IDENTIFYING DUAL OR MULTIPLE EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS

Summary
This advice sheet is aimed at More Able Lead Teachers in all school phases and gives guidance about how to identify dual or multiple exceptional learners (high ability students with one or more special educational needs). Some children 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.

Introduction

It is important to remember that identification of DME children is the starting point; they will need appropriate provision and ongoing support to ensure that you are meeting their needs.

Multi-dimensional approach

Teachers need to work together, across specialisms and departments. In most cases the More Able Lead Teacher will need to work together with SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) and/or the teacher with responsibility for inclusion and/or intervention.

It is important to look at discrepancies between different subjects and/or required skills, for example a child who is able to verbally tell creative stories and describe vivid situations, but unable to put that same level of detail down on paper. Only by sharing information and working together can teachers start to piece together the different parts of the jigsaw.

It is essential for a member of staff to have the responsibility of assessing the whole learning profile of a child in order to ensure that such discrepancies are picked up.

Psychological tests

Assessments that consider the ability (as opposed to the attainment) of a child can be very useful when dual or multiple exceptionality is suspected. They look at verbal and non-verbal reasoning, and teachers can compare the results with the attainment levels of the child to see if they are comparable, or not (which is more likely to be the case with DME). Even across verbal and non-verbal scores there can be a discrepancy; all of which highlights a child with a ‘spiky’ learning profile and provides essential information about the child’s learning needs.

Most psychological tests are carried out by an educational psychologist (either independent or linked to the school, academy chain or local authority), or by organisations such as Potential Plus UK, that undertakes a series of assessments to better understand the child’s learning profile.
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Checklists

Checklists are a straightforward tool to use when considering DME children. Such checklists might include:

- Characteristics of DME Learners
- Common characteristics of high potential learners, from the research of Dr Linda Silverman
- Profiles of high potential learners, including the DME child, from the research of Maureen Neihart and George Betts
- Checklists of specific disorders or conditions, such as ASD, ADHD or dyslexia

However, it is essential to remember the following:

- Checklists should be just one of several methods of identifying DME children
- Be aware of contrary indicators; a child might display obsessive concentration on something they love, but be unable to stay focused on other things
- A checklist on its own does not provide evidence of high ability; or frequency or context of a child’s action
- Caution should be used when considering checklists for specific disorders or conditions; these are best used by the relevant specialist
- A checklist is an aid to identification

Starry Night Observation Protocol

The identification of a DME learner is likely to require the observation of particular skills. One method for observing and evidencing this is by using the Starry Night Observation Protocol, as this:

- provides a useful framework for celebrating and recording a child’s abilities and talents over time;
- contains unusual items that would not necessarily fit into usual measures of ‘ability’;
- has a record sheet that encourages the documentation of observed behaviours, including a description;
- generates detailed information that is more evidence-based than simple checklists.
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The Starry Night record sheet should be used over a designated period of time, during which teachers/teaching assistants spot an activity that fits on the map and mark 'X' in the relevant area, together with the date of observation and a brief description. At the end of the designated time period, relevant staff use the map as a tool for understanding the child’s areas of strength and how to start addressing his/her needs.

Creativity tests

Creativity tests can provide much wider scope for the identification of talents and offer opportunities for children to demonstrate interesting and alternative responses. However, they also tend to be more subjective and difficult to score, so they may have less recognised validity.

Specialist identification

Subtle links and differences exist between the characteristics and indicators of high ability and some disorders and conditions, such as ASD or ADHD. Similarly, the high ability of a child can mask other things that are going on, such as dyslexia – the bright child is able to develop strategies for dealing with the difficulty and may therefore appear as an 'average ability' learner, rather than a child with high potential. There is frequent misunderstanding and misdiagnosis, making specialist identification essential.

Identification through provision

One very appropriate approach to the identification of DME children is through provision in the classroom. Opportunities are provided for the whole class for challenge, problem-solving, trial and error activities, higher order thinking, divergent thinking, team building, leadership, and so on. These might range from short 10 minutes lesson starters to full day challenges. Teachers and/or teaching assistants observe what comes out of the challenge and use this information about the child’s area of strength or interest to provide appropriately to meet their needs.

Further Information

S05a Checklist of Characteristics of Dual or Multiple Exceptional Learners

This information is aimed at SENCOs and More Able Lead Teachers in all school phases. The term 'dual or multiple exceptionality' is used in the UK to describe children who have high learning potential but who also have one or more special educational needs (SEN). Potential Plus UK has compiled a list of characteristics of DME children through our work in supporting parents, professionals and DME children. The check list is meant as a starting point for schools.
| S501 High Learning Potential and Special Educational Needs | This advice sheet explains what DME is, how it can affect a child and their learning, what you can do to spot the signs of DME in the classroom and how to develop a strategy for supporting children with DME within your school. |
| Teaching Gifted Children with Special Educational Needs by Diane Montgomery | Children with both giftedness and special educational needs are often found in mainstream classrooms. This essential resource provides an overview of existing knowledge about dual and multiple exceptionality (DME), examining the needs of gifted and talented children from both the class teacher's and SENCo's perspectives. |
| Twice-Exceptional Gifted Children: Understanding, Teaching and Counseling Gifted Students by Beverly A Trail | This comprehensive text provides an overview of who these students are, how teachers can tap into their strengths and weaknesses, and what educational strategies should be implemented to help these students succeed in school and beyond. The book will guide a collaborative team step-by-step through the process of identifying students' needs, selecting modifications and accommodations, and developing a comprehensive plan to meet the diverse needs of twice-exceptional children. |
| Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children by James T Webb et al | This book includes discussions on diagnoses commonly given to gifted children and adults, characteristics of gifted children and adults, traits of diagnoses incorrectly given to gifted children and adults, guidelines to avoid mislabeling gifted children, parent-child relationship problems, issues for gifted adults, and advice for selecting a counselor or health care professional |

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