

Submission

No 34

INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

Organisation: GLD Support Group, NSW Association for Gifted and
Talented Children

Name: Ms Rhonda Filmer

Telephone:

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NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children
c/- Hilltop Road Public School
Hilltop Road
MERRYLANDS NSW 2160

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Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Committee on Children and Young People: Inquiry into children and young people 9 – 14 years.

Overview

We welcome the opportunity to respond to your invitation for submissions to your committee. We represent a parent support group which operates under the auspices of the NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children, a state-wide, self-funded, not-for-profit organization that seeks to optimize outcomes for gifted children. Our position is that services for this population vary enormously across NSW and depend upon the training and understanding of teachers who have largely sought their knowledge base in their own time and at their own cost. No training in the learning needs of gifted children is mandated in any pre-service teacher education in this nation, to our knowledge. A significant sub-group of this under-resourced population is gifted children who have learning disabilities or other special needs which prevent them from meeting the potential of their assessed cognitive intelligence.

The level of disadvantage in these children may remain masked in particular settings but has no less impact on their day to day lives than the behavioural disorders associated with poverty, neglect and social abuse. The confusion and lack of resilience which may characterise these children when their learning needs are left unmet frequently leads to a lack of self-efficacy, underachievement, and even school disruption, school refusal, aggression and lack of social cohesion.

It is typically within the 9 – 14 year age group when gifted children with disabilities discover that their giftedness can no longer compensate for the unidentified learning difficulties. This time period is the last chance for underachievement to be addressed before life potential is impacted negatively and irrevocably.

In[r3] this submission, we would like to address Terms of Reference 1, 2 and 3, and draw your attention to:

- *the unique/specific needs of these children;*
- *the extent to which the middle years are a peak point of disadvantage; and conversely*
- *a moment of opportunity for targeted intervention.*

As well, we discuss some of the strategies, services and support which will provide opportunities for these children to develop resilience and robust self-esteem.

Who are Gifted Children with Learning Disabilities (GLD)?

Children with high IQ scores who fail to perform to expectation and who exhibit one or more specific learning disabilities — dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, auditory and visual perception disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (including the purely inattentive or combination type), Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome etc — are described as gifted and learning disabled (GLD) . Gifted children, in general, are qualitatively different from the norm but when they also have a learning disability the combination causes an increase in their range of learning strengths and weaknesses and renders them 'twice exceptional', that is, high ability on the one hand but an equally high level of difficulty in attaining their potential on the other. American research suggests that approximately one-sixth of gifted children suffer from some form of learning disability or special need.

GLD children are gifted in areas such as understanding and identifying complex relationships, vocabulary, abstract reasoning ability (including mathematical reasoning), creativity, wide general knowledge and observational skills. At the same time, the mechanics involved in writing, reading, basic computation and completing academic tasks, particularly timed tests, often present great difficulties[r8]. GLD children also frequently have poor time management and organizational abilities, and/or inconsistent attention issues.

This typically results in a lack of self-esteem, a lack of resilience and a rise in anxiety and/or depression. Often the problem first presents itself as one of anxiety, for which there are resources in the public school system. Anxiety, however, is only a symptom and a long way from the root causes of the problems suffered by GLD children, which often remain unaddressed and unsupported.

Why do GLD children experience difficulties with academic work?

The time period addressed under the terms of this inquiry is critical for positive life outcomes for GLD children. As they progress from primary school to high school, academic work demands more hours of sustained effort and students are presented with ever increasing organizational and time management challenges. The GLD child's giftedness can no longer mask the unidentified learning difficulties and previous coping strategies, such as memorization, fail. When they can't cope, GLD children often find themselves labeled as "lazy" and "careless".

What activities, services and support will enable these children to develop resilience?

Implementation of the strategies below will have beneficial results in building resilience for all children across the school systems, and in particular will target GLD children who undoubtedly have enormous potential to contribute substantially to society. Resources directed at students with high potential will prevent the inevitable problems that result from disengagement, hopelessness and failure, and will allow the documented cognitive abilities and creativity of these students to find expression, not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of their families and of society.

The greatest difficulty in identifying GLD children is that their high intelligence compensates for their learning disability and their disability masks their intelligence. This means they may present at school as a generally "average" student.

It is important that appropriate support be given to each child, particularly at school. Ordinary remedial programs are usually disastrous for GLD children, who are not assisted by more repetition of facts presented sequentially. GLD remediation programs should focus primarily on the child's strengths, teaching to their giftedness and, through those strengths, help the child discover self-belief and an ability to improve weaknesses.

The coordination of these services needs to be initiated and overseen at a systemic level, across the Department of Education and independent school systems. Although the identification and provision for gifted students is mandated within the school system,

there is currently no funding for additional teachers, support teachers and teachers' aides.

The identification of students with learning difficulties is also mandated, with additional funding allocated to assist children with IQs below 70 points. GLD students with high IQs are not eligible for such assistance, even when they are clearly struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. These children are a neglected part of the school population, and remain unidentified and unsupported. Accordingly, the child and the community are denied the benefit of the unique and special contribution they could have made if their remarkable gifts had been nurtured in the educational system from an early age.

The key strategies which need to be considered to support GLD children through the middle years include the following:

Teachers need to be:

- trained in the characteristics, identification and learning needs of gifted children and GLD children in their pre-service university courses;
- given ongoing professional development in the areas of cognition, giftedness, special needs and individualised programs;
- [r12]allowed time for more individualised attention for students through reduced class sizes;
- granted time and specialist assistance to prepare Individual Education Plans for children with specific needs;
- encouraged to use differentiated learning techniques, such as ability/interest groupings, acceleration and cluster groupings, which are wholly supported in the research literature despite being underutilized in schools.

Current thinking and practice in schools need to change to enable:

- delving beyond apparent behaviour problems to seek root causes for disruptive behaviour;
- psychologists trained and resourced to diagnose and mentor students and develop strategies in partnership with teachers to target the subtest indicators in their GLD identification;
- academic support which responds to both the giftedness and the learning difficulty;

- focus on the systematic analysis and synthesis of current research related to brain function, learning strategies and remedial programs (such as Multilit, Lindamood Bell, Spalding), specifically drawing attention to the world class research and program development being undertaken through the MUSEC unit at Macquarie University, as well as the work on strategic outcomes for gifted children being undertaken at the GERRIC unit of the University of NSW.

GLD students from families of limited financial means require strategic assistance over the long term. Services for supporting these families need to be explored such as: academic mentors within schools to work with GLD children across the primary years; access to a voucher scheme specifically targeted at GLD academic support over the course of the primary years; and effective record keeping to accompany the child during the transition from primary school to high school to facilitate this crucial transition.

It is unrealistic to suggest that families simply make use of federal and/or state disability discrimination legislation to force schools to adequately address and accommodate their children's disabilities. The cost and complexity of such avenues mean that they are realistically available only to a privileged few.

Conclusion

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to bring to your attention the unique and specific needs of Gifted Learning Disabled children, as well as the extent to which the middle years are a peak point of disadvantage and conversely a moment of opportunity for targeted intervention. We commend to your consideration the strategies, services and support which would, we believe, be effective in providing opportunities for these children to develop appropriate literacy and numeracy skills, resilience and robust self-esteem.

*Rhonda Filmer and Verena Mauldon
on behalf of the GLD Support Group,
NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children*

An article 'Not Lazy' is attached to this email.

An opportunity to address the public hearing on 11/6/08 is requested.

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Not Just Lazy – Gifted and Learning Disabled

by Marlo Payne Rice, M.S.

School Psychologist / Education Consultant

Director of Brideun School for Exceptional Children

Many gifted children have inconsistent skill development and significant discrepancies between their innate cognitive abilities and their actual academic performance. In fact, the majority of gifted children are often referred to as lazy or seen as not trying hard enough. Gifted children deserve support, not criticism, for their efforts to fit into a system that is not designed for their learning style.

Statistically speaking, it is quite unlikely that any child has a single skill beyond the 99th percentile. Now consider the probability that all of a child's skills will lie in this range. Intelligence, according to our evaluations, lies in the mind. In order for a child to show gifts in all areas however, she must not only exhibit gifted processing in abstract reasoning, synthesis, organization and memory but must also demonstrate strength in visual and motor output. For many children their mental age is much higher than their physical age. This has been described to me as the funnel effect. This child wishes to write a thesis on the species of turtle, but what comes out of her hand when asked to quickly write about her ideas is "I have a small, green turtle at my house."

Inappropriate challenge can lead to a learning disability look alike. Learning disabilities are defined by the difference between cognition and learning. Therefore, gifted children who are not provided with curriculum at their level can, over time, develop skill delays relative to their own abilities. On the other side of the coin, children who are gifted and learning disabled may not necessarily fall below average. Many learning disabilities go unnoticed in the gifted population, as most gifted children are able to hide their deficits through their strengths. The ability to compensate also varies with cognitive energy. When rested a gifted child with learning disabilities can perform well. They simply cannot maintain this level of performance all day. "You can do this. I have seen you do this before" is not a fair statement. None of us can perform optimally all of the time. And for these children, it takes tremendous energy to even perform to their ability some of the time.

For the gifted child, high abstract reasoning is at the heart of their talent. However, it is this same gift that often interferes with their success in a traditional school setting. I often tell our parents that their children are the "Super K-Mart shoppers," not corner market kids. What I mean by this is that the highly abstract thinker has many more choices when answering a single question. Choosing one apple in a group of 3 is easy. Choosing that same apple out of 100 apples, choices take time. To make matters worse, high abstract reasoning is the main skill that allows a child to self analyze their abilities. They know what they are capable of, the master's thesis on turtles. They simply can't get their organizational systems, their eyes, and their hands to cooperate. What we see on the outside, we call perfectionism or work refusal. What they feel is anxiety, low self-esteem and the need to try harder despite their previous best efforts.

Typical school settings rely heavily on a child's ability to sit quietly in a desk, listen carefully to an oral presentation or read,

then quickly and efficiently summarize and remember what was learned. The child must then prove that knowledge through either speaking or writing. However, for the abstract thinker, the more information that is processed, the more time the summary will take. This is especially true when the learning style dictates that the information be converted from pictures to words. Despite this, we assume that the gifted child is the child who first raises her hand to answer our questions. Given the question "what is a fire truck," the child who immediately replies "an emergency vehicle that puts out fires" is not necessarily the most gifted child. In fact, the brightest child in the class will often pass right by the answer as far too simple and might tell you about their neighbor who raises Dalmatian puppies.

Children who are gifted and learning disabled are a puzzle to even the most seasoned professional. When referred for testing, these children are frequently misdiagnosed and often misunderstood. They spend their school careers hiding their deficits while using every ounce of their strength to simply get by. Often, they look average and lazy. Underneath, they are under challenged and over stimulated. These kids who are both gifted and learning disabled reveal themselves through their behaviors. They claim boredom but don't want to do anything. When they are calm and alert, they flood with self-deprecation. They can be anxious, avoidant and rigid. They can also look impulsive and distracted. Depression is common, as is fatigue. They are frequently described as being "in their heads or in their bodies." They can't seem to settle. They can be prone to illness and hyper-vigilance. Writing is almost always a challenge, although their ideas are good. Organization is also difficult. Although some are athletic, most have poor physical stamina. Sensory issues for many are a part of life. These kids hear it, feel it and sense it to a higher degree but are often challenged for their "sensitivities." Through it all, we see flashes of brilliance but rarely sustained performance.

It is these gifted / learning disabled children, or twice-exceptionals as we call them, that truly live their lives outside of the box. Neither at the top of the class, nor at the bottom, they are discontent with the middle. They can be withdrawn or they can act out. No matter what the pattern, gifted/learning disabled children confuse us. However, despite their difficulties, twice-exceptional children are inventive and passionate. They problem solve in ways no one else can, and take alternative perspectives in each new situation. It is their unique strengths, not their disabilities that should demand our attention and support. Referring to these children as lazy or underachieving only serves to humiliate them and shut them down. We must instead provide an opportunity for these unique learners to freely share their insights with a world that desperately needs them. It is through our support, patience and understanding that the twice-exceptional child can truly blossom.