

# Addressing the Social and Emotional Needs of Twice-Exceptional Students

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disabilities

Children who are both gifted and have a learning disability (gifted/LD) face numerous challenges in the classroom and in life. These students often feel as though they are a part of two worlds, one as a student with a disability and the other as a student with outstanding abilities. Being classified as having a disability and being gifted, sometimes called twice-exceptional, can be quite confusing. These students often wonder, for example, “Why am I so good at math but need special help with reading? Where do I fit in?”

In addition to the challenge of having a disability, gifted/LD students may experience increased frustration resulting from heightened expectations and higher standards for achievement that go along with being gifted (Coleman, 2001). Because these students are labeled as “gifted,” they may be expected to be strong in all areas, when in fact their strength may lie in only one or two areas (Strop, 2003).

As a result of these expectations, school can be very frustrating for a twice-exceptional student. Most curricula require students to depend on basic academic skills, such as reading, arithmetic, and writing, which can be areas of difficulty for many children who are gifted/LD. Because of their ongoing conflict between intellectual strengths

and academic struggles, many students who are gifted/LD develop low self-concepts after starting school (Swesson, 1994). These students have also been shown to have difficulty with social skills and often report feelings of not fitting in with their peers (Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992). Therefore, recognizing and supporting the social and emotional needs of twice-exceptional students are just as important as addressing their academic needs. We must appropriately identify and serve students who are gifted/LD in order to maximize their potential both inside and outside the classroom.

### Types of Gifted/LD Students

Students who are both gifted and have learning disabilities exhibit superior intellectual ability as well as a significant discrepancy between their level of performance in a particular area, such as reading, mathematics, spelling, or written language, as compared with

their performance in areas of strength (McCoach, Kehle, Bray, & Siegle, 2001; see box, “Possible Characteristics of Twice-Exceptional Students”). The literature defines three types of students who are gifted/LD:

1. The first group consists of students who are identified as gifted and have subtle learning disabilities (Baum, 1994). These students may have a large vocabulary and excellent verbal abilities, whereas their handwriting and spelling abilities contradict this image (Baum, 1994). Students in this category also achieve on grade level, thus causing their learning disability to be overlooked. Identification of their disabilities could offer these students an understanding of their academic difficulties (Baum, 1994).
2. The second group of students who are gifted/LD consists of those who are unidentified. In other words, their abilities and disabilities “mask” each other. These students’ superior intelligence seems to compensate for their undiagnosed learning disability (Baum, 1994). They usually receive instruction in the general classroom and often perform at grade level, so no “red flags” are raised. However, these students are often functioning below their potential. The talents of students in this group often emerge

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in specific content areas, becoming noticed later in life. This group of students may also suffer from mild depression (Baum, 1994).

3. The third group contains those students identified as both gifted and LD. They are identified more often than those in the previous two groups because they stand out in the classroom. These bright students often fail in school and are noticed because of their disability, not because of their talents. Because little attention is given to their strengths, these students become more aware of their difficulties in learning, feeling academic failure more often than success. Over time, this negative outlook on school can lead to disruptive classroom behavior and feelings of low self-concept (Baum, 1994).

### **Identification of Gifted/LD Students**

Identifying children who are both gifted and LD poses a challenge to teachers and school psychologists. Both teachers and parents can have difficulty associating failing grades and incomplete assignments with giftedness (Swesson, 1994). A central issue in the complexity of identifying students who are gifted/LD is that their giftedness may mask their learning disability and that their learning disability may mask their giftedness (McCoach, et al. 2001). Although these students have varying patterns of strengths and weaknesses, they may appear to have average abilities and achievement in the classroom. This masking of abilities is also apparent in the identification of giftedness with full-scale IQ scores. These students' learning disability may in fact lower their IQ score so dramatically that they do not qualify for gifted services (Waldron & Saphire, as cited in McCoach et al., 2001). Because students who are gifted/LD appear to have hidden gifts and at the same time have the ability to compensate for their learning disabilities, educators and psychologists must look for unique characteristics to identify this population of students.

Because many students who are gifted/LD have creative interests that may

not be nurtured in the classroom, their behavior may be drastically different in their home environment. Parents should be involved in the identification process to offer insight into their child's activities outside of school (Rivera, Murdock, & Sexton, 1995). In many cases, students who are gifted/LD continually experience failure in school while successfully learning and creating at home, where they can put extended effort into their hobbies and interests (Baum, 1984). Developing a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers will also facilitate productive intervention strategies.

### **Emotional Concerns of Gifted/LD Students**

Twice-exceptional students are often caught between two worlds. Many of these students are internally motivated and have strong beliefs in their abilities, much like gifted students, yet they repeatedly fail at certain tasks, similar to children with LD. One group of students who are gifted/LD reported hav-

#### **Possible Characteristics of Twice-Exceptional Students**

- ◆ Discrepancy between verbal and written work.
- ◆ Creativity.
- ◆ Excel on tasks requiring abstract concepts.
- ◆ Difficulty on tasks requiring memorization of isolated facts.
- ◆ Anxiety.
- ◆ Depression.
- ◆ Acting-out behavior.
- ◆ Poor organization.
- ◆ Poor motivation.
- ◆ Active problem solvers.
- ◆ Analytic thinkers.
- ◆ Strong task commitment when topic is personally meaningful.
- ◆ Withdrawal/shyness.
- ◆ Discrepancy between out-of-school talents and classroom performance.

Source. Baum, 1984 and Swesson, 1994.

ing "some idea that they could not make their brain, body, or both do what they wanted each to do" (Schiff, Kaufman, & Kaufman, 1981, p. 403)

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Because of a strong belief in their abilities, gifted students also tend to have high expectations of their achievement level that are not always realistic (Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992). Therefore, a student who is gifted/LD may experience failure much more often than he or she expects, which can result in a fear of failure with future tasks. This fear can lead to frustration with, and feelings of anxiety toward, academic tasks as these students become aware of the discrepancy between their potential ability and their performance (Vespi & Yewchuk).

Students who are gifted/LD also report experiencing frustrating dichotomies of feeling both confused and bored, not understanding why they are good at some tasks and not others. The mixed messages that twice-exceptional students seem to get concerning their abilities often leave them with the feeling that they must prove they are smart (Rizza & Baum, personal communication, April 7, 2005). As a result, some students who are gifted/LD report avoiding or rushing through academic tasks in which they fear failure, often because completing the task seems more important than the quality of their work. Vespi and Yewchuk (1992) reported that not attending to a task also appears to be a way that such students cope with the anticipated frustration of a difficult task. Students who are gifted/LD often use their memory skills to hide their deficits. Hiding their deficits

can develop into coping skills (Coleman, 1992).

The disappointments that twice-exceptional students experience in the classroom can often be observed in their behavior. These students may be disruptive, aggressive, and easily frustrated in the classroom environment (Fetzer, 2000). Students who are gifted/LD commonly daydream, doodle instead of listen, and may act impulsively when given directions (Fetzer). However, these students have been shown to persevere with difficult tasks when they are given encouragement and support (Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992).

### **Self-Concept of Gifted/LD Students**

Students who are gifted/LD and who have difficulty coping with the discrepancy between their abilities and disabilities, may develop a low self-concept. Global self-concept is defined as the “general evaluation of one’s self worth as a person” (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998, p. 655). Students may also develop more specific self-concepts, such as an academic self-concept, which “refers to individuals’ knowledge and perceptions about themselves in achievement situations” (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 6). Because of their experiences of failure in school, many children with learning disabilities have lower self-concepts than normally achieving students (Cooley & Ayres, 1988). Research in the area of self-concept and its relationship to LD is relatively thorough, indicating that both global and academic self-concepts affect an LD student’s classroom achievement (Cooley & Ayres).

Similarly, the self-concepts of children who are both gifted and LD are lower than the self-concepts of their normally achieving peers (Waldron, Saphire, & Rosenblum, 1987). But how do students who are gifted/LD compare with those who are only LD? Children who are gifted/LD face the same academic challenges that students with LD face; however, students who are gifted/LD have additional challenges. Most children who are gifted are highly critical of themselves and tend to set extremely high goals (Waldron et al.). A

student’s view of his or her academic work strongly influences his or her self-concept, making students who are gifted/LD even more vulnerable (Winne, Woodlands, & Wong, 1982).

The expectations of parents and teachers further complicate students’ development of self-concept. Although parents and teachers may set high standards because of the giftedness, they often lower their expectations because of the learning disability, regardless of the student’s talents (Swesson, 1994). These mixed messages are hard to interpret. Therefore, students who are gifted/LD often have conflicting thoughts concerning their capabilities in the classroom and the expectations of their performance; such thoughts tend to result in a low self-concept (Waldron et al., 1987).

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Waldron and colleagues (1987) found that students who are gifted/LD had lower self-concepts than gifted students and believed that they were less intelligent than their peers. Twice-exceptional students rated themselves as more anxious and personally dissatisfied than their gifted peers, appearing to internalize their perception of academic behavior (Waldron et al.). Even when students who are gifted/LD hide their learning difficulties, they may be doing so at the expense of a lower self-concept.

### **Social Concerns of Gifted/LD Students**

Students with LD have more social problems than their peers without LD. These problems include difficulty using appropriate social skills, generating solutions to social problems, and interpreting social cues (Stormont, Stebbins, & Holliday, 2001). In fact, students with

LD are less likely to be leaders in their peer group, are less likely to be popular, and are often more rejected than their nondisabled peers (Flicek, 1992; Flicek & Landau, 1985). What about students who are both gifted and LD? Does giftedness serve as a protective factor in social situations? Actually, research has found the opposite to be true. Students who are both gifted and LD are at even more risk than their LD peers (Moon & Dillon, 1995; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992).

Because twice-exceptional children seem to possess characteristics of both giftedness and LD, they often struggle with perceptions of being different and feeling isolated. One study that interviewed four twice-exceptional boys concluded that these children seemed to know how to make and keep friends but were often unable to put that knowledge to use in social situations (Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992). All four boys in the study reported being frustrated with their peer relationships, and three of the four appeared to relate better to adults than to their peers (Vespi & Yewchuk). Students who are gifted/LD may also experience anger, frustration, and resentment because of recognizing the discrepancy between their potential and their social and academic problems, which can further influence relations with peers (Brody & Mills, 1997; Moon & Dillon, 1995). To nurture the whole child, teachers and parents must recognize the social and emotional needs of students who are gifted/LD.

### **Supporting the Needs of Gifted/LD Students**

The essential element in meeting the educational needs of students who are gifted/LD is providing instruction that emphasizes these students’ strengths and interests while remediating their learning deficits (Nielsen & Mortorff-Albert, 1989). However, many schools offer only remediation designed for LD-only students, that is, it focuses only on improving a child’s weaknesses. One study investigating the effects of special education on the global self-concept of students who are gifted/LD found that the self-concept scores of students receiving gifted services were significantly higher than those receiving serv-

ices for learning disabilities only (Nielsen & Mortorff-Albert). This study concluded that the self-concepts of students who are gifted/LD appear to vary according to the type of special education services they receive. When students' services included gifted programming that focused on their strengths, the self-concepts of students who are gifted/LD matched those of their nondisabled peers (Nielsen & Mortorff-Albert).

Why is remediation alone not helpful for students who are gifted/LD? Remediation offers few opportunities for a twice-exceptional child to demonstrate his or her gifts and talents and often focuses on weaknesses at the expense of developing gifts. This set of circumstances can result in low self-esteem, a lack of motivation, depression, and stress (Baum, 1994). Therefore, students who are gifted/LD require a program designed to develop their strengths, interests, and superior intellect as well as remediate their deficits. Students who are gifted/LD need an educational environment that circumvents problematic academic areas, such as reading, arithmetic, and writing, and highlights abstract thinking and creativity (Baum, 1994).

### **Strategies for Supporting the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted/LD Students**

Support services for twice-exceptional children must treat the whole child—that is, must include not only academic interventions but also strategies to address these students' social and emotional needs (see box, "Guidelines for Developing Programs for Gifted/LD Students"). Following is a list of strategies that will likely benefit the students who are gifted/LD in your classroom:

1. Foster a clear understanding of their disability as well as their strengths to promote self-understanding and self-acceptance. If students are aware of their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, they will be better prepared to make decisions about their future (Stormont et al., 2001).
2. Continually encourage gifted/LD students to succeed, and enlist the sup-

port of their parents and other teachers in this endeavor. Teach students to set realistic goals, accept their limitations, and reward their accomplishments.

3. Teach students coping strategies to use when they become frustrated. Learning ways to cope will help reinforce a student's commitment to persist with challenging tasks (Stormont et al., 2001).
4. If needed, encourage counseling to effectively monitor each student's emotions that accompany frustrations and perceived failures. Group counseling may also be beneficial, especially if students can speak with other students who are experiencing the same difficulties and frustrations (Brody & Mills, 1997).
5. Remind yourself and encourage others to recognize the unique needs of twice-exceptional students. Think of these children not only as having a disability or as being gifted but as having individual needs.
  - a. Think twice about why a student may avoid a task or rush through an assignment. Does this child always avoid the same type of assignment?
  - b. Offer multiple ways in which students can learn and demonstrate their knowledge in the classroom

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### **Guidelines for Developing Programs for Gifted/LD Students**

- ◆ Focus attention on developing students' talents and strengthening their abilities through enrichment activities.
- ◆ Provide a nurturing environment in which students feel valued and their individual differences are respected.
- ◆ Teach compensation strategies after efforts to remediate skill deficits have helped students reach a level of proficiency.
- ◆ Encourage students' awareness of their individual strengths and weaknesses.

Source: Baum, 1990.

(e.g., presentations, projects, skits).

- c. Encourage and positively reinforce students' efforts, especially on challenging tasks.
- d. Recognize and support the social and emotional needs of these children while also nurturing their academic strengths.
6. Provide support in establishing and maintaining social relationships by
  - a. Introducing a structured learning environment that encourages positive social interactions with peers in the classroom (Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992);
  - b. Increasing the opportunities for peer interactions in the classroom and supporting students in the appropriate use of social skills (Stormont et al., 2001); and
  - c. Giving students who are gifted/LD opportunities to act in leadership roles with peers, especially in areas in which they excel.
7. Ensure parents' understanding of their child's giftedness and disability, emphasizing the child's potential. Build a collaborative relationship with parents to create a school-home partnership that supports the child.
8. Support students who are gifted/LD with future goals and career planning. Make sure that students are aware of their potential and do not sell themselves short.
9. Provide a mentorship with an adult who is also gifted/LD. This relationship can lend encouragement and hope to those who are frustrated with their school experiences (Swesson, 1994).



## Final Thoughts

Twice-exceptional students have great potential to succeed. However, many become incredibly frustrated and have difficulty coping with the discrepancy between their giftedness and their learning disability. Their struggle to cope with frustration often leaves them feeling inadequate, disappointed, and angry, all of which negatively affect their self-concept. Many twice-exceptional students are also confused about where they fit in among their peers, and they often struggle with the social skills needed to maintain positive peer relationships.

Teachers, administrators, and parents must first acknowledge the individual gifts as well as the needs of students who are gifted/LD. These students must then be encouraged to recognize their own strengths and limitations so that they can better prepare for their future. Teachers must aim to strengthen these students' academic abilities and nurture their gifts while also supporting the social and emotional struggles that twice-exceptional students face inside and outside the classroom. By providing support that targets the whole child, we have the opportunity to tap the full potential of gifted students with learning disabilities.

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