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THE FEATURES AND CHALLENGES OF TWICE EXCEPTIONALITY PHENOMENON IN THE CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The article aimed to study and highlight the main educational needs of gifted and "twice exceptional" learners in inclusive educational settings. The article used qualitative and quantitative methodology to study the specifics of the "twice exceptionality" problem, the nature of its manifestation, and the difficulties that arise in the educational process.

Data-based analysis and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five specialists working in the "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex. The demographic data of 1,200 learners was studied to highlight the primary educational needs that can emerge as a result of twice-exceptionality and to analyse the needed methodological approaches and required environmental adaptations for facilitating the educational process. The study's data analysis combined descriptive and quantitative data analysis methods.

Current research **results** have shown that learners who considered being twice exceptional and having correctly identified as gifted hyperactive experienced diverse challenges in the classroom and at school since special instructional strategies to help them reach their potential were still missing. At the same time, schools and families of twice-exceptional learners have to develop and be ready to address

the needs of such learners more effectively and in a structured way.

Keywords: *"twice exceptional" phenomenon, giftedness, learners with special educational needs.*

INTRODUCTION

The topic of "twice exceptional," meaning gifted while having a disability, has received increased attention in recent years (Assouline, Foley Nicpon, & Whiteman, 2010; Trail, 2011). With the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), children with disabilities who are gifted and talented were recognized as a unique population in need of additional support. The Republic of Armenia declares universal, inclusive education to guarantee every child's right to education. Inclusive education policy is aimed at enabling every child's access to education, equal participation opportunity, and quality assurance (Law of the RA "On Amendments and Supplements to the Law of the Republic of Armenia "On General Education," 2014).

During the last two decades, the efforts of representatives of the education sector have been mainly directed at the issues of effectively organizing the education of children with psychophysical developmental problems within the scope of inclusive education. However, in recent years, effective organization of gifted children's education has become actual as well.

Due to various definitions of giftedness and learning disabilities, problems in identifying twice-exceptional students arise. Generally, twice-exceptional students meet the eligibility criteria for giftedness and learning disabilities (Beckley, 2017). Gifted children are commonly described as having exceptional abilities or potential for learning and problem-solving. A twice-exceptional schoolchild is one who experiences special educational programming to accommodate one or more handicapping conditions while also promoting the learner's potential for exceptional achievement in one or more areas in which they may be gifted (Wang & Neihart, 2015).

Twice, exceptionality often does not show up until children are in school. In their early years, these children often seem very bright, with varied interests and advanced vocabularies (particularly concerning same-age peers), and many times, parents are unaware that they have a child with twice-exceptionality. Teachers sometimes spot problems in school; sometimes, parents are the first to notice their children's frustrations with school. During the early years, social difficulties may occur. The Twice exceptionality child may find it hard to make friends and communicate with them. Academic problems also often appear later (Dare & Nowicki, 2015).

In order to effectively organize the learning process of learners with twice-exceptionality, first of all, it is necessary to make changes in the curriculum content, knowledge delivery, and testing approaches, as well as in the educational environment. In this regard, the research aimed to study and

illuminate the problem of giftedness and the phenomenon of "twice exceptionality" in organizing inclusive education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A learner "is considered twice exceptional when he or she is identified as gifted/talented in one or more areas while also possessing a learning, emotional, physical, sensory, and/or developmental disability" (Assouline, Foley Nicpon, & Whiteman, 2010).

The concept twice exceptional refers to gifted learners who have some form of learning or developmental disability (Beckley, 2017). These learners are considered exceptional both because of their giftedness (e.g., intellectual, creative, perceptual, motor, etc.) and because they are disabled (e.g., specific learning disability, neurodevelopmental disability, etc.) or neuro-divergent. Children identified as twice exceptional can exhibit a wide range of traits, many typical of gifted children. Like gifted children, twice-exceptional children often show greater asynchrony than average children (that is, a larger gap between their mental and physical age). They are often intense and susceptible to their emotional and physical environments (Ronksley-Pavia, 2015).

Nowadays, giftedness is seen as an innate potential of a person rather than an ability acquired through training and learning. It can develop and lead to the creation of something new in science or art, but it can also fail and remain "infertile." In the scientific literature, the following groups of gifted children are distinguished: intellectual, creative, partial (musical, mathematical, etc.), and academic (endowed with high learning abilities) (Pylaeva, 2015).

According to the extensiveness of manifestation, giftedness is general and private, according to the features of age development - early and late manifested, according to the degree of formation - actual and potential, and according to the form of manifestation - hidden and obvious (Assouline, & Whiteman, 2011). Most often, people with high intellectual abilities (IQ ³ 130) and exceptional creative abilities are considered gifted (Araqelyan, 2017).

Twice exceptionality requires unique identification methods and targeted educational supports highlighting a child's strengths. The intellectual potential of twice-exceptional youth is great. At the same time, they have an enduring disability or disorder that inhibits their learning experience (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011).

It should be noted that people with extraordinary abilities cannot always be considered absolutely healthy, both from a somatic and psychological point of view. According to Missett et al. (2016), research based on teachers' experience, left-handedness, speech disorders, and autoimmune diseases are common among gifted children. Giftedness is often combined with attention deficit hyperactivity

disorder, learning difficulties (mainly dyslexia), autism (especially Asperger's syndrome), and bipolar disorder (Lee et al., 2006).

Research results have shown that among children considered gifted, up to 20% have learning difficulties. In cases when giftedness is combined with learning difficulties, attention, or other cognitive functions, behavioural disorders are called "twice gifted" or "twice exceptional" (Atmaca & Baloglu, 2022). These children need pedagogical methods, approaches, and adaptations more than gifted children and children with learning difficulties and attention and behaviour disorders in their learning process. Their support should be aimed at developing strengths (talent) and, at the same time, overcoming weaknesses (Lovett & Lewandowski, 2006).

"Twice exceptional" learners can demonstrate the potential for high achievement or creative productivity in one or more domains such as math, science, technology, and the social arts, and at the same time, they manifest one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state eligibility criteria (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014). They are considered twice-exceptional when identified as gifted or talented in one or more areas while having a learning, emotional, physical, sensory, or developmental disability (Ronksley-Pavia, 2015). This includes students with various cognitive disorders and learning difficulties, sensorimotor disorders, autism or Asperger's syndrome, ADHD, or social disturbance (Coleman, Harradine, & Williams, 2005). Therefore, special individual training programs can benefit this group of children, in which the development of strengths will be emphasized, and, at the same time, the necessary attention will be paid to overcoming their weaknesses (Pylaeva, 2015).

Teachers often think that gifted children are always successful in the educational process, but not all gifted people in history have been successful in school. For example, children with learning difficulties and gifted children are often far ahead of their peers in terms of mathematical knowledge. However, they are less able to read and meet the demands made by the school for learners of a given age. Their creative approach to problem-solving outside of school is often astonishing, but at school, they feel depressed and unfulfilled. Many problems are often hidden behind extraordinary abilities, which can be divided into two groups: internal (personal characteristics, somatic and mental health problems) and external (family atmosphere, school environment, opportunities to study subjects of interest in more depth, and lack of psychological support from others, etc.) (Polojay, 2013).

Many teachers have difficulty comprehending that a learner can be gifted and also have learning disabilities, which complicates their participation in educational and classroom activities. As a result, children with special educational needs that result from both their high abilities and their learning problems are rarely identified and are often poorly served. Twice-exceptionality is gaining increasing recognition in the gifted education literature, but little is understood about the knowledge and awareness

of this concept within the educational and psychological community or about professionals' experience working with this population of learners. This study explores the scope of expression of "twice exceptional" phenomenon and the challenges that arise in the process of organizing inclusive education. Included recommendations would help ensure that gifted learners with learning disabilities receive the intervention needed to help them achieve their full potential.

METHODOLOGY

Current research methodology is based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for investigating and exploring the specifics of the "twice exceptionality" problem and, the nature of its manifestation, the difficulties that arise in the educational process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For the statistical analysis, the digital data of 1200 learners was examined to investigate the nature, age, and gender composition of learners with special educational needs studying in "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex from 2017 – 2022.

Semi-structured interviews with psychologists of "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex were done, which were well-informed about the educational landscape and provided services for learners with special educational needs and considered "twice-exceptional". Data collection was based on understanding the nuanced cognitive and psychosocial patterns within this population and exploring the existing opportunities and challenges that experienced learners with characteristics of giftedness problem could be considered having "twice exceptionality" in an inclusive educational system.

Since giftedness is defined as an "asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm (Ruban & Reis, 2005), the descriptive data analysis method was applied to study the main educational needs and environmental conditions that gifted and "twice exceptional" learners experienced in inclusive educational process in "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex.

DATA COLLECTION

Two data collection forms were used: a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with a school psychologist (Patton, 2002). The demographic questionnaire included information about family background (e.g., parent education level, siblings, community makeup) and educational information (e.g., extracurricular activities, college and career goals, and grade point average). A general interview guide for the semi-structured interview was created based on the

researchers' experiences in education and literature review.

Based on an empirical literature review of the domains of twice-exceptionality (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and specific learning disability), educational plans and accommodations of learning environment have been studied that can help to provide recommendations for how school psychologists can interpret formative and summative assessments taken by twice-exceptional learners and subsequently help design educational plans that will meet their unique needs.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was based on the descriptive and quantitative analysis method for exploring the educational experience of twice-exceptional learners (Marczyk, DeMatteo & Festinger, 2010). The descriptive data analysis method was used in the form of quantitative research to interpret, summarize, and draw meaningful insights from numeric data (Trochim, 2006). The data gained from the semi-structured interviews was elaborated, and open-ended questions were coded to investigate the educational characteristics of learners, teachers' awareness of, attitudes about, and experience with twice-exceptional learners, and the effects of school environments on the learning process. As a result of data analysis, the characteristics of the educational experience of "twice exceptional" learners in a general educational setting were investigated and described in accordance with the school environment, and support was given.

RESULT/ DISCUSSION

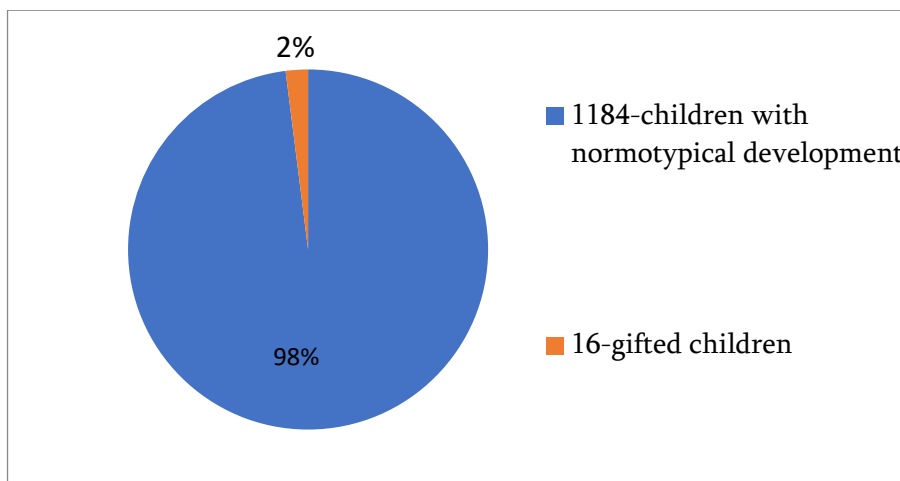
This study aimed to identify the primary educational needs and environmental conditions that gifted and "twice exceptional" learners experienced in the inclusive educational process in "Shirakatsy Lyceum". Very often, learners who have been identified twice as exceptional can experience many difficulties in their learning environment as their characteristics can be complicated. Reis, Baum, and Burke (2014) define twice-exceptional learners as those with simultaneous characteristics of a gifted learner and a learner with a disability.

Research data analysis has shown that in the educational setting, teachers may also experience difficulties meeting the needs of twice-exceptional learners while simultaneously addressing their remarkable strengths. Several studies suggest that when faced with identifying "twice exceptional" learners, educators were more likely to recognize learners' disabilities despite the learner demonstrating exceptional talent (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2013; Ferguson, 2015), which could likely be due to their perceptions about giftedness and disability.

The statistical data analysis of 1200 learners who have special educational needs and study in "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex from the period of 2017 – 2022 have shown that giftedness results were registered among 16 learners (2%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

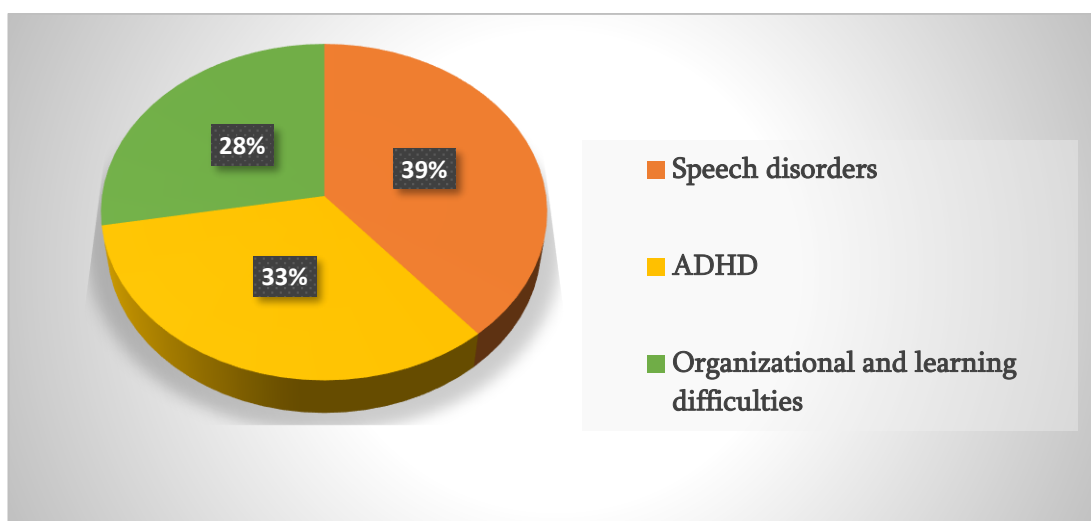
Number of gifted learners studying in "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex from the period of 2017-2022.



Within the scope of the research, the special educational needs of twice-exceptional learners were investigated and outlined, which is considered to be the main obstacle in the organization of their educational process. Recognition of their exceptionality and daily lived experiences of impairment and giftedness can be helpful for better establishing daily and school-based activities. The main difficulties that were possible to outline have been presented as follows (Figure 2):

Figure 2.

Difficulties and disorders of twice-exceptional learners studying in "Shirakatsy Lyceum" International Scientific and Educational Complex from the period of 2017-2022.



Current research participants have defined that some gifted learners were able to learn educational materials faster, work with abstract concepts more easily, and simply find connections between subjects. Therefore, in some cases, they needed to work at a higher learning level, at a faster pace, and with a greater variety of materials. Data analysis has shown that the following methodological approaches are considered to be effective while working with gifted learners in educational settings:

- Speeding up the pace of studying the material provides a higher learning level.
- Reduction of the time required for mastering the material.
- Condensed assimilation of the curriculum.
- Ability to conduct independent studies.

Summarizing research data from conducted interviews, it became possible to group the most frequently encountered difficulties of learners with twice exceptionalities in a current educational environment. Specialists and teachers working with twice-exceptional learners (who have special educational needs) have described the main difficulties and problems that usually arise in the educational process, and they tend to struggle with them in the school environment. Those were listed in the following order of priority:

1. Difficulties in social interactions with peers
2. Inconsistent performance
3. Disorganization during classroom activities
4. Executive dysfunction
5. Lack of initiative in school and out-of-school activities
6. Frequent fatigue/tiredness

At the same time, the other major problem outlined as a result of data analysis was defining and distinguishing twice-exceptionality and giftedness among learners with special educational needs.

Inadequately defining or failing to define twice-exceptionality makes it problematic to acknowledge and consider their educational needs related to their distinctiveness. Recognition of their exceptionality and daily lived experiences of impairment and giftedness can lead to a better understanding by educators, parents/carers, and the children themselves (National Association for Gifted Children, 2013). However, twice-exceptional learners must be treated and educated differently than other gifted children or learners with special educational needs. Both giftedness and other disorders could be considered as learning barriers, and in turn, such erroneous perception may lead to failures in the learner's educational experience (Pfeiffer, 2013).

Research data analysis has shown that learners who considered being twice exceptional and having correctly identified gifted hyperactivity experienced diverse challenges in the classroom, and a lack of instructional strategies existed to help them reach their potential. At the same time, schools and families of twice-exceptional learners have to develop and be ready to address the needs of such learners effectively. Many researchers found out that gifted hyperactive children were in the category of learners who require a unique "dual-emphasis approach that focuses on strength and talents while supporting and addressing the disability," so it is necessary to address both areas using different educational and instructional strategies in order to provide appropriate educational service to gifted hyperactive children (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Adapting the educational environment—the social, learning, and physical environment—to twice-exceptional learners' needs is the other important aspect of facilitating their school educational process.

Including twice-exceptional learners in general classrooms requires more collaborative work by teachers to achieve the same educational goals, such as supporting one another, developing appropriate instructional plans, and differentiating instruction for learners with unique needs (Kennedy et al., 2002). Developing this idea, Reis et al. (2014) discussed that an individual educational plan for twice-exceptional learners or "an accommodation plan with goals and strategies" can be the solution to inclusive education for gifted, hyperactive children.

Speaking about the social environment, it is worth noting that, like all learners, those with twice exceptionalities also need a safe environment where they will be willing to demonstrate their abilities. It is also important that the environment provides intellectual challenges that they must overcome, ask questions, get full answers, sometimes take risks, and have the opportunity to make mistakes. The social environment should also allow these children to have fun and feel relaxed. It is also important that children follow the rules. Children should be praised for good work and treated as individuals with both strengths and weaknesses. Regular discussions with teachers, other adults, and other gifted learners

should be organized for learners with twice exceptionalities.

Adaptations of the learning environment: When choosing methods and techniques for working with gifted learners, it was advisable to consider the following principles:

A complication of the material: It was necessary to give tasks that will challenge them and constantly have additional complex tasks in cases where they finish the work earlier than others; otherwise, finishing early, they will begin to get bored and look for other ways to kill time. At the same time, it was necessary to increase not the number of tasks but the level of complexity.

Incorporating tasks that develop divergent thinking which have several possible solutions. They allow you to express your own opinion. Most significant was to accept the opinion of a gifted child and, at the same time, show him that other opinions exist.

Enrichment of the educational material: It is necessary to provide gifted learners with the opportunity to obtain additional materials on the main topic to make comparisons and generalizations.

At the same time, a number of research studies revealed that not only collaboration and developing unique educational plans would have a successful result in serving twice exceptional learners, but just everyday classroom techniques and methods could also have a positive influence on their academic and non-academic development (Abramo, 2015; Lee & Olenchak, 2015).

For this aim, research specified that many kinds of techniques used in the classroom can be beneficial for twice-exceptional learners, such as *deepening the material, assigning interesting, complex tasks and puzzles on the topic, excluding mechanical work, and revealing logical connections in each work, providing tasks that develop creativity.*

It was useful and needed to allow twice exceptional learners to independently choose the tasks of the lesson and the way of their implementation, according to their interests.

Satisfy the curiosity of gifted learners and respond to the questions they raise. The question should be answered during the break if it is outside the lesson's topic. If the teacher finds it difficult to answer the question accurately, it can be suggested that they search and find the answer together.

It is necessary to provide feedback to the learner regularly and to ensure that the gifted learner does not focus on details, leaving aside the main task and losing track of time.

Research by Abramo (2015) highlighted that twice exceptional gifted hyperactive learners are usually very good at problem-solving and are able to "generate creative solutions and make connections between ideas that are seemingly unrelated" (p.63). That is why challenging and motivating twice-exceptional learners in the classroom can also be a good strategy for making their education enjoyable and meaningful to them. Therefore, they can spend much time and energy completing challenging but creative activities. Speaking about the physical environment adaptations, it is important to note that the

physical environment should be comfortable, provide variety, and, at the same time, not distract learners from their actual work (Ilyin, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was necessary to note that creating the necessary conditions for the manifestation of talent in gifted children was an important social and educational issue since it was these children who, growing up, became the "engines" of scientific and technological progress in the future, leaving behind a tremendous scientific and creative legacy, which made humanity gets the opportunity to transition to a higher level of life. Most often, learners identified as gifted did not have the possibility to make their talents recognized or developed while studying at school since most of them did not receive appropriate and necessary services.

It was obvious that the "twice-exceptionality" phenomenon was not well studied in Armenia, and it was evident that considerable advocacy and support were needed to help twice-exceptional learners develop the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate negative experiences. Schools and families of twice-exceptional learners also needed support and direct services to address their children's needs effectively since this was one of the main tasks of inclusive education, the primary purpose of which was to provide a suitable education for all, regardless of background.

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