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Inspire a Disadvantaged Child: Be That One Light in the Darkness

The prevailing expectation in education today is, “All children can learn.” This is an important expectation. Our actions are guided by our expectations. If we believe that all children can learn, then children *can learn*. If we believe that children cannot learn, then assuredly, our self-fulfilling prophecy will come true. Children will not learn. As the old saying goes, “*Monkey see, monkey do.*” If children sense we do not believe in them and their ability to learn, they will not believe in themselves. If children perceive that we believe they can learn and we expect them to learn, children in turn will believe in themselves and learn. We can turn them toward learning or against learning. It is humbling to realize that we as teachers have much power in our hands; we can literally cause success or failure.

At the beginning of every school term, teachers of all levels are excited about setting up their new classrooms. Teachers are eager to get acquainted with their new class of students. They work diligently on various procedures cautiously developing classroom procedures and lesson plans. Everything is

new at the beginning of the school year and everyone in the school building is cheerful and has great hopes and aspirations for a successful school year. An optimistic feeling prevails; everyone embraces learning with anticipation, joy, and enthusiasm.

Gradually after a few weeks of school, reality sets in. Teachers become clearly aware that although many children learn alike, many of them learn differently too. Some work faster than others; some work more slowly than others. The perplexing question inevitably arises: *“How do I teach all children in the classroom?”* Another question arises: *“How do I challenge the high achievers, and while doing so, structure my lessons to accommodate the slower learners?”* First year teachers don’t just ask these questions. All teachers, even experienced ones, ask these questions every year when differences in children become noticeably apparent, and in some cases almost overwhelming.

Some research concludes that teachers make unconscious subtle decisions regarding how we treat children. Bright children who have all of the “right answers” are favorably responded to frequently by teachers. Often children who struggle to come up with “right answers” are subconsciously overlooked in the “questioning process.” Obviously, bright children drive any lesson forward (at least for most of the class). To the contrary, slower students, when given adequate attention by the teacher, sometimes can delay the timing of a lesson geared for the entire class of learners. The teacher is in a dilemma. Such indicates the vital need for differentiated instruction. It is therefore important to make appropriate accommodations for both high and low learners. Although the

goals of instruction may be relatively the same for all learners, children with diverse learning needs obviously will achieve different outcomes at different times. With some children, the teacher can accelerate the lesson and enrich the content. With slower learners, the teacher must make it a priority to break lessons down into more sub-steps for adequate and successful guided practice and mastery.

The concern arises when teachers do not watch for underrepresented groups who are consistently delayed in achievement. The reality is: underrepresented groups score far below European and many Asian Americans on achievement tests. The reasons sometimes include socio-economic status, diverse families, and cultural barriers. Yet, another valid reason may very well be inadequate responses by schools, specifically administrative leaders and classroom teachers.

In the American society, African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Native-Americans tend to occupy the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Consequently, many families in these groups are unable to provide their children with the stimulation and academic preparation that are typical of a middle-class “white” upbringing.

Another important disadvantage is that many students from underrepresented groups face academically inferior, overcrowded classrooms in urban schools. And unfortunately, often minority-group students perform poorly because the instruction they receive is inconsistent with their cultural

backgrounds. Thus, it is important to relate to the child's cultural background in some way showing an acceptance of some differences.

In this "acceptance process", it is important for teachers to understand some underlying principles of behavior with minority cultures. For example, there is a tendency of many African-American students to accuse their peers of "acting white" if they strive to achieve. In contrast, many Asian American parents strongly stress academic excellence as a cultural expectation. Therefore, as stated earlier, different cultures have different expectations for learning.

Another problem is the lack of respect concerning the students' home languages and dialects. This lack of respect also can lead to a diminishing commitment of giving these children a quality education. Even well-meaning teachers and/or administrators disproportionately place students from under-represented groups in low-ability groups or tracks. Once a child is in a low-ability group or track, he/she seldom exits from this track. Once the label and attitude is applied, the lack of success results in more negative experiences with failure and the child's confidence erodes month after month, year after year. This cycle of failure can turn into a generational cycle that is difficult, if not almost impossible to break. Teachers must band together for success of disadvantaged children and slow learners.

Hopefully, the lower achievement of African-American, Latino, and Native American children will decrease through future decades as these children attain more status in American society and more prestigious, high paying jobs. As most educators know, attitudes take time to change, yet can change positively in

time. Schools are important! Schools can break the cycle of poverty. Schools can give poor children a chance to succeed and reach high expectations in learning and advancing toward gainful life employment. The schools have the worthwhile and fortunate opportunity to give equal rights and justice for all.

Changing a student's life is a great opportunity that teachers have only once in a lifetime. Teachers may only truly have one golden opportunity to make a lasting imprint on a child's life. A teacher can be that one light that changes and inspires a life forever, encouraging the child to climb the highest mountain and capture incredible and amazing dreams!

Many stories have been said about "one teacher" who inspired a disadvantaged child to seek success through education and a fulfilling, people-serving lifetime career. That light was the only "one light" that made the difference from years of poverty to blessed years rewarded with gratification, fulfillment, and prosperity.

And this was all because of one teacher!