

The
Inconvenient
Student

Critical Issues
in the Identification
and Education of
Twice-Exceptional Students

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Preface

I sat in a chair in a small room of our local elementary school, startled by what I was witnessing. My son, Benny, a passive bundle of nervous energy, sat at an adjacent table with Ms. Williams, one of the assigned school proctors tasked with the difficult job of screening potential candidates for what the school had labeled “kindergarten readiness.” With his hoodie pulled firmly over his head and his intense blue eyes fixed on the table, Benny was clearly doing his best to avoid opening up in any meaningful way. The proctor, to her credit, was speaking in calm, reassuring tones as she attempted to connect with Benny at a personal level prior to the onset of the assessment, but he was having none of it. He would only answer her with short, blunted responses.

I sat and watched in silence, perplexed. Who was this boy? Was this the same child who greeted each morning with enthusiasm based on the sole premise that he might find a new snake that day? Was this the same mischievous imp who designed and built elaborate habitats for his precious reptiles? Was this the same child who loved to lead the neighborhood gang on a daily romp through the cul-de-sac looking for new adventures? Who was this quiet, sullen boy at the table next to me?

I struggled to make sense of what was happening. I had never seen this kind of behavior in my son before. Something was wrong.

I am an educator; I specialize in the education of students with high intellectual potential, and I understand that the fundamental rule of any intellectual assessment for curricular

readiness is to eliminate distractions. Yet I could tell that something had Benny so distraught that he couldn't possibly answer any of the proctor's questions in a way that would demonstrate to her how much he knew and loved to learn. In retrospect, perhaps I ought to have stopped the procedure since I knew that something was amiss. I didn't.

Unable to break through Benny's wall of stoicism, Ms. Williams gave up her efforts to get the boy to warm to her and turned her focus toward the assessment. Benny was barely able to get through the first round of personal information. The next step was to try to ascertain his cognitive ability level. After all, if Benny was to start kindergarten, he needed to be ready for the academic expectations placed upon him by the educational system. After stumbling through a few basic mathematical inquiries, an assessment of his language skills, and some general educational questions, I had all but lost hope of being able to show off our wonderful "Benny goes to kindergarten" pictures to relatives and friends.

But then we hit what I was sure would be a bright spot. The one-sided conversation, laced with intermittent pauses that enabled our brave proctor to scribble notes in her notebook, turned toward science. *We've got this one*, I thought to myself. *This is where he'll turn it around*. Benny was a natural scientist. Even as an infant he was fascinated with the world around him: how things work, what things are, why they are that way. His constant questions and daily adventures into the wide and wild world around him gave me a confidence that he would ace this section of the test. Benny knew more about animals, dinosaurs, cars, space, and ecosystems than any kid his age. It was this knowledge, along with his unquenchable thirst for all things reptilian, that made him the star of the neighborhood. Surely, it was time for him to wow the proctor. And then...nothing.

“Can you tell me what a dinosaur is?” Ms. Williams asked. I sat choking on the unfolding silence. “Can you name any reptiles that live in our state?” No response. “How about any animals that live here—or even in the United States?” Benny never moved, never said a word. In my head I was screaming, “You know this stuff, Benny! Why aren’t you talking? Why is this happening?” Something was desperately wrong. What had turned our free-spirited son into an insolent, mute child? What had happened to the boy whose intense intellectual curiosity had led us to wonder, even when he was still a toddler, if he might be gifted? Why? Why? Why?

Perhaps sensing my angst, Ms. Williams mercifully ended the assessment, allowing Benny and me to head out of the school and back to the refuge of my truck. She did, however, follow us into the parking lot and request a private conversation with me. A feeling of dread crept over me as I returned with her to the front of the school, where she asked me to have a seat on one of the oak benches next to the school entrance. Glancing back toward the truck, I noticed Benny’s blue eyes peeking over the door toward me.

Ms. Williams didn’t need to say the words that came from her next. I knew them already. “I am not sure how to tell you this, Mr. Postma, but there is definitely something wrong with your son.”

* * *

My experience is not unique. Many parents go through a similar incident with their child. Perhaps the child has always been unusual, but the parents never understood how dramatic the differences were until they came face to face with them in an academic setting. Maybe they are utterly blindsided by their child’s behavior, as I was. In any event, learning that something is wrong with your child is a shock

to any parent. It can knock you down and trample on you a bit before you recover your wits and try to envision what life is going to look like next.

The purpose of this book is to demystify the misunderstood and often-misdiagnosed child with dual (or more) exceptionalities. In our particular case, a diagnosis of Asperger's was given to Benny shortly after this incident occurred, shocking us into the reality that our lives would be different than those of our neighbors and friends—very different. We had suspected that Benny was not a typical child. In fact, we had deep concerns regarding his social adaptation to others his age, especially in situations outside of his typical comfort zones of our home and neighborhood. Other clues had also emerged over his childhood years: Benny's intense, singularly focused interests; his lack of need for a full night's rest; his clumsy nature; and, probably most importantly, his extreme visual-spatial skills. We knew that something was amiss but couldn't put a finger on the heart of the issue. Despite my educational background and training, I was blind to the truth about my own child. It was only after Benny was given a specific diagnosis that things began to make sense: Benny was a twice-exceptional child.

Twice-exceptionality, or 2e, is having exceptionalities that encompass both ends of the spectrum. 2e individuals are typically extremely intellectually bright but also suffer from learning disabilities or emotional, social, or behavioral disorders. When the deficit is a learning disability, often the person's giftedness masks the disability, or the disability masks the giftedness. Gifted individuals frequently can compensate for their struggles with their amazing brains, but the result is that their output, whether it is schoolwork or professional work, is typically average. And when that happens, neither the giftedness nor the disability is diagnosed

or addressed, making life an ongoing source of frustration for the 2e person.

However, when the disorder is emotional, social, or behavioral, that disability is readily apparent, and it often usurps the individual's expressions of giftedness such that these types of 2e children are treated for the obvious problems, while intellectual and academic challenges are withheld as nonessential because they seem less urgent.

Benny was a 2e child whose problems were clearly apparent. We knew that he was smart, but we hadn't realized just how different he was because of his disorder. With the onset of school attendance, our life had suddenly become complicated.

But that was just the beginning. Over the next few years, it became apparent that Benny's siblings were also atypical learners. His younger brother, an extremely bright and talented individual, was diagnosed with a debilitating anxiety disorder, and shortly thereafter his younger sister received a diagnosis of Asperger's accompanied by ADD and social anxiety.

It is no mystery that the vast majority of schools, both in the United States and abroad, are not prepared to educate twice-exceptional learners. Our story is just one of many thousands. Parents of children with dual or multiple exceptionalities across the globe have struggled, and continue to struggle, with the reality that very few professionals understand their children. The dearth of knowledge concerning these children remains prevalent within the field of education, and while social norms have become more accepting of non-traditional learners, those who have been identified as twice-exceptional, along with the many who remain hidden, continue to struggle to reach their innate potential. It is for this reason that information

is exceedingly necessary: to explain and demystify the conundrum that is the twice-exceptional learner and thereby assist those educational professionals who are tasked with teaching them in the hopes that more understanding will lead to a better environment for twice-exceptional children.

This book was written with educators in mind, but it will also be helpful to parents looking for answers about their child. I have taken a progressive approach to this subject, beginning with early development issues and progressing through to effective teaching strategies for educators of 2e students. It is my firm belief that one must first know the child before one can effectively teach that child. Therefore, there must be a foundation of understanding before any adaptations or remediations can be implemented, whether at school or at home. In addition, I have sprinkled real case studies throughout this book to give readers a sense of what twice-exceptionality is like from the perspective of children and their families. This important insight allows readers to understand both the triumphs and travails of the 2e family while gathering ideas about what might work for a specific child.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I covers the basics of twice-exceptionality. Part II places that information into an educational context.

Chapter One contains an introduction to the book and includes a short case study. Chapter Two contains a definition of twice-exceptionality, as well as explanations of the most common disabilities and disorders that occur in twice-exceptional children. Chapter Three discusses some hallmark characteristics of gifted children that twice-exceptional children share, as well as the challenges most 2e children have in common. Chapter Four goes into detail about what it is that makes the twice-exceptional brain different. Chapter Five covers the problems inherent

in accurately identifying twice-exceptional children—a vital step to accommodation—and includes a checklist of behaviors to look for in a child yet undiagnosed. Chapter Six discusses the possible reasons that so many more twice-exceptional students have been diagnosed in the last decade. Chapter Seven investigates and debunks prevailing myths that haunt twice-exceptional children.

In Part II, Chapter Eight deals with the school’s responsibility for educating and accommodating twice-exceptional children. Chapter Nine discusses optimal instructional design for 2e students, including establishing social and emotional foundations and then building classroom instruction upon that with specific methods that will benefit all children, but especially children with disabilities or disorders. Chapters Ten and Eleven explore general and specific strategies for teaching twice-exceptional students. Finally, Chapter Twelve affords readers an opportunity to tackle case studies and formulate learning plans accordingly.

I have included in this book expert opinions and analysis on the variety of disorders that can afflict gifted learners. A special thanks to Dr. Dan Peters, Dr. Devon MacEachron, Linda Collins, Dr. Ed Amend, and Ken Dickson, along with host of other experts in the field of gifted education, for their assistance in this. Their contributions have served both to build my own understanding of twice-exceptionality and also to enhance readers’ perspectives of what it is like to live and breathe twice-exceptionality.

One quick caveat: Some of the stories may seem negative, given the trauma that some children experience in schools that neither understand nor appreciate their differences. The fact is that most teachers have not had the training and do not have the resources to cope with these extraordinary children and thus are at a loss as to how best to handle them. The same is true of school administrators, counselors, and other

support staff. It is difficult to look past behavioral symptoms, but we must try. It is essential to peel back the layers to find the true source of a child's frustration or anger. In the case of twice-exceptional children, behavioral issues are almost always rooted in the child's mental, social, and emotional makeup and are not intentional. That is why the intention of this book is to help readers learn ways to understand, accommodate, and apply adequate pedagogy for 2e kids.

It is my sincere hope that you enjoy this book and that it offers you knowledge and perspective that will help our twice-exceptional children.

– Dr. Michael Postma

Part I
The Twice-Exceptional Child

Twice-Exceptionality: An Introduction

In the fall of 2016, I had the privilege of visiting the Reid Day School in Orange County, California, for the purpose of observing and evaluating the school's programming. The Reid Day School, I was to find, was an oasis for twice-exceptional children. A dedicated, knowledgeable staff, a passionate leader, and a modest group of twice-exceptional students spent each day pursuing passions and strengths while working to remediate those pesky disabilities. The students, ranging from second graders to middle schoolers, were happy. But, as I was to learn, this had not always been the case. Many of the students had come to the school burdened with a large cache of files containing reports on everything from attendance issues to behavioral issues, as well as government-mandated educational plans for students with specific disabilities. In addition, many carried with them a full gamut of labels: *lazy, dysfunctional, bad attitude, angry, frustrated, loner*. Many had been enrolled at Reid by their parents out of pure desperation—there was nowhere else for them to turn. In speaking with staff, I learned that many of the students arrived with symptoms of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) due to the continual barrage of negative input from their teachers and administrators at their previous schools. Sadly, this is a common theme encountered by the 2e-friendly schools that admit students with large behavioral portfolios.

Progress is typically slow at Reid. In some of the more serious cases, the ability to rebuild trust with a student can

take six months or more. However, over time and with much support, these children inevitably blossom.

Ten-year-old Kate was no different. The day I arrived, she greeted me with a big smile, a bounce in her step, and exclamations about her aspirations to become an author. Kate, like the others, had struggled to fit in at her former school. While her story is not as dramatic as that of many of the 2e children I have worked with, it is not an uncommon one, and it is a lesson in why reaching these students is so important. This is Kate's story, as told by her mother.

Kate's Story

I believe that finding Reid Day School was truly divine intervention. Before I had even heard of the school, we had decided that we were going to pull Kate from public school after third grade and attempt to homeschool her. She had complained of not liking school as early as kindergarten. I always blew it off, saying, "Of course you do. You are doing great!" She was so smart, working well above grade level in all areas, especially reading. I thought it was only the struggling kids who didn't like school. Through the years, though, she complained that it was boring, that she wasn't learning anything, that the work was too easy—babyish, she said. However, she really liked her friends and teachers.

Kate would get frustrated with math. She hated it and would call herself stupid for not understanding it. In third grade, she had trouble with the timed math facts tests. She wasn't failing; she just got average scores. But average was below what we were used to seeing from her, and she held herself to higher standards. As for language arts, her written work consisted of short, simple answers, reflecting only a fraction of what she understood or could do.

When I helped out in her class, I noticed that Kate wasn't raising her hand to participate. Instead, she would look out the window or pick at her nails. The nail picking got bad. Then she started developing phobias—elevators, heights, airplanes. She became uncomfortable in social situations, especially when there were a lot of people she didn't know. She didn't want to go anywhere without me.

I told Kate's teacher that she needed more challenge, and the teacher seemed surprised. She said that Kate had never said anything to her and that she seemed fine, but she agreed to give Kate more demanding work. Unfortunately, the "increased challenge" that her teacher provided was a separate research project given with little guidance, at which Kate floundered, and then she still had to sit through the slow pace of the regular lessons.

We needed to find out what was up. Was Kate so smart that she was bored and frustrated, or did she just need to buckle down and concentrate? So we had her IQ tested. It was 148! That's in the highly gifted range. We also found out that she had mild dysgraphia—an inability to write coherently. Her physical writing capability was far below her cognitive ability. No wonder she had experienced such frustration!

Although I had heard from other parents that the GATE (Gifted And Talented Education) program offered nothing more than an extra project at the end of the year, the school claimed that it provided differentiation. Before I made my decision about whether or not to homeschool, I wanted to see if Kate could even get into GATE. She could not. The school used the OLSAT (Otis-Lennon School Ability Test), an achievement test. Kate scored 99% on the verbal portion of the test but only 60% on the nonverbal part. Her combined score was too low; they wouldn't accept her.