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Twice exceptionality in neoliberal education cultures: Implications for special educational needs co-ordinators

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‘Twice exceptionality’ describes the coexistence of a learning difficulty or disability (SEN/D) and exceptional performance in one area of learning. A popular discourse around autism and savantism in the United States promotes a hierarchical differentiation of the twice exceptional’ based on measured intelligence and commodifies support for this group. Such support is designed to appeal to a neoliberal ethos of seeking competitive advantage in a marketised system. Alternatively, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) could raise awareness and promote a non-hierarchical understanding of twice exceptionality’ in schools, thereby highlighting what is missed when allegedly science-based discourses become hegemonic within education and when governmentally mandated accountability practices are prioritised over professional judgement and the interests of individual students. Calls for ‘twice exceptionality’ to be recognised as a SEN/D category risk additional pressures on SENCOs at a time when governmental demands on SENCOs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have served to heighten existing tensions associated with the neoliberalisation of education (commercialisation, commodification, decentralisation, and residualisation). Nevertheless, SENCOs could play a key role in addressing longer-term processes affecting children with disabilities and learning difficulties such as stigmatisation and, in this instance, discriminatory configurations of giftedness’.

Introduction

‘Twice exceptionality’ describes the coexistence of a learning difficulty or dis/ability with an exceptional performance in one area of the school curriculum (Berlin, 2009; Boothe, 2010) where identification is held to be especially problematic given the fragmented nature of

policy (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2011) that dictates attention to either ‘giftedness’ or dis/ability; in this context, schools are characterised as failing to provide high-quality education for all students (Dimitriadis and Georgeson, 2018, p. 358). The aim of this paper, however, was to look beyond familiar political and professional discourse in which deficits in teacher training or school policy and practice are identified and followed by calls for such deficits to be addressed. Instead, the varied discourses pertaining to ‘twice exceptionality’ will be situated within broader shifts in the education landscape, particularly those that collectively comprise a process of neoliberalisation and that affect ‘twice-exceptional’ students and the educational professionals that are charged with their support in multiple ways.

Prevalence

The prevalence of ‘twice exceptionality’ is difficult to determine given the widely acknowledged problems around identification, whereby a student’s learning difficulty or dis/ability can be obscured by their ‘giftedness’ or vice versa (Ruban and Reis, 2005; Zirkel, 2004). A common misconception is that such ‘giftedness’ extends to more than one curriculum area, and yet, this is rarely the case (Neihart, 2008; Neihart et al., 2002). Additionally, national policies vary globally and estimates of prevalence are commonly derived from existing data relating to SEN/D and from countries that have introduced programmes designed to support ‘gifted’ students such as China, Singapore and Malaysia (Karup and Dixit, 2016). The proportion of school populations deemed to be ‘gifted’ is estimated to be 3% whilst 10–15% of this ‘gifted’ population is estimated to have learning difficulties or dis/abilities (Silverman, 2003 cited in Karup and Dixit, 2016, p. 8). In Chivers (2012, p. 28), it is 3% of school populations that are stated to exhibit ‘twice exceptionality’ as a recognised ‘condition’, thus evoking Hacking’s (2006) analysis of the processes through which specific conditions become empirical ‘realities’. The once contested estimate of the size of ‘gifted’ populations is conveyed by Borland’s (2005, 2009) reference to the ‘myth’ of ‘3% or 5%’ which is attributed to the Marland

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report (US Commissioner of Education, 1972). It is notable that this report refers to the potential contribution of ‘gifted’ children to ‘the arts, politics, business and the sciences’ (p. 1) rather than to national economic performance or the ‘national loss of human resources’ (Karup and Dixit, 2016, p. 9), thereby evidencing a historical shift in how the purpose of education has been constituted in political discourses concerning education in late or neoliberal capitalism.

In the UK currently, there is no diagnostic category of ‘twice exceptionality’ and a programme directed towards the ‘gifted and talented’ was disbanded in 2010. According to national statistics related to SEN/D, in the academic year 2020–2021 3.7% of the UK school population had Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans (indicating a requirement for a high level of support) and the most common category of need was autistic spectrum disorder (ASD); pupils classified as ‘SEN Support’ (indicating some requirement for additional support) constituted 12.2% of that population (Gov.UK, 2020). It is likely that a sizeable number of those with diagnosed SEN/D exhibit ‘exceptionality’ in at least one area of the curriculum but, as yet, it is in the United States where ‘twice exceptionality’ is widely recognised. The reasons for this are explored below, specifically, the wider socio-economic and political context, and hegemonic neoliberal discourses around the contribution of education to national economic performance and the entrepreneurial self (Hall and Gunter, 2016).

Identity

Studies on ‘twice exceptionality’ first appeared in the United States in the 1980s (Buică-Belciu and Popovici, 2014), and this term has since gained traction globally. This is despite the uncertainties and misconceptions about what disability and ability mean that are reflected in ‘twice-exceptional’ status (Pereira, Knotts and Roberts, 2015). In relation to ‘giftedness’, although an Australian Senate Select Committee (Commonwealth of Australia, 1988, p. 177) recognised the ‘gifted’ as a ‘national resource’ and recommended a national programme aimed at provision, Ronksley-Pavia (2015) notes that no such programme has been introduced. The concept of ‘giftedness’ as a fixed and measurable property of individual identity has been rejected in Australia, as Ronksley-Pavia (2015) suggests, in favour of a focus on potential within a developmental model that acknowledges contextual factors (Education Queensland, 2013); nevertheless, competencies are relied upon as markers of that potential.

A strong argument can be made that the terminology of ‘twice exceptionality’ and ‘giftedness’ serves to reinforce the notions of identity as fixed and of ability as innate, and thus amplify the difference with the attendant risk of othering or stigmatisation (Lewis, 2015; Reis, Baum and Burke, 2014); however, in the context of the current analysis, it is the ambiguity of the term ‘exceptional’ that is

particularly relevant since it both denotes a diagnosed disability or learning difficulty that distinguishes an individual from a normatively defined population *and* simultaneously carries positive connotations (as in an exceptionally strong performance or effort) within a neoliberal culture where a competitive ethos dominates despite a social justice policy agenda (Done, 2019). Alternative descriptors such as ‘dual exceptionalities’ (Fetzer, 2000; Karup and Dixit, 2016, p. 14) vary little in import, and this appeal to neoliberal values has facilitated the processes of marketisation and commodification of resources purportedly designed not only to support the ‘twice exceptional’ but also to foster ‘exceptionality’ in a wider population. These processes are evidenced in the popularised discourses relating to savantism and ASD and are discussed below.

Key propositions

A key argument outlined here is that the dominant role of the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience in defining ‘talent’ or ‘giftedness’ militates against the acknowledgement of exceptional abilities in children who do not score highly in IQ tests and /or are not identified as being on the autistic spectrum, raising the issue of equitable support for all children currently classified as having disabilities or learning difficulties, including those deemed to possess not only a particular talent but also low intelligence.

Giftedness and intelligence

Calls to clearly distinguish the educational needs of ‘twice-exceptional’ students from the field of gifted education, given their multifaceted needs (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2011; Foley-Nicpon, Assouline and Colangelo, 2013), are complicated by the retention of IQ (intelligence quotients) scores or intelligence in definitions of ‘twice exceptionality’ and ‘giftedness’. This association of ‘giftedness’ in a specific domain of measured intelligence risks a discriminatory focus in schools on those students whose exceptional performance in an academic subject is perceived as potentially enhancing school performance data, with a concomitant neglect of students who do not exhibit academic high potential but who excel in other domains (e.g., art or music). It also risks an objectionable presupposition that students with, for example, relatively profound learning difficulties are precluded from identification as exceptionally talented in some area, and a differentiated or hierarchical understanding of disabilities or learning difficulty categories. Ronksley-Pavia (2015) maintains that the conflation of IQ and ‘giftedness’ not only contradicts a ‘generally accepted notion of giftedness in Australia’ (p. 318) but also cites an American National Education Association (2006) statement that students with profound learning difficulties may excel in art or sport, raising the question as to why a hitherto contested configuration of ‘twice exceptionality’ in the United States has apparently given way to a hegemonic discourse that presumes measurable and high intelligence

quotients (IQ). This discourse also obscures an ambiguity around what constitutes exceptionality; that is, whether performance in a specific area is significantly higher than that in other areas within the same individual, or whether performance in a specific area is deemed to be high relative to that of peers (Berlin, 2009; Neihart, 2008).

Social justice

In an Australian context, Keddie and Holloway argue that the neoliberal discursive constitution of state-maintained schooling threatens 'traditional links to social justice and the common good' (2020, p. 288), and similar paradoxical developments to those that these authors delineate are evidenced in England, not least around categorisation, which is discussed below with reference to paradigmatic conflicts. One difficulty here is that the concept of the common good is inextricably linked in utilitarian thinking to that of the greater good (Done, Knowler and Armstrong, 2021), and historically, the latter has functioned as a rationale for segregation in education systems and exclusionary practices within schools. In neoliberal political discourse, the common good is synonymous with national economic performance within a global economic system such that skills promising economic reward are valorised; the capacity to protect or threaten that economic order is also viewed as one way to differentiate a subpopulation. Hence, a recent newspaper article (MacIntyre, 2021, p. 31) in which young people with autism and exceptional code-breaking and cybersecurity skills (employed by the UK Government Communications Head Quarters, GCHQ) are contrasted to young people with autism who are susceptible to radicalisation and therefore more likely to engage in terrorist activity than their non-autistic peers.

In England, prior to the onset of neoliberalising processes in the 1970s, social justice in education implied a meritocratic system that relied heavily on performance in cognitive skill testing and a related concept of intelligence to determine the type of schooling that children and young people received. It is symptomatic of the persistence of the social attitudes that prevailed in the post-WW11 period that the coexistence of 'talent' and 'disability' can still be referred to as paradoxical (e.g., Baron-Cohen et al., 2011, p. 275). The latter list several 'paradoxes emanating from human brain functioning', including the alleged paradox of 'Brazilian street children who fail academic mathematics tests but who are lightning quick in performing calculations in the market place' (p. 274). It is unclear in what sense this particular example could be construed as primarily related to neurological functioning rather than to a social context in which access to formal high-quality education varies according to class or socio-economic status. However, such examples illustrate the bio-neuroscientific reductionism that is increasingly informing a popular literature around 'savantism', denoting ASD combined with a specific cognitive skill. Baron-

Cohen et al. (2011) focus on savantism and 'uneven cognitive profiles', eliminating learning disabilities where 'most' cognitive functions are impaired from consideration (p. 274). This type of reductionism has become prevalent within neoliberal education, and it can be noted here that it reinforces the identification of 'twice exceptionality' with cognitively defined intelligence.

Commercialisation

Baron-Cohen et al. (2011, pp. 274–275) describe savantism as the possession of a 'prodigious talent' within a cognitive profile in which that area of skill is significantly superior to other skills; statistically, individuals presenting with ASD are over-represented in the savant population although not all children with ASD exhibit such talents. The popularisation of research in psychology and neuroscience has led to the formulation of identifiers such as 'paradox children' (Clark, 2016), and to popular texts directed towards those without ASD diagnoses who, nevertheless, wish to cultivate savantism or 'islands of genius' in their own cognitive functioning (Treffert, 2010). The latter is premised on the presumption of hidden but shared neurological potential in neuroatypical and neurotypical individuals. Clark (2016) outlines a 'differentiated curriculum' for use by parents and teachers that is purportedly designed to benefit savant children. However, from the poststructuralist perspective adopted in this paper, this literature commercialises savantism and reinforces trends towards an inequitable privatisation of support for some children who are classified as having 'special' areas of educational need or disabilities.

The neoliberalisation of education comprises varied, but related, processes, including commodification, commercialisation and privatisation, and structural reform that has facilitated such processes (Verger, Fontdevila and Zancajo, 2017). As Ball and Youdell (2007, p. 80) argue, education policy discourse is replete with a 'vocabulary of choice, improvement, quality, effectiveness and efficiency' such that 'these policy "moves" and their concomitant techniques at the organisation level often result in privatisation and privatising effects'. Hence, the growth of edu-businesses (Ball, 2018), quasi-commercial philanthropic services (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2018) and a proliferation of published texts offer purchasable expertise. The commercial interests at stake are evidenced in the 'sometimes exaggerated and misleading' claims made to establish a market and optimise sales. The discursive constitution of savantism in the U.S. literature as providing a neuroscientific key to cultivating 'islands of genius' in the general population (e.g., Treffert, 2010) is a case in point. Similarly, the design of specialised curricula aimed directly towards schools and the parents of children identified as autistic savants (e.g., Clark, 2016) illustrates how the process of commodification gains traction by appealing to both parental aspiration and the requirement that schools fulfil their role within a wider educational inclusion policy agenda.

Regardless of their aspirations for their children, parents living in poverty or in areas of high socio-economic deprivation are unlikely to be in a position to take advantage of such resources, and Renzulli (2005) identifies other barriers to inclusion of the 'twice exceptional' in initiatives that are correlated (i.e., class, caste and ethnicity). Kettler, Russell and Puryear (2015) found that rural schools, small schools and the proportion of economically disadvantaged students were the strongest predictors of less funding and staff resource allocated to 'gifted' programmes. The relevance of context, contrary to the ostensible free and fair competition between students and schools that is presumed in neoliberal discourse, has recently been powerfully illustrated in research by Montacute and Cullinane (2021), which found marked disparities in the IT (information technology) capacity of affluent schools (state-maintained and private) and those in the poorest areas as schools in England moved to online provision following pandemic-induced school closures. It can be assumed therefore that under 'normal' pre-pandemic conditions, students with learning difficulties or neuroatypical conditions associated with high potential in areas such as computing are disadvantaged given the IT facilities available to their peers in schools within socio-economically affluent areas. Ironically, in Karup and Dixit (2016, p. 22), it is the same barriers to identification and provision that demonstrate the need for a national programme for the 'twice exceptional' even though such programmes are argued to neglect the inclusion of students from 'poor, rural and tribal households'.

Marketisation

The quasi-marketisation of education, through which schools compete for students that may enhance their position in academic performance league tables (Keddie and Holloway, 2020) and tend to exclude students that risk dilution of that performance (Done and Knowler, 2020a), has exacerbated tensions between the education policy agendas of raising academic 'standards' and inclusion (Done, 2019; Done and Knowler, 2020b). The risk for 'twice-exceptional' students here is that, far from viewing such students as a homogeneous group, schools will select and support those that promise to contribute to valued school rankings. A process of residualisation has been identified by Exley and Ball (2011) and most recently in an Australian context by Keddie and Holloway (2020), which has implications for 'twice-exceptional' students and, indeed, for all students categorised as having 'special' needs or disabilities in state-maintained schools. Residualisation involves a self-perpetuating dynamic whereby schools with high proportions of these students are a less popular parental choice and may, eventually, have rolls showing almost 50% of students as on the school's SEN/D register. The workload for SENCos in such schools will be onerous (Clarke and Done, 2021), and initiatives intended to identify and ensure support for students with disabilities or learning

difficulties that also appear gifted in a particular domain will not be a priority. In research conducted by Dimitriadis and Georgeson (2018, p. 375), it was noted that no SENCos responded to a questionnaire on 'giftedness' despite their schools claiming that their 'gifted' policy was part of the school's SEND policy.

In selective schools known as grammar schools in England, where the proportion of students on the SEN/D register is commonly well below the national average of approximately 15% (DfE, 2020), 'twice-exceptional' students with dyslexia or high-functioning autistic students are also affected by marketisation; the former, for example, may be prevented from pursuing academic subjects such as foreign languages in order to protect school performance ratings even though they may have the potential to excel in a spoken language, although the latter are differentiated by gender and girls with autism risk not being identified as such because they exhibit gender-specific autistic traits that tend to go unnoticed (Loomes, Hull and Mandy, 2017); this includes a tendency to mask or camouflage such traits, compounding the likelihood that their dis/ability may be less likely to be identified than their 'giftedness' (Vialle and Rogers, 2009). Such scenarios can lead to frustration and associated emotional, psychological and behavioural problems, as widely noted in the literature on 'twice exceptionality' (Karup and Dixit, 2016; Leggett, Shea and Wilson, 2010; Blacher & Reis, 2002), or it may be that a pre-existing emotional and/or behavioural disorder is neglected as schools attend to an evident 'gift' (Reis and McCoach, 2002).

Centralisation

The neoliberalisation of education and educational inclusion policy is premised on structural reform that is exemplified by the academisation of English schools, which limits the oversight of local government as academised schools report directly to the central government (Done, 2019). Such decentralisation is constituted as affording schools greater autonomy and when combined with legislation and statutory guidance relating to inclusion (Wilkins and Olmedo, 2018) and pressures linked to performance league tables (Ball, 2003); then, buying in inclusion-related services and products is one solution to the problem faced by schools of fulfilling potentially conflicting policy demands (Done, 2019). As Ball (2003, p. 221) maintains, the school culture that subsequently emerges is one where 'impression management' prevails; the imperative is to be seen to be meeting legal requirements around inclusion, which is not the same as practising inclusively and ensuring social justice (Keddie et al., 2022). The 'twice exceptional' is likely to be doubly disadvantaged by such trends.

The decentralisation of governance structures and practices evidenced in the academisation of English schools, which is discursively constituted as enhancing school

autonomy, has been accompanied by centralised political control of inclusion policy (Done, 2019; Wilkins and Olmedo, 2018) and the curriculum (Department for Education, 2013). A new national curriculum was introduced in England in 2014 and was presented as integral to a 'standards' agenda. Teachers and SENCOs complain, however, that this curriculum is premised on an erroneous assumption that all children learn at the same pace, and as Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017, p. 943) argue, 'progress' has been reified and the calculation of degrees of progress forms the basis of metrics through which the performance of schools and teachers is quantified. Following Ball (2003), such mandated displays of school performance neglect contextual factors in order to create an illusory-level field of play within the marketised education system where schools compete for students with high academic potential. These measures have resulted in a marked narrowing of the curriculum as 'core' subjects are prioritised with detrimental consequences for children and young people who, for example, excel at music or art (Rabkin and Redmond, 2006). The implications for many 'twice-exceptional' students are self-evident.

Implications for schools and SENCOs

The implications of varying configurations of 'twice exceptionality' for SENCOs matter. In England, all schools must have a SEN/D policy to ensure compliance with statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2015), and Dempsey and Arthur-Kelly (2007) argue that a curriculum for 'twice-exceptional' students should be designed by teachers according to their specific needs. However, some schools in England also adopted their own policies around 'giftedness' prior to the disbanding of the national 'gifted and talented' (G&T) policy in 2010 (Loft and Danechi, 2020). It is currently unclear how many schools have clearly articulated objectives around 'twice exceptionality' or whether narrow definitions of 'giftedness' prevail (those linked to measured intelligence and core subjects rather than potential to excel in a wider range of subjects and activities). It is known that in some schools, the SENCO is made responsible for both policy areas, whereas in others, it is the school principal or subject teachers that take responsibility for students with high potential in an academic area (Dimitriadis and Georgeson, 2018). As previously mentioned, in the latter's research, no SENCOs volunteered to participate in data collection related to 'giftedness', suggesting that twice exceptionality is not a priority, despite their remit to support all those with 'SEND'. The shifting demographics of the school labour force means it is likely that a significant proportion of teachers and paraprofessionals will be unaware of former policies pertaining to 'giftedness' and even less aware of 'twice exceptionality' as an area of need given that no related data collection is mandated for inclusion in government statistics.

Paradigmatic tensions

As Goodley and Lawthom (2005) argue, quantitative methodologies feature prominently in disability research and in the mandatory monitoring of SEN/D school populations (Done and Knowler, 2020b). This emphasis on quantification and measurement is, in turn, reliant on the identification and categorisation of specific 'pathologies' (Hacking, 2006) such that areas of need currently excluded from mandated data collection procedures by schools are unlikely to warrant the attention of SENCOs. The COVID-19 pandemic has evidenced the politicisation of scientific discourse around prevalence, and such discourse has been valorised within neoliberal political discourse in order to convey scientific 'impartiality' as necessitating political investment in population control and management (Kelly, Hofbauer and Gross, 2021). Notably, the presumption of an 'inexperienced' and 'passive' national populous by governments, one for whom decisions had to be made, was analogous to the 'oppressive discourses' to which children with SEN/D are routinely subjected (Singh and Ghai, 2009, p. 129). The priorities for SENCOs at this time have largely been dictated by government policy and emergency legislation under pandemic conditions.

Conclusions

Calls for 'twice exceptionality' to be recognised as a SEN/D category could place additional pressures on SENCOs. Advocacy on behalf of vulnerable or relatively powerless groups of students throughout the recent pandemic has been presented as one aspect of their role, and this is in addition to onerous managerial and strategic remits (Clarke and Done, 2021). Nevertheless, the support of SENCOs in raising awareness of 'twice exceptionality' within schools would serve to highlight what is missed when an allegedly science-based discourse becomes hegemonic within inclusive education and when governmentally mandated accountability practices take priority over professional judgement and attention to both context and the interests of individual students. It has been argued here that 'twice exceptionality', long before the COVID-19 pandemic, serves to illuminate the tensions associated with the neoliberalisation of education, namely, commercialisation, commodification, decentralisation and residualisation. Similarly, 'twice exceptionality' exposes longer-term processes affecting children with dis/abilities and learning difficulties such as stigmatisation and discriminatory configurations of 'giftedness' and discursive shifts brought about by wider socio-economic trends. A popular discourse around ASD and savantism in the United States indicates the risk of a hierarchical differentiation of the 'twice exceptional' based on measured intelligence; and the commodification of support for this group, which is designed to appeal to a neoliberal ethos of seeking competitive advantage in a marketised system.

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