

Recognizing the Gifts of Twice Exceptional Students



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Gifted students with disabling conditions remain a major group of underserved and understimulated youth (Cline, 1999). The focus on accommodations for their disabilities may preclude the recognition and development of their cognitive abilities. It is not unexpected, then, to find a significant discrepancy between the measured academic potential of these students and their actual performance in the classroom (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). In order for these children to reach their potential, it is imperative that their intellectual strengths be recognized and nurtured, at the same time as their disability is accommodated appropriately.

Assessment

Identification of giftedness in students who are disabled is problematic. The customary identification methods (standardized tests and observational checklists) are inadequate, without major modification. Standard lists of characteristics of gifted students may be inadequate for unmasking hidden potential in children who have disabilities. Children whose hearing is impaired, for example, cannot respond to oral directions, and they may also lack the vocabulary which reflects the complexity of their thoughts. Children whose speech or language is impaired cannot respond to tests

requiring verbal responses. Children whose vision is impaired may be unable to respond to certain performance measures, and although their vocabulary may be quite advanced, they may not understand the full meaning of the words they use (e.g., color words). Children with learning disabilities may use high-level vocabulary in speaking but be unable to express themselves in writing, or vice versa. In addition, limited life experiences due to impaired mobility may artificially lower scores (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). Since the population of gifted/disabled students is difficult to locate, they seldom are included in standardized test norming groups, adding to the problems of comparison.

In addition, gifted children with disabilities often use their intelligence to try to circumvent the disability. This may cause both exceptionalities to appear less extreme: the disability may appear less severe because the child is using the intellect to cope, while the efforts expended in that area may hinder other expressions of giftedness.

The following lists are intended to assist parents and teachers in recognizing intellectual giftedness in the presence of a disability.

Gifted Students with Visual Impairment

- ❖ Fast rate of learning
 - ❖ Superior memory
 - ❖ Superior verbal communication skills and vocabulary
 - ❖ Advanced problem-solving skills
 - ❖ Creative production or thought that may progress more slowly than sighted students in some academic areas
 - ❖ Ease in learning Braille
 - ❖ Great persistence
 - ❖ Motivation to know
 - ❖ Sometimes slower rate of cognitive development than sighted students
 - ❖ Excellent ability to concentrate
- (Whitmore & Maker, 1985)*

Gifted Students with Physical Disabilities

- Development of compensatory skills
 - Creativity in finding alternate ways of communicating and accomplishing tasks
 - Impressive store of knowledge
 - Advanced academic skills
 - Superior memory
 - Exceptional problem-solving skills
 - Rapid grasp of ideas
 - Ability to set and strive for long-term goals
 - Greater maturity than age mates
 - Good sense of humor
 - Persistence, patience
 - Motivation to achieve
 - Curiosity, insight
 - Self-criticism and perfectionism
 - Cognitive development that may not be based on direct experience
 - Possible difficulty with abstractions
 - Possible limited achievement due to pace of work
- (Cline, 1999; Whitmore & Maker, 1985; Willard-Holt, 1994)*

Gifted Students with Hearing Impairments

- ◆ Development of speech-reading skills without instruction
 - ◆ Early reading ability
 - ◆ Excellent memory
 - ◆ Ability to function in the regular school setting
 - ◆ Rapid grasp of ideas
 - ◆ High reasoning ability
 - ◆ Superior performance in school
 - ◆ Wide range of interests
 - ◆ Nontraditional ways of getting information
 - ◆ Use of problem-solving skills in everyday situations
 - ◆ Possibly on grade level
 - ◆ Delays in concept attainment
 - ◆ Self starters
 - ◆ Good sense of humor
 - ◆ Enjoyment of manipulating environment
 - ◆ Intuition
 - ◆ Ingenuity in solving problems
 - ◆ Symbolic language abilities (different symbol system)
- (Cline, 1999; Whitmore & Maker, 1985)

Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities

- ◇ 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
 - ◇ Comprehension of complex systems
 - ◇ Unreasonable self expectations
 - ◇ Difficulties with sequential tasks
 - ◇ Wide variety of interests
- (Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991; Silverman, 1989)

Research indicates that in many cases, a child is diagnosed with ADHD when in fact the child is gifted and reacting to an inappropriate curriculum (Webb & Latimer, 1993). The key to distinguishing between the two is the pervasiveness of the "acting out" behaviors. If the acting out is specific to certain situations, the child's behavior is more likely related to giftedness; whereas, if the behavior is consistent across all situations, the child's behavior is more likely related to ADHD. It is also possible for a child to be BOTH gifted and ADHD. The following lists highlight the similarities between giftedness and ADHD.

Characteristics of Gifted Students Who Are Bored

- Poor attention and daydreaming when bored
 - Low tolerance for persistence on tasks that seem irrelevant
 - Begin many projects, see few to completion
 - Development of judgment lags behind intellectual growth
 - Intensity may lead to power struggles with authorities
 - High activity level; may need less sleep
 - Difficulty restraining desire to talk; may be disruptive
 - Question rules, customs, and traditions
 - Lose work, forget homework, are disorganized
 - May appear careless
 - Highly sensitive to criticism
 - Do not exhibit problem behaviors in all situations
 - More consistent levels of performance at a fairly consistent pace
- (Cline, 1999; Webb & Latimer, 1993)

Characteristics of Students with ADHD

- ❖ Poorly sustained attention
- ❖ Diminished persistence on tasks not having immediate consequences
- ❖ Often shift from one uncompleted activity to another
- ❖ Impulsivity, poor delay of gratification
- ❖ Impaired adherence to commands to regulate or inhibit behavior in social contexts
- ❖ More active, restless than other children
- ❖ Often talk excessively
- ❖ Often interrupt or intrude on others (e.g., butt into games)
- ❖ Difficulty adhering to rules and regulations
- ❖ Often lose things necessary for tasks or activities at home or school
- ❖ May appear inattentive to details
- ❖ Highly sensitive to criticism
- ❖ Problem behaviors exist in all settings, but in some are more severe
- ❖ Variability in task performance and time used to accomplish tasks.

(Barkley, 1990; Cline, 1999; Webb & Latimer, 1993)

Questions to Ask in Differentiating between Giftedness and ADHD

Could the behaviors be responses to inappropriate placement, insufficient challenge, or lack of intellectual peers? Is the child able to concentrate when interested in the activity? Have any curricular modifications been made in an attempt to change inappropriate behaviors? Has the child been interviewed? What are his/her feelings about the behaviors? Does the child feel out of control? Do the parents perceive the child as being out of control? Do the behaviors occur at certain times of the day, during certain activities, with certain teachers or in certain environments?

Implications for Students with Dual Exceptionalities

Commitment to identifying and nurturing the gifts of students with disabilities implies specific changes in the way educators approach identification, instruction, and classroom dynamics.

Identification

Include students with disabilities in initial screening phase. Be willing to accept nonconventional indicators of intellectual talent. Look beyond test scores. When applying cutoffs, bear in mind the depression of scores that may occur due to the disability. DO NOT aggregate subtest scores into a composite score. Compare with others who have similar disabilities. Weight more heavily characteristics that enable the child to effectively compensate for the disability. Weight more heavily areas of performance unaffected by the disability. Allow the child to participate in gifted programs on a trial basis.

Instruction

Be aware of the powerful role of language; reduce communication limitations and develop alternative modes for

thinking and communicating. Emphasize high-level abstract thinking, creativity, and a problem-solving approach. Have great expectations: these children often become successful as adults in fields requiring advanced education. Provide for individual pacing in areas of giftedness and disability. Provide challenging activities at an advanced level. Promote active inquiry, experimentation, and discussion. Promote self-direction. Offer options that enable students to use strengths and preferred ways of learning. Use intellectual strengths to develop coping strategies. Assist in strengthening the student's self concept.

Classroom Dynamics

Discuss disabilities/capabilities and their implications with the class. Expect participation in all activities; strive for normal peer interactions. Facilitate acceptance; model and demand respect for all. Candidly answer peers' questions. Treat a child with a disability the same way a child without a disability is treated. Model celebration of individual differences.

Gifted students with disabilities must be provided with appropriate challenges. The personal and societal costs of not developing their potential cannot be overstated. ■

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