

## REFEREED ARTICLE

### **Erasure of Exceptionality: How Manitoba's Twice-Exceptional Learners Lose Out**

**Jennifer Metelski**

#### **Abstract**

*Twice-exceptional (2e) students are a unique group at risk for social/emotional difficulties and disenfranchisement in schools. These students' profiles combine giftedness with areas of struggle such as learning disabilities, social impairments, emotional and mental health issues, or behavioural problems. Supporting 2e students requires developing and delivering learning plans that address both their gifted needs and areas requiring support. When their giftedness goes unaddressed, 2e students are particularly susceptible to negative school outcomes. Currently, Manitoba does not recognize giftedness as a criterion for academic consideration; therefore, 2e students in the province are not assured appropriate educational support.*

A unique population of young people at special risk for social/emotional difficulties and underachievement at school are referred to as twice-exceptional (2e) learners (Reis et al., 2014). These students have profiles that combine superior ability in one or more areas and disabilities that may be areas of specific learning disabilities, behavioural or attention deficits, or social impairments. Educators frequently have little knowledge or understanding of 2e learners and are therefore limited in their ability to meet the unique needs of this group (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2018). Many 2e learners become disenfranchised at school; the remedial instruction and intervention they receive fails to address their strengths, talents, and interests (Gierczyk & Hornby, 2021). Negative school experiences have lifelong ramifications for these students: they continue to feel insecure, undervalued, and like they do not belong (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2018). Unless Manitoba educators are aware of the existence of twice-exceptionality, and policy is written to recognize the needs of these students, 2e learners will continue to struggle in the province's schools. This discussion posits that each of these problems has a solution, moving from individual teacher choices to broader professional development and legislative remedies.

#### **Describing Twice-Exceptionality**

The term *twice-exceptional* was coined to describe students who demonstrate superior ability in one or more areas, but who also have one or more disabilities; their performance falls on both ends of the learning spectrum (Neihart, 2018). Much literature on 2e learners focuses on gifted individuals with specific learning disabilities. Other challenges, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, physical disabilities, and behavioural and emotional disorders, are also included under the 2e umbrella (Baldwin et al., 2015). Understanding 2e students begins with identifying how their performance exceeds that of their age peers, how their disability is manifested, and how the characteristics of each part of their profile interact (Reis et al., 2014). The complex interplay between giftedness and disability means that these individuals require multifaceted plans combining seemingly contradictory interventions; discrete solutions intended to address giftedness or disability in isolation fail to address the wide range of 2e learners' needs.

#### **Identifying Twice-Exceptional Learners**

Educators frequently are unaware of or unable to identify 2e learners. Their learning traits – whether advanced or remedial – may be missed for a variety of reasons (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Some 2e learners achieve average grades because their superior talents and disabilities are counterbalanced in a manner that masks both high potential and areas of weakness (Neihart, 2018). Due to strong compensatory strategies, their grades are unremarkable despite exhibiting learning patterns common to disabled children (Gilman et al., 2013). Students initially identified as gifted may not be assessed for learning disabilities because of the common perception that failing or working below grade level is a prerequisite for diagnosis (Reis et al., 2014). For others, because the focus is on their deficits, their particular strengths and talents are ignored in favor of remediation (Baum et al., 2001). In Bishop and Rinn's (2019) study, at least one professional believed that youth with high IQ were always happy and sociable; according to this stereotype, students with social or emotional disabilities would be precluded from inclusion in high-ability categories. Without sufficient training, teachers' stereotypes of giftedness and disability limit the interventions they select to address the needs of 2e learners.

Teachers must be prepared to identify and meet the learning needs of 2e students during pre-service training, where courses in gifted education must be the rule rather than the exception (Peters & Jolly, 2018). Because educators execute programs in accordance with their level of training, it is essential that they develop perceptions of and dispositions toward 2e learners that will serve as catalysts for differentiation rather than barriers (Heuser et al., 2017). Courses about gifted students, which should be required for graduation, should address inaccurate perceptions, incorrect beliefs, and opinions about giftedness that may be grounded in partial truth but cannot be relied upon or used as specific guidelines for informing educational experiences for gifted students in general (Tirri & Laine, 2017), and 2e learners in particular. Teacher training, knowledge exchange, and continuing education for the enhancement of pedagogy and instructional skills are necessary to ensure that teachers are properly equipped and appropriately motivated to engage effectively with gifted and 2e learners (Heuser et al., 2017). When teachers possess strong skills related to differentiation – identifying individual needs, responding with effective teaching strategies, and assessing student progress in multiple ways to further drive instruction (Tirri & Laine, 2017) – they are prepared to successfully address 2e learners, who otherwise might succumb to underachievement and the problems associated with lack of challenge.

### **Moving From Disenfranchisement to Enchantment**

Feelings of disenfranchisement from school are common in 2e learners. Though they can think abstractly, process complex concepts, engage in authentic problem solving, and communicate their ideas creatively, development of their strengths and talents is thwarted by educators who see the mastery of basic skills as prerequisite for more advanced learning (Baum et al., 2001). Successful identification and interventions for 2e learners depends on understanding the effects of intersectionality between giftedness and disability (Baldwin et al., 2015). Learning problems often become the primary focus for educators, and 2e learners are denied the opportunity to participate in advanced learning opportunities that address their giftedness. When schools do not provide access to appropriate intellectual challenge for these students, poor outcomes can accrue: 2e students may become depressed, anxious, withdrawn, angry, discouraged, disinterested, and upset about school (Neihart, 2018). Because they tend to evaluate themselves based on their deficiencies rather than their strengths, 2e learners often have low self-esteem (Webb et al., 2019). They commonly see themselves as inadequate impostors, and their academic self-concept tends to be very low (Baldwin et al., 2015). This is particularly true when interventions intended to address their gifted needs go unmet.

Providing resources and supports for teachers of gifted and 2e students is essential in assuring that appropriate differentiation takes place in our province's classrooms. Many school leaders and teachers prioritize addressing academic weakness; this is neither good nor bad, but it does leave less instructional time for students requiring attention because the standard curriculum is inadequate (Peters & Jolly, 2018). Heuser et al. (2017) stated that because the

vital task of implementation rests with teachers, they must be provided with sufficient time, funding, and support to actualize effective differentiation strategies in practice. As more resources are allocated to programming for gifted students, the more formalized, appropriate, and sophisticated their programming becomes. Today's classrooms present a wide range of student academic readiness (Peters & Jolly, 2018), and we cannot assume that teachers are capable of limitless adaptation without sufficient assistance.

### **Directing Educators From Above**

Though they may have adequate training and support for classroom differentiations, Manitoba teachers still lack legislative direction to accommodate this group of students. As it is written, the Public Schools Act (PSA) does not allow gifted students to be identified as 2e, because only disabilities are considered grounds for adaptation and differentiation (Manitoba, 2020) while giftedness is not. This deficit-based model emphasizes weakness and the need for lowering the bar, while effectively erasing needs that exceed what students at a particular age are expected to understand, know, and do. Teachers and schools, guided by our province's legislation, look for learning problems and try to fix them – a noble cause. However, when the root of a learning difficulty lies in the gap between a student's high intellectual capacity and the lows of their cognitive profile, the PSA essentially directs educators to consider only one source of the 2e learner's difficulties. It is not common for giftedness to be considered within the realm of special education (Gierczyk & Hornby, 2021), but the needs of 2e learners are effectively erased when only their disabilities are considered significant for instructional planning purposes.

Manitoba must define giftedness as a criterion for educational accommodation, recognizing that which students are identified for assessment and served by programming depends largely on the definition that is used (Dole & Bloom, 2017). Incorporating a definition of giftedness that is both scientifically accurate and socially responsive (Heuser et al., 2017) into the PSA can help to secure 2e learners equal access to appropriate educational programming. The presence of a carefully crafted, broadly accepted definition of gifted and 2e learners in legislation will support teachers and school leaders, and guide their decision-making (Tirri & Laine, 2017). In other jurisdictions, new approaches for identifying giftedness have broadened the range of students included under the 2e umbrella; by recognizing social constraints and other disadvantages, these new, more inclusive definitions serve a wide range of students who may not have been identified by more traditional approaches (Lo & Porath, 2017). Because government initiatives and policies are intrinsically and explicitly linked to funding allocation, enrichment programming would be more likely to receive financial support (Brown & Wishney, 2017). Formalizing a definition of giftedness in the PSA is the first, crucial step in providing training opportunities for teachers and funding to support their efforts with 2e students.

As a group, 2e learners deserve to have their unique needs understood and met; they are part of the overall student population, and deserve thoughtful and strategic consideration when educational priorities are identified (Brown & Wishney, 2017). Policy-makers and educators in Manitoba have not yet embraced the concept of twice-exceptionality; without the requisite knowledge and skills for identifying and serving these students, educational systems will continue to fail to support 2e learners (Baldwin et al., 2015). We may need to grapple with the fact that our educational systems have underlying inadequacies that exacerbate the difficulties of 2e learners (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2013). The social, emotional, and educational implications for 2e learners whose needs are unmet are far reaching (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2018), and include the possibility that these students will be prevented from reaching their full potential.

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### **About the Author**

*Jennifer Metelski is an M.Ed. student at Brandon University. She has an interest in learning about gifted children and adults, and is particularly interested in understanding how lack of gifted identification and gifted-specific education in schools affects adult outcomes. She edited this paper with a pug puppy nibbling on her toes. Welcome to the family, Gertie!*