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# The Pilot Project of Twice-Exceptional Gifted Education in Taipei – Reflections on the Policy

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As a coordinator of the Pilot Project of Twice-exceptional Gifted Education in Taipei, I have been very fortunate to be able to contribute to my profession in this field. With the approaching closure of the pilot project, I wish to take the opportunity to reflect on the implementation of the policy. I hold some strong views, which often clash with the dominant thinking on the issues. In this paper, I explain the problems we confront and discuss some possible actions which we might take to move on.

## **A poison with sugar coating?**

Special Educational Needs (SEN) students with above-average IQ scores in public schools in Taipei were invited to join the pilot project. Education provision included a Gifted and Talented curriculum, which was designed to arouse students' potentials and inspire their superior talents, alongwith a SEN curriculum targeted at their limited abilities. Their parents asserted that since their children were gifted or talented, SEN education was not needed. They preferred their children to get "the reputation of Gifted and Talented (G & T)" and wanted to get rid of "the label of SEN." Such thinking caused a serious problem by ignoring the importance of addressing their children's weaknesses and setting unreasonable expectations for their children.

The parents' attitude to the project was "give us more G & T, no more SEN." It brings out the positive effect and the negative effect simultaneously. On the one hand, it makes twice-exceptional learners consider their strengths. With a positive self-image, the pupils are really motivated and this has an impact on their learning. On the other hand, their parents' lack of sensitivity to their children's special educational needs was an issue. Strongly influenced by their parents, the children refused the provision of SEN curriculum or counselling. Their learning problems often worsen because of this lack of SEN awareness. It seems like an "opportunity trap".

## **The tension between G & T teachers and SEN teachers**

Due to insufficient understanding, G & T teachers and SEN teachers in Taipei experience tension in the division of their labour. They may also believe that twice-exceptional gifted education is a new burden which might result in a heavy workload.

In the past, G & T and SEN were regarded as two parallel lines. Nowadays, the aim of twice-exceptional gifted education is to mix the two of them. Due to the lack of knowledge of this new issue, the teachers are afraid to accept the current trend. The truth is that many teachers are afraid of changing.

In fact, that is a misunderstanding. The original intention of the policy is to bridge the profession of G & T and SEN teachers to provide twice-exceptional gifted pupils a better educational service. Through collaboration, alleviating their workload could be 'just around the corner'. The key challenge is how to team them up in order to make them work together for the children's brighter future.

### **The conflict between parents and policy administrators**

This phenomenon occurs due to the difficulty of resource allocation. With the awakening of the concept of twice-exceptional gifted education, parents were empowered and actively strive for their children's rights. Not only twice-exceptional pupils' parents but also SEN pupils' parents spare no efforts to be categorised within the cohort of giftedness. That is to say, even SEN pupils who were not identified as gifted wish to join the project. However, administrators could not meet all the parents' needs because of their limited budget and the limited human resources.

What is more startling is that parents argue for getting twice-exceptional gifted identification in order to give their children a shortcut to get resources easily when their children advance to higher education. They consider the identification as a passport to go anywhere they want. One example is a parent in our research who hopes her child is diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in order to receive twice-exceptional gifted education. She knows it is impossible for her child to be identified as gifted through the general gifted identification process. Nevertheless, through twice-exceptional gifted identification, her child may have the chance to be identified. However, the child proved not to have Asperger's Syndrome.

Policy administrators try to distribute resources to people in need appropriately. But many parents are motivated to gain "the more, the better". The tension between them seems unavoidable in the absence of better communication and dialogue to obtain mutual understanding.

### **The gap between idealism and realism**

According to theories, the twice-exceptional gifted identification process should be adjusted in order to meet students' needs. We endeavour to unlock students' potential by decreasing the negative effects of handicaps, which may hinder their performance. How it is adjusted depends on the educators' professional evaluation.

One of the adjustments is to lower the criteria for acceptance into gifted programs. Based on the experience of the three-year pilot project, students accepted on the basis of lower criteria, suffer from great challenges when they enter gifted classes. Even if gifted education teachers attempt to narrow the gap between twice-

exceptional gifted pupils with lower criteria and the general gifted pupils by designing individual teaching and individual counseling, the improvement of students' performance is still limited. Some students even lose confidence in themselves and have inferior self-images.

Therefore, policy administrators suggest other adjustments rather than lowering the criteria. This clashes with the theories. Thus there is indeed a gap between idealism and realism. Before a policy is implemented, the pros and cons should be seriously discussed and assessed. Since the pros outweigh the cons, we have to respect the choice. In conclusion, what is the most imperative here is to balance idealism and realism and to bridge theory and practice.

### **The struggle between 'absolutely superior' and 'relatively superior'**

We have faced a dilemma regarding the selection of our subjects. Should the educational provision be offered to 'absolutely superior' twice-exceptional gifted learners who are outstanding in their talents compared with general students or 'relatively superior' ones who are better than other SEN peers? We decided to give both groups special provision. The second problem was who should offer the provision.

In our pilot project, both cohorts were selected. We found 'absolutely superior' students gained a lot from our project, but 'relatively superior' students did not. That is because the 'relatively superior' students' parents held unrealistic expectations of their children. They considered their children to be as smart as the general gifted students and put their children under great pressure.

Based on this experience, we recommend that absolutely twice-exceptional gifted learners join our project as the curriculum really motivates them. As for the relatively superior students, we did not advise them to do so. Instead, we suggested that SEN teachers offer appropriate educational provision for these students in the SEN resource room.

In traditional situations, SEN teachers often help students with their learning difficulties only. Yet from a contemporary viewpoint, SEN teachers could also inspire students by focusing on their superior abilities. For our relatively superior twice-exceptional gifted learners, we believe placement in the SEN resource room is a better choice for their learning.

### **Effective vs efficient**

As Klees (2008) noted: "In terms of understanding, most fundamentally, all these theories are focused on marginalization. They see the world as composed of systems and structures that maintain, reproduce, and legitimate existing inequalities. From these perspectives, inequalities are not system failures but the logical consequence of successful system functioning." This statement helps us to reflect on what we are doing. We conducted the pilot project on twice-exceptional gifted education over a

three-year period. What did we expect? To set up a perfect policy which makes the 'system' function smoothly? Or just to meet every student's need? I would argue that to establish a perfect and efficient policy is not too difficult to attain, yet to meet every pupil's need is really challenging.

For a policy administrator, 'efficiency' is paramount, that is, to use the least amount of budget to get the best outcomes. However, what teachers and parents are concerned with is 'effectiveness'. They care about whether the children's needs are met and their potential realised. To resolve this tension, we refer to the origin of our policy. Where does the policy stem from? What is the original intention of drawing up the policy? Does the policy achieve our goals?

### **Do we marginalise our twice-exceptional gifted learners?**

As Klees (2008) illustrated, marginalisation is a pervasive phenomenon which we need to consider. The issue is so controversial that it cannot be neglected. In the field of special education, labelling is a problem that concerns many educators. Even in gifted education, labelling is an issue. Nowadays, with the new term 'twice-exceptional gifted learner' being created, a new pattern of labeling appears.

With the new classification, marginalisation has potentially become more serious. Now that the terms of SEN and G & T are regarded as 'special' by the public, the term of twice-exceptional gifted seems 'doubly special'. By such labelling, it may be more difficult for such students to integrate into society. I understand labelling is inevitable since we have to spotlight the issues and provide the children with appropriate education. What we could do is to carefully examine the possibility of marginalising our pupils when offering what we think is the best educational provision to students.

### **Conclusion**

It is not intended to suggest that twice-exceptional gifted education is 'bankrupt' nor should we "throw out the baby with the bath water." I advocate the policy because it reminds us to be attentive to this cohort of learners' needs. The import of the issue cannot be overemphasised.

However, there are still gaps existing in the various facets of the policy as I mentioned earlier. I look forward to seeing more dialogues in order to narrow and bridge the gap. In addition, I yearn for a more equitable society where differences are highly respected and no child is marginalised. No matter what hardship we face, I am confident of a better future. After all, it is not so much where we stand but in what direction we are moving.

### **References**

Klees, S.J. (2008). Reflections on theory, method, and practice in comparative and international education. *Comparative Education Review*, 52, 301-328.