

Mini Review

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Inclusive Support to Safeguard the Strengths of Twice-Exceptional Students

Alexander Minnaert

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

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*Corresponding author:

Alexander Minnaert

Full professor in Inclusion and Special Needs Education and in Clinical Educational Sciences
Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences
University of Groningen
The Netherlands
Email: a.e.m.g.minnaert@rug.nl

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Abstract

Twice-exceptional (2e) students are blessed with both a gift and a persistent developmental problem like Specific Learning Disorders, ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorders. To appropriately include these 2e students and to provide equitable quality education schools should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy to meet both their strengths and needs to prevent early school dropout. Even with a needs-based and increased focus on inclusive education, this still is a huge challenge, likewise in Dutch education. Unfolding major insights stemming from recent literature reviews on 2e students, it was concluded that schoolcounselors and teachers in cooperation with parents can play a vital and tailored role in helping these students overcome their frustration and negative school-related emotions, to prevent early school dropout, and to reduce the loss of talent to our society. Research aiming at 2e students' profile of both strengths and weaknesses might pave the way to effective psycho-educational interventions.

Keywords: Giftedness, Inclusive Education, Persistent Developmental Problems, Professionalization, Twice-Exceptionality

Introduction: toward more inclusive education in the Netherlands

The Dutch education system has a lengthy history of differentiated and segregated special education, but is, more recently, turning towards a more inclusive system. The foremost reason to change the system was aimed at decreasing the number of students being referred to segregated special schools and the affiliated financial costs of this segregated special education system[1]. Despite the intention to diminish the number of referrals to special education, a growth was encountered because schools were not *obliged* to include and educate students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). To overcome this issue, the act for "*Befitting Education*" (in Dutch: *Passend Onderwijs*) was implemented in 2014[2]. A student is only referred to as segregated special education if the cognitive and non-cognitive needs of a student cannot be met in a regular school setting. The changes in the Dutch education policy is in line with international policies, such as the UNESCO Salamanca Statement[3] and Incheon Declaration[4], stating that those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting their needs. Translated into the daily school practice, this means that teachers need to facilitate the inclusion of all students and meet their academic and social needs[5]. All in all, the Dutch education system is making a demanding shift from a multi track education system towards a (more) inclusive education system[6]. There are, however, students that fall between the cracks.

The enhanced focus on 2e students

There is an augmenting awareness for the existence of students with a high (learning) potential who at the same time struggle with academic tasks at school[7]. This concept of gifted students who also have persistent developmental problems with regard to learning, behaviour and/or emotions, also referred to as *twice-exceptional (2e)* students, has become widely accepted[8]. Despite the fact that literature on this subject is expanding, there is, however, not much consensus yet on how to *define* and *identify* these students[9-11]. The bare truth is that these 2e students are often overlooked or fall between the cracks when assessed for either giftedness or persistent developmental problems because of the masking effect: the giftedness might mask the developmental problem, the developmental problems might mask the giftedness, or they mask each other[11]. This can result in 2e students being deprived (or even denied) access to appropriate educational and career opportunities.

The warrant for practical guidelines for 2e students increased substantially in the Netherlands after the act on "*Befitting education*" was effectuated in 2014. The current educational system is, regretfully, inadequately prepared and equipped to meet the challenging educational needs of these 2e students. This enhances the risk of problematic behavior, of negative school-related emotions, of attaining lower educational levels than expected on high intelligence and related study aptitudes, and of early school dropout. High learning potential could therewith be lost, both in case of the students' personal developmental trajectories as for society in general. A growing need arises within schools to gather profound insights on 2e students and to unfold support structures and guidance that match their high capacities on the one hand and their relative weaker learning-related, neuropsychological and/or social-emotional developmental aspects on the other hand[12].

Insights on 2e students derived from recent literature reviews

Based on their systematic literature review, Beckmann and Minnaert[9] wrote about the often overlooked "non-cognitive" characteristics (e.g., emotions, motivation, social aspects) faced by gifted students who also have a persistent specific learning disorder. The study revealed that these 2e students experience a high degree of frustration in academic situations. Besides, a considerably duality in these 2e students' noncognitive characteristics was encountered which requires tailored counselling skills to provide targeted and effective support for their learning needs.

The main conclusions of a systematic review by Burger-Veltmeijer et al.[12] on the co-occurrence of intellectual giftedness and Autism Spectrum Disorders are three fold: 1. it is very difficult to diagnose these students (a variety in criteria are used); 2. it is tough to tap their needs; and 3. it is important to apply an individual approach lead by an expert diagnostician. These psychoeducational challenges are accentuated by the

shortage of empirical data on this matter, being first recognized more than two decades ago, emerged continuously thereafter, and is still valid and present today. Within the very limited amount of practice-oriented literature from research conducted within the Dutch educational system, statements are made on the needs of these students, however, without empirical basis, which are often presupposed by professionals [12]. Consequently, the risks of these unsubstantiated facts or even myths could possibly result in a lack of (inclusive and) equitable quality education for 2e students (in line with the Incheon Declaration of 2015). In general, the large inter- and intra-individual differences between levels of intelligence, learning results, academic performance outcomes, neuropsychological and non-cognitive characteristics generate even more complexity into the diagnostic and needs-based assessment processes of 2e students[9, 13].

The plea for 2e professionalization is more and more acknowledged, though not (yet) a default option in the curriculum of contemporary teacher education and school counseling. Although the global emergence of twice-exceptional education is recognizable in the newsletter *Variations 2e* published by Bridges 2e Media, American scholars like Renzulli and Gelbar[14] make a plea in 2020 for strengths-based educational approaches as a best practice for working with 2e students, including the use of (social-emotional) support strategies, enrichment clusters, and extracurricular activities. Foley-Nipcon and Assouline[15] found no empirical support for counseling strategies that work specifically for 2e students, and this finding was replicated by Renzulli and Gelbar[14]. Therefore, generic implications serving 2e students are of utmost importance: e.g., teacher pre- and in-service training, the need for a continuum of special education interventions, the need for collaboration with parents and psychoeducational specialists, and teachers needing to focus on students' developing strengths as much as on their psychoeducational challenges[16].

Conclusion

Although an emerging focus on 2e students is to be found, challenges in the (early) identification of these students still comes to the fore, not at least among both teachers and parents. Hence, the agenda in the Netherlands is to professionalize staff members by means of in-service trainings at school. School counselors and teachers can play a vital and tailored role in helping these students (and their parents) overcome their frustration and negative school-related emotions, and reduce the loss of talent to our society. These young people have much to contribute if they receive the educational and socio-emotional support they need as well as the recognition of their strengths.

The literature is, however, still scarce on strengths- and need-based assessments of 2e students. Furthermore, to our knowledge, there are still no systematic studies available on the effectiveness of psycho-educational interventions for 2e students. Supported by a grant from the Netherlands Initiative for Education Research on 2e students and their teachers (NRO project by Kroesbergen, Burger-Veltmeijer, Minnaert &

Hoogeveen), we seek to lay the evidence-based foundation for programs that more adequately accommodate the educational and psychological needs of 2e students, to find factors to reduce their frustration, to increase their talents and to contribute to a successful school career of these youngsters blessed with a gift and a challenge.

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