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Twice-Exceptional Students

An Endangered Species?

By Barbara Gilman, Dan Peters,
Mike Postma, & Kathi Kearney

The identification of gifted students with coexisting disabilities—the Twice-exceptional (2e)—has always been problematic. Such students send mixed messages to both parents and teachers. Those with *specific learning disabilities* reason well and grasp concepts quickly, but academic skills lag behind. Savvy teachers may recognize them by their contrasting abilities and inconsistent performance, or view them as “bright but lazy.” Gifted students with AD/HD may struggle with organization and present a pattern of high-test scores, but grades lowered by failure to turn in homework. Classroom focus may be an issue. They may be identified and helped with organizational skills, or deemed unqualified for services because their abilities are too advanced. Similarly, gifted students with autistic spectrum issues may struggle with social anxiety and overstimulation, but their adequate learning skills may dispel teacher concerns. Children with both AD/HD and Asperger Syndrome may need accommodations to develop advanced capabilities, but may be overlooked if achievement is not stellar.

Sadly, many 2e students are missed when conflicting symptoms are not explored. Two very different outcomes are possible. Early identification and interventions for twice-exceptionality may eliminate years of frustration and permit 2e children to develop impressive potential. Conversely, a failure to identify twice-exceptional challenges and offer help may predispose a talented child to being undereducated and underemployed. Perhaps most damaging is the emotional ramification of appearing lazy and being blamed for real, albeit subtle, weaknesses throughout one’s education.

A 2011 review of research, “Empirical Investigation of Twice-exceptionality: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?”

(Nicpon, M. F., Allmon, A., Sieck, B., and Stinson, R. D.) notes generally increasing acceptance in education of the existence of twice-exceptionality, but also the necessity to diagnose it through comprehensive assessment. Thorough individual assessment by psychologists and other relevant specialists is necessary to separate strengths from weaknesses, and determine the degree of *relative deficits*—keeping ability in mind. Discrepancies between high scoring abstract reasoning ability and lower scoring processing skills and academic achievement clarify that a child is *gifted* with learning disabilities, rather than just *average*. Weaknesses discovered in areas such as sensory processing, auditory processing or visual processing help to further document and explain the reasons for a student’s struggles. Such information is critical to determining the need for intervention and tailoring interventions to specific disabilities in children who are cognitively advanced.

CHANGING THE RULES FOR DISABILITY IDENTIFICATION: FROM RELATIVE TO ABSOLUTE

Services to twice-exceptional students maintained slow but steady progress in school districts prior to the reauthorization of federal special education law in 2004. Twice-exceptional instructional approaches were developed and some full-time programs for twice-exceptional students were launched. Progress was made possible by the fact that specific learning disabilities were diagnosed through readily available comprehensive assessment by school psychologists and other specialists, based on the presence of significant score discrepancies between ability and achievement. A student qualified if his or her academic achievement was *not* commensurate with ability—a relative performance requirement assuming achievement should approach ability. (This discrepancy

can no longer be *required* for eligibility, but can be used.)

Following on the heels of No Child Left Behind, which was designed to reach children who were not meeting minimal, standardized goals of achievement, the new Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) introduced an absolute performance requirement into the process of determining Specific Learning Disabilities. Children are now first evaluated by a Response to Intervention (RTI) process in the classroom, which seeks to locate students performing *below average* and provide levels of increasingly targeted interventions. Those children who subsequently need additional help are referred for special education and other services. However, many gifted/learning disabled students are initially missed by RTI because they score in the average range due to strong compensation.

Additional complications have arisen with RTI. While parents can directly request a special education evaluation, there is the increasing consensus (especially in debt-ridden states) that RTI should *replace* comprehensive assessment, and such evaluation is becoming more difficult to obtain. In addition, the RTI model has become very popular among gifted education advocates because it holds the promise of integrating interventions and accommodations for twice-exceptional students—and by extension, gifted children without disabilities—into regular education programs. If

Verbal Comprehension (VCI)-132 (gifted, 98th percentile)
Perceptual Reasoning (PRI)-119 (high average, 90th percentile)
Working Memory (WMI)-110 (high average, 75th percentile)
Processing Speed (PSI)-100 (average, 50th percentile)
Annie's Full Scale IQ score lacked meaning due to an over two-standard-deviation discrepancy between gifted verbal reasoning/language skills (VCI) and speed on paper-and-pencil tasks (PSI). Annie's General Ability Index score (GAI), summarizing the reasoning portions of the test, was 129 (97th percentile). Her individual subtest scaled scores ranged from the 99.6th percentile in abstract verbal reasoning (Similarities) to the 25th percentile in Coding (visual-motor speed/handwriting), a range of 10 scaled score points—over three standard deviations. This discrepancy suggests a child who experiences frustration when her hands cannot keep up with her fine mind. There were significant relative lows in vocabulary, reasoning with visual abstract patterns, and non-meaningful auditory memory, suggesting auditory and visual processing weaknesses. This is a classic 2e profile.

• **Woodcock-Johnson-III Tests of Achievement**

BRIEF READING-107 (average, 69th percentile)
BRIEF MATH-117 (high average, 88th percentile)
BRIEF WRITING-87 (low average, 20th percentile)

We would expect Annie's achievement scores to approach her

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an RTI team can create needed interventions for children with disabilities, why can't it also modify curriculum for advanced, gifted students? However, high hopes for RTI's success with gifted and 2e children must be tempered by the fact that its use is largely voluntary, mandated by law only for children performing below grade expectations.

Further complicating the situation for 2e students, some states are adding additional low achievement requirements (e.g., 12th or 5th percentile) on classroom assessments of reading, writing, spelling, or math for children to qualify for special education services. The ramifications of moving to absolute performance criteria to diagnose learning disabilities in gifted students are alarming. Moreover, to base eligibility for services for AD/HD, autistic spectrum, etc, significantly on performance—as is being done in many schools—simply cannot be justified.

“ANNIE”

Let's consider a gifted child with learning disabilities through both comprehensive assessment and absolute performance. Annie left school in 2nd grade to homeschool because classroom struggles with reading and writing caused significant loss of self-esteem. Comprehensive testing revealed the following:

- Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fourth Edition
Annie earned these Composite/Index scores:

IQ scores, for example, for Brief Reading (107) to more closely approximate Verbal Comprehension (132). However, Annie's reading scored 25 points lower (over 1.5 standard deviations). Brief Writing (87) was 45 points lower (3 standard deviations). This is the pattern of many 2e children with reading disorders who have accompanying problems with written composition and spelling. Annie scored at the 19th percentile in Writing Samples and 26th percentile in Spelling.

Specialist evaluations diagnosed visual processing, sensory processing, and auditory processing weaknesses—a combination not uncommon in children with dyslexia—for which Annie was undergoing therapies. As these had not resolved her reading/writing difficulties, reading therapy would likely be needed.

Response to Intervention, which seeks to locate children performing below grade level, did not identify Annie as a student in need. Her test scores, which clearly suggest a twice-exceptional child, found her to be below average (90) only in writing (87). She was missed through RTI, and had she been identified and offered interventions, services would have been discontinued once she reached the average level. Parents can request comprehensive assessment for special education, and services may be available to aid writing, spelling or reading—based on relative weaknesses. However, in states imposing a low absolute crite-

tion, children such as Annie no longer qualify.

TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS—WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO

The 2e child presents an extraordinary dilemma for any educational setting, especially those faced with continued budget shortfalls and staff reductions. Ideally, comprehensive assessment will locate such students and guide teachers in targeted interventions and accommodations. However, in the absence of adequate assessment and trained specialists, what can teachers do?

- First, realize and recognize the differences between high achievement and innate ability. Some gifted students will appear average to avoid standing out from their peers. Others may habitually refuse to perform if the level of challenge in the classroom is perceived as too easy for them.
- Second, understand that twice-exceptional students compensate for their disabilities with advanced reasoning, and the combination of their strengths and weaknesses may be puzzling. Learn to detect the subtle clues of a 2e student's weakness. Look for capable learners who lack the skills to organize, complete, and submit work. Consider whether the absence of social skills, as is prevalent with Aspergers Syndrome, is disguising a student's true intellectual capacity. Social anxiety can prevent the 2e child from participating in classroom activities, even inhibiting the ability to think properly. Rec-

include a dyslexic gifted child in the advanced language arts group to benefit from the higher level content and literature study, while accommodating for reading or writing needs. Include the child with advanced mathematical reasoning in the high math group, but allow the use of a calculator for dyscalculia.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Schools can play a dynamic role in identifying and educating twice-exceptional students. Have professional, knowledgeable staff available to advocate for 2e students, train other classroom teachers on the nuances of 2e characteristics, and encourage the use of multiple assessments to diagnose both the strengths and weaknesses of the child. Allow parents the option to obtain outside testing to further clarify a child's needs. Finally, make Response to Intervention resources available to twice-exceptional students performing well below their potential in one or more areas, regardless of absolute performance level.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

- Trust your instincts about your child! While you may not know why your child is struggling or how to help, you do know when something is not right. You recognize when your child

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ognize children who exhibit sensory weaknesses: the inability to see or hear correctly, or the tendency to overstimulate with bright lights, loud talk, or particular seating arrangements. Acknowledge those students who show flashes of brilliance but underachieve. Do they struggle with sound/symbol relationships, math facts or spelling, but power through activities using contextual clues and extraordinary effort? Are they capable but refusing to write? High performing except when timed? Do they demonstrate high verbal abilities but have difficulty with calculation? All such indicators suggest the need for further diagnosis.

- Third, avoid the temptation to view lower-than-expected achievement as a motivational issue. Most 2e children want to do well. Viewing them as “lazy” or “irresponsible” leads to even higher levels of anxiety and/or frustration. Some 2e children will become self-critical to the point of inertia, refusing to participate in any classroom activity in which they do not feel successful. Realize the importance of your support to the 2e child.
- Fourth, every 2e child has the best chance for success when taught first to his or her strengths, with accommodations offered secondarily (as gently as possible). Teach at the child's conceptual level, then accommodate. For example,

is unduly frustrated, exhausted, irritable, anxious, underperforming, unengaged in learning, and/or disliking school. A parent's concern that a child is underperforming for his or her ability is a critical indicator of the need to explore learning, processing, and developmental issues, and either rule out or address them. If someone tells you your 2e child is just average, don't hesitate to disagree!

- Share concerns with your child's teacher or support team. Work collaboratively with the RTI committee. If sufficient clarification of problem areas and appropriate services fail to materialize in a timely manner, look further. Because comprehensive assessment is so important, consider either private testing or assessment through your school. If you choose the latter, make a request for such in writing (not email) to your school's special education department. Include your permission for the testing in your letter. The school must determine what testing needs to be done in “all areas of suspected disability,” and has 60 calendar days (unless your state regulations specify a different timeline) to determine if your child is eligible for special education services. Keep in mind that a 2009 Supreme Court Decision found the public schools liable to pay private school tuition for a child whose needs were not adequately assessed or addressed (see Dixon, S. G., Eusebio, E. C., Turton, W. J., Wright, P. W. D., & Hale J. B., 2011).

CONCLUSION

Discrepancies between reasoning strengths and weaknesses in all suspected areas *can* and *should* be used to determine whether a gifted child has a learning or processing issue (the 2006 clarification of IDEA 2004 allows this). Twice-exceptional children are typically diagnosed by complex scoring profiles. The absolute level of performance is not a key factor. A child thus diagnosed with a learning disability has the right to receive an individualized learning plan—provided state laws don't introduce stumbling blocks. If classroom accommodations are sufficient, a Section 504 Plan can be created.

The larger question remains: What happens to twice-exceptional students missed by RTI and rendered invisible by a host of new regulations not planned with them in mind? What alternatives do parents have who cannot provide private comprehensive assessment and therapeutic interventions? Court challenges and new Office of Civil Rights rulings may help 2e

ONLINE RESOURCE GUIDE

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U. S. Department of Education. (2007). Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004. *Q and A: Questions and answers on response to intervention (RTI) and early intervening services (EIS)*, January). Retrieved from <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CQaCorner%2C8%2C>.

Wrightslaw, Twice-exceptional Children: Gifted Students with Disabilities <http://www.wrightslaw.com/nltr/09/nl.0922.htm>.

children one day regain their status as gifted students with disabilities, eligible for assistance to derive a free and appropriate education. It is our responsibility to make the pendulum swing back sooner than later. ■



BARBARA (BOBBIE) GILMAN is Associate Director of the non-profit Gifted Development Center in Denver, which specializes in the assessment of gifted children, with and without disabilities, for educational planning, advocacy and parenting. She consults with parents worldwide and is a popular speaker. Bobbie trains testers in the intricacies of gifted assessment, and has been active in test development with major testing companies. She wrote *Academic Advocacy for Gifted Children: A Parent's Complete Guide* and *Challenging Highly Gifted Learners* (for teachers). She chairs the National Association for Gifted Children's Assessments of Giftedness Special Interest Group.



DAN PETERS, Ph.D., licensed psychologist, is Co-Founder and Clinical Director of the Summit Center, specializing in the assessment and treatment of gifted, talented, and creative individuals and families. He is also Co-Director of Camp Summit for the Gifted, Talented, and Creative. Dr. Peters speaks regularly at state and national conferences on a variety of gifted issues. He consults with GATE and Special Education Departments, and trains and consults with teachers and parents about understanding, teaching, and raising gifted children. Dr. Peters serves on the Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) Editorial Board and is Associate Chair of the National Association of Gifted Children's (NAGC) Assessments of Giftedness Special Interest Group.



MICHAEL POSTMA, Ed.D., is the Executive Director for Metrolina Regional Scholars Academy, a school for highly gifted students, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Dr. Postma holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, an M.A. in Gifted Education, and a B.A. in History. Michael and his wife Julie, have four children including two who have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.



KATHI KEARNEY, M.A. Ed., is the founder of the Hollingworth Center for Highly Gifted Children, a national resource and support network for exceptionally gifted children and their families. She has worked with gifted children as a teacher and administrator in a wide variety of settings, urban and rural, in public, private, religious, and home schools. Kathi is a recognized expert on homeschooling exceptionally gifted children. An excellent diagnostician, she works primarily in New England.