Stealth Dyslexia: Flying Under the Radar

Dan Peters, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist, PSY 16823
Executive Director
Summit Center
Santa Monica, Walnut Creek, Napa, Millbrae
www.summitcenter.us
www.DrDanPeters.com

Annie - Age 8-5, 3rd grade

- Recognized as advanced in math, but reading was always harder for her.
- Reversals were evident in reading and spelling (e.g., “baby bird” was spelled “dady drbe”), she added words, and missed some sounds altogether.
- Experiences anxiety over reading, writing and spelling.
- Spends at least one full weekend day on homework to avoid losing sleep each night. “If no one helps me in reading it will take me 24 hours!”

Table 1. Annie’s Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Fourth Edition (WISC-IV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composite/Index</th>
<th>Standard score</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Comprehension</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>Very superior (“Gifted”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual Reasoning</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Gifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Memory</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>High average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing Speed</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Low average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Ability Index</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Gifted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Annie’s Woodcock-Johnson-III Tests of Achievement (WJ-III ACH).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Standard score</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief Reading</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief Math</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>Superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief Writing</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brian - Age 16-1

- “We know he is smart. Why does he struggle in a traditional school environment?”
- Failing for 4 semesters, too many classes to make up in summer school
- Brian’s mother reported that for 2 years she had asked the school to test Brian; however, school personnel saw no need.
- He was designated as “gifted in art and leadership,” so educators thought his academic problems were due to laziness.
Is Brian “average” and “fine”?  
- He never learned multiplication tables.
- There were significant holes in his knowledge of arithmetic operations.
- Broad Reading was average, but nonsense word reading (Word Attack) was low average (fourth grade level), suggesting a reading disability (dyslexia).
- He never learned to sound out words.
- Spelling was low average, at the fifth grade level.
- Writing Samples showed writing weaknesses combined with gifted content.

What is Dyslexia?  
Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological processing component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include reading comprehension and reduced reading experiences that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

Stealth Dyslexia  
- Drs. Brock and Fernette Eide (The Mislabeled Child, The Dyslexic Advantage) have done considerable work on what they call “stealth dyslexia” in gifted children, because their grade-level performance may hide a significant LD.
- They advocate teaching to strengths, but also addressing the likely constellation of processing weaknesses (sensory, visual, auditory).
Memory and Processing

- High episodic memory, low procedural memory (sequencing)
- High contextual memory; low rote memory
- Many with stealth dyslexia have a constellation of weaknesses including some or all of the following: executive-functioning, auditory processing, and visual processing.

What happens in the classroom?

- Performs below average – weaknesses over power strengths
- Performs "average"; meets "grade expectations" – strengths and weaknesses cancel each other out
- Performs high average – strengths over power weaknesses

What happens to the student?

- Fatigue
- Frustration
- Self-criticism – “I’m stupid”
- Hopelessness
- Underachievement
- Anxiety
- Depression

What to look for....

- High verbal abilities and average academic performance
- Students who are a mystery because they are not performing to their perceived potential
- Poor handwriting; mixture of upper and lower case words
- Poor spelling; can get most right on Friday’s spelling test, but forgets most words by Monday

More things to look for...

- Poor spelling; can get most right on Friday’s spelling test, but forgets most words by Monday
- Difficulty memorizing math facts
- Fails to respond to literacy efforts that emphasize more reading; reading level may improve by end of school year, but gains are lost by fall.
- Frustration with learning and producing work

Annie - What’s really going on?

- Gifted verbal and visual intelligence
- Reading Disability (dyslexia)
- Disorder of Written Expression
- Sensory, auditory, and visual processing weaknesses
- Some executive functioning issues
What does Annie need?
- A strength-based learning plan.
- Advancement in math.
- IEP for reading/writing interventions and accommodations to manage her workload and ensure success.
- Interventions/accommodations are needed for sensory processing, auditory processing, and visual processing deficits, and some executive functioning issues.

Brian - What is really going on?
- Gifted verbal intelligence
- Reading Disorder (Dyslexia)
- Mathematics Disorder,
- visual and auditory processing weaknesses
- depression

What happened to Brian?
- Did not qualify for sufficient services (IEP) to remain in school. Offered no options to repeat work more slowly or take fewer courses per semester.
- 504 Plan insufficient.
- Couldn’t keep up.
- Self-confidence declined.
- Suffered depression
- Dropped out of school.

What happened?
IDEA 2004 - Response To Intervention (RTI)
- RTI was designed for students who are performing academically below grade level
- The goal is to get them up to grade level, not for them to achieve in relationship to their potential
- Those who fail to respond to interventions are referred to Special Education
- Now special education law and even the DSM-5 requires absolute low performance.

What to do...
- Refer a child to a RTI or SST team when he/she is not performing as expected
- Refer or request a comprehensive evaluation in writing
- Use the testing results to put together an IEP or Section 504 plan that capitalizes on the child’s strengths and talents, while also providing accommodation and intervention

Comprehensive Assessment Finds Gifted/Dyslexic Children Easily
The use of a comprehensive IQ test (e.g., WISC) and individual achievement test can document the complex patterns of strengths, weaknesses, and current academic achievement typical of advanced learners/gifted children with learning disabilities.
Focus on Strengths/Develop Talent

- The child’s strengths must be addressed first!
- What are they good at?
- Passionate about?
- Interested in?
- Use strengths to improve weaknesses
- Maximize assistive technology

Recommended Resources

Critical Issues in the Identification of Gifted Students With Co-Existing Disabilities: The Twice-Exceptional
http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/3/3/2158244013505855.full

Gifted + Learning Disabled = No Desk For You
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-b-peters-phd/gifted-learning-disabled_b_5052115.html

The Dyslexic Advantage by Brock Eide, M.D., and Fernette Eide, M.D.

The Dyslexic Empowerment Plan by Ben Foss