

The Other Side of the Coin: Perceptions of Twice-Exceptional Students by Their Close Friends

SAGE Open
April-June 2021: 1–11
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DOI: 10.1177/21582440211022234
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


María Leonor Conejeros-Solar¹ ,
María Paz Gómez-Arizaga², Robin M. Schader³,
Susan M. Baum³, Katia Sandoval-Rodríguez¹,
and Sandra Catalán Henríquez¹

Abstract

Friendship can be critical at any age but considering the gifts and challenges of twice-exceptional students, friends can be an essential element in navigating school years. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions that close friends of twice-exceptional students have about their friendship, characteristics, and how they relate to classmates and teachers. The sample was comprised of 17 students. Under a qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with friends of students who were gifted with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or with autism spectrum disorder. Results showed a deep relationship, in which friends of twice-exceptional students were able to make a realistic depiction of them, which was based on empathy, common interests, and a connection that stems from facing adversity. The results are not only a contribution to current research but also take a positive and strengths-based angle not always found in the literature. Implications for practice and research were discussed.

Keywords

peers, twice-exceptional, friendship, school, experience

Introduction

The conceptualization and understanding of twice-exceptional (2e) learners have been addressed by the literature, providing a characterization of this phenomenon at cognitive and socioemotional levels. Some authors have stressed the importance of defining 2e learners as those who (a) have a potential for high achievement or creativity that can be expressed in different domains and (b) manifest one or more learning disabilities and/or disorders. These characteristics blend to conform a unique set of traits (Baum et al., 2017).

The 2e students are one of the sub-populations of giftedness that has been historically disregarded and underserved (Assouline et al., 2009). Moreover, at the school level, there is an excessive tendency to focus on the deficits 2e students present, which is related not only to the academic realm but also includes socioemotional issues (Baum et al., 2017). It has been documented that this particular group of gifted students is more prone to underachievement, as well as low self-concept and self-esteem when left unchallenged by society and the school environment (Mayes et al., 2018). The 2e students are also exposed to peer rejection (Hoza et al., 2005); however, there is still little research about

the social experiences of 2e students (Fosenburg, 2018; Ronksley-Pavia & Townend, 2017).

Forming relationships with peers is a critical developmental task for any child or adolescent; however, for 2e students, the coexistence of two opposing conditions can result in a paradoxical way of constructing meaningful relationships with peers (Beckmann & Minnaert, 2018). Numerous challenges can arise for 2e students in the social realm because of a constant dichotomy of not being able to fit in with gifted peers and/or with those who exhibit difficulties (King, 2005). They also can feel isolated due to not finding “true” peers with whom they can share interests and passion toward specific topics (Baum et al., 2001).

¹Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Chile

²Universidad de Los Andes, Santiago, Chile

³Bridges 2e Center for Research and Professional Development, Studio City, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

María Leonor Conejeros-Solar, Escuela de Pedagogía, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, 2530388, Chile.
Email: leonor.conejeros@pucv.cl



Peer support can be an essential element for 2e students, and researchers have found that friends can positively influence students' academic achievement and engagement in school (Wang & Neihart, 2015). Also, it has been found that friendships can be instrumental in helping 2e youngsters to develop life skills (D'Souza, 2014). This study aims to contribute to the current research about the social realm of 2e students, considering an approach that has not been taken before: to study the other side of the relationship, that is, the perceptions of friends about the relationship held with their 2e peers.

Literature Review

Characteristics of Gifted and Twice Exceptional Students

Gifted students. Gifted students, in general, display an array of superior cognitive abilities that, conjointly with a heightened intensity, can generate internal experiences that are different from the norm (The Columbus Group, 1991; Silverman, 1993). These students represent 10% of the population (Gagné, 2015) and have learning characteristics that are different from their peers, which are manifested as abilities such as rapidness, complexity, depth, and problem-solving skills (Conejeros-Solar et al., 2018a; Hébert, 2010; Pfeiffer, 2013). At the socioemotional level, gifted students can also present distinctive characteristics, such as a great sense of humor, deep concerns, and profound feelings of justice (Hébert, 2010).

These abilities and traits can also be present in 2e students; however, they combine into a unique set of traits given the particular combination of this complex phenomenon.

Gifted/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) students. In the cognitive realm, this population of 2e students has distinct characteristics; however, their academic achievement can be so inconsistent that it makes it difficult to grasp their real strengths and abilities (Conejeros-Solar et al., 2018a). From the evidence of different studies, cognitive traits of gifted/ADHD are varied. Some of these can include (a) difficulties with writing tasks, particularly handwriting (Zentall et al., 2001), and (b) higher creativity than gifted peers, showing proneness to divergent thinking (Fugate et al., 2013).

At the socioemotional level, it has been found that the difficulties that have been traditionally associated with the ADHD condition in peer and academic realms, can be compensated by the giftedness in the case of gifted/ADHD students, as is stated by Foley-Nicpon, Rickels, et al. (2012): "being intellectually gifted may indeed positively influence these relationships" (p. 234). Townend and Pendergast (2015) found that gifted/ADHD students had difficulties achieving connectedness with teachers, feeling isolated from school. This situation could be expressed in an unfavorable disposition by the teacher when interacting with this group (Gomez-Arizaga & Conejeros-Solar, 2021).

Gifted/autism spectrum disorder (ASD) students. Similarly, to the gifted/ADHD group, student achievement in school can be erratic, with really high achievements and others that are rather average (Neihart, 2000). Their cognitive characteristics seem to revolve around a highly discrepant profile that shows superior skills (verbal and nonverbal) but low basic skills, such as working memory and processing speed, which at the same time can affect their achievement in writing, mathematics, and reading (Assouline et al., 2012; Assouline et al., 2009; Foley-Nicpon et al., 2012).

Concerning socioemotional characteristics, gifted/ASD students can display some—but not all—of the traits that are typical of the ASD-only population, such as difficulties with social interactions, engaging in imaginative play, and rigidity associated with routines (Foley-Nicpon & Assouline, 2010). Because of the problems associated with communication, social skills can be affected in this group of students, making relationships in school difficult, even with teachers (Rubenstein et al., 2015).

Friendship in Gifted and Twice Exceptional Students

The formation of friendships is significant in every stage of life, with particular importance in pre-adolescence and adolescence, as a group of peers can be as relevant as the family nucleus (Barber & Wasson, 2015). Friendship can be understood as a relationship defined by closeness and reciprocity and has qualities such as loyalty and fellowship (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Friendship has been defined in a continuum that considered different types of friends (Berndt & McCandless, 2009); however, in this study, we focused on the close and/or best friend, conceptualized as an intimate relationship in which secure interactions occur, and where social and emotional support is provided (Baiocco et al., 2014).

Friendship in gifted students. When addressed from a social perspective, friendship can be crucial for the development of giftedness, as the context provides the necessary support for a gifted individual's potential to grow and also can have an impact on his or her inner life. However, forming relationships with peers is not always straightforward. Gifted students can not only see themselves as having different characteristics but also can perceive that their peers can have high expectations based on those characteristics causing them to feel pressured to maintain certain standards (Cross et al., 2019).

When it comes to close friends, it has been found that gifted students tend to have very few, but they do not necessarily perceive that as problematic (Cross et al., 2019) and consider their friends to be a source of social support (Ogurlu et al., 2018). In a qualitative study conducted by Riley and White (2016) with gifted students and the type of social relationships they established, they found that students usually had one or two close friends who were also gifted. When

asked about what they were seeking in their friends, like-mindedness was described as important. Gifted students in the sample sought peers who were as smart as they were and with whom they could relate at intellectual and social levels. Similarly, Foubister (2017) investigated the characteristics of “secure groups” in which gifted students participated. The results showed that the elements that were valued in these types of groups were the possibility to connect with like-minded peers, honesty, trust, and being accepted as they are.

Gifted/ADHD students’ friendships. Findings for this particular group of 2e students regarding friendship seem to be mediated by different factors. Some researchers suggest that 2e/ADHD students may be more similar to their peers who have an ADHD diagnosis when establishing relationships with friends and are capable of finding and sustaining friendships (Foley-Nicpon, Rickels, et al., 2012; Fosenburg, 2018; Blinded & Blinded, 2019). Lovecky (2004) found that this group of students had an adequate social adjustment and could even become leaders among their peers. Regarding self-perceptions of them as friends, it has been found that they worry about not being liked according to the flaws they see in themselves (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2016).

Gifted/ASD students’ friendships. For students with ASD, it has been found that the formation of friendship can be a difficult process and that verbal aggression and psychological bullying experiences have been reported for this group (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2016). Berns (2016) found that these students considered friendship to be a reciprocal and secure link, in which both parties could provide support and help each other. Close friends were viewed as individuals with whom they could share their interests and that were able to defend them when experiencing intrapersonal or social distress. Finding and approaching these true friends, however, can be difficult because, for gifted/ASD students, emotional expression and social relationships are difficult due to the ASD characteristics that are present in the 2e duality (Gomez-Arizaga & Conejeros-Solar, 2021; Rubenstein et al., 2015).

The Chilean Context

Two different pathways can be found regarding special education in Chile: On one side, several legislations such as the Decree 170, created in 2010, are focused on providing access and services within regular schools to students who need support, which is done through the Programs for School Integration. These laws, however, do not consider gifted students as a population that also needs to be supported (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2016). On the other side, the concept of talent emerged in Chile in the year 2001, with the creation of the first extracurricular enrichment program for the gifted. Nowadays, there are eight of these programs, serving only 1% of the gifted population in the country (Conejeros-Solar et al., 2018b) and mainly focusing on students from public

schools. These policies result in a lack of gifted services for 2e students. If these students are identified at all, they tend to be served for their difficulties at the school level, with no policies that mandate addressing their academic gifted potential (Conejeros-Solar et al., 2018a). Many students remain invisible within the school context and their experiences are hardly known by others. Given this scenario, this study is focused on the person who might be the best informant of the school experiences of 2e students: his or her best friend.

Purpose and Research Questions

Considering the critical role that a friend can have in the life of a 2e student, the purpose of this study was to analyze the nature and meaning of friendship from the perspective of 2e students’ best friends. The questions that guided the study were as follows:

Research Question 1: What were the salient characteristics of 2e students according to their friends?

Research Question 2: What was the common ground of the relationship and the perceived differences between 2e students and their friends?

Research Question 3: How was the lived experience in the school context of 2e students according to their friends?

Method

This study was part of a large-scale research project conducted in Chile to explore—for the first time in the country—the characteristics and needs of gifted students with a concomitant diagnosis of ADHD or ASD. Besides gaining an understanding of the cognitive profile of these students, the study explored students’ family and school contexts. Within the school context, this study sought to collect information of 2e students’ socioemotional lives through the eyes of their best friends. Taking “the other side of the story” perspective, the research explored friends’ perceptions of the 2e student, the nature of the relationship, and the contextual elements at the school level using an inductive qualitative content analysis approach (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative content analysis involves three main phases: preparation, organization, and reporting of results (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1). In this approach, data are reduced to concepts that describe the research topic through the elaboration and abstraction of categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso under Resolution Code: BIOEUCV-H 217-2018. This Scientific Ethics Committee complies with the ethical standards defined in university regulations and in the UNESCO Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights of 2005, and also with Chilean national research standards dictated by the National Agency for Research and Development (ANID by its acronym in Spanish).

Table 1. Participants: Friends of Twice Exceptional Students.

Type of school/ location	Pseudonym	Age	Sex	School grade	Friendship duration
1B/Quilpué	Maite	12	Female	7th	1 year
2A/Villa Alemana	Santiago	12	Male	7th	7 years
3B/Casablanca	Sonia	11	Female	6th	7 years
4C/Quillota	Victor	11	Male	6th	4 years
5C/Viña del Mar	Amanda	10	Female	5th	6 years
6A/Los Andes	David	10	Male	5th	6 years
7B/Casablanca	Cristian	11	Male	5th	2 years
8C/Villa Alemana	Iván	10	Male	5th	3 years
9B/Villa Alemana	José	11	Male	5th	2 years
10B/Quillota	Valentín	11	Male	6th	5 years
11A/Viña del Mar	Valeria	13	Female	7th	7 years
12B/Los Andes	Beatriz	10	Female	4th	1 year
13A/Villa Alemana	Carla	12	Female	7th	4 years
14B/Valparaíso	Marcela	10	Female	4th	4 years
15A/Quilpué	Pablo	12	Male	7th	3 years
16A/Valparaíso	Aldo	14	Male	9th	1 year
17B/Valparaíso	Jorge	13	Male	7th	5 years

Participants

Following a purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), the sample was comprised of 17 friends of 2e students—ages 10 to 13—of which seven friends were females and 10 were males. They were nominated by the 2e students that participated in the large-scale study as their closest or best friend at the school level (all of them were in the same school grade). These friends were in different kinds of schools and cities of the Valparaíso region (Chile)—A: Public (6), B: Charter (8), and C: Private (3). To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used. In Table 1, the characteristics of the sample of friends are described.

In Table 2, the characteristics and diagnosis of participants and their 2e friends are described; 29% of the participants have been diagnosed with a disability.

Instrumentation and Procedures

Data were collected using a semistructured interview script. The script was created, and afterward, two pilot interviews were conducted with friends of 2e students who were not part of the sample, to strengthen the interview protocol (Majid et al., 2017). The interview aimed to explore with the friends of the 2e students topics related to the nature of the relationship, depiction of the 2e friend within and outside the school context, and activities they enjoy together, among others. The script is shown in Table 3.

As stated before, the 2e students participating in the research project were asked whom they considered to be their closest friend. These students and their parents were contacted and asked about their willingness to participate in the study. Upon agreement, a day was arranged to conduct

Table 2. Participants and Their Twice Exceptional Friends.

Participant Pseudonym	Disability	2e friend Pseudonym/age	Sex	2e friend diagnosis
1. Maite	None	Alfredo/13	Male	Gifted/ADHD
2. Santiago	ADHD	Francisco/12	Male	Gifted/ADHD
3. Sonia	None	Rita/11	Female	Gifted/ADHD
4. Victor	None	Javier/11	Male	Gifted/ADHD
5. Amanda	None	Irene/10	Female	Gifted/ADHD
6. David	ADHD	Jaime/10	Male	Gifted/ADHD
7. Cristian	ADHD	Emilio/11	Male	Gifted/ADHD
8. Iván	None	Andrés/10	Male	Gifted/ADHD
9. José	None	Gonzalo/11	Male	Gifted/ADHD
10. Valentín	None	Julian/11	Male	Gifted/ASD
11. Valeria	None	Karina/12	Female	Gifted/ASD
12. Beatriz	ADHD	Camilo/10	Male	Gifted/ASD
13. Carla	None	Mario/12	Male	Gifted/ASD
14. Marcela	None	Katia/10	Female	Gifted/ASD
15. Pablo	None	Danilo/12	Male	Gifted/ASD
16. Aldo	None	Eduardo/14	Male	Gifted/ASD
17. Jorge	ASD	Vito/13	Male	Gifted/ASD

Note. ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

the interview, which was done in a classroom or office within the school setting. Each student was provided with an explanation of the research and the goal of the interview, attempting to create an adequate rapport based on mutual trust. Also, the privacy of the conversation was guaranteed to each participant, by ensuring them that only pseudonyms would be used and that the content of the interviews was only for research purposes. Also, assent and consent forms (for parents) were signed before conducting the interviews

Table 3. Interview Questions.

Topic	Sample questions
Context of the relationship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been friends with _____? 2. How did you two meet? 3. Why did you become friends? 4. What do you have in common?
Characteristics of the 2e friend	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you think of _____? 2. What do you like the most about him or her? 3. What do you dislike about him or her?
Relationship with the 2e friend outside of school	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you like doing with _____ outside the school? 2. Do you have friends outside of school?
Characteristics of the 2e friend within the school context	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is _____ doing in school? 2. Do you think he or she likes coming to school? Why? 3. Do you know what school subjects he or she likes and dislikes? 4. How does he or she get along with classmates? 5. What do you like doing during recess?

with the students. Each interview had an average length of 30 min and was audio-recorded. Theoretical saturation was achieved through participant interviews (Elo et al., 2014).

Analysis

Approach. The type of analysis used in this research was qualitative content analysis, which consists of a process of systematic coding, searching for meaning, and providing descriptions of social meanings and contexts when creating themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Stages of analysis. After transcribing interviews verbatim, several stages of analysis were conducted to enhance the trustworthiness of results, improve consistency, and to calibrate all the individuals involved in the coding process. Four investigators, who had ample experience in qualitative research and gifted education, participated in the coding process. The use of investigator triangulation enabled the research process to achieve cohesiveness, solve possible disagreements, and address potential biases (Archibald, 2016).

The coding process followed the guidelines proposed by Goodell et al. (2016):

1. Creation of a codebook that included each code, its definition, and on what occasions it can be applied.
2. Multiple sessions that consisted of several steps:
 - (a) Reading and coding individually to apply the codebook to transcript sections. This process was accompanied by individual memoing by each coder, to record impressions and thoughts;
 - (b) Discussing possible disagreements;
 - (c) Applying the entire codebook to a whole interview transcript to then read it line by line and ask each researcher how they coded each section, discussing discrepancies to achieve consensus.

3. Once consensus was achieved in the sessions, ATLAS.ti 8 software for qualitative analysis was used to register all the codes (50) and start the final stages of coding (<http://www.atlasti.com>; Talanquer, 2014). Interrater reliability was not calculated for this study. However, Tracy's (2010) criteria of quality in qualitative research were met throughout this study: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, and ethical and meaningful coherence (p. 840).
4. Codes were then grouped into themes, and categories were created thereafter. In this study, we report 22 of the original codes, which were those that achieved more density during the phase of analysis using the ATLAS.ti software.

Results

The results presented here are themes and categories that were created from the codes that achieved more density. An example of the codes that were used from the original codebook, their definitions, and participant excerpts can be found in Supplemental Appendix 1.

Themes were grouped into three categories: friend's depiction of the 2e student, relationship between friend and 2e student, and perceptions about the school context in which they are immersed. Concerning the friendships reported here, the average length was 4 years, and in seven of the 17 cases, the length was between 5 and 7 years.

Friend's Depiction of the Twice Exceptional Student

Interviewed friends clearly recognized the potential and strengths of the 2e students, and could visibly identify the areas in which the 2e students were at their best, both academically and in the social/emotional realm.

Academics. At the academic level, the friends were able to build a comprehensive view of their 2e peers, achieving profound depictions that were focused on students' strengths. Many of these views were related to intelligence and cumulative knowledge, whereas others referred to abilities such as problem solving, being able to understand quickly, persist through difficult tasks, and their creativity, which was salient for gifted/ADHD students. Also, within their views of the 2e friend, the participants demonstrated admiration of their characteristics, showing pride in their accomplishments.

I think he is really smart, he knows how to adapt to society, like everyone, only with more capacities. (1B Maite, female, Gifted/ADHD friend)

This may sound weird, but I like his imagination . . . because he takes a piece of paper and a pencil and in five minutes he comes up with something to draw and draws something that is impressive. (4C Victor, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

She amazes me because it is the first time I see a girl that knows so much because I have never seen a girl like this . . . and she starts to answer everything we have to answer and it is amazing . . . at least for me . . . it is awesome to have a friend like this, who knows everything. (11A Valeria, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

Regarding academic achievement, most of the friends were fully aware of the grades obtained by the 2e students and tended to naturally depict their good performances in different school subjects. Achieving good grades was more salient for the gifted/ASD students.

She gets good grades because in English, she gets only seven,¹ she does good. (14B Marcela, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

Participants were also able to recognize the academic areas in which their 2e friend did not excel or had difficulties. They could clearly state the content knowledge and/or skills that need improvement: In the case of ASD, it was related to memory, whereas for ADHD it was writing abilities.

She hardly ever understands math. Sometimes she would make a hundred questions, but she still doesn't understand. (14B Marcela, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

Vito has a hard time memorizing some little things. (17B Jorge, male, Gifted/ASD friend)

He has difficulties with the answer, I mean his idea is good (. . .) but he doesn't know how to write it. (6A David, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

Socioemotional realm. At the socioemotional level, friends described the sense of humor displayed by their 2e friends. They also mentioned that these 2e youngsters were good

friends to them. These participants highlighted the 2e friends' sensitivity toward other people's emotions and their profound sense of justice and helping others in need.

She is friendly, she is a good classmate, she helps others . . . she always treats people in a good way, she defends them, she always wants to help others . . . because sometimes when someone is bothering a classmate, she goes and tries to stop them . . . (3B Sonia, female, Gifted/ADHD friend)

He has always helped me (eyes fill with tears) . . . he has always helped me in everything. I suffered from bullying a while ago . . . (17B Jorge, male, Gifted/ASD friend)

On the contrary, friends were also able to recognize and act upon 2e students' weaknesses at the socioemotional level; identifying challenges for both gifted/ASD and gifted/ADHD students was related to emotional breakdowns during school time and lack of confidence when facing academic tasks.

When we have to work in pairs, she doesn't know how to do it, she thinks they are going to say "no." She doesn't have much confidence. (14B Marcela, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

I don't know if it's patience or something else . . . but he gets mad easily. (8C Iván, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

Relationship Between Friend and the Twice Exceptional Student

Friend support. The relationship between the friend and the 2e student was defined by reciprocal help and assistance, especially when facing difficulties at the school level. This help could translate into a broad spectrum of actions, three of which were the more salient: (a) defense, when the friend safeguarded the 2e student from attacks, usually from peers; (b) emotional support, which referred to the occasions in which the friend provided direct advice for when the 2e student was struggling; and (c) mutual support, provided by both parties and particularly focused on academic issues, such as difficulties with certain topics.

[Recreating a scene with classroom peers] I told them, "you know he has Asperger's, and he gets annoyed by things (. . .) you cannot disturb him, because, if I was a lawyer, you would already be in jail." (13A Carla, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

I like to encourage him, make him do things, and not being so negative. (1B Maite, female, Gifted/ADHD friend)

When there is homework, we help each other. When I don't know something in English, he helps me. (13A Carla, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

Common ground. The friendship was constructed by shared academic interests that translated into stimulating conversations between friends. Participation in extracurricular

activities together based on shared interests provided another basis for their friendship. For instance, these friends enjoyed sharing activities such as drawing (e.g., anime) and playing video games.

Hum . . . for example, once we were talking about countries, no, about capitals . . . one time I would say a country and he would say the capital or vice versa . . . and these were our educated conversations. (4A Víctor, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

Besides having shared interests, some of the friends in the sample felt connected to their 2e friend because they both had the same disability or were recipients of special education services:

One of the things we have in common, that says here [pointing at the assent sheet] is autism. We both have the same condition, so that helps us to strengthen our friendship. (17B Jorge, male, Gifted/ASD friend)

I also have attention deficit and I'd say I am more distracted . . . (2A Santiago, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

Common experiences also included facing difficult social situations or interactions with peers. Friends felt profoundly connected with the 2e students' needs because they also had suffered similar situations in the past (e.g., bullying).

Other kids are always bothering him . . . but I said to him "I put myself in your shoes," I went through the same as you [bullying]. (13A Carla, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

Differences. Despite having several common grounds, friends also reported the differences they had with 2e students, many of which were related to socioemotional aspects they saw in their 2e friend, such as the intensity in the way they reacted or their persistence through different tasks:

Sometimes he gets very angry, and curses. (13A Carla, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

He puts more effort than me . . . he tries again and again until he gets it. (6A David, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

Perceptions of the School Context

Emergent themes in this category were related to the views held by friends about the relationships that 2e students established with the large group of classroom peers and the different teachers they interact with.

Relationship with peers. As stated before, closest friends reported witnessing threats or aggression episodes from other classmates toward the 2e student, especially to the gifted/ASD group, in which verbal aggression was more common. However, friends also reported more positive

interactions when it came to leisure activities that they saw were enjoyed by the 2e student and in which he or she could interact and engage with the larger peer group.

[Referring to classmates] Sometimes they say "no, he has no intelligence" and start bothering him with the school subjects. (12B Beatriz, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

During recess, we all play ball . . . (8C Iván, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

He has a lot of male friends, also female friends in our classroom . . . (4C Víctor, male, Gifted/ADHD friend)

Teacher–twice exceptional student relationship. Regarding teachers, few friends of 2e students reported situations in which their peers get along with their teachers, engaging in meaningful or intellectual conversations. The most recurrent episodes with teachers were those in which punishment is applied, especially when teachers found the 2e student not focusing or paying attention to class activities, which was the case for both 2e conditions.

She helps the teacher . . . she gives him information, they talk to each other . . . (1B Maite, female, Gifted/ADHD friend)

The teacher says to him "sit down!" (. . .) for example, in English, he gets very distracted, time passes very slowly. (8C Iván, male, Gifted ADHD friend)

He wasn't paying attention, basically because he was playing on the cell phone, and the teacher scolded him . . . (16A Aldo, male, Gifted/ASD friend)

I think they (teachers) don't understand her situation . . . and she suffers. (11A Valeria, female, Gifted/ASD friend)

Discussion

Salient Characteristics and Traits of Twice Exceptional Students

The friends of the 2e students in the sample were able to recognize the duality of their friends' characteristics: They enthusiastically referred to their friends' strengths, but they could also appreciate the areas in which they struggle. Regarding academic aspects, they held more traditional views of characteristics in their friends, such as being knowledgeable and successful, using the word *seco* to define the 2e student. This word, part of the Chilean jargon that has no literal translation, is related to being "awesome" and excel in different things. Therefore, from their friends' perspectives, 2e students do stand out to them and they value and admire their achievements, which are closely related to how different authors in the field have conceptualized as characteristics of gifted students in general (Conejeros-Solar et al., 2018a; Fugate et al., 2013; Hébert, 2010; Pfeiffer, 2013). In this

study, cognitive/academic characteristics were related to being able to rapidly grasp the content knowledge, solving complex problems, and displaying abilities associated with creative behavior. Regarding socioemotional traits, the most salient ones referred to their particular sense of humor and sensitivity toward relevant issues, traits that also have been noticed to be present in this group (Hébert, 2010). This acknowledgment of characteristics and traits suggests that the characteristics of giftedness can positively affect the relationship between 2e students and their closest friends (Foley-Nicpon, Rickels, et al., 2012).

Likewise, friends of 2e students can recognize many of the cognitive/academic profiles that can be found in the literature of twice exceptionalities. For gifted/ADHD students, their friends recognize difficulties with their fine motor skills, particularly with writing (Zentall et al., 2001), and difficulties focusing their attention (Brown et al., 2011), but at the same time value their creativity and imagination (Fugate et al., 2013). On the contrary, gifted/ASD students are recognized by their friends as having high academic records (Neihart, 2000), and their difficulties are associated with memorizing and grasping mathematical concepts (Assouline et al., 2012; Assouline et al., 2009; Foley-Nicpon et al., 2012).

At the socioemotional realm, the characterization of traits, attitudes, and behaviors was similar for both groups (ASD and ADHD gifted students). Friends, as stated before, are able to acknowledge strengths, but also they perceive some social and emotional difficulties, such as when 2e students are disturbed by specific school episodes and their lack of self-confidence. Also, these intense or sometimes exacerbated reactions were seen as traits that created differences between both friends. However, they did not assign a negative value or saw this as problematic, and they showed to be deeply connected with their 2e friend's needs at the socio-affective level (Gomez-Arizaga & Conejeros-Solar, 2021).

How Do They Connect? Pillars That Sustain This Particular Friendship

One salient result is that friends in the study tended to connect with 2e students with a sense of empathy and understanding because they themselves had faced similar social difficulties in the past, such as bullying. In some cases, the connection was related to the disability because both participated in special education services. This sense of shared identity did not occur in relation to giftedness because no information was available as Chilean schools do not perform identification procedures for gifted students.

Strengths were also seen as a common ground between friends—such as stimulating conversations and shared leisure activities—which shows a like-mindedness aspect of friendship that is also present in this group of 2e students because their friends nurtured their intellectual abilities (Foubister, 2017; Riley & White, 2016).

An element that lays the groundwork for friendship is support, which, as stated before, can emerge from school situations that are hard to face. The perceived risk scenarios, therefore, translate into a relationship in which mutual support is critical (Baiocco et al., 2014). In this sense, and consistent with the findings of Berns (2016), the friend of the 2e student tends to safeguard the relationship, providing protection against a potentially harmful environment. However, other forms of support may also be present in this relationship, such as mutual collaboration for academic purposes; socioemotional incentives, which are translated into messages of encouragement in relation to the school demands; and activities (e.g., doing homework together or praising each other on their grades).

The Twice Exceptional Student in Context: Friends' Views of the Educational Setting

When acting as spectators of the broader spectrum of school activities, in which classmates and peers are included, friends are able to report different situations in which 2e students are at ease, such as games or conversations with classroom peers and teachers. However, friends are more prone to comment on conflictive situations, about classroom peers who verbally attack 2e/ASD students, exerting a psychological bullying based on their flaws (Gomez-Arizaga et al., 2016). These negative interactions with peers are rooted in a lack of understanding of what it means to be different, especially from the 2e condition.

Regarding teachers, even with the report of positive episodes, their disposition is not always one of acceptance and respect (Gomez-Arizaga & Conejeros-Solar, 2021), showing rigidity and lack of understanding. A plausible explanation is that teachers have an urgent need to control the classroom environment, expecting adherence to certain rules or norms, which can be difficult for 2e students. Aggressive styles exerted to favor classroom management, such as punishment, are therefore detrimental for this group of students (Ronksley-Pavia & Townend, 2017).

Limitations

Some limitations of the study refer to the sample selection, in which only one friend of each 2e student was selected for the interviews. A broader group of friends could give a more detailed picture of the characteristics they perceived from their 2e friends and the experiences they faced at school, finding possible commonalities or contradictions.

The research did not explore information related to the years of friendship and the socioeconomic and cultural factors related with the type of schools the students were attending. Future research could include these data to have a better comprehension of the kind of relationships students were building.

Also, the interview protocol could be challenging, as the students had a mean age of 11 years old. In some cases, responses were more superficial or based on anecdotal experiences; therefore, extra support was needed to elaborate on their answers. Complementing interviews with other qualitative techniques, such as drawing, could help with this type of difficulty.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings are a contribution to the current understanding of the academic and inner lives of 2e students, and add novelty by taking a side that has never been considered before: their closest friends. Much has been investigated regarding the representations, beliefs, and perceptions teachers and parents hold of gifted and 2e students. However, views from adults versus same-age friends can have different connotations and provide not only theoretical but also practical information on how to navigate the challenges faced by 2e students within the school environment. In this line, some studies to be conducted in the future can consider aspects such as (a) perceptions of other peers besides close friends, (b) different cultural contexts in which friendship might have a different value and meaning, and (c) other 2e conditions than ASD and ADHD.

Results that stem from this study show that friends can act as a “safety net” for 2e students, providing support for academic success and surmounting academic difficulties. They also can be a critical pillar for the socioemotional realm of 2e students, being able to clearly identify their needs and providing timely intervention against harmful events within schools. This can be of great value for the well-being of the 2e student, as well as to strengthen socioemotional aspects that can be diminished. However, the close friends demonstrated to be not only fierce advocate of the 2e student but also acute and knowledgeable observer of his or her academic performance, behaviors, and conflicts, among others. In this way, because of their deep connection, the close friends can have a crucial role and become an active part of the network of advocates a 2e student needs for succeeding at the school level, by being an informant that can help understand the characteristics, concerns, and strengths of the 2e student on the classroom context.

In summary, the results shed light on the importance of this relationship that can be critical for the 2e student to successfully go through schooling. It also provides insights for teachers and practitioners on how to orient the support provided to 2e students at academic and socioemotional levels. These supports have to consider in this support critical periods in which friendship is better established and can reach deeper levels of connection, such as adolescence.

Ethical Statement

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso (Code: BIOEPUCV-H 217-2018).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This project was supported by the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development (FONDECYT for its acronym in Spanish; Grant Number 1181857).

ORCID iD

María Leonor Conejeros-Solar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9725-9753>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. The 7-point grading scale is used in Chile, where 1 is the lowest grade and 7 is the highest grade on scale. The minimum passing grade is 4.

Grade point average (GPA)	% Achievement	Grade description	Honors
6.0–7.0	90–100	Outstanding	Highest honors
5.0–5.9	80–89	Good	Honors
4.0–4.9	70–79	Sufficient	Passed
1.0–3.9	0–69	Deficient	Failed

<http://www.chileeducation.info/Education-System/Education-Structure-and-Grading-System.html>

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