

The Handicapped Gifted Child: Problems of Identification and Programming

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Children who are both handicapped and gifted usually are chosen for special educational programming on the basis of their handicaps, not their giftedness. Stereotypic expectations, handicapping effects, and program limitations explain this practice. Some 12,000 to 54,000 Canadian gifted handicapped schoolchildren require special programs that recognize their weaknesses and strengths.

Les enfants doués atteints d'un handicap se voient habituellement offrir des programmes spéciaux qui sont davantage axés sur leur handicap que sur leur douance. Les attentes stéréotypées, les effets du handicap et les limitations imposées par les programmes expliquent cet état de fait. Quelque 12 000 des 54 000 élèves doués handicapés au Canada ont besoin de programmes spéciaux qui tiennent compte de leurs points forts et de leurs faiblesses.

Although an extensive literature considers the needs and characteristics of gifted children on the one hand, and the special attributes and educational requirements for various handicaps on the other, the combined subject of "handicapped gifted" has emerged only in the last ten or fifteen years. In the United States, the first national conference on the handicapped gifted was held in 1976, and the category "gifted handicapped" was added to the indices of the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) in 1977 (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). In almost all cases the handicapped gifted are identified and labelled only by their handicap.

Because of the separate historical developments of Special Education and Gifted Education, educators of the gifted are typically uninformed about handicaps, and educators of the handicapped unfamiliar with giftedness. When teachers of 60,000 handicapped children in New York were asked to nominate children for a program for gifted and talented learners, for example, not one nomination was received (Eisenberg & Epstein, 1981). With training on the needs and characteristics of gifted children, however, teachers do learn to identify gifted handicapped children. After learning

appropriate teaching methods, teachers of the handicapped adapt programs to gifted handicapped students very well. These teachers are, after all, skilled in individualizing instruction and sensitive to individual differences.

Who are the handicapped gifted? Because of the variety of handicapping conditions, and the multifaceted aspects of currently employed definitions of giftedness, a variety of individuals with different profiles of strengths and weaknesses may be defined as handicapped gifted learners.

Handicapped children typically include the mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, speech impaired, visually handicapped, seriously emotionally disturbed, orthopedically or other health-impaired children, or children with specific learning disabilities (U.S. Congress, 1975). In the United States, these children are eligible for special education services if the impairment prevents them from performing appropriately in regular programs.

According to the most widely quoted definition of giftedness in the literature, gifted children are those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any, some, or all of: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability (Marland, 1971). These children require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond the regular school program to realize their individual and social potential.

Various estimates of the incidence of handicapped giftedness range from a conservative 2% of all handicapped children in the United States or between 120,000 and to 180,000 (Schnur & Stefanich, 1979), to a more liberal 5% or between 300,000 and 540,000 (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). These estimates assume the incidence of giftedness among the handicapped is similar to that within the general population, since with the exception of mental retardation, handicapping conditions typically do not preclude giftedness. In Illinois, Mauser (1980) found 2.3% of learning disabled children to be intellectually gifted, and in Alberta Bibby & Yewchuk (in press) found 5.5% of children in classes for the hearing impaired to be intellectually gifted, lending some support to the assumption. If the Canadian population of handicapped children is analogous to that of the United States, then total incidence in Canada is probably between 12,000 and 54,000, the vast majority of whom have not been identified as gifted.

Identification of gifted handicapped children is fraught with difficulty. The same screening and multifaceted data collection procedures used with gifted children in general produce the best results (Whitmore & Maker, 1985), although special concessions are required for each area of handicap (Pendarvis & Grossi, 1980). For example, the hearing impaired may be given non-verbal tests such as the WISC-R performance scale (Eschler, 1974), the Leiter International Performance Scale (Leiter, 1969), or the Raven's Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1956) to judge intellectual potential.

Special educators require specific information and inservice training on gifted handicapped children's needs and characteristics to improve their ability to identify this sub-group of learners (Eisenberg & Epstein, 1981). The gifted handicapped should be compared with their handicapped peers, not with the population of gifted learners at large, or with the non-handicapped. Teachers should also observe the manner in which children compensate for their handicapping condition, and attach greater weight to characteristics instrumental in successful adaptation. For example, deaf children's non-verbal communication, visual and abstract abilities might provide the best clues to ability; reading disabled children's problem solving and abstract thinking powers might be weighted more than reading or writing (Maker, 1977).

Even with special training for teachers and with concessions appropriate to various handicaps, a number of obstacles impede the identification of gifted handicapped learners: stereotypic expectations, handicapping effects, and program limitations.

Stereotypic expectations. Gifted handicapped individuals surveyed by Maker (1977) reported they were usually noticed for their handicaps rather than for their talents or gifts. They thought teachers and parents lowered expectations in all areas because of their handicap. As one of the respondents commented, "They try to stifle you if you're handicapped . . . it's awful hard to convince people that you're gifted" (p. 33). In other words, the handicap is generalized to the whole child, and areas of functioning that are inconsistent with the stereotype are ignored. Children who don't look "normal" (for instance, they drool because of cerebral palsy) are particularly likely to be considered less gifted than they actually are. The historical practice of segregating the handicapped for instructional purposes (for example, placing them in schools for the deaf) has hindered contact with non-handicapped peers, and may have contributed to the maintenance of the stereotypical notion that the handicapped are intellectually inferior to the non-handicapped.

Handicapping effects. The nature of the handicap itself may limit or distort assessment of potential or ability. Since it is not now possible to assess ability directly, inferences must be based on behavioural samples. These inferences will be more or less accurate depending on the extent to which the behavioural database is free from test error resulting from handicap effect. For example, children with reading disability will be at a disadvantage on most group IQ tests by comparison with good readers. In general, unless care is taken to eliminate test items that discriminate against specific kinds of handicap, or to alter the mode of testing (for instance, to use Total Communication for deaf students), standardized tests of intelligence and achievement—common components in most procedures for the identification of gifted learners—will underestimate ability in handicapped individuals. In

some situations, it is recommended that the IQ criterion cut-off requirement for admission to programs for gifted learners be lower for the handicapped than the non-handicapped. For example, educators working with the learning-disabled gifted typically use WISC-R scores of 120 or 125 on any one of the Verbal, Performance or Full Scales instead of the more commonly employed 130 and over (Yewchuk, 1986).

Program limitations. Handicapped children in special classes face limits on the expression of their gifts. Special programs emphasize remediation of basic academic and self-help skills, such as to limit the expression of special gifts and talents. In "normalizing" handicapped student learning, the artistic, creative, intellectual, scientific, and literary endeavours that interest and challenge the inquisitive minds of the gifted are neglected. Typical methods stress memorization, repetition, and conditioned responses, or the lowest level of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Students have little chance to exhibit the higher levels of cognitive ability (analysis, synthesis, evaluation). This is particularly true if the child is language-delayed—as in the case of hearing impairment—since advanced verbal questioning and information exchange associated with giftedness in the non-handicapped may be absent.

Whereas programs for the handicapped emphasize remediation of deficiencies and amelioration of weaknesses, programs for the gifted seek to foster superior talents and gifts in creative problem solving, deductive and inductive reasoning, research into real problems, and enrichment or acceleration of specific academic areas. Typically, because of the stress on excellence, children with high intellectual abilities who exhibit learning difficulties in such academic subjects as reading are excluded from special programs for the gifted.

Appropriate educational programs for handicapped gifted children combine educational principles from programs for the handicapped and programs for the gifted. Such a program would embody these features:

1. *Development of self-concept.* Maker (1977) and Whitmore and Maker (1985) emphasize strategies for affective development of gifted handicapped students. Exceptional children in general are subject to labelling, rejection by others, and feelings of inferiority. In addition, gifted handicapped children experience feelings of frustration because of the limitation imposed by their condition. The result of these negative experiences is a poor self-concept. The gifted handicapped must resolve discrepancies between the ideal self and the real self, to learn to live with and accept their handicap, and to find someone (peer, teacher, or parent) who believes in their ability. Classroom strategies might include social activities with peers, handicapped and non-handicapped, encounter sessions with counsellors to encourage open and honest communications about their handicap, and independent, self-initiated learning activities.

2. *Accurate diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses.* Special educational programming should be based on a profile of strengths and weaknesses for each gifted handicapped student. The child's needs arise in part from the handicap and from the discrepancy between areas of excellence and deficit. Ideally, multidisciplinary teams consisting of special educators knowledgeable about the handicapped, educators of gifted learners, parents, counsellor/psychologists, medical personnel, and administrators should collect information and prepare a diagnosis. Without thorough investigation, expectations for the child are likely to be set inappropriately. The child should meet mentors and role models with similar patterns of handicap, excellence, and vocational preference. Career education covering a range of realistic vocational choices for the child is important.
3. *Teaching to strengths.* In contrast to programs for the handicapped which traditionally have been remediation-oriented, programs for the gifted handicapped learner should provide opportunities for creative self-expression, self-directed learning, development of abstract thinking skills, and pursuit of interest areas in the arts and sciences. These goals are typical of programs for the gifted, and some gifted handicapped children may flourish if placed in gifted classes. An ideal placement would be with other children having the same handicap and the same talent and ability, as in a special class for children both gifted and learning disabled. Given the relatively low incidence of gifted handicapped students, however, the more likely situation is that they are placed in individual educational programs with time spent in a class with similarly handicapped, or similarly able children.
4. *Remediation of deficits.* Programs for the gifted typically are not deficit-oriented since students in gifted programs are high in IQ, high in academic achievement, and highly motivated to succeed in school. However, because the gifted handicapped are deficient in selected endeavours, an educational program should be tailored to provide remediation where improvement is possible. Along with remediation, curricular adaptation to limiting conditions would be helpful. As an example, reading disabled students might use aural or pictorial information sources to gather information on a topic of interest rather than rely on the written word. Various mechanical or technical aids provide alternate avenues of communication. Microcomputers are used increasingly in learning deficient skills.

Throughout history, gifted handicapped individuals have made significant social contributions despite their handicaps: Leonardo Da Vinci (learning disabled and creatively gifted), Franklin Delano Roosevelt (orthopedically disabled and gifted in leadership), Yoshikiko Yamamoto, a "Van Gogh" of

Japan (mentally retarded and artistically gifted), Ray Charles (visually impaired and musically gifted), to name only a few. Their stories and many others' provide eloquent testimony to the diversity of physical and other handicaps that may be associated with giftedness. Educators and professionals who work with the handicapped or the gifted against stereotypes of exceptionality, should recognize that the gifted may be handicapped and vice versa. Although the study of individuals who are both gifted and handicapped is still an "emerging field" (Whitmore & Maker, 1985), this paper may provide guidelines for identification of and educational programming for handicapped gifted learners.

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Kinder, die sowohl behindert als auch begabt sind, werden gewöhnlich ausgewählt für spezielle Erziehungsprogramme auf der Basis ihrer Behinderung, nicht ihrer Bega-

bung. Stereotype Erwartungen, die Auswirkungen der Behinderung und Programmbeschränkungen erklären diese Praxis. Etwa 12 000 bis 54 000 begabte und gleichzeitig behinderte kanadische Schulkinder benötigen spezielle Programme, die ihre Schwächen und Stärken erkennen.

Los niños que son tanto minusválidos como excepcionales son generalmente elegidos para programas educacionales debido a su minusvalía no a sus excepcionales talentos. Las expectativas stereotípicas, los efectos minusválidos y las limitaciones de programa explican esta práctica. Cerca de 12,000 a 54,000 escolares excepcionales canadienses requieren programas especiales que reconozcan sus debilidades y sus habilidades.

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