

Diamond in the Rough: Gifted Students With LD

By: Lisa Fine Goldstein (2001)

Lisa Greim Everitt couldn't fathom why her son Mark, who had dazzled child-care employees by reading National Geographic articles even as a 5-year-old, was struggling through 1st and 2nd grades.

In fact, Mark had become a "problem student." He clammed up, refusing to answer questions even when he knew the answers. He wouldn't participate in group activities, or follow directions. And though Mark could read almost anything, writing a simple sentence was beyond him.

"How could a student who loves to learn, hate school?" says Greim Everitt. "It was a mystery."

School officials deemed Mark "emotionally disturbed" and told his mother to find him an alternative setting – someplace outside the public school system. But local private schools weren't interested. No way would Mark thrive, or even survive, in their rigorous programs for gifted students, they said, because he wasn't a self-starter.

What Mark is, in the vernacular, is "twice exceptional." That is, Mark, like a still difficult-to-quantify slice of other American students, has a combination of uncommon intellectual power and uncommonly formidable mental roadblocks. He is gifted, according to his school district's reckoning. But he also has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder, and nonverbal learning disabilities, his mother says.

Twice-exceptional children like Mark are one of the most underserved populations in schools, research has established. Few school districts have screening procedures to identify them. Fewer still have special classes or programs to meet their needs.

And if such students pass through public schools with one or both qualities unaddressed – and in most cases it's the giftedness left unnoted – research studies say it's more than likely such students will fall well short of their considerable potential for achievement and enter adulthood without skills to compensate for their learning disabilities. The result, numerous studies say: emotional turmoil, low self-esteem, and, probably, an academic washout.

"Meeting the needs for gifted resources is hard enough," says Greim Everitt, whose family lives in Arvada, Colo., a Denver suburb. "But then add in the learning disabilities, and it's damn near impossible. It feels like something has got to give – you have to either change the kid or change the school."

Mark is lucky. In the fall of 2000, when he entered 3rd grade, Colorado's Jefferson County public schools – at an existing magnet school for gifted students – set up an experimental program for students who are both gifted and have learning disabilities. In that way, Mark's case is likewise exceptional. Few of his peers around the country have such an opportunity.

Three decades of study

Until recently, the past 30 years of research on twice-exceptional students had received little attention from most school districts. Some programs for twice-exceptional students do exist. Experts point to districts such as Fort Collins, Colo.; Montgomery County, Md.; and Westchester County, N.Y., as models for the nation. So far, however, the models have yet to persuade educators, or their school boards, to begin mass production.

"The education world is becoming more cognizant of these students," says Peter Rosenstein, the director of the National Association for Gifted Children, an advocacy group based in Washington. "With President Bush's 'Leave No Child Behind' plan, we are thinking a lot about how one size in education does not fit all students. We are thinking more about individual needs of students."

Some of that thinking has gone on at national conferences for educators of gifted and special education students in the past few years, giving advocates hope that conferees returned home to spread the gospel of twice-exceptionality. They hope that more school districts will make the investment to develop programs that meet the needs of such children.

As interest increases, educators are turning back to the research for lessons on how to identify the students and to meet their needs.

Teachers wouldn't want to overlook the next Albert Einstein or Thomas Edison, for instance. Both had trouble in school, but, as history and two lifetimes of towering scientific achievement demonstrated, they fit comfortably within any definition of "gifted." Their considerable talents, for the most part, were nurtured outside the classroom.

Of course, before a problem can be studied and perhaps remedied, someone has to make the intellectual leap of even defining it. The initial soundings of what came to be seen as twice exceptional, experts say, surfaced 30 years ago.

Dr. Lloyd J. Thompson, in a 1971 *Journal of Learning Disabilities* article, highlighted the lives of exceptional men who had had difficulties in school. Other writings in that period picked up on the theme, including a 1973 piece in the same journal that looked at Einstein's spotty academic life.

Despite Einstein's brilliance in visual and spatial reasoning and problem-solving, researcher Bernard M. Patten wrote, as a schoolboy he had behavioral problems, was a rotten speller, and had trouble expressing himself. His report cards were dismal.

With that convincing predicate established, considerable research on twice-exceptional students followed in the 1980s and 1990s.

Scholars concentrated on discovering why certain students underachieve, how to identify twice-exceptional students, and how best to serve them. The focus on twice-exceptional students in education literature and research was bolstered by a 1987 report to Congress by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, a group set up by Congress that included representatives from federal agencies. After reviewing existing research and information, the committee concluded in its report that more research was needed on how to provide services for gifted students with learning disabilities.

By the mid-1990s, experts say, scholarship had established twice-exceptionality as a viable concept, and provided a roadmap for finding and guiding such students. But, according to specialists in the field, some educators still view gifted students and students with learning disabilities as mutually exclusive occupants of opposite ends of the education spectrum.

And, more to the point, teachers still tailor educational practices to one or the other designation, not both.

"If they have a disability, we might fail to see areas in which they are gifted," says Lynda Van Kuren, a spokeswoman for the Council for Exceptional Children, an advocacy group for both gifted students and students with disabilities, located in Arlington, Va. "If they are gifted, we expect them to do well in everything. Most teachers are not trained to look for those differences."

Estimates vary

So, how common is twice exceptional? Here, the research is far from clear.

The U.S. Department of Education's office for civil rights has tracked the number of students considered by their school districts to be gifted and who also have a disability. The number has crept up over the years, from 23,632 in 1992 to 45,142 in 1998, the latest year for which figures are available. But experts believe those numbers to be an underestimate because the reports count the students districts have identified, not the ones who have slipped by unnoticed.

It has been difficult for experts to determine the exact number of gifted students with learning disabilities, but researchers estimate that about 2 percent to 5 percent of all students are likely to be gifted and talented and also have learning disabilities.

Because the high IQ or special skills that make students "gifted" can mask learning disabilities, and because gifted students find ways to compensate for their weaknesses, such students' special education needs often go undetected by schools. Conversely, some students' learning disabilities hide their giftedness.

"They may seem like average students who have a bad attitude, or who are lazy, because they are bright enough they are able to get by," says Richard Weinfeld, an instructional specialist for the program in Montgomery County, Md. "They may get by, but they will never use their giftedness."

"Take a closer look at the seemingly average students," he advises. "If a student exhibits brightness that is not matched by what he or she can produce, you may uncover a gifted student with a learning disability."

Researchers point out three general categories of twice- exceptional students that are most likely to go unnoticed.

"Underachievers," the classic bright children who come across as lazy and unmotivated, may in fact have learning disabilities, researchers say. What comes across as a bad attitude may in fact be beyond the child's control.

"Teachers will sometimes say, 'C'mon you are too smart for that' to a twice-exceptional student who is misbehaving due to behavioral disabilities," says Meredith Warshaw, a consultant on twice-exceptional education who is based in Newton, Mass. "That just makes the student feel bad about himself."

Students with noticeable learning disabilities, meanwhile, may have intellectual capacity that educators underestimate. If a student's learning disability is severe, the school will likely focus all of its resources on remedial help, experts say, and never think to screen the student for giftedness.

And then there are the twice- exceptional students most likely to remain unrecognized, researchers say: children with an unusual bag of gifts and deficiencies that obscure one another and produce what comes across as mediocrity. In such cases, even though the students may coast for years, their disabilities often become apparent in the later years of school when coursework gets more demanding.

"It's difficult for schools to come around to understand that these children exist," says Carol Mills, a psychologist and the director of research for the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "In many cases, they aren't underachieving severely. It's a question of what they could be doing relative to their potential."

Twice-exceptionality can serve as its own camouflage.

Such students may reveal only their learning disabilities at school, then go home and engage in lengthy, complicated, self-directed projects or research. So experts say parents are key to helping educators get a complete picture of their children.

"I used to think that every parent would think their child is gifted," says Weinfeld of the Montgomery County twice- exceptional program. "But I have found that whenever a parent comes to us thinking their kid is gifted, even though the schools haven't identified him or her that way, they are almost always right."

Identifying twice-exceptional students is a challenge for educators, in addition, because of the wide array of strengths and types of learning disabilities that exist. But researchers have noticed certain characteristics of twice-exceptional students.

Twice- exceptional students may use an extensive vocabulary when they speak, but much simpler words when they write. They might excel in reading comprehension, but refuse to do written work on the books they read. Their ideas are creative, but their written thoughts might be misspelled and penned with bad

handwriting. They might grasp concepts easily, but be unable to do well on a timed test.

To fully assess giftedness and learning disabilities, the research suggests using a battery of methods. Educators should review individually administered intelligence tests, diagnostic achievement tests, peer evaluations, parent input, teacher impressions of the student's classroom performance, and tests of aptitude and creativity. To pinpoint disabilities, experts recommend tests of perceptual ability, visual-motor coordination, and expressive ability.

Above all, research suggests, severe discrepancies between a student's potential and performance should be a flag to educators that a student is twice exceptional.

Getting help

Once a school has deemed a student as both gifted and learning-disabled, however, that does not necessarily mean that the student will get the services needed.

"If a student should be functioning above grade level, and all they are doing is meeting the standards in their own grade level, the school can't say everything is fine and 'we are doing our jobs,' when they are wasting their abilities," says Andrea McCarthy, the mother of a twice-exceptional student in Montgomery County.

A district can provide a whole range of services depending on the students' needs, says Mills, who diagnoses twice-exceptional students at the Baltimore- based Center for Talented Youth.

The students, for example, might need extra time on tests, oral rather than written exams, or writers to take notes for them so they can concentrate on what is being said, Mills says.

"Many students just need to use computers and calculators," she says. "Many don't even need a special teacher."

Twice-exceptional students should ideally receive instruction as a special group for at least part of the day, with peers who also have dual exceptionalities, according to a 1997 article in the Journal of Learning Disabilities written by Mills and Linda Brody, the director of the Study of Exceptional Talent at Johns Hopkins.

Greim Everitt, the Colorado mother, says that after her son Mark started attending self- contained classes for twice-exceptional students, his depression lifted and he felt he was part of a group again.

"He said at his old school, he felt like a crayon in a pencil box," she says. "He feels like they understand him. That's so huge. You can't expect a little guy to learn about social stuff, when he feels so different."

Mark is now in a 4th grade class of just four pupils who are all twice exceptional. The small group stays together for some classes, taught by teachers who provide challenging material in ways that meet the youngsters' learning styles. Mark has a special keyboard device to write assignments.

He and his classmates take field trips and do a lot of hands-on activities. The twice-exceptional students are also mainstreamed into gifted classes, and get special accommodations, for other parts of the day.

McCarthy, whose twice-exceptional son attends a special self-contained program in Montgomery County, says her son only recently shared with her how miserable he felt during his 1st grade in a regular classroom at a private school.

"It took him years to talk about that 1st grade year of school," she says. "How boring it was or him, being profoundly gifted, sitting there bored with repetition. How bad he felt having to produce all this work on a worksheet with a writing implement, when he couldn't do that."

A political problem

Even convincing and widely known research can't offset a lack of money, school officials say. With state and local budgets tightening all over the country as the economy slumps, even existing programs for twice-exceptional students may be on tenuous footing. Proposed new programs, therefore, face an even tougher challenge getting off the ground. And programs with the word "gifted" in their title have always faced political problems. Public education dollars are most likely to go to programs perceived as helping those without superior intellectual gifts.

"It's a lot of resources for a school to expend on a small group of kids," Greim Everitt acknowledges. "It seems like money well spent. It keeps them feeling positive about school and learning. It teaches them to build on their strengths." Greim Everitt knows regular students don't get as much attention and resources. Her daughter is one of them.

The biggest cost to the school district is salaries for three people devoted full-time to the four children in the twice-exceptional lab: a teacher, whose annual salary is \$30,000; an aide, who makes \$7 an hour; and a social worker, who makes around \$15,000.

"There is a lot of individual time and care for the few twice-exceptional students," Greim Everitt says. "In a perfect world, they all would get this kind of attention. All students have gifts, and they all have challenges. My daughter is smart, but not gifted. Wouldn't it be great if they could all be understood as well by their teachers as Mark is right now?"