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Cover Page Footnote
This study was conducted under the auspices of the Fisher-Landau Program at Dalton, and was greatly facilitated by the administrative support of Susan Etess, Program Director. The authors would like to acknowledge with gratitude the helpful review and editorial comments of Dr. Bernice Wilson.

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THE FISHER-LANDAU/DALTON PROGRAM
A Pilot Study of Teachers' Perceptions of Learning Disabilities

Herbert Zimiles and Sylvia Ross

BACKGROUND

The Fisher-Landau program at the Dalton School is designed to facilitate the school careers of children who are both learning disabled and intellectually gifted. It is aimed at children with above-average intellectual aptitudes whose overall ability levels are such that they are capable of benefiting from a rigorous, academically demanding school experience, but who are impeded by specific learning disabilities which seriously impair their academic progress. These are children who are capable of high levels of academic achievement and self-development if they are helped to overcome the barriers to academic effectiveness imposed by their specific learning disabilities.

The Fisher-Landau program at Dalton has two major objectives: (1) to achieve early identification of specific learning abilities in otherwise intellectually gifted children in order to help them compensate for and thereby forestall some of their difficulties and academic defeats earlier in their school careers; and (2) to improve the effectiveness with which schools are able to meet the educational and developmental needs of learning-disabled children. The latter goal entails (a) developing educational strategies that will enable teachers to support the educational progress of learning-disabled,

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gifted children more effectively, (b) developing and enacting staff development procedures that will sensitize teachers to the special characteristics and needs of children with specific learning disabilities, and (c) helping teachers to implement the special procedures devised to assist such children.

Because the syndrome of specific learning disabilities is at the same time wide-ranging in its character and idiosyncratic in the particular form it assumes in individual children, the phenomena remain vexingly elusive, not only in relation to their etiology but with regard to specifying precisely the full scope of their involvement in any given child. As a result, the difficulties experienced by the individual child may remain obscure and are often misunderstood. A number of factors may account for this: (1) The child has learned to adapt to and compensate for his/her special difficulties and is therefore unaware of them (this being, after all, the only reality the child has experienced); (2) The child may sense a deficiency in certain ways of apprehending or responding to reality and, because of fears associated with being different and less effective, manage somehow to conceal this embarrassing and mystifying disability.

Specialists in the field of learning disabilities have helped to delineate the scope of this complex and obscure pattern of dysfunction, although there is still disagreement and substantial mystery regarding its precise nature. They have made important advances in their diagnostic abilities, and have developed techniques and alternative strategies for dealing with various facets of this syndrome and its patterns of manifestation. Part of the difficulty in arriving at a fuller understanding of this syndrome is that it crosses over many different modalities, which require different areas of expertise to describe and explain. Specific learning disabilities range from circumscribed perceptual disabilities, to areas of language impairment, to problems in the organization of thought, to patterns of motor dysfunction that may include specific motor impairments and/or levels of hyperactivity, to mystifying inability to acquire particular intellectual skills such as reading. In some children the etiology of their disability is blatantly neurological, while others may require speech and language therapy from a very different category of clinical specialist, while still others may benefit most from tutors who are less concerned with the etiology of their difficulties than with developing techniques for helping the child to circumvent or master the specific difficulties that impede their educational progress.
Because this syndrome, with its confusingly varied and surprisingly specific faces, has so many different and unpredictable patterns of manifestation, each child needs to be understood individually. The syndrome has thus far defied efforts to achieve clearcut identification and diagnosis by means of systematic testing and screening. This has persuaded some investigators to shift their focus from efforts to develop methods of diagnosis and screening on the basis of necessarily limited samplings of behavior (from test items) to arenas that provide a wider and more concentrated view of behavior (i.e., the classroom). Observing the child in the classroom provides more extended exposure to distinctive modes of behavior and is therefore more likely to generate educational methods of intervention that help each child to become more aware of his or her disability and to develop ways of overcoming specific impediments to learning effectively in school. Such tailor-made efforts to deal with the educational problems of individual children are more likely to be effective than generalized prescriptions. They may also have broad general educational value insofar as they have implications for how education can be individualized and how all children can be helped to learn more effectively.

By focusing on the learning-disabled gifted child, the Fisher-Landau project shifts the arena of scrutiny and analysis from the testing laboratory of the clinician to the domain of the educator—the sphere in which the child spends much of his/her time during childhood and where the problems of learning disability are operative. It investigates how teachers, with their vastly greater exposure to the behavior of individual children, can contribute to the early identification of patterns of learning disability or their precursors, and how teachers can be helped to support the development of learning skills and coping mechanisms in learning-disabled children. These interrelated goals embody a variety of questions: What are the early precursors to more visible patterns of learning-disabled behavior manifested in the middle years of childhood? Do children at age 3 or 4 or 5 show distinctive cognitive patterns of behavior that can be discerned by the trained eye which are precursors to the more apparent disabilities exhibited in the early elementary school grades?

In order to validate whatever methods or criteria are used to identify such early appearing patterns, we need a prospective longitudinal study design that will determine whether the early identified children do, in fact, show definite signs of learning-disabled behav-
ior at later ages. Such a time-consuming and costly, yet essential, strategy of study is further complicated by the fact that the incidence of early identified learning-disability is comparatively low. Large pools of children need to be screened initially in order to find a substantial number who appear to be learning disabled. Further, large numbers must be included in a prospective longitudinal study in order to determine the proportion of false positives and false negatives associated with the problem of prediction. To help gauge the potential usefulness of a prospective study and to generate other information that would support the Fisher-Landau project at Dalton, we conducted an exploratory interview study of faculty and staff at the Dalton First School, which includes work with children preschool through third grade.

THE EXPLORATORY STUDY

The interview study of Dalton faculty and staff was directed at obtaining (a) their ideas about the nature of learning disabilities and their sense of the usefulness of the concept in dealing with children in their classes, and (b) their recollections of children with whom they had worked in the early grades who later developed clearcut indications of the learning-disability syndrome.

In order to support the basic objectives of the Fisher-Landau project at Dalton, it was important to learn more about what teachers actually know and think about the concept of learning disabilities, and to begin to determine whether the precursors of learning disabilities are observable in very young children. In turning to the task of helping teachers to respond more effectively to the needs of gifted learning-disabled children in a mainstreamed classroom, we needed to determine what teachers knew about the learning-disability syndrome, how useful they found the concept to be in thinking about individual children and their educational needs, and the nature of their ideas about productive methods of intervening in behalf of such children. Knowledge of teachers' level of awareness and understanding and their potential receptivity to various modes of intervention can serve as a valuable guide to staff development work in this field. Conversely, the experience and insights gained by teachers can inform efforts to help them. If teachers are able to remember distinctive behavioral antecedents to later manifestations of learning-disabled behavior in young children, such information would point to the potential usefulness of a prospective longitudinal

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study and, further, could be used to identify the patterns of early behavior that it would be most fruitful for a prospective study to record in detail.

Accordingly, we conducted a preliminary study of teachers and support staff in the early school at Dalton, in which 15 faculty members were interviewed. Among the areas explored were teachers' ideas of what is meant by the learning-disability syndrome and their assessment of the usefulness of the concept. They were also asked to recall the classroom behavior of specific children who, in subsequent years, were found to be learning disabled.

RESULTS

Teachers' Perceptions of the Term "Learning Disabilities": Its Meaning and Usefulness

When the faculty in the Dalton First School were asked to comment on the usefulness of the concept of learning disability and to present (spontaneously) their ideas about what is entailed in learning-disabled behavior, many described an evolutionary process characterized by a growing sense of awareness of these phenomena and an increasing appreciation of the value of this difficult-to-pin-down diagnostic category. They referred to previous times when the concept of the learning-disabled child was narrow and more restricted, and therefore less useful. When invoked in the past, it was mainly limited to patterns of perceptual-motor dysfunctioning. Current ideas about learning-disabled behavior extend over a much wider terrain, one that includes language disorders and patterns of disorganized thought. The main criterion for diagnosing learning-disabled behavior in the past was the failure to learn to read, and disabilities were described almost entirely in relation to dyslexic patterns of perception and problems in the mechanics of writing. Their treatment, in turn, was confined largely to tutorial programs aimed at eliminating the inability to read.

Currently, learning disabilities are not only identified within a much wider range of cognitive dimensions, they are also recognized by some educators as having emotional and social ramifications that are associated with the core of the child's adaptation and development. No longer viewed exclusively through the lens of reading problems, they continue to manifest themselves most dramatically in the course of learning to read.
All those interviewed had had experiences with children in their classes whose disabilities interfered with their school achievement. They indicated that the screening activity and staff development work of the Fisher-Landau program has helped to bring about an expanded understanding and awareness of the scope and character of learning disabilities. Teachers pointed to particular children whose potential learning problems had been identified earlier by the Fisher-Landau staff than would otherwise have been the case. A number of children were reported as being helped by the interventions introduced by the Fisher-Landau program. Almost invariably, teachers spoke of the great strides made at Dalton in coping with the learning-disabled child and attributed much of the progress to the Fisher-Landau program.

When asked to describe children in their current or previous classes who were learning disabled, teachers cited a wide range of cognitive patterns. These included disabilities in categorizing and labeling; in voicing thoughts; in following directions; in remembering sight words; in ordering stimuli according to size; in remembering colors; in mastering visual symbols; in blending sounds into words; in sequencing, eye-hand coordination, grapho-motor skills, perceptual matching tasks, auditory and visual discrimination, and word retrieval; and in the execution of writing behavior as well as the tendency to reverse letters.

Less exclusively cognitive were those behavior descriptions that entailed lessened impulse control (including temper tantrums), negativism and the tendency to avoid work, a generalized lack of interest, patterns of overdependency, an overreliance on talking as opposed to doing and acting, a high degree of distractability and disorganization, a foggy, unfocused quality, and a tendency to be easily rattled. In their vulnerability, some of these children were described as giving the impression of a child struggling to survive, almost as if he/she were drowning.

In the course of discussing their own ideas and experience associated with learning-disabled children, teachers described significant ways in which the Fisher-Landau program had influenced them. They were now better able to identify potentially learning-disabled children whose problems has not yet become observable in the classroom and had become aware of facets of disability that were new to them. Their understanding and conceptual framework had been considerably expanded.
At the same time, elements of reservation were expressed that pointed to dilemmas associated with early identification of the gifted learning-disabled child and programs designed to intervene in their behalf. Many of these reservations referred back to previous experiences and residual feelings about work with learning-disabled children that preceded the Fisher-Landau program. These questions revolve around several issues: (a) the perception of learning disability specialists as often focusing on weaknesses rather than strengths; (b) the degree to which programs for learning-disabled children may lead to teachers' abdication of their own responsibility and, in a related way, serve to undermine the authority and sovereignty of the teacher in the classroom; and (c) the fragmentation and disruption that participation in such programs can bring to those who are involved, as well as the stigmatization that may be associated with such participation. Elaboration of the reservations follows:

The negative focus. All of the faculty who were interviewed acknowledged that there were children with enigmatic and undermining learning patterns which interfered with their progress in school. However, many were reluctant to label children in ways that emphasized their deficiencies and weaknesses, preferring instead to deal with children in a manner that focused on their strengths. In effect, they were uncomfortable with a program of work that served primarily to uncover and delineate areas of weakness, and preferred a more affirmative and constructive approach in their dealings with children and their parents. These sentiments show close correspondence with the framework that governs the Fisher-Landau program, which is geared to make full use of the child’s strengths and interests as a means of compensating for deficits that impede learning and growth, to utilize the child’s interests as a motivating force in achieving effective compensation, and to assist teachers to perceive children in a more differentiated way.

Teacher authority/responsibility. Teachers saw the classroom as the primary arena for the educative process and the classroom teacher as the principal mediator of effective learning. It is the classroom teacher who is fundamentally responsible for helping each child to advance academically, to unlock the mystery of each child’s mind, and to pave the way to developmental progress. Some teachers, however, pointed to the dilemma posed by the child with severe learning difficulties. They noted that in previous years there had been a tendency for teachers to conceal children with learning problems, to keep them under wraps because they perceived them as
representing failure on the part of the teacher. As a result, children who most needed help often remained hidden from view as teachers attempted to deny, or even to wish away, their "failures." Now the reverse occurs, some teachers noted with irony. If some children seem resistive to learning or show some incapacity, they are dispatched out of the classroom to a cadre of specialists who are expected to deal with them. In this manner, classrooms are cleansed of their "difficult" children.

The fragmentation of classroom life and the stigmatization of special treatment. Some teachers fretted about the pervasive overreliance on specialists, including those who work with learning-disabled children. Such practices were criticized for helping to bring about a fragmentation of classroom life that interfered with the continuity and coherence of classroom experience. They also called attention to the stigma attached to children's leaving the classroom for special help, which undermines the child's status in the classroom. Further, when called upon to leave the classroom for special assistance, the learning-disabled child, who is already experiencing difficulty in some aspects of the classroom learning regimen, is required to miss more classroom work and thereby feels even more out of step with the activities of the classroom and its community.

For all of these reasons, some teachers favored remedial activities designed to be carried out in the classroom. They reported that in many cases when children (including those who are learning-disabled) were singled out for special activities to be conducted within the classroom, their status was enhanced by the attention they received. Further, when the work of the specialist was integrated into the classroom, children remained connected with the ongoing activities in the room. Those Fisher-Landau activities that reflected this approach were judged to be maximally effective as a mode of attending to the special needs of learning-disabled children.

Retrospective Descriptions of Gifted Children Whose Learning Disabilities Later Became Major Problems

When teachers were asked to give retrospective descriptions of children who were later known to have significant areas of learning disability (teachers were often primed with specific names of such children), their recollections varied. In some cases, in thinking back to when they had taught them in earlier grades, they remembered
little that was noteworthy about these children. Either their memory of the child had faded or they recalled that the child had functioned without signs of disturbance or disability. In other cases, some teachers who had taught these children during the preschool years did remember them as having had particular difficulties, often related to prereading activities. However, there was a tendency in such cases to think of children simply as maturing more slowly or showing a reluctance to participate in academic-type activities.

Teachers who had worked with these children later—in the first or second grade—almost invariably remembered them as having demonstrated difficulties in specific areas of cognitive processing. Some teachers offered the middle of kindergarten as the time when clear signs of the presence of a learning disability appear, while others regarded the first grade as the turning point. There were enough recollections of distinctive modes of adaptation to preschool (including, for example, uneven and unexpected patterns of strengths and weaknesses) among children who later became manifestly learning disabled to support the belief that it is possible to support efforts at earlier identification of learning disabilities by means of guided classroom observation.

CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary study, based on the premise that a program of school-based study and intervention in behalf of learning-disabled children is a powerful method for advancing our knowledge of the nature of the learning-disability phenomenon in gifted children, indicated that work in this potentially productive area would be enhanced by more extensive research in a number of areas. Our exploratory study supports the notion that there is variation among teachers in terms of their understanding of the nature of the learning-disability phenomenon and emphasizes the need for collaborative approaches among all adults involved with the learning-disabled child.

If a larger and more extensive study could be conducted, it would be possible to arrive at a comprehensive assessment of the dimensions of each teacher’s concept of learning disabilities as related to children’s behavior. Upon investigating the conceptual frameworks held by a large number of teachers, it would be possible to produce a typology of different configurations and levels of thinking
about the learning-disability phenomenon. Knowledge of the patterns of variation in teachers' ideas and information would materially aid the design and planning of a collaborative staff development program. This program, in turn, would build on the knowledge and understanding of the nature of learning disabilities in gifted children, and of the strategies that can be used to help them.

The study of teachers' recollections of children who later developed learning disabilities indicated that it is possible for teachers to develop the ability to detect distinctive patterns of classroom behavior in young children that are predictive of later patterns of learning disabilities. We need to conduct a more comprehensive study and an identification of these cues based on a larger pool of subjects drawn from many schools in order to identify the most promising indicators of possible dispositions to learning disabilities observable in young children. The identification of these cues will facilitate undertaking the research program that is vitally needed: a prospective longitudinal study of the children whose early behaviors suggest, and indeed may lead to, later learning problems. Further insight into the nature of learning disabilities in children and in the nature of their early manifestation may be gained from interviews with parents, the children themselves, and with other professionals who work with the children.

Moreover, the interview format used in this pilot study was perceived by many of the teachers as providing a useful experience. The interview itself served to raise the teachers' consciousness and to sharpen their perceptions and memories of children's behavior as related to special needs.

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