The Gifted Learning Disabled Child: Not a Paradox

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Jane is a 3½-year-old child who is clearly gifted. Her ability for spatial tasks such as assembling blocks to match a model, and replicating complex figures by drawing are extraordinary. Her performance on puzzles and mazes and her visual memory are on a 9-year-old level. While Jane excels in nonverbal skills, her verbal skills are average to poor. She has a problem articulating letters and sounds and her speech is difficult to understand. In trying to make herself understood, Jane becomes easily frustrated. Her ability to express herself is at a 2½-year level. When asked to perform tasks requiring auditory judgment, she will refuse. Jane’s receptive language is good, but her productive language is poor. Jane’s IQ is in the superior range at 175. She is a learning disabled/gifted child with exceptional abilities in nonverbal areas and likely to develop problems in reading and writing.

The phenomenon of being gifted and learning disabled has mostly been documented retrospectively using biographical evidence. Examples of talented individuals such as Einstein, Rodin, and Rockefeller who had reading and writing problems which persisted into adulthood, provide compelling demonstration that superior and poor skills and abilities can coexist in the same individual. In the last few years, the phenomenon has received some attention from professionals who might identify and work with such children, but by and large, individuals who are gifted/learning disabled are unlikely to be identified in childhood.

One typical view of the learning disabled child is that of a normal individual who does well in some areas of learning, but poorly in others. As a result of some minimal central nervous system disorder, such a child may have, for example, a perceptual disability (visual, auditory) a psycholinguistic disability or an attention deficit which leads to learning problems in reading, writing or mathematics. In contrast, the prevailing view of the gifted child is that of an individual who excels at everything, so it is not surprising that the learning disabled gifted youngster who is not a high achiever goes undetected. The gifted child with a learning disability may be invisible or the rare case in most school settings, in part because teachers are unlikely to conceptualize the existence of such a child. In addition, the simultaneous occurrence of giftedness and a learning disability may lead to a behavioral...
The developmental path of the learning disabled child may be very different depending on whether weakness or strength becomes the focus.

Performance profile in which neither talent nor inadequacy are apparent.

The overall incidence of gifted children with learning disabilities is not known. However, it has been estimated that approximately 10% of gifted children have a reading problem such that they perform 2 or more years below grade level. Further, as many as 30% of gifted children will show a significant discrepancy between mental age and achievement scores in reading.\(^5\) In order to develop adequate procedures for screening and identification of the gifted/learning disabled child it is necessary to have good definitions of the phenomenon. Unfortunately, much of the literature is confused over definitions and labels in the fields of learning disabilities and the gifted. However, some current trends in either area are useful for guiding conceptualization and preliminary construction of the profile of the gifted/learning disabled child.

The notion of exceptional competency or giftedness as a single attribute of an individual vs. the idea of competency as a collection of skills and abilities is a pivotal issue for understanding the existence of the gifted/learning disabled individual. A pervasive problem in the definition of competency takes two forms: 1) when considering competency or giftedness it is necessary to examine more than one domain and, 2) within a domain, is competence a set of skills and abilities or is it a single factor? Both problems of definition have been considered in the intelligence literature. An example of the first issue is the exclusive use of intelligence as the only domain of significance when considering competence. An example of the second issue is the notion of intelligence as a single factor or attribute as compared to intelligence as a collection of skills and abilities.\(^3,4\)

Emphasis on IQ as the major criterion of giftedness and as a principal criterion of competence persists. The tendency to equate competence and IQ in practice, if not in theory, can be attributed to the fact that IQ can be comparatively well measured and has a large collection of correlates that are predictive of success in a wide variety of human enterprises. While it is true that some children with superior IQs excel in all aspects of intellectual functioning (eg, in verbal and nonverbal skills) as well as across domains of competence (eg, in cognitive, social and physical function-
avoidance of weakness to the point of excluding all careers or activities that might require reading skills. Little is known about the psychological adjustment of children who must cope with a dual status, that of being superior in one intellectual area but deficient in another. One study observed that talented children with learning disabilities have the tendency to show less social maturity, more neurotic behavior and more often described their educational experiences as unfavorable.7

If the child's weakness rather than strength becomes the focus then the child's giftedness may be totally obscured by the learning disability. For example, the child who is creative, and has a facility with spoken language, but who cannot spell and has problems learning to read, is not likely to be seen as superior in language arts by a teacher. In fact, there are a number of cases reported which suggest that there are children who are capable of complex abstract thought but who have difficulty with reading, writing and mathematics.8 Such children may be referred for psychological difficulties perhaps more often than for skill deficits. They have been described as emotionally upset or disorganized, having inadequate impulse control, poor self concepts, and poorly developed integrative functions. The understanding of the social and emotional functioning of learning disabled children in general is limited so it is not surprising that little is known about particular problems encountered by the highly intelligent or talented child who is learning disabled. However, it is important to be alerted to the fact that some children with psychological and/or learning problems may have unnoticed superior skills. In considering these children's behavior, it should be noted that they may give responses that suggest their capabilities. For example, these children may give elaborate responses which indicate their intelligence. They have been observed to use intellectualization to defend against being perceived as inadequate.9 These children may have a large knowledge base in certain subjects or they may show the ability to play with word meanings but be unable to write well. Learning disabled/gifted children may fluctuate between flashes of brilliance and frustrations of failure and may be particularly vulnerable to retreating from challenges in both their areas of strength as well as weakness.

In some cases neither the strengths nor weaknesses of the learning disabled gifted children are detected. Essentially the idea is that some children can mask their weaknesses and not demonstrate their strengths; for example, children whose math and reading skills are at grade level but who put in prodigious efforts to keep up with classroom assignments. Ironically, the gifted/learning disabled child who manages to get by in the classroom may be worst off. Such children who are not referred for giftedness or learning disability may continue to experience frustration, find school unrewarding and remain unaware of their own potential. Little is known concerning what circumstances or factors predict how children will adapt to the dual status of gifted and learning disabled. Biographical evidence indicates that the learning disabled who were labeled, in retrospect, gifted, may have been strongly motivated to prove their intelligence to themselves and parents and were more likely to come from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.10 The nature of the school and family environment are obvious factors which contribute to the gifted learning disabled child's developmental outcomes. In the school setting, opportunity for such a child to participate in both a program to remediate deficits and one to nurture special talents would be ideal, although currently unlikely.

The pediatrician may play an important role in the identification of children who are gifted/learning disabled. Parents often will express certain concerns or complaints. In some cases the parent will report that their child is bright but that their school performance does not reflect this state of affairs. For example, a parent will say "I (or others) feel my child is bright but she doesn’t seem to be doing well, or is only doing average in school." The second kind of complaint indicates that the parents feel the child is not getting appropriate stimulation in school and so is not performing well or making expected progress. Finally, in some instances the parents will state that the school personnel refuse to see that the child has exceptional endowments in the absence of superior performance. While some parents may have unrealistic expectations concerning their child's abilities, others may be expressing awareness that their child's performance and capabilities do not match. If the pediatrician suspects a child is gifted/learning disabled, the family history may provide an indication that the parents or other relatives have had learning problems in combination with intelligence and/or accomplishments. Questions concerning the achievement history of parents, grandparents and parents' siblings should be asked to determine 1) the extent to which a family member as a child experienced problems in reading,
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writing, spelling, math or attention span in the school setting but who as an adult was able to achieve a high level of competence in a chosen field or areas of interest; 2) the extent to which a family member is perceived as being bright but not living up to potential. In addition, questions concerning the child's behavior, such as level of curiosity, tenacity in pursuing interests and the amount of knowledge in areas of interest may provide some feel for the extent to which a child is bright but not performing well at school. High achievement in one area but not another may also indicate a gifted/learning disabled status.

In the case of Jane, her father had experienced language difficulties as a child, although he was able to persevere, complete college and obtain a professional degree. He was particularly attuned to the possibilities for frustration in his child's language development and was also aware of Jane's spatial ability, although he did not know the extent to which Jane's strengths exceeded her weaknesses. Standardized testing of Jane's skills and abilities revealed a pattern which is cited as evidence of being a gifted/learning disabled child, i.e., a large discrepancy between verbal and non-verbal components on a standardized test of intelligence with one area being in the superior range. Overall, Jane was socially mature and confident. However, had we observed her only during those tasks where she had to play word games we might have concluded that she was uncooperative and lagging behind in some important verbal skills. Fortunately Jane had a supportive family environment and is now receiving remediation for her language problem as well as the opportunity to develop her outstanding spatial and drawing skills.

In working with the gifted/learning disabled, the pediatrician should encourage parents to work with the child on weaknesses as well as strengths. Parents can be instrumental in helping a child deal with frustration and failures as well as accomplishments and successes. Acknowledgment and support for effort in those areas which are weakest and which require more struggle for mastery is critical, as is encouragement for pursuing strengths.

REFERENCES