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Yes, I can Do This!

I recently took some time to look back through the articles I have written for the NTA newsletter. I had no particular purpose in mind really, just a random occasion to revisit past thoughts and ideas and self-critique my efforts. I couldn't help but notice a particular academic concept that I unknowingly, and without intent, regularly mentioned in those articles. It was the concept of "***agency: yes, I can do this.***" Within the context of these articles, developing a sense of "***agency***" was always a goal that I, as a tutor of struggling children, sought to inculcate in each of my tutees. A very important objective for any self-respecting tutor to embrace, I think! However, somewhat indirectly, I may have turned the eyes of scrutiny on myself. I was now desperate to know whether I can write well, and with clarity? Can I express a point that exists only within me, and can I make it compelling for my readers? Re-reading the articles was clearly an internal and integral effort to prove these things to myself. Jeez come to think of it, I now wish I had that very special teacher who would just tell me. Like the old days in school! Life was so much easier as a young student. I was simply the receiver of the very affirmation that I couldn't give myself.

"***Yes, I can do this***" seems to me a simple affirmation of a belief one holds about oneself. And it takes time to build. This mantra, if you find it useful to attribute to yourself, is the very place I chose to start my tutor practice. I had to answer one very important question: *could I do this?* Was it worth my trouble to invest so much energy and resource to develop the requisite skills to be an effective tutor? This became part of the problem-solving process that I, as a prospective tutor, had

to answer. Tutoring, when well done, holds the promise of improving the life of a tutor and, quite reciprocally, the tutee. The practice of tutoring builds confidence, and ignites the curiosity and passion in everyone involved in a transformational way. But I am still left with the question: could I be an effective tutor?

(Please be patient everyone and thank you, I promise to get to the point of my article in a paragraph or two!!)

I have purposefully avoided any mention of the skills-based aspects of professional tutoring. In my case I am a Literacy specialist. I help young children who struggle with reading. Other tutors are skilled in English, mathematics, the sciences, foreign language, and other specialties. These constitute very specific academic skills and they enable the tutor to assess and address the struggles that students bring to the tutor classroom. I prefer to assume that devoted tutors are fully capable of turning simple school assignments into project-based activities instead of abstract assignments or rote worksheets all the while appropriately aligning tutor services with what's going on in the classroom. It is a tremendous advantage to students when teachers can leverage effective tutoring around their instruction. It's a tremendous advantage to the tutor to clearly see the intended outcome of your service. To this extent I trust you now have a partial answer to the question: ***can I do this?*** The rest of the puzzle is about to appear.

Naturally, prospective tutors who are sufficiently introspective know if they have the academic skill to assess and address the struggles that students experience. Successful tutors must have specific content experience. But you must also know the answer to these more esoteric and truly personal questions:

1. Can I build ***strong, personal relations*** with my students? In my business as a literacy specialist, I spend a good bit of time during each class reminding my

students that it is OK to be wrong and that I expect them to experiment with a variety of possible solutions until they are successful. I am speaking specifically about the sometimes confusing process of decoding unfamiliar words and “sounding” them out. Easier said than done for that struggling first grader. I can’t be more emphatic: “tutors must personalize their learning, incorporate the student’s interests, and tutor to the student’s strengths while minimizing the student’s weaknesses.”

2. Do I have the *energy* to be that *actor* or *actress* that embodies a good mood and motivation, such that it positively impacts a student discouraged by school and resultant poor grades? Can I be a model for success, encouraging the child to apply their talents and do better? Even after a long day?

3. Can I be *accessible, available, involved, and empathic* to the extent that my support makes the child feel valued? I can attest to the fact that even as a mature adult, when a person demonstrates an interest in my interests, in any regard, I feel valued and the offer of mutual interest is much appreciated.

4. *Humility* allows the tutor, who has the subject matter on the tips of their fingers, to admit that some concepts have escaped them. Rather than guess, it is preferable to tell the student that ‘*I don’t know*’ and thereafter work hard to find the answer before the next tutoring session. It is also very important to recognize when the sessions are not having the desired affect and take a step back. You may not be the right person for this student!

There are a number of additional questions and challenges that face the prospective tutor. Please consider these: can you align with parents and teachers? Are you willing to embrace other learning styles? Are you familiar with the building blocks of an academic discipline and can you develop lessons that fill in these learning gaps? Can you improve a student’s study skills? Take a moment and

seriously consider these questions I posited to you and then with a resounding voice say, ***Yes, I can do this!***