

A Qualitative Study of Parents' Perspectives and Advocacy for Twice-Exceptional Children

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored parents' perspectives and advocacy efforts for twice-exceptional children. The research aimed to understand how parents perceive twice-exceptionality, how they support their children, and the barriers they encounter. An exploratory research design was employed, with data collected from six parents (N = 6) using purposive sampling. A twice-exceptional checklist, demographic form, and a semi-structured interview protocol were utilised for participant selection and data collection. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Three major themes emerged: comparison, support, and barriers. Parents often compared their children with typically developing peers, expressing emotional distress over their children's social and emotional challenges. Despite these difficulties, parents actively supported their children through advocacy, provision of resources, and emotional care. Notably, mothers reported a lack of familial support, particularly from spouses, as a significant barrier. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive support systems and effective management strategies tailored to the unique needs of twice-exceptional children.

Keywords: Twice-exceptional Children, Parents' Perspectives, Support Strategies, Barriers.

Introduction

Twice-exceptional (2e) children possess extraordinary potential in areas such as intelligence, creativity, and leadership, while also experiencing one or more developmental challenges such as learning impairments, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), making the identification of their dual needs particularly difficult. Due to this "masking" phenomenon, giftedness can mask disabilities and vice versa (Baum et al., 2017). Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to explore the identification and experiences of twice-exceptional children, as many individuals were unfamiliar with the term twice-exceptional prior to focus group discussions.

Children classified as twice-exceptional are gifted individuals who also have disabilities. Coleman et al. (2005) emphasised that twice-exceptional children often exhibit high

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performance in one academic domain while facing difficulties in others. Similarly, Brody and Mills (1997) noted that these children typically demonstrate a discrepancy between performance and potential, showing strengths in one area alongside deficits in another. According to Yewchuk and Lupart (1988), as cited in Assouline et al. (2006), twice-exceptional children are identified based on exceptional talent or giftedness in one or more domains combined with the co-existence of learning, emotional, physical, sensory, and/or developmental disabilities.

The term gifted was first used by Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who also explored learning difficulties in her research in the early 1920s (Hollingworth, 1923). Later, in the 1940s, Hans Asperger introduced the idea of multiple diagnoses by identifying individuals with high IQs and autism-like traits (Reis, Baum, & Burke, 2014; Baldwin et al., 2015). During the 1960s and 1970s, researchers like Gallagher (1966) and Maker (1977) formally investigated “gifted-disabled” children and the “peaks and valleys” in their performance profiles, which influenced federal policy, such as the Marland Report (1972) (Firmender et al., 2013; Foley et al., 2011). The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) further reinforced the recognition that giftedness and disability can coexist (Leggett et al., 2010).

In contrast, Savant Syndrome refers to individuals, often with autism, who demonstrate extraordinary skills (e.g., in music or art) despite significant cognitive or developmental limitations (Treffert, 2009). Twice-exceptional children, however, require both enrichment for their advanced abilities and remedial support for their challenges (Krochak & Ryan, 2007).

Despite their cognitive strengths, twice-exceptional children often experience social isolation and exclusion due to advanced interests and emotional maturity that set them apart from their peers. This can lead to loneliness, rejection, or the pressure to conceal their abilities to blend in. These social challenges may result in low self-esteem, difficulty forming relationships, and emotional distress, highlighting the importance of environments that support both intellectual and social-emotional development (Yaman & Sokzem, 2020).

Many parents’ advocacy efforts aim not only at addressing their children’s internal challenges but also at overcoming societal barriers. According to the social model of disability, individuals are disabled not by their impairments but by social structures, attitudes, and environments, such as inaccessible spaces, negative expectations, and labelling. Parents in this study frequently reported educating schools about inclusive communication, flexible participation, and strength-based approaches. However, they also faced resistance rooted in a deficit-oriented, medicalised framework. While the social model is not without limitations—such as minimising the lived experience of impairment—it offers a compelling foundation: by eliminating stigma and fostering supportive learning environments, twice-exceptional children can thrive rather than merely cope (Ronksley, 2015).

Dabrowski’s (1964) theory of positive disintegration complements this discussion by exploring how internal conflict and overexcitability—common in twice-exceptional children—can lead to personal growth when nurtured in a supportive environment. His model involves five types of overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginative, and emotional. According to Piechowski and Daniels (2009), gifted and twice-exceptional individuals are more likely to undergo disintegrative crises, which may result in psychological transformation. Wiley (2015) further explained that this process can lead to “secondary integration,” where individuals develop an authentic, independent identity despite previous emotional struggles.

Educational programs for parents often incorporate Erikson’s eight-stage psychosocial theory, which underscores how crises—such as trust vs. mistrust or identity vs. role confusion—shape lifelong development (Cross, 2001). Silverman (1997) described asynchronous development in gifted and twice-exceptional children, where intellectual growth surpasses emotional or physical maturation. This imbalance can result in emotional delay, identity confusion, and hypersensitivity (Wiley, 2015). Twice-exceptional children may be academically advanced but emotionally or socially unprepared for the expectations of their developmental level. Silverman

(1997) found that children with high ability and coexisting disabilities often exhibit the most pronounced developmental asynchrony, necessitating age-appropriate and tailored educational responses.

Recent research highlights the increasing number of college students diagnosed with ASD who also qualify as twice-exceptional. Despite their potential, little is known about the experiences and factors that shape their successful transition to higher education. Madaus et al. (2022) conducted semi-structured interviews with parents of ten such students in U.S. institutions. Parents shared insights into the most supportive and challenging aspects of high school and postsecondary transition, offering recommendations to improve services for this specific population.

Advocating for a twice-exceptional child can be overwhelming. Besnoy et al. (2015) interviewed parents ($n = 8$) of twice-exceptional elementary school children and found that parents often had to simultaneously advocate for their child's disability and protect their giftedness. This dual responsibility shaped their expectations of school systems and revealed gaps in professional knowledge. Once parents became familiar with educational policy and terminology, they were better able to advocate effectively. However, limited access to resources on twice-exceptionality remained a significant barrier.

Neumeister et al. (2013) explored primary caregivers' perceptions of their role in their children's academic success. Findings revealed that mothers played a key role by first recognising both the gifts and disabilities of their children, then securing evaluations and supports, shaping self-identity, and promoting advocacy and high expectations, despite the presence of disabilities.

Johnson et al. (2024) built upon the foundation of parental involvement by conducting a qualitative phenomenological study with 11 parents of highly and profoundly gifted children. Using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis, eight themes emerged, including self-efficacy, advocacy, cultural context, community belonging, and the effects of COVID-19 on gifted education. These insights support schools, counsellors, and communities in understanding parental needs for connection and support.

Finally, Papadopoulos (2021) synthesised recent research on parenting gifted and talented (G/T) children, with a focus on their social-emotional needs. The study emphasised that authoritative parenting—which fosters independence and motivation—positively influences gifted children's development. In contrast, authoritarian parenting was associated with poor psychological outcomes. Reducing the stress of caregiving can enhance parents' ability to support the complex developmental trajectory of their gifted children.

Research Gap

An in-depth examination of current literature on twice-exceptional children revealed an extensive research gap in parental knowledge and understanding, particularly in the setting of Pakistan. The majority of existing research has focused on educational professionals, with little emphasis paid to how parents detect, interpret, and respond to the complicated combined demands of twice-exceptional children. Preliminary findings revealed that many Pakistani parents are unfamiliar with the phrase "twice-exceptional," despite witnessing such features in their children. As a result, this study attempted to investigate parents' conceptual knowledge and the advocacy techniques they use to assist their children. By addressing this gap, the research aims to enhance contextual knowledge and inform practices that empower parents to support the unique needs of twice-exceptional children in Pakistan effectively.

Rationale of the Study

The study aimed to address a significant research gap concerning the awareness and understanding of twice-exceptional children among parents. Parents were familiar with the concept of twice-exceptional children, but they were often unfamiliar with the term. Therefore,

the study focused on exploring the term twice-exceptional children, how they compare their child with others, and support them. This exploration and its implications for management and support aimed to fill the identified research gap and enhance understanding of how to best address the needs of twice-exceptional children.

Research Questions

1. What are the twice-exceptional children as perceived by parents?
2. How do parents compare and support the needs of twice-exceptional children?
3. What types of barriers do parents face in the management and support of twice-exceptional children?

Methodology

Research Design

The current research study employed an exploratory research design to investigate parents' perspectives and advocacy for twice-exceptional children, providing valuable insights into their understanding and experiences.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of six parents' perspectives (N = 6) were taken from different Special Child Education Center of Lahore for this study. Purposive sampling strategy was used for this study.

Demographic Information

Table 1: Summary Table of Study Sample Parent (N=6)

Sr. No	Code	Gender	Age	Education	Child Code
1	P1F1	Female	32	BSc	C3M3
2	P2F2	Female	30	MBA	C1F1
3	P3F3	Female	39	BSc Zoology	C5M5
4	P4F4	Female	30	B.Ed. (Hons)	C4M4
5	P5F5	Female	35	Master in Urdu	C2F2
6	P6F6	Female	34	BSc	C6F6

Note: To establish and maintain anonymity and confidentiality of information, each participant was given an assumed name. B.Ed. = bachelor of education, MBA= master in business administration

Table 2: Summary Table of Twice-exceptional children (N=6)

Sr. No	Code	Gender	Age	Problem	Exceptionality
1	C1F1	Female	05	Mild Autism	Music singing/ instrument played piano/ guitar
2	C2F2	Female	05	Mild Autism	Exceptional reading skill in English
3	C3M3	Male	05	Mild autism	IQ/ vocabulary/Reading
4	C4M4	Male	06	Mild autism	Abstract art/imagination
5	C5M5	Male	11	Mild autism	Sketches/YouTube channel
6	C6F6	Female	09	ADHD	Exceptional in reading

Note: C= child, M= male, F=female

Inclusion Criteria

The study only included children who scored highly on the twice-exceptional children checklist, and then the parents of those twice-exceptional children were asked to share their perspectives and observation.

Exclusion Criteria

The study excluded the children without a confirmed diagnosis of twice-exceptionality.

Data Collection Strategies

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of twice-exceptional children. Each interview ranged from 30 to 40 minutes. Demographic details of the interviewees, such as gender, designation, and years of experience, were collected to identify them. The Twice-Exceptional Checklist (Silverman et al., 2016) was used to assess twice-exceptional children. However, this checklist lacks validity and reliability and is used solely as a form to recognize twice-exceptional children.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained to ensure adherence to established research standards and protect the participants' rights and well-being. The process began with identifying parents whose children were believed to be twice-exceptional. For this purpose, the Twice-Exceptional Checklist developed by Silverman et al. (2016) was utilized as a guiding tool, even though it lacks formal validation. Despite this limitation, the checklist served as a helpful framework in recognizing the unique profiles of children who display both exceptional abilities and learning or behavioral challenges.

Once potential participants were identified, those who met the criteria were invited to take part in the study through in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Participants were purposefully selected from various special education centers across Lahore to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences. Efforts were made to build rapport and create a comfortable environment for open and honest conversation.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes and included a series of open-ended questions, beginning with basic demographic information such as gender, occupation, and years of parenting experience. These background details were essential for understanding the context of each parent's perspective and ensuring a rich, meaningful interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a six-step qualitative process that includes data familiarization, first coding, topic identification, review, theme definition, and final write-up. It starts with a thorough absorption in the material, followed by meticulous labelling of relevant parts and grouping these codes into logical themes. The researchers then polish and precisely describe each subject before publishing a thorough report that integrates thematic insights with demonstrative data samples. This technique provides a flexible yet organized framework for analyzing complicated qualitative data in well-defined stages.

Ethical Considerations

The Permission letter was given to authorities of every special education children center to gain permission from them for data collection. Before conducting an interview, a signed letter from authorities were given to interview for their further permission. The letter included the purpose of the study, and a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality of all information given. Since interviews need to be recorded, permission will also sought to use audio recording during the course of the interview.

Results

The results of the study the parents' perspectives and advocacy efforts for twice-exceptional children were arranged by providing separate tables and thematic maps of codes, subthemes and main themes discussed on semantic and latent levels. Each section is supported by participants verbatim and researchers' summation and conclusion supported by literature.

Table 3: Emerging Themes, Subthemes, and Codes from Parents' Perspectives (N=6)

Interview Questions	Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Do you know the term "twice-exceptional children"?	Twice-exceptional children definition	Unawareness	No idea, Unclear, Recognized intelligence, Strong reading skills
How do you support your child's exceptionality?	Support	Exceptionalities	Provided resources, Books, Home library, YouTube, Mobile phone, Mirror learning
Do you compare your child with other "normal" children?	Support	Compare with others	Observed other children, Felt disappointment, Acceptance, Belief in God, Trust in God's will
What do you expect from psychologists or teachers?	Support	Expectations from professionals	Focus on child's strengths, Individual treatment, Use of music, Behavior-focused support
What kind of barriers do you face while dealing with your twice-exceptional child?	Barriers	Difficulties	Lack of spousal support, Toilet training issues, Child seen as a blessing

Emerging Themes of the Study

Thematic analysis of parents' interviews revealed key patterns in their understanding of twice-exceptional children, support provided on the part of parents to such children, and barriers/challenges faced by the parents while nourishing and educating their twice-exceptional children. The following themes and subthemes emerged from the qualitative data.

Theme-1: Twice-Exceptional Children Definition

Twice-exceptional children are those who are exceptional in one or more domain such as science, art, technology, visual, spatial, math along with one or more disorder. These disabilities include language disorder, physical disabilities, specific learning disorder, Attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder, Autism spectrum Disorder (Reis et al., 2014).

This part of the study explored definition of twice-exceptional children from the parents. The idea was to understand how the parent defined twice-exceptional children. In this regard, the views of all the parents on the question "what is twice-exceptional children?" were analyzed using thematic analysis. Based on results one subtheme (unawareness) was constructed.

Subtheme-I: Unawareness

Parent were asked about the definition of twice-exceptional children. All of them didn't know the term twice-exceptional children. However, they did recognize special exceptional traits in their own children such as strong reading abilities. But the General consensus was that they are unaware from the term of twice-exceptional children.

"No, I don't know." (P1F1)

"I don't know." (P2F2)

Theme-2: Support

A study was conducted with parent (N= 8), Findings revealed that parents that safeguarded their brilliant child's abilities while still advocating for their child's impairment. This overriding topic exposed parents' ignorance of the field and affected their expectations of the local educational system (Besnoy et al., 2015).

Parent were asked, how they support their twice-exceptional child. In this regard, the views of all the parent on the question were analyzed using thematic analysis. Based on results, the subthemes like exceptionalities, compare with other, and expectation from professionals (psychologist/ teacher) were constructed.

Subtheme-I: Exceptionalities

Parent were asked about the support of twice-exceptional children, they mentioned that they support their exceptionality in a different way.

“I have my own library, whenever I go there I took my child, I have also book story for my child and we there just read the books.” (P6F6)

“I have a mirror in my home, and I paste different word on mirror, so my child see and learn different words.” (P5F5)

Subtheme-II: Compare with Others

A question was asked to all of them, they compare their child with other? Some of them compare their child with normal child while other parent never compare their child with other.

“Yes I do, when I see other children playing with their mother, they understand their mothers’ emotions, then I think why not my child.” (P3F3)

Subtheme-III: Expectation from Professionals

Parent were asked what they expect from professionals (psychologists/ teachers), most of them answered that, they want best for their child.

“I just expect that, I know my child is intellectual superior, so they used them their superiority don’t used all those strategies which is common for other child.”(P4F4)

“I just want do best for my child, do work on their speech, behavior especially.”(P2F2)

Theme-3: Barriers

This part of the study explored the Barrier parent face while dealing the twice-exceptional children. The idea was to understand how the parents face the barrier while dealing with the twice-exceptional children. In this regard, the views of all the parent on the question “what kind of barrier they face while dealing with twice-exceptional children?” were analyzed using thematic analysis. Based on results one subtheme (difficulties) was constructed.

Subtheme-I: Difficulties

A question was asked to all of them, what kind of barrier they face while dealing twice-exceptional, they mention some difficulties, yet one parents claiming that my child is blessing for me.

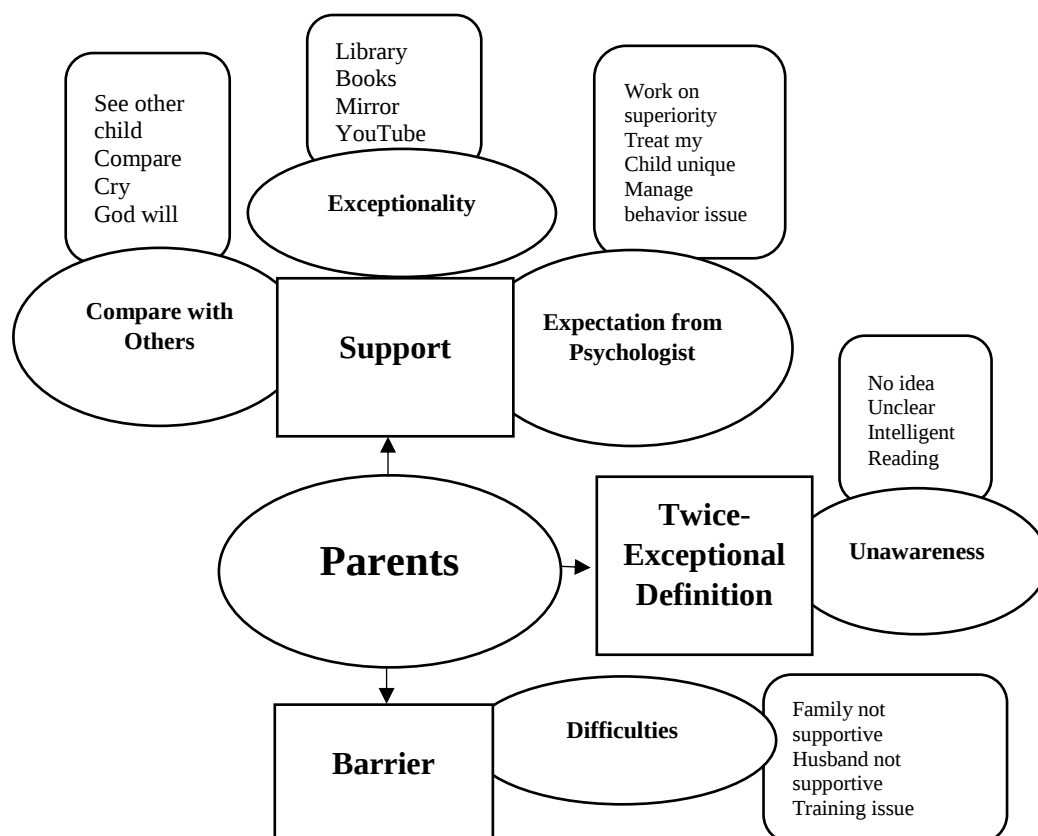
“I am very disturbed, my husband is not supportive, and sometimes I think what I can do.” (P3F3). “My child is blessing for me, we performed a lot of ummrahs due to our child.” (P1F1)

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of the current qualitative research work was based on three main themes of the study, which were derived through thematic analysis: the definition of twice-exceptional children, parental support for twice-exceptional children, and the barriers that were faced by parents during the handling of their twice-exceptional children. The framework began by investigating parents’ understanding and views of twice-exceptionality, which revealed a widespread lack of familiarity with the word, twice-exceptional, while detecting exceptional characteristics in their children. It also emphasized how parents encouraged their children’s talents while managing their obstacles, frequently comparing them to others and seeking individualized assistance from specialists. Finally, the framework covered the emotional,

social, and family challenges parents faced, highlighting the importance of systemic assistance. Together, these themes shaped our understanding of parental advocacy and the complex experience of parenting twice-exceptional children.

Figure 1: Thematic map showing interlink of themes, subthemes and codes regarding twice-exceptional definition, support and barriers on the part of parents (N=6).



Discussion

In this discussion section, the researcher(s) examined the parents' perspectives and advocacy for twice-exceptional children. From parents' perspectives, they were unaware from the definition of twice-exceptional children, they didn't even know the term twice-exceptional children, but they understood the concept, once it was explained by the researcher. Twice-exceptional children are those who are exceptional in one or more domain such as science, art, technology, visual, spatial, math along with one or more disorder. These disabilities include language disorder, physical disabilities, specific learning disorder, Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Autism spectrum Disorder (Reis et al., 2014).

Most of the child assess twice-exceptional children through checklist, often identifying only mild autism, in Pakistan, the only center for special child's focus on autism center, but there are many exceptionality and disorder that define proper twice-exceptional children, as one of the teacher mentioned that "I know a child who has a oppositional disorder and trichotillomania but exceptional in dancing". Furthermore, According to (IDEA) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, there are 13 disabilities such as, Autism, ADHD, sensory processing disorder, dyslexia, specific learning disorder, anxiety, executive functioning issue, speech disorder, mood disorder and language disorder, which relates with twice-exceptional children.

Furthermore, how they support their twice-exceptional children? As mention, a study was conducted with parent ($N=8$), wherein the findings revealed that parents that safeguarded their brilliant child's abilities while still advocating for their child's impairment. This overriding topic exposed parents' ignorance of the field and affected their expectations of the local educational system (Besnoy et al., 2015). However some parent support their child in exceptionality by providing resources such as musical instrument, as one parent mentioned that "I have mirror in my room, so I paste different words on that mirror in order to enhance their vocabulary" they support child as well as their exceptionality.

In addition to that, parents frequently compared their child to other children, noting how those children interacted with their parents and understood their feelings, and felt tremendous regret and despair as they questioned why their own child couldn't do the same. Parents faced a lack of support from their families and the absences of encouragement from the husbands was identified as the main barriers. These parenting stress lead parents of twice-exceptional children to contemplate and in some cases parents of twice-exceptional children may feel lonely, hopeless and in some instances it can be heart breaking (Wells, 2018).

Implications

The study's theoretical goal is to create models that explain how twice-exceptional children's skills and difficulties change over time. In practical terms, it seeks to guide customized interventions like individualized enrichment and education plans (IEP/IET) incorporate family-centered supports, and encourage cooperative working between educators, experts, and families in order to meet the particular needs and strengths of every child.

Limitations and Suggestions

The study's external validity is restricted as it only included parents from Lahore. Additionally, the results may be influenced by response and recollection bias, such as self-reporting distortions, which are typical in qualitative research. Resource restrictions also limited sample size and data depth, thereby jeopardizing richness and interpretability. To improve future study, data collection should be broadened to include various Pakistani cities, mixed approaches to eliminate bias, and varied sources such as documents, interviews, and focus groups to increase validity and generalizability.

Conclusion

The present research explored parents' perspectives and advocacy efforts for twice-exceptional children. Findings revealed that most parents were initially unfamiliar with the term twice-exceptional. Three primary themes emerged: comparison, support, and barriers. Parents frequently compared their children with typically developing peers, expressing emotional distress and questioning why their own children struggled with social and emotional understanding. Despite these challenges, parents played a crucial role in supporting their children's exceptional abilities through advocacy, provision of resources, and emotional care. Furthermore, a significant barrier reported by mothers was the lack of familial support—particularly the absence of encouragement from spouses. This lack of support intensified their challenges and highlighted the need for broader family and institutional involvement in addressing the needs of twice-exceptional children.

It is hoped that this study will serve as a foundation for future research and contribute to the development of new theories and interventions. By addressing the insights presented here, researchers and practitioners can work toward enhancing the well-being and potential of twice-exceptional children through a deeper understanding of their unique needs and the experiences of their caregivers.

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