



## Asynchrony in Asia: International Schools & Twice Exceptionality

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With 6 years of international teaching experience leading learning support, gifted education, and inclusion in international schools in Asia (Hong Kong and Thailand), I take you on a journey into "learning gifticulties."

International schools are a rapidly expanding phenomenon especially in Asia (ISC, 2020) which is dominating the international school market worldwide (Ang & Kwok, 2012) and although there is a growing global awareness of the coexistence of disability and giftedness or twice exceptionality (2e) there are no agreed international definitions of any of these terms (Harris, Rapp, Martinez & Plucker, 2007). Research into giftedness in the international school context is rare yet some issues have been identified in the literature: cultural and linguistic diversity, high teacher and student mobility and lack of provisions (Begg, 2012). Research on students experiencing 2e who already "straddle two subpopulations" of giftedness and disability (Olenchak, Jacobs, Hussain, Lee & Gaa, 2016, p. 206) in an international school setting, may be even more sparse.

In 2006, I began this international teaching journey in Bangkok. I already knew about 2e from my teaching experience in Australia however, things become more layered in an Asian international school. The intersection of giftedness, disability, and contextual factors over time (Neihart et al., 2015) means that change and discontinuity (Grimshaw & Sears, 2008) uniquely impacts those experiencing 2e. One view is that expatriate and international school students may all have special needs of some kind due to the cross-cultural differences experienced in different curriculum and assessment, mother tongue language used, and culture shock from multiple transitions (Sperandio & Klerks, 2007; Sternberg, 2007; Robinson, 2008).

### Diversity in International Schools

Walker (p. 8, 2006) suggests that 'at the heart of international education lies the appreciation of difference, in the sense both of valuing diversity and of calling into question previously unchallenged assumptions and prejudices.' However, discomfort with intellectual precocity seems to be an international and cross-cultural phenomenon in Western societies and therefore may be present in international

schools. It is suggested this can be reduced through professional development on gifted students and their learning needs (Geake, 2000; Geake & Gross, 2008; Lassig, 2009), but is this happening? Observations and careful assessments of diverse students require culturally sensitive tools, including dynamic assessment methods (Al-Hroub, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). But are they used in international schools? Parent perspectives need to be included in personal profiling to gain an understanding of the whole student (Grassi & Barker, 2009) because achievement and behavioral issues can mask giftedness, disabilities, or 2e. But are they?

Fast forward to 2017, and now in Hong Kong, I became more interested in the liminal space of 2e and the social context of international schools. International Schools Consultancy (ISC) and Next Frontier Inclusion (NFI) collaborated to produce the Inclusion in International Schools Global survey reports (2016, 2017, 2019). The 2019 report includes this summary:

"Almost 74% of schools report accepting highly capable students, and only 29.27% report satisfaction with how they serve this population." (ISC, 2020 p. 15).

So, they enrol but do not provide, with no mention of 2e in any of the ISC reports. We know there is considerable asynchrony, between and within individuals in this heterogeneous 2e group, across different domains and degrees of giftedness and disability (Beckmann & Minnaert, 2018; Mönks, Heller, & Passow, 2000), and we know working successfully with this unique population requires specialized academic training and ongoing professional development (Baldwin, et al., 2015, p. 212-213). Is this happening?

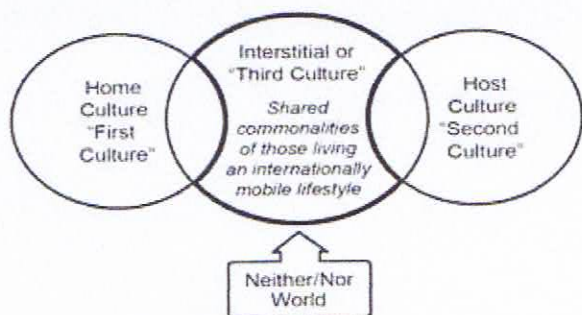
In the systematic review by Beckmann and Minnaert (2018), overall, the non-cognitive characteristics which have the highest prevalence among students experiencing 2e (gifted with learning disabilities) are:

- use of compensatory techniques
- close relationships with/supported by relatives
- self-awareness
- strong perseverance
- negative attitude toward school
- high frustration with school

Frustration was the most common characteristic, and it is suggested that the social environment might explain the inter- and intra-individual variability in non-cognitive characteristics. The social and academic environment of an international school may therefore promote greater acceptance of diversity through a focus on multiculturalism which is the "idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities" (Baker, 2001: p 402). From another perspective, students with 2e may already be experiencing a 'third culture' between their giftedness and disability.



Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a term originally coined by Useem, Useem & Donoghue (1963) in reference to expatriates living and working abroad. Later it was used by Pollock & Van Reken (1999; Van, Reken, Pollock & Pollock, 2017) to describe the international school as an interstitial, or culture between cultures (Sheard, 2008) and TCKs.



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In some ways this resembles the conception of 2e by Ronskley-Pavia (2015).

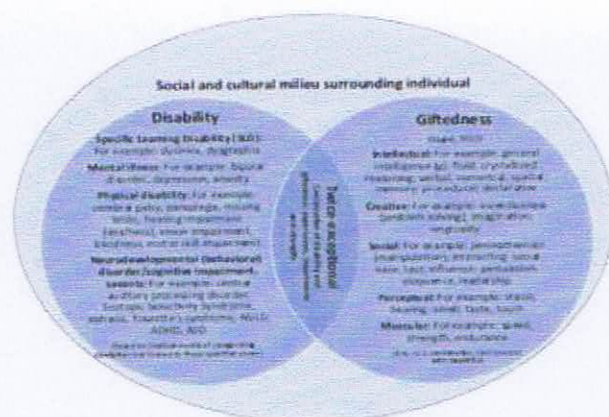


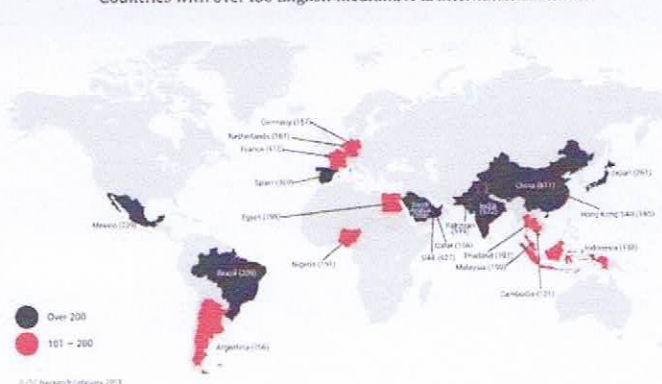
Figure 2. Inside the twice-exceptional model. Note. ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; ASD = autism spectrum disorders; NVLD = non-verbal learning disability.

(Ronskley-Pavia, 2015, p. 330)

According to McNulty and Carter (2017) the TCK experience is one where "culture and identity collide" which can lead to TCKs being seen as victims of globalisation struggling with identity, and relationships during a fragile stage of their development, such as the early and adolescent years (p. 4). In contrast however, it has also been suggested that globally mobile students find comfort, security, and a sense of shared identity to thrive in their international environment (Sears, 2011; Tsumagari, 2010) due to a sense of belonging in relationships with others of a similar background (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). These alternate positive and negative views of the experiences of TCKs mirror the research on 2e and how the dynamic interplay of environmental and individual variables may provide the alchemy for social and emotional development.

A big shift has been that most students (80%) are now children of local families attending an international school in their native country. Local, and expat are not necessarily distinct terms. For example, bicultural families with a parent who is a citizen of the host country may have lived internationally, and in contrast, some originally expatriate families may now be permanent residents of the host country. Passports do not tell the whole story. Bailey (2015) suggests we are seeing a global middle-class that shares a trans-national orientation to the meaning of their children's education, an international culture.

Countries with over 100 English-medium, K-12 international schools



From ISC Inclusion in International Schools report 2017

### Third Culture Kids, Cross-Cultural, Globally Mobile or Affluent Locals?

The important role of the dynamic between the individual and social and cultural environment is a distinctive feature in many Asian cultures (Phillipson, et al., 2013; Vialle, 2013). It is noted that in Asian countries with roots in Confucianism there is the core belief of a moral obligation for parents and teachers to develop every child's ability as far as possible (Cho & Lin, 2011). Cultural diversities of parenting children with 2e have been scarcely discussed in the research.

### International Schools and Giftedness in Asia

In terms of gifted education, the research has been predominately from the West, so Asian gifted education and research has been heavily influenced by Western gifted education. (Vialle & Ziegler, 2016). We see from some of the research that there are significant differences in self constructions of individuals between cultures that are collectivist (interpersonal) or individualistic (intrapersonal) and these differences shape cognition and emotion (Niehart, et al., 2015). Sue and Sue (2013) explained that most Asians tend to have a collectivistic orientation so within this cultural context, Asian parents are likely to emphasize achievement and conformity to family goals.

Lo and Yuen (2014; 2015), conducted small-scale exploratory studies in Hong Kong investigating the coping strategies used by Chinese students with 2e (gifted with learning disabilities). Family and peers were found to be important sources of support, and a recommendation was that coping strategies be explicitly taught in school. However, according to Park (2015) Asian parents may need support in advocating for their children with 2e, because due to the Asian parenting style, self-advocacy may not be taught at home. Further to this, in a study from Singapore it was concluded that high academic self-efficacy in students with 2e can exist when there is a focus on developing two things: their strengths and achievement in learning, and their area of interest. The main avenues for this academic self-efficacy according to this study are "effective parental support, teacher's care, and peers influence and creating a positive schooling experience." (Weng & Niehart, 2015 p. 70). Parents who have academically successful children with 2e recognise their children's gifts and normalize their disabilities. These parents also sought resources and taught their children how to advocate for themselves (Speirs, et al., 2013).

### Intersection of TCK and 2e: Learning Gifticulties

The asynchronous development of students experiencing 2e may however, not be identified in the international school culture, but may instead be attributed to diverse cultural backgrounds, high mobility English language learning or mobile life experiences, meaning the necessary teaching and curriculum adjustments may not be offered in the school. Constant transitions and international living may mean that a student's 2e experience; or not fitting in, may be seen as typical, accepted, and normalised as part of a globally mobile student



population. Learning gaps may be blamed on moving countries, discontinuous grade/ age groupings or disparate curriculum (Hattie, 2018). In the international school context, high ability or achievement may be attributed to relatively high expectations, socio-economic status and ready availability of personal tutors and nannies (Wu, 2005). Parents may not know of their child's 2e or if they do may be concerned about disclosure during a selective admissions process of some international schools where disability or other support is not mandated or funded by the host country resources (Sperandio & Klerks, 2007).

Generally, international schools are staffed by relatively large numbers of expatriate teachers and administrators who would bring with them their own cultural, curriculum and professional knowledge base from their training and experience (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). Increasing intercultural competence in a school community requires continuous responsive professional development (Hofstede, 1980; Shaklee & Merz, 2012). If being intercultural competent is valued in the international school then multi-cultural curriculum explicitly teaching adaptive cognitive, affective, and behavioural skills may support some of the social emotional needs of students also experiencing 2e in an international school.

### Alchemy

There are some similarities in descriptions in the literature for those who are globally mobile (TCK) and those with 2e. From the literature the international school can offer the potential alchemy of an 'intercultural identity' (Moore & Barker, 2012) for those with 2e to feel successful across different cultures, if certain conditions are met. The environment needs to be supportive and appropriately challenging to them in their area(s) of highest potential (Kaufman, 2018). Some shared TCK /2e characteristics present as the paradox of "learning gifticulties":

- Denial, hiding details about their lives (Eakin, 1998; Swiatek, 2001)
- Downplaying abilities (Alsop, 2003)
- Teacher duality toward them (Sheard, 2008) Asynchronous development (Pollock & Van Reken, 1999)
- Lifelong condition affecting choices and decisions (Eakin 1998; Sheard, 2008)
- True peers are mind-mates (Sheard, 2008) of similar global awareness
- Close family relationships (Sheard, 2008)
- Flexibility in learning to deal with and communicate with others (Eakin, 1998)

A heightened sense of community was reflected in the significant role various social media played in maintaining the connectivity of TCKs who move between international schools and cultures across the globe (Hannaford, 2016) which has implications for support for students with 2e internationally. Turning potential 2e frustration into something more positive requires more research into, learning gifticulties, educational fit, personal and family characteristics, and the impact of all these on talent and social-emotional development.

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