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# Seeing and Supporting Twice-Exceptional Learners

*Chin-Wen Lee and Jennifer A. Ritchotte*

## QUERY SHEET

- [Q1] Please cite [U.S. Department of Education 2013] in text or delete reference.
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# Seeing and Supporting Twice-Exceptional Learners

**Chin-Wen Lee**

*Department of Special Education, College of Education & Human Development, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, USA*

**Jennifer A. Ritchotte**

*School of Special Education, College of Education & Behavioral Sciences, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado, USA*

## **Abstract**

*Through a four-part discussion, this essay advocates for seeing the characteristics and special needs of gifted students with disabilities and using best practices to support their learning. Part 1 delineates the evolution of the legislative acts and professional initiatives regarding twice exceptionality. Part 2 discusses the educational rights of twice-exceptional learners. Part 3 presents challenges to understanding and supporting this student population, followed by a call for ongoing personnel training in part 4.*

**Key words:** *Disabilities, gifted and talented, professional development, twice-exceptional.*

Students with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate public education, and this is no exception for gifted students with disabilities (also called twice-exceptional or 2e). An indicator of equity in education is the number of disability populations represented in gifted and talented programs. Unfortunately, the Civil Rights Data Collection of 2011–2012 shows that students with disabilities do not have adequate access to gifted and talented education programs: “While 7% of students without disabilities are participating in gifted and talented education (GATE) programs, only 1% of students with disabilities served under IDEA [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] do so” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014, p. 4). This disproportionality discloses that there is much to be done to ensure twice-exceptional students have equitable access to gifted education (Coleman & Ford, 2016).

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1 Educating twice-exceptional students requires school personnel to be trained in recog-  
2 nizing the characteristics of these unique learners. The lack of understanding of the phe-  
3 nomenon of twice exceptionality is a huge barrier to nurturing students' talents (Morrison  
4 & Rizza, 2007; Nielsen, 2002). Failing to recognize the potential of students with disabilities  
5 may prevent them from getting advanced learning opportunities. No one really knows  
6 how many twice-exceptional students exist, although professionals estimate that 5% to  
7 6% of children with disabilities may also be gifted and talented (National Education As-  
8 sociation, 2006; Whitmore, 1981). In 2012–2013, it was estimated that more than 3 million  
9 students who had a disability were also gifted (Kena et al., 2015). Compared to 50 million  
10 students in public schools, 3 million is a fairly small number, yet society cannot afford the  
11 consequences of losing those talents. Not providing opportunities for this special popula-  
12 tion to achieve represents a "silent crisis" (Davidson, 2002; Ross, 1993).

### ***The Evolution of Legislative Acts and Professional Initiatives Regarding Twice Exceptionality***

16 Twice exceptionality is not new to the 21st century. Hollingworth (1923) described  
17 how children with both high IQ and special conditions survived schools: "Whatever the  
18 vicissitudes of fate—illness, absence, special disability—a child of superior general capac-  
19 ity manages to hold his own, at least" (p. 201). Two changing forces shaped education for  
20 twice-exceptional learners: legislative acts and professional initiatives (Gallagher, 2006).

#### **Legislative Acts**

23 Prior to the introduction of The Gifted and Talented Children's Educational Assistance  
24 Act in 1969, which urged administrators to develop programs for gifted and talented stu-  
25 dents, gifted education in the United States received little attention and financial support.  
26 Another purpose of the 1969 bill was to include the phrase "gifted and talented" in the  
27 Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Educational Professional Development Act  
28 (Harrington, Harrington, & Karns, 1991). Yet, there was no consensus on a definition of  
29 "gifted and talented" in education that could critically influence the provision of suitable  
30 services for these students.

32 A federal definition of "gifted and talented" presented in the Marland Report (1971)  
33 became the definition on which many American states began to model their own defi-  
34 nitions. This very first federal definition in the United States recognized that gifted and  
35 talented students (a) need different programs or services from regular school programs  
36 and (b) excel in one or multiple academic/ability areas. The majority of experts accepted  
37 the inclusion of those six areas: (a) general intellectual ability, (b) specific academic apti-  
38 tude, (c) creative or productive thinking, (d) leadership ability, (e) visual and performing  
39 arts, and (f) psychomotor ability (McClellan, 1985, p. 2). Adopting this definition was done  
40 with good intentions. In the National Excellence report, Ross (1993) reported that 73% of  
41 school districts in the nation adopted the Marland definition, which suggested that dis-  
42 tricts were "consider[ing] a broad range of talents" (p. 23). Unfortunately, districts inter-  
43 preted state and local requirements in ways that were different from the original intent  
44 of the legislation (Ross, 1993). For example, many districts' identification practices relied  
45 on test score cut-offs or intelligence quotient (IQ) and did not address a broad range of  
46 talents. Those practices also did not help find gifted students in different areas other than

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exceptional intellectual ability. Consequently, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, the economically disadvantaged, females, students with disabilities, underachievers, and students with artistic talent were underrepresented in gifted programs (Ross, 1993).

Since the 1980s, federal and state grants have been initiated to support services and programs for twice-exceptional students (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015). Special attention has been given to gifted students whose potential may not easily be demonstrated through standardized testing. The Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, passed in 1988, gave funding priority to “identifying students missed by traditional assessment methods (including children who are economically disadvantaged, have limited English proficiency, or have disabilities) and to education programs that include gifted and talented students from such groups” (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Javits grants have been the main source of funding for gifted education studies (Jolly & Kettler, 2008). Although the Javits Act was defunded during 2011–2013 and not restored by Congress until 2014, it remains the only federal program that supports research, projects, and personnel training to equip schools for identifying and meeting the needs of underrepresented gifted students (CEC, n.d.; Jolly & Kettler, 2008). The Javits Act’s priorities remained the same with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015.

The reauthorization of the IDEA of 2004, where the ability-achievement discrepancy model was removed from the definition of specific learning disabilities, has broadened discussions concerning how to identify gifted students with learning disabilities (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011). The Response to Intervention (RtI) model was adopted as a part of the evaluation procedures to identify students with specific learning disabilities (20 U.S.C. 1414(b)(6)). This legislative change led experts in the field of gifted education to recommend that the RtI model be applied in the identification of twice-exceptional students (CEC, 2009; NAGC, 2013) and, later, to call for including gifted education specialists on RtI teams (NAGC, 2013).

Interestingly, the existing federal definition of “gifted and talented” delineated in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) is similar to the one introduced in the Marland report. The ESSA, the successor to NCLB, has not yet provided a definition of “gifted and talented” but retained the Javits program, which supports the identification of and service for gifted students, especially “minority, economically disadvantaged, English language learners, and children with disabilities” (NAGC, n.d.). Retention of the Javits program holds promise for improving the education of twice-exceptional students.

In addition to the retention of the Javits program, the recognition of twice exceptionality in state law embodies the rising awareness that the needs of gifted students with disabilities must be addressed. Today, some states adopt either the phrase or concept of twice exceptionality in their definitions of “gifted and talented.” Many more states consider disabilities as vital factors in determining identification and/or services provision for gifted students (NAGC, 2015, 2016). Colorado actually includes “gifted students with disabilities (i.e., twice exceptional)” in its state rules for the Exceptional Children’s Education Act (1 CCR 301—8, 12.01, 2013(12)). Alabama also states that gifted students can be

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1 found “in all areas of human endeavor,” which contributes to the state’s efforts to identify  
2 students “among all populations [...] as well as students with disabilities” (Alabama Ad-  
3 ministrative Code, 290-8-9.12(1), (2)(b)). Further, Georgia and Arizona advise education  
4 agencies to consider possible disadvantages caused by disabilities in identification and/or  
5 the provision of services (NAGC, 2015, 2016).

### 7 Professional Initiatives

8 Along with the changes in legislation and administrative rules, initiatives led by profes-  
9 sional organizations shaped how twice-exceptional students are served today. Profession-  
10 als interested in twice exceptionality formed The Association of Gifted (TAG) Committee  
11 on the Gifted/Handicapped in 1975 (Whitmore, 1981) and the National Twice-Exceptional  
12 Community of Practice (2e CoP) in 2014 (Baldwin et al., 2015). The TAG Committee esti-  
13 mated 2e prevalence, raised public awareness, recruited individuals with disabilities to  
14 serve on the committee, sponsored topical conferences, and developed a position state-  
15 ment on 2e (Nielsen, 2002; Porter, 1982; Whitmore, 1981). Using a consensus approach, the  
16 National 2e CoP created a definition of “twice-exceptional individuals,” hoping to help  
17 people gain more understanding of twice exceptionality and bring about necessary sup-  
18 ports as a result. The definition reads:

19  
20 *Twice exceptional individuals evidence exceptional ability and disability, which*  
21 *results in a unique set of circumstances. Their exceptional ability may dominate, hiding*  
22 *their disability; their disability may dominate, hiding their exceptional ability; each may*  
23 *mask the other so that neither is recognized or addressed. 2e students, who may perform*  
24 *below, at, or above grade level, require the following:*

- 25
- 26 • Specialized methods of identification that consider the possible interaction of the  
27 exceptionalities,
- 28 • Enriched/advanced educational opportunities that develop the child’s interests,  
29 gifts, and talents while also meeting the child’s learning needs,
- 30 • Simultaneous supports that ensure the child’s academic success and social–emo-  
31 tional well-being, such as accommodations, therapeutic interventions, and special-  
32 ized instruction, and Working successfully with this unique population requires  
33 specialized academic training and ongoing professional development. (Baldwin  
34 et al., 2015, pp. 212–213)
- 35

36 This practitioner-oriented definition is crafted with characteristics of twice-exceptional  
37 individuals, ideal identification methods, and approaches to supporting these students’  
38 educational needs, as well as best practices to address the training needs of the personnel  
39 who work with them. The definition is important in “creating common language that can  
40 be shared among general educators, gifted educators, and special educators” and is likely  
41 to shape “legislation, teacher preparation programs, parameters of eligibility, and program  
42 accountability” in relation to educational services for twice-exceptional learners (Roberts,  
43 Pereira, & Knotts, 2015, p. 217). While the National 2e CoP is still working on disseminat-  
44 ing information (Baldwin et al., 2015), it expects its definition to be “a means to building  
45 awareness, promoting understanding, encouraging advocacy, and supporting best practic-  
46 es for students who are 2e” (Coleman & Roberts, 2015, p. 256).

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The evolution of understanding twice exceptionality is shown in how the federal and state governments defined giftedness and created a rationale to identify and serve this underrepresented student body. Twice-exceptional students, like gifted students in general, need differentiated education and fair identification procedures. Although the ESSA did not redefine the gifted and talented, it retained the Javits education program that gives a priority to gifted students with disabilities. The recognition of twice exceptionality is on the rise. States where the coexistence of giftedness and disabilities is addressed in state law may have better opportunities to improve their practices than states where gifted education is not mandated.

### ***The Right to Education for Twice-Exceptional Learners***

State and local education agencies do have a legal obligation to meet the needs of twice-exceptional learners. Different from the provision of gifted education, state and local education agencies that receive federal funding, including public charter schools, must provide special education and related services for eligible individuals and cannot discriminate against them. That is based on IDEA of 2004 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. An individualized educational plan (IEP) and Section 504 Accommodation Plan are legal documents that ensure qualified students receive access to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The implementation of an IEP or Section 504 plan “is not an option but the law” (Schultz, 2012, p. 127).

#### **IDEA of 2004**

In order to qualify to receive special education and related services under the IDEA, a child must first have a disability (or disabilities) as outlined in 34 C.F.R. § 300.8: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, mental retardation (replaced by “intellectual disability” in 2013), multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment. In addition to the educational category of disabilities, except for specific learning disability, there must be evidence that a disability “adversely affects a child’s educational performance” (34 C.F.R. § 300.8(c)(1)–(13)). So far, seven states (Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Maine, Montana, Vermont, and West Virginia) explicitly define “educational performance” as performance in academic and nonacademic areas; three states (Kentucky, Montana, Vermont) specify an adverse impact of a disability as below-grade-level performance (Thomas, 2016).

When a more inclusive perspective is adopted—both academic and nonacademic areas are encompassed in the definition of educational performance—the needs of twice-exceptional students are more likely to be addressed (Eig, Weinfeld, & Rosenstock, 2014). In its decision on the appeal of *Mr. and Mrs. I. v. Maine School Administrative District No. 55* (1st Cir. 2005), the Court of Appeals agreed with the district court that the Asperger’s Syndrome that caused a student’s social-emotional difficulties could adversely affect her educational performance (*Mr. and Mrs. I.*, 2007). In view of the child’s poor ability to communicate, the Court considered social skills and pragmatic-language instruction as special education within the intent of the IDEA. As a result, a broad definition of educational performance benefited that twice-exceptional student.

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1 Even though some professionals promote a broad, inclusive definition of education-  
2 al performance (Thomas, 2016), according to the (U.S. Department of Education, 2015),  
3 “some local education agencies (LEA) are hesitant to conduct initial evaluation to deter-  
4 mine eligibility for special education and related services for children with high cognition”  
5 (para. 2). In fact, the phenomenon is not new. The National Education Association (NEA)  
6 already pointed out that some twice-exceptional students may “[g]o unnoticed for possi-  
7 ble special education evaluation” (NEA, 2006, p. 5). Performing on grade level may be the  
8 reason that 2e students are excluded from a special education referral (Crepeau-Hobson  
9 & Bianco, 2011; Morrison & Rizza, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education responded to  
10 Dr. Jim Delisle’s request for clarification of applying the IDEA to students who have high  
11 cognition and who may also have specific learning disabilities (SLD):  
12

13 *[I]t would be inconsistent with the IDEA for a child, regardless of whether the child*  
14 *is gifted, to be found ineligible for special education and related services under the SLD*  
15 *category solely because the child scored above a particular cut score established by State*  
16 *policy (2013, para. 4).*  
17

18 In a related memorandum, the Department restated the obligation of each local educa-  
19 tion agency to “evaluate all children, regardless of cognitive skills” (2015, para. 2). In light  
20 of the Department’s statement, students’ needs for special education and gifted education  
21 are not exclusive of one another.  
22

23 The adequacy of educational benefits under IDEA is another issue with regard to  
24 maximizing the potential of high-ability students with disabilities. The Rowley case, *Amy*  
25 *Rowley v. Hendrick Hudson Central School District*, drew people’s attention to *educational ben-*  
26 *efits*—whether the education and related services provided are enabling students with dis-  
27 abilities to reach their maximum potential (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Hazelkorn, 2007). However,  
28 “post-*Rowley* courts have reviewed passing grades and grade advancement as important  
29 factors when determining if a student received educational benefit” (Johnson, 2003, p. 565).  
30 Consequently, some schools “have failed to consider a student’s specific cognitive ability  
31 in view of grade-level performance” (Eig et al., 2014, p. 20). In fact, the issue for 2e students  
32 under the IDEA goes beyond access to specialized services; it is about having higher expect-  
33 ations for education outcomes (Johnson, 2003; Yell et al., 2007).  
34

35 In March 2017, the *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School Dist. RE-1* case served as a wake-  
36 up call for the need to provide a higher standard of educational benefits for students with  
37 disabilities. The Supreme Court was presented with the following: “What is the level of  
38 educational benefit that school districts must confer on children with disabilities to pro-  
39 vide them with the free appropriate public education guaranteed by the Individuals with  
40 Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.?” (*Endrew F. v. Douglas County School*  
41 *Dist. RE-1*, 2016). Currently, eight Circuit Courts (1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11) adopt lower  
42 standards with some benefits more than trivial or *de minimis*; the Ninth Circuit has a con-  
43 fused standard, depending on the panels; and the Third and Sixth circuits have a “mean-  
44 ingful educational benefit” standard that is considered better than some or more than triv-  
45 ial (Yell & Bateman, 2017). The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously rejected the *de minimis*  
46 standard applied by the 10th Circuit where the *Endrew* case was first heard. The Supreme

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Court declared, “[A] student offered an educational program providing ‘*merely more than de minimis*’ progress from year to year can hardly be said to have been offered an education at all” (*Andrew F. v. Douglas County School Dist. RE-1*, 2017, p. 14). This affirmation from the Supreme Court holds merits for providing educational services to twice-exceptional students. These students, if formally identified for special education services, now must receive meaningful educational services that will extend their learning beyond a minimum threshold and afford them the opportunity to achieve to their full potential in school.

### Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Except for IDEA, twice-exceptional students can seek services and accommodations through Section 504 if they show evidence that their physical or mental impairments substantially limits major life activities, including learning (34 C.F.R. 104.3(j)(2)(ii)). Unfortunately, the vague guidelines about educational services under Section 504 pose challenges for schools to meet the needs of 2e learners. School personnel may not be familiar with regulations (Schultz, 2012). In some cases, school personnel do not acknowledge that students in advanced programs may have special needs or students in special education can receive gifted education as well (Besnoy et al., 2015; Ritchotte & Matthews, 2012; Schultz, 2012). In response to the provision of 504 plans, parents reported things such as they needed to fight for a 504 Plan, the school did not provide a 504 plan because the student was succeeding academically, and the counselor insisted that one 504 meeting in a year was enough and denied possibilities to make changes to a 504 plan (Besnoy et al., 2015; Ritchotte & Matthews, 2012). In addition, state and local education agencies have their own interpretations regarding the development and implementation of a Section 504 plan (Bennett & Frank, 2009). Foley-Nicpon (2015) had this observation: “[A] student identified as needing a 504 Plan in one school may not meet the requirements in another” (p. 251). As a result, this inconsistency may impede the provision of necessary resources to meet 2e students’ needs.

In addition to an IEP or Section 504 plan that addresses accommodations for learning and testing, a 2e student needs a gifted education plan (e.g., advanced learning plan) to develop areas of strengths (Crepeau-Hobson & Bianco, 2011). The question is what can be done to better implement a gifted education plan and an IEP or Section 504 plan in school? “Dual emphasis,” for example, is a parallel approach to addressing a student’s strengths and challenges simultaneously (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2012). As the National 2e CoP addressed in its definition, twice-exceptional learners need (a) learning opportunities that develop their gifts and talents while meeting their learning needs and (b) simultaneous supports for academic achievement and well-being (Baldwin et al., 2015). The meaning of developing suitable, comprehensive education plans goes beyond following the laws.

In conclusion, pursuing education equity for twice-exceptional students is an obligation, not an option. Parents/guardians and schools need to make decisions based on students’ needs. As Alabama’s law states, gifted children and youth “can be found in all populations, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor” (Alabama Administrative Code, 290-8-9.12(1)). If educators are aware of educational and clinical categories of disability and acknowledge that giftedness and disabilities can coexist, they should know that twice-exceptional learners have multidimensional needs: mental, physical, and



1 social-emotional. The ethical issue of educating a whole child can equal or surpass the  
2 responsibility to comply with federal regulations.

### ***The Complexity of Twice Exceptionality***

5 A long-standing perception about gifted and talented individuals is their above-aver-  
6 age performance. The first federal definition of giftedness said gifted children are “capable  
7 of high performance,” including “those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential  
8 ability” (Marland, 1971, p. ix). Gifted and talented students, defined in the NCLB Act of  
9 2001, are those who “give evidence of high achievement capability” (20 U.S.C. § 7801 (22)).  
10 By following the law, teachers or diagnosticians who are responsible for an identification  
11 referral must seek evidence of high performance, such as scoring at the 95th percentile or  
12 above on a standardized test or observation tool.

### **No Typical Twice-Exceptional Learner Profile**

15 Despite the general perception of above-average performance, the National 2e CoP  
16 indicated that for twice-exceptional students, the interaction between their disabilities and  
17 gifts and talents may end up with three results: “Their exceptional ability may dominate,  
18 hiding their disability; their disability may dominate, hiding their exceptional ability;  
19 each may mask the other so that neither is recognized or addressed” (Baldwin et al., 2015,  
20 p. 212). Furthermore, twice-exceptional students “may perform below, at, or above grade  
21 level” (Baldwin et al., 2015, p. 212). *Redefining Giftedness for a New Century* (NAGC, 2010)  
22 stated, “The development of ability or talent is a lifelong process. [...] Various factors can  
23 either enhance or inhibit the development and expression of abilities” (para. 2). Twice-  
24 exceptional learners may not demonstrate gifted behaviors due to barriers to attainment,  
25 such as impoverished learning environment or disabilities that prevent individuals from  
26 performing adequately on standardized tests. Opportunities to learn are also opportuni-  
27 ties to develop gifts and talents.

29 The unknown about twice exceptionality remains bigger than what educators and  
30 researchers have known. Cognitive or psychosocial characteristics of individuals with  
31 disabilities do not always apply to twice-exceptional individuals. Likewise, gifted char-  
32 acteristics cannot fully represent twice-exceptional individuals. Quite a few empirical  
33 studies conducted after 2010 help educators validate how twice-exceptional students  
34 function mentally and emotionally (e.g., Assouline, Foley-Nicpon, & Whiteman, 2010;  
35 Foley-Nicpon, Doobay, & Assouline, 2010; Foley-Nicpon, Rickels, Assouline, & Richards,  
36 2012; Fugate, Zentall, & Gentry, 2013; Lovett & Sparks, 2010). For example, teachers may  
37 have had observations about gifted students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). How-  
38 ever, an empirical study on students’ cognitive and academic profiles did not come out  
39 until 2012 (Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Stinson, 2012). Because it is difficult to establish  
40 patterns of twice-exceptional students, researchers repeatedly call for a comprehensive  
41 analysis/assessment of learner profiles in order to have correct diagnosis and suitable in-  
42 terventions (Foley-Nicpon et al., Foley-Nicpon et al., 2012; Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014).

### **Limited Study Focuses**

45 Traditionally, the discussions on twice-exceptional students cover a broader range in  
46 books than in research articles. Maker (1977) discussed programming for gifted students

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with blind and visual impairments, deaf and hearing impairments, emotional disturbance/behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, and physical disabilities. In 1999, Cline and Schwartz published *Diverse Populations of Gifted Children* and included gifted students with hearing and visual impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and physical disabilities. Callard-Szulgit (2008) presented multiple types of students to teachers and parents: gifted students with deafness and hearing loss, visual impairments, emotional disturbance, ADHD, Asperger’s Syndrome, autism, dyslexia, learning disabilities, epilepsy, and traumatic brain injury. Montgomery (2015), based on a UK system, had an in-depth discussion about gifted children with ADHD, Asperger’s Syndrome, dyslexia, and developmental coordination difficulties.

Foley-Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, and Stinson (2011) conducted a review of 2e empirical studies published from 1990 to 2009. They indicated that ADHD, ASD, and SLD are “the three most commonly investigated areas” (p. 4). Two reasons for this common focus are given in another article (Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2013, p. 170): (a) SLD and ADHD are the largest disability categories in schools, and (b) the ASD population is growing. However, according to statistics in the fall of 2013 (Institute on Disability, 2015), speech or language impairment (19.1%), following SLD (38.6%), is the second largest group in schools. Yet researchers have not explored high-potential students in the category of speech or language impairment. Furthermore, rarely have researchers brought up the possibilities of identifying gifted and talented students in populations of those with emotional disturbance or multiple disabilities. The National Education Association said in *The Twice-Exceptional Dilemma*, “Certainly, any child with a disability can also have gifts and talents. For example, a student with mental retardation can be a gifted artist or athlete” (NEA, 2006, p. 1). Reis et al. (2014) suggested that a definition of twice exceptionality must acknowledge the coexistence of giftedness and any of the IDEA categories except for intellectual disability. Being open to possible new categories of twice exceptionality also challenges existing definitions of disabilities and giftedness.

In summary, the cognitive and psychosocial characteristics of the twice-exceptional student vary from individual to individual. Students who are 2e may not always perform above grade level. Instead, they may have average or below-average performance depending on the interaction between giftedness and disabilities. Researchers are starting to find patterns by analyzing students’ assessment results. However, to generalize 2e groups is next to impossible. For practitioners and researchers, more empirical studies are needed to help identify gifts and talents of students with visible and invisible disabilities.

### ***Personnel Training in Supporting Twice-Exceptional Students***

It is generally accepted that teacher training has a relationship with the effectiveness of identifying or serving twice-exceptional students (Bianco & Leech, 2010). Professionals who work closely with students are often inadequately exposed to issues around under-represented groups, including gifted students with disabilities. Whitmore pointed out that teacher candidates preparing to teach gifted students or students with disabilities “have shared little information between the fields. [...] [T]he professionals in both fields know very little about the knowledge and skills representative of the other area of specialization” (1981, p. 112). Thirty years later, researchers still reflect on the isolation that both new and

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1 experienced teachers of students with disabilities and students with gifts and talents feel,  
2 and assert the negative impact this often has on the students they teach (Henley et al.,  
3 2010).

4  
5 Specialized training with limited exposure to diverse learners may affect teachers' per-  
6 ceptions about students. For example, Bianco and Leech (2010) found that teachers' train-  
7 ing background affected referral recommendations for gifted services: Compared to gifted  
8 and general education teachers, special education teachers who focused more on students'  
9 weaknesses and perceive IQ as an indicator of giftedness were least likely to refer students  
10 to a gifted program. Additionally, Bianco and Leech (2010) noticed that general, gifted, and  
11 special education teachers were affected by disability labels when making referral deci-  
12 sions. The researchers confirmed this finding to be consistent with other studies conducted  
13 before 2005. Although the effects of preservice and inservice teacher education were not  
14 distinguished, the lack of training about twice exceptionality was obvious.

15  
16 In fact, a team approach has dominated methods to supporting twice-exceptional stu-  
17 dents and reshaped expectations for professionals outside gifted and special education  
18 (Coleman & Gallagher, 2015). These include classroom teachers, school counselors, and  
19 school psychologists. Assouline and Foley-Nicpon (2007) indicated that making curriculum  
20 and accommodation recommendations for twice-exceptional students needs to be collab-  
21 orative and team-driven, and members of the educational team "need to be aware of all  
22 educational options available to address students' diverse areas of exceptionality" (p. 13).  
23 However, two similar surveys conducted at different times showed that education profes-  
24 sionals were unfamiliar with guidelines that were used outside their disciplines but were still  
25 related to the education system (Assouline & Foley-Nicpon, 2007; Foley-Nicpon et al., 2013).  
26 To support twice-exceptional students, professionals need more cross-disciplinary training  
27 on how to work with gifted students and twice-exceptional students. School psychologists  
28 who have expertise in measurement and assessment can help evaluate twice-exceptional  
29 students' learner profiles by including "norm-based, psychometrically sound, comprehen-  
30 sive individual intelligence and achievement tests and measures in all areas of suspected  
31 strength and disability" (NAGC, 2013, p. 2). School counselors need to play an important role  
32 as well. All students, including 2e learners, can benefit from school counselors who "help  
33 all students in the areas of academic achievement, personal/social development and career  
34 development" (American School Counselor Association, n.d.a, para. 1). Data strongly indi-  
35 cate the need for more twice-exceptional training: In a national survey, nearly 60% of school  
36 psychologists ( $N = 300$ ) revealed that they had no to little familiarity regarding twice excep-  
37 tionality (Robertson, Pfeiffer, & Taylor, 2011). Leggett, Shea, and Leggett (2011) reported that  
38 only three out of 37 graduate-level counseling students had knowledge of twice exceptionality,  
39 and one of the three students indicated that he/she acquired the knowledge from his/her  
40 supervisor. In addition, these participants did not consider themselves advocates for gifted  
41 students with disabilities, despite the expectation that school counselors should "promote  
42 equity and access to rigorous educational experiences for all students" through "leadership,  
43 advocacy and collaboration" (American School Counselor Association, n.d.b, p. 1).

44  
45 Voices of twice-exceptional students, their parents, and their teachers suggest what  
46 educators need to know and be able to perform in order to help 2e students succeed. Beth,

## *Seeing and Supporting Twice-Exceptional Learners*

a 2e student, shared her experience: “The schools system struggled to understand that even though I was smart, I still needed extra support to learn and be successful in school” (Brownstein, 2015, p. 226). To teach 2e students, educators must acquire fundamental knowledge and skills such as 2e student characteristics, flexible approaches to structuring learning, and collaboration among school personnel and parents (Rubenstein, Schelling, Wilczynski, & Hooks, 2015). Research from 2e students’ experiences and observations from parents and teachers suggest that twice-exceptional students need ownership in their learning, higher-level thinking skills, compensation strategies, and strength-based, talent-focused learning environments (see Table 1). Another 2e student commented on the benefits of attending a school that adopted a strengths-based philosophy: “The school tailors curriculum around your strengths. It helps you grow your mind in every way” (as cited in Baum et al., 2014, p. 321). Educators need to focus their professional learning on enhancing their knowledge and skills in these areas.

Adequate training includes not only knowledge and skills but also maintaining high expectations for students. Through a case study, Missett, Azano, Callahan, and Landrum (2016) found that the participating teacher’s low expectations for her gifted student with an emotional and behavioral disability were likely to drive the choice of deficit-based interventions more than strength-based ones. Acknowledging the asynchronous development in twice-exceptional students is important as well. In relation to assessing students’ learning progress, teachers should measure students’ growth over time instead of using grade-level expectations (Baum et al., 2014; Mann, 2006; Rubenstein et al., 2015). Teacher attitudes are equally as important as knowledge and skills.

**Table 1. Possible Professional Learning Topics Regarding Teaching Strategies**

<i>Teaching strategies</i>		<i>Sources</i>
Learners’ ownership	Establish and explain assignment criteria.	(Willard-Holt, Weber, Morrison, & Horgan, 2013)
	Help allocate time for completing assignments.	
Higher-level thinking skills	Present complex ideas and ways of thinking about them; for example, the ways that ideas are connected to one another.	(Willard-Holt et al., 2013)
	Utilize strategies to enhance giftedness; for example, critical and creative thinking.	
Compensation strategies	Deliberately teach study/learning and performance strategies.	(Reis, McGuire, & Neu, 2000; Willard-Holt et al., 2013)
	Teach the use of compensation supports.	
Strength-based, talent-focused philosophy	Create a psychologically safe environment.	(Baum, Schader, & Hébert, 2014; Mann, 2006; Rubenstein et al., 2015; Willard-Holt et al., 2013)
	Foster positive relationships.	
	Give students time for growth.	
	Understand students’ asynchronous development and be patient with it.	
	Encourage students to pursue topics of interest at their own pace.	

1     **Specialized and Ongoing Professional Development**

2     The National 2e CoP indicated that working with twice-exceptional students requires  
3     specialized academic training as well as ongoing professional development (Baldwin et al.,  
4     2015). Under the ESSA, ongoing professional development means activities that are “sus-  
5     tained (not stand-alone, 1-day, or short term workshops), intensive, collaborative, job-em-  
6     bedded, data-driven, and classroom-focused” (§8002 (42)) and can help teachers or related  
7     service professionals implement the knowledge and skills in classrooms. Some states have  
8     tried to improve professionals’ capacity to better serve twice-exceptional students. Among  
9     42 responding state education agencies, three states were either educating or supporting  
10    their professionals to learn about twice exceptionality at the state level (NAGC & CSDPG,  
11    2015). In the category of positive developments and/or innovations in gifted education,  
12    Colorado listed its twice-exceptional professional development project. Texas developed  
13    the *Twice-Exceptional Students and G/T Services* website, which is under the state’s Equity  
14    in Gifted/Talented Education framework. Rhode Island reported having designated per-  
15    sonnel at the state education agency to provide technical assistance, and believed this was  
16    having a positive impact on the delivery of gifted education services in the state during  
17    the time frame when the *State of the States* survey was completed. Still, the United States  
18    has a long way to go before achieving the goal of making every student succeed. Studies or  
19    reports on the development, implementation, or effectiveness of twice-exceptional profes-  
20    sional development have not yet been found. Administrators who are dedicated to helping  
21    professionals serve 2e learners are either seeking models to learn from or finding ways to  
22    establish evidence-based practices.

23  
24    In summary, there is a need for recruiting a more diverse, representative sample of pro-  
25    fessionals to support twice-exceptional learners. Gifted education teachers or specialists  
26    alone are unable to carry out all duties that relate to identification and educational services;  
27    general and special education teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, and other  
28    specialized service professionals should be part of the teamwork. Twice-exceptional train-  
29    ing that includes knowledge, skills, and dispositions should be integrated into personnel  
30    preparation programs and professional development.

31     **Conclusions**

32     Supporting twice-exceptional learners requires specialized academic training as well  
33     as ongoing professional development. It also requires collaboration and advocacy of pro-  
34     fessionals. To better support the learning of twice-exceptional students, professionals  
35     should advocate for including twice exceptionality in public law since there are no stat-  
36     utory requirements to define or identify 2e students. This action should be followed by  
37     explicit guidelines about identification and programming. Professionals who have learned  
38     about twice exceptionality should be compelled to help other educational professionals  
39     understand characteristics and needs of twice-exceptional learners. Next, professionals  
40     should expand the discussion about twice exceptionality beyond gifted students with SLD,  
41     ADHD, and ASD to include other disability categories. Empirical studies on the coexis-  
42     tence of high-ability and other disability categories (e.g., emotional disturbance or speech  
43     or language impairment) are needed to advance the understanding of twice exceptionality.  
44     Finally, professionals should be aware of trends and issues in an education system. Under-  
45     standably, professionals who care about twice exceptionality cannot remain siloed from  
46

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other educators. Recognizing gifted students with disabilities and providing them with appropriate learning opportunities can help these students fulfill their potential.

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