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Dear Teacher,

This is letter that I make available to parents of exceptionally able children who are struggling to enjoy school to share with teachers. The parent who has given it to you may already be on your radar as a nuisance. I don't know them personally, and they may well be a nuisance; and/or they might just be desperate because their child is unhappy at school although they love learning.

It's difficult to teach exceptionally able children – precisely because they're exceptions. During a whole career as a primary teacher, you might teach just one classful of children who are the brightest 1 in 30. You may only meet one, or none, of the most able 1 in 1000.

So when you do meet an exceptionally bright child, it is different and it can be threatening and hard to believe. So it's easy to think that the parents are pushy, the child is bolshy, or that there's something else going on such as autism or a behavioural issue. All those things can sometimes be true, but sometimes it's just that a child is very, very bright and it is going to take strategies that you haven't used before to enable that child to be happy at school. It is certainly not the case that every child who is exceptionally bright is also sad, weird, friendless, obnoxious, or has some diagnosable condition. That's just a fictional trope born out of a desire for advantages to come at a price.

Why should you put that extra effort into that child, who is "going to be alright anyway", when there are other children struggling with the basics who need the scarce time you have to give? The thing is, that child won't necessarily "be alright anyway". For all children, their emotional well-being is tied up with the learning to some extent. Nobody likes being bottom of the class, everybody likes to enjoy their schoolwork and not find it boring. But for the brightest children, learning is even more important for their happiness: being good at learning stuff is a huge part of who they are, and if they are unable to learn they do not feel fully themselves.

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There's a question of fairness too: all children come to school to learn things they don't already know, things that they need your help to learn. If a child spends most of his time going over things he already knows, it is a waste of his time being in your classroom. He will act up, be rude, bossy, disruptive, arrogant; or maybe sullen, quiet, tearful, unpredictable – because he is BORED. Imagine being on a long-haul flight, unable to sleep, and with no books to read or films you want to watch, and nobody to

talk to. Every day. That's how boring school can be for an exceptionally able child.

Don't, please, fall in to the trap of saying, "He can learn social skills" or "he can work on his handwriting". Everyone at school gets to learn social skills and to write legibly. Those basics are not compensation for coming to school to go over stuff you already know. Exceptionally able children are entitled to **Equality of Struggle** with other learners – experiencing the same difficulties and frustrations at the limit of their abilities, being helped to overcome those difficulties by teachers who know how to structure learning and motivate learners. If they don't get that struggle and all the work is easy, what they learn is contempt for others who do struggle, and they also begin to shy away from anything that they find hard, because it is an unfamiliar experience. Nothing fosters a fixed mindset more than finding everything easy – how could you possibly see the value of effort and careful practice if you never need it to succeed?

How can you as teacher provide that equality of struggle with the limited time and resources you have? The first thing is to **do no harm**, and at the very least not waste their time with stuff they already know. Some children can read chapter books when they get to reception. Don't torture them with phonics. If you don't have time to prepare something else for them, let them read a book.

The second thing is to let them do **Most Difficult First**. Don't make them wade through lots of easy stuff before they get to the more challenging thing: let them do the more challenging thing first, and then go on from there to greater challenges.

The third thing is, **teach the child, not the age**. A child's brain has no idea at all of what is expected of an average 4 year old, 8 year old, or 12 year old. The segregation of children into age bands is an accident of how schools have developed. It doesn't tell you what to expect from the brightest 1% any more than it tells you what to expect from the 1% least able. A child, and their parents, also couldn't care less about what is on the syllabus, and whether you are taking content from the year above. It makes no difference to them. Most of all, they don't care about mastery learning or what the government says about everyone progressing at the same time. Mastery learning, and the government, are concerned with league table performance, and not with the intellectual wellbeing of individual highly able children. So if you don't want to take content from the year above, find things that are not on the curriculum that can provide a higher level of challenge – or find ways to make the same topics everyone else is doing far more challenging for the one child who needs it.

This is not a matter of differentiation: you can only stretch that so far. Let them do the most challenging differentiated task you can, and then get them to do something different but still connected – a super example was a reception teacher who got one child to write instructions for the construction of a Stick Man, and to then to visit Year 5 to test these out. Don't feel that it always has to connect closely with what the others are doing. OFSTED might think that you should have an extension task for every aspect of the curriculum that takes the learning objective of the rest of the class and just goes deeper. If you have the time and imagination to do that 195 days a year for every topic, you should be writing books about it. In reality, **go-to projects** that a child can return to when they have squeezed everything you can offer them from the main work allow children to do work with greater scope and individuality, with less teacher input.

What makes it possible to provide for exceptionally able children without adding much to your workload is that it is in their nature to be able to **do a lot with a little**: if you can find an open-ended, compelling task, you may be able to productively occupy such a child for hours with relatively little teacher input. You use their ability and enthusiasm

to magnify the results of your efforts.

Lastly, **don't try and do everything yourself**. Because of the way the maths works out – that it is difficult for any teacher, unless they are in a selective secondary school, to get that much exposure to exceptionally able children – it's unlikely that you will have all the answers. Talk to colleagues, ask other schools, and most of all, talk to their parents. Don't feel the parents will be annoyed that you don't have all the answers – they will just be glad that you have acknowledged the difficulty. They probably don't find it easy either – such children can be like a bolt from the blue, and a constant puzzle to their parents.

Thank you on behalf of this particular parent and child for your patience in reading this letter. My connection is that, having had a rather unsatisfactory experience of schooling as an exceptionally able child myself, I now run courses for exceptionally able secondary age children. It's very difficult to provide services for younger children because they are so hard to find, but I see them a few years later when some have been largely turned off of school by years of frustration. You are welcome to get in touch and I can direct you to some resources, or help you get started with some suggestions for forthcoming topics. It's a pro bono service so I can't give much time to each child but I'll do what I can.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Buckley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, decorative flourish at the end of the name.

Jason Buckley