

# Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

## Summary

High potential learners in secondary school are at risk of underachievement because of their different pace of learning, particular learning style, barriers to learning or social isolation. In order to combat these problem areas, five types of support have proven to be effective for high potential learners. This advice sheet is aimed at teachers and senior leadership team members in secondary schools and it shows how these types of support can be provided in the secondary school setting.

## Introduction

High potential learners are all different, though they broadly have similar issues and can be vulnerable to underachievement. Experience has shown that there are five kinds of support that high potential learners need, and that schools should consider in their provision for them.

The five kinds of support for high potential learners are:

1. **Understanding**

It is important that there is a level of understanding about high potential learners' unique personalities, sensitivities, learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, hopes, and interests.

2. **Challenge**

Providing regular meaningful challenge is the cornerstone of provision for high potential learners. How this happens within a classroom depends on the school, the learner and the resources available but it is essential that these children are challenged in their thinking in order to develop learning and study skills.

3. **Risk-taking**

Many high potential learners can be natural perfectionists who, through rarely having the opportunity or the will to struggle with things that are hard or unfamiliar, become used to working within their comfort zones.

4. **Self-understanding**

Experience has shown that many high potential learners are often at a disadvantage when it comes to self-regulated learning. Without sufficient challenge they can find it difficult to know what their strengths and weaknesses are.

5. **Social context**

High potential learners sometimes struggle to have a natural social group, sometimes preferring to work alone or with older children and adults. However, all learners need to function within a social context and skills in this area are important for future success.

None of these needs are any different to what every learner requires in order to have positive and challenging learning experiences. However, high potential learners are at risk of being misunderstood, under-challenged and socially isolated. Therefore, the support outlined above needs consideration for this group.

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

How can secondary schools provide the support high potential learners need in order to tackle underachievement?

### Understanding

**Provision must start with identifying the group of high potential learners. This must be done early to allow learners to continue their progression from their previous schools.**

One way to identify high potential learners early on is to use a combination of their Key Stage 2 data and the results of any CAT tests carried out, together with school performance information. Some schools opt to identify high potential learners by subject and there are checklists available (for example, from Potential Plus UK for its school members) to help with this kind of identification. Others use profiles of high potential learners to aid identification and there is information about this available on our website and in our advice sheet *S106 Profiles of High Potential Learners*.

Once high potential learners have been identified, some work needs to be done in order to understand who they are, what their backgrounds are, what they do outside school, what their individual strengths and weaknesses are, what their favourite subjects are and what aspirations they have for the future. This could be done through a questionnaire to complete with their parents/carers, or an interview process with the learners themselves. Attention must also be given at this early stage to identifying any lack of aspiration, so that this can be addressed as part of an action plan.

Members of staff in the school need to have an understanding of who the high potential learners are. This can be communicated in a variety of ways, including laminated sheets for each year group handed out to every member of staff, a central electronic record accessible by all staff members, or regular email communication. It is also important for every member of staff to have an understanding of how to support high potential learners, maintain their motivation and address their aspirations. The school's approach to this needs to be underwritten by policy and class data sheets, and staff members need both training and written communication on the subject.

- **School-wide understanding through policy and procedure:**  
Structure of support reflecting best practice, whole school input, parental input, linked policies, whole school initiatives, regular reviews, strong senior leadership for high learning potential, governor involvement at a strategic level
- **Identification of high potential learners:**  
Key stage 2 data, CAT tests, subject check lists, teacher nomination, parental input, profiles of high potential learners, assessments, consideration of SEN and ethnic minority learners in line with whole school disability and race policies, consideration of learners who are underachieving or in danger of underachieving, consideration of the cognitive ability of learners
- **Questionnaire or interviews to give better understanding of the cohort:**  
Learner interviews, parent and carer questionnaires, parental input and communication, transfer and transition data, teacher or pastoral led discussions on aspirations, goals and motivation

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

- **Staff knowledge of who the individuals are in this cohort:**  
Access to individual learning plans and/or register of learners, procedure and structure for staff communications, sharing of relevant information backed up by policies
- **Training and written materials for staff members on how to support high potential learners, both generally and in subject areas:**  
Governor training, staff development on identification and learning needs of this cohort, support from SLEs (Specialist Leaders in Education) focusing on high potential learners, support and guidance on raising aspirations of both learners and parents.

### Challenge

**Because high potential learners are often capable of working and thinking at a higher level and at a quicker pace, the most important provision for them is regular meaningful challenge in the classroom.**

Without being challenged it is difficult to develop critical learning skills that can be applied in the future when work becomes harder. In addition, higher level thinking activities allow this group of learners to begin using the skills that will get them the top marks in external exams.

Often high potential learners have some areas of advanced understanding, together with gaps in their knowledge. They need to be able to build skills that will earn them success later on, whilst also extending their understanding at a high level. Sympathetic teaching that gives learners the tools to achieve the level of work required for their age, as well as allowing them to express their advanced knowledge and ask questions at an advanced level, is the key to this provision.

Sometimes, high potential learners have particular passion areas that are either outside the curriculum or are at a level that is advanced beyond that taught in the school. These areas of passion need nurturing in order for school to be relevant to the learner and for them to be challenged in this area. Naturally, this can be a very difficult area to provide for and good practice often sees learners take part in a mentoring system, which allows those with particular interests or advanced abilities to be mentored by others with passions or experiences in similar areas.

- **Differentiation to a high level:**  
Extension\* and enrichment in subject areas in the classroom, extra-curricular activities and initiatives, learner-centred provision in the classroom, differentiation even within setted classrooms
- **Quick pace of learning:**  
Extension, project work, opportunities to learn collaboratively with similar ability peers, acceleration where appropriate
- **Higher order thinking activities:**  
Subject enrichment, project work, research projects, collaborative learning, extra-curricular activities and clubs
- **Mentor system to challenge in strength areas:**  
Buddy system using older high potential learners; support from specialist teachers in school and across school networks; links with industry, further and higher education institutes, specialist organisations

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

- **Skills development:**

Research projects, team tasks, presentation skills, collaborative learning, self-regulated learning; with support from specialist teachers in school and across school networks, links with industry, further and higher education institutes, specialist organisations

\*High potential learners do not need more of the same; they need different starting points, and challenging, exciting tasks that enable them to think differently about a task and apply their knowledge in new situations, which are planned in advance.

### Risk-taking

**When offered challenges, some high potential learners are reluctant to take part to the best of their abilities.**

This is either because they have naturally perfectionist personality traits or because they are unused to being challenged to the limits of their ability and have not developed coping mechanisms to overcome difficulties. It is important that high potential learners have regular opportunities to take intellectual risks, so that they are able to overcome these tendencies and become practiced at dealing with more difficult concepts. Regular opportunities to work at the limits of their abilities will contribute towards avoiding underachievement.

In addition, many high potential learners are very creative and need opportunities and guidance in safe environments to express themselves creatively. Having these kinds of opportunities will ensure that they are able to build their confidence to combine their academic potential with creativity in order to achieve at the highest levels.

Some high potential learners may not push themselves; rather they become used to doing the minimum to get by, even though this may look like a lot of effort when compared to others. It is therefore important that teachers know who the high potential learners are and gain an understanding of what constitutes taking a risk for individuals in this cohort.

One of the key solutions to encouraging risk-taking in high potential learners is to implement a marking system in which an element of the marks are awarded for risk and innovation. A safe classroom environment will enable learners to both show what they are capable of and be creative in their performance.

- **Understanding of what risk means for individuals:**  
Effective identification of high potential learners, interviews and questionnaires to aid understanding of learners' strengths, weaknesses and areas of interest
- **Questioning by learners:**  
Welcoming of challenging questions from the learners – even if teachers do not know the answers themselves!
- **Marking system underpinning intellectual risk-taking and innovation:**  
Whole school policies and classroom procedures to promote a safe environment within which to take risks, whole school recognition and promotion of creative and innovative

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

thinking, whole school marking scheme to include the importance of risk-taking and innovation, creative classroom environment

- **Implementation of regular opportunities to work at limits of ability:**  
Effective identification of learners' ability, extension and enrichment in regular classroom lessons, acceleration where appropriate, open-ended project work, opportunities for mentoring, opportunities for collaborative learning with ability peers (may not be age peers)
- **Provision of creative opportunities:**  
Creative classroom environment, extra-curricular activities and clubs.

### Self-Understanding

**Self-understanding is important for individual learners' future development, as well as their academic performance.**

Without good self-understanding, high potential learners are at risk of being too hard on themselves, not performing to their potential and of giving up too easily.

A questionnaire that is sent to each learner identified as a high potential learner to complete with their parents (as recommended in the Understanding section above) will aid them in discovering more about themselves. Likewise, an interview with a member of staff to discuss this information will serve a similar purpose.

A mentoring system (as discussed in the Challenge section above) would serve the purpose of allowing high potential learners to discover more about themselves and their performance in areas of interest to them. Learners could also be encouraged to discuss aspects of themselves with other high potential learners within a formally led group.

In order to gain greater self-understanding, high potential learners need to be working at a level that challenges them so that they can build self-regulation skills. Tasks that encourage self-regulation are ones that enable the learner to estimate their performance before commencing, and to review their performance afterwards. Naturally, there needs to be the possibility to fall short of performing perfectly for the individual learner in the level of the task chosen.

Clear and detailed criteria for performance, explicit and prompt feedback, as well as examples of standards of work at the highest level will all encourage self-regulation in high potential learners.

- **Questionnaire or interview:**  
Identifying strengths, weaknesses and areas of interest; parental input through questionnaires, face to face meetings and open two-way communications, supported by whole school policies and procedures
- **Mentoring system and led learner group:**  
Support from specialist teachers in school and across school networks; links with industry, further and higher education institutes, specialist organisations; pastoral support and relevantly trained professionals to support learner discussions

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

- **Self-regulation tasks:**  
Support and advice for learners on self assessment, provision of tasks with sufficient challenge to promote self-regulation
- **Performance criteria, feedback and exemplary pieces of work:**  
Information for learners on marks' schemes and grade boundaries, learner access to resources on how to improve grades, explicit and prompt feedback from teachers, staff development through best practice sharing

### Social Context

**All learners need a social context in which to discuss ideas and feel connected.**

The social side of learning is often integral to the challenge for learners and it can be motivating to work collaboratively or in competition with similar ability peers. Sometimes high potential learners are either not able to find an appropriate social group in which to function or are so advanced in their learning that none of their peers are at a similar level.

Educational provision that is considered by schools for high potential learners sometimes finds learners working alone (e.g. work through a book or syllabus or distance learning). Whilst this approach could enable a learner to work at an advanced level, thereby accessing regular challenge, it could also disadvantage a learner by removing the collaborative and motivating element. Therefore, it is important that any strategy for high potential learners needs to be considered with this in mind.

Experience shows that collaborative learning is an effective strategy to support the achievement of high potential learners, and this effect is higher where the collaboration is between intellectual peers. Often set up as problems relating to sorting and organising information, the purpose of these activities is to oblige learners to explore and understand the nature of the subject content and encourage them to think and talk together.

Streaming of learners within subjects gives high potential learners opportunities to work together at a more challenging level and a faster pace, so this practice encourages a natural social context in which to work. A flexible system that begins as early as possible within secondary provision to enable learners to progress quickly from their achievement in Key Stage 2 and avoid a dip in both their achievement and motivation levels is suggested.

A formally led group that gives high potential learners the opportunity to get to know others with similar interests, even across year groups, will give these learners a forum within which to feel connected. Learners within such a group could be encouraged to discuss issues of concern to them, work together (such as on an enterprise or charitable project), or take part in a variety of different activities (such as strategy games, debating or team building exercises). Encouraging peer relations through educational visits and guest speakers also provides learners with role models and possible paths of development to inspire them and keep them motivated.

- **Actively planning for high learning potential in every classroom, whether streamed, setted or not:**

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

Early identification of ability levels and potential, opportunities for learners to learn beyond the syllabus and to research areas of interest further, opportunities to work with similar ability peers in the classroom, regular review to ensure continuing opportunities for those not yet identified

- **Collaborative learning activities:**  
Across year groups and amongst school networks, at further and higher education establishments
- **Formally led social or interest groups beyond the classroom:**  
Debating societies, strategy games, engineering clubs, creative writing, educational visits, guest speakers (especially those from the school that have gone on to university or a 'dream' job to raise aspirations and maintain motivation).

### Summary

Provision that tackles underachievement in high potential learners needs to be underpinned by school-wide policy and practice. Members of staff must have an understanding of the reason structures are put into place to support this group of learners, as well as regular training and written information about understanding and supporting learners in subject areas. This, together with the strategies outlined above, will ensure learners' potential is recognised and supported in school and underachievement is minimised. At the same time, schools should develop a positive partnership with parents to ensure good two-way communication and mutual support for the benefit of the learners.

### Further Information

S109 Identification of High Potential Learners in the Secondary Years	This advice sheet builds on the information provided in <i>S101 Approaches to Identification of High Potential Learners</i> and <i>S102 Identification of High Potential Learners: Sources of Evidence</i> and offers additional guidance that has specific application in the secondary years. This advice sheet is therefore aimed at classroom teachers, subject coordinators, lead teachers and senior leadership teams in the secondary phase.
S106 Profiles of High Potential Learners	In 1988, following extensive research in gifted education, Maureen Neihart <sup>1</sup> and George Betts <sup>2</sup> proposed six profiles of children with high learning potential. The profiles have been widely used in supporting high learning potential children and more recently (2010) they have been revised based on the authors' experiences in the intervening years. This advice sheet is aimed at educators who want to find out more information about high learning potential or looking for ways to support and provide for high potential learners in the classroom.
S110 Identifying High Potential Underachievers	It is widely acknowledged that there is significant underachievement among high potential learners, and that gaps exist between the progress, achievement and attainment of some of the most disadvantaged groups and

## Tackling Underachievement in High Potential Learners in the Secondary Phase

	<p>their peers. This advice sheet is aimed those with responsibility for high learning potential in all school stages and gives guidance about identifying high potential learners who are underachieving.</p>
<p>S602 Identifying Dual or Multiple Exceptional Learners</p>	<p>This advice sheet is aimed at teachers in all school phases and gives guidance about how to identify dual or multiple exceptional learners (high potential learners with one or more special educational need). Some learners are not able to easily demonstrate their ability or potential in a traditional way within the classroom and this can lead to them being missed, making it highly likely that they will not have the opportunities they need to thrive and gain personal and educational fulfilment. Here we will look at various approaches that can be taken to ensure that these children do not fall through the net.</p>

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Potential Plus UK Planned Review Date: March 2020

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