



Strength-Based Strategies for Twice- Exceptional High School Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Derrick is a 10th grader at Pacoma High School who receives special education services as a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). He is also academically talented, with extremely high verbal skills, aptitude and achievement scores in the 95th percentile, and talents and interest in meteorology. As his team begins to plan his annual meeting, they consider ways to use a strength-based approach to capitalize on his academic talents and prepare him to be ready to transition to postsecondary education. But what strength-based learning strategies benefit students with ASD who are also academically talented, particularly in high school? And what specific practices and experiences can enable Derrick to excel in high school and be prepared to succeed in a competitive college environment?

A growing awareness has recently emerged among educators that some students with ASD demonstrate advanced cognitive abilities, including academic gifts and talents (Charman et al., 2011). Students identified with both ASD and giftedness are increasingly labeled *twice exceptional (2e)*, a term used to identify individuals who are identified as both gifted and with one or more disabilities (Reis et al., 2014). Some previous research found that 2e students with ASD (2eASD) may not be receiving the necessary educational support to succeed in school (Cain et al., 2019). Unfortunately, individuals with ASD are less likely to attend postsecondary education than those with other types of disabilities and the general population, and those that do attend experience both academic and nonacademic difficulties and challenges (Gelbar et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012). Furthermore, older students and adults with ASD often report important social and mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and pervasive loneliness, and have been found to be disadvantaged in their employment, social relationships, and quality of life (Anderson

et al., 2018; Billstedt et al., 2005; Howlin & Moss, 2012), negatively affecting their success in college and employment.

Currently, limited research focuses on which successful teaching practices, learning strategies, and academic experiences also help 2eASD students achieve and thrive in secondary school and college (Reis et al., 2014). According to some preliminary suggestions, successful teaching strategies for this population should focus on finding a balance between fostering and developing students' academic strengths and interests and enabling them to compensate for the learning difficulties that accompany their disabilities (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2014; Reis, Gelbar, & Madaus, 2021). It is important for educators of students with ASD to understand these students have academic strengths that can help them achieve and even excel in academic settings.

The National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (n.d.) identified 28 evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with ASD (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). The National Standards Project cited agreement on 19 of these identified practices and added five more as emerging practices (National Autism Center, 2015). Of these 19 strategies, however, only four are recommended for high school students with ASD. These include behavioral interventions, modeling, self-management, and social skills package. However, the majority of these strategies are not necessarily appropriate for students who are 2eASD. Josephson and colleagues (2018), citing previous summaries and reviews, suggested five practices for teaching and supporting 2e students, not specifically 2eASD, that "emphasize the strengths first, address the needs, support the social-emotional needs, recognize the difference between 2e and gifted underachievers, collaborate and

communicate to provide optimal support" (p. 3). However, in summary, little data-based research has been conducted about teaching practices that benefit 2eASD students specifically.

Specific Strength-Based Teaching Strategies and Academic Experiences Contributing to Students' Academic Success

To identify specific effective strategies contributing to academic success during high school, Reis, Gelbar, and Madaus (2021) conducted interviews with 40 students who identified as 2eASD, had high grades in high school and strong SAT scores, and had been accepted or matriculated at competitive colleges and universities, including Ivy League institutions. Results identified specific strength-based teaching and instructional strategies and academic experiences that students reported as contributing to their academic success during high school. Strength-based strategies are defined as focusing on what students can do well, their interests, the academic work they like and enjoy pursuing, and the types of experiences and relationships that make them feel successful in school (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2014; Reis, Gelbar, & Madaus, 2021; Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997; Reis, Renzulli, & Renzulli, 2021). Assessment of strength-based pedagogy has been described in other work describing enrichment pedagogy and processing for assessing students' interests, product preferences, and preferred modes of learning (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). In the work described in this article, these were defined as the following: (a) dual identification as 2e, (b) interest-based extracurricular activities, (c) challenging and advanced classes, and (d) the use of strength-based learning strategies. These are discussed in more detail in the following.

Dual Identification as 2e: Academically Talented With ASD

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this, educators can implement strategies suggested by Morrison and Rizza (2007) to help identify those students who are 2e and create a plan to identify students based on the unique needs of the individual. This may include school district identification as 2eASD, case studies, teacher nomination, participation in honors or advanced classes, and other indicators of talent, such as science fair and summer enrichment program participation. More recent research suggests the addition of profile analyses and multiple observations over settings and situations to identify students' strengths and the interventions needed to develop talents (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2014).

Twice-exceptional students experience many challenges navigating their educational pathways because of their dual exceptionalities, fitting neither of the traditional exceptionality definitions (Reis et al., 2014). Identification of and meeting the unique needs of students who are 2e continues to be problematic due to misunderstanding, misdiagnosis, missed diagnosis, confusion, and criticism from professionals (Doobay et al., 2014; Morrison & Rizza, 2007; Reis et al., 2014). Students who are 2eASD often mask their disabilities by compensating with their assets; concomitantly, their disabilities may also mask their academic talents (Doobay et al., 2014; Reis et al., 1997).

It was particularly important for Derrick's own self-belief and self-efficacy that his teachers and counselors believe he had strong academic abilities and talents and could successfully participate in advanced learning opportunities. Derrick explained to his team at the annual individual education program (IEP) meeting that only one or two of his teachers recognized and helped him to understand and also identify his academic talents. For Derrick, the acknowledgment of

his talents seemed to be a crucial step in both his personal and academic development, and this recognition of talents contributed to his increased confidence, over time, in his ability to be academically successful.

Interest-Based Extracurricular Activities

Another strength-based strategy that seems to be particularly important is the encouragement of participation in interest-based extracurricular activities (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 1997; Reis, Gelbar, & Madaus, 2021). Students should be asked to select at least one opportunity as one way to further understand and enhance their strengths and talents. This encouragement can also create opportunities for 2eASD students to participate in high-interest classes (e.g., coding, digital animation, game design) in the areas of their favorite extracurricular activities. Teachers can provide a choice of virtual social opportunities, various extracurricular activities, and academic opportunities in areas of interest and available during extracurricular time. Both teachers and parents can encourage students to spend time considering how to learn more about their interests and how to use these interests and high school extracurricular activities to consider future college majors, as well as careers, using tools such as interest inventories and padlets (see examples described in the following).

These special interests of students are often reflected in the extracurricular activities they pursue both within school and out of school (Reis et al., 1997; Reis, Gelbar, & Madaus, 2021). Extracurricular activities have been found to support a positive sense of self and help 2e students overcome their negative school experiences (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 1997; Reis et al., 2021). Because interests can influence and suggest potential academic pursuits, students can become increasingly more engaged and driven to participate in more challenging content if they are also encouraged to pursue interest-based extracurricular activities (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2021). Additionally, high-interest extracurriculars may contribute to success in high school and realization of opportunities about potential college majors and future careers for this population (Reis et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2021).

Derrick was involved in various extracurricular activities, including sports, clubs, and competitions. His most important and favorite activities related to his strongest areas of interest, robotics, meteorology, and computer clubs and arts activities such as band or choir. His preferred extracurricular experiences were individual opportunities compared with team-based sports. Derrick tried multiple clubs and dropped out of some before finding the right fit for his talents and interests. Analyzing how and why these decisions were made helped him focus on an analysis of these areas and led to various discussions about how these interests might guide his future choices both in academics and in the hobbies and interests he pursues for enjoyment and talent development in life. The IEP team also discussed how the skills gained from these experiences can play a role in college success by helping him to understand and develop his interests, social connections, and time-management and organizational skills.



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Participation in Challenging and Advanced Classes

Students who are identified as 2eASD should be encouraged to enroll in challenging college level classes with other nonidentified 2eASD students in areas of interest and choice. Research identifies the importance of participation in at least one challenging and advanced class that aligns with interests (Reis et al., 2021). Having the opportunity to participate in these college-level classes addresses several goals, such as enabling students to interact with other academically able students with ASD, to participate in discussions and advanced content acquisition, and to potentially increase a student's self-efficacy to complete advanced work. In addition, these challenging classes enable students to learn and apply skills that are important for future success, such as time management and dealing with challenge. Academic success in these challenging classes is important for subsequent advanced work in high school and college (Reis et al., 2021).

Students can also be exposed to a variety of workshops that complement the challenging college courses in which they are being encouraged to enroll and help students focus on developing both their academic strengths and interests, as opposed to only compensating for the learning difficulties that accompany their disabilities (Baum et al., 2014; Reis et al., 2014). Teachers can design workshops to focus on topics important to 2eASD students, such as the unique needs of 2eASD students and how to react to advanced-content classes. Educators can provide opportunities for students to attend workshops focusing on helping them to understand their strengths and interests, to consider planning processes for college, and to identify future interests and talents (for workshops identified from field tests and research as most helpful and enlightening for 2eASD students, see *Table 1*). Workshops, such as those described in *Table 1*, focus on a particular aspect of being 2eASD. For example, a workshop titled "Understanding Your Interests and Creating a Personal Talent Goal" enables students to focus on their interests and strengths and to consider how these might guide their selection of various enrichment experiences and extracurricular opportunities. Students are asked to focus



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on answering questions about their interests, such as "If you were able to visit any museum in the world, which would you choose?"; or "If you could spend time collecting objects with no restrictions on finances, what would you collect?"; or "if you were able to write a book, what would the title be?" Considering interests and strengths enables student to start thinking about selecting one talent goal, based on these interests.

Use of Specific Strength-Based Learning Strategies

Students can be encouraged to utilize digital tools such as padlets to post summaries, ideas, and findings about their interests, goals, and plans on a common virtual page (*Figure 1*). The notes can include links, videos, images, and document files. The free version of Padlet enables students to create up to three padlet boards at any time. Sections of the padlet include summary information from an adaptation of Renzulli's (1977) Interest-a-lyzer, a widely used tool in enrichment programs to enable students to self-reflect about their interests. The padlet also maintains an electronic record of areas such as students' perceived favorite subjects and majors, hobbies, goals, next steps for college, jobs or work, and other summaries of what is special and important to them. Workshops on the use of these types of tools can be conducted in any high school special education class. Padlet examples created by students include areas such as volunteer work, hobbies and collections, work experience, general interests, academic interests, academic strengths, what students wish their teachers knew about them, some favorite things, and steps for college planning.

In addition to padlets, teachers can use strategies to engage students, such as quizzes and reflections (described in the

following and in *Tables 2* and *3*), to assess students' knowledge and increase self-advocacy skills about college disability centers. In this way, students began to understand the types of skills needed to participate in advanced courses at competitive colleges in the future. These tools can also be helpful to other high school students with disabilities to consider what they will need for their future academic success. For example, the College Services Pre- and Post-Quiz, administered in conjunction with a workshop on college disability services, provides students with the opportunity to assess how much they actually know about college disability services and how these differ from high school services before the workshop. They can then compare that level of knowledge to what they learned after participating in the workshop (for more information about this tool, see *Table 3*). This quiz could be used in classes with high school juniors and seniors for similar purposes.

Students can also use a Reflection Log (see *Table 4*) to think about what types of disability-related services they receive in high school, in what classes, how this helps them, and who arranges the services (e.g., How is extended time set up for an exam or quiz?). This log can also be used to consider the same questions regarding similar services a student will need in college. The goal of using this type of reflection is for students to employ metacognitive strategies to appropriately plan to use and assess one's understanding of services to enable academic success. It also helps to prompt students to consider which services and strategies work well for them, in what ways, and also, whether these services should be continued or changed for future academic and social and emotional success.

Finally, it can also be helpful for educators to identify peer mentors who can work with students to develop

Table 1 Sample Workshops

<i>Workshop title</i>	<i>Description</i>
Transition to College: Choosing the Best College for You	This session will help you to understand the process of applying to and getting accepted into college. The different types of colleges and different types of college programs for autistic individuals will also be discussed to help you understand how to choose the best college for you.
Disability Services Available for College Students	Colleges offer a range of support services for students, including services specific to students with disabilities. This session will provide an overview of these services and tips on how and when to access them.
Understanding Your Interests and Creating a Personal Talent Goal	<p>This session will help you understand your interest areas by discussing your interests and using a padlet. You will learn how to create talent and enrichment experiences, starting with one talent goal, based on your interests and create a personal talent development plan, which will launch you on your own talent development journey as you complete high school and apply to college.</p> <p><i>Tips included the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Take advantage of the range of available supports</i> • <i>Self-advocate with professors, support services</i> • <i>Set clear goals</i> • <i>Understand need to improve skills (e.g., time management, notetaking)</i> • <i>Work hard, but also work efficiently</i> • <i>Find ways to express your interests and passions</i> • <i>Develop social networks (e.g., clubs of interest areas)</i> <p><i>Things 2eASD students can start practicing now included the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Develop a consistent schedule</i> • <i>Get up at the same time every morning</i> • <i>Learn how to do your laundry</i> • <i>Learn how to manage stressful events</i> • <i>Understand your high school accommodations that work best for you</i>

Note. 2eASD = twice-exceptional student with autism spectrum disorder.

self-regulation skills, especially the ability to filter distractions, prioritize tasks and goals, and control impulses to pursue nonacademic interests until advanced school-related work was completed (see **Tables 1** and **5**). Some previous research has suggested that peer mentors can help students with ASD enhance their well-being, improve academic success, and increase retention in university settings (Siew et al., 2017). Other research with college students with ASD has also found that peer mentors can enable students with ASD to identify their personal strengths, increase their autonomy, achieve goals, and build relationships (Thompson et al., 2019). Peer mentors can also help students to prioritize how to shift their focus from leisure activities and interests to a focus on academic work and classes that they also enjoy. Success in this type of discussion enables students to

apply skills such as time management and self-regulation (see **Table 2**) to interest-based projects completed during their classes that they enjoy in a strength-based manner. Peer mentors can also help students with ASD feel less isolated and help them to focus some of their effort and time on their strengths and interests, especially when they struggle socially or with academic self-regulation. These strategies can be discussed as part of class, workshops, and mentoring meetings where mentors discuss ways to integrate the strategies in the college classes students take.

Mentoring meetings might group sessions of six to eight students and last for 30 to 60 minutes (see **Table 5**). During these meetings, mentors can discuss the importance of creating relationships with a teacher in their high schools as well as learning and study strategies. In addition,

they can provide tips for time management and self-regulation using examples from the students' classes. These small, personalized meetings can enable mentors to learn about students' progress in their classes, examine the relationships they build with faculty and other students, and discuss ways students can apply the learning and study strategy instruction for time management to other classes and project experiences. These peer meetings can also provide an opportunity for students to share experiences with peers who are in their classes and to begin to create relationships. This process could occur under the guidance and supervision of a teacher or counselor using activity suggestions for peer mentors provided in **Table 5**. School and community partners can help identify mentors, and a school district's written policies can help teachers determine how and when these

Figure 1. Padlet



Note. <https://padlet.com/sallymreis/94k07ukn3aqt1buib>.

Table 2 Specific Self-Regulation Strategies for Discussion With Twice-Exceptional Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder Students

- A. **Personal:** usually involves how a student organizes and interprets information, including:
1. **Organizing and transforming information**
 - Outlining
 - Summarizing
 - Rearrangement of materials
 - Highlighting
 - Flashcards/index cards
 - Draw pictures, diagrams, charts
 - Webs/mapping
 2. **Goal setting and planning/standard setting**
 - Sequencing, timing, completing
 - Time management and pacing
 3. **Keeping records and monitoring**
 - Notetaking
 - Lists of errors made
 - Record of marks
 - Portfolio, keeping all drafts of assignments
 4. **Rehearsing and memorizing** (written or verbal; overt or covert)
 - Mnemonic devices
 - Teaching someone else the material
 - Making sample questions
 - Using mental imagery
 - Using repetition
- B. **Behavioral:** usually involve actions that the student takes
1. **Self-evaluating** (checking quality or progress)
 - Task analysis (What does the teacher want me to do? What do I want out of it?)
 - Self-instructions; enactive feedback
 - Attentiveness
 2. **Self-consequating**
 - Treats to motivate; self-reinforcement
 - Arrangement or imagination of punishments; delay of gratification
- C. **Environmental:** These strategies involve seeking assistance and structuring of the physical study environment.
1. **Seeking information** (library, Internet)
 - Library resources
 - Internet resources
 - Reviewing cards
 - Rereading records, tests, textbook
 2. **Environmental structuring**
 - Selecting or arranging the physical setting
 - Isolating/eliminating or minimizing distractions
 - Break up study periods and spread them over time
 3. **Seeking social assistance**
 - From peers and teachers or other adults
 - Emulate exemplary models

Source. Adapted from Zimmerman (1990).

Table 3 College Services Pre- and Post-Quiz

1. My IEP goals and objectives or my 504 accommodations will be continued when I am in a college setting.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
2. Disability Services will contact me regularly once I am on campus.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
3. I will be responsible for notifying my professors of my disability if I want to receive accommodations in their class.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
4. I may or may not receive the same services in college that I received in high school.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
5. I do not have to disclose my disability to anyone if I don't want to.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
6. When I disclose my disability to the college, I will automatically receive all of the accommodations that I request.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
7. It doesn't matter when I disclose my disability.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>
8. I will be responsible for providing documentation of my disability to my college if I need services.	<i>T</i>	<i>F</i>

Note. Correct answers are in italics. IEP = individualized education program.

Source. Adapted from *Self-Advocacy and the Transition to College*, by D. Merchant and M. Dintino, 2011. <https://nextsteps-nh.org/wp-content/uploads/Self-advocacy-and-the-Transition-to-College-12-13-2011.pdf>.

Table 4 Reflection on Services

<i>Type of service/strategy (e.g., extended test time, quiet test room, tutors)</i>	<i>In which classes do you use it?</i>	<i>How does it help?</i>	<i>Who sets it up?</i>

opportunities should occur and who should be involved in the meetings (Probst, 2006). Peer mentoring opportunities could be arranged by special education teachers or case workers among groups of college-bound students who are 2e and 2eASD to enable discussions about the topics discussed previously as well as strategies such as identifying strengths and interests, self-regulation as outlined in **Table 2**, or successful tips for time management (see **Table 2**, which is based on the conceptual framework of Zimmerman, 1990).

As a result of these mentoring opportunities, Derrick believes he better understands the importance of learning how to interact and talk with his peers and with his teachers and mentors after participating in meetings and workshops. He discussed the need to focus on his strengths

and interests and to develop relationships with faculty during his mentorship meetings. During these meetings, he reflected on how he had developed at least one thoughtful relationship with a teacher in high school. This opportunity provided the basis for his reflections about the importance of developing relationships with other students and his teachers. Derrick's peer mentor suggested that he take time for interest-based extracurricular activities and use specific learning and study strategies and ways to monitor his progress in his courses. He also helped him determine whether course requirements and demands were being met and find time to pursue an interest-based independent study project. Derrick's peer mentor also attended 2eASD workshops with him to support his strengths and interests and identify content that he might want to pursue independently in the future.

Conclusion

Students' individual strength-based characteristics should be discussed and described when planning for the IEP (e.g., present level of performance, summary of preferences, interests, needs, and strengths). It is important to consider what 2eASD students do well, their interests and strengths, what they hope to achieve next, and how their strengths can be used to establish goals that address both their talents and deficits during the IEP meeting.

As noted previously, limited research exists on the teaching strategies that work best to engage, challenge, and help students who are 2eASD to become academically successful and prepare for competitive colleges (Reis et al., 2014). In summary, the activities described in this

Table 5 Sample Peer Mentor Opportunities and Activities

Academic work activities:

- **Helping with homework**—such as writing assignments or math problems
- **Studying for tests**—to learn effective strategies and overcome anxieties about test taking, focusing on practical tips and strategies from their own experiences
- **Learning how to do advanced work and research projects**—how to use the library or search the Internet for information that can help with homework assignments and advanced work
- **Use of technology**—finding online information, creating personal web pages, editing and printing photographs, making brief movies, integrating music

Social and emotional growth activities:

- **Goal setting**—identify initial goals for the mentoring relationship, identifying personal short- and long-term goals.
- **Conflict resolution**—model and develop effective problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills
- **Friendships, relationships, and social interactions**—discuss importance and development of friendships, model suggestions for positive social interactions
- **Bullying/aggression**—help students recognize, respond to, and prevent bullying behavior in and out of school
- **Diversity and respecting differences**—examine how students view themselves and others to better understand how to interact with peers, school acquaintances, and their communities.
- **Self-esteem**—reflect on strengths and internalize success in different areas
- **Anger management**—discuss how to handle frustrations in a more mature way
- **Peer pressure**—share experiences and discuss strategies for making good decisions
- **Health and wellness**—discuss issues relating to avoiding tobacco, drugs, and drinking in college as well as healthy eating habits, personal hygiene, physical fitness

article have demonstrated promise in serving as data-based strategies to help students reflect and capitalize on their strengths when transitioning from high school to college. To the greatest extent possible, students should have opportunities to participate in advanced academic options in high school to enable them to matriculate, and then graduate, from competitive colleges and universities. They should also be able to participate in challenging classes in areas of interest and pursue interest-based extracurricular activities with other students who share their interests. They should also have time to complete project-based learning opportunities related to their interests.

Derrick's team talks with him to determine which academic and enrichment experiences will most likely meet his profile of strengths and interests. As Derrick has documented interests in meteorology, the team encourages him to participate in more advanced learning opportunities and to further develop his interests in this area via an independent study. Additionally, the team discusses the possibility of Derrick enrolling in a community college course during his senior year. The team also discusses the possibility of enabling Derrick to start a meteorology club at his school. Specific

goals and objectives are also developed related to him developing and applying time-management skills that will benefit his academic present and future. He will also be given the opportunity to discuss any social challenges encountered in these new experiences and to apply strategies to help him succeed socially in new settings with new individuals, especially those with whom he shares areas of interest and academic strength.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by a grant from the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program.

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TEACHING Exceptional Children,
Vol. XX, No. X, pp. XX-XX.
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