

Simultaneously identifying a child as being both gifted and learning disabled seems to many to be a contradiction of terms, an oxymoron. Yet there are those students who have great difficulty achieving in school, yet commit considerable time and effort to demanding, high level activities outside of school. Other students are found to have considerably high reading levels, yet they experience great difficulty in spelling and writing.

Just what is meant by 'gifted' or 'learning disabled' is a matter of controversy. Many educators (Baum, 1989; Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994, p. 165) view below grade level achievement as a prerequisite to a diagnosis of a learning disability. However, using this criterion alone, the extremely bright student who is struggling to stay on grade level will very likely not be identified, either as gifted or as learning disabled.

Researchers (Baum, 1989; Brody & Mills, 1997) group gifted students with learning disabilities into three categories: (1) those who are identified gifted but exhibiting learning difficulties in school, (2) those students who are identified learning disabled and are also, unknowingly, gifted, and (3) unidentified students whose abilities and disabilities mask each other.

The first group is usually identified as gifted because of high achievement or high IQ scores when they are quite young. Yet as they grow older, the discrepancy between expected achievement and actual performance widens. These students are often considered underachievers, with their underachievement attributed to a problem of work habits or attitude, poor self-concept, lack of motivation, boredom, or even laziness (Brody & Mills, 1997; Delisle & Berger, 1990). Baum (1989) reports that since these children are generally on grade level and already identified as gifted, they are usually overlooked for screening procedures necessary to identify subtle learning disabilities.

The second group is composed of students whose learning disabilities have been identified but whose exceptional abilities have never been addressed. These children are often failing in school yet they have high level interests at home. They tend to generalize their academic failure to an overall sense of inadequacy and are frequently found to be off-task, acting out, daydreaming, or complaining of headaches (Baum, 1989, Webb & Latimer, 1993). Delisle & Berger (1990) found, in their research, that underachievement is tied to the development of self-concept. Children who learn to see themselves as failures begin to place self-imposed limits on their abilities.

Students who fall into the third category, may comprise the greatest number of gifted students with learning disabilities. Their superior intelligence works overtime to help compensate for weaknesses caused by an undiagnosed learning disability. These children, whose abilities and disabilities mask each other, are considered to have average abilities and merely mark time in general education classrooms. Although these students are functioning reasonably well, they are performing well below their potential (Brody & Mills, 1997).

A complete assessment battery is needed to identify and plan interventions for gifted students with learning disabilities, including an individual intelligence test, an achievement battery, indicators of cognitive processing, and behavioral observations. Brody and Mills (1997) recommend that early identification and appropriate intervention are needed to help prevent the development of the accompanying social and behavioral problems that often result when the needs of a gifted child with learning disabilities are overlooked. In fact, Webb and Latimer (1993) found that bright children are frequently referred to psychologists or pediatricians because they have exhibited certain behaviors that are commonly associated with ADHD (e.g., restlessness, inattention, impulsivity, high activity levels, and daydreaming). Yet almost all of these behaviors are also associated with giftedness raising the potential for misidentification in both areas -- gifted and ADHD (see appendix).

Although teachers and parents may see glimpses of exceptional gifts and talents in these children, particularly in non-academic subjects, or in activities outside of school, they may fail to refer them for assessment. The only means of discovering, and providing appropriate interventions to these hidden bright children with masked learning disabilities is through early assessment of all children. This is clearly a problem for school districts with limited funding. While we generally feel morally obligated to help those students clearly at a disadvantage compared to the average person, there can be considerable resentment toward those who eclipse the ordinary individual in some area of achievement and we may wonder about our moral obligation to help someone who is already advantaged (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994). To go one step further and identify all children hidden within the average student population that have the dual exceptionalities of giftedness and learning disabilities is perhaps an unrealistic goal.

Fortunately, although each of these subgroups has unique problems, they all have similar curricular needs (Baum, 1989). When dealing with these children, we need to focus attention on the gift, rather than the disability. Researchers (Baum, 1989; Delisle & Berger, 1990) have found that focusing on weaknesses at the expense of developing gifts can result in poor self esteem, a lack of motivation, depression and stress.

We further need to provide a nurturing environment that acknowledges multiple intelligences and values individual differences (Delisle & Berger, 1990; Brody & Mills, 1997; Baum, 1989). In order to realize their full potential, Maslow (1962) states that an individual must feel that they belong and are valued.

Last, we need to encourage remedial strategies. Students need to be given opportunities to excel in their areas of strength while learning strategies for overcoming areas of learning deficiencies (Baum, 1989; Delisle & Berger, 1990).

If teachers are well trained to incorporate strategies to provide nurturing environments and a focus on individual gifts for all of their students within the general education environment, and are sensitive to the possibility of hidden gifts and learning disabilities among their students, more children will likely be identified for the assistance they need, and are entitled to, in order to achieve their full potential. And those who still fall through the cracks will fare better for being, at least partially, in the environment they need.

Appendix

Seeing the difference between behaviors that are sometimes associated with giftedness but also characteristics of ADHD is not easy. It is important to examine the situations in which a child's behaviors are problematic. Gifted children typically do not exhibit problems in all situations. By contrast, children with ADHD exhibit problem behaviors in virtually all settings (Webb & Latimer, 1993).

Behaviors Associated With ADHD

(Barkley, 1990)

1. Poorly sustained attention in almost all situations.
2. Diminished persistence on tasks not having immediate consequences.
3. Impulsivity, poor delay of gratification
4. Impaired adherence to commands to regulate behavior in social contexts.
5. More active, restless than normal child.
6. Difficulty adhering to rules and regulations.

Behaviors Associated With Giftedness

(Webb, 1993)

1. Poor attention, boredom, daydreaming in specific situations
2. Low tolerance for persistence on tasks that seem irrelevant
3. Judgment lags behind development of intellect
4. Intensity may lead to power struggles with authorities
5. High activity level; may need less sleep
6. Questions rules, customs and traditions

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