

Quincy

In their reactions to including Samuel, audiences voiced to Habib concern about the less visible issue of emotional and behavioral disability. As a result, his next film, "Who Cares About Kelsey?" followed a young woman struggling to graduate from high school, despite her struggles with family and past sexual abuse. Then one day, as Habib was watching his son Samuel, now in high school, communicate with his principal, recently diagnosed with ALS, Habib found his next subject. "Mr. Connelly Has ALS" chronicles the journey of a healthy, wildly popular principal of Concord High School before, and after he was diagnosed with ALS.

But what about the general issue of intelligence? What about what, back in the 1950s, was referred to

as "mental retardation"? Who is intelligent? What is intelligence?

Habib: "Intellectual disability is the holy grail of disability. What about students who have the intellectual disability label? Can they be fully included in the classroom? Go to college? Can they work? Can they marry? As I explored this topic, I found that only 17 percent of students with disabilities are included in regular education. Just 40 percent will graduate from high school. Of 6.5 million Americans with intellectual disability, barely 15 percent are employed. The intellectual disability label still carries the same implication we experienced decades before."

Habib's newest film, "Intelligent Lives," explodes those labels, interweaving stories of three people with intellectual disabilities: Micah, Naieer, and Naomie. If they had been born in the first half of the 20th century, their parents would

have been counselled to institutionalize them. As recently as 1975, they would not have had access to a public education.

Instead, Micah, born in 1984, is a student at Syracuse University with a vibrant social life, a job co-teaching university classes, and a sophisticated grasp of social media, yet has an IQ of 40. Naieer, born in 1999, is a talented visual artist, immersed in general education and basketball games at a public high school in Dorchester, anticipating going to college to study art. Naomie sings and dances in her Providence, Rhode Island, Creole church and is working towards her first paid job in a beauty parlor.

Habib's films ask us all to rethink our own assumptions about disability and intelligence. What is ability and disability? My husband suffered a stroke more than a decade ago; the first symptom was difficulty speaking. It turns out that a disability, the

fact that he had trouble reading as a young boy, actually helped him fully recover his speech because his brain had already adapted to using both hemispheres to help him read. I did not discover my son Gabe was dyslexic until he was 24.

In her book *Upside Down Brilliance—The Visual-Spatial Learner*, author Linda Kreger Silverman described Gabe—intelligent and gifted in many difficult subjects and yet he struggled with reading. The book helped me rethink—and actually reverse my thinking about—what constitutes ability and disability.

As I watched *Intelligent Lives*—and Habib's other films—I was struck by the fact that we must not only rethink our measuring gauge for intelligence, but also factor in the issue of character—otherwise described as "grit." In *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, Paul Tough draws

on the research of math teacher-psychologist Angela Duckworth about the role of self-control and grit—the relentless work ethic sustained towards a long-term goal—and its impact on success.

Duckworth changed her view of school reform: "The problem, I think, is not only the schools, but also the students themselves. Here's why: learning is hard. True, learning is fun, exhilarating and gratifying—but it is also often daunting, exhausting and sometimes discouraging. To help chronically low-performing but intelligent students, educators and parents must first recognize that character is at least as important as intellect."

Nowhere is character more evident than in Habib's films. No one understands better how learning can be daunting, exhausting, discouraging and seemingly impossible than Samuel, Kelsey, Mr. Connolly, Micah, Naieer, and Naomie. Each takes

great risks, delves into the unknown parts of themselves, faces obstacles head-on, and deals with the anxiety of trying new things without knowing if they can accomplish them or not. In fact, we can all learn something about risk-taking and courage by watching *Intelligent Lives*.

Habib: "Intelligent Lives is a catalyst to transform the label of intellectual disability from a life sentence of isolation into a life of possibility for the most systematically segregated people in America." As Keith Jones, also a man with cerebral palsy, stated, "Never let anybody tell you about you."

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

To view a trailer or host a screening of *Intelligent Lives*, go to: www.intelligentlives.org.

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