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Twice-Exceptionality

Evolving Definitions and Perceptions

How can some students appear “lazy” and “distracted” in the classroom, applying little or no effort to school tasks, but then successfully pursue demanding and creative activities outside of school without missing a beat? Why, despite years of research findings, do educators, parents, relatives, and other professionals have such a hard time accepting the idea that children can have both high abilities and learning disabilities? These questions emphasize that many students face not only an obstacle course of internal and environmental challenges that threaten their academic achievement, but also a host of widely shared beliefs at home and at school that can obstruct their progress. Exploring the realities underlying these attitudes can help us understand this unique group of children, nearly all of whom have been unable to successfully learn in a traditional classroom setting.

The Story of Neil

A turning point in the life of the first author of this book occurred when she crossed paths with a student named Neil in 1978. Susan was a learning disability “teacher consultant” specializing in “diagnosis and prescriptive teaching,” which is what it was called then. Neil was a highly creative, unproductive, and troubled high school student with learning disabilities who had threatened suicide. It was at this juncture that Susan was called in to identify his learning issues and to help him

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with his academic productivity. The story of his roundabout journey to success has inspired an ongoing inquiry into the lives of students like him. Working with Neil led Susan to realize, for the first time, that many students with learning disabilities have exceptional abilities in certain areas, as well.

“School is like a basketball game, totally irrelevant to life!” muttered Neil in frustration. At the time, he was failing all of his classes as a high school sophomore. His observation was actually completely accurate. For him, neither school nor basketball was meaningful for neither connected with any of his needs or interests.

Convinced that Neil had the capacity to do better if only he applied himself, his teachers described him as lazy. “When I talk to Neil, he has so much to offer, but he just doesn’t produce,” one said. Neil’s classmates, applauding his moments of cleverness, viewed him as the class clown. But Neil saw himself as a misfit. He was baffled and frustrated by the inconsistencies between what he knew he was capable of achieving and people’s perceptions of him. What resulted were growing feelings of inadequacy.

Neil began to have academic difficulty in fourth grade. Each year, as he drifted upward, he accomplished less and less. Eventually, he was in such a depressed emotional state that weekly psychological counseling became necessary. His psychologist suggested an educational evaluation for Neil; the results indicated learning disabilities in writing, organization, and sequential tasks, such as those required in linear math.

With that knowledge, Neil’s academic program was adjusted. He began receiving supplemental instruction from the learning specialist (Susan), and his teachers made special provisions for testing and assignments—procedures usually recommended for students with learning disabilities. However, unlike those students with disabilities who begin to feel better about themselves when they experience success through modified assignments or additional time, Neil’s depression worsened. In spite of his improved grades, Neil discounted and dismissed his progress, attributing it to factors outside of his control—a less rigorous curriculum, accommodations, and extra support from a tutor. He clearly did not view his new academic accomplishments as personal successes.

Yet, although failing at school, Neil had independently amassed a wealth of knowledge about music, religion, psychology, and photography. He also pursued extracurricular interests with enthusiasm and commitment, running his own small business as a photographer. His photos won awards in amateur contests, and he was asked to photograph weddings and social events. Little wonder he was confused about the school’s claim of impaired ability to learn when he was obviously learning so much through other channels. To add to the confusion, Neil’s family placed a high priority on academic achievement that would lead to an eventual college degree. His father was highly accomplished, and the school identified his younger brother as a gifted student.

Neil best expressed his creative and insightful self through photography. The statements that he made with the camera were powerful and showed the depth of his feelings. Could using photography as a substitute for written schoolwork ease Neil's conflict? Surprisingly, when Neil was encouraged to submit photographic essays instead of written papers, he stopped taking pictures altogether, declaring, "Why can't I be like the piano player in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, who used the piano for his own pleasure?" Photography was Neil's escape, an activity over which he had complete control. He didn't want teachers to use his work for their purposes or evaluate his photography by their standards. In essence, Neil was asking for attention to his strengths in their own right, not as a means to work through his weaknesses. Neil demonstrated clearly that the solution to overcoming the challenges of learning disabilities is not as simple as discovering and using the interests of these students.

We will return to Neil a bit later, but for now, the important message of his story is that it represents those of many other bright and creative students with learning, attention, and social issues. It is far from unique. Described as 2e today, young people like Neil experience frustration on a daily basis when trying to cope with the discrepancy between what they can and cannot do. Fortunately, continuing research has given us new ways of understanding these students, new terminology for describing them, and new approaches for helping them.

Twice-Exceptional: The Term and Its History

For many people, the terms *learning disabilities* and *high abilities* occupy opposite poles of a continuum of capabilities. The term *twice-exceptional* (2e) describes someone whose learning patterns have characteristics on both ends of the scale. On the surface, this combination might seem illogical for, as Assouline and Whiteman (2011) argued, the term *twice-exceptional* unites two seemingly disconnected special education categories. To resolve the apparent contradiction of thinking of someone as having both "high abilities" and "disabilities" simultaneously, let's look at a few notable observations from clinical psychologists, educators, and writers, some written prior to either the passing of special education laws or legislation on the gifted and talented.

Origins of Twice-Exceptionality in Education

The idea of public schools for all came to the forefront when Horace Mann founded *The Common School Journal* in 1838. In his adaptation of the industrial production model, there was an assumption that everyone should learn at the same pace within a classroom context, and children were placed in classrooms by age rather than ability. At that time, most "disabled" children (also described as "men-

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tally defective" or "feeble minded") were institutionalized and were not included in public schools.

By the early 1920s, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (a psychologist, educator, and researcher known today primarily for her early contributions to the recognition and education of highly intellectually gifted children) had become interested in the distinguishing characteristics of students outside the norm. Her beliefs included the idea that schools should offer opportunities for all students to develop their abilities as completely and as rapidly as possible, and that included students who were highly advanced, as well as those who were below the norm. Hollingworth had started her work at the Clearinghouse for Mental Defectives and Bellevue Hospital, where she became the principal of the School for Exceptional Children. In her foundational work, *Special Talents and Defects: Their Significance for Education* (1923), Hollingworth explicitly included descriptions of students who exhibited both high abilities yet limiting deficiencies in areas such as reading, basic arithmetic, spelling, and handwriting. And she hinted at varying reasons why children of superior general intelligence might not succeed in school, stating, "All children cannot easily learn to read by the method that serves the majority" (p. 65). Providing examples such as a study of seven nonreaders with IQs ranging from 94 to 130, she wrote that all of them learned to read but through methods not regularly used in the classroom. She also noted, "Occasionally a very intelligent child is found who does not readily learn arithmetic, and on the other hand there exist children whose ability at calculation far exceeds expectation from other performances" (p. 114).

Not only did she observe and record examples of what is now called "twice-exceptionality," she also remarked on the need for personalized learning! She wrote,

The most important single cause of truancy is that the curriculum does not provide for individual differences. . . . Not only is the curriculum not adapted to individual differences in general intelligence, but it is far less adapted to individual differences in special defects and aptitudes. (p. 200)

In the same vein, Samuel Orton (1925) tested a group of 88 students who were unable to learn to read. Using the Stanford-Binet IQ test, he observed a wide range of individual differences—from full scale lows between 70 and 80 to a high of 122. From this work, he questioned whether the IQ score always reflected true intellectual ability in students with reading disabilities. Describing a "typical case," he wrote:

I was strongly impressed with the feeling that this estimate did not do justice to the boy's mental equipment, and that the low rating was to be explained by the fact that the test is inadequate to gauge

the equipment in a case of such a special disability. (as cited in Hallahan & Mercer, 2001, p. 3)

In the early 1940s, Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger described and labeled a set of behaviors in patients he referred to as "little professors." They frequently showed intense, focused areas of interest and high-level, but rigid thinking processes. These children also had difficulty with environmental demands. Failing to read social cues, their play, as well as their speech patterns, appeared repetitive and pedantic. They were rarely educated in public settings (Asperger, 1944). Across the ocean, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Leo Kanner first published the term *autism* and, in a 1944 issue of *Pediatrics*, outlined two characteristics of the condition—elaborate ritualistic behavior and autistic aloneness—but also noted "good cognitive potential" (as cited in Silberman, 2015, p. 184).

Strauss and Lehtinen (1947) wrote about children who exhibited "disturbances in perception, thinking, and emotional behavior either separately or in combination. These disturbances prevent or impede a normal learning process" even among children with at least normal intelligence (p. 4). Intelligence level, it was noted, was not a sufficient explanation for why a child was not able to learn conventionally. The focus, however, was on understanding or working with the neurological disorder(s) rather than developing the normal or high intelligence.

Dissatisfied with attributing mental retardation as the cause of learning difficulties in school, educational psychologists introduced new terminology to describe deficits in learning. For instance, in 1961, Cruickshank, Bentzen, Ratzeburg, and Tannhauser conducted a pilot study of educational options for children with brain injuries and hyperactivity, including those without brain injury but whose behaviors were considered typical of the brain injured. Their work opened the door to a distinct field of learning disabilities. The following year, Samuel Kirk published *Educating Exceptional Children* (1962), clarifying that a learning disability could interfere with academic learning, describing it as

a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other school subjects resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbances. (p. 263)

Other researchers were focused on understanding the development of giftedness. Terman and Oden published their first volume of *Genetic Studies of Genius* in 1947 but did not address the possibility of any learning disabilities among their subjects. However, when Mildred and Victor Goertzel (1962) reviewed the biographies of 400 eminent adults, they discovered that some of the highly accomplished



To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled is one of the most popular resources available on identifying and meeting the needs of twice-exceptional students. This updated third edition provides a comprehensive look at the complex world of students with remarkable gifts, talents, and interests, who simultaneously face learning, attention, or social challenges from LD, ADHD, ASD, and other disorders. Through case studies and years of research, the authors present a rationale for using a strength-based, talent-focused approach to meeting the needs of this special population. From a thorough description of twice-exceptionality and the unique learning patterns of these students, to strategies for identification, comprehensive programming, talent development, and instructional strategies, this book explores the distinguishing strengths (yellows) and complex challenges (blues) that these students face. In painting, green is a mix of yellow and blue—and, because of their individual characteristics, twice-exceptional students come in a remarkable range of greens.

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