

Twice Exceptional:
Learning Disabled and Gifted

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A person who is both learning disabled and gifted at the same time is often termed twice exceptional. There are many people who cannot put their mind around the concept that someone can be very intelligent and also have serious academic weaknesses. Characteristics, the possible existence of masking, methods of identification, and educational methods are important things to consider when addressing this topic.

The first time this population received any discussion at all was about 30 years ago, in the early 1970's (Goldstein 2001). Educators of learning disabled and gifted students got together in 1981 to discuss students with both characteristics. This established that it is indeed possible to be what has become known as twice exceptional (Brody & Mills, 1997). This is a change from past views, which saw gifted students as being uniformly strong in all areas of academics (Baum, 1997). Goldstein (2001) further notes that "focus on twice-exceptional students in education literature and research was bolstered by a 1987 report to Congress by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, a group set up by Congress that included representatives from federal agencies. After reviewing existing research and information, the committee concluded in its report that more research was needed on how to provide services for gifted students with learning disabilities." Still, when all is said and done, it was not until the middle of the 1990's that the status of twice-exceptional was fully established. It is currently thought that 2 to 5 percent of students are both gifted and learning disabled (Goldstein, 2001).

There are many examples of people, both historically and today, who are both learning disabled and gifted. Some of them have dyslexia. According to West (2001), dyslexia may actually give some of these gifted people an advantage. The learning disability may make them

more visually minded and thus better able to handle some of today's technologies. This could be why people such as Nicholas Negroponte are so successful in the world of computers.

Apparently dyslexia is quite common among those studying at MIT. It may also allow them to think in more creative ways, coming up with ideas that non-dyslexics would not have considered. This can give them an advantage in business. West brings the examples of Charles Schwab, Richard Branson, and others who are both gifted in business and dyslexic. Additionally, the man most responsible for Singapore's success as a nation, Lee Kuan Yew, is also dyslexic. Another dyslexic, Jack Horner, has excelled in the field of paleontology, despite his lack of a formal degree. Of course, not all those who are twice-exceptional are dyslexic, but it is remarkable that at least one learning disability may be linked to one type of giftedness.

Classification of subgroups and masking

According to Baum (1997), these students can be classified into three sub-groups, namely: "identified gifted students who have subtle learning disabilities[,] unidentified students whose gifts and disabilities may be masked by average achievement[, and] identified learning disabled students who are also gifted." Brody and Mills (1997) say that those who are identified as gifted, but who are not living up to their potential, are more apt to be labeled as "underachievers ... [due] to poor self-concept, lack of motivation, or even laziness." They may not be labeled as learning disabled until very late in their academic careers. There are students who are labeled as learning disabled, because their disability is enough to overshadow their giftedness. This group may never have their gifts brought out. Goldstein (2001) would place Einstein in this category, though he was fortunate in that he had parents who nurtured his gifts. Students in the middle category of Baum's categorization above may fall between the cracks for a long time, labeled neither as learning disabled nor gifted. Brody and Mills (1997)

say that this group is the largest of the three. Since “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.” Eventually, as they progress in school, their struggles will become more apparent and they will likely be identified as learning disabled. It is unlikely that they will also be identified as gifted. Maker and Udall (1985) refer to the phenomenon of giftedness and learning disabilities hiding each other as masking. McCoach, Kehle, Bray, and Stegle (2001) feel that the concept of masking is “fraught with theoretical and pragmatic problems” despite the concept of masking being “a central tenet within the current literature in the field.” In part, they feel that some students who are achieving at average levels with above average potential may simply not be motivated or interested. It is hard to believe, however, that others in the field of special education have overlooked this fact. Certainly such issues would have to be ruled out before a person was diagnosed having a learning disability.

Characteristics and identification

Because of masking, identification of those who are both learning disabled and gifted can be difficult. Willard-Holt (1999) lists some characteristics of gifted children who are also learning disabled to aid parents and teachers in identifying them:

- High abstract reasoning ability
- Good mathematical reasoning ability
- Keen visual memory, spatial skills
- Advanced vocabulary
- Sophisticated sense of humor
- Imaginative and creative
- Insightful
- Exceptional ability in geometry, science, arts, music
- Good problem-finding and – solving skills

- Difficulty with memorization, computation, phonics, and/or spelling
- Distractibility and/or disorganization
- Supersensitivity
- Perfectionism
- Grasp of metaphors, analogies, satire
- Unreasonable self-expectations
- Often, failure to complete assignments
- Difficulty with sequential tasks
- Wide variety of interests.

Maker and Udall (1985) say that some weaknesses are more often seen in children who are both LD and gifted, including “poor handwriting, poor spelling, lack of organizational ability, and difficulty in employing systematic strategies for problem solving.” With the latter characteristic, they disagree with Willard-Holt above. Maker and Udall (1985) say that the following are common strengths of these students: “speaking, understanding and identifying relationships, vocabulary, knowledge of information related to a wide variety of topics, and observational skills.” Furthermore, Maker and Udall (1985) state that “thinking and reasoning processes are often not impaired, but the mechanics involved in writing, reading, mathematics computation, and completing academic tasks often present great difficulties.” Goldstein (2001) informs us of some characteristics that have been noticed that may help in identifying these children: they “may use an extensive vocabulary when they speak, but much simpler words when they write ...[their] ideas are creative, but their written thoughts might be misspelled and penned with bad handwriting... [and they] might grasp concepts easily, but be unable to do well on a timed test.” While looking for the characteristics laid down by Maker and Udall, Willard-Holt, or Goldstein alone are insufficient to identify a student, they may help start the ball rolling towards the identification of the twice exceptional.

Brody and Mills (1997) recommend that the following be “considered when 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.” They caution educators and evaluators to be aware that the learning disability can lower the results on tests in the classroom. One can easily imagine a student who contributes wonderfully in class, but does not do as well on a test. Brody and Mills (1997) further caution that for those who are gifted in areas such as the arts or even mathematics, IQ tests are not useful for identification. With those who are twice exceptional “global IQ measures may be particularly insensitive to depression of scores caused by the disability.” This being said, IQ tests can be used for identifying strengths of these students. Aptitude tests that show a child working above grade level “in mathematical and/or verbal areas” can also be useful in identification. They recommend that discrepancy between ability and achievement be used as only one of the criteria in this process. The tester should also look for a processing deficit, as mentioned earlier. However, if the child has high abilities, even average scores in processing can mean a deficit exists. Ultimately, continue Brody and 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.” The earlier a child is identified, the better.

McCoach, Kehle, Bray, and Stegle (2001) argue against profiling as a way of identification. They say that sub-test scores of the Wechsler IQ test should not be used to show the strengths and weaknesses of a student, because they are not as reliable as the full scale score. They state that the “subtest scatter increases with as [sic] the value of the highest subtest score rises. If these findings are true, then intellectually gifted children would display more atypical

and scattered profiles than other students. Therefore, profile analysis would capitalize on chance variability, and would be especially inappropriate for students of superior ability.” It would seem logical, however, that the fact that gifted students will show more scatter would actually be useful. Also, they note that “both gifted students and gifted/learning disabled students showed strengths in the similarities tests and digit span.” This would seem to be a useful way of finding out if a student is gifted, but not learning disabled. In fact they note that since the subtests are not useful in identifying the existence of a learning disability in general, they would not be useful with this population either. As an alternative, McCoach, Kehle, Bray, and Stegle (2001) recommend that these students be identified first as learning disabled, following federal and state guidelines. A wide variety of things should be looked at, including how they are doing in the class and standardized achievement tests. In the classroom, they recommend “curriculum-based assessments, informal reading inventories, permanent product reviews of a student’s written work, and portfolio reviews.” They agree with Brody and Mills on the battery of tests to be conducted, but also think that a longitudinal study of performance and achievement is useful and should be done. They note that the scores of the twice exceptional on standardized achievement tests will likely “decline over time as the specific learning disability exerts an increasingly greater influence on their academic achievement.” It seems to me, however, that this strategy will only work with those who first identified as gifted and have subtle learning disabilities. If that is not the case, the child will likely be labeled LD by this method, but have his or her gift totally overlooked. Obviously, the identification of this population is not simple and likely will be a source for debate and discussion for some time.

Educational Recommendations

Once these children are identified, they will need both assistance or accommodations in areas of weakness and an environment to encourage their gifts. Brody and Mills (1997) state that these students “need (a) highlevel or ‘gifted’ programming in their areas of strength, (b) developmental instruction in subjects of average growth, (c) remedial teaching in areas of disability, and (d) adaptive instruction in areas of disability.” It is ideal if they spend at least part of the day with other students who, like them, are both gifted and learning disabled. Cosmos (n.d.) suggest that a team be responsible for the educational needs of the twice exceptional. She also recommends use of appropriate technologies to help the students bypass deficit areas so they can concentrate on strengths. Additionally, these students should have a mentor to help them fully realize their potential, not only remediation. They may also need counseling to help them deal with their differences. Teachers should play up their strengths, so that their weaknesses do not get all of the attention. Also, placements should be flexible. They may do well with accommodations, in an advanced science group, and still need remedial reading.

Those who are twice exceptional, both learning disabled and gifted, tend to share some characteristics in common, but are often hard to identify. All too often, they fall through the cracks, not being served in either special education or gifted programs. In the past, such people would only have their gifts nurtured outside of school. If we want these students to live up to their potential, their educational needs must be met. Rare and precious, unique and special, the twice-exceptional are a wondrous gift that educators and society need to nurture. We not only need to help them in their weaknesses, but we need to encourage their talents, giving them wings so they can fly.

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