

A Question About Processing Speed

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An admissions director called me the other day to talk about an evaluation that he had received for a tenth grader whom the school wanted to accept. He described the candidate as being a terrific young man who is verbal, curious, and social. Math was an area of strength; he was artistic, musical, and a fairly decent athlete—the kind of student who

would add to the community in many ways.

He went on to say that on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—Fourth Edition (WISC-IV) the student's IQ scores were:

Verbal Comprehension 115, Perceptual Reasoning 123, Working Memory 109, and Processing Speed 83. He wanted to know what would make the processing speed score so low, and how at risk this young man would be in a competitive independent school. The evaluation did not provide that information and he needed some clarification and advice.

Processing speed on the WISC-IV is designed to measure how quickly one can complete simple, timed cognitive tasks using pencil and paper. The two subtests require visual scanning, grapho-motor output (writing), speed, flexibility, attention, and concentration among other things. When you find a low processing speed score there are a number of factors to consider; the following questions will help you better understand its significance.

1. What is the student's tempo? Is it sluggish and slow? Some students move through life at a slower pace than others because that is the way they are wired. If so, they are likely to have difficulty keeping up in an environment that is too fast paced.
2. Is the student a perfectionist? Does the student want everything to be perfect, making sure to make no mistakes and checking work twice? If so, that can be addressed by teaching students to take risks and to trust their instincts. Once



they learn to let some things go, they have the opportunity to complete work in a more timely fashion and with less angst.

3. Does the student have ADHD? Waxing and waning attention, difficulty shifting and sustaining focus, daydreaming, and problems with sustained effort can all be related to ADHD. A number of strategies can be employed to facilitate the student who has attentional weaknesses, including medication and executive function and cognitive training.
4. Are grapho-motor weaknesses making writing difficult? Is manipulating a pencil a tedious and time consuming task? If so, there are ways to work around this. In addition to using

a computer, there are speech recognition programs, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking, that can be used to dictate answers to homework questions, compose a five-paragraph essay, or write a novel.

5. Does the student seem anxious or depressed? Both anxiety and depression can cause a student to perform more slowly than might otherwise be the case. Is the student filled with self-doubt,

poor self-confidence, or feelings of low esteem? Those issues can be addressed through formal and informal counseling, exercise, involvement in activities, and mindfulness training.

6. What is the student's level of motivation? If a student lacks interest or finds a task boring, he or she may perform poorly. This factor needs to be teased apart thoroughly because a lack of motivation for a given task is one thing, but for life in general, it is another.

A well-written evaluation should provide information that will answer questions such as those posed here. Testing is more than just numbers, and it is important to ask questions before rejecting or accepting a student on the basis of a processing speed or IQ score.

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