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Abstract

Who are twice-exceptional students, what are their needs and how does a teacher best facilitate their learning in the primary classroom? The purpose of this paper is to identify issues surrounding twice-exceptionality and explore how classroom teachers can overcome some of these educational issues. Three foci are addressed: teacher attitudes toward twice-exceptional students, issues surrounding misdiagnosis and the importance of curriculum differentiation for learners. Teachers need a comprehensive understanding of the condition, equipped with a positive attitude and ample curriculum differentiation options tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses. Quality support for students in their primary years will result in individual success in future schooling and work life. With enough attention, adequate support and an education tailored to their needs, they can not only succeed, but excel in life.



Twice-exceptionality in the classroom

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Who are twice-exceptional students, what are their needs and how does a teacher best facilitate their learning in the primary classroom? The purpose of this paper is to identify issues surrounding twice-exceptionality and explore how classroom teachers can overcome some of these educational issues. Three foci are addressed: teacher attitudes toward twice-exceptional students, issues surrounding misdiagnosis and the importance of curriculum differentiation for learners. Teachers need a comprehensive understanding of the condition, equipped with a positive attitude and ample curriculum differentiation options tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses. Quality support for students in their primary years will result in individual success in future schooling and work life. With enough attention, adequate support and an education tailored to their needs, they can not only succeed, but excel in life.

Keywords: twice-exceptional; gifted and talented; learning disabled; teacher attitudes; misdiagnosis; differentiation

A child struggles with reading but has a higher than average IQ for his or her age. He or she scores low in standardised class tests but displays an abundance of intellect in challenging, small-group activities. The child is overwhelmed when reading aloud in class but can detail all the prime ministers of Australia. What could be the issue?

Twice-exceptional students are those learners who are gifted in one or more areas of ability but who also possess an additional exceptionality (Vialle & Rogers, 2009). This additional exceptionality can be vastly different in each child. It may include hearing or vision impairment, physical disability, emotional or behavioural disorders. The particular set of paired characteristics may also be referred to as dual-exceptionality or GLD (Gifted Learning Disabled). This article will provide a clearer understanding for educators of twice-exceptional students, highlighting teacher attitudes, issues surrounding misdiagnosis and the importance of curriculum differentiation for learners.

Teachers' attitudes toward twice-exceptional students

Teachers of young people with learning disabilities do not expect them to excel in areas of academic competence (Welisch *et al.*, 2010). While attention increasingly focuses on assisting students with learning disabilities, teachers are still less inclined to refer a student with a learning disability for placement in a gifted program; whether



it is the unfamiliarity of the condition, insecurities of what others may think, or lack of education and support. The combination of a learning disability and giftedness is uncommon and therefore overlooked (Ashman & Elkins, 1998).

It is the attitude of the teacher that determines whether the student succeeds in the classroom situation. There needs to be a common understanding among new and experienced teachers that *all* students need our attention and assistance. Teachers need to feel empowered to teach twice-exceptional students effectively and creatively. To assist with this notion, more teacher education needs to be introduced, such as professional development workshops in the area of twice-exceptional learning. This would enable teachers to work alongside their students, supporting them to the best of their ability. Teachers should always keep an open mind when working with the students in their class or school, particularly throughout the programming and implementation process. Students need to be engaged in their learning to develop to their highest potential. The responsibility comes down to the role of the teacher, how he or she supports the students and educates individuals to embrace their learning gifts and disabilities (Winebrenner, 2003).

The whole-school program should cater for the needs of the individual, meeting high-quality teaching standards. Although the school may cater for the gifted students well, and also provide support for students with learning disabilities, they need to recognise that a child may identify with both of these extremes. There is the need for bridging the gap and facilitating collaboration between gifted specialists and learning disabled units in primary schools (Winebrenner, 2003). Both groups need to work in partnership to create something new that adequately addresses the needs of the twice-exceptional student. Teachers need to create a positive school ethos that recognises, accepts and celebrates multiple learning differences among all students and teachers (Leggett, Shea & Wilson, 2010).

Misdiagnosis

Misdiagnosis of twice-exceptional learners seems to be a common occurrence in the primary classroom. This may be due to:

- (1) The giftedness and disability cancel each other out, therefore, the child appears to be an average learner
- (2) The focus is on the disability and the giftedness is overlooked
- (3) The focus is on the giftedness and the disability is overlooked. (Vialle & Rogers, 2009)

This assumes that twice-exceptionality is misdiagnosed, as the disability camouflages the gift and the gift conceals the disabilities (Zirkel, 2004). The risks associated with overlooking or misdiagnosing twice-exceptional students may include: heightened risk of social and emotional vulnerabilities, low self-confidence and self-esteem issues, hypersensitivity, and academic or behavioural risks (Blacher & Reis, 2002). Quite often those at most risk of being overlooked are children from low socio-economic backgrounds, ESL learners, gifted and talented students, learning disabled and those with physical disabilities.



Zirkel (2004) suggests the notion that teachers will often fail to recognise students' dual exceptionality as one dis/ability masks the other. The issue is that teachers notice either evidence of giftedness or symptoms of a disability, place the student accordingly and subsequently fail to recognise indicators that the student may have additional skills and needs (Leggett, Shea & Wilson, 2010). Early identification is important, to ensure that both exceptionalities are identified and accommodated for successfully (Blacher & Reis, 2002). The student will significantly benefit from early identification, intense intervention, ongoing counselling, parental and teacher understanding and quality support (Blacher & Reis, 2002). Although there is only a relatively small percentage of affected students – with approximately 3% identified as twice-exceptional (Blacher & Reis, 2002) – it is important to foster and support these students in the classroom environment.

Differentiating the curriculum

Twice-exceptional students seem to pose a significant problem for primary educators. Aside from the issues of misdiagnosis and attitudinal concerns, the teacher must face the challenge of appropriately accommodating one child with two specific learning needs. Students possessing dual exceptionalities are often labelled 'bright but tough' students (Morrison & Omald, 2000). Despite their high levels of intelligence, their behaviour is often difficult to manage in a mainstream classroom. Although difficult, challenges in the classroom can be conquered by implementing simple yet effective programming designs.

To achieve flexibility in the curriculum, an individualised program does not need to be designed for each student, however, the teacher needs to be aware of students' learning needs and adjust the curriculum to accommodate the twice-exceptional student (Dempsey & Arthur-Kelly, 2007). Commonplace strategies recommended for the gifted child may not suffice in supporting the disabled student and vice versa. If the student is working mainly within the gifted education unit, then the teachers need to make accommodations for the student's learning weakness. For instance, a student with a low reading ability may require audiotapes or particular visual cues to assist in their educational pathway. On the other hand, if the student is working in a special education unit, the teacher requires additional curricula that challenges and advances the giftedness of the twice-exceptional learner. Primary educators need to be able to teach the whole child, creating "optimum learning conditions for these very interesting and challenging youngsters" (Winebrenner, 2003, p.137).

Opportunities provided should allow students to engage in higher-order thinking skills whilst compensating for their area of weakness – teaching them in the way they learn (Winebrenner, 2003). Differentiation does not comprise of assigning a fast-finishers' activity, it involves extending and building on student learning, by teaching the same concept in a range of ways that suits the student's learning style. When teaching in the area of strength, students should be provided with the same compacting and differentiation opportunities as other gifted students. However, when teaching in the area of weakness, students need direct strategies that will increase learning success; "never take time away from their strength areas to create more time to work on their deficiencies" (Winebrenner, 2003, p.133). When teachers use



individualised methods that build on a student's strength and compensate for their weakness, educational success is achievable.

Parents, carers, the classroom teacher and principal along with any supporting parties, such as therapists and psychologists, should be consulted when planning for the educational needs of the twice-exceptional child (Zirkel, 2004). High-quality support could result in furthering the individual to succeed to the best of his or her ability in the future schooling and workplace. Twice-exceptional students have unique learning profiles that need individual attention, as well as high educational and emotional support (Leggett, Shea & Wilson, 2010). Acceptable social behaviour is more likely to occur if the student is engaged and actively involved in the context of their learning.

Conclusion

Twice-exceptionality is an under-researched yet extremely interesting topic. To foster students with twice-exceptionality, teachers need a comprehensive understanding of the condition, equipped with a positive attitude and ample curriculum differentiation options tailored to individual strengths and weaknesses. High-quality support for students in primary school may result in furthering the individual to succeed to the best of his or her ability in future schooling and work life. With enough attention, adequate support and an education tailored to their needs, they can not only succeed, but excel in life (Leggett, Shea & Wilson, 2010).

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