We both have hypercalculia (which has been described as the ability to do maths too well) combined with an obsessive interest in mapping and probably a number of other undiagnosed LLDs. If you care to indulge in hypochondria you can construct yourself in ways far more complex than just saying you are especially gifted or ungifted.

## References

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