

FEATURES

Twice-Exceptional Learners

The Journey Toward a Shared Vision

Lois Baldwin¹, Susan Baum², Daphne Pereles³, Claire Hughes⁴

Abstract: For more than 50 years, the unique needs of twice-exceptional (2e) learners have challenged educators. Because of this challenge, much work has been done in different areas across the country in creating appropriate learning environments for serving this population. However, no unified way has been developed to bring together the best research and thinking regarding practice. Most importantly, no one definition has been embraced by both researchers and practitioners. To address this issue, professional organizations and specialists in the field of twice-exceptionality formed a Community of Practice and a new definition was created. This definition and how it can be used to move the field forward is presented.

Keywords: gifted education, twice-exceptional, advocacy

In this special issue we present a new definition of twice exceptional individuals and how the implementation of this definition will help move the field forward in a cohesive manner. A Community of Practice was created to develop a definition that would improve practice in a consistent way. In order to appreciate this effort and to gain a solid understanding of where we are now, it is important to review the challenges and the progress that has been made over the course of the last 50 years.

The 2e Journey

The field of twice exceptionality grew out of the merger of two lines of inquiry—special education and gifted and talented education. Over the past 50 years, researchers and educators in both

educational areas have built a solid theoretical foundation, enabling educators to generate approaches that have helped 2e students develop into creative, productive adults. A timeline for this history of 2e is shared in Table 1.

The Early Years (1923-1970)

Seminal works that described outstanding characteristics of special populations of individuals began to appear as early as 1923 with Hollingworth's book, *Special Talents and Defects: Their Significance for Education*. In 1944, Asperger's description of a set of behaviors in children was characterized by pedantic speech content, impairment of two-way interactions, excellent logical abstract thinking, isolated areas of interest, repetitive and stereotyped play, and ignorance of environmental demands. Others,

including Strauss and Lehtinen (1947), Kirk (1962), Cruickshank, Bentzen, Ratzeburg, and Tannhauser (1961), noted that some children with at least average ability had learning deficits, providing the foundation for the field of learning disabilities as distinct from other syndromes. At the same time, Terman (1925) and Terman and Oden (1947) began publishing their ongoing volumes of the *Genetic Studies of Genius*, which affected the beginnings of research on gifted individuals. In short, much of the work on learning disabilities was framed in the context of brain injuries and perceptual deficits. High full-scale IQ scores and academic achievement in school, on the other hand, strictly defined giftedness.

Some of these early researchers made a connection between high ability and personality and behavioral

traits. As early as 1943, Kanner described a set of behavioral characteristics in children with high IQs that he then named

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DOI: 10.1177/1076217515597277. From ¹Colorado Department of Education, ²Bridges Academy, ³Private educational consultant, ⁴Department of Education at the College of Coastal Georgia. Address correspondence to: Claire Hughes; Daphne Pereles; email dpereles@me.com
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Table 1. A Timeline: The History of Twice Exceptionality (2e)

Year	Occurrence	Significance to 2e
Precursors to the birth of the field: 1923-1970 Seminal work lays the foundation for the development of special education for both gifted students and students with disabilities.		
1923	Hollingsworth published her book <i>Special Talents and Defects: Their Significance for Education</i>	Coined the term “gifted.” Some highly gifted students demonstrated learning difficulties.
1944	Asperger defined a new personality disorder (later named the Asperger Syndrome) in his article <i>Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood</i> .	Hypothesized that his syndrome was more likely to appear in children of high intelligence and superior abilities, characteristics documented: Pedantic speech content Impairment of two-way interactions Excellent logical abstract thinking Isolated areas of interest Repetitive and stereotyped play Ignorance of environmental demands
1947	Strauss and Lehtinen published <i>Psychology and Education of the Brain-Injured Child</i>	Learning deficits could be traced to minimal brain damage incurred before, during, or after birth, which may result in defects of the neuro-motor system. Children diagnosed as brain-injured demonstrated problems in areas of perception, perseveration, conception, or behavior. Learning difficulties are not associated with low intelligence.
1947	Terman and Oden published the second edition of <i>Genetic Studies of Genius</i>	The nature of individuals with superior intelligence was measured by the Stanford–Binet Test of Intelligence. The construct of IQ defined the field of gifted for a long time.
1961-1973	Cruickshank, Bentzen, Ratzeburg, and Tannhauser published <i>A Teaching Method for Brain-Injured and Hyperactive Children: A Demonstration-Pilot Study</i> In 1966, Gallagher published <i>Children With Developmental Imbalances: A Psychoeducational Definition</i> In 1973, Elkind published <i>The Gifted Child With Learning Disabilities</i>	The children’s high abilities were enhanced by their attention to everything in the environment. Discussed the peaks and valleys that show patterns of strengths and weakness for children with learning disabilities, foreshadowing gifted with learning disabilities. Introduced the idea of gifted children with learning disabilities.
The influence of federal legislation and the birth of twice exceptional: 1970-2000		
1975	PL-94-142 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed	Mandated a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for all children with disabilities. Ensured due process rights. Mandated Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Introduced the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Defined “learning disabled.”

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Year	Occurrence	Significance to 2e
1977	Council for Exceptional Children published Maker's <i>Providing Programs for the Gifted Handicapped</i>	This first book addressed program implications for 2e.
1978	The Gifted and Talented Education Act, H.R. 11533 was passed	Established a National Training Institute. Set up a federal office of gifted and talented. Defined "giftedness."
1978	Meisgeier, Meisgeier, and Warblo published <i>Factors Compounding the Handicapping of Some Gifted Children</i>	Learning-disabled student with superior abilities needed remediation, enrichment, and special counseling to address unique emotional problems. Severity of emotional issues resulted from discrepancy between strengths and weaknesses.
1978	Joseph Renzulli (1978) defined giftedness as above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment	Gifted behavior occurs in certain people, at certain times, and under certain circumstances. Bright students with academic, attention, and social challenges often demonstrate these behaviors when engaged in an interest or talent area.
1980-1995	These publications focused on gifted students with difficulties: Whitmore (1980) Whitmore and Maker (1985) Fox, Brody, and Tobin (1983) Daniels (1983) Dixon (1983) Gallagher (1986) Baum (1991) Special issue of <i>Journal of Secondary Gifted Education</i> focused on gifted/learning disabled students, spring 1994, guest edited by Mary Ruth Coleman	These publications explored the combination of gifts with areas of disabilities showing the unique characteristics and needs of individuals who have both.
1980-1999	Programs for gifted students with learning disabilities in Westchester County, NY, Montgomery County, MD, Prince George's County, MD, Albuquerque, NM, were developed	Growth of public school programs
1984-2000	Federal projects and state grants were initiated	Jacob Javits Grants: The Twice Exceptional Child Project Project High Hopes, A.C.E.S. Colorado state grants to Cherry Creek Schools and Littleton Public Schools
1985-1999	Organizations were formed	Association for the Education of Gifted Underachieving Students and the Special populations division of the National Association for Gifted Children were formed.
1997	Brody and Mills published a review of issues	A review of the issues provided a summary of best practices and challenges in identification and programming.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Year	Occurrence	Significance to 2e
The term <i>twice exceptional</i> is used to describe this population of students. <i>Twice exceptional</i> term appears in federal, state, and national organization policies—2000-2015		
2004	Individuals With Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEA) was reauthorized	Acknowledged that students with learning disabilities can also be gifted. Twice-exceptional students were listed as a possibility for grants. Minimized the use of the discrepancy formula for the identification of specific learning disabilities; encouraged the use of a comprehensive team-based, problem-solving approach with multiple data sources.
2000-2015	Policy guides were disseminated and Jacob Javits grants for underserved populations of gifted learners were supported	Several states published policy guides to identify and serve 2e students (Colorado, Idaho, Maryland, Montana, Ohio, Virginia). Iowa Department of Education and the University of Iowa's Belin-Blank Center for Gifted Education addressed gifted and talented students who have learning difficulties. PROJECT2EXCEL focused on changing the way we look for, serve, and support learners who are gifted and also have various additional exceptionalities.
	These publications focused on gifted students with disabilities: Silverman (2002); Lovecky (2004); Webb et al. (2005); Trail (2010); Weinfeld, Jeweler, Barnes-Robinson, and Shevitz (2013) Articles appear in major journals: <i>Special issue of Teaching Exceptional Children</i> , 2005, guest edited by Coleman, Harradine, and King Special Issue of <i>Gifted Child Quarterly</i> , 2013, guest edited by Foley-Nicpon Newsletters for parents and teachers available electronically: Twice-Exceptional (2e) Newsletter Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities	The literature base and understanding of the field grew extensively with multiple publications.
2014	National Twice-Exceptional Community of Practice (2e CoP) formed	Collaboration of professionals with expertise and interest in twice exceptionality created and published definition.

“Autism.” In 1979, Asperger suggested that the set of behaviors he had described earlier was more likely to appear in children of high intelligence and superior abilities. Cruickshank (1977), whose work was focused on hyperactive and easily distracted students, later hypothesized that these traits might describe the way high-ability students navigate the environment, suggesting that their attention to all stimuli in their environment enhanced

their knowledge base as well as their perceptions about the world. Likewise, the Goertzel and Goertzel (1962) examined the childhoods of 300 gifted adults through biographies and found that a considerable number of gifted individuals had not excelled in school and many disliked their educational experiences, with some documenting that they struggled with conventional learning experiences.

Although there were hints of co-incidence of gifts and disabilities, the fields took separate paths. During these years, gifted students, if identified at all, may have received advanced curriculum and highly stimulating enrichment work, whereas those with deficits may have received remedial support. Programming services for both groups were not guaranteed.

Thirty Years of Growth

The year 1970 marked a turning point for the two still separate fields of learning disabilities and gifted education. By the mid-1970s, federal legislation offered definitions for the terms “learning disabled” and “giftedness” and provided guidelines for meeting the educational needs of students thus identified. The availability of federal funds triggered the growth of programs for both exceptionalities and, indirectly, had an impact on students who seemed to fit both categories.

Public Law 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 mandated a free, appropriate public education for all children with disabilities, ensured due process rights, mandated Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and introduced the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Children who were gifted and talented, however, were not included.

Three years later, the Gifted and Talented Children’s Education Act (1978) was passed. This act established a National Training Institute, a federal office of gifted and talented, and a definition. Six areas of giftedness were identified: general intellectual ability, specific aptitude, visual and performing arts, creativity, leadership, and psychomotor abilities. Later, psychomotor abilities were excluded from the Act in 1992. Although the definition clearly stated that students talented in one or more of these areas were entitled to specialized services, there was no mandate.

Neither Act alluded to the fact that students might be identified as gifted and also have a disability. In fact, state funding policies often limited funding to one area only. Some professionals, however, began to recognize this seeming paradox of being gifted and disabled and began to call attention to this dilemma. Maker’s 1977 seminal work, *Providing Programs for the Gifted Handicapped*, described the dual diagnosis of individuals who had extraordinary gifts and talents but experienced physical and cognitive disabilities. In addition, Meisgeier, Meisgeier, and Werblo (1978) acknowledged that gifted students with learning disabilities had a need for both learning supports and advanced programming. They argued that the emotional issues resulting from the discrepancy between what these students could and could not do distinguished them from other populations of students.

The 1980s witnessed a growing interest in students identified by teachers as very bright but also affected by some form of learning and/or behavioral challenge. A few public school programs began to appear that were designed to meet their needs. For instance, The Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in Westchester County, New York, offered two

different types of programs, initially funded by federal grants for “the gifted handicapped student.” Southern Westchester BOCES initiated a full-time elementary through high school program. Northern Westchester BOCES sponsored a mentorship program. *Giftedness, Conflict and Underachievement* (Whitmore, 1980) described a special program in Cupertino, California for gifted underachieving students who would be considered 2e today.

Organizations were being formed to address the needs of 2e students. The Association for the Education of Gifted Underachieving Students (AEGUS) was focused on advocating for underachieving gifted students especially those with learning and emotional needs. Likewise, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) created a division focused on special populations of gifted students including those with disabilities. Because of this intensified focus, the number of articles and books describing the characteristics, needs, identification practices, and appropriate services for this population of students began to increase. For example, Baum et al (1991) brought about a deepened understanding of the complexity of 2e through their book entitled *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled*.

During the 1990s, both state and federal funds were made available through various grant programs. Chief among them was the U.S. Department of Education’s Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 that established a National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented and funded grants for program development for underserved populations of students, including gifted students with disabilities. Two examples were Project High Hopes (Area Cooperative Educational Services [ACES] New Haven, Connecticut, and Cranston, Rhode Island) and The Twice Exceptional Child Project (University of New Mexico and Albuquerque Public Schools).

More public school programs appeared. For example, the Gifted Students With Learning Needs in Prince Georges County, Maryland, and Gifted and Talented Learning Disabilities Programs in Montgomery County, Maryland, still exist today. Other districts, such as Cherry Creek and Littleton Public Schools in Colorado, began to use state grants to train their teachers in ways of identifying and working with 2e students. Closing out these years was a timely article by Brody and Mills (1997), which provided a summary of best practices and challenges in identification and programming up to that time.

Current Work and Trends (2001-2015)

Attention to 2e students is increasing. In 2004, Congress reauthorized the *Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA)*, which had major implications for 2e students. Significantly, the mention of students with disabilities who may also have gifts and talents was noted for the first time in the priorities for funding. In addition, the legislation minimized the use of the discrepancy model for the identification of specific learning disabilities and gave states the option of using a different approach. Some states have

implemented this option by replacing the discrepancy model with an analysis of below-grade-level performance as one of the criteria for the formal identification of a specific learning disability. This requires a comprehensive, team-based, problem-solving approach when identifying and serving 2e students. This collaborative approach, if done appropriately, can actually benefit the educational programming for 2e students by breaking down barriers between general, gifted, and special education. At the same time, during this current era of educational reform, many school systems are embracing a tiered approach to providing supports for all students, allowing the needs for 2e students to be more directly addressed within the context of a comprehensive systems approach.

An increasing number of publications and websites focusing on the special needs of this population continue to emerge. Newsletters such as *Smart Kids With Learning Differences* and the *Twice Exceptional (2e) Newsletter* provide information for parents and teachers. Some states (Colorado, Idaho, Maryland, Montana, Ohio, and Virginia) have published policies and guidelines for identifying 2e youngsters. Research centers focusing on 2e students, such as the Belin–Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development (University of Iowa) and the 2E Center for Research and Professional Development at Bridges Academy (Studio City, California), are playing a role in moving the field forward with publications, professional development, and research.

Over the years, critics have faulted the field for not providing substantive empirical proof that this population of students exists. They claimed that there is no research foundation for our field or a unified definition that was precise, research based, and operational (Cohen & Vaughn, 1994; McCoach, Kehle, Bray, & Siegle, 2001; Vaughn, 1989). Most recently, critics argue that we, as a field, are not always in agreement in terms of identification issues and best practices (Lovett & Lewandowski, 2006). In partial response to some of these issues, Foley-Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, and Stinson (2011) published a comprehensive review outlining empirical studies on identification, characteristics, and program strategies about three distinct 2e populations (gifted students with disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder). Although they conclude that there is no question “that gifted students can have a coexisting disability” (p. 13), they emphasize the need for better research and clarity about the issues in our field.

Looking Forward

Based on this history and where we are as a field, it became clear that to best serve this population of learners, a shared vision and common language would be necessary. Several members of the Special Populations Network, the Assessment Special Interest Group, and the 2e Special Interest Group (2e SIG) brought this idea forward at the NAGC Annual Convention in the fall of 2012. This group recognized that the professionals working with the 2e population are a specific subset of many aspects of education.

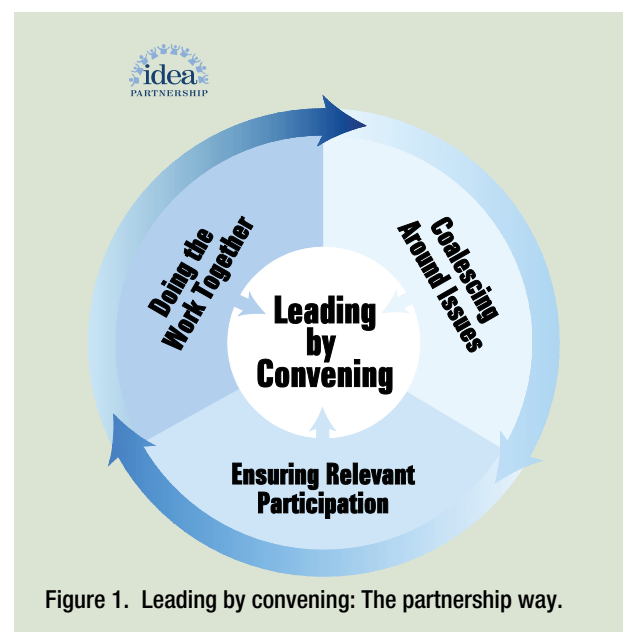


Figure 1. Leading by convening: The partnership way.

Because of this, it became increasingly important to have a unified understanding to move the field forward.

It was deemed equally important to convene a group of important stakeholders from multiple organizations and educational fields to open the discussion about needs and supports. These needs and supports cut across multiple educational programs and practices, including general education, special education, and gifted education. In addition, they cut across multiple settings, including K-12 education, higher education, private schools, private clinical practice, and family advocacy.

The question was how to convene a group to ensure the time would be meaningful and productive. It was ultimately determined that an approach to stakeholder engagement adopted and refined through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Partnership (IDEA Partnership) would be an effective approach for this group of passionate and engaged leaders (see Figure 1). This idea of creating Communities of Practice started with the use of a structure created by Wenger (1998) and evolved into what is called *The Partnership Way*. This approach is defined as a “strategy of partnership that builds connections and fosters authentic engagement through leading by convening” (Cashman et al., 2014, p. 3). The Leading by Convening work is a guiding framework for interaction that includes three habits of interaction drawn from Wenger’s work with the IDEA Partnership. These include (a) coalescing around issues, (b) ensuring relevant participation, and (c) doing work together (Cashman et al., 2014).

In the spring of 2013, the initial planning group was able to reach out to the IDEA Partnership for support in establishing the development of the National Twice-Exceptional Community of Practice (2e CoP). Stacy Skalski, Director of Professional Policy

and Practice from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), helped organize and facilitate the stakeholder meetings. Stakeholders from multiple organizations, educational fields, and private organizations that support the research and educational needs of 2e individuals were invited to participate in this new National 2e CoP. An initial steering committee of these individuals participated in multiple meetings to create a proposed purpose for the community, and an agenda for the first full day meeting, called the 2e CoP Summit. The members of the 2e CoP came from 26 national, state, and local organizations, including the following:

- 2e Newsletter
- AEGUS
- Amend Psychological Services
- Baltimore County Public Schools
- Blucher Educational Services
- Bridges Academy
- Council for Exceptional Children
- College of Coastal Georgia
- Colorado Department of Education
- Gallagher Consulting
- Johns Hopkins University
- NAGC
 - Special Populations Network
 - 2e Special Interest Group
 - Assessment Special Interest Group
- NASP
- National Center for Learning Disabilities
- Northwestern University—Center for Talent Development
- Regent University
- Summit Center
- The Association for the Gifted (TAG), a division of the Council for Exceptional Children
- University of Connecticut
- University of Houston
- University of Iowa—Belin–Blank Center for Gifted Education
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Western Kentucky University
- Weinfeld Consulting.

2e CoP Summit

The 2e CoP Summit took place at the NAGC National Convention in Indianapolis in November of 2013. The IDEA Partnership set up an online space for the community to use in subsequent work. The 2e CoP Summit, facilitated by Stacy Skalski and the steering committee members, met on November 6, 2013. There were 24 individuals representing 23 organizations in attendance. The purpose of the Summit was to build the foundation for a CoP committed to addressing the pressing problems of practice affecting 2e individuals.

The 2e CoP Summit resulted in the creation of a purpose, two initial priority areas of focus, and related activities:

Purpose

The purpose of the National 2e CoP is to provide a cross-stakeholder forum for discussion of the issues related to the education of 2e students within a K-12 school environment. Ultimately, this discussion will stimulate the creation of materials, resources, and products by the Community that will improve policy and practice related to 2e students, including possible implications for parenting, counseling, and education.

Priorities

Priority 1

Develop an agreed-upon understanding, based on research and experience, of what 2e is and is not (recognition of legitimacy) and what needs to be done to support a 2e student's capacity to grow and prosper. Focus: identification, intervention, and social emotional health.

Priority 2

Create a consistent national message to inform policy about 2e students. This would include recognition and response with evidence-based practices to the needs of 2e students.

The Definition

The first priority was to create an agreed-on definition that would allow the field to move toward a more cohesive, meaningful understanding of twice exceptionality and the needed, appropriate supports. The 2e CoP agreed to meet regularly in a virtual format to discuss the evolving definition. It was determined that all members would begin by reading a common article titled “*Empirical investigation of twice-exceptionality: Where have we been and where are we going?*” (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2011). From that point, a definition was crafted through numerous meetings over the course of several months. All members had input into the development of this definition. Using a consensus approach, the definition was continually refined. This working definition seeks to unify the community and act as a foundation for our collaborative work. The following is the final agreed-upon definition:

The definition of “twice-exceptional individuals” is as follows: *Twice exceptional individuals evidence exceptional ability and disability, which results in a unique set of circumstances. Their exceptional ability may dominate, hiding their disability; their disability may dominate, hiding their exceptional ability; each may mask the other so that neither is recognized or addressed.*

2e students, who may perform below, at, or above grade level, require the following:

- *Specialized methods of identification that consider the possible interaction of the exceptionalities,*

- *Enriched/advanced educational opportunities that develop the child's interests, gifts, and talents while also meeting the child's learning needs,*
- *Simultaneous supports that ensure the child's academic success and social-emotional well-being, such as accommodations, therapeutic interventions, and specialized instruction, and*

Working successfully with this unique population requires specialized academic training and ongoing professional development.

Having a national definition is just the beginning of the collaborative work that needs to be accomplished by the 2e CoP. Per the stated purpose statement from November, 2013, the stakeholders emphasized that it was important that the group “stimulate the creation of materials, resources, and products by the Community that will improve policy and practice related to twice-exceptional students, including possible implications for parenting, counseling, and education.”

To address that vital part of the purpose statement, the 2e CoP has established three practice groups. Embedded in the definition are specific strategies that are crucial for the 2e student to be successful. The strategies identify an aspect of concern and need that must be addressed. Each practice group will focus on one of these important areas. The groups are (a) Recognition and Identification, (b) Programming and Dual Differentiation, and (c) Specialized Supports.

Members of the 2e CoP have volunteered to co-lead the discussion, activities, and outcomes for each practice group. Just as the large group used a “leading by convening” approach, the practice groups will operate in the same manner. Rather than dictating what needs to be accomplished, each group will determine what its members want to accomplish that will best meet the stated purpose of the 2e CoP. The 2e CoP identified activities as possible outcomes and directions for moving the 2e information forward:

- Create a repository (online) of research and resources that can be reviewed and organized initially.
- Identify a research agenda.
- Create a venue (online, blog, interactive) for conversations/communication to establish the agreed-upon overall *message* regarding 2e—with recognition of different disciplines (i.e., higher education, families, psychologists, teachers, etc.).

Some of the tools that the practice group may decide to develop could be position papers, conference sessions, mentoring or coaching opportunities, online chat forums, fact sheets, white papers, or webinars. These are some of the ways to further 2e research, policy, and practice. Each practice group will report on their plans during the course of the year and then on their progress and outcomes to the larger 2e CoP at the November, 2015, meeting at the NAGC Conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

As we move forward to directly influence research, policy, and practice, this special edition of *Gifted Child Today* is our first step in disseminating information. We hope you find the perspectives of multiple stakeholders valuable as they reflect on the importance of a common definition for 2e individuals.

Conflict of Interest

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Bios

Lois Baldwin is an educational consultant working with school districts and the Colorado Department of Education Twice-Exceptional Project. She resides in Tarrytown, NY.

Susan Baum is the Director of the 2e Center for Research and Professional Development at Bridges Academy, Studio City, CA.

Daphne Pereles is a private educational consultant previously with the Colorado Department of Education. She now resides in Austin, Texas.

Claire Hughes is an associate professor in the Department of Education and Teacher Preparation at the College of Coastal Georgia, Brunswick, GA.