ARE SCORES A GOOD MEASURE OF INTELLIGENCE?

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"Many highly intelligent people are poor thinkers. Many people of average intelligence are skilled thinkers. The power of a car is separate from the way the car is driven." - Edward de Bono

Each year at this time, the pressure cranks up in the race for school and university places, as SATS and A-levels prepare to feed another raft of league tables. As these help determine our standing on the world stage, through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), our obsession with measuring children takes centre stage.

Confident in our system of public examinations, that is broadly designed to separate those more 'intelligent' from the less 'intelligent', we can feel content that we are filtering out our most able for higher education and all the opportunities that entails. Sounds simple enough, if it was really that easy.

The problem lies with the word intelligence. The common definition, that of possessing 'a quickness of understanding and an ability to apply knowledge and skills to a high level' – should give us pause to ask how well equipped our current examination system is to deliver?

Many 'intelligent' students, so identified by the data emanating from various intelligence tests (which incidentally too often reinforce teacher expectations), are frustrated by papers that trot out the same questions in a different garb. These allow for little or no original thought and even actively discourage creative thinking and intelligent responses.

Simply stated, measuring intelligence through examination is, inevitably, as limited as the examination itself. Whilst it might prove a reasonable sieve – perhaps even the best we can provide – it will not identify many of those we instinctively know to be intelligent.

There are simple reasons for this, apart from the failure of examinations to measure divergent thinking and creativity (due in part to the need to keep marking as objective and, therefore, as inflexible as possible to remove any room for subjective judgment).

The problem of measuring intelligence per se is that it is an inadequate guide to human capability, and that many of the ways we use to measure working intelligence are woefully inadequate. Surely those we should be seeking to identify and nurture are students with the capacity of effective or applied intelligence, those who can do something with what knowledge and skills they acquire?

These people can lack initiative, the ability to ask difficult questions (and solve them), EQ, cooperative and communication skills and the organisational discipline crucial to make intelligence an active, rather than a passive, trait.

Because our perceived definition of intelligence is so closely linked in with an ability to be measured by exams, many intelligent people are disfranchised.

Many times, tests are inaccurate representations of one's aptitude. Students sometimes have bad days, good days and even sick days. Some suffer from test anxiety or have difficult home lives that make it hard to get work done or focus in class. Some have learning disabilities. Some are geniuses in psychology but could not take a chemistry test if their life depended on it. Everybody has varying strengths and weaknesses, however if someone fails to succeed in one subject, many will perceive them as being less intelligent.

What about the individuals who cannot afford an education and do not know facts that seem basic to you? What about the student who knew how to do the math problem at home, but temporarily lost their memory due to the increased anxiety they felt when the teacher called them out?

While this is more problematic in high schools, there have still been several occasions where I witnessed judgmental peers whisper as a confused student braved the critics and asked a question. Even I have felt frustration towards somebody who did not know what appeared obvious to me. When this thought comes into mind, I quickly remember that there have been occurrences where I was lost and somebody else found the same material simple.

Grades limit us. In many ways they are necessary and a good work ethic is imperative for our futures. But the issue is when people imagine that a grade is an indicator of whether or not an individual is smart. When people do this, they are

devaluing this person.

There are thousands of ways to be smart. I guarantee that if you struggle with keeping a high GPA due to external struggles or just a general difficulty to succeed in a class, there is something else that you excel at. Perhaps you couldn't score above 80 percent on your paper. Maybe instead you stayed up late with your crying friend and knew just the right words to say to make them feel better. Maybe there was an emergency and when somebody was in danger you were the first to act. Maybe you couldn't ace an accounting test, but you were able to write a beautiful poem that inspired many.

A number cannot be evaluative in determining somebody's level of intelligence. The numerical system that defines how smart you are based on which facts you've grasped onto is a system that we created. It is also a system that we can beat. The word "stupid" must be eliminated from our vocabulary. It is a word that reduces us and directly insults one's brain. In doing so, you are degrading one's heart, ability to empathize, to show kindness, to be cautious, to know what to do in complex situations and much more.

Grades are important. But they are not representative of who you are or what you can do.