

Visit With The Utays

Intelligence, Achievement, Self-esteem, Oh My!

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Instead of answering a mailed-in question, this month's column describes a very moving encounter Carol experienced this week.

It begins the usual way. A young man and his mother come to a learning center for advice. John (not his real name) sheepishly follows his mother in. Looking unsure and nervous, he surveys the people and students and tables and books, wondering how long it will take for the people here to find out just how dumb he really is. His mother explains he is having a horrible time in school. The school had tested him and found that he has a learning disability in math and writing. He joins the homework center where other students are inviting and accepting and he starts his homework while I talk to his mom alone in my office. She shares how depressing it is to want, yet be unable, to learn.

Realizing that John needs to hear what I am about to explain, I invite him to join us. I talk for a minute about what our goals are for students and then I say, "Let's look at your individual profile." I bring out a copy of the bell curve and explain to John that if you test enough people on just about anything, everyone can be placed

somewhere on the chart. Some are very low (less than 2%), some are very high (less than 2%) and half of us are in the middle (50%). I then ask him where he would be on the chart for his intelligence, not school achievement. He points to the lowest end. I was certain he misunderstood so I ask if he thinks about guys his age some are very short, some very tall, and many in the middle so, "Where would you be on this chart?" He points to the high-average range which I agree is a good guess.

I ask him again to show me where his intelligence is. He again points to close to the lowest end of the chart. I know it is not because he does not understand the chart. "Okay," I continue. "Where would your mom place you?" He answers, "My mom has a really high opinion of me so she would think I am here" pointing to the low-average area. I then ask about his dad's opinion. He explains that his dad thinks he is even below where he had placed himself. Then I ask about friends and he says many think the same as he does though a few have higher opinions of him – in the low-average range. I then ask about each of his teachers. Most of his teachers, in John's opinion, think of him as he thought of himself, very low,

except for one. That one, not surprisingly, is John's favorite teacher.

I then tell John, "Everyone including you is wrong. The test you took at your school shows that your intelligence is in the high-average range. You are smarter than at least 6 out of every 10 people your age around the country." At that, this 17 year old young man bursts into tears. He never knew he was capable. He never knew that he could learn. He always looked around class convinced he was not as smart as the other students.

After recovering his composure, he asks if we can help him with English: "I have stories in my head I want to write." John's posture straightens as he pleads, "Please help me learn. I have stories and characters in my head I want to share. It isn't about the money. I want people to love the characters. If I can get them out and share them, I can die happy. I will give my heart and soul to learning. I know it won't be easy but it will be worth it."

I wonder how many other students have given up because they were not successful

learning from traditional methods of teaching. Help your child realize that there is not always an automatic connection between IQ, school achievement, and how you feel about yourself. IQ tests are indeed important. John's helped him recognize one aspect of his worth and gave him hope. But there are many factors not measured by IQ tests including motivation, curiosity, creative talent, work habits, study skills, personality, imagination, social behavior, achievement in particular academic subjects, spirituality, and how effectively a person integrates these factors.

No test or person can tell you anyone's real potential. Help your children see themselves as "smart" meaning they have incredible potential regardless of their IQ or school grades. You having faith in their potential can make a vital difference in their attitude toward themselves and learning. Once you have helped them realize they have what it takes to move toward whatever goals they have set for themselves in life, do what John's mother is now committed to doing: give them the support and tools needed to prepare today for success tomorrow.