

# Authentic Opportunities and Talent Development: An Essential Curriculum for Twice-Exceptional Learners

by

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Twice-exceptional learners (2e) present interesting challenges for educators. Because 2e learners manifest a duality of behaviors (extraordinary intellectual and/or talent potential coupled with difficulties in areas such as academic performance, attention, social and emotional regulation), curriculum must simultaneously stimulate their bright minds in ways that help the overcome problematic weaknesses. One approach found to be successful is engaging these special learners in project based learning where individual strengths, interest, and talents fuel the learning experience. (Baum, 2008; Baum, Schader, & Hebert, 2014).

Bridges Academy, a college preparatory school exclusively for 2e learners, has found success in providing a variety of curricular experiences where students engage authentically and intellectually in relevant and creative pursuits as part of their academic program. Immersed in these learning experiences, students apply their academic skills to real problems and projects. In the process they deepen their understanding of academic concepts and enhance their cognitive and social skills development. Depending on the grade level, these experience take different forms.

## Talent Development in the High School

At the high school level students with advanced abilities and interests

participate in talent classes related to their talent profiles. Here in spite of difficulties they may have these students participate fully and are highly productive. The following snapshots of these students at work provides a glimpse of learning at its highest level.

### **The Writers Group**

After a long day of school, a group of twice-exceptional high school learners gather around a conference table. These students all share a passion for writing. Each also has problematic weaknesses in cognitive, behavioral, social or emotional areas. Yet in this setting, their abilities take precedence over their disabilities. These students, many of whom show poor social skills in other settings, provide respectful feedback as they critique each other's work in preparation for Coffee House where these young authors will present their literary pieces and eventually submit their work for publication.

### **Robotics**

Another group of high school students has chosen to be members of the FIRST Robotics Competition\*. Luckily both the high creative students and those with an eye for detail are drawn together to create the perfect robot. The high-creative students, frequently those with attention deficits, contribute original ideas and unique conceptions of how to meet the criteria. The others who are often students on the spectrum have a keen eye for detail and enjoy the exacting standards of performance. In fact, these youngster, often cited for their issues with cognitive rigidity and social skills, find their "deficits" to be advantageous. Their commitment and hyper-focus allow them to stay in the struggle, attending to the

details needed to create a worthy robot. Other members of the team whose strengths are in writing and economics author the business plan required by the competition, while still others design the obligatory safety video. In short, the team relies on the diverse strengths of each member as these twice exceptional youngsters pursue their common goal.

### Art Workshop

A stop in the art studio provides a glimpse of young artists working on professional portfolios and artist statements. Their art teacher, an artist herself, mentors each of member to the group. She provides constructive feedback and a “on the spot” instruction while sharing her own experiences. Interestingly, these in pursuit of their passion may overcome problematic weaknesses they identify interfering with their personal development

For instance, one student’s cognitive rigidity and perfectionism often prevented her from finishing pieces. While she did receive some counseling to help her overcome this issue, her understanding that she would not be able to become an artist unless she reversed this pattern of underachievement encouraged her to examine ways to overcome this problem. Another highly talented student rarely made eye contact and as a result, she avoided including eyes in her work. During her junior year, she realized that art schools might evaluate the work negatively while viewing her portfolio. Subsequently she set a goal to study eyes that year to perfect her prowess as an artist.

As students’ individual abilities and interests emerge, new talent classes and opportunities are created to provide rigor and relevance to their curriculum.

## Talent Development in the Middle School

In middle school all students participate in problem-based authentic learning experiences that align to the understandings and skills of the academic curriculum. Sometimes these opportunities are extensions of the regular curriculum. These experiences happen three times a year. During these times, the regular curriculum is abandoned in favor of the students participating in all-day-long for one or two weeks in a project or problem based learning experience. The other opportunity for authentic learning is weekly enrichment clusters, which are designed around the students' interests. (Renzulli, Gentry, & Reis, 2011). Students spend one full day a week in a problem-based interest group that spans one semester. Field trips, guest speakers, and creative productivity are valuable components of this talent development opportunity. Both are described below.

### Project Weeks

One example of project week was entitled Ancient Egypt on Display. During this two-week session, fifth and sixth graders immersed themselves in designing an Egyptian museum within a room-sized pyramid. Divided into four groups--builders, mathematicians, , artists, and scientists-- by talents and interests, the students set goals, developed action plans, and prepared for authentic work. The builders focused intently on building a walk -in pyramid made out of cardboard, sand-coated bricks. The scientists and artists spent their days completing artifacts such as mummified fish and a gold painted sphinx as they became experts in Ancient Egypt. The mathematicians keep track of the costs and allocated materials to the different

groups, provided some drawings to scale, and studied the money system of ancient Egypt. The session culminated in offering tours of the museum to the greater community. Some of the students conducted tours, while others provided short presentations about Ancient Egypt, and still others designed and distributed flyers about facts of ancient Egypt. The students' abilities to focus attention, stay in the struggle, and work collaboratively during this experience validate this approach and justify time taken from more traditional differentiated learning.

### Enrichment Clusters

The other talent development opportunity for these students in Enrichment Cluster Day. One day a week, all middle school students participate in Enrichment Clusters, where they join a 10-week offering based on their interests. They collaborate to set goals and define what they would like to contribute to the cluster based mostly on using their strengths and talents. Examples of clusters include "Photographers on the Run", "Bridges Times, The Newspaper", "Culture Exposures" and "Kitchen Chemistry". Cluster activities, which include field trips, projects with deadlines, and group work, all require these students to become aware of and practice socially acceptable behaviors, facets of time management, and skills of collaboration and cooperation. Academic skills across content areas are integrated into the activities and products of the cluster. Students who have been reluctant to produce during traditional learning blossom as their intrinsic motivation and strength-based activities catapult them into productivity –artistic, written, or performance.

### Conclusion

While these examples of learning may seem like extra-curricular events for most students, for twice exceptional students these experiences constitute an essential part of curriculum. In each of these scenarios students learned, applied, and honed academic skills, acquired social skills, and practiced their abilities to stay in the struggle. Motivated and energized by their strengths, interests, and talents, these twice exceptional learners began to compensate for their problematic weaknesses and, in some cases, managed to overcome them as they engaged in authentic, purposeful learning. Teachers work with these students in the more traditional experiences as well as these authentic experience. They marvel at the differences they notice, “Students produce work that is far superior to what they produce in more traditional curricular experiences And there are no behavioral issues!” explained one faculty member. Indeed in authentic talent based opportunities, strengths and interests triumph over deficits!

## References

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