

Resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLB) support for twice-exceptional students

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KEY POINTS

- RTLB need to be able to confidently identify the potential for twice-exceptionality in students who are referred to them.
- RTLB need support to develop their 2e knowledge.
- Strengths-based, or multilayered approaches to interventions, including collaborating with educators of the gifted, are suggested.

Twice-exceptional (2e) students face many barriers to learning opportunities due to their combinations of giftedness and learning disabilities. If 2e students are referred to special education teachers such as resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLb), challenges may be encountered when RTLb lack knowledge of twice-exceptionality. This article provides insight into the barriers RTLb face when identifying 2e students, and how RTLb provide learning programmes that promote and strengthen 2e students' talents while scaffolding support for their learning disabilities. It draws upon a small exploratory qualitative study of RTLb knowledge of 2e concepts, how they identified these students, and the common intervention approaches used when working with 2e students.

Introduction

Twice-exceptional (2e) students are gifted, or have the potential to be gifted, while also having one or more disabilities (Ng et al., 2017). However, identifying 2e students can be challenging. Often 2e students are either identified by teachers or other professionals within education for only their gift/s or their disability, and sometimes they go unrecognised altogether due to their gifts hiding their disability or their disability hiding their gifts. In literature, this is referred to as “masking” (Brody & Mills, 1997). Twice-exceptional students often experience failure at school, leading to high levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and underachievement (Ministry of Education, 2019). This can also be externalised with behaviours such as hyperactivity and aggression. These students are often forgotten about within the complicated realm of the classroom, or receive only remediation for their learning or behavioural disabilities (Baum et al., 2014; Munn, 2016). Twice-exceptional students need appropriate and timely support at school to ensure successful outcomes.

What's happening in Aotearoa New Zealand schools

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Ministry of Education does not offer a definition of giftedness and instead suggests this should be co-constructed between each school and their community. Bicknell and Riley (2013) found that only approximately 50% of schools actually had a giftedness definition in place. Munn's (2016) research suggested that, if gifted identification was not mandated in the National Administration Guidelines, schools would be even less focused on these students and their needs. The lack of knowledge and support schools have to identify gifted students complicates the identification process of

2e students because school definitions need to be broad enough to include students who are gifted as well as including students with disabilities in order to identify and support them to achieve to their potential. To achieve this, specialist teachers, especially resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLb), need a strong understanding of twice-exceptionality in order to support the schools and teachers they assist.

Research has found that 2e students tend to get referred for their special needs rather than for gifted education (Bianco & Leech, 2010). In Aotearoa New Zealand, such students would normally be referred to the RTLb. This might be unfortunate, as specialist teachers of the gifted have better knowledge of 2e students (Mullet & Rinn, 2015). Referring 2e students to RTLb rather than specialist teachers of the gifted creates a problematic mismatch of services and education provision for 2e students in schools. When their gifts and talents are not identified, 2e students are often relegated to special classes, and/or behaviour programmes, leaving their gifts and talents, and their strengths, unnoticed and unaddressed (Ng, 2018). Twice-exceptional students need RTLb who have up-to-date knowledge of 2e concepts, and feel confident in identifying these students. This should then lead to careful planning of programmes that focus on students' strengths, wellbeing, and what they can achieve, while also scaffolding their learning needs, using a multilayered approach of strengths-based and needs-based interventions. This approach can empower them to use their strengths to support their needs (Morrison & Rizza, 2007).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, RTLb have a commitment to, and involvement in, strengths-based approaches for students with learning and behaviour issues. RTLb guidelines state that a strengths-based approach should “enhance the mana of the individual by focusing on their strengths and their potential to address challenges”

(Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 4). A collaborative approach with educators and family values everyone involved and seeks to maximise participation and potential. Given that 2e students have, by definition, both gifts/strengths and particular needs, a strengths-based or multilayered approach should be particularly suited to supporting their education. The exploratory study reported in this article sought to find out how familiar RTLB are with the complex needs of 2e students, how confident they are in identifying these students, and when identified, the types of interventions they provide to support their learning.

Research design

Following ethical approval, RTLB across Aotearoa New Zealand were invited to participate in an online anonymous survey via an invitation sent to all 40 RTLB clusters. Disappointingly, of approximately 1,000 RTLB, only 13 agreed to participate in this survey (positive response rate of 1.3%). As the survey was anonymous it is not known where these RTLB were located. The survey asked about RTLB experience and knowledge of twice-exceptionality, their confidence in being able to identify 2e students within their casework, and the interventions they used to support their 2e students.

Participating RTLB responded to questions by indicating their answers to closed questions on a Likert-type scale, and by answering some open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis were used to identify themes across the data relating to the current perspectives and experiences of this sample of RTLB and their knowledge of, and work with, 2e students. Due to the small sample and exploratory nature of the study, raw numbers are used to present the findings.

What do RTLB know about 2e concepts?

In this small study, RTLB had varied knowledge of 2e concepts. Four RTLB indicated they had no knowledge of 2e concepts, six revealed that they had some knowledge of 2e concepts, and two RTLB indicated good and/or excellent knowledge. Those with good and/or excellent knowledge stated that they had had experience working within gifted education programmes.

When asked where they had learnt about 2e concepts, those with knowledge of them had mixed responses. Two RTLB had had some kind of professional development on either giftedness or 2e concepts. The remaining seven RTLB were self-taught in their knowledge of 2e concepts, stating they had acquired this knowledge while working with children who displayed 2e characteristics.

Identifying 2e students

Overall, a majority of the 13 RTLB in this study lacked confidence to identify 2e students. Three RTLB had no confidence in identifying 2e students and only two RTLB reported they could confidently identify 2e students in their case work. These two RTLB had had experiences working in programmes for gifted and talented students. One had worked in a gifted and talented programme as an RTLB, while the other had run a gifted and talented school in South Africa for 3 years. The remaining five RTLB felt they had some confidence in identifying 2e students. It was interesting to note, however, that some participants indicated confidence in identifying 2e students even though they had indicated in an earlier question that they had no knowledge of 2e concepts.

RTLB were asked about their understanding of the complexities of issues such as masking when identifying 2e students. When asked if they agreed or disagreed that 2e students often achieve average marks in class because their giftedness masks their full potential, or their disability can mask their giftedness, eight participants agreed/strongly agreed with this statement and no participants disagreed.

The survey asked RTLB if they had worked with students who they felt were 2e but had not been identified as such by the school. Of the 13, three said they had not worked with students who were potentially or unofficially 2e. These RTLB reported limited knowledge of 2e concepts which could have impacted their understanding of how they might identify potential 2e students. The remaining 10 RTLB said they had worked with students who would fit the description of 2e students of some kind. The two RTLB with good or excellent knowledge of 2e concepts felt they had come across these types of students several times in their case work. These data suggest links between knowledge of twice-exceptionality and the ability to identify 2e students. The findings indicate that, when participants had knowledge of 2e concepts, they were more likely to notice the potential for undiagnosed 2e students in their casework.

RTLB intervention approaches

RTLB's reported a varied array of opinions about their role in supporting students with learning and behaviour disabilities. Five RTLB agreed that their role is to focus on disabilities. The remaining eight RTLB disagreed with this statement.

The open-ended questions in the questionnaire sought more details about how the RTLB supported their 2e students and the responses demonstrated links between RTLB views of their role and the approach they took for their interventions. When describing their approaches to interventions, most RTLB who felt their role was to

support disabilities used interventions that aligned with a needs-based approach, whereas RTLB who felt their role was to support individuals the best way they could, used a strengths-based approach. One RTLB who had excellent knowledge of 2e concepts and experience working with 2e students used a multilayered approach of both strengths-based and needs-based interventions.

Six RTLB described using a strengths-based approach in their interventions. This included either focusing on students' passions or advocating for acceleration opportunities in students' areas of strengths.

I pointed the teacher to his passion areas—coin collection, bugs, Lego, certain genres of books, conversation and several other areas. Got the teacher to include his interest in his curriculum design. (P8)

His strengths were in maths and science. Whānau were so grateful that the student had been identified as he had not had good experiences at school up to that point (however) the management and some teachers were particularly difficult to convince ... (I had a) meeting with the deputy principal and teachers re the decision to move student (into the gifted and talented unit), explaining (by) using data and strengths. (P2)

To address the student's strengths, we enrolled him into Te Kura for math and science as he was working equivalent to Year 10 as a Year 5. (P12)

Seven RTLB described interventions that were identified as a needs-based approach. These included using technology to support the learning needs of the students and to help create faster success within the classroom. They explained that these approaches helped to scaffold the learning disability so their students had faster access to the classroom curriculum. For example:

(I applied for) assistive technology, this was approved and we were able to purchase him his own laptop. (P9)

(I used) a timetable for the student to see how the day was planned and all changes to the routine were discussed the day before and a person was agreed on to support the student when her anxiety became too much in the classroom ... tasks were set at her level, rewards were agreed upon when a task was completed ... she was given reading as a reward. (P1)

One RTLB shared success supporting a student by taking a multilayered approach to intervention and advocating for their strengths while still continuing to support their learning needs.

I recommended that this student become part of the Gifted and Talented programme with special scaffolding in English. This student subsequently became a top science student and won a trip to NASA—much credit must go to the science teacher with whom he had a special bond. He also won a scholarship to Otago University to study Astrophysics. However, he did not pass English so had to get a special dispensation.

There appeared to be a clear link between RTLB who have excellent/good knowledge of 2e concepts and their approach to interventions. RTLB who had excellent or good knowledge of 2e concepts approached their interventions with a strengths-based approach or a multilayered approach.

Discussion

This small exploratory study highlighted gaps in both RTLB knowledge of, and experience with, 2e students. This knowledge/lack of knowledge subsequently impacted on the ways that 2e students were/were not supported, indicating a potential issue with RTLBs' ability to identify and cater for 2e students. Furthermore, the very disappointing response rate to the survey may also suggest that a lack of knowledge of giftedness and 2e concepts may have worked against RTLB electing to participate.

Twice-exceptionality has long been recognised in the gifted education literature; however, little is known about knowledge and awareness of 2e concepts in the special education needs community (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2013), including RTLB. Importantly, RTLB can play an important role in supporting 2e students. As schools embrace principles of inclusiveness, it is no surprise that the number of students with diverse learning needs such as 2e students has increased in general education settings (Byrnes, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2019). Research also shows that 2e students often get referred to special education rather than gifted education (Bianco & Leech, 2010). Therefore, it makes sense that RTLB would be part of collaborative teams that support 2e students.

Identification is the first barrier to providing effective support for 2e students, as poorer outcomes are more prevalent when disability and gifts are misunderstood (Gilman et al., 2013). This study revealed various levels of confidence in RTLB in their ability to identify 2e students, with only two RTLB feeling very confident. RTLB also demonstrated even lower rates of knowledge of 2e concepts. Not only is it concerning that RTLB lack knowledge of 2e concepts, but it is also worth asking how RTLB can identify 2e students if they lack essential knowledge of concepts related to twice-exceptionality. This creates a paradox, as it would be assumed that RTLB would need to understand twice-exceptionality before being able to identify these traits in the students they encounter.

Identifying 2e students can be complex due to the way their gifts and/or disabilities present and can be masked. This study revealed that all 13 RTLB had some understanding of the issues of masking. Although varied in degree, all participating RTLB also agreed that some underachievers are actually gifted children, thus acknowledging simultaneous underachievement and giftedness.

Ng's (2018) research into provisions that impeded or enhanced achievement for 2e students concluded that embracing students' learning strengths, while also providing support for learning difficulties, benefits students academically and psychosocially. In this study, when RTLB advocated for a strengths-based approach and used students' strengths and interests as the main focus of their intervention it appeared outcomes for students could be much better. RTLB who had good knowledge of 2e concepts used a strengths-based approach in their interventions.

Finding the best provision for each student, however, is not an easy task. Having programmes that do not separately address strengths and weaknesses but use a multilayered approach, starting with strengths, are advised (Pereles et al., 2009). In this study it was found that, although a combined strengths-based and needs-based programme is required, most RTLB appeared to provide one or the other, rather than both. And the one RTLB who gave examples of using a multilayered approach demonstrated that outcomes could be more positive for the 2e student.

In this small study, participants who had good knowledge of twice-exceptionality advocated for students to have access to acceleration classes while also having their learning needs addressed as a major part of their intervention. However, it is still not clear why many special education teachers, including many RTLB, do not refer students to, or collaborate with, gifted education or accelerant educators. Assouline and Foley-Nicpon's (2007) research indicates that educators appear to look for either exceptional strengths or deficits, but not both. Screening for learning disabilities is rare in gifted programmes as is screening for giftedness in special education programmes. The study reported in this article did not investigate if RTLB screen for giftedness when working with students with challenges to their learning and behaviour. It would make sense that both gifted specialist and RTLB expand their knowledge of twice-exceptionality in order to be able to better identify and cater for the needs of 2e students. Furthermore, the findings in the study reported here did not shed light on why some of the RTLB in this study, who are educated about the use of strengths-based programmes, did not report using them and in contrast relied upon interventions to support students' disabilities only.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is still confusion with definitions, characteristics, and identification processes and practices for 2e students. The Ministry of Education's *Learning Support Action Plan 2019–2025* suggests that the definition of giftedness and understanding concepts of giftedness is complex and covers a range of different types of ability and cultural concepts (Ministry of Education, 2019). This present study has also highlighted that RTLB need, and want, to develop their knowledge of

2e concepts. All 13 participants overwhelmingly agreed they needed more professional development regarding twice-exceptionality and how to support 2e students. This finding aligns with Ng et al. (2017) who suggested more professional development on 2e concepts should be available for all educational professionals.

Although not reflective of the diversity of RTLB throughout Aotearoa New Zealand due to the small sample size, this study does indicate a need for further investigation of RTLB and cluster managers' understanding of twice-exceptionality and how a strengths-based approach can be implemented for 2e students. RTLB may believe that they are using strengths-based approaches but may not currently be providing opportunities for 2e students to engage with their gifted peers. This study suggests the need for additional professional development for RTLB regarding twice-exceptionality. Increased knowledge and understanding of twice-exceptionality would enable identification of 2e students and lead to the multilayered strengths-based approaches necessary to cater specifically for 2e students' needs.

Conclusion

This small study of RTLB from various clusters within New Zealand revealed three key issues: the importance for RTLB being able to confidently identify 2e students who are referred to them; the need to build RTLB professional knowledge of twice-exceptionality; and the need to support RTLB's ability to use strengths-based, multilayered approaches to interventions when working with 2e students.

RTLB can be important players in the larger collaborative team required to support 2e students. However, RTLB professional knowledge and understanding of 2e concepts and the way in which they perceive their role as specialist teachers of learning and behaviour could be limiting factors in supporting 2e students. A strengths-based approach, by definition, should include embracing and extending students' gifts and talents while scaffolding their learning needs. While some RTLB in this study used a strengths-based/multilayered approach, others focused on remedial approaches in their interventions. And, although some RTLB provided interventions that focused on strengths to scaffold help for student needs, there was little evidence in the present study of collaboration with gifted educators or recommendations for acceleration for these students. This was a small study but the indicative evidence in this study suggests that, when there was collaboration with gifted education teachers, and when RTLB had good knowledge of 2e concepts, the outcomes for 2e students were more positive for the student and their whānau.

Finally, this exploratory study indicates a need to investigate RTLB knowledge and understanding of twice-exceptionality across Aotearoa New Zealand. As the indications in this small but random study suggest, RTLB may need urgent support to expand their knowledge of twice-exceptionality. When RTLB have better knowledge of twice-exceptionality they will be able to identify and support 2e students they are working with, and provide a strengths-based/multilayered approach to their collaborative action plans. This will also allow them to advocate for their 2e students and pass on their knowledge of 2e concepts to the wider education community, including teachers, Special Education Needs Co-ordinators (SENCo), and whānau.

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