

Terms of Reference: The education of students with disabilities

Topic: The education of gifted, learning disabled students

Submission by:

Tracy Chaloner

Past President of the Gifted and Talented Children's Association of Western Australia

Past member of the Education Department of Western Australia committee reviewing the role of Supplementary Provision

Past member of the Supplementary Provision for Gifted and Talented Students—Joondalup District Committee

Parent of a profoundly gifted learning disabled child

Address:

11 Yardarm Court

Ocean Reef 6027

Western Australia

Ph: (08) 9307 6964

Email: tracy@cycloneco.com.au

Twice exceptional, twice neglected

Executive summary

Giftedness and learning disabilities can co-exist.

At least one sixth of gifted children tested by Dr Linda Silverman at the Gifted Development Centre have significant learning disabilities and that these children were often undiagnosed at the time of testing.

More often than not parents initiate the diagnosis in response to concerns about the disparity between ability and achievement. Parents know their children's abilities better than teachers.

Expert assessment is required to tease out the results, which are often hidden in depressed or average IQ scores.

Higher abstract reasoning enables children to compensate to some extent for these weaknesses, making them harder to detect. However, compensation requires more energy, affects motivation, and breaks down under stress or when the child is fatigued. (Silverman 2002)

Gifted learning disabled students can underachieve substantially without ever being detected.

Greater awareness of the different types of learning disabilities is essential to improving outcomes for these students.

Teaching certification should include at least a minimum level of instruction on the needs of gifted learning disabled students.

Remediation techniques need to be explicitly developed within the context of the individual needs of gifted students. What works for students of average ability does not always work for gifted students.

Legislation needs to be written to specifically protect the rights of both gifted students and gifted learning disabled students.

In the current educational paradigm, high levels of giftedness could be imputed to be a disability.

State or Territory education systems may be in breach of legislation. In Western Australia the *School Education Act 1999* states that government schools will be provided to educate all children and that an education programme is required to be relevant to an individual student's needs. The Western Australian education system would not appear to be upholding its legislative responsibilities.

Resources and curriculum materials need to be developed to specifically cater to the needs of gifted learning disabled students. What works for a student of average intelligence may not work for a student of extreme intelligence.

Alternative entry pathways to tertiary institutions need to be developed, and ongoing support mechanisms put in place, to enable gifted learning disabled students equitable access to higher education.

Each State and Territory should be required to provide expert assistance to parents and teachers of gifted learning disabled students in the form of specialist schools, resources and a dedicated advisory panel comprising both experts and parents.

That the blame for lack of achievement should not be placed on the student but rather that the system is required to respond to their needs.

There are many roles for the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments in ensuring that the rights and needs of gifted learning disabled children are upheld.

Definition of a learning disability (*Disability Discrimination Act 1992*)

disability, in relation to a person, means:

(f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction;

and includes a disability that:

(k) is imputed to a person.

Introduction

One of the most seriously at risk groups of students in education systems are those that are both gifted and learning disabled, especially those that are extremely gifted. They have so much potential but little or no way of developing it fully or demonstrating achievement commensurate with that potential; at least not in ways that are generally required by schools, universities and society in general.

Traditionally, learning disabilities are thought to be demonstrated where a student achieves at a below average level. Many people find it difficult to reconcile the concept of a gifted child underachieving due to a learning disability. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* does not define a maximum IQ or achievement level, just that the disability results in a person learning differently from a person without the disorder. This is as true of gifted students as it is of any other group of students.

One part of the problem for gifted students is the notion that 'a gifted student is not gifted at everything' and therefore underachievement is often put down to lack of ability in that particular domain. However, expert diagnosis often shows these students to have a hidden disability, denying them the opportunity to achieve their full potential in the same way as a gifted student without the disability. More often than not it is the parent that initiates the diagnosis.

"One problem people often run into when advocating for twice-exceptional children is that the children use their giftedness to compensate for their special needs so well that they perform at grade level. This can make it difficult to persuade schools that they should provide remediation or accommodations. (Warshaw, 2002)" (PG Cybersource)

Many parents have been told that their child "is not as bright as you think s/he is" but the parents are correct in their assessment more often than not, and the child's potential is being masked by a learning disability. It is extraordinarily difficult to convince educators of this, with them already being biased against, or ignorant of, the needs and traits of gifted students, as was found in the Senate inquiry into the education of gifted children. It is doubly difficult to convince them that a gifted child can also be

learning disabled and that this may be the reason for poor performance. The consequence to the child, both short and long term, is usually devastating.

“Recent advances in both fields have alerted professionals to the possibility that both sets of behavior can exist simultaneously (Baum and Owen, 1988; Fox, Brody, and Tobin, 1983; Whitmore and Maker, 1985). Children who are both gifted and learning disabled exhibit remarkable talents or strengths in some areas and disabling weaknesses in others. They can be grouped into three categories: (1) identified gifted students who have subtle learning disabilities, (2) unidentified students whose gifts and disabilities may be masked by average achievement, and (3) identified learning disabled students who are also gifted.” (Baum 1990)

Dr Linda Silverman of the Gifted Development Centre reports that at least one sixth of the gifted children she has assessed are also learning disabled, in the traditional paradigm of learning disability diagnosis. The percentage is much higher if asynchrony and/or learning style is taken into consideration.

“Gifted children often have hidden learning disabilities (dual exceptionalities). One-sixth of the gifted children who come to us for testing have some type of learning disability—usually undetected before the assessment—such as auditory processing weaknesses, difficulties with visual-perception, writing disabilities, spatial disorientation, dyslexia, and attention deficits. Giftedness masks disabilities and disabilities depress IQ scores. Higher abstract reasoning enables children to compensate to some extent for these weaknesses, making them harder to detect. However, compensation requires more energy, affects motivation, and breaks down under stress or when the child is fatigued.” (Silverman 2002)

Remediating the learning disabilities of gifted students can come at a high price. These children do not tolerate boredom and frustration well and even simple remediation can cause them to experience a sense of failure, especially if the remediation is not developed specifically to address their individual needs or is not delivered by experts. Often remediation becomes the student's entire curriculum; the student being held back to 'correct' problems that have no impact on their ability to learn, but more on their ability to demonstrate their learning. They are not afforded the experience of success that other students enjoy and so eventually switch off or suffer from diminished self-concept. Remediation techniques need to be specifically developed within the context of the individual needs of gifted students. What works for students of average ability does not always work for gifted students.

“Children with learning disabilities who are also gifted in one or more areas should be allowed to develop in their gifted areas of strength while they receive assistance in their areas of need. (Winebrenner, 1998)” (PG Cybersource)

The underachievement, and consequent disfranchisement from learning, experienced by gifted, learning disabled students can develop into a tragic loss to the individual and the community on many levels. For the individual there is a loss of self-esteem due to lack of success in school, the student knowing full well that success is attainable if only the methods of demonstrating learning did not discriminate against them. This sense of futility can lead to a downward spiral into depression, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts; sometimes well before adolescence. There is research and academic writing to support both giftedness and learning disabilities as a risk factor for depression and suicide. The coexistence of these traits clearly indicates a significantly higher risk factor. Higher levels of giftedness exponentially increase that risk.

“Highly gifted students with learning disabilities are at high risk of developing low self-esteem. Their disability is combined with their unrealistic expectations as a gifted learner. (Maker, 1997)” (PG Cybersource)

The community loses out, having to provide substantial levels of social services for these students if they become dysfunctional. Under the right circumstances they could be major contributors to their community. Society also loses out because these people are generally the lateral and divergent thinkers that are now highly sought after to answer some of the biggest questions facing human survival. There are many of them in our schools, they are just very well camouflaged, with little or no opportunity to get to a place where they can make a significant contribution.

“Students who are gifted with learning disabilities and whose needs go unrecognized or unserved are at high risk of becoming school dropouts. (Winebrenner, 1998)”
(PG Cybersource)

Gifted children have a heightened sense of moral justice, sensitivity and commitment to what is right and fair. Lack of an appropriate education is therefore doubly cruel; they suffer substantial emotional trauma from being neglected or worse persecuted, sometimes at levels which would constitute abuse, when at the same time they know within themselves what they are capable of achieving, and would give just about anything to have that opportunity. Their disabilities and difficulties can make it difficult for them to remain self-motivated. No-one listens to their pleas except their parents, who are often vilified by educators, accused of making excuses for their children's non-performance.

Teachers, education administrators and policy makers are not often aware of the subset of children that are both gifted and learning disabled, an apparent oxymoron. When a learning disability is defined as a significant discrepancy between potential and achievement and factors such as lack of appropriate curriculum are excluded, the relationship between high levels of cognition and relatively low levels of

demonstrating that cognition becomes apparent. They have a barrier to achieving their full potential. This barrier is not insurmountable when the right conditions are available to the student.

To get a learning disability diagnosed in conjunction with overlaying giftedness is not readily available within the current context of education instruction and experience. Very few professionals have qualifications or skills to enable them to tease out the data from the testing. It also becomes an emotionally charged issue where the educator believes that excuses are being made for the student, rather than recognising the disadvantage that a disability would cause. The disability does not diminish cognitive ability, it diminishes the outward manifestation of that ability. It is like being trapped inside a mental prison.

State and Territory education systems may be in breach of legislation. In Western Australia the *School Education Act 1999* states that government schools will be provided to educate all children (Part 1, s 3, Objects) and that an education programme is required to be relevant to an individual student's needs (Part 1, s 4, Definitions). Not only is this not occurring, but there are limited mechanisms in place for parents to have the rights of the child upheld. It is only a matter of time before this deficit is tested in the Courts.

The compulsory education period defined by chronological age discriminates against both gifted students and gifted learning disabled students. Many of these students have reached levels of achievement, or have the potential for excellence, given an appropriate education programme, far in advance of students that have the right to choose to leave school or to enter tertiary institutions. Research by both Professor Miraca Gross and Professor John Geake, has found that a gifted child's levels of intellectual functioning are closer to their mental age than their chronological age. Gross has found that this is true for emotional and social maturity as well (Gross 1998). This means that a child can be trapped inside a body of 12 years but have a mental age of 22 years and an emotional age of 17+ years, quite capable of making the same educational choices as a 17 year old, but being restricted due to the legislative requirement to remain in school until a chronological age of 15–16, depending on the State or Territory.

If their education has been mismanaged by the State school system, as is often the case, the student becomes alienated from the school environment and would be better served in programs outside of that environment. Legislation, however, requires them to continue to attend school long after a school environment can meet their needs. Universities are often far more sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities and it would be preferable if they had the responsibility for managing the student's

education at this stage, rather than forcing the child to remain in an environment that does not meet their needs and is not fulfilling legislative or human rights requirements on a number of levels.

The brain of a gifted, learning disabled child functions in an entirely different manner to that of an average child, which, if harnessed and nurtured, will enable them to develop innovative and exceptional thinking and achieve levels of satisfaction that will enable them to lead a happy and productive life. Society needs to find a way to identify these students and modify their learning environment to ensure that they do not continue to suffer disadvantage when compared with students of similar intellectual ability without learning disabilities.

Without specific intervention, funding, curriculum and even specific language that legislatively protects their rights, these children will continue to be marginalised in the education process.

Harnessing the ideas of gifted learning disabled students is possible if their special needs are considered and catered for. They often don't need remediation, just as a person in a wheelchair does not need remediation. Many learning disabilities respond more to changes in the education model rather than remediating the difficulty. They need to have alternative methods of expressing their ability and they need the understanding of educators and the community to do so. They need specialised resources, just as a person with a physical disability needs specialised resources. They need legislative protection to ensure that opinion and bias does not shape decision making. They need people with expertise to teach them and they need modifications to the methods used in assessing learning outcomes. Above all, they need understanding of, and compassion for, the day to day difficulty of being both gifted and learning disabled.

The issue is one of misunderstanding, misinformation and general distrust toward those that are different. Gifted children are already marginalised in our education system. The gifted learning disabled child is even more marginalised because they do not conform to the traditional expectations of what a high achieving gifted student 'looks like'.

Those children that are highly gifted and do not have learning disabilities are those that conform to society's expectations of the high achiever; becoming doctors, lawyers, architects or entering other high level professions. The highly gifted learning disabled student rarely has access to appropriate learning opportunities to allow them to develop their equally high potential. To do so means that they need specialised education and more importantly, being able to access higher education in a way that

is relevant to their individual need. At the moment there are far too many barriers for gifted learning disabled students to overcome to get anywhere close to achieving their potential.

Without recognition of these difficulties and properly documented and resourced educational models and pathways, these children are often doomed to failure.

Common learning disabilities in gifted children

There are many learning disabilities, difficulties and disorders that affect a gifted child's ability to achieve their full potential. Among them are:

- AD(H)D (Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)
- Anxiety Disorders (Generalized Anxiety, Panic/Agoraphobia, Social Anxiety)
- Apraxia/Dyspraxia
- Asperger's Syndrome/Autism/PDD and other Autistic Spectrum Disorders
- Auditory Processing (CAPD, APD)
- Bipolar
- Conduct Disorders
- Depression
- Dyscalculia (math disabilities)
- Dysgraphia (written language disabilities)
- Dyslexia (reading disabilities)
- Executive Function
- Hyperlexia
- Miscellaneous Medical Conditions
- Non-Verbal Learning Disability (NLD,NVLD)
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Psychiatric Disorders in General
- Sensory Integration (DSI/SI/SID)
- Tourette Syndrome
- Trichotillomania
- Vision Problems
- Visual-Spatial Learners
- Word Finding/Expressive Language Difficulties
- Written expression

(Warshaw 2002)

Some of the learning disabilities that impact on gifted students'

achievement

Written expression

One of the most common and debilitating forms of learning disability for gifted children is in the area of writing; both physical writing and written expression. In an education system that is almost entirely dependent on written assessment, this is an extreme impediment to a gifted child achieving their full potential.

The child at 11 years old who is capable of university level thinking, reasoning and learning but only writes at age appropriate levels has a learning disability. They are impeded in their education due to this discrepancy because they are unable to achieve successful outcomes at their cognitive level. They are disadvantaged in comparison to gifted students without the disability. They are often denied access to higher learning experiences, relative to their cognitive ability, solely due to a lack of performance or demonstration of outcomes, especially in tertiary entrance examinations.

A disability in written expression substantially impacts on the student's access to an appropriate education programme. If an appropriate programme is developed solely on the cognitive abilities of the student, it can still fail due to an undiagnosed learning disability, diminishing the student's achievement and often causing the withdrawal of the programme, or the student's omission from the programme, due to non-performance.

Tertiary entrance assessment is usually made up of between four and seven written examinations of three hours each, far too much for a student with a disability in written expression (and some of the other disabilities) to be able to cope with. It is also far too much for a younger gifted child to cope with in spite of the fact that they may well be have levels of cognition in excess of that required to enter university and to succeed in university courses, provided appropriate assessment modifications are made.

In Western Australia, students with disabilities are allowed an extra 10 minutes per hour of examination, which can actually exacerbate the problem for them. The student struggling with the fatigue of intense concentration and compensation for their disability will be exhausted long before the normal three hours is up, let alone another half an hour on top. Other measures need to be developed, such as split examination sessions, scribes, oral examinations or examination waivers based on school assessed performance under modified conditions.

Dysgraphia

“The term dysgraphia has customarily been used to refer to a disorder of written language expression in childhood as opposed to a disorder of written language acquired in adulthood. Written language disorders have also been referred to as ‘developmental output failures’.”

(Kay 2001)

Dysgraphia appears to be a commonly occurring problem, especially for boys. The dysgraphic student either cannot physically write or has extreme difficulties with the physical act of writing. The classroom teacher is more likely to fail the work based on its lack of legibility than its content, or fail the student based on their output rather than their understanding. Remediation is often limited to the student to repeatedly rewriting their work, under the mistaken belief that 'practice makes perfect'. This is especially devastating to the gifted student where it is difficult enough in the first place to demonstrate their understanding, often not having the fine motor skills commensurate with their depth of understanding, but to further be punished by rewriting work can lead to lowered self-esteem and behavioural problems.

“Difficulties in writing have an adverse impact on academic achievement in school and subsequently on business and industry. It is currently estimated that dysgraphia costs American industry and business \$30 billion per year.” (Kay 2001)

Dyslexia

“Dyslexia is one of several distinct learning disabilities. It is a specific language-based disorder of constitutional origin characterized by difficulties in single word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing abilities. These difficulties in single word decoding are often unexpected in relation to age and other cognitive and academic abilities; they are not the result of generalized developmental disability or sensory impairment. Dyslexia is manifest by variable difficulty with different forms of language, often including, in addition to problems reading, a conspicuous problem with acquiring proficiency in writing and spelling.

The Definition of Dyslexia as adopted by the Research Committee of IDA, May 11, 1994 and by the National Institutes of Health, 1994.

- *Studies show that individuals with dyslexia process information in a different area of the brain than do non-dyslexics.*
- *Many people who are dyslexic are of average to above average intelligence”.*

(IDA 2002)

Dyslexia is one of the more commonly recognised and readily diagnosed disabilities, yet many students still suffer substantial disadvantage. Dyslexia affects the ability to read, write and spell and can cause significant frustration to the gifted student. Anecdotal evidence shows that when there is a focus on more and more rote learning, and/or practice to remediate these difficulties, without also catering for their advanced intellectual ability, a student is more likely to withdraw from learning.

Irlen Syndrome

“Irlen Syndrome, also known as, Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (SSS) is a type of visual perceptual problem. It is not an optical problem. It is a problem with how the nervous system encodes and decodes visual information. Academic and work performance, behavior, attention, ability to sit still and concentration can be affected. Individuals with this problem see the printed page differently, although they may not realize that they do. Having Irlen Syndrome keeps many people from reading effectively, efficiently, or even at all. Until now, it has baffled educators and medical scientists because it is undetected by standard visual, educational and medical tests.

Individuals with Irlen Syndrome see the printed page differently from those with normal vision and must constantly adapt to distortions appearing on the printed page. They may be slow or inefficient readers, exhibit poor comprehension, suffer from strain, fatigue or headaches. It can affect their attention-span, energy-level, motivation, handwriting, depth-perception and, ultimately, self-esteem. Irlen syndrome sufferers may be labeled as underachievers with behavioural, attitudinal, or motivational problems. It is a complex and variable condition sometimes found to co-exist with other learning-disabilities. (Irlen 2002)

Auditory and/or visual sequential disability

Many gifted and learning disabled students have both auditory and visual sequential difficulties overlaying their learning disability. These difficulties do not impinge on the degree of intelligence per se, they impact on demonstrating that intelligence. Some IQ tests, such as the WISC III, are now used to detect these types of difficulties due to the effect on specific subtest scores. Difficulties and learning disabilities can have the effect of suppressing IQ scores and so therefore some tests can't measure the child's true potential. It takes a skilled examiner, expert in learning disabilities, to identify these discrepancies and make accurate diagnoses, both of the child's true potential and their overlaying disabilities.

Auditory sequential difficulties impact on the student's ability to learn in an environment where information is delivered aurally without visual aids, for example where a lecturer might give instructions verbally prior to a lecture but not think to provide visual support for those instructions. Many students mishear this information, cannot store it or recall it and can miss out on important components of their courses, where non-attendance or not doing a task could constitute failing the course.

Visual sequential difficulties impact on a student's short term recall of visual information. This then impacts on a student's ability to work quickly in tests, having to re-read information or questions many times. Sometimes this difficulty can make a question unintelligible to the student, where a simpler question construction would have provided the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding. Difficulty decoding questions, due to learning difficulties and disabilities can become a barrier to successful completion of a course, where the student has high levels of competence but has no equitable opportunity to demonstrate their competence.

The net result of these difficulties is that the student is usually unable to sequence their thinking, especially under timed testing conditions. Multiple choice tests penalise students with learning disabilities, and/or a visual spatial learning style, particularly gifted students. Many entrance tests to selective schools or programs for gifted students involve multiple choice tests. The gifted and learning disabled student often misses out on placement in these programs, doubly penalising them, both from the aspect of developing their intellectual ability and also having access to intellectual peers. Many competitions, such as the Westpac Math, The Australian Geography Competition and the UNSW competitions are also tested with multiple choice questions, not allowing the gifted learning disabled student access to the same opportunities for community recognition of their ability.

Visual spatial learning style

While the visual spatial learning style is not a recognised learning disability, it can be imputed as a disability because it affects learning outcomes and creates a disadvantage to the student.

The 'visual spatial' learning style is not served well in the majority of classrooms that tend to have sequential curriculum, thus causing a situation where this learning style becomes a deficit and should be imputed to be a disability. An imputed disability would enable a visual spatial student to be similarly identified to those with standard diagnoses of learning disabilities and to get education services that would allow them to develop their potential. The visual spatial learning style, in a

sequential environment, can mean a significant discrepancy between potential and achievement, similar to the criteria for diagnosis of a disability.

Visual spatial thinking can involve the discovery of new ideas and new concepts. They think of the big picture, and often in pictures. These pictures then have to be translated into words which takes time and also loses the essence of the thought. Think of a Monet painting and try to adequately describe that in words to give a true concept of what that painting says when it is viewed. This is what it is like for a gifted, visual spatial student, with or without other learning disabilities. The words are often inadequate and may not be able to be written or expressed in any other way. Many of these students would prefer to illustrate their understanding but this not only takes considerable time and artistic skill but is not often an available option for assessment.

The consequences of not identifying and providing for gifted learning disabled students

Recent research by Winebrenner (1998) suggests that the gifted student that is most likely to drop out of school is the one that is also struggling to demonstrate outcomes due to learning disabilities and therefore experiences extremes of frustration and subsequent loss of self-esteem. These students see no point in continuing their studies because they know that they are unlikely to pass their high school leaving or university examinations. They are generally unable to learn these skills. Their brains are just not wired to do so. Modifications to demonstrating outcomes are required but are rarely offered. There is an overwhelming misconception that modifications will unfairly advantage the student and disadvantage other students. This is due to a lack of good research in this area, poor understanding of the difference between cognition and demonstration of learning and limited understanding not only of extreme giftedness, but the multiple problems of developing that potential when overlaid with learning disabilities.

Gifted children often start out self-educating at home, prior to formal schooling. They reach a certain point where they need formal education, often well before the compulsory education age, but from the very start their asynchrony impacts on their learning outcomes. At home their asynchrony and disabilities had no bearing on their learning, being in an individualised and nurturing environment, however in a formal school setting they are required to 'prove' what they know to someone else before they can access the next part of the curriculum. This becomes a significant problem.

Many of these children are intrinsically motivated, meaning that they learn for themselves, but the system requires that they demonstrate that learning as proof of educational progress. The mere fact

that they are intrinsically motivated means that they naturally learn at their own pace if no impediments to that learning are in the way. They also shy away from feeling like they need to 'prove' themselves to others. Allowing these students to manage their own education program is the only way their needs will be served.

More often than not, however, they are trapped in an education system which is exhausting and frustrating, for 25 or so hours a week, leaving little motivation or energy to learn in the limited time they have after school. They often have to struggle for hours to do minimal amounts of homework leaving them with a forced choice dilemma, either to struggle and complete their homework and be exhausted for school, or make the decision not to finish and be penalised. These children are often labeled lazy and unmotivated when the opposite is the real truth. The effort and concentration required for these students to achieve outcomes is quite extraordinary. To label them lazy and unmotivated is a travesty of natural justice.

Without specific intervention, funding, curriculum and even specific language in legislatively protecting their rights, these children will continue to be marginalised in the education process. This is no more apparent than at the critical stage of studying for entrance to university and university education, where demonstration of English competence is a requirement of entry to most universities in Australia and which excludes the majority of these highly able children. There have been a number of cases where students have achieved outstanding results in all subjects but English, subsequently being denied entry to university and not achieving Secondary Graduation.

Once at university, the support for students with disabilities is quite good. Universities generally have a good understanding of equity of access to learning opportunities, far and away better than those systems run by State education departments for students in schools. Some initiatives that universities undertake are those such as the Liberated Learning project being trialed at Murdoch University for hearing impaired students, which also assists those students with auditory and visual sequencing problems. Universities allow for multi-modal examinations, such as computer based examination, oral examination, scribes and time extension. They also have continuous assessment where multiple methods of demonstrating outcomes are encouraged.

The major barrier to gaining access to such an ideal learning environment is often the entrance requirements, which disadvantages the learning disabled student, especially the extremely gifted learning disabled student that could be ready for university level curriculum as young as 9 or 10 years old. Universities often have limited control over their own entrance criteria or are unwilling to make exceptions due to the additional burden this could place on already stretched resources. In some cases,

there is a lack of awareness of the need or a lack of understanding that extremely gifted students are much more mature than their chronological age and quite capable of conceptual understanding required by university level study.

For gifted learning disabled students there are still too many barriers that impede their right to develop their full potential.

Creating opportunity

There are many ways in which opportunities can be provided for gifted learning disabled students. Some of these opportunities already exist to provide equitable outcomes for physically disabled students.

For example, they may need a scribe, not only to take down their thoughts but to sequence them. The cognitive work is still that of the student, but the mechanics of the work are being done for them. For a physically disabled student, having a scribe is seen as a natural resource to ensure that the student has equitable educational opportunity. For a learning disabled student, it can be seen as an advantage because the disability is less tangible.

When gifted learning disabled students have scribes, especially if they are the student's parents, those that don't understand the process often question whether the work is that of the student or the scribe and insist on testing the student separately. This generally leads to the student's failure to meet the pass requirement and validates the suspicion held against the student causing them significant distress. The parent also has accusations leveled against them. This is an all too common situation.

Other opportunities for providing equitable outcomes can include aural as well as visual presentation of the same information, such as the Liberated Learning strategy, use of computers in examinations, exemption from timed tests and more emphasis on continuous assessment, less reliance of demonstrating specific English competence but relying more on demonstrating discipline specific communication and language outcomes, alternative entry to university based on auditing units or a trial placement, online learning environments and external studies for younger students. None of these strategies unfairly advantages the student but provides for equitable educational outcomes to those students with similar intellectual ability but without learning disabilities.

The nature of learning disabilities is that they are so much less tangible than physical disabilities. Just as it is difficult for society to understand that the needs of gifted students are as great as those of

intellectually disabled students, due to the problems being less visually obvious, so too are the needs of gifted learning disabled students far more difficult to be addressed due to the lack of achievement of these students in comparison to their intellectual peers being put down to a lack of motivation or laziness.

Some of the world's most notable and eminent people are believed to have had learning disabilities that were often overcome either late in life or due to being given opportunity to develop talent in a less restrictive educational environment that is on offer in today's highly structured, but poorly resourced, education system. Visual spatial learners usually become smarter as they get older (Silverman 2002) and are more likely to fail in a conventional school environment. Einstein, Edison, Mozart, da Vinci and Disney are amongst the many hundreds of eminent people that are believed to be either learning disabled or have ADHD and are likely to also be visual spatial learners (Child Development Institute 2002).

The names that appear on these types of lists are predominantly male, leading to speculation that success in overcoming disabilities appears most prevalent in males. Many females also have learning disabilities but are more often overlooked due to other significant issues of giftedness in females, such as peer conformity, masking and less expectation of high levels of success.

The way that autism is now treated and understood is testament to changing attitudes toward students with different needs. Many autistic students can now expect to gain entry to university and go on to lead productive and fulfilling lives. Gifted learning disabled students often do not have such overt behaviours that are easily diagnosed. They can suffer in silence, their learning disabilities can make them appear average or below average in intelligence. Even IQ scores can be depressed and examiners unskilled in teasing out the learning disabilities from the giftedness can dismiss the child as being 'only' average and the parent as being pushy.

The role of the Commonwealth, states and territories

To amend legislation to include more specific definitions of learning disabilities, especially including the coexistence of learning disabilities and giftedness.

To provide curriculum resources to enable gifted learning disabled students equal opportunity to demonstrate outcomes commensurate with their intellectual ability.

Removing barriers to entry into higher education institutions.

Provide opportunities for very young, extremely gifted, learning disabled students to access tertiary curriculum without attending tertiary campuses, in order to enable them to have the opportunity to develop at socially and emotionally appropriate levels, commensurate with their intellectual level and not their chronological age. This will ensure that they are able to remain socially and emotionally supported as long as is necessary for optimum development at the same time as accessing learning opportunities at their intellectual level.

To remove barriers to school retention and participation, such as changing models of assessment that disadvantage gifted learning disabled students and diminishes their access to higher learning.

To educate the community and educators on the needs of gifted learning disabled students.

To encourage research into the needs of gifted learning disabled students, the impact of this affliction on their families, the skills of parents at identifying the needs of their children in comparison to the classroom teacher or other professionals, and optimal interventions to ensure equitable educational outcomes for gifted learning disabled students.

To provide simpler mechanisms for complaints to be resolved without the necessity to seek legal counsel or take legal action.

To uphold legislation and provide government schools that actually do meet the needs of all students.

To regularly review education policy, policy implementation and outcomes of policy, ensuring that all stakeholders have equal input.

Exercise—putting yourself in their shoes

Exercise one

Put yourself in the shoes of a gifted learning disabled child with a writing disability. For one full day, write with your non-dominant hand, backwards from right to left. Do not use a computer. Note how you feel at the end of the day. Are you frustrated and tired? Did you achieve as much as you normally would have achieved? Are you any less intelligent or capable of doing the level of thinking just because you couldn't write it all down properly? Do you feel less intelligent and capable, especially when questioned why you didn't get everything done? Now multiply that by seven days a week, forty weeks a year, thirteen years of school and if you are still in any way motivated to keep struggling with your disability, three or more years of university. You now have a picture of the struggle experienced by gifted students with a disability that affects writing.

Exercise two

If you wear glasses, think how not wearing them for one day at work would impact on your ability to work effectively. Has it diminished your cognitive ability or merely the demonstration of that ability? Needing glasses is an accepted and easily remedied deficit. Dyslexia, Irlen Syndrome and visual processing disorders are not always accepted as real disabilities. Remedies that would enable a student to achieve are often withheld for no reason, or worse, because the educator does not believe the professional diagnosis and has the authority to make that judgment.

Exercise three

Wear headphones or ear plugs for a day. Note how the sound is muffled but you can make out the meaning if you concentrate hard enough. By the end of the day note if you feel frustrated, if your colleagues have treat you differently or get frustrated with you. Would it have been better for you with visual cues to support the aural information? This is what it is like for a student with an auditory processing problem, often mishearing information or forgetting it completely within seconds.

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