

A Nation of Children with Wings

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In the art classroom at Brideun School for Exceptional Children, one young girl is standing up at her desk with a potato sack wrapped from her feet to her waist as she paints, pausing to smile enthusiastically as Marlo Rice enters the room. "The sack is engaging her kinesthetic senses," Rice says. "Touching, feeling and even smelling are all part of the learning process for students with AD/HD, not just hearing or seeing."

Engaging Multiple Intelligences

Rice and her husband Sean, a physicist who now teaches science and technology at Brideun, established the school to teach gifted children with AD/HD or other learning disabilities after their own children struggled with traditional classroom settings. Together, they adapt Brideun's environment to teach these exceptional children, who are usually multisensory learners.

"Television, video games and a number of other media distractions can over-stimulate kids," says Rice, who believes many of Brideun's students suffer from "sensory degradation." "It isn't considered a medical diagnosis, but can play a huge part of the lives of many children with ADD," she says.

To aide students disabled by audiovisual overload, Brideun's environment is modified to calm the mind and body by actively engaging all of the senses. At Brideun, classrooms typically have between one and eight students, and children are considered to be at several grade levels depending upon their aptitudes for different subjects. "We have students who at the age of 15 may be taking College Psychology 101, or planning research projects on geophysics," says Rice. "There is no 'norm'."

Each child is also working on their "portfolio," a collection of their beginning and best works as well as the comprehensive skills that they have acquired to present, should they aspire to go to college.

Misunderstood Genius

However, the same student taking calculus and physics at such a young age may be at a second grade reading or writing level. Rice describes a large population of Brideun's students as "autistic spectrum learners," a problem she believes is increasingly common with AD/HD. They are highly gifted in some areas, but have difficulty with written and oral communication skills and often lack the social skills necessary to survive in an everyday society. "They are often using so much of their energy academically that they have very little left to contribute socially," she says. To that end, Brideun's curriculum concentrates on areas in which AD/HD students are typically weakest, such as reading, communication, and social skills. Rice has also assembled a staff of learning disability specialists including a speech pathologist and occupational therapist. Students at the academy receive "effort only" report cards that indicate what progress they have made

toward completing assignments. Behavior grades also provide an assessment of the children's ability to interact with other students and teachers.

Parents Give Brideun an A+

Brideun students often come home talking about foreign affairs and calculus, to the delight of their parents, who are free to enjoy the company of their gifted children rather than struggle through hours of assignments with them. "If kids are spending three and four hours at home after school every day doing homework, then the school isn't doing their job," says Rice.

Brideun students are equally enthusiastic. "I have kids asking to sleep over. They cry on Friday because they can't come to school again until Monday," says Rice. "There are schools out there that are targeted toward children with ADD, and schools for gifted children – Brideun recognizes that these students can be both. There is just no school like it!"