

Report of the Special Education Review Committee, 1993

Section on 'Pupils who are Exceptionally Able or Talented', pages 160-165 (formatting may differ from original)

6.3 Pupils who are Exceptionally Able or Talented

6.3.1 Definition

Pupils who are exceptionally able or talented are those who have demonstrated their capacity to achieve high performance in one or more of the following areas:

- (a) General intellectual ability;
- (b) Specific academic aptitude;
- (c) Creative or productive thinking;
- (d) Leadership ability;
- (e) Visual and performing arts;
- (f) Mechanical aptitude;
- (g) Psychomotor ability, e.g. in athletics, gymnastics.

Pupils who are exceptionally able or talented form part of the overall pupil population. As such, any decision to adopt a specific degree of endowment or performance as a criterion for inclusion among those who would be described as exceptionally able or talented must be arbitrary. Insofar as a score on an intelligence test can be regarded as an indicator, we suggest that the description "exceptionally able" be used to denote pupils with an IQ score in the range 130 and above. It is our opinion, however, that adopting a precise cut-off point can have little practical application.

6.3.2 Special Educational Needs

In general terms, the needs of exceptionally able or talented pupils are as stated for all pupils in the *Primary School Curriculum, Teacher's Handbook, Part 1*: "(Each pupil needs) to be provided with the kind and variety of opportunities towards stimulation and fulfilment which will enable him to develop his natural powers at his own rate to his fullest capacity". The more exceptional the ability or talent of an individual pupil, the greater the need for some form of special or supplementary arrangements to assist him/her in developing educationally at a pace and to such extent in breadth and depth as is compatible with capacity. Pupils who are capable of functioning within the range of exceptionally able as defined above, will require special arrangements in addition to the range of educational activities which can usually be provided in the ordinary classroom.

Such pupils need to be treated in a manner appropriate to their age as children in a climate which unequivocally values high performance. They also need a form of in-school organisation which is sensitive and thorough in the identification of pupils with exceptional ability or talent. Such organisation should enable them to participate in mixed-ability groups and find ways of having them work with pupils of generally comparable levels of ability. They also need to be challenged in tasks pushing into the frontiers of their competence.

6.3.3 Identification

In Ireland, pupils who may be exceptionally able or talented are not formally identified, as such, within the school system. Where such pupils are formally identified, it is important that a representative range of relevant individual characteristics is taken into consideration, e.g.

- (a) General ability, including intelligence test results;
- (b) General achievement and creativity, including test results, teacher ratings and work samples;
- (c) Other behaviours, e.g. work habits, task commitment, self-directedness, pride in accomplishment;
- (d) Particular talent, as indicated by expert judgement of pupil performance in areas such as art, music, athletics.

Information from professionally-qualified persons, such as psychologists and teachers, can be usefully supplemented by the opinions of parents and peers. While exceptional ability and talent are seen as an interaction between three basic human traits — above-average general abilities, high levels of task commitment and high levels of creativity — a high score on an intelligence test remains the single most favoured criterion where such pupils are formally identified.

The recognition and development of the potential of individual pupils is part of each school's function. In the exercise of this function, it is necessary to make assumptions about individual potential that are as well-founded as the school can arrange for them to be. This requires an in-school programme of pupil evaluation. Such a programme is particularly necessary for the identification of exceptional pupils at either extreme of the ability continuum. Insofar as the identification of exceptionally able and talented pupils is concerned, a pupil evaluatory programme should involve a series of steps or stages, e.g.

- (a) *Screening*: Various in-school procedures of the kind used for identifying individual differences;
- (b) *Selection*: Further investigation of selected core group to confirm and refine screening results;
- (c) *Differentiation*: Use of a "revolving door" concept in relation to ability to cope with high ability/talented activities.

6.3.4 *Number of Pupils who are Exceptionally Able or Talented*

The number of pupils classifiable as being exceptionally able intellectually, under identification procedures such as those outlined above, is not universally agreed. Instances can be found in the literature in which the proportion of a pupil population regarded as being "gifted" ranges from 1% to 15%. A high score on intelligence tests is widely accepted as the best single index of exceptional intellectual ability. On such tests, about 1 % of the total pupil population would be expected to score at 135 or above, about 2% at 130 or above, about 5% at 125 or above and about 10% at 120 or above. The description "exceptionally able", as defined above and denoting pupils with, inter alia, an IQ score of 130 and above, could be expected to be applicable to approximately 2% of the overall pupil population, i.e. to about 10,000 pupils at first level and to about 6,500 pupils at second level. Little authoritative information is available in relation to the proportion of the pupil population which might be expected to be highly talented in specific areas of achievement such as art, music or athletics.

6.3.5 *Present Provision for Exceptionally Able and Talented Pupils*

(a) *First level*

Provision for the education of pupils who may be exceptionally able or talented is in the context of the mainstream provision which is made for all pupils. The need to make due allowance in programme content, class organisation and teaching strategies for differences in educationally significant pupil characteristics is incorporated as a basic principle in the *Primary School Curriculum (1971)*. The Teacher's Handbook contains a recommended syllabus for each subject area for the various classes. Using these, and taking the particular aptitudes and interests of their pupils into account, individual schools are to compile their own programmes. Content is to be provided to suit the needs of pupils of widely-varying natural endowment and cultural background. Class organisation is to include class, group and individual activities in efforts to enable each pupil to go forward educationally at a pace and to such extent in breadth and depth as is compatible with individual capacity. Circular letter 16/73 on the Duties of Principal Teachers states that they "should ensure that additional opportunities and facilities are available to allow the more gifted pupils to make the fullest use of their natural abilities".

Special provision which is made by schools for those of their pupils who may be exceptionally able and talented usually takes the form of combinations of:

- (i) *Enrichment*: giving a pupil supplementary tasks requiring greater sophistication within a class topic;
- (ii) *Acceleration*: progress through programmes as fast as ability allows;
- (iii) *Ability-related output*: a common task is given but a response is demanded from individual pupils according to ability.

(b) *Second level*

As at first level, educational provision for pupils who are exceptionally able or talented is made at second level in mainstream schools, through higher-level and enrichment courses, acceleration and encouragement of ability-related pupil output. The A bands in the State Certificate grading system provide a structure to reflect high academic performance.

6.3.6 *Review of Present Provision*

We agree that provision for pupils who may be exceptionally able or talented should be made within the context of the ordinary school. The capacity of schools to make due allowance for individual differences varies and is adversely affected by factors such as large classes and inadequate time and resources. In the Survey Report, *The Implementation of the Primary School Curriculum*, Curriculum Unit, Department of Education (1987), teachers in a sample of national schools were requested to indicate from a list of fourteen factors the three which most militated against their efforts at making due allowance for individual differences. They perceived their main difficulties as being associated with class size, and with inadequate time and resources for doing so.

While it is not proposed that a special education system be established for exceptionally able and talented pupils, we believe that a more positive response to their particular special needs is required than that which generally obtains at present.

6.3.7 *Recommendations*

The Review Committee makes the following specific recommendations in respect of pupils who are exceptionally able or talented:

- (a) Provision for pupils who are exceptionally able or talented should continue to be made in the context of the provision made for the generality of more able pupils within mainstream schools;***

(b) each School Plan, in outlining a school's arrangements for pupils with special needs, should describe arrangements for the identification and encouragement of pupils who might be exceptionally able or talented;

(c) there should be a named teacher in each school with responsibility for coordinating programmes for pupils who are exceptionally able or talented;

(d) in addition to aspects such as academic attainment and general ability, assessment of pupils who may be exceptionally able should also include an evaluation of creativity, social skills and other personal characteristics such as motivation and self-direction;

(e) schools should be allowed to use their discretion regarding placement according to competence in the various curricular areas; accelerated promotion should be considered where it is thought to be educationally desirable and consistent with the pupil's social and emotional welfare, as well as academic development;

(f) guidelines to publishers in relation to first-level textbooks should include suggestions on the provision of materials for use in enriching and extending the curriculum;

(g) the Department of Education should facilitate and assist by way of grant-aid, where feasible and appropriate, schools, agencies and organisations which provide enrichment activities for exceptionally able or talented children and young people.

