Addressing the needs of twice-exceptional students in the regular classroom

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In this article, we focus on addressing the needs of twice-exceptional students in a regular classroom. We do this by answering three questions: why is it so difficult to identify that a student may be twice-exceptional? If being twice-exceptional means that there is a clash between one's natural ability and one's natural inabilities, how does that clash affect the student's development? What can you do to address the educational needs of a twice-exceptional student, bearing in mind that there are limitations to what a teacher can do without having additional support in his or her classroom.

Definitions

In this article, we view giftedness as the result of a developmental process. The interaction between a student's natural abilities (i.e. intelligence, creativity etc.), the student's ecological system (i.e. teacher, family, peers, curriculum and physical learning environment) and malleable personal traits (i.e. motivation) can lead to extraordinary achievements (Gagné, 2008; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilus, & Worrel, 2011). According to Gagné (2008), one might expect that, under the right pedagogical-didactical conditions, a gifted student will be amongst the top 10 per cent of his age group, practising in the same (academic) domain. Although a child may have many gifts and be gifted in a broad range of human domains, in this article, we focus on students whose gifts lie within the academic domain.

A learning or developmental disability influences a student's capacity to process the information needed for acquiring knowledge and skills in the domain of their disability (Kirk, Gallagher, & Coleman, 2015). In this domain, the student is less likely to achieve as highly as he might have if unhindered by a disability (McCallum, Bell, Coles, Caldwell-Miller, Hopkins, & Hilton-Prillhart, 2013; Trail, 2011). Other domains, which rely on support from the disability domain, will also be affected. Good examples are the consequences of dyslexia on the domain of mathematics or the consequences of an Autism Spectrum Disorder on comprehensive reading (van Gerven, 2017c; Weterings, 2017).

Being gifted does not work as a magic shield protecting the student against learning or developmental disabilities. Twice-exceptional students are students who are gifted and who are also hindered by a learning and/or a developmental disability (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014). As a result of this, their developmental process is not only influenced by their exceptional abilities, but also by specific inabilities concurrent with them (Olenchak, Jacobs, Hussain, Lee, & Gaa, 2016; van Gerven, 2017a). They show an intrapersonal discrepancy between their IQ and their achievement levels in the disability domain (Brody & Mills, 1997).

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Change and solution focussed

Although one can focus on a formal classification for being both gifted and having a learning and/or a developmental disability as a primary condition for intervening, in this article we choose to take on a solution-focused and change-oriented approach. This approach means that we do not proceed from a formal classification as a starting point for interventions. We deploy from “the Big Bang”; the clash between natural abilities and natural inabilities, as this clash limits chances for educational success (Kreger-Silverman, 2015; Trail, 2011; van Gerven, 2017a) and necessitates the seeing, acknowledging and understanding of specific educational needs. It stresses the need for meaningful educational responses. One could see this point of departure as the often unexplored domain of opportunities in a pre-diagnostic stage (Webb et al., 2016).

This approach does not mean that we ignore the fact that at a certain point in time a classifying diagnosis may become important, because it can open doors for educational opportunities that are not available otherwise. It merely means that we are convinced that one can realise huge improvements for these students prior to striving for a classifying diagnosis. In other words: a diagnosis becomes important if it leads directly to an improvement of the student’s situation. If that is not the case, and one can realise similar improvements without a classifying diagnosis, one should postpone taking the path towards a classifying diagnosis (van Gerven, 2017d).

Masking the one, the other or both

When it comes to identifying twice-exceptional students, there is a risk of misdiagnoses and a risk of missed diagnoses (Hughes, 2011). We can distinguish three groups among twice-exceptional students. (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014; Webb et al., 2016)

Firstly, there are students whose giftedness masks the disability. The behaviour and personal traits of these students indicate giftedness, although their achievements lag behind what one might expect of a gifted student. However, as long as these achievements lie around the average group level, the idea that the student may have a learning or developmental disability is hardly ever the first option that comes to mind. The discrepancy between expectations and reality in these cases is often explained as underachievement.

Secondly, there is a group of students whose disability masks their giftedness. In these cases, the disability hinders them to such an extent that the student’s intellectual potential stays undiscovered. The problems caused by learning or developmental disabilities are so big that, at school, their intellectual potential cannot compensate for the problems that occur in the domain of the disability or the domains affected by the disability. The student’s behaviour draws our attention. Although we have our eyes on the student, it is not for the right reasons.

Thirdly, there are students whose abilities and inabilities interact in a way that leaves both their giftedness and their learning and/or developmental disability unseen. Often these students stay undiscovered until their behaviour gives us direct cause to be worried. If these students come to our attention, their school results are seldom the trigger. More often it is their out of school performances that draw our attention. In these non-curricular oriented activities, they can express

their potential in a way that matches their abilities, where their inabilities do not create barriers that cannot be overcome.

The difference between underachievement and twice-exceptionality

When it comes to twice-exceptional students, the term able underachievers should be avoided. Although twice-exceptional students are often extremely able in domains not affected by their disability, in the domains of the disability they experience limitations. Their achievements are curtailed by their disability. The fact that their achievements in those domains do not match the top 10 per cent of their age group has nothing to do with underachieving. Quite often these students make huge efforts to perform (Weterings, 2017). Their results might even belong in the top 10 per cent of all gifted students with the same disability in the same age group. However, comparing them with their age group amongst other gifted students, without considering the effect of their disability, might indeed show an achievement gap. That gap differs definitely from underachievement.

Underachievement is the discrepancy between potential and realised potential unhindered by a disability (Reis & McCoach, 2000; van Gerven, 2017e). It is about the difference between what is and what could have been. In the case of a learning and/or developmental disability our perspective on the 'could have been' says more about the environmental belief of the endless malleability" of gifted students than it says about the student's efforts.

With underachieving students, a lack of motivation causes the gap between ability and achievement. For twice-exceptional students, the gap between ability and achievement may cause motivational problems when they realise that, despite all their effort and eagerness to master new knowledge and skills, their progress and level of success lags behind their peers. That discovery can result in a twice-exceptional student giving up. For these students, while motivation may not be the cause of their problems it become the result of their learning problems.

It is important to note, therefore, that unidentified twice-exceptional students are not getting what they need out of education. That not only does being twice-exceptional influence their development, but that the lack of proper meaningful educational responses influences their development even more negatively. Moreover, in these cases, the interventions are wrongly chosen and wrongly aimed, and may hurt the students more in their development than 'just' being twice-exceptional does.

Risk and resilience

Trail (2011) describes how, for twice-exceptional students, the consequences of the interaction between ability and inability can be complex. She refers to four areas of human development that can be influenced when a student is twice-exceptional.

- Academic achievements
- Cognitive style
- Intrapersonal understanding
- Interpersonal relationships.

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In each area of human development, the combination of being gifted and having a disability leads to individual strengths and weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses can coincide and do not always merge. The strengths do not always compensate for the weaknesses, nor do the weaknesses always trump the strengths. Trail points out that on top of that, these four areas of human development are strongly intertwined. They have a reciprocal influence on one another. The better the balance is between these four areas, the more likely it becomes that the student functions as optimally as possible.

Therefore, for twice-exceptional students self-actualisation is negatively influenced by the clash of the strengths and weaknesses in all four areas. In all cases the process of self-actualisation differs between gifted students and twice-exceptional students, as it differs between a twice-exceptional student and a student of average intelligence, with a disability. This unicity creates a unique educational profile for every twice-exceptional student.

Academic achievements

The achievements of twice-exceptional students within the academic domain of their disability often lie around the average group level, expressing a difference between their intelligence and achievements of two or more standard deviations (van Gerven, 2017a).

A similar intrapersonal discrepancy can be observed between two academic domains. Twice-exceptional students can achieve highly in the academic domains that are not influenced by their disability, while at the same time they achieve at an average or just below average level in the academic domains that are affected. Examples are extremely high achievement scores in maths compared to average or just below average achievements in language, arts and/or comprehensive reading (McCallum, et al., 2013; van Luit, Bloemert, Ganzinga, & Mönch, 2014; Weterings, 2017).

This intrapersonal discrepancy shows superficial similarities to the gap between the abilities and achievements of a gifted underachiever. If one perceives a student as gifted and excludes the opportunity that something else might be going on as well at the same time, it is easy to mistake the student for being an underachiever instead of seeing him as a twice-exceptional student. Seeing the student only through the lens of being gifted can also lead to the misperception that low achievement scores are merely a relative weakness in the student's ability profile. Accepting that explanation without questioning it might also lead to missed opportunities for education. In addition to all this one should bear in mind that a student's compensation strategies are affected by the student's condition and by the student's ecological system (Weterings, 2017). Where, at the start of the day or under relatively relaxed circumstances, a student may be able to compensate for his disability through the strengths of his gifts, under different conditions the student may not be able to show this resiliency. This ability to compensate under specific conditions may explain fluctuating achievements or fluctuating motivation and effort in the learning process (Kreger-Silverman, 2015).

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Cognitive style

Cognitive style refers to the combination of an individual's thinking style, the way this individual perceives and processes information, how he solves problems, and the quality of the individual's executive skills. One's cognitive style is the catalyst for one's developmental process. Having a learning or developmental disability influences a student's cognitive style (Kirk, Gallagher, & Coleman, 2015). For example, students with an autism spectrum disorder and ADHD perceive and process information differently from students without the disorder. This different way of perceiving and processing information has consequences for the student's behaviour. These consequences influence interpersonal relationships; they may also cause problems for the student's learning process. Each student has a unique profile. Hence, they all experience difficulties differently in education (Hughes, 2011; van Gerven, 2017a).

Due to these difficulties, educational results can vary under different circumstances (Baum, Schader, & Owen, 2017). Being gifted may help the student to compensate for their problems to the point where the problems remain unnoticeable (Amend, Schuler, Beaver-Gavin, & Beights, 2009). However, that does not mean that the student can avoid coping with these problems, which may prevent them from developing a good understanding of learning content, which in turn influences the student's academic development and results in fluctuating achievements.

Fluctuating results may confuse not only the student but also the teacher, parents and peers. Confusion can be unintentionally expressed as a disappointment ("I expected you to do better."), as a misunderstanding ("You were able to do it yesterday, why not today?") or even as anger when it feels as though you are being misled deliberately ("You are doing this on purpose."). These social responses influence the student's intrapersonal understanding.

Intrapersonal understanding

Twice-exceptional students experience the emotional consequences of the clash between being gifted and having a disability (Baum et al., 2017; Reis et al., 2014; Trail, 2011). On the one hand, they experience their enormous talents and developmental potential. On the other, they discover that they cannot use these talents in the same way as other gifted students with identical talents. Therefore, without proper educational responses, twice-exceptional students are at risk of developing a low self-efficacy in the domain of their disability. It does not matter how hard they try; it does not matter how often they exercise; it does not matter that they might experience personal growth; for them, it just feels frustrating that they cannot use their strengths and gain the same results as similar gifted students without a disability. After a while, the feeling of being incompetent affects their self-confidence in developmental domains where previously they were able to achieve well. Consequently, their academic self-concept decreases and their intrapersonal understanding becomes blurred by the mixed messages they experience during their learning process (Weterings, 2017).

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Interpersonal relationships

Twice-exceptionality can affect interpersonal relationships twofold. Firstly, the disability itself might hinder the student developing interpersonal relationships. For example, gifted students with autism spectrum disorders experience persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts. Their problems are due to deficits in social-emotional reciprocity; deficits in verbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction; and deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). Secondly, the increasing frustration of the clashes between ability and disability may lead to (unexpected and seemingly unavoidable) meltdowns, influencing the interpersonal relationships of twice-exceptional students with their fellow students, their teachers and their parents (Baum et al., 2017; Trail, 2011; van Gerven, 2017a).

Self-actualisation

One can describe self-actualisation as the motivation to realise one's full potential. Twice-exceptional students often experience living in two worlds: the world of high abilities and the world of unexpected limitations. Consequently, they might experience difficulties in understanding their full potential and determining how they can actualise their potential.

Earlier on we described the influence of the ability to use compensation strategies. Using compensation strategies is complex. The success of compensating for weaknesses by using strengths depends not only on the circumstances where the strategies are needed. The success also depends on the level of compensation that is required to reach the set standards. The bigger the gap that has to be bridged by using compensation strategies the more difficult it becomes for the student. When circumstances decrease, i.e., when the student becomes tired, when there are too many stimuli, or when there are too many aspects that require direct compensation, we can spot holes in the student's defence. As a result, teachers may experience an ambiguous perspective of the student. This ambiguous perspective may prevent a proper match between what the student is asked to do and what he can deliver. Sometimes the standard is set too low, and sometimes the standard is set too high. Kreger-Silverman (Kreger-Silverman, 2015) refers to this as the two-edged sword of compensation.

Self-actualisation is, therefore, not only a result of how strengths and weaknesses interact with one another and how the individual copes with these strengths and weaknesses. It is also the result of how the student's ecological system responds to that interaction. When educators of a twice-exceptional student focus on compensating for weaknesses by using a student's strengths, without encouraging him to develop these strengths in their own right, or without teaching the student how to cope with limitations due to his weaknesses, they prevent self-actualisation, because they do not teach the student how to realise his full potential. They only teach him how to realise a partial potential.

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1+1=3

International literature points out the special consequences of a clash between being gifted and having a learning disability. Costis (2016) states that the combination of being gifted and having a learning and/or developmental disability results in "new" behaviour. In this context, "new" refers to observed behaviour that is neither typical of being gifted nor typical of having a learning and/or developmental disability. The conclusion is that the sum is more than the whole of its parts. One cannot focus on the giftedness or disability individually. A joint perspective is required, where giftedness and disability are addressed at the same time. That is why van Gerven (2017a; 2017c) refers to these consequences as 1+1=3, and Baum et al., (2017) refer to it as "being green". The novelty in this behaviour is not what can be observed, but in what causes the behaviour (Bianco, Carothers, & Smiley, 2009; Costis, 2016; van Gerven, 2017c). It can best be compared with the different causes of a feeling of frustration while you are still learning and not yet completely successful, and the feeling of frustration because you know exactly what to do and how to do it, without ever being to execute effectively that knowledge and understanding. Although the behaviour is similar, it is only a superficial similarity. Coping with this behaviour requires a genuinely different approach. The student's unique profile of educational needs determines which educational responses are meaningful.

Meaningful educational responses

What makes a response meaningful? A meaningful educational response does not merely aim for changes; it aims for *good* changes (Biesta, 2012). To determine what is good requires a teacher's ability to judge his or her professional actions contextually (van Gerven & Hoogenberg, 2011). This means that reflecting on educational responses can only lead to a meaningful response if we take the "3" of being twice-exceptional into consideration.

Parallel segregated interventions have been proven unsuccessful (Baum et al., 2017). These responses aim separately for the remediation of the disability and for challenging the student by setting up an enriched programme. Segregated interventions create a feeling of being "door-handle-gifted" (the feeling of being "allowed" to be gifted on the days participation of the enrichment class is scheduled) and "door-handle-learning disabled" (the feeling of being seen as a student with a disability on the days he joins the SEN class for remediation lessons).

The characteristics of remediating tasks are that they have a slow pace, a high level of copying and small learning steps towards educational objectives. That approach is contradictive to what is considered characteristic for gifted students. Even in the domain of their disability, they can learn at a higher pace, with less copying and repetition and with bigger learning steps than students of average intelligence with the same disability (de Bruin-de Boer, 2009).

Sometimes parallel segregated interventions addressing the same academic domain may even be contradictory. For example, working on remedial tasks below classroom level for reading and spelling because that addresses the weaknesses, and at the same time working on an enrichment task that requires the ability to read and write at an above classroom level because that addresses the student's strengths (Weterings, 2017). For twice-exceptional students, this approach leads to being

bored to death while working on remedial tasks and to being extremely frustrated while executing a task that requires a production process that is beyond their capabilities. Reflection on these segregated and parallel interventions can only lead to the conclusion that these responses are not meaningful.

Single goal interventions aiming to overcome the difficulties a student has in their disability domain are also unlikely to be meaningful. Although the student learns how he might use his strengths to compensate for the weaknesses in his achievement profile, the approach to the strengths comes from a negative perspective. In this approach, the focus lies on the deficits and not on the opportunities the student has. The student's strengths are used to create a balance between weaknesses and strengths without respecting the basic need to develop the strengths on their own merits. Big and long-lasting successes are not likely. A focus on the weaknesses and viewing strengths merely as a tool to overcome them does not ignite long-lasting motivation.

Reis et al., (2014) concluded that twice-exceptional students have seemingly paradoxical educational needs that can be best-addressed from a holistic perspective. Baum, Schrader and Hébert (2014) described an approach they referred to as a strength-based and talent-focused approach. Strength-based means to proceed from the student's strengths, cognitive style, learning style preferences and intelligence profile. Talent-focused implies an ongoing process of the student's developmental potential combined with his interests, and creating opportunities to include a student's capabilities that would not normally be part of the curriculum. In this approach addressing a student's talents and interests is specifically encouraged. The authors conclude that twice-exceptional students thrive on the opportunity to explore their multiple talents and capabilities for something other than using them to overcome their weaknesses. They suggest that there is a negative effect when the use of these talents is the reward for a delivered achievement. They also suggest that there is a negative effect if the opportunity to use these talents is only encouraged to motivate the student to become engaged in tasks that compensate for their weaknesses.

The strengths-based and talent-focused approach takes the "3" of 1+1=3 into account. The contextual implementation of interventions based on this approach should lead to meaningful educational responses to the educational needs of twice-exceptional students.

Helpful approaches for teachers

Daily practice in education requires a reality check. A teacher has only one pair of hands; classroom assistants are scarce; all students in a class have a right to their teacher's attention, and funds for additional means are limited. Therefore, even though the student and the teacher both might need more in the long run, start by thinking KISS: Keep It Simple and Small.

- *Lose the need for a label*
  Do not wait until there is a formal label that classifies your student as being twice-exceptional (Amend et al., 2009). Every student has the right to get an education that stimulates his or her development in the broadest sense as possible. If we postpone responding to the student's educational needs until the student gets a label, we fail our students (van Gerven, 2017c; 2017d). Teaching is all about seeing, understanding and

responding to the educational needs of the students in one's classroom and one does not need a label to start doing so!

- *Think about opportunities*
  Think of creating learning opportunities instead of "fixing what is broken" (Cauffman & van Dijk, 2009; van Meersbergen & de Vries, 2013). What does the student need to learn and why is that important? Extend learning objectives beyond the academic domain, also consider interpersonal and intrapersonal objectives. What interventions might be a match with these set objectives?
- *Make it safe*
  Consider that both teacher and students are in a learning relationship. The teacher learns how to implement new professional behaviour in an existing educational context or existing professional behaviour in a new educational context. The student learns how new behaviour, new knowledge or new skills contributes to his development. Both might feel incompetent or only partially competent at the start. That feeling has an impact on regulating emotions. This kind of learning requires a safe pedagogical-didactical environment for the both of them. Explore together how they can each contribute to this safe climate.
- *Respect unicity*
  Each gifted student has an individual intelligence profile. Each disability comes with an individual profile as well. These two individual profiles interact uniquely, fuelled by interaction with the student's ecological system. So even when you have two students who are both gifted and dyslexic or two students who are both gifted and have ADHD, each of them has a unique profile and therefore unique needs (Hughes, 2011). There is no quick fix or silver bullet.
  Each teacher has a unique profile as well. Each teacher has different strengths and different weaknesses. That teacher profile interacts with the student's profile. Consequently, changing teachers may lead to a change of educational needs. What works in situation A may no longer work in situation B. Therefore, no intervention is likely to be successful forever.
- *Joint venture*
  If it is your task to support the teacher designing the interventions, help her make it a joint venture between the student and herself. They need each other to become successful in education (van Meersbergen & de Vries, 2013).
- *Small steps*
  Take small steps, bear in mind that the teacher and the student together define what "small" means. Your definition of "small" might be different from theirs (van Gerven, 2013).
- *Motivation*
  Require an investment both from the teacher and from the student in the intervention. Consider that four questions ignite a student's motivation (McCoach & Flake, 2017). "Is my task meaningful?" "Do I think that I can be successful in completing the task?" "How do I value the task objectives?" "Are costs and results well balanced?" and then consider that teachers and students are more alike than we sometimes think. The same four questions ignite a teacher's motivation to implement interventions. So start exploring what is meaningful for both of them. Do not strive for interventions that exceed the teacher's capabilities or stretches out her capacities above and beyond what she can do in the context of her classroom practice. If you aim high for your student, remember that this requires that

the teacher should be able to provide high-level support. Explore if both teacher and student value similar objectives at a similar level. The last question to answer is, “do they get good value for money”, as in is the effort the task requires in balance with the expected results?

- *StiCoRDi: Stimulate, Compensate, Remediate and Dismiss*
  Stimulate the use of both strengths and weaknesses (van Gerven & Troxclair, 2017). Remember that doing something in a domain that confronts you with a relative weakness, may be something a student likes to avoid. Stimulate the student to take on the challenge to give it a try. Stimulate the development of strengths as well. Do not see them only for their difficulties or disabilities but also for their abilities.
  Teach them how to use their ability to *Compensate* effectively. Also, teach them how to cope with the fact that their ability to compensate might not always be equally strong under different circumstances.
  Just as with other students, a learning disability does not mean that there cannot be progress in the domain of their relative weaknesses. Use *Remediation* as a strategy to develop skills as good as possible.
  Dismiss the student in situations where stimulating, compensating and remediation did not lead to progress and development.
- *Respect the disability as equally as you respect the IQ*
  Last but by no means least, being gifted does not mean that a student has an endless malleabilit. Too often the idea exists that if the gifted student is willing to put in enough effort, he or she can overcome the disability. That might be true to a certain extent. You can teach a dyslexic student grammar and spelling strategies. You can teach a student with dyscalculia basic mathematical strategies. You can teach a student with autism spectrum disorder what is socially accepted behaviour in communication. You can teach a student with ADHD to inhibit dominant reactions. However, you don’t know to what extent the student will be able to use the taught strategies within the proper context in the proper way. That not only depends on being gifted, but also on the profile of the disability and the context wherein one has to function. Encourage a growth mindset, but accept that there may be a point in time where the student has a right to give in, and at that moment, giving in does not mean giving up or having a fixed mindset, it merely means that the student is ready to accept who he is.

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