

## **GLD – A Little-Known Phenomenon: Gifted Learning Disabled Students who do not fit the System**

Barbara Prashnig, Director of Creative Learning Centre in Auckland interviews Frances Hill, Principal of Te Moana School in South Canterbury. She has been chosen to be an advisor for LS and GLD in the Forbury Project in Dunedin and is an experienced Learning Styles practitioner who has, for the last eight years, implemented a successful programme for students who experience difficulty in fitting into the education system. Prior to teaching in New Zealand she has worked extensively in the UK, teaching pre-schoolers to High School students. Frances is a trained Primary and Secondary Teacher who also has an interest in pre-school education. She is the creator of the Building Blocks Pre-school programme which provides an innovative approach to the education of young children. Frances also works with the George Parkyn National Centre for Gifted Students which has run One Day Schools for Gifted Students since 1996. She has been granted leave from her present position at Te Moana School to teach students at the South Islands' first "One-Day School for Gifted Students" which will open in Timaru during term three of this year.

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Inset:

### **FOR JACK AND JENNY -THE KIDS WHO DIDN'T FIT THE SYSTEM**

**It was early summer. Outside our inner city classroom the world beckoned; ships made their way up and down the Clyde, fruit market tradesmen called to their customers in florid Glaswegian cadences and I could hear the factory workers across the road busy at their whirring machines.**

**We were inside, trapped. The teacher was, as usual, berating Jack because his work was not up to standard. I knew she would start on Jenny next. She always did. I didn't understand why our teacher couldn't see what we all saw - that Jack and Jenny were different. They needed different ways of learning.**

**I knew I would be next, in trouble again for dreaming out the window. It was the only way to escape the gut wrenching boredom of the school room. "Frances marches to the beat of her own drum," our teacher said. I wasn't sure what it meant but I knew it wasn't good. Our teacher never said anything nice.**

**It is memories like these which have stayed with me throughout my teaching career: from the hair raising experiences of teaching in "No go" areas of inner city Glasgow to the rarefied atmosphere of Oxford, teaching the children of university dons, my focus has always been the same - reaching those hard-to-reach students, who by reason of disability, social dysfunction or giftedness do not fit into the system.**

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Barbara Prashnig (B.P.): How did your collaboration with the Forbury Project in Dunedin begin?  
Frances Hill (F.H.): After graduating in The Diploma in Holistic Education offered by Creative Learning Co, I had been in regular contact with you when it came to fight for keeping Te Moana

School alive during the past seven years. When I was invited to participate in this project as Learning Styles Advisor, I also suggested an additional aspect for the creation of the project. It is a matter which concerns me deeply, namely the education of students who are gifted but who also experience specific learning difficulties (GLD students). My contribution in this area was accepted and I was delighted when I was given the opportunity to work with the staff at Forbury School in identifying and planning teaching programmes which meet the needs of GLD students.

B.P.: Why was the GLD approach included?

F.H.: Because from the information we had about students' poor academic performance at Forbury we knew that quite a few must be GLD students because they showed signs of high intelligence but still were underachieving in class, causing disruptions and discipline problems.

B.P.: Which are the main components of the GLD programme?

F.H.: The first step was to assist the staff in identifying GLD students. This we have done. We are currently arranging a Specific Learning Difficulty Assessment and a Wechsler IQ test for each identified student. I prefer to use the Wechsler test because it shows the subset scatters. A wide variation in subset scatter is indicative of a GLD learning profile. Having completed the identification procedures and obtained an accurate diagnosis, the next step for the Forbury staff will be the creation of a learning programme for each GLD student following the model which I have devised and have previously used successfully. I shall assist the teachers in this task.

B.P.: GLD students – who are they?

F.H.: In the course of my teaching, I have become aware of a significant sector of the school population who fit into the above category. They are students who are gifted but who suffer a specific learning disability. These are the students who are usually labelled as underachievers or who puzzle their teachers by displaying an excellent verbal ability which does not transfer to productive outcomes. Characteristically there is no overt learning difficulty which could account for the reluctance because the above average intelligence of a student masks the severest effects of a learning disability. The students tend to perform in the average range with the exception of their advanced verbal facility and their highly developed thinking skills. A strong creative streak is usually present as well.

B.P.: Aren't such students often seen as 'unmotivated', 'not interested in learning' and often described by their teachers as 'Could do much better'?

F.H. Yes, there is a tendency for the misinformed to label these students as disengaged or lazy. There is rarely a pattern of acting out in school; rather these students 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. As the students progress through school they become increasingly anxious as the discrepancy between their strengths and weaknesses becomes wider. They may become moody or withdrawn, behaviours which result in 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.

B.P.: Can you outline the programme which you are using at Forbury School?

F.H.: I first visited Forbury School last October and since that time I have continued to work with the staff, assisting them in implementing the radical learning methods based on Learning Styles which are already making a considerable difference to the performance and motivation of the students. In addition to that we have now started the GLD programme because my goal was to initiate change and to create a programme which would seek to address the needs of students who are both gifted and

learning disabled. This I did at Te Moana School using a programme which encompassed the following:

### **Step 1: IDENTIFYING GLD STUDENTS**

The usual methods of identifying gifted students namely high PAT scores and an IQ test do not readily identify GLD students because of the blocking effect of the learning difficulty which those students experience. A holistic method of identification is required. The identification procedures outlined do include the above. In addition they use careful teacher observation and an accurate history of the students' early development and current interests and attitudes.

### **PARENT INPUT:**

It is my experience that parents are aware of, and are puzzled by, their child's unusual behaviours and characteristics long before the child attends school. GLD pre-schoolers may display precocious thinking patterns and mature oral skills whilst appearing to be socially immature and delayed, often in the key area of motor skills development. Information cleaned from parents regarding their child's early development is invaluable as it highlights key characteristics of students' early development such as those listed below:

### **CHARACTERISTICS AND TRAITS OF A GIFTED PRESCHOOLER:**

Compiled by Dave Lawrie and Ann Bonifant covers the following:

- \* Early linguistic development (talks, reads early- lots of questions)
- \* Psychomotor development (early motor milestones, active and independent)
- \* Personal characteristics (adult oriented, sensitive)

### **SAWLOR'S PARENT REFERRAL:**

This checklist gives an accurate picture of the students present characteristics. Areas noted include; Interests / Resourcefulness / Social Ease / Imaginative Qualities.

GLD students' home behaviours often vary greatly from their school persona. They may reveal their giftedness when relaxed at home or they may take out their frustrations on their parents by displaying anger and destructiveness. The two checklists above are easy to use and are an invaluable way of providing an accurate picture of the student's home behaviours.

### **TEACHER INPUT:**

Busy classroom teachers are often puzzled and a little frustrated by the variable performance of GLD students who alternatively display characteristics of giftedness and of learning disability. Using the tools below helps teachers to clarify their thinking regarding a GLD student.

### **TEACHER OBSERVATION SCALES:**

I use the NCER Teacher Observation Scales which cover:

- >> Learning characteristics
- >> Social leadership characteristics
- >> Creative thinking characteristics
- >> Self determination characteristics
- >> Motivational characteristics

B.P.: Which other assessments do you use to diagnose GLD?

F.H.: Besides the Learning Style Analysis (LSA) developed by the Creative Learning Company I use the following:

## **WHITMORE CHECKLIST FOR UNDERACHIEVERS**

The Whitmore Checklist for Underachievers provides a holistic picture of the students' abilities and learning characteristics and is particularly useful when identifying GLD students.

## **PAT AND OTHER TEST RESULTS**

Any academic records which highlight both the strengths and the perceived academic weakness of the students are useful. These are used to provide baseline data which will form the basis of comparison between the GLD student's academic performance before and after the intervention programme.

**“THE WECHSLER PRE-SCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCALE OF INTELLIGENCE”** is the final tool in the identification process. Unlike other IQ tests which do not meet the needs of GLD students because they only give an overall score, I prefer the Wechsler test which reveals the classic subset scatter which is indicative of GLD students' performance. Study of the Performance Scale and Verbal Scale subset contained in the report will reveal areas of strength and areas of deficiency. A difference of more than 11 points between the Verbal and Performance Scale is indicative of a GLD student profile.

## **Step 2: ANALYSIS OF NEEDS**

The next step in the process of meeting the needs of GLD students is to gain an accurate picture of the strengths and disabilities of each student. For this purpose I use the tools outlined below.

**LEARNING STYLES ANALYSIS (LSA-Junior)** - in order to create a targeted learning programme I need detailed knowledge of the students' learning profile. For this I use an LSA Profile which provides an accurate picture of BIOLOGICALLY BASED ELEMENTS (Brain Dominance, Sensory Modalities, Physical Needs, Preferred Environment) and CONDITIONED/LEARNED ELEMENTS (Social Preferences and Attitudes) as well as LEARNING STYLES TENDENCIES (Analytic / Holistic thought patterns).

## **A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY REPORT:**

An SLD report as it is commonly referred to, provides an in-depth assessment of motor development – spatial concepts - visual and auditory perception - sensory integration - oral development - academic achievement levels.

The SLD report, together with the Weschler IQ test with its revealing subset scatters provides an accurate picture of the GLD student's strengths and difficulties. Depending on the results of the above assessment I may consult the following agencies to identify the disabilities which underpin the GLD students' learning difficulties;

B.P.: Should additional specialists be contracted if necessary?

F.H.: Yes, because they can find additional need areas which can be corrected and supported with their help. Each of the following agencies will provide detailed reports and advice on the best way to remedy the problems. The most often consulted ones are:

**OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS** - to assess fine and gross motor skills development and to highlight possible problems such as Dyspraxia or lack of sensory integration.

**DEVELOPMENTAL OPTOMETRISTS** - to detect visual perceptual problems such as eye tracking difficulties

**AUDIOMETRICIANS** - to detect hearing difficulties such as central processing disorder

### **Step 3: CREATING THE PROGRAMME**

Following identification and analysis of need, an individually tailored programme is created and monitored. The purpose of the programme is to remedy the learning difficulty and to celebrate the gift. Targeted programmes are highly effective in eliminating the learning disability and in freeing GLD students to access the higher order thinking skills which characterise their performance.

Elements of the Programme are:

#### **1. Training In Metacognition.**

GLD students suffer greatly from a sense of frustration and hopelessness. They need to come to terms with the learning difficulty which has effected them and to learn how to use their giftedness to overcome the effects of the learning difficulty. They literally need to learn how to learn. Above all they need to believe in themselves as successful learners who, against the odds, have overcome a major learning difficulty and are able to go forward.

#### **2. Regular Conferencing Sessions**

It is vital that students overcome the sense of learned helplessness which afflicts them. They must be partners in their own recovery. Together with Teacher, Teacher Aide and parents, the student plans the programme, sets achievable goals and reviews progress. A signed contract and daily timetable provides details of the elements of the programme.

#### **3. Slaying The Dragon**

Provision of a daily programme to address the problem which underpins the learning difficulty. This may take the form of a perceptual motor programme, eye tracking exercises or auditory processing training depending on the need of each student. The agencies previously mentioned provide strong support for the class teacher by providing exercises and success indicators.

#### **4. Direct Daily Intervention**

This programme is written by the teacher and is supported by a teacher's aide. The programme targets the specific learning difficulty which is experienced by the students. Careful study of the SLD report and of the Wechsler IQ report will assist teachers in devising a programme. The programme is revised weekly and adjusted in the light of the rapid progress which GLD students invariably make.

#### **5. Curriculum Compacting**

I use curriculum compacting to find the correct learning level for each student and then use a judicious mixture of acceleration and enrichment to provide the optimum learning programme which will allow the student to excel in those areas of giftedness which have been identified. The programme includes accessing those higher order thinking skills which gifted students display.

#### **6. Celebrating The Gift (at every opportunity!)**

GLD students rapidly lose their sense of helplessness by using their gifts to help others in buddy programmes, mentor programmes, by being the class spokesperson in whatever interests them. Give GLD students responsibility; they will thrive.

#### **7. Mentor programmes**

Find someone who shares the student's passion. Perhaps a local artist or science teacher, inventor or enthusiast, anyone who can spend some time with the student. I find that local community members are willing to come to school to spend some time with a student who shares their interest. It may only be a matter of a few weeks contact, just long enough to validate the student's belief in themselves and to make them feel that they are not as different as they had feared.

## 8. Counseling Sessions.

In addition to the above programme, support should be offered in the form of counseling for both students and families to enable individuals to come to terms with the unusual needs of GLD students. It may simply take the form of contact with other families in a similar position or it may need the assistance of an outside agency.

B.P.: Could such a programme for GLD students be introduced to other primary schools, even if there is no funding available from the Ministry of Education?

F.H.: Most certainly, because the elements of the programme are the basis of an individualised programme for each student. Creating such a programme is well within the reach of all primary schools and requires little additional cost. The key to success is the collaborative support which is offered to the student. Freed from the fear of being "different" or "strange", freed from the deep seated loneliness, students experiences renewed hope and energy. The fact that they are agents in their own renaissance is also vitally important. They are able to use their giftedness, their insights and their thinking skills to overcome the worst effects of their learning difficulty. The most rewarding aspect of working with GLD students is the speed with which they overcome and/or accommodate their learning difficulty and are able to access the regular gifted students' programme.

B.P.: Can you give us an example how a GLD student can be helped and how the changes occur?

F.H.: With pleasure. Here is a case history based on my own experience:

Anthony displayed the classic early characteristics of a gifted learner. He was a sleepless baby who seemed to be interested in everything. Mother reported that she had, from an early age, 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 2 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 works 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 way and avoided other children.

By the age of 3 years his parents were convinced that something was wrong with their son and so 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 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 in how to do so. 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 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.

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 which caused him to wear glasses.

Anthony was referred to a Developmental Optometrist who found that Anthony had no 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 his eyes.

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 programme which I devised and which is 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 which he entered he won a book. The next competition he entered was the Ursula Moray Competition for 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.

Anthony continued to go from strength to strength. He is now a senior school student. His ambition? To become a teacher of special needs students. The anguish which his family experienced is typical of the pain which the families of GLD students suffer.

In my work with GLD students I have often seen a similar pattern repeated. The good news is that GLD students respond rapidly to provision of an appropriate programme of intervention and enrichment. Anthony was the first GLD child I taught and I'd like to close this interview with a quote from a recent GLD student in my class whose family were moving for employment reasons. His parents were concerned that the rapid improvement he had made whilst on the intervention programme might not be sustained when he moved to another school. John however, settled all our fears with a few words: "Wherever I go, I'll be fine. I now know who I am."

B.P.: Thank you, Frances, for your detailed description of this wide-spread but little known phenomenon of GLD.

Other useful Addresses:

**Seabrooke Mackenzie Centre** (Specific Learning Difficulty Assessment)  
68 London St. Christchurch Ph: (03) 381-5383 Fax: (03) 381-5385

**Dyspraxia Foundation**

<http://www.emmbrook.co.uk/dysprax/homepage>

**The International Dyslexia Association**

<http://www.interdys.org.nz> <<http://www.interdys.org/>>

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