

Three Steps Toward Classroom Success For Twice Exceptional Learners

by Julie F. Skolnick, M.A., J.D.

“Gifted & Distractible” is a term I use - casting the net widely to capture students who are both gifted and have a learning difference or disability. Commonly referred to as “Twice Exceptional,” “2e,” or “GT/LD,” these people (not just students or children since we never outgrow our ‘2e-ness’) have incredible strengths and potential but are often misunderstood, inappropriately disciplined, and taught incorrectly.

People living with, working with, and educating 2e students scratch their heads over the simultaneous occurrence of their 2e students’ abilities and challenges. Gifted children who struggle socially, emotionally, or with anxiety are at once able to read or solve mathematical problems years ahead of their grade level, but unable to enjoy success in group

settings, on the playground, or in the cafeteria or say and do things that appear rude or disrespectful.

If the 2e child has a specific learning disability she may have incredible abilities in reading, for example, but struggle with writing output. Advanced mathematics abilities may co-exist with an inability to read. This asynchrony is confusing and frustrating enough for the child living with their uneven development, but when the adults in the room cannot meaningfully address the strengths and struggles, we almost always see a downward spiral of challenging behavior, self-doubt, and sabotaged self-esteem.

Misunderstanding begins with the question, “What does *gifted* mean?” We most often hear words like ‘ability,’ ‘potential,’ ‘smart,’ and

‘talented’ in response to this question. These adjectives do indeed describe the *gift* in giftedness. Yet, a holistic definition of giftedness includes three characteristics: asynchronous development, perfectionism, and intensity. Asynchronous development is the juxtaposition of strengths and struggles as manifested in a typical 2e student. Perfectionism can serve as a driving force or incentive to do one’s best work. However, perfectionism often includes anxiety. The student experiences paralysis from the astronomical expectations set for oneself or by others and is unable to move forward. Intensities present in five different realms: intellectual, emotional, imaginal, sensory, and psychomotor. A person can experience one, or all of these *overexcitabilities*, which enhance or undermine their moment-by-moment life experience. In a nutshell the overexcitabilities – in all five domains – cause the person to react to stimuli in a much grander fashion than neurotypical peers. These overexcitabilities are innate, unable to be controlled, and, in my opinion, are the root of many misunderstandings about twice exceptional kids.

Behavior is communication, but so often with a twice exceptional child, behavior does not indicate the precipitous challenge. Imagine a math whiz in the classroom. We know his ability is far superior to his peers, yet he seems unable to control his impulses. He’s like a jack-in-the-box; in and out of his seat, poking his classmates, participating in discussions by shouting out rather than raising his hand. He resists reading directions, showing his work, or doing homework. What is going on with this student?

Human nature may lead us to think “What a waste, if he could only sit still or be respectful, or just get his work done, he could go so far.” Worse, a teacher may decide “Even though this

student has superior math ability I cannot challenge him until he gets his behavior under control.” The focus of these thoughts needs recalibration. Rather than concentrating on behavior and discipline, success with a 2e student comes when adults turn their attention to understanding what lies behind behavior – the *why* and *when* rather than the *what* and always remembering the child’s strengths, abilities, and potential.

There is a three-step process to success with 2e students; 1. understanding, 2. a strength-based approach, and with these two in mind, 3. Crafting appropriate strategies.

Understanding

Start by asking yourself “What else could be going on with this child?” The child in constant motion may have psychomotor intensity, may be identified with ADHD or, due to his abilities, may be bored. Remember, overexcitabilities are innate – just like impulsivity, the person cannot inherently control them even if there is a strong desire. Additionally, the maturity necessary to reign in such behavior is derailed by the child’s uneven development. If educators and parents focus on and highlight challenges, kids self-define as annoying, difficult, and disruptive. Rather than trying and failing *again*, these children demonstrate behaviors they know are expected to get it over with.

We need to understand the child’s perspective. Perhaps the child spends a lot of time waiting for other students to catch up. Perhaps the student has mastered the material but because his peers need practice, he is forced to do more busy-work to show what he has already shown he knows. Is the class at the end of the day or just before lunch or recess? Maybe this child’s particular neurology requires

movement and he has spent a lot of his day fighting against his innate need to move.

Does this child have executive functioning challenges or working memory issues? These learning differences often affect gifted learners who have more data floating around in their consciousness. Extra information naturally depletes the ability to organize. As math requires a student to organize, keep information in his mind and apply it later, or conduct multi-step problems, mathematically strong students with these challenges worry about what happened to their abilities when things get challenging for the first time. Showing work for this child may be extraordinarily frustrating and nearly impossible. Gifted learners are sometimes intuitive learners; they just see the answer. Asking a child like this to show their work for something they just know is like asking someone to explain how they surmise 2 in the problem $1+1$.

Sympathizing with this child's needs, whether they are for movement, for constant intellectual challenge, or for strategic supports, may shift our perspective to wonder how in the world the child behaved *so well* in our classroom! At the very least we now understand how much harder he works to conform.

Strengths Based Approach

With an understanding of what lies behind our student's behavior, we can stop taking that behavior personally. We recognize that a process is necessary to re-set this child's behavior patterns, and that we need to look beyond behavior to remember strengths and abilities. A strengths-based approach requires that we understand that the child does not want to be disruptive.

Somehow in parenting and teaching the normative assumption for challenging children is that they are manipulative, limit-testing, rude, self-serving, or purposely difficult. All children want to do well. Everyone wants to be "the good kid" but some children are naturally equipped to meet societal expectations while others are doomed to fail due to no fault of their own. Focusing on the child's interests and strengths allows us to craft appropriate strategies that are long-lasting.

Crafting Appropriate Strategies

In the case of our "antsy" mathematician, we need to think about structural supports to address his need to move. Can we send him on an errand – bring a message to the front office – so he starts off class with a needed walk. Can we provide a ball chair, a stretchy band around the front legs of his chair, a standing desk? Can he use a fidget, chew gum, or pace in the back of the room?

For content, can we provide him with problems requiring deeper thinking and give him support to walk through the steps requiring strong executive functioning and working memory? We can adjust homework. If we know the student has mastered the skill, why make him do more problems? If writing out multi-step processes is difficult, ask the student to tell you verbally. If the student is an intuitive learner, do not require showing work. Rather, provide work that requires him to show work in order for him to get the answer.

Unfortunately, with 2e kids the most prevalent question is, "How can we change their behavior?" Focusing on when and why behavior occurs, rather than what behavior we observe, is the first step toward positively and durably changing behavior. From this standpoint we are

able to remember and address the child's strengths and utilize those strengths in crafting strategies to help the child meet classroom expectations.

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