

Chapter 9

Examining Twice Exceptionality From Various Perspectives: What We Wish We Knew

Jessica A. Manzone

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6291-894X>

Northern Arizona University, USA

Sam Young

Young Scholars Academy, USA

ABSTRACT

Twice exceptional (2e) children are identified as simultaneously having gifts and talents along with one or more disabilities. They are a unique population of learners who often go unnoticed in K-12 classrooms and under-discussed in teacher preparation programs. Providing support for 2e students begins by recognizing and honoring their strengths while simultaneously accommodating their challenges. Doing so maximizes their potential, confidence, and agency. This chapter addresses instruction, empowerment, and support for 2e learners from three critical perspectives: the parents of 2e learners, classroom teachers working with 2e learners, and higher education faculty working with preservice teachers in preparation programs. Activities and reflective questions to help parents, educators, and beginning teachers meet the academic and social needs of twice exceptional learners are provided from each perspective.

INTRODUCTION

When Mila left her fifth grade graduation ceremony at a local elementary school, she was overcome with emotion. Not because she was going to miss her friends, was excited for summer vacation, or because she was nervous for what middle school had in store. She was overcome with relief. Her relief came in the form of knowing that she was transferring to a new school in the fall. A school that was as unique as she was. A school for twice exceptional (2e) learners. Although her records showed that Mila possessed above-average intelligence, she was often behind in school. She did not complete her homework in a

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timely manner, would blurt out comments in class, and failed to read social cues from peers and teachers. Yet, she could draw from memory the layout of every airport she had experienced. She could talk intelligently about the need for better public transportation in her city and had specific and passionate thoughts on the construction of the new light rail. Mila was an excellent photographer, expertly catching the nuances of light and shadow with only the camera on her smartphone.

Mila's elementary school teachers recognized the need to modify the curriculum and instruction provided to her. She received a formal Individualized Education Plan (IEP) since Kindergarten with concrete and specific curricular and instructional goals. Yet, these modifications consisted mostly of minimizing the amount of writing she needed to produce in class and attending a social skills group three times per week. It was difficult for Mila's teachers to reconcile the seemingly paradoxical gap between her strengths and her challenges. The ambiguity of neurodiverse, 2e students, such as Mila, mystified and confused her teachers and school site administrators. The mindset that children with both *gifts* and challenges are incompatible is not new (Baum, Rizza, & Renzulli, 2006). More recently, increasing evidence from psychologists, educators, parents, and students themselves has led to an understanding that students with gifted talents and strengths can simultaneously have challenges (Foley Nipcon, et al., 2011).

Twice exceptional learners are students who have strengths in a particular area(s) and challenges in others. Technically speaking, a 2e learner refers to students who are formally identified as gifted and talented *and* diagnosed with one or more of the special education categories defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Reis, Baum & Burke, 2014). Ronksley-Pavia (2015) clarifies this definition to include any combination of a disability (in the areas of specific learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, and neurodevelopmental disorders or cognitive impairments) and giftedness (in the areas of intellectual, creative, social, perceptual, and muscular). There is no single profile of a 2e learner because the nature and characteristics of twice exceptionality are so varied. Just as children's gifts and talents can take many forms, so, too, can their challenges. For example, a 2e child may be one who is diagnosed with one or more learning disabilities such as dyslexia, visual or auditory processing disorder, obsessive/compulsive disorder, or a sensory processing disorder while also having an above average ability, talent, or strength (Nielson Pereira, Knotts & Roberts, 2015). Teachers must also be vigilant and flexible in their thinking to recognize that other 2e learners may not be formally diagnosed, but have learning differences of other kinds, such as interests, styles, or preferences. These challenges can prevent their ability to perform in relationship to the curriculum and instruction that has been typically demanded in classrooms. Figure 1 presents relationships between some of the common behaviors of 2e learners' and how these challenges can impact students in the classroom. (Note that this is not an exhaustive list or a standardized, one-to-one set of relationships.)

It is easy for twice exceptional learners to go unnoticed or to be misidentified. Many often fail to receive services for their giftedness and their disabilities (Arnstein, 2022; Wormald, Rogers & Vialle, 2015). Some 2e learners, such as Mila, are obviously gifted. However, they might seem disengaged during curricular and instructional experiences in the classroom, causing them to be labeled as underachieving or lazy. Their failure to be successful in school-based tasks is sometimes seen as deliberate defiance, rather than the result of curricular and instructional conditions beyond their control. Other 2e learners are identified as having learning difficulties. These learners are sometimes recognized and responded to for the curricular and instructional tasks that they cannot do, leaving their gifts, talents, and strengths to go unnoticed.

This phenomenon is called masking. Masking refers to the concealing of strength and/or struggle areas that complicates the identification of 2e learners. There are three types of masking that can occur.

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