

A Narrative Exploration into the Experience of one Mother Raising a Twice-exceptional Child

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Abstract

"Self-narrative" is about the story of their own life experience. This study seeks to describe the researcher's experience of raising a twice-exceptional child in Taiwan. The researcher's first child was identified with developmental delay at the age of 2.5, and he was identified as an intellectually gifted child at the age of 7.5. The researcher states her motherhood experience of accompanying her first child through various developmental stages, including identifying her child's uniqueness, overcoming her concerns and allowing her child to take the placement examination, handling her struggles and anxiety for the child's early enrolment, and reflecting on the overall process after the child was identified as an intellectually gifted student. Finally, this study observes that the keys to rearing twice exceptional children successfully are early identification and treatment, recognition of and respect for their uniqueness, promoting their weaknesses with their strengths, cooperation between parents, and the guidance of some important others, or "mentors."

Keywords: twice-exceptional, motherhood experience, self-narrative

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Introduction

In special education, talents and mental/physical disabilities are two major subjects, and each is generally considered taking up the end of spectrum of learning needs without any overlapping. Recently, scholars and educators have drawn attention to so-called “twice-exceptional learners,” who are identified not only as specially talented, but also as mentally/physically disabled. Their particular educational needs pose a great challenge to the pedagogy realm: their potential talents need to be realized on the one hand, and their maladjustment caused by mental/physical disabilities requires different assistance on the other hand. Adequate identification and education for these special learners has been one of significant issues in the domain of special education in that they deserve equal share of educational resources to realize their potentials (Zhe-liang Wu, Qiu-juan Xiao, & Mei-ni Xiao, 2016; Gui-fang Cai & Ya-ling Hou, 2006).

There are a great number of related studies on the “twice-exceptional” learners, but few researchers focus on the “parenting” these learners have received (Foley Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, & Stinson, 2011; An-qi Shi, 2011). Based on the researcher’s own long term observation as an educator of special education, it is noticed that these parents have trouble classifying their twice-exceptional children into a certain type of learners. They are aware that their children have some inborn disabilities as well as talents which somehow are hindered from realizing, thereby worrying that their children’s future will be greatly impeded when the disabilities overshadow the talents. This condition truly bewilders these parents.

Parenting is always the key to the success of special education. Although parents are not teachers of special education with the expertise, they are the one who are most involved in the growth of their children. As a result, parenting plays a very important part in facilitating the physical and mental development of twice-exceptional children. The research herself is a mother of a twice-exceptional child and is deeply aware of the difficulty of raising this kind of children. Given the limited amount of research has been published in this area, the motivation of this study is that in this qualitative exploration, the researcher’s personal narrative of recollecting and reflecting her experience of parenting a twice-exceptional child expects to shed light on the issue of twice-exceptionality and accordingly solicit more research, even offering some assistance.

Literature review

1. The characteristics of twice-exceptional students

Twice-exceptional students have the traits of both talented and disabled students. They can exhibit outstanding potentials in one or more than one fields with single or multiple disabilities at the same time (Ming-yi Liao, 2013). Hardly can these dual-exceptional students be placed in a due learning setting and rarely can they be identified as gifted given the present selection process of gifted learners (Kun-shou Wu, 1999). These students don’t often match any gifted or disabled classification criteria because the gifted trait(s) can veil disabled trait(s) and vice versa (Kun-shou Wu, 1999).

Twice-exceptional students demonstrate greater disparities between awareness and social emotional competence than other gifted students, and these disparities were even more evident than those disabled students with general level of intelligence (Foley Nicpon et al., 2011). What influences their learning consists in comorbidity. The disturbed mood and maladjusted behavior that mental/physical disabilities bring out hinder realization of their potentials. The emotional and behavioral hindrances can be eliminated through the intervention of consultation or treatment and their gifted potentials can be actualized. Accordingly, educational counselling plays a crucial role in handling the learning needs of these dual-exceptional students (Reis et al., 2014; Zhe-liang Wu et al., 2016).

Twice-exceptional students demand steadfast education to cultivate their gifted talents and remedial education to improve their disabilities. Parents play a more crucial role in the holistic education students receive, and should fully cooperate with teachers to provide their children with sufficient support that helps unfold talents and to assist their children in building up faith in confronting their own disabilities (Trail, 2006; Wong & Morton, 2017).

2. The parents' parenting attitude towards twice-exceptional students

The parents of twice-exceptional students first couldn't identify their current situation and address it appropriately when facing their particularity. Some students even miss the right timing of diagnosis and placement, especially for those parents with a low economic status (Tai-hua Lu, 1995, 1996). Unlike common gifted or physically disabled students, twice-exceptional students have extremely high disparities between strengths and weaknesses and their performance are highly inconsistent. They can't be identified early and given appropriate parenting unless their parents are highly aware of their conditions (Kan-yu Li, 2015). For those twice-exceptional students with certain accomplishment, their parents' high expectation is the dominant support that drives their independence. These parents' tremendous effort in their early learning stage helps them grow up with more positive behavior (Gui-fang Tsai & Ya-ling Hou, 2006).

In order to assist twice-exceptional students, their parents can build a family support system, and upgrade their conception of parenting by joining some study groups or conferences. These parents also can join some support groups that are related to twice-exceptional students, learn to modify family budgets and resources, strengthen their conviction and improve their understanding of the strengths/weaknesses of their children from their own observation and interaction with schools (Xiao-lan Zou & Tai-hua Lu, 2015).

Research Method

1. Research orientation and method

This research is a qualitative study on the self-narrative, in which the researcher recollects and reflects on her experience of raising a twice-exceptional child.

2. The researcher

The writer of this report is also the researcher of this study, who gleans, analyzes information and composes this report. The researcher has gone into special education for about thirteen years and is currently studying in the PhD program of Department of special education. In order to promote and master the parenting methods of twice-exceptional children, the researcher once took a course named Seminar on the Gifted Education for Special Groups. The researcher remains objective and neutral to abide by research ethics in this study.

The researcher's personal experience of parenting a twice-exceptional child

In terms of analysis, the researcher's personal experience of parenting her own twice-exceptional son can be divided into four phases, each of which contains several accounts and self-reflections:

1. Turning point—recognition of the particularity of the child

Account of November, 2009: My first child, Peter (henceforth referred as Peter), suffered from hypoxia during the labor process, and was later born by Cesarean delivery. I paid close attention to my baby boy, Peter, for fear of some latent side effects. Since Peter was a toddler, he had bumped into objects, hurt his forehead, and got bruises and wounds, some of which sometimes even needed suturing. I thought to myself these were what usually happened to an ordinary toddler until I suspected there was something wrong with Peter, a two-year-old boy who had a poor sucking ability, with saliva frequently coming out of his mouth. As an educator of special education, I took the initiative to handle this noticeable abnormality and take him to hospital.

Self-reflection: I have blamed myself for my insistence on natural birth, in the process of which hypoxia took place. If I had not stuck to my insistence so much, Peter would not have this problem. Yet, I did not feel depressed or helpless since I knew I was capable of confronting a condition like this.

Account of February, 2011: Peter was taken to hospital for assessment and was diagnosed as Developmental Delay at the age of two and half. The doctor recommended Peter to receive some sense coordination training and language intervention. Peter, therefore, received early intervention service, that is, each session once a week.

Self-reflection: Except for self-blame, I did not have any negative emotions. Instead, I had the initiative to take the doctor's advice and arrange early intervention sessions. Part of the reason is that being a special education major enabled me to face my child's condition in the very beginning.

Account of September, 2011: Both my husband and I had work to do. In the daytime, Peter was mainly taken care of by my mother. Peter asked her to read books to him every day, but this request was too difficult to carry out for my mother with only primary education. I accordingly hired a female babysitter to read picture books, draw pictures, play in the park and do handicrafts with him twice a week. Thanks to the

babysitter who assisted him in the reading process, Peter started to develop a reading habit, and knew some words gradually. He used to inquire about the words he noticed in the ads and read out the words he could recognize on his own. The babysitter once mentioned Peter performed much better than ordinary children of his age in reading comprehension. However, I did not pay much attention to this since my major concern at that time was his needs for assistance.

Self-reflection: The babysitter had played a great role in helping Peter develop a reading habit. Peter could make up stories from the pictures he read and recognize some words. Because of her, my mother could temporarily have some break time. I believe the babysitter is beneficial to Peter and contributes to his interest in learning.

Account of August, 2012: Peter told me about his desire to go to school when he was three and half. Although I was willing to fulfill his desire, I still worried if it was too early for a three-and-half-year-old child to start schooling, so I chose the small kindergarten close to our house. After two days of pre-school class, a teacher noticed that Peter performed quite well, and the current class failed to quench his thirst of knowledge. So, it was recommended that he receive a replacement in a class of higher level. I also thought there should not be a great gap between Peter and other kids of his age in the class of higher level given he was born in the latter part of the year. After I negotiated with Peter, he agreed to be transferred to a higher level.

Self-reflection: I wanted Peter to try a more advanced level and I was ready to adjust anything based on my observation of his performance.

Account of April, 2013: One day, I went to the kindergarten to take Peter home. A teacher informed me that Peter had recently performed a traditional custom, called Ba Chia Chiang (The Eight Police Officers of the Dead), and said some mumbo-jumbo. This behavior looked so weird that Peter was recommended to see a doctor or have evil spirits exorcised. Peter also liked to tell his peers about history, astronomy, and parade formation culture, and it was hard for him to stop talking once he started to talk about these subjects. However, his peers had no idea about these subjects and were unable to engage in the communication. I told the teacher that this was his interest in watching some temple festivals nearby and mimicking some acts, and I was ok with that. Also, I told the teacher I would communicate with Peter, and ask him to mimic those acts only at home. However, Peter refused to observe the teacher's prohibition later on and even asked other classmates to learn from him about those acts. Peter couldn't stop performing Ba Chia Chiang, so the teacher asked me to transfer my son to another kindergarten for fear that these acts would possibly have some bad impacts on other kids.

Self-reflection: The teacher did not accept Peter because of Peter's bizarre behavior as well as his own unfamiliarity with students with particular learning needs. I think the teachers in the preschool should have some knowledge and skills about special education. After all, the ages of from 0 to six are golden period for early intervention, and these preschool teachers can help identify children with latent developmental retardation and initiate early intervention as early as possible.

2. Facing challenges—overcoming my own concerns and supporting twice-exceptional Peter’s decision to join the placement test for early admission

Account of August, 2013: Peter was four years and seven months old. It was again the time for follow-up assessment. I informed the doctor that Peter exhibited some obstinate behavior. I also informed the doctor of his performance at home and school. The hospital did a series of assessments. Later, I returned to the hospital for the final report. I was notified that Peter was excellent in intellectual performance and language comprehension. He was a talented child. Relatively speaking, Peter couldn’t express his emotions well, he was extremely active and he had insufficient concentration. Peter also exhibited some obstinate behavior and particular interests. I was asked to observe whether Peter exhibited noticeable problems in social interaction. He might have suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity or Asperger Syndrome. Therefore, it was recommended that Peter continue early intervention and come back for follow-ups. We were recommended to make some more difference on Peter’s behavior.

Self-reflection: Through the doctor, I learned that Peter might be a gifted child. I had little idea about giftedness, so I did not pay attention to it. I just followed early intervention service and focused on enhancing Peter’s weak parts. Looking back now, I learn that I should have promoted his strong parts at the same time instead of mainly reinforcing his weak parts.

Account of July, 2014: I worried about Peter’s learning condition, so my husband and I virtually visited all kindergartens nearby for the one suitable for Peter. After our discussion, we decided one and transferred Peter to there. Peter studied in the program of the highest level and showed no any maladjustment. Except for relatively poor performance in writing, Peter adapted to the new setting well. The new kindergarten applied some language assistance sessions for Peter and I had Peter receive some early intervention service outside the kindergarten. One day, I received a call from a teacher of language assistance service and I was notified that it was not so urgent to deal with Peter’s problem with pronunciation in this stage. The teacher noticed Peter was obstinate and often obsessive about certain ideas, and asked me if there was anything similar to this situation. I replied that this situation took place quite often at home and Peter would accept any change only when I constantly negotiated with him. I learned that I should notify Peter and discuss with him before making any decision related to him.

Self-reflection: Communication between teachers and parents is important. As parents, we can not exactly know our son’s learning condition at school. Teachers informed us of this, so it was easier for me to specify the parts he needed for assistance.

Account February, 2015: The new semester started and it was time for practicing the graduation show and taking graduation photo. I told Peter he was going to take graduation photo twice and Peter wondered why he would do so. I told him, “Because you are going to study in the same level second time.” Peter replied, “I never say I want to study in the same class twice.” I said, “If you want to start elementary school earlier than children of your age, you have to take an exam.” Peter decided to give it a try, so I helped him apply for the placement test for early admission. I did not realize the test day happened to be the day of our trip to Japan until the moment I paid the

exam, so I later returned to the office to cancel his application and ask for a refund. I came home and explained to Peter about this condition. Peter expressed his preference of taking the test and his willingness to give his younger brother the chance to travel overseas. The next day, Peter's father went back to re-apply for this exam. On the test day, Peter's grandmother took him to attend the exam.

Self-reflection: My son had his own opinion. I allowed him to make decisions since he was little and I always respected these decisions. However, I agreed to his decisions under the condition that the choice he made was correct and harmless. After all, he was still too little and his judgment was not good enough.

Account of March, 2015: Peter was six years and four months old. Because of the problems of concentration and volatile emotions, Peter's right eye constantly winked and his right cheek trembled for a period of time. He was then taken to hospital and was suspected of Tourette Syndrome. It took a while to confirm the diagnosis. Peter's insistence and obstinate behavior along with these new conditions worried me more. Fortunately, it turned out to be a case of severe eye allergy and the symptom ceased after seeing a doctor for a few months. It was a false alarm.

Self-reflection: Educator of special education as I was, I still got the jitters when a new condition emerged. I was worried that my son's condition was getting worse and I might not be able to handle it.

3. Worrying—my inner struggles and torment during my twice-exceptional son's early admission to elementary school

Account of March 2015: I had been struggling with the decision to have Peter early admitted to elementary school after he passed this early admission test for gifted preschool children. What worried me was not Peter's academic performance, but his not being physically/mentally mature enough to adapt to the elementary school and to handle some interpersonal problems, especially when some of his behavioral problems accumulated. For this reason, my husband and I talked to Peter about the possible problems he was going to face and discussed with him. However, Peter still insisted on early admission. I also consulted some professional scholars and other parents who had their kids early admitted to elementary school. All of them agreed to this decision, so we respected Peter's will and allow him to be early admitted to elementary school.

Self-reflection: Childhood is once in everyone's lifetime, so I hoped Peter could have stayed in the kindergarten a little longer and had some more care-free moments. I re-confirmed his intention several times before admission, and Peter was firmly determined. Despite my own worry, I could not but support his decision.

Account of August, 2015: Although I had had a lot of preparation beforehand, I still felt anxious after he started schooling. To my surprise, Peter adapted pretty well although he sometimes felt sad that some boys in his class refused to play with him because of his younger age. Hearing this, I felt sorry for him, but I decided to teach him how to confront a situation like this. I told him it was not easy to pass the placement test and passing this test meant he was capable of handling schoolwork and there was no connection between learning and age. I asked him not to take this matter too seriously, and he agreed with me. Later, he didn't care about it so much.

Self-reflection: To handle the issue of Peter's early admission, I had made a plenty of preparation and I even improved Peter's social skills and self-care ability. So, it did not surprise me when Peter encountered a problem with his peers. Fortunately, I had made preparation to handle things like this.

4. Peter's immersing in learning happily—taking him to join a co-learning group after school

Account of 2016: As a special education major, I had Peter receive early intervention before schooling, and all I wanted from Peter was that he could learn happily. As a result, I did not have much demand on Peter's academic performance whether he passed the placement test or studied in the gifted class. After Peter entered elementary school, I decided to take care of him on my own and organize a co-learning group with other mothers so that he could have a group of learning mates, and enjoy different activities every day after homework. Activities were like physical exercises, board games, reading, field trips, visiting National Science And Technology Museum and other museums, etc. Peter learned from fun and this learning pattern provided him with a great amount of extracurricular knowledge and an understanding of the importance of teamwork. This made me believe I had made a correct decision.

Self-reflection: I was convinced that learning is a lifelong matter and the knowledge children learned from the classroom was not enough for them to cope with the coming complicated world. Hence, with my husband's support, I organized the co-learning group. Peter had a very inquiring mind, and this co-learning mode had enriched his learning life and generated a sibling-like bond with other group members. Every day, Peter along with other group members did homework, created new games, learned how to nurture interpersonal relationships, and make up with friends after some quarrels. To my surprise, I made friends with other parents. We encouraged each other, and learned from each other. I earned more benefits than I had expected.

Recommendations for educators and the parents of twice-exceptional children

The researcher analyzed and classified the textual analysis as shown above and came up with some suggestions for the parents of twice-exceptional children and related educators as follows:

1. The importance of early intervention and treatment

In the process of raising children, parents should be aware that children will never grow up safe and sound all the way to adulthood, and they always go through certain major or minor physical conditions. Although I have received some professional training about special education, I still had to follow the recommendations from doctors and other professionals when I was notified that Peter had a problem of developmental delay so that I was able to arrange suitable training and lessons for my child and to make early intervention more efficient by combining some therapeutic activities and methods with everyday activities. From my own experience of raising my son, I believe that the children will have a better outcome of early intervention as long as their parents face their conditions positively and address them in right moments.

2. Understand and respect specialties of the children while promoting their weaknesses with their strengths

Everyone has his/her own strengths and weaknesses. What tells twice-exceptional children from others is that they have greater disparities between strengths and weaknesses. If the education they receive makes a good use of their strengths to facilitate improving their weaknesses, they are more likely to demonstrate their outstanding talents and build up confidence. For instance, Peter learned some lessons from the co-learning group, such as leadership, teamwork, and respecting and listening to other's opinions. His social relationship was greatly improved and he became less obstinate and insistent.

3. Cooperation between the parents is also the key to successful parenting

My husband offered great help by sending our son to and from school. He also often communicated with the school teachers about Peter's performance. I often shared with him some parenting articles written by some professionals. After this kind of interaction, my husband was familiar with the parenting suitable for twice-exceptional children. Our collaboration did help solve problems and offer psychological relief. As a result, I was very hopeful and affirmative in my parenting process of helping Peter grow up well.

4. The guidance of some important others in the children's life

The most treasurable thing in one's life is to have a "mentor" who notices one's inner abilities and is willing to help them realize. Fortunately, Peter met more than one mentor, who helped him discover his own talents and offered opportunities for him to demonstrate his talents. Thanks to them, Peter's strengths can be seen.

Conclusion

Peter and I can be regarded as the mentor for each other. Because of his presence in my life, I have made progress in education field although the process of raising him up demands me a lot of attention and efforts. With gratitude, I hope I can continue to guide him forward. At the same time, I can sympathize more with and work better for my students and their parents because of my similar experience.

As a teacher of special education and a mother of a twice-exceptional child, I learned one thing from my experience: the parents are the best teachers of their children. For the parents of those children with special needs, it is highly recommended that they cooperate with professionals as early as possible for a better result of early intervention and treatment. This is the key to my successful raising of my twice-exceptional son.

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