

Ensuring Gifted Children with Disabilities Receive Appropriate Services: Call for Comprehensive Assessment

Like all other students with disabilities in America's schools, gifted students with co-existing disabilities—the Twice-Exceptional (2e)—have the right to a free, appropriate, public education. However, due to challenges inherent in accurately evaluating a student's learning strengths and weaknesses, and special education identification processes that focus on below grade-level achievement, many 2e students are going unidentified. NAGC recommends five strategies that will increase the probability that gifted students with disabilities are identified and that their advanced abilities and disabilities are simultaneously addressed and supported.

For many gifted students with a disability, overlapping exceptionalities may render them invisible as either gifted or as students with learning disabilities. As such, they often may not receive either appropriate gifted or special education services that support their unique and complex learning needs. Although many are able to perform at grade level by using advanced reasoning and hard work to compensate for learning difficulties, this capacity to compensate is increasingly challenged as instructional pace accelerates and large-group instruction becomes predominant, putting students at risk for under-achievement and social and emotional problems. Without early interventions and accommodations to address their disabilities and manage increasing educational demands, some 2e students are unable to fully participate in advanced learning opportunities, communicate their understanding of content or demonstrate advanced skills, reach the high levels of achievement commensurate with their giftedness, or interact socially in a productive manner. Research has shown that gifted students with disabilities that significantly impact learning present diagnostic challenges and are best identified through comprehensive assessment by psychologists and other specialists that detects complex patterns of strengths and weaknesses. A combination of standardized assessments of intellectual potential, achievement, and areas of suspected disability can provide sufficient data to correctly diagnose and identify many twice-exceptional students for special education services and for gifted education programs and services.

To determine whether a student has a learning disability, schools have moved away from the use of a significant score discrepancy between ability and achievement to confirm that a child is performing below expectations for ability. Instead, schools locate students performing below grade level on ongoing classroom performance measures and provide initial support services through a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention. Response to Intervention (RtI), and similar programs developed to meet this requirement, was designed to provide such interventions quickly, beginning in the regular classroom. Typically, only those students who fail to respond sufficiently to the interventions are mandated for referral to special education under this approach.

Concern is mounting that below-grade-level performance criteria are too low to reliably locate higher ability children (not just the gifted) with learning disabilities (Foley Nicpon et al, 2011; McCallum, et al., 2013; McKenzie, 2010). Conversely, giftedness may also remain hidden without comprehensive assessment due to the "masking" effects of concomitant exceptionalities (McKenzie, 2010), which can reduce achievement and increase the likelihood that the students will be denied access to gifted programs. In essence, gifted students with disabilities may appear "not impaired enough" for disability-related services if they perform at grade-level and "not gifted enough" to receive gifted education services.

In order to improve identification processes that enable 2e students to be recognized and served as having both gifts and talents and disability(ies), NAGC recommends the following:

1. Provide comprehensive assessment (including norm-based, psychometrically sound, comprehensive individual intelligence and achievement tests and measures in all areas of suspected strength and disability) whenever a disability or second exceptionalism is suspected in a gifted child or when students identified with a disability show signs of advanced reasoning, creativity, or problem solving. Consider testing students who exhibit advanced abilities in some situations but fail to perform as expected, or who appear “lazy” or “unmotivated.” Include students with suspected learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and mental health concerns. Utilize comprehensive assessment by qualified school personnel such as school psychologists for diagnosis, eligibility determinations, and to guide interventions and accommodations.
2. Ensure that parents who report concerns of underperformance in a bright child are informed of the student’s rights concerning comprehensive assessment and the process to request it.
3. Adapt Response to Intervention to ensure that screening identifies all potential twice-exceptional children. In addition to using below-grade-level performance, look for students whose performance is discrepant across major academic areas, highly variable across academic tasks, or whose school performance, as reported by parents, differs greatly from outside of school learning and achievement. Refer these children for further assessment.
4. Include gifted education specialists in planning RtI interventions that may involve gifted or 2e students. Scientifically based interventions should meet the higher conceptual needs of the gifted: the most effective interventions take both exceptionalities into account (Yssel, 2012) and continue as long as the child continues to progress.
5. Provide training for teachers and other school professionals on the nature of and performance patterns of twice-exceptional students to improve identification and raise academic expectations. Due to the complexities in assessing twice-exceptional students, schools must look beyond using a single approach that may identify only the disability or the giftedness. Instead, comprehensive assessments in a process managed by school psychologists who understand both sets of exceptionalities and that is informed by parent experience provides the greatest promise for identifying and appropriately serving students with gifts and talents and disability(ies). RtI can be adapted to screen for patterns of performance that signal twice-exceptionality, diagnosed by subsequent comprehensive assessment. Teachers and all educational personnel can benefit from professional development on the characteristics and performance of twice exceptional students, which will increase the probability that these students will be identified and appropriately served with both gifted and special education services.

References

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The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

All position papers are approved by the NAGC Board of Directors and remain consistent with the organization's position that education in a democracy must respect the uniqueness of all individuals, the broad range of cultural diversity present in our society, and the similarities and differences in learning characteristics that can be found within any group of students. NAGC Position Papers can be found at www.nagc.org.