



Conference

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Twice Exceptionality: The Intersection of Giftedness and Autism

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**Greetings from the
Belin-Blank Center!**







2e individuals evidence exceptional ability and disability, which results in a unique set of circumstances.

Barriers for 2e Individuals

- Masking → Missed or incorrect identification
- At high risk for not receiving appropriate services
- Limited understanding of 2e needs in research and practice



Autism Spectrum Disorder

DSM-5:

Deficits in social communication and social interaction

Social-emotional reciprocity

Nonverbal communication

Developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships

Restricted interests/repetitive behaviors

Stereotyped, repetitive motor movements

Insistence on sameness, inflexible routines, or rituals

Intense interests

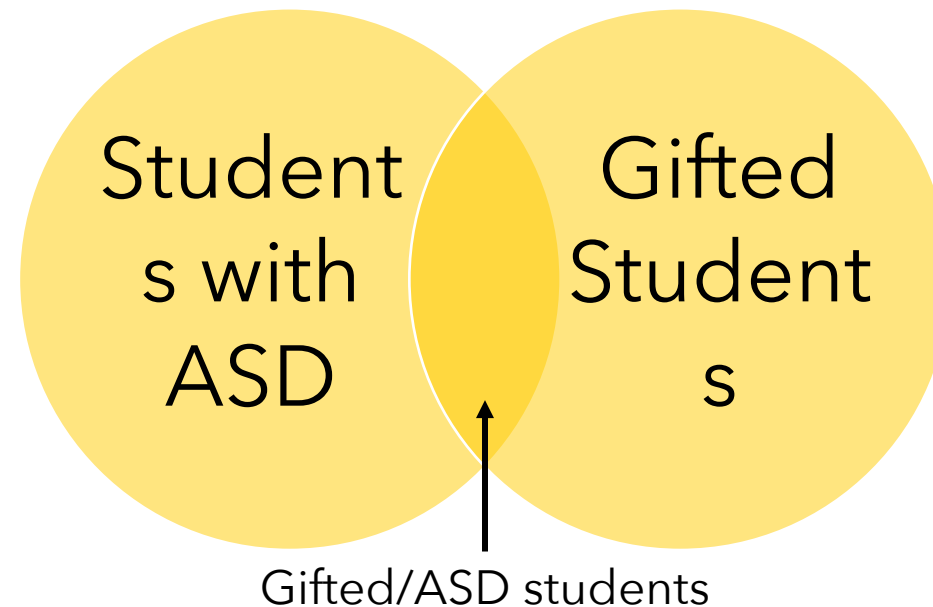
Sensory sensitivity

A young girl with dark hair, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt, is sitting at a table and painting a rainbow. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. In front of her is a white surface with a rainbow painted on it, consisting of horizontal bands of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. To her left are several paint containers: a pink one with red paint, a yellow one with yellow paint, a green one with green paint, and a blue one with blue paint. Each container has a wooden stick or brush inside. The background is a plain white surface.

Intersection of High Ability and ASD

High Ability Students with ASD

- Diagnosis of ASD has grown tremendously over the past two decades
- Limited research focused on high ability students with ASD



Characteristics of High Ability Students with ASD

- Risk for missed, delayed, and inaccurate diagnosis
- Variable cognitive abilities in different domains
- Strong language abilities, but problems with social reciprocity and relationship skills
- Fine motor and adaptive skill deficits (relative and/or absolute)
- Restricted interests and behavioral rigidity
- Comorbid anxiety and executive functioning concerns

If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism.

Difficulties may present as:

Poor judgment in new situations

Lack of problem-solving skills in new situations

Maladaptive stress reactions

Lack of coping skills

Anger outbursts

Frustration over lack of social savvy

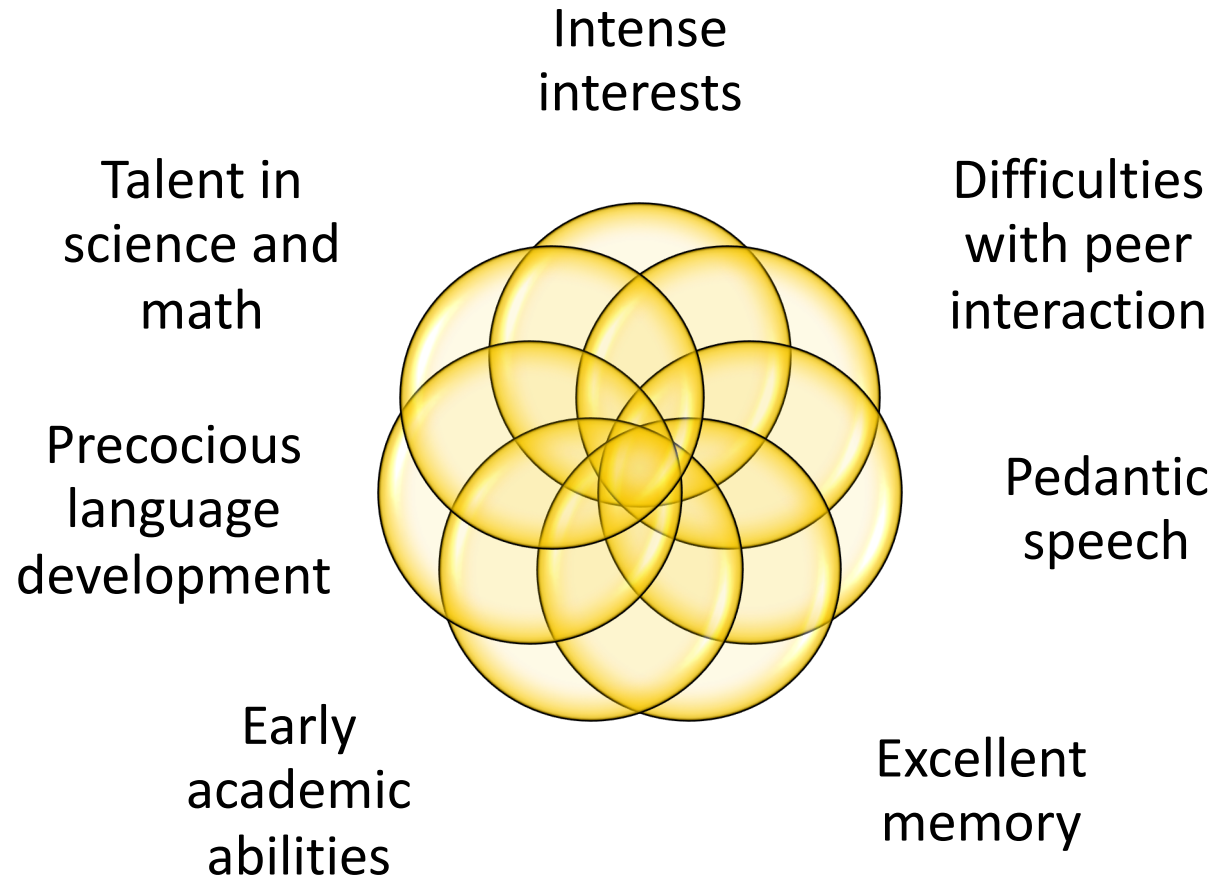
Social isolation and loneliness

Withdrawal and avoidance of difficult situations

Sense of failure

Co-occurring depression and anxiety

Overlap of ASD and Giftedness



Assessment Procedures

1. Review of records (educational, medical)
2. Interviews with parent and child
3. Individual administration of cognitive and academic tests and other measures as indicated (e.g., attention, executive functioning, visual-motor)
4. Completion of behavior rating scales by parent, teacher, and child
 - a. Measures of self-concept, depression, anxiety
5. Parent-Report measure of Adaptive Functioning
6. Autism-specific measures
 - a. Autism Diagnostic Interview– Revised
 - b. Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, 2nd Ed.

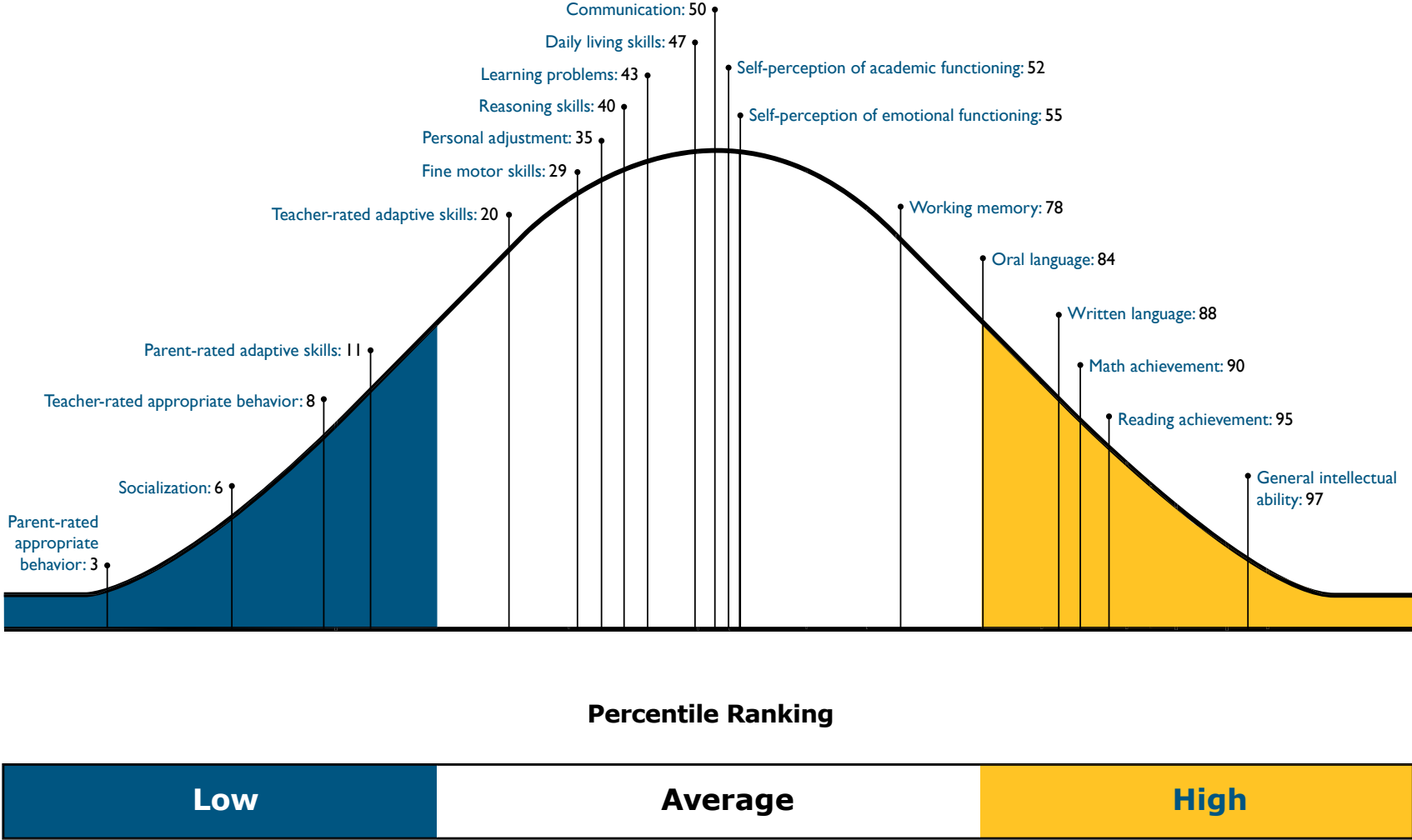


Research Example

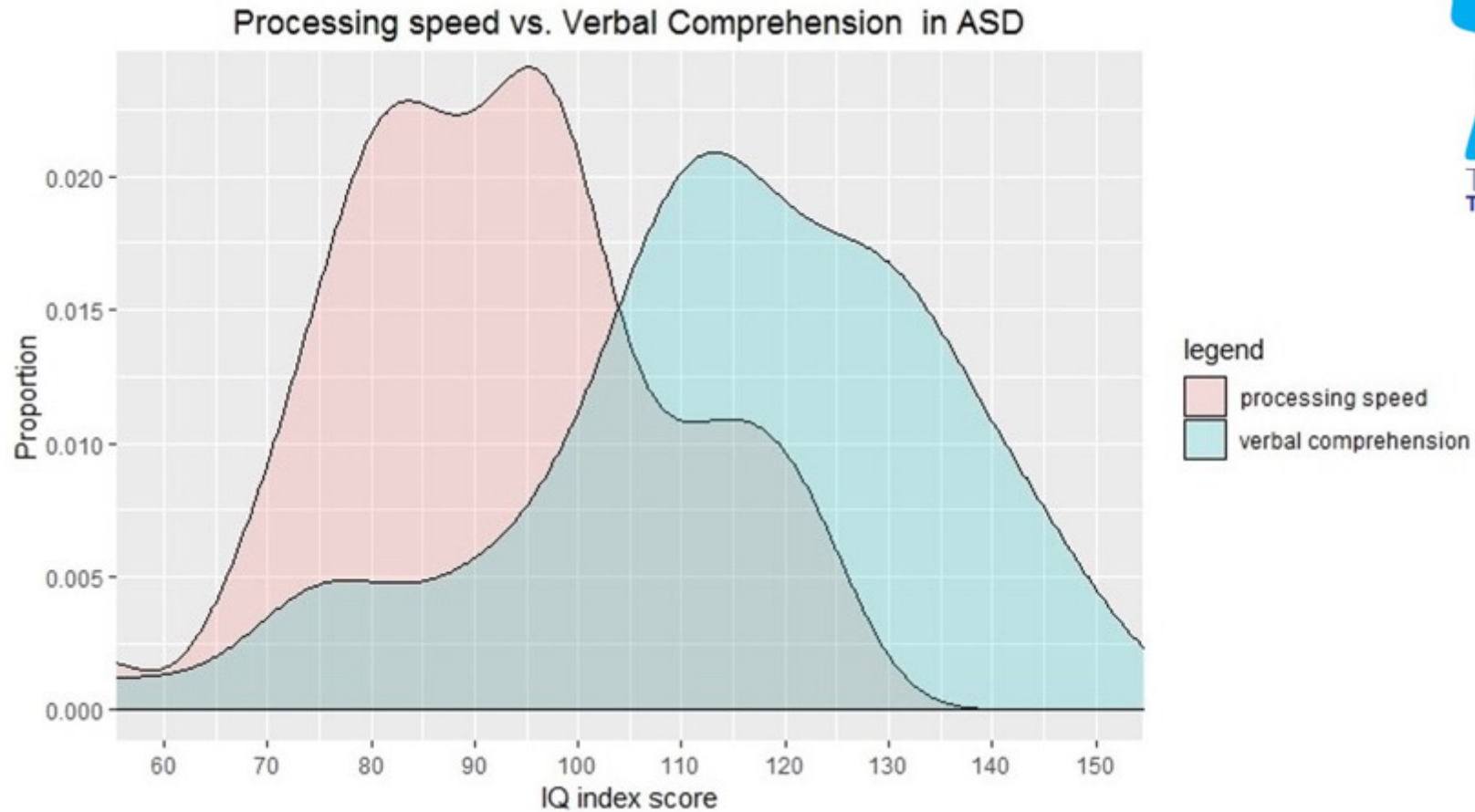
- Comparison of gifted youth with and without ASD:
 - Both groups demonstrate exceptional cognitive ability (IQ>130)
 - Processing speed differs between groups
 - Significant differences in adaptive behavior
 - Socialization, Daily Living Skills, Communication
 - Parent & teacher differences in behavioral and emotional functioning
 - Social withdrawal and unusual behaviors, inattention and hyperactivity, depression
 - Adaptability, daily living activities, social skills
 - Self-report anxiety, depression, sense of inadequacy, social stress

(Doobay, Foley Nicpon, Ali, & Assouline, 2014)

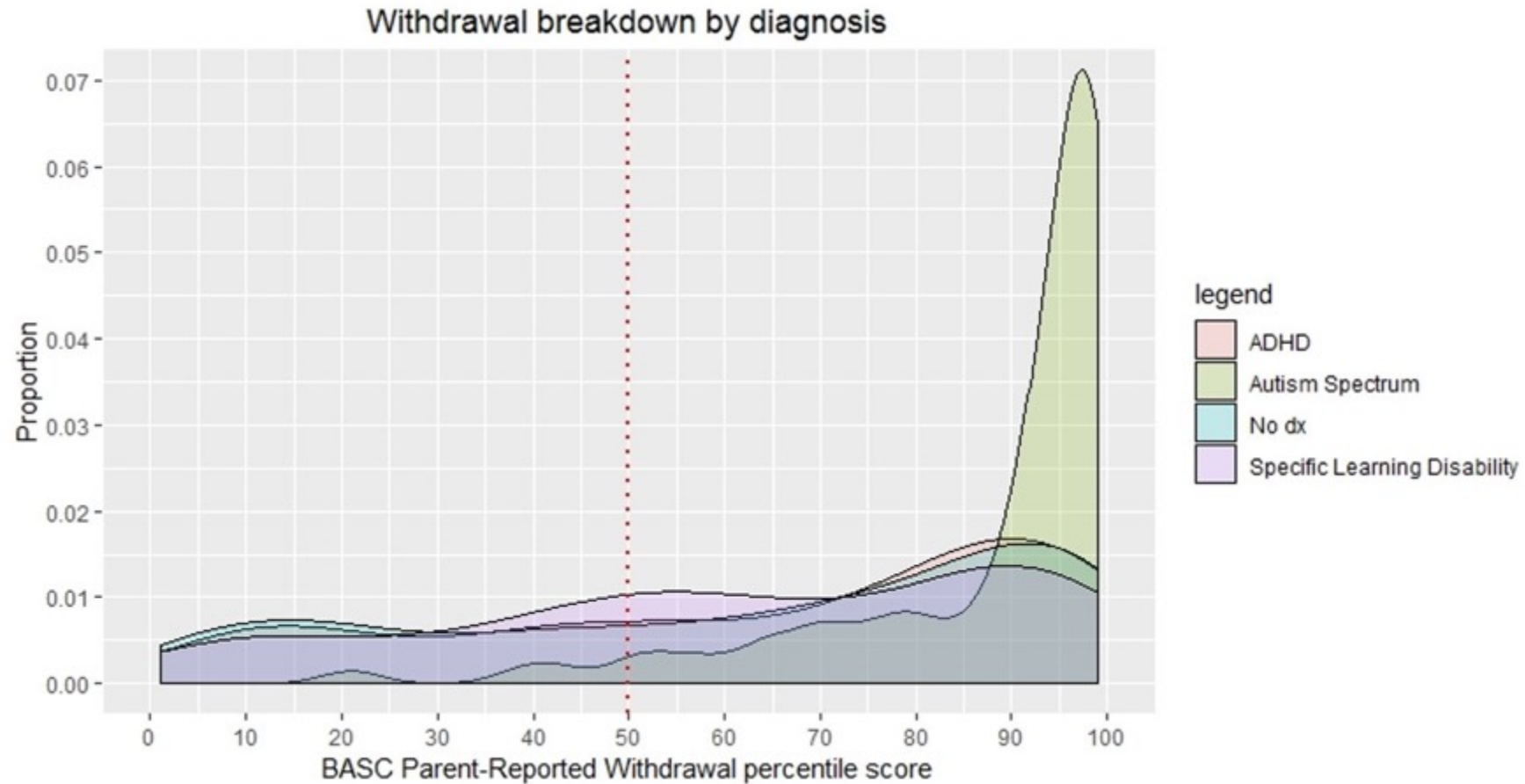
Distribution of Skills in Prior ASD Sample



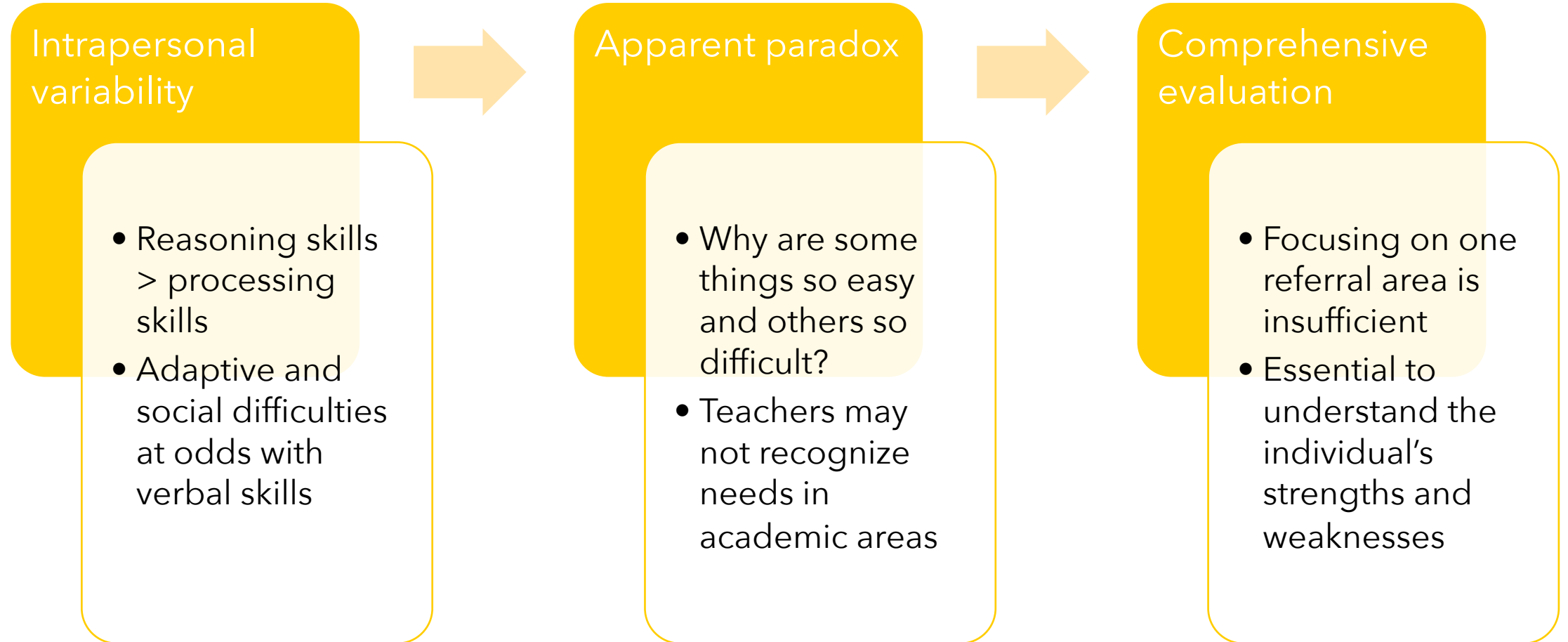
Preliminary Results of Larger Sample



Preliminary Results of Larger Sample



What does this mean?





Services and Supports

Recommendations - Home

Peer Relationships

Extracurricular/enrichment activities of interest

Social engagements through shared interests

Coping with Anxiety

Use social stories for unfamiliar situations

Employ positive behavior strategies

Building Skills

Model and practice adaptive and social skills

Develop self-advocacy skills

Recommendations - Therapies

- Consider private speech therapy and/or occupational therapy
- Individual psychotherapy – focus may include:
 - Coping with anxiety and/or depression
 - Building adaptive, executive functioning and/or self-advocacy skills
 - Career planning
 - Coping with loneliness and isolation
- Group psychotherapy:
 - Social skills training
 - Coping with common challenges

Recommendations - Medical

- Consult with pediatrician and/or child psychiatrist
- Specific symptoms may benefit from medical intervention:
 - Executive functioning concerns
 - Anxiety
 - Obsessive-compulsive behaviors
 - Depression
 - Aggression



Recommendations - School

- Direct services:
 - Specific learning needs
 - Social skills training
 - School-based OT for sensory/fine motor needs
- Schoolwide supports:
 - Peer mentoring
 - Monitor for bullying concerns
- Formal service plans (IEP or 504) as needed
- Access to appropriate GT services and/or acceleration
 - GT participation *should not* be contingent on behavior



Recommendations - Classroom Accommodations

Executive Functioning

- Provide preferential seating conducive to focus
- Check for understanding of instructions and use multiple modalities
- Encourage and facilitate use of checklists/planning systems
- Provide testing accommodations based on needs

Work Completion

- Reduce review of mastered material
- Incorporate students' interests into learning activities
- Provide alternate methods to demonstrate understanding
- Employ assistive tech to overcome skill weaknesses

Behavior

- Provide access to quiet space to calm down
- Provide warning for transitions and use visual schedules
- Establish clear expectations for behavior during free time
- Implement positive behavior support strategies

Advocating for School-Based Services

- Establish clear priorities to discuss with school
- Communicate concerns with the classroom teacher
 - Escalate through school ranks as needed
 - If response is unsatisfactory, submit a written request for evaluation
- Determine whether IEP or 504 Plan is best



Advocating for School-Based Services

- Two federally-regulated formal supports: IEP and 504 Plan
- IEP – more rigorous, requires demonstration of *need for specially designed instruction* (BUT not limited to academic need)
- 504 Plan – typically provide accommodations only, with limited to no direct services incorporated
- Parents of students with disabilities have rights under these laws

<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/504-plan/the-difference-between-ieps-and-504-plans>

Advocating for School-Based Services

→ Potential Pitfalls:

- Lack of awareness & understanding of 2e among school staff
- Greater systemic focus on disability rather than strength
- Lack of understanding/support among the disability community

→ Strategies:

- Request involvement of TAG teacher when possible
- Provide resources on 2e in order to advocate for strength-based services
- Seek out 2e communities for resources, emotional support

Learning At Home

- Encourage students to follow their passions and direct their own learning to the extent feasible
- “Pick your battles”
- Establish consistent, predictable schedules and behavior expectations
- COVID-19: Acknowledge and appreciate effects of increased stress on whole family – not “business as usual”

Resources for “Learning-from-Home”

→ 2e News

- <https://www.2enews.com/health-wellness/raising-a-2e-child-while-under-quarantine/> (subscription required)
- <https://www.2enews.com/teaching-learning/distance-learning-tips-for-parents-of-2e-kids/> (subscription required)

→ Bright and Quirky

- <https://brightandquirky.com/prizant-webinar/>

→ Bridges Academy

- <https://2ecenter.org/bridges-online-courses/>

→ Social Thinking

- <https://www.socialthinking.com/free-stuff>

High Ability ASD in Adulthood

- Dearth of research and support for adults with ASD
- Protective factors: Stronger cognitive and language abilities, history of intervention
- High rate of unemployment/underemployment
- Comorbid depression and anxiety; elevated suicidality
- Desire for social and romantic relationships; inconsistent findings regarding rates of romantic relationships and marriage
- Low incidence of perpetrating crimes/violence

Ohl et al 2017; Portuguese, 2019; Strunz et al., 2017

High Ability ASD in Adulthood

Anecdotes from practice:

→ Barriers in transition to adulthood

- Executive functioning concerns
- Sleep difficulties
- Limited adaptive skills
- Cognitive and behavioral rigidity
- Difficulty adjusting to change

→ Protective factors:

- Support from family
- Opportunities to develop coping/adaptive skills
- Invigorating and accommodating work environment
- Careers that match strengths and interests



Case Example - “Max”

→ 4th grader

→ Parent reports:

- Strong interest in reading and researching about animals, and sharing knowledge with others
- Sensitive to others’ emotions and attempts to offer comfort
- Avoids other kids at the park
- Difficulty handling change of any kind – melts down and hard to console

→ Teacher reports:

- Highly creative thinker generally
- Often brings a preferred book for downtime/recess
- Shuts down when frustrated or challenged
- Difficulty regulating emotion and behavior
- Interacts effectively with adults one-on-one



Case Example - “Max”

→ Direct assessment:

- STRONG: verbal & nonverbal reasoning skills, visual spatial skills, reading and math achievement
- WEAKER: processing speed, writing achievement, social interaction (from ADOS-2)

→ Developmental interview:

- Typical language, but difficulty modulating volume and integrating nonverbals
- Limited interest in other children, limited pretend play
- Intense restricted interest, sensory sensitivities

→ Rating scales:

- Difficulty with self-regulation (executive function)
- Elevations in anxiety, withdrawal, attention problems
- Difficulty with activities of daily living (adaptive function)

Case Example - “Max”

Diagnostic Impressions:

- Meets criteria for ASD
- Comorbid anxiety disorder?
- Clinically significant inattention?

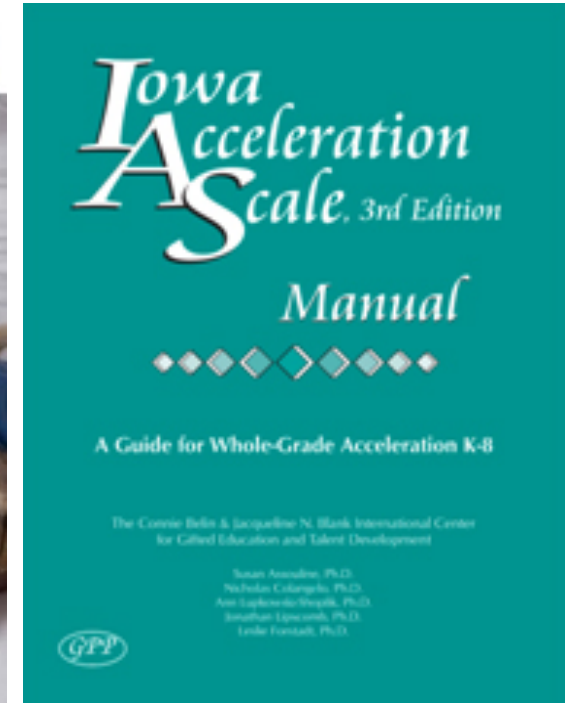
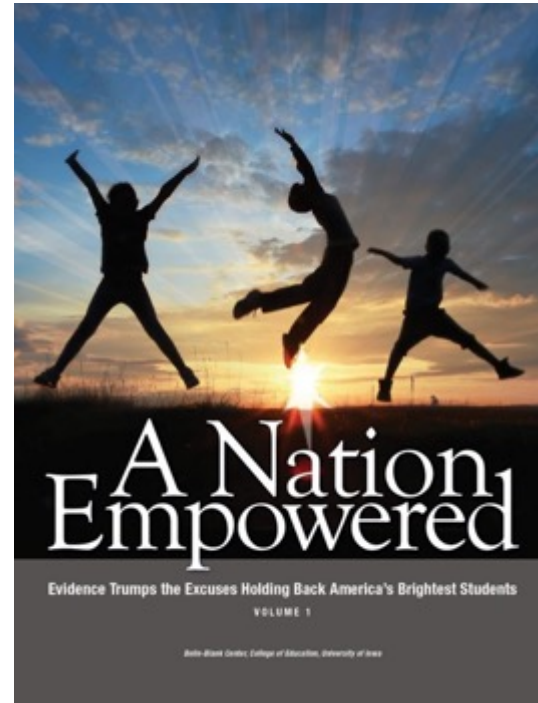
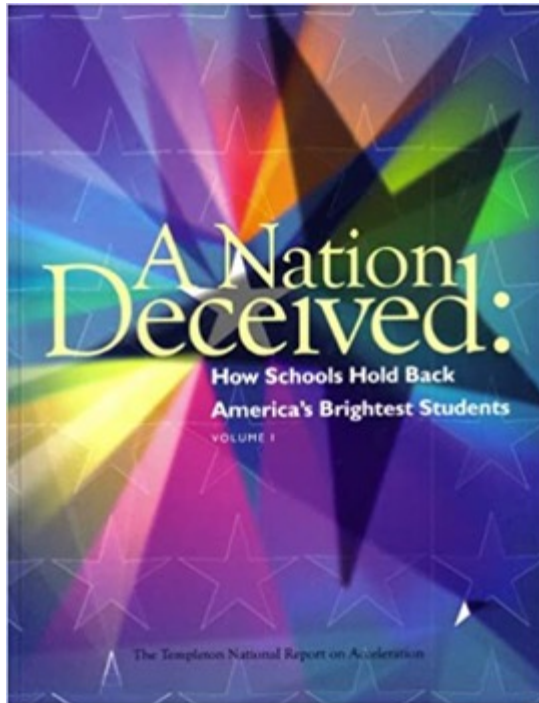
Recommendations:

- Consider subject acceleration
- Involve in extracurricular activities of interest – connect to like-minded peers
- Use assistive technology – esp. for writing
- Offer test accommodations – esp. for time
- Build support for developing executive and adaptive functioning

Conclusions

- 2e students are complex – important to understand interactions between giftedness and disability
- Important for professionals to be aware of what ASD looks like in high ability population
- ASD and anxiety are highly associated
- Essential to intervene from a talent development perspective addressing talents and disabilities simultaneously

Resources



Resources

2e
News



IOWA

Connect with the Belin-Blank Center:

