



Children and young people with High Learning Potential (HLP) may have educational needs, strengths and weaknesses, that require support, identification and learning/teaching strategies to succeed. Here, art and design education consultant **Paul Carney** defines the behavioural traits and characteristics associated with HLP in art and design and, given the paucity of government recommendations, invites NSEAD members to help build an HLP art and design framework

High Learning Potential in art and design

Education has a long history of attempting to define and identify pupils who were deemed to have ability higher than their peers and so require modified or more challenging forms of learning. Many of us will remember the Gifted and Talented programmes that ended around 2013. The term 'gifted and talented' was replaced by Ofsted in 2014 with the descriptor 'more able', which it still uses to this day.

However, Potential Plus UK, a charity that has been working with schools and families with highly able children since 1967, use the term 'High Learning Potential' (HLP) instead. In its experience, these terms have accrued a social stigma or bias – it is assumed these pupils' future prospects are unequivocally bright and free from obstacles, and that they are top of their class, successful, and not in need of further support or assistance. The reality, Potential Plus say, is a little more complex. Many children who have HLP also have specific weaknesses or a special educational need (thus being Dual or Multiple Exceptional (DME)) that needs to be identified and supported.

The most recent Ofsted research on more able pupils in 2013 and 2015, which applied to learning across the curriculum, painted a depressing picture of life as a pupil with HLP in England. It found that these students were consistently being let down and failing to reach their full potential.

Currently, the Department for Education (DfE) states that improved school accountability measures, such as Progress 8 and higher GCSE grade boundaries, allows schools to be held to account in how well they support 'more able' students. They also say the Pupil Premium funds allow schools to provide support to highly able students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Reports by the Sutton Trust and Potential Plus UK have argued that Ofsted should strengthen its inspection of provision for disadvantaged, highly able students and called upon the DfE to invest in programmes to evaluate the effectiveness of the support provided.

Across all four UK nations, there are very limited governmental recommendations in place for the teaching of HLP students across the curriculum, let alone in art and design. Identifying such students is especially complex. The 1993 study, *Gifted Young Artists: Developmental and Individual Differences*, conducted by Marion Porath and Patricia Kennedy Arlin, investigated the ways in which Gifted and Talented pupils were the same as or different from their average peers. Their studies indicated that these students most strongly displayed a flexible and elaborate use of spatial structure. Representing spatial structure is an important aspect of artistic and cognitive growth. It describes the nature of pictorial structure – the way that children at different ages organise elements in their drawings, and their ability to accurately render dimensions, scale and proportion.

Part of the complexity, however, is that HLP pupils can demonstrate their artistic talents in

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different ways, and it is important to realise that not every product they produce will be outstanding. In fact, the research found that many other age-related artistic trends were similar to those of children with average ability. It seems as though advanced artistic ability is encapsulated – that is, that cognitive development follows a typical course, but the means to express themselves artistically within that developmental range is greater.

Written by MICA Chair Emeritus in Art Education alumnus and art educator Dr Al Hurwitz in 1983, *The Gifted and Talented in Art: A Guide to Program Planning*, Davis Publications, defines behavioural traits and characteristics associated with HLP in art. Below, I've adapted them slightly into my own single list:

- HLP is evident from an early age
- Highly skilful drawing – drawing dominates due to the accessibility of the media and because it can convey detailed information about a subject more easily than with other media
- Rapidity of development – pupils with HLP often traverse the stages of visual development at an accelerated pace

- Extended concentration – pupils with HLP stay with an art project longer than other children, and see more possibilities in the task they have selected or been assigned
- Self-directedness – pupils with HLP often have the drive to work on their own
- Fluency of idea and expression – visual and conceptual fluency is a particularly significant characteristic, where outcomes display more complex and elaborate thinking, and manifest as sensitivity to detail, the use of memory and more inventive outcomes
- Calculating capacity – a superior ability to utilise past information in new contexts
- Possible inconsistency with creative behaviour – although risk-taking is a characteristic typically associated with creative people, HLP students are often hesitant to experiment in a new area if they have achieved a certain level of mastery in an idiom
- Random improvisation – doodling and improvising with the effects of lines and shapes

Though higher levels of skill are often more visible in HLP pupils, art isn't only a skill – it's about ideas too. As teachers of art, we must also ensure children develop cognitively in order to raise their capacity to formulate, mould and shape their ideas into more sophisticated, elaborate outcomes.

Therefore, pupils who think creatively, divergently and with some originality can also be described as having HLP in art and design.

Open-ended projects should facilitate this. They should lead to more dynamic outcomes, where pupils might respond more imaginatively:

- in more depth
- by synthesising unusual materials or techniques
- by referencing more complex, intellectual sources
- by use of metaphor, analogy or symbolism
- by employing unique, divergent solutions to problems

This asserts the importance of curriculum design, where pupils are cognitively challenged, and higher aspirational thinking is developed and supported.

There is, finally, one more aspect to HLP in art and design that we have to consider and that is a greater capacity to critically engage with sources. Just as there are highly skilful or imaginative artists, there are also those whose critical interaction, expression and articulation of visual media goes beyond that of their classmates.

Pupils with HLP for art criticism deserve just as much recognition as those with high technical ability. This ability can lead to exam qualifications in art history or to rich oral presenting skills. The Articulation Prize (see *AD 37, Art and Oracy*,



p. 26), is one such example, where young people take part in presenting to audiences about art images.

To be honest, some of what I've described should be obvious to subject specialists. However, to raise attainment, I do think it's important that we have a framework to identify pupils with HLP in art and design, and that art educators have some recommended strategies for the teaching of pupils with identified HLP needs.

Potential Plus UK maintain that a lack of an appropriate education for HLP children can lead to loss of motivation, underachievement, disaffection, rebellion and anger, poor social adjustment, poor self-esteem, blending in with the crowd, and anxiety and/or depression.

HLP children require their individual potential and talents to be recognised, nurtured, supported and challenged for them to feel fulfilled and to develop good self-esteem. As art educators and as members of NSEAD, let us work together and build a framework to help identify pupils with HLP and to recommend strategies that will support them. ●

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Top Pop art, year 8

Opposite Light drawing, year 8

References

1. Potential Plus UK, *High Learning Potential Advice Sheet PA101*
2. Philip Loft, Shadi Danechi, (2020) House of Commons Briefing Paper, #9065, *Support for more able and talented children in schools* (UK)