Understanding the Gifted Underachiever and Twice-Exceptional Student

Karen Mickenberg, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist

Diagnostic and Counseling Center
Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University
Diagnostic and Counseling Center

- Provide individualized assessments and educational guidance for average to above-average students from age 4 to 18

- Help families, students, and schools understand the strengths and weaknesses of students

- Assist individuals and their families in finding ways to support the student's overall educational needs
Who We Serve?

- Students whose parents want information about their children’s cognitive strengths and areas in need of growth
- Students who are not sufficiently challenged in school
- Students who are underachieving and/or have inconsistent performance in school
Presentation Goals

Definitions and Myths

Characteristics of the Gifted Underachiever & Twice-Exceptional Student

Strategies for identification and programming
General Definitions

Gifted Underachiever =
student who has cognitive abilities and/or academic skills above the majority of their same-aged peers, but who does not consistently demonstrate these abilities and skills

Twice-Exceptional Student =
student who has a significant strength and a significant weakness, each relative to same-aged peers; usually referred to as Gifted with a Learning Disability

The two are not mutually exclusive.
Myths about Gifted Students

*Gifted Students*...

Will excel in any academic environment

Do not need to work hard – learning is easy for them

Love learning and love subjects in which they excel

Have perfectionism, which is related to high performance

Can *not* have learning disabilities and/or ADHD
Some Characteristics

An outstanding ability and/or evidence of high achievement

Unexplained differences between test scores and classroom performance

Inconsistent school performance

Wide-ranging test scores, even within the same subject

Slow processing of information on basic tasks and timed tasks

Disorganization (things, work, ideas)

Difficulty in one or more major areas (reading, writing, math)
Examples

- 2nd grader who has excellent verbal reasoning and excels in math, but struggles to read and write.

- 5th grader who is creative, excels sporadically, is disorganized, and is thought to be “lazy.”

- 8th grader who works very hard to compensate for difficulty learning new material quickly and completing multi-step tasks.

- 11th grader who has a long history of getting excellent grades but now struggles with a demanding course load.
Barriers to Identification as Gifted with a Disability

Conception that Giftedness Cannot Co-exist with Weaknesses

Gifts Hide Disabilities – verbal expression > reading

Disabilities Mask Gifts – creativity > writing production

Gifts and Disabilities Mask Each Other
Strategies

A good evaluation identifying strengths and weaknesses

Advanced-level programming in areas of strength

Developmentally-appropriate instruction in some areas

Remedial instruction in areas of significant weakness

Adaptive instruction and/or accommodations in areas of significant weakness

Nurturing and flexible environment
A good evaluation

Takes a multisource approach and is more than just testing

Includes many areas of functioning
  - cognitive abilities/ processes and academic skills
  - specific areas of concern
  - social and emotional issues
  - other possible explanations

Includes a written report that summarizes and explains
  - factors leading to a diagnosis, if one is made
  - recommendations for education
Advanced-level programming

Ability grouping – enrichment, subject, grade level

Acceleration – subject, grade level

Independent work – computer courses, projects
Remedial and Adaptive Instruction

Should be concurrent with advanced-level programming in areas of strength

Skills – reinforcement and gap-filling

Flexible-pacing

Modification of assignments and accommodations – write on tests, use computer for writing, extended time on assessments, varied methods of assessment, use of a reader and books-on-tape
Resources

Organizations for Gifted Students
DCC - http://cty.jhu.edu/counseling/index.html
kmickenberg@jhu.edu
Hoagies - http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/
NAGC - http://www.nagc.org/
IDL - http://gifteddifferentlearners.org/Walkingthepath
2e - http://www.2enewsletter.com/

Organizations for Disabilities
LDOnline - http://www.ldonline.org/
• 2nd grader who has struggled to make progress in reading even with some intervention with the school reading specialist

• Teacher – reading is difficult, needs a lot of time to copy from the board, average attention

• Testing – above average reasoning, conceptual understanding, memory; however, very low reading (rate and accuracy for oral, phonological awareness and memory)

• Reading Disorder – with recommendations for a reading specialist and intervention at the phonological level, support services such as books-on-tape, build sight-word vocab., but not decrease discussion of material and level of challenge in math
Real Examples - Michael

- 3<sup>rd</sup> grader getting good grades without effort, but writing performance is inconsistent. He is distracting to others (e.g., blurts out answers in class, fiddles with objects). He has been seated by himself in the back of the class, but feels alienated and is eager to be part of class activities.

- Teacher - indicated that he is excitable and impulsive, interrupts others, fidgets, leaves his seat, and refuses to do what adults tell him to do.

- Parents – frustrated that the school focuses on his behavior rather than his academic abilities, concerned that Michael feels he’s a bad boy and that school is not a good place for him

- Testing - excellent verbal and nonverbal reasoning abilities, working memory for visual information, skills in math, reading, and writing. However, he has significant weaknesses in sustained attention on basic tasks, shifting of attention, impulsivity, and auditory attention (i.e., separating teacher’s instructions from classroom noise).

- Very bright but with ADHD (Combined Type) – with recommendations for challenge in all subjects and the option to work forward, minimization of rote and repetitious work, clear instructions and prompts to get back on task, placement in the front of the class, and reward system to increase quiet work, finding errors, etc...