

COMMENTARY

I Am a Twice-Exceptional Student

Now that I'm in 12th grade and set to graduate this year, I have decided to reflect upon my experience as a "twice exceptional" student in the public school system. The system has failed me. I learned a lot from my time in public education and hope to give you a firsthand account of one of its biggest problems—an account that I believe can only be accurately provided by someone with my experience, rather than a researcher looking in on the issue.

I have come to realize that some of the students most at risk in our country aren't just the ones from poor family backgrounds or those who have mental weakness. The twice-exceptional student is also at a tremendous risk. He is at risk of developing low self-esteem, a poor work ethic, depression, and frustration toward school. A twice-exceptional student is a student who is both gifted and disabled, possessing the mental ability or skill at, or above, the 98th percentile in some areas, but remaining significantly deficient in others.

I want to explain how it has been for me so that some of you reading this may come to a better understanding of the needs of students like me and how easy it is to turn our attitudes against school.

"To the people who shared classes with me in which my disabilities did not affect my performance, I was the smartest kid in school. To the people in my math class, I was an idiot."

For the first half of my public education career, my school system led me to believe I was stupid, despite the fact that I qualify for Mensa and have a verbal IQ of 150. Because of my executive-functioning problems and my learning disabilities that inhibit my performance in math and sciences, my teachers and special educators placed so much focus on accommodating these weaknesses that any trace of superior ability I possessed was completely obscured. The support I received was so obvious and excessive that I became known as an idiot among my classmates.

It is, of course, important for students with disabilities to have their weaknesses properly accommodated, but under no circumstances should it be done at the expense of their strengths. It must have been easier for the school system to place me in a universal special education program, because I was placed in lower-level reading groups, too, despite the fact that my reading speed and comprehension-ability scores were in the gifted range, and I had read *War and Peace* way back in 5th grade.

By 8th grade, the discrepancy between my strengths and weaknesses was obvious. By now, I was about 100 pages into writing my first novel and earning a perfect score in my English class every quarter. I was literally moving through four times the amount of material as the rest of my class, but nevertheless, absolutely no attention was given to this strength. Instead, I continued to be smothered with accommodations for my weaknesses. My math teacher treated me as though I suffered from mental retardation, and my English teacher, despite my outstanding performance in her class, refused to recommend me for honors-level English because I seemed to receive so much support through an individualized education program.

Balancing my reputation among my peers became more difficult. To the people who shared classes with me in which my disabilities did not affect my performance, I was the smartest kid in school. To the people in my math class, I was an idiot. In the same day, I would have people ask me why I hadn't dropped out yet, and others ask me why I hadn't just skipped every grade up to college.

When I started high school, I got another psychological evaluation, which made me realize just how superior some of my abilities were compared to those of my peers and how inferior others were. In some areas, I could pass as a genius, with some scores even in the exceptionally gifted range. However, I was learning-disabled, and that continued to be all that my teachers and special education workers cared about. I began to feel extremely frustrated and underappreciated. I began to fight with my teachers. I stopped applying any sort of effort to the classes in which I had once excelled, because I knew that no one seemed to care about my outstanding performance anyway. I felt a complete emotional and academic collapse coming, so I spoke to my guidance counselor.

I asked my guidance counselor if I could begin taking my English classes at the local community college. I noted that my testing indicated that my writing scores were in the highest age level that could be tested, equivalent to that of a 35-year-old. The counselor

told me that I should just appreciate my talents, and that I should use them to pass my current classes easily instead of trying to take higher-level classes. When I returned a few weeks later to tell her that her solution was unacceptable and would certainly lead me to further emotional distress, my counselor accused me of simply "liking to be a nuisance."

When 10th grade started, I absolutely hated school, and the feelings of dissatisfaction and underappreciation it gave me followed me everywhere I went. I stopped talking to my peers because I was so concerned that they would discover my weaknesses and begin to think I was an idiot as some of my other classmates did. I almost completely removed all effort from school, and my grades dropped sharply in all areas. Instead, I completed my first novel, began to publish poetry, and began to win numerous writing competitions. These successes all seemed like hollow victories. At this point, grade acceleration in my areas of strength was more important to my emotional well-being than anything else.

Junior year was spent trying to pull myself together again. By now, it was clear that I was not going to get the recognition of my strengths that I needed from my school.

Unfortunately, I never did, and because of the whole emotional collapse it put me through, I was left with a substandard GPA and the knowledge that I was never going to get into the top schools that I had always wanted. My grades steadily began to improve, but my full effort toward school would never be applied. Now that I am a senior and don't have to take any sciences, I am breezing through the year and earning great grades again. However, there is hardly a day in my life when I don't wish things had gone differently for me in school. The emotional pain still lingers strongly.

Twice-exceptional students all over the country are facing the same sort of challenges that I faced during the last several years of my life. Because of how damaging my own experience has been, I feel the need to raise awareness of our unique situations.

We need our strengths to be accommodated along with our weaknesses; otherwise, we will feel deeply underappreciated. I can assure you that if my school system had even accommodated only my strengths and not my weaknesses, my GPA would put me at the top of my class. We need our strengths to be recognized for the sake of our emotional well-being, and unless that happens, we cannot reach our full potential.

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