

Exploring Psychologists Perspective on the Assessment, Management and Challenges of Twice-Exceptional Children

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Abstract

The current research explored psychologists' perspectives on the assessment, management, and challenges related to twice-exceptional children. An exploratory research design was employed. The sample consisted of six (N = 6) psychologists selected through purposive sampling. A demographic sheet and a semi-structured interview protocol were used for participant recruitment and data collection. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method was applied for thematic analysis. Psychologists reported difficulties in assessing and managing twice-exceptional children. For assessment, they primarily relied on informal methods such as observational techniques, anecdotal records, and teacher-made checklists. Management strategies included balancing disorder and exceptionality through differentiated instruction, individualized education plans (IEPs), and strength-based approaches. The findings revealed that while psychologists were unfamiliar with the specific term "twice-exceptional children," they understood the concept. Additionally, they encountered barriers such as the nature of the disorders, cultural differences, and parental pressure and expectations. This study highlights the need to develop comprehensive assessment tools and effective support strategies to better address the unique needs of twice-exceptional children.

Keywords: Twice-exceptional Children, Psychologists' Perspectives, Assessment, Management, Challenges.

Introduction

Twice-exceptional (2e) children, also known as "gifted with disabilities," possess outstanding potential in areas such as intellect, creativity, and leadership, while simultaneously experiencing one or more impairments or disorders. These dual characteristics can be difficult to identify, as giftedness may mask the disability and, conversely, the disability may obscure the giftedness. This complexity makes both assessment and management of 2e children particularly challenging.

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This study explores psychologists' perspectives on the assessment, management, and challenges associated with twice-exceptional children, offering insights into the issues faced and the strategies applied by professionals in the field.

Twice-exceptional children exhibit exceptional talents alongside learning difficulties such as dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), creating unique educational challenges (Qur'ani & Syafril, 2025). These children are characterized by the coexistence of abilities and disabilities (Manzone & Young, 2024).

Savant syndrome exemplifies an unusual presentation, wherein individuals—often with autism—display extraordinary skills in areas like music, arithmetic, or art, despite significant cognitive or developmental challenges (Treffert, 2009). Similarly, 2e children possess both intellectual and creative strengths along with behavioral or learning problems, necessitating both enrichment and remedial interventions (Krochak & Ryan, 2007).

Twice-exceptional children are often misunderstood because their cognitive strengths may obscure their impairments and vice versa. Brody and Mills (1997) referred to them as “the most misunderstood of all exceptionalities.” This masking effect increases the risk of under-identification in both gifted and special education programs (Baum & Oreck, 2004).

King (2005) observed that students with advanced linguistic abilities may hide their learning issues, leading to underachievement and low self-esteem in later school years. Diagnostic challenges are further compounded by inconsistent definitions, masking effects, and a lack of valid assessment tools (Rizza & Morrison, 2002). Therefore, novel and multidimensional approaches to assessment are necessary (Pfeiffer, 2009).

Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences posits that intelligence encompasses linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic domains. This theory challenges traditional IQ-based models and promotes teaching methods tailored to students' diverse cognitive strengths, despite ongoing debate about its empirical support.

Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration (1964) explains how gifted individuals, particularly those with emotional intensity, undergo internal restructuring triggered by crises, leading to personal growth. Dabrowski identified five forms of overexcitability—psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional—as central to this transformation. Piechowski and Daniels (2009) noted that gifted and 2e individuals are more prone to such crises. Wiley (2015) emphasized that this developmental struggle can lead to “secondary integration,” where individuals emerge with a more authentic identity.

A deeper awareness of twice-exceptionality is essential for all educators and psychologists, especially school psychologists, who play a critical role in assessment and intervention. Assouline and Whiteman (2011) discussed the treatment of giftedness and disability as separate constructs before merging them into a 2e framework, illustrated through case studies focusing on ADHD, ASD, and specific learning disabilities. Their work also references the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and concludes with ten evidence-based practices, including the necessity of comprehensive evaluations to identify both strengths and weaknesses.

Amend and Peters (2015) emphasized that psychologists are responsible for differentiating between typical and atypical development, understanding trajectories across behavioral, cognitive, academic, and social domains, and offering tailored interventions for children and their families. Many gifted students with disabilities are difficult to categorize and may be misidentified or overlooked.

Foley-Nicpon et al. (2013) surveyed professionals across 40 U.S. states and found varied levels of awareness of twice-exceptionality among teachers, gifted education specialists, special educators, and psychologists. Notably, gifted educators were generally more knowledgeable about 2e than psychologists. This aligns with findings from Robertson et al. (2011), who

reported that 37% of psychologists had never received training related to gifted children, including those identified as 2e, and 66.2% had never or only occasionally evaluated gifted students.

The term “twice-exceptionality” is relatively new in the domains of education, psychology, and therapy. Twice-exceptional learners often have processing difficulties—auditory, visual, or cognitive—which negatively affect their academic performance. These challenges include difficulty with attention, concentration, linear thinking, planning, and prioritizing. Psychologically, 2e students often exhibit traits such as high creativity, strong problem-solving skills, divergent thinking, emotional sensitivity, social withdrawal, perfectionism, and elevated anxiety levels (Amiri, 2020).

Twice-exceptional students may have learning disabilities, ASD, or ADHD alongside high intellectual ability. In a recent qualitative study involving six participants, Becks (2024) applied Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory as an interpretive lens. Results indicated that assessment practices varied based on district resources. While some psychologists felt prepared, others lacked adequate training and requested more clarity and professional development. Becks recommended that state and federal policies clarify the role of school psychologists, including formal guidelines, specific assessment procedures, and institutional support. A checkbox on Evaluation Team Report (ETR) forms and ongoing professional training were also proposed to improve 2e identification.

Research Gap

An extensive review of the literature on twice-exceptional children revealed a significant research gap concerning psychologists’ awareness and understanding of this unique population. Prior to this study, it was evident that many psychologists in Pakistan were unfamiliar with the term *twice-exceptional children*, although they understood the concept. Therefore, the study aimed to explore psychologists’ assessment strategies, management approaches, and the challenges they encounter. This investigation into both terminology and practical implications contributes to filling the identified research gap and enhances understanding of how best to support twice-exceptional children within the Pakistani context.

Rationale of the Study

This study was designed to address the notable gap in research related to psychologists’ awareness and understanding of twice-exceptional children. While psychologists were generally familiar with the concept, many were unfamiliar with the specific term *twice-exceptional*. Hence, the study focused on exploring their perspectives regarding the assessment, management, and challenges involved in working with this population. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge and inform strategies to effectively address the unique needs of twice-exceptional children, particularly in the context of Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of psychologists regarding twice-exceptional children?
2. How do psychologists assess and manage twice-exceptional children?
3. What kinds of barriers do psychologists face in the assessment and management of twice-exceptional children?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory research design to investigate psychologists’ perspectives on the assessment, management, and challenges associated with twice-exceptional children.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

The sample consisted of six psychologists (N = 6) selected from various special education centers in Lahore. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure the inclusion of professionals with relevant experience.

Demographic Information

The demographic information is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Study Participants (N = 6)

S. No	Code	Gender	Age	Education	Experience
1	P1F1	Female	32	MS Clinical Psychology	8 years
2	P2F2	Female	37	MS Clinical Psychology	10 years
3	P3F3	Female	27	MSc Psychology	5 years
4	P4F4	Female	30	MSc Psychology	5 years
5	P5F5	Female	47	ABA Therapist / MPhil Special Education	15 years
6	P6M6	Male	34	MS Clinical Psychology	7 years

Note: To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, each participant was assigned a coded pseudonym. ABA = *Applied Behavior Analysis*.

Inclusion Criteria

Psychologists with a minimum of four years of professional experience who were currently employed in school, clinical, or educational settings were included.

Exclusion Criteria

Psychologists with less than four years of experience or those not actively working in relevant settings were excluded to ensure relevance to the study objectives.

Data Collection Strategies

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each psychologist. The interviews lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. Demographic data such as gender, age, qualifications, and experience were also collected.

Procedure

Leading up to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review bodies. Psychologists were identified from various special education centers across Lahore. Interviews were conducted after obtaining signed consent from both the institutions and participants, outlining the purpose of the study and ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

This method allowed for an in-depth understanding of the latent and semantic meanings within the data, providing both flexibility and structure in qualitative analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Permission letters were sent to the heads of each special education center. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, with an explanation of the study's purpose, confidentiality assurance, and the right to withdraw. Permission to audio-record interviews was also requested and obtained.

Results

The findings were organized into major themes and subthemes. The table below summarizes the codes, subthemes, and overarching themes derived from participants' responses:

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes of Psychologists' Perspectives (N = 6)

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Do you know about the term twice-exceptional children?	1. Definition/Perception	I. Unawareness	No idea, Uncertainty, Misunderstood as giftedness/ability, Lack of information
What are their exceptionality and disorder?		II. Exceptionality vs Disorder	Memory retention, Autism, Sharp observation, Modeling, Writing, ADHD, Intellectual disability, Physical disability (e.g., no limbs), Mathematics, Music, Drawing
What is your perception if a child with a disability performs a simple task?		III. Unique Perception	Repeatedly doing something, Comparison, Performance, Beyond age, Mental age, Normal age, Functional, Exceptional, Unique
Do you know about the assessment of twice-exceptional children?	2. Assessment	I. Lack of Information	New term, Uncertainty, Informal methods, God-gifted, No idea
		II. Subjective Rating	Observation, Informal strategies, Strengths and weaknesses, Good abilities
		III. Objective Rating	IQ tests, Slosson, WISC, Memory tests, Cognitive assessments
		IV. Future Directions	Gardner's theory of intelligence, Visual-spatial memory
What are the possible management strategies for twice-exceptional children?	3. Management	I. Balancing Needs	Sensory issues (e.g., texture, smell), Observation-based support, Painting activities, Ability-based planning
		II. Strategic Approaches	Use of strengths, Address weaknesses, Combination strategies, IEP vs. ITP, Reinforcement, Skill development, Activity planning
What kind of barriers do you face while working with twice-exceptional children?	4. Barriers	I. Difficulties	Complex disorders, Time-consuming diagnosis, Cultural barriers, Parental resistance, Lack of diagnostic acceptance
		II. Overcoming Difficulties	Systematic approaches, Collaboration, Teamwork, Role clarity, Multidisciplinary support

Emerging Themes

The data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The following key themes emerged, reflecting the core perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Theme 1: Definition and Perception of Twice-Exceptional Children

Twice-exceptional children are those who demonstrate exceptional abilities in one or more domains such as science, art, technology, visual-spatial reasoning, or mathematics, while simultaneously experiencing one or more disabilities. These disabilities may include language disorders, physical disabilities, specific learning disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or autism spectrum disorder (Reis et al., 2014).

This section of the study explored how psychologists defined and perceived twice-exceptional children. It aimed to understand their definitions and interpretations regarding the term "twice-exceptional children." Responses to questions such as "What is a twice-exceptional child?", "How would you categorize them?", and "What is your perception of exceptionality?" were analyzed thematically. Based on the analysis, three subthemes emerged: unawareness, exceptionality vs. disorder, and a perception of uniqueness or difference.

Subtheme I: Unawareness

Most psychologists reported being unfamiliar with the term "twice-exceptional children," though some associated it loosely with giftedness or ability. The general consensus was a lack of awareness of the specific terminology.

"No, no I didn't know the term, something related to giftedness." (P1F1)

"I don't know." (P4F4)

Subtheme II: Exceptionality vs. Disorder

Once provided with a definition, psychologists could identify and categorize twice-exceptional children. They acknowledged that these children could be gifted in certain areas while simultaneously facing challenges in others (Brody & Mills, 1997).

"Yes, I know those children. Recently, I worked with three: one exceptional in mathematics with autism, another in drawing with ADHD, and the third in writing with mild to severe autism." (P6M6)

Subtheme III: Unique or Different Perception

Psychologists tended to recognize twice-exceptional children based on observed differences from age-based norms, particularly when mental age exceeded chronological age.

"I consider him gifted when a four-year-old is compared with another four-year-old, and one exceeds in normal age function. Then it is giftedness." (P1F1)

"Those I told you about, doing their exceptional work repeatedly—I think they are God-gifted." (P2F2)

Theme 2: Assessment

Twice-exceptional children often go unrecognized due to their gifts masking their disabilities or vice versa (Pfeiffer, 2009). This section explored how psychologists assess twice-exceptional children. Their responses to the question "Do you know about the assessment of twice-exceptional children?" were analyzed thematically. Four subthemes emerged: lack of information, subjective rating, objective rating, and future assessment directions.

Subtheme I: Lack of Information

Most psychologists lacked knowledge about formal assessment tools for twice-exceptional children and reported using informal assessment methods.

"No, I don't know. Is there any scale? I have an informal way." (P3F3)

"I never used and I have no idea." (P4F4)

Subtheme II: Subjective Rating

Psychologists admitted to relying on informal assessments, often based on observation, as they found existing tools insufficient to evaluate the diverse traits of twice-exceptional children.

"There is a lot of exceptionality. How can we adjust it in just a single scale? I write down their good abilities, and in that way, their exceptionality is revealed to me." (P2F2)

Subtheme III: Objective Rating

Some psychologists mentioned using standardized tests such as WISC, IQ tests, and the Slosson Intelligence Test.

"In my perspective, if we see twice-exceptional children with IQ exceptionality, there are IQ tests, as well as CPM and Slosson Intelligence Test. Using all these, we can assess the exceptionality." (P1F1)

Subtheme IV: Future Assessment Directions

Participants suggested developing future tools based on cognitive theories and individual strengths, particularly in memory, visual-spatial skills, and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

"We have Gardner's theory of intelligence, which covers aesthetic sense, dance, and other domains. If we work on that, we will have a direction." (P1F1)

"I think we need to work on memory (visual and spatial); most children with disorders have strong visual memory." (P5F5)

Theme 3: Management

Robertson et al. (2011) reported that many psychologists lack proper knowledge about managing and evaluating twice-exceptional children. This section explored how psychologists manage such children, particularly how they balance disorder with exceptionality. Questions analyzed thematically included "How do you balance disorder and exceptionality in twice-exceptional children?" and "What strategies do you use?" Two subthemes were identified: balancing and strategies.

Subtheme I: Balancing

Psychologists highlighted the use of a child's strengths as a tool to address their weaknesses.

"If they have a sensory issue, like texture, then I do finger painting. If they have a smell issue, then I do oil painting." (P2F2)

"It's okay if someone doesn't perform due to sensory issues. We shouldn't mask their weaknesses." (P1F1)

Subtheme II: Strategies

Psychologists outlined structured plans such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to manage both strengths and challenges, often adapting activities regularly to prevent rigidity.

"When someone comes with a presenting complaint, first we make the IEP plan to highlight strengths and weaknesses. Then, we use strengths to overcome weaknesses. That combination is perfect for any special child." (P1F1)

"First, we plan their strengths and weaknesses, then structure their activities. But activities should change monthly to reduce fixation." (P2F2)

Theme 4: Barriers

This section examined barriers faced by psychologists in dealing with twice-exceptional children. Responses to "What kind of barriers do you face, and how do you overcome them?" were thematically analyzed. Two subthemes emerged: difficulties and strategies to overcome them.

Subtheme I: Difficulties

Disabilities themselves and cultural factors were cited as major barriers. Some parents struggled to accept their child's diagnosis.

"The barrier is the disability; it may be extensive and time-consuming to overcome." (P5F5)

"Yes, there is also a cultural barrier. Parents are not ready to accept that their child has a disorder." (P4F4)

Subtheme II: Overcoming the Difficulties

Psychologists emphasized self-regulation and the importance of a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach.

"As human beings, we also feel anger or aggression if a child throws tantrums, but we must control ourselves." (P3F3)

"If we have a collaborative team, then it will be good for us." (P5F5)

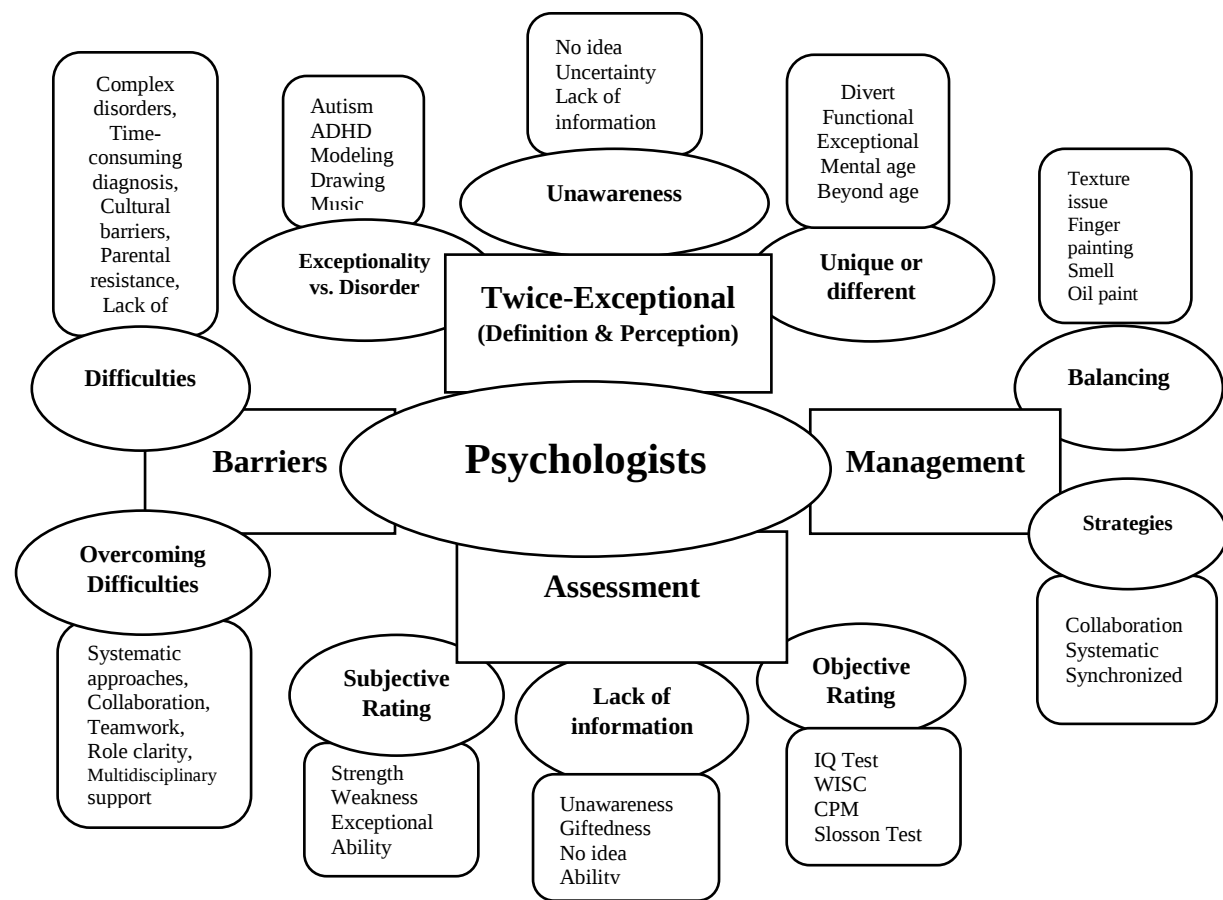
Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework centers on four interrelated themes illustrating psychologists' perspectives on twice-exceptional children

Definition and Perception, Assessment, Management, and Barriers

It highlights limited familiarity with the term, reliance on informal assessments, strength-based interventions, and challenges like parental denial and cultural resistance. The framework below visually synthesizes these insights to show how psychologists engage with twice-exceptional children in practice.

Figure 1: Thematic map showing the interlink of themes, subthemes, and codes regarding psychologists' management and assessment of twice-exceptional children (N = 6).



Findings

Thematic analysis revealed that while psychologists were unfamiliar with the formal term “twice-exceptional,” they understood the concept and recognized such profiles in children who exhibit both exceptional talents and learning or behavioral challenges. Their understanding stemmed from practical experience, where they had observed students excelling in areas like mathematics or the arts, yet struggling with disorders such as ADHD, autism, or learning disabilities. However, they highlighted that these children are often misidentified or overlooked due to the masking effect—where strengths conceal weaknesses or vice versa.

Psychologists reported a lack of formal assessment tools specifically tailored to identify twice-exceptional profiles. Consequently, they relied heavily on informal methods such as classroom observations, anecdotal records, and teacher input. For managing these children, they emphasized individualized education plans, differentiated instruction, and strength-based strategies. Key challenges included cultural stigma, parental pressure, and limited institutional resources. Psychologists stressed the urgent need for specialized training, development of appropriate assessment tools, and collaborative efforts among families, educators, and professionals to better support the unique needs of twice-exceptional children.

Discussion

This section examined psychologists' perspectives on the assessment, management, and challenges related to twice-exceptional children.

Psychologists reported a lack of familiarity with the term *twice-exceptional children*, although they understood the concept once it was explained by the researcher. Twice-exceptional children are those who demonstrate exceptional abilities in one or more domains—such as science, art, technology, visual-spatial reasoning, or mathematics—while simultaneously experiencing one or more disabilities. These may include language disorders, physical impairments, specific learning disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or autism spectrum disorder (Reis et al., 2014).

Furthermore, participants were asked about their perception of exceptionality and how they identify twice-exceptional children. When asked whether a child with a disability performing simple tasks could be considered twice-exceptional, most psychologists responded that they identify such children by observing repeated behaviors or actions that exceed developmental expectations for their age. Some mentioned using tools like the Slosson Intelligence Test or referring to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. According to Gardner (1999), as cited by Gardner and Moran (2006), there are eight distinct intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

In addition, the majority of twice-exceptional children often remain unassessed or unnoticed due to the masking effects of their gifts or the presence of disorders (Pfeiffer, 2009). Psychologists noted that they generally lacked formal tools for assessing such children and relied on informal methods, such as observing and recording strengths and weaknesses. One participant noted, "The only way to assess twice-exceptional children is through formal tools. I know a child who is exceptional at baking—where can we find a standardized baking scale?" Most psychologists reported relying on subjective ratings; however, when asked about objective assessments, they mentioned using tools like IQ tests, the Slosson Intelligence Test, Raven's Colored Progressive Matrices (CPM), and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). Some also proposed future directions for assessment, suggesting that tools could be developed based on Gardner's multiple intelligences framework.

Robertson et al. (2011), in a survey conducted through the National Association of School Psychologists, concluded that many psychologists lack knowledge regarding the management and evaluation of twice-exceptional children. In line with this, participants in the present study described managing such children by balancing their strengths and disorders. For example, if a child with sensory issues has a talent for painting, psychologists would adjust their approach—using finger painting for texture sensitivity or oil painting to accommodate smell sensitivity. Such adaptations illustrate how exceptionality can be used as reinforcement to address a child's challenges, thereby enhancing functionality for future life.

Finally, psychologists identified several barriers in working with twice-exceptional children. The most commonly cited barrier was the child's disorder itself. Additional challenges included cultural norms and parental attitudes, particularly resistance to acknowledging the presence of a disorder. One participant noted, "yes, there is also a cultural barrier because their parents are not ready to accept that their child has a disorder."

Implications

The theoretical aim of this study is to contribute to the development of models that explain how the abilities and challenges of twice-exceptional children evolve over time. Practically, the study seeks to inform the creation of tailored interventions, including assessment-informed individualized education or enrichment plans (IEPs/IETs), that address each child's unique combination of strengths and needs. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of family-centered supports and encourage collaborative efforts among psychologists, educators, specialists, and families to meet the complex and specific needs of twice-exceptional children in a holistic manner.

Limitations and Suggestions

The generalizability of the study is limited due to its small, localized sample consisting solely of psychologists from Lahore. This restriction affects the external validity of the findings. Additionally, the data may be subject to response and recall bias, such as distortions common in self-reported qualitative data. Resource constraints also limited the sample size and the depth of data collection, potentially affecting the richness and interpretability of the results.

Future research should aim to broaden data collection to include participants from multiple cities across Pakistan. Employing mixed methods can help reduce bias, while the inclusion of diverse data sources—such as document analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions—can enhance the validity and generalizability of findings.

Conclusion

The present study explored psychologists' perspectives on the assessment, management, and challenges associated with twice-exceptional children. The findings revealed that while most psychologists were unfamiliar with the term "twice-exceptional," they were aware of the concept once it was explained. The roles of assessment and management emerged as critical components in supporting twice-exceptional children. For assessment, psychologists primarily relied on informal methods such as observational techniques, anecdotal records, and teacher-developed checklists.

In terms of management, various strategies were employed to balance disorder and exceptionality, including differentiated instruction, individualized education plans (IEPs), and strength-based approaches. Psychologists also identified multiple barriers, including the nature of the disabilities themselves, cultural factors, and parental pressure and expectations.

This study provides a foundational understanding that may guide future research, encourage theoretical advancements, and inform the development of formal assessment tools for twice-exceptional children. By addressing these findings, researchers and practitioners may work toward enhancing the well-being and maximizing the potential of twice-exceptional children through more comprehensive and individualized support systems.

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