

# Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities: A Review of the Issues

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## Abstract

Many people have difficulty comprehending that a child can be gifted and also have learning disabilities. As a result, children with special needs that result from both their high abilities and their learning problems are rarely identified and are often poorly served. This article explores the current policies and practices with regard to defining, identifying, and educating this population. Recommendations are included that would help ensure that students who are gifted and have learning disabilities receive the intervention needed to help them achieve their full potential.

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When educators first began describing children who showed evidence of having a learning disability (LD) yet also appeared to be gifted, many viewed this as contradictory. The stereotype that had prevailed since Terman's (1925) time was that gifted children score uniformly high on intelligence tests and perform well in school. How could a child be considered gifted who has serious enough learning problems to be characterized as having a learning disability?

In 1981, a colloquium held at The Johns Hopkins University convened experts from the fields of both learning disabilities and giftedness to consider this issue. At the time, interest in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students, as well as students with learning disabilities, was evident on many levels, but students who exhibited the characteristics of both exceptionalities had received scant notice. The participants agreed that students who are gifted and also have learning disabilities do, in fact, exist but are often overlooked when students are assessed for either giftedness or learning disabilities. The colloquium did much to establish students who are gifted but also have learning disabilities as a population

with special characteristics and needs (Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983).

In recent years, the concept of giftedness and learning disabilities occurring concomitantly in the same individual has become commonly accepted. Several books have been written on the subject, numerous articles have appeared in journals, and most educational conferences focusing on either learning disabilities or giftedness include at least one presentation on the dual exceptionality. We appear to have reached an understanding that high ability and learning problems can both be present in the same individual. Nonetheless, empirical research on the characteristics and needs of this population has been limited, and relatively few students with LD who are gifted are identified as such or given special services. In this review, we examine some of the theoretical arguments, regulations, and educational practices that affect students with LD who are gifted.

## Who Are These Students?

Students who are gifted and also have learning disabilities are those who possess an outstanding gift or talent and are capable of high performance, but who also have a learning

disability that makes some aspect of academic achievement difficult. Some of these students are identified and their needs are met. This happens only rarely, however, unless a school specifically decides to identify and then serve these students. The majority of students who are gifted with learning disabilities "fall through the cracks" in the system.

There are at least three subgroups of children whose dual exceptionality remains unrecognized (Baum, 1994; Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991; Fox, Brody, & Tobin, 1983; Landrum, 1989; Starnes, Ginevan, Stokes, & Barton, 1988). The first group includes students who have been identified as gifted yet exhibit difficulties in school. These students are often considered underachievers, and their underachievement may be attributed to poor self-concept, lack of motivation, or even some less flattering characteristics, such as laziness (Silverman, 1989; Waldron, Saphire, & Rosenblum, 1987; Whitmore, 1980). Their learning disabilities usually remain unrecognized for most of their educational lives. As school becomes more challenging, their academic difficulties may increase to the point where they are falling sufficiently behind peers that someone finally suspects a disability.

