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Roots and Wings

Smart Kids with School Problems

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There are only two things we can give our children: One is roots; the other is wings.

If the elementary school's soil is fertile and its atmosphere inviting, a child can put down academic roots and take wing into the world of ideas. Unfortunately, though, in a school climate that is perfectly suitable for most children, some promising children may not be able to develop healthy roots and wings.

I call such bright but puzzling students “conundrum kids.” They are intelligent and talented, but nevertheless they struggle and often fail because their learning styles and developmental timetables do not match the materials, methods, or sequences of a standard curriculum.

A pattern common to conundrum kids is wide swings of performance, which frequently stem from variation in learning styles. The frustrated learner may have a distinct strength in one type of learning and a pronounced weakness in another. A student with a natural affinity for numbers may be a weak reader, for example. Or a student whose complicated Lego structures show an intuitive grasp of engineering may be quite inarticulate.

Highs and lows can even occur within a single learning system:

- In the visual learning system, a talented art student may have trouble recognizing printed letters or words.
- In the motor system, an exquisitely coordinated athlete may have barely legible handwriting.
- In the auditory learning system, a student with perfectly good hearing may not remember oral instructions.
- In the language system, a student who speaks fluently may have trouble organizing written work or comprehending written text.

A Case Study of a Conundrum Kid

Allen, one student with such an uneven profile of capabilities, was a discouraged fifth grader whose work had been deteriorating since the middle of third grade. In the early years at home and as a nursery school and kindergarten student, Allen had been a physically adventurous, friendly boy who preferred action to words. His outstanding physical coordination and innate sense of fair play made him a natural leader. He was proud to be a line leader, passed out the snacks and poured the juice skillfully, and built imaginative structures with blocks. He showed very little interest, though, in listening to stories and playing with rhymes, riddles or other word games.

In first and second grades, Allen was a happy boy who enjoyed math manipulatives and showed keen interest in numbers. He was in the middle reading group and did satisfactory work in phonics.

In third grade, however, the reading requirements advanced beyond decoding words. As reading became the primary tool for learning, it required more speed, wider vocabulary, and accurate inference. Allen dropped farther and farther behind. Math, too, was increasingly perplexing. Gone were the Cuisenaire rods and Dienes' blocks. In their place loomed the symbolism of flash cards and word problems, a far cry from spatial learning through manipulatives. Allen started biting his nails. By February, his fingers were often bloody.

In fourth grade, a science textbook replaced hands-on experiments. In social studies, students were expected to read long selections about colonial America and to write book reports or stories about life in eighteenth century Massachusetts. Allen started "losing" his homework and disrupting library periods.

By fifth grade Allen was getting in fights and had sunk to the bottom of his class in all subjects. His parents were by turns angry, fearful, defensive and accusatory. His teachers were irritated, discouraged and pessimistic.

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Worst of all, Allen was losing faith in himself. As his self-concept disintegrated, he retreated farther and farther into the shadows of avoidance.

Caught in a Pushme-Pullyou conflict, Allen's principal at first tried to sympathize with each point of view without betraying anyone. When the problem remained unresolved, the principal urged a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation. Allen's parents reacted apprehensively. "Testing will only make him think there's something wrong with him," they said.

"Something is wrong," the principal replied. "We have a virtual shut-down. If we find out why, we might be able to help." And that is just what happened.

The evaluation found Allen to be a very intelligent boy with strong spatial capability. He showed great potential in science, athletics, engineering, sculpture, interpersonal skills and mathematics. On the negative side, Allen was distinctly weak in the receptive and expressive language necessary for listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Children with receptive language trouble tend to misinterpret what they hear. They avoid listening whenever possible, which is hardly surprising since for them, learning through listening is unproductive and frustrating.

Maladroit listeners do not develop the visceral familiarity with language that is vital to fluency, so they become poor readers. Reading is, after all,

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listening with the eyes; it is one step more complicated than listening with the ears because visual images must be perceived and then mentally translated to sound.

Since receptive language ability controls and predicts the quality of the expressive functions—you can speak and write no better than you listen and read—the patterns of Allen's academic history made perfect sense. In nursery school and kindergarten, where Allen had been successful, his receptive language deficits had gone unnoticed. The only hints of impending trouble were his lack of interest in stories and word games.

In first and second grades, Allen had natural ability in the tactile math manipulatives, and he enjoyed them. He was also able to manage phonics

adequately, since at beginning levels, phonics is a kind of manipulative for reading, and the workbooks demand only the simplest comprehension.

By third grade, though, the undetected language weakness was gnawing away at Allen's achievement in every subject. His weak inferential ability undercut reading comprehension, and a weak language base made it difficult for him to deal with word problems in math. He also had to contend with flash cards, a verbal form of rote memory drill that was far more difficult for him than spatial manipulatives.

As symbolic work came to dominate the curriculum in fourth and fifth grades, Allen's opportunities to work in his areas of strength virtually vanished. At the same time, the school's academic expectations called for him to deliver increasing volume and complexity in his area of greatest weakness. Allen's shallow roots could no longer sustain him, and his wings had begun to atrophy.

The apparent change in Allen was illusory. He remained consistent. His discouragement and misbehavior were predictable psychological responses to the reorientation of external events.

Working with Words

On the advice of the evaluator, Allen's parents, teachers, and principal—and Allen himself—all cooperated in an effort to get his schooling back on track without turning the school upside down.

First, Allen needed a program of language therapy. He needed practice looking for marker words, such as *if*, *unless*, *until*, *although* and *whenever*. Weak readers often miss these cues and consequently misinterpret what they read. They may then get wrong answers on a math word problem not because they cannot do the math, but because they misread the problem.

Allen's three-times-weekly program also helped him plug other linguistic holes. To expand his supply of labels and to help him become more adept at categorizing and comparing, he was taught to analyze and construct figures of speech, similes, and metaphors. To improve his ability to use one word in two senses, Allen practiced with homonyms, puns and riddles. He also learned to use his spatial skills to assemble and

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After a few months of individual language therapy, Allen was ready to work in a classroom group. Interestingly, attention to Allen's deficits led his teacher to discover similar weaknesses in many other students. Allen's group expanded, and Word Working time became a favorite part of the day.

As Allen worked to remediate his disability, his parents offered their active support. Together, the family began listening to books on tape. They also watched the news together, afterward discussing what they had seen and encouraging Allen to attach words to whatever he found interesting. When Allen asked to enroll in a summer sculpture program, his parents readily agreed, realizing that it would give him a chance to exploit his strengths, to stretch his wings.

Accommodation, Not Mollycoddling

At school, Allen's case touched off some exciting curriculum modifications that have been helpful to the students, faculty and learning climate.

The process was set in motion when the principal scheduled a series of three meetings. At the first, the learning specialist who had conducted Allen's evaluation explained learning styles and demonstrated how strength in one area, masked by weakness in another, can result in bright children having mild to severe school problems.

At the second session, a workshop, the learning specialist and faculty worked on case studies, looking for specific combinations of strengths and weaknesses. This raised the consciousness of the faculty, leaving them alert to causative patterns beneath the surface.

At the third session, the teachers and principal brainstormed and found teaching strategies, methods and materials that could accommodate different learning styles without diluting curriculum content.

For example, one teacher recalled a detailed diorama of Eskimo culture that Allen had made in third grade—the same year he had been unable to organize an acceptable written book report. That recollection spurred teachers to expand the way they measure mastery; instead of always relying on written reports and tests, students may sometimes prepare visual or performing exhibitions.

Another teacher, remembering how Allen had kept a soccer league bar

graph in second grade, helped convince social studies teachers that they could incorporate more nonverbal elements into their teaching: graphs, models, pictures and visual aids. The teachers recommended that hands-on science demonstrations precede textbook readings whenever possible. In math, the faculty decided to extend the use of manipulatives through grade nine and to include geometric concepts and exercises as often as possible. Four teachers volunteered to set up a math lab if the principal could find space and money for materials. Done!

As Allen's case shows, reversing a child's downward spiral can turn spirals upward for all concerned. The adaptations made in his school's curriculum are a far cry from mollicoddling. They simply take varying learning styles into account and give more students the chance to succeed.

Educators need to provide such a variety of ways to learn if all children are to develop their roots and wings. Roots of talent, like Allen's spatial abilities, need to be nurtured, or they will wither. When roots are not growing well, they need the kind of deliberate cultivation that Allen's weak language roots got. Children cannot, by themselves, grow out of such weaknesses: they just learn to hide them.

And wings? Well, some take wing via words or concepts, other through pictures or objects. The sooner we learn to teach in ways that allow all wings to stretch and soar, the better job we will do for every child's education.

Priscilla L. Vail was an educator active in the fields of learning disabilities and dyslexia. A prolific writer, she published many articles on the teaching of gifted learning disabled students. This article was previously published in The Parents League Review in 1989 and originally appeared in Principal Magazine.