

Overlooked and Unchallenged

Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities

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36

Knowledge Quest

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Despite the many examples of famous individuals who were obviously talented and yet had great difficulty as students, many people have difficulty understanding that a child can be gifted and also have a learning disability. Because these students are so misunderstood, they are rarely identified and even if identified are often poorly served. This article explores the current policies and practices with regard to defining, identifying, and educating this misunderstood and underserved population.

Although there are many examples of famous individuals who were obviously quite talented and yet had great difficulty as students (e.g., Edison, Einstein, Churchill), many people still have difficulty comprehending that a child can be gifted and also have a learning disability. As a result, children with high abilities who are struggling or underachieving in school because of a learning disability are often not identified and rarely receive appropriate academic services.

Who Are These Students?

Gifted students with learning disabilities exhibit characteristics of both exceptionalities: high ability (e.g., high IQ or aptitude test scores, or classroom behavior that is indicative of high ability) combined with problems achieving in one or more academic areas (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics, memory, organization, or sustaining attention). The majority of such students "fall through the cracks" in the system because they never quite meet the criteria set forth for identifying either gifted or learning-disabled students.

There are at least three subgroups of children whose dual exceptionality makes it

difficult for them to be appropriately identified. The first group includes students who have been identified as gifted, but because they exhibit difficulties in school, are often considered underachievers. Their underachievement is usually attributed to poor self-concept or lack of motivation, and so their learning disability usually remains unrecognized for most of their educational life. As school becomes more challenging, the academic difficulties of these students may increase to the point that they are so far behind their peers that someone finally suspects a disability.

A second group includes those students whose learning disability is severe enough that they have been diagnosed as LD, but their exceptional abilities are never recognized or addressed. Inadequate assessments and/or depressed IQ scores often lead to an underestimation of these students' intellectual abilities. Rarely are they referred for gifted services because of this underestimation or because of inflexible identification and/or instructional expectations in the "gifted program."

Perhaps the largest group of unserved students are those whose abilities and disabilities mask each other. Since these students

typically function on or near grade level (though well below their potential), they are not seen as having problems or special needs. Consequently, these children sit in regular classrooms, are considered to have average abilities, and are ineligible for services provided for students who are gifted or have learning disabilities. As these students tackle more demanding coursework in later years without the help they need to accommodate their limitations, their academic difficulties often increase to the point where someone suspects they have a learning disability. In this scenario, however, much damage may have been done to the students' self esteem because their high abilities go unrecognized.

Definitions

Definitions are important for proper identification to take place and for the development of appropriate services, yet no formal or official definition exists for describing students who exhibit both exceptionalities. Educators are forced to rely on the separate definitions of gifted and learning disabled. These do not preclude the co-occurrence of each other but, nonetheless, do not adequately address the unique characteristics of this population.

Most definitions of learning disabilities allow for the co-occurrence of being gifted and having a learning disability since they set no upper limit on general intelligence or specific abilities in one or more areas. Many definitions also include a reference to a discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement, a concept and practice that is important for identifying students who are gifted with learning disabilities. But the definitions fail to specifically encourage practitioners to identify gifted students with learning disabilities or to develop resources to meet their needs.

In the gifted and talented field, varying definitions of giftedness abound such as relating giftedness to high general intelligence, high aptitude in a specific academic area, or creativity. Contributing to the difficulty in defining giftedness is a lack of consensus as to the definition of *intelligence*. Some definitions are more likely than others to accommodate the

child with learning problems. For example, Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences provides for high ability in one area without requiring exceptional ability in all areas. Proponents of the concept of general intelligence have greater difficulty considering students with significant learning difficulties as highly able.

The U. S. Department of Education, as well as a majority of state departments of education and school systems advocate a multifaceted view of giftedness. The federal definition of the gifted child accommodates students with learning disabilities because the definition (a) specifies that a child need not be exceptional at everything to be gifted, (b) sets no lower limits of performance or ability in remaining areas, and (c) specifically acknowledges that students may be gifted, if they have potential, even if they are not currently performing at a high level.¹ Unfortunately, academic potential independent of performance is a difficult concept for many to accept, especially if the student's giftedness and learning disability both lie in a related academic area (e.g., exceptional vocabulary and reading comprehension, but great difficulty with spelling and the mechanics of writing). It is these students, whose talents and disabilities seem to overlap, that are the most misunderstood and underserved.

Identification

At present, the identification of students for gifted programs and for services for the learning disabled tend to be mutually exclusive practices. For example, gifted students who are able to compensate for their learning problems rarely get referred for LD services unless they exhibit behavioral problems. On the other hand, because students who are gifted with learning disabilities rarely show consistently high achievement (usually a prerequisite for even being nominated for screening of giftedness), they often are unrecognized as gifted. Another obstacle in the way of identifying gifted students with a learning disability is that they are a very heterogeneous group of students, representing all types of intellectual giftedness and academic talents, in combination with

various forms of learning disabilities. Although there is no one defining pattern of test scores or set of criteria to identify these students, the presence of the following three characteristics is indicative of an individual who is gifted and has a learning disability: (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.

When seeking evidence of a student's ability or potential, one often turns to a standardized intelligence test. The results of a carefully administered intelligence test can provide considerable information about a student's cognitive functioning. IQ tests, however, have limitations. For example, the sole use of an intelligence test will overlook students who are creatively or mathematically gifted. In addition, a global measure of ability such as this is not as useful for educational programming as are specific aptitude tests. Identifying students who have exceptional talent in a specific area (e.g., mathematics or written expression) lends itself to targeted instruction and programming. This kind of programming is often more appropriate and, ultimately, more justifiable than a general gifted program designed for students identified by global IQ.

Within the LD community, there is a debate as to whether it is necessary or even useful to know a child's potential. Lyon notes, however, that a child's level of intelligence influences his or her emotional and behavioral response to persistent failure, and, more importantly, how he or she learns and adapts.³

Of course, the critical issue for gifted students with learning disabilities is that without some assessment of a student's level of ability (whether IQ or specific aptitude test), gifted students who are underachievers will not be identified. And, regardless of the measure used to assess intellectual ability, practitioners need to be aware that a learning disability can depress test scores. Cutoff scores for gifted programs, therefore, may have to be adjusted downward. In general, the use of multiple measures of ability will provide more opportunities to identify the strengths in an individual

who also has weaknesses due to a learning disability and will avoid the limitations noted above.

The second criterion for identifying a gifted student who has a learning disability is evidence of a discrepancy between ability and achievement. This is because the relatively high achievement (usually at or near grade level) of many of these students compared to chronological peers often masks a disability unless that achievement is compared to the student's potential. Once an individually administered IQ test (e.g., the WISC III) and/or measures of specific aptitude have established potential, classroom performance, and scores on a battery of standardized tests (e.g., Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement) should be considered to document achievement levels. To reiterate, it is the *discrepancy* between a gifted child's ability and achievement that points to a possible learning disability, not just achievement that is below grade level.

Although the presence of an aptitude-achievement discrepancy is critical for identifying academically talented students with learning disabilities, it is not sufficient, since such a discrepancy may result from many different causes. Evidence of a processing deficit can help to distinguish a learning disability from other causes of underachievement and can inform decisions regarding the appropriate type of intervention. For example, identification of a processing deficit can help differentiate between a gifted child who is underachieving because of educational placement issues (e.g., a curriculum that is not sufficiently challenging) and one who is underachieving due to a specific learning disability. The educational needs of these two children would be quite different. It is important, however, to reiterate that for children with high abilities, scores that are "average" may be sufficient to indicate a "deficit."

Intervention

Numerous educators who have studied gifted children with learning disabilities suggest that, ideally, these students should receive instruction as a special group for at least part of the

day with a teacher or librarian who is sensitive to their specific academic and social needs. Although a separate class/all-day model for students who are gifted with learning disabilities is often recommended for those students with the most serious disabilities, gifted students with mild to moderate learning disabilities also can benefit from exposure to peers who share their dual exceptionalities. A part-time resource room model for this population can be a valuable option. Whether full-time or part-time, special classes for gifted students with learning disabilities allow the teacher to develop a program unique to this population, one that is challenging but also provides structure and strategies to accommodate weaknesses. Teachers for such classes should be specialists in both gifted and special education.

While many gifted students with learning disabilities would be best served by separate programs developed especially for them, it is likely that the needs of many could be met through a flexible, individualized approach to learning that uses existing services and resources—including the school library program. In general, gifted students with learning disabilities need a continuum of services including (a) high level or "gifted" programming in their areas of strength, (b) age-appropriate instruction in subjects of average growth, and (c) remedial teaching and adaptive instruction in areas of disability.

In determining placement of gifted students with learning disabilities into classes for gifted children, the severity of the learning disability and the nature of the gifted programming must be considered. However, every effort should be made to have such placement occur. Classes where subject-matter acceleration is the focus may benefit gifted students with learning disabilities because they can receive advanced coursework in their areas of strength without being placed at that same level in their areas of weakness.

Enrichment programs are intended to provide gifted students with a more varied educational experience either by modifying the curriculum to include depth and/or breadth or by offering exposure to topics not normally

included in the curriculum. Such programs can be very beneficial for gifted students with learning disabilities. Mentorships are another programmatic vehicle for gifted students that should be considered for those who also have learning disabilities; the mentors serve as role models while offering an opportunity for the student to learn about a subject of interest in a one-on-one environment.

A study of gifted students with learning disabilities found that students who received a combination of both gifted and learning-disability services, or only gifted programming, reported a higher self-concept than students who received intense or exclusive learning-disability services.⁴ Given the positive social/emotional and academic benefits of accelerated or enriched educational experiences for gifted students with learning disabilities, placement in a gifted program for at least part of the day seems advisable.

Placement of gifted students with learning disabilities in programs for the gifted does require some instructional and curricular adjustments. Adaptive technologies such as calculators, word processors, and tape recorders, as well as practices such as untimed tests, can help students compensate and succeed in challenging gifted programs if basic reading, writing, or computation skills are deficient, but thinking skills are at a high level. Teachers of the gifted, however, may be particularly resistant to adapting to the needs of a student who is not a consistently high achiever.

Gifted students with learning disabilities also need placement in the regular classroom for developmental instruction in areas of normal growth. The regular classroom teacher needs to be sensitive to the fact that gifts and disabilities may mask each other and that students who are both academically talented and have learning disabilities are likely to exhibit variable performance as well as social and emotional difficulties. The regular classroom teacher also should be the chief source of referral for gifted students with learning disabilities to special education services and gifted programs in their schools.

For schools that have adopted an inclu-

