Twice Exceptionality and Inclusive Education. What do we know? What can we do?

Inclusive Education

Definitions of disability have broadened over the last 30 years and gifted education has undergone paradigm changes including questioning giftedness as a category (Borland, 2003; Lo & Porath, 2017). There has also been criticism of elitism in gifted programs with calls for gifted education to be more inclusive (Peters, et al., 2019). Overall, giftedness can now be viewed as a multi-dimensional, developmental process with a focus on developing all abilities (Lo et al., 2021).

Students with both disability and giftedness, however, still don't make it into the inclusive education literature. Despite evolving awareness, inclusive education has remained focused on disability as a single identity with the result students who are gifted or twice exceptional are still not getting their needs met. UNESCO claims that inclusive education has its focus on quality education for all, *where every learner matters and matters equally* (UNESCO, 2017, p.12). However, a narrow approach to inclusion has been prioritised (de-Beco, 2022) with a focus on a single lens of disability and concerns about placement. This narrow approach is challenged through a focus on diversity, equity, intersectionality and the reality of students with twice exceptionality in diverse classrooms.

One recent critical analysis of the inclusive education literature considered that placement was only one of four categories of definition for the concept of inclusive education. These categories identified are as follows; placement; social emotional and academic needs of those with disability; social emotional and academic needs of all children; and creation of community (Göransson and Nilholm, 2014). The *creation of community* definition of inclusive education may have the potential to help address the equity issue of twice exceptionality. Intersectionality, and factors such as race, poverty, ability/disability, and gender, emphasise that inclusion is about the diversity of all children while transforming exclusionary school/systemic structures. All educational policies should be aligned in this space which is not the case currently in Queensland. For example, the Queensland Department of Education (Qld) embraced Inclusive Education as its overarching policy for all learners (2005), at the same time the Federal Disability Discrimination Act legislation (DDA) was released (Duke, 2009). Qld has retained its Inclusive education Policy (2021) but has since removed its gifted education policy. As Jolly (2021) reminds us, if gifted education policy is present or absent indicates the level of support for students who are gifted.

Creation of Community

The shift from the narrow concept of where to provide education to *how* to provide education for all children has a focus on diversity and equity within the broader idea of developing each student's unique talents and abilities (de-Beco, 2022; Lo et al., 2022). This community definition of inclusive education means students with twice exceptionality matter and matter equally in a community of learners who have a right to have their needs met in education.

What do we know about Twice Exceptionality (2e)?

We know that there is no diagnosis of “twice exceptionality”, that this is a very diverse, relatively small idiosyncratic group, and that asynchrony, precocity, intensity and complexity are markers. We know approximately 2-7% of the school student population in Australia (Ronksley-Pavia, 2020) is estimated to meet the accepted criteria of students who are gifted and talented and who are impacted by disability (NCCD, 2023).

From the research, the context in which behaviour is observed is crucial to identification and appropriate provisions but it can be impacted by biases, stereotypical expectations and deficit views. The coexistence of the degree and type of disability and type and degree of giftedness creates a third level of complexity all its own. The 2e research field is small and growing but often based on small clinical samples which are lacking in diversity for race, gender and socioeconomic diversity, which means there is still a lot we do not know.

We do know we need to focus on a strengths approach, creating environments that provide, positive structures, highly visible expectations, avenues for student investigation and opportunities to connect strengths, interests and choices that empower all students and allow us to identify these otherwise difficult to observe needs. We do know frustration is the most reported student characteristic for students with 2e. Generally, however, research on how school counsellors can support students with 2e is limited and students who are gifted and have emotional and behavioural disabilities have been overlooked in the 2e literature.

Differentiation

Differentiation was designed originally for students who are gifted and talented (Tomlinson, 2003) but in Australia it is seen as a response to inclusive education and mixed ability teaching (Gibbs & McKay, 2021). Yet, there is a lack of literature and research on differentiation from an inclusive education, mixed ability classroom perspective (UN, 2016). Spandagou, (et al., 2018), concluded that although an inclusive education orientation was not used in operationalising differentiation, if it was, it could help challenge the barriers to inclusive education. However, differentiation on its own is not a cure all to meeting the needs of learners with 2e. (Peters et al., 2019) however we need to support teachers in delivering it equitably for all students.

What can we do?

A full comprehensive assessment is important for the individual learner to identify their profile of needs in consultation and collaboration with them and a range of specialists. In the inclusive education space, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) including prior learning assessments, IEPs, accommodations, interventions and adjustments for the disability impact, differentiation and extension in areas of giftedness and strengths are all required. Within a whole school approach Multi-Tiered Supports for Learning (MTSS) offers a way of addressing the social and academic needs of all students. However, some of the MTSS research discusses inclusion without mention of students who are gifted so this too will need to be addressed. We also need to address teacher education for diverse students and abilities and the reality of diverse students who are gifted in the inclusive classroom rather than narrow approaches to inclusive education.

There are, therefore, gaps in the policy and practice of inclusive education which has no universally accepted definition, theory or model of practice (Jarvis et al., 2020). Similarly, there is also no universally agreed definition of twice exceptionality, or giftedness which complicates the matter, but points to the need for more empirical, collaborative inclusive education studies and actions.

So, inclusive education for students with twice exceptionality (2e) requires both personalised and whole school approaches with actions, to identify and provide for all students so that they can each develop their unique talents and flourish.

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Prior Learning

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