Gifted but Learning Disabled: A Puzzling Paradox

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Introduction

For many people, however, the terms learning disabilities and giftedness are at opposite ends of a learning continuum. In some states, because of funding regulations, a student may be identified and assisted with either learning disabilities or giftedness, but not both.

Uneasiness in accepting this seeming contradiction in terms stems primarily from faulty and incomplete understandings. This is not surprising, because the "experts" in each of these disciplines have difficulty reaching agreement. Some still believe that giftedness is equated with outstanding achievement across all subject areas. Thus, a student who is an expert on bugs at age 8 may automatically be excluded from consideration for a program for gifted students because he cannot read, though he can name and classify a hundred species of insects. Many educators view below-grade-level achievement as a prerequisite to a diagnosis of a learning disability. Thus, an extremely bright student who is struggling to stay on grade level may slip through the cracks of available services because he or she is not failing.

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Who are the learning disabled/gifted?

Recent advances in both fields have alerted professionals to the possibility that both sets of behavior can exist simultaneously (Baum and Owen, 1988; Fox, Brody, and Tobin, 1983; Whitmore and Maker, 1985). Children who are both gifted and learning disabled exhibit remarkable talents or strengths in some areas and disabling weaknesses in others. They can be grouped into three categories:

1. identified gifted students who have subtle learning disabilities
2. unidentified students whose gifts and disabilities may be masked by average achievement

3. identified learning disabled students who are also gifted

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Identified gifted students who have subtle learning disabilities

This group is easily identified as gifted because of high achievement or high IQ scores. As they grow older, discrepancies widen between expected and actual performance. These students may impress teachers with their verbal abilities, while their spelling or handwriting contradicts the image. At times, they may be forgetful, sloppy and disorganized. In middle school or junior high, where there are more long-term written assignments and a heavier emphasis on comprehensive, independent reading, some bright students find it increasingly difficult to achieve.

Concerned adults are convinced that if these students would only try harder, they could succeed. While increased effort may be required for these students, the real issue is that they simply do not know how!

Because they may be on grade level and are considered gifted, they are likely to be overlooked for screening procedures necessary to identify a subtle learning disability. Identification of a subtle disability would help students understand why they are experiencing academic difficulties. More important, professionals could offer learning strategies and compensation techniques to help them deal with their duality of learning behaviors.

A word of caution is necessary at this point. A learning disability is not the only cause of a discrepancy between potential and achievement. There are a number of other reasons why bright children may be underachieving. Perhaps expectations are unrealistic. Excelling in science, for example, is no assurance that high-level performance will be shown in other academic areas. Motivation, interest, and specific aptitudes influence the amount of energy students are willing to apply to a given task. Social or emotional problems can interfere with achievement. Grades and school are simply unimportant to some students. Some youngsters have not learned how to study because, during primary grades, school was easy and success required minimal effort.

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Unidentified students

The second group of youngsters in which this combination of learning behaviors may be found are those who are not noticed at all. These students are struggling to stay at grade level. Their superior intellectual ability is working overtime to help compensate for weaknesses caused by an undiagnosed learning disability. In essence, their gift masks the disability and the disability masks the gift. These students are often difficult to find because they do not flag the need for attention by exceptional behavior. Their hidden talents and abilities may emerge in specific content areas or may be stimulated by a classroom teacher who uses a creative approach to learning. The disability is frequently discovered in college or adulthood when the student happens to read about dyslexia or hears peers describe their learning difficulties.

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Identified learning disabled students who are also gifted

These bright children, discovered within the population of students who are identified as learning disabled, are often failing miserably in school. They are first noticed because of what they cannot do, rather than because to the talent they are demonstrating. This group of students is most at risk because of the implicit message that accompanies the LD categorization that there is something wrong with the student that must be fixed before anything else can happen. Parents and teachers alike become totally focused on the problem. Little attention, if any, is paid to the student's strengths and interests, other than to use them to

remediate weaknesses,

Interestingly, these children often have high-level interests at home. They may build fantastic structures with plastic bricks or start a local campaign to save the whales. The creative abilities, intellectual strength and passion they bring to their hobbies are clear indicators of their potential for giftedness (Renzulli, 1978). Because these students are bright and sensitive, they are more acutely aware of their difficulty in learning. Furthermore, they tend to generalize their feelings of academic failure to an overall sense of inadequacy. Over time, these pessimistic feelings overshadow any positive feelings connected with what they accomplish on their own at home. Research has shown that this group of students is often rated by teachers as most disruptive at school. They are frequently found to be off task; they may act out, daydream, or complain of headaches and stomachaches; and they are easily frustrated and use their creative abilities to avoid tasks (Baum and Owen, 1988; Whitmore, 1980). Since school does not offer these bright youngsters much opportunity to polish and use their gifts, such results are not surprising.

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Curricular needs

Although each of these subgroups has unique problems, they all require an environment that will nurture their gifts, attend to the learning disability and provide the emotional support to deal with their inconsistent abilities. Four general guidelines can assist professionals in developing programs that will meet the needs of these students.

Focus attention on the development of the gift

Remediation of basic skills historically has been the single focus of efforts to serve students once they have been classified as learning disabled. Few opportunities exist for bright students with learning disabilities to demonstrate gifted behaviors. Research has shown that a focus on weaknesses at the expense of developing gifts can result in poor self esteem, a lack of motivation, depression and stress (Baum, 1984; Whitmore & Maker, 1985). In addition to offering remediation, focused attention on the development of strengths, interests, and superior intellectual capacities is necessary. The students need a stimulating educational environment which will enable them to fully develop their talents and abilities. Enrichment activities should be designed to circumvent problematic weaknesses and to highlight abstract thinking and creative production

Over the last 6 years, the state of Connecticut has funded a variety of special programs for gifted students who have learning disabilities. All the programs have emphasized the development of gifts and talents of these students. The results of the projects showed dramatic improvement in student self-esteem, motivation, and productive learning behaviors. Improved achievement in basic skills for many students has been an unexpected bonus (Baum, 1988). In fact, according to Whitmore and Maker (1985), more gains are seen when intervention focuses on the gift rather than the disability.

Provide a nurturing environment that values individual differences

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1962), individuals must feel like they belong and are valued in order to reach their potential or self-actualize. How valued can a student feel if the curriculum must be continually modified, or assignments watered down, to enable the student to achieve success? Currently, only certain abilities are rewarded by schools, primarily those that involve strong verbal proficiency. Indeed, according to Howard Gardner (1983), schools spend much of their time teaching students the skills they would need to become college professors. Success in the real world depends on skills or knowledge in other areas besides reading and writing.

A nurturing environment - one that shows concern for developing student potential - values and respects individual differences. Students are rewarded for what they do well. Options are offered for both acquiring

information and communicating what is learned. The philosophy fosters and supports interdependence; students work in cooperative groups to achieve goals. Multiple intelligences are acknowledged; A well-produced video production about life in the Amazon is as valued as the well written essay on the same topic. In such an environment no child will feel like a second class citizen, and the gifted students with learning disabilities can excel.

Encourage compensation strategies

Learning disabilities tend to be somewhat permanent. A poor speller will always need to check for errors in spelling before submitting a final draft. Students who have difficulty memorizing mathematics may need to use a calculator to assure accuracy. Thus, simply remediating weaknesses may not be appropriate or sufficient for the gifted learning disabled student. Remediation will make the learner somewhat more proficient, but probably not excellent, in areas of weakness. For instance, students who have difficulty with handwriting will ultimately fare much better if allowed to use a computer to record their ideas on paper than they will after years of remediation in handwriting. The following list outlines suggestions for providing compensation techniques to assist the student in coping with problematic weaknesses typical of the learning disabled student:

1. Find sources of information that are appropriate for students who may have difficulty reading. Some examples are visitations, interviews, photographs, pictorial histories, films, lectures, or experimentation. Remember, these children do not want the curriculum to be less challenging or demanding. Rather, they need alternative ways to receive the information.
2. Provide advanced organizers to help students receive and communicate information. Students who have difficulty organizing and managing time also benefit from receiving outlines of class lectures, study guides, and a syllabus of topics to be covered. Teach students who have difficulty transferring ideas to a sequential format on paper to use brainstorming and webbing to generate outlines and organize written work. Provide management plans in which tasks are listed sequentially with target dates for completion. Finally, provide a structure or visual format to guide the finished product. A sketch of an essay or science project board will enable these students to produce a well-organized product.
3. Use technology to promote productivity. Technology has provided efficient means to organize and access information, increase accuracy in mathematics and spelling, and enhance the visual quality of the finished product. In short, it allows students with learning disabilities to hand in work of which they can feel proud. Preventing these students from using word processing programs to complete all written assignments is like prohibiting blind children from using texts printed in Braille!
4. Offer a variety of options for communication of ideas. Writing is not the only way to communicate; all learning can be expressed and applied in a variety of modes. Slides, models, speeches, mime, murals, and film productions are examples. Remember, however, to offer these options to all children. Alternate modes should be the rule rather than the exception.
5. Help students who have problems in short-term memory develop strategies for remembering. The use of mnemonics, especially those created by students themselves, is one effective strategy to enhance memory. Visualization techniques have also proved to be effective. Resources are listed at the end of this digest. Encourage awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative that students who are gifted and learning disabled understand their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses so that they can make intelligent choices about their future. If a goal that is important to such a student will require extensive reading, and, if reading is a weak area, the student will have to acknowledge the role of effort and the need for assistance to achieve success. "Rap" sessions, in

which these students can discuss their frustrations and learn how to cope with their strange mix of abilities and disabilities, are helpful. Mentoring experiences with adults who are gifted and learning disabled will lend validity to the belief that such individuals can succeed.

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Conclusion

In the final analysis, students who are both gifted and learning disabled must learn how to be their own advocates. They must ultimately choose careers that will accentuate their strengths. In doing so they will meet others who think, feel, and create as they do.

One such student, after years of feeling different and struggling to succeed, was finally able to make appropriate decisions about what he truly needed in his life. He was an outstanding amateur photographer who loved music. He had also started several "businesses" during his teenage years. In his junior year at college he became depressed and realized that he was totally dissatisfied with his coursework, peers, and instructors. He wondered whether he should quit school. After all, he was barely earning C's in his courses. His advisor suggested that he might like to create his own major, perhaps in the business of art. That was the turning point in this young man's life. For the first time since primary grades, he began to earn A's in his courses. He related that he finally felt worthwhile. "You know," he said, "finally I'm wit people who think like me and have my interests and values. I am found!"

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Resources

Webbing and mind-mapping

Heimlich, J. E. & Pittleman, S. D. (1986). Semantic mapping: Classroom applications. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Large, C. (1987). The clustering approach to better essay writing. Monroe, NY: Trillium Press.

Rico, G. L. (1983). Writing the natural way. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher.

Visualization techniques to improve memory

Write to Trillium Press, P. O. Box 209, Monroe NY 10950 for information on the following materials.

Bagley, M. T. Using Imagery to Develop Memory.

Bagley, M. T. Using Imagery in Creative Problem Solving.

Bagley, M. T. & Hess, K. K. Two Hundred Ways of Using Imagery in the Classroom.

Hess, K. K. Enhancing Writing Through Imagery.

Using technology

Summa, D. & Kelly, S. (1989). What's new in software? Computer software for gifted education. Reading,

Fox, L. H., Brody, L. & Tobin, D. (Eds.) (1983). Learning disabled gifted children: Identification and programming. Baltimore, MD: Allyn & Bacon.

Gardner, H. (1983). Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Maslow, A. (1962). Toward a psychology of being. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrum.

Renzulli, J. (1978). What makes giftedness: Reexamining a definition. Phi Delta Kappan, 60, 180-184.

Whitmore, J. (1980). Giftedness, conflict, and underachievement. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Whitmore, J. & Maker, J. (1985). Intellectual giftedness among disabled persons. Rockville, MD: Aspen Press.

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