Teachers’ Perceptions of Students Who Are Learning Disabled and Gifted

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Teachers’ Perceptions of Students Who Are Learning Disabled and Gifted

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers’ perceptions of students who are learning disabled and gifted. Through the use of a survey questionnaire, this study attempted to determine whether teachers’ perceptions influence the identification of giftedness in students with learning disabilities.

Significance of the Study

This study was viewed as being significant for teachers who are interested in teaching the LD/gifted. Children who are both gifted and learning disabled are likely to benefit from the knowledge and skill of educators who are committed to developing both the creativity and academic areas of students who are gifted and learning disabled face obstacles in the typical classroom setting. Parents of these students also might benefit from this study.

Parents and students should be more aware of the availability of services their schools provide in assisting them in becoming successful. Federal laws such as PL. 94-142 mandate that all students with disabilities are to receive a free and appropriate education and must have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) to meet their needs.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study were the time devoted to the study and the sample size. The study was conducted between September and February. The study was also limited to the number of teachers at the middle school. The population selection limited the generalizability of the results of this study.

Research Questions

The two major questions which guided this study were: What are the perceptions of teachers toward students who are gifted and learning disabled?

Do they believe students can be gifted even though they have a learning disability?

How much knowledge do teachers have regarding students who are learning disabled and gifted?

Characteristics

The laudable qualities of high-potential children with disabilities may not always seem praiseworthy to adult observers. There are two ways in which positive traits may appear as negative. First, children who
are both gifted and disabled’s strengths may be used to achieve negative goals. These students may use their perceptiveness, for example, to identify and openly deride those school policies which strike them as inconsistent (Rosner & Seymour, 1983).

Second, positive qualities also may interact with negative characteristics to bring results that are especially painful to high-potential pupils with disabilities. The perfectionism of these students, for instance, when paired with depressed academic performance, may lead to particular frustration (Whitmore & Maker, 1985).

According to Kunjufu (2005), many African American males are incorrectly placed in special education because they have the following eleven gifted and talented characteristics:

1. Keen power of observation.
2. Sense of the significant.
3. Willingness to examine the unusual.
4. Questioning attitude.
5. Intellectual curiosity.
6. Inquisitive mind.
7. Creative and inventiveness.
8. High energy levels.
10. Versatility.
11. Diversity of interests and abilities.
12. Varied hobbies.

Reasonably, it is possible to explain graphically how the strengths of children who are gifted and disabled can interact with these youngsters’ problems in producing distinctive implications for feelings and behavior. These implications are described in the following table provided by the Virginia Department of Education.

Figure 1    CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED HANDICAPPED STUDENTS AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gifted Characteristic</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Areas of Strength</td>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>Uneven Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for Challenge</td>
<td>Desire for Independence</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of researchers (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982), believed that, if one is familiar with the characteristics of students who are gifted and disabled, one is more likely to identify these pupils correctly and direct them toward appropriate educational programming.

Gifted identification is emphasized rather than special education identification, but it is the superior abilities of students who are gifted and disabled that go unnoticed rather than their disabilities. Furthermore, special education identification procedures, while far from perfect (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982), have been federally mandated since 1975 by Public Law 94-142 and are familiar to many educators. Baum (1990) stated that learning disabilities and giftedness are at opposite ends of a learning continuum. She also stated that some believe that giftedness is equated with outstanding achievement across all subject areas. Likewise, many view achievement below grade level as a prerequisite to a diagnosis of a learning disability (Baum, 1990).

**Identification**

While earlier studies tended to rely on a 15-point discrepancy between verbal and performance scores on an intelligence test to indicate a learning disability, many children with LD may not have this large a discrepancy (Anderson, Kaufman, Kaufman, 1976; Bloom & Raskin, 1980; Tannenbaum & Baldwin, 1983; Vance, Gaynor, & Coleman, 1976). While it is generally acknowledged that an optimal measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perfectionism</th>
<th>Areas of Low Achievement</th>
<th>Frustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heightened Self-perception</td>
<td>Super Sensitivity</td>
<td>Fragile Self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Aspirations</td>
<td>Low Expectations</td>
<td>Inner Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heightened Intellectual</td>
<td>Limited Outlets</td>
<td>Pent-up Energy &amp; Physical Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few Intellectual Peers</td>
<td>Few Handicapped Peers</td>
<td>Social Difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Career Ambitions</td>
<td>Limited Access</td>
<td>Feelings of Exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Creative Problem Solving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 From “The Gifted Handicapped Students: The Way Forward,” by Terrence Friedrichs, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia and Janice R. Szabos, Gifted Program Administrator, Fairfax County Public Schools, p. 17. Copyright 1990 by the Virginia Department of Education.
of intelligence does not exist, the WISC-R"… is a reasonable measure of where a youngster is currently able to function. It is the most frequently used structure for observing intelligent behavior" (Rosner & Seymour, 1983).

The primary problem with the use of an intelligence test to identify gifted students with LD is that the disability may lower the IQ score so dramatically that the students do not qualify for inclusion in the school district’s criteria for gifted, even though they demonstrate strong abilities in some areas. Despite this problem, Fox and Brody (1983) noted that careful review of the subtests will provide clinicians with a profile of cognitive strengths and weaknesses. High scores on others may indicted a disability. Baum (1994) indicated that teachers are deterred from identifying students as gifted who have low IQ scores, and have behavior problems that mask their giftedness. There are school policies and teacher practices that further interfere with a student who is gifted and learning disabled from being served appropriately when this occurs.

These students often have limited access to technology, are denied admission to honors programs because of poor grades in some areas, are not placed in gifted programs that are reserved for the highest achieving students only, and are not provided with alternative classrooms that may accommodate their differences (Baum, 1994).

Identification Problems

There are four steps that lead to the final identification of a child who should be placed in a gifted program. These steps include: referral, assessment, selection and placement. This section discusses the current difficulties in the identification of learning disabled students who are gifted.

During the identification process, several factors deter teachers from considering students who are learning disabled to be gifted. These factors include behavior problems, low IQ scores, learning disabilities that mask giftedness, and teachers’ perceptions.

The learning disabled gifted student often demonstrates an uneven pattern of behavior, with manifestations taking the form of aggression, withdrawal, frustration, and lack of impulse control (VanTassel-Baska, 1991).

The definitions of both giftedness and learning disabilities have been cited as impeding identification of children as gifted learning disabled (Whitmore, 1982). While many school systems rely on IQ test cutoff scores ranging from 120-140, to identify their gifted populations, methods of identifying the gifted population have included a recognition of WISC-R subtests scatter, discrepancy in intelligence and achievement scores (Barton & Starnes, 1989; Schiff, Kaufman, & Kaufman, 1981; Maker & Udall, 1983; Fox & Brody, 1983). It is quite possible then to project that teachers would not consider referring students whose disabilities might lower their IQ scores.

The student who is gifted and learning disabled can be essentially unnoticed. These students may be struggling to stay at grade level. Their superior intellectual ability may be working overtime to help them compensate for weaknesses caused by an undiagnosed learning disability. In essence, their gift masks the disability and their disability masks the gift (Baum, 1994). These students are often difficult to find because they do not attract our attention with exceptional behavior. Often the talents of these hidden gifted students emerge in specific content areas or with a teacher who uses a more creative
approach in the classroom (Baum, 1994). If the characteristics of these students are familiar to the teacher then, perhaps, they would not go unnoticed and appropriate referrals would be made for further testing.

**Teacher Perceptions**

Educators may have trouble seeing the day-to-day strengths of some pupils with disabilities. Eisenberg and Epstein (cited in Davis & Rimm, 1985) surveyed teachers of 60,000 students with disabilities in New York City and failed to get back even one referral for their gifted-and-talented program for the disabled. In selecting pupils for such a program, Eisenberg and Epstein suggested that educators often picked conforming children rather than those highly energetic youngsters who were more likely to be gifted (Davis & Rimm, 1985). Eisenberg and Epstein indicated that bright students with disabilities disrupt rather than conform. Students with learning disabilities, in particular, face significant obstacles to referral, since their disabilities tend to mask their giftedness.

Suter and Wolf (1987), based on their review of the literature, presented some generalizations regarding the identification of the gifted learning disabled population. These generalizations are:

1. A multi-dimensional approach to identification is necessary to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses.
2. The WISC-R is helpful in identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as overall performance.
3. Academic testing is necessary to determine the discrepancy between potential and performance.
4. Important information can be obtained from parents and teachers about activities that may not be demonstrated on standardized tests.
5. Evaluators should spend time interviewing and assessing the quality of children’s responses for signs of giftedness.

**Summary**

The key element in the identification process is the initial referral. If teachers do not identify the giftedness in students who are learning disabled, then the process is not initiated. Teacher perception then becomes extremely important in the service of these students. It is usually a teacher’s input that reveals the most accurate and true profile of a student along with test results. Placement is often based on this input. Knowledge of characteristics of students who are learning disabled/gifted allows for a more accurate evaluation, placement, and service to these students.

The responsibility of meeting the needs of students who are learning disabled/gifted, however, rests with the entire educational system. The knowledge and perceptions of classroom teachers have a
great impact on whether or not these needs are met.

**Methodology**

The two major research questions which guided this study were:

How much knowledge do teachers have regarding the characteristics of students who are learning disabled and gifted?

What are the perceptions of teachers of students who are learning disabled and gifted? This study was an attempt to determine whether or not teachers’ perceptions influence the identification of giftedness in students with learning disabilities.

**Sample and Demographics**

The sample population of this study consisted of teachers at a middle school located in Southeastern region of the United States. The population of this rural community according to the 2010 Census Bureau Report is 7,217.

The teachers involved in this study resided in the county and in surrounding counties and cities. There were 29 faculty members in the total sample population. The school system uses a team-teaching approach, thereby allowing a teacher to teach multiple subjects.

Regular education teachers were involved as well as art, music, physical education, special education, teacher of the gifted and talented, the guidance counselor, and the principal. The guidance counselor was included based on her experience as a former classroom teacher and significant person in the referral process. The principal was also selected to participate in the study based on her past experiences as a teacher of children with learning disabilities and supervisor of special education. There were four sixth grade teachers, four seventh grade teachers, four eighth grade teachers, four technology teachers, three special education teachers, two music teachers, two foreign language teachers, two physical education teachers, one art teacher, and one gifted/talented teacher. Twenty-one of the teachers were female and eight were male. Teachers from the following ethnic group were represented: African-American, European-Americans, Native-Americans and Hispanic Americans.

**Instrumentation and Scoring**

A questionnaire served as the instrument used for obtaining data from the subjects. This instrument was selected because it is inexpensive, easy to use, and efficient. Responses were presented in percentages. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher.

The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about how much knowledge teachers have concerning the characteristics of students who have learning disabilities and giftedness. It was also designed to determine the perceptions of these teachers about students who are learning disabled and gifted and their role in the identification process.

**Procedures**

This study was a descriptive research project. A checklist was constructed in the form of a
questionnaire. Data was collected to answer questions concerning the influence of teachers’ perceptions in the identification of students who have learning disabilities and are gifted. The teachers, guidance counselor, and the principal at the middle school were surveyed in an attempt to collect data to determine whether their perceptions influenced the identification of students who are both learning disabled and gifted.

The questionnaire was designed with a checklist to make certain that responses would more likely be responsive to the major research questions. A cover letter attached to each questionnaire explained the purpose of the study. A deadline was also given. The questionnaires were hand-delivered to each person involved in the study and collected in the same manner.

**Threats to Validity**

Some possible threats to the validity of this study included unanswered questionnaires, incomplete responses, and limited knowledge of either category of students. The limited amount of time in which the questionnaire was constructed is also a threat to validity.

**Methods of Analyses**

Data was analyzed using Chi Square analysis to examine differences between the responses on perceptions for the identification of learning disabled/gifted students. A comparison was also made of the perceptions based on the gender of subjects used in the study.

\[ x^2 = \sum (O - E)^2 / E \]

The following identifies each survey questionnaire/statement and the responses of the subject. The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions/statements which pertained to some identifying characteristics of students who are learning disabled and gifted. The first three questions on the questionnaire required a “Yes” or “No” response. The other ten items/statements required the subjects to identify characteristics by placing a check mark by the words “LD,” “Gifted,” “Either,” or “Neither,” as perceived by the respondent. Pie charts were displayed in percentages to serve as an illustration of report findings from the survey. Comments concerning the findings from the survey follow.

**Findings**

Question A asks, “Do you think any of the students in your class are gifted?”

Table 1 represents the responses of the sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>Male/Female</th>
<th>Responses to identification of Gifted Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18.10</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 represents the calculated \( x^2 \) with 1 df at .05 level of confidence to be .016. The table value of \( x^2 \) was 3.84. The data showed that there appears to be no significant difference between the way males and females felt on whether or not their students were gifted.

Question B asks, “Do you think any of the students in your class are LD?”

Table 2 represents the responses of the sample.

Table 2: Question A  Male/Female  Responses to identification of students with L.D.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>18.10</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 represents the calculated $x^2$ with 1 df at .05 level of confidence to be .016. The table value of $x^2$ was 3.84. The data showed that there appears to be no significant difference between the way males and females felt on whether or not their students were learning disabled.

Question C asks, “Do you believe children can be gifted even though they have a learning disability? One hundred percent of the individuals surveyed stated that they believed children can be gifted even though they have a learning disability.

The following statements/items are characteristics and/or behaviors that describe either students with learning disabilities and/or giftedness. Item One stated “Is restless.” Results of the survey revealed that none of the subjects felt this was solely a characteristic of students with learning disabilities. Of the total subjects surveyed, 3.4% felt it was a characteristic of gifted students, 72.4% felt is was a characteristic of either, and 24.1% decided it was a characteristic of neither type of student.

Item Two stated “Is easily frustrated.” The results revealed that 37.9% of the subjects perceived this to be a characteristic of students with learning disabilities. None thought this was a characteristic of a gifted student. A total of 51.7% felt either student would possess this characteristic and 10.3% decided this was a characteristic of neither type of student.

Item Three stated “Has poor peer relations.” The response was that 13.8% of the subjects chose LD, none selected gifted, 62.1% felt it could be either student while 24.1% decided that this was a characteristic of neither group of student.

Item Four stated “Has a tendency to lose awareness of time.” The results showed that 24.1% of the subjects selected LD, 6.9% selected gifted, 51.7% selected either, and 17.2% selected neither category of student.

Item Five stated “Has wild silly ideas.” None of the subjects chose LD, 24.1% chose gifted, 55.2% chose either, and 20.7% chose neither category of student.

Item Six stated “Is unusually self-critical.” The responses of the sample revealed that 10.3% selected LD, 17.2% selected gifted, 44.8% selected either, and 27.6% selected neither category of student.

Item Seven stated, “Plays around, yet tests well.” None of the subjects selected LD, 48.3% selected gifted, 37.9% selected either, and 13.8% selected neither category of student.

Item Eight stated, “Demonstrates unusual ability in painting and/or drawing.” The results revealed that 3.4% of the subjects decided this characteristic belonged to the students with learning disabilities. A total of 20.7% chose gifted, 75.9% chose either and none of the subjects chose neither category of student.

Item Nine stated, “Frequently interrupts others when they are talking.” The responses indicated that 17.2% of the subjects felt this was a behavior belonging to students with learning disabilities. Of the total subjects surveyed 3.4% felt this could be a behavior belonging to students who are gifted, 58.6% of the subjects felt it could be a behavior belonging to either and 20.7% felt neither category of student.
Item Ten stated, “Shows unusual ability in instrumental music.” The results of this item showed that 3.4% of the subjects decided this was characteristic of gifted students. A total of 62.1% felt that it was a characteristic of either and 10.3% felt it was a characteristic of neither category of student.

Summary

The findings suggested that all of the subjects surveyed agreed that children can be gifted even though they have a learning disability. However, of the 29 faculty members surveyed only 10.3% agreed that all of the characteristics and behaviors listed were shared simultaneously by LD as well as gifted students by checking the “either” column. This small percentage indicated a lack of training or knowledge of characteristics of students who are learning disabled and gifted. This might also account for the low incidence of identification of these students.

Conclusion

It appeared that teachers’ perception is a major influence in the identification of students who are learning disabled and gifted and the service they receive. If the teachers are knowledgeable about the characteristics and behaviors that they are more likely to refer students to special programs designed for students who are gifted. All too often the weaknesses of students with learning disabilities are targeted and the gifted traits go unnoticed and thus do not receive appropriate services. Since the teacher is in a better position to identify a student, he/she should be more aware of their scholastic abilities whether strong or weak. Although, in some school localities, IQ test scores are the critical source in identifying categories of exceptional education, other factors are perhaps equally or more relevant. Teachers should then be available to describe various characteristics through multiple observations and assessments.

On the basis of analyses of the surveys taken, it can be concluded that students who have learning disabilities and giftedness do exist. There is a gap between realization and actualization, also they tend not to have the level of knowledge to make more accurate identifications. In conclusion, the teachers’ perceptions then become a great influence in the identification process of students who have learning disabilities and giftedness. It can be assumed this classification is under identified, therefore under-served.

Recommendations

According to (Baum & Owen, 2004; Brody & Mills, 2004; Yewchuk & Lupart, 2000), there is no real consensus that has been established as the best method of identifying twice-exceptional children, however there is agreement that it is difficult to identify students who are gifted or learning disabled.

Seemingly in most school systems, whatever identification program is practiced, it is likely that neither will have the flexibility to facilitate the recognition of both gifts and learning disabilities. Additionally, if a student is successfully identified, interventions tend to support one area and therefore, are not as likely to focus on the exceptional learning needs in the other area of exceptionality (Reis, McGuire, & Neu, 2000).

Recommendations for further study include evaluating all students at the middle school, who have been identified as having learning disabilities to determine whether they may need the services provided by
the gifted and talented program. Perhaps, the need for a collaborative program would then be developed to help these students reach their fullest potential. There is a greater need for teacher sensitivity toward students with learning disabilities. Teachers of students with learning disabilities need training in gifted education.

References


Baum, S. M., & Owen, S. V. (2004). To be gifted and learning disabled: Strategies for helping


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