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effects of talents unlimited counseling on gifted/learning disabled students

Abstract

Students who have learning disabilities concurrently with giftedness continue to trouble educators regarding the nature of programming best suited to their needs. While numerous extant studies have concentrated on the disabilities of such students, this analysis, patterned after a similar study (Olenchak, 1995), has focused on their personal strengths. This inquiry was structured to ascertain the effects of counseling aimed at enhancing their success in instructional environments. The counseling interventions were based predominately on Talents Unlimited (Schlichter & Palmer, 1993) and the study probed their effects on the attitudes, self-concepts, and creative productivity of gifted/LD youngsters enrolled in the sixth through eighth grades. Quantitative results indicated that year-long participation in such counseling had significant positive impact on attitudes toward school and self-concept. Furthermore, qualitative data consisting of interviews, journal analyses, and classroom observations reinforced the quantitative findings.

These individuals are at very high risk for emotional problems and disorders for two related reasons. They are at risk because they struggle with the disability itself. They are also at risk because they are misunderstood, mistaught, misdiagnosed, and mistreated not only in school but also in psychotherapy and in life.

Carol Wren,
*Hanging by a Twig: Understanding and
Counseling Adults with Learning Disabilities
and ADD*, p. 1

At least some therapists and educational practitioners see persons with learning disabilities as being seriously at risk for manifesting psychosocial problems during adulthood. Imagine, then, the potential for emotional upheaval experienced by young people who manifest not only learning disabilities but who also are gifted. The apparent juxtaposition of having on one hand great academic potential and on the other considerable learning disabilities places individuals of all ages and from all

walks of life at significant risk for developing a variety of problems. However, during the pivotal developmental years of adolescence, individuals run particular risk for establishing a pattern of underachievement and low self-efficacy rooted more in their disabilities than in their talents (Olenchak & Reis, 2002).

Although a fairly broad literature base addresses gifted and talented students who experience a collection of learning disabilities (gifted/LD), only several empirical investigations have examined the specific effects of specialized instructional programs targeted at this population. No empirical studies have investigated counseling approaches aimed at enhancing the success of these students in instructional environments, though one previous exploration relied on case data to form some initial recommendations about counseling techniques appropriate for the gifted/LD population at the secondary school level (Olenchak, 1994).

Given that the identification of learning disabilities is as controversial as the identification of giftedness, studies continue to concentrate predominately on identification issues (McCoach, Kehle, Bray, & Siegle, 2001; Olenchak, 1994; Webb et al., 2005). As in studies of children with learning disabilities exclusively, conclusions from research of gifted/LD students have revealed that they often demonstrate behavioral and academic characteristics that negatively single them out from the regular school population. Despite the fact that learning disabilities encompass several types in such academic areas as reading, mathematics, and writing, behavioral traits tend to be similar regardless of the specific nature of the learning disability. Classroom interruptions, inattention to detail in one or more academic areas, difficulties in relationships with peers and adults alike, severe deficits in handling

perceptual and/or memory tasks, and apparent shortcomings in task motivation and task orientation are some of the more prevalent behavioral identifiers distinguishing the majority of students with learning disabilities whether gifted or not (Baum & Owen, 1988; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Suter & Wolf, 1987).

However, a body of literature does exist that provides some significant behavioral features distinguishing gifted/LD students from their non-gifted/LD peers. Performance on tasks requiring higher order cognitive skills, such as analysis and synthesis in problem solving and in abstraction of sophisticated concepts, parallels that of their gifted/non-LD peers (Montague, 1991; Nielsen, 2002), yet it is also commonplace for gifted/LD students to engage in complex, creative thinking and concurrently to precipitate significant incidents of indiscipline in classrooms to a degree exceeding that of non-gifted/LD students (Baum, Cooper, & Neu, 2001; Baum & Owen, 1988; Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991). 'Because of their dual set of seemingly contradictory characteristics, gifted learning-disabled students may develop feelings of depression and inadequacy and consequently may demonstrate acting-out behaviors to disguise their feelings of low self-esteem and diminished academic self-efficacy' (Baum et al, 2001, p. 478).

Regardless, the conundrum for parents and professionals is that students who are gifted yet have concomitant learning disabilities is that they present a set of glaring contradictions between great ability in some ways and serious disabilities in others to the extent that one wonders whether first to treat the disabilities or first to serve the gifts. And because the adults in their lives are discomforted by their behaviors, these young people are at special risk for developing

equally discordant, confused self-concepts and associated fragility of self-esteem (Boodoo, Bradley, Frontera, Pitts, & Wright, 1989; Nielsen, 2002; Olenchak & Reis, 2002; Suter & Wolf, 1987).

Although research has continued to probe the issues of identification and behaviors, few empirical studies have provided conclusive direction for counseling interventions likely to scaffold gifted/LD students' learning. Researchers generally agree that programming for what has become known as 'twice exceptional' students – gifted with some concomitant disability – is optimized by emphasizing strengths while not overly accentuating their weaknesses likely yields the best outcomes (Olenchak & Reis, 2002). However, the studies undergirding that conclusion have provided little specific direction as to what the nature of such programs should be that might optimally enhance the development of these young people, and the notion of counseling holding an educational place of importance that is much more than an ancillary is absent in the literature.

A previous investigation (Olenchak, 1995) that is the foundation for the current inquiry offered some insight about talent development programming and counseling likely to address psychosocial needs of gifted/LD students using the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli & Reis, 1985) as a framework for individualizing strength-based education for each pupil. Despite examining a comprehensive educational improvement intervention such as Schoolwide Enrichment, that study did not explicitly identify a single approach – let alone one that can be simply integrated into the context of counseling. Although that earlier study certainly offered educators a clear rationale for applying Schoolwide Enrichment as an overarching method for

addressing the needs of the gifted/LD student population, the fact is that, to be successful, Schoolwide Enrichment requires fairly significant commitment throughout the school – even if the approach is used only with gifted/LD students (Olenchak, 1995). Although Schoolwide Enrichment is a powerful means for serving gifted/LD students, what if the school is not prepared to adopt such a sweeping program?

In a thorough examination of acceleration for twice exceptional students, Moon and Reis (2004) concentrated one section of their chapter on gifted/LD students. They concluded that among other strategies appropriate for educating gifted/LD pupils are those that promote both attention to students' advanced curricular needs and content strengths while simultaneously providing opportunities to gain the compensatory strategies necessary to address their weaknesses, a process called 'dual differentiation' (Baum et al, 2001). Hence, ideal strategies that can bridge between talent development and disability compensation would prove to be economical in terms of time and resources, yet no empirical studies have shown whether any such strategies exist. Moreover, how might any such methods embrace not only classroom instruction but also address the unique psychosocial needs undergirding the academic success of the gifted/LD population? For gifted students who have concomitant special needs, such as the gifted/LD population, to attain success commensurate with their strengths, counseling that interfaces effectively with instruction is essential (Reis & McCoach, 2002).

The purpose of the current study was to examine the efficacy of a well-documented model for identifying and nurturing cognitive aptitude, Talents Unlimited (Schlichter & Palmer, 1993), as a means for

counseling gifted/LD students with strategies they can apply to enhance development of their strengths while simultaneously providing compensatory skills for handling their learning weaknesses. The ultimate utility of such inquiry is to assist schools in the implementation of programs that have been empirically assessed as useful for attending to the acute learning needs of the gifted/LD population during early adolescence, perhaps the most difficult years of development. Specifically, this study examined how Talents Unlimited influenced gifted/LD students' attitudes toward school and their self-concepts utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry.

Method

Student Participants in the Quantitative Aspects of the Study

To address the two research foci quantitatively (attitudes toward school and self-concept), a sample of 57 gifted/LD students (39 males and 18 females) enrolled in grades six through eight was selected from six urban and suburban school districts in the Southwestern and Rocky Mountain sections of the United States. Paralleling the selection process utilized in the previous study (Olenchak, 1995), participants were selected through a case study identification process that combined classroom-based referrals and psychometric strategies. This case study identification process was used because it allows for thorough consideration of each child's particular strengths independent of the weaknesses (Boodoo et al., 1989). All subjects were selected based on IQ scores of at least 120 on the verbal or performance scales of the WISC-IV (Wechsler, 2003) because of Guilford's (1967) claim that this IQ level is a minimum threshold for high creative operations of the type indicative of

gifted and talented children. In addition, participants met the following criteria for inclusion in the study: 1. Each student had demonstrated at least one incidence of disruptive behavior during the previous school year that had required involvement of the school principal; 2. Each student was performing at least one standard deviation below the mean score on academic achievement tests used in the included school districts in at least one academic field such as reading, language, math, or math applications; and 3. Each student had been identified as one who needed services for youth with learning disabilities.

Of the students participating, all had been involved in varying degrees of school-related counseling in the year preceding the study. These counseling interventions, including group and individual meetings, ranged in frequency from once per semester for four students to twice weekly for one student, with the mean frequency of 3.00 per academic semester. The length of those counseling sessions ranged from 10-30 minutes, with the mean lasting 14.5 minutes. Hence, it can be fairly concluded that counseling in the school year preceding the study for all but very few participants was limited at best and probably did not have sufficient frequency or contact time to produce any lasting impact. More critically to this study, none of the participants had had prior exposure to Talents Unlimited in classroom or in counseling situations, so any influence of Talents Unlimited on this population took place during the single academic year in which this inquiry took place.

All of the participating students had been served in on-going activities designed to provide remedial assistance for their learning difficulties through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) as

mandated federally in the United States through a series of laws and revisions, the most recent of which is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), known as IDEA-2004. Services delivered to students through IEPs typically are gauged to consideration of each individual pupil's skill and knowledge levels at the beginning of the school year, and goals are established for growth in each aspect of schooling that is considered to be affected by the child's disability. While there occasionally is attention paid to the strengths students present, the emphasis of IDEA-2004 is on improving each individual pupil's learning through a variety of accommodations tailored around the disability; clearly, the disabling condition becomes the rudder for the student's IEP, and direct attention to and development of each student's strengths in the IEP is seldom of much consideration, particularly in the case of students who present giftedness concomitant with a disability (Olenchak & Reis, 2002). In fact, many gifted/LD students are not recognized for their gifts at all because of the high value accorded to the predominately remedial provisions of IEPs (National Education Association, 2006).

As a result of the way in which giftedness has often been disregarded among students with disabilities in the United States, the gifted/LD youth participating in this study were intentionally selected because they represented this tendency toward emphasis on the disability and de-accentuation of the gift; in other words, gifted/LD students who had received services specially targeted at nurturing their giftedness in the year preceding this study were excluded from participation. Hence, the sample in the present study was composed of pupils who had not experienced any systematic educational attention to their giftedness for

at least one school year.

Student Participants in the Qualitative Aspects of the Study

To enhance and to deepen understanding of the effects of the treatment, 10 students (5 male and 5 female) were randomly selected from the pool of 57 who participated in the quantitative aspects of the study. As a subsample of the 57 participants, the case study subjects all were defined as gifted/LD students, having been identified in accordance with the guidelines utilized for the entire sample as described above. Each demonstrated a history of academic and behavioral difficulties, and all of the case study subjects had been involved in varying counseling activities during the year prior to the study. Like their peers from the sample of 57, the 10 case study participants were involved in educational programming that predominately reflected emphases on their learning disabilities as opposed to stressing their strengths. To illustrate the 10 cases, those of Matthew and Melissa were purposefully selected for inclusion in this article because these two subjects presented behaviors typifying all the cases both before and after the treatment.

Matthew

After he had agreed to participate in the case study aspect of the investigation, Matthew greeted the researcher in his counselor's office with a hearty handshake befitting a young man several years his senior, yet he immediately hung his head after the introduction. Physically, Matthew was a bit taller than most of his male peers but on the lanky side with longish wispy, light brown hair drooping just above his eyebrows – a sort of sheepdog appearance not unlike that of innumerable other Anglo boys his age from around the globe.

At age 14 in grade eight, Matthew had been involved in special educational programming directed at his learning disability since he was 9 years old. His auditory processing disability continued to make sitting in classrooms, where listening is requisite, a challenging if not all but impossible chore. Nonetheless, it was clear that Matthew was exceedingly intelligent and well-read particularly when it came to astronomy. Having been involved in a Head Start program as a little boy, Matthew came from a home where wealth was not monetary; rather, Matthew spoke early and often of how loving his mother was to him and to his two older brothers and of how they had all become ever closer as a family after his father had been killed in a traffic mishap when Matthew was just 3 years old. He said profoundly, 'The way we care about each other at home gets me through the days here at school. My friends keep me going, too, but they won't always be with me like my family.' His words exemplified maturity and insight, yet when it came to classroom behavior, Matthew was well known for disruptiveness which he claimed mostly was unintentional 'coping.' Shortly before the first meeting with the researcher, Matthew had been placed in the in-school suspension room for two days because he had fallen asleep in his English class and when awakened by the teacher, he stood up, threw his book, and walked out of the room.

Teachers in kindergarten, first, and second grades reported that Matthew was one of the brightest students they taught, yet at the same time, records all noted his inability to pay attention to classroom instruction and his contributions to discussions often being inappropriate and off topic. Since his auditory processing disorder had been identified and he had been involved in special education services, there had been some improvements in his

classroom behavior, but his academic performance still lagged well behind his ability. As his counselor confirmed Matthew's conundrum, 'He is a brilliant boy. If we could give him a laptop and a library and leave him alone to work, he would probably flourish. But what then will become of his ability to interact more effectively with others?' Services for Matthew's giftedness were erratic throughout his schooling, often taking short shrift to services for his disability; counseling services had also been erratic.

Melissa

At age 12 in grade six, Melissa comes from a middle class, African American home where she lives with her mother, who is a master's degreed nurse, and a younger sister. While she sees her father approximately once each week and their relationship seems positive, he did not seem to have as much influence on her as her mother. 'My mom is my role model. I want to be able to learn as fast as she can,' Melissa responded when the researcher asked her to describe the one or two persons most important to her. Of average stature but a bit overweight for her age with a stylish dreadlock hair style, Melissa spoke only when spoken to and did not elaborate unless coaxed, hence presenting herself as mostly unconfident although not remarkably so as compared to other girls her age. The real distinction from girls her age was evident in observing her interactions with peers as she tended to remain on the periphery of conversations.

Presenting a history of sullen, non-participative classroom behaviors, Melissa had been first referred early in grade two for emotional disabilities services because her teachers had expressed concern about her withdrawn demeanor and the need to prod her to participate in conversations. It was during that screening that her serious

dyslexia was uncovered, and it was also in that process that she qualified for gifted education services. Still, her elementary school chose to focus attention on her reading problems, and no particular provisions were provided through gifted education until she was in fifth grade when she was included in a series of exploratory and accelerated activities in math. 'I like math way better than anything else, but I don't have the LD there,' Melissa explained when asked about the things she enjoys in school.

Most recently, Melissa has been more involved in counseling because teachers have observed that her already pronounced tendency to remain withdrawn from classroom activities seemed to escalate. Worse, she had been truant from school for two days in one week, having spent her time at home alone without her mother's permission. The counselor felt that while Melissa's ability was undeniable, she was most concerned that Melissa was heading for depression that was probably rooted in her continuing struggle to read with fluidity and fluency. And in spite of special education that utilized such research-based strategies as sequencing, segmentation, and advance organizers, Melissa continued to experience significant reading problems to the point that she was increasingly avoiding tasks that involved reading. For instance, one teacher described how, when given options on the form of an assignment, Melissa invariably chose drawing, dance, musical or theatrical presentations or products: 'She will always choose something that avoids reading to the greatest extent possible.' While her intelligence enabled such products to be of generally high quality, teachers remained sufficiently worried that Melissa would continue to fall further and further behind her peers academically that conversations had been held with her parents about increasing special education

services. No discussions had taken place regarding her giftedness.

Counseling Treatment

The treatment during this year-long study encompassed the methodical use of the cognitive enrichment techniques associated with Talents Unlimited that were embedded within the context of each participant's IEP in a counseling component. Based on Taylor's (1968, 1986) extension of the landmark factor analytic studies of intelligence completed by Thurstone (1938), Talents Unlimited addresses the fact that not all gifted individuals excel in the same ways or in the same domains of human ability. Talents Unlimited has been shown to improve students' critical and creative thinking skills within the context of classroom curriculum, to enhance student's self-concept, and to increase students' metacognitive capacity and performance in five specific thought processes that interface with traditional academic talent to produce success in day-to-day life (Schlichter & Palmer, 2002).

The five processes are: Productive Thinking, Communication, Forecasting, Decision Making, and Planning. Through consistent practice of the skills and of the metacognitive language of each of the five Talents, students become conscious of their own thought patterns and gradually integrate them into their operational repertoires in a fashion that improves their ability to understand and use academic information. Simultaneously, students not only acquire the complex skills and processes of the Talents but also master the integrated content (Newman, 2005; Schlichter & Palmer, 2002). Table 1 provides a definition for each of the five Talents Unlimited areas as well as an illustration of how they were used in counseling with participants in the study.

Inherent in the treatment was the inclusion of Talents Unlimited as a primary component of regular counseling for participants, each student receiving one 45-minute individual session along with one 45-minute group session per week for 24 weeks of the school year; these provisions were incorporated as a segment of each gifted/LD student's IEP.

However, the IEPs of the students involved in this inquiry differed from typical IEPs. Most IEPs tend to be implemented by learning disabilities specialists working in tandem with regular classroom teachers, with efforts concentrating on remediation of student difficulties. In contrast, the IEPs of students in this study all designated counselors, who were trained in Talents Unlimited, to address the development of Talents Unlimited strengths for transfer to academic situations in the general education classroom. While the IEPs of participants included the remedial goals and objectives required by IDEA-2004 for any child formally identified with a learning disability, goals and objectives were also included that aimed at uncovering and nurturing each student's personal gifts and talents through counseling techniques relying on Talents Unlimited as the foundation.

As in the study that served as the backdrop for the present inquiry (Olenchak, 1995), the strength-focused sections of participants' IEPs were based on assessment of student capabilities in terms of aptitude, ability, creativity, interests, and learning style preferences, as well as insights provided by teachers, peers, and classroom performance. By using Talents Unlimited, each student's strength information was constantly revised and updated based on the nature of student responses to stimuli in counseling activities. Activities in counseling were rooted in instruction in the six Talents Unlimited talent

domains and were formulated with attention to individual student interests and strengths serving as the primary feature of programming. The notion that purposeful attention to both student strengths and personal interests reverses underachievement and improves self-concept, both critical factors in working with gifted/LD students, has been supported by a number of previous studies (Baum, 1984, 1988; Butler-Por, 1987; Covington, 1984; Delisle, 1990; Emerick, 1992; Olenchak, 1990; Rimm & Olenchak, 1991; Supple, 1990).

At every research site, participants were involved in an organized schedule of Talents Unlimited activities that took place individually and in small groups led by the designated counselor. In addition, Talents Unlimited was integrated as much as possible with typical school experiences whether they occurred in regular classrooms or were delivered through special education services. The consistency and quality of all Talents Unlimited services were assessed across school sites for participating students through semi-structured counselor's logs documenting activities and their frequency. In addition, quarterly interviews with counselors as well as classroom and special education teachers served to maintain adherence to Talents Unlimited and its delivery in terms of frequency and quality.

Research Design and Procedure

This investigation was structured to contain both quantitative and qualitative components. This mixed research design paradigm was selected because it enables an interaction of quantitative and qualitative data, yielding a more thorough examination of phenomena.

Quantitative Aspects

At the beginning and at the end of the school year, each student completed two tests. The *Arlin-Hills Survey Toward School Learning Processes* (Arlin & Hills, 1976) was used to assess gifted/LD students' attitudes toward learning before and after the year of participation in the enrichment treatment. This 15-item survey relates to student perceptions concerning the types of activities in which they engage in class, classroom structure, and the accommodation of self-selected student interests. Developed through field testing with 6000 students in grades 1-12, the instrument employs a four point summated rating with a mean score of 24.4, standard deviation of 10.8, and standard error of 3.4; internal consistency reliability estimate for the instrument is .90 with a test-retest coefficient of .86.

Previous studies of students involved in talent development programs, whether of the enrichment or acceleration variety, have noted a large number of intervening variables involved in assessing the effects of such programs (Olenchak & Renzulli, 1989; Olenchak, 1990). As a result, hierarchical multiple regression techniques, a means for examining complex phenomena of the type in this study, were selected for analyzing the unique contribution of the treatment to variance in the dependent variable apart from the various intervening variables that had been identified in the earlier studies. This approach allowed for the measurement of variation in student attitudes toward learning in school, with grade level, teacher, classroom climate, teaching style, and the Talents Unlimited counseling treatment used as predictor variables.

For regression purposes, classroom climate and teaching style were assessed by

all general classroom teachers who taught the participants during the period of investigation ($n=121$) using appropriate subscales of the *School Assessment Survey* (SAS) (Wilson, Firestone, & Herriott, 1985). This instrument, yielding high reliability determined through a four-stage test-retest study ($p=.85$), was created as a means for both assessing attitudes among teachers with respect to school improvement programs and for measuring important dimensions that help to distinguish instructional and organizational processes in schools.

To probe self-concept of participating gifted/LD students, the *Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale* (Piers, 1984) was used because of its efficacy and sensitivity for assessing changes in self-concept among young people. It contains 80 dichotomous items relating to school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, happiness, and behavior. Effects were measured using dependent t-tests, and ANCOVA was used to control for possible effects of the pretest to examine for potentially significant differences in self-concept attributable to gender or grade level. Both the SAS and the *Piers-Harris* have been employed extensively in studies involving gifted youngsters (Coleman & Fults, 1982; Karnes & Wherry, 1981; Kolloff & Moore, 1989; Olenchak, 1988, 1990; Olenchak & Renzulli, 1989).

Qualitative Aspects

To examine the effects of Talents Unlimited counseling on gifted/LD students qualitatively, a research design was used that integrated features of case study and ethnographic inquiry. The two cases described herein represent a subsample of 10 such cases gathered in the study.

Merriam (1998) defined qualitative case study as an 'intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit' (p. 27). Ethnography refers to research that involves the description of a culture (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Case studies are often used when attempting to answer 'how' or 'why' questions, such as those posed in the present study. As a research approach, case studies enable researchers to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2002). They are especially helpful when researchers seek to deepen understanding of a particular group of people, a precise problem, or a unique situation. When the researcher can identify cases containing rich data within such a group, problem, or situation, case study research can yield valuable information that would not otherwise come to light (Patton, 2002). In this study, gifted/LD students were investigated to enhance the researcher's comprehension of the overall effects of Talents Unlimited counseling on the participants, and the primary goal of this aspect of the study was to provide additional insights to complement those extracted from analyses of the quantitative data.

The qualitative data were gathered through a combination of participant observations, ethnographic interviews, and document reviews. Participant observations require researchers to experience and to record in detail the various aspects of a situation as they continually scrutinize their observations for meaning and personal bias (Glesne, 2005). Given that ethnographic researchers observe participants as a means for listening to people and observing them in their natural settings (Spradley, 1980), participants in this study were observed in their classrooms, in counseling, at lunch, in school hallways, in school extracurricular activities such as club meetings and sporting events. Four in-depth semi-structured interviews of

approximately an hour in length were conducted with those participants in the qualitative aspect of this study, each interview consisting of open-ended statements asking the participants to respond in a manner that would enable exploration of how they viewed their school experiences, particularly with respect to Talents Unlimited counseling. For example, 'Tell me how you feel about your experiences at school right now,' and 'Tell me what it is like to be you at this school,' were used as stimuli to establish parameters for more precise probes. This sequence of interviewing – general probes leading to specific inquiry based on participants' responses – allowed the researcher to capture an insider's perspective of the school with special focus on the educational lives of the gifted/LD students who were interviewed. This process continued during each interview and enabled the researcher to develop a conceptual grasp of the school and the significance of the Talents Unlimited counseling treatment in question in this study.

Document reviews consisted of examination of logs maintained by counselors and selected teachers who had agreed to complement counseling services; these reviews helped determine the consistency of Talents Unlimited services. In addition, journal entries were written electronically using a secure web site at least once weekly by student participants. The researcher also examined samples of student written work and other products they completed as related to their involvement in Talents Unlimited counseling.

The qualitative data were analyzed using a systematic method as delineated by Stake (1995) in which field notes recorded during observations and transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed through a process

in which the researcher scrutinized the data for categories of information to emerge; this process of pattern-seeking in the data is repeated until the researcher has as few categories as possible that still explain the phenomenon. This process aims to achieve the simplest structure possible, and its purpose is akin to that achieved through the quantitative methodology of factor analysis. To enhance the validity of the process, the researcher conducted intensive direct observations, interviews, and document review until data saturation occurred when new information collected was redundant and did not offer any additional insights to elucidate further understanding. In addition, after the data had been categorized through the repeated pattern identification process, participants were asked to verify the researcher's interpretations.

Results

Quantitative Results

The multiple regression analysis of the *Arlin-Hills* data revealed that gifted/LD students' attitudes toward school were significantly improved as a result of their participation in the Talents Unlimited counseling treatment activities ($p < .01$). Although classroom climate and instructional styles were unveiled as predictor variables, paralleling previous analyses of gifted/non-LD students (Olenchak, 1988, 1990, 1995; Olenchak & Renzulli, 1989), the treatment emerged as a significant predictor of gifted/LD students' attitudes toward school. Over 60% of the variance in gifted/LD students' attitudes was encompassed after all of the variables had entered the equation. Table 2 provides the details of these results.

The analyses of the *Piers-Harris Scale* results showed statistically significant gains in self-concept among the gifted/LD students sampled in the study. Differences between pretest and posttest administrations were significant for the dependent t-tests conducted ($p < .001$), and the effect size was .384, based on a gain between pretreatment and posttreatment scores of 2.84, pretreatment data analyses ($X = 50.38$, 46 percentile; $SD = 7.98$), posttreatment data analyses ($X = 53.49$, 53 percentile; $SD = 7.34$). Furthermore, when self-concept results were analyzed using ANCOVA as a control for the pretest, no statistically significant differences in self-concept gains were revealed between genders and across grade levels ($p = .31$).

Changes in scores on the *Piers-Harris* are shown in Table 3. The percentage of students scoring higher on the posttest was substantially greater than the percentage of students scoring lower. Although approximately 11% of the students experienced declines in self-concept, nearly 74% showed increases during the same period. Given the fairly brief duration of the experiment, the rapidity of changes in self-concept are of particular interest. Previous research among gifted students has unveiled relatively positive self-concept levels before any treatment (Janos & Robinson, 1985). Furthermore, short-term variability in self-concept among gifted youth is common (Olszewski-Kubilius, Kulieke, Willis, & Krasney, 1989). However, among gifted students who experience concomitant learning disabilities, previous inquiry has exposed relatively low pretreatment self-concept; this distinct phenomenon has been ascribed to a general tendency to 'place blame for failure on themselves while attributing success to externalized factors' (Bryan & Bryan, 1986, p. 203).

Qualitative Results

The case data analyses distinctly yielded three overarching themes: 1. Strong emphasis placed by the school on remediation; 2. Student use of unstructured time; 3. Student perspective of self. While several other themes emerged from the case study data, these three were consistently and repeatedly reinforced in all 10 case studies. The three themes are discussed below utilizing Matthew and Melissa as exemplars of all of the case studies.

Strong emphasis placed by the school on remediation. The participants were apparently made over time to feel as if their school experiences were intended primarily to adhere to a 'find it, fix it' approach in which curriculum, instruction, and even counseling targeted the learning disabilities often at the expense of serving the gifts. During one interview, Matthew particularized the dichotomy between what school offered him and what he felt he needed:

You know that you must have bigger problems than they are even aware of – that you are really, really screwed up somehow. A lot of school is just to help me with my LD and if it isn't that, then it is stuff that just doesn't work at all for me. Really, school is just a place to hang out for now – just like marking time until I can go someplace where I can be the way I am and learn what I need the way I need and be good at it.

Matthew, like the other cases, acknowledged his awareness that something at school was missing for him, and though he did not mention it specifically, he alluded to the fact he could be successful in some fashion if only his personal needs were better served at school. In fact, outside of school, Matthew had experienced a

significant amount of success in Boy Scouts and in Little League Baseball. Perhaps it is the fact that neither of those activities relies so heavily on speaking and listening as does the typical classroom; even when auditory processing is critical, both Scouts and Little League Baseball are quick to integrate kinesthetic tasks with the spoken word, whereas many classrooms seldom do so (Ellis, Deshler, & Shumaker, 1989).

For her part, Melissa also provided ample support for the apparent overemphasis of school programming on the disability and the associated underemphasis of talent. During one classroom observation approximately midway in the study, the researcher watched as Melissa quit her participation in a science lab in which she was expected to work with a partner to carry out an experiment, all the while reading directions to do so and taking lab notes along the way. Even though the teacher had provided her with a structured advance organizer for her lab notebook, it was clear that Melissa was exasperated with herself as well as the situation when she sulked to her seat. Upon being confronted by the teacher, Melissa feigned illness and sat with her head down between her arms atop her desk. After the class, the researcher walked with her to the counselor's office where she explained her actions:

I start feeling like I am a stupid person, and I know I'm not. If everybody had to do their work with my problems, teachers would be different than they are. I wasn't really sick in there, but you know that always having the things you do poorly at being made the main thing in your life could probably make you sick, too. I'm treated like I'm sick anyway. When will somebody ever let me just show them I get the stuff, and we can move on? You'd be surprised how much I learn by

listening and watching. I know reading is important, and I'm getting better at it, but there has to be a way that it doesn't have to drag me down.

Student use of unstructured time. It was evident from each of the case study participants that whenever they were handed free, unstructured time in the course of the school day, it created opportunities for them to engage in less than productive activity that at least occasionally led to disciplinary problems both in school and at home. On several occasions, Melissa had misused classroom work time by talking with others, by playing with a video game, or by listening to music. She also had been truant from class on several occasions, and she had acquired a reputation for visiting the school's health suite with a variety of contrived maladies. Similarly at home, Melissa's mother described her as less than productive unless she was playing her violin or composing music:

Whenever she is playing her violin or is creating new music, she is totally entranced. The world could tumble down around her, and she would continue. Last summer, when she went to music camp up in Michigan, she was recognized for her musical talent, and she seems happiest and most relaxed when she is playing violin.

Melissa also corroborated the fact that she was at her best in her orchestra class at school – that she felt not only competent but contented there. Through giggles, she pointed out in one interview, 'I don't have any trouble reading music like I do with words – too bad books aren't all full of notes.'

Like Melissa and the other case study participants, Matthew also had a fairly lengthy record of school disciplinary

incidents that had developed due largely to his inability to use free time wisely. Having been involved in more than a few fights with other students, he was thought by peers and teachers alike to be a bit of a bully. When he was questioned about this dreadful reputation, he was quick to make excuses:

It is a problem when I cannot do things that interest me. I know not everything is going to be fun, but when I get bored and when other dudes pick on me, I just cave in. Then I start picking fights with them a while later and somehow I always get accused of being the bully who started it. I almost never start a fight, but I am not going to just sit there and let somebody take advantage of me. I get back at them. One kid called me '____ing stupid' and I hit him hard after school.

Matthew also admitted that he grew weary of tedious, repetitive work that was of little interest to him and for which he could see little ready application to his daily life. Both Melissa and Matthew demonstrate the sort of frustration of living with both high abilities and significant disabilities that has been described in previous research (Baum & Owen, 1988); however, they also exemplify gifted students who, probably due to their learning disabilities, often act impulsively without contemplating consequences. While impulsive behavior is characteristic of adolescence in general, it is clear from these data that the participants lacked the metacognitive skills that are necessary for enhancing executive functioning, including self-control.

Student perspective of self. Once the researcher had established rapport with each of the participants, interview after interview encompassed at least one reference to marginalization of self-concept. Paralleling previous research encompassing the gifted/LD population (Baum, 1984; Baum, et

al., 2001; Coleman & Fufts, 1982; Olenchak & Reis, 2002), these participants unveiled inner feelings of self-doubt even to the point of skepticism and occasional denial of their giftedness. Even as the intervention treatment was well underway, participants continued to voice negative sentiments about themselves and their abilities, though the frequency declined and the intensity with which pessimistic statements were made diminished. For example, near the conclusion of the first interview, Matthew described himself as follows:

I feel like a phony and a fraud...They must have made some huge mistake when they said I was a gifted kid. I can't be; I have so much trouble so much of the time that I can hardly get anything done to please anybody – even myself. If I'm so gifted, how come I can't get anything done? How come I feel so bad about the way my life is heading?

Similarly, Melissa corroborated the theme of self-doubt in her second interview when she explained her hesitation to participate in classroom activities. While her self-perception was different from that of Matthew, it still reflected a good deal of negativity. She elaborated:

If the world was a big football stadium, and everyone who had something incredibly important to offer was on the stripe in the middle, I would be sitting in a seat near the top of the stadium watching. I am scared to death that I am not what I feel I am deep inside... a really smart person who just has trouble reading and writing words.

Throughout each of the interviews, it was commonplace for participating students to discuss their self-perspective. Comments ranged from those centered on their own abilities and feelings to how they saw themselves integrating into their larger

worlds at school with peers and adults, away from school with peers, and at home with parents and siblings. Regardless, as the treatment period continued, the nature of these comments became less negative even though self-doubt remained a noteworthy concern voiced by 4 of the 10 participants in the qualitative segment of this study. Melissa remained one of the doubtful ones, while Matthew seemed to become predominately positive.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the regression study demonstrate that gifted/LD student attitudes toward school learning were positively enhanced by their year-long participation in the Talents Unlimited counseling treatment. Although most of the intervening variables had a significant relationship with student attitudes (grade level, teacher, classroom climate, and teaching style), the regression equation that emerged from the analysis included the treatment as a significant contributor to variance in student attitudes toward school. Given that previous inquiry about gifted/LD students has found this group to be unlikely to find much pleasure in school learning environments (Olenchak & Reis, 2002), any intervention that promotes positive school attitudes among gifted/LD students must be considered to be a useful tool for serving this population of pupils. Any school component that yields significant improvement in gifted/LD student attitudes toward school needs to be added to the array of options that academic institutions implement in behalf of these students. Moreover, comments from students themselves underscored the value of the Talents Unlimited counseling intervention. Matthew described it as 'the most awesome stuff I have ever done at school... something I have already used to get me out

of trouble,' and Melissa noted that she looked forward to counseling with Talents Unlimited as it was 'the way best part of school.'

Talents Unlimited as an integral component of a comprehensive counseling program for gifted/LD students appears to improve school for them, with the effect size representing self-concept improvements of approximately 40% of one standard deviation. Although this change is but moderate in scope, it can be fairly concluded that the Talents Unlimited counseling treatment had a noteworthy impact on the sample. While substantial changes in self-concept in much less than several years' time are unlikely among the gifted/LD population (Ellis et al., 1989), the implausibility of swift change in self-concept is of particularly critical consequence given that the sample involved young people who had all presented a history of school difficulties for more than five years. The cycles of failure and of learned helplessness – an individual's belief that his or her efforts will not result in desired outcomes (Schunk, 1989; Seligman, 1992) – experienced by students who are concomitantly gifted and learning disabled make these students much more like those who have learning disabilities than like those who are gifted (Baum et al., 1991). The interview data certainly lends credence to that notion, too, as students often focused more on their disabilities and deficits instead of spotlighting their gifts and talents. Matthew and Melissa as illustrations of this phenomenon consistently overstated their weaknesses and understated their strengths, though this trend seemed to wane over the period of Talents Unlimited counseling treatment. Perhaps the ambiance of 'repair work' offered by schools as they provide programs for these youngsters is at least partially responsible for their self-perspective of 'being broken,' as Matthew put it.

As in the earlier investigation of gifted/LD students (Olenchak, 1995) changes in self-concept data were multifarious. While a collection of students demonstrated self-concept scores that increased significantly by more than one standard deviation, the scores of some other students declined by just as much. However, the percentage of gain was over 8 times greater than the proportion of students whose self-concept scores declined by one standard deviation. Also like the previous study, the sample produced higher self-concept scores than the normative group before as well as after the treatment was instigated. The literature is inconclusive regarding explanations for this phenomenon, though it is hypothesized that because students who are gifted and have concomitant learning disabilities are accustomed to being involved in interventions – even though those interventions are predominately remedial in nature, they may, as a result, typically present higher mean self-concept scores than is typical for the general population. In other words, the additional attention provided through special education services could actually produce enhanced self-concept simply because these students receive so much extra educational attention. In effect, this equates to a type of pre-treatment halo effect attributable to the spate of special education services the participating students receive. The point here is that school efforts may be inadequate as well as inappropriate for identifying and nurturing their strengths.

Regardless, the majority of the subjects examined in this study ($n=42$) did experience increases over their pretreatment scores in self-concept. The decline between pretreatment and posttreatment scores among nearly 11% of the subjects is as puzzling in this study as it was in the 1995 investigation. Although no explanation aside from regression effects is apparent from the

data, it is logical to conclude that no single counseling approach effectively serves all the gifted/LD students all the time. Thus, astute counselors, school psychologists, and psychologists should maintain a buffet of strategies for gifted/LD youth and utilize them on a level determined by the personal needs of each student. Still, given the fact that the Talents Unlimited counseling intervention was largely successful for the vast majority of participants in the present study, Talents Unlimited should definitely be among the principal set of strategies on which counselors rely for use with this student population.

Comments from participants involved in the qualitative component of the study certainly provided additional substantiation for the use of Talents Unlimited. All 10 of those participants indicated that Talents Unlimited had been helpful to them, and the remarks of Matthew and Melissa serve as examples. In several electronic journal entries, both Matthew and Melissa pinpointed Talents Unlimited counseling explicitly. Matthew wrote during the second month of the study:

This Talents Unlimited is way cool! I used Productive Thinking to help me out of a problem when I thought of the many and various things I could do to keep from getting into trouble at lunch. If I had not done it, I probably would have skipped out of the cafeteria and been in detention, but I instead used Talents and decided to use my free time at lunch to design a new logo for the astronomy project I am working on in Scouts.

Months later, Matthew wrote that using Talents Unlimited had helped him create a plan for his required science fair project that enabled him to avoid conflict at home: 'My Mom said it was the first time I wasn't running around at the last minute to get something done.'

Similarly, Melissa stated in an electronic journal entry near the end of the treatment that Talents Unlimited had been particularly useful to her as she structured a written assignment. By relying on both the Planning and Communication Talents, she described her success:

Reading and writing are never going to be easy, but Talents Unlimited helped me a lot. I could think about all of the things that I needed to do before I started to try to write the essay on my ancestors, and then I sat down and thought of the ways I could tell the story in a way that was interesting. Then I sat down and drew illustrations and from those I wrote the essay using Talents Unlimited to help me organize the story. I actually got the best grade on writing I ever got on such a big project – 88%! Talents makes me feel that I am not so dumb.

Quantitatively and qualitatively, the results of this study provide cause for schools to consider Talents Unlimited as a major component of its counseling efforts for gifted/LD students at the middle school level. There is ample reason to believe that Talents Unlimited counseling provides ammunition for each gifted/LD student metacognitively in a manner likely to enhance self-concept and, along the way, improve academic acumen, at least insofar as feelings of competence go. The paradoxical needs of gifted/LD youth can at least be partially served through a Talents Unlimited counseling program, and the beauty of this intervention is that it is low in cost of time and materials, yet it allows counselors a streamlined mechanism to interface attention to affective development while paralleling the cognitive demands of classrooms. Perhaps more importantly, Talents Unlimited counseling appears to offer an efficacious means for gifted/LD students to attach value and meaning to

their strengths in a fashion that may improve their overall school performance as well as their self-concept. Studies about the importance of optimism on human performance are conclusive (Seligman, 2002) – that persons are most likely to succeed when they are treated by others positively.

If educators persist in emphasizing weaknesses of gifted students who are identified as having concomitant learning disabilities, it is reasonable to conclude from the current study that those young people will develop their talents only marginally. They are likely to draw the inaccurate conclusions internally that they are less than they are and will perform accordingly. In contrast, if gifted/LD students are served through counseling that utilizes cognitive strategies to bolster the personal affective dimension of each learner, there is every reason to believe from this investigation that such young people will emerge as confident and competent, spending less time bridled by their disabilities and more time exercising their talents. As Matthew stated it so well in his final interview:

Talents Unlimited is just a thinking tool; I realize that. But it has helped me see for maybe the first time in my life that I can pay attention and can do things as well as anybody else. Now I know how to pay attention and nobody ever taught me how to think like this before. It isn't magic – it takes work, but it has made me see that I am not a loser.

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Table 1: Talents Unlimited Descriptions and Counseling Illustrations

Talent Area	Skill Involved	Counseling Illustration
Productive Thinking	Generate many, varied, and unusual ideas or solutions and to add detail to make the ideas more interesting	Students learning about emotions think of many, varied, and unusual events that would make people: 1. smile; 2. laugh; and 3. cry.
Communication	Use and interpret verbal and nonverbal communication to express ideas and feelings appropriately to others	After listening to a story about a difficult classroom situation, students write about and then act out the feelings the story evoked.
Forecasting	Make a variety of predictions about the possible causes and/or effects of a phenomenon	When discussing the good, bad, and neutral feelings about school, students predict the many, varied possible causes and effects of their feelings.
Decision Making	Outline, weigh, make final judgments, and defend a decision in response to the numerous alternatives for resolving a problem	After examining the many ways they can deal with a bully, students generate criteria to select their decision and then defend it as the best resolution to the situation.
Planning	Design a means for implementing an idea by describing what will be done, identifying needed resources, delineating a sequence of steps, naming possible problems, and improving the plan.	Having thoroughly examined the fact that all people have strengths and weaknesses, they develop a plan to survey the entire school about self-perceptions of personal strengths and weaknesses.
Academic	Develop a foundation of knowledge and skills through acquisition of information and development of concepts	Students read a story about how a child handled a life obstacle and make notes about key ideas and points in the story.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Using Pretreatment Scores as a Covariate and Grade Level, Teacher, Classroom Climate, Classroom Instructional Style, and the Talents Unlimited Counseling Treatment to Predict Student Attitudes toward School

(N=57)

Step/Variable	R	SE	Rsqr	Increase	Adjust	b	B	t
1/Pre-Scores	.303	4.510	.181	.000	.170	.227	.027	.245
2/Grade	.328	4.013	.189	.008	.173	.241	.101	2.047*
3/Teacher	.401	3.895	.227	.038	.203	.281	.139	2.277*
4/Climate	.484	3.702	.318	.091	.286	.323	.201	3.239**
5/Style	.627	3.503	.490	.172	.447	.545	.307	3.778**
6/Treatment	.737	3.491	.684	.194	.672	.598	.361	4.076**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 3: Piers-Harris Scale Score Changes for Gifted/LD Students Participating in Talents Unlimited Counseling

(N=57)

	Frequencies	Percent
Scores Gained	42	73.7
Scores Unchanged	9	15.8
Scores Declined	6	10.5
Gained 1 SD	15	26.3
Declined 1 SD	1	1.7