THE EVALUATION OF EXCELLENCE CLUSTERS:

Interim Report

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1.   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

Excellence Clusters (EC) represent a development of the government's Excellence in Cities (EiC) policy initiative. The evaluation of the EC initiative is being undertaken by a consortium of researchers from the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER), and the London School of Economics (LSE), who are also involved in the evaluation of EiC. It was intended from the outset that the evaluation of EC would inform, and be informed by, the findings from the EiC evaluation. The evaluation of EC has therefore sought to adapt, wherever possible, research instruments used in the evaluation of EiC, whilst at the same time allowing the uniqueness of the individual Clusters and the Cluster initiative to be demonstrated.

The evaluation has focused on the work of 11 Clusters: the first seven Excellence Clusters announced in October 2000 and the four Clusters announced in February 2001. All of the Clusters began operation in September 2001.

1.2   Evaluation Activities January – June 2002

School survey questionnaires were sent to the headteachers of all secondary and primary schools in the 11 Clusters in January 2002 (a total of 166 schools). The aim was to gain a picture of how the EC strategy is operating in individual schools, the impact on school processes, and senior management perceptions of the initiative. There were returns from 74 of the 111 primary schools (67 per cent) and 35 of the 55 secondary schools (64 per cent). All of the returned secondary questionnaires and 71 of the primary questionnaires were subject to statistical analysis (three questionnaires were returned too late to be included). There was a slightly higher response rate from schools in the highest achievement bands at key stages 1-3 and GCSE, and fewer returns from those schools in the lowest bands. There was also evidence of a higher response rate from secondary schools with the lowest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), and a lower response rate from schools with the highest proportion of FSM pupils.

The analysis of the partnership plans, the interviews with key partnership personnel and the school survey results were used as the basis for selecting a sample of schools for participation in detailed thematic studies. The schools initially selected were drawn predominantly from the first seven Clusters, but schools from other Clusters may be

included at a later date. A number of themes were selected for focus in these longitudinal studies:

- Working in Partnership
- Primary-Secondary School Transition
- Raising Achievement
- Coherence with other Local Initiatives.

Working in Partnership. The EC initiative is built upon the principle of partnership between schools, which has emerged as a major theme of the evaluation to date. In discussing the initiative with individual schools, we aim to explore the links formed or developed within Clusters, and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of collaborative working. Particular attention is paid to the role of the 'more successful'[1] schools within Clusters, and the effect of Cluster membership on relationships with non-Cluster schools.

Primary/Secondary School Transition. Primary and secondary schools are both involved in the initiative, presenting an opportunity for examining the impact of Clusters on cross-phase continuity and progression. Some Cluster schools send pupils to, or accept pupils from, schools not included in the Cluster, and possible tensions are examined in the light of local arrangements.

Raising Achievement. An important aim of the initiative is to raise standards in schools in areas of disadvantage. Interviewees are asked to consider how standards might be raised in their own schools and in the local Cluster as a whole. Specific examples of an impact of the initiative on the improvement of test results and the quality of teaching and learning is sought.

Coherence. The extent to which the EC initiative enhances the impact of other local initiatives, including those aimed at improving schools, promoting inclusion, reducing disaffection, and contributing to the welfare of young people, is being explored with individual schools. Coherence between EC and other initiatives is examined, together with the impact of Cluster membership on involvement in other local initiatives.

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[1] Clusters are required to include at least one 'more successful' local school, such as a Beacon or a Specialist School. The specific role played by these schools is discussed in Section 4.1.2. In order to preserve anonymity, given the small number of schools involved, we refer to all such schools as 'more successful' rather than by specific type. The term is used as a generic description rather than a value judgement.

Schools have been selected to highlight a range of issues within the main themes and to provide examples of innovative, effective and typical practice. These individual case studies also focus on the background and management of the Cluster initiative and of the four strands. A detailed interview schedule has been developed to cover all of the relevant areas and issues.

Visits to individual schools began in May 2002 and will continue until the end of the evaluation. Eight schools (five secondary and three primary) from four Clusters were visited in May or the first half of June. Data collected during these visits is presented in this interim report, together with the data from the school survey questionnaires.

1.3   Structure of the Report

Discussion of individual school experience of the initiative begins in Chapter 2 of the report. Chapter 2 provides contextual information on the specific issues and problems addressed by the schools and how they came to be involved in the EC initiative. It also examines key aspects of the overall management of the initiative. The progress of the individual strands is reported in Chapter 3. The four EC strands – Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units, Gifted and Talented, and the Tailored Strand – are examined in depth, with attention given to key aspects of the management of the individual strands, emerging issues and challenges, and the impact of EC. The fourth chapter looks at the cross-cutting themes of partnership and transition. Chapter 5 presents a summary and conclusion to the report, including a comparative analysis of preliminary findings from EC and EiC.

2. CONTEXT AND MANAGEMENT

In the first part of this chapter, the focus is on contextual information which provides a background to the understanding of the work of the individual schools within the Clusters. A description is provided of the local context in terms of the socio-economic problems faced and how these translated into specific issues for the schools. This leads into a discussion of how individual schools came to be involved in the EC initiative.

The second part of the chapter examines key aspects of the overall management of the initiative within the schools. This section presents a discussion of the management structures established, staff involvement, the use of resources, the target-setting process and the role played by the schools in the monitoring and evaluation of the initiative. The Strand-focus of the initiative has led to the creation of specific management structures within individual Strands. These are not considered in detail here where the emphasis is on providing an *overview* of initiative management. Specific details regarding the management of individual Strands are discussed in the relevant Strand sections.

2.1 Contextual Information

The EC initiative is part of the drive to raise standards in schools in areas of disadvantage. The schools visited reported a variety of social and economic indices of deprivation in their local areas, including:

- high unemployment
- a high number of recipients of income support
- low income for those in work
- high rates of crime
- a high proportion of single-parent families
- high rates of teenage pregnancy
- low aspirations
- low self-esteem
- extremes of social mobility – either a high rate of mobility or none at all.

These problems translated into specific issues within the schools themselves. In terms of basic needs, pupils were poorly clothed and poorly nourished and high numbers of children were known to be entitled to free school meals. Low aspirations within families and in some cases, amongst teaching staff, were a particular problem, with the

lack of parental, pupil and teacher expectations forming a real barrier to learning in the schools. Some pupils had behaviour problems, apathy, poor attendance and poor self-esteem. Parents' evenings were poorly attended and parents (some of whom were keen to help their children) were unable to support them in their education because of their own backgrounds and limited education. Within the home, there was no quiet space for homework nor any tradition of helping children with educational activities, e.g. hearing them read. Some schools had to deal with a highly mobile population and high casual intake figures. Additional problems were caused by the fact that some pupils had English as an Additional Language (EAL), and were from refugee or asylum-seeking families. Even one high-performing school reported limited parental support, poor role models and a lack of tradition of learning amongst its families, contrary to what might be expected of a school of its type.

Whilst individual schools may have different socio-economic profiles within the same Cluster, the initiative was seen in a positive light and as a way of addressing some of these issues, especially through the flexibility inherent in the Tailored Strand. It was mentioned in the previous EC report (Schagen *et al.*, 2001) that some Clusters have opted for a broad focus to enable schools to adapt the initiative to local needs. Later sections of this report indicate how the initiative has enabled schools to respond to particular needs and issues.

It was intended that individual Clusters be built around 'core' schools nominated by the DfES as having '*a history of under-performance and disadvantage*'. Clusters were built up around these core schools to form a more comprehensive group of schools, with different Clusters adopting different approaches to this in an attempt to create 'rational' groups within the remit of the initiative. In terms of getting involved in the initiative, it was clear that individual schools had come via different routes, and had different motivations for involvement. Whilst some schools had actively sought involvement, or had accepted invitations, there was an indication amongst some that they had little choice.

Of the eight case-study schools, two (one primary and one secondary) were 'core' schools. Whilst one of these schools reported that it was happy to be involved in the initiative, there was nevertheless a feeling that they had little choice about the matter. Two of the other primary schools had been brought into the initiative because they were main feeder schools for the secondary schools involved. Senior staff at three other schools (two primary and one secondary) were not sure how or why their school had become involved. At one of the primary schools, there was a perception that the

initiative was targeted at schools in need or those with problems. Given that the schools had good key stage test results, the (new) headteacher was not sure why they were involved. It was reported that the previous head had been less than happy about being involved because of the perception of the initiative as being for schools in need. One of the more successful schools had been invited to be involved by the LEA and saw involvement in the initiative as a positive opportunity to regenerate links with local schools which had suffered because of competition. Finally, the headteacher of one school had been active in the initial bid for Cluster status within the LEA.

2.2   Management of the Initiative

2.2.1 Management structures

In some cases, the EC initiative was able to build upon and extend management structures already in place. Where this was the case, schools clearly had a head start in terms of the development of management structures to support the initiative. One school already had management structures in place as a result of its involvement in the statutory Education Action Zones (EAZ) initiative. EC was able to build upon these structures and as a result it was difficult to separate out specific EC structures. However, the initiative had enabled the school to extend its work for gifted and talented pupils and its Learning Mentor/support provision. For example, prior to EC, the school had already established a number of developments in learning support, including the provision of Learning Mentors. Through EC the school was able to add to this provision by recruiting Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) who worked closely with teachers.

However, in this instance, the challenge for the staff was to 'pull together' these different initiatives into a coherent whole. The headteacher noted that a key task for him was to develop coherence from the school's involvement in the various initiatives including EC, the statutory EAZ, Excellence Challenge and Connexions.

As is to be expected, in other cases, EC led to the development of new structures where these did not previously exist. At one school, the creation of a Learning Support Unit prompted a complete review of its guidance structures, previously known as Pastoral Care. The school had put in place better structures for supporting the pupils which were felt to be wider and more far-reaching. Staffing included a deputy headteacher with responsibility for guidance and a team of five staff supporting the LSU.

2.2.2 Staffing

The early days of the initiative, focussing on planning and preparation, were characterised by the involvement of headteachers. As the initiative has spread into the schools, headteachers and other senior staff have retained overall responsibility for the management of the initiative. The backing of the senior management team (SMT) is regarded as important, in order to drive the initiative forward.

The key role of senior staff in the initiative was illustrated in one secondary school, where the headteacher took the lead for EC. A senior teacher had responsibility for gifted and talented pupils and worked with three responsible teachers which the school was able to retain through the provision of a salary point from EC funding. Faculty heads had lead responsibility for gifted and talented teaching, although the school was trying to develop the idea of whole-school responsibility. The assistant headteacher had overall responsibility for learning mentoring and learning support, and was also a trained counsellor working part-time with pupils and families and supporting peer counselling. The deputy headteacher had oversight of the Tailored Strand and was in charge of developing coherence between the various initiatives in which the school was involved.

Senior staff may find themselves managing several key areas within the EC initiative and/or other initiatives within the school. The question of workload and the sheer number of areas of work for which senior staff were responsible is clearly an issue generally and one that is likely to impinge on the management of EC.

The spread of the initiative to other staff varied from school to school. In one school, only the headteacher was involved for most of the first year. Now the Learning Mentor, the deputy headteacher and the gifted and talented coordinator are involved, but it is still mainly the responsibility of the headteacher. There is concern about 'initiative overload', and the spread of the initiative has been restricted by the headteacher's wish not to over-burden staff.

The burden of the work continuing to fall only on the headteacher is the exception rather than the rule, with most schools appointing coordinators for the individual strands. In some cases these appointments have built upon the experience, responsibilities and/or interests of existing school staff. In one school it was reported that the strand coordinators (for the Gifted and Talented, Learning Mentors, and Tailored Strands) '*fell into*' obvious roles. For example, the focus of the Tailored Strand is raising standards in literacy, so the key stage 1 and key stage 2 Literacy

Managers have taken on the task of coordination. The gifted and talented coordinator was already doing work in this area, was interested in this work and had the time because she is a deputy headteacher. The other deputy headteacher is the SENCO and coordinates the Learning Mentors.

In some cases coordinators may have responsibility for more than one strand, or may take responsibility for the overall management of the initiative as well as for an individual strand. Other key staff have been appointed from outside, using EC funds. These include Learning Mentors (see Chapter 3.1 for a more detailed discussion of Learning Mentors) and staff appointed to roles within the Tailored Strand. For example, in one Cluster an 'Attendance Officer' had been appointed to work with identified families on school liaison for all of the Cluster schools.

The involvement of other school staff in the EC initiative came largely through the identification of pupils to be part of the gifted and talented cohort or to work with Learning Mentors, in the delivery of specific programmes, or through involvement in INSET. Beyond this, awareness of the initiative within individual schools was variable. In some cases, it was reported that staff were 'very aware' and kept informed of developments through staff meetings. Awareness of particular strands was noticeable with the Learning Mentor, Learning Support Unit, and Gifted and Talented strands highlighted.

In contrast, it was reported that staff in some schools were only very slightly aware of the initiative. In one school it was felt that staff would not necessarily identify the initiatives in which they were involved as specifically 'Cluster' activities: in some cases initiatives now brought under the Clusters remit pre-existed the initiative. In another school, the headteacher described staff knowledge of the initiative as '*basic*'; the deputy headteacher described it as '*poor*' (as well as describing her own knowledge as '*mediocre*'). Staff had been told about the initiative on a '*need to know*' basis, i.e. if they had been involved in the identification of the gifted and talented cohort or had had feedback on pupils from the Learning Mentor. In this school and in another (where there was a low level of awareness below middle management), the headteachers were concerned not to overload staff with involvement in multiple initiatives, and efforts were being made to integrate initiatives. In another school where staff were described as being '*very aware*', efforts were being made to incorporate the initiative into the School Development Plan rather than have it as a bolt-on feature.

2.2.3 Resources

The allocation of Cluster funds among the schools involved was decided at Partnership level. In most cases, formulae (based on the number of pupils on roll, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, attendance, exclusion rates, and involvement in particular strands) had been devised, and funds allocated accordingly. As might be expected, the amounts received by the schools differed greatly. Specific amounts reported ranged from £7,500 to £42,000 (increasing to £78,000 in 2002/03).

Where funds were delegated to schools, the headteacher or a member of SMT was responsible for its use. In some schools, some or all of the funding for particular strands was delegated to individual strand coordinators who were responsible for the day-to-day management of the funds. In other cases, funds were retained 'centrally', where, for example, the total amount of money received by the school was small.

The funds had been used in various ways. A substantial amount of the money was used for staffing: to pay salaries (particularly those of Learning Mentors), to give additional responsibility points for staff, to facilitate staff promotion, and to pay for supply cover. Money was also spent on resources, rewards and incentives, and was channelled into specific projects, e.g. to pay for overseas visits, or for an artist in residence.

2.2.4 Target setting

Schools approached the setting of targets for the EC initiative in a number of ways. The methods adopted included consultation of post-OFSTED action plans and discussion between the headteacher and the LEA. However, concerns about the process were expressed by schools in a variety of circumstances. For example, there were doubts about the realism of the targets set. One headteacher expressed concern about being pushed into setting unrealistic targets and setting pupils up for failure. On the other hand, the headteacher of a high-performing school did not see how it could raise its target of pupils gaining grades A*- C at GCSE when 100 per cent of its pupils were already achieving this. It was aiming to increase the number of pupils achieving the highest grades.   Another headteacher expressed concern about the mismatch between targets for different initiatives, for example, for statutory Education Action Zones (of which the school is part) and for EC. There was a concern to ensure that all targets were consistent, realistic and referenced to individual pupils and their prior attainment rather than to 'external' parameters.

2.2.5 Monitoring and evaluation

For half of the schools, it was still early days as far as the processes of monitoring and evaluation were concerned. There were some reports of systems of checks and balances, especially with regard to how funding was used, the reporting and monitoring of activity and ensuring that action plans were being met, discussion of emerging roles, e.g. of Learning Mentors, and of liaison between staff within schools and between the schools and Cluster staff. Where processes were being more formally considered, there was evidence of the emergence of a two-tier system with a school and a Cluster focus. An emerging pattern is for overall Cluster monitoring and evaluation, coordinatored by those responsible at Cluster level for individual Strands, based upon individual school reports on the progress of the Strands by school Strand coordinators. An overall Cluster approach was felt to offer consistency across schools with regard to the evaluation of the Strands. However, some schools may adopt an individual approach, particularly where there is concern to develop coherence amongst disparate initiatives, and where there are mechanisms already in place.

3.   THE FOUR EC STRANDS

In this chapter, we report the Clusters' experience to date with the four EC strands, based on the school survey and the first school visits.

3.1   The Learning Mentor Strand

In our previous report (Schagen *et al.*, 2001) we noted that the Learning Mentor Strand had generated by far the most enthusiasm from interviewees. At the time of our first visits to Cluster chairs (November 2001), some Learning Mentors were already in post, and their work was much appreciated. Others were still in the process of appointing LMs, but were eagerly anticipating the support that they would be able to provide from January 2002. We wished to find out whether their expectations had been realised.

According to the school survey, 31 out of 35 secondary schools had at least one LM funded by EC (and eight schools had LMs funded by other sources). Twenty-three schools had full-time LMs funded by EC, and 13 had part-time LMs funded by EC (five schools had both full-time and part-time staff). The majority of schools had one or two LMs funded by EC, but four schools had three and two schools had four. Just under half (16) of the schools reported that they had had staff with dedicated time for mentoring before Excellence Clusters; for the others, LMs were clearly a new experience.

Of the 71 primary schools, 51 schools had one LM (full-time or part-time) funded by EC, and ten had two. (Five schools had LMs funded by other sources.) Half of the LMs were full-time and half were part-time. Only ten of the primary schools had had staff with dedicated time for mentoring prior to the EC initiative.

Respondents were asked to indicate the background(s) of their LMs. Those most frequently mentioned for secondary schools were learning support/teaching assistants (mentioned by 18 schools), youth work (12 schools) and teaching (eight schools). Evidently the majority had a school background. This was also the case in primary schools, where 34 respondents reported ex-LSAs as mentors, compared with no more than nine reporting any other category. Earlier interviews with Cluster chairs had suggested that previous school experience was desirable (despite fears that this might result in a shortage of LSAs) because people from different backgrounds were often unprepared for the challenges of school life (and, in particular, dealing with difficult pupils).

Case-study schools reflected the survey pattern, in terms of the number and background of their LMs. One school had four, and other schools one each (in one primary school, the LM was part-time, being shared with another primary school in the Cluster). However, interviewees from two secondary schools noted that they had other LMs in the school, although only one was funded by the Cluster. It may be that the interviewee who reported four LMs was referring to the number in the school, rather than the number funded by EC.

The majority of LMs in case-study schools had previously worked as LSAs; others had trained and worked in nursery nursing, or in special units for those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). In several cases, the LM had either worked in the school, or had close links with it, before obtaining their current post. This had a number of advantages. It meant that the potential LM was familiar with the school and the children, and would be able to make an informed decision about whether it was the right post for them; conversely, school staff would be able to judge whether the candidate was suited to the post; if some of the children knew the LM personally, this would be an additional benefit.

3.1.1 Role of Learning Mentors

Almost all of the responding secondary schools (30) said that their LMs did targeted work with individual pupils. In addition, 13 worked with specific groups and 12 offered drop-in access. Again, the primary pattern was similar, although drop-in access was less common (14 out of 61 schools).

One of the case-study schools saw the role of the LMs as designed *'to reduce exclusions and increase attendance levels in the school'*. Another interviewee said that *'The rationale is ultimately to promote attainment … Another key objective is not only to ensure that pupils get their qualifications but that they also continue on to post-16 education'*. The phrase *'remove barriers to learning'* was also used in two Clusters. In support of these aims, LMs were reported to carry out a variety of tasks. One school said that they preferred not to have a standard model, while another said that their (two) LMs had gradually specialised in different types of work. The main focus was on working with individuals, although there were differences in how these individuals were identified and referred.

In one secondary school, the children chosen were those with behavioural problems, who might be at risk of exclusion. (A primary school said that they had begun by targeting those at risk of exclusion, but in the light of their training, had decided that

LMs should be involved at an earlier stage.) In another secondary school, the criteria was underachievement: children who had the potential to achieve five A*-C GCSE grades, but who were not achieving at that level, for whatever reason. In a primary school, children selected were those with low self-esteem and/or emotional problems.

Some schools had established formal systems for referral, which might originate with class teachers but needed to be approved/agreed by senior managers. The number of mentees varied. One interviewee observed that LMs should be assigned 10 to 12 pupils each, but *'in practice it is more than that'*. Conversely, one LM was working with 12 pupils, but her manager said that the limit was 20. One primary LM was working with seven children, another with 17.

One-to-one sessions were usually held weekly, more frequently in special cases. One interviewee described the process in detail:

> *The LM works individually with pupils, taking them out of class every week for a one-to-one session, during which they have the opportunity to give their point of view of what they are doing at school. A general discussion is followed by an attempt to find out where they are having problems for each of their lessons. LM and pupil agree on a target or targets, between one and four per week, to be completed for the following week. Not all pupils have target sheets, the strategies depend on the individual child, what they like and work best with. The target can for example relate to homework completion or organisational problems, and the sheet will then be signed by a teacher. The aim is to set fewer, rather than more targets.*

The content of the meetings might vary according to the particular focus adopted by the school. For example, if the emphasis was on children with emotional problems, the LM might spend less time talking about academic work.

Although one-to-one sessions with identified children were seen as the core of the LMs' work, a range of other work was mentioned. Activities undertaken by some of the LMs included:

- support for children in the classroom, or in a special unit (not necessarily a Cluster LSU)
- 'drop-in' sessions, when LMs were available to any child that wished to come and talk to them
- checking attendance and following up children who regularly arrived late
- home visits to parents of mentees (and being available for parents to consult at school if required)

- group activities (e.g. small group circle time, sessions on anger management and self-esteem)

- organising/helping to run School Councils

- running Breakfast Clubs

- involvement in out-of-school-hours activities, e.g. lunchtime football matches, after-school Drama Club

- liaising with outside agencies (e.g. those dealing with drug/alcohol abuse, rape crisis)

- liaising with LMs in other schools about primary-secondary transfer.

Some schools stressed that work with individual pupils was the core task of LMs; other activities, such as those listed above, were *'the icing on the cake'*. Nevertheless, they were important. There was an emphasis on LMs dealing with families. One interviewee observed:

> [The LMs'] *role is to support children **and their families** [our emphasis] who are experiencing difficulties. Parents don't like coming into school, but the LMs have time to deal with them in a personal, informal way. They have more flexibility. They build relationships with parents and become approachable.*

There were opposed views about whether LMs should work in the classroom. In some schools it was understood as part of their role, but in other cases LMs went into the classroom only in exceptional circumstances (instances mentioned were helping a child with a broken arm, and mediating on behalf of mentored pupils).

Some Clusters anticipated that their LMs would play a key role in primary-secondary transition. In one case, it had been arranged that a primary LM would pay regular visits to the local secondary school next term, and hold open surgeries for children from the primary feeder. They would see a familiar face, and be able to talk to the LM about any difficulties they were experiencing. The surgeries would be open to all children from the primary school, although the LM's current Year 6 mentees would be told about the visits to ensure that they had the opportunity of attending.

3.1.2 Funding and training

On average, three-quarters (76 per cent) of LM funding in secondary schools was used on salaries, with another 13 per cent spent on training. Primary schools spent an even higher proportion on salaries, and much less (only six per cent) on training.

The case-study Learning Mentors who had been on the national training course reported (directly, or via their line managers) that they had found it useful. One school, however, reported that *'training was fantastic, but too late'*. As a result, the LMs were *'starting blind'*, so their roles and responsibilities were vague: *'We didn't pitch it right at first ... it was an experimental year'*.

In most Clusters, the LMs met regularly, in some cases weekly. The dividing line between formal training and general discussion/information exchange was not always clear, but it seemed that the meetings tended to serve both purposes. Some interviewees mentioned that local training or talks had been provided by representatives from other Clusters or EiC areas. Some LMs were working towards qualifications, and were given time to prepare their portfolios. One interviewee observed: *'They are largely involved in self-supported training. They have access to a pack of books and resources ... The Learning Mentors are very motivated'*.

Even if no formal training was involved, meeting with other LMs was perceived as useful. A primary LM described it as *'essential'*, because *'some have lots of experience'*; moreover, she wanted to be kept up to date with developments relating to national initiatives, in order to know what kind of impact it would have in her context.

3.1.3 Expectations of Learning Mentors

Interviewees were asked what their expectations of LMs had been, and whether these had been realised. This question was particularly relevant to those schools which had not previously had a member of staff in that kind of role. Although respondents found it difficult to identify a specific impact, they were very positive about the work of the LMs. The Learning Mentor coordinator in a high-performing school observed:

> *The anticipated impact is an unknown. The* [pupils] *trust them as mediators. The mentors help them make decisions, they help them say 'How can we avoid trouble in the future?' They help them with strategies, to develop strategic ideas. The LMs have made themselves invaluable, I don't know what I would have done without them, or how we managed before...*

In response to the question *'Have your expectations been realised?'*, the deputy headteacher of a primary school answered *'Very much so'*. She commented:

> *It's hard as a class-based teacher to give emotional support. The impact* [of the LM] *is a lot of very small steps. But a lot of the children in my class go to* [the LM]*, and they've come alive ... Everything is geared to higher percentages, but self-esteem and aspiration come before attainment ...*

Supporting children emotionally, through difficult periods, will have a positive effect on attainment.

3.1.4 Impact on mentees

Interviewees were asked whether there had been any positive or negative effects on pupils supported by the LMs. The LMs were clearly popular with most pupils. Two interviewees (from different Clusters) remarked that children who were not supported by an LM had asked if they could have one, *'so clearly those who are assigned LMs have given positive feedback'*. A third interviewee observed that none of the mentored children had missed an appointment: *'they are all keen to go'*. Moreover, one remarked that *'When the LMs are not in school, it's really noticeable. We are inundated with pupils wanting to know where they are'*. It was reported that some pupils in one school had refused mentoring, but they were clearly exceptions to the general rule.

A number of interviewees reported that the LMs had had a positive effect on behaviour and/or attendance, although they added that the impact was hard to measure: it was visible but not quantifiable. Improvement in emotional health was considered particularly difficult to judge; however, one teacher observed:

> *It's a long-term thing, but there are obviously more smiles. One girl was very aggressive, never smiled, now she is laughing, joining in, generally more sociable.*

No negative impacts were reported, but interviewees voiced a few concerns. One interviewee worried that pupils might become too attached to their LM. Similarly, one school reported instances of jealousy: children did not like it if others were given attention by *'my Learning Mentor'*. Another interviewee reported overhearing a parent (who had been contacted by the LM) complaining about the LM *'sticking her nose into my business'*. Finally, one headteacher noted the possibility that the work of the LMs could uncover previously undiscovered problems, which could lead to significant changes in pupils' lives.

3.1.5 Impact on other pupils

In response to a question about the impact of LMs on other pupils (i.e. those not assigned a Learning Mentor), some interviewees said they were not aware of any such impact, perhaps because it was *'early days'*. Four interviewees again made the point that several pupils were keen to have their own LM: *'Other children want to be involved. It is seen as something special, there is no stigma'*. *'Some pupils are*

jealous of the relationship – there are more [pupils] *who want mentors than there are* [mentors] *available.'*

Two interviewees expressed the view that, if the behaviour of mentored pupils improved, this would have an indirect beneficial impact on other pupils: *'There is less disruption in class as a result of the time pupils have spent with LMs'*. However, one interviewee added: *'The problem is, there are not enough LMs, which makes it difficult to have a huge impact'*.

The impact on other pupils depended to some extent on how the role of the LMs was understood. In one school, where the Cluster-funded LM was not distinguished from other 'learning support teaching assistants', it was observed that *'if LSTAs are working with* [mentored] *pupils in the classroom, they will not work exclusively with these pupils',* and hence other pupils would get to know them and benefit from their work. By contrast, a Learning Mentor from a different school reported that there was a clear distinction between her work and that of LSAs: *'Learning assistants work in the classroom with children in groups, but I am assigned to individuals. It was made clear to me when I started the job that I would not be asked to work in the classroom'*.

3.1.6 Evaluation and monitoring

Most interviewees reported that the work of the LMs was monitored at school and/or Cluster level. In the school mentioned above, where the Cluster-funded LM was a member of a wider learning support team, there would be team meetings (with the headteacher present); in other schools, where the LM had a more individual role, there were weekly meetings between the LM and his/her line manager, sometimes with the headteacher as well. In this way, the school's senior management would be kept up to date with the LM's work and could provide appropriate guidance as necessary.

Individual success stories were considered to be indicators of the success of the initiative. One LM reported that:

> *We carry out monitoring through progress reports to teachers. I personally check attendance records, truancy levels, absences. I liaise with the key stage managers. So far, two pupils have exited from the LM programme, with certificates.*

An interviewee from another school in the same Cluster observed:

> *We look at pupil records as evidence and there is follow-through of pupils. Proof of the value* [of the scheme] *is in individual pupils – for example, some go from very poor attendance to almost one hundred per cent.*

We noted above that most Clusters organised regular meetings for their Learning Mentors. In this context, some schools reported that the Cluster's lead LM, or LM coordinator, oversaw the work of individual LMs and perhaps came in to the school to observe.

Evaluation was acknowledged to be difficult. It was hoped that LMs would have an impact on emotional health and self-esteem, but as one interviewee observed, these are difficult to quantify. Ultimately, schools hoped for an improvement in examination results, but clearly this would take time to realise (and even then, it would not be easy to attribute any gains directly to the work of the LMs). Not surprisingly, therefore, some schools said that they had not yet considered how to measure academic progress.

One interviewee reported, however, that all LMs in their Cluster had to complete evaluation forms for the Cluster coordinator, who them wrote a report. In this way, *'good practice is shared and disseminated'*. The forms apparently detail improvements in mentored pupils' work and behaviour, although the interviewee was unable to supply any details.

It was reported that two other Clusters were in the process of setting up monitoring and evaluation procedures.

3.1.7 Perceptions of Learning Mentors

Overall, it seems that the high expectations of LMs had been fulfilled. There had been some uncertainty at first, particularly in those schools where the role was unfamiliar. Misunderstandings had to be corrected: for example, in one school, *'some staff got the wrong end of the stick'* and thought the LM was someone to whom they could send misbehaving pupils. The interviewee perceived a need to set up meetings between teachers and LMs to clarify their role.

In another school, *'there was a bit of resentment at first'*, because the LM did not have to do any teaching, *'but now staff know what she is doing, they have accepted her'*. This was perhaps due to the fact that the LM concerned *'had a well-organised start – she was quiet, finding things out, not gung ho'*. She had *'got the trust of the kids'*, and this was also true of other LMs in the case-study schools. Moreover, it was reported that the parents of mentored children had (with exceptions, perhaps) been

'pretty good about it'.   One mother was said to be *'really happy'*, because her daughter, who had been bullied, now had someone she could go and talk to when this happened.   The interviewee added *'Teachers don't have the time'*.   This sums up the overall impression of LMs' work – they were able to do things which were recognised as important, but which teachers simply did not have time for.   Interviewees were in no doubt that their work was valuable, even if the impact was difficult to measure.

3.2   The Learning Support Unit Strand

The original intention of EC was that each Cluster would have a number of learning support units (LSUs), located in what partnerships agreed to be the most appropriate schools.   Survey respondents were therefore asked whether they had an LSU on site, or whether they had access to an LSU.   Of the 35 secondary schools, 18 said that they had an LSU on site, and only one that they had access to an LSU elsewhere.   Not surprisingly, perhaps, the proportion of primary schools with an available LSU was much lower: only five of the 71 had one on site, and a further seven had access.   This means that a large majority of primary schools, and nearly half of the secondary schools, were without access to an LSU; evidently the concept of sharing LSUs between Cluster schools had not materialised.

Schools were asked whether, before Clusters, they had a unit where pupils who needed particularly intensive support could spend some of their time.   Nineteen of the secondary schools said that they did, including the large majority of those with an LSU on site.   This suggests that, in most cases, the Cluster LSUs were developed from existing provision.   Interestingly, five of the schools which reported they had no LSU, nor access to an LSU, said that they had specialist provision pre-Clusters.   As it seems unlikely that this provision would have ended, it suggests that some schools had units similar to LSUs, but not classified as such (this was confirmed by the case-study visits – see further below).   Of the 12 primary schools with an LSU on site, or access to an LSU, only one reported having a specialist unit pre-Clusters.

Of the eight schools visited, two (both secondary schools) had LSUs on site.   The only school which reported having access to an LSU was a high-performing school, and the headteacher commented that he had never used the LSU, and did not anticipate using it: *'The level of difficulty our* [pupils] *have would not justify sending them there'*. Conversely, another school said that they did not have access to an LSU, even though there were four within their Cluster.   A primary headteacher said she understood that there was an LSU at the local secondary school, but it was not open to primary

children; she added that she would not use it anyway, as they *'preferred to manage things within the school'*.

Comments from interviewees suggest that there may have been some uncertainty about interpreting the question *'Does your school have access to a Learning Support Unit?'*. As noted in the recently-published Good Practice Guidelines (DfES, 2002), many schools have avoided the term 'unit' and use an alternative name for their LSU. This raises the question of definition. One of the schools which said they had no LSU did have a 'pastoral support unit', while another had a 'nurture assessment unit'; from the brief descriptions given, both sounded similar in function and purpose to our understanding of an LSU. The headteacher of one of these schools said that she was not keen on LSUs, referring to them as '*sin bins*'; this negative perception of LSUs indicates that their purpose is not fully understood.

It is possible therefore that LSUs may be more prevalent than the survey results indicate, if the term is understood to include units with similar purpose but different names. On the other hand, it may be that some respondents understood the question to refer exclusively to LSUs funded by the EC initiative. This illustrates the importance of phrasing the question precisely, in order to gain the fullest and most accurate picture of the current situation.

Both of the case-study schools with an LSU on site said that they had had a unit pre-Clusters which was, in the words of one interviewee, *'sort of similar, but not quite the same'*. According to the other interviewee, the pre-Clusters unit had been a withdrawal facility for children on-call from lessons: it succeeded in that purpose, but was not an LSU, so *'I needed to do some re-educating of pupils as to the perception of its use'*.

Both LSUs were exclusively for pupils at the schools where they were situated; this confirms the picture based on reports of other interviewees, that LSUs are rarely shared. One school *'could fill every space two or three times over'*, but the interviewee thought that another school in the Cluster had an 'open' LSU.

3.2.1 Staffing and funding

Schools with LSUs on site were asked to respond to some questions relating to staffing and funding. Most LSUs had one teacher, though a few had more (the maximum was three). In terms of support staff, the numbers varied from 0.5 to four, although the majority of secondary LSUs had one, and a few did not answer the

question, suggesting that they functioned without any support staff. Schools were asked whether staffing the LSU had proved difficult, not very difficult, or not at all difficult. Four of the five primary LSUs, but only four of the 18 secondary LSUs, had found it difficult.

Both of the case-study LSU managers were external appointments. One unit had an additional teacher for three days a week, and a part-time LSU assistant. The other had two LSAs, but this was to be changed to one LSA and one full-time teaching post: *'This will allow us to have two days of full teaching and two days to work with smaller groups of pupils'*.

One LSU manager had had two days training: one was described as *'a waste of time'*, while the other was *'excellent ... It consolidated what we were already doing'*. The other LSU manager had not had any specific training, although she had attended the national conference, which had provided an opportunity to share good practice with other LSU coordinators. Both expressed the view that further training was unnecessary, as a background in special needs/behaviour management was sufficient. However, one interviewee was planning training for other members of staff (not just those working within the LSU), in order to raise awareness. The LSU manager had budgeted for the training, but observed that *'Staff cover is an issue for training activities'*.

In terms of funding, the five primary LSUs had spent at least 90 per cent of their allocation on salaries. Thirteen of the secondary LSUs provided a complete breakdown of expenditure, which reflected a more variable pattern, with up to 40 per cent devoted to buildings and refurbishment, up to 24 per cent on ICT hardware and up to 20 per cent on specialist teaching materials. On average, just over three-quarters (78 per cent) was devoted to salaries or supply cover, but spending in this category ranged from 38 per cent to 100 per cent.

3.2.2 Attendance at LSUs

Schools with an LSU on site, or with access to an LSU, were asked how many pupils in each year group had attended the LSU during the autumn 2001 term. For secondary schools, the numbers ranged from 0 to 20, with a mean between 5 and 6 in each of Years 7, 8 and 9 and around three in Years 10 and 11. The most common pattern of attendance was for 7-12 weeks, but short periods (2-5 days and 2-6 weeks) were also frequent. Four schools said that pupils most commonly attended part-time, two full-time and nine for a combination of part-time and full-time.

In primary schools, the numbers attending LSUs were smaller: a range of 0 to 10, and an average of two pupils in Years 5 and 6, even lower numbers in Years 3 and 4. Very few schools responded to the questions about patterns of attendance, which suggests that those completing the questionnaire knew little about the operation of the LSUs.

The two LSUs whose managers were interviewed were both based in secondary schools. One catered for all year groups, the other only for Years 7 to 9: *'By Year 10, it is too late to do anything useful with pupils'*. Pupils were referred mainly because of behavioural issues: *'Some of their behaviour is very challenging'*. They would be identified initially by teachers. One school had established a formal referral process:

> *A computer system has been set up to administer the referral process, which goes through a number of formal stages, or steps, before pupils are accepted. It works like this. If a pupil is* [behaving] *so bad* [in class], *they have an 'on-call'. One member of staff goes to the room and takes them out. You can negotiate pupils back into the room, but sometimes not. So pupils go somewhere to calm down, near the office. They get a red 'on call' slip written, which goes to the deputy head, who makes referrals to the unit. If they accumulate enough points, the next stage is the parents are asked to come in, then they are given one day out, then governors are consulted and finally exclusion. The aim of this staged process is to give the pupils lots of opportunities to go back and get it right. It operates on an accumulation of points. Pupils get put on different sorts of report, green report, then yellow, then red. The green report is the first suspicion that things are going wrong. On yellow, they report to the head of year, on red to a senior member of staff. Then they get referred to the LSU.*

The interviewee went on to say, however, that this process was due to be changed, with the aim of identifying potential pupils at an earlier stage: *'We are getting better at identifying the children who might benefit from coming to the LSU ... we are aiming to access more pupils, to be more pro-active ... our problem is, we are not doing enough, there are too few pupils being reached'*.

Seven pupils had attended the Unit since its opening. Originally, the length of stay had been 12 weeks, but this had been extended to two terms. However, it was felt that for some pupils this was too long – they might enjoy being in the LSU and not wish to return to regular classes. During their stay in the LSU, there would be weekly meetings with relevant staff, and also regular meetings with parents, to review progress. A staged return to lessons would then be negotiated, with the aim of full re-integration by the end of the second term.

We ask them, 'Let's see which lessons you can go back to, where are things going right?', then we draw up a timetable ... the pupils are supported back into lessons with LSAs and LMs. There are, however, finite resources, so we try to guarantee that pupils will be supported in at least their first three lessons. The re-entry process gets harder as they go back into more lessons, but hopefully the time spent in the LSU has an effect, their self-esteem is raised, their achievements ... we encourage their subject teachers to find out what they have done, some members of staff now come to the LSU to see what their pupils are doing.

3.2.3 The LSU curriculum

Interviewees were asked whether pupils followed the same curriculum as in normal classes. The two LSUs represented had different approaches. In one case, the intention was to follow the curriculum as far as possible, though using different activities. Teachers would provide work which could be covered by staff who were not expert in the relevant subject areas. The LSU manager did spend some time on 'life skills' activities (otherwise *'it is a constant battle'*), but because the LSU had to follow the standard curriculum, there was no time for behaviour therapy.

The other LSU had a more radical approach:

The same curriculum is not followed. It is not possible, we tried to do this but it can't be done and the LSU would then be a school. So in the morning we have lessons, then at mid-day Options, followed by lunch break with the pupils' tutor group, then lessons in the last period. We concentrate in the LSU on English, maths, sciences and therapeutic activity, with bits for bullying, particular difficulties.

The LSU manager regretted that not enough was done in terms of therapy, and noted that input formerly obtained from the LEA's Behaviour Support Service was no longer available. He felt that, in the LSU:

Period five in the school day needs to be addressing behaviour with strategies like Circle Time, making videos, anger management, dealing with issues such as bullying etc., which should be done daily.

3.2.4 Impact of the LSUs

One interviewee said that, because of the LSU, pupils had come to school who otherwise (she believed) would have truanted. Moreover, *'They do more work in the Unit – surprise themselves about how much work there is in their books. They get more personal attention, which helps them work'*. The other LSU manager believed

that the unit would reduce the number of permanent exclusions, and improve the quality of learning for pupils who did not attend:

> *If you identify, say, 20 pupils with behaviour problems, you can construct a framework for them to be addressed, and arrange strategies to modify their behaviour. If you can change them just a little bit, then this will have an effect on the others. A small change can affect many.*

The only reported negative impact of an LSU was that some pupils go to the Unit when they should be in class, because they prefer it there. LSU staff found this a problem, as they wished to maintain a welcoming environment, but realised that the children needed to be in lessons.

3.2.5 Monitoring and evaluation

It was noted that it was difficult to measure the impact of an LSU, since it aims to deal with emotional difficulties and issues such as self-esteem which are not easily quantifiable. Further, it would take time for any impact to be realised. One interviewee said, however, that she had to fill in evaluation forms for the Cluster coordinator. In the other Cluster, the LSU manager reported that there was no formal monitoring, but he had completed a review and produced a report for the headteacher.

3.3   The Gifted and Talented Strand

This section focuses on the Gifted and Talented Strand. In particular, the following issues are discussed:

♦ the coordination of the Gifted and Talented Strand

♦ gifted and talented pupils

♦ provision for the gifted and talented

♦ staff training and networking

♦ distribution of gifted and talented funds

♦ monitoring and evaluation of the Gifted and Talented Strand

♦ issues and challenges related to the Gifted and Talented Strand

♦ the effect of the Gifted and Talented Strand on pupils.

3.3.1 Coordinating the Gifted and Talented Strand

Of the 71 primary schools included in the questionnaire survey, 61 had a responsible teacher for gifted and talented pupils, and all 35 secondary schools had a coordinator

for pupils identified as gifted and talented. In primary schools, an average of 15 per cent of the responsible teachers' time was designated for work relating to gifted and talented pupils. In secondary schools, gifted and talented coordinators had been designated an average of 12 per cent of their time for such work. The majority of responsible teachers and coordinators held other specific posts of responsibility; only nine teachers in primary schools and eight in secondary schools did not hold other posts. In primary schools, teachers responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand were most often subject coordinators/managers or senior teachers, whereas gifted and talented coordinators in secondary schools were most frequently heads of department.

In primary and secondary schools, the majority of responsible teachers/coordinators were appointed in September 2001, although some were appointed earlier, and others later. It was evident from interviews in schools, that where they were appointed later, some of the work in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand was still in its early stages of development.

Interviews with gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators in schools revealed that the majority had been 'recruited' internally for the role because of their previous backgrounds and experience, or had volunteered because of their own personal interest. However, in one secondary school, the gifted and talented coordinator had been given the role for more pragmatic reasons. The original coordinator had '*left the school under a cloud*', which meant the school faced staffing problems. The SENCO, who had been involved in the coordination of the Learning Mentor strand, was asked to take responsibility for the Gifted and Talented Strand because she was aware of the Cluster initiative and how it operated. The person responsible for the Learning Support Unit took on the responsibility for the Learning Mentors, and the SENCO was then available to take over the Gifted and Talented Strand. It was of course more usual for the SENCO to work with 'the bottom end', so the possibility of working with 'the top end' was '*refreshing*'.

In one secondary school, the gifted and talented funding had been used to expand staff responsibility for provision for gifted and talented pupils: three coordinators had been appointed internally to coordinate provision within three specific subjects (RE, PE and art).

It was not unusual for the person responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand to be a senior teacher or member of the school senior management team, indicating the status of the strand. In all of the schools visited, organising and managing the Gifted

and Talented Strand was not the only responsibility held by responsible teachers/coordinators, which often meant added pressure. However, many personal gains were identified by those who had taken on the role, including professional development (three mentioned gaining salary points) and the personal satisfaction associated with seeing pupils motivated by the opportunities given to them. Comments included:

> *It is refreshing to be bombarded by bright buttons who are dead keen...*
>
> *The kids think it is wonderful that I am responsible for them doing extra things...it is good for my ego.*
>
> *I have gained personal satisfaction...seeing their faces and reactions...we make them feel special.*

The role of gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators involved the identification of gifted and talented pupils, making teachers aware of who they were and what provision should be made for them, and ensuring that such provision was made.

It is worth noting that the responsible teacher in one primary school was dissatisfied with the level of support offered by the gifted and talented coordinator for the whole Cluster. In the interviewee's opinion, the role of the Cluster coordinator did not appear to have been clearly defined. She commented, '*There is no support from outside*', and as a result felt '*disheartened*'.

3.3.2 Gifted and talented pupils

Table 3.1 illustrates the average percentage of gifted and talented pupils in each year group. Years 5 and 6 had the highest proportion of gifted and talented pupils, with one in eight pupils being identified as such.

Table 3.1   **The average percentage of Gifted and Talented pupils in schools**

Year Group	Average percentage of Gifted and Talented Pupils
PRIMARY	
3	8
4	8
5	12
6	13
SECONDARY	
7	10
8	11
9	10
10	11
11	9
12	9
13	10

Interviews with key staff in Cluster schools, namely the gifted and talented responsible teacher/coordinator, allowed for exploration of how pupils were identified as gifted or talented. Following DfES guidance, schools had aimed to select the top ten per cent of pupils to be on the gifted and talented register: seven per cent (two thirds) gifted and three per cent (one third) talented. However, in some cases (as indicated by Table 3.1), more than the top ten per cent of pupils were identified as gifted and talented, '*as it is difficult to cut it off*'.

Gifted pupils were identified by analysing test results, such as cognitive aptitude tests (CATs) and end of key stage assessment results. Recommendations from heads of department, heads of year and subject teachers were also given, as were recommendations by parents and peers in some cases. In addition, secondary schools sought information from their feeder primary schools about who should be identified. Talented pupils were identified following teacher, parent, and in some cases peer, recommendations. In one school, the coordinator was thinking about giving pupils the opportunity of nominating themselves next year. In another school, gifted and talented pupils had not yet been identified at the time of the interview, as the coordinator was still receiving training on how to identify such pupils.

3.3.3 Provision for the Gifted and Talented

Six of the eight schools visited had made no provision for gifted and talented pupils prior to involvement in the Cluster initiative. As one coordinator stated, '*It was a very new idea…we started from nothingness*'. Moreover, neither of the two schools which had previously made some provision had a formal policy, rather they simply organised

'*add-on or enrichment projects*', such as summer school activities for pupils who were talented artists.

Since being involved in the Cluster initiative, a substantial amount of time had been spent identifying pupils as gifted and talented, which meant it was still '*early days*' in terms of provision. One school was in a '*slight limbo period*' between the identification of pupils and provision, but considered this preferable to '*rushing through the implementation of the programme*'. In another school, one responsible teacher was still involved in training on how to identify gifted and talented pupils, and so it was too early to talk about provision.

The other six schools had organised a mixture of activities on a range of different scales. One secondary school coordinator had simply started by organising out-of-school activities for pupils, such as trips to the local university, and by purchasing resources, including revision books. She recognised the importance of embedding provision for gifted and talented pupils in the curriculum, and planned to explore how to do so in the next academic year.

The other schools had reviewed and extended lesson plans and schemes of work to cater for gifted and talented pupils in lessons (particularly the core subjects for gifted pupils, and music, art and PE for talented pupils). For instance, one primary school had focused on a literacy and numeracy project for gifted pupils in Year 6, which had replaced timetabled lessons. A secondary school had provided gifted and talented pupils with the opportunity to take PE GCSE exams early, in Year 9: they could then take a coaching qualification in Year 11.

Another secondary school ran 'immersion projects' for gifted and talented pupils. For instance, pupils in Years 7 to 9 and Year 6 (from the local primary feeder school) were involved in a cross-curricular ICT project, which involved them spending a week off timetable designing a child's mobile telephone. The project was run on the Internet, so pupils could continue with their work at home. The timetable for the week was flexible, in that pupils could stay late if desired. They did not have to wear school uniform, '*which made them feel special*'. The project was thought to have been valuable in terms of raising self-esteem, which was one of the aims. The project was going to be replicated in other curriculum areas, such as history and art.

In addition to the important work going on within the curriculum, enrichment activities in and out of school had been provided, such as coaching for talented pupils, summer

school events and talent shows. It should be noted, however, that due to the time constraints of the gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators, provision was not always as widespread as they would have liked. Moreover, some gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had faced difficulties in providing for gifted and talented pupils. These issues are discussed further in Section 3.3.7.

3.3.4 Training and Networking for Staff

Six of the eight gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had been able to attend the national training course. The training was considered to be of some value, although five responsible teachers/coordinators were quite critical about certain aspects of the course. One of the main objections was that coordinators were unaware initially that the course was going to be accredited, and thought this was unnecessary and felt patronised. As one coordinator commented, '*The pressure to complete an assignment was entirely inappropriate*'. The other main criticism was that although the course had been valuable in terms of gaining knowledge and understanding (particularly in relation to identifying gifted and talented pupils), it failed to offer enough practical suggestions in terms of classroom activities: '*How do you really provide for the gifted in the classroom...how do you stimulate and stretch these children?*'

The general consensus was that networking with other gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators was more informative than formal training. Exchanging ideas and real experiences was considered to be of value. However, even though meetings for coordinators were arranged at a Cluster level, it was not always easy for them to attend every one due to other pressures. As an alternative, one Cluster had organised 'Mail Base Links' (an email forum) for gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators. This meant that ideas could be exchanged quickly without having to find time to meet. A coordinator in another Cluster had benefited greatly from liaison with a more successful school in the Cluster: '*The [ ] school has been brilliant...in an advisory role they have been useful*'.

There had been little training for staff other than the person with overall responsibility for the strand. However, most gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had organised INSET or more informal feedback sessions for other staff based on their own formal training, most often in relation to the identification of gifted and talented pupils.

3.3.5 Distribution of Gifted and Talented Funding

The questionnaire survey sought information on how funding for the Gifted and Talented Strand had been allocated. The findings are illustrated in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2   The distribution of Gifted and Talented funds

Allocation of funding	Average percentage of G&T funds allocated in *primary* schools	Average percentage of G&T funds allocated in *secondary* schools
Teachers salaries or supply cover	42	17
Salary points to the responsible teacher/coordinator	24	25
Teaching materials	11	21
Out-of-school activities	11	16
INSET	9	13
Other	3	8
N	47	26

The Ns in the table refer to the number of respondents who provided a complete breakdown of expenditure.

The table shows that the highest proportion of funding was allocated to teaching salaries or supply cover, or to salary points awarded to staff responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand.

3.3.6 Monitoring and evaluation of the Gifted and Talented Strand

Responsible teachers/coordinators were asked whether any procedures existed for monitoring and evaluating the work with gifted and talented pupils. As provision for gifted and talented was in its early stages, monitoring and evaluation was '*in its infancy*'.

In some cases, monitoring procedures appeared to exist at Cluster level. For instance, in one Cluster, reports were produced by gifted and talented coordinators on a regular basis, usually each term. These were based on a proforma designed at a Cluster level, so that schools provided consistent information. The gifted and talented coordinator for the whole Cluster had visited schools and interviewed staff about the progress of strand activities and the impact they were having. However, in some Clusters individual schools had to decide on and implement their own monitoring procedures, which were not formally in place at the time of interview. Some schools had planned how they would monitor progress in the near future: two mentioned value-added

analysis, although they commented that it would be almost two years before an impact on GCSE results could be identified. In some cases, pupils had been asked by coordinators to give their views of activities by completing evaluation forms.

3.3.7 Issues and challenges related to the Gifted and Talented Strand

The following issues and challenges in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand were identified by coordinators and responsible teachers:

- **Time**. All of the responsible teachers/coordinator in case-study schools had other responsibilities within schools, which meant they had other commitments. Some coordinators were concerned about their workload, and stressed that this could have a negative impact on the progress of the Gifted and Talented Strand. In one primary school, for instance, the responsible teacher had sole responsibility for identification of gifted and talented pupils, developing activities for the gifted and talented and for delivering them, as well as being the deputy headteacher and assessment coordinator. She said, '*There is only one of me*'. Another coordinator stressed, '*The time demands for the gifted and talented coordinator are much greater than anyone anticipated*'.

- **Starting from scratch**. In the majority of schools, there had been no provision for gifted and talented pupils prior to the Cluster initiative. A general concern was '*how to make it an integral part of what children do, rather than a bolt-on extra*'. Revising schemes of work and lesson plans was a considerable challenge in schools with no previous provision. However, the importance of provision being embedded in the curriculum was appreciated.

- **Provision for talented pupils**. One coordinator expressed concern about how to provide for talented pupils. Identifying talented pupils had not been a problem, but '*knowing where to get the provision and how to organise it…knowing the contacts*' had proved difficult. The Cluster coordinator for the Gifted and Talented Strand had provided advice or support.

- **Stimulating gifted pupils in the classroom**. It was evident that the national training for gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had not provided enough examples of practical activities to use in the classroom, which would stimulate and motivate gifted pupils. As one gifted and talented responsible teacher commented, '*There is a need for basic training for teachers on how to stimulate and stretch these children*'.

Some coordinators also suggested that the Gifted and Talented Strand could have a negative effect on some pupils. However, many positive benefits for pupils were also identified. The effect of the strand on pupils is discussed in the following section.

3.3.8 The effect of the Gifted and Talented Strand on Pupils

Coordinators and responsible teachers were asked their views on the positive and negative effects of the Gifted and Talented Strand on pupils. Their views are discussed below.

Positive effect on gifted and talented pupils

The general consensus among responsible teachers/coordinators was that pupils identified as gifted or talented were motivated and enthused. Comments included:

> *In terms of attitudes and aspirations, it has been an outstanding success.*

> *The change in them has been clearly visible, in that they have improved motivation, simply because they have been singled out this way.*

> *If you make them realise they have a talent and make them feel special, it will spill out into the academic performance.*

Gifted and talented pupils were thought to enjoy and appreciate the opportunities that had been given to them: '*It makes them feel special...their faces light up*'. This was particularly the case with talented pupils who perhaps lacked academic ability, but were being praised for other talents.

Negative effects on gifted and talented pupils

Some responsible teachers/coordinators were slightly concerned that being identified as gifted or talented could make pupils feel pressured. For instance, parental and staff expectations of them were raised. Some coordinators also mentioned that they were worried about the 'boffin' or 'swot' labels that might be attached to gifted and talented pupils by others, which might '*ruin street credibility*' and de-motivate gifted and talented pupils. Some said that there was no evidence of this, and that other pupils were pleased to see their peers do well. However, to avoid these problems in case they arose, some schools decided not to publicise the names of gifted and talented pupils. In fact, in some cases, gifted and talented pupils were not themselves aware that they had been identified as such.

Impact on other pupils

Four coordinators thought that the positive attitudes of the gifted and talented pupils had spread throughout the rest of the school: '*It will up their* [other pupils'] *aspirations*'. Moreover, the changes in classroom practice were thought to have benefited everyone: '*Changes in classroom practice for the gifted and talented has*

affected everyone beneficially...it raises expectations'. There was some concern that a number of pupils were at the top but had not quite made it onto the gifted and talented register, which could make them feel excluded and de-motivate them. As one coordinator stressed, '*One or two feel they have been unjustifiably excluded*'. However, in some schools the names of gifted and talented pupils were not known to other pupils, and activities were open to others so that they could also benefit. Moreover, it was perceived that not quite making it onto the gifted and talented register could motivate some pupils to work harder.

3.4   The Tailored Strand

This section focuses on the Tailored Strand. Where possible, statistical data collected from the school survey questionnaire is used to complement that collected as part of the individual school studies. Unlike the other strands of EC, there is a great deal of scope for flexibility in the focus of the Tailored Strand, designed as it is to meet specific local needs and circumstances. As might therefore be expected, the work being undertaken is very diverse. In order to provide an indication of the scope of the Strand, the first two parts of the section describe the focus of the strand within individual schools, classified into broad areas, and of the activities so far undertaken within these areas. The other parts of the section examine the key aspects of the management of the Strand, including staffing involvement and training, the implementation issues that have emerged to date, and how the work within the strand is being monitored and evaluated. The section concludes with an examination of perceptions of the success of the strand so far.

3.4.1   The focus of the Tailored Strand

The main focus of the Tailored Strand within each Cluster has been determined at Partnership level, where there is general agreement on the main issues that need to be addressed. In some Clusters there is a different focus for Tailored Strand activity in primary and secondary schools. Some Clusters have opted for a broad focus to the Strand that can be fine-tuned to reflect the specific needs of individual schools and even pupils with the Cluster schools.

The school survey questionnaire sought evidence on the focus of the Tailored Strand within the primary and secondary schools involved in the 11 Clusters. Respondents were able to list up to three separate activities. These were grouped according to several broad categories to aid analysis and discussion. Table 3.3 provides details of the statistical data obtained for both the primary and the secondary schools responding.

Table 3.3   Focus of the Tailored Strand

Focus of activity	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
Curriculum/teaching and learning focus	29	22
Parents/family focus	19	9
Subject-specific focus	18	2
Cultural focus	11	6
Community focus	10	6
Other	22	3
None at present	3	-
No response/uncodeable	1	1
N =	**71**	**35**

A multiple response question.

For primary and secondary schools, 'curriculum/teaching and learning' was the most popular choice for the focus of the Tailored Strand (29 of the 71 primary schools and 22 of the 35 secondary schools). This category was distinct from that which had a subject-specific focus. It included, for example, the development of thinking and independent learning skills, improving curriculum provision through the development of curriculum enrichment activities, the provision of additional examination courses, the development of on-line learning, and the removal or reduction of specific barriers to learning. Because of its important impact on learning, the management of transition was also included in this category and is examined in detail in Section 4.2.

'Parents/family focus' was the second most popular choice for the focus of the Tailored Strand for both primary (19) and secondary (9) schools. Activities were designed to increase parental involvement in, and support of, the child's learning. Along with the raising of parental awareness, specific attention was directed towards the provision of workshops and other programmes for parents and families, and the development of family partnerships.

The rankings of the remaining categories for the two sectors varied. Sector activities with a subject-specific focus, for example, literacy, were chosen as the focus of the Tailored Strand by 18 primary schools. However, in the secondary sector, only two schools had opted for a subject-specific focus.

In the secondary sector, the 'cultural' and 'community' categories ranked equal third (each was the focus of the Tailored Strand in six schools). Through the cultural focus there was a concern to address aspects of cultural deprivation and to develop pupil

awareness of other cultures. The community category included the building of civic pride, addressing community change and turbulence, the identification and support of community needs, and the work of EC-appointed 'Community Development Workers'.

In the primary schools, the 'other' category was very diverse and included a focus on attendance and punctuality issues, addressing pupil mobility and transience, and a range of pupil issues such as poor self-esteem and confidence, disaffection, and attitudes towards learning.

3.4.2 Tailored Strand activities

In order to gain some indication of the progress of the Tailored Strand within individual schools, the school survey questionnaire asked respondents to describe up to three activities carried out thus far. As before, these were grouped into broad categories. Table 3.4 provides details of the statistical data obtained for the responding primary and secondary schools.

Table 3.4   Activities undertaken as part of the Tailored Strand

Activity	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
Preparatory work	34	15
Parents/family	20	6
Curriculum/Teaching and learning	18	16
Administration	5	1
Community	2	1
Other	16	9
None/little	13	2
No response/uncodeable	4	2
N =	**71**	**35**

A multiple response question.

It is perhaps to be expected that in the early stages of the initiative the emphasis will be on activities that might be described as 'preparatory'. This category included such activities as reviews of current provision, planning activities such as the establishment of working groups, allocation of funds and the setting up of facilities, the appointment and training of staff, and the identification of pupil cohorts for specific activities. This was the highest-ranked category in the primary sector, mentioned by 34 primary schools, and the second highest in the secondary sector, mentioned by 15 schools.

In the secondary schools, the highest-ranked category, mentioned by 16 schools, was 'curriculum/teaching and learning'. This was less of a focus in the primary schools (mentioned by 18 schools). Specific activities reported included a variety of curriculum enrichment activities, such as theatre and arts visits and artists in residence, the development of thinking, learning, problem-solving and study skills, promoting independent learning, and involvement in specific programmes such as the 'Comenius' project and IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All).

Two of the schools visited reported an emphasis within the Tailored Strand on curriculum/teaching and learning. One school reported that the Cluster had adopted the broad focus on teaching and learning to enable individual schools to tackle different aspects. The Cluster coordinator was looking at accelerated learning including brain gym. This had been tried at the school to see if it helped to calm the children down after lunch. It was reported that an unexpected benefit of this had been helping lower ability pupils with their writing, in particular those who had problems with 'b' and 'd' reversal.

Another school was focusing attention on speaking and listening. This was tied in very closely with the School Development Plan: speaking and listening run through all of the subject plans and had been identified as a whole school issue on the grounds that '*poor language skills underpin everything*.' A speaking and listening 'playground' had been designed and was in the process of being developed. Intended for use by the whole school but with a specific focus on key stage 1, this was a resource-based playground with activities to stimulate speaking and listening, to build vocabulary and to develop pupils' social skills. It was intended that specific lessons would be carried out in the playground.

A focus on 'parents/family' activities was a key feature of primary school work, mentioned by 20 schools; in the secondary schools there was slightly less of a focus on activities in this category (six schools).

'Other' activities including a focus on attendance issues, the development of pupil opportunities within local businesses, involvement in the Eco-school initiative, the production of a school newspaper, after-school clubs, public speaking events and foreign trips, accounted for a significant proportion of primary and secondary school activities. Two of the schools reported activities relating to their close links to the European mainland, including pupil exchange programmes, work experience abroad, participation in the European Schools parliament, and educational and sport-related

visits. One of the schools had set up video-conferencing to communicate with other schools on a French-speaking programme. This will also be available to the local community for use in adult learning and by local businesses.

The early stages of the initiative are indicated by the fact that there were reports from some schools of no or very little work having been carried out thus far. One primary school visited reported that very little work had been carried out on the Tailored Strand in the school. This reflected the situation at Cluster level where the Cluster Coordinator had not been in post very long and was concentrating on the Gifted and Talented Strand. Money for the Tailored Strand had been vired to create a base for the school's Learning Mentor. It was intended that the Tailored Strand would build upon/extend work already being undertaken by the school and would facilitate links with other schools.

In some instances, the activities promoted as part of the Tailored Strand were built upon or extended existing activities. One school reported the involvement of all staff in a programme focussing on a teaching and learning initiative (IQEA) which is a theme of the Tailored Strand of EC. This programme has been operational for some time and pre-dates EC. It is seen to have had a very important impact in the school and permeates all of its work. It was envisaged that EC would complement this initiative but would not change it.

Where schools are building upon existing work, it may prove difficult to disentangle the specific effects of the Cluster initiative.

3.4.3 Staff involvement and training

The scope of staff involvement in the Tailored Strand varied from school to school and depended on the particular focus of the work of the strand. Staff with particular responsibilities were involved in the programme, as appropriate. These included staff with responsibilities for teaching and learning support (such as Learning Mentors, Learning Support Assistants and Teaching Assistants), those with responsibility for particular key stages, members of senior management, heads of year, the staff of particular subject departments, and classroom teachers. In some instances specific appointments, such as 'attendance officers', had been made using EC funds specifically to support the work of the Tailored Strand. In other cases, staff funded from other sources (youth workers for example) contributed to the work of the Strand. Staff involvement was more extensive in some programmes with a history pre-dating the EC

initiative. In some cases the initiative had extended staff involvement in these pre-existing initiatives and/or had served to formalise arrangements.

In some cases there had been no training in relation to the Tailored Strand and some schools did not feel that any specific training was necessary because staff were already well trained in the relevant areas. Nevertheless, the availability of funds for training was seen as valuable, although there was some concern about the quality of the training available to support the work of the Tailored Strand. The training that had occurred was related to the specific activities undertaken and varied from school to school.

3.4.4 Implementation issues

It was early days for some schools who did not feel that they had yet encountered any significant problems with the implementation of the Tailored Strand. Those problems that had been experienced, centred around organisational issues such as finding time, encouraging staff to try new approaches, and liaison with other schools.

♦ Time, or the lack of it, was a problem commented upon by two schools. In some cases the problem was caused by the fact that those with involvement in the Tailored Strand had other, often multiple, responsibilities elsewhere. Where staff have taken up roles within the Tailored Strand because of their expertise and other responsibilities, this is perhaps to be expected. One school reported that staff demands and other responsibilities made it difficult for staff to find time to plan and coordinate strand activities. There was concern to develop and coordinate activities across key stages, and both key stage 1 and key stage 2 coordinators were involved in the initiative. The key stage 2 coordinator was the 'coaching' initiative coordinator, and a classroom teacher. The fact that the two coordinators could not meet was felt to be a hindrance to their effectiveness (and presumably to the effectiveness of the Strand overall).

♦ The need to develop staff confidence to try new approaches was commented upon by the assistant headteacher of one of the visited schools. One obstacle was described as the 'fear of failure' and the need to make staff feel secure enough to try new teaching and learning strategies (which were the focus of the Tailored Strand). It was felt that there was a need to encourage staff to take risks.

♦ One school commented on the problems of liaising with other schools within the local Cluster, due to the mix of selective and non-selective schools involved. The headteacher commented that: '*The day to day organisation is fine. But where there are selective and non-selective schools, it is hard to mix and match. In terms of individual programmes, the school can simply get on with it.*'

3.4.5 Monitoring and evaluation

Reflecting the situation within the initiative as a whole, evaluation and monitoring procedures for the Tailored Strand were generally not well developed. Three schools (one primary and two secondary) reported the existence of some evaluation and monitoring systems. In one of the secondary schools this was for an initiative which had been brought under the auspices of the EC Tailored Strand but pre-dated it. The other secondary school reported a pre-established system for the electronic monitoring of pupil attendance. The primary school, focusing on speaking and listening in key stages 1 and 2, had developed a system in specific response to the Tailored Strand. For the purpose of key stage 1 monitoring, there was a system which involved taking a baseline in Year 1 in aspects of speaking and listening (for example, vocabulary progress and expression). This was monitored and assessed termly by the class teacher, and the results passed on to the key stage 1 coordinator, and then on to SMT. They had never formally assessed this before, but because of the extra emphasis resulting from Cluster money they will do so in the future. As far as key stage 2 monitoring was concerned, there was a practical assessment in drama and one main element of monitoring every five weeks. Next year the school intends to look more closely at progress across the whole curriculum, rather than just drama.

3.4.6 The success of the Tailored Strand

Finally, in this section the success of the Tailored Strand is considered. The evidence from the first EC Progress Report (December 2001) suggested that the Tailored Strand was seen in a very positive light because it allowed Clusters/schools to focus on local areas of need. Whilst the Tailored Strand is still in its early stages in the individual schools and its impact remains to be seen, the statistical evidence from the school survey questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive. In response to a question about how far the Tailored Strand would meet the needs of the school, only one primary school and two secondary schools indicated that the Strand would not meet the needs of the school, or was not applicable. The most common response from primary (23) and secondary (13) schools was that the Tailored Strand would have a significant impact on the school or that it was very much needed. A smaller number of schools said that it was too early to make definitive judgements, or that the success of the Tailored Strand would depend on certain conditions. Specific impacts reported or anticipated included the following:

- raising awareness amongst parents and increasing parental involvement/support
- providing resources/support for the school
- promoting pupil self-esteem

- counteracting the effects of cultural isolation/providing cultural enrichment
- promoting involvement in the local community.

This very positive picture was borne out by respondents in the eight case-study schools. Specific benefits mentioned included those relating to the additional resources, which one school felt had allowed for a more structured approach and '*made our wish list come true*'. In another school, the additional funds were used to extend provision to all pupils. Other reported benefits included improved pupil self-esteem, raising of the status of Tailored Strand-focussed activities within the school, improvement in home-school relations. Schools reporting no impact as yet, nevertheless anticipated that the strand would be '*very successful*' in meeting the needs of the school.

4. ISSUES

In this chapter we examine two specific issues in the context of the Excellence Clusters initiative, namely collaboration and competition on the one hand and transition from primary to secondary school on the other.

4.1 Partnerships: Collaboration and Competition

The philosophy underlining the Excellence Clusters' initiative is the raising of standards by encouraging cooperation between schools. When asked in the questionnaire survey to comment on the benefits of being involved in the Cluster initiative, 'liaising with other schools and sharing good practice' was one of the most frequent responses given by primary schools (mentioned by over half of the schools that returned questionnaires) and secondary schools (mentioned by over a third of the schools). Headteachers in the case-study schools also identified collaboration as one of the most important advantages of the initiative.

In this section we focus on the different forms of collaboration that emerged in the case-study schools and its corollary, competition between schools. A number of themes have been identified:

- pre-existing and new links
- the role of the 'more successful' school
- time constraints associated with collaborative ventures
- collaboration and potential negative consequences
- communication between schools
- collaboration and innovation.

In the subsequent sections each of these are discussed with reference to the eight Excellence Clusters case-study schools. It should be noted that these themes are not mutually exclusive and there is, inevitably, a degree of overlap between them.

4.1.1 Pre-existing and new links

The headteachers and other staff (involved in the EC strands) who were interviewed identified a number of links between schools. In some cases these predated Excellence Clusters. Some links had developed as a result of other government initiatives, for example, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) or statutory

Education Action Zones. In others, the links had less obvious roots and in some cases had been built up on the basis of personal contact.

One boys' secondary school had close links with other secondary schools in the area under the former TVEI initiative. Once this ended there '*was some drifting. This coincided with the new, competitive market in education*'. The headteacher reported links with a nearby girls' school which pre-dated the EC initiative; they were reported to be historical and included joint timetabling with the sixth form of the girls' school, joint drama productions and joint visits and exchanges. The head noted that the EC initiative had provided the opportunity to '*regenerate*' some of those links.

The gifted and talented coordinator at the same school also remarked on the partnerships that existed with the former TVEI schools. He noted that when grant-maintained status was introduced, these partnerships broke down. In relation to cooperation within the Gifted and Talented Strand, the coordinator noted that in the Cluster, which included selective schools, it was '*easier to collaborate on the talented side with other schools than on the gifted or academic side*'. On a positive note, the gifted and talented coordinator reported that:

> *Excellence* [Clusters] *has enabled the school to re-establish links between schools in the area, which had reduced ... and these links will lead to development and co-operation.*

More generally, however, the headteacher felt that it was impractical to expand collaborative working any further: '*we don't have enough in common, our hours are not in common...and there is distance – one school is six miles away, another is up to 20 miles away*'.

The headteacher of a secondary school in another Cluster had not formed or developed strong links with other schools in the Cluster. In this case, most of the links were with the schools in the statutory EAZ (although two of the EAZ schools were also in the Excellence Cluster). The headteacher believed that, when the statutory EAZ formally ended, a new Cluster might be formed that would involve the existing EAZ schools and possibly some additional secondary schools.

The headteacher of a primary school in the same Cluster had recently been appointed, and retained close personal links with schools outside the Cluster as a result of her former role as a deputy headteacher in the same LEA. She saw the Excellence Cluster

as offering new opportunities to develop links with schools in similar circumstances to her new school.

4.1.2 The role of the 'more successful' school

Many of the Cluster schools are in difficult circumstances, facing broadly comparable challenges. Partnerships therefore involve linking with similar schools. Some of these links predate the formation of the Clusters; for example, in one Cluster it was reported that Church and community schools formed separate groupings.   A secondary headteacher noted that the main advantage of EC was working with schools in similar circumstances, which was helping to *'develop practical solutions to long-term strategic development'*. In another Cluster, a primary headteacher noted that, as all schools were within the same catchment area and were serving the same kinds of children, it provided useful comparisons.

However, the DfES guidelines require the inclusion of 'more successful' schools, which may be Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools, or schools with particularly good examination results. In our previous report, we noted that there was some questioning of the role that these *'good'* schools might play; and (given their often very different circumstances) how far good practice could be effectively transferred. However, the recent case-study visits provided evidence that, in some cases at least, initial doubts had been overcome and positive relationships established.

A secondary school in an area of 'huge deprivation' had established links with a more successful school within the Cluster. In this case, the Gifted and Talented coordinator had developed close links with the more successful school and this had proved *'very useful'*.   In the same Cluster, a primary headteacher commented on the benefit of children being involved with schools of different types, including more successful schools: *'We are building relationships and often get together to share good practice'*. In spite of this, she did feel that there was a lack of clarity in the role of the more successful schools within the Cluster and that this was compounded by the fact that they were some distance away from the remainder of the Cluster schools.

One of the case-study primary schools, in an area of high social deprivation, reported initial difficulties in establishing collaborative arrangements with a primary school with a contrasting intake. The interviewee felt that relationships had been a *'bit prickly'* to start with and that the headteacher of the 'good' school was *'embarrassed'*. However, the relationship had settled down well and the schools were now networking on equal terms. There was evidence in some other Clusters also of a growing realisation that

collaboration brought benefits to all involved, and that all schools (core schools as well as more successful schools) had something to contribute to the process.

4.1.3 Time constraints

The amount of time required to carry out effective collaboration was identified as a major problem particularly in the schools that faced the most difficult challenges. Many staff had multiple jobs in schools. For example, in one secondary school, the gifted and talented coordinator was also a member of the management body of the school), the key stage 3 strategy manager and the out-of-hours coordinator. Due to historically falling (although now increasing) rolls, the school has been '*running a significantly reduced senior management team*' and had only one deputy headteacher.

In another secondary school, time pressures were reported as one of the disadvantages of collaborative working:

> *Staffing and* [teacher] *retention is also a particular problem which makes the issue of staff release – and those activities associated with the initiative – problematic.*

Those involved with the initiative were all '*key players*' in the school and the school could not do without them even if finance was available to release them periodically. The same interviewee noted that '*partnerships between schools are difficult because of day-to-day pressures*'.

The gifted and talented coordinator in another secondary school considered that time pressures had prevented her actively liaising with other schools – other than at the Cluster meeting. A similar problem was raised by the LM and LSU coordinator who found it difficult to visit schools because of the problem of finding suitable cover. It seemed that even though money was available, supply cover was not.

The Learning Mentor in a primary school in the same Cluster drew attention to the lack of time '*at their level*' for LMs to meet their counterparts and liaise informally and it was not always possible for them to attend Strand meetings. The responsible teacher for gifted and talented pupils, in the same school, considered that there was a need for another level of collaboration between gifted and talented coordinators, namely, *across* Clusters not just *within* them. However, there was little opportunity to do this. The national training, she felt, had offered this opportunity as two Clusters attended the same course. However, they did not mix together and worked in their separate Cluster groups, so the opportunity was missed.

4.1.4 Collaboration and potential negative consequences

Notwithstanding the difficulties with collaboration, the headteacher of a high-performing school indicated that he wanted *'to avoid competition with other schools'*. Examples of strategies included possibly advising pupils who wished to do GNVQs to go to other schools in the area, and if pupils from other schools wanted to do A-levels, they might be advised to come to the high-performing school: *'On our particular role, we have taken the lead on* [the Gifted and Talented Strand].*'*

The headteacher of a lower-performing school in one Cluster reported that the advantages of collaborative working outweighed the disadvantages. He also noted though: *'There may be a fear in some schools of losing children'* to high-performing schools, although this was not a concern at this particular school.

A primary school in another Cluster saw resistance by schools outside the Cluster as one of the main challenges of the initiative for the schools involved. Schools outside the Cluster saw the same schools continually being involved in new initiatives (the interviewee's school was involved in eight such initiatives) and resented it. She felt more needed to be done to explain why that school and similar schools were selected and, in particular, to stress that this was due to the acute problems they faced.

4.1.5 Communication between schools

Communication between schools was reported to be the 'biggest benefit' by a headteacher of a secondary school. Links were now reported to be 'very strong' and dialogue was reported to be not just at the level of the headteachers:

> *Although we have always talked to each other, we worked separately. Dialogue goes way beyond the Excellence Agenda.*

The same positive comments about improved communication were made by a secondary headteacher in a different Cluster, who met once a term with another headteacher to talk about strategic developments and to share good practice. The two schools had a joint senior leadership group, which was reported to be *'a spin-off'* of the EC initiative. A primary headteacher in the same Cluster concurred with this view. She felt *'communication of the middle ground'* was particularly useful and schools were now using electronic communication more so that they were less reliant on meetings. She felt that the Cluster offered *'wonderful swapover opportunities'*.

4.1.6 Collaboration and innovation

Collaboration, by sharing good practice in teaching and learning and by offering opportunities for innovation, both inside and outside the classroom, was highlighted by headteachers.

One secondary school headteacher stressed the wide ranging benefits of collaboration in teaching and learning.

> *Excellence* [Clusters] *has radically altered the way we teach and learn, for example, in the sharing of good practice, in awareness and in the engagement and sharing of ideas, which have led to improved classroom practice. And the fact we are developing into a collaborative learning community which will help to address social issues ... It's been a terrific idea, because it involves a number of schools all working together – other initiatives have been focused on single schools.*

Similar views were expressed by the headteacher of secondary school in another Cluster. He noted that the advantages of collaborative working lay in the opportunity for innovation and learning new or different perspectives. The headteacher felt that the statutory EAZ – and also the Cluster – had enabled the school to take on a specific issue, such as attendance, and *'deal with it at its source'*. He gave as an example the fact that some Year 7 pupils had come from primary schools with poor attendance *'which can be tackled through partnerships'*.

The headteacher of a primary school in the same Cluster considered that the main benefit of Excellence Clusters was the collaborative element. In particular, it allowed the sharing of knowledge about other schools, as well as the sharing of ideas and theories. In addition, it helped in benchmarking and *'not just in the official sense'*. For example, in looking at attendance across schools (part of their Tailored Strand) it helped schools to share knowledge by looking at how some schools with a similar catchment area and similar children managed to achieve better attendance than others.

In another Cluster, where the Tailored Strand was broadly focused on teaching and learning, the Cluster coordinator was examining accelerated learning, including brain gym, as a potential benefit for Cluster schools. Brain gym had already been tried in a primary school, where staff thought it might help *'calm children down after the lunch break';* they found that there were additional and unexpected benefits in improving the writing skills of lower-ability children.

In a further Cluster, collaboration was taking place between a primary school and a more successful secondary school. An interesting approach to achieve higher levels of literacy was utilised as part of the Tailored Strand – a book of poetry of *'high quality'* had been produced. Not only did the publication enhance individual pupils' self-esteem but it had *'raised the status of literacy in the school'*.

4.2   Transition

It was evident from the evaluation of Excellence Clusters that some schools were concerned about a decline in the achievement and attainment of pupils in Year 7, and suspected that 'emotional difficulties' faced during transition from primary to secondary school were contributory. The questionnaire survey sent to Cluster schools sought information on transfer arrangements. Subsequently, interviews with Cluster staff allowed for a more detailed exploration of whether the Cluster initiative had helped schools to promote primary-secondary continuity and progression to a greater extent than previously. The findings from both the questionnaire and face-to-face interviews are discussed in this section.

4.2.1 Transfer arrangements

The findings from the questionnaire survey show that pupils from any one primary school transfer to, on average, seven secondary schools at the end of Year 6. Regarding secondary schools, an average of 19 primary or middle schools were represented among their intake in September 2001.

Of the 71 primary schools that responded to the survey, 60 had special arrangements in place to facilitate the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school. Of the 35 secondary schools responding, 31 had special transfer arrangements in place. Most primary schools (59) and secondary schools (30) had arranged taster/induction days for pupils. A similar number had arranged staff visits between schools. Fifty-five primary schools had arranged for their pupils to visit the secondary schools they would transfer to, in order for them to familiarise themselves with the environment. Primary schools were involved in cross-phase projects (29) and cross-phase working groups (16). Of the secondary schools included in the survey, 25 had been involved in collaborative cross-phase activities with primary schools. Nineteen secondary schools had organised summer holiday projects for primary school pupils. Other special transfer arrangements included primary schools sending examples of pupils' work to secondary schools and secondary schools' Learning Mentors visiting primary schools to support specific pupils.

Visits to Cluster schools confirmed that such transfer arrangements were in place, but also allowed for an exploration of whether being involved in the Cluster initiative had any effect on continuity and progression from primary to secondary school, as discussed below.

4.2.2 Impact on cross-phase continuity and progression

Interviewees were asked whether they expected the Cluster initiative to strengthen primary-secondary continuity and progression. It appeared that being involved in the Cluster had made it easier to liaise with schools on such matters. However, the increased liaison appeared to be informal, and the Cluster initiative was not expected to have much of an impact on transition in the majority of Clusters (either because arrangements were already in place and/or because the Cluster was focusing on other activities). Moreover, not all of the schools that pupils transfer to or from were necessarily included in a Cluster, meaning that the increased opportunity for liaison only applied to some schools.

One Cluster was the exception, as the issue of transition was the focus of the Tailored Strand. One primary school and one secondary school were visited, although the secondary school was not the one to which the primary school children would transfer. Both schools were very positive about the effect the initiative had on transfer arrangements, suggesting that the Cluster initiative was having an impact on transition across the whole Cluster.

The Tailored Strand coordinator in the primary school suggested that the funding had allowed for '*a more formal, structured transition programme to be put in place*'. Links with the secondary school to which almost all pupils transferred (also in the Cluster) pre-existed the Cluster initiative, although these arrangements were enhanced by the Tailored Strand. Previously, teachers from the secondary school visited the primary school for one day at the end of the summer term to visit Year 6 pupils. The pupils would then spend a day at the secondary school getting to know the staff and the environment: '*It was informal and there was no budget for it*'. Concerned about a decline in attainment in Year 7, the school valued the opportunity to formalise the arrangements by using Cluster funding.

With the funding, the school had developed a formal start-up programme involving cross-phase projects. In particular, pupils with SEN and language difficulties in Year 6 will start a specific programme in primary school after their key stage 2 tests, and then

continue it in Year 7. Staff from the secondary school will also spend more time in the primary school teaching pupils in Year 6. As this was the first year that the programme was being implemented, the impact could not yet be detected, although the general perception was that '*we have bridged a gap for the children...without the extra money it would be more hit and miss*'. Liaison with the schools to which the remaining children transfer was '*still based on individual cases*', but as the numbers were so small it was not considered a problem.

The secondary school in this Cluster considered transition to be '*a major issue*'. The Tailored Strand coordinator suggested that '*pupils are not adjusting at all well in Year 7*'. Prior to the Cluster initiative, the school had organised a Saturday club for their main primary feeders (which are all in the Cluster) and also induction days for all feeder schools. However, Cluster funding allowed them to spend time focusing on transfer issues in more depth. The coordinator spent time talking to primary headteachers about what they considered to be the main issues for pupils when they transfer. It was concluded that pupils found it difficult to adjust to having more than one class teacher and to the different style of environment.

In response to these concerns, two primary-style classrooms were developed in the secondary school using Cluster funding: a primary school practitioner was recruited to work in one classroom and a Year 7 teacher for the other, and both were furnished in a similar way to primary classrooms. Pupils were being selected for the classes at the time of the interview: Learning Mentors in the feeder primary schools were used to 'gather evidence' about potential pupils. Pupils from any of the school's primary feeders could have the opportunity to benefit from the primary classrooms, not just pupils in Cluster schools. As the first cohort of pupils had yet to experience the classrooms, the coordinator could not comment on impact, although he hoped that '*pupils will benefit in terms of improvements in their attendance and fewer incidents in class...and the quality of teaching will be high*'. He hoped for '*smoother transfer in general*'.

Although the two schools discussed above were very positive about the impact that the Cluster initiative had on transition, continuity and progression, this was because they had used Tailored Strand funds to finance their new arrangements. In their view, if they had not done this, the Cluster initiative would have had little impact on transition.

5.   SUMMARY AND COMPARISON WITH EXCELLENCE IN CITIES

This chapter presents a summary of the key findings evident from this stage of the evaluation of the EC initiative. An overview of each of the four EC strands is given, followed by a discussion of cross-strand issues, namely management of the EC initiative in schools, training, monitoring and evaluation, partnerships, and transition. The findings are then compared to the findings from the evaluation of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) Policy, focusing on similarities and differences that have emerged from the two evaluations in relation to the three strands which are common to both policies: Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units and Gifted and Talented.

5.1   Summary of the Four Excellence Cluster Stands

The key findings in relation to Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units, the Gifted and Talented Strand and the Tailored Strand are discussed in turn in the following sections.

5.1.1 The Learning Mentor Strand

The Learning Mentor Strand had generated by far the most enthusiasm from interviewees. The main role of Learning Mentors was to target individual pupils, although in some cases they also offered drop-in services, supported pupils in the classroom and visited the parents of mentees. Across the Clusters, they focused on behaviour issues and reducing exclusions, increasing attendance, and helping pupils to achieve qualifications. The general consensus among interviewees was that Learning Mentors had the time to give support over and above that which class teachers could provide, including emotional support at difficult times. It was clear that mentees were positive about their Learning Mentors and had conveyed this to other pupils, to the point that they too were asking if they could have access to a Learning Mentor.

However, initially there was some uncertainty about the role of the Learning Mentors, which to some extent was still evident when the fieldwork was carried out. For instance, there were differing views about whether Learning Mentors should work in the classroom; some schools understood that this was an aspect of their role, although others thought Learning Mentors should only work in the classroom in exceptional circumstances. Despite this uncertainty, it appeared that the high expectations of the Learning Mentors had been fulfilled, although there was doubt that the impact of their work could be easily measured (as discussed below in Section 5.2.3).

5.1.2 The Learning Support Unit Strand

A greater proportion of secondary schools than primary schools had an LSU on site. In fact, a large number of schools were without access to an LSU. It was evident that LSUs were not being shared, and that schools '*preferred to manage things within the school*'. Moreover, as one LSU manager commented, they could fill every space twice over with their own pupils, and would not be able to accommodate pupils from other schools. There appeared to be some confusion about what an LSU was: some schools referred to alternative units on site that sounded similar to LSUs, yet they criticised LSUs for being '*sin bins*'. This suggests a need for clarification of the purpose of LSUs across Clusters.

Most LSUs had been developed from existing provision. The number of pupils attending was greater in secondary schools than primary schools, although in secondary schools a greater number of pupils attended in Years 7 to 9 than higher up the school. Most frequently, pupils attended for 7 to 12 weeks, although shorter periods were also common.

Two of the case-study schools had LSUs on site and had formal referral procedures in place. Pupils were most often referred to the LSUs for challenging behaviour. One LSU intended to follow the curriculum where possible, and found it difficult to allow time for behaviour therapy, which would have been beneficial. The other LSU did not follow the whole curriculum, rather it focused on the core subjects in addition to therapeutic activity.

Although the impact of the LSU was considered difficult to measure (as discussed below in Section 5.2.3), anecdotal evidence suggested that attendance had improved, as had the amount of work produced by the pupils who had attended the Unit.

5.1.3 The Gifted and Talented Strand

In some Clusters, progress in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand was limited. In fact, ten primary schools were still without a responsible teacher at the time the questionnaire survey was administered. A considerable amount of time had been spent identifying gifted and talented pupils, and thus some schools were in a '*limbo period*' between identification of pupils and provision. Schools that had started to provide for gifted and talented pupils were offering a range of different activities, including out-of-hours activities (often referred to as 'add-on' activities), off-timetable immersion projects, and in some cases activities embedded in the curriculum. All schools recognised the importance of embedding provision in the whole curriculum, rather than

simply offering 'add-on' activities, although in some cases time had not allowed for such provision to be put in place. All of the gifted and talented coordinators/responsible teachers interviewed had other responsibilities in school, which meant that, in some cases, time had not allowed for provision to be as widespread as they would have liked. For instance, in one school the responsible teacher was focusing on a literacy and numeracy project (off-timetable) for gifted pupils in Year 6, because that was all that time allowed.

However, gifted and talented coordinators/responsible teachers had already gained personal satisfaction from their role, resulting from seeing pupils' motivation increase. Moreover, the rise in aspirations of gifted and talented pupils was thought to have had a knock-on effect with other pupils. In some cases, other pupils had been involved in gifted and talented activities, not just those on the gifted and talented register.

Some gifted and talented coordinators/responsible teachers would have liked more training/advice on how to stimulate gifted pupils in the classroom, and how to gain useful contacts to assist with provision for talented pupils. The issue of training is discussed further in Section 5.2.2 below.

5.1.4 The Tailored Strand

Schools were extremely positive about being able to address the particular needs and circumstances of their own school. Given the nature of the Tailored Strand, schools were involved in a diverse and rich range of activities. It is perhaps to be expected that work in relation to the curriculum/teaching and learning was a popular choice for the focus of the Tailored Strand. However, specific activities relating to the school's wider involvement with parents, families and with the local community and in its role as a provider of cultural enrichment were also a feature of the Strand. It should be said, however, that for some schools, the work was still in its infancy and thus the success of the Strand in terms of meeting the needs and expectations of schools remained to be realised. Case-study schools reported the involvement of at least some staff in the Strand at this stage but other aspects remained to be developed. In some instances, the work being carried out within the Tailored Strand had been boosted by the fact that it had been able to build upon and extend existing initiatives. The very positive messages concerning the Tailored Strand, which were cited in an earlier report (Schagen *et al*., 2001), were reinforced by both the school survey questionnaire and in the school studies.

5.2 Cross-strand Issues

Certain key issues emerged from the evaluation of the EC initiative. These were management, training, monitoring and evaluation, partnerships and primary-secondary transition. These issues are each discussed in turn in the following sections.

5.2.1 Management of the initiative in schools

Reflecting the structure of the initiative as presented to them, the case-study schools had established management structures within the individual EC Strands. It was commonplace for example, for schools to appoint individual strand coordinators to oversee the work within the schools and to liaise with other strand coordinators in other Cluster schools and with those with strand responsibility at Cluster level. The challenge for schools and Clusters will be to develop coherence across the four Strands in EC, and also with similar initiatives impinging upon the schools. The appointing of overall managers of the initiative within the schools should assist in this process.

In some cases, schools were able to build upon pre-existing management structures; in other cases, they found it necessary to put new arrangements in place. The initiative had clearly spread within schools from the initial involvement of the headteachers, to a wider range of staff. Some appointments to specific EC posts had been made from within the schools; other staff, for example, Learning Mentors, were employed with EC funds. Senior staff often held key positions within the initiative. This can be seen as positive in giving the initiative the necessary impetus for it to succeed, but must also be seen as a factor contributing to the heavy workload of senior staff. Other school staff were involved to varying degrees – in some cases, senior staff were keen to protect colleagues from 'innovation overload'. The degree of awareness of the initiative was also variable; staff would, of course, know that the school had a Learning Mentor, or an LSU, but would not necessarily associate these with EC.

Formulae for the allocation of EC resources had been determined by the Cluster partnerships and in some cases funding was allocated to individual schools according to a formula reflecting the needs of these schools. Because of this, some Cluster schools received more than others. Once in the schools, it was common practice for some of the funds to be distributed to the strand coordinators. A large amount of the money received was used to pay for staff.

There was a concern to set 'realistic' targets for schools in all situations and that these were referenced to individual pupils. Reflecting the concern for the issue of coherence

between initiatives, it was felt that targets for other initiatives should match or complement those for EC.

5.2.2 Training

There were mixed feelings among interviewees about the standard and usefulness of the national training provided in relation to the EC strands. The national training for Learning Mentors was thought to have been extremely useful, although provided too late. In fact, one school was '*starting blind*' prior to the training, but had found it so useful that they had decided to re-think the role of the Learning Mentors and who they were targeting. Training for staff managing or working in the LSUs was perceived to have been useful, although because of the background characteristics of the staff (including experience of working with pupils with SEN and behaviour problems) additional training was not considered necessary.

Views on the national training for gifted and talented coordinators/responsible teachers were not so positive. Coordinators/responsible teachers resented the fact that the course was being accredited, and felt patronised by this. The additional work that the accreditation required had caused workload problems. Moreover, it was considered by some that there were gaps in the training provided. Coordinators/responsible teachers would have preferred more practical examples of how to provide for gifted and talented pupils. For instance, as mentioned above, some interviewees were concerned about how to stimulate gifted pupils in the classroom, and would have appreciated more guidance on this.

The fact that the Tailored Strand enables schools to focus on their specific needs meant that activities varied considerably both across and within Clusters. A generic training course would not, therefore, be appropriate for the Tailored Strand. Although funding for training was considered valuable, schools were having to seek out specific training appropriate to the focus of their own Tailored Strand, which did not always prove easy. However, in some cases there was not a perceived need for training, as the staff involved in the strand already had the necessary skills and experience.

Some strand coordinators mentioned receiving local (more informal) training at a Cluster level, which had proved useful. The general opinion amongst interviewees was that networking face-to-face with other strand coordinators was more useful than formal training. Face-to-face liaison about experiences and good practice was favoured, although time did not always allow for this to take place as frequently as would have been liked. One Cluster had set up an email forum so that more immediate

liaison could take place. Networking was considered '*essential*' in order to keep up-to-date with developments on a Cluster or national basis.

5.2.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Across the Clusters, and across all strands, monitoring and evaluation was in its infancy. Some interviewees mentioned the use of evaluation forms that had been developed at Cluster level, although these were not discussed in detail. Methods of monitoring and evaluation will be explored in more detail during the next round of visits undertaken by the research team.

There was considerable doubt among interviewees that the impact of certain Cluster activities could be evaluated at all. For instance, the impact of the Learning Mentors or attendance at an LSU was thought to be '*visible but not quantifiable*', given that the focus was often on emotional well-being. Anecdotal evidence indicated an impact on attendance, behaviour and attainment, although the impact was difficult to measure.

Moreover, much of the Cluster work undertaken was based on what was already in place in schools, which made it difficult to assess the specific impact that the Cluster initiative had had. For example, it would be difficult to measure the impact of an additional Learning Mentor (funded by Cluster finances) if a school already had Learning Mentors in post prior to involvement in the initiative.

5.2.4 Partnerships

One of the main aims of the Cluster initiative is to enhance relationships between schools. When asked in the questionnaire survey to say what the main advantages of being involved in the Cluster initiatives were, the benefit of building partnerships with other schools (resulting in improved communication) was the most frequent comment made by secondary schools, and the second most frequent made by primary schools. Some schools suggested that the initiative had provided them with the opportunity to regenerate links with schools that had previously existed but dwindled. Moreover, collaboration, by sharing good practice and innovation in terms of teaching and learning, was highlighted by schools as beneficial.

Maintaining links with other schools proved difficult due to time pressures. Staff had multiple responsibilities, which made it difficult to find the time to meet staff in other schools. There was also some concern about competition between schools. For instance, a high-performing school was advising other schools on provision for gifted

and talented pupils, and one interviewee felt that staff in some other schools might fear losing their gifted pupils to the high-performing school.

5.2.5 Primary-secondary transition

The majority of schools included in the evaluation (in both the survey and case-study visits) had transfer arrangements in place to varying degrees, including taster/induction days for pupils, cross-phase projects and staff visits to feeder or receiving schools. Staff in case-study schools suggested that being in a Cluster allowed for increased liaison, although only informally (schools had not deliberately discussed transition). In some cases, it was anticipated that Learning Mentors would play a role in primary-secondary transfer. For instance, the Learning Mentor from one primary school was planning to visit the local secondary school regularly in the autumn term to talk to former pupils about any difficulties they were facing.

Otherwise, being involved in the Cluster was thought to have little impact on primary-secondary transfer, unless transition was the focus of the Tailored Strand, which was the case in one Cluster. Two schools visited in this particular Cluster were extremely positive about the impact that being involved in the initiative was expected to have on primary-secondary transfer, although they did not think this would have been the case without the use of Tailored Strand funding.

5.3   Excellence Clusters Compared with Excellence in Cities

This section examines some of the similarities and differences that have emerged from the evaluations of the Excellence in Cities Policy and the Excellence Clusters Policy (as the EiC Policy focuses on secondary schools, comparisons are restricted to these schools).[2]

Whilst Excellence in Cities (EiC) was launched in September 1999 as the Government's key policy initiative for redressing educational disadvantage and under-performance in schools located within the most deprived urban areas of England, the Excellence Clusters initiative started later, in September 2001. It represents a development of the EiC Policy, by focusing on small groups of schools in disadvantaged areas – not within EiC areas – with a history of underperformance.

It is important to note at the outset that there are three Strands which are common to both policies, namely, the Gifted and Talented Strand, the Learning Mentor Strand and

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[2]   The evaluation of Excellence in Cities in Primary Schools is currently underway.

the Learning Support Unit Strand. There are additional Strands in Excellence in Cities and in Excellence Clusters there is also the innovative Tailored Strand (see Section 3.4).

This section focuses on the three core Strands that are common to both Excellence in Cities and Excellence Clusters. In comparing the findings, it should be noted that the methodologies differ, with teacher and pupil data being collected as part of the evaluation of Excellence in Cities as well as data from headteachers (which is common to both evaluations). The comparisons relate to data from the EiC surveys of schools and preliminary case studies carried out in 2000/01 (further details are given in NFER, 2002, Paper 1), and data from the EC survey of schools and case studies obtained in 2002.

The following sections examine similarities and differences between the Learning Mentor Strand, the Learning Support Unit Strand and the Gifted and Talented Strand in EiC and Clusters schools.

5.3.1 Learning Mentors

In both Excellence Clusters and Excellence in Cities schools, the Learning Mentor Strand had been favourably received. This was reflected in interviews with chairs of Clusters and EiC partnership coordinators, and in responses from schools.

The EiC evaluation revealed that Learning Mentors had been well received by pupils and teachers – for example, nearly three-quarters of teachers surveyed thought that all pupils should have access to a trained mentor. This aspect of EiC was also positively viewed by employers and training providers. For over 60 per cent of responding EiC schools, LMs provided a form of learning support that had not previously been on offer; this compares with just under half of the secondary schools in Excellence Clusters. Most of the funding from the Learning Mentor Strand was used for salaries in both Excellence in Cities and Excellence Clusters schools; this is unsurprising given the nature of the Strand.

In terms of the potential impact of the Learning Mentor Strand, nearly eight out of ten teachers in the Excellence in Cities schools surveyed felt that LMs would benefit the pupils being mentored and over one-fifth felt that they would benefit all pupils. The case studies of Clusters schools resonate with these findings. The LMs were reported to be popular with pupils and a number of interviewees reported that they had had a positive effect on behaviour and/or attendance – although significantly they noted that

the impact was hard to measure, being visible but not quantifiable. In addition, two interviewees commented that if the behaviour of mentored pupils improved, this would have an indirect positive impact on other pupils.

Overall, then, in both Excellence Clusters and Excellence in Cities schools, the Learning Mentor Strand was perceived positively by key players, at this early stage.

5.3.2 Learning Support Unit Strand

The LSU Strand in EiC schools was viewed favourably, with eight out of ten teachers surveyed believing that LSUs would benefit pupils attending the unit and over six out of ten feeling that they would lead to less disruption.

Few EiC schools had any facility resembling an LSU prior to the introduction of EiC. By way of contrast, around half of the EC schools surveyed had an LSU on site; and in most cases these LSUs had developed from existing provision, indicating that unlike LSUs in EiC areas, money from Excellence Clusters was frequently substituting for other funds. Only two of the five secondary schools visited had an LSU on site; one high-performing school had access to an LSU elsewhere but did not use the unit.

This particular Strand, then, appears to differ to some extent in Excellence Clusters and in EiC schools.

5.3.3 Gifted and Talented Strand

Schools in Excellence Clusters and in EiC used similar mechanisms to identify pupils under this Strand, with test results, including key stage test results being mentioned, along with other types of information. In both Excellence Clusters and EiC schools, it was found that most of the funds emanating from the Gifted and Talented Strand were used to cover salaries (including supply cover), with a small but significant proportion of funds being used for teaching materials.

Preliminary findings from the evaluation of the Excellence in Cities Policy revealed that although some teachers did not always welcome the positive discrimination given to certain pupils under this Strand, the vast majority of teachers surveyed believed that every school should have a distinctive teaching and learning programme for its most able pupils. In addition, around one in five teachers felt that the Gifted and Talented Strand would raise the attainment of all pupils. Turning to the Excellence Clusters case-study schools, half of the Gifted and Talented coordinators thought that the

positive attitudes of the gifted and talented pupils had spread throughout the school and would raise other pupils' aspirations.

Early findings from the EiC Gifted and Talented Strand Study revealed that positive changes in pupils' attitudes had been identified amongst gifted and talented pupils. Similar findings were observed in the case studies carried out as part of the evaluation of Excellence Clusters, with the general consensus being that pupils identified as gifted and talented were motivated or enthused.

The evaluations of both Excellence Clusters and EiC Policies noted that positive effects of the Gifted and Talented Strand on other pupils had been identified. However, there was concern about the possible negative impact on other pupils. A significant minority of teachers surveyed as part of the EiC evaluation, felt that the Strand would create undesirable distinctions between pupils. This finding chimes with a concern raised in interviews as part of the Excellence Clusters evaluation that pupils who were at the top, but who had not quite '*made it*' onto the gifted and talented register, would feel excluded and be de-motivated. One interviewee noted that pupils had felt '*unjustifiably excluded*'.

5.4   The Next Stage of the Evaluation

More school visits will be undertaken in the remaining weeks of the summer term. In the autumn term, fieldwork will take place in all 11 Clusters. During these visits, we will complete the first round of school visits, and interview Cluster Chairs in order to examine the developments within individual Clusters since the first interviews in autumn 2001. We also plan at this stage to interview the Cluster strand co-ordinators, all of whom should now be in post.

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