

The Gifted Dyslexic: A Case Study with Theoretical and Educational Implications

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Practical problems of the gifted dyslexic are explored through a case study, that of an unusually talented craftsman who is both dyslexic and epileptic, and whose school history is reviewed and evaluated.

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How many of tomorrow's Rodins, Einsteins, and Edisons are unidentified in the current search for the gifted? Those children, whose promise is disguised behind an inability to learn to read, present unique applied, and theoretical problems; how can educators deal with the difficulties of children with special gifts, and does the occurrence of such a population have theoretical implications for understanding of giftedness in general? A case study is presented of an individual who represents a microcosm of the larger issues.

The Gifted Dyslexic: A Case Study

R.D. is a 26 year old male who suffers from petit mal epilepsy and an extreme form of dyslexia. Though all school and medical records were made available, he refused to be evaluated by this investigator; however, there is evidence that he reads, at best, a few sight words. Intelligence quotients on individual tests were always above average;

reasoning ability is apparent in his thoughtfulness and insight into problems. Language behavior is characterized by numerous syntactic oddities (always refers to a *person which*, even after correction). Vocabulary reflects some anomia and marked difficulty with initial segments of Latinate two or three syllable words (pronounces 'success' as 'uc-sess'). In contrast to his extreme language difficulty, R.D. is an accomplished, successful metalsmith; he earns his living by designing and crafting jewelry of gold, stones, and other materials. An expert at all phases of the metalsmithing process, R.D. has been the recipient of numerous prizes and awards in local, state and national juried competitions. In addition, he has been featured in several one-man shows, and served as artist in residence in area schools. R.D.'s home, which he renovated, is filled with fine pieces of furniture he built.

His early and lingering dyslexia is a source of great emotional turmoil; by his own admission he is obsessed with the inability to learn to read. The depth of emotion is clear in the poignancy of his story.

School and medical records reveal a history that may be archetypical of the gifted non-verbal person: the tragedy is that R.D. was given many years of instruction by people who were well meaning and often well educated, without success, and with a residue of anger on R.D.'s part, as well as his current obsession with the disorder. The triumph is that his talent was discovered and developed, allowing him a satisfying and creative life despite afflictions.

Born into a family characterized by early and continuing difficulty in the verbal sphere, R.D. had no unusual early history or trauma. Delayed speech and poor articulation were the harbingers of lifelong difficulties with all aspects of spoken and written language. As late as 2nd grade, R.'s teachers reported that his speech was not always comprehensible. Also characterized by slow development of coordination, R. did not master the bicycle until he was ten, and could not dress, button or tie his shoelaces until third grade.

At the age of 12, he developed epilepsy and is presently on medication for this condition. Except for abnormal EEG recordings in the left brain hemisphere, there is no evidence at this time to link R.D.'s epilepsy with his dyslexia. However, researchers (1979) recently described the brain abnormalities of a developmental dyslexic, who was also a metalsmith, and epileptic.

At 14, when seen by a neurologist, R.D. still had difficulty reproducing some designs, read at second grade level with errors, could repeat five digits forward and three backward, was ambidextrous with confused laterality, finger agnosia, abnormal EEG recordings, a convulsive disorder, and generalized cerebral disturbance.

What of R.D.'s education? No stranger to remedial reading classes, he was given special instruction in school, summer school, a summer camp run by a famous *expert*, and tutoring at the most respected private clinic

in his city. He was exposed to every method: sight words, phonics, *linguistic* readers, Fernald, VAKT, ITA, experience stories, drill cards, etc. His teachers repeatedly commented that R.D. could understand and learn the contents of materials he could not read; they also noted his continuing effort in the face of incredible frustration.

Ultimately, it was R.D.'s own strength, intelligence, talent, and perseverance that led him to decide the direction of his own education, which he pursued with the assistance of school people, family, friends, and craftspeople at various centers. After deciding to become a jewelry maker, he apprenticed to a master metalsmith; years of disciplined training resulted in the ability to produce beautiful works of art, a fine home for himself, and a generally satisfying life. He is, however, still plagued with the emotional residue of the dyslexia and epilepsy, as well as the corollary physical and functional problems.

R.D.'s allegory teaches several morals: ways must be found to identify promise in non-academic children; it is essential to accept and understand their forms of giftedness; there is no *gifted* mold into which people of promise can be poured; *early* identification dooms the R.D.'s of the world to *waste their sweetness in the desert air* of inappropriate educational settings.

R.D.'s own words offer a direction toward the solution:

Do watch for the *slow or quiet or inarticulate* child and do all those things to try to determine if and how much *dyslexia* is a problem.

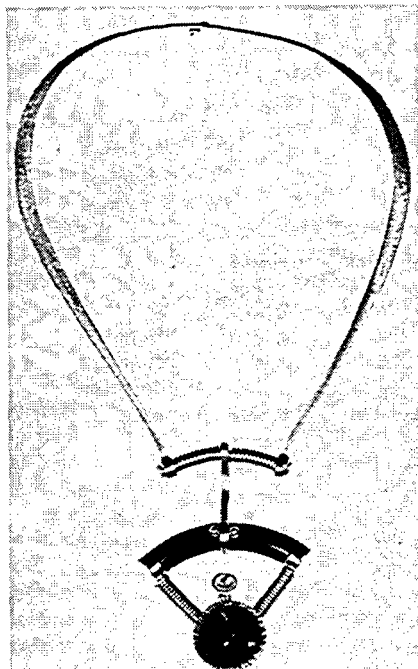
Having made a diagnosis, ***do not* make learning to read the central focus of their education. Take his or her other abilities — visual or tactile or whatever and work with them and let the language come. More often than not, my school records show that I worked for the person who took the time to reach me. Patience, understanding, and loving were far more important than dogma. Do not keep insisting that they *try a little harder to read*. In my case, that was like asking a blind person to try a little harder to see. The frustration that that engenders is overwhelming, and, as you can see, is more of a problem for me today than illiteracy.**

It is important to realize that the dyslexic person is not *disabled*, but *disadvantaged*. They need a special kind of help from a special kind of person in finding what they do best as alternatives to written expression. They need compassion, concern, and the kind of special insight that can help them recognize, value, and use the full dimensions of their being instead of feeling forever inadequate.

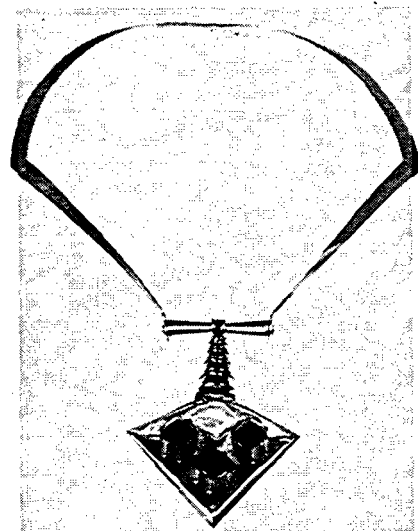
I have experienced firsthand the anguish, despair, and utter frustration of the inarticulate child who cannot tell the literate person that literacy is not the only level on which he exists; that he is a whole person with many ways of giving and receiving information other than reading

and writing, and that the social environment demand for functional literacy tends to overshadow all the other potentials that an individual may possess . . . The essence of my message is that functional literacy is not the only measure of an individual and never was. My argument is with the world of education which tends sometimes to forget the relative narrowness of its focus and thereby does some of us a grave disservice.

(This quote was edited for syntax and pronunciation; the original statement was tape recorded.)



R.D.'s current work



Evidence of giftedness and creativity

Implications for a Theory of Giftedness

Giftedness still has not been well defined; many educational conflicts result from this lack of clarity. Is

giftedness a unitary or a multiple phenomenon? The utilization of IQ and achievement scores for selection of gifted children operate from the unitary base; *giftedness* results from having faster development in the components of IQ and achievement scores. Much evidence supports this concept of the global nature of talent: research has consistently shown that the IQ score is a pervasive measure which influences performance on a wide variety of tasks; certainly this is evidence in favor of the unitary explanation of giftedness.

However, cases like R.D. force reconsideration of the notion that giftedness is a factor which can be measured by intelligence scores; cases like this provide support for the notion that many types of giftedness coexist, that talent is asymmetrically divided within and among individuals. This kind of dramatic evidence, bolstered by emerging research on differential localization of disparate functions in the brain, leads to the conclusion that talent has many faces, and therefore gifted children cannot be chosen by any one score or matrix.

R.D.'s life would have been easier and less painful, and the cost of his education more wisely spent, had his potential been identified early; however, slow motor development and weakness in drawing obscured his talents until he was about twelve years old. The art of finding the potentially gifted in non-academic endeavors is still so crude that there simply was no way the talents of R.D. could have been identified early in his life. Other talents, for example, dance ability, also are difficult to discern in young children, while music appears to blossom young; therefore the identification process must not only be differentiated for the various areas of talent; these processes probably differ in optimum timing as well. As R.D. noted in his own remarks, the sensitivity of teachers, parents, and mentors is the only selection tool presently available for non-academic talents.

For the talented dyslexic child, education without literacy must be considered; resources must not be wasted on repetitive instruction for failure, but must instead be allocated so that time and energy is also devoted to full development of the nonverbal gifts of learning disabled gifted youngsters. This requires a profoundly different structure to the school program, perhaps early internship and mentorships, creativity training, and use of media, etc.

For those who are verbally gifted, literacy education is the priority (Mindell and Stracher, 1980); but those whose gifts lie in other spheres should not be overlooked; they are entitled to a free, appropriate public education that will bring forth their talents to benefit themselves and society.

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