Teacher Preparation for Twice-Exceptional Students: Learning from the Educational Experiences of Teachers, Parents, and Twice-Exceptional Students

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Abstract

The increasing population of students defined as "twice-exceptional" (2e) exhibits identified or unidentified intellectual or creative gifts in one or more areas, and also faces significant learning challenges and may have autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, or other characteristics that make them eligible for special education. However, neither special nor general education teachers are prepared for the unique complexities of these students, because preservice and in-service teacher education rarely addresses 2e students. This study examines the stories of teachers, parents, and 2e students themselves, to listen to their experiences in school and seek their insights to inform preservice and in-service teacher education. This study (1) provides insights for educators from 2e students, parents, and teachers; (2) promotes a deeper understanding of issues that go beyond individual faculty contexts and experiences; and (3) provides empirical evidence in support of transforming teachers and teacher education programs.

Keywords: inclusion, twice-exceptional, professional development, special education, qualitative methods

Beth explained the escalation of her 2e son's struggles in school: "At this point (age 11) he was frequently talking about suicide as a 'way out' of his problems." Rhonda, a 2e parent, lauded a teacher who effectively supported her child:

> What I appreciated was how she could see his strength [and] was willing to offer a potential solution to a problem that was not even in her area of expertise. She cared about him, saw connections, and was willing to try to help. That is a professional educator.

Tamika, a 2e student, reflected on her experiences in school and emphasized that teacher training "is crucial to prevent years of unnecessary trauma caused by being punished for not learning the same ways as the majority."

Twice-exceptional (2e) students and their parents have plenty to say about the challenges they face in schools. Experienced teachers also have perspectives on 2e students they have supported. Teachers' education and in-service professional development programs must be designed to raise their awareness of the 2e population, because teachers can be essential agents in identifying and nurturing all sorts of genius.

Teachers are professionals who can change the world through their impact on students (Tirri, 2017). It will require substantial investment to redesign preparation and professional development programs so that all teachers receive the specialized training they need to identify talents and challenges effectively and serve a diversity of learners.

Twice-exceptional students can be very complex and have needs that are usually met in gifted or special education settings, yet these students are often served in general education settings. Teachers' training programs on gifted, general, and special education often lack explicit instruction on this population as well (Foley-Nicpon, Assouline, & Colangelo, 2013). Meeting the needs of 2e students must be a shared responsibility and requires collaboration between different specialty areas of teacher education.

Definition

In 2014, the National 2e Community of Practice (COP) developed a comprehensive definition of twice-exceptional individuals:

> 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. (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015, p. 212)

Significance

It has been estimated that 5%–7% of children with identified disabilities may also be gifted and talented (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011; National Education Association, 2006; Whitmore, 1981). Because of a phenomenon called "masking," in which cognitive strengths compensate for weaknesses or weaknesses overshadow strengths, teachers often fail to recognize 2e students' unique needs (Baldwin, Baum, et al., 2015; Foley-Nicpon, et al., 2013). This means that the estimate of 5%–7% prevalence may be too low. Empirical investigation of twice-exceptionality remains scarce, however (Foley-Nicpon, et al., 2013), and there are even fewer empirical data specifically on preparing teachers to support 2e students. This is probably due to a shortage of faculty researchers who can generate and translate new knowledge about effective practices into teacher preparation programs (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010), which are often divided into silos where special education is treated separately from gifted education.

Twice-exceptional students have been gaining explicit attention since Melody Musgrove, Director of the Office of Special Education Programs for the United States Department of Education, published "Letter to Delisle" (2013) and a memorandum on it to state directors of special education (2015). In the latter document, Musgrove urged the states to remind school districts of their "obligation to evaluate all children, regardless of cognitive skills, suspected of having one of the 13 disabilities

outlined in 34 CFR §300.8" (p. 2). She specifically mentioned students with high cognition, whom districts have been reluctant to assess appropriately and who often do not receive services. A lack of understanding of twice-exceptionality is a huge barrier to recognizing and supporting these students (Lee & Ritchotte, 2018).

The Problem: A Need for Teacher Training Across Settings

The federal IDEA mandate (2004) ensures that students with disabilities have free and appropriate public education. The U.S. Supreme Court, in its decision in Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, suggested that an "appropriate" education "must offer an 'individualized education program' reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" (*Endrew F. v. Douglas*, 2017, p. 2). Although states retain the right to make educational decisions, federal mandates establish precedence that guide them. However, there is little state-level legislation addressing 2e learners (Nielsen Pereira, Knotts, & Link Roberts, 2015).

The National Association for Gifted Children and the Council for Exceptional Children have developed teacher preparation standards for gifted and talented education. The Council for Exceptional Children (2015) has also issued professional preparation standards for special educators. Many states also have professional preparation standards for educators. For example, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (2017) developed teacher performance expectations for general and special education: developing special educators are accountable to both sets of performance expectations, but general educators are accountable only to the general education standards. Because "the two exceptionalities are often addressed separately in educational settings" (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011), general education with enhancement and supports, or dual differentiation, is often the most appropriate placement for 2e students (Gould, Staff, & Theiss, 2012; Yssel, Adams, Clarke, & Jones, 2015). However, 2e students often receive no explicit mentions in general education or special education teacher preparation standards. There are also inconsistencies in legislation that supports preservice and in-service teacher preparation for these students (Nielsen Pereira, et

al., 2015).

Because teachers are not often trained across specialty areas, they frequently do not recognize the unique profiles of 2e students and so do not make appropriate referrals. Bianco and Leech (2010) studied the effects of teacher preparation and disability labels on gifted referrals and found that all teachers (gifted, general, and special education) were far less willing to refer students with a disability label to gifted programs; special education teachers were the least likely to do so. The idea that a student can be gifted and also have a disability seems contradictory to many teachers (Baldwin, 1999). In addition, because the social and emotional needs of 2e students are unique and complex, most teachers are not adequately prepared to support them in this area (Baldwin, Omdal & Pereles, 2015) or to make referrals for additional social and emotional support.

Teaching this population requires school psychologists and general, gifted, and special education preservice teachers to receive ongoing specialized training on the characteristics and instructional needs of 2e students and on their comprehensive assessment and identification (Assouline & Whitman, 2011; Baldwin, et al., 2015; Foley-Nicpon, et al., 2013; National Association for Gifted Children, 2013). Inadequate teacher training is one factor in the under-identification of 2e students (Johnson, Karnes, & Carr, 1997; Silverman, 2003). All educational professionals should consider the parents' and 2e students' perceptions and educational experiences when reshaping preservice and in-service and teacher education to meet the needs of these students (Foley-Nicpon, et al., 2013).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of parents, teachers, and twice-exceptional students and to examine their advice for the professional development of teachers who support 2e students. Though the professional literature on assessment and instructional practices that benefit 2e students is growing, little empirical research has included the views of key stakeholders specifically on preservice and in-service professional development (Willard-Holt, Weber, Morrison, & Horgan, 2013). Their experience could lend a valuable perspective to the field of teacher education.

Positionality

Qualitative inquiry is based on interpretations, so primary investigators and authors should reveal any positionality that may influence their understanding (Creswell, 2013). I was a classroom teacher for 28 years before becoming a full-time teacher preparation faculty member in a higher education setting. As a classroom teacher, I primarily worked in general education, but I spent several years in special education and was eventually assigned to gifted classrooms because of my experience with highly engaged parents. My district supported my receiving training in gifted education, which complemented my special education training, experiences, and passion for educational equity. I was committed to meeting the needs of all students. The situation gave me a unique perspective as a hybrid teacher—one who was passionate about and qualified to teach both gifted and special education students. Parents began requesting their children be placed in my 8th-grade ELA classes, especially children who were known to be "quirky" or who had known disabilities, such as profound hearing impairment, cerebral palsy, emotional disturbance, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). I welcomed these students and was properly prepared to help them. Now I work in teacher preparation at an independent liberal arts college and see opportunities to re-envision teacher education to include support for 2e students.

Methodology

My research question was this: What are the perceptions of parents, teachers, administrators, and adults who have experience with or as twice-exceptional students?

This was a phenomenological study in which I sought to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders on the educational experiences of 2e students. Qualitative retrospective interviews were used to understand participants' experiences and their suggestions for future educators. Retrospective interviews are a reflexive exercise that can contribute substantially to one's understanding of processes of change in educational practice by presenting a "living theory" (Whitehead & McNiff, 2014).

Before beginning this study, I obtained approval from the

affiliated institutional review board. The retrospective interviews were conducted with one participant at a time, either face-to-face for approximately 60 minutes, or via email, with the participant replying to and expanding on the initial questions; participants chose which type of interview they preferred. Data were collected over a six-month period. The interviews followed a phenomenological approach, beginning with predetermined open-ended questions that only loosely guided the conversation in order to allow other questions to emerge as a result of the sharing. The face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded for later professional transcription. These transcripts and the email interviews were then analyzed and coded for common themes and salient insights on 2e learners that could be considered in teacher education. The transcripts and the themes that emerged from them were then shared with the participants for member checking in order to improve their accuracy, credibility, and validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The data and interpretations were revised when participants provided clarifications of their ideas.

Participants

Participants were identified using nominative, purposeful sampling for maximum variation in roles. Potential participants were identified using professional and personal contacts and through a social media community for parents, professionals, and people who self-identify as 2e. A total of seven participants were found, all of whom continued through the duration of the study: two self-identified 2e students who are now adults, four parents of 2e children, and one teacher. One of the parents also spoke from her experience as a pediatrician who assists 2e children.

Findings

The retrospective qualitative interviews suggested that 2e students appreciate neurodiversity. This term was first used by Judy Singer to characterize neurological differences as positive and important, analogously to biodiversity (Singer, 1998). However, the participants reported that they feel misunderstood and marginalized and had had troubling experiences in school. Their stories illustrated the complexity of 2e students but also

confirmed that support for 2e students is a critical issue in teacher education across the specialty areas of general, gifted, and special education. Participants also gave specific advice to be considered for teacher education programs.

Appreciation for Neurodiversity

One theme that emerged from the interviews was an appreciation for neurodiversity, and the unique strengths and challenges each person has. However, participants repeatedly affirmed their perception that there is a problem in education, specifically in teacher education regarding 2e students. The participants spoke about the asynchronous development of 2e children and the strengths these individuals often have. They also addressed schools' concern for 2e students and their parents, and described the 2e population as under-identified, unsupported, and inadequately educated in most schools.

Participants described the positive attributes of 2e students and the benefits of their condition through a strength-based lens. Helen, a parent, said, "These students are very bright and talented. They are creative thinkers who do not always think in the conventional, linear way that most teachers expect." Rhonda, speaking from a dual lens as a parent of a 2e child and a pediatrician who assists 2e children, explained, "They are usually really fun because they are so creative. They look at the world a little differently and have interesting points of view or solutions to problems." Rhonda shared the appreciation she and teachers have for her 2e son:

> He has an advanced big-picture view of the world, which makes discussions with him at home really fun. The teachers say that he is one of the best discussants no matter the subject. They look to him often to hold the discussion together and move it forward in class. Interestingly, in some classes he says he purposely takes the opposite point of view than what he believes in because it makes him think more.

Beth was pleased with some of her son's teachers. "The best experiences have been when educators have been open about viewing our son's differences. They have enjoyed the challenge

our son presents and have made him feel comfortable to be the person he is." Janay, the long-time teacher, said, "Each child has his own sensitivities, excitabilities, strengths, thoughts, personality, and learning journey."

Affirmation of the Problem in Education

Though the participants celebrated differences in 2e individuals, they also described the problems those differences created in schools. Emphasizing the seriousness of these problems, a parent of two 2e children said that as a society, we are "losing beautiful minds" because our educational system isn't supporting these unique learners. Some participants described specific examples, such as Tamika's school experience as a 2e student:

> We are misunderstood, and our ways of learning aren't often recognized and/or acknowledged. When a child is isolated—in my case, the "carrel," or [being] sent to the hallway for distracting others by not paying attention—not only is the opportunity to learn being jeopardized, but the social implications are heartbreaking. Kids aren't ever going to be friends with that weird girl who has to sit in a box!

All the participants discussed teachers' lack of awareness and under-identification of 2e students. Paul, a student, described his struggles through adulthood. He talked about the variety of advanced degrees he had earned, most recently in law, but he said that he still struggles to keep jobs despite his success in academia and on tests such as the bar exam. He recalled his school years as filled with the feeling of being marginalized and unsupported despite his easy success: "I was incessantly told I was a gifted but that I had attitude problems. That I was lazy. When I was 40, I figured out I had Asperger's. I was 40." For Paul, recognizing as an adult that he was 2e provided him with some understanding, and he believes he would have benefitted from earlier identification and support in school.

Rhonda, a parent, implicated the teachers' lack of awareness in the problems faced by 2e students:

> These kids are anomalies. Few general educators are aware of 2es or…think that they are real people. Many general education teachers really don't have much background in

> learning disorders and disabilities. Some of them seem to think that this is a "special education problem" and "I'm not trained for 'special education'" so I can't really help.

Teresa, a parent, echoed this sentiment strongly: "Many of the signs of his 2e status had been there all along—and none of his teachers had ever recognized it or recommended him for screening." Beth, another parent, described the irony in her son's situation: "The public school told us he did not qualify for any services because his academics were at grade level (even though he had anxiety, word-finding deficits, and dysgraphia). We had a teacher who told us her job was to make him see he was not as smart as he thinks he is." This was in second grade. The problems became severe as he continued not receiving the support he needed: "At this point (age 11) he was frequently talking about suicide as a 'way out' of his problems at school."

Complex Learning Profiles

Participants' stories illustrated the complex and specialized learning profiles of 2e students. Paul described himself as "a long-time unemployed lawyer with multiple advanced degrees." He said, "I could get an A in a class without learning anything, but I had no idea how to interact with others. I still don't. Teachers need to look behind the grades." Janay, a lifelong classroom teacher, explained her perspective: "The majority of the 2e students were kinesthetic learners, as well as moving talkers. They had to have meaningful experiences to understand the concepts and ideas." She felt the students had to 'live' the curriculum through simulations and integrated thematic learning. Beth discussed her son's unique learning style and its implications for his daily schedule: "In pre-kindergarten, with some of his disabilities (ADHD, fine motor difficulties, speech deficits) … he was reading and comprehending chapter books and doing math computations that were far above age level." In second grade her son underwent educational testing, and his vast asynchrony was documented (from the 99th percentile to the 9th percentile). Since then he has learned to be in class with students who are two years older than him or in college (in English), one year older (in math), or the same age, and with special education students (in PE and

speech). Rhonda described the complexity another way: "The 2e's are curiosities to the general ed teachers and even counselors."

A Need for Advocacy and Collaboration

The participants declared that there was a strong need for collaboration and advocacy in schools from parents, teachers, and administrators. They were all willing to talk about their experiences with 2e, which may have influenced their perspectives, but their stories clearly illustrated the problems, along with the need for and benefits of collaboration and advocacy. Discussing her son, Beth said,

> I have worked with all of his teachers, schools, and consulting professionals. I have also read as much as possible and consulted with other parents and professionals. This has almost been a full-time job (with me not going back to work due to his needs).

Rhonda's comments also made clear the need for advocacy and collaboration among parents of 2e children and schools:

> We, as parents, had to drive the entire process at all stages, and there has been little that the administrators have done to help us anticipate the needs, especially around transitions. For example, I didn't realize that I would need to know about foreign language and college transitioning in the sixth grade, because the decisions we were making during junior high registration in sixth grade were going to, and have, made a difference for him for his high school classes and anticipation of college applications. We have had administrators who did not offer help, even when asked, because I did not use educational terms (like accommodations and modifications) and had not put it into a formal letter (but had put it into a formal email). Parents do not speak 'edu-speak' and forcing them to, even to get their child evaluated, is an injustice. Parents have to be very savvy—educate themselves so they are effective advocates for their children.

Advice to Teachers: A Shared Responsibility

As a former classroom educator who now works in teacher education, I asked participants about teacher training specifically,

and encouraged them to give advice to teachers and teacher educators. The participants universally stated the need for specialized teacher training. Many suggested that teachers, counselors, and administrators in all specialty areas needed to be aware of the profile of 2e students.

Tamika, a student, emphasized that teacher training "is crucial to prevent years of unnecessary trauma caused by being punished for not learning the same ways as the majority." Beth's perspective as a parent led her to support increased training: "For teachers to be aware—at least until more teachers gain awareness—is one of the struggles these students and their families go through to get the educational system to work for them." Teresa said, "It's crucial for all teachers to be trained to, at the very least, identify 2e students. There should be teachers who are trained specifically to support 2e students—for the sake of professionalism and out of compliance with IDEA." Janay, who had been a classroom teacher for more than 40 years, said,

> [Teachers] need to take courses that help them understand the dual exceptionalities. There has to be availability to the "regular" teachers to take these courses as part of their program as well because every one of them is going to teach a special needs child [or] children in every year of their teaching experience. Teachers need to be focused on their strengths and not their weaknesses. Their gifted areas need to be recognized so that they can shine in their strong areas.

Beth expected teachers to be challenged. She suggested,

> Teachers need to be able to see the whole student—the high academics as well as the disabilities—and realize that this asynchrony can very much affect the student as well as his [or] her academics. Teachers need to know that there are students who will perform extremely well academically (or are capable of high-level performance) but who also have disabilities (some severe). Teachers need to be challenged about thinking of students [who] fall into multiple labels. Teachers are somewhat trained in gifted kids (or at least the need for differentiated instruction with high-level kids), and they are trained in special education

> (kids [who] need academic and social supports to receive education). Teachers need to be challenged into thinking about all of these qualities occurring in a specific student. Teachers need to be aware that "twice-exceptional" does not mean "high performer with just one disability," but that many twice-exceptional [students] have multiple exceptionalities.

Rhonda was hopeful, emphasizing the amount of knowledge teachers already have:

> [Teachers] know a huge amount about the differences in kids and how to try to motivate and teach a variety of kids. Plus they want to help kids to learn and usually are very curious themselves and want to improve as … professionals. They could … with a little effort and additional in-service/mentoring/support etc. learn a little bit more about the learning disabilities and gifted and talented [students] and how they can adapt and stretch what most of them are already doing to help some of these kids.

Recommendations for Teacher Education

Teacher education programs in independent colleges are particularly well situated to integrate practices for ensuring that future and current teachers are equipped to support 2e students. National organizations have long called for general education teacher preparation programs to collaborate across disciplines so that all educators have effective understandings of special education students (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian, 2011; Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). However, this study showed that there remain opportunities to integrate knowledge of and strategies for 2e students into teacher education. In light of current market trends in enrollment, which demand that independent liberal arts colleges remain competitive and relevant, these colleges are striving to differentiate themselves by developing decisive "brands" (Baker & Baldwin, 2015). Independent liberal arts teacher education programs are empowered to respond and have the opportunity to more effectively prepare teachers for 2e students.

As a current faculty member in a teacher education program at an independent liberal arts college, I suggest several actions

that can be taken in this direction. General and special education teacher preparation programs need to do the following:

1. Build capacity in teacher education faculties, encourage faculty members to consider their deep beliefs (Smith & Edelen-Smith, 2002) and hire people with proven experience in general and special education. Engage faculty members in broadening their own understandings of 2e students so that they will be equipped to identify gaps in preparation programs and start critical dialogues across credential areas.
2. Collaborate to develop course content across credential areas that supports an appreciation of neurodiversity, explores the complexity and social–emotional learning needs of 2e students, and promotes a strengths-based approach to them (Baum, Schader, & Hebert, 2014).
3. Include specialized training that ensures knowledge of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), referral protocols, and the continuum of placement options, and that integrates dual differentiation, Universal Design for Learning, co-teaching techniques, and specific strategies for all educators to use with 2e students.
4. Develop strategic partnerships with K–12 schools and create fieldwork experiences to increase awareness of the 2e population and understand how these students are served in schools.
5. Design ongoing in-service professional development programs that respond to the evolving understanding of 2e students in schools.

Conclusion

Although twice-exceptionality is complex and unique, 2e stakeholders, including students, parents, and a lifelong teacher, described their experiences with or as 2e students to lend insights to teachers and teacher educators. The common themes that emerged from this study add to the body of research on twice-exceptionality. The stakeholders discussed an appreciation for neurodiversity (Armstrong, 2012) yet acknowledged that there is a problem in schools for 2e students (Foley-Nicpon, et al., 2013;

Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014). 2e students have complex learning profiles (Lee & Ritchotte, 2018) that require advocacy and collaboration (Dare & Nowicki, 2015; Lee & Ritchotte, 2018; Nielsen Pereira, et al., 2015) between parents and school teams. Teachers can benefit from the development of specialized instruction in their own education programs to help them understand, identify, and support twice-exceptional students (Baldwin, Baum et al., 2015; Bianco & Leech, 2010; Brownell et al., 2009; Lee & Ritchotte, 2018; Nielsen Pereira et al., 2015; Rowan & Townend, 2016; Tirri, 2017). The stakeholders in this study urged teacher educators to develop explicit preservice and in-service training that equips teachers to identify, refer, and support 2e students effectively in all educational settings, including general, gifted, and special education (Foley-Nicpon, et al., 2013).

A limitation of this study was that it had only seven participants: self-identified 2e students and parents and one teacher of all types of students. These participants may tend to share stronger views on this matter and may also not be a representative sample of 2e stakeholder voices. However, the themes they brought up were consistent with the current literature on twice-exceptionality and teacher education. The participants gave a powerful voice to the field of teacher education. Future studies could address the specific nature of the specialized training that is needed in teacher education.

These participants supported the development of high-quality preservice and in-service teacher education curriculum. When teachers are well equipped, students' lives are improved. Janay expressed this well: "My students began to smile and sing and hum and enjoy school once their needs were being met."

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