

Preface

EDUCATION CAN and should extend beyond what takes place in a classroom. Case in point—one of the most important learning experiences I had in graduate school took place rolling along 301 North in Virginia. It was fall 1992, the first semester of my school psychology doctoral studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). I got a ride to New York City to visit my brother with Bill, a second-year student in my program. During the drive we got to sharing impressions of professors and courses and the topic eventually turned to psycho-educational testing. I commented that assessment was a real challenge because of all the administration and scoring procedures inherent in standardized intelligence and achievement batteries. Bill then posed an astonishingly simple question, one I had never considered: “What is assessment?” Understanding the point behind his question, I resisted my initial urge to rattle off all the tests I had been trained to administer. After a moment, he answered his own question in the negative, “Assessment is not the same as testing. Testing is just one part of assessment.”

So maybe my professors had made that point during a lecture or I had come across it in a textbook. But until I heard it from a peer it never clicked with me, and I have never forgotten it. The notion that assessment *includes* testing complemented one of the reasons I left teaching for school psychology. I wanted to be able to diagnose learning problems—not just in terms of assigning kids to categories or labels, but to really understand why a student is struggling. Why is writing such a challenge for this eighth grader? What makes math so complicated for this fifth grader? I wanted this diagnostic ability, obviously, so that I could help struggling learners. It made perfect sense that understanding the root causes of an academic problem would guide the solutions.

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Earlier that year I was still teaching in New York City and had already committed to the school psychology program at UNC-CH. Along with fellow faculty I attended a day-long lecture on memory by Dr. Mel Levine. The presentation fascinated me because it started to provide a framework for understanding what I observed in my students; it gave me initial tools for diagnosing, for understanding why a student might be struggling. I was thrilled to discover that, coincidentally, Dr. Levine was a professor of pediatrics at UNC-CH. I remember thinking that perhaps I would get the chance to learn more from him some day, or maybe even work with him. I got that chance during my third year of graduate school in an externship at the Center for Development and Learning, where Dr. Levine was the director. I got to see Dr. Levine in action assessing students with learning problems—how he avoided labels in favor of descriptive profiles, delved into specific breakdown points, relentlessly searched for assets, and demystified students by explaining their profiles and delivering messages of optimism. That year solidified my goal of being a psychologist who specializes in learning problems and who uses a descriptive, asset-driven approach. I also wanted to promote this approach with other professionals (e.g., pediatricians, educators, speech-language pathologists) and so reach as many students as possible.

Following the completion of my dissertation and internship, I earned a fellowship at the Center for Development and Learning and, later, at the All Kinds of Minds Institute, which Dr. Levine co-founded. For the past nine years I have worked at All Kinds of Minds with Dr. Levine and many other talented, devoted individuals. Building on the philosophical core of Dr. Levine's approach we have developed service-delivery models for clinicians and educators, professional development programs, and tools to help understand and support struggling learners. This book is a detailed description of a critical aspect of this approach—how to assess so you really understand a student's learning issues.

And because I have not forgotten what I learned over a decade ago on 301 North, the approach is not bound by tests.