

These were the words I heard from the case carrier of the high school where Jonathon was currently enrolled as a sophomore. I had requested a meeting with Jonathon's classroom aid to go over strategies for learning his World History class. The case carrier had to be present at the meeting since I was not an employee of the district. I welcomed the opportunity to share new strategies with him as well. I was greatly surprised when what I thought would be a meeting about learning strategies turned into a session about everything the case carrier felt was going wrong and why Jonathon did not belong in the class. I realized this was not a "coming together" to see how to help this child. It was a repeat of narrow-minded belief systems which were being dictated to myself and the aide.

The case carrier's beliefs were that Jonathon was not capable of being successful in the class because of his standardized test scores. Here we go again, I thought. If he can be a broken record, so can I.

At Jonathon's IEP meeting in June, the school psychologist, felt that his test scores were too low for him to be successful in World History and wanted to place him in a SDC (special day class) where he would not receive graduation credit.

Given the fact that he has only half a brain and the tests to which she was referring, were normed on children with both sides of their brain; the scores were hardly valid. Secondly, he had completed a similar class in science the year before with a passing grade. Third he had not been in an SDC placement for the past three years and had had more academic growth than in the previous five years. Knowing that none of the psychologist facts, were justified, and knowing Jonathon's desired to graduate, his parents pushed for him to be in the World History class.

When do we as teachers, doctors, or therapist, have the right to make predictions of what children can't accomplishing? That is exactly what was happening in this situation. Someone's belief system were being imposed on a child's life...A belief system that had no relevance whatsoever to fact or experience. Predictions can only be accurate when it is based on previous data an similar case history. This was simply not possible in this unique case.

There were three other professionals sitting at the conference table that day. They included myself, a NeuroPsychologist, and a Learning Specialist. All three of us had worked with Jonathon, for five to twelve years. We had tested his learning styles, and capabilities with both standardized tests and individual exercises. We were in agreement that he could complete the World History class, successfully. We explained how the test results were not accurate to use in regards to class placement. We explained the type of support he would receive, outside of the classroom to help him achieve the goals of the class and complete the requirements. His parents shared with the team, Jonathon's desire to graduate from high school, even if it meant taking the required classes more than once.

He was not a behavior problem or a distraction in any way to the classroom. So why could he not be allowed to try to complete the class? Why could he not be given the opportunity to graduate with a high school diploma? Is it not the goal in education to help children graduate from high school, so they can go on to college, or get jobs that allow them to be a contributing part of society? This child was asking for the chance to prove he could do it. Was it going to be hard for him? Absolutely! Was he going to have to work twice as hard as any other student in the classroom? Absolutely! Were his parents fully aware of the work involved for Jonathon to participate in the class? Without a doubt! Did they still want their son to have the opportunity to participate in the class and receive graduation credit? Yes they did! Does this seem like an unreasonable request? No. Then why was the school opposed to giving this student a chance?

Eventually, his parents did get Jonathon into the World History class. It was now a month into school and his mom was concerned. She felt the information she was receiving from the classroom aid, did not match the information he was being tested on.

I turned to the case carrier and said, "I think we discussed this issue at length in his IEP in June." These tests are not accurate to make a prediction, or judgment in anyway regarding Jonathon's success or failure in a classroom situation. These tests were normed on children with a whole brain. What does that mean? Jonathon has had most of his left hemisphere removed. Based on medical science, and what we know about neuro-anatomy, he shouldn't even be talking. He shouldn't be walking. He shouldn't have humor, or even language. But thank God, he does! Why? Because the brain is such a miraculous organ, it created new pathways not used in other human beings for talking, and walking, and learning. I know this to be fact because, when a blood flow study was done on Jonathon about five years ago, it was found that his Occipital lobe, which normally controls the eyes, filled with blood, (meaning it reacted) when he kicked a ball. Normally the motor cortex of the brain would react with this type of motor movement. The brain had rerouted and developed new pathways to compensate for missing pathways. Jonathon is a scientific miracle. We should be celebrating his victories and presenting him with every opportunity possible, so we can learn through him about the capabilities of the brain. Not shutting him down from graduating because he doesn't score well on some standardized test, from which we make inaccurate predictions.

I can personally tell you of a bad predication involving standardized tests and myself. As a younger student, I was a poor and intimidated test taker. I constantly second guess myself and didn't trust my own abilities. After taking the entrance test for graduate school, the Dean of Communication Disorders for Boston University told me I had the lowest entrance scores in the history of the college, and he didn't expect me to be successful in the program. He told me I was only admitted to the college because when one of the professors had called to talk to me about my application to the college and to do a personal interview over the phone, they got my very loving and passionate mother on the phone, instead of me.

My mother would not let the woman off the phone until she passionately told them every reason why they should accept me to the college and on top of that give me a scholarship. Never underestimate the power of a mother. I was accepted to the college, through the grace of God and did receive the scholarship. I graduated from the program with honors. I believe I graduated with honors because I had the desire to do my best and complete the program to the best of my ability. I also know it was because of a professor that I had for Voice Disorders, my very first semester at BU. He gave me the words and support I have never forgotten.

One of the class requirements was a group project where we had to evaluate two voice disordered patients over a two week period and develop a treatment plan for them. At the completion of the project we had to meet with our professor, individually and tell him what grade we thought we deserved and what grade our other team mate deserved. My team mate was one of the smartest girls in the program. At least I thought she was one of the smartest. She knew what to study and always got some of the highest marks in the class. She had to study much less than me and usually got a higher grade than me.

When it was my time to meet with my professor regarding the project, he, did not allow me the opportunity to tell him what grade I thought I deserved on the assignment. He started off by telling me, he was giving me an A+, based on all his observations of me working with the individual patients. When he asked what grade I thought my team mate should get, I immediately said, an A. He said, I disagree with you. Why are you giving her an A? My response was, that she is so smart and she always gets A's. He looked me in the eye and said, "Good grades, don't make a good clinician." You can have all the book smarts in the world and still not be a good clinician. A good clinician treats with their heart and uses their knowledge to make accurate decisions. Your book smart partner is getting a B until she can prove to me she is a good clinician.

His belief in me, and his belief system about what is truly important has stuck with me for my whole career. I think he was not only one of the best professors at Boston University. I think he was a very wise man in his perspective of how we should evaluate students. Our evaluation of students is so critical, because it affects not just the moment, but it can have a trickle down affect for the rest of their lives.

After going into great detail about why this standardized was not accurate on many levels for Jonathon, the case carrier responded with, "Well, I don't see why his parents can't just be happy with him being in SDC." They are pushing Jonathon too hard and sometimes he seems so stressed, because of how hard school is for him. Why can't his parents just recognize his limitations and be happy with who he is and the fact that he is an SDC student.

Wow! How many self-imposed beliefs were in that statement? I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I couldn't believe as students, and as parents, we have to be exposed to and fall victim to beliefs such as this. This man was in a place of power over this child's academic career. He could very easily make it difficult for this child not to achieve his goals of graduation. "Well", I said, that is the exact reason why it is a good thing that you are not Jonathon's parent. See if you had been Jonathon's parent, with that belief system, he probably never would have walked, or talked, or be a sophomore in high school in regular ed classes. Jonathon's parents were told that he would never do any of these things, but they didn't accept it as truth. They didn't accept it as a possibility for their son. Because they didn't accept it and encouraged him to be all that he could be, is the reason why he is such and exceptional child today. It is the reason why he has totally defied medical science. Because of his parents, Jonathon is an example to all of us, of what is possible. He is our teacher.



Why Can't His Parent's Just Be Happy with SDC?

As far as it being hard for him, it is definitely hard. I didn't work with him when he was learning to walk, but I don't think it was an easy task. Or I am sure the many years of speech therapy while learning to talk he got very frustrated and cried. I am sure there were many tears shed along the way. However, he was able to do it.

I tried to open this man's eyes to the amazing path of Jonathon's accomplishments. His parents had fifteen years of experience in knowing and seeing what Jonathon is capable of, I don't think they are going to settle now.

It would be nice to think that the case carrier heard me and changed his perspective that day, making it easier for this student. Unfortunately, that is not the case. He maintains his beliefs and his perspective and the war wages on. Jonathon's parents are not giving up. They know what is possible for their son and they will stand by his desire to graduate from high school. They will support him with outside help through professionals and encourage him to be all that he can be. At the IEP meeting, Jonathon's neuro-psychologist, Dr David Lechuga, who has worked with him for twelve years, said it best. He said, "We are not working with a child injury, we are working with a system injury." We are working with a system injury, fueled by a belief system that it is okay to make a prediction about a child's abilities based on standardized tests and diagnosis.

I want to empower parents to be like Jonathon's parents. Parents are the experts when it comes to their child. No one has the right to tell you what is not possible for your child. Parents are a powerful force. Be the power behind the change! Remember, it only takes one to start an army.

Many Blessings,

JoQueta Hayes, M.S., CCC-SLP