Twice-exceptional students’ early experiences in school can leave parents’ minds swarming with questions. Why is my child struggling in school when she is so smart? Why can my child not focus on his history text book for more than 45 seconds but then spends hours at home reading about World War II? My child gets along so well with adults; why does she have such difficulty interacting with peers?

The term twice-exceptional, sometimes shortened to “2e,” is being used more often to describe high-ability learners who also have learning difficulties. We refer to these students as “twice-exceptional” because they are highly gifted (one exceptionality) but also have diagnosed learning differences or disabilities (the other exceptionality). These differences include dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or some other learning challenges that keep them from engaging in learning and demonstrating their true abilities and potential. These students come in many forms. Students who have verbal abilities in the 99th percentile, yet cannot read or spell near grade level due to dyslexia, are twice-exceptional. Budding science and technology whizzes who know everything about cell phones and satellites, but cannot connect with others due to ASD, are also 2e.

But thinking of a student as just twice-exceptional is often an oversimplification. Many students have more than one area of significant strength and more than one area of significant weakness within their cognitive profile. They are not just twice-exceptional, but thrice or more! This happens because both strengths and weaknesses can occur in clusters (known as "co-morbidities"). For instance, 50 to 90 percent of people who have ADHD also have some other weakness/disability such as a learning disability, anxiety, depression, or bipolar disorder, according to some estimates. And this is the same for giftedness — it is quite common for a 2e student to have strengths in more than one area, like verbal reasoning, fluid reasoning, and creativity, among others.

Identifying a twice-exceptional student’s giftedness can be complex because their challenges can mask their areas of strength. Global measures of intelligence like IQ are composites of many different abilities, including verbal, visual-spatial, fluid reasoning, memory, processing speed, and other abilities. Twice-exceptional learners might not test as traditionally “gifted” because their areas of weakness can bring down their full-scale IQ.

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For my part, I consider a student to be gifted — to be “exceptional”— if they have a significant strength in a cognitive area related to learning and higher-order reasoning. They don’t need to be “globally gifted” and good at everything to be gifted in my book. A student who is exceptionally strong at higher order math thinking, yet makes frequent careless errors, can be characterized as a gifted mathematician.

Identifying the extent of a 2e student’s difference or disability can also be complicated. Some academicians, educators, and others feel that students do not have a disability unless they are performing below the average level of their peers (e.g., below the 25th percentile). I disagree, as do many professionals. Students are expected to perform academically at their ability level. If there is a significant gap between ability and achievement, that’s a problem that needs to be addressed.
Twice-exceptional learners are complex and fascinating. They have enormous potential, but it may be hidden from view. Underachievement is a high risk. Frustration is a given. Anxiety and depression are common side-effects. If you think your child might be twice-exceptional, one of the greatest gifts you can give them is the gift of understanding.

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