Learning Experiences of Gifted/ASD Students: Using a Success Case Method

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Abstract

Students with dual-exceptionalities have been increasingly identified in North America. However, empirical studies which investigate their learning experiences and needs remain scarce. This study sought to explore the positive learning experiences of gifted students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (G/ASD). G/ASD students demonstrate potentials for high achievement and/or creative productivity while exhibit characteristics of ASD. Without proper education, they also face potential psychosocial distress, such anxiety, poor self-concepts, and lower academic self-efficacy. Using a success case method, the researchers invited two grade 5 G/ASD students in a public school in a Southwestern state to participate in this study. Data were collected through multiple means: interviews, observations, questionnaires, and supplementary artifacts (e.g., IEP, products, and photos). Adopting a general inductive approach and a Glaserian coding paradigm, the researchers identified a core category, supportive context, along with three sub-categories: (1) curricular flexibility, (2) strength-based approach, and (3) safe environment. More than providing useful strategies for teachers, school administers, and parents, research findings also shed light on policy making regarding students who are twice-exceptional. For future research, investigating G/ASD students’ positive school experiences across schools and education levels, and expanding the range of participants are recommended.

Keywords: twice-exceptional, ASD, strength-based approach, success case method, gifted education
Summary

Once, a student described herself as two different people in the same body and said, "one who was competent and bright who was inside, and another who blocked the smart person inside from communicating" (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997, p. 472). This student demonstrates a classic representative of students who are twice-exceptional—gifted students with coexisting disabilities. This study focused on one of the most common twice-exceptional categories seen in school settings, that is, gifted students with autism spectrum disorders (G/ASD students). G/ASD students not only demonstrate potential for high achievement or creative productivity, but also exhibit characteristics of ASD, including deficits in social communication/interactions across contexts and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, 2013).

Purpose

Due to cognitive and social profiles of G/ASD students, it is natural that most researchers have been interested in their performance regarding their cognitive capacity and their social skills (e.g., Barnhill, Hagiwara, Smith Myles, & Simpson, 2000; Joseph, Tager-Flusberg, & Lord, 2002). Studies of effective strategies in their learning experience for gifted/ASD students have scarcely been explored. Therefore, this study sought to explore the positive learning experiences of G/ASD students. Moreover, this study also aimed to render effective strategies and provisions for this group of students.

Perspectives

Students with dual-exceptionalities have been increasingly identified in North America
(Foley-Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, & Stinson, 2011). However, empirical studies which investigate their learning experiences and needs remain scarce. G/ASD students demonstrate potentials for high achievement and/or creative productivity while exhibit characteristics of ASD. School is the primary context within which the development can be changed and directed (Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). However, most twice-exceptional students thought school fail to assist them in developing their potential (Willard-Holt, Weber, Morrison, & Horgan, 2013). Without proper education, they also face potential psychosocial distress, such anxiety, poor self-concepts, and lower academic self-efficacy (Coleman & Karraker, 2003; Baum, Schader, & Hebert, 2014; Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014).

**Methods**

Using a success case method (SCM; Brinkerhoff, 2003), the researchers invited two grade 5 G/ASD students in a public school in a Southwestern state to participate in this study. Both two students in the same school settings were referred and recommended due to their significantly positive development. The SCM method helped produce concrete evidence of students’ positive learning experiences, such as what teacher did, what strategies worked, and what students experienced, to get better development from future efforts.

**Data sources**

Intensive entry during a month benefited the researchers to gather the latest data. Data were collected through multiple means: interviews, observations, questionnaires, and supplementary artifacts (e.g., IEP, products, and photos). The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to allow students’ new ideas to be brought up as a result if the interactive nature of communication. Observations in different type and different subject classes enlarged
the breadth of investigation into the students’ learning experiences. Questionnaires and supplementary artifacts were collected to increase the depth of data exploration.

**Results**

A general inductive approach and a Glaserian coding paradigm (Glaser, 1992, 1998) were adopted for the data analysis. The researchers identified a core category, supportive context, along with three sub-categories: (1) *curricular flexibility*, (2) *strength-based approach*, and (3) *safe environment*. *Curricular flexibility* allowed G/ASD students to learn enrichment curriculum (i.e., challenging content and enrichment program) and exploration (i.e., hands-on activities and collaborative learning) to fit their academic needs. Integrating *strength-based approach* (i.e., learning preferences, accommodation, and demonstration opportunity) enhanced opportunities for G/ASD students to develop their intellectual potentials. Providing a *safe environment* for G/ASD students, including social and physical environment, supported their comprehensive development, such as social and emotional health.

**Educational Importance of the study**

For practices, teachers, administers, and parents could create a supportive context by implementing effective instructions identified from the research findings. The useful strategies could also be provided for policy making regarding students who are twice-exceptional. For future research, investigating G/ASD students’ positive school experiences across schools and education levels, and expanding the range of participants are recommended.
References


