

EDUCATING FOR SUCCESS – the identification and inclusion of the ‘twice-exceptional’ student on the spectrum in differentiated educational programs

What do we mean by ‘twice-exceptional’ in students on the spectrum? How do we identify these students and their abilities? How do teachers include ‘twice-exceptional’ students in educational programs today?

Case-studies of several people on the autism spectrum who display exceptional abilities and who are achieving success in life today, will introduce the audience to this often misunderstood and under recognized area of autism. The paradox of ‘exceptional ability’ in relation to ‘disability’, in this case autism, is discussed and its implications for both gifted and autism education. The cohort of ‘twice-exceptional’ students is defined. Although we have yet to accurately identify the numbers of ‘twice-exceptional’ students with autism in schools today (Nicpon, Allmon, Seick and Stinson, 2011), research has shown that up to 30% of people with autism display savant abilities (Howlin et al, 2009). Students who display these abilities are referred to as autistic savants, and are a cohort of the larger group of ‘twice-exceptional’ students with autism. Savant abilities are associated with intense interests and maybe considered remarkable in contrast to the disability of autism, or prodigious in relation to the typical population. These skills however, often appear to have little functional use or meaning. Given the low-employment rates of adults with autism (Roux et al, 2015), the identification of ‘exceptional abilities’ and their inclusion in educational programs is critical to promote better post-school outcomes. ‘Twice-exceptional’ students on the autism spectrum remain some of the most underserved of all ‘twice-exceptional’ students in classrooms today.

Previous research into the education of ‘twice-exceptional’ students with autism will be overviewed, along with the educational challenges these students face in classrooms today. A study of a differentiated educational program for autistic savants – the *Savant Skill Curriculum*, will be outlined (Clark, T.R., 2016. *Exploring Giftedness and Autism: A study of a differentiated educational program for autistic savants*. London. Routledge). The conceptual link of the differentiated program is made to the field of gifted education and its application to the education of the savant; a new model for the development of savant skills will be outlined (Model for Savant Skill and Talent Development, Clark 2011).

Every child and adolescent should have access to an educational service appropriate to his or her learning needs, including the student with autism who displays ‘exceptional abilities’. By merging the two distinct fields of gifted and autism education through collaborative learning and increased research, we will better able to the support the learning needs of these exceptional students. The session concludes with the overview of a new cutting edge Australian savant research project that involves a vocational differentiated educational program for high school students with autism who display exceptional abilities.

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