



Research Reflection – Louise Tapper

August 2016

Understanding “the alphabet children”: Supporting twice-exceptional learners.

Dare, L., & Nowicki, E. A. (2015). Twice-exceptionality: Parents’ perspectives on 2E identification. *Roeper Review*, 37(4), 208-218.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283554302 Twice-Exceptionality Parents%27 Perspectives on 2e Identification](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283554302_Twice-Exceptionality_Parents%27_Perspectives_on_2e_Identification)

Recently some education professionals have become more aware that there are students in our schools who are both highly able and still have learning or behavioural difficulties. They are twice-exceptional learners. (Note that although twice-exceptional, or 2E, is the accepted term in the literature, many of these young people could be coping with multiple exceptionalities). So a young person who is highly intelligent may yet have a specific learning disability (SLD) such as dyslexia, or be diagnosed with ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This can lead to challenges in both the learning process and in the development of a social identity for these students. Because of the various labels that such students might be saddled with (for example, G&T/ADHD/SLD) they have been called “the alphabet children” (Baum & Olenchak, 2002, p. 77).

It has been suggested that around 7% of school-aged children could be twice-exceptional (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011). But beyond an increased awareness in the gifted education field, understandings about twice-exceptionality are still somewhat limited and this lack of knowledge could affect estimations of the prevalence of twice-exceptional learners in schools (Foley-Nipcon, Assouline & Colangelo, 2013). This in turn impacts on the support that these children will receive from educators. I have found in my conversations with educators and those who work in the youth area that most are unaware of who twice-exceptional learners are. However, although knowledge about twice-exceptional learners is limited, it does seem that many of these professionals are very interested in this group of young people and are keen to find out more about the different kinds of twice-exceptionality and how best to support their needs within a variety of environments. The article I am sharing for this research reflection addresses these issues by looking at the lived experiences of a group of talented young people who each have varying 2E profiles.

The authors present vignettes that were co-created with parents of twice-exceptional learners and which give an illustration of the parents’ experiences advocating for their young person’s needs at school. Through these vignettes we get a sense of the concerns that can exist for these young people who have differing kinds of twice-exceptionality but who had similar experiences with teachers and school management. Some common themes for the students were feelings of academic ineptitude and self-doubt, frustration, and social isolation because of feeling intensely different to their age-related peers.



Parents and students wanted teachers to focus more on the twice-exceptional learners' strengths but they reported that mostly the focus was on weaknesses which only served to increase their low sense of self-worth. Support is also needed to help these young people feel included amongst peers as they are at risk of feeling "differentness twice over" (p. 216) and they need help to find peers with similar interests.

The authors do acknowledge that this research was conducted with a group of parents who had the resources to find support for their children outside the school. However, parents as well as professionals, cannot be expected to be able to always identify twice-exceptionality and those parents who do not have resources to seek help may find that their children are further disadvantaged. I did find that the kind of support that these parents sought was heavily weighted towards further diagnosis of 'syndromes', and much testing for the student, perhaps a reflection of a North American system. I think a more simple, (and less expensive) solution could be developing more effective partnerships between school and home resulting in teachers focusing on extending a 2E student's strengths as well as supporting his or her weaknesses within the school programme. It would also be important to listen to the voices of the 2E students themselves. These young people can provide valuable insight into the difficulties they face.

Note

Further information on twice-exceptional learners can be found at:

<http://www.2enewsletter.com/>

<http://sengifted.org/resources/resource-library>

References

Assouline, S. G., & Whiteman, C. S. (2011). Twice-exceptionality: Implications for school psychologists in the post-IDEA 2004 era. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 27*, 380–402.

Baum, S. M., & Olenchak, F. R. (2002). The alphabet children: GT, ADHD, and more. *Exceptionality, 10*, 77–91.

Foley-Nicpon, M., Assouline, S. G., & Colangelo, N. (2013). Twice-exceptional learners: Who needs to know what? *Gifted Child Quarterly, 57*, 169–180.