

## *Experiences of Teachers Handling Students With Twice-Exceptionality*

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### **Abstract**

The study was conducted to investigate experiences of teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality. The identified students with twice-exceptionality fit in the operational definition of Gallagher (2006) as all three were diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome but showed giftedness in the areas of languages and Science. A qualitative single case study was employed which used the transcribed interviews from the respondents for thematic analysis. The researcher looked into their successes along the process and sought to identify the issues and challenges that the teachers encountered along the journey. The findings included: (a) teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality had positive and challenging experiences; (b) teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality found effective strategies based on their experiences; (c) teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality encountered challenges and issues which were recorded in this study. The positive experiences of teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality included: teacher improvement and inspiring experience. The negative experiences included: required effort and no prior experience. The recorded successes of the teachers included: identification of the child's strength and constant communication; encouragement; follow-up works; communication with parents and use of Montessori method. Moreover, the challenges and issues and problems by the teachers included: social or peer relationship, accepting defeats and teachers' lack of experience. The recommendations of this study are: for teachers to have training programs or courses related to twice-exceptionality, an available recommended checklist on the characteristics of students with twice-exceptionality, specific policy/cies and other laws intended for students with twice-exceptionality, and for strengthened parent-teacher partnership to be continued.

Keywords: Twice-Exceptionality, Giftedness, Montessori Method

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## **Introduction**

The noble profession of teaching becomes more meaningful when educators effectively impart knowledge to all students - students with disabilities, students who are differently abled, and even to the gifted ones. The nobility of this work does not exempt it from challenges especially in the area of handling different learners. Among these learners are students identified with giftedness. Gifted learners are students who give evidence of high achievement capability in the areas of intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership capacity, or specific academic fields. With the frequent school- related problems that they face include difficulty enduring boredom, negative attitudes of peers, difficulty to understand others, introversion, perfection, impatience, and intolerance (David, 2018). However, when the student is not only gifted but also exhibit one or more specific learning difficulties such as forgetfulness, poor organizational skills, poor peer relationships, low self- esteem, and demonstration of school failure, the teachers' problem becomes more complicated.

Teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality are expected to meet their needs the same way regular students and those with disabilities are catered in the classrooms. This is the ideal situation. However, this task becomes more arduous if the teachers lack prior knowledge or experience in teaching this type of student. Add to this the challenge in misidentification or late identification of the students' needs which hinders the teachers' work. Pawilen (2018) stated that there is a current movement in the Philippines through the Department of Education (DepEd) in developing its first national gifted education curriculum standard to be used in the country.

Additionally, the department has long ago recognized the urgency to address the problem of the implementation of inclusive education for students with disabilities in the country through the DepEd Order 72 series 2009. Students with twice-exceptionality unfortunately don't have specific category to belong in the above-mentioned priorities of the Department of Education making it more difficult on the part of the teachers to address their presence in the classrooms. At present, the entire Philippine education system continues to be challenged with the proper implementation of high-quality inclusion (Muega, 2016). Teachers have the responsibility to meet the needs of all students including students with twice-exceptionality.

There is more than enough international representation of twice- exceptionality even in the neighboring Asian countries. Yet in the Philippine set-up; the country still lacks empirical data about this phenomenon. While twice-exceptional studies are highly emerging in the west, its context locally needs more study.

For the purpose of this single case study, the researcher used the identified categories and characteristics by Gallagher (2006). Who are students with twice-exceptionality? The National Education Association published a journal entitled "The Twice Exceptional Dilemma" which gave a summary of the three categories where students with twice-exceptionality may be found. The first category are those formally students identified as gifted. The giftedness clouds the disability. The second category are those student formally identified a having disability. This time, it's the disability that masks the giftedness. The third category is those students not formally identified as gifted or disabled. The giftedness and disability components mask one another. It is quite complicated to identify students with twice-exceptionality. No wonder teachers, even the trained ones, are required both awareness and knowledge to employ assessment and identification methods.

Students with twice-exceptionality can be specifically identified according to the following types:

- Gifted with Physical Disabilities
- Gifted with Sensory Disabilities
- Gifted with Asperger's Syndrome
- Gifted with Emotional and/Behavioral Disorders
- Gifted with ADHD
- Gifted with Learning Disabilities

According to a journal entitled "Inclusive Education in the Philippines: Through the Eyes of Teachers, Administrators, and Parents of Children with Special Needs", teacher participants in inclusive education have expressed concern over the lack of training among teachers accommodating students who are differently abled and those with special needs (Muega, 2016). Clearly, teachers implementing inclusive education require proper information and skills through trainings so that high-level inclusive education is attained.

This qualitative research used a single-case design to examine the experiences of teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality. Starman (2013) quoted Sturman (1997) in defining a case study as a general term for exploring an individual, group or phenomenon. It is therefore the complete description of an individual's case and its analysis. This includes the description of the case and thorough explanation of the discovery process of research on its own. In the same journal of Contemporary Educational Studies (2013), a supporting definition of a case study by Sagadin (1991) stated that a case study is used to analyse and describe each person individually, or a group of people, process, phenomenon, or an institution in detail. There is an emphasis on the idea that cases are generated and evolve over time and that events occur in "that particular time and particular place".

Additionally, this research interviewed 8 teachers and the three parents of students with twice-exceptionality. Creswell (2013) explained that as an investigation of one or more cases over time through a detailed data gathering collection, the sources of information comes in multiple forms. This results in triangulation, which strengthens the validity of this study.

## **Participants**

This research used purposeful sampling using a selection criterion based on the following: teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality and parents of students with twice-exceptionality. The process of finding the participants was as follow: the researcher looked for three students with twice-exceptionality from three different schools. Afterwards, the researcher selected eight teachers who handled the selected students with twice-exceptionality. These teachers were identified through homogenous purposive sampling. The homogenous sample was created on the basis that the teachers who participated in this research all handled students with twice-exceptionality. The students with twice-exceptionality were diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and at the same time showed giftedness in the areas of languages and science. Moving on, the researcher gathered data through interviews from the identified teachers who handled students with twice-exceptionality. Additionally, the researcher also interviewed the three parents of students with twice-exceptionality as an important element of this case study. This is to strengthen the validity of this research.

From the 8 teachers interviewed for this study, the first three taught in a private Montessori school. The next three teachers work in a private school affiliated with the British International School with many branches in the Philippines. Lastly, the two remaining teachers worked in a Special Education Center Davao City. They were identified through a criterion sample technique wherein they shared the same school activities as teachers of students with twice-exceptionality, performed the same tasks in their respective schools, and engaged with the same group of people such as their student with twice-exceptionality as well as their parents. The criteria used for the selection of other participants apart from the teachers were the following: (a) teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome and gifted in languages and sciences, and (b) parents of the students with twice-exceptionality. Presented in Table 1 are profiles of the teacher participants of this research.

Table 1: Profile of the Teachers handling Students with Twice-Exceptionality

Pseudonym	Age	No. of years teaching	Type of School
Teacher 1/T1	45	23 years	Private-Montessori
Teacher 2/T2	25	5 years	Private-Montessori
Teacher 3/T3	36	13 years	Private-Montessori
Teacher 4/T4	26	5 years	Private-British Int’l
Teacher 5/T5	23	3 years	Private- British Int’l
Teacher 6/T6	25	4 years	Private- British Int’l
Teacher 7/T7	41	15 years	Public-SPED Center
Teacher 8/T8	37	13 years	Public- SPED Center

### Sampling Design

The researcher used a purposeful sampling technique. This is the use of homogenous sampling that is specifically purposive. The participants were teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome and showed giftedness in languages and sciences. They all handled students with twice-exceptionality in a regular class. Aside from that, these teachers also performed common activities related to students with twice exceptionality. The researcher decided on the bases of the above-mentioned commonalities of the respondents whether they share significant and meaningful experiences concerning twice-exceptionality (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Parents were also interviewed for triangulation purposes.

### Research Instruments

The researcher secured the records made available by the school where these teachers work as guide tools to know the status of the students with twice-exceptionality. These served as a guide during the whole duration of the data gathering procedures.

The researcher also prepared the following research instruments to obtain the necessary information for this study. The first instrument was the semi-structured questionnaires for the series of interviews focusing on the experiences of teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality. Another set of semi-structured questionnaire for parents was also used for this study. The researcher prepared a set of questions that lead the participants to share and describe their experiences as teachers handling twice-exceptionality as well as the parents (See Appendix B). Moreover, the research questionnaires underwent validation (See Appendix C). Furthermore, the researcher also gathered observational and anecdotal reports from the teachers that gave description of the performance of the students with twice-exceptionality while under their classes. These are present in the Students' Portfolios.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

The data gathering procedure ensured the permission letter from the office of the Dean of the College of Education, University of Southeastern Philippines, Davao City to the Head of School of a private school where the participants of the study work. This same process was also done for the teachers working in a public school. The letter contained the request for the study to be approved for the conduct of the institution. It also declared the purpose, statement of the problem, instruments to be used, and the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was selected as the research approach for this investigation. It is the process of identifying patterns or themes within the qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Additionally, the goal of a thematic analysis is to recognize themes or patterns in the data that are significant or noteworthy. Moreover, these themes or patterns are then used to address the research or its issues. To put it simply, it's not just summarizing the data but rather making sense out of the summarized data that makes a good thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) as cited by Maguire & Delahunt (2017) described the two levels of themes, advising researchers to practice identifying the latent level wherein the ultimate goal of the study is to investigate the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations, and ideologies that were theorized in shaping the semantic content of the data.

To ensure the objectivity of this study, the researcher gathered another set of data for triangulation to validate the outcome of this research. Creswell (2013) mentioned that the use of triangulation gives validity to the findings of the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

For this research, the researcher sent approval letters as part of the preliminary procedures before starting the research and conducting the interviews with the participants. This was to ensure that they understood the purpose and methods of the research. The participants will be kept completely anonymous or assigned with aliases in the research and were fully aware that the observation records from this research will remain confidential so that readers may not know their identities.

The participants were also thoroughly informed of the rationale of the study before the onset of the data gathering procedures. This includes discussion of the activities that they will participate and the general questions that were asked from them which will be part of the consent letter.

## **Research Questions**

This study was designed to examine the personal accounts of these teachers, which includes their perceptions towards students with twice exceptionality.

Furthermore, this study would like to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of teachers who are handling students with twice-exceptionality?
2. What are the successes of teachers who are handling students with twice exceptionality?
3. What are the challenges and issues encountered by teachers who are handling students with twice-exceptionality?
4. What recommendations could be offered for teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality?

## **Research Methods**

The participants of this study were also briefed that they were to answer a series of questions prepared by the researcher, which was validated by experts in the field of study. These were recorded upon the agreement of the participants. Confidentiality was of high value for this study. That's why, aliases will be used instead of their real names and information about the school where they are working might be traced, therefore the researcher will not include the mention of this.

The participants were made aware through the consent letter that they will sign that their participation to this study is completely voluntary. This means that they have the right to discontinue their participation if they feel stressed or unable to continue study completion.

The researcher conducted a briefing to the participants explaining to them that their participation of this study will benefit the improvement of programs related to students with twice-exceptionality. Thus, there will be very minimal risks in their participation of the study.

## **Results and Discussion**

The following are the experiences of teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality.

### ***Positive Experiences :Improve as Teachers***

When the respondents were asked to describe their experiences in handling students with twice-exceptionality, the responses varied. Four out of the eight teachers described their journey positively. Teacher 1, 3, 6 and 7 generally described their experiences in a positive way. Subsequently, they reflected that the experience helped them improve as teacher. Altogether, the four participants remember the experience as something that helped them improve as teachers.

The parents learned that the teachers handling their child with twice-exceptionality didn't have any experience of doing so.

### ***Inspiring***

Another positive experience shared by the participants was how they felt inspired while handling students with twice-exceptionality. Three out of eight participants felt inspired because of the experience.

To support this, a parent also shared observable experiences with the teacher handling her child. The parent commented that she was impressed and at the same time inspired at how the teacher was able to follow her child and continue being motivated despite the many challenges called for in handling students with twice-exceptionality.

It is quite surprising to discover that there is a very limited number of studies on the intrinsic motivation of teachers in special education. There is one entitled “Teacher career motivation in special education in China” that discussed about the intrinsic motivation being the reason why teachers decided to teach in special education. Consequently, the teachers who participated in that study emphasized that it was their personal decision to teach students with special needs and that they’re driven by their passion to influence their students (Yan, 2011). This is aligned to what the participants in this research shared that their positive experience of handling students with twice-exceptionality is factored by them being inspired along the process.

### ***Challenging Experiences: Requires Effort***

Seven out of eight teachers on the other hand described their experience as challenging because it required effort on the part of the teachers. Teachers 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8 shared the different ways in which they had to exert extra effort to be able to meet the needs of students with twice-exceptionality.

The parent affirmed that the participants’ job of handling their child with twice-exceptionality required effort. They recognized the adjustments that the teacher had to go through to be able to meet the child’s needs.

### ***Lack of Experience***

Teachers 5, 6, and 7 admitted that it was really challenging for them to handle this type of learner. Aside from the fact that they did not have a background in Special Education, it was also their first time to handle this type of student as a beginning teacher. Teacher 5 confessed that didn't have any experience handling students with special needs. Teacher 6 also confessed that since she didn't have a background in Special Education, she considered the experience as personally challenging. For Teacher 7 who also considered the experience as a challenge due to lack of experience and specifically highlighted the behavioral concern that she had with the child.

Among these Successes, the first on the list is:

### ***Identify the Strengths***

Majority of the teachers in this study found it a success that they identified the strengths of students with twice-exceptionality as they experienced handling this type of learner. Six out of the eight teachers emphasized the efficient use of this. Teachers 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, and 8 shared

that found banking in the child's strengths as effective. Identifying the student's strengths included the student likes, interests, potentials, and current level.

The parent also confirmed that the teacher was successful in handling her child by using the child's strengths. The parent shared that her child felt secure with the teacher because the teacher knew strengths and knew how to manage her.

### ***Constant Communication: Regular Meetings***

Maintaining constant and open communication with students with twice-exceptionality is a tedious yet fulfilling task as this leads to successful treatment of their behavior in class. The teacher participants found it really important to communicate to their students that they care, therefore, they never hesitate to talk to them when necessary. Six out of the eight teachers emphasized the importance of constantly talking to students with twice-exceptionality.

Consistently meeting the child helps their overall performance. Additionally, the parents also observed the importance of communication through regular meetings. She shared that the meetings help their child be properly guided. And she acknowledged that it was effective.

### ***Encouragement: Choice and Feedback***

The next common theme found in the interviews with the teachers was giving of encouragement. Three out of the eight teacher participants mentioned that they found it effective and helpful based on their experiences to encourage the student with twice-exceptionality. These teachers were successful in dealing with the needs of students with twice-exceptionality because of the use of encouragement.

The parent's interview above affirmed the ways the teacher participant encouraged the student with twice-exceptionality. This proved to be an effective strategy for the child. The parent confirmed that her child felt loved because of the encouragements of the teachers.

### ***Follow-Work: Extra Activities***

Another theme that emerged and found to be a success by teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality was providing follow-up work. Four out of the eight teacher participants signified that they give and prepare extra- materials for follow-up works for students with twice-exceptionality and it was effective. In order to keep this type of learner focused and productive in school, the teachers were successful by giving them extra work.

## **Problems in Social/Peer Relationships**

### ***Peer Conflicts***

Upon summarizing the interview results of this research, another theme emerged which delved on the social challenges of students with twice-exceptionality. Six out of the eight teachers recognized the social struggle experienced by this type of learner as they mingled with their classmates. The social challenges that these students experienced burdens the teacher in class.



Coming from the parents' statements, she admitted that her daughter found it difficult to understand people. Her child found it difficult to interact and communicate with her peers. In the end, her child often would end up working on her own and not socializing with others. This was one problem that the teacher had to solve constantly while managing the class.

### ***Parent Communication***

Communication is not only limited to talking to the child as this also involves processing the emotions of the child. Additionally, the teacher participants also highlighted the importance of communicating to the parents and Occupational therapists, as there should exist a partnership among these people who are working together for the benefit of students with twice-exceptionality. Four out of the eight participants suggested this strategy to be applied by other teachers as they found it effective from their own experiences.

### ***Use of Montessori: Lesson Connectivity***

Two out of the eight participants mentioned the use of the Montessori method as an experience that was successful as they handled students with twice-exceptionality. The researcher included this in the list, as it is among those answers that is something new and unique.

Additionally, the parent also affirmed the use of Montessori method as an effective strategy to help handle students with twice-exceptionality. The parent explained that because the method allowed students to be self-paced, it gave her daughter the opportunity to be taught lessons at her current level. Moreover, the same parent emphasized that the method allowed the school to give chances to support her daughter's learning development effectively.

### ***Teacher's Lack of Experience***

There were three participants who shared in their responses that the challenges that they had in handling students with twice-exceptionality was mainly because they didn't have prior experience on it. Additionally, their major or background knowledge during their undergraduate is limited or has never included discussions about students with twice-exceptionality.

The statement of the parents supports this when they realize that the teacher struggled in handling their child due to lack of experience. Add to it the fact that their child is really physically active.

## **Conclusions**

### ***Summary of Findings***

1. Teachers handling students twice-exceptionality had positive and challenging experiences along the process. The positive experiences documented that the experience of handling students with twice-exceptionality lead to their improvement as teachers. Another positive experience that the teachers shared was the realization that they discovered inspiration in teaching because they handled students with twice-exceptionality.

2. From the same group of participants, they shared that they also felt challenged when they were handling students with twice-exceptionality. The challenges that they experienced spring up from the lack of prior experience or enough knowledge about students with twice-exceptionality. There were participants who had no prior experience in handling students with twice-exceptionality and so they were challenged. Some confessed that it was a challenge because the experience requires effort on the part of the teacher.
3. Teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality shared successes from their experiences. They considered the following as successful experiences: identifying the strengths of the student, communication with the student, encouragement, giving of follow-up works, initiating communication with the parents and other specialists, and using Montessori method.
4. Moreover, teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality encountered issues and problems along their journey. These issues include social or peer relations challenge and the teacher's lack of experience in handling students with twice-exceptionality.

### ***Conclusions***

The following conclusions were made based on the findings:

1. Teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality described their experience as positive and challenging experience.
2. Teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality experienced successes as they addressed the giftedness and disabilities of their students.
3. Teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality experienced dealing with issues, and challenges to address the giftedness and disabilities of their students.
4. Teachers handling students with twice-exceptionality need training, proper assessment in handling students with twice-exceptionality, and administrative support to effectively meet the needs of these children.

### ***Implications***

1. Policies on meeting the needs of learners with special educational needs such as the Philippine Senate Bill No. 1331 have been approved and mandated. However, the literature of this study reveals that there is no particular policy intended to address the needs specifically of students with twice-exceptionality.
2. The outcome of this research also implies that the knowledge about students with twice-exceptionality is limited for those with background in Special Education. All the more this is true for teachers without any background or experience about students with twice-exceptionality. Additionally, there are very few if not no empirical studies about students with twice-exceptionality in the Philippines.
3. Teachers who handled students with twice-exceptionality weren't equipped but still they found effective strategies in meeting the needs of this type of learner from their own experiences.

## ***Recommendations***

In light of the findings and conclusions of this study, the following are recommended to the teachers who participated in this study:

1. The teachers of this study should have the proper knowledge and understanding about students with twice-exceptionality to create affirmative educational environments for this type of learner. Conducting relevant training programs or courses are strongly recommended.
2. Appropriate assessment tools like such as checklist of the characteristics that can help identify students with twice-exceptionality should be used during the diagnostic phase of instruction. Earlier identification leads to earlier and proper intervention.
3. Existing policies and laws should be revisited or enhanced to capture the needs of students with twice-exceptionality.
4. The teacher-parent partnership in handling students with twice-exceptionality did positive results in this study. Therefore, this study recommends this to be continued.
5. Future research on students with twice-exceptionality in the Philippines should be conducted to enrich the empirical data about this type of learners.

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