

Ain't Nothing Wrong with the Kids

By
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The above title represents the response of teachers who had achieved what by some is the seemingly insurmountable feat of closing the achievement gap. President Obama asked, what they thought was the one-thing teachers and the public should know about their achievement. They responded, you have to enter your classroom with the underlying belief that "Ain't nothing wrong with the kids." I think they used the word "Ain't" because it has a higher degree or resonance and impact.

I came to this county in the early seventies and was fortunate enough to be appointed to the position of Supervisor of Title I. This is a federally funded program designed to meet the needs of low-income students. I entered this position with such high levels of anticipation and expectations. I have always had this premise that as an educator you need to consider two elements when it comes to student learning, "Research and Reality." I called it "R & R." Most of my colleagues know that I am a reader of the research; but they also know that I base my actions on the military axiom of "Respond to what you see on the ground" or reality. I have found that by combining the two, high levels of learning can take place for students, far beyond what we expect. I have had the pleasure of working with colleagues who shared similar beliefs. There is a special gift of insight given to educators who have had the experience or belief in the ability of all students. Instead of approaching students with the thought of "I taught it and you did not learn it." We approach our students saying, "you don't get out of here without learning." Instead of saying you have to prove that *you "can" learn it*, our approach is you have to prove to us that you *"can't."*

Upon entering this new supervisory position I immediately began the process of research. Prior to my assuming the position, the students receiving services were tracked into classrooms and isolated from the regular classrooms. The new inherited model allowed students to interact with the mainstream but the concept of tracking remained in place by another name. It remains today in some of our classrooms. Children know when they are being tracked. One of our military friends relocated to the area. When they asked their son Adam about his first day of school they received the following reply: "There are three reading groups, the apples, oranges and bananas. The apples are the smart kids; the oranges are the so-so kids; I am an orange; but Lawd help those poor bananas!"

This still exists in some schools. Instead of bananas, they are called the "sub-groups." Sometimes these banana groups slide back instead of up. Before you know it they have slid out of our school system. They slide on the very banana peel that was supposed to protect them because; in error they were insulated from the gift of high expectations. It can also happen in the apple group, they are students whose

gifts and talents are not being recognized and they slide into boredom, non-participation, disruptions or silence.

There were two ways of educational thinking in the early seventies that unfortunately prevails today. It was called the "Deprivation or Deficit Model" (M. Deustch). The second model is the "Different Model." Educational research and many educators believed that some students were deficient when it came to learning and used testing instruments to prove it. One test used when I arrived required students to draw a triangle, square, and diamond successfully. Another activity required them to draw a line between two parallel lines successfully (eye-hand coordination). Other tasks required students to speak in complete sentences using the exact language pattern of the teacher (Senfried & Engleman). Here is where the reality and my life experience came in to play. I was shocked when students failed what appeared to be such a simple task. Unfortunately, teaching to the test started long before the Standards of Learning). The consequence of failing this test could mean full year of drawing geometric designs and speaking in complete sentences when in reality students needed to learn how to read.

Thirty five years ago, I watched a poor rural child who made the mistake of calling a sweet "potato" a "tater" go through a grueling process of trying to repeat the phrase "This is a potato for at least fifteen minutes. I stayed longer to watch this once perpetual hand raising, gregarious child become silent for the remainder of the morning. I asked myself, "What just happened here?" I concluded what appeared to be a genuine effort to teach a child the difference between the "language of school" and the "language of home" (our jobs) had in fact become a "slippery banana moment." Two things occurred. The child now knew neither she nor her parents "Talked right." As educators we are always engaged in a dance of teaching students to grow without destroying who they are and where they came from (Different model). Knowing who you are is called "self-efficacy" (Jeff Howard). No one has a right to take that away from you, especially educators.

The above experience resulted in my writing a memoir called "Skinned Knees, China Berry Trees and Miss Louise" about thirty-five years ago. I am sharing the thinking and some of the excerpts from that memoir publicly for the first time. Research in the early seventies said that children from poverty-minority-rural backgrounds lacked language and structure. Yet Miss Louise, my two room duplex neighbor, a washwoman, was the queen of structure. We knew which day of the week it was by her weekly rituals and her entrepreneurial spirit. On Monday the clothes for families were washed and hung on clothesline to dry regardless of the weather. Tuesday was ironing day, so what were called "smoothing irons" were heated in the front yard and ironing was done. Folding clothes allowed us to see triangles, rectangles, squares and yes diamonds like the ones on the test. Every single wrinkle or "cat face" had to be removed. Wednesday was delivery day, where she placed a basket on her head and took the freshly ironed clothes to her customers. I took in ironing at thirteen because learned from the best..

Geometric forms and motor coordination were on display daily as we played hopscotch and other outside games. My brothers drew geometric forms when shooting marbles. No one had better eye-hand coordination than my brother who could hit the center of that “triangle” of marbles with precision and accuracy. Tell me that the boys in my neighborhood lacked this gift when they made slingshots and could hit an object using chinaberries from unheard of distances. Geometric forms were on display every Saturday evening when Miss Louis swept our dirt yard and made beautiful geometric forms; so beautiful that we avoided walking on them.

It was always perplexing to me that students’ background knowledge was not always transferred to a classroom setting or the test given to them. Teachers have to find a way to make that transfer. A frequently used tool in classrooms is the acronym KWL. “K” relates to what the learner already knows, W is what he wants to learn and L what is learned. This is a wonderful tool if used properly. Some teachers skip or spend little time in the most important part of part of the acronym, the “K.” We focus on the “W” because that gets us to the SOL objective. I have even heard educators say, “They have no background knowledge.” A better phrase would be they do not have the type of background knowledge we value. The “K” portion of this is not only the most important element for students who learn differently but it allows students who already know to move ahead. I wonder what would have happened if the students taking that test in the early seventies had been allowed to draw a hop scotch or even shoot marbles aka as “Performance-based learning” or “Authentic learning” today.

In all of my years as an educator I have seen only one child with the courage to seek membership in the apple group. It happened in the early seventies. While attending an early morning conference with one of my teachers, a young man entered unannounced with several books under his arms. When asked why he was there he replied, “I think I need to be moved to a higher reading group!” That memory has stuck with me all of these years. Very few students have that level of self-efficacy. It is our job to know that students should be constantly moving up the fruit chain and not sliding back on a banana peel.

If we want to change our instructional practices we have to change our “Mindset” (Carol Dweck). It can be a slow process. Dweck’s research indicates intelligence is not fixed but grows with experience. There is nothing “sub” about students who come to our classroom at the age of five speaking two languages. In order for change to occur teachers and others have to engage in a concept call “Positive deviance” (Pascale, Sternin and Sternin) aka observable exceptions or “Islands of Excellence” (Douglas Reeves).

More than 40 years ago, Ron Edmond found schools in low income, urban and rural America where students were out-performing majority students. A colleague of mine Paul Adams has had a 100% graduation-college-bound rate for more than thirty years (Providence Effect). Douglas Reeves, a famous educator, showcases what are called 90/90/90 schools where 90% of the students are poor, 90% are

minority, yet 90% are passing all standards. Education Trust, an agency that works to close the gap has numerous listings of such schools.

The high performing teachers recognized in the White House were right, nothing is wrong with our kids. What is wrong is that we don't all know it!