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Confusing Achievement With Aptitude

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Confusing Achievement With Aptitude

Abstract

My wife and I read and reread the words several times, allowing them to sink in. "Being in an academic class would cause him harm," the principal wrote about our son, "as the rigor would be too great." The report continued, "He would be the lowest-ability student in the class and by a large margin." It is a day you don't soon forget when the principal of your son's school tells you—in an email, no less—that your child simply is not capable of managing academic work. [*excerpt*]

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COMMENTARY

Confusing Achievement With Aptitude

By Dave Powell

My wife and I read and reread the words several times, allowing them to sink in. "Being in an academic class would cause him harm," the principal wrote about our son, "as the rigor would be too great." The report continued, "He would be the lowest-ability student in the class and by a large margin." It is a day you don't soon forget when the principal of your son's school tells you—in an email, no less—that your child simply is not capable of managing academic work.

My wife and I used to be sanguine about the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act, the education reform law that everyone loves to hate. And we thought, as a colleague of mine once suggested, that we could "school proof" our child, that the advantage of having two educators as parents would give him a leg up in life. We assumed that a kid who visited museums in the summer, spent hours on end outdoors, traveled widely, slept under a safe and comfortable roof each night, ate well, and had health insurance would surely find a way to be successful in school.

Instead, by the end of 5th grade, our son had already been labeled a "basic" reader. His 3rd grade teacher had suggested that he do his career-day project on becoming a garbage man. She later told us not to get our hopes up. "Let's face it," she told my wife at a conference that year, "he's not going to be the next John Steinbeck." His 4th grade teacher, a veteran of almost 40 years in the classroom, churned out worksheet after worksheet with expiration dates from the Reagan era. In 5th grade, our son was placed in a remedial-reading program with a name that would have made George Orwell proud: Soar to Success. Instead of soaring, his interest in reading hit rock bottom. And now this: Barely through one quarter of 6th grade, the die had been cast. Our son had reached his academic limits, and he was only 11.

But his school record did not indicate that he lacked the ability to do "academic" work. He had consistently passed his end-of-year tests, and had even scored above grade level in reading before 3rd grade.

What happened?

Slowly, the problem came into focus: His school district had made the mistake of confusing achievement with aptitude and worsened it by using tests as an exclusive measure of both. His teachers and principals had presumed that the year-end state tests, which measure whether or not students have mastered the standards supposedly taught the previous year, could also be used to predict future performance, though the tests have no such predictive validity. And these year-end tests are only a small part of the problem. Our children have grown accustomed to taking tests throughout the year, tests with exotic and inscrutable names like "4sight," "DRA2," and "DIBELS," disseminated by entities with names that conjure more images of Orwellian overreach—Success for All, Dynamic Measurement Group Inc.—and, of course, by the omnipresent Pearson.

They come with a dizzying array of scientific-sounding diagnostic procedures used to measure such things as "ORF" and "LNF" and my personal favorite, "prosody"—things that make you wonder how anybody ever learned to read before we started measuring them.

And there is another thing these tests do: They measure failure better than they do success. In our district, the testing regimen is used to decide which students are in need of "remediation" or "learning support" or whatever other vaguely patronizing euphemism is favored by the test administrator. You can almost feel the scores being talked about in hushed tones at meetings of the "data team," just as consequential decisions are being made about who will be "fine" and who will need "extra support" to succeed (i.e., pass his tests) in the coming year.

We began to realize that 30 years of educational dogma had come home to roost in a painful and very personal way. This is the ideology of public schooling in the era of No Child Left Behind: It is one that encourages people to look for and remediate failure, instead of trying to find and nurture success. It is an ideology that promotes the use of jargon ("heterogeneous ability groups," "learning styles," "multiple measures of student effectiveness") as a substitute for genuine conversation about what kinds of people we want students to be and become. It is an ideology that privileges testing over teaching, a system that makes the beguiling promise that sophisticated instruments (administered incongruously with the oldest technology around—pencil and paper) can tell us everything we need to know about human cognitive ability in just a few hours. How could we blame our son's teachers for believing everything they had been told? After all, as Upton Sinclair once said, it's difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it.

At the same time, how can we let his teachers off the hook? When people look back on this era decades from now, I suspect it will be seen as a time when school personnel, with the wool pulled tightly over their eyes and self-preservation well in sight, allowed schools to be

invaded and occupied by an almost invisible enemy: their own insecurity. A clear sign of the inability of educators to handle the pressure being placed on them is visible wherever school districts hand over responsibility for educating students to testing companies, then complain that they had to because their hands were tied by federal law. The surest sign that you've been fully subjugated is your own complicity in it. I'm not sure that my son's teachers asked so little of him because they thought he was incapable of doing more. I think they had grown weary of working within an irrational education system focused on a senselessly narrow handful of goals, but had also internalized many of the assumptions upon which that system was based. That's a toxic combination for kids.

Sometimes the easiest solution is the best one: no nonsense, just good sense. It will take a lot of courageous teachers and parents to arrest the continued slide of public schools into brain-numbing educational irrelevance, but the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. The next time you see a kid's future being framed by a test score, ask yourself: Is this what I would want for my kid? That alone may start a powerful internal struggle, and, if it does, you will have already taken the first step of a journey well worth taking. Making the decision to work with another teacher or parent to do something about it is a crucial step two.

We are confident that our son will be fine because we have taken these first steps, and many more, though it has not been easy. We have decided, heeding the words of Mark Twain, not to let schooling interfere with his education. If only schooling could be made to enhance his education. Now that is an idea worth fighting for.

Dave Powell taught high school social studies for six years in suburban Atlanta and is now an assistant professor of education at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. He teaches courses on the foundations of education, educational psychology, social studies methods, and teacher action research.