

## Rare and extraordinary abilities in autism spectrum disorder

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper aims to bring forth the presence of rare and extraordinary abilities in Autism Spectrum Disorder despite significant deficits. It proposes how working on the strengths and accepting the weaknesses can bring out the true genetic potential in nonverbal children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The study aims to emphasize the need of interdisciplinary intervention and use of traditional communicating skills like, writing, in case of no speech production. It was done to encourage literacy and functionality despite severe deficits.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is purely qualitative. It is based on an exploratory longitudinal case study presented in a narrative form. Reporting is based on insight participant observation and open ended interviews. The data was complemented by background information, pictures, videos and documents related to the child.

**Findings** – The paper provides empirical insights about how positive change is brought about by channelizing the strengths and abilities of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder despite their deficits. It confirms that rare and extraordinary abilities are at times present in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. These abilities can vary from knowing about the unknown, reading other's mind and predicting future

**Research limitations/implications** – The role of interdisciplinary interventions in making a nonverbal child with Autism Spectrum Disorder to communicate through writing and study the standardized yet modified syllabus is inspirational. Rigorous investigation is needed in the domain of the presence of rare abilities as only few cases with rare abilities like the one reported in this study have been reported. These particular results may lack generalization.

**Practical implications**- This case inspires the community of service providers in Autism Spectrum Disorder as an example of harnessing the special and rare abilities of these children to strengthen their other areas of development.

**Originality/value** – This paper fulfils the need of empowering the nonverbal children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and channelizing their rare abilities to enhance their development.

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder, Rare Abilities, Interventions, Interdisciplinary, Nonverbal

## Introduction

“If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism”.

DR. STEPHEN SHORE

Each child with autism unfolds a unique story of everything about him/her. It is heartening to get close to their lives and their special abilities sometimes amaze everyone.

“Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a pervasive neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairments in social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities” (A P American Psychiatric Association, 2013 [APA]). Nonverbal communication, speech deficits, issues in social interaction and behaviors either restricted or repetitive are common issues present in this condition. Although one finds common underlying symptoms, but the severity and combination of issues varies for each person.

As per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), People with ASD mostly exhibit communication deficits like not responding appropriately in conversations, misinterpretation of nonverbal cues and interactions, or facing difficulty in establishing relationships even with peer group. People with ASD are at times over fixated with routines, highly sensitive if the structure changes and sometimes too absorbed with unnecessary items. Symptoms of ASD fall on a continuum, ranging from mild to severe. The spectrum of ASD allows the practitioners to come across a large number of variations in the behavior patterns and symptoms in people with this condition.

ASD is generally diagnosed around 2-3 years of age when some very obvious symptoms and signs are clearly recognized but, in some cases, the children either show regression in the skills that were learnt or just stop learning new skills (APA, 2013).

This case reports the presence of special and rare extraordinary abilities along with difficulties in a child with ASD.

In 1944 Hans Asperger also came up with his theory of autism where he describes it as a syndrome where children are intelligent but have deficits and communication and social skills. In today’s time also, we use the term Asperger’s disorder for children with milder symptoms specially in social communication and socialization (Kanner, 1965).

Some children with ASD have remarkable talents and abilities despite their challenges and deficits. Savant syndrome is a condition that is rare and extraordinary in persons with grave mental deficits including ASD. They seem to have ‘island of genius’ despite the handicap and challenges. Approximately 1 in 10 people with autism have such abilities in various degrees and forms. These abilities are mostly associated with massive memory (Treffert, 2009).

Special abilities are still less studied and understood as compared to other features in ASD. Mostly ASD children have extraordinary talents in music, arts, calendar skills, math, calculation skills or memory (Happé & Frith, 2009). There is no connection between the intelligence and the presence of extraordinary skills. These skills at times seem to be supernatural and amaze the researchers although substantial work needs to be done to explore these autistic savants.

Basic social skills training and learning at an early age appears to be more effective with child centered therapeutic interventions as compared to the therapist centered approaches (Tanguay, 2000).

There is evidence of a very contrasting theory but it is not researched much. Diane Hennacy Powell, a psychiatrist and a trained neurologist did a revolutionary experiment to test presence of telepathy in non-verbal children with ASD. Powell’s experiment results suggested that people who have compromised abilities of language by birth are open to an underlying means of communication to express and connect. She suggested that some skills in non-verbal children having autism were ‘Psi Like’ and need rigorous investigation. Telepathy was the most reported in Autistic savants (Powell, 2014).

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Treffert suggested that seclusion or deprivation that is caused by sensory deficits may at times be the cause of the development of special skills or savant skills. Inability to socialize in autism can result in development of savant skills in autism (Treffert D. , 2011).

Nonverbal communication skills are linked with the severity of symptoms in ASD and also the adaptive functioning. Receptive language and expressive skills are associated to the cognition levels. Cognition is primarily related to the verbal ability and skills in children with ASD. Cognition is a predictor of language acquisition in ASD (Kjellmer et al; 2012).

Low functioning ASD children who are nonverbal mostly communicate for behavior regulation and very rarely for declaration purpose. They differ from typical children in the rate of communication for some specific objectives. Nonverbal ASD children usually use very simple forms of communication that are not complex (Maljaars et al; 2012).

Before the reading and writing skills are taught it is important to start a pre-reading segment including exercises to develop motor and visual sequencing skills. Reading and writing skills can be facilitated by teaching the following 6 skills to any child (Blank & Marion, 2012) :

- Motor skills to facilitate eye hand coordination needed for writing
- Sequencing helps to maintain the order in reading and retaining letters
- Phonology equips with the letter sounds and their recognition
- Semantics skills teach comprehending the meanings of the words
- Syntax teaches grammar skills
- Text skills incorporate joining words to construct meaningful sentences

The findings of a pilot study (Goh et al; 2013) suggested that some children with severe levels of ASD can also learn to read and write despite the absence of functional communication skills.

### **Special Abilities in ASD**

Children with ASD are exceptionally talented and have various abilities and skills. There is evidence to show that ability and disability can be a possession of one mind and one body in a class of individuals called autistic savants. The special educators play an important role by planning the intervention model, executing it and doing follow up on it in the life of autistic savants. If the focus of rehabilitation in ASD is on making the children independent, acceptable in the society and productive then many possibilities and opportunities will find way like in a typically developing child's life. There is a probability of autistic savants being the extreme cases of ability as the skills like creativity or talent found in normal children (Grover, 2015).

Powell's experiment results suggested that people who have compromised abilities of language by birth are open to an underlying means of communication to express and connect. She suggested that some skills in non-verbal children having autism were 'Psi Like' and need rigorous investigation. Telepathy was the most reported in Autistic savants (Powell, 2014).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The participant in the study is a non-verbal child with ASD. There is a lack of focus on training nonverbal ASD children to read and write and that was something that inspired the researcher to take up this case. During the intervention program the team discovered that Bob had a special, unique and rare ability that is described in this report.

The case reported has been studied for more than ten years. He was observed and provided interventions for three hours from Monday to Friday. A team comprising of a speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, special educator, psychologist and the parents worked constantly on the child. His day plan included circle time, audio-visual training, group play, lunch time and art and craft classes apart from the therapeutic intervention sessions. His Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was developed and revised every three months and parents were guided to follow the home plan. The entire team had weekly meetings to discuss the progress.

No community members were involved in this study.

## **BACKGROUND:**

Bob was born full term and is the only child of his parents. He had delayed milestones in the very early years. At the age of 3 he was diagnosed with ASD. He was restless as a child and was self-absorbed. He had no speech and could not chew properly. His response to name was inconsistent and so was the eye contact. He established sitting at the age of 1 and started walking at the age of 2. He loved to spin toys and objects and loved playing with water. He could follow some of the parent's commands. He had a habit of smelling things. As per the assessment by the psychologist and psychiatrist he performed at below 1 year of age. He was referred for therapeutic evaluation to the researcher.

After consistent, rigorous and individualized interventions he started showing positive results in some most domains of development except speech.

Currently Bob is a non-verbal child with autism who is very sensitive and capable. He is now studying the syllabus of grade four CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education). He understands what he reads but writes only with few prompts. He feels all emotions and tries to express himself non-verbally. He is very well behaved, calm and serene boy who never creates fuss. He is blessed with competence beyond explanations but recoverable only by the ones who love him deeply.

## **UNFOLDING BOB'S SPECIAL, EXTRAORDINARY AND RARE ABILITIES**

The best thing about Bob was that he picked up emotions and became very expressive. He learnt to express his sadness, happiness, excitement and anger with the help of the interdisciplinary interventions. He developed attachment for some people around him although could not build interactive relations with his peer group because of his inability to speak. Although when instructed he helped other students by either holding their hands and taking them from one place to another or helping them with their bags or things. He loved to be among children and participated in all the activities. He had full awareness of things around him and he could read others body language too. His father told the researcher that at times he could hear a very low sound from a long distance. He knows even if somebody is talking three rooms away.

In the meditation session when all the children were to lie down he always maintained a "Vishnu" (a Hindu God) pose where he lied sideways with his one hand supporting his head and one leg over the other. He felt very uncomfortable if his position was changed and got irritated. He always relaxed in this position and felt calm.

When Bob was learning to write letters of English alphabet the researcher noticed that he was trying to write something in Hindi. When she let him write whatever he intended, he wrote a difficult Hindi

word ‘shadyantra’ although he was not taught Hindi. Wondering how and why he wrote that word the researcher noticed that he started writing the letters that were going on in the researcher’s mind although these were the letters that were not yet taught to him. He was just practicing forming the letter D till that day. The researcher thought in the mind if Bob could read the mind and Bob wrote yes. The researcher had goose bumps and was totally amazed thinking that he might be Hyperlexic. But to explore it a little further she asked few more questions and he wrote the answer. The researcher thought that he might be reading her mind and since he wrote with physical prompt she thought that probably it was she who facilitated the movement of his pen. The researcher did not discuss it with anyone and went back to read and understand more about hyperlexia.

After a few days the occupational therapist came running to the researcher with the white board. Bob was simultaneously being trained to write yes and no for the simple questions asked, like if he wanted to do clay activity or if he wanted to watch a video. The therapist had an urge to ask him few questions and the conversation on the white board was as follows:

Therapist- Do you believe in God?

Bob- Yes

Therapist- Which God do you believe in?

Bob- Om

Therapist- Do you know whom do I believe in?

Bob- Sai Baba.

Bob took everyone to a surprise and in that amazement the researcher phoned another psychologist and shared it with her. She came to the center in few minutes. Now since the researcher felt that he wrote the answers that she already had in mind, the other psychologist was asked to put up a question for which the answer was not known to the other people. The psychologist asked him to name her brother who had passed away many years back and to everyone’s amazement, he wrote the correct name. She asked him to write the password of her account and he wrote it correctly. Some more questions were asked and this time the other therapists gave touch to write and each time his answers were correct. The researcher finally called his parents and shared it with them asking them to try it at home and not to disclose with other people as they might exploit him or misuse his ability. His father asked him to write his qualifications in the evening at home. To his surprise Bob wrote each degree and credential that he had ever acquired. Even some that he didn’t remember offhand. His father came to meet the researcher the next day and they mutually decided to channelize his special ability into making him communicative through reading and writing as he had not started speaking yet. Also, they decided to keep it among themselves so that people do not misuse his extraordinary ability.

That was the day and he started picking up whatever was taught to him quickly and it seemed as if he took split of seconds at times to read and skim the information provided. At times it also happened that he wrote the answer correctly without even looking in the note book.

An educator who also was his occupational therapist said ‘If I ever gave him two options he always wrote the one that I thought was the answer, at least 70 percent of the times. If I don’t think of an option, he does not write anything’.

Once he was crying profusely and no one could make out what had happened. Then he was asked to write on the white board. He was asked in writing “do you have pain”? He wrote ‘yes’. “where”? He wrote ‘Nose’. Then when the nose was checked he had a wound in his nose which was hurting.

Another educator reported that Bob was able to answer questions from the chapters he was not even taught before. But, she thought that he mostly wrote the answers when she knew in her mind and didn’t write anything if she did not know the answer.

The other therapists working with him also felt that at times he wrote the answer without the question even being written. He answered while the question was just in the mind of the therapist. It was telepathy or mind reading nobody knew but it was totally mysterious.

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Once he was very glad as he was writing all the answers to the questions after reading a comprehension. Seeing him so happy the researcher intervened and asked him if he wanted to have a talking time. He agreed and the conversation was as follows:

Researcher-Do you want to talk?

Bob-Yes

Researcher-Since you are able to read, comprehend and write, would you want to read a book?

Bob-Yes

Researcher-Which book?

(He just moved the pencil round and randomly)

Researcher-I promise I will get you that book. Let me know which book you want to read?

Bob-Roger Federer

Researcher and the educators around were amazed to see his response. Researcher wondered where would have he seen or heard about the tennis player. Researcher made a written promise to gift him that book. Even after searching for a child friendly book on Federer the researcher could not find a book of his level and got an adulterated novel on Roger Federer. When he was gifted that book he seemed to be extremely happy. He started reading the book till the researcher marked and then he was asked to reply to questions related to that paragraph in writing. For example, 'where did Federer live'? Bob gave absolutely correct responses to the questions asked. He was given one or two paragraphs to read at home with his mother and she also made him write answers to confirm that he followed what he read. And he continued reading the book at both places regularly. Sometimes he was given multiple choice questions and sometimes fill ups. He was also made to write one word answers and very short answers but he wrote everything with a non-living touch with his educator and with a slight physical prompt if the educator was changed some day.

One of the special educator said "He could sense if something was going to happen". On asking she gave an example of a day when he just kept on crying the whole day and didn't even write why he was so disturbed. He didn't want to engage in any activity and was crying with tears rolling down. His parents were informed and asked if something had happened at home but they were also clueless. The same day in the evening there was a tragic and untimely demise of a close relative of an educator. It could be a coincidence but many a times such things happened where his expression of extreme joy or sorrow was an indication of some event that was either happy or sad. It also happened the day his grandfather passed away. He was inconsolable throughout and we could relate to it only when we got the news later in the day. He was probably very attached to his grandfather because after his demise it took him days to come back to his normal routine.

"I felt many a times that he could read my mind and wrote the answer before I could finish writing the complete addition sum." Said one of his educator. Although he is good with numbers his answers were strangely prompt at most of the times and all calculated mentally.

Another educator who took his special education sessions for very long said "I believe that Bob has much higher abilities than any other typical child. His communication ways are different but he communicates everything. I feel he can read minds of people. When I thought of an incorrect answer he wrote the incorrect one. If ever I had some doubt in my mind for the answer, he used to keep the pen down and stop writing. He kept on solving sums and calculated correctly in his mind till the time I didn't have any doubt. Sometimes while starting a new concept I felt that he knew what I was going to explain. Whenever he knew it, he used to laugh a lot as if telling me that he knows what I am thinking. Once I had to teach him about types of houses and he started laughing. I had an instinct that he knew it. I did not explain and told him that okay so let me test what you know. I wrote Kutcha house, Pukka house and Mud house on the board. I asked him which type of houses do we live in and he circled pukka house and similarly all his responses were correct. And this was all with a non-living touch. In fact one day I had got my son along with me and he wrote his name when I asked him if he knew him".

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He thoroughly enjoyed doing math and one day when the educator was doing fractions with him it seemed as if it was a piece of cake for him. And again he started laughing and without any explanation could answer all questions.

The researcher had made two special note books for Bob which were labelled in bold as a Free Expression notebook and a Communication notebook. He was given the free expression notebook whenever he was not in a mood to write and did all the communication with his educators and his parents. His mother also used to talk to him in the communication note book. One day he did not want to study. The communication in the notebook was:

Why are you not studying?

I don't want to.

Why?

Want to play.

Why?

It is raining outside.

And then the mother realized that he wanted to play outside in the rain and took him out where he was very happy.

Whenever he did not want to pick the pen to write he was given a choice and he picked the communication notebook. On asking why he didn't want to write he responded either that he wanted to play or was hungry. He was then allowed to do what he wanted and then he studied later.

Each time his special education session began he was given a choice to pick the work he wanted to do first. Invariably he picked math first, then English and then Environmental Science.

Each educator wondered how despite all his challenges he could read and write so well. The researcher used to ask him few questions once in a while just to check if he still possessed the extraordinary ability where he kind of knew all and could predict too. But this was not disclosed to the therapists and educators. In between the researcher asked him questions just to check the presence of his rare ability. Once she asked him what her daughter will become and he wrote doctor and this was when her daughter was in grade tenth. And coincidentally or as Bob predicted she went to become a doctor. He also wrote chief for the researcher's son when the son was in class nine and repeatedly every year he wrote the same. And amazingly the son went to study culinary to become a chef. Although it is not exactly the same word so we cannot be sure of it but it is very close to what he wrote. Since there are no measures or tools to assess and study these abilities the researcher kept asking some questions here and there to just check and validate the presence of ability. Bob had always been moody. He answered only when he wanted to otherwise he kept on making circles. He had to be requested to answer and he was very selective in when to respond and when not. There was a time when one educator's spouse had an employment issue and when Bob was asked where he will get the job he wrote a name and astonishingly her husband got the job in that company only. It is an ability to predict future or a psi like ability as Powell mentioned and researched where telepathy was found or mind reading, it is not clear and there does not seem to be any measures to test these skills.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This is the researcher's "close to the heart" case. The researcher and Bob lived this journey together for more than 10 years and this association helped both of them to get better in many respects.

Bob is an exceptional child with ASD with extraordinary skills. A non-verbal child with severe level of ASD, who never attended any formal schooling but who wanted to read the story of Roger Federer and he did.

The first extraordinary skill in Bob was that despite being non-verbal and autistic, he could be trained to read and write. He was never put on a picture exchange communication system but with consistent training he could communicate by writing although he wrote only with people he loved or was close to like his parents, the researcher, his two special educators and a senior speech therapist at times. He could be taught the regular text books after few years of customized and modified syllabus. He was even given assessments to check if he remembered what he studied.

Treffert stated in his book that there are children with ASD who are prodigious savants. They are extraordinarily rare children with outstanding skills. During the time he wrote this book there were fewer than 100 known children who were prodigy savants (Treffert D. , 2010).

The researcher was sure that Bob was a prodigy savant. But to the researcher's surprise Bob had a very rare and extraordinary talent or skill that is revolutionary but because of the parent's hesitance she did not bring it to the expert's notice worldwide. Bob had some very unique abilities, one of them is kind of telepathy or mind reading which is well explained by Powell's experiments.

Autistic savants have extraordinary skills, sometimes they are amazing with music, other times calculation, arts or memory despite the fact that they have some mental and intellectual disabilities and this has always fascinating for people working in brain science. The research by Powell suggested that this could be just as little of what we know about autistic savants. Powell suggested that children with ASD having savant syndrome could have an enhanced capacity for extrasensory perception. Diane Hennacy Powell is a former Harvard professor and a neuropsychiatrist. She came out with some revolutionary research on enhanced capacity of extrasensory perception in children with ASD. "Powell, in her new book *The ESP Enigma: The Scientific Case for Psychic Phenomena*, former Harvard professor Diane Hennacy Powell combines philosophy, physics, and empirical data to examine supernatural traits like telepathy (the ability to access someone else's consciousness), psychokinesis (the ability to use one's consciousness to affect external objects), clairvoyance (the ability to broaden one's consciousness to remote time and space) and precognition (the ability to see into the future)." —Time Magazine (Powell, 2008)

Powell presented her findings in the 57<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association and amazed the audience. There was no evidence of fraud or cueing in the videos of her experiments on telepathy and mind reading skills in children with ASD. She was sent some homemade videos of a child with severe ASD that claimed presence of telepathic skills and abilities in that child in 2013 (Greg, 2014).

The another extraordinary ability that amazed the researcher and for which she couldn't find many answers except a few was Bob's ability to know the unknown. It included knowing something related to the present including somebody's password or relative's names and also predicting things for future. The case study has many such examples that reconfirmed the presence of some unexplainable, extraordinary and rare skill. As narrated in the study he could know answers for what he was about to be taught or told. He wrote without looking on the note book or the board and still wrote correct answers. All this was overwhelming for the researcher but she decided to use this as an opportunity to teach him concepts, make him literate and help him to express himself and communicate. And it actually worked. The diversion of his skill, the utilization of his ability into a more productive channel helped him to learn language and start communicating by writing. Treffert said that honing the abilities

of children with autism can improve their language, communication, socialization and daily living skills and Bob's case has proved it right (Treffert, 2014).

There is a report that was published in Khaleej Times in Sharjah on March 25, 2013 that talked about a nine-year-old girl with ASD who demonstrated extraordinary and rare skills. This girl could feel her mother's emotions and also read her mind and thoughts without any medium. Dr. Treffert, who has done a lot of work on savants also wrote to Khaleej Times and showed his interest in this case. Dr. Treffert stated that the type of telepathy skill in this girl was extraordinarily and exceedingly rare and he found the report convincing. He wrote to them "So I would clearly classify Nandana as a savant with a very rare skill among savants. In my savant registry of 319 savants, one percent reported 'paranormal' abilities such as ESP (extra sensory perception) and Psi (parapsychology). However, none reported telepathy or mind reading of the type Nandana exhibits." (Saseendran, 2013).

There is ample evidence available to prove the benefits of early intervention but not much research is there when we talk about educating children with ASD beyond 5 to 6 years of age and specially it is very limited in the case of non-verbal children with ASD. This case study helped the researcher to explore and work on their education beyond fundamental academics, not for academic acclaims but to channelize his capabilities constructively and distract him from unusual behavior patterns.

Bob might not be age appropriate in different domains of child development but for sure he is a very cooperative, manageable and lovable child who has learnt to read and write despite being nonverbal and being at the severe scale of autism spectrum. He knows a lot of concepts and is studying the grade four syllabus which is sometimes modified as per his needs. He is now brilliant at following instructions and getting better day by day in his daily living skills.

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