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An enigma: barriers to the identification of gifted students with a learning disability

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An Enigma: Barriers to the Identification of Gifted Students with a Learning Disability
An Enigma: Barriers to the Identification of Gifted Students with a Learning Disability

Catherine Wormald, Diploma of Teaching (Secondary Maths) WIE, Graduate Certificate in Education (Gifted Education) CSU, M.Ed. UWS.

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
University of Wollongong

Faculty of Education

2009
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis reported the original work of the author, except as stated. It has not been previously submitted for a degree at this or any other university.

Catherine Wormald
November 2009
This thesis is dedicated to my mother without whose personality traits I would not have survived, and to my husband for his faith in me and his love.

I also thank:

My son Matthew, who paid me back for my years of pushing him to achieve at school by persistently cracking the whip, my daughter Cassandra, who helped with the transcribing and provided feedback, and my daughter Amanda for her proofreading, editing and constructive criticism.

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All the participants who embraced the research and welcomed me into their world of raising a child who is not only gifted, but also has a learning disability and in particular Scott and his mother.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to understand the barriers to the identification of gifted students with a learning disability. Gifted students with a learning disability are an enigma within schools and are underrepresented in programs for gifted students. The benefits to students, families and teachers of appropriate programs for gifted students with a learning disability have been well documented.

This study employed a mixed method of research and consisted of two phases which ran concurrently. In Phase 1 teachers from New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DET) schools, Sydney Catholic Education Office (CEO) schools in a metropolitan Sydney School Education Area, and an independent Kindergarten to Year 12 school were surveyed using the Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs (SOP). The schools included selective high schools, schools with opportunity classes as well as mainstream classes, comprehensive high schools and mainstream primary schools. A number of teachers were also interviewed.

In Phase 2 multiple case studies were undertaken. The participants consisted of students who were identified as gifted with a learning disability, their families and willing professionals they had consulted. Documents, results from various assessments and intervention programs, as well as reports from school counsellors, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, paediatricians and other educational consultants were provided and analysed. Students and their families were then interviewed.

The results of the research showed that teachers have knowledge of, and a positive attitude towards gifted students but are ambivalent towards students with other special needs. Teachers also demonstrated substantial confusion and conflict about their understanding of gifted students, their educational needs and their responsibility to these students and also students with special needs. There was virtually no understanding of gifted students with a learning disability.
The results indicated that identification of these students is occurring through the efforts of the parents and that there is minimal recognition and support from the schools. All the students have had negative experiences with respect to their schooling.

Finally it was recommended that an identification protocol be established in schools based on the information provided by the parents of the participants in this study. In addition teachers need to be provided with comprehensive training in this field and support from the decision makers across all sectors of education. Furthermore additional extensive research needs to be undertaken on gifted students with a learning disability. Specific research needs to be completed into the effectiveness of an instrument specifically designed for teachers focused on gifted students with a learning disability in order to assess the effectiveness of an identification protocol and in addition research on the social and emotional issues for these students.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY ..................................................................................................... iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................................ iv
ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................... v
TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................................ vii
LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................ xii
LIST OF TABLES .......................................................................................................................... xiii

CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1
  1.1 BACKGROUND ....................................................................................................................... 1
  1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY .......................................................................................... 2
  1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .................................................................................................... 3
  1.4 RESEARCH DESIGN ............................................................................................................. 4
  1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS ............................................................................................. 5

CHAPTER 2  LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................................... 7
  2.1 INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................... 7
  2.2 DEFINITION ........................................................................................................................... 7
    2.2.1 Giftedness ....................................................................................................................... 7
    2.2.2 Learning Disabilities ........................................................................................................ 12
    2.2.3 Gifted learning disabled students .................................................................................. 15
  2.3 CHARACTERISTICS ............................................................................................................. 17
  2.4 IDENTIFICATION ................................................................................................................ 22
  2.5 PROGRAMMING .................................................................................................................. 25
  2.6 TEACHER ATTITUDES ....................................................................................................... 28
  2.7 GENDER AND DISABILITIES ............................................................................................. 29
  2.8 CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................... 30

CHAPTER 3  RESEARCH METHOD .......................................................................................... 31
  3.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 31
  3.2 DESIGN ................................................................................................................................. 32
  3.3 RESEARCH METHOD .......................................................................................................... 35
  3.4 PHASE 1 - Educational Professionals, Their Knowledge and Attitudes ......................... 35
    3.4.1 Pilot study ....................................................................................................................... 35
    3.4.2 Site .................................................................................................................................. 37
    3.4.3 Sample ............................................................................................................................. 38
    3.4.4 Instrumentation and Data Collection ............................................................................. 38
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.4.5 Procedure</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.6 Data Analysis</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.7 Limitations</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 PHASE 2 - Case Studies</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1 Sample</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2 Instrumentation and Data Collection</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.3 Procedure</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.4 Data Analysis</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.5 Limitations</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 PHASE 2 - Case Studies</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1 Sample</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2 Instrumentation and Data Collection</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.3 Procedure</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.4 Data Analysis</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.5 Limitations</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 RESULTS OF PHASE 1</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS, THEIR KNOWLEDGE and ATTITUDES</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 TEACHER SURVEYS</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Demographics</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 Part I</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Part II</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.4 Part III</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5 Part IV</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6 Discussion</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 TEACHER INTERVIEWS</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Policy</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Learning Disabilities</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4 Classroom and school practices for gifted students and students with learning disabilities</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.5 Barriers to identification and appropriate programming</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.6 Discussion</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 CASE STUDY 1 THOMAS</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 IDENTIFICATION</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 IQ Assessment</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 Vision Assessment</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Physical Development Assessments</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10.5.1 Partnerships ........................................................................................................... 240
10.5.2 Knowledge Acquisition ........................................................................................ 242
10.6 RECOMMENDATIONS ............................................................................................. 243
10.7 LIMITATIONS ........................................................................................................ 245
10.8 FURTHER RESEARCH ............................................................................................ 246
10.9 CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................... 247
REFERENCES AND APPENDICES ............................................................................. 249
APPENDIX A  GAGNÉ MODEL ................................................................................... 259
APPENDIX B  SURVEY OF PRACTICES WITH STUDENTS OF VARYING NEEDS (SOP) ... 261
APPENDIX C  PARTICIPATION CORRESPONDENCE AND FORMS ............................... 268
APPENDIX D  CODEBOOK FOR SURVEYS .................................................................... 287
APPENDIX E  DOCUMENTS RELATED TO CASE STUDY 3 – EMMA ............................. 297
APPENDIX F  DOCUMENT FOR CASE STUDY 4 – DAVID ............................................ 314
APPENDIX G  DOCUMENTS RELATED TO CASE STUDY 5 – SCOTT ......................... 316
APPENDIX H  DESCRIPTIONS OF ASSESSMENTS AND INTERVENTIONS ................. 324
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Renzulli's 'What Makes Giftedness' (1993) ........................................... 9
Figure 2.2 Gagné’s Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (2004) .... 11
Figure 3.1 Research Process ..................................................................................... 33
Figure 4.1 Formal Study in Gifted Education or Learning Disabilities....................... 60
Figure 4.2 Gifted and Learning Disability Provisions Excluding Selective High Schools 61
Figure 4.3 Responsibilities for Gifted and Learning Disabilities excluding Selective High Schools ............................................................................................................. 62
Figure A.1 Gagné (2009) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT)..... 259
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 Positive and Negative Characteristics of Children with Gifts/Learning Disabilities (Adapted from Fetzer, 2000) ................................................................. 21
Table 3.1 Codes for Teacher Interviews ................................................................. 46
Table 3.2 Documentation provided by participants ................................................. 55
Table 3.3 Codes for Analysis of Participant Interviews .......................................... 57
Table 4.1 Teacher Demographics (n = 131) ............................................................. 63
Table 4.2 Formal Study in Gifted Education or Learning Disabilities ................... 64
Table 4.3 Gifted and Learning Disability Provisions ............................................. 65
Table 4.4 Responsibility for Gifted and LD ............................................................. 66
Table 4.5 Mean teacher and school counsellor knowledge and attitude towards gifted learners and struggling learners ................................................................. 68
Table 4.6 Effects of Teachers’ Age and Educational Setting on Attitudes to Gifted and Struggling Students ................................................................. 69
Table 4.7 Effect of training on participants’ responses to gifted scale ..................... 70
Table 4.8 Effect of training on participants’ responses to struggling learners scale ... 70
Table 4.9 Percentage Rankings of the Relative Amount of Time Spent with Academically Diverse Learners as Measured by Part II of the Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs (SOP) ............................................. 71
Table 4.10 Mean Rankings of Confidence with Classroom Differentiation as Measured by Part III of the Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs (SOP) .................................................................................. 73
Table 4.11 Percentage of Respondents indicating that they would use various instructional strategies with academically diverse learners as measured by Part IV of the Survey of Practices with Students of Varying Needs (SOP) ... 75
Table 5.1 Results of IQ Assessment ........................................................................ 92
Table 5.2 Results of Visual Assessment ................................................................. 93
Table 5.3 Results of the Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual Motor Integration ............................................................................................................ 94
Table 5.4 Results of Bruininks-Oseretksy Test of Motor Proficiency ....................... 95
Table 5.5 Results of Clinical Observation of Motor and Postural Skills .................... 96
Table 5.6 Clinical Observations of Handwriting – (non-standardised) ................. 98
Table 5.7 Handwriting Speed Test .......................................................................... 98
Table 5.8 Clinical Observations of Motor and Perceptual Skills .............................. 99
Table 5.9 Test of Visual Perceptual Skills – Non Motor .......................................... 99
Table 6.1 Results of IQ Assessment ......................................................................... 110
Table 6.2 Results of Neale Analysis of Reading (3rd Edition) – Form 1 ...................... 111
Table 6.3 Results of Auditory Assessment .......................................................... 113
Table 6.4 Results for Physical Development Assessments .................................. 115
Table 6.5 Results of IQ Assessment .................................................................... 125
Table 6.6 Results of Neale Analysis of Reading (3rd Edition) – Form 1 .......... 127
Table 6.7 Results of Auditory Assessments ....................................................... 128
Table 6.8 Results of Physical Development Assessments ............................... 132
Table 7.1 Results of IQ Assessments .................................................................... 145
Table 7.2 Results of Diagnostic Evaluation of Levels of Cognitive and Language Function .......................................................... 152
Table 7.3 Results Summary of Woodcock-Johnson III tests of Cognitive Abilities and Test of Achievement .......................................................... 154
Table 7.4 Results of Reading Assessment ........................................................... 155
Table 7.5 Results of Neale Analysis of Reading (3rd Edition) – Form 1 .......... 157
Table 7.6 Results of South Australian Spelling Test ........................................ 157
Table 7.7 Results of SCAN – C Test .................................................................. 160
Table 7.8 Results of Time Order Processing Test (Speed) .................................. 162
Table 7.9 Results of Test of Visual Perceptual Skills (non-motor) by Gardner ...... 163
Table 7.10 Results of Vision Assessment .............................................................. 164
Table 7.11 Results of BarOn EQ-I:YV Assessment ........................................... 166
Table 8.1 Results of IQ Assessment .................................................................... 175
Table 8.2 Results of Neale Analysis of Reading – (3rd Edition) – Form 1 – Assessment ........................................................................................................... 177
Table 8.3 Results of Auditory Assessment ........................................................... 179
Table 8.4 Results of Physical Development Assessments ............................... 182
Table 9.1 IQ Assessment Results ......................................................................... 198
Table A.1 Scaling System in the Primitive/Postural Reflex Assessment .......... 351