

Identifying and Serving Gifted Children Who Are Twice Exceptional

Introduction

NAGC's (2019) Definition of Giftedness that Guides Best Practice emphasizes the complex nature of being academically advanced and suggests the need for a multifaceted approach to educational identification and service provision. The definition acknowledges the diversity of students within this group, including those who are twice-exceptional. Twice-exceptional students "demonstrate the potential for high achievement or creative productivity on one or more domains . . . AND who manifest one or more disabilities" (Reis et al., 2014, p. 222). Although they are heterogeneous in how they present cognitively, socially, and emotionally, twice-exceptional students all possess a combination of strengths and vulnerabilities that require support. Therefore, NAGC recommends strength-based, talent-focused, and inclusive identification and intervention strategies for twice-exceptional youth.

Research Overview

Like other academically advanced students, twice-exceptional students are racially/ethnically and economically diverse, curious, and creative, and have varying interests and talents. Like other students with disabilities, twice-exceptional students have learning, social, emotional, processing, and/or behavioral challenges. This may result in inconsistent grades or test scores, frustration, insecurity, lack of motivation (Foley-Nicpon & Lin, 2022), as well as underdeveloped social and emotional skills (Reis et al., 2014; Renzulli & Gelbar 2020).

Educator knowledge and awareness of twice-exceptionality have increased in recent years. In the most recent NAGC State of the States in Gifted Education report (Hodges, 2025), six states reported references to twice-exceptionality and/or disability in their definitions of giftedness, and eight states reported addressing twice-exceptionality in their equity/excellence gap policy. Yet how many of these students are served varies widely: representatives from 23 states reported percentages of students identified for both gifted and special education/Section 504 plan accommodations ranging from 0% to 18.66%, with all but two being less than 10% (Hodges, 2025). Recent National Center for Education Statistics data estimates that 15% of all public school students have a disability (NCES, 2024), suggesting that twice exceptional students likely remain underrepresented in gifted education settings (Barnard-Brak et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2019). Some schools are addressing these inequities, but it can be challenging given the lack of federal policy, mandates, and/or funding for advanced education services (Hodges, 2025).

Educational Identification. Twice-exceptional students face barriers to appropriate identification for both advanced learning and disability-related supports (Foley-Nicpon et al.,

2013; Reis et al., 2014). Their disabilities may limit the extent to which their strengths are evident, which can be especially problematic when identification is determined via composite rather than domain-specific academic and ability scores (i.e., general ability versus performance in math or language arts). Alternately, their strengths may compensate for their disabilities, especially in the early grades, which precludes early identification for appropriate accommodations and/or interventions (Reis et al., 2014). Failure to recognize their exceptionalities typically prevents twice-exceptional students from receiving necessary supports, as the provision of alternatives to standard educational practices are often predicated on formal identification.

When determining eligibility for disability-related supports, such as Section 504 Plans and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), federal legislation requires that the student (a) have a disability, and (b) demonstrate a need for specially designed instruction and/or accommodations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). In many cases, it is the latter criterion that limits twice-exceptional students from being determined eligible for disability supports. Many do not display below-average grades or achievement scores, which are often used as a screening metric, especially since the adoption and implementation of the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support framework (MTSS; Bell et al., 2015; McCallum et al., 2013). As a result, twice-exceptional students may not have access to structured supports until educational demands so significantly outpace their abilities that they can no longer compensate. While it would be beneficial to expand the definition of "educational need" to include nonacademic indicators (e.g., emotional distress, executive dysfunction), it is also possible that the needs of many twice-exceptional students could be met through informal strategies applied at the individual and/or universal level.

Twice-exceptional identification is further impacted by systematic barriers. Specifically, students from minoritized groups are persistently underserved by talent development programming (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Peters, 2022; Shores et al., 2020) and overrepresented within special education (Shores et al., 2020; Wiley et al., 2025). Additionally, some research suggests that students who receive special education services are less likely to be referred for advanced learning opportunities (Barnard-Brak et al., 2015; Cain et al., 2019; McCallum et al., 2013). Therefore, because students of color are more likely to be referred for disability-related programming, and students in special education are less likely to be referred for gifted programming, twice-exceptional students from minoritized groups may be especially at risk for receiving appropriate talent development opportunities at school.

Research has suggested that comprehensive assessment is the best way to understand the full range of twice-exceptional

students' abilities (Foley-Nicpon & Assouline, 2020; Reis et al., 2014), but this is rarely feasible within systems for identifying advanced learners due to limited funding and related resources available to advanced education programs (Hodges, 2025). Increased identification of historically underrepresented student groups, including twice-exceptional learners, can be achieved through universal screening (McCallum et al., 2013). Universal screening also aligns identification systems within a talent development framework (Subotnik et al., 2011) by focusing on domain-specific talents and abilities that can then be aligned with domain-specific advanced learning opportunities.

Service Provision. Twice-exceptional students need access to settings conducive to developing their talents (Subotnik et al., 2011). Without access, opportunities may be reserved for students whose families have the educational capital and financial resources for additional outside-of-school programs and other services. This supposition is supported by researchers who have demonstrated variable career outcomes for academically advanced students with ADHD (Park et al., 2024) and parents of twice-exceptional youth who note the substantial cost associated with educational and psychological resources needed to help their child succeed (Park et al., 2024; Speirs Neumeister et al., 2013).

Few researchers have examined educational interventions for twice-exceptional learners. This could be explained in part by the diversity of profiles in this group; twice-exceptional students vary cognitively (Michaelson et al., 2021) as well as psychosocially (Mahatmya et al., 2023). Research and practice recommendations coalesce around a strengths-based, talent development approach that emphasizes psychological well-being, acceptance of difference, adequate time allocation to academic pursuits, and positive interpersonal interactions (Baum et al., 2014). A recent case study (Speirs Neumeister, 2024) outlined a framework of support for twice-exceptional youth that includes (a) creating a "culture of acceptance;" (b) professional development regarding the needs of high-ability youth; and (c) inclusion of a learning specialist who understands twice-exceptionality. Schools with frameworks of support can bring together educational professionals to create Personal Education Plans (PEPs) to address students' specific strengths and areas for growth that are grounded in systemic, MTSS frameworks (Foley-Nicpon & Teriba, 2022). Similar recommendations have been found to be successful at the postsecondary level, where researchers have discovered that strengths-based educational environments that develop students' interests and social/emotional skills are beneficial for college students with autism (Reis et al., 2022).

Research-Based Best Practices

For twice-exceptional learners, NAGC recommends the following:

1. Develop policies related to twice-exceptional students that allocate adequate financial and educational resources for identification and service provision.
2. Ensure that identification practices for gifted services allow for the flexibility necessary to include twice-exceptional youth for talent development opportunities.

This starts with universal screening or offering eligibility assessment to all students.

3. Ensure that practitioners demonstrate awareness about the extreme variability in what it means to be twice-exceptional, thereby requiring an individual differences approach to identification and intervention.
4. Adopt talent development frameworks for gifted services that include supporting students with potential to qualify for advanced education programs (Olszewski-Kubilius & Thompson, 2015). Offering domain-specific talent development opportunities to students advanced in one domain does not require advanced skills in all (or other) domains, which benefits twice-exceptional learners who often have variable achievement scores.
5. Ensure that educational professionals from diverse perspectives (i.e., special and gifted education, school counseling) are involved in designing and implementing strength-based interventions through MTSS models, where students are afforded specially designed instruction and opportunities to excel in their talent domains while having access to accommodations for areas of challenge.
6. Provide psychosocial coaching for all students, with particular emphasis on twice-exceptional learners who may need assistance developing resilience, grit, executive-functioning, and stress-management skills (e.g., Subotnik et al., 2011).
7. Adopt eligibility determinations for disability-related supports that take a broader view of "educational impairment" that go beyond below-average academic performance.
8. Train educators in using data to identify and serve twice-exceptional students.
9. Introduce school psychologists, administrators, and other specialists to twice-exceptionality and facilitate communication and collaboration between special education and gifted specialists for identifying and serving twice-exceptional students.
10. Help administrators develop ways to move their school culture from a deficit-based model to a strengths-based, talent-focused approach.

Conclusion

NAGC recommends strengths-based, talent-focused, supportive identification and intervention strategies for twice-exceptional youth to meet their multifaceted educational and psychosocial needs.

Resources

Belin-Blank Center: <https://belinblank.education.uiowa.edu>

Bridges 2e Center Resources: <https://losangeles.bridges.edu/resources.html>

Bridges 2e Media: <https://www.2enews.com>

The Davidson Institute Guides to Twice-Exceptional Students: <https://www.davidsongifted.org/resource-library/gifted-resources-guides/guides-to-twice-exceptional-students/>

UConn Project 2e-ASD Online Learning Modules: <https://giftedasd.project.uconn.edu/video-modules/>

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