



Advocating for gifted
learners with disability

Gifted Learners with Disability (GLD)

A neurodevelopmental paradox

Parents and teachers sometimes assume that all clever children, having supposedly won the genetic lottery, will invariably enjoy school, learn effortlessly, and succeed academically.

Sadly this is not always the case. Some gifted children are every day silently coping with an unidentified disability which affects their learning and their academic success.

Children of high intellectual potential who also have one or more disabilities or additional educational needs are described as 'gifted learners with disability' (GLD).

However the term GLD is not restricted to those who have a formally diagnosed specific learning disorder (SLD) such as reading disorder (dyslexia), disorder of written expression, or mathematics disorder (dyscalculia). Indeed the term also encompasses intellectually gifted children who have other special needs, including neurodevelopmental disorders (such as ADHD or ASD), motor disorders (dyspraxia), physical disability or emotional issues such as anxiety or depression – in short, the child who is intellectually gifted 'with something else going on' – something which emanates from within the child rather than being environmentally imposed, but which can sometimes interfere with school achievement and/or with social/emotional well-being.

GLD children are sometimes referred to in the research literature as '**2e**' (twice-exceptional) or '**DME**' (dual/multiple exceptionality) – the two 'exceptionalities' being the giftedness on the one hand and the disability on the other.

GLD children may be gifted in identifying complex relationships, generating and analysing ideas and using advanced vocabulary when speaking. They may have a wide variety of interests or opinions and extensive general knowledge, and are probably good at difficult, abstract problems. Indeed they may be intellectually astonishing.

At the same time, however, the mechanics involved in writing, reading, spelling, penmanship, rote memorisation, basic computation and other ostensibly simple and basic academic tasks, particularly timed tests, often present seemingly insurmountable difficulties. GLD children frequently have poor time management and organisational abilities, and/or inconsistent attention issues. They may appear vague or preoccupied, and they may have difficulty following step-by-step instructions.

Being GLD is somewhat akin to being the rope in a tug-of-war: the GLD child may be pulled in one direction by their high IQ and their intense desire to pursue their intellectual interests, but at the same time they may be pulled in the opposite direction by their disability or special need which may prevent them from developing their gifts into talents – ie, transforming their high potential into high performance.

Identifying GLD children

GLD children are often hard to identify. The most common and significant feature of a GLD child is uneven or inconsistent academic performance which is unexplained and unpredictable. They may achieve outstandingly high results in academic competitions outside of school, yet be receiving mediocre results on everyday school assessments and tests. They may excel on multiple choice tests, yet struggle when asked to compose answers on a blank page – or sometimes the other way round. They may similarly excel verbally but perform poorly on pen and paper tasks.

The greatest impediment to identifying some GLD children is that their high intelligence may compensate for their disability, and their disability may mask their intelligence. Such GLD children may present at school as having generally 'average' ability and performance. Some may be first noticed because of challenging behaviours, usually stemming from frustration and embarrassment about not being able to perform simple school tasks which others seem to find 'easy'. In other cases, the child's giftedness may have been identified but the disability not, or conversely the disability may be patently visible while the giftedness remains hidden. Unless challenging behaviour starts to become an issue, the quiet, behaviourally compliant, polite GLD child may continue to underachieve for years and years at school. No one usually notices a non-squeaky wheel.

Psychometric (IQ) testing will usually identify GLD children. They typically score very highly in some sub-tests and poorly in others. IQ testing is best conducted in concert with individualised achievement testing so that the assessment is as comprehensive as possible. The assessment is best carried out by educational and developmental psychologists or by developmental paediatricians who have extra specialised training in identifying developmental differences such as SLD, ASD or ADHD (in particular, the predominantly inattentive, vague, dreamy presentation

of ADHD without hyperactivity, impulsivity, defiance or bad behaviour). This inattentive ADHD presentation often occurs with reading disorder (dyslexia).

GLD children at school

Children need not be actually failing at school to be struggling with a disability which affects learning – many are not identified until late primary or early high school. As children progress from primary to high school, academic work increases in difficulty and volume, and demands more hours of sustained attention, effort and independent productivity. Students are presented with ever increasing organisational and time-management challenges, stemming from a complex schedule, multiple teachers and classrooms, and numerous textbooks which are meant to be kept (but are in fact often lost...) in lockers and schoolbags. When they can't cope, GLD children often find themselves labelled as 'lazy', 'forgetful', 'careless' or even 'naughty'.

In reality the GLD child may be continually struggling to make sense of having BOTH high intellectual potential AND crippling disability. They may begin to doubt their abilities and become increasingly frustrated and mystified, as the compensation strategies which they have unknowingly developed in primary school may cease to work as well, if at all. The high intelligence is no longer able to compensate for the disability, and school performance steadily diminishes, even though the GLD child feels as if they are actually making considerable effort.

It is crucial that appropriate support be given to GLD children, especially at school. They must be regularly provided with work which they find challenging, enriching and interesting, and which is in keeping with their intellectual abilities. First and foremost, educators need to feed the gift. At the same time, GLD children need to receive both in-school support and classroom and test adjustments which address and minimise the effects of their disability and which allow the child to participate in their education on the same basis as a child without disability. Depending on the nature of the disability, the GLD child may also benefit from assistive technology and/or specialised remedial teaching or one-on-one out-of-school tutoring which is tailored to the child's specific disability.

Ordinary in-school remedial programs or separate 'special education classes' are usually disastrous for gifted children, who are invariably not assisted by more repetition of facts presented sequentially, and who, despite their disabilities, still require regular opportunities to interact with their intellectual and like-minded peers.

Responding to GLD children's needs

A surprising number of intellectually gifted children experience chronic underachievement due to disability – and usually, the higher the IQ, the later an accurate diagnosis is made. After repeated failures, unidentified or unsupported GLD children tend to conclude that they are 'just stupid'. The result can be continuing underachievement, lack of motivation, low self-efficacy, chronic literacy problems, poor peer relationships and disenchantment with school. The long-term outcomes can be tragic – school refusal or dropout, social and family problems, chronic under-employment, low socio-economic status and serious mental health concerns.

There is no universal solution appropriate for all GLD children. If you've met one GLD child, then you've met one.

It is usually a matter of gradually and systematically responding to each strength and weakness. The key to success is often a well-trained and empathetic teacher who understands the needs of GLD students and who is thus able to both feed the gift AND accommodate the disabilities.

GLD children are frequently not only twice-exceptional but also twice-misunderstood. Some teachers and administrators who do not grasp the reality of GLD may point on the one hand to the child's giftedness or stellar grades to 'prove' that the child has no real disabilities, and on the other hand to the child's disabilities to suggest that the child is not really gifted. This approach can be tragic.

As well as trained, understanding teachers, success for GLD students depends also on well-informed parents who are skilled at effectively advocating to get their child's needs met at school and to have the child's medically-supported applications approved for legislatively mandated disability adjustments for exams. Reading widely about GLD and attending conferences and seminars on both giftedness and disability are highly recommended. Joining groups such as GLD Australia, gifted associations and learning disabilities associations may also assist parents to acquire the requisite knowledge, expertise and confidence, and at the same time to benefit from being part of a sympathetic support network.

The earlier a problem can be identified, the greater the chance that it can be addressed. Some parents don't notice the problem, or choose not to implement treatment for it, until the GLD child is much older, and until a pattern of chronic underachievement has already been allowed to become established. By then it's harder to reverse, and for some GLD it may be already too late.

GLD children virtually never 'grow out of it'. There are no magic wand solutions, but there **are** strategies for managing GLD. With positive support at school, GLD need not be an insurmountable problem. It **can** be addressed – sometimes with huge success!