

Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities: A Review of the Issues

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Abstract

Many people have difficulty comprehending that a child can be gifted and also have learning disabilities. As a result, children with special needs that result from both their high abilities and their learning problems are rarely identified and are often poorly served. This article explores the current policies and practices with regard to defining, identifying, and educating this population. Recommendations are included that would help ensure that students who are gifted and have learning disabilities receive the intervention needed to help them achieve their full potential.

When educators first began describing children who showed evidence of having a learning disability (LD) yet also appeared to be gifted, many viewed this as contradictory. The stereotype that had prevailed since Terman's (1925) time was that gifted children score uniformly high on intelligence tests and perform well in school. How could a child be considered gifted who has serious enough learning problems to be characterized as having a learning disability?

In 1981, a colloquium held at The Johns Hopkins University convened experts from the fields of both learning disabilities and giftedness to consider this issue. At the time, interest in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students, as well as students with learning disabilities, was evident on many levels, but students who exhibited the characteristics of both exceptionalities had received scant notice. The participants agreed that students who are gifted and also have learning disabilities do, in fact, exist but are often overlooked when students are assessed for either giftedness or learning disabilities. The colloquium did much to establish students who are gifted but also have learning disabilities as a population

with special characteristics and needs (Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983).

In recent years, the concept of giftedness and learning disabilities occurring concomitantly in the same individual has become commonly accepted. Several books have been written on the subject, numerous articles have appeared in journals, and most educational conferences focusing on either learning disabilities or giftedness include at least one presentation on the dual exceptionality. We appear to have reached an understanding that high ability and learning problems can both be present in the same individual. Nonetheless, empirical research on the characteristics and needs of this population has been limited, and relatively few students with LD who are gifted are identified as such or given special services. In this review, we examine some of the theoretical arguments, regulations, and educational practices that affect students with LD who are gifted.

Who Are These Students?

Students who are gifted and also have learning disabilities are those who possess an outstanding gift or talent and are capable of high performance, but who also have a learning

disability that makes some aspect of academic achievement difficult. Some of these students are identified and their needs are met. This happens only rarely, however, unless a school specifically decides to identify and then serve these students. The majority of students who are gifted with learning disabilities "fall through the cracks" in the system.

There are at least three subgroups of children whose dual exceptionality remains unrecognized (Baum, 1994; Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991; Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983; Landrum, 1989; Starnes, Ginevan, Stokes, & Barton, 1988). The first group includes students who have been identified as gifted yet exhibit difficulties in school. These students are often considered underachievers, and their underachievement may be attributed to poor self-concept, lack of motivation, or even some less flattering characteristics, such as laziness (Silverman, 1989; Waldron, Saphire, & Rosenblum, 1987; Whitmore, 1980). Their learning disabilities usually remain unrecognized for most of their educational lives. As school becomes more challenging, their academic difficulties may increase to the point where they are falling sufficiently behind peers that someone finally suspects a disability.

A second group includes students whose learning disabilities are severe enough that they have been identified as having learning disabilities but whose exceptional abilities have never been recognized or addressed. It has been suggested that this may be a larger group of students than many people realize. In one study, as many as 33% of students identified with learning disabilities had superior intellectual ability (Baum, 1985). Inadequate assessments and/or depressed IQ scores often lead to an underestimation of these students' intellectual abilities. If their potential remains unrecognized, it never becomes a cause for concern or the focus of their instructional program. Due to this underestimation or to inflexible identification and/or instructional expectations in the "gifted program," they are rarely referred for gifted services.

Perhaps the largest group of unserved students are those whose abilities and disabilities mask each other; these children sit in general classrooms, ineligible for services provided for students who are gifted or have learning disabilities, and are considered to have average abilities. Because these students typically function at grade level, they are not seen as having problems or special needs, nor are they a priority for schools on tight budgets. Although these students appear to be functioning reasonably well, they are, unfortunately, performing well below their potential. As course work becomes more demanding in later years, and without the help they need to accommodate their limitations, their academic difficulties usually increase to the point where a learning disability may be suspected, but rarely is their true potential recognized.

For all three of these subgroups, the social and emotional consequences of having exceptional abilities and learning disabilities, when one or both of the conditions is unrecognized, can be pervasive and quite debilitating, as well as difficult to address if appropriate diagnosis and programming never take place or are delayed until

adolescence (Baum et al., 1991; Durden & Tangherlini, 1993; Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983; Whitmore, 1980). With an increasing number of LD researchers questioning the relevance of a child's aptitude in determining intervention strategies (cf. Siegel, 1989), even fewer students with high potential and learning disabilities will be recognized or fully served, resulting in a great waste of intellectual potential.

Definitions

The literature is replete with references to individuals with extremely high abilities and talents who also have a specific learning disability (e.g., Aaron, Phillips, & Larsen, 1988; Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; Ochse, 1990; Thompson, 1971). Some researchers have even suggested that, at least for some individuals, the learning disability may be fundamentally associated with a "gift" (e.g., Geschwind, 1982; West, 1991). To most practitioners who work with individuals with disabilities, being gifted and also having learning disabilities does not appear to be an unfamiliar or especially problematic condition, at least in theory. Nonetheless, a number of thorny issues and debates make the understanding and identification of the condition difficult.

Controversy surrounds what is meant by the terms *gifted* and *learning disabled*. As Vaughn (1989) pointed out, "no two populations have suffered from more definitional problems than learning disabled and gifted" (p. 123). With regard to students who exhibit the dual exceptionalities simultaneously, legislation defining special populations has never specifically described this group. When educators and researchers describe these students as a unique group, they generally talk about students who exhibit strengths in one area and weaknesses in another (e.g., Ellston, 1993; Fall & Nolan, 1993) and/or show a discrepancy between potential and performance (e.g., Gunderson, Maesch, & Rees, 1987). For a more formal defini-

tion, however, it has been necessary to rely on the separate prevailing definitions of gifted children and children with learning disabilities, which are almost always inadequate for accommodating students who exhibit the characteristics of both groups simultaneously.

Definitions of Learning Disabilities

Numerous conceptual definitions of learning disabilities have been proposed by experts in the field (Hammill, 1990). Most of these allow for the co-occurrence of being gifted and having learning disabilities, as they set no upper limit on general intelligence or specific abilities in one or more areas. When the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities (1985) proposed a definition that specifically included the phrase "average and superior intelligence" occurring concomitantly with the disability, the door was opened wider for recognition of children with disabilities who are gifted. Some conceptual definitions include a reference to a discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement, a concept and practice that is important for identifying many students with LD who are gifted, though the use of such a discrepancy for defining a learning disability has been criticized (cf. Lyon, 1989). Although there is nothing in most LD definitions that excludes students with learning disabilities who are also gifted, the definitions fail to specifically encourage practitioners to identify students in this subgroup.

Swanson's (1991) review of operational definitions is quite useful in understanding the issues related to defining and identifying learning disabilities. Many of the issues and debates he discusses, particularly the concepts of *specificity* (which refers to a learning disability being confined to a limited number of academic or cognitive domains), *discrepancy* (whereby it is determined that a child's achievement does not measure up to his or

her potential), and *exclusion* (whereby the learning disability is distinguished from other handicapping conditions), are particularly relevant to defining students with academic talents and learning disabilities. Because operational definitions are so closely tied to identification, these issues and debates are reviewed later in this article under "Identification."

Definitions of Giftedness

In the gifted and talented field, attempts to define giftedness from a conceptual viewpoint have resulted in little consensus. For example, giftedness has been defined as high general intelligence (Terman, 1925); high aptitude in a specific academic area (Stanley, 1976); and the interactions among high ability, task commitment, and creativity (Renzulli, 1986). (For other examples, see Sternberg and Davidson, 1986.) Perhaps contributing to the difficulty in defining giftedness is the lack of agreement as to what intelligence is, with proponents of a variety of psychometric, developmental, and information-processing approaches offering conflicting viewpoints (Kail & Pellegrino, 1985; Sternberg & Detterman, 1986). Some of these definitions are more likely than others to accommodate the child with learning problems. For example, Gardner's (1983) concept of multiple intelligences provides for showing high ability in one area without requisite corresponding ability in all areas. In contrast, proponents of the concept of general "g" (Spearman, 1927) have greater difficulty considering students with learning difficulties as highly able.

A multifaceted view of giftedness, proposed by Marland (1972), has been adopted by the U. S. Department of Education and a majority of state departments of education and school systems. Marland described gifted and talented children as those who demonstrate high achievement or potential in any one of six areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic

aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability (which was deleted in subsequent legislation). Recently, a revised definition has asserted that "outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor" (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 26). This recognition of culturally disadvantaged gifted children was not matched by equal attention to gifted students with learning disabilities. However, neither federal definition of the gifted child excludes students with learning disabilities because the definitions (a) specify that a child need not be exceptional at everything to be gifted, (b) set no lower limits of performance or ability in remaining areas, and (c) specifically acknowledge that students can be gifted even if they are not currently performing at a high level, as long as they have the potential. Unfortunately, however, academic potential independent of performance is a difficult concept for many to accept.

Conclusion

Attempts to describe students with LD who are gifted have drawn heavily on definitions of each exceptionality separately; yet, a lack of consensus is evident in definitions of giftedness or learning disabilities, and the implications of the two conditions overlapping have not been adequately considered. For example, the broad-based federal definitions of giftedness, as well as other definitions, recognize students' abilities in a variety of areas. Thus, a student might exhibit talent in leadership or the arts but not in academic areas, and be labeled gifted and qualify for services. If such a student also has a learning disability, he or she might be considered gifted and learning disabled. The concept that a student might have different abilities and needs in art than in mathematics is not difficult for most people to accept or understand.

However, accepting the concept that a student's giftedness and learning disabilities both lie in related academic areas, such as a student whose reading level is well above grade level but who has great difficulty with spelling and writing, is more problematic for most people. And the programming implications for these two types of students (i.e., those whose talents and disabilities lie in related or unrelated areas) are very different. Although students whose strengths and weaknesses are in unrelated areas might be gifted and have a learning disability, it is students whose talents and disabilities overlap and are both in academic areas who are most likely to be misunderstood, underserved, and in need of special services.

Descriptions of individuals who are academically talented and individuals who have learning disabilities should be examined and expanded to include students who exhibit the characteristics of both exceptionalities *simultaneously* in related and unrelated areas. At present, the operational definitions currently used by most schools to place children in gifted or special education programs exclude many academically talented students with learning problems who rarely meet the rigid cutoffs of most identification procedures (Fall & Nolan, 1993). For the few students who are identified via existing definitions and guidelines, it usually means receiving services in one or the other area, but not both.

Identification

At present, identifying students for gifted programs and for special education services for individuals with learning disabilities tend to be mutually exclusive activities (Boodoo, Bradley, Frontera, Pitts, & Wright, 1989). Unfortunately, too many students with LD who are gifted fail to meet the eligibility requirements for either because the identification protocols fail to consider the special characteristics of this population. For example, re-

search has shown that teachers are much more likely to refer nondisabled students than students with learning disabilities for placement in gifted programs (Minner, 1990; Minner, Prater, Bloodworth, & Walker, 1987). Screening for learning disabilities typically requires evidence of underachievement. Gifted students who are able to compensate for their learning problems rarely get referred unless they exhibit behavioral problems (Senf, 1983). At the same time, because students with LD who are gifted rarely show consistently high achievement, they often go unrecognized as being gifted. Although a few will qualify for special education services because of the severity of their disability, and some will qualify for gifted services because of the type or level of their talent (Baum et al., 1991), most students with LD who are gifted rarely qualify for multiple services. Unless operational definitions and identification criteria are modified to accommodate the characteristics of this subgroup, this situation will, unfortunately, continue.

In an effort to shed light on the pattern of abilities of students with LD who are gifted, and to simplify identification, many researchers in this area have focused on Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R) score patterns (e.g., Bannatyne, 1974; Baum et al., 1991; Kaufman, 1979). To date, however, no consistent pattern of results has come from this research. Although Schiff, Kaufman, and Kaufman (1981) reported a significant Verbal-Performance (V-P) discrepancy (greater than that found for students with LD with average ability), with Verbal scores higher, Waldron and Sapphire (1990) concluded that a significant discrepancy between Verbal and Performance scores may not be the best indicator of a learning disability in gifted students. Barton and Starnes (1989) observed that "the inconsistencies in magnitude or direction of V-P discrepancies among the studies seem to result from differing patterns of deficits in the samples"

(p. 28), and Fox, Brody, and Tobin (1983) concluded that "more research is needed to determine what, if any, unique patterns characterize the gifted/LD child" (p. 106).

It is clear that we are dealing with a very heterogeneous group of students who represent all types of intellectual giftedness and academic talents, in combination with various forms of learning disabilities. Therefore, trying to find one defining pattern or set of scores to identify all gifted students with learning disabilities is probably futile. On the other hand, there are some defining characteristics that should be considered in identifying these students: (a) evidence of an outstanding talent or ability, (b) evidence of a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement, and (c) evidence of a processing deficit.

Evidence of an Outstanding Talent or Ability

To identify a student with LD who might be gifted, one should find evidence of a special gift, talent, or ability whereby the student exhibits performance at a high level or the *ability* to perform at a high level. The talent or gift can be general ability or a specific talent in any of a variety of areas. However, practitioners need to recognize that a learning disability can depress the test performance of students who are academically talented. Thus, if academically talented students with learning disabilities are to be recognized as gifted, cutoff scores on whatever measures are used may have to be adjusted downward to accommodate the depressing effect of their learning disability (Karnes & Johnson, 1991; Silverman, 1989), and, for those students who manage to meet cutoff scores in spite of their disability, the extraordinary nature of their ability should be recognized.

When seeking evidence of a student's ability or potential, one often turns to a standardized intelligence test. However, the use of IQ tests for identification is problematic and has

become increasingly controversial. The issues have to do with the nature of IQ tests and what they measure, the appropriateness of using them for certain populations, and whether an IQ score contributes to our understanding of students or programming decisions for them.

Within the field of gifted education, the reliance on IQ scores to identify gifted students has been questioned on many fronts. One concern is that intelligence tests measure a limited range of abilities (Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 1991; Sternberg, 1991) and thus many gifted students will be overlooked. For example, intelligence tests are not good measures for identifying students who are creatively gifted (Torrance, 1979) or mathematically gifted (Stanley, 1974, 1979). The IQ scores of students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not reflect their true abilities (Baldwin, 1991). And, with gifted students who have learning disabilities, global IQ measures may be particularly insensitive to depression of scores caused by the disability (Fox & Brody, 1983).

Another concern is that a global measure of ability is not particularly helpful for educational programming (Fox & Brody, 1983). Although some children can certainly be gifted and talented in many diverse areas, identifying students who have exceptional talent in a specific area (e.g., mathematics, written expression) lends itself to targeted instruction and programming that is more appropriate and, ultimately, more justifiable (Durden & Tangherlini, 1993; Stanley, 1974). With just a global measure of academic potential to work with, only a global and often academically irrelevant program can be implemented. This is not to say, however, that IQ tests have no usefulness for diagnostic or intervention purposes.

Fox and Brody (1983) discussed the appropriateness of intelligence tests, aptitude and achievement tests, teacher nominations, and creativity tests for identifying strengths and potential in students with LD who are gifted. Tor-

