Students Lack Words – Thought's Raw Material

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By David Hawkins

The debate over public schooling features the decline in SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores. I know a man who sits at the center of student aptitude testing, and he has something to say about the decline in these scores.

John Gaston called me from his Dallas lab the other day to say that he was making a testing trip to Little Rock next month. When 10 or more out-of-town people ask for it, Gaston takes his Aptitude Inventory Measurement Service (AIMS) to them. I'd taken some of the tests Gaston gives, so when he called we naturally got off on the subject of education.

Was it still true, I asked him, that vocabulary was dropping nationwide, and did he still blame vocabulary for poor scholastic showing? When he'd tested me four years before, he'd complained about a one percent annual drop in vocabulary tests and had tied poor SAT scores into it.

"Yes to both questions," Gaston said. "And not only that, I've correlated vocabulary and SAT scores to the point that I can test an 8-year-old boy's or girl's vocabulary and predict within 20-30 points what the SAT score will be. If you're low on vocabulary at 8, you'll do low on SAT – unless you start building vocabulary."

I listen when Gaston talks because he's a career aptitude and vocabulary tester and in a unique tradition. His AIMS is an outgrowth of his years of association with Irvin Shambaugh and Brenda Smith and is a center for isolating and measuring natural, inborn aptitudes. AIMS, by the way, is nonprofit and tax-exempt.

It was natural that career guidance should grow out of such extensive testing (much of it children) and that AIMS should follow up with its clientele so as to validate its testing and guidance. The tests themselves have to prove out mathematically – that is, be reliable – and they have to test something meaningful, which is to say, real aptitudes.

I can't do better, in discussing the aptitudes, than talk about my own testing. Approaching it, I knew I had a respectable IQ but I also knew I was dumb about a lot of things. As I told Gaston when he began putting me through the three days of testing, I wasn't any good with my hands, had a hard time learning tunes, looked away when I saw mechanical diagrams, didn't understand art – things like that. We'll see, he said.

We did see. I hated diagrams because I was low in "structural visualization," the ability to "see" in three dimensions. It's the engineer's trait. Cheer up, Gaston said – its absence means you have a high ability to think abstractly. I knew I could do that.

My hard time with tunes? The test showed I had a poor tonal memory, though a good enough ear. Unhandiness? Well, I was low in dexterity, though I'd always thought my hands were nimble enough. I did poorly in some other things, too; so it was a relief when, after taking a "what's missing" picture test, I broke through at the 97th percentile in "inductive reasoning," which Gaston said is the ability to get the "big picture" from scattered clues.

Then he gave me some numbers and words to match and I found out I was high in "accounting aptitude," meaning the ability to handle figures, symbols and papers. When he asked for responses to certain situations, I zinged in again at the top of the chart. I had "ideaphoria" – a good flow of ideas.

Don't think, as I first did, that all you need is practice and study to clear up your dense areas. Gaston told me I never would be much better in music or mechanics or handiness.

Heredity had handed me low ratings in them. The smart thing, he said, was to lead from my strengths.

"You can handle symbols," he said, "because you inherited fast eyes. Not everybody does. Many a teacher thinks a student is stupid when he simply has slow eyes. He can't improve them much, but if a teacher knows the problem, then he and she both know why he's slow on tests and overwhelmed by homework." File that away, you parents and teachers.

The AIMS people are big on this genetic approach: they want to isolate the aptitudes upon certain genes, and they know that some genes are sex-linked – which is why great engineering families are few. "Structural visualization" is inherited only from the mother.

Looking at what he had on me so far, Gaston said I was in the right field – either newspapering or the law fit my aptitudes. I said I'd studied law before journalism. But Gaston wasn't through. An even more important test was coming up, he said – one that could decide whether I was much good in either field. The test was vocabulary, and I knew I was all right, but I was surprised to come in around the 95th percentile and even more surprised to see Gaston's reaction. He was greatly pleased.

"I guess I'm high in that aptitude, too," I said proudly.

"Yes, you're high," he said, "but vocabulary isn't an aptitude – it's learned. Congratulations. Somewhere along the way you picked up the most important thing for career success, an extensive and exact knowledge of words. That's even more important than aptitudes. They just point the way. Vocabulary tells us how far you will go."

Gaston told me about the levels of vocabulary in various work, how they drop from company presidents down to, say, mechanics – and how executives score highest of all, higher even than writers, professors, and lawyers.

"But what matters," he said, "is that it's all learned. Anybody can build his vocabulary up. Words are knowledge, the raw material of thought. Without them, you can't express yourself, and you put a limit on what you can achieve."

Those aren't Gaston's exact words, but he'd claim them as an accurate paraphrase, and it's easy to see how what he says about aptitudes and vocabulary apply to young people and poor school scores. If you don't know your aptitudes (and few do), you don't know which way to point yourself. But even if you do know your aptitudes and don't know the words that give them wings, you're still earthbound.

One more thing – the last dimension that AIMS and other John Gaston labs add to their testing and counseling. That's personality testing, and all I know is that it's a word – association test and above the 90th percentile in reliability. Gaston says that "specialist" people (a quarter of the population) work best alone and "generalist" people work best with others. It's vital for a student to know his type when, armed with vocabulary and knowledge of his strengths, he goes career hunting.