

Exceptionally Able

The Education Act, 1998, makes provision for the education of all students, including those with a disability or other special educational need. 'Special educational needs' are defined in the Act as referring to the needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, 2004, does not explicitly refer to such needs. No single agreed international definition of 'exceptionally able' exists. A range of terms is used interchangeably in the literature and includes 'gifted', 'talented', 'exceptionally able' and 'exceptional'.

The term 'exceptionally able' is used in "Exceptionally Able Students - Draft Guidelines For Teachers" (NCCA, 2007) to describe students who require opportunities for enrichment and extension that go beyond those provided for the general cohort of students.

A working definition of 'gifted' that is accepted world-wide in educational and psychological circles is that a 'gifted' student shows exceptional ability in one area or more (e.g. mathematical, verbal, spatial, musical, artistic, etc). Defining the term 'exceptional' is more difficult as the abilities of this group extend in a continuum that renders the identification of an exact cut-off point complex.



The term 'gifted' tends to be reserved for those with an IQ (Intelligence Quotient) greater than 130 on standardised IQ tests, i.e. the top 2% of the population. It is important to remember that, although the number of such students decreases as IQ scores of 170 and above are reached, their needs become increasingly acute. Adopting a precise cut-off point can have little practical application.

Exceptionally able students are likely to show some of the following characteristics: have acute powers of observation; learn to read early (often prior to attending school); read rapidly and widely; have a well-developed vocabulary; possess intellectual curiosity; absorb information rapidly (often described as sponge-like); have a very good memory; display an ability to concentrate deeply for long periods; have very good powers of reasoning and problem solving; have intense interests; and possess exceptional imaginative powers. Students may have a great interest in 'big questions', such as the nature of the universe and environmental issues. Students may be very sensitive, easily upset and demonstrate a strong sense of fairness.

It should be noted that good practice for exceptionally able students is also good practice for all students and can improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school.

As regular schoolwork may not be sufficiently challenging, students may describe experiencing boredom and frustration in school. Prolonged boredom in school may lead to underachievement as the student finds new ways to absorb him/herself (e.g. by daydreaming, scribbling, etc). If this goes unchallenged for long periods, the habit of concentrating on schoolwork may be diminished and can require an effort to 'relearn'.

Underachievement may also be related to perfectionism, where students are so afraid that their work won't measure up to their own high standards that they avoid doing it, fearing the outcome. Some students may experience low self-esteem, stemming from a perception that they cannot live up to the expectations of parents and teachers. Also, in the pre-teen and teenage years, underachievement may be an attempt to conform and blend in with their peers.

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