Identifying and evaluating provision for more able and talented pupils in a south Wales secondary school

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This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of candidature for the degree of M.A. Education

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Declaration

This work is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree M.A. Education and has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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Abstract

Estyn (2015, p.47) highlights that ‘more able and talented (MAT) learners in Wales do not achieve as well as they should’. Unfortunately, this is not a new criticism of the Welsh education system and echoes many previous publications and reports. The message is clear; schools are not doing enough for their MAT learners. This is evidenced by poor attainment of A/A* GCSE grades (DCELLS, 2014, p.2), poor PISA results (OECD, 2013) and low percentages of Welsh pupils going to top universities (DCELLS, 2014, p.3). This case study research looks at the MAT provision in a south Wales secondary school. Initially it was found that provision was very inconsistent across the subjects and it does not meet the needs of MAT learners. A wide range of literature including academic journal articles books and publications were reviewed. Staff perspectives were collected via questionnaires and interviews. Pupils’ perspectives were collected via questionnaires and a focus group session. From this triangulation of data sources, recommendations have been set out for the school to improve MAT provision. The three main areas covered are: the use of the MAT label, extra-curricular provision and home-school communication. Improving MAT provision is essential to drive up school standards, which ensures all pupils reach their full potential and it is also in line with Welsh Government priorities.
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# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction............................................................................................................. 1  
  1.1 Research statement and rationale.................................................................................. 1  
  1.2 Research questions ........................................................................................................ 7  
  1.3 Ethical considerations ..................................................................................................... 8

Chapter 2: Literature Review .................................................................................................. 11  
  2.1 Literature sources ........................................................................................................... 11  
  2.2 Identifying MAT pupils .................................................................................................. 11  
  2.3 Labelling MAT pupils ...................................................................................................... 15  
  2.4 Extra-curricular MAT provision in schools .................................................................. 16  
  2.5 Home school communication ......................................................................................... 18

Chapter 3: Methodology ......................................................................................................... 19  
  3.1 Philosophy of research .................................................................................................... 19  
  3.2 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 20  
  3.3 Research methodology ................................................................................................... 21  
  3.4 Research methods ......................................................................................................... 23  
    3.4.1 Questionnaire ........................................................................................................... 23  
    3.4.2 Focus group discussion ............................................................................................. 26  
    3.4.3 Semi-structured Interview ....................................................................................... 26  
  3.5 Validity and reliability .................................................................................................... 27

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis ............................................................................................... 29  
  4.1 What level of support do MAT pupils currently receive in school x? ......................... 29  
  4.2 To what extent does the current provision fit the needs of MAT learners? .......... 30  
  4.3 What approaches can school x take to improve MAT provision? ............................... 33  
    4.3.1 MAT label ............................................................................................................... 33  
    4.3.2 Extra-curricular activities ....................................................................................... 38  
    4.3.3 Home-school communication ............................................................................... 40  
  4.4 Evaluation of methodology ............................................................................................ 42

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations .................................................................... 43  
  5.1 MAT Label ...................................................................................................................... 43  
  5.2 Extra-curricular activities ............................................................................................... 44  
  5.3 Home-school communication ......................................................................................... 46  
  5.4 Future research ............................................................................................................. 47

References............................................................................................................................. 48
Appendices ........................................................................................................................................... 55
Appendix 1: Research timetable ......................................................................................................... 55
Appendix 2: Teacher questionnaire ..................................................................................................... 56
Appendix 3: Parent letter and consent form (School header removed) .......................................... 57
Appendix 4: Pupil questionnaire ......................................................................................................... 58
Appendix 5: MAT register of pupils involved in study ..................................................................... 60
Appendix 6: Base questions to semi structured interview (Deputy Headteacher and MAT co-ordinator) ........................................................................................................................................ 61

Word count: 12816
List of figures

Figure 1. Proportion of learners achieving five or more A* grades at GCSE by UK country. Adapted from Estyn (2015, p.16).

Figure 2. ‘If you are good at a subject you should be distinguished as More Able and Talented (MAT) in that subject’.

Figure 3. ‘If you are good at a subject you should be given extra-curricular opportunities in that subject (lunchtime/after school sessions)’.
List of acronyms

ACCAC Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru
ADEW Association of Directors of Education in Wales
BERA The council of the British Educational Research Association
CCEA Council of Curriculum Examinations and Assessment
DCELLS Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
EAL English as an Additional language
ERIC Ethical Research Involving Children
MAT More Able and Talented
NACE National Association of Able Children in Education
NQT Newly Qualified Teacher
OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA Programme for International Student Assessment
SEN Special Educational Needs
SRA Social Research Association
STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths
QCA Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research statement and rationale

All schools will have pupils who are capable of excelling in one or more areas of learning. Descriptions can include genius, gifted, talented, exceptionally able, high flyer, very able and more able. For educational purposes, Wales has adopted the term ‘more able and talented’ (MAT) (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), 2008a; 2015a). Estyn (2012, p.2) states that MAT refers to approximately ‘20% of pupils who require enriched and extended opportunities to develop their abilities or talents in one or more areas’. MAT not only includes pupils capable of achieving above the expected level in the end-of-key-stage assessments, but also pupils who show ability or a talent in music, drama, art or sport (National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE), 2016). Although there are mixed opinions on MAT identification, labelling and provision; from the range of evidence discussed below, there is no question that MAT pupils are often not being given the opportunity to develop their ability and/or talent. This is disappointing, as outlined in A curriculum for all learners (DCELLS, 2010), we must provide a meaningful, relevant and motivating curriculum while meeting the specific needs of all pupils.

To improve Welsh MAT provision, in May 2008, Meeting the Challenge: Quality Standards in Education for More Able and Talented Pupils (DCELLS, 2008a) was published. This complemented the guidance issued by the Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru (ACCAC) in 2003, A Curriculum of Opportunity: Developing Potential into Performance (ACCAC, 2003). Unfortunately, recent evidence outlined below, suggests Wales is still failing MAT pupils and is lagging
behind other UK countries. As summarised by Estyn (2015, p.47) in its annual report (2013-2014), ‘MAT learners in Wales do not achieve as well as they should’.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests are designed to ‘assess to what extent students at the end of compulsory education, can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and be equipped for full participation in society’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2013, no pagination) in maths, reading and science. Worldwide, 65 countries participate in the tests conducted every three years. Disappointingly, the 2015 PISA tests results had not been released at the time of this research, therefore the most up to date findings come from PISA 2012. The UK immensely underperformed, with Wales scoring significantly lower than England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Wales had also dropped points since 2009 (OECD, 2013, p.3). It must be acknowledged here that the Welsh Government has developed INSET resources and initiatives over the last three years to improve PISA results (Welsh Government, 2014a).

Academically MAT pupils have the potential to be Oxford and Cambridge university applicants during their later stages of secondary education. Unacceptably, the number of Wales’ top pupils applying to Oxford and Cambridge is too low and the success rate is lower than other parts of the UK. ‘In the 2011–12 admissions cycle, only 19.5% of Welsh applications to the UK’s top two universities were successful, compared to a success rate of 25% for England and Northern Ireland’ (DCELLS, 2014, p.2). In response to these statistics, Paul Murphy MP (former Secretary of State for Wales) was appointed the Welsh Government’s Oxbridge Ambassador in May 2013. His task was to improve the decline in Welsh applications and admissions to Oxford and
Cambridge. One such initiative, *The Seren Network*, is a network of regional hubs designed to support MAT pupils achieve their academic potential and gain access to leading universities. The network is designed to: inspire pupils about future career aspirations; provide subject-specific support; link pupils with leading UK universities and support schools (Welsh Government, 2015a).

Shocking statistics from Wales illustrates that 65% of learners who achieved level 5 or above in English and maths at the age of 11 (leaving primary school) failed to go on to achieve an A or A* in both these subjects at GCSE in 2013 (DCELLS, 2014, p.16). GCSE results in Wales at A* are also below that of Northern Ireland and England (figure 1).

![Figure 1. Proportion of learners achieving five or more A* grades at GCSE by UK country. Adapted from Estyn (2015, p.16).](image)

The evidence presented above suggests the Welsh educational system is failing MAT pupils during KS3 and KS4. Unfortunately, this is not a new criticism of the Welsh education system (BBC, 2003; DCELLS, 2008a; Independent, 2013) and also mirrors that found by Ofsted (the English equivalent to Estyn). Ofsted conducted a school survey report in June 2013 titled *The most able students: examining failure to achieve* (Ofsted, 2013). Its main findings, amongst others, were that non-selective secondary schools had too low expectations of what the most able pupils should achieve, that there was little focus on MAT KS3 pupils and pupils were not achieving at the end of KS4 and KS5 (Ofsted, 2013). There was little improvement observed in the follow-up survey in 2015 that determined that ‘too little has been done by schools to address the
concerns raised in the previous report...[MAT pupils] in non-selective schools are still not being challenged to achieve the highest levels of scholarship’ (Ofsted, 2015a, p.1). Ofsted concluded in their recent report *Key stage 3: the wasted years?* (Ofsted, 2015b) that all pupils, including MAT pupils, do not make enough progress through years 7, 8 and 9. An important point to note, is that poor MAT provision is not confined to under-performing schools. Even in schools where standards are good; the needs of MAT pupils are not always met effectively by the teaching staff and upper management (Estyn, 2015).

Even though there are ongoing publications and articles concerning MAT learners as highlighted above, schools often do not prioritise improving support to this group. Instead many schools target underachieving pupils (Clark and Callow, 2002; Robinson and Campbell, 2010). Schools provide impressive provision for KS3 and KS4 Special Educational Needs (SEN) pupils including: in lesson support; numeracy and literacy support sessions; behavioural support sessions; learning support sessions and extra-curricular opportunities. Unfortunately, as the Council of Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (2007, p.4) suggests, many retain the myth that ‘gifted and talented pupils will always do well whatever the circumstances’ and therefore as Distin (2006, p.23) indicates, ‘teachers often go at the pace of the average or less able learner’. Overall, MAT provision in schools is not deemed essential and can often be left to interested members of staff.

Nevertheless, schools have now been given a new incentive to support MAT learners. In January 2015, a national school categorisation system was introduced in Wales
replacing the school banding system (DCELLS, 2015b). This system categorises schools according to the level of support that they require.

A review with the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW) and the four regional consortia in Wales was undertaken. The aim was to make the process robust, transparent and consistently applied across Wales (DCELLS, 2015b, p.3).

As well as weighting changes of certain criteria, a whole new indicator has been added. This indicator looks at the outcomes of MAT pupils with the analysis of 5+ A/A* GCSE’s (or equivalent). Now schools will be categorised from the following data sets; Level 2 threshold including English/Welsh first language and maths; capped points score including English/Welsh first language and maths; 5+ A/A* (or equivalent) and attendance (DCELLS, 2015b). With the A/A* indicator affecting categorisation heavily, it is in a school's best interest more now than ever to review their support of MAT learners.

School x is one such school that has taken a renewed school-wide interest in its MAT provision this academic year. The secondary school in south Wales has approximately 1000 pupils on role from 11 to 18 years old. The school has five primary feeder schools. The school has gone from strength to strength over the last three years and 24% of pupils achieved 5+ A/A* grades in 2015. Although this exceeds the Welsh national average of 19.2% (Welsh Government, 2015b), this percentage was achieved without targeted support for MAT pupils.

For this research, I chose to concentrate solely on school x as I am a maths teacher in the school with the responsibility of running maths primary, KS3 and KS4 MAT sessions. This non-essential voluntary role is carried out as I have an interest in challenging learners and believe that MAT pupils should be provided with extra
opportunities to develop. Regrettably, until recently, MAT provision had not been a priority of school x, even with the ongoing concerns about MAT provision. Although, maybe not for wholly the right reasons (school categorisation), I welcome this new drive to ensure all pupils are pushed to reach their maximum potential. This is an area I feel very strongly about and strive for in my department both in lessons and through extra-curricular activities.

The aim of this research was to identify and evaluate the current provision for MAT pupils and identify opportunities to improve provision. This research will contribute to my professional development as the maths MAT co-ordinator and aid the development of the whole school approach to MAT pupils. Most importantly, it is to make progress in ensuring that all learners, including MAT, reach their full potential in school x. Ofsted (2009) illustrate that by pushing MAT pupils, all pupils within a school generally do better. This understanding is resonated through various academic and educational literature (Robinson and Campbell, 2010; DCELLS, 2015a; NACE, 2016). Therefore, driving up MAT standards in school x should theoretically drive up the overall standards of the school. MAT provision is also within the Welsh Government’s national priorities as stated in the School Effectiveness Framework (DCELLS, 2008b) and recent Estyn reports (Estyn, 2011).

This project takes the form of a case study. Case studies are an important source of research data that looks at ‘real people in real situations’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrision, 2011, p.289), concentrating on a particular issue (Bell, 2009, p.10), in this case MAT provision. Nevertheless, there are limitations to case studies, for example, one could investigate a case that ‘does not comply with normal circumstances’
(Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.291). Fortunately, as the aim of this project is to improve MAT provision in school x exclusively, this issue did not weaken the project.

The case study research was conducted over five months, from October 2015 to February 2016 (Appendix 1: Research timetable) and involved teaching staff and upper management on a voluntary basis. KS3 and KS4 pupils identified as MAT were also included. Hopkins (2002, p.133) states the technique of triangulation is the best known test for trustworthiness in research. Triangulation involves gathering accounts of a teaching situation from at least two different points of view, thus validating any findings. This research includes: the pupils’ points of view (via a questionnaire and a focus group); staff members’ points of view (via a questionnaire and interviews with the Deputy Headteacher and MAT co-ordinator) and published research.

1.2 Research questions

1. What level of support do MAT pupils currently receive in school x?
2. To what extent does the current provision fit the needs of MAT learners?
3. What approaches can school x take to improve MAT provision?

Starting this project and carrying out the literature review took me on a journey that has made me thoroughly re-evaluate my concept of MAT provision in schools. I understand that there are many factors involved and a full overview was beyond the scope and time of this dissertation. Therefore, when considering the research questions, the following issues were prioritised to investigate through the methodology: the use of the MAT label, the offer of extra-curricular activities and home-school communication.
1.3 Ethical considerations

The Council of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) provides ethical guidelines to ensure all educational research is conducted to the highest ethical standard, primarily promoting respect for all those engaged (BERA, 2011). Details of this research were discussed with the Deputy Headteacher of school x and the MAT co-ordinator. The identity of the staff and pupils have been kept anonymous and the school has been referred to as school x throughout this report. This is an extremely important aspect of research highlighted in point 25 (privacy) of the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2011, p.7).

As Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) reminds us, it is essential to weigh up the potential benefits and harms of research before embarking on a project (ERIC, 2013). Despite the fact that the potential risk of physical damage is extremely low in social research (Hill, 2005), it can be intrusive and cause stress to participants (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Therefore, it is important to consider if children need to be actively involved and in what capacity. On consideration, it was extremely important to give MAT pupils a voice in the project. This would provide further insight into the current provision and hence inform a more successful set of improvements, especially on the use of the MAT label from a pupil’s point of view. McLaughlin (2015, p.9) affirms the right of children to express their views on issues, which also ‘encourages them to take an active interest in the wider world and, hopefully, will support them in becoming the informed citizens of the future’. Nonetheless, the following concerns were considered extensively.
As both staff and pupils were consulted in this research, conflicting agendas needed to be planned for. Robinson and Kellett (2004) note that often researchers cannot dispel the central adult characteristic of adults having power over children and may not take children’s views into account if they conflict with that of the adults. I have been completely open to the pupils’ opinions and have used their comments in this project, even if they are not complimentary about current school practice. It was also important to recognise that pupils’ perspectives and those of adults can differ. Both parties need to be negotiated fairly. For example, pupils may not understand factors such as class sizes and syllabus requirements that can influence the way a class is taught. Staff responsible for MAT provision were asked to fill in questionnaires about MAT provision in the school. As some departments do not currently specifically cater for MAT pupils, there was a need for sensitivity to avoid undermining teaching practice, hence, participation was voluntary.

As the purpose of this project was shared with the stakeholders (staff and pupils), a potential issue predicted was the disappointment for participants if certain expectations were not met. For example, if pupils felt that by participating in the focus group, changes would be implemented on their recommendations. To avoid this, expectations and limitations were discussed with pupils prior to data collection.

Another significant concern was that pupils involved in the research, having been identified as MAT, would feel singled out (some pupils view being more able as ‘geeky’) or superior compared to other pupils. The former was addressed by making participation voluntary. The latter, however, was more challenging to avoid.
Apprehensions included that pupils would be challenging in lessons, be boastful or undermine other pupils. Again, this area was addressed in the initial brief.

A possible area of conflict discussed with the Deputy Headteacher was the school’s ongoing development of the growth mind-set approach to learning. Sternberg (2005) challenged traditional categorical conceptions of gifted education that sees giftedness as fixed and innate. He emphasized that creativity, intelligence, and wisdom are all fluid and modifiable, and can therefore be learned. Caroline Dweck, a research phycologist, has pursued with this train of thought, branding it growth mind-set.

In a growth mind-set, people believe that basic abilities can be developed through hard work, good strategies, and good mentoring… that praising for ‘process’…instead of ability or intelligence creates a growth mind-set and enhanced achievement in students (Dweck, 2015, p.10).

Identifying pupils as MAT and providing extra opportunities for these pupils seemed to conflict with the ideals of the growth mind-set model, as it may reinforce the idea that intelligence is fixed and that some pupils are inherently smart, and some are not (Dweck, 2006). Matthews and Foster (2008, p.4) also advocate that ‘there is a lot of compelling evidence showing that this categorical attitude is associated with lower achievement and self-esteem’. Although a research project in itself, I will be considering how MAT provision and growth mind-set can work side by side.

As the Social Research Association (SRA) remind us, good ethical practice in social research is vital to protect research subjects, ensure high quality research, reassure funders, help maintain the good reputation of the sector and comply with legislation (SRA, 2013).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Literature sources

A range of literature sources were used. Initially, government publications for Wales, Scotland and England were accessed to gain a brief overview of educational provision in the UK as a whole. Progressively, publications specifically relating to Wales were consulted as school x is based in south Wales and significant differences have developed in the educational systems of the UK, post devolution (BBC, 2010). As there are continuous changes in education it was important to consult the most recently published reports and policies. Education Scotland has produced extremely relevant publications this year on MAT pupils. Numerous Welsh publications mention MAT pupils, but there was no up to date publications dedicated to this group. However, near the end of the research, a new MAT review for Wales was released which was incorporated into the project. Estyn proved to be a good source of information and various annual reports and best practice reports were utilised. Where possible, peer reviewed journal articles were incorporated, but it was disappointing to find that UK research on MAT pupils was sparse. Therefore, international work has been included. Generally these sources are less than five years old, but some seminal work has been integrated. Conflicting opinions by various authors were very thought-provoking (specifically Dweck, Kohn, Matthew and Murray) and have been incorporated.

2.2 Identifying MAT pupils

Unfortunately, identification of MAT pupils is extremely complex in nature for parents, teachers and support staff. There are various theories and definitions linked to giftedness and talent. Still, ‘despite copious contributions from fields such as
philosophy, psychology, education and sociology and debate on the subject…as yet, (there is) no universally accepted definition’ (Education Scotland, 2015a, p.8). Estyn (2012, p.2) reminds us that MAT refers to approximately ‘20% of pupils who require enriched and extended opportunities to develop their abilities or talents in one or more areas’. From experience, many schools take the 20% suggestion too literally and often add pupils to the MAT register who should not be. This results in the ability of MAT pupils varying greatly between schools, supported by Goodhew (2009).

Identifying MAT pupils presents a challenge for schools, which are under pressure to cater for talented individuals. Most schools devise their own identification procedure for MAT pupils, but there can often be too large an emphasis on test results. As noted in the national tests reports, tests provide limited information about a pupil’s ability (Welsh Government, 2014b). Education Scotland (2015a, p.8) summarizes that ‘there is no single test that will tell us whether or not a child or young person is or is not more able’. Kohn (2014, no pagination) elaborates on this point by explaining that while some test questions may require problem-solving skills, on the whole tests are ‘artificial pencil-and-paper exercises that measure how much pupils remember and how good they are at the discrete skill of taking tests, (therefore a pupil) may be a talented thinker and yet score poorly’. Consequently, talented pupils may be overlooked, as personally experienced. After a year of working with MAT pupils I had identified from my class, I discovered that one non-classified pupil had a particular talent at answering abstract mathematical questions, such as those found on Maths Challenge papers. In fact, he scored some of the highest marks in the class and yet in the class tests he often came near the bottom of the class. On reflection, I decided not
to create the Year 7 maths MAT register until after the first half term as it is extremely important that teachers are given the opportunity to:

Assess current knowledge, skills, attainment and rate of progress; look for certain behaviours associated with high ability or underachievement; gather information from others such as the pupils themselves, parents, peers, and other professionals who work with the child (Education Scotland, 2015a, p.8).

Prior to this project, I conducted my own research on maths MAT pupils to improve my practice. Primarily I found that it is often ‘helpful for teachers to provide enrichment and extension activities and to observe pupil responses to challenging activities’ (Chiswick community school, 2004, p.1). What I had observed was incorporated into my identification of MAT pupils and colleagues were encouraged to do so as well. It was intriguing how many ways mathematical talent could manifest itself. Many pupils perform at levels that are unusually advanced for their age, some pupils may communicate their reasoning very well whilst others may be unable to communicate their ideas well orally or in writing. One particularly useful comment relating to high mathematical achievers was, ‘sometimes highly able pupils reject obvious methods and answers as too easy, and opt for something more obscure’ (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2008, no pagination). This is the case of one extremely talented pupil in the MAT group, who often loses exam marks due to this.

Thomas (2006) suggests that teachers have the responsibility of identification; and despite the fact that teachers play a strong part, I believe they cannot be wholly responsible. From personal experience there is little training on MAT identification in the PGCE year, the Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year or subsequent teaching years. This issue is highlighted in many publications (DCELLS 2008a; QCA, 2008). Parents can often be a good source of information in identification. Robinson, Shore and Enersen (2007, no pagination) suggest that parents of MAT pupils are ‘notoriously
accurate in identifying their children’s abilities’. Out of school talents can be discussed and this alleviates the concern raised by Gray-Fow (2004) that teachers do not have the ability to identify all the various talents a child could possess.

Most researchers agree a combination of strategies should be used to identify MAT pupils, both quantitative and qualitative, including test results, observations and staff/parent opinions (Gray-Fow, 2004; Thomas, 2006; Robinson, Shore and Enersen 2007; QCA, 2008; Education Scotland, 2015b). Giving teachers a longer time frame to identify MAT learners is recommend by Kohn (2014, no pagination) who considers that the ‘barrier to gauging how successfully students are learning often lies not with the teacher but with features of the school structure, such as classes that are too large or periods that are too short’. This is an issue in school x as pupils are banded by a combination of maths and English ability at KS3. Consequently, some English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils with a poor grasp of English, but strong mathematical ability are placed into a low ability band.

Another problem in MAT identification is that underachievement is common in MAT pupils. Montgomery (2009) expresses that MAT pupils may find the work too easy, that the work has been covered before or they may just find it boring. She elaborates that this is a complex phenomenon and a careful analysis is needed to identify it and find ways of overcoming it. No single strategy for intervention is likely to work but using several strategies as discussed as above, can improve the identification of such pupils.
2.3 Labelling MAT pupils

Throughout this research, the term MAT has been used, yet there is no universally agreed term for this group of pupils. For example, MAT is used in Wales and England uses the term ‘gifted and talented’. In direct contrast to Wales, Scotland has specifically opted not to use the term ‘more able’. It suggests that if one pupil can be described as ‘more able’ than presumably another pupil can be described as ‘less able’ (Education Scotland, 2015a). Education Scotland (2015a) also argue that some terms suggest that high ability is innate and requires no effort on the part of the learner, while Smith and Campbell (2016, p.254) question why names such as gifted ‘continue to be found useful’ and exaggerate that the terms are often ‘strange, unhelpful [and recall] ancient views of endowment by God or gods’. Matthews and Foster (2008) also warn of the effect labelling can have on pupils and their confidence. Sternberg (2005) and Dweck (2015) go one step further by promoting the belief that all abilities can be developed through hard work, therefore there is no need for any type of MAT label. In consideration of these arguments, as an alternative, Scotland defines more able pupils as ‘highly able’ stating that they are ‘working, or have the potential to work, ahead of other children and young people their own age’ (Education Scotland, 2015b, p.1). Despite the fact that Education Scotland has made a very good case for the sensitivity needed in labelling MAT pupils, I do not agree that their term ‘highly able’ has achieved this. In fact, I believe it would present the same issues as most other labels.

As discussed in the introduction, there has been a surge of interest in provision for MAT pupils. Therefore, it is in direct contrast that authors have requested the removal of the MAT label as the ‘idea of giftedness has been recently subject to sustained [criticism]’ (Smith and Campbell, 2016, p.255). Every child and every situation is
unique, therefore the labelling experience varies considerably from one child to another and depends on factors such as age; psychosocial factors (e.g. resilience, personality); family support; degree of giftedness; attention or learning problems and school-related factors (e.g. educational opportunities that follow being labelled) (Matthews & Foster, 2005). Furthermore, as there is a general consensus that MAT represents 20% of a cohort, MAT ability will vary from school to school. A pupil identified as MAT in one school may not have been identified as MAT in another higher performing school, Goodhew (2009) therefore questions if it is fair to label these pupils. The author also highlights that often peers can become jealous and unrealistic expectations are set by parents and teachers. Not only are these issues also discussed by Distin (2006) but I have seen these problems surface in the classroom and at parents’ evenings. Another issue I have encountered, but one that is not often discussed in literature, is the burden some parents can put on staff when their child is identified as MAT.

2.4 Extra-curricular MAT provision in schools

It is extremely important that MAT learners are nurtured throughout their education to ensure they reach their full potential as an adult. Estyn regularly produces good practice reports based on the teaching and learning of MAT pupils. A recent example, *Partnership approach ensures more able and talented pupils make a smooth transition into secondary school* (Estyn, 2014), stresses the importance of strong links between a secondary school and its feeder schools. Estyn (2015), also explores some of the ways to cater for MAT pupils, emphasizing that ‘[MAT] learners benefit greatly from working with other more able learners’ (Estyn, 2015, p.48). As pupils are often set in the core subjects this allows them to work with pupils of a similar academic level. This
approach benefits many pupils but it also has drawbacks, including the development of low ability sets that are often demotivated and exhibit poor behaviour (Kutnick et al., 2006; Francis et al., 2016). This challenges the assertion made by many authors, including Ofsted (2009) that all pupils benefit when MAT pupils are targeted.

Tailored extra-curricular provision such as film-making, writing clubs and maths clubs are important. These sessions provide learners with opportunities to extend their knowledge and understanding and, in some cases, to gain extra qualifications (Estyn, 2015). Extra-curricular activities come more naturally to some subjects than others (such as sport, music and drama) and consequently some subjects at school x have not offered MAT sessions to this date.

Some suggest suspension of all extra-curricular MAT provision. The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, which did offer extra support for gifted children in English state schools finished in 2010 when funding was diverted elsewhere. Clark and Callow (2002) explain that MAT pupils are not seen as priorities in school and ‘why give more to those who are already endowed’ is the general attitude. In contrast, A curriculum for all learners (DCELLS, 2010) emphasizes that we must provide a meaningful, relevant and motivating education for all pupils. Controversially, the publication goes one step further, proposing that MAT pupils have an additional need that must be catered for. Whilst I do agree that MAT pupils should be provided with extra provision, I do not feel MAT pupils require the same time and resources as SEN pupils. An interesting study by Murray (2010) contains various conflicting opinions by educational professionals. One comment summarising many educators’ views reads, ‘I've always had a problem with the gifted and talented register
because I prefer to think inclusively about the needs of all young people’. In contradiction, one comment reads ‘If the government was talking about reducing support for children being bullied or underachieving at school, there would be a public outcry. But many people don’t recognise that gifted and talented children need support’. Murray (2010) goes on to explain that in some schools, recognising academic excellence can be confused with elitism, but as Ofsted (2009) highlights:

Having an effective programme in place for gifted and talented pupils is not elitist. Schools that ensure all pupils, included gifted and talented, are suitably challenged find that all pupils benefit (Ofsted, 2009, no pagination).

Matthew and Fosters (2008) also support this view that education must provide MAT pupils increased opportunities for interactions with their intellectual peers.

2.5 Home school communication

As discussed previously, Robinson, Shore and Enersen (2007) suggest that parents can aid in the identification process of MAT learners, moreover, they imply that parental involvement is vital in the development of MAT pupils and there should be continuous discussion between home and school. Thomas (2006, p.41) agrees, explaining that as well as providing a MAT policy and identification, a school should provide ‘advice and guidance about the MAT community’ so parents can help support and encourage pupils at home. A point that the Welsh Government (DCELLS, 2008a) argues is vital to MAT outcomes. The Meeting the Challenge publication from 2008 set out a strong expectation that schools listen to and take account of the views of parents of MAT learners. Parents should be kept informed and encouraged to take responsibility for supporting their child’s learning (DCELLS, 2008a). School x is currently debating the use of the MAT label and how much information should be shared with home as part of improving MAT provision.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Philosophy of research

Educational research can be often be met with scepticism. Pring (2010) discusses the main reasons, including the limited sharing between researchers thus a poor knowledge base; the powerlessness of research to actually influence and develop physical practice within the classroom; and the inability for small studies to improve education on a broader scale. I agree with one main improvement suggested by Pring (2010), that it is essential that teachers are involved in research. However, this is not a new idea as in 1975, Stenhouse stressed that only ‘teachers … appreciate, and have access to, the complexity of data required to understand the interactions of the classroom’. 40 years later, this crucial concept is slowly entering classrooms through PGCE research and a new emphasis on masters’ qualifications. There is still much to improve in educational research, however, I disagree with the many authors (Hargreaves, 1996; Hillage et al., 1998; Carr, 2003) who vastly criticize the lack of connection between researchers. They suggest that poor collaboration in educational research leads to limited generalisations in education. However, as every educational setting is unique it is erroneous to overly generalise. Even if a small set of pupils receive some benefit from research conducted then it is extremely worthwhile, an idea supported by Barrow and Foreman-Peck (2005). Criticism of educational research may arise from the conflict between the two research philosophies.

A research philosophy is a belief about the way in which data about a phenomenon should be gathered, analysed and used. Two major research philosophies have been identified: positivist and interpretivist (Ausubel, 1953). I have approached this research
from an interpretivist’s viewpoint. Interpretivists believe that knowledge is subjective, social contexts (such as schools) are unique therefore cannot be generalised and suggest positivists cannot avoid affecting those phenomena they study (Ausubel, 1953, p.7). This is the case in this study, as asking staff and pupils questions concerning MAT provision may bring about a new thought or a new interest, thus changing the previous perception of that individual.

3.2 Introduction

The aim of this research was to answer the following questions:

1. What level of support do MAT pupils currently receive in school x?
2. To what extent does the current provision fit the needs of MAT learners?
3. What approaches can school x take to improve MAT provision?

Due to time constraints the three main issues investigated were: the use of the MAT label, the offer of extra-curricular activities and home-school communication.

When preparing for data collection, Ashley (2012, p.35) explains that it is initially important to identify ‘key individuals, often referred to…as gatekeepers who are in the position to give you the access you need for your research’. The Deputy Headteacher and MAT co-ordinator were identified as the gatekeepers. Meetings were conducted with them and both were consulted throughout the project. Concerns were anticipated and addressed with the parental permission letter causing the biggest trepidation. The school is currently developing MAT provision and there are many discrepancies between departments. Parental notification and involvement is currently in contention. Despite the fact that I believe the advantages outweigh the disadvantages (supported
by Robinson and Shore, 2007; DCELLS, 2008) and the maths and English department do send home letters, I understand the apprehension of other staff members and their reluctance to notify parents. The gatekeepers were anxious about possible repercussions of sending permission slips home to parents that had not been notified of MAT identification to date. Nevertheless, there are many ethical implications in research relating to MAT pupils, explored in the introduction, which were discussed with the gatekeepers. Also, as Campbell and Groundwater-Smith (2007) note, pupils are not often asked permission to participate in activities. Therefore, I felt parents and pupils should be given the opportunity to provide permission or withdraw at any point. The letters were sent home, with one parent objecting to her son being interviewed; this validated my choice to seek permission.

The gatekeepers were also asked if there were any particular aspects they would like developed, in line with the suggestion by Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (2006). Two main points emerged: pupils’ perceptions of challenge (the main focus in lesson observations between teaching staff and upper management in school x this year) and pupils’ perceptions of a MAT label.

3.3 Research methodology

This project takes the form of a case study, a method that has been ‘used in many disciplines for decades’ (Scholz and Tietje, 2002, p.3). Case studies are an important source of research that look at ‘real people in real situations’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrision, 2011, p.289) ‘concentrating on a particular issue’ (Bell, 2009, p.10). ‘A case is considered from a specified perspective and with a special interest’ (Scholz and Tietje, 2002, p.1). The particular case in this study is school x and the issue to be
investigated is MAT provision. Stake (1995) discusses three main types of case study: collective, intrinsic and instrumental. A collective case study would involve more than one school which is beyond the scope of the project at present. Originally, I saw my research as an intrinsic case study as I have a particular interest in the issue, yet, as Stake (1995, p.3) states, intrinsic studies are not meant to look at a general problem. Therefore, on reflection, an instrumental case study was more appropriate for this research, as I have a need to understand an issue (in this case MAT provision in schools) by studying a particular case (school x). As Baxter and Jack (2008, p.549) elaborate, ‘the case is often looked at in depth and its contexts scrutinized’.

Qualitative data is the major contributor to this study. I see myself as an interpretive researcher as Burton, Brundrett and Jones (2014) describe this type as a researcher exploring perspectives, developing insights and a deeper understanding of phenomena using predominantly qualitative data. The aim of this study is not to generalise as a positivistic researcher would with quantitative data, as each school setting is different.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to case studies, for example, one could investigate a case that does not comply with ‘normal’ circumstances and generalisation can be limited (Cohen, Manion and Morrsion, 2011, p.291). This problem did not apply to my research as the aim was to evaluate MAT provision in the setting that the research took place. Hence, I did not need to extend this case study to other situations or compare school x to other schools. Due to the complexity of case studies, they are frequently conducted by teams (Scholz and Tietje, 2002); as a lone researcher with time constraints this vastly confined the breadth of my research.
Dale (2005) advises that the Data Protection Act (1998) applies to all research. One must ensure that all paper-based and computer-based records are kept secure, especially if individuals or organisations can be identified by the data kept. I ensured paper documents were kept in a locked cabinet and that electronic materials were password protected (both of which I only have access to).

3.4 Research methods

Three methods were used in this case study: questionnaires; semi-structured interviews; and a focus group discussion.

3.4.1 Questionnaire

As Descombe (2010) summarises, questionnaires have the advantage of covering a large number of respondents without requiring personal, face-to-face interaction and when there is a need for standardized data from identical questions. As the school environment is extremely busy it was anticipated that teaching staff would be more likely to contribute to the project if it had minimal impact on their time. This also limited the amount of time pupils were absent from lessons. Permission was sought from the gatekeepers to conduct the questionnaires as suggested by Descombe (2010). Bell (2009) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) advise to pilot questionnaires on a small group similar to the focus group. Piloting can alleviate potential problems by checking for errors and clarity. Suggestions may also be made that were not thought of by the researcher. Each questionnaire was shown to the gatekeepers for editing and after alterations were made, they were piloted by participants similar to the intended sample. The pupils’ questionnaire was piloted with two Year 10 pupils and two colleagues were asked to pilot the staff questionnaire. No suggestions were made.
to the staff questionnaire, but minor wording changes were made to the pupil questionnaire.

The sample selected for the staff questionnaire was a non-probability (purposive) quota sample and the full population was used. ‘Non-probability quota sampling selects respondents in accordance with some predetermined criteria’ (Baker, 2002, p.111), in this case, the role of subject MAT co-ordinator. Paper questionnaires were issued to teaching staff responsible for MAT provision in their designated subject (including maths, sciences, English, humanities, languages, sport and arts). Eight questionnaires were completed in total. With quota sampling there is the possibility of bias (Baker, 2002). In this case, I did consider that all subject MAT co-ordinators were volunteers in their department and therefore would probably have an interest in MAT provision. This could affect potential results, especially on questions such as ‘should MAT pupils have extra-curricular provision?’ To help alleviate this, staff were encouraged to discuss answers briefly in their departments, possibly at a departmental meeting, so a paper-based copy was best in this instance (Appendix 2: teacher questionnaire).

Questionnaires were also issued to MAT pupils where consent had been provided (Appendix 3: parent letter and consent form and Appendix 4: pupil questionnaire). Ideally, all MAT pupils would be included in the study, however, the number of MAT pupils across the school was potentially large. Approximately 20% of each year group are identified as MAT pupils, which meant there are approximately 250 MAT pupils across the school. It was not possible or feasible to question every member of the relevant population. Due to time constraints and to limit the impact on the school, a
sample was chosen to represent the MAT population of school x. The original sample was a non-probability sample, MAT as the criteria. Eight pupils were selected from each year group, including years 8, 9, 10 and 11 from the MAT register that was provided by the MAT co-ordinator, despite it being a work in progress. Year 7 were not included in this instance as they did not have enough experience of the secondary school environment. Years 12 and 13 were also not included as they were busy with work, exams and university applications. Conveniently, the MAT register was in the form of an excel spreadsheet. The pupils were already separated by year group and then were further separated by gender, to have approximately the same number of male and female participants. The =RAND() command was used in a new column to generate random numbers next to each pupil. This column was then sorted into ascending order and the first four names were used. A random sample is one in which every unit has an equal chance of selection (Baker, 2002) and this method insured this. In total, 32 parent letters (with permission slips) were given out. It was anticipated that not all consent forms would be returned. In total, 22 permission slips were returned and these pupils completed an online questionnaire. The sample included seven Year 8 pupils, five Year 9 pupils, five Year 10 pupils and five Year 11 pupils (Appendix 5: MAT register of participants in study, pupils chosen for the focus group are highlighted in yellow).

Strange, Forest and Oakley (2002) highlight the problem of giving out questionnaires in the classroom, explaining that it is often difficult to get school groups to complete questionnaires individually. Moving pupils and/or demanding complete silence could cause pupils to be reluctant to participate or deliberately answer questions incorrectly. Another issue suggested by Denscombe and Aubrook (1992) is that pupils see
questionnaires as a form of school work. I explained that it was not compulsory to complete the questionnaires. To encourage independent answers and promote the promise of anonymity (no need to disguise handwriting or hand directly to the teacher), pupils answered their questions online via survey monkey. This method worked well, with all pupils participating in the questionnaire and, naturally, completing it individually. From the 22 pupils who completed the questionnaires, two pupils were randomly selected from each year group to create a focus group.

3.4.2 Focus group discussion

The pupil questionnaire was used as the basis of questioning of the focus group. I found that the discussion unfolded in a conversational manner and, as Longhurst (2009, p.580) emphasizes, this offers ‘participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important’. As pupils were discussing with their peers and not one to one with me, I felt they were more open. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.433) agree, highlighting that ‘group interviewing…encourages interaction between the group rather than simply a response to an adult’s question’. Baxter and Jack (2008, p.556) suggest that as data is collected ‘researchers may wish to integrate a process of member checking, where the researchers’ interpretations of the data are shared with the participants’. When unsure on a comment or justification in the discussion, I gave participants an opportunity to clarify an interpretation; this also allowed the contribution of new or additional perspectives on the point being discussed.

3.4.3 Semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Deputy Headteacher and MAT co-ordinator of school x to gain a deeper insight into MAT provision at the school.
Beforehand, I created open-ended questions as the basis of the interview (Appendix 6: Base questions to semi-structured interview (Deputy Headteacher and MAT coordinator)). Both interviews developed in different directions and produced various informative discussions which is a strong advantage of the semi-structured approach (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

### 3.5 Validity and reliability

In many sectors, ‘case research is viewed with scepticism, equated with weak designs and non-systematic procedures’ (Wooldridge, 2003, p.504). It is important to understand the terms reliability and validity and how they link to case study research. Statistically, reliability implies consistency and measures the extent to which a study will yield the same result if it were repeated. This may be best applied to a scientific experiment under controlled conditions in a laboratory. In contrast, in qualitative research, peoples’ opinions on an issue can change, dependant on various factors including mood, time of day and experiences of that day so far. Fortunately, as Scholz and Tietje (2002, p.334) emphasize, in case studies, validity, more so than reliability, is the core issue as ‘cases and their circumstance of their analysis are unique. Furthermore, the case is often affected and changed after the case study is performed’. This applies to my research as I am sure that by questioning staff about MAT provision, that some may have thought more into the issue and may have changed their opinions or approaches to those pupils. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.179) also stress that ‘validity is an important key to effective research. If a piece of data (sic) is invalid then it is worthless’. As discussed throughout the methodology, I was very aware of the factors that would affect the validity of my data,
for example, quota sampling and pupils’ perceptions. Steps were taken to minimise bias and inaccurate answers, for example, anonymity and group interviews.

It is essential to set out methods thoroughly and ensure various sources are being explored, as Scholz and Tietje (2002, p.3) suggest ‘case studies require the integration of data and knowledge from various sources’. Hopkins (2002, p.133) states the technique of triangulation is the best known test for validity in research. Triangulation involves gathering accounts of a teaching situation from at least two different points of view, thus validating any findings. This research used the pupils’ points of view, staff members’ points of view and published research. Wooldridge (2003, p.502) also emphasizes the importance of triangulation, asserting that the ‘best case research uses multiple methods and data sources to unravel complex interactions among a myriad of …forces within which the case is embedded.’ To ensure triangulation between the various sources, questions used with pupils and staff were similar. This allowed me to directly compare responses.

Utilising a combination of data sources carries through to the analysis phase as Baxter and Jack (2008) warn that:

One danger associated with the analysis phase is that each data source would be treated independently and the findings reported separately. This is not the purpose of a case study. Rather, the researcher must ensure that the data are converged in an attempt to understand the overall case, not the various parts of the case, or the contributing factors that influence the case (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p.555).
Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

I have taken a holistic approach to my research by combining the presentation and analysis where all sources of data are utilised; using my initial research questions as a structural device (Burton, Brundrett and Jones, 2014, p.166).

4.1 What level of support do MAT pupils currently receive in school x?

From the staff questionnaires it was clear that all staff understood the term MAT, with all departments writing an informed definition. However, from the questionnaire data and interviews with the MAT co-ordinator and Deputy Headteacher, it was evident that MAT provision varies greatly across the school. The initial steps have already been taken to remedy this. Education Scotland (2015a) reminds us of the importance of subject specific criteria and all departments have recently updated or created MAT identification policies. As a result of these policies, departments in school x have also updated or created MAT registers for pupils from Year 7 to Year 13. In line with other schools, ‘a wide range of complementary identification strategies…are recognised’ (DCELLS, 2015a, p.10). This includes, test scores, formative assessment and qualitative judgements. School x does not seek out or encourage parental input.

Four departments felt MAT pupils were sufficiently challenged in the classroom, two departments remained neutral and two departments felt that MAT pupils were not sufficiently challenged. When asked if the school supported MAT pupils as a whole, two departments indicated that they did not think so, two departments indicated that they did think so and four departments ticked the neutral option. In hindsight, I should have followed the advice from Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) to remove the
‘neither agree nor disagree’ option. The teachers completing the questionnaire may have not wanted to exhibit negative impressions of their department or towards other subjects thus may have used this as a safe option, influencing the results.

Currently maths and English send home letters to inform parents that a pupil has been identified as MAT. In maths and English there are dedicated MAT sessions after school once a half term. The maths department takes part in various competitions including the UK maths challenge and Glamorgan maths quiz. Art runs a MAT lunchtime club once a week and a MAT trip to London once a year for Year 9 and Year 11. The PE department holds many clubs and take part in various competitions on a very regular basis. There is currently no extra-curricular MAT provision in history, business, economics, health and social care or science. Other departments did not respond to the questionnaire. The school hosts primary MAT sessions once a term, after school, in each subject.

4.2 To what extent does the current provision fit the needs of MAT learners?

Due to the major discrepancies between departments at school x, current provision for MAT learners differs from subject to subject. The first steps towards consistency have been achieved by the updating or creation of MAT policies and registers for each subject even though some staff members were reluctant to do so.

The primary MAT sessions are extremely misleading, as many of the subjects do not continue with MAT provision though the pupils’ secondary education. During discussions with parents at open evenings, I found that parents are sending their child
to school x as they believe these targeted sessions will continue. Often, their child has been distinguished as MAT in primary school, therefore they want to send them to a school that caters for MAT pupils. During the interview, the Deputy Headteacher agreed that this was deceptive. He explained that although encouraged, a department has no responsibility to provide extra-curricular sessions for MAT pupils. I feel unhappy with this justification as they have been told they must offer primary MAT sessions and do so. One member of the focus group in Year 8 recalls coming to the primary school sessions in maths and science. He was bitterly disappointed that there are no science sessions in secondary school.

Results from the questionnaire indicated that 59% of pupils always wanted to be challenged in lessons and 41% of pupils sometimes wanted to be challenged in lessons. However, only 23% claimed that they were always challenged in their subjects with 86% of pupils claiming they sometimes find work too easy in school. In the optional comment section, remarks were varied but the general agreement was that there was a big difference in challenge between different subjects. This response suggests that MAT pupils are not being catered for in all subjects and does not meet the requirement that MAT pupils must be challenged within the classroom (DCELLS 2008a; Estyn, 2014). Five out of eight departments also felt that MAT pupils were not always challenged in lessons. This may be explained by the response to another question, where seven out of eight departments agreed or strongly agreed that staff needed more training on MAT provision. Additional comments read, ‘observations of effective delivery of challenging lesson/activities would be beneficial. More time to plan extra-curricular MAT activities’ and ‘provision and support for MAT learners comes from teachers’ time not from school/cover/time support’. This need for professional
development in teaching is echoed throughout the media and literature and Clark and Callow (2002) emphasize the need for development opportunities for teachers of MAT pupils.

There were mixed opinions over the need for extra-curricular provision for pupils. Five departments felt strongly that pupils should be provided with extra-curricular provision and four of them do so already. The three departments that did not agree, do not provide extra provision. I would have initially predicted that these departments would have felt that MAT pupils were challenged sufficiently in the classroom. Yet, surprisingly two departments disagreed with this statement and the remaining were neutral. During the literature review I discussed various stances for and against extra-curricular provision for MAT pupils (Murray, 2010) and there is still no universal agreed approach. In 2010, A curriculum for all learners (DCELLS, 2010, p.3) provided ambiguous advice on meeting the needs of MAT learners stating, ‘the best provision for more able and talented learners is made by extending that which is available to all learners’. Unfortunately, this can be interpreted in two ways. This could be confined to the classroom, where differentiated work and challenging content can extend learners. On the other hand, one could infer MAT pupils need to receive extra-curricular provision. In contrast, Estyn specifically emphasizes the need for extra provision that provides learners with opportunities to extend their knowledge and understanding and, in some cases, to gain extra qualifications (Estyn, 2015). School x is not complying with suggestions, thus are possibly putting pupils at a disadvantage compared to MAT pupils in other schools.
As many subjects do not currently share MAT information with home, this could be detrimental to a pupil’s development. Robinson, Shore and Enersen (2007) support this notion, explaining that parental involvement in education is essential, specifically as MAT pupils require academic interventions. They reiterate that parents and teachers must work together each year of the child’s school life for maximum potential, consequently, MAT pupils at school x could not be reaching their full potential.

4.3 What approaches can school x take to improve MAT provision?

4.3.1 MAT label

Five departments agreed that more able pupils should be labelled as MAT and three did not. In response to the pupil’s question ‘If you are good at a subject you should be distinguished as More Able and Talented (MAT) in that subject’, 82% of pupils agree or strongly agreed (figure 2).

Figure 2. ‘If you are good at a subject you should be distinguished as More Able and Talented (MAT) in that subject’.

During the focus group discussion we deliberated the advantages and disadvantages of the MAT label and overall, pupils felt that the advantages outweighed the
disadvantages. Three main disadvantages emerged: the effect on other pupils’ confidence (who had not been labelled), bullying towards MAT pupils and, refreshingly, the possible negative impact on the work load of teachers. This was an exciting development as during the literature review, adults often discuss this issue (NUT, 2014), but there was no mention that pupils would contemplate it also.

During the literature review, many negative impacts were discussed concerning the use of the MAT label (Distin, 2006; Goodhew, 2009) and many of the pupils shared these concerns. Questionnaire responses included, ‘pupils may fall further behind in a topic if they are not pushed’, ‘pupils could feel they are not smart enough’ and ‘people could get upset and not work hard enough’. This concern was also raised by the Deputy Headteacher in the interview. During the focus group we discussed how we could limit the effect on other pupils. While pupils agreed that MAT labelling should exist, they explained that it should not be overly publicised, for example (and I am guilty of this) reminding MAT pupils of sessions openly in class. In agreement, the recent MAT review for Wales states ‘many learners reported that being identified publicly as MAT at school was not necessarily a positive experience as they wanted to avoid being perceived as being different by their peers’ (DCELLS, 2015a, p.12). Initially, I could not think of another way of reminding MAT pupils of sessions unless in class. However, a school included in the review used the ‘school newsletter and Facebook page’ to send reminders and information (DCELLS, 2015a, p.24).

Pupil 9b advised that challenging work should not always be just aimed at MAT pupils but other pupils should be given a go. Other pupils agreed, explaining that this was especially the case in subjects like maths where pupils excel in different topics. From
this discussion point, I inferred that all pupils must understand that the MAT group is flexible and changeable and this message must be promoted across the school. This corresponds with the biannual update of the MAT registers proposed by school x. This is where MAT provision can possibly fit in with the growth mind-set approach school x wishes to pursue. Pupils should understand that the MAT group is not fixed and pupils can be added over time suggesting intelligence and talent are not fixed attributes in line with Dweck (2015). Moreover, it is good for MAT pupils to understand that they must continue to work hard to stay in that group. This will minimise the risk of those pupils getting complacent and not reaching their full potential.

Pupils also discussed possible bullying implications. Pupils identified as MAT in maths admitted that they had had problems at some point with name calling, jealously and also pressure to always do well. Unexpectedly, they felt it was not a major issue with the nature of school life in general, ‘there is endless banter, jealously, name calling and falling out in school and this is just a minor part of it’ (pupil 8c).

Pupil 8a highlighted that it can be worse for pupils as only certain subjects distinguish MAT pupils (such as art, English and maths). She felt that if all subjects distinguished their MAT pupils it would be a lot better as it would give more people confidence, ‘you might not be MAT in maths but if you are MAT in say, science, you wouldn’t mind as much’ (pupil 8a).

In the questionnaire, several pupils commented on possible pressures placed on teachers concerning MAT pupils. Comments included, ‘harder for teachers to set different work to different pupils’, ‘it could be difficult for teachers if some pupils get too
far ahead in class’ and ‘making (MAT) work and sessions could be too time consuming’. This emphasized a point made by Uprichard (2010, no pagination), that ‘children are quite capable of talking about many, many things, not just about their childhood lives’. This counteracts a common view by many that ‘children are inherently vulnerable… [due to] their lack of knowledge and experience in comparison to adults’ (McLaughlin, 2015, p.9). Whilst I do not dispute the vulnerability of children directly, I do believe that even the most experienced researchers perpetuate the unequal power relationship in research with children (Robinson and Kellett, 2004), sustained by a belief that adults have greater experience and superior knowledge.

The focus group discussion was used to develop the responses concerning teachers. Most pupils seemed to appreciate that teaching can be difficult and this could be an added pressure, some pupils had seen this first hand.

In year 8 in maths, the teacher often pushed certain pupils on more, often giving them GCSE stuff to work on. Now, in year 9, we have a new teacher and now and again when [name] teaches a new thing, that group have already covered it. She is often flustered trying to suddenly find extension work (pupil 9b).

It was interesting to hear that pupils had picked up on this in class as I had talked to this teacher previously about this issue, which is quite common, especially in maths. She is careful to always push pupils and is worried about possible parental complaints of redoing work already covered. We are trying to combat this problem in the maths department by giving enrichment activities to challenge and extend MAT pupils, instead of pushing them along the scheme of work, in line with a suggestion by NACE (2016). This is also the reason we teach non-syllabus topics in the afterschool maths sessions. Another problem is that pupils think they have a covered a topic, but merely have just touched upon it as an extension activity.
Pupils felt there were many advantages to a MAT label. Questionnaire responses included, ‘MAT people can have extra support’, ‘push pupils further to improve their ability’, ‘pupils can be given extra opportunities in different lessons and they will be able to unlock their true potential’ and ‘pupils could become motivated to work harder in subjects as they may become laid back and lazy if they constantly find work in school too easy’.

During the focus group, one pupil felt that extra-curricular activities unlocked potential and sometimes a new passion for the subject. This Year 11 pupil, although initially disliking maths, had a natural flair for it, ‘after attending afterschool MAT masterclass sessions I developed a new passion for certain strands of maths that eventually spilled over into lessons’ (pupil 11a).

Pupils also felt that while it was nice working with friends, sometimes it was important to work with other pupils of a high ability, pupil 8c stated, ‘sometimes I can hold back in lessons, but in MAT sessions I relish jumping in without being judged’.

The older pupils felt it would be highly beneficial to put on your CV, especially if you had participated in extra-curricular sessions in that subject. Pupil 11b explained that ‘it could benefit a person by being able to put it on university applications or job applications as it shows that you are able to cope with the course or what the job entails’. They felt it might give you an edge against other applicants. This is important as previously highlighted, not enough Welsh pupils are getting the top university spots in Oxbridge and Cambridge (DCELLS, 2014, p.2).
In the literature review it was discussed that even though Wales uses the term MAT, this group of pupils went by different names in other countries, for example, in Scotland they use the term ‘highly able’. There is a suggestion that certain names decrease some of the negative associated impacts of labelling (Education Scotland, 2015a). In the interview with the Deputy Headteacher, we discussed the possibility of changing the term MAT to ‘high flyers’ in school x. During the focus group, I asked if it made a difference what name was used for a pupil of high ability, the response was unanimous with all pupils stating that it did not make a difference. I discussed the fact that Scotland chose not to use the term ‘more able’ as it would suggest that other pupils are ‘less able’ (Education Scotland, 2015a) and one pupil made a valid point, ‘there will always be an opposite perception, for example, ‘highly able’ and ‘lowly able’, ‘high flyer’ and ‘low flyer’ (pupil 10a). All agreed that regardless of name, these pupils are still being singled out and labelled. One pupil was offended, affirming, ‘It doesn’t matter what you call it, everyone would still know what it is, we’re not babies’ (pupil 10b).

The MAT co-ordinator held the same opinion, that a label is a label regardless of the name. I agree with this, it would not matter what I called the MAT maths group, they and everyone else would know it is because they are very good at maths and in turn that other pupils were not quite good enough at maths to be in it. It is from this fact that the problems arise, not the name.

4.3.2 Extra-curricular activities

Five departments felt strongly that pupils should be provided with extra-curricular provision and four of them do so already. However, as someone that does organise
MAT sessions I understand the time and effort it can take and two departments felt we should be given time to plan MAT sessions. The issues of limited time and high workload for teachers is regularly explored in literature and in the media. A survey by the NUT (2014) found that the high workload of the profession has a very negative impact on teachers, their families and ultimately on the school system with 90% of respondents considering leaving teaching. As a result, one can see why it is unreasonable to expect staff to provide extra-curricular opportunities for no extra time or pay.

The Welsh Government found that ‘few schools reported that they receive effective support from their local authority or regional consortium’ (DCELLS, 2015a, p.21). This is true for school x, where little support or the opportunity of MAT related professional development has come from the local authority or regional consortium.

The advantages of extra-curricular activities have been discussed in the literature review (DCELLS, 2008a; Estyn, 2014; DCELLS, 2015a) in detail, but it was interesting to see the pupils’ point of views on the matter. An advantage of MAT identification discussed previously, was that participating in extra-curricular sessions could boost a university application. Nevertheless, as one year 10 pupil pointed out:

Yeah that's fine if you are applying for a maths course, but if you're applying for science or geography, the MAT kids don’t get extra clubs so they are no better off (pupil 10b).

The pupils questioned why some subjects offered MAT provision and others did not. As anticipated in the ethical considerations section, pupils have a different perception to situations, they felt if one department could do it, then all could. I discussed factors such as department sizes and teacher responsibilities, yet, they still maintained that
all departments should offer extra-curricular opportunities for MAT pupils to extend themselves. This was also the general consensus from the questionnaire results (figure 3).

Figure 3. 'If you are good at a subject you should be given extra-curricular opportunities in that subject (lunchtime/after school sessions)'.

During the discussion, pupils felt the challenge required by MAT pupils could not always be achieved in the classroom. 77% of pupils said they were only challenged sometimes in lessons and 86% of pupils stated they sometimes found work too easy. This differed with the view of the teachers, where five departments felt pupils were sufficiently challenged in the classroom. Although there are opposing views on extra-curricular provision discussed in the literature review, the recent MAT review for Wales concludes that ‘to stretch MAT learners and develop talent, the majority of schools supplement challenging tasks in the classroom with school-based extra-curricular activities, both during lunchtime and after-school' (DCELLS, 2015a, p. 20).

4.3.3 Home-school communication

The Meeting the Challenge publication from 2008 set out a strong expectation that schools listen to and take account of the views of parents of MAT learners. Parents
should be kept informed and encouraged to take responsibility for supporting their child’s learning (DCELLS, 2008a). The recent review of MAT provision in Wales (DCELLS, 2015a) states that ‘parental input…is taken into consideration in around half of schools’. Regrettably, while it is understood that in total 91 schools are represented in the review (five nursery and infant schools, 48 primary schools and 38 secondary schools) it does not distinguish between these schools. The review acknowledges that ‘nursery, infant and primary schools [are] more likely to seek parental nominations’ but it would have been beneficial to see how many secondary schools seek parental input.

There can be various issues that arise in the transition period between primary and secondary school, as the Welsh Government stress:

> Variation in interpretation of MAT and inconsistency in identification strategies between settings is reported to lead to misperceptions when information is shared about individual MAT learners at transition. Estyn, regional consortia, and NACE cited inconsistency in teacher assessment as contributing to a lack of confidence in MAT transition data (DCELLS, 2015a, p. 12).

As Thomas (2006) highlights, with good home-school communication, possible discrepancies like that highlighted above could be reduced. A current MAT maths pupil in Year 8 was sent to school x with the wrong data, whilst I have no doubt further down the line his ability would have been recognised, it was extremely beneficial that his mother set up a dialogue with the school after realising his sets. Therefore, the situation was rectified sooner rather than later. Parents should also have the opportunity to support pupils at home and work with teachers for pupils to reach their full potential. It may also prompt parents to take their children to outside school activities (for example, KUMON maths, singing lessons or a sports club). Parents could also develop an interest or talent with trips (for example, a trip to France for a talented linguist or museum trips for a budding historian).
I believe it is extremely important to involve parents with the MAT identification process and keep up the home-school communication. I understand the apprehension of some staff in school x, but believe the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. As some staff are apprehensive, I was encouraged that seven out of eight departments agreed that parents should be notified of MAT identification as did all of the focus group pupils. One of the recommendations from the annual Estyn report (Estyn, 2014) highlights the need to 'improve parents' understanding of how they can better support the education of their [MAT] child'. As with many Welsh secondary schools (DCELLS 2015a) at present, school x is not delivering in this area.

4.4 Evaluation of methodology

Case studies cannot be generalised (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). However, as this study was based in one school only, I have not attempted or needed to generalise my results beyond the scope of the case that I am researching. Data validation was applied throughout the project, using processes such as random sampling and triangulation of data sources.

Scholz and Tietje (2002, p.334) explain that cases studies are not objective and are constrained by the researcher, therefore the outcomes depend on the understanding, competence with methods, motivation and intention of the researcher. For that reason, one key component that would have promoted the validation of the findings further is, as Baxter and Jack (2008, p. 556) state, the use of multiple researchers to look over the data and analyse findings. Unfortunately, this was not possible in this situation as this research was to be submitted as a dissertation. Nevertheless, it is something I would endeavour to implement in future research.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This case study has given me valuable insight into MAT provision in school x. From reviewing literature and working with staff and pupils, my understanding of MAT has developed and I have tailored my own practices as a class teacher and as the maths MAT co-ordinator. School x should consider the following recommendations.

5.1 MAT Label

The possible repercussions of labelling MAT pupils (bullying, pupil confidence, teacher workload) have been discussed, as well as possible solutions. It was found that the emphasis put on these issues by adults (Distin, 2006; Goodhew, 2009) was not mirrored by the pupils, who expressed that there are always hurdles in school to overcome. It is accepted, that as Lambert (2013, p.105) concludes, ‘educationalists should at the very least, be keenly aware that the gifted and talented label is a gross, misleading over-simplification of learners’. Still, many advantages were discussed (challenge, increased subject knowledge, extra-curricular opportunities, university applications) which are largely echoed by government publications (DCELLS, 2008a; Estyn, 2014; DCELLS, 2015a) and in my opinion outweigh the disadvantages. However, this should not be at the expense of the main population. Independent enrichment activities should be used to challenge and extend and all pupils should have the opportunity to access these activities in lessons regardless if they are MAT are not.

A promising incentive gleaned from the literature (Robinson and Campbell, 2010; DCELLS, 2015a; NACE, 2016) is that by identifying and challenging MAT pupils that
whole school standards increase, benefiting all pupils. Encouragingly, I can suggest that MAT labelling can work within the growth mind-set model as long as there are continuous updates of the MAT register and that other pupils are occasionally given the same work/opportunities as MAT pupils. It can be confidently inferred that the name given to these pupils, such as MAT or ‘high flyers’, is irrelevant. MAT pupils should be continued to be distinguished from their peers in school x, but with the following recommendations:

**R1:** All subjects must inform MAT pupils of their identification. This must be a consistent approach throughout the school (e.g. by subject teacher).

**R2:** The MAT register must be flexible and promote the fluidity of MAT in line with the growth mind-set setting. Non-MAT pupils must be given opportunities to occasionally work on the same activities.

**R3:** Public addresses to MAT pupils in class should be avoided if possible. School social media could be used to remind and promote MAT activities.

### 5.2 Extra-curricular activities

Staff and pupils of school x are generally in agreement with the many publications (CCEA, 2007; DCELLS, 2008a; Estyn 2014) that suggest that MAT pupils cannot always be sufficiently challenged inside the classroom, therefore extra-curricular provision is required. DCELLS (2010) emphasize this point well by reiterating that being more able is an additional learning need and all pupils should be given the chance to reach their full potential. Many secondary schools provide various extra-
curricular MAT opportunities (DCELLS, 2015a) and school x should endeavour to do so as well. It must be emphasized, that extra-curricular MAT provision cannot be a substitute for the enrichment and extension of learning experiences that need to occur on a day-to-day basis (Estyn, 2013), and recommendations include:

R1: Staff must be given more access to MAT related professional development from the local authority and regional consortium.

R2: Staff need allocated time to plan extra-curricular sessions, for example one covered lesson per half termly session. Some subjects can combine extra-curricular sessions, for example; RE and history, science and geography, to minimise impact on staff workload.

R3: Various avenues should be explored by the school (suggestions from DCELLS, 2015a) including:

- Subject clubs (these do not just have to be solely for MAT pupils).
- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) programmes competitions.
- Online commercial platforms to encourage independent learning and to develop higher level literacy and numeracy skills.
- National competitions such the All European Language Olympics.
- Opportunities to study additional GCSE subjects e.g. Mandarin, astronomy.

R4: To avoid misleading pupils and parents, MAT primary sessions should only be provided by subjects that offer MAT sessions in secondary school.
5.3 Home-school communication

The development of home-school communication is vital (Robinson, Shore and Enersen, 2007; DCELLS 2008a; Estyn, 2014). Parents must be informed of MAT identification to allow them to support their children through school life, school x must also provide information to scaffold this support (DCELLS, 2015a). There may be possible repercussions, but these can be decreased by following recommendations from section 5.1, where MAT is seen as fluid and pupils can move into this group. Most importantly, non-MAT pupils must be provided with some opportunities to access the work and activities. Recommendations include:

R1: All departments should send out MAT identification letters when pupils are identified and this must be seen as an ongoing process. When registers are updated biannually (or before) letters should be sent out. One common template should be used for each subject to promote consistency.

R2: Pupils can be removed from the MAT register but parents should not actively be informed of this. Instead that pupil will not receive a MAT letter in the following academic year. However, prior to this point parents must be informed that their child is underperforming. This gives them and the pupil ownership of the learning, therefore taking some pressure off the teacher.

R3: Parents must be given more information on how to encourage and support their children at home. A meeting near the beginning of the year and regular information via a school newsletter or social media can contribute to this.
5.4 Future research

As discussed at various points throughout this project, school x is transitioning towards a growth mind-set model which conventionally goes against the idea of MAT pupils. I have suggested that under certain criteria, the two could potentially work together. This would be a very worthwhile topic to explore as many schools are implementing growth mind-set alongside trying to improve MAT provision.
References


Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2010) A curriculum for all learners; Guidance to support teachers of learners with additional learning needs Available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/11124/1/100426curriculumforlearnersen.pdf (Accessed: 5 March 2016)


Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2015a) *Review to identify more able and talented provision across Wales*. Available at:


## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Research timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date to be completed by</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Complete Introduction (milestone 1 submission)</strong></td>
<td>06/10/2015</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Make amendments immediately from tutor feedback</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss project with gatekeepers</td>
<td>04/10/2015</td>
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<td>Complete ethics form</td>
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<td>Complete literature review (milestone 2 submission)</td>
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<td>Complete sampling</td>
<td>23/01/2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Send out parental letter</td>
<td>25/01/2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pilot questionnaires</td>
<td>25/01/2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete methodology section (milestone 3 submission)</td>
<td>12/02/2016</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete data collection</td>
<td>26/02/2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyse results</td>
<td>11/03/2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make amendments immediately from tutor feedback</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete results, analysis, conclusions and recommendations (milestone 4 submission)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete title, abstract, preliminaries and pagination (submission)</td>
<td>27/03/2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Binding</td>
<td>19/04/2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submission</td>
<td>01/05/2016</td>
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</table>
Teacher Questionnaire: MAT provision

1. What subjects do you teach?

2. What do you understand by the term MAT (more able and talented)?

3. Do you currently have a MAT policy for identifying MAT pupils in your subject?  Yes/No

4. Do you currently have a MAT register for your subject?  Yes/No

5. Do you provide extracurricular opportunities for MAT pupils in your subject?  Yes/No

   If you have answered yes to question 5, could you please specify:

6. Please rate the following statements by placing a tick in the relevant box:


   More able pupils should be labelled as MAT

   Parents should be informed if their child has been labelled MAT

   MAT pupils are challenged sufficiently within the classroom

   MAT pupils should be provided with extracurricular provision

   I am confident identifying MAT pupils in my subject

   I am confident I can cater for MAT pupils in my subject

   The school supports MAT learners in all subjects

   Staff need more training on MAT provision

Please add any further comments below:

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix 3: Parent letter and consent form (School header removed)

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As part of my professional development, I have been undertaking a Masters Degree in Education with Cardiff Metropolitan University. I am in the process of completing my final year and have decided to base my dissertation on researching how more able learners are catered for in schools. The opinions of your child will be extremely valuable to my research. I would like your son/daughter to complete an online questionnaire along with approximately thirty other pupils. From this group, eight pupils will be randomly selected to participate in a group discussion. All data and information will be anonymous and will be kept in accordance with the data protection act. Participation is voluntary and pupils will have the right to withdraw at any time should they wish. No participant will be mentioned by name in the research.

Please feel free to contact me via the school by phoning [phone number] if you have any queries or concerns. If you give consent for your child to take part, please complete the slip below and ask your child to return to me in school by Monday 01/02/16. Many thanks for your time.

Kind regards,

Miss. L. Skyrme
Mathematics department (classroom D12)

I __________________ consent that my child __________________ may participate in the more able learners’ research as part of the dissertation with Cardiff Metropolitan University by:

• Completing an online questionnaire: Yes ☐ No ☐

• Participating in a short group discussion: Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that data collected will be kept anonymous in the research and that my child may withdraw at any time, should I or they wish.

Signed: ____________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix 4: Pupil questionnaire

**Challenge in school**

1. What school year are you in?
   - 8
   - 9
   - 10
   - 11

2. Please rate the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to be challenged in lessons</td>
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<tr>
<td>I enjoy being challenged in lessons</td>
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<td>I am challenged in all my subjects</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find the work easy in school</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please leave any further comments on your answers here.

3. Please rate the following statements.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils should be set in maths, English and science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pupils should be set in all subjects</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you are good at a subject you should be distinguished as More Able and</td>
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<td>Talented (MAT) in that subject</td>
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<td>Pupils should be given different work in class, depending on how good</td>
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<td>they are at the subject</td>
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<td>If you are good at a subject you should be given extracurricular</td>
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<tr>
<td>opportunities in that subject (lunchtime/after school sessions)</td>
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Please leave any further comments on your answers here.
4. What possible advantages could being distinguished as MAT bring?

5. What possible disadvantages could being distinguished as MAT bring?

6. Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?
Appendix 5: MAT register of pupils involved in study. **Pupils involved in focus group.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 8 Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Maths</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>D&amp;T</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Geog</th>
<th>History</th>
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<th>Science</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>D&amp;T</th>
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Appendix 6: Base questions to semi structured interview (Deputy Headteacher and MAT co-ordinator)

1. What do you personally understand by the term MAT?
2. Do you agree with the term MAT?
3. How do you feel about labelling pupils?
4. What does current MAT provision look like in our school?
5. What does MAT provision look like in the future?
6. What improvements can be made in MAT provision?
7. Do you think MAT pupils should be given extra-curricular provision?
8. Do you think MAT pupils should be informed they are MAT?
9. Do you think parents/guardians should be informed if their son/daughter is MAT?
10. How do you feel MAT provision can fit in with growth mind-set?