SECTION 5: Exceptionally Able

EXCEPTIONALLY ABLE

Not every child has an equal talent … but they should have the equal right to develop their talent and … to make something of themselves.

John F. Kennedy *Civil Rights Address* delivered 11 June 1963 taken from the National Association for Gifted Children (US) [http://www.nagc.org/](http://www.nagc.org/)
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 Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993, p.160) defines students who are exceptionally gifted or talented as those who have demonstrated their capacity to achieve high performance in one or more of the following areas:

- general intellectual ability
- specific academic aptitude
- creative or productive thinking
- leadership ability
- visual and performing arts
- mechanical aptitude
- psychomotor ability (e.g. athletics, gymnastics)

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 SERC Report observes that a 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 therefore be arbitrary.

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. The SERC Report cautions that 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.
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.

Tips for Learning and Teaching

- Use differentiated teaching, where the student remains with his/her peers, working with the same class material, but is also afforded access to differentiated materials that address the content in more depth.

- Project-based learning can draw on students’ innate drive to learn and consequently increase motivation. It permits frequent feedback and opportunities for students to learn from their experience, and it can also act as a collaborative learning experience with peers that will help to develop social skills and increase self-esteem. Projects can be open-ended, thus encouraging students to engage in the art of inquiry.

- Exceptionally able students may be very verbal in the classroom. Some may want to contribute more frequently in class discussions and find it hard to understand that other students may struggle with areas that they themselves find easy. Encouraging the students to respect the opinions and ideas of others can assist in reducing difficulties in this area.

- Encourage students to manage their own learning. Ask them to discern between what they did well and what they could do better in a particular project. Find out what aspects they are especially proud of. The emphasis should be on the evaluative component, rather than on the grades achieved.

- Give the student opportunities to consider questions/problems to which there are no definitive answers.

- Give the student access to activities that enrich and extend them (e.g. chess, quizzes, debates, drama, etc).

- Invite outside speakers to make presentations and use the topics as a springboard for ongoing work.
Avoid giving the student repetitious work as this may lead to students slowing down their work rate to avoid being given extra repetitious work as a ‘reward’ for finishing quickly. It is preferable to build extension activities onto the foundation of what has already been learned in new ways.

Create opportunities for the student to express what they are learning in non-traditional ways (e.g. PowerPoint presentations, speeches, web-page productions, inventions, classroom demonstrations, exhibitions, etc).

The student could be invited to act as ‘Expert on a Topic’, if they have demonstrated a deep understanding of a topic/concept/task.

Encourage the creation of school displays and enter competitions in the student’s identified area(s) of interest. Competitions provide opportunities for the student to research a topic beyond its content in the curriculum and assist in the development of the student’s autonomy.

Compact the curriculum to render it denser and more complex. This involves sifting through and streamlining the curriculum in order to challenge students and provide more time for pursuing accelerated and/or enriched activities. It also involves establishing a baseline assessment to ascertain how much of the prescribed material the students have already mastered and how to devise a programme of enrichment.
- Plan for acceleration by moving the student through the curriculum at a faster pace. This may involve skipping sections where work has been adequately mastered to move further ahead.

- Encourage and facilitate higher-order thinking and questions. Encourage critical thinking in relation to the curriculum. Allow the student to look for themes, patterns, main features, etc.

- Involve the student in organising co-curricular activities such as exhibitions, cake sales, outside speakers, etc. This will assist in the development of skills such as assessment of key issues, fact finding, self-management, managing others, managing resources and social skills.

- Use information and communication technology to allow the student to work on specific topics in novel ways and to enhance the presentation of their work.

- The student may enjoy assisting peers with their work, which is valuable in terms of creating inclusive school environments. It is important, however, not to overuse this strategy and to negotiate it with the students concerned.

- Provide opportunities for independent study. However, ensure group work with peers is not neglected as this is important in developing students’ social and emotional skills.

- Suggest and/or provide supplementary reading on selected topics.
Try again, Chris,’ she whispered in my ear. ... I tried once more. ... I shook, I sweated and strained every muscle. ...I drew it - the letter ‘A’. That one letter ... was my road to a new world, my key to mental freedom.

Taken from *My Left Foot* by Christy Brown Vintage: London (1990)

These are students who are exceptionally able but also present with an additional disability such as an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) or an emotional disturbance, a hearing, speech or visual impairment, physical disability or a specific learning disability. These students defy the notion of ‘global giftedness’, a phrase that denotes ability or talent in all academic areas. Students who are both exceptionally able and have a learning disability exhibit remarkable talents and strengths in one area, while also exhibiting the characteristics associated with the additional disability. These students are often under-identified in the exceptionally able population. Some characteristics to look for when attempting to identify these students are as follows: evidence of an outstanding talent or ability; a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement; and evidence of a processing deficit (e.g. students with visual or auditory processing deficits may underachieve in basic academic areas because of underlying difficulties that the brain has in processing and making sense of some types of visual and/or auditory information that it receives).

There are at least three subgroups of students whose dual exceptionality may remain unrecognised in school:

- students who have been identified as exceptionally able, yet exhibit difficulties in school. These students are often considered underachievers, and their underachievement may be caused by poor self-image, lack of motivation, or even laziness. As school becomes more challenging, academic difficulties may increase to the point where the student is falling significantly behind peers.

- students whose learning disabilities are severe enough that they have been identified as having learning disabilities, but whose exceptional abilities have never been recognised or addressed. Difficulties in assessing these students on standardised IQ (Intelligence Quotient) tests often lead to underestimation of these students’ intellectual abilities.
students whose abilities and disabilities mask each other, so that students are considered to have average abilities. Because these students typically function at normal school level, they are not seen as having problems or special educational needs. Their academic difficulties usually increase to the point where a learning disability may be suspected.

(The following approaches, in addition to the tips for learning and teaching outlined in relation to students who are exceptionally able, may be of help in supporting/challenging the student. Sometimes a combination of these approaches may be needed. It is important to note that the implications for learning and teaching associated with the student’s additional disability should also be accommodated.)

- Create a learning environment where individual differences are valued.
- Consideration should be given to these students in situations they find challenging. This should include time factors and the possibility of reading questions aloud to these students.
- Set short-term goals rather than longer projects.
- Teachers should find topics that the students are interested in to enhance students’ on-task engagement.
- Use tips for learning and teaching outlined in the section for exceptionally able students (pages 81–83), keeping in mind the implications of accommodating the student’s additional disability.


4. Irish Association for Gifted Children/An Óige Thréitheach. It aims to help exceptionally able students to fulfil their potential and to give support to parents, teachers and others professionally concerned with their development, website: [http://homepage.tinet.ie/~iagc/iagc.htm](http://homepage.tinet.ie/~iagc/iagc.htm)

5. The Irish Centre for Talented Youth (CTYI) has compiled a detailed bibliography related to the topic of exceptionally able students, website: [http://www.dcu.ie/ctyi/](http://www.dcu.ie/ctyi/)

6. National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) aims to support teachers in getting the best from exceptionally able students whilst enabling all students to flourish, website: [http://www.nace.co.uk/](http://www.nace.co.uk/)

7. National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) strives to support those directly involved with exceptionally able students, website: [http://www.nagcbritain.org.uk/](http://www.nagcbritain.org.uk/)

8. National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) has useful advice as to how Information and Communication Technology can be incorporated into the learning and teaching of children who are exceptionally able, website: [http://www.ncte.ie/](http://www.ncte.ie/)


10. Neag Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development has information about curriculum compacting, website: [http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/sem/semart08.html](http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/sem/semart08.html)

11. Special Education Support Service (SESS) has online fact sheets related to the exceptionally able, website: [http://www.sess.ie/](http://www.sess.ie/)


14. Useful Web addresses:
     The GT-Cybersource library contains a wide range of articles on exceptionally able students, including a large collection on dual exceptionality.
   - [http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/gt_ld/gifted_ld.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/gt_ld/gifted_ld.html)
     This site contains links to a number of articles on dual exceptionality.
     This site contains a paper on dual exceptionality by Dr Margi Nowak.
   - [http://www.twicegifted.net/](http://www.twicegifted.net/)
     This site contains information on famous people who had dual exceptionality.


16. World Council for Gifted and Talented Children. Its purpose is to focus world attention on exceptionally able students so that their potential is realised for the benefit of everyone, website: [http://world-gifted.org/](http://world-gifted.org/)
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Notes