

Is Your Child the “Typical Student?”

(Excerpted from *A-Academics' Simplified Organizational System*)

By *Mick Rosenblum*

Naturally, over the course of my thirty-year career as a professional, private teacher and tutor, I have received thousands telephone calls from concerned parents. Often, after describing in detail his or her student's difficulties, a parent will ask “Is my child normal?” After all of the years that I have been teaching students of all ages, I still marvel at this question, because it is one that has no concrete answer. What single definition or yardstick do we have to measure normality? There is none. Scholastic normality is determined, to a large extent, by subjective criteria. For example, your student's performance may seem entirely normal among his or her peers but, at the same time, may seem entirely unacceptable (abnormal, if you will) to his or her teachers. We are well aware that students themselves often socialize with other students whom they perceive as “normal,” according to a particular set of group criteria.

Even grades cannot be used, exclusively, to measure normal performance, because not all coursework and courses are equal in scope and difficulty. In every city there are certain schools that are reputed to be more difficult than others. And in your school system there are, undoubtedly, certain teachers who have earned the reputation of being “tough” graders. Fortunately, I have been able to answer the question “Is my child normal” by simply rephrasing it. Undoubtedly, what the parent really meant to ask was “Is my student's performance typical?”

Please understand that my use of the terms “typical and “atypical” are never intended to discount the fact that each student is unique in his or her own way. Indeed, every student possesses talents and skills that enable him or her to stand out as an individual. Instead, I am referring to the fact that certain behavior trends appear more often than others and tend to reside, in rather high percentages, among students of all ages.

Before I can make any determinations of typical vs. atypical, however, I might wish to establish a basis for comparison. What is the specific group to which we intend to compare the student? Do we wish to compare him or her, for example, to all children of the same age, or would we prefer to rank the student among other students in his or her same grade level (they are not always one and the same). Are we going to make our comparisons among students in a single school, or would we rather base our observations on the scholastic population of an entire city (or country, for that matter)? Unfortunately (and rather disgracefully, I might add), some people have even chosen to rate a student's performance on the basis of race, gender, or religion!

I am sure that you can now begin to appreciate the sheer numbers of categories and groupings that we can generate, and the need to consider each student individually before comparing him or her to any particular group. Unfortunately, human beings harbor a propensity to misinterpret and manipulate comparative data in many *interesting* ways. Has your student, for example, ever come home with a poor score on a test only to declare that his test grade is really “ok” because most of the rest of the class failed the test (students have an uncanny knack for

comparing *their* grades to those of classmates who have earned "D's" and "F's")? This is just one example of interpreting group data to suit one's needs.

Even educational professionals can misinterpret group performance data and may (unintentionally of course) misguide a student. Let me give you a rather startling example of this all too common phenomenon. A few years ago, while presenting the details of my SAT and ACT courses to a high school counselor, I was intrigued by that counselor's insistence that students take the test during the spring semester of the junior year. When I asked her why she and her fellow academics advisors held such a firm stance, she explained that "statistics demonstrate that SAT scores are generally higher during the spring semester." I was compelled, then, to point out to her the dangers of misinterpreting such statistics. I explained that, indeed SAT and ACT scores may be higher during the spring semester, but those data are based on a national average score (which happens to be below 1500) wherein the majority of the students do little or no preparation for the test. Naturally, if a student is inadequately prepared for these exams, then he or she is more likely to perform better, during the school year (while the intellectual "gears" are still turning), than after a summer of intellectual stagnation. The spring semester is also a time when many students attempt to cram for their SAT's. Although such preparation is far from adequate, those students are given at least a glimpse of the nature of the SAT, which is better than none at all.

I went on to explain that students who spend a summer preparing for the SAT or ACT should take the tests in the early fall when those students are fresh and focused and not yet burdened with heavy coursework loads and the prospect of final exams just around the corner. In other words, for students who intend to prepare for these tests, the spring semester may, in fact, prove to be the *worst* time to take the test!

A few schools have even managed to misinterpret standardized test data in ways that would tend to suggest that their students possess skills that those tests do not accurately measure. A few years ago, I was asked to evaluate a particular private middle school's math program in order to ascertain why its students have had so much trouble with subsequent algebra courses taken at the high school level. Upon careful inspection of the coursework, I discovered the source of the problem---the school was using what I felt was one of the worst algebra textbooks on the market at the time, a text that presented merely half of an Introductory Algebra course! As a result, students who had taken that course found themselves lacking roughly fifty percent of the skills necessary to proceed to Intermediate Algebra. One of the School's Administrative representatives insisted, however, that the school's math program was in no need of improvement, basing her conclusion upon the results of a set of standardized test scores. I tried to explain to her that the standardized tests upon which she placed so much confidence had serious limitations and did not measure a student's ability to handle specific algebraic skills, but she refused to accept my assessment. Instead, she seemed perfectly content with her interpretation of the test score data.

Now that I have discussed some of the caveats inherent in attempting to classify and categorize student performance based on statistical data, let me give you *my* working definition of a typical student, a definition that seems to transcend age, gender, race, standardized test scores, and any other effort to categorize performance statistically. Rather than attempting to

provide such a definition in sentence or paragraph form, however, I think it best for the purpose of this series of articles, to provide the following list of characteristics that a typical student is likely to possess. Based on more than thirty years of working with students on a private, one-on-one basis, I have observed that the typical student:

1. Would like to do well in school (but is often an unwilling to put forth the effort).
2. Almost completely lacks organizational skills.
3. Does not adhere to a specific study schedule.
4. Does not carefully record grades or points received on tests or assignments.
5. Does not keep (at home) carefully arranged files of completed assignments, tests, etc.
6. Does not have an efficient way to take notes.
7. Does math homework in a rather sloppy and disorganized manner (perhaps in pen).
8. May not hold his or her pencil properly.
9. Does not outline textbook notes.
10. Does little homework on weekends.
11. Carries several binders or wire-bound notebooks to school.
12. Does not review assignments from the recent past.
13. Does no school work on some evenings, because he or she "has no homework."
14. Does just enough work to "get by" (even if grades are good!).
15. Study's while listening to music, watching television, or talking on the telephone.

If this description sounds anything like your student (or you, yourself, for that matter), I assure you that you are not alone. Although very few students will exhibit *all* of the characteristics listed above, most students adhere fairly well to the majority of them. Would you believe, however, that you could quickly and easily make *major* improvements in a student's performance by making a few simple changes and by applying a few basic tools?

Here and there, I will present examples of "typical student" behavior in order to illustrate particular points. Undoubtedly, you will recognize some (maybe all) of these behaviors in your student (or in yourself). You will also notice that the typical student will be a male in one example and a female in another. I have done this on purpose in an effort to emphasize the fact that both genders exhibit typical student behavior *equally* (contrary to myth, girls are not more organized than boys are). Rest assured that each and every example applies to boys and girls alike.

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