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Using High-Leverage Practices to Support Twice Exceptional Learners

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Abstract

Students documented as twice-exceptional, possessing both giftedness and a disability, are a group of learners that despite strong potential, are often misunderstood and misdiagnosed. Often, for these students, either the giftedness hides the disability or the disability overshadows the giftedness. It is important that teacher education programs help preservice teachers learn how to recognize and support students classified as twice-exceptional. High-leverage practices can help support twice-exceptional students. This article demonstrates how all four key components of HLPs (i.e., collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral practices, and instruction) can be incorporated into the plan to support twice-exceptional learners and maximize learning outcomes for these students.

Keywords

high-leverage practices, twice-exceptional, 2e, teacher education

Cover Page Footnote

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Using High-Leverage Practices to Support Twice Exceptional Learners

Reaching and teaching *all* students is critical in bridging achievement gaps and supporting learning for diverse populations. Legislation, beginning with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 to its latest renewal as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), provides federal mandates supporting the education of students with disabilities. Despite this legislation, there is a special population of twice exceptional (2e) students (i.e., those with both a disability and identified areas of giftedness) that often fail to receive appropriate supports. IDEIA (2004) initiated the legislative conversation of twice exceptional by mentioning that students with disabilities may also have gifts and talents. However, because gifted and talented programs are not federally mandated, and consensus regarding a definition of 2e has been missing (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015), legislation regarding 2e students is lacking (Roberts, Periera, & Knotts, 2015).

To help build unity and better support 2e students, stakeholders from 26 organizations including the National Association for Gifted Education (NAGE), and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), formed the National Twice-Exceptional Community of Practice (2e CoP). This committee focused on 2e students within K-12 schools and in 2013 agreed upon a national 2e definition as:

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.

2e students, who may perform below, at or above grade level, require the following:

- Specialized methods of identification that consider the possible interaction of the exceptionalities
- Enriched/advanced educational opportunities that develop the child's interests, gifts and talents while also meeting the child's learning needs
- Simultaneous supports that ensure the child's academic success and social-emotional well-being, such as accommodations, therapeutic interventions, and specialized instruction.

Working successfully with this unique population requires specialized academic training and ongoing professional development (Baldwin, Baum, Pereles, & Hughes, 2015, pp. 212–213).

The scope of the definition highlights the challenges when working with 2e learners. Given the comorbidity of giftedness and the disability, recognizing and supporting these students can be a difficult task and requires a strong understanding

of 2e (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014). Furthermore, the absence of legislation mandating delivery of services to the 2e population puts the responsibility of finding and serving 2e students primarily on the teachers and other professionals working with this population. Therefore, it is important that teacher education programs help preservice teachers learn how to recognize and support students classified as 2e.

High-Leverage Practices (HLPs)

High-Leverage Practices (McLeskey et al., 2017) are evidence-based educational practices proven to benefit learners of all types. Because of their effectiveness, these practices are recommended as the focus of preservice teacher training. These 22 practices are divided into 4 components including (a) collaboration, (b) assessment, (c) social/emotional/behavioral, and (d) instruction. Learning how to utilize HLPs helps preservice teachers better understand the needs of 2e students and prepare them as educators. This is especially important for the 2e population, because as the definition highlights, often either the giftedness hides the disability, or the disability overshadows the giftedness. Therefore, teachers must be knowledgeable and well prepared, understanding that with 2e students it is important there is a dual focus, focusing on students' strengths and talents while also supporting and remediating the disability (Baldwin, Omdal, & Pereles, 2015). The HLPs not only provide teacher candidates with a strong foundation for teaching, but also support the needs of 2e learners by providing teachers with the skills they need to meet the unique challenges of this population of learners. The following paragraphs highlight how each component of HLPs (i.e, collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral, instruction) helps support learning for 2e students.

Collaboration

Collaboration is an important component for success of all students but is critical for twice-exceptional students given their extreme strengths and weaknesses. The 2e definition stresses the importance of specialized, trained professionals and the first three HLPs focus on collaboration of professionals to increase student success (HLP1), organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families (HLP2), and collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services (HLP3). Collaboration among the general education teachers, gifted teachers, special educators, and related services personnel is necessary to support 2e student learning. Parents are also crucial partners because they know their children better than anyone. Therefore, communicating and collaborating with families is crucial when determining the services and needs of the child. Keeping communication open between families and professionals ensures a better outcome for the students.

Assessment

The second component of HLPs, assessment, is another key area for 2e students because of the co-morbidity of the exceptionalities and the disability. The 2e definition calls for "specialized methods of identification" and this requires a multi-faceted evaluation to uncover what might be masked by the combination of the giftedness and the deficit areas to determine strengths and needs (HLP4). Communication is necessary so the assessment information, along with the educational plan, reaches all the stakeholders (HLP5). As with any instructional program, assessment data must be used to make instructional changes as needed (HLP 6) to maximize student learning and "develop the child's interests, gifts and talents" as recommended in the 2e definition. It is important that the appropriate professionals (i.e., special education teachers and school psychologists) interpret assessment information for all the stakeholders, especially the families. All parties must understand the information to effectively carry out the educational plan.

Social/Emotional/Behavioral

The Social/Emotional/Behavioral component of HLPs addresses the "social-emotional well-being" portion of the 2e definition. All three of the HLPs support the needs of 2e students. Twice-exceptional students often feel stress and frustration because they struggle with tasks they feel should be easily accomplished (Hughes, 2017). Furthermore, 2e students process cognitively so it's important to explain the "why" they are being asked to complete certain tasks. Twice-exceptional students benefit from positive and constructive feedback regarding their learning and behavior (HLP8), often need to be taught appropriate social behaviors (HLP9), and when necessary, conducting a behavioral assessment to develop a behavioral plan (HLP10) may be necessary to replace inappropriate behavior with more pro-social choices. Educators are responsible for not only teaching the curriculum, but also promoting and developing social skills. Because 2e students are more at-risk for emotional issues than their general education peers (Hughes, 2017), educators should provide feedback that is not only positive, but constructive as well, and focuses on student effort.

Instruction

The final component, Instruction, constitutes over half the HLPs. As the 2e definition states, 2e students present a "unique set of circumstances" that makes identification a challenge but may make instructional programming even more challenging. It is especially important to keep the individual characteristics of the 2e learner at the forefront, focusing on maximizing student learning and potential rather than being satisfied with making adequate progress (Roberts, Periera, & Knotts, 2015). To accomplish this, an effective instructional plan should focus on the strengths and talents of the 2e student while also remediating the disability

(Baldwin, Omdal, & Pereles, 2015). Looking at instructional practices for gifted students, such as enrichment activities and curriculum compacting, should be balanced with evidence-based practices specific to the areas of difficulty such as scaffolding (HLP15), and intensive instruction (HLP20) where needed.

Conclusion

Prioritizing what is most important for students to learn is critical for all learners, but even more so for 2e students. Establishing clear and obtainable long- and short-term goals (HLP11) and systematically designing instruction to meet those goals is critical (HLP12). It is especially important to explain the "why" and get buy-in with 2e students because they will be more motivated and invested in their learning. It is also important to share the learning plan with all parties involved including professionals, parents, and students to maximize student success.

It is important to remember that 2e students, or all students for that matter, are people first. The HLPs presented are meant to be guides and supports for educators and students alike. When implementing any of the aforementioned practices, it is crucial to remember that all students, especially 2e learners, possess varying strengths and weaknesses, and thereby present different learning challenges. Utilizing HLPs are effective for building on the strengths and gifts of 2e students while also supporting and remediating the effects of their disability.

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