

# Streamlined

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## The Doubly Exceptional Child: A Principal's Dilemma

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Most schools' mission statements convey a commitment to meet the needs of all students. In reality, however, this can be a difficult commitment. At our Diagnostic and Counseling Center we see dozens of very bright children who are on a downward spiral of falling grades, diminishing motivation, and increasing behavioral or emotional problems.

Parents tell us of seeing the early promise of a bright academic future for their child begin to change around fourth grade, and to dramatically shift in a negative direction in middle school. By the time it is evident that something is wrong and intervention is needed, we find ourselves dealing with angry and frustrated parents, confused educators, and a child who is either truculent and defiant, or emotionally and intellectually "turned off." What is happening?

In many, if not most, cases, we are dealing with a child who is "doubly exceptional": one who has exceptional

intellectual or academic strengths, but who also has one or more learning disabilities. The co-existence of giftedness with learning disabilities makes these students distinct from those who fall into one category or the other. And the complex nature of the way their strengths and weaknesses interact make assessment and remediation difficult. What can you do with a student who can solve complex math problems in her head but can't master multiplication? Or a verbally gifted student with ADHD who can't write an organized, coherent paper?

It is important to understand that doubly exceptional students are not underachievers because of a poor home or school environment, emotional problems, or lack of motivation. Although conceptually difficult to understand, there is something basically different about these students' processing of information that makes it difficult for them to learn certain things or to demonstrate learning, even as they show advanced abilities in other areas.

Because these children don't fit into the usual categories for sorting children with special needs, such as the learning disabled or slow learners, they are often misidentified and underserved. Their cognitive/academic profile is so complex, with so many pieces

of contradictory behavior to sort out, that their gifts and disabilities often mask each other. Yet, with proper identification, minimal accommodations, and some adjustments in their school programs, many doubly exceptional students flourish.

### Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities

Most doubly exceptional children—defined here as gifted students with learning disabilities—fall into three categories. The first group includes those who have been previously identified as gifted but are considered underachievers when they begin to have difficulties in school. Their learning disabilities are never diagnosed and over time they may no longer be seen as gifted.

A second group includes students whose disability is severe enough that it has been diagnosed, but their exceptional abilities are never addressed. They are often placed in a special education setting where they are ill-served and under-challenged. Although some gifted students with learning disabilities may benefit from time spent with a learning specialist, a special education resource room usually lacks the intellectual stimulation they need.

The third and largest group are those students whose gifts and disabilities mask each other. These students

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often perform at grade level and, therefore, are never recognized as having special needs in either area. In all three groups, too, often only those students with knowledgeable and persistent parents get the assessments needed to plan appropriate educational programs.

## The Principal's Role

Because most schools have students who are both gifted and have learning disabilities, it is important for principals to ensure that these doubly exceptional students are properly identified and served. Here are some ways you can help:

*School Climate.* As teachers struggle with larger and more diverse classes, the individual needs of students can get lost in the process. As the principal, you can encourage teachers to establish and monitor individual goals for students. And you can promote

flexible grouping, independent study, and other mechanisms to help students achieve their individual goals. With an increased emphasis on the characteristics and needs of individual students, the disparate strengths and weaknesses of doubly exceptional students are more likely to be observed, identified, and addressed.

*Staff Development.* As you become more aware of doubly exceptional students in your school, you need to educate your staff about how to identify these students and meet their needs.

*Assessment.* While many of the students we see are brought in by parents, schools should take the initiative by assessing all students who are achieving below their potential, as well as those who seem to have special intellectual abilities. As principal, you can encourage screening of all of your students and then obtain a more comprehensive and in-depth assessment for

those students who appear to have special needs. The complex cognitive profiles of doubly exceptional students require professional assessment by a school psychologist or an outside diagnostician in order to identify the underlying cognitive deficits that are at the heart of the child's learning disability.

*Flexibility.* Move away from rigid definitions and eligibility scores for the school's gifted program or special services. Some students may need both. Rather than thinking in terms of a "one-size-fits-all" approach, think about a range of services that are available to meet the needs of each student.

*Intervention strategies.* An appropriate program for the doubly exceptional child requires high-level instruction in his or her area(s) of strength, remediation in area(s) of weakness, grade-level instruction in some areas, and accommodations to enhance success in all of these areas. At times, only minimal accommodations, such as untimed tests or oral exams, may be needed. Others, such as gifted dyslexic students, may need targeted remediation even though they may need to be grouped with other intellectually gifted students in order to be fully challenged. Doubly exceptional students may also need counseling to address their social and emotional problems.

In a world of limited resources, competing agendas, and budget cut-backs, why should a principal care about doubly exceptional children? Most are not behavior problems. Most are achieving at or close to grade level.

The answer goes back to your mission to give every child an equal opportunity to realize his or her full potential. More importantly, without recognition and intervention, the doubly exceptional child often is doomed to a daily struggle with frustration, confusion, misunderstanding, and failure. In contrast, with recognition, understanding, and often minimal intervention, the gifted child with a learning disability has the potential to soar academically and develop into a happy and productive individual. □

## One Principal's Initiative: A Case Study

James is a doubly exceptional student. At a young age, he was seen as profoundly gifted: he had learned to read and picked up knowledge easily. In kindergarten and first grade, his teachers observed that he was fidgety and had poor peer relations, but his parents believed he just needed to be challenged more. By second grade, however, his teachers expressed real concerns about him. He still didn't know how to make friends and he was getting into fights on the playground. Although he was reading Harry Potter books, James performed poorly on standardized tests and never completed his work.

The principal met with James' parents, who reluctantly agreed to a full psycho-educational assessment that included IQ, achievement, and personality/behavioral tests. The principal then held a meeting that included James' classroom teacher, the school psychologist who had administered the tests, the gifted resource teacher, the special education resource teacher, and the school social worker. All had been asked to spend some time with James before the meeting.

The assessment results showed James to be a highly gifted student who already was reading on a middle-school level. He was also diagnosed with ADHD and symptoms suggestive of Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism. James was also found to have difficulties in the area of fine and gross motor development.

It was suggested that James move up to a third-grade group of advanced readers and, because of his advanced math skills, he could benefit from an individualized math program. Not only did these steps have a positive academic impact on James, but his peer relations improved with the older students. Consequently, he moved permanently into the third-grade class. He also was assigned a counselor to work on his social relationships and self-esteem.

James' difficulties in writing were addressed by an occupational therapist who worked on his fine motor development. He is now being taught keyboarding skills so that he will be able to use a computer for writing.