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Being twice exceptional: gifted students with learning disabilities

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Abstract

Gifted students with learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group of children, often described as twice exceptional students. They exhibit puzzling patterns of behavior, higher-level intellectual abilities, advanced vocabulary, and exceptional comprehension of abstract ideas and concepts intertwined with poor reading and writing skills, and poor phonemic awareness. Current identification procedures fail on certain children because of the “masking” effect (due to the compensation process). Some controversial issues regarding identification of gifted students with learning disabilities are discussed, as well as some common intervention strategies.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we aim to outline certain long-standing issues regarding both the identification of gifted students with learning disabilities (known as GLD or GT/LD students) and effective intervention strategies suitable for them. Trying not to take sides in our approach, we reviewed some of the most pertinent points of view, including the seminal work of Brody & Mills (1997).

The term *twice exceptional* was coined by James J. Gallagher (2004) who intended to set apart a new category of talented and/or intellectually gifted individuals who had a disability at a same time (Coleman, Harradine, & King, 2005). The search for children with twice/dual exceptionality has officially begun in 1981 when experts from gifted

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education and special education were invited to attend a colloquium on this topic organized by Johns Hopkins University (Fox & Brody, 1983). Since then, theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted and new methods and instruments have been created to identify and serve the needs of this category of students (cf. French, 1982; Fox & Brody, 1983; Sutter & Wolf, 1987; Boodoo, Bradley, Frontera, Pitts, & Wright, 1989; Baum, Renzulli & Hébert, 1995; Baum, Cooper & Neu, 2001; Baum, 2004; Kalbfleisch, 2013). Gifted students with learning disabilities are an important yet not fully recognized contingent of twice exceptional children with unique special educational needs (SEN).

2. Subcategories of gifted students with learning disabilities

A survey of a corpus of research in the field of dual exceptionality led Brody & Mills (1997) to delineate three subcategories of students whose special educational needs remained unrecognized. These are: (a) gifted students who are labeled as underachievers; their learning difficulties are often attributed to personality and character development problems, being enhanced by academic challenges and, eventually, reaching the point where they are linked to a disability; (b) gifted students with severe learning disabilities (LD) who are diagnosed as LD students; they are enrolled in special education programs designed for LD students; therefore, their giftedness is usually ignored; and (c) students whose giftedness and learning disability overshadows each other, leading to an overall mediocre academic performance; due to this “mutual compensation”, these students are not identified as gifted and, as a consequence, they are not selected for gifted educational programs most of times. These are reasons why most of these GLD students “fall through the cracks” of the educational system (Brody & Mills, 1997, p. 282).

3. Controversial issues regarding identification of gifted students with learning disabilities

Many authors (e.g. French, 1982; Silverman, 1989; Coleman, Harradine, & King, 2005; Kalbfleisch, 2013) listed the most conspicuous markers of dual exceptionality (giftedness and learning disabilities, in particular). These are a mix-up of higher-level intellectual abilities, advanced vocabulary, exceptional comprehension of abstract concepts and ideas, productive imagination, subtle sense of humor, multiple and sophisticated interests, a keen sense of observation, on one hand; on the other hand, spelling difficulties, reading problems, poor handwriting, poor phonemic awareness. Brody & Mills (1997) described three defining criteria that were relevant in identifying gifted students with learning disabilities: “(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” (p. 285).

Conflicting approaches to dual exceptionality SEN were outlined by various authors, stretching from the lack of a comprehensive definition (Whitmore, 1980) to the scarcity of appropriate intervention programs for GLD students (Kalbfleisch, 2013). Both DSM-IV-TR and ICD-10 do not include diagnosis criteria for twice exceptional students. In fact, there is one mention in DSM-IV pertaining to gifted children enrolled in a class that does not motivate them. Thus, gifted children who exhibit attention problems in one school setting or in the presence of just one teacher have a problem of fit, not genuine ADD (Webb & Dietrich, 2005). However, the well-known fact that ADHD is often comorbid with learning disabilities (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007) makes really challenging the estimation of its prevalence in twice exceptional students (Kalbfleisch, 2013). The so-called “two-edged sword of compensation” (Silverman, 2000) keeps GLD students just above the “floating line” turning them into underachievers, not failing students (Brody & Mills, 1997). For this reason, GLD students are often overlooked during screening for special education services (Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991). Moreover, depressed IQ scores are low performance predictors in gifted students with learning disabilities (Davis & Rimm, 1989). Lyon (1989) has already shown that the IQ score is irrelevant to the definition of learning disabilities as the discrepancy model claimed (Klassen, Neufeld, & Munro, 2005). According to Baum, Owen, & Dixon (1991), there *is* a discrepancy, but between proven/potential higher level intellectual skills and actual school achievement in areas of math and reading, in other words, between the ability of constructing concepts and operating with abstractions and the inability of expressing them properly in a formal manner. Such GLD students show high-level intellectual or creative abilities, but due to specific cognitive processing problems they usually perform below average levels in school settings, in certain subjects anyway (Baum, Cooper, & Neu, 2001). Current psychometric instruments are not fine tuned for the purpose of testing GLD students. No matter how high GLD students score at any test, the result is merely an estimation of their true potential

(Rimm, Gilman, & Silverman, 2008). Research has not shown distinctive score patterns on WISC-IV for GLD children so far, though a wider gap between scores obtained at verbal tests and those obtained at performance tests has been noted comparing to regular LD peers (Schiff, Kaufman, & Kaufman, 1981). A significant discrepancy between V (verbal) and P (performance) scores would not be the most valuable criterion, after all, according to Waldron and Saphire (1990), other criteria should be considered (e.g., curriculum-based assessments, portfolio reviews, nominalizations). McCoach, Kehle, Bray & Siegle (2001) argued against using profile analysis for learning disabilities detection “under any circumstances” (p. 408). NAGC (The National Association for Gifted Children) argued against using WISC-IV Full Scale IQ as a requirement for admission to gifted programs, suggesting instead that testers should be flexible whether a subtest choice is needed (NAGC, 2008).

According to Silverman (2000), typical psychological testing of GLD children is biased because their scores (1) are averaged due to the masking effect (mutual compensation of strengths and weaknesses); (2) are compared to those of regular peers; (3) may be inflated or just below the norm due to their ability to compensate; and (4) are not analyzed while taking into account the extent of the discrepancies between their highs and lows. The intrapersonal view has proven more reliable than the usual normative perspective when test results of GLD children are interpreted (Silverman, 1998).

As shown above, identification of GLD students remains ineffective because of a multitude of convergent unsettled issues such as a comprehensive definition of LD giftedness, clear diagnosis criteria, adequate testing instruments and procedures. The identification of gifted students with learning disabilities should be an ongoing process throughout the school years because both their abilities and needs change over time as well as available services (Brody & Mills, 1997). Accurate identification of gifted children with learning disabilities continues to be a critical issue in the field of special education (Senf, 1983; Newman & Sternberg, 2004; Krochak & Ryan, 2007; Silverman, 2009).

4. Intervention strategies for gifted students with learning disabilities

According to McCoach et al. (2001) gifted students with learning disabilities “are students of superior intellectual ability who exhibit a significant discrepancy in their level of performance in a particular academic area such as reading, mathematics, spelling, or written expression” (p. 405). As a rule of thumb, their academic outcomes are considerably below expectations, considering their intellectual potential, all other environmental variables (e.g., poor education) being ruled out. Other factors such as lack of motivation (Silverman, 1989), learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972), emotional and social difficulties (King, 2005) should be taken into account when planning intervention programs tailored to individual academic and non-academic needs.

Response to Intervention (RTI), a three-tiered prevention of academic failure system, could be used to identify and support gifted students with learning disabilities (Crepeau-Hobson & Bianco, 2011). However, the downside of this approach is that twice-exceptional students make good use of their superior abilities to compensate for their learning difficulties. Thus, the specific needs of these students may be masked by an overall acceptable school performance, both their gifts and disabilities may go unnoticed and unaddressed (Rowe, Pace, & Cohen, 2013). Mentorship is also a powerful method to prevent underachievement. For this to work, a caring, open-minded and nonjudgmental person is required to establish a personalized one-on-one relationship with the GLD student, with a carefully designed individualized education plan, focused on strengths and interests to put in motion (Hébert & Olenchak, 2000). Counseling services are mandatory for gifted children with learning disabilities in order to help them fight against depression, low self-esteem and lack of self-efficacy, lack of motivation, emotional difficulties (Renzulli & Park, 2000). Educational and related services should be planned and provided by a team including the homeroom teacher, a learning disabilities specialized teacher, a school psychologist, a social worker (if necessary), a speech-language pathologist (if necessary). Parents and student (aged 14 and older) involvement is a must (VanTassel-Baska, 1991).

The main concern regarding the GLD students is that they do not always receive educational programs for both areas of intervention (Brody & Mills, 1997). Scattered GT/LD programs have been proven successful so far, according to their creators. For instance, Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) run an academic program for GLD students based on Brody & Mills’ (1997) criteria of LD giftedness and VanTassel-Baska’s

concept of high functioning (Weinfeld, Barnes-Robinson, Jeweler & Shevitz, 2002). According to Weinfeld et al. (2002), the MCPS model is “unique because it simultaneously addresses the giftedness and the academic needs of each student regardless of the grade level or the severity of the disability” (pp. 227-228). The GT/LD programs are provided at elementary, middle and high school levels based on assessment and placement conducted by IEP school teams using CPS (Collaborative Problem Solving) and EMT (Educational Management Team) guidelines. WINGS Mentor Program is provided as a related service. GT/LD students benefit from qualified support in order to enroll in an enrichment program in their individual area of interest (MCPS, 2013). In our opinion, independent assessments of such programs should be conducted more thoroughly before choosing the most effective one as benchmark.

5. Conclusion

Neither identification nor intervention is a simple matter when speaking of GLD students. Difficulties are not just conceptual or methodological; they are also financial and organizational. Most educational systems cannot afford reimbursement of both types of services. Therefore, GLD students may be categorized either as students with learning disabilities or as gifted/talented students. The majority of special education programs are designed for LD students, while acceleration and enrichment programs are offered to gifted/talented students only.

Gifted students with learning disabilities differ significantly from their peers – gifted or not, with disabilities or not – claiming an identity of their own. Researchers and educators grasped the idea that these children have specific needs and they require tailored intervention programs. Identification and subsequent interventions are still controversial proving the fact that this highly specialized area of special education is under substantial transformation. Major breakthroughs in the field are yet to come.

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