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Educating the Autistic: What Works?

by Richard P. Phelps

***Students with Autism: How to Improve Language, Literacy, and Academic Success**, Katharine Beals, John Catt Educational, 2022, pp. 264, $15.00 softcover.*

The concept of autism is not precise. It is a "spectrum of symptom intensity," a "spectrum of severity across multiple dimensions," and a "heterogeneity ... of different levels and types of challenges in language, literacy, and learning." "On the spectrum" is the popular way of saying that autism is not a single thing but, rather, an amalgam of several interrelated and confounding factors.[1]

At one time, it seemed that autism fit well classified among human disabilities then, confusingly, it also seemed to bestow super abilities. For example, didn't the autistic Dustin Hoffman character with the extraordinary memory in the film *Rain Man* break the bank in a Las Vegas casino? Moreover, aren't the quirky autistic-adjacent characters in television's *Big Bang Theory* funny and adorable, in addition to being extra smart? These sympathetic portrayals may assure us that autism is nothing to be afraid of and autistic individuals share most in common with the rest of us.

But also, partly because autism is difficult for many of us to understand, it can be exploited. There's the vaccine-causes-autism hoax, with a recent revival of interest from among COVID-19 vaccine skeptics. Then there's "facilitated communication," an arm dance in which a "facilitator"—typically a parent—holds an autistic individual's hand (or elbow, or shoulder, or the keyboard itself) while an autistic person's index finger pokes a keyboard, allegedly releasing the latent communication ability inherent in a non-speaking autistic individual.

Of course, autism is relevant to higher education. There are autistic students, professors, and staff. Academic institutions conduct much, if not most, autism research. That research can be found crossing many academic field boundar-

ies in the hard and social sciences and even in the arts and music.

In *Students with Autism: How to Improve Language, Literacy, and Academic Success*, linguist, autism parent, professor, and software developer Katharine Beals addresses these larger public policy issues while maintaining the thread of an instructional manual for educating students with autism.

Autistic children do better in school when both instruction and the physical environment are straightforward and unadorned. Perhaps Katharine Beals has internalized that message. Her book, too, is well-organized, sequential, easy-to-understand, and clearly written. The first two chapters define autism and explain why and how autistic individuals have trouble adapting to a society mostly organized by the non-autistic, and that the non-autistic can easily misunderstand autistic behaviors.

Chapters three to six advise what to do—how to teach autistic students, with an overarching emphasis on language and communication: chapter three—directing attention and breaking things down; chapter four—the importance of grammar and how to teach it; chapter five—broadening comprehension and literacy; and chapter six—universal instructional techniques and programs that benefit autistic students.

For those educators who can manage to teach autistic students directly, Beals writes *Consumer Reports*-like evaluations of methods, devices, and programs that work best (or worse) with autistic students in these chapters. Unfortunately, not all educators are able to teach autistic students in the ways that work best for them.

We tend to believe that everything has gotten better for those we used to call disabled. There are the legislative victories (ADA, IDEA, etc.); the wider public acknowledgement and acceptance of individuals with physical disabilities or cognitive differences; and the "mainstreaming" of many of those individuals into the common, more popular flows of public life.

Perhaps because of complacency inspired by that assumption of progress, however, some aspects of autistic lives have gotten worse, particularly in education. For decades, educators have tussled between two polar theories of instruction, generally called traditional and progressive. Most older citizens remember traditional instruction—teacher-centered, chalk-and-talk, sage on the stage, kids in rows, etc. The now more-prevalent progressive instruction—student-centered, teacher as guide on the side, kids grouped in circles, project-based learning—prioritizes students' constructing or discovering their own knowledge.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 centralized testing requirements nationally and required testing of all students—even those in special education—with a common measure. A decade later, the Common Core Standards superimposed a single set of progressive standards onto the NCLB accountability structure.

Two groups of students were most negatively affected by progressive education's victory. Both socioeconomically disadvantaged and autistic students arrive at elementary school with the smallest base of prior academic knowledge from which to build and most in need of acquiring new knowledge, which traditional instructional methods deliver quicker. With its emphasis on multiple methods to solve problems, group collaboration, and explaining your answer, Common Core made learning slower and more confusing, and made math more verbal, thereby negating an advantage common to many autistic students.[2]

Beals calls autistic students the "canaries in the coal mine" for progressive ed's fuzziness. Research has shown that so-called direct instructional methods—clear, step-by-small-step, and sequential instruction leading to mastery—works best for most students but is exceptionally better for the autistic and the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

This contrast between mainstream education instructional fashion and what works best for autistic students leads naturally into chapter 7 and the tragedy of the Ouija-board-like mechanics of facilitated communication (FC) and its predation on parents of the minimally speaking autistic.[3] Common sense and a series of double-blind experiments in the 1990s betrayed the facilitator (typically a parent) as responsible for the actual composition of FC text.[4] But hope springs eternal among those who wish to believe (or earn salaries from FC programs). Though still unsupported by several relevant medical associations,[5] FC has re-emerged phoenix-like with new variants attracting new converts and new attention, including live demonstrations on popular television shows.[6]

Beals suspects the newfound popularity due to FC advocates' stubborn resistance to validity testing. The double-blind experiments of the 1990s weren't helpful to their cause. But, instead of new testing on FC's new variants, such as the Rapid Prompting Method and Spelling to Communicate programs, advocates now argue that validity testing itself is invalid and steadfastly avoid objective testing.[7]

Still, always, the "facilitee" must be accompanied by their facilitator. If, in fact, the autistic individual truly originates the sometimes lengthy and eloquent text without being "cued," shouldn't they at times or to some degree be able to communicate without their facilitator nearby?

Not one to gaslight the issue, the author provides a very long list of FC advocates and organizations. Anyone desiring to learn the other side of the story will have no difficulty finding it. At the end of the chapter, Beals recommends alternative instructional programs, techniques, and devices for the severely communication constrained autistic.

Perhaps not wishing to end her book on a down note, Beals' final two chapters emphasize the positive. Chapter eight suggests ways that some autistic characteristics, such as intense focus on detail, preference for order, perfectionism, and rote memorization can sometimes be

used in instruction to compensate for learning deficits elsewhere. Of course, autistic talents and predilections can lead to independent futures, too. Who hasn't heard of the autistic son, daughter, niece, or nephew now happily designing circuits or flow charts or coding software?

The final chapter discusses autism's place in the wider world: autistics' understanding of and interaction with others; who should represent autistics' needs and interests, particularly those of the more severely autistic; and the confusing place of autism in the current neurodiversity movement. The well-intentioned desire to celebrate autism as an identity for able individuals who can speak and fend for themselves may shortchange the more severely autistic who genuinely desire or need help and accommodation. It's a spectrum, after all.

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