

The Relationship between Giftedness and Learning Issues

SchwabLearning.org asks:

We hear frequently about children who are extremely bright yet also have learning difficulties. Can you explain how talents or giftedness can be masked by learning problems? Conversely, can learning difficulties be masked by talents or giftedness?

Priscilla Vail, M.A.T. Answers:

It is honorable and generous-spirited of Charles Schwab to publicize his dyslexia. Such knowledge goes a long way to swab the decks, hosing down and mopping away misconceptions about different learning styles, intelligence, and success.

In my parlance, "making whoopi" means having fun and celebrating. Hooray for Whoopi Goldberg for letting her zest for life bubble through her self-confessed dyslexia.

"Lightening," so nicknamed by his classmates because he worked so slowly, needed extra time to finish his homework, never completed the essay questions on his exams, and his stomach must be filled with rubber from all the pencil erasers he bit off and swallowed taking math tests. Yet he won the state-wide high school poetry contest when he was only in 10th grade and went on to be published in four national magazines before graduating in the middle of his class. This articulate, athletic, intelligent boy (who chooses to remain anonymous) is both gifted and dyslexic. He is a slow, though thoughtful, reader whose laborious handwriting slows down his output in classroom tests or exams and whose rote memory is far weaker than his capacity for generating imagery.

Until recently, the idea that school problems and giftedness could conceal one another was too paradoxical for general acceptance. But that was long ago. Maybe.

Conundrum kids have irregular patterns of successes and difficulties that present a puzzle to traditional educators. Those who were understood and helped along the way may have succeeded as have Charles Schwab, Whoopi Goldberg, and "Lightening." But when talented kids who have trouble in school are only recognized for their inadequacies, they may turn against themselves, schooling, or society in general. Or they may chose quiet concealment.

I think of Charlie, a doorman in a modest New York City apartment building, whose attempts to cover up a problem nearly cost him his job. A tenant who admired Charlie's combination of quick mind and high energy had always wondered why he wasn't running a downtown law firm or claiming some other high achievement ground. Selfishly, she was glad of his service capacity but puzzled.

One day, she was expecting a piece of mail vital for the job she was working on at her computer upstairs. Not wanting to interrupt her project, she called downstairs and asked Charlie if he would sift through the morning's mail, find her letter, and bring it up. He put her off by saying the mail sorter hadn't come in yet. His job was to watch the door, and he shouldn't be responsible for other people's work. She lost her temper. "Darn it, Charlie. I gave you a big tip last winter. Now I just need a little favor, and you won't help me out. What's the matter with you anyway?"

She snatched her coat from the hook, punched the elevator button, stormed out at the lobby floor, flinging her words at him. "Where's the mail? I'll do it myself. This isn't going to help you out at the Board meeting."

"I'm sorry. I'd do it if I could. Really."

His tone of voice made her look at him. Head hanging low and shaking from side to side, he repeated, "I'm sorry. I'd do it if I could. Really."

"Oh my gosh, Charlie. You can't read?"

"Nope. Never could."

"How did you get through school?"

