The Emotional Toll of Being a Twice Exceptional Adult: A Case Study

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Lisa's arms are hidden by long-sleeved shirts, t-shirts or jumpers. Even in the heat of Australian summers she keeps them covered. It's not the shame of the cuts, the dulled scars in her flesh, which stops her from showing her pale arms. It's the bright red trails of destruction that illustrate recent attacks that she hides from the world.

Lisa has attempted to take her life at least three times. I use the term 'at least' because Lisa herself cannot confirm whether the times she was rushed to hospital, for self-harming, were expressions of pain and stress or attempts at taking her own life.

Meeting Lisa is like unwrapping a toy, complete with new batteries. At first glance Lisa is effervescent, funny, and beautiful and shines with happiness. She exudes confidence when she speaks. She is intelligent and passionate about a wide range of topics including education, wildlife, the environment and creative arts. This initial glimpse into her life is brief and enjoyable; the surface you see is stunning. However, after time, when she becomes comfortable in your presence, after multiple encounters, the toy that is her personality, her life, begins to wind down. On her bad days, she is moody and sullen. On her worst days, she is depressed, melancholic, dark and bloodied. These are the days that she shuts herself away, emails her teachers and employer to advise them that she is ill. Lisa admits to sitting or lying on the bathroom or kitchen floor contemplating the razor or knife blade she holds in her hands. She says she stares at it, watches the natural light bounce off the steel and feels it calling to her, drawing her attention. She makes timid cuts in her flesh, her arms, her thighs, her stomach or chest and cries at the release she feels as she watches a trickle of blood escape. Most days these cuts remain superficial, they heal quickly and without deep scarring. However, on occasion they have turned into deep gashes that required extensive suturing or even stapling.

Lisa is 23 years of age. She is studying an undergraduate degree at an Australian university. As a primary student she was labelled a child with "additional learning needs". During her secondary education she was 'found' to be artistically gifted. Lisa is a twice exceptional young adult.

The needs of twice exceptional individuals

Research into twice exceptional students is growing slowly but steadily. Studies have clearly identified that twice exceptional students pose quandaries for their teachers

(Reis & McCoach, 2002; Ruban & Reis, 2005) as they have very unique strengths and weaknesses. Although research has studied various areas of twice exceptionality, one factor remains incredibly important for parents and educators: as children grow older the gap between their actual performance and their expected performance widens especially as the content of their lessons becomes more difficult (Reis, McGuire & Neu, 2004). In addition to the educational needs of such students, their socioemotional needs are critical to their overall academic achievement and are, quite frankly, as important as their academic ability (King, 2005).

When Lisa attended primary school, she was bored by writing essays or stories and reading aloud in class. She also found such, traditionally simplistic, tasks to be difficult. Upon reflection she believed this was due, in part, to her school teacher's verbal feedback. "My teacher would tell me that my work was 'no good', that it 'lacked depth, structure and cohesion'. These words meant nothing to me then". As Lisa continues to speak she becomes teary. "When I used to try and read aloud, I took so long to get through a sentence that the teacher would become impatient and instead of letting me continue, like she did the other children, she would huff loudly and stop me at the full stop, instructing someone else to 'take over' ". Lisa's memories of her English classes are so painful; she still cringes when she is required to write an essay for her undergraduate degree.

Schooling is a social, language-based experience for many children. For those students with learning difficulties, who are gifted learning disabled or have gifts and talents in 'non language' domains, school can feel like a "secret arts lesson" (Baum, Cooper & Neu, 2001, p1). Because twice exceptional students display both an academic strength and weakness, they can easily baffle their parents and teachers, who may accuse them of being lazy (Assouline, Foley Nicpon & Whiteman, 2010). Therefore, twice exceptional students can feel trapped by their learning deficits but their gifts ignored (Baum et al., 2001). As a result, many twice exceptional students fail to achieve at levels that are commensurate with their gifts (Baum et al., 2001; Reis & Ruban, 2005) especially when they are misidentified (Ruban & Reis, 2005) or their strengths and weaknesses interrelate (Coleman, 2005). In essence, twice exceptional students can find themselves living in two distinct worlds, one which supports their strengths and another that fears, misunderstands and misinterprets their inconsistencies (Cash, 1999).

Research hypothesises that there are three subgroups of twice exceptionality. Students who are identified as gifted but who struggle to achieve are the first group. The second group is students whose learning disability is so severe that their giftedness remains undetected at school. The third and final group refers to students whose giftedness and learning disability mask each other (Conover, 2002; Fetzer, 2000; King, 2005; Ruban & Reis, 2005). It is this third grouping of students, whose strengths and weaknesses cancel each other out, which are the most problematic for education.

Lisa is discovered

I met Lisa, by chance, when she attended one of my lectures at university. She escorted a friend to class during her free session. "I initially went along because I didn't have anything else to do. Perhaps it was fate. You were speaking about giftedness and then you spoke about something called twice exceptionality. This was a term I had never heard before, but I knew, I knew that it applied to me. So, I did the only thing I could, I begged my friend to introduce us."

It's been two years now since Lisa and I first met. We meet often to discuss her past schooling experiences and her current studies. It was, in fact, Lisa who asked me to write about her experiences, detailing her struggles.

Lisa is currently undertaking a fine arts degree. She enrolled in university at the age of 21, as a mature-aged student. During her senior year at high school, the careers advisor told her she lacked the academic ability for university study and recommended, sternly, that Lisa either travel or work full time "in a shop or something". So, Lisa did just that. She started working in a pet store, in a large shopping complex. During the quiet hours she sketched the puppies and kittens and any other pet that grabbed her attention. It was a shopper's comment that sparked Lisa's determination to pay more attention to her first, and by self-admission only, love – art.

"I was sitting behind the desk and had my sketch books out when this lady walked up to ask a question. She commented on my colour tones, on the quality of my stroke, she called it 'strokemanship'. She said such nice things that I remembered how good it felt to do art. I hadn't paid much attention to art since high school, but it came flying back at that very moment," she says.

When Lisa started art classes, in her junior year of high school, her teacher realised she had an exceptional talent. The teacher originally suspected that Lisa's parents had helped her with a portrait so the teacher gave Lisa an assignment, over the next few weeks of class, to draw her own (the teacher's) portrait. Because she had watched the process and was amazed by the final piece, the teacher recommended that Lisa be assessed for artistic giftedness. Unfortunately, as Lisa had a troubled academic background, the request was denied by the school. Regardless of this, the words of encouragement given to Lisa by her teacher motivated her to continue her artwork at home.

Her interest in art now sparked, Lisa attempted to use it in other classes. However, her teachers saw this as an attempt to avoid work, especially the written component of tasks. Knowing that Lisa had been diagnosed with a learning disability at primary school, her teachers all but ignored her arguments in favour of incorporating art into her projects. Eventually, after the persistence of her art teachers, Lisa was 'found' to be artistically gifted. She completed senior arts classes and participated in school and state competitions where she was very successful.

Strengths, weaknesses and ADHD?

Twice exceptional students have been found to have a range of academic strengths and weaknesses. Strengths can include visual memory, spatial skills, extensive vocabulary, sense of humour, imagination and creative ability and insight. Learning difficulties can include difficulty with phonetics, spelling, handwriting, memorisation of information, lack of organisation, poor reading and mathematical skills, difficulty with expressive language, limited attention spans and an inability to focus (Baum et al., 2001; Conover, 2002; Fetzer, 2000; King, 2005; Yssel, Prater, & Smith, 2010).

In Lisa's case she has difficulty with verbal memory, spelling, handwriting, verbal reasoning and expressing her thoughts as words. By grade 3 she was referred to the school's learning disability team where her parents were consulted about Lisa's additional learning needs. However, they were also asked to seek a medical consultation for ADHD.

Consultations and enquiries about ADHD are not uncommon for students with learning disabilities or giftedness. These children can display high levels of activity in some areas, distractibility and a reduced attention span (Hartnett, Nelson & Rinn, 2004; Rinn & Nelson, 2009; Webb & Latimer, 1993). However, although similarities can exist, children with ADHD generally show variability in their performance quality and can have difficulty sustaining attention and concentration in most tasks and activities (Reis & McCoach, 2002). When gifted, and twice exceptional, children exhibit such distractibility and lack of attention it is generally a result of being unchallenged and bored (Martin, Burns & Schonlau, 2010; Reis & McCoach, 2002).

When Lisa told me about her early years of education and the constant referral to specialists she became enthused about her symptoms of ADHD actually being examples of her giftedness. "I used to love drawing and talked about what I was doing. I did try and avoid written work, especially big assignments, so that could have looked like an attention issue, but my ability to work for hours on a picture was evidence of my ability to concentrate for extended amounts of time. A sign of my giftedness. I used to complete visual puzzles, look up things on the computer and always had a sketch book with me, even in my pocket. If my teachers had thought that this was a positive thing, rather than an excuse, perhaps they would have realised I was gifted learning disabled much sooner." Becoming visibly angry Lisa now questions whether this realisation would have stopped the incessant bullying she endured, from both students and staff, throughout primary and secondary school.

Self-harming behaviour

Lisa started to express her pain in more "unusual ways" when she was in high school. She believes it was a combination of teacher comments and teasing from other children that led her to this 'outlet'. "When I was in year 8, I started to shave my legs for the first time and I accidentally cut myself. But instead of it stinging or hurting, it felt, well, good. It was like this release of pent up energy and emotions that I couldn't release another way. From then onwards, whenever I had a bad day at school, I would

stand in the shower and shave my legs, twice a day if needed, deliberately nicking myself," she states.

Initially, no one saw the marks on her legs because Lisa refused to participate in sports and her family lived in a cool climate of Australia. Due to scabs that wouldn't heal quickly, she began cutting other areas of her body including her thighs, stomach and breasts. During the school holidays, the wounds would heal over but once school resumed she would be "back in the shower with the razor".

Research by Cross (2007) has noted that although there is a wide variation in the estimates of self-injurious behaviour of gifted students, they do indeed self-harm with cutting being one such method. Cutting is known for being a private act, one that is not meant for public revelation (Cross, 2007), however by the time Lisa was in senior school she had moved her cutting to her upper and lower arms. "I ran out of room on my lower extremities so I went to my arms. The first time my mother saw it she totally freaked. She had thought I had fallen into barbed wire at school. It took me hours to calm her down and explain to her that I was doing it to myself. She responded by ringing the school and demanded to know why she hadn't been told. The issue was, the school didn't know. At least until now," she says.

Lisa's school responded quickly, referring Lisa to their in-house psychologist who recommended Lisa be sent to a psychiatrist for evaluation and medications. Lisa begged her parents not to send her and to prove that she was better she promised not to cut herself to show them that she could stop. For a few months Lisa's mother checked her skin most days for marks, but eventually her parents' interest in their daughter's "odd behaviour" faded and Lisa resumed cutting.

As a young adult, Lisa continues to cut herself a few times a week. When things are very stressful, from work or university, after an argument with her parents or her partner, she resorts to self-harming behaviours. It is when she feels so bleak and dark that she has taken things too far. "Some days I sit on the floor of my bathroom or kitchen and stare at a razor or knife. I watch the sunlight bounce off it, rotate it around in my palm and start to cut. Each few cuts I stop and look at what I've done and sometimes I'm completely surprised at how deep I've gone or how extensively I've hacked at my body," she states calmly. "There have been occasions when my partner has come home to find me on the floor unconscious or close to unconsciousness. These were the darkest times in my life and triggered by major traumas. I don't know whether I was cutting or hacking, whether I was releasing or trying to end my pain," she says bluntly. On one occasion the hospital sent her home within five hours of stapling her skin and recommended she seek 'some help'. "It made me feel that they didn't care either so it exacerbated the cutting until I was able to get psychiatric help via the university."

Life as a twice exceptional young woman

Unfortunately little research has investigated how twice exceptional students succeed in school and whether such students proceed to university (Baum et al., 2001; Lovett & Sparks, 2010; Reis et al., 2004). Life at university, for Lisa, can be very difficult. She

is enrolled as a part-time student and is older than most of the other students. Although it was a stranger's comments, in the pet shop, that encouraged her to consider enrolling into tertiary studies, her parents were not supportive. In fact, after a conversation with her parents about returning to school, Lisa was so upset she cut herself so deeply, on her legs and arms, she required extensive stapling. "My parents could not see past my inability to write an essay. When I told them I wanted to study fine arts, they complained about all the phone calls, interviews and doctor appointments they had to attend with me during my schooling. I even showed them my senior artwork, ones that had been awarded school and state medals, but they could not see past my inability to write an essay," she mumbles as she cries. With the help of her boyfriend and a small group of friends, Lisa was able to write her application and 'wowed' the interviewers during the face-to-face.

Lisa has been learning to adapt to the demands required at university. During our catch-up sessions we talk about coping techniques, support networks and her future career options. She has been thinking about training to be an art teacher so she can help children who experience the same issues as herself. For twice exceptional tertiary students, university demands include autonomy, self-monitoring and the utilisation of problem-solving strategies (Reis et al., 2004). Twice exceptional adult students benefit from cultivating friendships with other students, photocopying their notes to fill in the blanks of their own, and taking a reduced load (Baum et al., 2001, Reis et al., 2004). Thankfully Lisa has been able to establish such support networks and with the help of the disability unit of the university, a small group of classmates and her lecturers, she is thriving.

Although the future does look bright to Lisa, she admits that her earlier memories of her schooling continue to haunt her. "Some days I wake up thinking about the comments made by my teachers and it drives me, in part, to cut myself in order to release the pain. I see a counsellor and talk to my partner, but my scars are obvious," she says. One could be confident in stating that Lisa's scars go much deeper than the skin she routinely pierces.

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