Gifted Child Quarterly’s Special Issue on Twice-Exceptionality: Progress on the Path of Empirical Understanding

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Both personally and professionally, it is common to reflect back on the path that led us to our current position in life. As I reflect back on the almost 10 years I’ve spent at the Belin-Blank Center, it is exciting to consider how twice-exceptionality has evolved in the gifted and talented community, as well as within my own professional identity. Joining the Center’s Assessment and Counseling Clinic as a postdoctoral fellow in 2004, I immediately began working with a very unique population of children, referred to as twice-exceptional, who were incredibly bright, but who also had disabilities that were interfering with their success. Coming from Arizona State University, where I gained invaluable knowledge about gifted populations from Barbara Kerr and Sharon Robinson Kurpius and about pediatric and child clinical populations from David Wodrich, I discovered that in my new position, my worlds were colliding. I appreciated the importance of strengths-based identification and intervention along with securing accommodations to remediate areas for growth. Were other psychologists, educators, and researchers working with and writing about this population? Some were—and were doing it extraordinarily well—but it did not seem like enough.

Seven years later, in collaboration with my research team, I wrote an article titled, “Empirical Investigation of Twice-Exceptionality: Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?” (Foley Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, & Stinson, 2011). Our goal was to review 20 years of empirical contributions in the area of gifted students with specific learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorder. At the time, only 43 empirical studies were in existence between 1991 and 2011; this was troublesome given the increased attention this population had in our field. We stated,

This summary of the extant research points to the need for future empirical investigation where there is a sound, replicable methodology with clearly stated inclusion and exclusion criteria. There is a call for additional, quantitative analyses that offers evidence for the effective identification and treatment for twice-exceptionality. (Foley Nicpon et al., 2011, p. 11)

Two years later, Drs. Betsy McCoach and Del Siegle asked whether I would be the Gifted Child Quarterly guest-editor for a special issue on twice-exceptionality. The number one goal was to increase the empirical investigation of twice-exceptionality to help move it from a theoretical concept to an operationalized definition with associated research-based identification and intervention strategies that work. The researchers highlighted in this issue unveil groundbreaking findings in diverse areas within the broad definition of twice-exceptionality. Readers will learn more about screening, identification, characteristics, and successful intervention and support strategies. Some of the key findings obtained through quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods methodologies are as follows:

1. **Screening**: Curriculum-based measurements administered within a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework could potentially be used to screen for children gifted in reading, but struggling in math, and vice versa (McCallum et al., 2013). Focusing on intra-individual differences obtained by twice-exceptional children within an RtI framework may decrease the likelihood they would be missed when the focus is solely on poor academic performance. This proposed screening method also identifies a pool of students who would be appropriate to refer for a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether twice-exceptionality exists. This is a step forward regarding how we can work together to identify students given the tools and strategies being implemented in our schools.

2. **Identification**: Gifted children with a specific learning disability in reading (dyslexia) could be easily missed if professionals rely on ability–achievement discrepancies and/or RtI data alone in their identification practices (Berninger & Abbott, 2013). As demonstrated, superior verbal reasoning does not eradicate central deficits related to dyslexia in this population; “unless these skills are assessed and educators are aware of which skills are impaired in an
individual students, the nature of the learning struggles in a twice-exceptional student with dyslexia faces remains invisible” (Berninger & Abbott, 2013, p. 229). These findings provide further support that comprehensive assessment is necessary for accurate identification of and intervention with twice-exceptional students.

3. **Characteristics**: Gifted children with ADHD displayed higher levels of creativity than their gifted peers without coexisting ADHD, despite displaying poorer working memory skills (Fugate, Zentall, & Gentry, 2013). These findings have ramifications for how we identify giftedness in students with ADHD and design curriculum and evaluation within their talent domains, such as using problem-based learning strategies, portfolio or project-based evaluation, and encouragement of divergent thinking.

4. **Intervention**: When successful twice-exceptional learners reflected back on practices used to highlight strengths and remediate weaknesses, they generally recommended students have ownership of their learning along with choice and flexibility in the content and process of learning (Willard-Holt, Weber, Morrison, & Horgan, 2013). Focusing on students’ higher-order thinking and analysis skills and treating them as mature learners are important, in addition to recognizing their need for disability accommodations. Unfortunately, almost all the participants did not report experiencing this type of a learning environment in their schools, suggesting there is still growth to be made regarding implementing effective strategies for twice-exceptional learners.

5. **Support**: The primary caregivers of academically successful twice-exceptional students perceive their encouragement as central to their children’s accomplishments (Speirs Neumeister, Yssel, & Hays Burney, 2013). Mothers interviewed recognized and celebrated their children’s talent domains, as well as identified and normalized their disabilities. They sought resources for their children, at all costs, and taught them to self-advocate. It is troublesome to think of the multitude of twice-exceptional students who do not have such advocates; as stated by Speirs Neumeister and colleagues, Support for the development of their talent needs to be built into the system with early and accurate identification of both gifts and disabilities, access to research-based interventions for addressing their disabilities, and opportunities to participate in gifted programs with appropriate accommodations to facilitate their success. (p. 270).

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. . . . Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. (Martin Luther King Jr.)

As a field, we have made substantial progress toward gaining greater knowledge about effective identification and intervention strategies for the twice-exceptional because of the impassioned work of many committed professionals. We don’t have all the answers but we are increasingly asking the right questions. With publications like this special issue of *Gifted Child Quarterly*, we will continue to move forward on the path of empirical understanding for these amazing children and their families.

**References**


