

## Portraits of Twice Exceptionality

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The research suggests that certain gifted students have deficits in learning, attention, and socialization behaviors (Foley Nicpon, et al., 2011). Because of the dual exceptionality, these students experience great difficulty in negotiating learning pathways. Recent studies also suggest that the numbers of these students have almost doubled in the last decade (NEA, 2006).

Because of the individual issues that twice-exceptional profiles present, it is often difficult for them to be identified for gifted or special education programs as these students are likely to develop compensatory strategies that mask either the disability or the talent. Educators many times see a flat profile that blends in with the crowd, because a student's giftedness is tempered by a learning disability, while at the same time, a student who should be identified for special education services will be denied because her giftedness lifts test scores and academic achievement just enough to fall within the "normal" range (Weinfeld et al., 2013).

As a result, national data indicate that this population is not systematically programmed for, or even properly identified. Researchers have also found that comorbidity is a common problem for these students, suggesting that learning disabilities will also pair with ADD/ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, depression, anxiety disorders, and various other complicating variables that often make identification particularly difficult (Weinfeld et al., 2013).

In my experience as a public school teacher, I have found that more than any other student population, twice exceptional students differ from the average student, and in fact, from each other, in nearly every respect, but particularly in terms of how they learn and what motivates them to achieve. I have found very little blanket data on what works universally with all twice exceptional learners. Rather than stretching credulity and claiming that I have the answer, I offer you stories. In my experience as a teacher, anecdotal data regarding what has worked with specific students with a specific profile is more useful and meaningful than generalizations about a widely varying and wide-ranging population.

I am in a unique position to identify and work with these students. As a Latin teacher, I usually work with students across multiple years (and therefore, different developmental stages), which allows me to understand their needs and their gifts at a much deeper level than most other teachers. I will profile here four students I have taught, each now in their junior or senior year of high school. Each of these students has demonstrated twice exceptionality in some way, though only one of them has been formally identified as gifted.

### STUDENT A - PROFILE

"Max" is a male student, diagnosed with ADD (attention deficit disorder), ED (emotional disability) and specific learning disability for dysgraphia, who was enrolled in my Latin I and Latin II classes. From my observations, Max is a generally happy student, who varies between extreme excitement and boredom and/or fatigue. He can be very charming, vocal and attentive when engaged, but very often retreats into books when exposed to the same or similar material for more than ten minutes. He also seems fatigued on a daily basis and will usually nod off at least once, but with focused attention of the teacher and specific direction, he seems to come alive. He is a highly verbal student who excels in presentations and classroom discussions, but can't express his thoughts in writing easily, due to his dysgraphia and poor organizational skills. His parents do not feel that they can adequately explain Max's academic difficulties. They theorize that he is a "bored gifted student with a possible mood disorder." Max says of himself, "I know I'm smart, but I only realize that outside of school, when I'm making connections to the real world. School is so far from reality... I can't play the game [of school]."

### Student A – Accommodations That Work

Because Max often does not pay attention to the details of what he reads, he should have test directions read to him or instructions given to him rather than reading them to himself. In other settings, his reading and writing needed to be structured with graphic organizers wherever possible. Max tends to become overwhelmed by assignments and spends more time thinking in tangential topics rather than focusing his thoughts on the topic at hand. He needs a clear road map or table of contents to help him in reading English passages on history or mythology, and a similar road map to help him outline his thoughts or translation when he needs to write.

Ideally, Max would have a computer on hand at all times to help him take notes, since he can type much faster than he can write with a paper and pen. Unfortunately, given his history of losing school-supplied Neo's and other electronic equipment, the school district will no longer provide him with one, nor are his parents inclined to purchase one. As a result, I encouraged him to invest in a small recording device that he wore around his neck to record lectures and class discussions for future reference. Max also needs further opportunities for metacognition to help him think about his own thinking process. He became deeply engaged in the conversation we had about how he thinks and how he learns best, and immediately wanted

to test out his own hypotheses. He needed to be aware of himself on this level, and spend time evaluating his own learning.

Like many gifted students, Max suffers from chronic boredom in many of his classes. He knows that he is very bright, and feels uninterested in doing 'busy work.' Since Max can't control either when a teacher will give him this kind of work, or when activities in class will fail to engage him, the problem of motivation is best addressed affectively, rather than cognitively. Max should continue to reflect on his own feelings and emotions and evaluate when they are or are not keeping him from understanding the material. He has admitted to me that sometimes he takes pride in not listening and still being able to understand the material, though he also admits that he hasn't had that particular sensation in a while. He needed to become more aware of these sensations and feelings as they happen, and begin the process of learning to regulate them when possible.

Max also worked on developing his strongest skills and abilities through acting and presenting where possible. He is a student who needs to be able to develop his strengths and skills and use those to access new information wherever possible. He desperately needs to know that he is developing and growing – this is key to his self-concept.

#### **Student A – Student's World Language Trajectory**

'Max' completed two years of Latin before deciding to switch to Spanish for two years, where he says his work with the Latin language helped him learn to read the Spanish language more fluently, and helped with the 'organization of the language' – in particular, vocabulary and grammar.

#### **STUDENT B - PROFILE**

"Laura" is a female student who was born deaf, and uses American Sign Language (ASL) as her first language. Laura is fully mainstreamed in the public school setting, accessing all of her classes with the aid of interpreters who translate for her in the classroom. She has excellent work habits in all of her classes, except for math, which is her weakest subject area. She is an avid reader, who read many college-level texts in middle school, and continues to express herself well both orally and in writing.

While Laura is a student who regularly shines in class, she has difficulty accessing some areas of the curriculum due to her disability, and can sometimes shut down, either by retreating into a book or, at times, becoming defiant. She responds well to stories about people, facts and details, and translates literature at a higher level than most of her peers, but often has difficulty understanding the finer points of grammar and will disengage from the material at hand if it is not represented visually.

She also has difficulty relating to the 'sonics' of poetry, such as meter and figures of speech. At one point, she insisted that I could not expect her to learn how to scan poetry due to her disability, and that she simply couldn't, no matter what. Scansion refers to how many short versus long vowels there are in a line of poetry, which affects

how it is pronounced, and can affect interpretations of the grammar, and therefore, how a line can be translated. Because scansion is in the program of studies and on the AP exam for Latin, Laura could not be excused from this material. Because she couldn't hear the vowel sounds, she didn't believe she could evaluate them, but by working individually with her and a like-minded interpreter, and giving her a list of rules about how to tell a long vowel from a short one, she was able to learn scansion better than her hearing peers.

#### **Student B – Accommodations That Work**

This anecdote taught me that Laura could learn anything in my classroom, and learn it well, as long as she was provided a list of procedures to follow, in a step-by-step process. She needed the structure and visual confirmation of the rules for both scansion and other grammar points. I knew that all information needed to be presented to her visually on some level, but never realized how important the 'formula' would be for her.

As with any deaf student, graphic organizers and organized notes are important accommodations, because they allow her to process the material in structured ways. She also benefits from use of the SmartBoard, as it allowed me (and the students) to mark up the text we were studying at any given time, so that she could see our discussion unravelling on the board, not just through her interpreters' hands.

Like Max, Laura can suffer from chronic boredom with school, due to her intellectual ability which sets her apart from her peers, and at times, because of the difficulties of communication with others. To succeed, she needs teachers who will structure conversation in class, through a Socratic Seminar or other means, and engage with her in discussion, and make connections with any of her various intellectual interests.

She also requires guidance regarding her future career path. She says, "I don't have definite plans for the future when it comes to jobs, but perhaps I'll be a history researcher, translator of works written in foreign tongues, or a scholar in classical history or languages such as Hebrew, Latin, or Greek." Working with students like Laura on future career choices and how best to pursue them is crucial, as sometimes accessing that information can be difficult. Creating connections to real-world job opportunities can be crucial in establishing identity, preparing students and empowering them.

#### **Student B – Student's World Language Trajectory**

'Laura' is currently completing her fifth year of Latin, while concurrently enrolled in Spanish for two years. She attended the prestigious Governor's School Latin Academy over the summer after her junior year, with the aid of interpreters. She has also won numerous awards related to her study of Latin, from gold medals on the National Latin Exam, to scholarships offered by the National Junior Classical League.

## **STUDENT C - PROFILE**

“Ryan” is a male student, diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorder), ED (emotional disability) and a specific learning disability for dysgraphia. He is always eager to share his knowledge and participate in class in any way that he can. He is highly motivated in his classes, but when frustrated, he tends to react very strongly. He sometimes raises his voice, or uses inappropriate tone or language in reaction to certain triggers. He has been a victim of bullying in the past, and is very concerned with the perceptions of other students. Ryan can become embarrassed easily. He also is very worried about equity in the classroom, and will immediately stand up for himself or any other student if he perceives something as unfair.

Ryan suffers from problems with organization, and with his motor coordination, particularly in respect to writing. He often has difficulties finding homework or notes if they have been hand-written, and will become frustrated looking for things in his backpack or binder, which can be a trigger for him. Ryan also becomes frustrated when teachers don't recognize his talents, either because of his difficulties with handwriting or social communication. He excels in his scientific knowledge of various species, and brings outstanding vocabulary skills to the Latin classroom, in addition to many interesting scientific connections. Ryan is deeply focused on a few subjects that are of interest to him. He talks a lot about certain characters from teen fiction and comic books that appeal to him, but he is most passionate about animals.

### **Student C – Accommodations That Work**

As for many students, the use of a laptop was crucial for Ryan. The laptop allows him to access saved homework assignments, e-mail his homework and classwork assignments, and access helpful applications and websites that extend his knowledge on certain topics. The laptop also allowed him to learn a new way of thinking about organization of files, and he has begun scanning important papers into .pdf files on his computer.

Ryan requires a good amount of teacher direction to stay on task if other students in the room are talking, as they are a significant source of distraction for him. However, at the same time, he can not bear to complete work outside in the hallway or in the neighboring computer lab, as that separates him from peers. This caused me considerable frustration until I realized that he needs to learn to organize his thoughts, his time and his work in highly structured ways as a part of a regular routine. By asking him to work on a separate graphic organizer, separated out by how much time he has to complete an assignment and giving specific time requirements for each section, I've found that other people are much less of a distraction for him, as his work becomes a race against the clock. I also found that helping him to organize his binder and his backpack aided his concentration as well.

At the National Association for Gifted Children Conference in Denver, Colorado, I had the good fortune to share a conversation about Ryan with Temple Grandin.

Given her own experiences and her passionate interest in animals, I asked her advice as to how to help Ryan. Her advice was clear-cut: get him as much career advice as possible, and make sure he is counselled in directions that will help him become a strong candidate for jobs. As a result, Ryan now visits the Career Services center at school once a month, doing research on what careers would be appropriate, and familiarizing himself with the requirements.

### **Student C – Student's World Language Trajectory**

'Ryan' is currently completing his third year of Latin, which he hopes will further his interest in working with animals on a scientific level.

## **STUDENT D - PROFILE**

“Mitch” is a male student, and the only one from this study formally identified as gifted. He has been diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and ED (emotional disability). He is an excellent writer with outstanding verbal skills that put him far above his peers in respect to his use of vocabulary, critical thinking skills and maturity of thought. Mitch completes all assignments and assessments with the top grades in the class. Mitch is very reluctant to speak, even in situations where he has much to say on a topic, due to social anxiety. When he does speak, he speaks very quietly, and can often be misheard or misinterpreted. Many teachers have underestimated his skills based on his problems with communication.

While his peers respect his skills and talents, he has few friendships at school. His older peers from Latin class and Latin Club have been his social network at school, after school, and at extracurricular competitions. His mother believes very strongly that Latin helped him to grow in his social development. Mitch is very interested in social issues, and can make excellent arguments for his stances. He feels very strongly that he would like to work for a non-profit.

### **Student D – Accommodations That Work**

One of the more important accommodations for Mitch was allowing him to work independently. I found quickly that he shut down in group work situations as soon as he had completed his part of the task. At first, I suspected this was due to his social anxiety. However, further inquiry revealed that he didn't feel challenged when asked to work as a part of a group, doing only one component of a project. He far preferred being able to delve into all aspects independently. He also needed (on occasion) to give presentations to me after school, or present information in a different format that wasn't as stressful for him as an oral presentation.

Acceleration has been the most important accommodation for Mitch. In Latin I, I took far too long to recognize his gifts, and could not do much for him beyond independent projects and alternative assessments. In Latin II, he began work on advanced Latin III material, and was able to pass the Latin III final exam with flying colors. At his request (and after a little teacher investigation), Mitch skipped Latin III and jumped into AP Latin as a sophomore.

His mother felt that the acceleration may have made it more difficult for him to make friends in class, but I argued that he needed to be with his intellectual peers, engaged with higher level material. He scored a 5 on the AP exam.

#### Student D – Student’s World Language Trajectory

‘Mitch’ is currently enrolled in his fifth year of Latin, and plans to take a sixth year next year, an independent study course. He has earned perfect scores on every National Latin Exam, and won various awards from the National Junior Classical League.

#### COMMONALITIES

Since only three out of the four students I profiled were actually identified as gifted, some may ask why I included them in this profile. According to research, twice-exceptional students are under-identified for gifted services, at a ratio as high as two in four. I believe that, given my background (an M. Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction, specializing in Gifted Education), and given the subject I teach, identification can happen via challenging curriculum. Curriculum that forces students to think in complex ways and at an accelerated pace brings forth behaviors overlooked in other classrooms. I would argue that for effective identification to happen, students should have the opportunity to take such challenging coursework, which highlights a student’s readiness for more advanced work.

I can’t pretend that any one of the strategies I used with these students will work with all students from a similar profile. I believe there is no replacement for taking the time to get to know the student and what coping mechanisms work for him or her. While I believe all four of these students differ in respect to their needs and talents, there are commonalities among them, and perhaps among twice-exceptional students. All of the four need interventions that are both academic and social-emotional. On the academic side, each of them required different forms of acceleration, either within individual assignments or for a whole grade level. At the social-emotional level, these students needed to learn to take academic risks and learn to work on metacognition. They also needed career guidance provided by a counselor or career services specialist, as well as career-oriented advice and help with relevant skills from all teachers.

Characteristics these students responded to also varied, but some were common among all. They all appreciated teachers who were open to trying new things, especially if student-selected or suggested. One student said, “Even if a strategy doesn’t work, at least it lets you know they care enough to see if it does.” Another said that he preferred teachers who were willing to teach to his strengths, “since very few teachers see me for who I am if they teach me in [my area of weakness].” Another desirable teacher trait was patience, helping them work through their difficulties or disabilities, and particularly supporting them when they failed at something, refusing to let them quit. These students need an advocate who will help them succeed, allowing them freedom of choice wherever possible and focusing on what works for the student.

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*Excellence and Diversity in Gifted Education* (EDGE)

Volume 2 Number 1

Spring 2016

Hosted at <http://cectag.org>