Chapter 11

The Masking Effect:
Hidden Gifts and Disabilities of 2e Students

Jessica Cannaday
Azusa Pacific University, USA

ABSTRACT

Twice exceptional students, those who are both gifted and have learning or behavioral difficulties, are an often under-served population. This chapter recommends approaching twice exceptional student needs holistically using a Response to Intervention model. The chapter defines the twice exceptional learner, and discusses intelligence theory in relation to both giftedness and twice exceptionality. The chapter further recommends a combination of RtI universal screening identification practices and traditional gifted and talented education identification methods, as well as multiple differentiation techniques to support the needs of this special population.

INTRODUCTION

Giftedness is a seemingly simplistic word which researchers have found remarkably difficult to define (Ronksley-Pavia, 2015). In the Marland Report identification of students for Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) Programs required, “evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity or in specific academic fields,” (Marland, 1972). Later, the National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent report added the phrase, “potential to perform at high levels of accomplishment” (1993). Researcher, Francois Gagne defines giftedness as “the possession and use of outstanding natural abilities, called aptitudes, in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of age peers” (Gagne, 2008, p1). The definitions are numerous and sometimes conflicting, and according to Kristen Stephens (2006), “The absence of a consistent definition weakens advocacy efforts for gifted education and supplies those opposing gifted programs and services with a means to further perpetrate myths that negate efforts in identifying and serving gifted students” (https://tip.duke.edu/node/832).

Stephens’ assertion is supported by the dearth of information available on gifted education. Data on gifted and talented students and programs is sparse (Callahan, Moon, Oh, 2014). Although the federal Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Children and Youth Education Act of 1988 recognizes a need for special programs for the gifted, there is no federal mandate for the education of gifted children as does exist for other special needs populations, such as children with specific disabilities (H.R. 543, 1988 in Callahan, Moon and Oh, 2014). Federal funding for the gifted represents less than 1% of Education funding in the United States (Callahan, Moon and Oh, 2014).

A further complication in defining giftedness is the truth that children are NOT all gifted in the same way, or across the board. A child may be gifted in one area, but have a specific academic, social, physical or intellectual disability in another area. In both the gifted and disability fields we often call this phenomenon “dual-exceptionality”, “twice-exceptionality”, or “2E” because the child is exceptional in his/her gift or talent, while also exhibiting an exceptionality in terms of a learning, emotional, physical, sensory, or developmental disability (Coleman, Harradine & Williams King, 2005).

Gifted education is a field that is already limited in scope in terms of both research and funding. It is unsurprising that the study of a population within the already small gifted population is extremely limited and particularly complex. Twice-exceptional or 2E students are increasingly studied within the gifted field itself, but very new to the special education population and almost unheard of within the general education literature. However, this population of students is also in dire need of support.

In a system that often utilizes achievement to identify students with academic needs, whether those needs be an increase in challenge level or support in meeting educational requirements, the 2E student is in a tenuous position. It is often the case that a students’ strength may mask a weakness, and vise-versa. A child who has a high vocabulary and very strong auditory skills for instance, may master content in the classroom very quickly. However, if that same child struggles with a learning disability that affects his/her reading, academic output may not match conceptual understanding. This can cause the child to appear average, or even below average in terms of actual classroom achievement. The masking effect allows twice exceptional students to sit in the regular education classroom indefinitely, without receiving support for or even identification of either their disabilities or their gifts.

This chapter will further explore the masking effect. First, the chapter author will discuss intelligence theory in relation to the twice exceptional child. Spearman’s (g), Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences theory, and Sternberg’s Triarchic intelligence theory, will be included. Additional perspectives on fluid and crystallized intelligence will also be explored. Further, the Atypical Brain Development model as a neuroscientific perspective on twice exceptional students will be discussed as a method for viewing the 2E child from a holistic perspective. Methods for identifying twice exceptional children utilizing a combination of gifted and talented education practices and special education practices will be explored, with a particular focus on the Response to Intervention universal screening process. The chapter will also discuss diverse methods and strategies for meeting the individual needs of twice exceptional students. Gifted and talented education strategies, including the Icons of Depth and Complexity, tiered lesson design, curriculum compacting, ability grouping, and flexible grouping will also be discussed. An emphasis on Response to Intervention best practice and tiering will be explored. Additional notes on the emotional difficulties twice exceptional children may face will be included. Chapter objectives comprise understanding the twice exceptional child as multifaceted intellectually, recognizing the need for diverse methods of identification, including universal screening, in order to ensure that twice exceptional students receive necessary services, exploring multiple differentiation and support strategies for