

Gifted with Learning Disability

Carol Barnes

Most Mensans will know (perhaps only too well...) that not all gifted children always do well in school—and equally, that not all high-IQ folks always do well in life.

Of the many sad causes of academic underachievement among high-IQ learners, perhaps the most common and yet most serious is one which still prompts most educators to respond, ‘What? Really? No Way!’ And that cause is learning disability.

Children of high intellectual potential who also have one or more disabilities or additional educational needs are described as ‘gifted with learning disability’ (GLD).

However the descriptor ‘GLD’ is not restricted to those who have a formally diagnosed specific learning disability such as dyslexia, dysgraphia or dyspraxia. Indeed the term also encompasses high-IQ children who have other special needs such as medical conditions (e.g. ADHD), developmental differences (e.g. ASD), physical disability, or emotional issues such as anxiety or depression. In other words, the GLD child is intellectually gifted but also has ‘something else going on’—something which emanates from within the child rather than being environmentally imposed, but something which can sometimes interfere with school achievement and/or with social/emotional well-being.

This relatively straightforward description disguises the enigmatic complexity which characterises the GLD child.

Sometimes parents assume that their child could not possibly have a learning disability because the child has tested as gifted or because the child has been accepted into Mensa. The fact is however that some high-IQ children do indeed have one or more of all the disabilities and disorders which may befall the non-gifted—except of course intellectual impairment.

Giftedness does not preclude

disability—and vice-versa. A high IQ is protective against nothing except a low one.

Similarly, sometimes parents assume that their child could not have a learning disability because the child has tested as ‘exceptionally’ or ‘profoundly’ gifted. ‘Oh no it’s not LD—my child is really smart!’ Again, even children with an IQ in the 99.9th percentile can also have a learning disability. GLD does not mean ‘lightly gifted’ or ‘wannabe gifted’.

GLD children are sometimes referred to internationally as ‘2e’ (twice-exceptional) or ‘DME’ (dual/multiple exceptionality).

Like other gifted children, GLD children may be gifted in understanding and identifying complex relationships, generating ideas and using advanced vocabulary. They may have wide general knowledge and be good at difficult, abstract problems. Indeed they may be intellectually astonishing.

At the same time, however, the mechanics involved in writing, reading, spelling, penmanship, rote memorisation, basic computation and other ostensibly simple academic tasks, particularly timed tests, often present seemingly insurmountable difficulties. GLD children frequently have poor time management and organisational abilities, and/or inconsistent attention issues. They may appear vague or preoccupied, and they may sometimes have difficulty following step-by-step instructions.

Identifying GLD children

GLD children can be hard to identify when they are very young.

The most common and significant feature of a GLD child is uneven or inconsistent academic performance which is unexplained and unpredictable. They may achieve outstandingly high results in academic competitions outside of school, yet be obtaining mediocre results on

everyday school assessments and tests. They may excel on multiple choice tests, yet struggle when asked to compose answers on a blank page—or sometimes the other way round.

The greatest impediment to identifying some GLD children is that their high intelligence may compensate for their learning disability, and their disability may mask their intelligence. This means that these GLD children may present at school as having generally ‘average’ ability. Some GLD may also display challenging behaviours, usually stemming from frustration and embarrassment about not being able to perform simple school tasks which others seem to find ‘easy’.

In other cases, the giftedness may have been identified but the disability not, or conversely the disability may be patently visible while the giftedness remains hidden. Unless challenging behaviour starts to become an issue, the quiet, behaviourally compliant, polite GLD child may continue to underachieve for years and years at school. No one usually notices a non-squeaky wheel.

When it comes to identifying GLD children, the higher the IQ, the greater the difficulty—and similarly, the milder the disability, the greater the difficulty.

GLD children at school

As GLD children progress from primary to secondary school, academic work increases in difficulty and volume, and demands more hours of sustained attention, effort and independent productivity. Children are presented with ever increasing organisational and time-management challenges. They must learn to deal with a complex schedule, multiple teachers and numerous textbooks which are meant to be kept (but are in fact often lost...) in lockers and schoolbags. When they can’t cope, GLD children often find themselves labelled as ‘lazy’ or ‘careless’

or 'undeserving' or even 'naughty'.

In fact the GLD child may be continually struggling to make sense of having BOTH high intellectual potential AND crippling disability. Continuing failure at school may prompt the child to begin to doubt their abilities and to become increasingly frustrated and mystified, because the compensation strategies which they have unknowingly developed in primary school may cease to work as well, if at all. The high intelligence is no longer able to compensate for the disability, and school performance steadily diminishes, even though the GLD child actually feels as if they are making considerable effort.

After repeated failures, unidentified or unsupported GLD children tend to conclude that they are 'just stupid'. The result is persistent underachievement, lack of motivation, low self-efficacy and disenchantment with school. The long-term results can be tragic—school refusal, school dropout, social and family problems, chronic under-employment, low socio-economic status and serious mental health concerns.

Responding to GLD children's needs at school

As soon as an accurate diagnosis has been determined and documented, it is crucial that appropriate support be given to the GLD child, particularly at school. Without targeted academic intervention, the gifts of most GLD students will never be developed, and the likelihood of underachievement is high. Without proper intervention, school just doesn't work.

Most importantly, GLD children must be regularly provided with work which they find challenging, enriching and interesting and which is in keeping with their intellectual abilities. First and foremost, educators need to feed the gift.

Ordinary remedial programs or traditional in-school separate 'special education classes' are usually disastrous for gifted children, who are invariably not assisted by more repetition of facts presented sequentially, and who, despite their disabilities, still require regular opportunities to interact with their intellectual and like-minded peers. Depending on the nature of the disability, the GLD child may benefit from specialised remedial teaching or one-on-one out-of-school tutoring which is tailored to the child's specific disability but which also respects and honours the child's high intellectual potential.

As well as targeted learning support



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and remediation, all children who are professionally diagnosed with disability, including gifted children, are protected by federal and state disability discrimination legislation, and may be entitled by law to professionally recommended disability adjustments so that they have an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and what they can do, on the same basis as a child without disability.

Depending on the nature of, and the level of impairment occasioned by, the disability, they may qualify for adjustments such as extra time, rest breaks, assistive technology, permission to type rather than handwrite or separate supervision for both in-school activities and tests, and for NAPLAN, ICAS, and Year 12 State exams.

Of course disability adjustments constitute but one ingredient in the wider 'solution' for a GLD child—but they can constitute a very important component.

For some GLD children, appropriate adjustments will mean the difference between going on to university—or not.

How can teachers support GLD children?

Since GLD children are a heterogeneous group, each child requires specifically targeted adaptations to their educational program. There is no universal solution appropriate for all GLD children.

If you've met one GLD child, then

you've met one.

It is usually a matter of gradually following the ball of wool through to the end, and systematically responding to each strength and weakness. The key to success is often a well-trained and empathetic teacher who understands the needs of GLD children and who is thus able to both feed the gift AND implement adjustments to accommodate the disabilities.

GLD children are frequently not only twice-exceptional but also twice-misunderstood. Some teachers and school administrators who do not grasp the reality of GLD may, on the one hand, point to the child's giftedness to 'prove' that the child has no real learning disabilities and, on the other hand, point to the child's learning disabilities to suggest that the child is not really gifted. This approach can be tragic.

As well as trained, understanding teachers, success for GLD children depends on well-informed parents who are skilled at effectively advocating to ensure that their child's needs are being met at school and that their child's medically-supported applications are approved for legislatively mandated disability adjustments.

To this end, reading widely about GLD and attending conferences and seminars on both giftedness and learning disability are highly recommended. Joining groups such as GLD Australia (see below), gifted associations and learning disabilities associations may also assist parents to acquire the requisite knowledge, expertise and confidence, and at the same time to benefit from being part of a sympathetic support network.

The earlier a problem can be identified, the greater the chance that it can be remediated, or at least accommodated and supported. Disability is not a recipe for future underachievement in the gifted – unless of course it goes unaddressed.

Some parents don't notice the problem, or choose not to acknowledge it or implement treatment for it, until the GLD child is much older, or until a pattern of chronic underachievement has already been allowed to become established. By then it's harder to reverse, and for some GLD children it may already be too late.

GLD children virtually never 'grow out of it'. There are no magic wand solutions, but there are strategies and ways of managing GLD.

With positive support at school, GLD

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need not be an insurmountable problem. It can be addressed—sometimes with huge success!

GLD Australia

If you're new to GLD, and if you've read to the end of this article, you may be feeling a bit uneasy. If you're a teacher, you may be wondering if you have a GLD child in your classroom. If you're a parent, you may be wondering if you have a GLD child in your kitchen. And if you're a Mensa adult, you may even be wondering if you have a GLD child inside yourself. In any case, you may be wondering where you can find out more.

To this end, you might like to consider joining GLD Australia, a national not-for-profit online learning community and support group responding to the needs of GLD individuals. Through the sharing of information, research and personal experiences, GLD Australia members seek to provide support for GLD learners and for those who care for, teach and advocate for them.

Formed in June 2012, GLD Australia is an independent community with a member-owned and member-operated closed and non-archived Yahoo group list. It is affiliated with the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented (AAEGT): <http://www.aaegt.net.au>, which is the Australian national umbrella association for State gifted associations.

Members of GLD Australia include parents, educators and other professionals dedicated to promoting awareness and understanding of the challenges faced by GLD people and related issues, thereby assisting them to benefit from specialised identification and intervention or treatment as early as possible.

GLD Australia is not a business and has no political or commercial affiliations. It is run by volunteers, and members participate in the community as individuals and support one another without commercial interest.

Joining GLD Australia is free. Simply send an email to: gld.australia@yahoo.com.au.

Further information on GLD children and on GLD Australia: Carol Barnes—carol@bartink.com.au

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Resources—GLD Children and Disability Adjustments

Disability Standards for Education 2005

<http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2005L00767>. The Disability Standards for Education operate as subordinate legislation under the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992, http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/dda1992264/ which applies in all States and Territories and to all schools, public and private. (You may hear the former sometimes referred to as the 'Ed Standards' and the latter as the 'enabling legislation'.)

ACARA

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/StudentDiversity/Pdf/StudentDiversitypage7>

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/StudentDiversity/Children-with-disability>

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/StudentDiversity/Student-diversity-advice-personalised-learning>

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/StudentDiversity/Who-are-children-with-disability>

ICAS

<http://www.eaa.unsw.edu.au/>—not on website but send an email via the website and a disability adjustments table will be sent to you.

NAPLAN

http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/school-support/adjustments-for-children-with-disability/disability-adjustments-scenarios.html#_Extra_time_and

https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p_10/naplan15_principals_handbook.pdf part A6

http://www.nap.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_protocols_for_test_administration_2015_-_web_version.PDF part 6 ■