

Different children: between giftedness and special educational needs – an integrative outlook^b

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ABSTRACT: Within the comprehensive framework of the concept of exceptional children—a term that encompasses a wide spectrum of learners, including both gifted and talented individuals as well as those with special educational needs - there emerges the necessity for a coherent theoretical and empirical foundation. The present study, currently situated at the stage of terminological clarification and the establishment of an experimental sample, focuses on identifying and analysing children with special educational needs from Romanian schools who simultaneously exhibit evident aptitudes or talents across various domains.

In addition to the conceptual analysis, the study also examines statistical data regarding children with special educational needs and the manifestation of diverse abilities, confirming that many of them possess the potential for successful social integration, personal development, and meaningful contribution to collective progress. The research adopts a qualitative–conceptual methodological approach, combining theoretical analysis with the preliminary designed empirical investigation tools intended for future application within inclusive educational settings. The main purpose of the investigation is to refine the conceptual understanding of giftedness, exploring its multiple dimensions and the interrelation between gifted potential and special educational needs.

Preliminary results and discussions highlight the integrative perspective that both giftedness and special needs can coexist in the same learner, requiring flexible, individualized, and inclusive educational strategies. This approach supports the development of an educational framework that views giftedness as a universal form of human potential, manifesting in diverse ways depending on contextual, cognitive, and emotional factors.

KEYWORDS: exceptional children; children with special educational needs; educational integration; forms of giftedness; performance;

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Introduction

Some children have special educational needs that affect their learning and social integration. These children should not be considered „different“ in a negative sense but rather as possessors of unique potential, often demonstrating abilities or talents that are overlooked in traditional educational settings. Recognizing and supporting this potential contributes not only to individual development but also to promoting equity and inclusion in the society.

The recognition of children with *special educational needs* (SEN) has increasingly become a focal point in international education policy, particularly through landmark frameworks such as UNESCO's *Salamanca Statement* (1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). These instruments affirm that all children, irrespective of their abilities or challenges, have an unequivocal right to access and participate fully in mainstream education. They further emphasize that educational systems themselves bear the responsibility to accommodate learner diversity, rather than adjusting expectations solely to perceived limitations of individual children.

Despite the widespread adoption of SEN as a standard term, significant debates persist regarding its precise conceptual boundaries, particularly in relation to terms such as *handicap*, *impairment*, and *disability*. Such terminological nuances carry profound implications for educational practice, as narrow or inconsistent definitions may obscure the recognition of abilities and talents in children with atypical developmental profiles. Attending to the full potential of these learners is therefore essential, not only to support their individual growth but also to promote equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Empirical and theoretical studies underscore the dual nature of SEN: while some children require targeted support to engage effectively in learning, many also demonstrate distinctive cognitive, artistic, or social talents that are frequently overlooked within conventional classroom settings. By bridging the intersection between specialized support and the recognition of exceptional abilities, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of children with special educational needs, highlighting both their educational needs and their often-unacknowledged potential. Such an approach aligns with contemporary perspectives on inclusive education, wherein the focus shifts from deficit-oriented classification to systemic adaptation that facilitates participation, learning, and the flourishing of all students.

Building on this conceptual and empirical foundation, the present study aims to address three interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to **define and delimit the terminology associated with children with special educational needs**, clarifying conceptual distinctions and addressing ongoing debates regarding terms such as *handicap*, *impairment*, and *disability*. Second, the study aims to **analyse the accessibility and provision of educational resources** for children with disabilities or atypical

development, highlighting systemic responses to diverse learner needs. Third, it intends to ***demonstrate, through statistical and empirical evidence, that many children with SEN exhibit outstanding abilities and may be classified as gifted or talented learners***, thereby bridging the gap between support for learning needs and recognition of exceptional potential.

Children with Special Educational Needs: Policy-Based Conceptualizations

Inclusive education and support for children with special educational needs are grounded in a clear legal and conceptual framework, as established by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006). Disability is understood not merely as a medical condition but as the result of the interaction between the child and environmental barriers. Implementing reasonable accommodations ensures equitable access to education, while General Comment No. 4 (2016) emphasizes that effective inclusion requires not only physical integration but also adaptation of curricula, learning environments, and teaching strategies, alongside the development of Individualized Education Plans tailored to each child's specific needs.

The principle of *education for everyone* stated in the Salamanca Statement (1994), established inclusive education as an educational standard rather than an optional approach. European practice operationalizes this principle by defining Special Educational Needs as requirements for additional support arising from learning difficulties, disabilities, or social circumstances, emphasizing support needs rather than deficits. Within the conceptual framework of the document, the term denotes a flexible and inclusive set of educational needs that extend beyond the standard support typically provided within mainstream educational systems, without being restricted solely to medically or psychologically defined disabilities.

The document emphasizes that education systems must recognize and respond to the diversity of learners' needs, including those of students with special educational needs, which may arise from disabilities, learning difficulties, or other individual characteristics requiring differentiated pedagogical approaches. The Salamanca Statement situates the concept of special educational needs within an inclusive educational paradigm, shifting the focus from the identification of individual deficits to the adaptation of educational systems to learner diversity.

This conceptualization has provided a terminological and normative foundation for numerous subsequent educational policies and has been instrumental in the global development of inclusive education. The term *Special Educational Needs (SEN)* has become a globally recognized standard in education, largely due to the influence of UNESCO and its integration into international and European educational policies. Documents such as the *Salamanca Statement* and the frameworks promoted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education have contributed to

establishing SEN as a unifying concept, facilitating the development of inclusive practices, the harmonization of policies, and the implementation of curricula that respond to diverse learner needs. Despite this standardization, terminological debates continue, particularly concerning distinctions among handicap, impairment, disability, special needs, and inclusion, reflecting medical, social, and pedagogical perspectives. Whereas medical models emphasize diagnostic classification and individual deficits, social approaches focus on societal barriers and the responsibility of systems to adapt, and pedagogical frameworks highlight the individualized educational support necessary to ensure meaningful participation. The international trend increasingly favors a contextual and inclusive interpretation, in which SEN refers not merely to a child's characteristics, but to the dynamic interaction between learners' needs and the educational environment. This conceptualization highlights the shift from labeling students to transforming and adapting educational systems, thereby reinforcing the principle that inclusion constitutes a systemic responsibility. Consequently, clarifying and harmonizing these terms is essential for effective policymaking, coherent educational planning, and the advancement of equitable and inclusive learning opportunities across diverse contexts.

Practical implementation of this concept depends on the alignment of national legislation with the CRPD, guidance from European agencies, and policy frameworks linking education to broader social inclusion objectives. Such terms as „learners with support needs,” Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and reasonable accommodations ensures coherence between legal mandates, educational practice, and a rights-based approach that recognizes the potential and dignity of every child.

Child Capacities: Conceptual Outlook

When we examine how particular students demonstrate their capacities within specific areas, we observe significant variation, not only between students but also across different types of activities. This diversity suggests that individuals are born not only having different degrees of potential, but also with distinct tendencies or predispositions to excel, each with their own intensity and dynamics of the development in a particular field. These differences in special abilities require educators particularly those working directly in classrooms to apply differentiated teaching strategies and tailor the individualized tasks especially for students who exhibit medium to high levels of ability.

This becomes particularly relevant in educational process that strives to offer equal opportunities to all students. Nevertheless, there are children whose abilities exceed the normative expectations for their age and peer group. Although such students form a minority, they represent a part of the school with exceptional talent in specific domains students who are supported by offering appropriate conditions are capable of achieving outstanding performance.

Often teachers at general educational schools might find it challenging to provide

a suitable support for the development of gifted learners or those with special educational needs. In such cases it is essential that these students be included in specialized educational programs tailored to their specific needs. This situation is particularly common when guiding talented or gifted learners toward institutions focused on artistic disciplines such as music, visual arts, dance, or drama.

The researcher uses the term „exceptional children” to refer to learners who demonstrate pronounced abilities in a particular field. Adopting this term is consistent with established educational frameworks that classify both gifted learners and those with special educational needs under a broader umbrella concept of *exceptionality*.

This choice of the concept is supported by several authoritative sources. For example, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) defines „exceptional children” as learners who differ from the norm—either above or below—in ways that require individualized educational approach. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), classify gifted students and students with disabilities as groups requiring individualized adaptations, demonstrating that both categories can be regarded as forms of exceptionality. Internationally, UNESCO’s Inclusive Education frameworks (2017) also acknowledge that learners with outstanding talents as well as those facing learning challenges, fall outside typical developmental pathways and therefore need tailored educational approaches.

By using a single, comprehensive term, we create a coherent conceptual space in which to analyse the educational needs of these learners without repeatedly differentiating between subcategories. This approach reflects the perspective promoted in official guidelines, which emphasize the importance of approaching diverse learners through flexible, adaptive, and responsive educational environments. Moreover, it facilitates a more integrated discussion of pedagogical strategies, individualized support, and specialized programming suitable for students whose learning path diverge significantly from the majority of students.

Consequently, the term ***exceptional children*** allows one to refer collectively to learners with outstanding abilities based on widely recognized and authoritative educational frameworks.

Pedagogy has long been concerned with two key aspects of this issue: the determination of the reliable criteria for identifying gifted children and developing effective strategies and methodologies for supporting their growth. Partial answers to the first aspect can be found in both contemporary literature. It is important to clarify that both concept of giftedness and the criteria for identifying gifted individuals differ significantly from one researcher to another. These variations are interconnected to the evolving values and needs of the society. Without attempting an exhaustive analysis of the numerous definitions of giftedness that exist nowadays the author w focuses on highlighting the overarching meaning of this complex and dynamic phenomenon.

It is widely accepted that gifted individuals possess abilities that surpass their peers and exceed the typical expectations for their age. These advanced capacities allow them to achieve notable success in one or more areas often demonstrating exceptional performance. From author's perspective, Sidney Marland's definition of giftedness and gifted children is a particularly valuable because it emphasizes the diverse aspects of mentioned phenomenon and also the multiple domains in which it can be manifested. Marland states: "*by means of outstanding abilities or the potential for such abilities exceptional children are capable of high performance in areas such as intellectual, creative, academic, leadership, or visual and art and music and who require the personalized approach or educational support not ordinarily provided by the general school*" (Marland, 1972, p. 33).

This definition aligns with theoretical perspectives that supports the idea of the existence of *specific types of giftedness*, also referred to as *multiple intelligence* expressed in various fields, such as music, visual arts, dance, mathematics, languages, etc.. In this context, *Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence* (1983) deserves paying special attention. Gardner distinguishes seven distinct forms of intelligence which may also be regarded as distinct types of giftedness:

1. Linguistic intelligence
2. Logical-mathematical intelligence
3. Spatial intelligence (the ability to manipulate spatial configurations)
4. Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence
5. Musical intelligence
6. Interpersonal intelligence (orientation toward understanding and interacting with others)
7. Intrapersonal intelligence (self-awareness and understanding of one's own inner world)

One of the early U.S. projects that focused on identifying and fostering exceptional potential initiated in the 1950' s highlighted a wide range of giftedness domains including intellectual, scientific, leadership, creative, artistic, linguistic , dramatic, musical, mechanical, and physical abilities. This was among the first attempts to create a multi-domain model of giftedness, establishing what one might call a *first dimension of gradation* within the gifted people: the existence of multiple types of giftedness.

A second important dimension of mentioned gradation, from the researcher's viewpoint concerns the *degrees of giftedness*, often referred to as "*subcategories of giftedness*." Educational psychologist François Gagné (1968, 1988) proposed a hierarchy of giftedness levels, which includes:

- Mild giftedness
- Moderate giftedness
- High giftedness

- Profound (or exceptional) giftedness

The first criterion used by Gagné to distinguish between these subcategories was *IQ score*. Thus, he acknowledged the need for complementary indicators. The researcher supports the general acceptance of such a tiered model, but they also advocate for using additional variables specific traits, capacities, or testable criteria depending on the domain of giftedness being assessed. A detailed and domain-specific evaluation allows to deeply understand the child's unique level of the potential and to support the development of tailored educational strategies.

In order to define a clear framework for research, it is important to distinguish between key terms that often overlap in meaning, such as giftedness, high ability, and talent. The term giftedness generally serves as the foundational concept from which the notion of high giftedness (or exceptional giftedness) evolves. The prefix „supra”, denoting „above” or “beyond” a quantitative distinction, emphasizing a level of ability significantly above the norm (gifted vs. highly gifted).

In psychological terms, high giftedness typically refers to the intellectual domain, and is most often associated with superior intelligence, measured by an IQ significantly above the chronological age level. Romanian psychologist M. Jigău asserts that the term *high giftedness* should be reserved for “*exceptional intellectual capacities that enable high-level performance in any domain*” (Jigău, 2000, p. 55).

In everyday speech however, the term *talent* often interchange *giftedness* which can lead to conceptual confusion. At this point, François Gagné draws an important distinction: he views giftedness as a form of *natural ability or competence* whereas talent is regarded as the *actualized performance* the visible outcome of that competence. Both are considered above average, but they represent different stages in the development of potential.

Within the specialized literature there are experts who limits the use of the term *talent* to *specialized fields* such as music, theatre dance, mathematics, chemistry, etc. However, the current research is based on recent perspectives that support a broader usage of the concept of talent, extending it beyond traditional domains to include any field where high performance can emerge.

The author also supports Gagné's viewpoint that talent should be understood as *high achievement in any field*, which occurs *as a result of giftedness* that is through the development and expression of exceptional ability, competence, or a constellation of outstanding traits and capacities within a domain.

Assumption Validation via Statistical Data Synthesis

As part of the prognostic stage of our research, we conducted a synthetic study examining the number and distribution of children with various types of special educational needs. Relying on the data from two regions in Romania, the analysis

provides an overview of the diagnostic profiles, developmental characteristics, and emerging capacities of these children across different educational levels. This statistical overview serves as a foundation for the thesis of our paper: that children with diverse inclusion needs often display remarkable and specific potential—particularly in artistic, expressive, and practical domains being supported through adjusted and inclusive educational conditions. For ethical reasons, the specific regions and institutions that contributed to the formation of the sample are not going to be indicated in this article.

Inclusive education has significant development in recent years, and statistical data on children with special educational needs (SEN) provide a reliable overview of the diversity of learning and of the responses offered by educational institutions. Information collected from national monitoring systems and educational support services show not only the prevalence of various SEN categories, but also their aptitudes outline making it possible to understand students' developmental potential in a detailed way.

In one numerous educational institution at preschool, primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary levels, 69 of the 910 enrolled children (7.6%) are identified as having SEN. Their distribution across levels reveals important characteristics. At the preschool stage where children with SEN represent around 4% of the total number of children, autism spectrum disorders and intellectual delays are most frequently recorded. Despite challenges that refer communication skills and socio-emotional development, many children of preschool age demonstrate notable expressive abilities—particularly in visual arts, practical activities, and play-based motor tasks. Multisensory stimulation as a strategy of tactile, visual, and auditory exploration language development, social interaction, and autonomy becomes essential at this age.

In primary education, the number of pupils with SEN increases to approximately 28%. The most common diagnoses include autism spectrum disorders, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and to a lesser extent, hearing impairments. Although these diseases influence attention, learning pace, and school adaptation, a significant number of pupils show the remarkable results in mathematics, music, or visual arts. This pattern confirms the value of differentiated instructions which enables children to develop their strongest competencies even in the presence of learning difficulties.

At the lower-secondary level, the complexity of cases increases. Diagnoses range from neurodevelopmental disorders such as Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or mild intellectual disability to congenital malformations and other associated disorders. These can affect mobility, independence, or social integration yet pupils continue to demonstrate diverse abilities - linguistic, artistic, practical or visual. In this developmental stage, teachers and counsellors play a crucial role in maintaining school motivation and adjusting the curriculum. Individualized plans, mentoring and consistent collaboration with families support the creation of coherent educational path.

In upper-secondary and vocational education, the diagnostic profile remains

consistent with autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disability, and congenital conditions among the most common. Students increasingly display well-defined abilities, particularly in mathematics, literature, and personal development, suggesting that long-term educational interventions - adapted teaching strategies, continuous guidance, and emotional support - have cumulative positive effects.

Broadening the perspective to a regional level, available data indicate the presence of over 2,400 children identified with SEN. Approximately 15% are diagnosed with Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, 20% with autism spectrum disorders, and 63% with other types of disabilities including intellectual, motor, and sensory impairments. This distribution reflects the need for curricular adjustment, differentiated instructions, tasks and pedagogical approaches that strengthen autonomy and practical skills. A small group of children receive home-based education for medical reasons and their educational progress depends greatly on individualized teaching and steady contact with educators.

Another regional dataset, reflecting a comparably large number of students reporting nearly 1,500 pupils with SEN integrated into general education and a similar number enrolled in special education settings. Intellectual disabilities represent the largest category of the diagnoses followed by autism spectrum disorders, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, motor impairments, sensory impairments, and specific learning disorders. Each diagnostic group is associated with particular strengths: pupils with intellectual disabilities often excel in practical and artistic activities; those with visual impairments develop strong auditory memory and verbal skills; pupils with hearing impairments frequently show advanced visual-spatial abilities; students with motor impairments tend to demonstrate strong cognitive potential; and those with autism often present exceptional visual memory, attention to detail, or interest in structured, logical tasks. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is commonly associated creativity, energy, and divergent thinking, while specific learning disorders frequently correlate with artistic or technical talent.

These data reveal that the development of aptitudes among pupils with SEN is shaped by several key factors: adapted teaching strategies, sensory-rich and expressive learning environments, consistent long-term interventions, interdisciplinary collaboration among educators and specialists and a supportive school environment. Inclusive education extends beyond placement; it rests on a genuine appreciation of diversity and on the belief that each pupil combines challenges with unique strengths. Institutions that succeed in cultivating this potential contribute to authentic models of inclusion and educational equity/

Within the stages of thesis formulation, conceptual delimitation, data selection, and the analysis of the results of the research, the findings confirm the stated thesis: children identified with various forms of special educational needs possess significant

developmental potential and exhibit exceptional abilities in diverse domains. Rather than being perceived as a source of difficulty or burden these children should be recognized as the possessors of unique strengths that can enrich both educational system and society as a whole. The consistent manifestation of pronounced aptitudes—particularly in artistic, expressive and practical fields—across diagnostic categories and educational levels further reinforces the idea that inclusive education is not merely remedial, but transformative. It enables the identification, cultivation, and integration of individual potential into meaningful learning trajectories, positioning these children not at the margins, but as valuable contributors to the social and cultural capital of the community.

Conclusions

There is a noticeable change in education from adjusting children to general standards to genuine inclusion, which aims at recognizing the diversity as an educational resource. From this perspective, the notion of the “exceptional child” functions as an umbrella concept, reducing stigmatization and promoting a learner-centred approach grounded in flexible and personalized educational strategies.

Within this integrative framework, several categories of children can be distinguished:

- *Gifted children*, with high IQs and superior cognitive abilities;
- *Children with specific talents* particularly in artistic, athletic, or social domains;
- *Children with special educational needs (SEN)*, who might possess latent or atypically expressed potential;
- *Underachieving children*, who despite low academic results demonstrate notable interests, creativity, or abilities.

All these groups require differentiated educational interventions. Such interventions include precise individual profile, identification and targeted support for potential development, with particular attention to fostering creative and artistic abilities. Exceptional children should be viewed as an extended educational category, encompassing both evident high achievement and hidden or atypically expressed potential.

To fully harness these potentials, an inclusive pedagogical approach is essential. This approach should be based on comprehensive assessment, personalized strategies, and continuous support enabling each child to achieve their highest level of development in multiple domains. In the context of artistic education such practices are crucial for igniting creativity, self-expression and unique talents demonstrating that effective educational interventions can transform potential into observable achievement.

These conclusions emphasize the importance of *terminological clarity and precise practical application* of the theoretical terms showing that a clear understanding of concepts such as “exceptional child,” giftedness and special educational needs is vital for

implementing effective educational strategies especially in domains where creativity and individual expression are central.

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