Chapter 10

A Voice and a Choice: My Journey From 2x Learner to 2x Teacher

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ABSTRACT

The author shares personal reflections on her own talent trajectory and development from childhood to adulthood. Educational background and experiences inform decision-making at every level as a teacher. This chapter attempts to unpack the lessons learned from the experience of a twice-exceptional child put into practice. Learning and reflecting on individual experiences is key to understanding these populations of learners, but not only gifted students can become teachers of the gifted or special populations of gifted learners. Teachers should not ignore research-based best practice in a blind belief in the universal transfer of personal experience for different times, different cultures, and different students. However, through personal reflection, a teacher can approach students from a different angle, hopefully to support them and share those parts of experience that might benefit them. This chapter will focus also on how these insights have shaped the author’s work with gifted learners at the high school level, and will discuss commonalities found in action research with her students.

INTRODUCTION

As a teacher, I believe in my students and the importance of the stories they have to tell. Their voice in their own education is of paramount importance to me, certainly because I want them to have ownership and autonomy in their learning, but perhaps, at a more instinctual level, because I never felt I had a voice in most of my classrooms as a young girl. This chapter is my attempt to share some of my reflections on my own talent trajectory and development from childhood to adulthood. More than just a backstory, my educational background and experiences “growing up gifted” inform my decision-making at every level as a teacher. Of course, this is not to say that only gifted students can become teachers of the gifted, or that I ignore research-based best practice in a blind belief in the universal transfer of my own experience for different times, different cultures and different students. Rather, I believe that my experience allows me to approach my students from a different angle, hopefully to support them and share those experiences.
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parts of experience that might benefit them. This chapter will focus on my own profile and highlight personal, social, and academic experiences that influenced me as a gifted child who grew up to become a high school Latin teacher, working with a wide range of student populations, including the gifted. The chapter will conclude with a section on how my own story has influenced my work with gifted learners at the high school level.

EARLY CHALLENGES

From day one, it was clear I would not meet anyone’s expectations of normal. I was born in a suburb of Chicago in the early 80’s, with an unusual constellation of problems stemming from a capillary hemangioma, an expansive birthmark on the right side of my face that extended from the top of my head to my neck. This hemangioma kept my right eye swollen shut for my first year, until doctors chose to give me steroid injections to force it open. When my right eye opened for the first time, it visibly “wandered,” and I could only sense light through it, unable to see or read through it at all. This hemangioma also had consequences for my right ear, which suffered hearing loss. My ear would require reconstructive surgery later, at age four, when sedation would be considered relatively safe. But immediately from birth, the ear was malformed and sore, requiring daily soaks to keep it moist.

As an only child of older parents, my parents were eager to make sure I had plentiful and satisfying interactions with peers, as they were unsure how others would react to my appearance. I was encouraged into friendships with the children of family friends, and was often taken to the theatre and art museums with these other young children, and placed in swim lessons from an early age. When I started Montessori pre-school at two and a half, my love of the arts helped me to form quick bonds with others over the magic of the music of “The Nutcracker” and the color palette of the jungle scenes we were painting on cardboard around the banisters in the classroom. When the bullies did show their teeth, with cries of “Monster” and “pizza-face,” I was already secure enough in my relationships that I paid them little mind. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never… or so they say.

I’d be lying if I said that words never hurt me as a child, but not at the Montessori school, where I was so focused on language and music and art. They never hurt me at the Center for Talent Development, a gifted center my mother founded at Northwestern University. I can’t remember the classes I took through the Saturday Enrichment Program there, but I remember feeling engaged and supported in the environment. When we moved from our diverse neighborhood outside Chicago, a neighborhood comprised of immigrants from many different countries, I knew (as all children know) that change was bad. Moving to Williamsburg, Virginia, I became the social outsider; I had no friends to stick up for me or embolden me when kids started calling me names or asking why I looked so funny.

As time went on, my status as a “walking dictionary” at school somewhat elevated my social position from that funny-looking kid to that bookish nerd, always reading during recess. My social isolation lessened as other good students seemed to want to reach out, though at the same time, my congenital visual problems began to interfere with my performance in math. In my math classes, I eventually discovered that because I couldn’t see out of my right eye, I couldn’t line up columns of numbers accurately without doing some level of mental math. Around 3rd grade, my teachers started insisting that all students show their work. For me, this was impossible. If I directly lined up the columns of numbers to add or subtract,