

## Complex Learners 2.0 (Deshler, Barringer, Gabrieli)

Acquiring the broad array of skills and dispositions required of a successful learner meeting today's standards for career, college and life-long learning readiness is exceedingly challenging for a sizable subset of students in our schools. These are students who evidence persistent and substantial underachievement despite decades of major policy interventions (e.g., ESEA, IDEA).

An important step in facilitating the success for students who are persistently underachieving is a shared understanding of factors that prominently contribute to learning and performing. When learners have a profile that evidences vulnerabilities in one or more of these factors—or when their learning profile is mismatched to the instructional environment provided, they are deemed to be “complex learners”:

- ***Opportunity for learning*** – Safe, stable home and neighborhood environments where life's basic needs are provided, where learning is valued and fostered, models of success are evident, and learning endeavors are supported facilitate learning success. When not present, learning is inhibited. Learning is also inhibited when safe, well-designed school environments that set high expectations and provide high quality instruction are not consistently available to children and adolescents.
- ***Disposition for learning*** – Students provided with models for or explicitly taught such things as planning, organizing, strategizing, interpersonal skills, self-regulation, perseverance, grit, collaboration, and self-advocacy have a readiness and sustainability for learning that those who have not had such experiences lack.
- ***Neurodevelopmental integrity for learning*** – Each student brings a unique neurodevelopmental profile to the educational experience and instructional task. When profiles are well matched to the demands of the learning task, students succeed. When mismatched and misunderstood, learning is inhibited. Additionally, some students have neurological disorders in the basic psychological processes involved in understanding, learning, and using language that further inhibit learning.
- ***Preferences for learning*** – Learning accelerates when a student's interests, passions and preferences for receiving, manipulating, and expressing information are incorporated. Learning is inhibited when students are not an integral part of the planning process for learning in which they have an opportunity to express their preferences for how to engage in learning tasks.

The challenge that students who persistently underperform present to educators is this: their learning profiles are exceedingly complex because of the number and nature of inhibitors that may be in play at any one point in time. The magnitude of the instructional challenge presented to teachers is related to both the number and severity of inhibitors that students encounter in these four key areas. As the degree of complexity increases in a learner, the sophistication and power of the instructional response must increase commensurately, and those responses must ensure an attention to the strengths a student brings to the learning situation as well as the challenges.

Solutions for the large number of complex, persistently underachieving learners in America's schools must be deployed in optimized learning environments so the quality of their lives can be improved and the vitality of our country's workforce can be strengthened. These solutions must be carefully crafted to address *both* the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of learning as well as attending to the assets each student has as well as the challenges. Non-cognitive skills must not be seen as an “add-on” but rather as an essential component of student learning and performance; and hence, should be integral to the entire education process.