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Meeting the Needs of the
Marginally Learning Disabled
Intermediate Grade Child

by

Gail Geiger Lobach

A thesis submitted to the Division of Curriculum and
Instruction in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

August, 1985

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Abstract

This study focused on the needs of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students who have I.Q. scores of roughly 75-95. These students often function two or more years below grade level in school and are referred to as Marginally Learning Disabled (MLD), or slow learners. Factors which contribute to the existence of this situation were discussed as were problems of accurate identification. It was found that most school districts do not provide special help for these students. MLD students are usually placed in the regular classroom. A few school districts have experimented with special resource classes or self-contained classes. Parental involvement was found to be a major factor in the academic progress of the slow learner. Teacher effectiveness is also extremely important. An effective teacher was found to, (a) believe the child could learn, (b) be organized and run a structured program, and (c) provide direct, group instruction rather than individualized lessons.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Statement of Problem

One of the most frustrating problems a classroom teacher has to deal with is deciding what to do with the Marginally Learning Disabled (MLD) child in the regular classroom. The MLD child is the child which has an I.Q. score of 75-95. This child is often referred to as a slow learner, late bloomer, lazy, subnormal, or dull child. More than likely parents will relate that the child was a "late talker", but that the physical development was normal. When given an electroencephalograph (EEG) to test for possible brain damage, the child is usually found to have normal brain activity (Kranes, 1980). Can the needs of the Marginally Learning Disabled (MLD) child in the intermediate grades be adequately met in the regular classroom?

Rationale

The typical heterogeniously grouped fifth or sixth grade classroom often contains several students who have failed to learn at the same rate as the majority of students in that class. These students may have already "failed", or been retained, once, or even twice by this time, but still function at a rate of three or four years below grade level.

Most school districts have no special programs available to help these children. These students are considered "too smart" for programs designed for the retarded, but "too slow" for most programs which are designed for students with a specific learning disability (SLD). In fact, this learning group is probably the most overlooked group in the regular classroom (Kranes, 1980).

One of the major problems educators have when working with MLD children is in finding ways to help them overcome their feelings of lack of worth (Griffin, 1978). Today's educational system is failing the present generation of children who do not meet with academic success in the regular classroom. These children often feel like helpless failures when they leave school.

Educators with the responsibility of teaching groups of basically average students often find themselves trying to find programs into which they can place the child that doesn't "fit". It is time to develop new programs to fit the child rather than just finding programs into which we can fit the child (Keogh, 1977).

In the words of Kenneth J. Weber, (cited in Stevens, 1984), "Help them to feel confident and they will become competent; help them to think and they will solve their problems; help them to understand and they will understand themselves " (p. 37).

Only when children believe in themselves can they make the most of their natural abilities. And it is only when children develop a positive self-concept can they learn to believe in themselves.

Purpose

It is the intent of this study to examine available literature and to attempt to determine what type of instructional program would best meet the needs of the Marginally Learning Disabled intermediate grade child. The following types of programs will be examined:

1. Placement within the regular classroom.
2. "Pull-out" resource classes.
3. Self-contained MLD classes.

The importance of parent involvement will also be addressed. Does it make a difference?

What constitutes an "effective" teacher? Areas of concern to be discussed in this section are:

1. Is it important whether or not the teacher believes the child has the ability to learn?
2. Individualized vs. direct instruction.

Definition of terms

Direct instruction. A teacher sets and articulates the learning goals, actively assesses student progress, and frequently makes class presentations illustrating how to do assigned work (Good, 1977).

EEG. Electroencephalograph. An instrument used to measure activity of the brain to determine whether or not there is any irregularity in brain function.

EMH. Educably Mentally Handicapped. One who is mildly impaired in intellectual and adaptive behavior. The measured intelligence of EMH students fall between 2-3 standard deviations below the mean and the assessed adaptive behavior falls below age and cultural expectations. The I.Q. range is 55-70 in the state of Florida.

Heterogeneous grouping. The practice in education of placing a wide range of ability students in a given classroom.

Homogeneous grouping. The practice in education of placing only students of a similar ability in a classroom.

Individualized instruction. A teacher devises separate lesson plans for each individual child. Students work independently on their assignments asking for assistance from the teacher when they need help. The teacher moves from child to child helping one student at a time.

Junior High. The junior high includes grades seven, eight, and nine. It is characterized by departmentalization, age-level grouping, and discipline specialists teaching their subjects (Cielesz, 1982).

Intermediate grades. Elementary school levels of 4th, 5th, and 6th grades.

MLD. Marginally Learning Disabled. Students who are often referred to as slow learners. They have a normal physical development, but are academically behind in school. In the state of Florida they do not qualify for any special help through special education programs. They have an I.Q. of roughly 75-95.

P.R.E.P. Primary Education Program. A Florida State Department of Education program for diagnostic, prescriptive, and instructional programming, stressing basic skills. Major objectives provide resource impetus at the crucial early school years to assure that each child entering grade 4 has the basic learning tools necessary for learning success.

Project G.A.I.N. Gearing Academics Toward Individual Needs. A federal pilot project between 1966-70, in Broward County, Florida. The program's aim was to provide students who were culturally deprived, and who had an I.Q. score between 74-90 with special help.

Resource class. Resource class is a special education classroom. The students involved are assigned to a regular classroom, but are "pulled-out" for a specific period of the school day for special help in academic areas in which they need help (Cieleza, 1982).

SLD. Specific Learning Disability. Students with average or above average intelligence who have academic

deficits in a specific area such as reading, mathematics, or spelling due to a disorder in one or more of the basic process areas necessary for using spoken or written language.

CHAPTER TWO

Reviewing the Literature

By the time the Marginally Learning Disabled (MLD) student has been in school for four or five years the child is usually a discouraged individual who has seen little besides failure in so far as school is concerned. Very few school systems directly address the needs of the MLD child, but rather tend to ignore the existence of such a child. This study will examine the various factors which should be considered when devising a program which will meet the needs of the MLD child in the intermediate grades.

This study will deal with problems related to the accurate identification of MLD students. Factors which cause learning disabilities will be discussed. Three types of programs, or class structures, will be investigated. Finally, the importance of parental involvement and teacher effectiveness will be reviewed.

Identification

In the past, schools have had a tendency to wait for problems to develop before taking preventative measures (Wallace & Kauffman, 1978). Fortunately the trend in education today is being focused on preventative strategies, as in the case of the Florida Department of Education's P.R.E.P. Program for early detection

of learning problems (F.S. 230.2312). Proper identification of all children with learning problems would greatly reduce the need for remedial programs in the upper elementary grades and in high school.

Unfortunately, misidentification, or improper labeling of children with learning disabilities can have tragic consequences, with children being placed in the wrong type of program, placed too early in special education programs, or by a delay in remediation after identification has been made (Wallace & Kauffman, 1978).

Classroom teachers often find it difficult to know just what to look for when observing students for possible specific learning disabilities, other than by noticing the child which is unable to keep up with the regular class work. According to Stevens (1984), some of the most obvious characteristics of disability are left-right dominance, poor time concept, impulsive behavior, difficulty with sequencing and alphabetizing, easy distractability, being a loner or daydreamer, having messy work habits, and lack of personal property organization. Other behavioral indicators of potential problems are low self-concept, poor peer relationships, inappropriate relations with adults, deficits in speech

and language development, difficulties in auditory and visual perception, poor quantitative reasoning and computational skills, deficits in basic motor skills, (Wallace & Kauffman, 1978) and difficulties with abstract thinking (Kranes, 1980).

Unlike students with more easily identifiable characteristics, the Marginally Learning Disabled child often has excellent physical and motor skills, (Kranes, 1980), and may in fact be the top athlete in the class. As a result this child often goes unnoticed, or is simply referred to as a "slow learner".

Once the initial teacher referral process is completed, the next step in the process is often in administering an I.Q. test. There seems to be no agreement among educators as to which test is the best. There is, in fact, a wide range of tests on the market.

Generally speaking, once the needed I.Q. test instruments are used by the testing personnel, those students with an I.Q. score below 75 qualify for special programs such as Educationally Mentally Retarded (EMR). Those who fall in the "normal" range, which usually is above 90, may be eligible for Specific

Learning Disabilities (SLD) classes.

Following the testing process, school personnel have the responsibility of deciding whether or not the student qualifies for a special program. Accurately identifying learning disabled students is a very difficult, if not impossible, task. One study involving 18 judges who were experienced in assessing students with learning disabilities, found that when the judges were asked to differentiate between 50 school-identified LD students and 49 non-LD students, the judges were extremely inaccurate in differentiating between the two groups, and were in little agreement with each other (Epps, 1981). Surely this problem results in some students remaining "unidentified" even after going through the referral process.

As previously mentioned special programs are usually available for those who have been identified as EMR or SLD students. But what about those whose I.Q. scores fall between 75-90? Too often they are said, by educators, to "fall between the cracks" when it comes to special help. Can education afford to continue to ignore the needs of these "special" students?

Causes

Attempting to identify the causes of learning disabilities is not a new area of study. According to Felton and Biggs, (1977) "Over 100 years ago it was

clear that the problem of underachievement had multiple causes..." (p.6)

Authorities give a vast array of common sources of learning problems. Greene (1984) gives the following list:

1. Low aptitude or intelligence
2. Emotional problems
3. Poor teaching
4. Neurological disorders (brain damage)
5. Sensory impairment (for example: a hearing or vision loss)
6. Perceptual dysfunction (for example: poor visual memory)
7. Language deficiencies (for example: English is not the native language)
8. Language disorders (for example: speech impediments or difficulty with oral expression)
9. Cultural or environmental influences (for example: academic achievement is not reinforced by the family or subculture) (p.27)

Other reasons for learning problems are, lack of proper prenatal care, poor nutrition, and a "poor match" between the child's natural environment and the school style. Children from poverty backgrounds generally perform at a lower level in traditional school settings

than do middle-class children. They usually make lower grades, score lower on I.Q. tests, and they tend to score lower on standardized tests (Bee, 1976).

Physical handicapps, congenital defects, a disruptive and stressful home environment, material or emotional deprivation, and problems with a teacher or school in the child's early school career can also result in school related learning problems (Griffin, 1978).

Types of programs

In attempting to provide some type of help to the MLD child, various methods of student placement have been tried and studied. Three of the most common types of placement are (a) full-time in a regular class, (b) part-time in a resource class, and (c) full-time placement in a self-contained MLD class. Each type of class has met with various levels of success and failures.

Regular classroom. By far, the regular classroom is the most common placement for the MLD child. Most often this is a result of a lack of funds available to provide any other type of program. According to McKenzie, Egner, Knight, Perelman, Schneider, and Garvin, (cited in Wallace, 1978), recent studies show that regular classroom placement offers the best chance for remediation.

One of the most common arguments against this practice

is that the average classroom teacher lacks the proper training needed to deal with the learning disabled student (Cieleza, 1982). In some schools the regular classroom teacher can receive some assistance from a special education teacher (Cieleza, 1982). This process is often of little help, because the special education teacher very likely, is already responsible for a class of students.

Many school districts have consultants on the district level which are available to assist the classroom teacher deal with the MLD child. The consultant has a wide range of knowledge regarding research and practice, concerning approaches to learning for the MLD child (Barsch, 1968). The major weakness in this idea is in the inavailability of on-site assistance with problems requiring immediate attention.

One of the major problems facing the teacher in the regular classroom is the wide range of abilities. Some educators feel that teachers in extremely heterogeneous classes may be less able to meet the needs of individual students (Sanford, 1980). Many people believe that this problem would justify homogeneous grouping, which is practiced in many school systems across the nation. However, studies show that homogeneous grouping results in (a) conflicting evidence in promoting scholastic

achievement in high or superior groups, (b) unfavorable evidence for promoting scholastic achievement in average groups, and (c) unfavorable evidence for promoting scholastic achievement in low groups (Esposito, 1978).

Research also suggests that ability grouping may be damaging to the social and emotional growth of children as well as to the academic achievement. Wilson and Schmits (1978) stated that, "Desirable attitudes and self-concepts of children of low ability may be seriously impaired as a result of ability grouping while the self-esteem of high ability children is inflated " (p. 536).

Resource class. One alternative to the full-time regular classroom, which some schools use is the resource class. The resource teacher usually works with small groups of students for varying lengths of time throughout the school day. The resource class can enable a student to receive closer academic help due to the limited number of students a teacher works with at a given time. When handled properly a resource classroom can be a very beneficial addition to the school program. Unfortunately, if not monitored properly, the resource class can end up as a tutorial service intended to keep students up with their

regular class lessons, a supervised studyhall, or a dumping ground for troublesome students (Wiederholt, Hammill, & Brown, 1983). Another problem found by Cieleza (1982) is a lower self-concept for mainstreamed students who are pulled out for special help in a resource class.

In 1966, a federal pilot program aimed toward helping the culturally deprived MLD child was tried in Broward County Florida. Project G.A.I.N. was placed in the junior high school setting and was made up of students who were entering the seventh grade. Students attended the class for social studies and language, but were mainstreamed for the remainder of the school day.

After three years the project was discontinued because the program was found to be not effective for groups of students. Individual cases were found which indicated there were some success stories, but not enough to warrant continuing the plan (Biller, 1970).

Why did Project G.A.I.N. fail? A teacher who taught in the program reports that she felt she had been randomly picked from the existing faculty in her school. In fact, she was the "new-kid" on the faculty. No specific guidelines were given concerning what was to be taught. Books were not provided. She had to search

for materials, or use "teacher-made" materials. Support from the principal and from the county office was practically non-existent. She also believed that the class was a dumping ground for problem students who were not wanted in the regular classes. Project students were constantly ridiculed by the regular students in the school. (personal communication, June 23, 1985)

Is it any wonder that Project G.A.I.N. was not successful? Perhaps it would have been more surprising if the program had been a success.

Self-contained MLD class. The third alternative program for the MLD child is in a self-contained MLD classroom setting. Some educators disapprove of this idea because it tends to "single out" certain students, and make them "different". While this concern has some merit, one must remember that by the time children have been in school for five or six years they already know if they are different. Being the "dumbest" kid in the class, year, after year, is bound to have caused a great deal of emotional stress for any child.

The self-contained classroom situation enables the teacher and the child to establish a successful relationship with each other. The teacher is able to get to know the child much better than if he saw the child only an hour or two each day.

One Illinois, self-contained program of twenty slow-to-learn fifth and sixth graders, showed an average growth in a one year period of two years in reading, and 1.2 years in math. Two of the most important facets of the program was the emphasis on a structured classroom situation, and on parent involvement (Young, 1977).

In Houston, Texas, The Talent Preservation Program was devised to keep 14 year olds interested, and in school. Participants had an I.Q. score of 76-90, and were at least two years behind in reading, math, and language skills. Teachers were specially selected for their ability to understand and teach emotionally unstable, slow learners. They received an intense 40-hour training workshop before beginning to teach the program. High interest materials were selected which were on a level that the students could read. Audio-visual materials, newspapers, and field trips were incorporated to teach practical skills which the students could recognize as useful. Parents were encouraged to become involved in the program (Mock, 1961).

Parent involvement

Programs involving parents as well as the child appear to be the most successful programs (Bee, 1976).

According to the Plowden Report, (cited in Griffin, 1978) there is as much as a 24% variation in a child's performance which can be accredited to the amount of help, or lack of help that parents contribute. The parental influences are most marked among the least able child (Griffin, 1978). Parents need to spend quality time talking to and listening to their child. And they need to be willing to accept the child without reservations.

Teacher effectiveness

A common public opinion concerning teachers has been that some teachers are more effective, or "better" than other teachers. In the opinion of Good, (1979) "It is my contention that most educational practices that lead to increased student achievement are mediated by the teacher..." (p. 54) Why are some teachers able to achieve a better record of student achievement than others?

Believing in the child. One of the most important factors in student success is the teacher who believes the child can learn. Too often MLD children have been allowed to pass from grade to grade without learning, because nothing much was expected from them (Stevens, 1984). The teacher who believes students have the ability to learn are more careful in presenting demonstrations and in providing consistent feedback

in order to correct students mistakes (Good, 1979).

Slow learners who have met with failure in school, year, after year, often have a negative attitude toward themselves, and have a feeling of lack of worth. The effective teacher works at finding ways to overcome this attitude problem (Griffin, 1978). Many children who say they "can't do" a specific act are often reminded by parents, or teachers that, "Can't, never could!" The reverse is true in the area of learning. Students who are made to believe that they "can do" will, more than likely, find that they are more capable than they previously believed themselves to be.

John Dewey once said, "There is no such thing as competency without love" (cited in Griffin, 1978) (p. 15). One way teachers can show MLD children that they love them is by believing in them.

Another effective teacher factor is the type of instruction which the teacher presents to the class. The two major types of instruction most often used by classroom teachers is individualized instruction and direct instruction.

Individualized instruction. The major argument given in favor of individualized instruction, especially in programs for learning disabled students, is that children who have difficulties in academic areas have

very different needs and characteristics (Wallace & Kauffman, 1978). Some educators believe that the importance of meeting the student's individual needs is paramount when planning for the MLD child.

In relationship to student achievement and individualized instruction, Good (1979) reports an association between lower test scores and the following factors: (a) high rates of student misbehavior and socialization, (b) students working on their own for long periods of time while teachers work with one student at a time, (c) teachers doing clerical tasks while students work, (d) student choice of seating and activities, (e) students interrupting the teacher to find out what to do next after completing assignments and, (f) teacher and student difficulty in concentrating on the task at hand while other activities go on around them. Individualization does not appear to be strongly associated with achievement.

One study by the New York City School System to investigate the effectiveness of individualized programmed instruction found that while students learned through the use of the technique, the programs alone were not as effective as pupil-teacher interaction (Fanning, 1965). In other words, materials don't teach. Teachers teach!

Direct instruction. Recent research has shown a direct association between learning gains and direct, or active, teaching. Orderly classrooms, persistent applications to academic related tasks, teachers being actively involved with the students, and a well organized and structured learning situation are strongly related to higher achievement gains (Good, 1979).

Due to undeveloped attention spans data suggests that directed small group instruction may be beneficial in the primary grades; however in the upper elementary grades and above, large group instruction appears to be the better strategy (Good, 1979).

Even within the direct instruction concept it is most important to strive always to meet the different needs of the individual students. Good (1979) relates the following:

One classroom teacher who had grouped the class for instruction reported that all of her students appeared to respond more favorably to a change from group instruction to a whole class instruction (Muir, 1977). Formerly, she had been teaching five mathematics functioning groups in her sixth-grade classroom.

In accomodating the diverse needs of students, she emphasized speed and accuracy for some; for

others she only required that they complete the assignment either during class or at home. She reports that fast students relaxed more and that slow students worked harder than they had previously. In terms of her own behavior, she reports that she was able to circle the room and provide feedback much more often than she did previously, and that the amount of direct instructional time with the teacher for all students was increased from 20 minutes per group to 50 minutes for the entire class. Although she reports a number of problems in the adjustment from group to whole-class instruction, she concludes, "The total-class instructional technique was effective. When it went well, it had a 'catching' effect on even the most reluctant learner. Perhaps to learn in small groups and by individualized instruction too much too long is a lonely experience for some." (p. 58)

The teacher gains from using a direct instructional model by being able to develop more detailed lesson plans. Feedback is received more quickly from a large number of students. This enables the teacher to make adjustments in the instruction more quickly than if each student was being worked with individually.

Students benefit from the model because they receive more teacher modeling, and more thorough explanation. This enables students to gain a better understanding of why they are working on certain skills and the meaning of the skills. Students also have a better opportunity to have errors corrected before practicing them repeatedly (Good, 1979).

Summary

Identifying and meeting the needs of the Marginally Learning Disabled child is no easy task. Due to the complexities involved in the identification process for learning disabled children, some children are not identified for special help, even though they may be in need, simply because they don't fit into existing programs.

The factors which cause children to have learning disabilities are extremely varied. They range from congenital defects, brain damage, environmental factors, physical handicaps, and emotional problems, to a poor beginning in the child's educational background.

Unfortunately, one of the major reasons for a lack of help for the MLD child is due to the shortness of financial support from the local, state, and federal levels. Most MLD children remain in the regular classroom setting. In a limited number of cases some schools

provide pull-out resource classes, or even less often, a full-time self-contained MLD class.

As is the case with all children, whether learning disabled or not, parental interest and involvement is of utmost importance to the MLD child. Children need to know that they are an important part of the family unit, and that they have the support of the most important people in their lives, their parents.

Next to a concerned, involved parent, the most important influential positive force on a child's development is an effective teacher. Teachers who truly care about the children they teach will agree with Storr that, "Children develop most satisfactorily if they are loved for what they are and not what anyone thinks they ought to be (cited in Griffin, 1978). (p. 20)

Although some success is noted in the classes of teachers who teach by individualized instruction, research based studies have found that disciplined, structured, large group instruction methods result in the most significant academic growth in MLD students, as well as students in general.

CHAPTER THREE

Conclusions and Recommendations

A review of available literature was presented in Chapter Two. It was found that in practically every classroom students can be found who do not meet with academic success. These children often feel like helpless failures when they finally leave school. Supported was the idea that in many ways the educational system of today is failing the present generation of these "unsuccessful" students. Educators cannot afford to take the position that these slow-to-learn children can't learn. It is the responsibility of all professional educators to constantly be searching for ways to help the educationally delayed, or MLD child. Programs must be devised to meet the existing needs of these students. No one program exists which will serve as a panacea for all learning problems, but some types of learning situations were presented which show a higher success rate than others.

Conclusions

Problems associated with accurate identification of children with learning problems are ever present concerns for educators. Day to day events in a child's life can affect performance on an I.Q. test. The subjective nature of psychological evaluations may

result in a child not qualifying for an existing program. Eligible children may simply fail to be identified.

Year after year slow-to-learn children continue to fall through the cracks in educational programs and receive no special help. Even though school officials continue to "officially" ignore their existence, these children will not just "go away".

Causes of learning problems fall into three broad areas which include, uncontrollable biological factors, home based environmental problems and educational factors.

Educators have little, if any, control over biological factors and the home environment. However, educational factors as they relate to learning problems should be a major concern of educators. All children deserve to be taught by competent, caring, effective teachers.

There are conflicting opinions as to whether the regular classroom, resource class, or self-contained class is the best type of placement for the MLD child. Each one has strengths and weaknesses.

Parental concern and involvement is a major element in a child "making the most" of natural abilities. All children deserve a parent who cares.

This educator believes that teacher effectiveness is the most influential and controllable educational factor facing school administrators today. It is intriguing to speculate about the effects on student performance if all teachers were "effective". According to recent research, an effective teacher, (a) believes in the child's ability to learn, (b) is well organized and maintains a structured program, and (c) provides direct, group instruction rather than individualized lessons.

Recommendations

School officials should officially recognize the existence of Marginally Learning Disabled (MLD) children. Financial planning for each district should provide funds to adequately meet the needs of these slow learners.

The State of Florida Provides assistance in preventative planning through the PREP Program for grades K-3. ECIA Chapter 1 (P.L. 97-35) provides federal assistance to the lower elementary grades also. It is time for the needs of the intermediate grade child to be addressed. Each school should have resource, and, or, self-contained classes for intermediate grade MLD children. Teachers selected for these classes should have a desire to help the slow learner. Teacher training programs would enable an effective regular classroom teacher who does not

necessarily hold certification in Learning Disabilities to qualify for the position.

Each district should adequately evaluate all teachers to identify and recognize effective teachers. Teachers who are found to be ineffective should be provided with the necessary help to improve their teaching skills. Following an appropriate amount of time and assistance, aimed at helping ineffective teachers, they should be encouraged, or assisted, in looking for employment outside the field of education if they are unable, or unwilling to meet the standards of an effective teacher.

Summary

Education has much to be proud of in the area of providing special programs for children with identified learning difficulties, but educators cannot afford to become satisfied with what presently exists. In many classrooms across the nation children are found whose needs are not being met. They are the children usually referred to as slow learner, or Marginally Learning Disabled students.

School officials must continue to search for ways to help the MLD student become a successful member of the academic community. Remember, da Vinci, Edison, Rodin, and Einstein are all believed to have had learning disabilities, and yet they are four of the greatest

creative geniuses civilization has ever known. How does one know who else may be sitting in the classrooms of today's schools?

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