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Twice-Exceptional Learners: What They Need in Order to Thrive

Presenter: Beverly A. Trail, Ed.D., Consultant/Trainer**Coverage by:** Cathy Risberg**November, 2008**

Beverly Trail has been a dedicated voice of twice-exceptional children and a frequent presenter at NAGC conferences. Pursuing her area of passion for over 15 years, she recently completed her doctorate and presented her research findings in her presentation. The research focused on two questions:

1. In what ways do their unique characteristics, experiences, and intervening conditions influence twice-exceptional learners' academic achievement and satisfaction with life?
2. What do twice-exceptional learners need in order to thrive?

Trail's research involved interviewing students, capturing their words, and, it seemed, giving each a voice that reached across the slides in her presentation and into the hearts and minds of the audience. Trail identified what she described as five themes that influence the achievement and satisfaction with life in twice-exceptional learners. Her findings are summarized in the table below and in the further explanations that follow.

THEME	FIN DINGS		
1: Cognitive Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cognitive discrepancy: 2e students score above average in areas of strength and below average in areas of weakness. ▪ Executive functioning: Medication can help students focus and turn in work. ▪ Creativity/thinking and learning styles: 2e students are interested in having a variety of choices involved with learning. 		
2: Educational Experiences Continuum	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual student needs ▪ Strength-based challenges ▪ Encouragement in area of weakness ▪ Relevant work </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One-size-fits-all ▪ Lack of academic challenge ▪ Focus on fixing the student ▪ Busywork </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individual student needs ▪ Strength-based challenges ▪ Encouragement in area of weakness ▪ Relevant work 	<p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One-size-fits-all ▪ Lack of academic challenge ▪ Focus on fixing the student ▪ Busywork
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3: Interpersonal Relationships Continuum	<table border="0"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peer relationships ▪ Flexible teachers ▪ Empowering family affiliations </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peer bullying ▪ Rigid teachers ▪ Enabling families </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Positive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peer relationships ▪ Flexible teachers ▪ Empowering family affiliations 	<p>Negative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peer bullying ▪ Rigid teachers ▪ Enabling families
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- Realistic expectations
 - Understanding and acceptance
 - Risk: 2e learners are at risk in an education system that does not understand their unique characteristics or their academic, social, and emotional needs. Not addressing these needs puts students at risk of academic failure and potentially debilitating social and emotional consequences.
 - Resiliency: More positive social/emotional experiences lead to greater resiliency.
 - Locus of control: By working hard and doing well, students can see that they have control.
 - Goal orientation: Goals help students to persist through a task and to focus.
- 5: Self-Actualization
- Dysfunctional perfectionism
 - Drugs and alcohol

Theme 1: Cognitive Characteristics

Among Trail's findings was a discrepancy between verbal IQ and performance IQ test results. The verbal IQ scores for 2e children were 35 to 48 points higher than performance IQ scores. To illustrate the difficulty this discrepancy can present, Trail told of one student who had mental abilities ahead of the norm but was unable to relate to kids his own age, not only because he physically looked older than his peers, but also because of his advanced verbal abilities. This child was bullied by classmates who thought he was talking down to them.

Another area of focus in Trail's research was the difficulties with executive functioning (planning, prioritizing, and organizing) that 2e children display. These difficulties lead to a common problem for 2e students, one summed up by a child who told her, "Nobody cares what you know if you don't hand in all your work." This student was able to get A's on tests but could not manage the homework. The situation improved when the boy was put on medication. However, while the medication did help this student remember to turn in assignments, it also left him feeling depressed.

Trail's research on cognitive characteristics confirmed what other researchers in the field have found, that 2e students respond well when given a variety of learning choices to meet the diversity of their thinking and learning styles. In addition, her research indicated that these students thrive when solving unstructured problems.

Theme 2: Educational Experiences Continuum

Through her interviews, Trail learned that 2e students feel that the most helpful teachers are those who are flexible and encourage students when they struggle. In addition, she learned that students feel their strengths are sometimes ignored. When the focus is on fixing the students' weaknesses, Trail reported that the quality of the students' work declines, a situation that can lead students to feel that school is pointless and devoid of learning.

Trail cited research that indicates from 35 to 50 percent of all students already know the curriculum. If these students are not challenged, they don't "own their gifts," she observed. Furthermore, she stated, they will often underachieve simply to blend in with the crowd.

Theme 3: Interpersonal Relationships Continuum

Teachers who are fun, engaging, and exciting have a positive impact on their 2e students, according to Trail. In addition, she noted that because these students want so desperately to fit in and not be different, they especially benefit from being with their intellectual peers. Associating with fellow 2e students is a definite self-esteem builder, she explained; and a lack of suitable peers leads these students to miss out on an important developmental task – bonding. An often effective way to develop closer peer relationships, she noted, is by participating in extra-curricular activities with peers of similar interests.

Theme 4: Intrapersonal Understanding

Trail's research pointed out how confusing and frustrating dealing with both exceptionalities can be for 2e students. She explained that they must deal with "intense emotions, anxiety, over-sensitivity, and low self-esteem."

When they are in need of help, Trail noted the importance of finding a counselor who understands both the characteristics and the needs of 2e students. This understanding is essential to address the presence of depression, anxiety, and dysfunctional perfectionism as well as when suicide is a possibility.

Trail's findings also indicated what 2e students need in order to feel good about themselves. They must succeed at something difficult.

Theme 5: Self-Actualization

Trail identified factors that affect the ability of 2e students to become self-actualized: risk, resiliency, locus of control, and goal orientation. The risks she described for 2e students, based on her research, included anxiety, depression, social isolation, and academic failure. For one student that she interviewed, these kinds of negative experiences led to drug and alcohol abuse, trouble with the law, attempted suicide, a bipolar diagnosis, and treatment in a residential mental health substance abuse center.

Those 2e students who do become self-actualized, according to Trail's research, do the following:

- Learn to set realistic goals
- Achieve internal locus of control
- Possess the knowledge that they can be successful.

In addition, Trail found that resiliency in a 2e child increases with supportive interpersonal relationships, positive educational experiences, and intrapersonal understanding.

In tying together her findings, Trail noted that her research confirmed the role that the positive and negative factors listed in the chart (Themes 2 – 4) play in the development of 2e students. Positive experiences, relationships, and personal understanding enhance the likelihood that 2e students will achieve and develop resiliency; while negative factors increases their risk for underachievement, anxiety, and depression.

Cathy Risberg, M.A., is an educational consultant who specializes in providing academic advocacy services for gifted and twice-exceptional children and their families. Cathy has 15 years of teaching experience in public and private schools, including a school for the gifted and talented. She is an adjunct faculty member for the Technology in Education program at National-Louis University in Wheeling, Illinois, and presents regularly to various educational and professional groups. Cathy can be contacted at mindsthatsoar@comcast.net.



For additional coverage of the NAGC Conference, see *this article* from the November 2008 issue of 2e:Twice-Exceptional Newsletter:

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