Beyond the Normal Curve: 

The Experience of Parents with Gifted Children.

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Abstract. In Venezuela, giftedness has been vaguely studied and attended. This lack of knowledge determines the hampered experience of the parents with gifted children. This paper is an excerpt from a major investigation titled “The Experience of Parents with Gifted Children”. The principal objective was to understand the experience of parents with gifted children belonging to the Venezuelan organization: Proyecto Órbita – C.I. 130, achieved through twelve in-depth interviews, using grounded theory design in a qualitative methodology. We found some theoretical aspects that approach to the construction of a theory emerging from the participants’ speeches. Among these results highlights the problems in the motor development of the gifted children, the expectations that parents have for the future of their child, the importance of educating in the value of humility, and that parents do not get properly informed in the subject of giftedness.

Keywords: Giftedness, Mother, Father, Family, Experience.

1 Introduction

Currently, the exploration of the gifted children has been scarce in the Venezuelan context. Consequently, the Venezuelan society has limited tools to manage and confront the giftedness in children. According to Pérez & Valadez (2010), parents of gifted children are often afraid of not knowing what is best for them or how can they help develop their skills. This can lead to certain difficulties in terms of differentiation of the paternal role with the role of the child as parents tend to treat children as adults. Therefore, Keirouz (1990) states that having a gifted child could affect parents’ self-concept as they may feel threatened, resentful or competitive with their children.

Despite this, Cornell (1983), establishes that when parents find out about the giftedness of their child they tend to assume an active role in their education. Nevertheless, most of the authors agree with Chan (2005), that the family and specially the parents are one of the most important figures in the development of the gifted children. In addition, Barbe (1965), suggests that this children may have a greater difficulty adjusting to their environment due to the existence of skills far superior to those of their peers. Ergo, Colangelo & Dettmann (1983), state that giftedness engages a challenge and facing certain unique social and emotional needs. For this reason, Freeman (1994), came to the conclusion that these children need greater emotional protection, evidenced in the support and guidance of parents and teachers.

In this sense, we fight to give a voice to those parents who swim in an ocean of ignorance making their experience much harder and hampered. The present paper reflects some aspects of a major project degree titled “The Experience of Parents with Gifted Children” (Vera & Yanes, 2017), which had as principal objective to understand the experience of parents with gifted children. Moreover, the investigation was carried out in the only Venezuelan institution dedicated to attend families with a gifted member, called
“Proyecto Órbita – C.I. 130”. The project is distinguished for being a platform for identification, diagnosis and comprehensive assistance to people with high intellectual capacities, and its main objective is to promote the necessary conditions to develop the skills of these children and adolescents with an IQ equal or higher than 130 (Fundación Motores por la Paz, 2017).

The present research is defined within a qualitative approach using the grounded theory design. Its aim is to discover the subjective content that each of the parents gives to their own experience in order to build a paradigm that defines and integrates their experiences. This paradigm can then serve as support and learning source for other parents who face the same challenge. It should be noted that this is the first research at the Universidad Metropolitana and Venezuela that is developed within the framework of giftedness with a qualitative methodology, since all previous research has been based on a quantitative methodology. Therefore, this research supports both parents and teachers in the education of gifted children.

Understanding the way in which these parents construct their realities allowed us to explore in depth the feelings and experiences of the gifted children’s families. In order to do this, we carried out twelve (12) in-depth interviews to both parents from which four main respects emerged that sketched theoretical beginnings which might have derived the grounded theory. First, we found that all parents report finding motor development problems in early childhood. Second, the interviewees have expectations of their children’s future were different from what was reviewed in the literature consulted. In third place, we noticed the importance they place on educating their child in the value of humility. Finally, we found a lack of interest from the parents on informing themselves in the theme of giftedness. Before carrying out the investigation, it was important to understand the theoretical basis that supported our study. Thereupon, we defined giftedness as an aptitude for general intelligence that is above the average, following Sánchez (2003). Likewise, we define the term family as the universal social institution, which is considered the main source of the early influences to which the individual is subjected, as stated by López (2003).

2 Methodology

The present paper exposes a part of the results obtained from the larger investigation. We used qualitative research methodology to understand the experience of parents with gifted children. Our intention was to discover the subjective content of the parents’ experiences and the effect that this condition has had on their emotional experience in order to develop a reconstruction of their realities. This methodology enables a construction of knowledge that occurs on the basis of concepts (Krause, 1995), allowing us to approach the subject from a more flexible perspective, as well as a clear and holistic vision of the reality and experience of the participants themselves. As a result, we sought to reach the construction of a grounded theory through six objectives, which arose from our main questions. First, to understand what parents define as giftedness. Second, identify the emotions that they experience. Third, to explore the main strategies that the parents and the rest of the family use to face the gifted child. Fourth, explore the relation that the parents maintain with all of their children. Fifth, to know the family dynamic around the gifted child. Finally, to understand the different positions that each parent assumes from the giftedness of the child.

According to Strauss & Corbin (2002), this theory is derived from data collected in a systematic way and analyzed throughout a research process, which began with the area of study of the giftedness and allowed the theory to emerge from the information provided by the parents. Therefore, we used the emerging
design in order to develop the theory from the data collected from the participants without basing on predetermined categories.

We used the in-depth interview as a data collection technique to research in a profound way the parents’ experience, thus achieving an understanding of meanings. These interviews were used because they should be fully open, without hypothesizing, so interviewees could express themselves without the influence of the interviewer’s subjectivity (Creswell, 2005).

The sampling used was the case-type, which allowed the analysis of the experiences of a determined social group constituted by people who possessed similar characteristics (in this case, parents of gifted children). This also turned out into a chain sampling where one interviewee facilitated contact with the next and so on, reaching a total of twelve (12) respondents composed by eight (8) mothers and four (4) fathers, as described in Table 1. It is important to mention that the names used are fictional in order to protect the anonymity of the participants, highlighting their voluntary participation in the research. However, it may have been a limitation for us to use a chain sampling as the participant generally recommends others that share similar positions. In this respect, the sampling was composed by the parents of a gifted child, specifically those belonging to the institution Proyecto Órbita – C.I. 130, whose evaluation and diagnosis would have been carried out with a minimum of six months. The participants taken into account were both father and mother from the Caracas Metropolitan area, Venezuela.

Table 1. Description of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental Figure</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Civil Status</th>
<th>Name of the gifted child</th>
<th>Time since diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Gerard</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>William</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Tyra</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>William</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>William</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Manuel</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s creation.

To achieve the emerging design, we started by the transcription of each in-depth interview. Before we proceeded to the next interviewee, we completed the analysis of the first one and so on. We used the Open Coding to organize the data and assign initial categories of meaning, considering the phenomenon from what could be observed and studied. To ensure greater validity of the Open Coding results, we used the Constant Comparison Method as a processing technique for the information obtained from the
interviews. In order to achieve this, we contrasted the differences and similarities of our interviewees’ stories in relation to their experience as parents of gifted children, with the intention of generating concepts and characteristics that would approach theory and reality. In conclusion, we processed the data in a separate way, constantly comparing them to avoid biases and provide a greater enrichment to the investigation (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2010).

The next step was the description and interpretation of the meaning of the previously elaborated categories. We did this parallel to the comparison of these categories, looking for the differences and similarities between them aiming to identify patterns that appeared repeatedly between the categories. Likewise, the Axial Coding process emerged, by means of which we regrouped the data that had previously been fragmented. With this, we sought to relate the categories with the subcategories according to their properties and dimensions around the axis of a main category.

This main category had as its central nucleus the gifted son, called “The Different One”. This name is attributed from one of the participant’s verbatim. From our interviewees’ speeches we were able to obtain a variety of results which gave a response to the proposed objectives and even provided numerous findings. Therefore, three main categories emerged. First, “Who am I in front of?”, named after a participant’s verbatim, in which the aim is to explain what the arrival of giftedness into their lives involves for parents. Second, “A Premature Old Man”, also another verbatim, where we describe the implications of giftedness for the child. Finally, the last category catalogued as “The Experience” presents an approach to the reality’s construction of the participants, as parents of gifted children. We did this in order to formulate clear and precise explanations about what was studied and finally to carry out the analysis of the results obtained (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Finally, we managed to get to the Axial Coding to analyze and explain the data, leading to the findings exposed below.

In order to guarantee the quality and validity of the study, we followed the guidelines proposed by Hernández et al., (2010): dependence, confirmability and transferability. To comply with the first criterion, we individually reviewed the data so that we could reach coherent interpretations regarding the codes to be assigned according to the unit of analysis. In addition, we carried out an external audit by an expert in the methodology. Furthermore, another external audit was carried out to ensure confirmability. For transferability, we focused on describing with amplitude and precision the environment, participants and time of study, in order to determine the similarity between the study context and other contexts. Finally, we did a constant review of the list and elaborated the codification, reducing the probability of biases due to prejudices, beliefs and conceptions.

3 Results Analysis

There is no doubt that having an exceptional child is a challenge for the parents, making them become more resilient in the face of such adversity. As Victor stated “I think it was, it is and it will be a challenge for us to have her with this condition”. This shapes each one’s experiences and therefore their own child’s as well. In this sense, participants share common ideas that give us notions of four main theoretical features found in their speeches.

The first feature that caught our attention in all of the participants’ discourses was an important difficulty in the children’s motor development, both in their growth and in their coordination. They emphasize that, until now, while the intellectual ability of their children is their greatest strength, motor is their greatest weakness. This often leads to parents relating high intellectual maturity to poor motor development. Carol says “He may have all his intellectual ability but the motricity part is not there… i don't know if this has anything to do with his intellectual development”. On this matter, there is a theoretical
diatribe, with authors such as López (2003), asserting that there is indeed an imbalance in their motor development respecting the intellectual, while authors such as Benito (2006), highlight great psychomotor agility in the gifted children. Therefore, the question arises as to whether, motor development is affected by the high level of cognitive development, and if so, will this motor difficulty affect the child's ability to thrive?

On the other hand, it seems that our interviewees take giftedness as a characteristic of their child, rather than a condition. In other words, they focus more on their personal growth as a child than on their high abilities. As a result, they fail to create firm expectations about the academic and professional future. Regarding this, Mary begins by saying "Let her do what she wants and let her be happy". This is striking, since the literature consulted shows the high expectations that parents tend to have of their children's future, specifically on the basis of their exceptional condition. In this sense, Valenzuela (1992), concluded in her study that parents of children with giftedness have high expectations about their children's future, emphasizing the same towards professional achievement. However, this statement was not reflected in our research, with most parents agreeing that their first expectation is basically for the child to be happy regardless of their abilities. As Danielle also affirms, "...the most important thing is that he is happy with what he decides to do".

Another of the aspects that seem important to highlight is that most of the parents in the study, despite being proud of their child’s condition, grant a great importance to instilling in them the value of humility since they are concerned of the individual and social consequences it may bring them. However, we were struck by the fact that mothers sometimes even highlight their child’s weaknesses in order to educate them in values, as stated by Beatrice "I had to get in and put her feet on the ground, even if it's hard, and that's how I teach her to be humble". As we mentioned earlier, the Venezuelan society is not prepared to receive these children and therefore the parents state that we are still trapped in social patterns where the lack of humility in their children could even reinforce the phenomenon of bullying. Most of them are victims only because they are out of the ordinary and they outnumber their peer group. As a result, the environment seeks to disqualify their abilities through public humiliation: "... her classmates say to her 'oh yes because you think you're better than everyone else, you think you're so smart and savant', added Laura.

A final finding that emerged throughout the research is that the parents never get properly informed in the theme of giftedness, as Mary comments "When they told me about it I said 'Is that a disease'?...I didn't even know what the condition was about.". Therefore, we are struck by the fact that some parents, even after their children have been diagnosed, ignore the theoretical information that defines this condition. For example, Carol mentions "I don't really know what the definition of gifted is" and John states "It is not a subject that is widespread in the knowledge of the people and society, so you see it as something exceptional in a film". However, most parents agree that it involves a learning process and that the practical aspects develop in the day-to-day life of these families, despite not understanding the theoretical aspects. Furthermore, the participants stated that, like them, schools and public institutions are also submerged in this lack of knowledge, making the Venezuelan society unprepared to deal with these gifted children. Julia declares that "There is a society that is not prepared to receive them". So, if society doesn't provide these parents with the necessary support, how are they going to cope? If the country does not provide parents: schools, teachers, experts and institutions dedicated to the condition and prepared to deal with it, how could parents have access to this knowledge and the tools it provides if the specialists themselves lack it?
4 Conclusions

This study exposes a part of the results obtained from the major investigation, specifically the four (4) main theoretical features that emerged. Chiefly, giftedness is a condition that has been left aside by the Venezuelan society due to the tendency to perceive as wonderful and privileged the possibility of having this quality, considering that it doesn't require any special attention. However, this has had great repercussions in the lives of the gifted children and their families, since they must face a totally unknown situation without the necessary tools or support. From this finding, we came across that this aspect has become the most decisive in the experience of each one of the participants, since their entire history is built on the basis of misinformation, which leads them to develop an experience significantly more hampered. That is why we can consider that knowledge or ignorance in a society is capable of transforming and determining the experience of a person in their reality.

On the other hand, a second finding was that all participants referred motor development problems that their children have presented since birth, despite the fact that giftedness authors such as Benito (2006), state that agility and motor coordination is a notable feature in gifted children. This is why we consider important to investigate this aspect in future giftedness research.

Additionally, the main objective of the participants in raising their children is to instill the value of humility. As these children understand that they possess abilities superior to those of their peers, their parents teach them the importance of being humble with their own abilities. According to Dowling & Osborne (1996), the main step towards a change in the family experience is on behalf of parents in terms of their perception and appreciation of their children and their way of functioning. Therefore, several authors (Rothenberg & Wyshak, 2004; Wallace & Walberg, 1987), agree that family, school and social conditions are an indispensable support for the child with a higher capacity, highlighting the importance of orienting and meeting the needs of the family.

Taking into account that these children are ahead of others, and since the literature consulted shows the high expectations that parents tend to have of their children's future. However, and to our surprise, all the parents of the study coincide in the same expectation: that their son grow up to be happy. In contradiction to Chan (2005), who states that parents' expectations of their children will favor academic achievement and enhance leadership skills.

Faced with the broad topic of research, we are confronted with a theoretical gap in the Venezuelan context. As researchers, this prompted us to go deeper into the subject of giftedness. This is how we saw ourselves in the task of carrying out a research with a qualitative methodology, under the mean of a grounded theory. Which would allow us to work with the subjectivity of the participants, deepening the experience they have as parents of a gifted child.

The existing literature regarding giftedness and family is limited; therefore we consider it essential to carry out the qualitative research, since several authors such as Hernández, et al. (2010), recommend selecting this approach when the research topic has been scarcely researched and to provide a reinforcement of the existing theoretical body in relation to giftedness. For this reason, a deep approach to the experiences of each participant was necessary in view of the lack of information regarding the giftedness and those involved in this experience. Therefore, this methodology allowed us to approach the topic the subject from a more flexible perspective, as well as a clear and holistic vision of the reality and experience of the participants themselves.

The realization of the study, took us beyond words written on a paper and forged in us a true passion for the subject. This allowed us to take responsibility for expanding our knowledge of giftedness to help
other parents with similar experiences. And then the question arises: Will Venezuelan society be ready to receive and care for these children? At the end of this research, a single sentence remained ruminant in our minds: "Having a gifted child is the same as having a child with a disability". This is how we refer to the present work as beyond the normal curve, since everything that goes further what is considered normal is a challenge for those who must face it.

References


