

## **Introduction to Exceptionalities Script**

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### **Part 1: What are Exceptionalities?**

#### **A1T0: Introduction to Module**

Hi, thank you for taking your time to view the first module, Introduction to Exceptionalities, in the Foundations of Special Education learner pathway. This module was developed in partnership between Pastel Special Education and 1 Million Teachers.

No two students are the same. As each student has unique strengths, as well as needs, they may be some students that need to be supported in different ways.

The Foundations of Special Education learner pathway are a set of three modules aimed at improving the quality of education in the classroom for all learners, particularly ones with exceptionalities. This set of modules aims to aid teachers with tools and resources to create an inclusive environment within the classroom.

Through this module, we will learn the basics of special education-what special education is, what an exceptionality is, types of exceptionalities and how they can manifest as learning needs in the classroom.

Thank you for watching and in the next video we will look at what special education is and why it is important in our classrooms.

#### **A1T1: What is Special Education and why is it important?**

So, what is special education? This is a fundamental question and will guide the rest of these videos. Special education became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s when parents started to advocate for better educational opportunities for their children with disabilities (1). Special education is defined as creating learning environments to challenge and support students based on their needs (2). Special education encompasses all learners as they fit onto a spectrum, ranging from low functioning to high achieving. It includes students that have behavioural, intellectual, communicative, physical or a combination of exceptionalities who require an individualized approach to learning (3).

For example, special education can include individuals who need support writing or reading or individuals that need extra learning material to challenge them if they found the original content easier than the majority of students.

*What are some reasons you think special education is necessary in a classroom?*

Special education is important for a variety of reasons. It allows students to:

- access in a classroom setting, increasing social interaction
- increase their level of confidence
- help them reach their full potential

Start thinking about special education in your own classroom. What have you seen? Have there been students you can think of that required extra support?



Special education needs to be a fundamental part of the education system and in classrooms to provide educational opportunity for students, in hopes to increase the inclusiveness and level of education within a school setting.

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss what an exceptionality is.

- (1) Yell, M. L., Rogers, D., & Rogers, E. L. (1998). The Legal History of Special Education. *Remedial and Special Education*, 19(4), 219-228.  
doi:10.1177/074193259801900405
- (2) What's So Special about Special Education? Everything! (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.nctm.org/News-and-Calendar/Messages-from-the-President/Archive/Skip-Fennell/What\\_s-So-Special-about-Special-Education\\_Everything/](https://www.nctm.org/News-and-Calendar/Messages-from-the-President/Archive/Skip-Fennell/What_s-So-Special-about-Special-Education_Everything/)
- (3) Government of Ontario. (n.d.). Special Education. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/speced.html>
- (4) Special Education & Section Programs. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Leadership-Learning-And-Special-Education/Special-Education>

### **A1T2: What is an Exceptionality?**

You may have heard of the term disability, which covers a wide range of limitations or illness stemming from impairments in the body's structure or function (1). Disability is now commonly referred to as exceptionality. *Do you know why?*

There is a shift in language, to use exceptionality over disability. Disability, broken down into 'dis' and 'ability' has been increasingly seen to have a negative connotation, showing how someone is unable to do something or have a lack of, where in reality they may just have a different way of doing it.

Exceptionalities are defined as a pattern of both strengths and needs common to a group of students (2). Exceptionalities encompass all students, as all students have strengths and needs, but include those that require an extra level of support. These exceptional learners call us to make exceptions to teaching and stress the importance of teaching in multiple ways for the various type of learners within the classroom.

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss physical exceptionalities.

- (1) Disabilities. (2017, October 05). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/>
- (2) Department of Education. (n.d.). Education and Early Childhood Development. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentssupportservices/exceptionalities.html>

### **A1T3: Physical Exceptionalities**



Physical exceptionalities are limitations that affect one's physical being. These exceptionalities are often visible and can be seen as to how it affects an individual's daily life and their learning. Physical exceptionalities can be present from birth, can develop over time through trauma or genetics. Physical exceptionalities include deafness, blindness, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injuries, loss of limbs (1).

*What are some ways physical exceptionalities can hinder students in a school environment?*

In students, it can hinder participation in a school environment through physical limitations. This includes not being able to move around the room, participate in physical activities, reading, writing, articulation. This can affect school performance and social inclusion within classroom activities and on the playground.

Looking at the physical environment of the classroom, heavy doors, tight spaces, set-up of desks and chairs can all deter students with physical exceptionalities. For example, in the classroom, a student in a wheelchair may not have enough space to maneuver around the desks (2). This can impact their ability to see the board, partake in an activity, socialize with their peers, or a number of other challenges.

*What subject areas do you think students with physical exceptionalities would their performance be affected in?*

The answer is all, however some subject areas will be more impacted than others. For example, physical education will be impacted the most for the obvious reason that a physical limitation will affect many activities in a physical education class. However, a physical exceptionality may also have an impact on performance in less obvious subjects. For example, conducting science experiments may be difficult depending on how the classroom is set up and whether the students can easily access the equipment/materials. If seating is not inclusive, then a child may not be able to interact appropriately with peers and teachers during lessons. In addition, if the child does not feel included in the classroom, motivation and focus can also be negatively impacted.

Physical exceptionalities can impact a student's experience and affect their performance in the classrooms. Start thinking about how as a teacher you can make changes to the class for your students who may have physical exceptionalities. This will be addressed in future modules.

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss intellectual exceptionalities.

- (1) Physical Exceptionality: Blind and Low Vision. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Physical\\_Exceptionality.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Physical_Exceptionality.html)
- (2) Egilson, S. T., & Traustadottir, R. (2009). Participation of Students With Physical Disabilities in the School Environment. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63(3), 264-272. doi:10.5014/ajot.63.3.264

#### **A1T4: Intellectual Exceptionalities**

Intellectual exceptionalities are based on the mind and are split in three categories-giftedness, mild intellectual exceptionalities and developmental exceptionalities.



Giftedness is an advanced degree of intellectual ability (1). It requires different learning experiences that are beyond the normal educational material (1). Students can be gifted in one or more subject areas-it does not necessarily mean they are gifted in all subjects. Students who are gifted may find the learning material is simple and does not provide enough of a challenge. This translates into teachers seeing consistently high grades and students getting bored easily. Additionally, teachers may see students using a different thought process to arrive at an answer for a given question. For example, for a math problem, students may complete the calculation in a different but logical order to get the correct answer versus what has been taught in class. Finally, students may not know all the information they are taught but are able to pick it up quicker than average. This means that they may need extra higher-level information to challenge them or to learn it multiple ways.

Mild intellectual exceptionalities is where the student has a developmental delay where they may be unable to process information at the same speed (2). Often for students this may appear as a disinterest in the learning material, disengagement from the classroom, lower than average scores. Additionally, students may be able to complete the straightforward questions but have a harder time with conceptual and critical thinking ones. For example, a student may be able to solve the math problems in the steps they have learned how to, however they may not be able to complete a three-step problem that tie together multiple mathematical methods. Like giftedness, this exceptionalities may be visible in one or more subjects. It must be noted however, with a mild intellectual exceptionalities, these differences may be slight or even negligible (2). Students may require a little more time or additional resources to learn the information or require extra human support within the classroom.

Developmental exceptionalities is where the student has a limited ability to learn academic material within the classroom setting, even with extra resources and support (3). Students with developmental exceptionalities have an extremely difficult time learning and adjusting to a classroom setting. Most students with a developmental exceptionalities are identified at a young age, before school age, as they also have difficulties reaching other educational and developmental milestones. Learning for students with developmental exceptionalities is dependent on how severe the exceptionalities is, however is predominantly focused on life skills over academic content (3).

*Can you think of differences between physical exceptionalities and intellectual exceptionalities?*

An imperative difference between physical exceptionalities and intellectual exceptionalities is that intellectual exceptionalities may be hidden, versus physical exceptionalities being visible. For example, a student with a wheelchair is obvious and apparent whereas a student who has a mild intellectual disability cannot be seen upon appearance.

*What challenges could hidden exceptionalities pose?*

One major challenge that is often faced is the ability to determine the extent of the intellectual exceptionalities or whether there is one in the first place because it is hidden. This means that it is often difficult to decipher the 'right' amount of resources and support the student will require in the classroom.



A challenge with visible exceptionalities is that we may assume the extent of the challenges based on what we can see. We may not be able to see the secondary struggles that are associated with or the result of the primary challenges.

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss communication exceptionalities, with a focus on Autism Spectrum Disorder.

- (1) Intellectual Exceptionality: Giftedness. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Intellectual\\_Exceptionality/Giftedness/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Intellectual_Exceptionality/Giftedness/index.html)
- (2) Intellectual Exceptionality: MID. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Intellectual\\_Exceptionality/MID/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Intellectual_Exceptionality/MID/index.html)
- (3) Intellectual Exceptionality: DD. (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Intellectual\\_Exceptionality/DD/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Intellectual_Exceptionality/DD/index.html)

### **A1T5: Communication Exceptionalities Pt.1 (emphasis on ASD)**

Communication exceptionalities involve difficulties in speech and/or language comprehension and development. Communication exceptionalities are divided into several subcategories to cover the wide range of difficulties-Autism Spectrum Disorder, Students that are Hard of Hearing, Students with Speech Impairment, Developmental Language Delays and Learning Disabilities. To be thorough, communication exceptionalities have been broken up into two videos, this one focusing on Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are deficits and delays in development rates, including verbal and written communication, and social and interactive behaviours (1). It is known to be a development disorder because individuals are typically diagnosed at an earlier age. Autism is known as a spectrum disorder as the functioning of an individual is on a continuum- some individuals with ASD will be completely dependent, some will require some assistance with certain tasks and some individuals will be completely independent in life.

Socially, individuals who have ASD have difficulties in making eye contact, enjoy sharing experiences and objects, maintaining conversation, and understanding perspectives other people's actions (1). Another common characteristic individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder may engage in repetitive behaviours, both bodily movements and movement with objects, including hand-flapping, rocking and repeating words (2). In the classroom, this can look like students with ASD are unable to relate and get along with peers or seem to be disinterested in classroom activities. Other students in the classroom are less likely to accept students with ASD and reciprocate friendships and are less accepting as students grow older (3). Students with ASD may show difficulties in self-regulation, affecting focus, learning and making academic progress (4).

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss other communication exceptionalities.



- (1) Autism Spectrum Disorder. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>
- (2) Public Health Agency of Canada. (2018, August 29). Signs and symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd/signs-symptoms-autism-spectrum-disorder-asd.html>
- (3) Rotheram-Fuller, E., Kasari, C., Chamberlain, B., & Locke, J. (2010). Social involvement of children with autism spectrum disorders in elementary school classrooms. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51(11), 1227-1234. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2010.02289.x
- (4) Marsh, A., Spagnol, V., Grove, R., & Eapen, V. (2017). Transition to school for children with autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review. *World Journal of Psychiatry*, 7(3), 184-196. doi:10.5498/wjp.v7.i3.184

## **A1T6: Communication Exceptionalities Pt.2**

The last video on communication exceptionalities focused on primarily Autism Spectrum Disorder. This video will look at other communication exceptionalities- Hard of Hearing, Speech Impairment, Developmental Language Delays and Learning Disabilities. Just a reminder that communication exceptionalities involve difficulties in speech and/or language comprehension and development.

Hard of Hearing or Deafness is classified as a deficit in auditory response, also known as hearing, causes difficulties in language and speech development (1). Students who are hard of hearing may wear a device to help them hear. In the classroom, students who are hard of hearing and don't have a device, may not be able to hear or minimally hear the teacher or other students talk. It can also depend on the severity-some students may be able to hear if they are closer to however is talking than others. If students have a deficit in hearing however, this could lead to lack of or misinformation translating to poorer test performance. Additionally, if students cannot hear what is being said, they are unable to participate in discussions and engage with their peers both in the classroom and on the playground, leading to isolation and a lack of engagement and learning.

Speech impairments are difficulties in the transmission of oral information output, due to neurological or physical disturbances (2). The impairments in language formation leads to difficulties in articulation, rhythm and/or stress on oral output (2). These can be seen through a lisp, stutter and difficulties articulating. In the classroom, students can hear and understand what is going on however may have difficulties responding coherently depending on the severity of the speech impairment. It may appear as learning is slower, however this is typically not the case-they have a difficult time vocalizing but not understanding. This can impact their participation in class, oral presentations and general lack of engagement both in and out of the classroom.

Looking now to language impairments, it is a learning disorder where there are difficulties in comprehension affecting verbal and/or written communication, due to neurological or physical disturbances (3). This is displayed as language delays, delays in response and delays or lack of articulation when speaking and/or writing. In the classroom, students may struggle with keeping up with material when someone is talking or keeping up with the pace of reading. In



turn students with language impairments may not be able to respond to the questions as quickly or understand questions when being asked. This, similar to the other communication exceptionalities, could appear as a lack of engagement, disinterest or completion of work in the classroom. Language impairments are similar to speech impairments in that they both stem from neurological, physical or physiological factors and affect oral communication. However, a huge difference is that speech impairments affect oral output whereas in language impairments, understanding is affected which in turn affects oral and even written communication.

The final communication exceptionality we will be discussing are learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are deficits in comprehension of information, processing language (spoken and/or written), expressing one's self through language and mathematical calculations (4). There are three categories of learning disabilities-1) learning exceptionalities with visual-spatial processing deficits; 2) language learning deficits and; 3) muscle control difficulties (4). For the purposes of this module however, we will not be going into detail of the three types of learning disabilities as they will be covered in more advanced modules. Learning exceptionalities can be seen through language and math courses, where students may have difficulties with vocabulary, speaking coherently, understanding given information and completing math problems.

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss behavioural exceptionalities.

- (1) Communication Exceptionality: Hard of Hearing (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Communication\\_Exceptionality/Hard\\_of\\_Hearing/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Communication_Exceptionality/Hard_of_Hearing/index.html)
- (2) Communication Exceptionality: Speech Impairment(n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Communication\\_Exceptionality/Speech\\_Impairment/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Communication_Exceptionality/Speech_Impairment/index.html)
- (3) Communication Exceptionality: Language Impairment (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Communication\\_Exceptionality/Language\\_Impairment/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Communication_Exceptionality/Language_Impairment/index.html)
- (4) Communication Exceptionality: Learning Disability (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Communication\\_Exceptionality/Learning\\_Disability/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Communication_Exceptionality/Learning_Disability/index.html)

## **A1T7: Behavioural Exceptionalities**

In this video we will introduce behavioural exceptionalities. Behavioural exceptionalities are a type of learning exceptionality, with a focus on behavioural problems and social interactions that can impact academic performance within the classroom (1). Similarly, to intellectual and communication exceptionalities, behavioural exceptionalities may be hidden-most of the time they cannot be seen when you first meet a student. Sometimes it is apparent based on a first interaction however it typically takes time to see these signs.

A student with a behavioural exceptionality can present in different ways. It may look like a disengagement from peers and teachers within the classroom, a difficult time building friendships, anxious or fearful tendencies, and/or the compulsive tendencies. For example, a



child may attempt to sit away from students, not interact during activities within and outside of the classroom and defy instructions given by the teacher.

Students with behavioural exceptionalities may experience isolation within the classroom, poor performance due to disengagement, lack of friends or connections with peers and teachers. Like with physical, intellectual and communication exceptionalities, there is a stigma attached with students with behavioural exceptionalities from other students whom may not understand that each student has different strengths, differences and needs (2). Teachers may also notice the isolation that students with behavioural exceptionalities face because of the perceived attitudes of other students in the classroom.

Thank you for watching, and in the next video, we will discuss multiple exceptionalities and recap the module.

- (1) Behaviour Exceptionality (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special\\_Ed/Behaviour\\_Exceptionality/index.html](https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/adaptivetech/Special_Ed/Behaviour_Exceptionality/index.html)
- (2) Roberts, C. M., & Smith, P. R. (1999). Attitudes and Behaviour of Children Toward Peers with Disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 46(1), 35-50. doi:10.1080/103491299100713

### **A1T8: Multiple Exceptionalities and Recap**

Multiple exceptionalities are a combination of, one or more exceptionalities, and can include the aforementioned ones. Multiple exceptionalities are often difficult to describe as it is a combination therefore the signs and disturbances faced by students and what can be seen is extremely individual. An example of multiple exceptionalities that we can look at is if a child has an intellectual exceptionality and a behavioural exceptionality. The student may have a mild intellectual exceptionality, where they are disengaged from the class. When receiving instructions from the teacher, the student may also act defiant or disobedient.

Through this module, we learned what special education is, what an exceptionality is, types of exceptionalities and how they manifest in the classroom and in terms of learning. We learned that special education encompasses all students, in attempts to support and provide resources based on needs. We talked about the importance of special education; that it allows students participate in a classroom setting, increasing social interaction, confidence and their full potential. We deciphered that it is imperative to use the term exceptionality to eliminate the negative stigma that comes with the term disability, as students may have a different way of completing a task versus being unable to.

We learned the differences between visible and hidden exceptionalities, that physical exceptionalities are visible because they can be seen, whereas intellectual, communication and behavioural exceptionalities are hidden and can be harder to diagnose, understand and make modifications for. Through these last 7 videos, we have learned the importance of looking at students individually and assessing their needs likewise over grouping all students with the same exceptionality together.



Thank you for watching the first module, Introduction to Exceptionalities, in the Foundations of Special Education learner pathway. In the next module, we will be discussing Equity in Learning.

