As a university student studying psychology, I observed classrooms in a local elementary school to learn more about teacher feedback. On one occasion, an 11-year-old boy named Mark received a six out of 10 on a test he had taken a week earlier. In response to his disappointment, the boy’s teacher said, “It’s okay, Mark—not everyone has to be an Einstein.”

The comment stuck with me. Unlike his classmates, Mark was from a lower socioeconomic background. His parents were struggling financially and were unable to help him with his homework. Mark shared his bedroom with his siblings, so he didn’t have a quiet place to study at home.

Why, I wondered, did the teacher conclude that Mark wasn’t an Einstein? That comment made Mark’s grade entirely a function of his innate ability. Why didn’t the teacher consider the external conditions—such as the lack of a place to study—that prevented Mark from fulfilling his potential?

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