



Increasing the **VISIBILITY** OF THE NEEDS OF *Girls* WHO ARE GIFTED *With* **ADHD**

A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY

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 **In** the *Harry Potter* series, Harry used the invisibility cloak to walk the halls of Hogwarts unseen as he battled the evil forces that served Lord Voldemort (Rowling, 1997). This same phenomenon of invisibility occurs daily in schools all across the country, although it is not a result of magic, nor is it for the greater good. Researchers have estimated that there are as many as 385,000 twice-exceptional students in our schools across the country—students who are gifted but also have learning and/or behavioral differences (Assouline, Colangelo, VanTassel-Baska, Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2015). Unfortunately, a masking effect causes many of these gifted students to go unrecognized by teachers, special education professionals, and administrators—who are more often focused on students' weaknesses (Assouline, Nicpon, & Huber, 2006; Baum, Cooper, & Neu, 2001; Schultz, 2012), resulting in school days spent with few, if any, educators recognizing these students' talents and, in many cases, even their challenges (Baum & Olenchak, 2002; McCoach, Kehle, Bray, & Siegle, 2001).

Under the Response to Intervention model, many twice-exceptional students are overlooked as a result of the masking effect because, although they may be working below their potential, their performance may not be below that of their grade-level peers (Hughes, 2011). This can have serious consequences on the academic and social-emotional well-being of these students. Additionally, the characteristics of students with specific learning differences can be very distinct. Students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) share characteristics similar to those associated with giftedness. For instance, Fugate, Zentall, and Gentry (2013) found that students who were gifted and displayed characteristics of ADHD had higher levels of creativity—a trait often connected with giftedness—than their non-ADHD gifted peers. Although scholars identify these



similarities as a problem that they believe may often lead to misdiagnosis (Baum & Olenchak, 2002; Cramond, 1995; Leroux & Levitt-Perlman, 2000; Moon, 2002; Webb et al., 2005), no empirical research exists regarding the frequency it may occur.

If the student with these characteristics also happens to be a gifted girl with ADHD, then this masking effect becomes particularly relevant.

In gifted education, there exists an inequity of gifted/ADHD research between the sexes with more attention focused on boys. Although limited in number, studies of gifted students with ADHD inclusive of both sexes exist; however, no work specifically addresses the unique needs of girls with these exceptionalities. Because of this gap in the extant literature, I wanted to examine how gifted girls with ADHD cope with academic and social pressures associated with their middle and high school years.

GIFTED GIRLS

Frey (1998) found that “gifted adolescents experience psychosocial needs differently depending on their gender” (p. 41), specifically in the areas of ownership of giftedness, dissonance, risk-taking, others’ expectations, impatience, identity, and sexuality. More specifically, gifted girls face a variety of external and internal barriers in their social-emotional development, including gender roles; relationships with family, teachers, and peers; lack of self-confidence; feelings of isolation; perfectionism; and achievement/underachievement issues (Comallie-Caplan, 2008; Hébert, Long, & Speirs-Neumeister, 2001; Maurer, 2011; Phelps, 2009). Sadker and Sadker (1994) had this to say about the effects these barriers have on girls:

Each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worthless. Each time the teacher passes over a girl to elicit the ideas and opinions of boys, that

girl is conditioned to be silent and defer. As teachers use their expertise to question, praise, probe, clarify, and correct boys, they help these male students sharpen ideas, refine their thinking, gain their voice, and achieve more. When female students are offered the leftovers of teacher time and attention, morsels of amorphous feedback, they achieve less. (p. 13)

Further, the transition from elementary to middle school can be particularly difficult for gifted girls as they begin to face pressure to better fit in with their peers (Bain & Bell, 2002; Dai, 2002; Kerr, Vuyk, & Rea, 2012; Rimm, 2002). It is around this time that many gifted girls begin to be faced with the choice of being smart or being popular, seeing the two choices as mutually exclusive (Kerr et al., 2012). However, in a qualitative study of seven gifted girls transitioning into sixth and seventh grades, Pepperell and Rubel (2009) found that the transition may not be as difficult as the literature suggests. These researchers found that the girls in the study had a strong sense of themselves and their abilities. The girls were able to find a balance between their giftedness and their social interactions through participation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, theater, and student government. It was this balance that helped them find their place in the middle school social schema.

GIRLS WITH ADHD

The manifestation of ADHD characteristics in girls can result in lowered self-esteem, heightened emotional reactions, a lack of focus, and difficulty with peer and family relationships (Greene et al., 2001; Vail, 2002). These effects may become particularly amplified as these girls enter adolescence and can place additional stress on academic and personal performance (Owens, Hinshaw, Lee, &

Lahey, 2009), leading to underachievement (Reid & McGuire, 1995; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Grskovic and Zentall (2010) studied 262 girls with and without ADHD. These researchers found that girls with ADHD were verbally impulsive, hyperactive, faster in conversation and schoolwork, easily bored, often at the center of trouble among peers, impatient, and more easily prone to moodiness, anger, and stubbornness than their peers without ADHD. However, participants with ADHD in this study were also able to relate prosocial behaviors with high self-esteem. Specifically, these girls were able to discriminate between their own appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, understanding “that they were more likely to react with strong feelings than other groups of girls” (Grskovic & Zentall, 2010, p. 181).

Additionally, Mikami and Hinshaw (2006) and Owens et al. (2009) conducted studies of girls identified as ADHD who were 6–12 years of age. These researchers found that across time, long-term outcomes included increases in internalizing and externalizing symptoms, increased underachievement, higher rates of substance abuse and eating disorders, lower social skills, and difficulty maintaining peer relationships.

The socialization process becomes particularly challenging for girls with ADHD who have higher rates of peer rejection than their male counterparts (Blachman & Hinshaw, 2002; Carlson, Tamm, & Gaub, 1997) and “often serve as negative social catalysts, fueling conflictual social interactions among their peers” (Blachman & Hinshaw, 2002, p. 625). The exhibition of ADHD behaviors in girls has been found to be setting specific, with girls more likely to repress ADHD behaviors in academic settings where teacher disapproval is more likely. However, these behaviors become more prominent in social settings that “involve more complex rules and requirements, which may involve delayed and indi-

rect consequences,” the result of which is increased peer rejection (Grskovic & Zentall, 2010, p. 170). Mikami, Chi, and Hinshaw (2004) found that, because of their social difficulties, girls with ADHD run the risk of being “doubly disliked” by both peers and adults. These girls have a heightened awareness of the social consequences of their behaviors, which can result in a poor perception of relationships with their teachers, lowered self-esteem, and increased rates of depression and anxiety (Rucklidge & Tannock, 2001).

Because girls with ADHD are at greater risk of social impairment, when rejected by their peers they have increased possibilities of poor adolescent and adult adjustment that often lead to depressed and/or anxious behaviors (Gaub & Carlson, 1997; Greene et al., 2001; Mikami & Hinshaw, 2006). Researchers have identified links between peer rejection and academic underachievement, and increased incidents of substance abuse within this population (Barkley, Fischer, Smallish, & Fletcher, 2006). Further, if issues related to ADHD are left unaddressed, these girls find themselves at higher risk for low self-esteem (Becker, McBurnett, Hinshaw, & Pfiffner, 2013) and teen pregnancy (Quinn, 2005). These problems are likely to continue into adulthood, where these girls have been found to experience higher divorce rates, financial problems, and difficulties with time management (Nadeau & Quinn, 2002; Rucklidge, Brown, Crawford, & Kaplan, 2007). However, Mikami and Hinshaw (2006) also found that girls with ADHD who were more confident in their academic abilities demonstrated lowered incidences of these negative results and actually demonstrated increases in achievement over time.

METHOD

In collective case study, the researcher selects one area of concern, but selects multiple, representative cases

TABLE 1
Summary of Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Grade	Race	Type of School	Medication	State
Grace	12	7	Caucasian	Public	Y	IN
Jenny	13	8	Caucasian	Private	N	CT
Lea	13	7	Hispanic	Public	Y	IN
Lily	12	7	Caucasian	Charter	Y	CO
Teresa	13	8	Caucasian	Public	N	OR

TABLE 2
Sample Items From the Electronic Sampling Form

Construct	Questions: When You Received the Text . . .
Self-esteem	How self-conscious were you? Did you feel good about yourself? Were you in control of the situation? Were you living up to your own expectations?
Mood	What were you thinking about? How well were you concentrating? Describe your mood.
Feeling regarding activity	Was this activity important to you? Do you wish you had been doing something else? Were you satisfied with how you were doing? How important was this activity in relation to your overall goals?

for inclusion in the study and replicates the study procedures for every case.

For this study, five girls who are gifted and diagnosed with ADHD were recruited from various secondary school settings around the United States, including public, charter, and private schools, to consider the influence of the educational environment concerning how the girls respond and react to academic and social pressures. The average age of all participants at the time of the study was 12.6 years, with four of the girls identifying as Caucasian and one identifying as Hispanic. Three of the girls were taking medications for ADHD symptoms during their participation in the study. Table 1 provides a summary of the participant demographics, including their chosen pseudonyms, ages, grade levels, ethnicity, the type of school they were attending (i.e., public, charter, private), and whether or not they were taking ADHD medications at the time of the study.

A portion of the qualitative data collection method was modeled on the

Experience Sampling Method (ESM) developed by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1987). Over the course of 3 months, participants were prompted via text message twice weekly at varying times, once during the school day and once during nonschool time, signaling them to complete the Experience Sampling Form (ESF; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). Narrative responses to ESF questions established the setting, time of day, location, the activities with which and the people with whom the participants were engaged, and their feelings at that particular time. Participants responded to items on the ESF about their self-esteem, mood, and feelings regarding the activities they recorded using a Likert-type response scale. Sample items from the ESF are included in Table 2. Additional qualitative data were collected through individual interviews. At the conclusion of each interview session, I recorded my reflections, which included field notes made during the interview regarding specific

answers and observations, and which served as a personal journal to address potential researcher bias.

DISCUSSION

The girls in this study reported several positive and negative effects of being gifted and having ADHD on their academic achievement and motivation. Characteristics of giftedness such as good memory, advanced problem-solving ability, and attention to detail were reported in the girls' interview responses, but these gifted traits were mitigated by characteristics related to their ADHD. As they reported on the ESF, these girls associated school with feelings of confusion,

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tension, and shame, more so than they did at home. They attempted to compensate for their challenges through competition with others around them, which can become a source of social distress. However, distractibility and failure to complete tasks such as homework were the two main academic challenges these girls reported facing. These findings are consistent with literature on twice-exceptional students (Baum & Olenchak, 2002; McCoach et al., 2001; Moon, 2002).

Consistent with past twice-exceptional research (e.g., Baum & Olenchak, 2002; Grskovic & Zentall, 2010; Moon, 2002), even the slightest of distractions, such as the presence of a fish tank close by in the classroom, can divert the attention of a girl who is gifted and has ADHD (Lea). Grace echoed this, stating, "I have a hard time paying attention if there is something distracting . . . if someone's doing some-

thing wrong or chewing gum loudly, that bothers me. So like it's the slightest things, so I have a hard time paying attention" (personal communication).

Further, these girls become easily bored when faced with completing homework that they see as repetitive. Suddenly, time doing homework becomes time not doing homework, a fact that they are cognizant of—however, they cannot bring themselves to do something else, so they end up spending time doing nothing at all.

I spend a lot of time doing homework or attempting to do homework. There's a lot of time spent *not* doing homework but not doing anything else either because I still have homework to do, if that makes sense (Teresa, personal communication).

Interestingly, these girls are keenly aware of consequences related to their lack of focus on their achievement and motivation.

[My teacher] gave out a lot of homework that I couldn't really finish, and if I did, I forgot to turn it in so I got marked off a lot for that. Since I was G/T, most of the kids got stuff faster than me, so I wouldn't really get the material. I wanted to cry. (Lily, personal communication)

In addition to these external pressures, these gifted girls with ADHD faced many internalized symptoms as a result of their co-occurring conditions. Even at the middle school level, many of these girls were already looking beyond high school and considering their options for college. "We have this college book; the cover says *283 Good Colleges* and I found William and Mary that I want go to so I'm starting to get my grades up for that" (Grace, personal communication). Consistent with Baker's (1987) findings that perfectionist tendencies are more prevalent in gifted girls than their non-gifted peers, and because

of the traits associated with their co-occurring ADHD, these twice-exceptional girls worried about their grades and became hypercritical of their own performance. For Teresa, a 94 in an English class and an 83 in an advanced math class were considered only okay and left her with the feeling that she could have done better. Fortunately, these girls are also often self-aware and able to reflect upon past failures and use them as positive motivation, traits that Speirs-Neumeister (2004) identified in self-oriented perfectionists.

Sometimes I'm liable to give up, but I can't. I have to push myself to go forward. I have to care. You have to care to succeed, if you don't, you may succeed but you won't get far. I've learned that there are times when I didn't care, and I got bad grades. That's going to show on my records for college. I have to get good grades to go to college. I have to keep pushing forward. (Lea, personal communication)

Although this drive and determination positively motivates some of these twice-exceptional girls, unreasonably high expectations result in low self-esteem for others, supporting the findings of past researchers (Maurer, 2011; Phelps, 2009; Reis, 2002; Schuler, 2002). Suddenly, their sense of self-image is tied to the challenges of ADHD: "I mean I wish I could be a better person, able to get through things like tests quicker. I would like to have more time for other things and even read more and have a better memory" (Teresa, personal communication).

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Twice-exceptional students face many obstacles in the classroom as a result of the learning and/or behavioral differences (Baum et al., 2001; Baum & Owen, 1988; Coleman, 1992; Hughes, 2011) that require

academic supports that address both their giftedness and their ADHD. All too often, these gifted girls with ADHD find themselves in classrooms settings where they feel alienated or misunderstood because teachers fail to fully realize the challenges that they face on a daily basis. Grskovic and Zentall (2010) discussed the academic difficulties that girls with ADHD particularly have in areas of math and science. Unfortunately for these gifted girls with ADHD, these can be some of their most unforgiving classes: “I kind of am slower at taking notes and I think that the teacher—because she’s really good at science—she doesn’t really know what it’s like to not be good at science” (Lea, personal communication). Additionally, these girls are often asked to perform tasks that highlight their challenges, such as reading aloud in class: “I’ll look over the words and I’ll get really red in the face and I want to crawl into a hole. I want to sound like I know what I’m talking about but it’s new material. I don’t know, it just makes me nervous” (Jenny, personal communication). Consequently, when teachers lose patience with these girls or fail to recognize their giftedness and their learning needs, motivation and achievement decline: “She makes me feel really bad about that when I don’t get it. It makes me feel discouraged with myself. It just makes me not like the class as much” (Lea, personal communication).

Although I would like to believe that incidents like these are unintentional, they highlight the need that exists for research-based professional development focused on differentiation and the needs of twice-exceptional learners in general, and gifted girls with ADHD in particular. The idea of differentiation to meet the needs of gifted learners in the classroom is certainly not new; however, for these gifted girls with ADHD, differentiation is important for their achievement and increases self-esteem and

self-efficacy. These girls require more hands-on and visual learning experiences that put discrete skills into a larger context that they can relate to and understand: “I learn by seeing and I’m a hands-on learner. I don’t learn by hearing and writing it down. I have to have something to relate it to” (Grace, personal communication). In addition to contextual, hands-on learning experiences, providing these girls with more opportunities to have choices in their learning honors their interests and increases their motivation.

We’re doing this book thing where we have to read a book that [our teacher] approves. They have to be award-winning or notable. I asked [her] if Stephen King counts and she said yes. I was like, “YES!” I just adore him, his books, his writing; he’s a great author. (Lea, personal communication)

These findings support the literature on twice-exceptional learning differences, suggesting that these students achieve when learning is presented from a strengths-based perspective (Baum & Olenchak, 2002; McCoach et al., 2001; Neihart, 2000).

Just as important as differentiation are the relationships that educators develop with their students and the environment that educators create in their classrooms and schools. First, when these girls feel that their learning differences are honored and supported, their motivation increases. When talking about one of her teachers, Teresa noted, “She gets that I need more time on things or notes for things if she’s going through something. On the board, she’ll give them to me, but not in a really obnoxious, obvious manner, which I appreciate” (personal communication). Second, when these girls feel that their teacher genuinely cares, they want to work harder for that teacher, and the byproduct is that they reflect upon their own learning.

She encourages us to do our best, to work hard. Especially since some of the problems don’t take a short time to do; they take some time to think about them. It makes me think about how I’m doing and if I understand what I’m learning . . . She encourages me to check over my stuff and make sure that I have it as good as I can make it. (Grace, personal communication)

Finally, these girls need an environment, in their classrooms and in their schools, that meets their unique needs and encourages them to achieve.

It’s kind of a creative school. It’s not all about math or science or reading or writing, it’s about art too. [Since moving to this school] my grades have gone up so now I feel like I am smart, and I can do more . . . I think more of the kids at this school have ADHD too, and the teachers understand that. [My English teacher] is so supportive. We have creative stories sometimes, and she says that I write really well. (Lily, personal communication)

IMPLICATIONS

There are several implications for educators of gifted girls with ADHD to help them build a positive self-concept. Practitioners should find ways to support the achievement and motivational needs of this group of girls. Professional development should be provided that helps educa-

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tors understand the unique challenges and needs of this population. These girls have perfectionist tendencies that drive them to achieve, in spite of the challenges that they face as a result

of their ADHD. Educators need to recognize this desire to succeed but also understand that this motivation is not always positive. It is important that they work with these girls and help them set reasonable and attainable goals while maintaining challenge and rigor in the classroom.

These girls tend to have a growth mindset regarding their abilities, yet research suggests that overall, girls tend to receive more person praise such as, “you are a talented writer,” focused on specific behaviors that can lead to decreased motivation (Gunderson et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important that educators offer these girls more process praise focused on their efforts and strategies that honors their hard work and perseverance. This also provides an opportunity for collaboration between schools and families in helping these girls set self-oriented goals and expectations, not only for their academic achievement, but also in their personal relationships, helping them maintain positive self-concept and self-efficacy.

Academic support can be provided simply by teachers recognizing the strengths of these girls and then using those strengths to address any academic challenges. The development of creative thinking in gifted girls with ADHD is important and consistent with findings that students who are gifted and display characteristics of ADHD have higher levels of creativity than their non-ADHD peers (Fugate et al., 2013). By implementing opportunities such as problem-based learning (Dunlap,

2005), educators are able build those creative thinking skills. The addition of research-based approaches such as curriculum compacting to classroom practice will capitalize on these girls’ interests by allowing them to pursue self-directed avenues of learning while reducing the amount of redundant homework that occurs in subjects in which the girls demonstrate giftedness, thereby decreasing chances for low self-esteem as a result of missed homework assignments. This coupled with opportunities for choice in classroom assignments and projects will help to positively motivate these girls to achieve academic success. Finally, teachers should create classroom environments that are focused on developing relationships with and among their students. This trust can be an important factor in the academic and emotional success of gifted girls with ADHD. When these girls feel that their teachers not only understand their needs, but also honor them, their motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy increase.

Finally, the results of this study have implications for the girls themselves. First and foremost, these girls should understand that they are not alone. Gifted girls with ADHD have an acute awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, information that they can use to develop self-advocacy skills. Advocating for their needs with teachers and parents can help these girls better navigate their social and academic worlds. Through self-awareness and self-advocacy, they can learn to persevere as they

face challenges of inattentiveness and experience difficulties completing tasks. Unfortunately, all too often, these girls expect perfection in themselves and from those around them. Although this perfectionism can motivate them to succeed academically, it can be also be a source of distress, particularly when they perceive others around them as not following established rules. However, this sense of social justice can be a positive tool as these girls seek opportunities to help others around them. Finally, it is important that these girls understand that although it is normal to feel a certain amount of fatigue from the frustrations that come from being gifted and having ADHD, facing these challenges and succeeding leads to the ability to achieve socially and academically.

CONCLUSION

I propose that educators stop seeing these girls as gifted and having ADHD but rather as girls who are *ADHG* (Attention Divergent Hyperactive Gifted). Such a paradigm shift would then alter the focus from their challenges as girls who are gifted and as girls with ADHD and instead, highlight their strengths, perseverance, and resilience—those qualities that make them so very special. It is my hope that more researchers in the field of giftedness will take up this mantle and help remove the cloak that has kept these girls with *ADHG* invisible for far too long.

SAVE THE
DATE!



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