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Students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD

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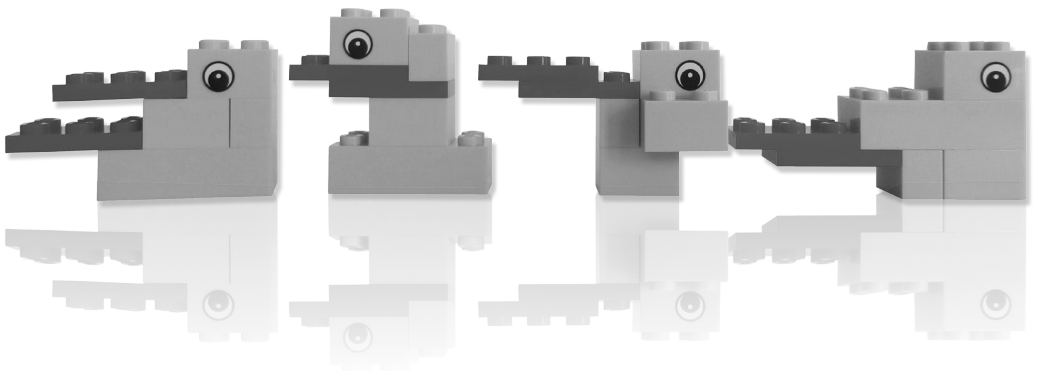
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Summary



The central objective of this thesis was the exploration of the phenomenon Intellectual Giftedness in co-occurrence with Autism Spectrum Disorder (IG+ASD) in relation to psycho-educational assessment praxis, especially concerning the difference between classification-based and needs-based assessment purposes. The theoretical parts in the chapters 2 and 3 were focused at characteristic traits of IG+ASD as well as on how students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD could be assessed in psycho-educational praxis. This resulted in the Strengths and Weaknesses Heuristic (*S&W Heuristic*). Subsequently, the empirical studies were focused on how assessments were actually 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.

In chapter 2, the state of the art regarding the phenomenon IG+ASD was explored 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. On the basis of an extensive analysis of possible IG+ASD characteristics, there appeared to be a slight trend that personal characteristics out of the following clusters might rather regularly be present in individuals with IG+ASD: Uneven development, superior non-verbal abilities, social issues, verbal/language issues, issues regarding executive functions, memory issues and hypersensitivity. Furthermore, it appeared that the diagnostic and/or assessment suggestions could roughly be divided into two categories: i.e. *Classification-based* suggestions, aimed at differentiation between IG and ASD and/or identification of IG+ASD, and *Needs-based* suggestions, in which the assessment process is not primarily aimed at labelling, but rather at recommendations for educational and/or psychological interventions. The literature review revealed the lack of a profoundly developed conceptualisation of IG+ASD, and its diagnostic and assessment issues.

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 prototype of the Strengths and Weaknesses Heuristic, the *S&W Heuristic*, which was built on three theoretical fundaments: 1. The (clusters of) characteristics that stood out in the literature review (chapter 2) serve as dimensions that can be assessed comprehensively. As such, assessment departs from possible IG+ASD characteristics, instead of IG-characteristics apart from ASD-characteristics, as seemed customary until then. 2. Biased assessments can be reduced if assessments are primarily focused

at the identification of individual S&W profiles within the aforementioned dimensions, and subsequently, if still necessary, at the identification of categorical labels such as IG, ASD or IG+ASD. This is opposite to common psycho-educational practice, in which the label merely precedes and determines the intervention indications. 3. Biased intervention indications can be reduced if the assessment outcomes, that is the individual identified S&Ws, are *translated* per dimension into Special Psycho-Educational Needs (SPENs). Special means here ‘adapted to the individual student’. The SPENs might be conflicting and lead to controversial intervention indications, because of possible large discrepancies between Ss and Ws of individual students. This should not be neglected but creatively integrated into a psycho-educational individual plan.

In chapter 4, the objective of the study was the onset of the validation process of the *S&W Heuristic*. 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*? A total of 36 assessment dossiers were analysed in various psycho-educational practices. It turned out that in the intake stage and investigation stage of assessment procedures, characteristics out of the ASD-cluster *Inadequate reciprocal social interactions* were present rather often. The continuous line of this dimension was ignored, however, in a rather large amount of dossiers, which is not in accordance with the systematic dimensional principles of the *S&W Heuristic*. Furthermore, the disregard of characteristics of other ASD-clusters, in case of presence of the cluster *Inadequate reciprocal social interactions*, indicated the possibility of missed signals of ASD-characteristics among IG-students. Moreover, a rather large amount of the dossiers generally revealed the absence of systematic continuous translations of data from intake stage into investigation stage into indication stage, especially in dossiers with at least a needs-based purpose. All of this indicated a trend that a rather large number of the assessments of IG students with(out) characteristics of ASD might not be arranged in a systematic dimensional need-based way, according to the basic principles of the *S&W Heuristic*. The analysis did not particularize, however, what the possible *biased* performances and *unsystematic* dimensional nature looked like. Therefore, the validation process had to be continued with in-depth case analyses.

Chapter 5 provides this further step in the empirical validation of the *S&W Heuristic* by means of in-depth descriptions of three assessment dossiers (out of the sample of 36 dossiers) of IG-students who displayed signals of ASD-traits in the intake stage of their assessment procedure. The assessment dossiers were searched for the presence of: 1. *Bias*, that is one-sidedness in choices and translations regarding Ss and Ws; 2. *Systematicity*, that is the dimensional way of thinking and justification from the intake stage till the

advice stage of an assessment process. The in-depth analysis was specifically focused on the two translation moments in respectively the strategy stage and the indication stage, since these seemed to be crucial for potential bias and lack of systematicity. It turned out that in two of the three dossiers, bias and unsystematicity seemed to commence at the very beginning of the assessment processes in the strategy stage. This means that the assessment process lacks a leading systematic which seemed to have resulted in haphazardly selected assessment instruments, one-sided interpretations of investigation data and haphazardly recommended interventions. In these assessments, the use of the systematicity of the *S&W Heuristic* might have prevented the diagnosticians from the rather unsystematic and biased translations in the indication stage of the assessment processes.

So far, it may be concluded that a substantial number of assessment processes in our sample were inconsistent with the theoretical principles of systematicity and reduction of bias. It turned out in chapters 4 and 5 that the use of the systematicity of the *S&W Heuristic* might have prevented the diagnosticians from the rather unsystematic and biased translations in the strategy stage and the indication stage of the assessment processes. Hence, it was suggested that the *S&W Heuristic* seems to pave the way for systematicity and less bias in assessment processes.

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

The general conclusion was, that there appears to be no empirically grounded theoretical conceptualisation of the phenomenon IG+ASD as a unified entity other than that it is a co-existence of behavioural characteristics of giftedness next to those of ASD. Moreover, no hard evidence was found for the existence of the camouflaging effect of IG-characteristics and ASD-characteristics. Gradually, the insight appeared that the phenomenon IG+ASD might not need to have a unified definition, nor narrowly defined identification criteria, as long as assessments of students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD were not primarily aimed at dual and differential categorical diagnoses, but rather at Special Psycho-Educational Needs (SPENs). In that case, the essence of the phenomenon IG+ASD might not comprise the category 'IG+ASD', but rather the construct '(suspicion of) IG+ASD'. This construct is open to needs-based assessment because of the subdivision in (neuro)cognitive, didactic and social-emotional dimensions, that might underlie and explain the (problematic) learning and social behaviours of individual students with (suspicion of) IG+ASD. Moreover, it implies the existence of a 'grey zone' between IG with and without ASD. In this way, it does not a priori exclude (the possibility of) individuals with possible camouflaged IG- and/or ASD-characteristics.

It was discussed, that The *S&W Heuristic* might help to explore the phenomenon Camouflage in theoretical studies, and detect and reduce camouflage in psycho-educational praxis, because it might provide solutions to the three central conditions that are related to camouflage, which are: 1. The existence of similar characteristics between IG, ASD and IG+ASD, such as ‘absorbing interests’, ‘precocious language’ or ‘interaction problems with peers’. 2. Characteristics of IG and ASD might mutually modify each other. That is, Weaknesses might obscure or increase Strengths and vice versa. 3. One-sided training and experience of professionals, such as teachers or diagnosticians.

Finally, it was suggested that future research makes use of the *S&W Heuristic* to study the following: Possible subgroups of IG-students such as camouflaged ones; the exploration of effective interventions in psycho-educational assessment praxis; studies regarding Twice Exceptionalities in general; and last but not least further validation of the *S&W Heuristic* itself. Implementation of dynamic use of a practice-friendly format of the S&W Heuristic in curriculum programs for professionals seems to be required. An example is shown in Appendix B.