The Twice-Exceptional (2e) Learner

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What does Twice-Exceptional (2e) Mean?

• A term for high-ability children with learning difficulties or disabilities.
• The word “exceptional” expresses the idea that abilities are at the extreme ends of a range.
• The word “twice” refers to the exceptionalities being in two areas: one in an area of strength and the other in an area of weakness.
• Many students are not just twice exceptional - but rather thrice or more (because problems often occur in clusters co-morbidities).
• Secondary problems include anxiety, depression.
Mixed Profile of Strengths and Weaknesses Presents Challenges
Global Full Scale IQ

IQ Score Distribution

- 34% of the population scores between 95% and 100%
- 14% of the population scores between 85% and 95%
- 14% of the population scores between 70% and 85%
- 0.1% of the population scores below 55%
- 0.1% of the population scores above 145%

IQ Score Range

- 55 to 70: 2%
- 70 to 85: 14%
- 85 to 100: 34%
- 100 to 115: 34%
- 115 to 130: 14%
- 130 to 145: 2%
- 145 and above: 0.1%
The “G” Words (Gifted and Genius)

- Gifted, genius, able, capable, intelligent, bright, smart
- Not necessarily accomplished
- Have the potential to achieve in areas drawing on higher-order reasoning processes
- Should do well in school – unless something is getting in the way
- Not necessarily destined for great success – other abilities come into play (e.g. people skills, motivation).
Cognitive Strengths in 2e Learners
Cognitive Weaknesses that Cause Reading Difficulties in 2e Learners

- Phonological processing
- Orthographic processing
- Rapid naming speed
- Oral language (receptive/expressive)
- ADHD
- Asperger’s
2E with Phonological Decoding Weakness

Verbal Comprehension 99%

Phonological Decoding 6%
2e Learners are Often Not Diagnosed

- 2e learners often fail to be diagnosed as gifted or learning disabled.
- Their disabilities and strengths are hidden.
- They’re like a duck paddling furiously to keep up.
- Stealth dyslexia: verbally-bright students who appear to be at grade level but are dyslexic.
When is a Weakness a Disability?

• Students with stealth dyslexia may not look “disabled.” Are they really?
• Yes, if they display the profile of cognitive ability weaknesses associated with dyslexia.
• Yes, if they are performing below expectations given their ability.
• Diagnosis of disability is generally based on APA DSM-5 and ICD-10 criteria.
• It’s complicated by the “average person standard.”
• Ability/achievement gap is relevant for 2e learners.
Conundrum Kids

- The combination of strengths and weaknesses can puzzle parents, teachers and professionals.
- May have been identified as gifted, as LD, or not have been identified at all.
- May be accused unfairly of lacking motivation and told to “just try harder.”
- The very possibility of a disability in a bright/gifted child is frequently questioned and misunderstood.
- Skeptics abound.
Identified as Bright or Gifted

• Can usually work at or above grade level until school production demands increase (often in middle school).

• “Sudden” underachievement is often attributed to laziness, lack of motivation, or social distractions.

• Parents and teachers admonish student to “try harder,” “you’re so smart – you can do it if you just try.”

• Self-concept plunges as student questions intelligence.
Identified as Having a Learning Disability

- Weaknesses are evident from an early school-age, gifts are hidden.
- An assessment for strengths was never conducted, or ability scores were depressed.
- Strengths may be displayed outside of school in hobbies, extracurricular interests.
- Student does not self-identify as being smart and may “dumb-down” to fit in with LD peers.
Just Average

• Student appears to have average abilities, but this is a result of strengths and weaknesses masking one another.

• Superior intellectual ability works overtime to try to compensate for the undiagnosed learning weaknesses.

• May perform at grade level but well below potential.

• Often not identified as gifted or LD because they are “good kids” who did not flag the need for attention due to behavior.

• Diagnosis may finally be initiated due to secondary depression or anxiety.
Strengths and Weaknesses Profile Approach

• The CHC model is the most widely accepted and empirically grounded model of cognitive abilities.
• Over 80 different cognitive abilities are identified.
• About 30 contribute to learning in reading, writing, math, and oral language.
• We need to understand the student’s complete profile of cognitive strengths and weaknesses to diagnose and provide strategic, targeted recommendations
Stereotypical Gifted Profile

Globally Gifted

Cognitive Abilities

Percentile

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Most of us Have Some Areas of Challenge
Stereotypical LD Profile

Uniformly Weak

Cognitive Abilities

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2E Strengths and Weaknesses Profile

• But if we all have strengths and weaknesses, what makes someone “2E”?

• Simultaneously having extreme or exceptional strengths and extreme or exceptional weaknesses
What Does Being a 2e Student Feel Like?

• School tasks are either too difficult or too easy – they’re rarely just right.
• Frustrated, misunderstood.
• Question their intelligence, self-esteem at risk.
• May try to hide struggles by internalizing or externalizing.
• May lose enthusiasm for learning.
• Daily humiliations can exact an emotional toll, resulting in secondary depression, anxiety, or behavior problems.

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Anxiety and Depression in Twice-Exceptional Learners
Assessment of 2e Learners

- Early diagnosis is important.
- Misdiagnosis is very common.
- Getting an accurate diagnosis can occupy years of the child’s early educational career.
- Assessment professionals should be knowledgeable about both sides of the equation: giftedness and and learning problems.
- Findings should reveal the child’s complete profile of strengths and weaknesses as a learner, not just provide diagnoses.
Why is Misdiagnosis so Common?

• It can be difficult to distinguish between behaviors associated with one exceptionality and another.
• Is the student inattentive because she has a learning disability or ADHD, or because school is boring?
• Behaviors associated with giftedness can be “pathologized” – seen as problems rather than evidence of ability.
• Educators receive very little, if any, training in identifying and teaching 2e and gifted students.
How to Help 2e Learners

• Learning plans should encompass 3 things: remediation, accommodation, and enrichment.

• **Remediation** is teaching/tutoring to improve skills in an area of weakness.

• **Accommodation** involves making adjustments to meet student’s needs, e.g. extra time for exams.

• **Enrichment** involves providing acceleration and challenge in areas of strength and interests.

• Learning plans should emphasize the development of strengths and weaknesses, not just focus on “fixing what’s broken.”
Remediation for the 2E Verbally Gifted Learner with Dyslexia

- Same kind of reading intervention as typical dyslexic student, with a few caveats.
- Address specifically what the student needs to learn, employing curriculum compacting. May move at a faster pace. Do not group students with different kinds of problems e.g. comprehension with decoding.
- Utilize student’s strengths to support learning.
- At some point, consider the diminishing returns from continuing with remediation.
Accommodation for the 2E Verbally Gifted Learner with Dyslexia

- Provide extra time for assignments and testing.
- Grade assignments separately for content and mechanics.
- Provide text-to-speech and speech-to-text and teach how to use them.
- Allow some assignments to be done in an alternative production format.
- May need to excuse from foreign language study.
- May require lower (but not less challenging) class load in high school and college.
To Each According to His Needs

FOR A FAIR SELECTION EVERYBODY HAS TO TAKE THE SAME EXAM: PLEASE CLIMB THAT TREE.
Enrichment for the 2E Verbally Gifted Learner with Dyslexia

- Challenge student with material at ability level, not independent reading level.
- Place in enrichment and honors classes despite weak independent reading skill. Provide supports.
- Provide opportunities to develop strengths and interests, e.g. debate club, book group, summer programs. Success increases motivation.
- Focusing on the student’s genuine interests encourages high achievement.
Utilize Strengths and Interests

• Perhaps more powerful than innate strengths: consider the student’s interests.

• Intrinsic motivation is associated with pursuit of one’s interests – and with success.

• Even the most unmotivated, apathetic-seeming child is interested in something.

• Interests can also be formally assessed, but parents can also play detective to uncover them.

• Don’t worry if interests are in different areas from strengths.
How Parents can use Interests to Support Their Child’s Development

• Incorporate into **Remediation** where possible

• Interests should guide **Enrichment** plan

• Be creative and open-minded, support your child actively
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