

Examination of Some Socio-Emotional Needs of Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Counselling

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ABSTRACT

Children differ from one another in various spheres such as: physically, intellectually, behaviourally, and health wise; this deviations is referred to exceptionality. When children have challenges in more than one area of exceptionality, such an individual is tagged being twice exceptional. This paper examines the socio-emotional needs of gifted children with learning disabilities (twice-exceptional or 2e students), highlighting the definitions of concepts, complexities of their asynchronous development. Gifted with learning challenges, these students often experience heightened anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem due to contrasting abilities. Key socio-emotional needs include coping with perfectionism, managing peer relations, and reconciling strengths with struggles. Implications for counseling emphasize strength-based, individualized support, fostering self-advocacy, and addressing emotional complexities. Implications for counseling emphasize strength-based, individualized support, fostering self-advocacy, and addressing emotional complexities. Recommendations include tailored interventions, collaboration between educators and counselors, and promoting resilience to optimize these students' potential. It was recommended that collaborations should be encouraged among school stakeholders because best results are achieved where there is collaboration between the counsellor, classroom teacher, gifted educator, special educator, parents, and the student in order to meet these needs adequately.

Keywords: Giftedness, Learning disability, Socio-emotional need, Twice Exceptional, Counselling

INTRODUCTION

The concept of exceptionality implies a deviation from the norm. It is an umbrella term which includes everyone who deviates either below or above the group norm to the extent that they require special education services to attain their potential (Winter, 2020). Exceptional children therefore refer to children who deviate from normal children in any way. Reis, Baum and Burke (2014) define the exceptional child as one, who differs from the average or normal child in mental characteristics, sensory abilities, communication abilities, behavioural and emotional development, or physical characteristics, which occurs to such an extent that the child requires a modification of school practices, or special educational services, to develop his/her unique capabilities.

When educators first began to describe children who showed evidence of having learning disability yet appeared to be gifted, many viewed this as contrary because they saw learning disability and giftedness as mutually exclusive. Today, it is generally accepted that an individual can exhibit characteristics of both (National Education Association, 2020). However, students in this category are frequently under-served and often not identified in school systems (Braverman, 2016). This situation makes such students to be referred to as being 'invisible' in many school settings.

A gifted child is typically defined as one who demonstrates exceptional abilities or potential in one or more areas, such as intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or specific academic fields. The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2013) describe gifted children as those who are identified as possessing exceptional abilities or talents in one or more areas, such as intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or specific academic fields." Gifted children are usually identified by their outstanding performances in different areas of endeavour.

Gifted children with learning disabilities, also known as twice-exceptional (2e) students, therefore are individuals who possess exceptional abilities or talents in one or more areas, such as intellectual, creative,

artistic, leadership, or specific academic fields, but also have a learning disability or disabilities that affect their academic performance. Twice-exceptional individuals are those who are identified as gifted and also have a disability, such as a learning disability, ADHD, or autism spectrum disorder, that affects their ability to learn and achieve."

Gifted students with learning disabilities therefore possess some needs that are often not addressed in schools. Students with learning disabilities often struggle with anxiety, self-esteem, and social relationships, requiring targeted support; they may need modifications, such as extra time to complete assignments or the use of assistive technology and they require guidance and support to transit to post-secondary education or employment. (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, 2020). The counsellor therefore must work hand in hand with other professionals in the school in order to meet the needs of these exceptional students. Such programme should focus on academic, career and personal-socio developmental needs of such children.

This paper aims at reviewing the concept of dual exceptionality (learning disability and giftedness) with the view to discussing the history, definition of concepts, socio-emotional needs of this group of exceptional students and the counselling implications.

History of Dual Exceptionality movement at the beginning concentrated on children with sensory and physical disabilities, but recently scholars began to extend their interests to students with learning disability.

Gifted students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, ADHD, or autism, often are not immediately recognizable, making them a hidden or invisible population. They may excel in certain areas, masking their struggles, or their disabilities might be subtle, making it harder to identify them. This invisibility can lead to: missed opportunities for support, underachievement, social-emotional struggles and misdiagnosis or lack of diagnosis. Raising awareness and understanding can help identify and support these students, ensuring they receive the accommodations and opportunities they need to thrive (Assouline & Whalon, 2013).

Earliest works on this topic were biographies of eminent individuals whose life suggested deficits that might be characterised as learning disability today. For example scientists and inventors such as: Albert Einstein, who struggled with dyslexia, autism, and attention deficit disorder, yet became one of the greatest scientists in history, changing our understanding of the universe; Thomas Edison who had dyslexia and hearing loss, but invented the lightbulb and held over 1,000 patents; Alexander Graham Bell, who possibly had dyslexia, invented the telephone, and revolutionized communication (Lalit, 2020 & Einstein, 2025).

Statistics show that, in the UK, approximately 1.5 million people have a learning disability, with around 349,000 being children aged 0-17, while in the US, about 15% of public school students (7.5 million) received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the 2022-23 school year. The most common disability types among students served under IDEA are: Specific Learning Disabilities (32%), Speech or Language Impairments (19%), other Health Impairments (15%) and Autism (13%). On giftedness and Learning Disabilities statistics, research suggests that up to 33% of students identified with learning disabilities may have superior intellectual ability. Gifted students with learning disabilities often face unique challenges, including inadequate identification and support.

Who is a Gifted Child?

A gifted child is typically defined as one who demonstrates exceptional abilities or potential in one or more areas, such as: Intellectual ability, academic achievement, creativity, leadership, and -visual or performing arts. (Renzulli, 2005). Bisht (2025) describes it as children who possess exceptional abilities that set them apart from their peers. Their intelligence, creativity, and curiosity often surpass age-related expectations, requiring unique approaches to education and social interaction.

The United States Department of Education cited in Woolfolk (2004) defines gifted and talented children as "children and youth with outstanding talent who perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment". Those children require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools.

Gifted and talented individuals have several characteristics that distinguish them from other average learners. Some of these are: superior reasoning power and marked ability to handle ideas; persistent intellectual

curiosity; creative ability and imaginative expressions; initiative and originality in intellectual work; and ability to communicate with adults in a mature way.

Researches over the years have led to identification of different types of gifted children. Betts and Neiharts (2020) for example identified 6 types viz: the successful, the challenging, the underground, the dropouts, the double labelled and the autonomous learner.

According to Teacher Institute (2025), the successful gifted are the most easily identifiable and they account for about 90% of the identified gifted students in schools. Such individuals are obedient, display appropriate behaviour, and are high achievers. However, they are dependent and less creative and lack autonomy. The challenging type are the divergently gifted, who possess high levels of creativity. They do not conform to the system and often have conflicts with parents and teachers. They are at risk of dropping out of schools for unhealthy activities, like getting involved in drugs or exhibiting delinquent behaviour.

Type 3 group (the underground) refers to gifted students who deny their talents or hide their giftedness in order to feel more included with a non-gifted group. They are generally females, who are frequently insecure and anxious as their belonging needs rise dramatically at that stage.

The fourth type is the angry and frustrated student whose needs have not been recognised for many years and feels rejected in the system. The double labeled are gifted students who are physically or emotionally handicapped in some ways, or have a learning disability. They are also often impatient and critical with low self-esteem, while the sixth types are the autonomous learners, who have learnt to work effectively in the school. They are highly successful and have high self-concept with some leadership capacity within their surroundings. They are also able to express their feelings, goals, and needs freely and appropriately.

What is Learning Disability?

Learning disability is a neurological condition that affects how an individual processes, retains, or expresses information, impacting specific areas like reading, writing, math, or language skills, despite average or above-average intelligence. It is not caused by poor education, intellectual disability, or sensory impairments, but rather by differences in brain structure and function (Smith, 2019). Students with learning disabilities experience a variety of learning problems, most notably in the areas of language acquisition and usage (Kirk, Gallagher, & Anastasiow, 2000). Such children achieve below their intellectual ability (Thompson & Davis, 2020).

Who are Gifted and Learning Disabled Children?

Gifted children with learning disabilities are individuals who possess exceptional abilities or talents (giftedness) in one or more areas, while simultaneously experiencing significant learning challenges or disabilities in other areas (Cvitkovic & Stosic, 2022). This set of students are often not identified and are frequently under-served in the school system for these reasons, such students have been referred to as being “invisible” in many school settings. McCoach, Kehle, Bray and Siegle (2001) describe GLD students as those 'of superior intellectual ability who exhibit a significant discrepancy in their level of performance in a particular academic area such as reading, mathematics, spelling or written expression'.

There are at least three sub-groups of children whose dual exceptionality are not recognised. The first group includes students who have been identified as gifted yet exhibit difficulties in school. They are often considered underachievers and their underachievement may be attributed to poor self-concept, lack of motivation, or even some less flattering characteristics, such as laziness (Al-Hroub, 2013). The second group includes students whose learning disabilities are severe enough that they have been identified as having learning disabilities but whose exceptional abilities have never been recognised or addressed. The third category are students whose abilities and disabilities mask each other; these children sit in general classrooms, ineligible for services provided for students who are gifted or have learning disabilities, and are considered to have average abilities. Students with learning disabilities often show highly abstract reasoning skills and are able to see the big picture readily, they may have difficulty remembering and putting events in sequences (Winefeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler, & Schewitz, 2002). Writing may also become hard for these students due to the problems in sequencing and attending to details (Winefeld, Barnes Robinson, Jeweler, & Schewitz,

2002). Some of the general common weaknesses of these children include: lack of attention, poor memory, motivation, deficiencies in academic areas like spelling, mathematics, and reading; poor handwriting; poor auditory, motor or visual perception; and low self-esteem with sensitivity to criticism (Sansom, 2015). Relating with peers can be particularly difficult for gifted students with learning disabilities if they feel like they do not belong with either the high achievers or with other learning disabled students (Brody & Mills, 2004).

Children with learning disabilities have extensive vocabularies, which are much more advanced than that of their peers (McEahern & Bornot, 2001). Apart from this, the authors are of the opinion that such children tend to exhibit good listening comprehension and are able to express themselves well. They also reason abstractly and solve problems; many demonstrate a sophisticated sense of humour. They also often prefer creative activities and usually have keen interests on hobbies outside of the school setting (Tssel, Adams, Clarke & Jones, 2014).

It must be noted however, that a number of cultural and contextual factors influence the identification and support of twice exceptional children. Cultural and contextual factors play a significant role in identifying and supporting twice-exceptional (2e) students. Some key factors include:

1. Cultural definitions of giftedness. Different cultures define giftedness and talent in various ways, influencing identification and support.
2. Socio-economic status. Students from low-income backgrounds may face barriers to identification and access to services.
3. Language and communication. Language barriers can also impact identification and support for 2e students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.
4. Family values and expectations. Family values and expectations can influence how 2e students are perceived and supported.
5. Teacher bias and training. Teacher bias, training, and experience can affect identification and support for 2e students.
6. Resource availability. Availability of resources, such as funding, services, and personnel, can impact support for 2e students.
7. Stigma and stereotypes. Stigma and stereotypes surrounding disability and giftedness can influence identification and support.

In Nigeria, specific contextual factors include:

1. Limited Resources. Limited resources and infrastructure can impact identification and support for 2e students.
2. Cultural beliefs: Cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability and giftedness can influence identification and support.
3. Language diversity: Nigeria's linguistic diversity can create barriers to identification and support for 2e students.

Understanding these factors can help educators and policymakers develop more inclusive and effective strategies for identifying and supporting 2e students.

Being gifted and experiencing learning disabilities is actually not a normal situation. It affects the individual one way or the other in the way he relates with people around him and sometimes, this could be frustrating. This paper therefore examines the socio-emotional needs of such individuals with the purpose of identifying ways to help them in this situation, so they can fulfill their full potentials.

Socio-emotional Needs of Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities

Gifted children with learning disabilities often exhibit some behavioural and emotional difficulties which can make them frustrated and depressed. For instance, Brody and Mills (2004) found that this category of twice exceptional children exhibit low-self esteem, poor motivation, depression and anxiety. These students may also be disruptive, aggressive, and easily frustrated in the classroom environment (Fetzer, 2000). Also, the students' learning difficulties may cause them to repress their gifted potential into very average performance (Brody & Mills, 2004).

More importantly, these students may be hyperactive, inattentive, and impulsive (Coleman & Cross, 2005). Gifted children with learning disabilities were also found to have lower self-concepts than were gifted students (Kay, 2000). They were also found to have lower opinions of their high school education and fewer out-of-class achievements (e.g. in leadership, athletics, arts) than their higher-achieving classmates (Sternberg, & Grigorenko, 2004). The self-concepts of children who are both gifted and LD are lower than the self-concepts of their normally achieving peers (Kay, 2000). These dual exceptional students are also confused about their mix of special abilities and these sharp deficits can lead to feelings of frustration, unhappiness, and isolation (Baum & Owen, 2004). The conflicted feelings may result in anger and resentment toward others, which may affect relationship with peers and family members. Erratic behaviour in the form of aggression, withdrawal, and lack of impulse control may be manifested at home and in school (Cross, 2008).

Gifted children with learning disabilities also show sign of social problems. These problems according to Stormont, Stebbins, and Holliday (2001) include difficulty using appropriate social skills, generating solutions to social problems, and interpreting social cues. King (2005) also noted that because twice-exceptional children seem to possess characteristics of both giftedness and LD, they often struggle with perceptions of being different and feeling isolated.

In the same vein, Bracamonte (2010) noted that twice exceptional girls tend not to call attention to themselves with "disruptive behavior" until late middle school or high school, when their challenges start to exceed their ability to hide them; this is the more reason why their needs require early identification. Also, Olenchak, (1994) noted that the drive to achieve perfection, common in many gifted children, generates much psychological conflict in academically talented children who have difficulty achieving and that twice exceptional students can be very self critical, which can lead to a particularly dysfunctional form of perfectionism.

Twice-exceptional (2e) children often face unique challenges that can impact their self-esteem, anxiety levels, peer relationships, and coping strategies. Studies suggest that 2e children tend to have lower self-esteem compared to their peers, often due to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt. Factors like supportive teachers, family support, and early identification can positively influence self-esteem (Kurry & Fischer, 2025). Again, 2e children are at a higher risk of experiencing anxiety, often stemming from academic pressures, social struggles, and perfectionism. Anxiety can manifest as emotional dysregulation, avoidance behaviors, or physical symptoms (Strop, 2011).

Also, studies have found that 2e children may struggle with social interactions, feeling isolated or misunderstood by peers. They might experience difficulties with emotional regulation, leading to social challenges. This category of learners also develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as avoidance or aggression, to deal with stress and anxiety. Positive coping strategies, like problem-solving and seeking support, can be taught and nurtured (Bonti & Sofologi, 2022).

Implications of Dual Exceptionality on Counselling

The effect of dual exceptionality is enormous on the individual and it has a number of implications for the counsellor if the individuals are to benefit maximally from school programmes and adjust to life with peers both in the class and outside of the classroom. The first thing to be done to nurture the whole child, teachers and parents must recognize the social and emotional needs of students who are gifted with evidences of learning disabilities. The implication of this group of learners is that they will not be able to fulfill their academic potentials and thus will be unable to adjust to life and living generally. Bracamonte (2010) noted that 'the goal of education is to provide opportunities for students to build knowledge, skills, and attitudes so that

they can become successful, contributing members of a global society. 2e students need not be excluded from this vision’.

Counselling for this group of exceptionality has been earlier on suggested by experts (e.g Mendaglio, 1993; and Olenchak, 1994). The benefits of both group and individual counseling have been identified by numerous researchers (Baum, 1994; Mendaglio, 1993; Olenchak, 1994) while some students may require individual counseling. Parents also need information and counseling to help them understand the characteristics and needs of their gifted children with learning challenges (Bracamonte, 2010). Group counseling also can be an effective format for addressing the immediate social/emotional problems experienced by talented students with learning disabilities, as it provides the opportunity for students to gain support from others in similar situations (Reis & Colbert, 2004).

The counsellor should help identify the areas of weaknesses of the individuals and their strength. This will help in promoting their self-understanding and self-acceptance among their peers. Gifted children with learning disability are like normal children and thus need a morale boost to have feelings of competence. This could be achieved by exploring their potentials and weaknesses. Counseling is recommended to address their unique needs and should be available on an as-needed basis (Bracamonte, 2010).

It can be concluded here that the enormity of not meeting the socio-emotional needs of the 2e children could be great because the effect could be felt on the children themselves, their parents, their peers and the society at large; since the individuals concerned will not be able to achieve their set educational goals.

Seeing the enormity of the challenges of twice-exceptional individuals, some counseling interventions are hereby suggested. Counselling strategies for twice-exceptional (2e) students involve a multifaceted approach that addresses their unique strengths and challenges. Here are some specific models and strategies the counsellor can employ to meet their needs:

1. **Strengths-Based Approach.** This strategy focusses on identifying and nurturing students' strengths, interests, and talents, while providing support for their weaknesses. This approach helps build confidence and self-esteem.
2. **Dually Differentiated Program.** This approach provides a program that nurtures gifts and talents while accommodating learning weaknesses.
3. **Executive Functioning Strategies.** These strategies teach skills like organization, time management, and self-regulation to help students manage their daily lives.
4. **Social-Emotional Learning.** This model explicitly teaches social-emotional skills, such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, and interpersonal relationships.
5. **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy.** This strategy helps students identify and challenge negative thought patterns and behaviors which could adversely affect their morale.
6. **Mindfulness and Self-Advocacy.** This model teaches students mindfulness techniques and encourage self-advocacy to help them navigate challenges.
7. **Collaborative Approach.** In this approach, the counsellor collaborates with teachers, parents, and other professionals to ensure a cohesive support system.
8. **SMART Goal Setting.** This model teaches students to set Specific, Meaningful, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Timely goals to build motivation and self-confidence.

These models and strategies can be tailored to meet the individual needs of 2e students, helping them thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

1. Counsellors as well as teachers should learn to identify these special needs group early so as to remediate their inadequacies on time. Their needs can be met through appropriate identification and individualised approach.

2. Collaboration should be encouraged among school stakeholders. The best results are achieved where there is collaboration between the classroom teacher, gifted educator, special educator, parents, and the student.
3. School counselors should help to identify academically talented students with learning disabilities as a part of a continual needs assessment process in their school counseling programs.
4. School counsellors can conduct thorough assessments to identify strengths, weaknesses, and needs and also develop tailored plans addressing academic, social, and emotional needs.
5. Counsellors should focus on abilities and talents to build confidence and motivation and also provide necessary support, such as extra time, assistive technology, or modified assignments.
6. Counsellors need to collaborate with other agencies. They should work with parents, educators, and specialists to ensure consistent support.
7. The government should as a matter of urgency establish clear policies and guidelines for identifying and supporting 2e students and allocate funding and resources for 2e programs, services, and professional development and ensure that 2e programs and services are accessible to all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or background.
8. In terms of teacher training and professional development, government should ensure it includes 2e training in pre-service teacher education programs, provide regular professional development opportunities for educators to learn about 2e students' needs and best practices and offer coaching and mentoring support for educators working with 2e students.
9. In terms of screening, agencies and educators must implement universal screening procedures to identify 2e students, use multiple criteria, including academic achievement, cognitive assessments, and behavioral observations, to identify 2e students, and regularly monitor and assess 2e students' progress to ensure they receive necessary support.

By implementing these recommendations, educators and policymakers can better support 2e students, helping them thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

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