At Risk? A Stealthy Cohort at Key Stage 2/3

Jenny Brookes, ESRC TLRP Research Fellowship (University of Bristol)

Hargreaves and Galton in their benchmark transfer study poignantly noted that,

“…it is now among high attaining pupils where motivation and enjoyment of school have seriously declined during the first year after transfer. It is these pupils who before transfer said they were looking forward to new subjects and increased challenge at secondary school. When they fail to discover this intellectual stimulation they appear to become demoralised, although continuing to work hard because they realise the importance of achieving good grades at the end of secondary school.”
(Hargreaves and Galton 2002: p194)

Are they right? Are gifted and talented a particularly and hitherto historically neglected cohort of pupils who are at risk during the transfer process? My visceral response is yes but does this assertion hold any substance? Very few studies have specifically explored the nature of gifted and talented transfer. Transfer studies typically predate the National Curriculum and tend to explore the issue generically and the burgeoning field of gifted and talented research has not yet explicitly addressed transfer. So from a research perspective, yes they are a neglected cohort. They also appear to be overlooked empirically within schools, where the focus of attention has often been directed towards children with special educational needs. Here liaison practices between primary and secondary transfer and the effective use of learning mentors and teaching assistants is well established.

So why then has little been said or done for gifted and talented children at this juncture of their educational careers? Presumably they are not considered to be at risk as they are generally high achievers and would cursorily appear not to be children who would encounter difficulties in coping with the challenges posed by adapting to a new regime. In this paper I would like to contest this notion and cogently argue that gifted and talented children are indeed at risk during the transfer process. First and foremost I seek to describe the nature of these potential risks and will illustrate each one with a vignette. The views contained herein represent my current thoughts and deliberations and the data is raw in the sense that I am still formulating my argument and analysing my data. The data referred to here were derived from structured interviews with a cohort of fifteen children, their parents and teachers for each of the transfer years (here recognised as years 5 to 8 inclusive) and forms part of some doctoral level research I am conducting into the field of gifted and talented transfer.

1. The Classroom Practice of Teachers

It seems paradoxical to suggest that classroom practice adversely affects the progress of gifted and talented children, but this does appear to be the case. In upper key stage two (KS2) primary classrooms teachers may struggle to meet the academic needs of their gifted children. At this stage children’s
subject expertise may well be in advance of their teachers, particularly in linear subjects such as maths. James’s Y6 teacher, Mr Dando, reflects with candour that he struggled to cater sufficiently for James.

...He's actually challenged me as a teacher to keep him interested...Err ... if I'm honest, with James, he's obviously learnt, I've been able to teach him mathematical concepts, but I genuinely think that to fully meet his maths potential I would need to be a maths specialist. I think his mathematical ability is probably better than mine – genuinely. So if I'm really honest I don't think I could actually push him to his full potential. I obviously do my best and differentiate the work for him, set him separate tasks, research tasks. He worked on a lot of open-ended problems as well. And he used a maths programme, where I could set him at a higher level, a maths game called Maths Invaders, where you can multiply in decimals and things like that. I mean, where everybody else would be doing long division, James will be doing long division in decimals and things. (laughs) Mr Dando Y6 Teacher

He also struggled to deal with Simon and his ebullience for learning.

...The teacher, as I said, said he did find him hard work, hard work because he's so demanding in terms of I've done this now, I want more. So he did use the words I find him hard work, and I think, mmm, don't like that term, he shouldn't be finding him hard work, that's not what I want to hear, I want to hear that he's finished that and then he needs to be provided with the opportunity to develop further, not to be classed as hard work really. So that's the only negative factor that I've come across... Mrs Brown Parent Y6

In fact this was the first blip that Simon had experienced at school and represented the lowest point of his educational career to date. At the crux of problem lay the nature of his relationship with his new class teacher and his ability to appropriately challenge him. Luckily however, both his supportive mother and caring class teacher both collaborated to ameliorate the situation.

Mr Dando like many other teachers often asked his gifted children to assume the role of ‘mini teacher’.

...What I have done, these 3 children have worked together in a small group in mathematics. And I've also used them to help other children, just checking that other children understand certain concepts. And they've enjoyed that, because they've felt valued. And I think it's helped them, because obviously if you teach something you have to understand it yourself, so it's reinforced their understanding of certain concepts. I think early on in the year I got them to help other children with long division. And I think sometimes the children who don't understand, hearing it from their peers, they explain it in a different way and sometimes they accept it more readily than from myself, and hitting it at all different angles is a much better way... Mr Dando Y6 Teacher

Whilst few would question the benefits accrued especially for the less able, a degree of measured circumspection is essential for both educational and social reasons. If this practice is adopted too regularly then gifted children miss out on the opportunity for furthering their own learning as Ben below purports.

Q And in terms of working with other people in the class, has that been okay?
Well the only problem is, because it’s such a mix sometimes it’s a bit hard to work with people who are completely different to you. If I work with the person who’s not the cleverest in the class then if I try and help them I won’t do anything. So I have to work on my own, I mainly have to just do it on my own, individual.

Is that your preference?

Personally, yes. Because it’s quite hard to help someone and finish the lessons.

Do you often have to help people?

Well because I’m so clever I do sometimes have to work with people who aren’t as clever.

Particularly in maths?

Yes, because I have been with Sorcha who hasn’t been the greatest in maths. I think I’m more or less top ten of the class. Ben Blue Y6 Pupil

This practice is not confined to the transfer classroom. However it is most likely to be most evinced here. In years 5 and 6, and 7 and 8 prior to setting, the gap between the gifted and the rest of the class is at its greatest. Able children are thus best placed to act as mini teachers at this stage.

Although opportunities for extension are frequently espoused as a highly desirable way of catering for gifted children it too can place them at risk in a number of ways. There were numerous instances at primary and secondary school where there was no facility for extension work at all. It was fairly frequently interpreted as reading or finishing off; cognitively undemanding tasks and opportunities were often not planned for in advance. Indeed maths and to a lesser extent English and science emerged as the only subjects where differentiated objectives were formalised. Even when extension opportunities were planned they were not always pitched at the right level and could erroneously be interpreted as ‘more of the same’, again devoid of challenge. Kerry responded by evading such tasks.

Is there any other subject other than English that you get extra for?

Sometimes maths …

But that could be for the general group, or does it tend to be you and Hermione?

Yeah, because we finish first, so she explains it to us first.

So is it a fairly regular occurrence?

Yeah.

Do you ever feel that, oh no, I think I might just slow down a bit, because if I finish that I’m going to have to go and write another poem…?

Err … yeah. Only in maths, because we were doing equations and I did them really quickly and I knew she’d just give me another page if I finished, so I was just trying to do them a bit slower. (laughter) Kerry Gold Y8 Pupil

Even when extension work is planned and cognitively demanding, it can be off-putting if it requires extra work to be completed at home.

Do you ever get given extra work or something, say if you’ve finished first or whatever?

Yeah, in English I’m given extra work and geography and sometimes history.

Right. And what sort of stuff is that? Do you find that interesting, or …?

Yeah. It does mean extra homework, though. (laughs) I just have this thing about homework.

What sort of homework would that be – is that finishing off, or …?

Yeah. Well, in English everyone else had to finish off their story – I had to finish my story and I had to write a poem as well. Kerry Gold Y7 Pupil
...And as far as the extended stuff that the English teacher gives you, while you're enjoying that, fair enough, and if it starts making Kerry not want to do it any more then there's no point, is there, because you have to enjoy what you're doing'. Mrs Gold Y7 Parent

This could run the risk of making sensitive and anxious children like Kerry feel a bit pressurised. Also providing extension work publicly, particularly at secondary school could run the risk of attracting negative peer attention.

Q: I’ll ask Kerry this question, but you don’t get the impression from Kerry that she holds back sometimes in lessons … because it’s not cool to be seen to be interested, motivated, eager in certain circumstances?
Mum: I don’t get the impression that that makes her hold back. Certainly there are comments, aren’t there, you and your friends, this is the swots. But in a sort of … in a benign way.
KG: In maths today, because we finished the work that everyone else was doing, and we had a choice to do extra work or not, and I just felt as if I didn’t really want to. (laughs) The Golds Y8

Furthermore with the competing demands of the rest of the class, gifted and talented children can suffer in terms of the amount of teacher input they receive with regard to extension activities.

… we have done a lot more investigative stuff, we’ve done a lot more work on algebra and developing formulas for things, and they’ve responded really well to that kind of work. All I’m saying is that for where they are they could have done a lot more than that if we’d had the ability to take them out more in smaller groups and work on specific tasks with direction. I felt that one of the problems was that lots of extension work that I was giving them, what I wasn’t able to give them was the time to go through it all and to work with them stage by stage, pushing them on bit by bit. So a lot of it was, right, here’s the task, have a go at it, when you get stuck come back to me and I’ll give the next little bit that you need, but I wasn’t actually working with them enough, I didn’t think, because obviously I also had the rest of the class to be working with… Mrs Dee Y6 Teacher

Effective and worthwhile provision of extension work is therefore a finely balanced operation which if not handled carefully can put able children at risk. Its effectiveness seems to be leveraged down to the skill and practice of individual teachers. Again this is likely to be a particular risk at the point of transfer because planning such opportunities is at its most challenging within the primary phase in the upper key stage 2 classroom since it is at this juncture that KS2 children are at their most literate, numerate and advanced in terms of subject knowledge and so most likely to complete the core task and be in need of an extension activity. Within the Y7 (Year 7) class there is a drive to establish a common ground, a baseline of which gifted children may well be in advance. Peer pressure is intensely potent at this time and classes are at their most mixed in terms of ability. So again the need for extension activities is likely to be at its most virulent.

As well as pedagogical practice, the formative assessment system also puts gifted children at risk of disengagement. Year 6 within English schools is dominated by SATs (Standard Assessment Tests).
Children therefore experience a distinctly dichotomised year, at its crudest ‘revision then rounders’ or controlled pressurised revision followed by a jam-packed social calendar.

_Tilly enjoyed her last term at Highgrove tremendously. After the SATs were completed the children seemed to relax into an idyll of projects, days out and social events which I suppose is the upside of the SATs system. However this year the teachers seemed very exam orientated before the exams, with a relentless narrow programme of coaching and testing as revision before the big week. Tilly tells me they did practice papers every day for 3 weeks before the exams! This I think is very bad!_ Transfer Diary; Mrs Yellow Parent Y6

Year 5 appears to be the final year of learning for academically able children and Year 6 and its exam orientated focus is very much a year of consolidation where little progress appears to be made.

Essentially gifted children have achieved what they needed to achieve by the end of Y5.

_Q … Corrie said to me Year 5 was the work hard year and Year 6 was the revision year? Would that sentiment --- with you?_ 
_Mum Yes, I think, yes... But I presume that’s because Corrie actually had got, I think she was probably working at Level 5 in Year 5 so I guess that’s why she would say that, yes._ 

_Q And that matches what you would think?_ 
_Mum Yes. But I'm sure she's fine tuned some of her creative writing and has obviously consolidated the, yes, I think it's probably portrayed as being revision... Mrs Purple Parent Y6

Work wise I'm not sure what he's done this year, because he doesn't come back and talk to me very much about it, but he does such a lot outside school and my feeling was, this year, I mean, he's achieved all the levels he was meant to achieve academically, so I wasn't expecting school to do particularly masses with him because, from a school point of view they've got 34 children in the class and they've got to get the 34 children up to a certain level. Their aim is not to fulfil what Andrew needs. I don't think he's done, as far as I'm aware he's not been taken out of the class to do specific stuff as he was last year... He does a lot outside school and I think in school, yes, it would have been consolidation, but I think realistically he can't expect, I'm not unrealistic in what I expected him to do._ Mrs Red Parent Y6

Year 6 appears to be capped. Since the removal of the extension paper there is no facility to formally go beyond level 5.

_Err … well, if you're talking about national curriculum levels it would be high level 5s – which was borne out by their results anyway... In fact, having SATs tests is a bit ridiculous with these children, because it didn’t really push them enough, they would have benefited from having level 6s. I mean, James could probably do a GCSE maths. That’s the frustrating thing about the SATs tests, the SATs tests we gave them were level 3 – 5. I knew they’d get level 5s. If I had something like 4 – 7 tests, that would have benefited them, because I think they're probably working at level 6 level._ Mr Dando Y6 Teacher

Teachers lament this ‘ceilinged year’ and parents pragmatically accept this status quo. Schools in Year 6 under the vigilant gaze of Local Authorities, ever cognisant of league tables provide booster support to borderline level 3/4 children. Those schools which are situated in more highly achieving catchments or which boast a tradition of high percentages of level 5s may well boost borderline 4/5 children. On
both counts gifted children are excluded. They are not the recipients of special provision in Year 6 and as Mrs Red alludes to above, special provision is often withdrawn in Y6.

I think it phased out. () not much need for him to be pushed... There certainly was at one point, but Mrs Peer kept him out of it, because he was already at level 5. Mrs Windsor Parent Y6

The profuse diet of revision these children experience is utterly superfluous.

Well, in the practice SATs I only got 2 questions wrong in 6 tests for maths, and they were both in one test. Tarquin Orange Y7 Pupil

Gifted children learn very little indeed in Y6.

Q: Would you rather have something a lot more challenging?
HW: Yeah.
Q: Do you feel you knew it all?
HW: Quite a bit. Because we were just doing revision of what we'd already done.
Q: Can you give me an idea of how long this went on for?
HW: How long the revision? Err, from September to the SATs.
Q: Right, so that’s a long time... So do you think you’ve learnt anything new in Year 6?
HW: Err ... (long pause) ... if I have, I can’t remember it. Humphrey Windsor Y6 Pupil

They also experience boredom. Humphrey above ‘… was bored witless with SATs work at school…’
(Mrs Windsor Y6) as was Adam.

Q Did you get bored at all?
AE Yes. Especially before SATs; before SATs was the worst bit.
Q How bored were you, on a scale of nought to ten, nought being not at all bored, ten being incredibly bored?
AE About, for SATs about eight or nine, and for most of it about four.
Q Really? Did you do lots of practice, sort of revision, going over things?
AE Yes, lots...
Q Yes. Now you’ve mentioned that you’ve been slightly bored.
AE Yes.
Q Have you been bored in other years?
AE Not as much.
Q So Year 6 has sort of been slight more boring for you than other years?
AE Slightly more, yes. Adam Emerald Y6 Pupil

This boredom causes gifted children to become far less enthusiastic about school. It is also a feature of the ‘rounders’ part of Y6 as well as the ‘revision’ part.

...once the SATs were over they stopped working and Simon found that a bit boring, he wanted to carry on. He wanted the fun things, but he wanted to do some work or whatever. But he said we don’t do anything any more, we watch DVDs - which was fine, it’s great, but after a certain amount of time he got bored with that and this is where I'm bored now, I'm bored, I can't wait to go, I'm fed up now. Because it was May I think the SATs were, weren't they? So there was nearly 2 months of not doing much. And he would have responded to having a little bit more work to do, I think - not as much as what he had to do before, all that pressure, but he would have responded to a little bit more work, I think, or something more positive to focus on, then he wouldn't have been so bored. Mrs Brown Parent Y6

For a number of other children in this study, the only source of academic stimulation was presented when preparing to sit entrance exams. Clearly not all gifted children have this opportunity.
These Y6 experiences add a new perspective to Galton and Hargreave’s demoralisation claim. Many able children may well be disappointed with a lack of challenge in Y7, but this is also true for gifted children in Y6. Whilst learning little and feeling bored these children still achieve high level 5s. Their disillusionment would thus not have been conspicuous within class, but was however detectable at home. Academically therefore, a dip in learning for gifted children occurs prior to transfer within primary schools, earlier than that reported for most children in Y7.

I. The Peer Group
The new class to which children transfer may also pose a risk to gifted and talented children. All children are subject to peer pressure. However this may be most acutely felt by gifted pupils, as it is not cool to be seen to be motivated and able.

...So those are the decisions that they’ve got to make, so that’s the difference for them, do they conform and how do they get the balance, because if they’re starting to be the swot-head are they going to get picked on? How do they get that balance, how do they make sure that they’re working the way that they want, yet still be a popular person and in with their peers? Mrs Brown Parent Y7

It is a difficult equilibrium to achieve – working hard and fitting in - and it is something that parents worry about.

I don’t have any worries about Ronnie as such because I think she is pretty good she will cope with anything, the only concern that I have got is that because she is so bright I am worried that there maybe some sort of dumbing down… But that is the only thing that concerns me, perhaps it won’t be cool to be … You know doing well and concentrating and listening in class, that is the only thing that concerns me, nothing socially for her but just I hope that she doesn’t I can’t put into words like not perform as well as you could. Yes that is the words I suppose, that is the only concern I have got. Mrs Magenta Parent Y6

The murmurings of this negative peer pressure begin to reverberate in primary school and become more pronounced upon transfer.

The lure of making new friendships and fitting into a new class can also divert attention away from studies.

And Nessa’s interests are friends, friends and friends… And she did have a good network of friends in primary school, but I think it’s even more evident now that she’s in such a short time been exposed to many different people and established these really good relationships with them. Mrs Violet Parent Y6

This distraction is partly responsible for Nessa coasting in Y7. Parents are not inactive participants in the process and try and engineer appropriate friendships at secondary school.

Umm again, I I wouldn’t want it it to seem manipulative, but of course it is. I mean for example going back to the music, umm you’re conscious if your child goes to a bulk standard comprehensive that there are different strata of children. Now Michael is probably quite naturally going to be attracted to a certain group of people. If he plays a musical instrument it’s going to put him with a certain group
and therefore they will become his friends and usually kids that play musical instruments are nice kids umm and I’ve got no research evidence to back that up, but you know that’s my judgement so, so that’s what I’ve done with Ella (Michael’s sister) and it’s worked in inverted commas and its provided her with quite an extensive social life outside the school umm and that’s what I intend to do with Michael, although I’m not sure that I’ll be as successful cos I don’t think the music is as important to him. Mrs French Parent Y6

Many gifted children relish and gravitate towards friendships with similarly able peers. Indeed this can be a criterion that parents consider when selecting a secondary school.

... I can remember when I went, when they're going round with Tim, I was asking questions like so on average, what are the SAT levels, and they just didn't want to answer me you know, they didn't want to answer me that at A, or B or C, they didn't want to say. Now I would have thought, to say well yes, we have so many, because I was saying so what percentage of level 5 and they really did not want to answer me that. And I'm sorry I think you should be able to say... I mean presumably anybody who's, I mean you have to be, you'd have to be level 5 wouldn't you to go to an independent school, won’t you? I don't know, do you know the answer?...I wanted to know because people had told me for when Tim was going, oh they're good, it's good, I wanted to check that he was going to be with children who were working at level 5... because you can't, I mean we know with teachers, yes you try and teach to the, you try and teach to the upper but if you've only got, you can't really do that can you... Mrs Purple Parent Y5

As Mrs Purple above testifies, being the only gifted child in a class may attract little teacher attention and can be a very isolating experience.

The demands posed by the spread of ability therefore constitute another risk for gifted children. This is an issue at primary school within the upper junior years as this is where the gulf of ability is often at its largest. It is particularly apparent in schools which do not set by ability whereby all teaching takes place within a mixed ability setting. This tends to characterise Y7 and to a slightly lesser extent Y8 classes. Indeed the spectrum of ability is even more pronounced at secondary school due to the vast range of feeder primaries located within quite contrasting catchment areas. With large classes and very mixed abilities, gifted children are often overlooked with teacher attention being directed towards those who are just below average.

In some ways more the average, or maybe less so. But I think with the above average I definitely sort of keep them occupied by having things to do, but in terms of really stretching them, to be honest I probably don’t, because I’m probably thinking, great, they’ve got something to do, they’re sorted, and then probably working with more … not the real special needs, but maybe the more less able, maybe the sort of level 3, the ones let’s say in maths, the ones who are having problems with fractions. I wouldn’t sit and work with them and as long as they’ve got something to do and they’re occupied then I probably … I don’t necessarily just give them more of the same, but I think, if I’m honest, as long as they’re occupied and they’re doing something that’s fine…I mean, the others, yeah, they can’t get on and otherwise they’re just sitting there, stuck. I mean, in an ideal world you would more, but out of those 3 kids, to be honest, probably not. I mean, hopefully, I wouldn't want them to be bored, but I can’t say hands on heart I’m really stretching them… Mrs Peer Y5 Teacher
The presence of less able children also slows the progress made gifted children at both stages of schooling.

(pause) Yeah, when they keep explaining over to people who don’t understand, it’s quite annoying because I just want to get on and do my work. And that’s when I get bored, because I would just sit there doing nothing, because I would understand but I had to wait for the other people. And I know it’s not their fault, it’s just that they (). Simon Brown Y6 Pupil

Err, sometimes it’s frustrating, because he keeps having to like repeat everything, like repeating what they say because they like don’t listen. And then … and he has to repeat it because they don’t understand, and like he spends like half the lesson sometimes repeating it, because they don’t understand. And we have to listen, which is quite annoying. James Indigo Y7 Pupil

The majority of children in this study prefer working in ability sets so supporting Hallam and Ireson’s (2006) recent finding that ‘Tellingly, higher-ability pupils preferred setting, with the converse being true of lower-ability pupils’.

Transferring to a more able class can also prove very problematic. Humphrey has found himself in a lot of trouble at school. His mother believes that one of the chief causative factors is that he is no longer by far and away the most able student. He is now probably ranked second in the class and finds reconciling himself with this fact most ardous indeed.

…And, as I said, he was the kingpin at (primary school), he was working on a different book in maths, he knew where he was, and suddenly somebody else can do all those things and more. I think that’s really hard – really hard… it’s left him with this false thing and suddenly he’s got this child who’s doing a GCSE and his ego’s just knocked for six. Mrs Windsor Parent Y8

Bullying is a fear and a fairly common feature of transfer. It is hard to ascertain the exact causes, but it is likely that ability is a contributing factor. A few boys in this study were subjected to some mild bullying at primary school.

…he’s the sort of child I think who gets picked on. Because he has been at Highgrove and he’s managed to cope with that quite well. But because he stands out from the crowd it’s easy to pick on him, and it’s heartbreaking to be picked on. So I want him to go somewhere where they won’t, so that he can just get by and do his thing, and do as well as he can… Mrs Red Parent Y6

Worryingly a couple of these boys actually went on to bully a few pupils post transfer. It appears to become more serious at secondary school. Geoffrey certainly encountered a very turbulent time indeed.

Transfer Diary; Geoffrey Pink Y7 Pupil.

His studious nature seems to have been the principal cause of this treatment.

I think Geoffrey, to start with, was probably on his own from choice; he didn’t easily jump in and make friends, I think he was probably on his own and he’d take a book to read. And also he would rather just ignore somebody if they were a problem, he hasn’t
Poor behaviour is another challenge to gifted and talented children’s educative welfare. Clearly effective classroom management strategies are essential for the smooth running of any class so to a certain extent this is a teacher-related risk. However the fact that teachers need to respond to the nature of the class they have inherited makes it principally a peer group risk. Nowhere is this more pertinent than at the point of transfer where children move to new Year 7 classes. It is at this point when many children may witness bad behaviour for the first time in their educational careers.

...There are a few stories of children who misbehave in the class, and they’ve gone from being... the primary school is quite a... what’s the word? All the children are nice as in there’s no behaviour problems, there’s no discipline problems, so they’ve had a pretty sheltered life really. And suddenly they’re there and there are children who shout and are cheeky and get told off, which I think is a bit of an eye-opener for them...I would just like to know what’s going to happen, because how do they cater for such a wide spectrum? Mrs Indigo Parent Y7

Year 7 teachers need to be able to adroitly manage such behavioural challenges. Able children expect this and most of those involved in this study, like James quoted below, anticipated and welcomed fairly strict secondary school teachers.

Yeah, ‘cos like the teachers will be stricter. I like that, because no-one can ruin the lesson then, because if you’ve got someone who ruins the lesson you need a strict teacher, ‘cos otherwise they’ll just ruin the lesson and the teacher won’t stop them and that’s the lesson gone, wasted. James Indigo Y6 Pupil

He however transferred to a class with which he is generally happy but which contains two badly behaved girls and a boy with EBD. Whilst this was frustrating for him, more worryingly it hampered his progress.

Probably not to my full ability, because like I’ve got some of people ... like there’s 3 people like annoying me all the time...I will get there, I will get there, I’m determined to get there. But not yet...I’m slowly getting over them. And most of the time they’re getting like sent out of the classroom now, so sometimes I can work to my full ability, but sometimes ... they just ... don’t listen to the teacher, they just sit down after they’ve been told to go out of the class. They throw worksheets out the window, they throw their pens out the window. So they’re a bit silly. James Indigo Y7 Pupil

What further compounds his situation is the fact that one of his teachers strategically sits him beside one of these naughty girls in order to dilute her behaviour. James is fortunate as he is a very popular boy with well developed social skills. The dominant presence of bad behaviour therefore did hamper his progress, but not to the extent that it could have done for less socially adept gifted children. I do
not wish to imply that bad behaviour does not occur within primary schools, it does, but for the children in my study and for many others it will be the first time where they are exposed to this.

**Gifted and Talented Pupils Themselves**

Finally gifted and talented pupils may unwittingly pose a risk to themselves during the transfer process.

**Perfectionism**

Relentlessly high standards can cause stress and pressure.

...he's very meticulous about doing his homework when he comes home, he has to do it straight away. He loves his sport, but one night he said do you mind if I skip rugby training because I've got homework which will probably take me about 2 hours to complete in entirety. And he did that. He has to do everything the day it's been given and he has to do it better than what is requested, he has to do more than what is thought to be enough. Which is a little bit of a concern sometimes to me, because he will not be able to keep this pace of work up. And he said to me one day, he said this high school lark, mums is becoming stressful. (laughs) And I said you're putting stress upon yourself, son, I'm not. Because he's just so conscientious. So whether he keeps this up, I just do not know. But he is a perfectionist at the minute and will accept nothing less than the best and has to be - unfortunately, which I think is a little bit of a concern - the best, otherwise it concerns him. But it's not isolating him, he's still got lots of friends, lots of new friends as well, which is good, and he still has the balance of leisure and academic. So at the moment he's fine... Mrs Brown Parent Y7

These exacting standards were apparent at primary school but became more acutely evinced at secondary school because of the nature and demands of the regime.

*He worries more, that's the only way, he worries more about the fact that he's got to get this done and get that done... And, as I said, he's very keen to get everything perfect, so I see more of that now, because there was not so much evidence of that in school, because he got very little homework really in his junior school, perhaps one piece of work a term. And the thing with the history teacher, he did a piece of work, they gave them 2 weeks, and Simon said, oh, I've done the timelines, Sir, the next day. He said but Simon it's 2 weeks. Yeah, I've done it now. He said I gave you 2 weeks - yeah, but I did it now. So that's the difference, I think, because I can see more obviously he's worrying about things. He might have been worrying before, but there's more to worry about now. Mrs Brown Parent Y7*

Failure to meet these standards resulted in distraught behaviour. Poorly developed organisational skills can also put gifted and talented children at risk. Whilst difficulties are easily anticipated for certain gifted children for others they are most unexpected as they appear within primary classrooms at any rate to be well organised. Again it is the demands of the secondary regime which seek out any weaknesses in this respect. Harriet really struggled to get to grips with the demands of homework and coined the apposite phrase ‘homework crisis’.

...I mean, nothing could help me, I just ... sometimes in the most desperate of situations, when I was losing things and I was getting told off by the teachers, it almost felt – and I know you’re going to think I’m over-reacting – but sometimes it
even felt a little bit suicidal, because you just had no way out. You had all this homework that needed to be in and you just couldn’t do it and the teachers were getting at you, and every time you went home it was homework again, and, yes, when you were losing things as well because like you had so much to remember, it was just … I felt like I was scrunched up tightly in a ball and I couldn’t like move… Yeah, trapped, I was absolutely trapped. It felt like I was in the middle of masses of papers and I couldn’t get out, it was mad. Harriet Emerald Y7 Pupil

Gifted pupils like Harriet who are incredibly articulate appear in total control of their learning and so are not considered by teachers to need pre or post transfer support with such skills. As well as poor organisational skills causing stress and difficulty for gifted children so too do learning difficulties. Ben experiences processing difficulties. These are not significant enough to entitle him to additional support at school, but are sufficiently well developed to cause him stress and discomfort.

… Now I at the beginning of the year had had a few instances where Ben had got upset and kept insisting that he didn’t understand what I was saying. And when he did it the first time I thought he was taking the Mick, because it was like, Ben, you’re really, really intelligent – I never actually said this to him, but it was what I was thinking – you are really intelligent, I have explained this now 3 times and you’re standing there and you’re still saying I don’t understand what it is I’ve got to do. And then I actually realised that it wasn’t that he didn’t understand the task, it was he didn’t understand the way I was explaining it and the way I was giving him the instructions. And I think from that point whenever he said to me I don’t understand what I’ve got to do, all I did was change the way that I explained it so that he did understand it, and then he was really, really happy… Mrs Dee Y6 Teacher

Initially even his class teacher, before she got to know him, thought that he was deliberately not doing the work and his Y5 teacher did not accept that he had difficulty processing instructions. This is of particular concern as primary school teachers have the advantage of being able to get to know their pupils well and early on in the academic year due to high levels of contact. Secondary teachers do not enjoy such arrangements. Unsurprisingly therefore his parents feared for his successful transfer. They informed the school of his difficulties, but as Mrs Blue’s quote below testifies, this may have fallen on deaf ears.

…Yes, when we went for the parent’s evening we spoke to the SENCO person there, which hopefully will get fed back to the form tutor and the classes. Because I think otherwise people don’t realise that, you know, they think, why has he not picked up on that? But I think it’s just those particular things he seems to have a problem with… but how much she would have taken that on board I don’t know, because she’s used to seeing people, I suppose, parents saying their child’s got dyslexia, or, ---, all these various other things you can get, and I don’t know whether she, not exactly took us seriously but I think she wasn’t expecting us to go and talk to her. She’s obviously got a list of names of perhaps children she was expecting to see their parents, so we sort of said about this and I don’t know how much she thought that was the case… Mrs Blue Y6 Parent

Another way in which gifted children put themselves at risk is in the active pursuit of enrichment activities. Many of the children in this study lead very busy lives. Whilst this is so and manageable at primary school it becomes more of an issue for some at secondary school due to the competing
demands of school work. Maintaining a healthy balance is not easy. Andrew for example who is not only gifted but musically talented has to balance some quite gruelling music commitments with homework.

*Oh, the only thing I would say, my only concern is that he has so many commitments I just don’t want him to take on too much. Because of his particular abilities, because of his musical abilities, they want to use him quite heavily at the high school. But he’s still got his commitments at X. So he’s only one child and I just have to watch carefully that he’s not doing too much. And also he’s keen to join in, so he puts himself forward for things. So I have said to him just be careful... I am watching, I am watching what he’s doing, I’m monitoring it. But I think he’s sensible enough to feel it sometimes, because he did say to me a short while ago that he felt he was... when the homework started to kick in he started to feel that time was a bit tight... Mrs Red Parent Y7*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Y5 commitments</th>
<th>Y7 commitments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In school</strong></td>
<td><strong>Out of school</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly trumpet lesson</td>
<td>Weekly organ lesson at local church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly science club</td>
<td>Piano practice before school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Piano lesson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organ practice at local church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trumpet practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly organ lesson at local church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choir practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choir social club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Football club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three choir services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Andrew like other children in this study is currently maintaining an equilibrium, but it is easy to see how this could tip in the opposite direction and cause some angst and even though he does have this in check, his commitments are impacting upon his work, as his sagacious director of studies noted. This is not surprising given such an extensive menu of activities. In fact these have increased rather than decreased over transfer and have to be balanced against homework commitments and a much longer school day.

**Conclusion**

What I hope to have achieved in this paper is to elucidate the number of ways in which gifted and talented are at risk during the transfer years. The risks appear to emanate from three contexts: from the classroom practice of teachers; from the peer group; and from the gifted and talented pupils themselves. Whilst discussed separately here, they are all strongly interrelated. Their combined effect is to prevent
children from reaching their full potential whilst making them increasingly disillusioned with school. This dissatisfaction however can be hard to detect at school as they continue to attain highly. They therefore display a marked degree of resilience to these inhibitors, which is further mediated by their parents. Hargreaves and Galton are correct, gifted children do become demoralised post transfer, however as has been demonstrated here, this also occurs prior to transfer in Y6. These authors noted that, “...This, in itself provides an interesting perspective on the issue of pupils at risk during the transfer process”. (Hargreaves and Galton 2002: p138) in reference to the increasing dissatisfaction felt by boys towards the end of Y7. I would suggest that this has a more generic relevance: gifted and talented children during the transfer years.

References
Suffolk Education Department Inspection and Advice Division (1997): A report on an investigation into what happens when pupils transfer into their next schools at the ages of 9, 11 and 13.

This research is funded through the Teaching and Learning Research Programme of the ESRC.

This paper was presented at the World G&T Conference in Warwick, Monday August 6th 2007