

Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities: A Paradox for Parents

Written by Sarah Macfarlane, 2000
Post Graduate Student, Massey University

Gifted children with learning disabilities present a paradox to educators and parents. The identification and characteristics of gifted children with learning disabilities is outlined. Issues relating to meeting the needs of these students in the New Zealand education system are discussed. The role of parents in supporting these children is explored.

Introduction

The gifted child with learning disabilities (GCLD) is seemingly a paradox — How can a gifted child be struggling with academic achievement and success in the school system, and yet be focused and passionate about complex interests at home?

How can they seem to learn some things with no apparent effort, and yet in other areas of learning experience so much difficulty? As noted by Sturgess (1997, p. 3): "Amazing and creative achievements can pale into insignificance if the student is unable to remember what was assigned for homework or where a math book was left. Understandably, parents, teachers, and the students themselves wonder how they could be so capable when it comes to higher level thinking and abstract concepts, and yet so incapable when they are required to organise a written product, sequence ideas, and pay attention to detail."

The recognition of the existence of GCLD children has become an increasing focus for writers, researchers, and educators in the field of gifted education, and this article explores the characteristics of the GCLD child, and considers some of the issues in the education of these children with a particular focus on the parent's role in supporting their GCLD children.

Definition and characteristics of "gifted learning disabled"

Significant writing and research on gifted children with learning disabilities began around 25 years ago (Birely, 1995). Much of the difficulty for some educators has been the misguided concept that "learning disabilities" and "giftedness" occur at opposite ends of the learning spectrum (Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1993), however a strong body of literature now supports the existence of both conditions existing simultaneously (Baum, 1990). Birely (1995) notes that the literature on GCLD can be categorised into four categories:

- case studies,
- articles on educational programmes designed to meet the needs of these children,
- studies of intelligence test patterns, and
- suggestions for teaching strategies to assist these children.

While no absolute definition has been developed or agreed upon, the GCLD can be defined as "a student with an overall IQ score in the superior range or a score on one section of an individually administered IQ test in the superior range... or A student with an exceptional ability in one area (eg mathematics..) and who exhibits a significant discrepancy between

achievement and identified intellectual potential...." (John Hopkins University, 1995, p. 12). Mendaglio (1993) gives three criteria for identification:

- average or above average intelligence,
- significant underachievement, and
- difficulty with skills involving encoding and decoding of language.

GCLD students can be grouped into three categories:

- 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 (Baum, 1990).

Estimations of the incidence of GCLD students range from 2–5 percent of the general gifted student population (Whitmore, 1981 cited in Stewart, 1998), while Dix and Schaeffer (1996) estimate somewhere between 5–10 percent of the gifted population are GCLD.

Berk (1983, cited in Mendaglio, 1993) considers that learning difficulties are a category of underachievement. Research by Silverman (1989, cited in Cline & Schwartz, 1999) noted that the characteristics of GCLD students defined in literature are nearly identical to characteristics given for gifted underachieving students. There is no absolute set of characteristics which define the GCLD student (Rivera, Murdock & Sexton (1995); Stewart, 1998), however a common set of characteristics is identified in the literature, and is summarised in Table 1. While some distinguishing patterns are usually in evidence in a WISC III test on a GCLD student (Stewart, 1998, and see table), generally the characteristics of GCLD students are defined in terms of behaviours, rather than specific diagnostic tests. Part of the difficulty in defining an absolute list of characteristics is that there are so many types and definitions of giftedness, and so many possible learning difficulties (Maker & Udall, 1983).

Many GCLD children also display attention deficit or attention deficit hyperactivity disorders. While there is an interrelationship between giftedness and these disorders (Cline & Schwartz, 1999; Williard-Holt, 1999) there is also the possibility that GCLD students be misdiagnosed as ADHD or ADD due to similarity in some of the characteristics, especially when a gifted child may be reacting to inappropriate curriculum and exhibiting these behaviours (Webb & Latimer, 1993).

Common symptoms of ADHD (listed by the American Psychiatric Association, 1994, cited in Cline & Schwartz, 1999) include:

- often does not give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork or other activities;
- often has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks;
- often fails to finish schoolwork;
- often has difficulty organising tasks and activities.

These are identical to characteristics often cited for GCLD students and it is thus imperative that such diagnoses are made by well-informed professionals who have a full range of information about the child.

Table 1: Characteristics of Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities

(Maker & Udall, 1983; Rivera, Murdock, & Sexton, 1995; Mendaglio, 1993; Delisle, 1992; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Dix & Schafer, 1996; Ellston, 1993; Fall & Nolan, 1993; Stewart, 1998; Birely, 1995a; Baum, 1990)

Weaknesses:

- Cannot do simple tasks but can complete more sophisticated activities
- Spells poorly
- Has poor handwriting, reversals of letter and poor formation of letters can be common
- Inconsistencies in reading ability: either good comprehension but poor reading skills, or good reading skills but poor comprehension
- Has difficulty with computation but demonstrates higher level mathematical reasoning
- Transposes numerals in mathematics
- Does well in mathematics, but poorly in language
- Does well in language but poorly in mathematics
- Does not do well on timed tests
- Does not respond well or consistently to auditory instructions/information
- Poor organisational skills, failure to complete or hand in assignments
- Difficulty with rote memorisation, sequential learning
- Poor ball handling skills
- Difficulty copying from the blackboard
- Generalises minor academic failure to feelings of overall inadequacy
- Affective behaviours can include: low self-esteem, unrealistic expectations, reluctant to take risks
- Disruptive in class
- Frequently off task
- Frustrates easily
- Acts out without thinking about the consequences
- Has poor social skills with peers and adults
- A "zig zag" or "scatter" WISC pattern, showing weaknesses the sub tests such as coding, digit span, arithmetic, and freedom from distractibility

Strengths:

- High scores on the WISC in vocabulary, similarities, block design, abstract reasoning and spatial reasoning
- Above average vocabulary
- Great knowledge and passion for subjects of interest
- Can show exceptional skills in mathematical reasoning, geometry
- Divergent thinkers – involving unusual, original, imaginative and creative thought processes
- Active imagination
- Excellent visual memory
- Sophisticated sense of humour

While the term "Gifted Learning Disabled" is in common use in the literature, other terms such as "Twice-exceptional" (Beckley, n.d.) are also in use. Some literature also refers to gifted children with "dyslexia", although this term has not been commonly used in education in New Zealand (Fischer, 1999).

Identification of GCLD students

Many GCLD students are not identified, and many fail to reach their full potential within the education system (Silverman, 1990 cited in Stewart, 1998). The lack of consensus about a definition of giftedness or LD means that there is confusion over identifying GCLD students (Pendarvis, Howley & Howley, 1990 cited in Stewart, 1998). In addition, recognition of learning disabilities is particularly difficult in some gifted children, as they have a remarkable ability to compensate and hide their weaknesses (Silverman, 1999).

Baum, Owen and Dixon (1993) note that identification often begins when parents or teachers suspect that a student is having a problem. In New Zealand, the WISC III is not generally used as a diagnostic test within schools, although some children may have had access to such testing through outside agencies and the results have been used in their identification. More commonly, identification will rely on knowledgeable educators or parents identifying a child's mix of abilities and disabilities.

To identify a student as GCLD a wide variety of information should be sought, including indepth assessment of both strengths and weaknesses (Van Tassel-Baska, 1992; Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1993; Maker & Udall, 1983). Evaluation should include individually administered intelligence tests, diagnostic achievement tests, evaluation of creative products by experts or teachers, peer evaluations of leadership ability, parent interviews, classroom observation of peer interaction and other performance, and ideally tests of perceptual ability, visual motor coordination, and expressive ability (Maker & Udall, 1993). Such comprehensive evaluation is unlikely to occur routinely in many New Zealand schools at this time.

Parent's role in identification of GCLD students

Sturges (1999, p 11) notes that parents often indicate that their children were "bright" during their early schooling, "but fell progressively behind other students, particularly in written language, specifically spelling, and sometimes reading". Gifted behaviour before entering school and subsequent failure in school can provide an important indicator of a GCLD student (Rivera, Murdock, & Sexton, 1995), and as parents can provide insight into their children's preschool activities or outside school interests, parental involvement in identification can be key (Rivera, Murdock, & Sexton, 1995; Baum, Owen & Dixon, 1993). Delisle (1992) notes that the most efficient way to gain useful parent information for identification is to ask parents specific questions about the traits and behaviours of their children, rather than yes/no type questionnaires.

Parent identification of giftedness and/or learning disabilities can be particularly important in the preschool years when test data is not readily available or appropriate. Research in one study showed that over 70 percent of parents with gifted children first suspected giftedness in their children between birth and three years of age (Gogel, McClumsey, & Hewitt, 1985c cited in Delisle, 1992). A study by Jacobs (1971 cited in Delisle, 1992) found that 76 percent of parents with gifted kindergarten children had identified them as gifted, compared to the teacher identification rate of only identifying 4 percent of the gifted children.

Parents often know the strengths and weaknesses of their children well, and it is likely that parents are just as accurate in identifying their GCLD children as these statistics suggest for parental identification of giftedness. For example, while a kindergarten teacher may regard a 4-year-old as developmentally normal in being unable yet to identify letters of the alphabet, a parent may recognise a huge contrast between their child's unmastered reading and writing skills, and their child's encyclopedic knowledge of dinosaurs and ability to identify them in great detail.

The need for GCLD students to be identified

It is essential that identification of gifted learning disabled children is made as early as possible, and preferably in the early childhood years to assist GCLD students to succeed in the school system (Williams, 1988). Silverman (1999) stresses the importance of early diagnosis of learning disabilities in order to enable early intervention, particularly in the case of motor delays. Keenan (1994, p. 10, cited in Sherwood 1998) advocates that "if intervention is begun at the preschool level, these children can enter school with their parents aware of where they will most probably benefit from gifted programs, where they will experience failure with normal school expectations, and how to allow for and/or remediate the areas of weakness".

Awareness of and identification of GCLD students also allows for the identification of the "hidden" gifted, students whose abilities are masked by their weaknesses. As noted by Johnson, Karnes and Carr, (1997) a barrier to identification of gifted children with disabilities is the expectation that the children will demonstrate the same characteristics of giftedness as children without disabilities who are identified as gifted. So for example, if a teacher believes that all gifted children will express their knowledge and ideas well in their written work, they are unlikely to identify a child as gifted who cannot even form letters correctly. The gifts of GCLD students often remain invisible to teachers and sometimes even parents (Beckley, n.d.). GCLD students may be mistakenly identified as ADD or ADHD, underachieving, "lazy", or "average", and it is therefore important to correctly identify these students using multicategorical information, so that their specific needs are identified.

Vaidya (1993) notes that parents may neglect the importance of nurturing their child's strengths and gifts while concentrating on addressing the difficulties posed by the child's learning disability. Therefore, it is imperative that parents and teachers identify GCLD students and put appropriate strategies in place, which offer enrichment and/or acceleration in the areas of strength, as well as addressing areas of weakness. Sturges, (1997, p 1) noted that the "use of inappropriate teaching strategies can result in negative attributions and limited learning experiences for GCLD students", and hence it is critical that these students are identified as the first step in meeting their educational needs in an appropriate way.

GCLD students are also at significant risk for developing negative self concepts as a result of their frustration at being unable to complete simple tasks successfully and yet thinking at high levels, as their intellectual abilities allow them to see clearly what they perceive as failures (Conover, 1996). Whitmore (1980 cited in Delisle, 1992) notes that many gifted children connect their success in school to their worth as a person. Appropriate identification and remediation and counseling can assist in GCLD students in having a more positive understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Baum (1990) notes that in planning for the educational needs of GCLD students, it is important to focus on the development of the strengths and interests, as well as to teach and encourage the use of compensation strategies. Strategies which assist in meeting the needs of GCLD students are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Strategies to assist GCLD students.

(Baum, 1990; Maker & Udall, 1983; Birely, 1995, 1995a; Beckley, n.d.; Sturgess, 1997)

- Focus on the child's strengths.
- Encourage compensation strategies such as calculator use, and word processes to compensate for spelling and writing difficulties.
- Find sources of information that are accessible to students who have difficulty reading.
- Teach how to use brainstorming and mind maps to organise their work, and teach formal essay and project planning and presentation.
- Allow the student to use strategies other than writing to communicate ideas and complete school projects eg dictate work to someone else, give a speech, present a video, audio tape, use a computer presentation program, make a model, use drama, create a mural.
- Use mnemonics to overcome short term memory problems.
- Teach auditory processing skills.
- Provide alternative learning experiences which are not dependent on paper and pencil or reading (puzzles, logic games, tangrams, math manipulatives).
- Give realistic deadlines for completing assignments (often longer than for others). Use contracts.
- Develop routines for daily activities — eg specific times for homework, organising clothing and schoolbooks for the next day, organising class books.
- The use of coloured lenses may remediate some reading difficulties.
- Encourage awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative that students who are gifted and learning disabled understand their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Provide mentoring experiences with adults who are GCLD.
- Provide appropriate success feedback.

Silverman (1999) notes that the asynchronous development of gifted individuals is magnified when high levels of intelligence are combined with disabilities. The asynchronous development of the gifted student can raise special challenges as they seek to understand themselves and to make life choices as they enter adolescence. It is important that parents and educators are aware of these issues, and take them into account when developing appropriate learning opportunities.

The GCLD student in the New Zealand education system

One of the key issues in the provision for the needs of GCLD students in New Zealand is the lack of a national policy for gifted students and the lack of a national policy that requires schools to provide identification or differentiated education for GCLD students. Official

recognition and provision of services for GCLD students is mandatory in other countries (Sturges, 1997).

Sturges (1997, p. 1) identified several issues that contribute to the lack of identification of GCLD students in New Zealand:

- lack of official recognition of either giftedness or learning disabilities as categories of special need;
- identification procedures that fail to identify gifted students who also have learning disabilities;
- limited understanding on the part of many educators of what it means, in academic and affective terms, to be gifted and learning disabled.

GCLD students present a special challenge to schools and educators in New Zealand, as many professional educators have received no training in the identification and provisions to meet the needs of these students (Williams, 1988). It is somewhat difficult for teachers to cater for GCLD students if they have not even recognised that they have specific learning needs. These students may be identified as being lazy and just not trying hard enough. Teachers specifically trained in special education are few and far between in our school systems at this time and while staff such as RTLB's may be trained to teach children with disabilities, few may have knowledge about gifted children and their programming needs. Professionals in gifted education may have little knowledge about learning difficulties.

The New Zealand school system is increasingly providing for children from diverse backgrounds, with diverse languages, cultures, socioeconomic levels, and complex family backgrounds that impact on each child's educational needs. These varying needs provide an ever increasing challenge for schools and for the classroom teacher to meet the needs of each child. It is inevitable that with such an array of needs to meet, teachers are will be making choices about which children's needs they can realistically address within their classroom. For some parents, their concern about their GCLD child's needs not being met in the school system becomes so great that they choose to home school their child.

Awareness of the needs of gifted children is however being continually raised in New Zealand, along with the awareness of the needs of GCLD students. The recent publication by the Ministry of Education of *Gifted and Talented Students: Meeting Their Needs in New Zealand Schools* is a strong signal to educators that the needs of all gifted students must be met and should result in many more New Zealand schools developing school policy and programmes for the gifted students including special population such as GCLD students.

The Education Review Office (ERO) is increasingly focusing on the needs of gifted children within schools, however without a national policy on gifted children, ERO can only comment publicly on the fact that a school is not adequately meeting the needs of these students, rather than actually require a school to put appropriate policy and programmes in place. Concerned parents can however draw ERO's attention to the issue by writing to the Board of Trustees and expressing their concerns, as this is likely to "flag" the issue when ERO staff are undertaking their audit (J. Adams, 2000, personal communication, June 19, 2000).

Parental involvement in meeting the needs of their GCLD child

Stephens (1999, p. 43) comments that "In order for gifted education to successfully move ahead into the 21st century, parental involvement is essential." Parental involvement can be critical in identifying GCLD students, and in assisting in strategies to assist the GCLD child at home and in school, and in ensuring that appropriate educational opportunities are available to meet the child's needs for extension. Parents of GCLD students also have a role to play in their child's school and community.

Parents' role in meeting the needs of the GCLD child at school

Fraser (1996, p. 444) states that "it is essential that parents go to extraordinary efforts to maintain the best possible relationship with the child's school". The New Zealand school system allows for and encourages community input into the running of schools. Elected Boards of Trustees allow for parents to have a significant role in determining staffing, resources, professional development, and in developing the special nature of their individual school. In addition, groups such as PTA, and the openness in some schools towards the use of "parent help" within the classroom allows for substantial interaction between school personnel and parents. While all of these positions offer excellent opportunities for working with and developing a relationship with school staff and offer an opportunity for increasing dialogue for advocacy, they also draw on parents' time and energy. In some schools, such parent roles of "helping" within the school are the main opportunity a parent has to build rapport and knowledge about the school and teaching staff. For those parents who work full time, access to school staff can be difficult, especially where no other formal avenues are made easily available for parents to meet with school staff — one 10 minute parent-teacher interview per year is not sufficient for adequate exchange of information between parents and professionals in order to discuss the needs of a GCLD student. While parent involvement within the classroom is common in preschools and primary schools, it is generally seen as less appropriate at intermediate and secondary schools.

Tolan (1987, p. 185, cited in Fraser, 1996, p. 446) notes "when professionals see themselves as the source of all knowledge and information and parents only as receivers of that information, it is perhaps not surprising that they are less aware than they might be of what life may be like for gifted children and their parents". While some educationalists and researchers see meeting the needs of GCLD students purely from a teacher-driven perspective, it remains difficult for parents to contribute towards their child's school education. Silverman (n.d.) notes that parents of gifted children can be placed in a "no-win situation: If they try to develop their children's abilities to their fullest, they often find themselves in an adversarial position with the schools" and until there are government requirements "protecting gifted children and assuring that they get an education commensurate with their needs, parents will have to bear the burden of being their children's advocates — even when it means being branded 'a pushy parent'."

The lack of knowledge exhibited by professionals within the field of education is a major constraint facing parents of GCLD students. In research by Sherwood (1995, p. 6, cited in Sherwood, 1996) parents expressed the view that "many teachers are not prepared to take anything you say seriously and have a tendency to label the children as being stupid or lazy". Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many parents of GCLD students in New Zealand their experiences are similar. Stephens (1999, p. 43) identifies that "pre-service teachers should receive special training in effective communication skills so that they might conduct more successful parent-teacher conferences", and further that "it is necessary that pre-service teachers receive sensitivity training to the unique needs of parents of gifted children".

Stephens (1999, p. 43) specifically identifies that pre-service teachers need to gain skills in "effective communication, collaboration with parents, and efficient dissemination techniques". Mark (1990) notes that when effective parent-teacher communication takes place, this has increased benefits for the child's learning, the teacher has access to information to teach more effectively, and the parents can more appropriately parent. It is still not uncommon for teacher trainees in New Zealand to complete their training with little or no training in how to interact with parents. In addition, schools and teachers have differing ideas about just how much information parents are given about their child's progress at school, which can provide a further barrier to parents wishing to access this information. While the Official Information Act ultimately means that parents are legally entitled to view their child's school records, in practice this is not always a straight forward process.

For some parents their own experiences of school may not have been positive and may have left them deeply distrustful and skeptical of teachers' abilities and commitment in general, and this may be a barrier to effective communication. For other parents they may have little familiarity with, or understanding of, educational terms and practices, and may be overwhelmed by information. Cultural difference may also result in parents not wishing to be seen to question a teacher's authority or ideas.

In a study by the Javits Centre (n.d.) to determine factors that enable some gifted students to succeed in an academic setting, parents identified the need for constant parental advocacy to ensure their child's academic success, and this advocacy took the form of stressing the importance of education, scheduling appointments with school personnel, constant encouragement and support for their child, seeking help from outside the school, and taking time to work with their child on school work. Delisle (1992) uses the terms "microadvocacy" and "macroadvocacy" to highlight that parents need to be able to separate issues that relate only to their child and those that are more general to all or many gifted children, and notes that both forms of advocacy are important. Delisle (1992) cites examples of microadvocacy as including parents speaking to their child's teacher about their child's progress; attending a PTA meeting and expressing views on issues pertaining to their child; volunteering in their child's school and writing to the school principal to suggest greater focus on gifted children's needs within the school. Examples of macroadvocacy include forming a parent support group, lobbying government for funding and policy decisions about gifted children, and involving media in promoting the needs of gifted children (Delisle, 1992). As stated by Tolan (1987, p. 195 cited in Fraser, 1996, p. 446) "until parents and gifted children come out of the closet and admit (even value) unusual abilities without automatically being accused of arrogance; until professionals are willing to learn from parents and children about the realities the gifted face instead of protecting their own positions as "experts"; until professionals as readily distinguish and serve children functioning several standard deviations above the norm as children functioning several deviations below, it will still be necessary to deal with the gifted as children at risk. There will still need to be advocates who put gifted children at the top of their list of priorities and who continue... to focus on the genuine needs of this real and still neglected minority".

The needs of parents of GCLD students

Parents of GCLD students are certainly likely to suffer from feelings of guilt and question their ability to parent adequately when their children are still unable to perform basic organisational tasks that other children have long since mastered. Eight-year-olds who can still not find their shoes, remember to put their socks or underpants on, and never know

where their homework is, provide frustrating challenges for their parents, and such experiences are hardly ones that a parent may wish to share with other parents whose children mastered such tasks at preschool. Parenting is particularly difficult and stressful when children do not measure up to family or community expectations. The need to share such experiences, gain some tips and strategies from parents who have worked on such issues, and just to relax and laugh with other parents who understand, underlines the importance of parent support groups, be they formal organisations or the casual meeting of parents at the school gate.

Stephens (1999) notes that parents often wonder if they are doing enough to cultivate their children's talents and gifts. Keirouz (1990) found that parents of gifted children experience anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty in how to provide appropriate opportunities for their child. Such feelings are likely to be heightened when parents are trying to cater for a "twice exceptional child". Not only do they have to become familiar with issues surrounding "giftedness" and providing enough stimulation for their child's strengths, but they must also deal with the consequences of a "learning disabled" child. Sayler (1994, p. 16, cited in Stephens, 1999, p. 43) notes that parenting a gifted child can be filled with "ecstasy and agony, and everything in between".

In order to fulfill their role as an advocate for their child, and in supporting their child's educational needs, parents need access to information. In New Zealand there has been limited literature aimed at parents of gifted children, although increasingly web sites and listservs are meeting this need for parent information. Some parent organisations provide libraries focusing on gifted education which include some information on GCLD students, as well as local gifted parent organisation newsletters and magazines such as Tall Poppies. There is however a need for more information for parents of GCLD students with specific New Zealand information. Ideally, parent groups can provide both skill training and emotional support for parents of GCLD children (Latson, 1995).

Another significant area of difficulty in meeting the needs of GCLD children in New Zealand is the lack of access to free or subsidised diagnostic services. For many parents, the expense is considerable in the journey to diagnose just what their child's particular needs are. Access to Educational Psychologists, doctor, pediatricians, vision and hearing tests, and tests to establish motor skills delay come at considerable cost in New Zealand, and provide a barrier to those who cannot afford to access such services.

Conclusion

For many gifted children with learning disabilities, academic success is a challenge. It is important that GCLD students are appropriately identified, and appropriate education strategies put in place to meet the needs of both their strengths and weaknesses. While knowledge about the existence of GCLD children and their needs remain relatively unknown amongst New Zealand Educators, parents can be a critical factor in recognising and supporting the needs of these children. Parents have a demanding set of tasks, including a dual role in providing appropriate and stimulating enrichment as well as addressing necessary remediation for their GCLD children. They also have the role of advocate, and take on researching educational options and strategies that may assist their children.

It is important that the needs and issues for GCLD students are acknowledged and acted upon in our schools, in homes, and researched further. In many schools in New Zealand GCLD

students are not being recognised, and their different educational needs are not catered for adequately. Awareness of the needs of gifted children is however being continually raised in New Zealand, along with the awareness of the needs of GCLD students. Of ultimate importance is the necessity to provide an appropriate curriculum and learning opportunities that address the needs of all gifted students and takes into account the needs of all categories of gifted students. Parents have a strong role to play in being advocates for their children to ensure that this happens in New Zealand.