Supporting Twice Exceptional Students in the Classroom

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A gifted person who has learning challenges beyond those that come with giftedness alone, are referred to in the literature as being twice exceptional, dual exceptional, thrice exceptional, or gifted with learning disabilities (Baum, 2013; 2E Newsletter, 2017; Hill, 2011; Hughes, 2017; Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014; Ronksley-Pavia, 2015; Wescombe-Down, 2013.) These people are defined by their great asynchrony, which can be up to five years difference between their strengths and their weaknesses. There can be many reasons for being twice exceptional, which include learning or physical disability, abuse or neglect in early childhood, mental illness, and attachment disorder (Hughes, 2017; Ronksley-Pavia, 2015; Westcombe-Down, 2013). What is most important to remember with the twice exceptional student is they are gifted first. They may have learning challenges but these people are still gifted, and, if we are to protect these students self esteem, self-efficacy, and well being, that needs to be considered in their educational programming, above all else (Hill, 2011; Hughes, 2017; Ronksley-Pavia, 2015).

Coleman, Harrading, & Willian-King (2005) defined twice exceptional students as those who are “identified as gifted / talented in one or more areas while also possessing a learning, emotional, physical, sensory and / or developmental diability” (cited in Ronksley-Pavia, 2015, p. 222).

Reis, Baum, & Burke (2014) define twice exceptional learners as:

"...students who demonstrate the potential for high achievement or creative productivity in one or more domains... AND who manifest one or more disabilities... These... students may fail to demonstrate either high academic performance or specific disabilities. Their gifts may mask their disabilities and their disabilities may mask their gifts." (p. 222).

Being twice exceptional can be described as a paradox, cataclysm or explosion of strengths and challenges which, when unsupported, confuse and frustrate the student, leaving them with feelings of inadequacy (see appendix 1 for strengths and weaknesses that may be present in twice exceptional students, as illustrated by Anthoney et al., 2009).

Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes (2015) note the importance of being aware of masking in gifted students with learning disabilities. Their giftedness needs as much support as their disability. If the child’s disabilities are more prevalent than their giftedness, then it is possible, due to their giftedness not being found, that the focus will be on their weaknesses rather than their strengths. When the strengths of a twice exceptional student are not extended and challenged then self-esteem, confidence, and mindset are at risk (Hill, 2011).

Appendix 2 and 3 show two models of education that can be used for twice exceptional students. Notice, they both have a high focus on talent development, supporting learning challenges, social-emotional well being, and team work.

If we combine these together, along with suggestions across the literature and you get the Strengths Based Approach simply illustrated in appendix 4 and described on the next page.
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**Strengths Based Approach for Twice Exceptional Learners:**

**Step 1: Identify**

- Note behaviours that may be indicative of giftedness and / or disability, which have been observed more than once.
- Seek support from persons responsible for gifted / special needs students in the school.
- If possible, arrange a meeting with the student’s parents to determine whether observations made at school match behaviours from home. Discuss behaviours at home, what the child’s interests are, information on past developmental milestones, and how their skills such as reading and Maths are at home.
- Begin collecting evidence of giftedness and other suspected disabilities or challenges, using a checklist to take down notes, including date, time and circumstances so a pattern can be established.

**Step 2: Analysis of Specific Needs**

- If the evidence from step one strongly points to the student being twice exceptional, seek ways of having them assessed for Giftedness AND the suspected disability / disabilities. Assessments, if possible, should be done by psychological specialists who understand BOTH disability and giftedness and how they affect learning and test scores - so testing is made more accurate (Hill, 2011). See if Dual Assessment (for a disability and giftedness) is available, and whether the child’s parents would be willing to asses privately.

**Step 3: Create a Learning Profile**

- Put together a learning profile for the student with detailed notes on how they learn, both their weaknesses and their strengths, and update these as more information comes in from assessments.

**Step 4: Eradicate Learned Helplessness**

- Install growth mindset strategies for wellbeing into the daily classroom routine (Dweck, 2012).
- Teach emotional regulation strategies to combat frustration (Baum, 2013; Hill, 2011). For example, social skills programmes, counselling, one on one support.
- Put physical supports in place for helping the student to achieve in their strength areas and to support their challenges
- Use interest based instruction to encourage attempts in challenge areas (Baum, 2013; Siegle & McCoach, 2005). For example, if the student has a strong interest in Science, but is dyslexic, teach writing around topics embedded in Science literature.

**Step 5: Design an Individual Programme**

- Put an Independent Learning Plan (ILP) in place for the student, setting specific goals for them, in coordination with their parents, with equal focus on strengths and challenges. Ideally some of the learning plan goals should include both, by using student strengths to support their challenges.
- Regularly update and differentiate the curriculum to fit with the student’s needs, including challenge and extension (Baum, 2013).
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- Provide opportunities for the student to excel in strength areas through mentorship, school lunch time activities or clubs, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Technology) projects, group leadership, and subject acceleration (Baum, 2013).
- Provide opportunities for the student to learn with like-minded peers, or peers that have similar interests (Hill, 2011; Rogers, 2007).
- Support their organisational skills through the use of written lists, with visual cues, they can follow, which are inconspicuous (Gathercole et al., 2006).
- Support the student’s disability through targeted remediation, to strengthen their weaknesses (Baum, 2013).

By providing a strengths based approach for not only twice exceptional students but ALL students, we will give them the opportunity to celebrate their strengths and the strengths of others, and to celebrate difference, seeing it for all the wonderful things it can be. When we focus on student strengths in twice-exceptional students we are giving them the opportunity to thrive and be the amazing people they can be into their adolescence and adulthood. In this way we are giving them the opportunity to achieve and be successful in any way they wish to be.

Useful Web Sites

GTCASA: http://gtcasa.asn.au/
2E information and support http://australiangiftedsupport.com/articles/
http://kidslikeus.org.au/2e/
http://www.2enewsletter.com/
Gifted information and support http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/
Gifted Advocacy http://www.nagc.org

References and Further Reading


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Hill, F. (2011). From GLD to gold. In C. Wormald, & W. Vialle (Eds.), *Dual exceptionality* (pp. 21-29). Wollongong, NSW: AAEGT.


Appendix 1: Where Strengths and Challenges Collide (copied from Anthony et al., 2009, p. 10)

TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

Strengths:
- superior vocabulary
- highly creative
- resourceful
- curious
- imaginative
- questioning
- problem-solving ability
- sophisticated sense of humor
- wide range of interests
- advanced ideas and opinions
- special talent or consuming interest

Challenges:
- easily frustrated
- stubborn
- manipulative
- opinionated
- argumentative
- written expression
- highly sensitive to criticism
- inconsistent academic performance
- lack of organization and study skills
- difficulty with social interactions
Appendix 2

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Identification
Twice-exceptional students are difficult to identify because their strengths and weaknesses may mask each other, creating a unique learner profile atypical of a gifted student or a student with disabilities.

Identification and Programming for Twice-Exceptional Students

- Student is identified as gifted using district procedures and an advanced learning plan is written.
- Student is identified with a disability using district procedures and an IEP or 504 is written.
- Student behavior or performance suggests the possibility of a disability. The classroom teacher initiates a referral to school's collaborative problem-solving team.
- Student's strengths and weaknesses mask each other.
- Student behavior or performance suggests gifted traits. Special educator and classroom teacher initiate a referral to school's collaborative problem-solving team.

Programming
In a collaborative effort between the classroom teacher, gifted educator, and special educators, appropriate strategies will be implemented to:

- nurture the student's potential.
- support development of compensatory strategies.
- identify learning gaps and provide explicit instruction.
  - foster social and emotional development.
  - enhance capacity to cope with mixed abilities.
Appendix 4: Strengths Based Approach collated together by Amanda Drury from the literature (Based on information from Baum, 2013; 2E Newsletter, 2017; Hill, 2011; Hughes, 2017; Ronksley-Pavia, 2015; Wescombe-Down, 2013.)
The following examples are students who are likely to be twice exceptional. What do you think their challenges are? What are their strengths and interests? How could you, as their teacher:

1. Extend and challenge their strengths, supporting their giftedness?
2. Accommodate for their learning and behavioural challenges?
3. Use their strengths to support their challenges?
Bridie is in grade one in your year one/two class. She comes to your class with several reports in her folder from her psychologist and speech pathologist. After reading them you discover that Bridie is on the Autism Spectrum with speech delay.

You are four weeks into term one and Bridie has barely uttered a word to you, but she uses flash cards to communicate what she needs, as well as simple sign language.

In the four weeks you have had her as a student Bridie has rarely sat with the rest of the class. She spends her days sitting at her single desk doing her art, number writing, and looking at books, without interacting with other children.

You have observed, although she refuses to do most set work, Bridie is independently writing numbers, letters and simple words. She writes numbers that are very large, sometimes up to six digits. There is evidence that she reads, as she regularly looks at books, but does not read aloud, or answer questions, so there is no way of knowing what her reading level is.

When you later look at her work she has chosen to do you notice that she is actually adding large numbers together correctly by writing down two five or six digit numbers, then the answer, which is correct. She is also writing strings of numbers in recognisable skip counting, or number patterns such as the Fibonacci sequence. When she draws pictures they are incredibly detailed, including use of perspective.

**What you know from Bridie’s Teachers:**

Bridie has a record of disruptive and violent behaviour from both preschool and her reception class. You have not yet observed this behaviour in your class.

**What you know from Bridie’s Parents:**

Bridie’s parents say she reads out loud accurately at home and she has a great interest in looking after and caring for animals. Books about cats and horses are her favourites. Her parents also say that Bridie is now speaking fluently at home. You have noticed that at pick up and drop off Bridie speaks whole sentences to her parents.
Jack

Jack is in your grade five class and is a puzzle to you. He is likeable and funny, constantly asks questions, and regularly has some great ideas that blow you away. He is an avid reader and drawer. His reading and comprehension are very good, well beyond his years. You regularly catch him with his nose in a book or drawing pictures instead of doing his work. His pictures are very detailed.

However:
Jack struggles to write neatly and rarely writes more than a few lines in a lesson. He has almost no punctuation in his writing, and his spelling is well behind what you would expect for his age. Verbally he is showing great potential but this does not show in his work. He regularly refuses to do the work you have given him, claiming that it is either too hard or too boring.
Jack currently has no diagnoses that you know of.

What you know from Jack’s other teachers:
There has been a consistent pattern in Jack’s work refusal throughout his schooling. One teacher has told you that he tests much better in a quiet environment, one on one with an SSO than in a whole class situation.

What you know from Jack’s parents:
He has always been very verbal and was speaking clearly in his first twelve months of life. He has a great interest in Science, Art and Drama. His biggest hobby is writing comic strips (they have given you a copy of one). He also attends an out of hours Science Club and drama lessons.
Sally is in her first year of high-school at just 10 years of age. She is in your Science and Maths classes.
Sally is profoundly gifted with an IQ on the 99th percentile (meaning her IQ is at or above 99% of children her age)
Due to her early reading and writing, at age 3, she was granted early entry to school at age four. She finished R-1 in her first year of school and years 4-5 were also finished in one year due to her advanced skills across the board.
While academically she is still achieving highly, her behaviour has become erratic. She comes to high-school with a ‘scathing’ report from her year seven teacher. With several incidents of behavioural outbursts in year seven, including swearing and aggression towards the teacher, the other children, and school property. It is noted by her past teachers that while she was very social in her younger years of school, she has become much more withdrawn as she has got older and she does not have any solid friendships, preferring to work alone.
Sally is keeping up with her work but is regularly bullied by other children, and skips classes, or storms out in reaction to this.
Sally has a good relationship with the school librarian and stays in the library when she can, where fewer incidents happen.
Sally thoroughly enjoys Science and comes to your office regularly after school to ask for extra work, or guidance so she can further her studies, particularly around astronomy. However, she never approaches you in class.