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Students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD

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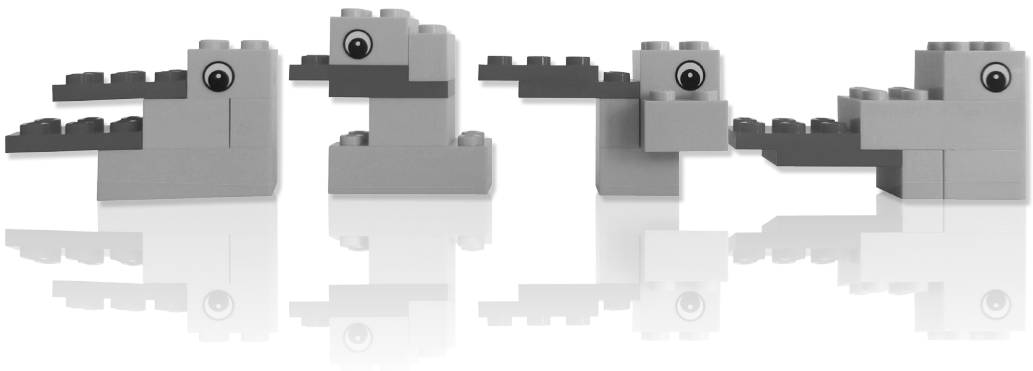
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction



Introduction

Growing insight

The onset of this dissertation emerged from my psycho-educational private practice at the beginning of this century. In practice, I was often confronted with Intellectually Gifted (IG) children and youngsters who suffered from problems with learning at school and/or social interactions with peers. The prevailing idea among professionals was that such problems were primarily related to underachievement and the absence of intellectual peers of these gifted students. This raised doubt, because the learning and social problems of these students seemed rather similar to symptoms and behaviours related to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (Burger-Veltmeijer, 2003). The question arose what differentiated IG-students with merely social problems from IG-students with co-occurring ASD. A preliminary literature search (Burger-Veltmeijer, 2006a) supported my experience that the combination of giftedness and ASD was difficult to diagnose correctly. Biased identifications of students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD, resulting in mislabelling or missed labelling, seemed to be due to various interrelated causes, such as: similar behavioural characteristics of IG and ASDs, one-sided experience of professionals in either giftedness or ASDs and the mutual camouflaging effect of IG- and ASD characteristics (Barber, 1996; Cash, 1999; Donnelly & Altman, 1994; Gallagher & Gallagher, 2002; Grandin, 1992; Henderson, 2001; Little, 2002; Neihart, 2000). Moreover, it became clear that the boundary between giftedness with and without ASD was not clear-cut. It appeared that the two conditions were situated at both ends of a continuous line, with 'giftedness plus social problems' positioned somewhere in between. This was consistent with the idea that social skills and cognitive styles of autism manifest themselves on a continuum (Baron-Cohen & Hammer, 1997; Baron-Cohen, Ring, Wheelwright, Bullmore, Brammer, Simmons, & Williams, 1999; Baron-Cohen, 2000; Baron-Cohen, Ashwin, Ashwin, Tavassoli, & Chakrabarti, 2009; Gillberg, 1992; Happé, 1999; Lawson, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, 2004) and implied the existence of a grey zone between giftedness with and without ASD (Burger-Veltmeijer, 2007).

So far, this resulted in the development of the preliminary theoretical differential model in the following successive stages: the Discrepancy-Continuum Model GFT+ASD (Burger-Veltmeijer & Peters, 2004), the Dimensional Discrepancy Model GFT+ASD (DD-Model) (Burger-Veltmeijer, 2006b; 2007) and subsequently the Extended Dimensional Discrepancy Model GFT+ASD (DD Model II) (Burger-Veltmeijer, 2008, 2009). The interested reader is referred to Appendix A for further details.

The construction of this model was a first theoretical step to provide theoretical guidelines to psycho-educational praxis. It needed further exploration and development. Moreover, the underlying literature search was restricted to articles published before

2005. It was methodologically limited, because of the narrow scope of search terms used, and because up till then the relatively few discussions of IG+ASD mainly appeared in non-peer-reviewed publications and were limited by lack of systematic data collection and statistical analysis (Huber, 2007).

The aforementioned implication and limitations were the point of departure of this dissertation. The current thesis was aimed at a systematic exploration of the phenomenon IG+ASD in relation to psycho-educational assessment praxis. Accordingly, it starts with a systematic literature review regarding the state of the art of the theoretical and empirical knowledge of the Twice-Exceptionality (TE) of Intellectual Giftedness and Autism Spectrum Disorders (IG+ASD), in relation to diagnostic and assessment issues. Subsequently, the Strengths and Weaknesses Heuristic (*S&W Heuristic*) was developed, in which the aforementioned DD Model II was more or less incorporated (see chapter 3).

It gradually appeared that the answer to the initial question regarding the differentiation between IG with ASD and IG with merely social problems was to find in the difference between classification-based and needs-based assessment purposes. That is, if one stops searching for the label(s) IG, ASD or IG+ASD and instead starts analysing the individual Strengths (Ss) and Weaknesses (Ws) regarding the various relevant (neuro)cognitive, didactic, and social-emotional dimensions that might underlie and influence the problematic learning and social-emotional behaviours, it might pave the way to the recognition of and solutions for special psycho-educational needs of individual students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD.

General purpose

This dissertation is aimed at understanding the phenomenon of the twice-exceptionality IG+ASD in relation to psycho-educational assessment praxis, especially concerning the difference between classification-based and needs-based assessment purposes. The research questions of the theoretical parts were focused at (characteristic) appearances of IG+ASD as well as on how students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD could be assessed in psycho-educational assessment praxis. This resulted in the Strengths and Weaknesses Heuristic (*S&W Heuristic*).

Subsequently, in the empirical studies, the research questions were focused on how assessments were performed in psycho-educational practices, whether they were consistent with the theoretical principles of the *S&W Heuristic*, and whether there seemed to be any necessity of optimisation of assessment trajectories in psycho-educational practice.

Outline of the chapters

In chapter 2, the state of the art review regarding the phenomenon IG+ASD was explored in relation to identification and diagnostic and assessment issues, by means of a systematic literature review among dissertations and publications in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Publications were compared regarding definitions, identification criteria, assessment issues and (possible similar, differential, or camouflaging) characteristics of IG+ASD.

In chapter 3, the following question was faced: How can clinical and psycho-educational theory and praxis, regarding assessments and intervention indications of students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD, be tuned to each other in such a way that biased assessments can be reduced, and that a grounded interconnection between assessment and intervention indications can be realised? This resulted in the construction of a theoretical framework for the benefit of Needs-Based Assessment processes, called the Strengths and Weaknesses Heuristic (*S&W Heuristic*).

In chapter 4, the objective of the study was the onset of the validation process of the *S&W Heuristic*. The purpose was to evaluate whether assessments in psycho-educational practice were consistent with the theoretical principles of the *S&W Heuristic* and whether there seemed to be any necessity of optimisation of assessments trajectories in psycho-educational practice. The leading question became: Do diagnosticians in various psycho-educational organisations, arrange assessment processes of IG students with(out) characteristics of ASD in a systematic unbiased dimensional needs-based way, in accordance with the basic principles of the *S&W Heuristic*?

In chapter 5, the validation process of the *S&W Heuristic* was continued with in-depth case descriptions of three assessment dossiers of IG-students who displayed signals of ASD-traits in the intake-stage of their assessment procedure. Assessment-dossiers were searched for the presence of both *Bias*, that is one-sidedness in choices and translations regarding Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as *Systematicity*, that is the dimensional nature of thinking and justification from the intake stage till the advice stage.

Finally, chapter 6 provides the summarised and general conclusions, as well as some reflections and implications for future research.

