Journal for Researching Education Practice and Theory (JREPT)
Volume 9, Number 2, 2026, pp. 5-39
ISSN 2616-6828

Research article

Twice-Exceptional Students in UAE Inclusive Classrooms: Insights Into Socio-Emotional and Academic Experiences

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Article history: Received: 27 February 2026; Revised: 14 March 2026; Accepted: 12 May 2026; Published: 15 October 2026

How to cite: El Naggar, A., & Rattra, C. (2026). Twice-exceptional students in UAE Inclusive classrooms: Insights into socio-emotional and academic experiences. *Journal for Researching Education Practice and Theory*, *9*(2), 5-39.

Peer review: This article has been peer-reviewed through JREPT's standard double-blind peer-review process.

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Open Access: *Journal for Researching Education Practice and Theory* is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal published by The British University in Dubai.

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences of gifted learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream schools in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Through semi-structured interviews with ten students, the research explores their lived experiences and perspectives. The thematic analysis uncovered challenges these students face, including the recognition of their dual exceptionalities and the effectiveness of existing inclusive practices. Key findings identify barriers, including inconsistent support measures and the need for improved resources for socio-emotional development. The findings emphasized the need to address the unique needs of twice-exceptional students and to advocate for improvements in educational provisions to support them better. By amplifying their voices, the research offers essential insights for improving inclusive education for this group in the UAE.

Keywords: autism; gifted; twice-exceptionality; inclusive education; social inclusion; differentiated instruction; teacher training; student perspectives

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition characterized by difficulties in social communication, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). While many students with ASD demonstrate remarkable cognitive abilities, their difficulties with social engagement, adaptive behaviors, and sensory sensitivities can obscure their strengths, leading to under-identification and inadequate educational support (Neihart, 2008; Foley-Nicpon et al., 2012; Assouline & Whiteman, 2011). This study focuses specifically on a subset of this population, namely twice-exceptional (2e) learners, including students who are simultaneously identified as gifted and as having a disability or neurodevelopmental condition (Baldwin et al., 2015). In the context of this study, twice-exceptionality refers to students who are both academically or intellectually gifted and diagnosed with ASD. These students present a unique cognitive and social profile: their giftedness may mask the ASD diagnosis, and conversely, the challenges associated with ASD may obscure their intellectual strengths, making them particularly difficult to identify and support within mainstream educational settings (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011).

In the UAE, inclusive education has been prioritized through policies such as Federal Law 29/2006 and Knowledge and Human Development Authority initiatives, which aim to integrate students of determination into mainstream schools (Gaad, 2019).

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However, despite these efforts, most inclusion policies focus either on disability or giftedness, rarely addressing both concurrently, namely, twice-exceptional students (Younis, 2018).

Although research on twice-exceptionality has expanded in recent years, much of it remains focused on academic interventions rather than on students' lived experiences (Foley-Nicpon et al., 2011; Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019). Existing studies largely rely on parental or teacher reports rather than direct student perspectives, limiting insights into how twice-exceptional students experience mainstream schooling (Peterson et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies primarily originate from Western contexts (e.g., Australia, the U.S., and the U.K.), leaving gaps in understanding twice-exceptional students' experiences in diverse cultural and educational settings such as Dubai (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019; Baldwin et al., 2015).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Recent literature portrays twice-exceptional (2e) students—those who demonstrate high intellectual or creative ability alongside a co-occurring disability—as possessing complex, "masking" profiles that require highly individualized, strengths-based supports. Because 2e learners combine advanced cognitive potential with developmental or learning challenges, they often exhibit asynchronous cognitive and emotional profiles. A systematic review by Rizzo et al. (2025) confirmed the persistence of these conflicting

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traits, emphasizing that single-IQ screenings frequently obscure a student's true potential by allowing strengths to mask deficits, or vice versa (Atmaca & Baloğlu, 2022; Rizzo et al., 2025).

This cognitive heterogeneity is further illuminated by Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory, which broadens the definition of giftedness beyond traditional, narrow psychometric measures. While 2e students often excel in non-traditional domains such as musical, mathematical, or visual-spatial reasoning, they simultaneously struggle with verbal, linguistic, or social communication (Neihart & Poon, 2009; Gojkov-Rajić et al., 2018). Quantitative evidence underscores this asymmetry; for instance, a Bayesian meta-analysis by Atmaca and Baloğlu (2022) demonstrated that 2e learners with learning disabilities score significantly lower on working memory and processing speed than their purely gifted peers.

When twice-exceptionality involves Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), these asynchronous profiles present distinct cognitive and developmental challenges in mainstream classrooms that can be understood through specific theoretical frameworks. Central Coherence Theory (CCT; Frith, 1989) posits that individuals with ASD tend to process information locally, focusing on fine details rather than synthesizing data into a broader holistic context. While this cognitive style can enhance performance on detail-oriented tasks—reinforcing their gifted capabilities—it often impedes a student's ability

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to generalize learning across different subjects and contexts (Roth, 2010; Klin, 2000). Consequently, mainstream educational settings, which routinely require students to integrate disparate concepts, can become particularly demanding for 2e learners with ASD.

Beyond cognitive fragmentation, 2e individuals frequently face acute socio-emotional vulnerabilities, including heightened anxiety and diminished self-esteem (Açar & Gül, 2025). Theory of Mind (ToM; Leslie, 1987) provides a critical lens for understanding the root of these social difficulties. Students with ASD often experience challenges in attributing mental states to others, which can lead to misinterpretations of social cues and subsequent peer isolation (Harms et al., 2010; Berard et al., 2017). For 2e learners navigate the complex social landscape of mainstream environments, ToM deficits frequently manifest as chronic misunderstandings with teachers, severe anxiety during group work, and persistent barriers to forming sustainable friendships (Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2021).

Ultimately, both empirical data and theoretical perspectives converge on a singular conclusion: inclusive educational success depends on holistic, differentiated, and collaborative support systems that simultaneously nurture intellectual talents and accommodate socio-emotional and cognitive deficits (Al-Hroub & Whitebread, 2019; Gierczyk & Hornby, 2021). Scholars widely agree that with rigorous teacher preparation

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and inter-professional collaboration, 2e learners can thrive in inclusive settings (Gierczyk & Hornby, 2021; Elhoweris et al., 2021). For example, Gierczyk and Hornby (2021) assert that effective instruction is entirely achievable if educators successfully bridge strategies from both special and gifted education.

Despite this dual imperative, significant global and regional gaps remain in policy, identification, and resource allocation. This disconnect is particularly pronounced in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While regional research indicates generally positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion, a critical lack of formal 2e training persists among educators (Elhoweris et al., 2021). Furthermore, while schools in hubs like Dubai are beginning to initiate proactive supports, UAE policy does not yet formally recognize twice-exceptionality as a distinct category, resulting in highly inconsistent identification processes and fragmented service delivery (Younis, 2020).

Because existing international literature relies heavily on small-sample methodologies and Western contexts, there is a pressing need for large-scale empirical work elsewhere. The current study directly addresses this gap by investigating how these theoretical frameworks manifest within the unique policy landscape of the UAE, ultimately aiming to provide the empirical data necessary to improve both the socio-emotional well-being and academic outcomes of 2e students.

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Problem Statement

Despite growing research on twice-exceptionality, three major gaps remain:

1. **Lack of student perspectives** – Most studies rely on teacher and parent reports rather than interviewing twice-exceptional students directly.

2. **Limited research in non-Western contexts** – Most findings are based on educational systems in the U.S., U.K., or Australia, with little focus on the Middle East.

3. **Overemphasis on academic accommodations** – Research tends to focus on curriculum differentiation but often neglects social-emotional support and inclusion strategies.

This study fills existing research gaps by exploring the academic and socio-emotional experiences of twice-exceptional students in UAE mainstream schools through direct student insights, offering perspectives on evolving inclusion policies. These gaps are particularly significant in the UAE context, where inclusive education policy has developed rapidly but remains largely untested regarding twice-exceptional learners, and where no studies to date have sought to capture these students' perspectives directly.

Aims of the Study

This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring the experiences of twice-

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exceptional students with ASD in UAE mainstream schools and to contribute to both theoretical and policy discussions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences and perspectives of gifted learners with ASD regarding the current educational provisions in their mainstream schools?

RQ2: What recommendations do gifted learners with ASD have for improving the educational provisions and support they receive?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perspectives of gifted learners with ASD in Dubai. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was subsequently used to analyze the data, chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

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Ten gifted students with ASD were recruited through purposeful sampling to provide in-depth insights. Students were recruited from 9 different schools in the UAE offering UK and US curricula, recognized by the KHDA (2018) for high-quality education and effective inclusion practices. Students were identified via teacher referrals, observations, assessments, school records, and parent nominations, ensuring they met criteria for both giftedness and ASD.

The participants, aged 10–16, represented diverse national backgrounds, including Emirati, South Asian, and European students. Their giftedness spanned multiple domains, including advanced mathematical reasoning, musical ability, visual-spatial skills, and strong verbal skills. Despite their intellectual strengths, many students faced challenges related to executive functioning, social communication, and sensory sensitivities.

Data Collection

Data were collected from primary and secondary sources. For the primary data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the ten student participants. The interview guide was developed around three core areas: (1) the academic support and provisions students receive, including whether they had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or any formal curriculum modifications; (2) the perceived usefulness and relevance of that support; and (3) their socio-emotional experiences, including access to counseling, social skills groups, and peer relationships. Sample questions included asking students

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about any special plans or curriculum adjustments in place for them, how helpful they found existing support, and whether they had access to counseling or social groups at school.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, with each session lasting 20-45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant and parental consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Parents of three students were present during the interview at the students' request, though they did not participate directly. The interviewer also kept field notes on context and reflections throughout the data collection process.

Secondary data were gathered through document analysis; specifically, school inspection reports and educational frameworks from the KHDA, the Ministry of Education, and the Dubai School Inspection Bureau. These documents provided context and helped triangulate the findings by situating the students' experiences within Dubai's broader educational policies and practices regarding inclusion.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) process. The researchers first familiarized themselves with the transcripts by repeated reading and noted initial ideas. Next, they generated initial codes by identifying meaningful data segments relevant to the research questions. These codes were then

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organized into potential themes and continually reviewed and refined to ensure they captured the breadth of the data. Each theme was defined and supported with illustrative quotes from participants. Finally, themes were named and finalized, ensuring they accurately reflected the data and addressed the research questions. Throughout this process, the researchers maintained reflexivity, continually reflecting on how their own perspectives might influence interpretation, thus ensuring the findings remained grounded in participant experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Toma, 2011). The analysis yielded five themes across the two research questions. Under RQ1, three themes emerged: (1) Differentiation and Support, (2) Over-Challenged or Under-Challenged?, and (3) Negative School Experiences. Under RQ2, two themes were identified: (1) Socio-Emotional Support, and (2) Teaching and Assessment Methods.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained in line with KHDA regulations. Participants and schools were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential benefits or risks, and they provided written consent (parents/guardians also consented for student participants). Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities. These measures ensured compliance with high ethical standards and safeguarded participants' rights and privacy.

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Results

RQ1: What are the experiences and perspectives of gifted learners with ASD regarding the current educational provisions in their mainstream schools?

Theme 1: Differentiation and Support

Students reported a lack of formal differentiation in the curriculum. All ten students indicated they followed the same curriculum as their peers, with no official modifications for their advanced abilities. When they finished work early, teachers usually provided extra tasks. However, these additional worksheets or responsibilities were perceived as unchallenging "busy work" rather than meaningful enrichment. One student (S4) noted that nobody told him about any special adjustments: his exams and classwork were the same as everyone else's, and although teachers commented that he was "smarter" than his peers, he did not receive any individualized work. Several students agreed that these extra tasks did not feel challenging or like they were learning anything new.

Theme 2: Over-Challenged or Under-Challenged?

A paradox emerged: at times, students felt over-challenged, and at other times under-challenged. Educators' assumptions about their abilities sometimes led to tasks that were either too difficult or poorly aligned with their skill levels. For instance, one student

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(S9) wanted more challenging work, saying that what he received "is not enough." In contrast, another student (S1) often felt overwhelmed by difficult assignments and would complete them without question, 'to get them done', even if he did not fully grasp them. S4 expressed frustration that teachers assumed she was proficient in all subjects simply because she excelled in certain areas and had a high IQ, leading to unrealistic academic expectations and inadequate support tailored to her actual needs. Academic mismatch affected their emotions: some thrived on difficult tasks, while others were bored or frustrated when work was too easy. One student (S2) mentioned getting bored waiting for classmates to catch up after he finished his work quickly. Students emphasized the need for advanced work or placement with peers at similar academic levels. As S10 noted, being in a class with others at his level would allow him "to push myself to the limits."

Theme 3: Negative School Experiences

Many negative experiences centered on social challenges, academic pressure, and misunderstandings with teachers. Socially, students struggled to form friendships and often felt anxiety during group activities. One student (S4) became frustrated with group work, preferring to work online or alone because navigating classmates and group dynamics was difficult. Academic pressures, especially around exams and ability-based class groupings, also caused stress. Students like S1 recalled feeling anxious before exams because they had not had enough time or support to prepare. Balancing high

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expectations with personal academic struggles was difficult. Misunderstandings with teachers were common: several students mentioned that their avoidance of eye contact (an ASD trait) was misinterpreted as defiance or inattention, leading to friction. Additionally, some students faced bullying or exclusion from peers due to their academic performance, which led to feelings of isolation and frustration.

RQ2: What recommendations do gifted learners with ASD have for improving the educational provisions and support they receive?

Theme 1: Socio-Emotional Support

A major recommendation was to enhance socio-emotional support. Many students expressed the need for improved counseling services and social skills programs. One student (S1) praised the counseling he was receiving for behavioral and social issues and strongly recommended that the school continue and expand such support, saying that being able to talk to a teacher or counselor has been very helpful. Another student (S3) said he would like to attend counseling or social group sessions at school, but had not been informed that these were available. Improving peer relationships was also a priority. Students advocated for structured opportunities to make friends—through social skills training, clubs, or group activities designed to foster inclusion. As S2 shared, "Making friends for me has always been difficult," and he wanted more chances to interact in groups and meet peers. S4 similarly emphasized the need for help in developing and

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maintaining friendships. These perspectives suggest that schools should facilitate peer connections (e.g., social groups or buddy programs) and guide social skills development.

Theme 2: Teaching and Assessment Methods

Students offered several suggestions to improve teaching and assessment. Many wanted one-on-one support or tutoring in challenging subjects. For instance, one student (S8) specifically requested extra help in math to better keep up with the material. Students also strongly favored hands-on learning and the use of visual aids over lecture-based teaching. S4 said he learns better by actually doing experiments or activities instead of just reading about them in books. Another student noted that diagrams, videos, or other visual supports helped him understand concepts more clearly than text alone. Students were generally critical of the current emphasis on frequent exams and rote memorization. One student (S3) suggested having fewer exams and more classes focused on understanding and discussion. Some also expressed a clear preference for independent work over group work because of difficulties understanding tasks in group settings and the social complications that ensued. Additionally, they craved more advanced material in their areas of strength. Several students recommended that schools offer special advanced classes or enrichment activities (for example, in music or mathematics) for subjects they find easy, so they can further develop their talents.

Students also highlighted aspects of current teaching methods that they found

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unhelpful. Many were frustrated with traditional study techniques enforced by teachers. One student (S1) gave the example of being told to use flashcards and mind maps, which he found unhelpful. Another (S6) shared that the standardized revision activities provided by teachers were unhelpful for him; he had developed his own study techniques that worked better. There was also concern that the school did not focus enough on their giftedness. One student (S3) noted that the school never informed them of any gifted programs or special opportunities for advanced learners. At the same time, another student (S1) felt that the school paid attention only to his high academic performance, not to his social difficulties, which made social interactions with peers more difficult for him. Taken together, these insights suggest that students want more individualized and engaging teaching approaches, as well as acknowledgment and support for both their strengths and their challenges.

Summary of Themes

In summary, the students are asking for an educational experience that recognizes them as whole individuals. They desire meaningful differentiation—not just extra busy work, but enriched or accelerated content that truly challenges them. They value engaging, hands-on learning activities over passive tasks. They also seek individualized support that addresses both their strengths (by providing advanced learning opportunities) and their needs (by offering help in areas of difficulty). Furthermore, they recommend

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increased socio-emotional support, such as better counseling services, inclusive clubs, and peer mentoring programs, to help alleviate feelings of isolation and build a sense of belonging.

Discussion

This study explores the educational experiences of gifted students with ASD in UAE mainstream schools, shedding light on their unique challenges and needs. By applying established psychological and educational frameworks, the findings offer valuable insights into how these students navigate their educational environments and highlight implications for inclusive education practices within the UAE's cultural context.

A recurrent theme in this study is the social isolation that gifted students with ASD face, which aligns with the Theory of Mind (ToM). The students expressed a desire for increased social support and meaningful friendships, a need that is often unmet due to their difficulty in understanding social cues and interpreting emotions. According to ToM, students with ASD struggle to understand the mental states of others, leading to difficulties in forming social connections (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). The data from this study support this: students reported frequent misunderstandings in peer interactions. Their experiences of bullying and exclusion further confirm ToM's applicability in explaining the social challenges faced by these students. Interventions that target social-emotional learning could help address these challenges by improving students' social

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understanding and fostering stronger social bonds.

Another significant finding in this study was the phenomenon of masking, where students suppress their ASD traits to conform to social expectations. Masking has been shown to hinder the identification of the true needs of gifted students with ASD, leading to misinterpretations of their behaviors (Loomes et al., 2017). Masking can obscure both academic strengths and behavioral challenges, resulting in inadequate support. These findings suggest that educators must develop inclusive school environments that not only support the neurodivergent aspects of these students but also allow them to express their true selves without fear of judgment. Emphasizing acceptance of neurodiversity is important in fostering an educational environment where gifted students with ASD can thrive academically and socially.

The academic experiences of gifted students with ASD revealed significant variability in their learning preferences. Some students thrived on challenging assignments and sought accelerated learning opportunities, while others preferred predictable routines and clearly defined tasks. This cognitive diversity aligns with the Central Coherence Theory (CCT), which posits that individuals with ASD tend to focus on detail-oriented processing rather than global understanding (Frith, 1989). Gifted students with ASD often excel in specific subjects but may struggle in environments that require abstract thinking or broad conceptualization. This study suggests that for twice-

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exceptional students, educational practices should be flexible and individualized to account for these differences. By providing differentiated instruction that caters to students' cognitive strengths and addresses their challenges, educators can better support students' learning and academic engagement.

The study also found that many gifted students with ASD preferred hands-on learning activities over traditional textbook-based instruction. This finding supports Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory, which emphasizes that intelligence is not a singular, static trait but exists across a range of cognitive domains (Gardner, 1983). Gifted students with ASD often excel in specific areas of intelligence but face challenges in social contexts. As the study shows, employing kinesthetic activities, visual aids, and technology-based learning can enhance their engagement and help them capitalize on their strengths. Personalized learning strategies that incorporate MI principles could better support twice-exceptional students by recognizing and nurturing their unique abilities while also accommodating their social and emotional needs.

Despite the commitment to inclusive education in the UAE's mainstream schools, there is a persistent struggle to support twice-exceptional learners. Educators often face challenges in identifying gifted students with ASD, especially when the giftedness may mask autistic traits or vice versa. This mirrors global trends that highlight difficulties in recognizing and supporting this unique population (Yssel et al., 2010; Foley-Nicpon et

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al., 2011). As a result, students may not receive the tailored support they need, leading to academic frustration and social isolation.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the UAE's educational landscape. As the country aims to become a leading knowledge-based society, creating an inclusive educational environment is crucial not only for social justice but also for economic growth. The students' voices emphasize the need for an educational system that goes beyond basic integration toward one that genuinely nurtures and values their exceptional abilities. Implementing Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) offers a pathway toward this goal. The DMGT advocates providing specialized support to address specific learning and socio-emotional needs while fostering exceptional abilities through challenging curricula and enrichment opportunities (Gagné, 2008). This dual approach requires a shift in educational paradigms to honor neurodiversity and empower all students to realize their full potential.

The study's results align with and extend previous research on the educational experiences of gifted learners with ASD. Similar to findings by Foley-Nicpon et al. (2011) and Reis and Colbert (2004), this study underscores the complexity of addressing both giftedness and autism in educational settings, highlighting the need for specialized support and tailored strategies. Additionally, this study confirms and extends the observations of Baldwin et al. (2015) regarding the challenges educators face in

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supporting twice-exceptional students. The persistent gaps in support systems and the need for specialized educational strategies align with the emphasis by Duncan and Bishop (2015) and Baldwin et al. (2015) on the importance of tailored interventions for these students.

However, while this study provides a crucial initial exploration of the experiences of gifted students with ASD in the UAE, it also highlights the need for further research to understand this educational context better and fully determine best practices. Future studies should broaden the scope to include a wider range of experiences, investigate the long-term effects of masking on social and emotional well-being, and develop culturally sensitive interventions tailored to the UAE's specific context. Addressing these areas will be vital for advancing inclusive education practices and ensuring that twice-exceptional students can flourish both academically and socially.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This study highlights several key areas for policy and practice improvements better to support twice-exceptional learners (gifted students with ASD):

- **Develop Specific Policies for Twice-Exceptional Learners:** Current policies do not explicitly address the dual exceptionalities of giftedness and neurodiversity, often resulting in one exceptional aspect masking the other (Duncan & Bishop,

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2015; Baldwin et al., 2015). As students in this study consistently reported receiving no formal curriculum modifications despite their identified dual needs, policymakers should update guidelines to include comprehensive assessment tools that accurately identify twice-exceptional students and inform tailored interventions for them.

- **Integrate Inclusive and Gifted Education Frameworks:** A unified approach that combines special and gifted education is essential. The KHDA's guidelines for gifted students emphasize curriculum differentiation and enrichment, but these strategies may not suit students with ASD who struggle with abstract thinking or social collaboration (Gaad, 2019; Younis, 2018). As illustrated by Theme 1 findings, where all ten participants followed unmodified curricula despite being identified as twice-exceptional, policies must blend these frameworks to address both cognitive strengths and socio-emotional needs simultaneously.
- **Mandate Professional Development for Educators:** Teachers are central to effective inclusion, yet many feel unprepared to support twice-exceptional learners (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2015; Gaad & Khan, 2007). This was echoed by students such as S4, who reported that teachers misread her gifted-related behaviors as signs of confidence or competence rather than recognizing her actual support needs. Ongoing professional development should be required, focusing on

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evidence-based inclusive practices like differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (Gallagher, 2019; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2023).

- **Enhance Curriculum Flexibility:** Dubai's schools offer alternative curricula (e.g., ASDAN, BTEC) for students of determination (Gaad, 2019), but these often overlook the dual needs of gifted students with ASD. As participants in this study described, the absence of advanced coursework left gifted learners bored and disengaged, while socio-emotional support remained equally unaddressed. Schools should ensure that advanced coursework and enrichment opportunities are available and adapted to provide intellectual challenge and social-emotional support.
- **Strengthen Monitoring and Accountability:** The KHDA's inspection framework encourages inclusion but lacks criteria specific to twice-exceptional students. Introducing measures such as regular audits of twice-exceptional support and clear accountability for schools can drive improvements (KHDA, 2017; Gaad, 2019).
- **Promote Inclusive Education for National Development:** Investing in twice-exceptional learners aligns with the UAE's vision of a knowledge-based economy. Gifted students with ASD often excel in fields such as technology, math, and the

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arts, which are valuable to national growth (Gaad, 2019; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2023). As S10 expressed: "*being placed with intellectual peers would allow me to push myself to the limits*", which is a drive that, when properly supported, can be harnessed as both a personal and national asset. Nurturing their talents while supporting their challenges can turn inclusion into an economic and social asset.

In conclusion, addressing these policy and practice areas could significantly enhance the educational experiences of twice-exceptional students. By closing policy gaps, improving school-level provisions, and increasing awareness and training, stakeholders can create a more inclusive environment that supports these students' unique profiles.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of gifted learners with ASD in UAE mainstream schools, but several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design with a small sample size (ten students) limits the generalizability of the findings. These students' experiences may not fully represent all gifted learners with ASD, especially in different schools or cultural contexts (Leung, 2015). Future research with larger, more diverse samples would help develop a more comprehensive understanding.

Additionally, the reliance on semi-structured interviews means the data are self-

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reported, which can introduce biases or omissions (Housand & Housand, 2012). The presence of parents in some interviews, while non-participatory, influenced what students were comfortable sharing. Using mixed-methods approaches in future studies (combining interviews with observations or surveys) could strengthen validity by triangulating findings (Vivek & Nanthagopan, 2021). Another limitation is that the study focused on schools with UK and US curricula in Dubai; thus, the findings may not directly apply to schools with other curricula or to public schools. Research across various educational settings (other curricula, public schools, other Emirates or countries) is needed to identify which challenges and successful strategies are universal and which are context-specific.

Conclusion

Conclusion

This study set out to amplify the voices of twice-exceptional students with ASD in UAE mainstream schools, and the findings make clear that this is a population whose dual needs remain inadequately addressed. The study underscores the need for enhanced recognition and support for twice-exceptional students. Participants reported significant gaps in the identification and understanding of their dual exceptionalities, reflecting inadequate provisions and support systems.

Three structural tensions emerge from the data. First, these students are neither

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fully "gifted" nor fully "students of determination" within existing policy categories, but fall between frameworks that were not designed with their dual profile in mind. Second, the gap between intellectual ability and socio-emotional support is pronounced: students are expected to perform at high academic levels while receiving little help navigating the social landscape of mainstream schooling. Third, student voice, which is the most direct and reliable source of guidance for improving inclusive practice, has been largely absent from both research and policy design in this context. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the educational experiences of twice-exceptional students by foregrounding those voices directly.

By highlighting the critical need for individualized support systems and tailored educational interventions, this study lays the groundwork for educators, policymakers, and researchers to explore further and address the needs of gifted students with ASD. The path forward lies not in choosing between gifted and special education frameworks, but in building bridges between them and ensuring that these students are given the opportunities and support they need to reach their full potential.

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