

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES
OF TWICE EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS
FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

RESEARCH PAPER: Exploring the Experiences of Twice Exceptional Students From Marginalized Communities

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This study explores the lived experiences of twice exceptional students in a Midwestern, public, residential high school for gifted students. While there is not a singular definition, twice exceptional is defined here as being gifted in one or more domains and being diagnosed with a disability (e.g., anxiety, ADHD, dyslexia) (Foley-Nicpon & Assouline 2015; Morrison & Rizza, 2007). Students that identify as twice exceptional are often not having their mental and emotional needs met in public education, hindering their learning and identity development (Jolly & Hughes, 2015; Rubenstein et al., 2015). In addition to these specific needs, students with twice exceptionalities that also come from a marginalized community (e.g., racial minorities, LGBTQ+, ethnic minorities) might face additional (and different) challenges due to their multifaceted identities (Mayes, 2016). The results of this mixed-methods study can be used to make improvements in schools to better meet the needs of twice exceptional students.

Purpose

There are approximately three million grade school students identified as gifted (six percent of students) and a little over seven million between the ages of 3-21 receiving special education services (Dlugosz, 2022). A study out of Purdue University's Gifted Education Research and Resource Institute found that 3.6 million students are not being recognized as gifted in the United States public schools. In addition, almost three-fourth of African American students are being overlooked as gifted (Gentry, 2019). These statistics result in millions of students not getting the proper educational experiences or environments they need for a quality education. The purpose of this study is to give a voice to the lived experiences of twice exceptional students from marginalized communities in a Midwestern, public, residential high school who have navigated their educational and personal challenges related to their multifaceted identities.

Literature Review

The definition of twice exceptional is ambiguous, with there being no set definition. The common definition of twice exceptional, and what is being used in this study, is a student being gifted in one or more domains and being diagnosed with a disability (Foley Nicpon et. al., 2011; Foley-Nicpon & Assouline 2015; Morrison & Rizza, 2007). Students often go without one or more of these exceptionalities being recognized (gifted or disability) due to the exceptionalities masking each other/another exceptionality (Cannaday, 1970). For example, a student with a high IQ and

undiagnosed ADHD might be performing on par with their grade level, but would be underperforming for what they are capable of.

A concern in identifying twice exceptional students, is the representation of students identified as being gifted. Research has consistently shown White and Asian American students are overrepresented in gifted and talented programs, while American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic, and African American students are underrepresented (Ford, 2003; Ford et al., 2002; Gardner & Mayes, 2013; Irwin et al., 2022). In addition, even when properly identified as twice exceptional, teachers might not have the knowledge nor training to properly address a twice exceptional student's needs (Gierczyk & Hornby, 2021; Hopwood, 2019; Rowan & Townsend, 2016; Wormald, 2011).

Marginalized Statuses

Racial and ethnic minorities continue to have unequal access to high quality education (Cardona, 2023). Racial and ethnic minorities are also more likely to face negative teacher bias, discrimination, overall more negative class experiences, especially in gifted populations, compared to their white counterparts (Cardona, 2023; Banks, 2014; Obiakor et al., 2010).

Students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBTQ+) are also likely going to face additional challenges. Individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ are more likely to face homophobic remarks and bullying than their heterosexual and cis-gender counterparts (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012; Orue & Calvete 2017). With bullying having a negative impact on school performance, these students will likely face additional

challenges related to their identities (Nishina et al., 2005; Oliveira et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2005).

Theoretical Framework

Identity and identity development is a crucial process that occurs, typically, during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). While this study was mixed-methods, this paper will largely be focused on the qualitative outcomes of the study. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory will serve as the base of this study. Ecological Theory attempts to demonstrate the influence of a person's environment on their identity, and in turn, how this person then influences their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). It is well researched that racial and ethnic minorities (Borrero et al., 2012; Ewing, 2020; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and LGBTQ+ students (Bochenek, 2023; Bronski, 2020) face additional challenges in schools. There is little research, however, that looks at the intersectionality of giftedness, disability, and belonging to a marginalized community. This theoretical view will allow for insight into how these adolescent students are interacting with the environments they have been in, and the effect their environments have had on them (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). As mentioned, there is little research in this area, thus this study fills an important literature gap. This framework will guide the question:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of twice exceptional students from marginalized communities?

Methods

Sample

All participants were students of a gifted, residential high school located in the Midwestern United States. Students had to be between the ages of 15 and 19. 46 students completed an initial survey, with 12 students completing a follow-up interview. All participants completed demographic information in the survey. A breakdown of their self-reported gender (left column) and sexual orientation is found below:

Field	Straight	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual	Asexual	Questioning or Uncertain	Other (Please Specify)	Prefer not to respond
Man	12	0	1	2	1	0	0	0
Woman	3	2	0	6	1	1	2	0
Non-binary / Third Gender	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	0
Transgender Man	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Transgender Woman	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
Gender-Fluid	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Agender	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Questioning or Uncertain	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Other (Fill in the Box)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Prefer not to respond	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

When looking at racial and ethnic makeup, two students identified as being Hispanic or Latino/a/x or of Spanish Origin. When looking at the racial makeup of the students, two

were American Indian/Alaska Native, three were Asian/Asian-American, 38 were White/European-American/of European descent, and three were other. Five of the students were Sophomores, 20 were Juniors, and 21 were seniors. Prior to coming to the gifted, residential high school: 41 students attended a public school, two attended a private school, one was home schooled, and two reported “other.” In this paper, the term “home school” is used to describe where the students were prior to coming to the gifted, residential school.

Procedures: Collection and Analysis

After obtaining IRB approval, the study was conducted in two phases. To recruit participants, information about the study was sent home to guardians via multiple media forms. Guardians then signed consent forms if their student was allowed to participate in the study.

Phase 1

A convocation was held for any student with signed consents to participate in the study. Students' names and emails were cross-checked to verify eligibility with the consents on file. Students were given a QR or link to a Qualtrics survey to complete during the convocation. Researchers were present to answer any questions or provide any clarifications needed. At the start of the survey, student's had an assent (consent if over 18). At the end of the survey, students were able to indicate if they'd like to take part in Phase 2 of the study.

Phase 2

Phase 2 of the study consisted of an option interview. Prior to the interview, students had to sign an additional assent/consent. The interview was semi-structured to

allow for researchers to follow the lead of what students wanted to talk about. All interviews were held in-person and recorded then transcribed using otter.ai. Participants will be able to review their transcript for reliability and validity. A phenomenology approach was determined to be the best way to analyze and view this data, as it will tell these student's stories.

Results

In the survey, which 46 students completed, one of the questions asked was: "How often were/are your gifted needs met at the following locations?" In *Figure 1* below, red (top bar) indicates the student's home school, with blue (bottom bar)

indicating the gifted, residential school.

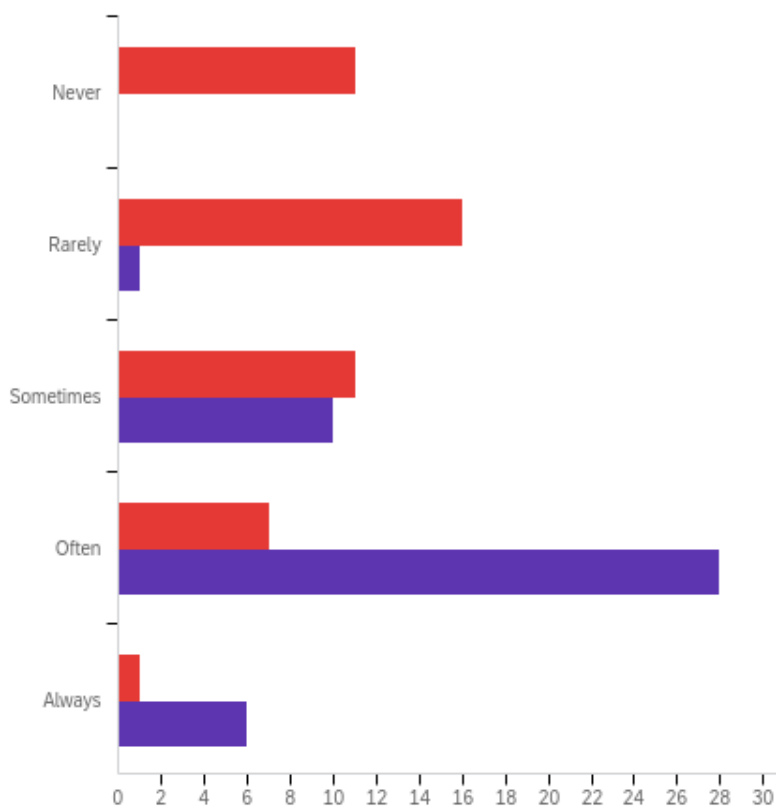


Figure 1

As indicated, the majority of student's home schools failed to meet their gifted needs, with the gifted, residential school meeting more of their needs in terms of giftedness. With giftedness being one aspect of these participants' identities, it is important to note that only one student felt their gifted needs were always met at their home school, and only six felt they were always met at the gifted residential school. If this facet of their identity is not being met, are they putting their identity elsewhere?

The following findings will share two recurring themes that came out of an open-ended survey question and the interviews. The survey question some of these answers came from was "What could the [gifted, residential school] do better to meet the needs of students that are neurodivergent?" Examples of neurodivergent were then given to ensure student understanding.

Finding 1: Environmental Impact

Many students reported having issues with their learning environment. With these students already having complex identities they are navigating, a disruption in their learning environment, rather it be physical or verbal, could further derail learning. One student when describing their experience with their peers in their home school stated they “just hear, like, the homophobic and transphobic things... a group of people who were just like, pretty aggressive, like made up songs, mocking people, specifically based on gender and sexuality” (individual interview, 2023). This student did identify as twice exceptional and LGBTQ+. Another twice exceptional student that identifies as LGBTQ+ was discussing the difference between their home school and the gifted, residential school. When describing the gifted, residential school, they were asked if they felt it was more inclusive. This student stated “Yeah. Because there are a lot of queer people here. So just based off of how many of us there are there just like covered already systems in place” (individual interview, 2023). One more student described their experience of being queer in middle school as “I was just kind of not talking to anybody. Yeah, [I] just sit alone” (individual interview, 2023).

In addition, numerous students with a disability such as ASD, ADHD, anxiety, etc., reported having issues with their physical environments in home schools and the gifted residential schools. There were multiple students who wish the gifted, residential school had an accommodating testing space on campus that was neurodivergent friendly. Another thing that bothered a few students was school lighting:

“...living in constant LED lighting makes it harder to cope with my sensory issues especially when I'm already struggling. In my room, and many student rooms, we never use the overhead or mirror lights because they're too bright and give headaches among sensory overload” (individual interview, 2023)

With another student stating “I know this is hard to avoid, but overhead lighting is the most overstimulating form of lighting (floor and desk lamps are much better)” (individual interview, 2023). A few more students wished there were ways to avoid fire/tornado drills (overstimulation and anxiety), have more non-verbal communication options, more seating options, and all around have an environment more adapted for the different parts of their identity (individual interviews, 2023).

Finding 2: Teacher/Professional Impact

The impact of teachers or other professionals involved in learning was the most mentioned theme from students. Many student's shared stories of their negative experiences, what made them feel safe and valued, and what they thought teachers and school personnel could do to improve their educational experience. There were two students that shared a story about racism occurring in their gifted, residential school. A teacher was audio recorded saying (according to the student): “...black students are just generally lazy or they don't work as hard. They don't deserve as many options as the white students and stuff like that” (individual interview, 2023). These two students told the same story in two separate interviews. Each student described the audio recording being taken to administration, and student's holding a protest, but nothing was done and the teacher did not face consequences. This seemed to lead to the students feeling helpless.

In an interview with a student that is Native American, they were describing an experience of wearing their Native American tribal headband to their home school. When asked if they ever had any issues related to being Native American and attending their home school, they said “Yeah, it was an issue because I wore this tribal headband one time, and it had a feather on the back standing up. And my teacher told me to take it off, because she said it's a costume” (individual interview, 2023). Another student was talking about being queer in their home school. This student when describing issues they had being queer in their home school stated, “Sometimes teachers would give you a hard time if you wanted to retake a test, because they knew things about you that they didn't like” (individual interview, 2023).

In addition to issues related to being marginalized, many students had issues with teachers/school personnel not respecting their disability or giftedness. A student with anxiety described their experience as “I must say that I have dealt with anxiety/stress problems in class and felt that my right to leave the classroom wasn't directly given and it's an uncomfortable process to even try to leave” (individual interview, 2023). A few students wished there were more clear expectations or alternatives when it comes to verbal assignments in classes. One student said their gifted, residential high school should “...encourage instructors to make discussion standards in class more clear.” with another student adding “Giving students an alternative to discussions and oral presentations... There are very few times that I am in a class with someone that knows that it is something I struggle with and will push me to ask questions and participate” (individual interviews, 2023). There were a few students who felt staff should be more understanding of accommodations, and be forced to follow

them. When describing a teacher at the gifted, residential high school that ignored accommodations, a student said, “Keep around the staff members that care about us and can be inclusive and aid with our accommodations. We need less teachers like [teacher], who manipulates students into allowing [teacher] to ignore [student’s] physical and mental accommodations” (individual interviews, 2023). A few more things mentioned by students was having school and staff members trained more on twice exceptionality/marginalized communities, having different ways to complete assignments, and utilizing multiple teaching methodologies in instruction (individual interviews, 2023).

Significance

These findings indicate that students with multifaceted identities, such as twice exceptional and from a marginalized community, are not having their needs fully met in public school settings or in a gifted, residential high school. With identity development being critical in adolescence, school's and professionals need to improve the education system, to more students to reach their optimal learning ability (Erikson, 1968). This study fits in with previous research related to identity development, while filling a gap in gifted literature that does not look at how these multifaceted identities develop and impact student's educational experiences. Most importantly, this study starts to give a voice to students that are not used to seeing themselves represented in literature.

Another important finding, is the possibility of the gifted, residential high school acting as a buffer to some of the negative experiences shaping identity that come from being in a marginalized community, specifically LGBTQ+. With a little over 2 out of 3 students identifying as LGBTQ+ on the survey, it is higher than the national average of 1 out of every 4 adolescents being LGBTQ+ (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). While it is not clear if this is the case, there were a couple students that talked about feeling comfortable being LGBTQ+ at their gifted, residential school.

Limitations and Future Research

As just mentioned, a future research path to be taken would be analyzing schools that are designed to promote a certain part of a student's identity, in this case the gifted, residential school, and see if it is actually acting as a buffer to lessen the negative

impact on student's identity development. It would be important to note precisely what it is doing and how, to see if changes could be made to schools similar to the student's home schools.

A limitation of this study is the small participation sample and lack of research in this area to draw from. Future research should aim to have a larger participation sample, with more qualitative interviews to see if the current themes persist. In addition, more gifted, residential schools should be researched to see if these themes occur in other geographic and demographic areas. A larger sample size and more bodies of research would increase reliability and validity of the findings.

Future research should also look into teacher and school personnel preparation programs, to see what teachers are learning about twice exceptional students, their identity development, and how to best help a student that might have multiple parts of their identities impacting their educational experiences. This could potentially lead to updating how teachers are taught on their way to licensure or professional development packages to increase teacher and school personnel knowledge.

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