

Twice-Exceptional/Twice Successful: Back to School Strategies that Work

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The beginning of a new school year is a welcomed time for many parents and students anticipating new learning, new teachers, and new friends. Hearing the familiar sounds of the marching band practicing, and seeing clothing that reflects the rich colors of fall long before they have appeared in nature is all part of our "back to school" culture. But many twice-exceptional students and their parents often experience stress and anxiety at the thought of another school year. One parent of a 2-e child braced herself as her child was asked, "Are you excited about school starting?" The response was, "No. Why would I be?" Parents of twice-exceptional children are cautiously hopeful about the upcoming school year, but unsure of what to expect and what to plan for, so they often feel unprepared.

Concrete plans can be put into place to alleviate some of the anxiety of the unknown aspects of the new school year to ease the transition for 2-e students and parents. Currently, our student population is becoming more and more diverse and teachers must meet this challenge with innovative resources. To effectively help twice-exceptional students, we must collaborate using both gifted education research, and special education research to refine best practices for 2-e through a shared understanding of this uniquely gifted group. How do we, how will we, engage these students in learning in our gifted education and general education classrooms? We must offer support for cognitive and affective growth and development for all students. When appropriate services are in place, all students benefit. Where do we start? Let's observe some classrooms of twice-exceptional students at the beginning of a school year.

In a Geometry classroom, a student struggles to listen, take notes, and work on problems. He does not like to show his work -- it slows him down too much and he does not want to fall behind -- but he has not heard most of what the teacher has said. He is gifted and diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder and ADHD. In an Anatomy classroom another student tries to order her notes according to teacher's

instructions. It feels confusing to her, and she stops trying to do it, shoving the notes inside her backpack instead. She is gifted and diagnosed with Mood Disorder and OCD. Outside the school, one girl tries to resist the panic attack that is leaving her gasping. She is already late for her first class, and does not want to face her teacher and the class, which makes her more frightened. She is gifted and diagnosed with Anxiety and Depression. Another student walks through the hallway, covering his head and face with his sweatshirt hood because someone at the locker next to his has sprayed on cologne, and it makes him nauseated. His eyes are watering and he begins to cough. He is gifted and diagnosed with sensory disorder and Asperger Syndrome.

A Collaboration of Gifted Education and Special Education

As a co-teacher in a gifted education class of a high profile suburban high school, I have noticed an increase in students who are identified as twice-exceptional, especially those with Asperger Syndrome. In our district, I am hired at the high school level as a Gifted Education Teacher, and our students can take our Academic Enrichment class as an elective for graduation. We have over 100 students enrolled in our classes each semester, teaching it every block/hour of the school day. The structure and design of our gifted education class allows for learning malleability; we have gotten used to diversity being status quo, but other academic classes are not always as flexible, due to the necessity of curricular constructs, and lack of knowledge and experience of working with gifted students.

In the past, students who were identified gifted, but who had a disability as their primary exceptionality, were usually assigned to the caseload of Special Education teachers who work with learning or behavior/emotional disabilities. When I began my graduate work in the Autism/Asperger Program at the University of Kansas, and worked on the Asperger Research team, I suggested that twice-exceptional students, including gifted Asperger students, should be served in our self-contained gifted education classroom, and I was assigned as their caseload manager.

Not every student in this country has the opportunity to receive the depth and breadth of special services that our students receive within our school district. Previously, I worked in inner-city urban school settings with at-risk students who did not have the opportunities available to them that my students have now. I am fortunate to teach in a school district that actively supports gifted education, which is under the umbrella of special education in the state of Kansas. Blue Valley School District is known for its exemplary

special education services that extend to our classroom. Our district's mission statement is *Education Beyond Expectations* which is something every parent wants for their child and every child deserves. At the elementary level, we have a pull-out program for students identified as gifted. At the middle and high school levels, identified students may enroll in a gifted education class. For Asperger students who need the support of a self-contained classroom, there is a special program at one middle school and one high school. Continuing collaboration between gifted education and special education benefits students, parents, and staff.

Planning Proactively

It is important for families to develop a plan for their 2-e student whether the school year has started or not, and whether or not the student has an IEP or a 504 plan. The presence and degree of gifted services also varies from school to school and from district to district, so parents must think and plan proactively to initiate a successful school year. "When is the best time to plant a tree? Twenty years ago. When is the second best time to plant a tree? Now." This Chinese proverb speaks to parents who are feeling regret about not doing something that they realize they might have done, previously, to help their child. Twice-exceptionality is a youthful research field. Information and research is constantly emerging, and parents should focus on what can be put in place, now, to change the future. Many students and their families are adept at designing their own "gifted education program" (outside the school system), utilizing community resources, and connecting with other parents of 2-e students to find resources for their children. SENG, for example, offers parental support through many of its services.

The best time to put a plan in place is before it is needed, but if it hasn't been done, then do it now. If possible, work on a plan for the 2-e student prior to the beginning of each school year—this is especially important before the transition into middle school or high school. Parents of 2-e students should consider doing the following things:

- Write a letter to the principal, counselor, case manager, and/or school psychologist introducing your child, sharing insights into his/her strengths and challenges. This letter should be proactive with a positive tone. Ask for an appointment to meet with each of them in person where you can introduce them, personally, to your child. You want them to be able to put your child's face with your child's name. Find out if gifted education services are offered

for students and what they are exactly, and if staff has training in gifted education, specifically 2-e students. Offer your help in obtaining or presenting 2-e information as staff development. Many administrators are amenable to this if you offer your assistance in organizing this for the staff.

- Schedule a longer appointment with your child's counselor to work on a class schedule that will foster success. This might include discussing when math or reading would be scheduled best for your child. My 2-e students often begin and/or end the day in our Gifted Education class to ease the transition to or from school. The time of day and the order of the classes should be considered. Most counselors will tell you that they cannot handpick teachers for a student, but go ahead and ask, explaining what kind of teacher your child needs. Request teachers that are knowledgeable of gifted students, twice-exceptionality, or are known to be student-centered and are willing to learn about and work with your child's special needs. Ask about any classes that can be tested out of, compacted, or paced. Discuss subject and/or whole grade acceleration. If your child has a case manager assigned to monitor the IEP process, ask him/her to be there to be an advocate.
- Schedule an appointment with the school psychologist, and possibly the school nurse to discuss pertinent medical, psychological, and affective issues, and determine what support and intervention will be used. This might include locker placement, assembly, lunch, fire drill procedures, hall passes, medication, substitutes, and a safe room or place, if there is not a Gifted Education Classroom. Discuss any sensory sensitivities that may cause additional stress for your child.
- Meet and establish a relationship with your child's case manager, if there is one, who will be your child's daily advocate at school. If there is a gifted education classroom, visit it with your child, and meet the teacher prior to the opening of school, if possible. Ask if a paraprofessional is available to work with your child if organization and/or study skills need support.

- If your child does not have a case manager, inquire about a staff member who can become a mentor for your student, and who will become an advocate for him or her on an ongoing basis. An administrator or a counselor may be able to suggest an appropriate adult role model.
- During the first week of school send an email to your child's teachers, similar to the one sent to the principal. Keep the tone positive, and ask what is the best way to communicate with them. If necessary, give them permission to include special instructions about working with your child in the folder that they keep for substitute teachers.
- If your child needs accommodations, but has been served well in the past without an IEP or 504, do not assume that accommodations will always be followed by every teacher, or at every school. If your child has qualified for an IEP or a 504, but does not have one in place, please consider getting one to ensure that your child will receive an education that is tailored to their individual needs. Services can vary from school to school, but the IEP and the 504 are legal documents that are designed to support all children with special needs. Some teachers will make accommodations at the request of students and their parents, whether or not they have an IEP or 504. In a perfect world, we would not need legal documents to ensure that modification and accommodations are implemented, but we do not live in that perfect world, so we must do what we need to do to nurture, preserve, and provide opportunities for these students.

Understanding the Needs of Gifted Students With Learning Disabilities

Disseminating the information about your student to his/her teachers is important. Teachers often misunderstand these students, because they are brilliant and puzzling in tandem. A teacher asked me, "If they are so smart, why can't they teach themselves to be organized or remember to hand in papers?" This is a question we may often be asked from people who do not know about twice-exceptionality. Routine changes in environmental and/or sensory issues can impact their learning (e.g. loud noises like fire alarms, strong odors from candles or science labs) in a negative way. Because of this, some teachers may misunderstand the extremes 2-e students will employ to prevent or avoid situations that are uncomfortable or distressing to them. If teachers are unaware of these challenges, they cannot help out, and may need guidance in areas that were not part of their training or experiences.

One teacher came to me distressed that one of my 2-e students was “sneaking back into the classroom during lunch.” He said that he had fixed that by locking the door so the student could not go back to work on the computer during lunch. I explained that lunch is a difficult event for this student to negotiate, the lines, the noise, the smells, and the loneliness of finding somewhere to sit. This student comes to our gifted education room during lunch, now, where he can eat or work on the computer. In fact, our room is always open to all of our students any time they need a safe, comfortable place to land.

Another time, one of my 2-e students decided to bring a math and science encyclopedia to his Honors Geometry class each day. As his teacher was lecturing, he opened the book to check to make sure that she was correct in what she was saying. If he thought her remarks needed clarification, he did not hesitate to raise his hand and speak to the class. Making sure that the world around him is right and that everyone follows the rules is very important and natural to him, but was not expected by his teacher, and she felt it was distracting to the class. His teacher and I talked about this, and we were able to put some guidelines in place for the student for how often to use his book, but we allowed him to continue to bring it to class and to use it at certain times.

Good basic organization and study skills are often challenges to the twice-exceptional student. One student struggled to organize her Advanced Placement notebook in the way the teacher had asked the class to do it. She told me that the ordering of the papers did not “make sense” to her, and she lost points on each notebook check. After talking to her teacher, we decided to let her organize the notebook in the way it made sense to her while she was studying and doing homework, and then we assisted her in reorganizing the papers when it was time to turn the notebook in to be checked for grading. In both of these situations, the teachers were amenable to putting a plan in place, once they understood why there was a challenge for these students.

Accommodations for 2-e Students

Teachers must be made aware of required accommodations, which are necessary for 2-e students to maximize their learning opportunities. These accommodations should also be requested for students who do not have an IEP, or a 504 plan, if they need them. One of my friends used to tell me, “Ask for the sun and the stars. You may get the moon.”

All of our teachers have a purple folder they receive at the beginning of each semester that contains an “IEP-At-A-Glance,” a shortened form of the IEP that includes required accommodations. Every teacher must sign-off verifying that they have received the IEP-At-A-Glance. The accommodations are individualized according to the needs of each student. Depending on those needs, these accommodations might be helpful for students diagnosed with disorders including dysgraphia, dyslexia, dyscalculia, OCD, auditory processing disorder, mood disorder, ADHD, sensory disorder, tourette syndrome, and more.

Some examples of accommodations included in an IEP for a twice-exceptional student might be:

- Access to a computer when needed
- Compact/pace/test-out of curriculum, required classes
- Break assignments into parts with completion check
- Preferential Seating
- Organization checks
- Copies of notes
- Differentiated assignments
- Opt out of daily assignments if tests are at mastery level
- Provide concrete cues
- Test grades weighted higher than daily work
- Extended time on assignments
- Work or test in quiet room

Intentional Support

Twice-exceptional students also need intentional support that personalizes a strategic educational plan in each class. This is not coincidental, accidental, or unintentional support. The IEP/504 fulfills legal obligations for special education services, but teachers may need a more detailed intentional approach to helping a 2-e student in a particular content area, a more focused, delineated, plan, especially if the student is attempting an Honors or Advanced Placement class. To help with this, I designed a Snapshot of Learner Characteristics, developed from research from the Asperger Research Team, for secondary students who have been diagnosed with any disabilities. This form highlights the student’s academic and affective needs

in each content area class, giving concrete suggestions for interventions. Many 2-e students choose to take AP or Honors courses, to support their precocious curiosity. Their grades are not always a reflection of their knowledge, often due to a lack of understanding from teachers who do not know how to intervene with appropriate instruction. The Snapshot of Learner Characteristics is a tool that can be used to encourage academic success for all students, and includes personalized information that narrows and defines the interventions to be content-specific.

Remember the 2-e students in the classrooms at the beginning of this article? When they are gathered together with their gifted peers something extraordinary happens and we see a beautiful diversity of interests, talents, and hear passionate disparate discussions....we see a freshman, rushing in, her hair still damp from her 5:00 a.m. swim practice for the U.S. National Team; a sophomore composing music using computer software; a freshman writing a geography book for National Geographic; a junior organizing a school-wide blood drive for the Red Cross; a junior working on the Riemann Hypothesis; a sophomore carefully prepping for the Academic Decathlon Team. With appropriate services, it is difficult to distinguish the 2-e students from their gifted peers who do not have disabilities. We only see the raw natural potential of those students' talents, which I believe are our greatest natural resources.

So, how do we, how will we, engage these students in learning in our general education classrooms? Educators must daily tweak, revise, update, and out-and-out change static activities to match the dynamic needs of all learners, ensuring that all students are making gains in their learning. We must offer support for cognitive and affective growth and development to all students. At the beginning of this new school year, educational staff and parents should work together to ensure that every child feels appreciated and valued, and that every child knows that his or her life can and will make a positive difference in our world, both now and in the future.

John F. Kennedy said, "Not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or equal motivation, but children have the equal right to develop their talent, their ability, and their motivation." I believe it is my responsibility, as a teacher, to provide the opportunities for students to develop their talents, their abilities, and to encourage their motivation.