
From GLD to Gold

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Recognising and Honouring the Needs of GLD Students

Imagine, if you will, the fate of being ground between two giant opposing forces against which you have no power. Such is the condition of the GLD student.

Students who are gifted but who suffer a specific learning disability are commonly referred to as double labelled or students of dual exceptionality. I prefer the term GLD [Gifted and experiencing Learning Difficulties] because it puts emphasis on the giftedness of these students who form a significant subset of the gifted community. GLD students present a challenge to their teachers and parents. Their test performance is variable despite flashes of high intelligence. They may appear to be unmotivated; their motivation is actually very high but they experience a destructive degree of frustration because their specific learning difficulty imprisons their intellectual functioning. They present as underachievers who puzzle their teachers by displaying excellent verbal ability, which does not transfer to productive outcomes.

I refer to the GLD condition but it is not one condition as such; rather it is a range of conditions in which the giftedness of the student is overshadowed by a specific learning difficulty.

Characteristically there is no overt learning difficulty, which could account for the reluctance because the above-average intelligence of the student masks the most severe effects of the learning disability. The student tends to perform in the average range with the exception of advanced verbal facility and highly developed thinking skills. A strong creative streak is usually present.

GLD [Gifted and experiencing Learning Difficulties]

There is a tendency for the misinformed to label these students as disengaged or unmotivated. There may be a pattern of acting out in school or they may tend, initially, to withdraw into themselves, causing little disruption at school but displaying patterns of negative behaviour at home or of illness which worries their parents. The students become increasingly anxious as the discrepancy between their strengths and weaknesses becomes wider. They may become moody or withdrawn in school, behaviours which result in further social dysfunction and alienation from their peers.

The keen sensitivity displayed by these students arises from a self-critical function which tends to be perfectionist and which damages self esteem. The combination of

high intelligence and a learning block produces a great deal of frustration and suffering for these students and their families.

When the precocious perceptiveness and sensitivity of a gifted student coexists with a debilitating learning difficulty, the stage is set for significant emotional and social dysfunction because the GLD student adopts a range of maladaptive perceptions and behaviours in the struggle against this perplexing condition. The social and emotional needs of GLD students must be met if any real learning is to take place.

Emotional and social consequence of the undiagnosed GLD condition

There is a significant body of research which attests to the emotional needs of gifted students who experience significant learning disability. This subset of the gifted community is at high risk of developing emotional dysfunction resulting from the conflict and frustration which they experience. The presence of a learning block, in a student of high intellectual function, characterised by a tendency to perfectionism, creates considerable suffering.

It is these students who are vulnerable to depression and substance abuse because their critical faculty undermines their self-perception. The restless energy of their minds cannot find expression in productive outcomes because the unidentified learning difficulty frustrates each attempt.

Emotional Concerns

GLD students have a distorted perception of self because they are constantly receiving conflicting internal messages.

The undiagnosed GLD condition is extremely painful. Normally giftedness is considered to be an asset but in the GLD student it contributes to the pain. The student is crushed between the limiting effects of the learning disability and the drive for mastery which the giftedness promotes. A bright questing intellect which cannot find expression in high performance may well turn in upon itself with destructive consequences.

Families, too, suffer along with the student. There is a seemingly endless cycle of hope and despair as the student exhibits flashes of brilliance alternating with incredibly frustrating limitations. A pattern of uneven emotional maturity compounds the problem. Confusion reigns in the afflicted student, in their parents and in their teachers.

Parents may blame themselves for the unusual behaviours which GLD students exhibit or they may be blamed by others as having poor parenting skills. It is not unusual for school conforming GLD students to vent their frustrations in extreme behaviours at home.

Siblings may well feel neglected as parents struggle to assist this child who perplexes them. They may well be extremely resentful of the time and attention which the GLD

condition demands. Sibling relationships are even more fraught than usual, the outbursts more extreme since the already pressured GLD student does not respond well to further pressure.

The harshest critic of all is the inner critic which the GLD student is forced to listen to at every moment. Such a condition cannot be endured for long. The student often sinks into a pattern of hopelessness alternating with outbursts of anger and resentment.

The introverted GLD student is most often the victim of a condition known as Learned Helplessness. When this happens, all learning is compromised and Dysphoria, the inability to access any joy, sets in. The stage is now set for a depressive event.

Their giftedness strives for mastery, engages in endless inquiry and produces perfectionism.

The learning block delays skills development limits the acquisition of a wide knowledge base and frustrates every attempt to achieve high performance.

GLD students invariably perceive themselves as damaged or stupid. This self-perception must be changed. It falls to the teacher as the significant other to recognise the giftedness of the student and to convince the student that he/she is talented and that the giftedness is not a mirage but is very real and can be used effectively to offset the worst effects of the learning difficulty which has been diagnosed. In short, what the GLD student needs is hope which is based on observable and verifiable evidence. The 'Celebrating the Gift' component of the GLD Intervention program will provide such evidence.

Any GLD student who has graduated from junior school without an accurate diagnosis of the GLD condition will invariably be in the firm grip of Learned Helplessness which sucks the energy, enthusiasm and hope of its victims. Learned Helplessness deals in absolutes; every set-back is a catastrophe, is permanent, and is the result of personal defect. Learned Helplessness (LH) teaches a GLD student to adopt the victim role, that each previous failure is firm evidence of a pervasive worthlessness which cannot be remedied.

The old adage success builds upon success has never been truer. GLD students must achieve significant success which is valid in the eyes of the student, if the grasp of LH is to be loosened. This must happen up front — don't wait for the intervention strategies designed to address the learning difficulty kick in. Engender success now. An astute teacher can devise leadership opportunities for GLD students whose giftedness will create windows of opportunity.

Dual exceptionality leads to a morass of confused thoughts and perceptions. If it is challenging for an educational professional to diagnose the condition, imagine the quality and nature of the sufferer's perceptions.

GLD students need to learn how to learn. They need to be partners in their own recovery. They need to learn strategies to cope with the effects which their particular learning difficulty brings.

They need to learn those strategies which will eradicate, minimise or mitigate the effects of their learning disability. They need to let go of old habits and perceptions which have become maladaptive.

They need to learn adaptations which will prevent the learning difficulty from blocking them. They need to learn to pace themselves and to recover their focus after a set back. They also need to learn to handle stress.

They will also need assistance in dealing with the organisation involved in a learning task, coping with the time frame and accessing appropriate learning strategies and resources.

Social Concerns

GLD students are often very lonely. They fit in neither with the special needs community nor do they feel that they fit in with the regular gifted. Their giftedness drives them to seek the company of older students or gifted peers; their poor academic performance embarrasses them and causes them to withdraw.

Alienation from peers compounds the GLD student's sense of isolation, as does their acute sensitivity to the expectation of parents and teachers who perceive the giftedness and cannot account for the failure in performance. It is the fate of many GLD students to be labelled as 'lazy' or 'unmotivated' when, in fact, they are highly motivated to succeed but cannot do so. This kind of harsh labelling further alienates GLD students from their peers.

As with the regular gifted students, it is vital to find a like-minded peer but where can such a peer be located? It is my experience that the regular gifted community does accept GLD students. It is the GLD students themselves who opt out of such a community because of their acute sensitivity and their perception that they are inferior.

GLD students are welcomed, acknowledged and supported by their gifted peers

Nevertheless they do belong with their gifted peers and can, with the support of a perceptive teacher, access those differentiated programs which celebrate excellence of creativity, originality of thought and advanced problem solving.

GLD students are welcomed, acknowledged and supported by their gifted peers who know what it feels like to be different. In such a community they come to recognise their giftedness and are able to contribute to the ideas pool of the group. The only note of caution would relate to interaction with gifted underachievers who are in the recovery stage. Their caustic wit is too sharp for the sensibilities of the fragile GLD.

GLD students' social antennae are usually sensitive to perceiving possible slights. They tend to be very dismissive of compliments, believing them to be the result of a mistaken perception. This mistaken perception can be changed by actively teaching GLD students to develop a realistic sense of self and by encouraging them to take their place in normal social interaction.

The way forward: The GLD Intervention Program

Provision of an exceptionally differentiated program which incorporates these elements is required to free GLD students from the limitations of their condition. Such a program must also address the worst effects of the specific learning difficulty whilst celebrating the giftedness of the student.

Challenges for Teachers

Teaching students of dual exceptionality is a demanding task. Both the learning disability and the giftedness must be addressed simultaneously yet each presents different characteristics and demands opposing differentiation as exemplified below.

Learning Blocks	Giftedness
Holds Back	Drives
Needs structure	Needs open ended inquiry
Needs clarity	Needs complexity
Limits performance	Seeks mastery
Needs support person	Seeks autonomy
Creates confusion	Creates intensity
Creates skills deficits	Promotes conceptual leaps
Limits horizons	Strives for perfection

Identifying typical GLD behaviours

GLD Girls

As with the regular gifted and the underachieving females, GLD girls' priority is social acceptance. This coupled with their more sophisticated socialisation skills, allows them to operate within the early/junior classroom setting. As they progress through school, they are more likely to come to a teacher's attention but by then they may have adopted maladaptive practices which are limiting and are in danger of becoming permanent. GLD girls tend to take the imagined safety of the withdrawal route in reaction to their condition because:

- They are more sensitive to public perceptions.
- They display a greater need for social acceptance .
- Their social and coping skills are well developed, even in the presence of a learning difficulty.

- Their brain organisation favours a more adaptive strategy which allows them to broaden their performance base and perform at average or slightly above average level particularly in the early years of schooling.
- Parental perception in terms of expectation may be less demanding and therefore educational performance less important.

They are less likely to act out in a public setting, but may do so in the relative safety of their own home, creating difficulties for siblings and for parents. They are more difficult to identify but their need is no less pressing. They may sublimate their drive for mastery and their innate leadership skills by indulging excessively in 'social behaviours'.

GLD Boys

Whether GLD boys withdraw or act out depends on their personality and degree of extroversion. The more likely scenario is that they will act out by becoming the classroom clown or the classroom terror. The more obvious signs of their learning difficulty may well be picked up as junior teachers are on the alert for linguistic developmental delays in young boys. Most of Reading Recovery students are male. The underlying Specific Learning Difficulty which causes the developmental delay may not be accurately diagnosed and so may continue to cause a range of confusing and maladaptive behaviours.

What is likely to happen is that they acquire a label and their giftedness is buried beneath the raft of acting-out behaviours which they adopt in response to a dual exceptionality which they cannot comprehend but which continues to drive them.

Common GLD male behaviours include:

- Playing classroom clown.
- Acting aggressively.
- Displaying poor impulse control.
- Constantly indulging in disruptive classroom behaviours.
- Displaying very immature behaviours.
- Ceaseless energy alternating with bouts of fatigue.

Given the nature of their behaviours, it is little wonder that their name does not occur to teachers when they are asked to nominate a student for a gifted and talented school program. Teachers may well be aware that there is certain brightness there but feel that the student should mature socially before being considered for such a program. That day will never come unless an intervention program is put in place which promotes this maturity.

In the meantime the GLD boy will continue along the path of destructive behaviours, gaining a dreadful reputation and steadily losing his potential.

The Four Step Intervention Programme

[Extract from "The Responsive Teacher Course"]

Teachers and parents who are faced with the challenge of meeting the emotional, social and cognitive needs of GLD students require an exceptionally differentiated program which is effective, efficient and pragmatic.

The 'Slaying the Dragon' Program was devised and taught by me for over ten years. Recent developments in the field of neuroscience have resulted in the updated version of the program which is outlined below.

GLD students who are currently enrolled in full-time education at the Alpha eLearning virtual facility benefit from the on-line version of the program.

Step 1 Identifying GLD Students

- GLD Preschool Profile
- GLD Parent Information Checklist
- Teacher Observation Tools [GLD Learners]
- Standardised Test Results

Step 2 Analysis of Specific Needs

- Synergistic Learning Profile
- Specific Learning Difficulty Report.
- Wechsler Test of Intelligence.
- Agency Reports
- GLD Template Tools

Step 3 Eradicating Learned Helplessness

- Training in Metacognition.
- Regular Conferencing Sessions.
- Mapping Change
- Emotional & Social Skills Training
- Family Support
- Individual Counselling

Step 4 Designing an Individual Program

- Slaying the Dragon
- Direct Daily Intervention
- Curriculum Compacting
- Celebrating the Gift
- The Mentor Program

Anthony: A case history

Anthony displayed the classic early characteristics of a gifted learner. He was a sleepless baby who seemed to be interested in everything. His mother reported that, from an early age, she had to carry him around in a sling so that he could view the world. He spoke complex sentences at 12 months, learned to read by two years of age and asked endless 'Why?' and 'What if?' questions.

He didn't play with other toddlers but loved the company of adults. Anthony's idea of play was to dismantle the clock to see how it worked or, on one occasion, to attempt to take the toilet system apart. He was late in walking and seemed to lack both gross

and fine motor skills. He often fell over and was fearful of playground equipment. He didn't play in the expected ways and avoided other children.

By the age of three years his parents were convinced something was wrong with their son and consulted an educational psychologist. Anthony loved the sessions with the psychologist who provided lots of interesting conversation. The psychologist's conclusion was that Anthony was a bright child and the parents were worrying over nothing.

Anthony entered school eagerly on his fifth birthday. An astute teacher noted his intelligence but also remarked upon his lack of social and play skills and on his inability to dress himself properly despite instruction. By the third week of school Anthony was unhappy. He asked his parents "Why do the children not accept me?"

Anthony, who was always full of energy and enthusiasm, became reticent. The light faded from his eyes. He became withdrawn. As he moved from class to class the pattern was always the same. Initially his new teacher would enthuse over this delightful new child in the class. Invariably, by about the third week, the teacher would telephone his parents to express concerns about Anthony's lack of play skills, lack of co-ordination and generally disorganised behaviour.

His reading age was four years above his chronological age and his oral language skills were highly developed. The children called him 'the little professor' because of his sophisticated speech patterns. On two more occasions concerned teachers referred Anthony to an educational psychologist for assessment. On each occasion the response was the same. There is nothing wrong with the child. He must have pushy parents.

Anthony's writing was large and poorly formed. He could not complete simple physical tasks such as using scissors. Teachers reported that he was becoming increasingly withdrawn and tended to 'space out'. Although highly imaginative he could not produce a legible, ordered piece of writing. Number work presented a challenge because he could not grasp sequence. Learning tables was a nightmare.

At the age of nine Anthony finally found help

An SLD assessment noted Anthony's verbal ability but pinpointed delays in gross and fine motor skills. The Wechsler Intelligence test showed the classic GLD wide subset scatter of abilities with exceptional ability in the area of verbal performance and deficits showing in the areas of visual perception.

At the age of nine Anthony finally found help. He visited a motor skills specialist who diagnosed Dyspraxia, a condition which affects motor planning. She also expressed concern about Anthony's ability to see which she suspected was more severe than the short-sightedness for which he wore glasses.

Anthony was referred to a developmental optometrist who found Anthony lacked binocular vision. He was able to read because he unconsciously shut off the vision from one eye but for other activities he saw double. He had poor stereoscopic vision

so he had no appreciation of depth and he had limited peripheral vision so he could not see much beyond that which was directly in front of him.

He also had slow motor speed which accounted for the difficulty he had in finishing a piece of written work. Despite these severe problems Anthony's school performance was average or slightly below average in certain areas, with flashes of high verbal ability and problem solving ability.

Anthony's intelligence had masked the worst effects of severe physical impairment. No wonder Anthony felt tired at the end of a normal school day! I began to teach Anthony using the program which I had devised and which I have outlined above.

Within weeks he changed, becoming once again the lively child he had been before entering school. He used an Alpha word processing machine to write. Freed from the stress of having to form letters, which he could not see clearly, he became a prolific writer. The first writing competition he entered he won a book. The next competition he entered was a competition in creative writing. Anthony was competing against children several years older than himself but he won the cup. That was a wonderful day and was a validation of all the people who had helped Anthony and of Anthony himself who struggled against severe learning impediments but never gave up.

The anguish which his family experienced is typical of the pain which the families of GLD students suffer. The provision of accurate diagnosis and a comprehensive intervention program freed Anthony to use his giftedness in productive easy.

Anthony continued to go from strength to strength. He is now in tertiary education. His ambition? To work with at-risk youth who have been alienated by the system. In my work with GLD students I have often seen a similar pattern. The good news is that these students respond well to provision of an appropriate program of intervention and enrichment.

The way to success is the collaborative support offered to the student. Freed from the fear of 'different' or 'strange', freed from the deep-seated loneliness, students experience renewed hope and energy. Being agents in their own renaissance is vitally important. They are able to use their giftedness, their insights and their thinking skills to overcome the worst effects of their learning difficulty.

Below are the remarks of one of my former students who transferred to another town. His parents were fearful of the detrimental effects of losing the program. I attempted to reassure them that their son had been engaged in the GLD Intervention program for a sufficient time which would allow the changed behaviours to become permanent; still the parents remained anxious but their fears were settled by their son. "Wherever I go, I'll be fine. I now know who I am."