Letter of Intent

Gifted/Learning Disabled Children: A Handbook for Parents

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This project will involve the creation of handbook for the parents of gifted/learning disabled (GLD) students in the Alberta school system. This letter will outline the need for such a handbook, identify what the handbook will include, and provide details of the handbook development process.

Problem Statement

Despite being identified as a unique group for over 30 years (Brody & Mills, 1997), a detailed understanding of GLD students remains allusive. The seeming contradiction of the terms “gifted” and “learning disabled” can create confusion in the minds of anyone involved with the child. In order to achieve their potential GLD students require opportunities to enhance their gifts, while at the same time need remediation in their areas of need (Beckley, 1998). While research continues into the identification and education of GLD students, little attention has been paid to helping parents understand their children’s unique needs (Cloran, 1998; Grimm, 1998; McCoach, Kehle, Bray & Siegle, 2001; Reis & McCoach, 2002). This project will address the following (a) what does it mean to be gifted and learning disabled, (b) how are GLD children identified, (c) what are the unique needs of the GLD child, both academically and personally, and (d) what can parents do to help ensure these needs are met.

Project Rationale

A handbook for parents of GLD students is needed for a number of reasons. Because of their unique combination of two seemingly opposite educational needs, the needs of GLD students may be difficult to understand. How can a child be gifted and have a learning disability? Complicating matters even further, researchers (Baum, 1990; Beckley, 1998; Brody & Mills, 1997; McCoach et al., 2001) have identified three different types of GLD students.

The first type includes those who are gifted and also have a mild learning disability. These students often do well in elementary school and may participate in gifted programs at that level. They only begin to have difficulties once they must work to a higher level in the area of their disability.
Achievement begins to decline and they may be considered lazy or lacking in motivation rather than learning disabled since they previously did well (Beckley, 1998).

The second type includes those students who have severe learning disabilities. These students are often identified as having a learning disability, but not as gifted because of the severity of their disability. Unless they are properly identified and supported, it is unlikely they will reach their full potential (Baum, 1990). Attention remains focused on their problems and what they cannot do, rather than on their gifts and what they can do (Neu, Cooper, & Baum, 2005).

The last type involves those whose gifts and disabilities mask each other. These students are not identified as gifted or disabled. Their giftedness masks their disability and their disability masks their gifts. This masking effect makes them appear average and they are not referred for any type of evaluation (Brody & Mills, 1997). These students may perform at grade level, but their full potential is not reached (Baum, 1990; McCoach et al., 2001). Even if students in this group are referred for testing, their disabilities may lower their IQ scores to the point where they are not identified as gifted (Waldron & Saphire, 1990).

There is however a set of characteristics that seems to apply to all GLD students: “(a) evidence of an outstanding talent or ability, (b) evidence of a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement, and (c) evidence of a processing deficit” (Brody & Mills, 1997, p. 285).

In addition to not reaching their academic potential, GLD students are at risk for behavioural or emotional disturbances such as frustration, depression, anger, low self-esteem, disruption, and off-task behaviour (Baum, as cited in Beckley, 1998). This may due to being unprepared for higher expectations and challenges as they progress through their education. Elementary school is often easy for them and they do not learn the skills and processes needed to progress to higher levels. Self-esteem issues can arise if they believe they are letting their teachers or parents down. Bloom (as cited in Waldron, Saphir & Rosenblum, 1987) tells us that this is a possibility when teachers and parents focus
on what these students cannot do, rather than what they can do. Students themselves are often confused by the unpredictability and inconsistency in their performance (Assouline, Nicpon & Huber, 2006).

Review of the Literature

The bulk of the literature focuses on the identification and educational strategies for GLD students. While several articles acknowledge that the parents and children have difficulty understanding the concept of being both giftedness and learning disabled and the resultant psychological implications, little attention is paid to this area and little focus is given to helping parents understand and help their children.

The literature review has determined that GLD students remain an underrepresented group in terms of special educational programming (Brody & Mills, 1997). The main reason for this is a lack of direction, accuracy, tools, and demand for identification. However, even when they are identified, some professionals still have difficulty accepting the idea that a student can be gifted and learning disabled (Vaidya, 1993). If there is still confusion on the part of the professional, it is understandable that there is confusion on the part of the parents and the students themselves. In addition to their unique educational needs, GLD students may also have poor academic self-esteem and feel they do not fit in with their peers. The disparity between their abilities in some areas and deficits in others may leave them feeling confused and helpless, leading to low motivation (Vaidya).

An in depth study completed by Reis, Neu, and McGuire (1995) found parental support to be one of the major factors affecting achievement in GLD students. The support they provided included advocacy and consistent support in a number of areas, both within and outside of the school setting. All areas of support relied on a thorough understanding of the student’s unique needs and strengths.

A literature synopsis from the University of Calgary (2005) highlights many areas of understanding giftedness that have implications for parents of GLD students. First, there are many ways to be gifted. Second, there are different types and levels of giftedness, each with it’s own set of needs and challenges. For example, highly gifted students may have difficulties in establishing social
relationships with their peers. Third, due to the presence of a learning disability, giftedness does not necessarily guarantee achievement. On the other hand, the presence of a learning disability does not guarantee a lack of achievement. Fourth, GLD students may have unique characteristics that need to be understood. This can include things like perfectionism and issues of self-concept and self-esteem.

Because GLD students may have academic difficulties due to their learning disability, parents may be focussing on what the child cannot do, rather than on what they can do. That is, rather than nurturing the gift, they are focused on addressing the difficulties. Vaidya (1993) suggests that increased parental awareness is necessary for the optimal development of these students. Parents are their child’s best advocates. Because of the focus on the disability, GLD students are often placed in classes that provide learning support (Vaidya). Here, their weaknesses are meant to be addressed, but there is no enrichment to advance their strengths. Unfortunately, the strategies used to address learning disabilities do not typically work with the GLD students due to their unusual combination of strengths and weaknesses (Vaidya). Parental understanding of their children’s unique needs will put them in a better position to become educational advocates for their children.

Another important factor when considering GLD students is their style of attribution (Vaidya, 1993). Style of attribution refers to how they attribute their successes and failures. Learning disabled students will often have an outer directed style of attribution. They blame themselves for their failures and do not take credit for their successes (Vaidya). Repeated failures strengthen this, as they focus more and more on their weaknesses. Along with teachers, it is important for parents to recognize and nurture strengths. One way of doing this is to encourage the child’s attributions to become inner directed by noting successes and by providing concrete feedback regarding the successes (Vaidya).

The social and psychological needs of the GLD student need to be addressed. It has been found that GLD students are more often referred for assessment for psychological reasons, than for academic reasons (Vaidya, 1993). Parents need to be aware of these social and psychological needs, not only to help the children understand them, but also to ensure they are being addressed.
Method

Definitions

Definitions of gifted, learning disabled, and of gifted/learning disabled are critical to understanding these students. These definitions will be derived from the literature, as well as from Alberta Education. It is important to include definitions from Alberta Education to ensure a correlation between parent information and the student’s educational setting.

Procedures

A literature search will be conducted primarily through PsycINFO, as well as the ERIC database. These searches will be done using terms such as gifted, learning disabled, gifted/learning disabled, twice exceptional, and duel exceptionality. Preference will be given to peer reviewed journals, although website resources will be used if they are determined to be of high quality using methods outlined by Branham (1997). An attempt will be made to use Canadian based resources, however to limit the search to only Canadian literature would be too restrictive. Government documents, particularly those from Alberta Education will also be used. Current books on the subject of GLD students will be reviewed. Further articles will be found using the reference lists of all resources.

The next step will involve speaking with parents, educational psychologists, and teachers currently involved with GLD students. The researcher has access to these parents, psychologists, and teachers in her current role of Special Education Coordinator and teacher in a gifted program in an Alberta school. Interviews will be conducted to determine what is currently available and what is missing.

The final project will include comprehensive definitions of gifted, learning disabled, gifted/learning disabled, and the three types of GLD students, the literature review, and recommendations for the type of materials needed to adequately assist parents as they help to address the educational and psychological needs of their children. A handbook for parents will be developed to
meet these recommendations. This handbook will include the following sections: definitions, including
the different types of GLD students, identification of GLD students, unique educational, emotional,
and social qualities and needs, types of school interventions, rights and responsibilities of the family,
the role of Alberta Education, parents as teachers, advocating for student needs, and working as
partners with the education system.

Potential Implications

Due to their unique combination of disability and giftedness, GLD students often do not reach
their full potential, based on inadequate academic strategies, psychological factors, or a combination of
both (Reis & McCoach, 2002). Gifted students with a learning disability are at risk academically,
behaviourally, and emotionally. These students become frustrated by their “inability to demonstrate
academic achievement commensurate with their ability” (Shevitz, Weinfeld, Jeweler, & Robinson,
2003, p. 37). They know they are bright, but become frustrated by their inability to succeed in school.
Low self-esteem, behavioural issues, and decreased motivation can result (Baum, 1990; Beckley,
1998). Frustration felt by the students is likely to be mirrored by their parents and vice versa.

Frustration for the students, their parents, and their teachers can lead to excessive stress for all.
Knowing the issues facing these students will allow parents to begin to address them. Parents often
know there is something unique about their children, but do not have the training or experience needed
to accurately make an assessment or develop an understanding of their needs and strengths (Assouline
et al., 2006). Developing this understanding can bring a sense of relief to parents, easing the frustration
with their child’s behaviour, and giving them hope that these issues will be addressed (Assouline &
Bramer, 2005),
References


