

Commentary [10-21-20]

Attacking the Achievement Gap From a Strength Bases Perspective:

A Counterintuitive Approach

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Another year of disappointing results about American schools from the PISA report. The release of the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress painted a stark picture for reading and math achievement in our country. Thirty-one states saw scores drop for eighth grade reading achievement. Increased commentary about stress, frustration, and pressure on our college bound students that has resulted in depression and anxiety on the parts of many students and given rise to college application scandals and a thriving college prep consulting industry for those who can afford it. Seventy percent of teens say stress is a major problem. And no matter how you interpret it, the “evidence based” school improvement requirement of ESSA focuses only on improving test scores, even if has made our schools into tedious memorization and work sheet factories, especially for schools that serve low income and minority students. Perhaps it is time to take a serious look at the causes of these conditions and examine some alternatives to an education system that thinks drill-and-practice pedagogy and a test prep mentality will improve schools rather than turning them into punitive, dreary, and unhappy places for so many of our young people.

Is it possible to change the dominant goal of schooling by making enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning (The 3 Es) the predominant mission of American Education? And if so, how can we make these goals a reality for schooling rather than just adding more platitudes to the endless parade of the meaningless clichés and new names for “mastery learning” that, in the final analysis, are always more focused on the deductive, didactic, and prescriptive end of the continuum of learning theories rather than the inductive, investigative and inquiry end.

First and foremost, we must be realistic about the stranglehold that the standards promoters, the text-book companies, and testing industrial complex have on our schools. These external shackles are not going to go away, but we can take some small and gentle but effective steps to *infuse* the 3 Es into any and all aspects of the required curriculum. The first thing we can

do is to identify and reward the still-optimistic teachers in our school who are willing to learn a few skills about a different “brand” of learning and related teaching skills that focus on the 3 Es mentioned above. Effective school change has always been a bottom-up rather than top-down process. When talking about change, Dwight Eisenhower once said, *“Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you’re a thousand miles from a cornfield.”*

The first skill for teachers to learn is how to use some observation and student completed self-assessment instruments that identify strength areas and especially student interests. There are many instruments readily available for this process. With this knowledge they should experiment with small practices such as allowing student to select a book or books in a high interest area rather than always using required textbooks for the majority of their instruction. Asking open-ended questions about required curricular topics provides a good compass for infusing interesting engagement activities into the prescribed curriculum. “What are some things about the Great Depression that you would like to learn about?” The Music? Movies? Newspaper Articles? Women’s Fashions? Photographs, Cartoons? Popular fiction? Imagine the interesting research, creativity, and thinking skills that can result from infusing these choices into this unit of instruction. And these are exactly the kinds of skills that control access to opportunity and advancement in today’s rapidly changing and highly competitive job market. Students interested in, for example, the photography of the Great Depression can find literally thousands of photos and be encouraged to classify and present them to others around various themes.

There was a time when the scarcity of resources and limits on teachers’ time made the kinds of interest-based searches suggested above unrealistic; however, the Internet has made searches for any and all types of information just a few clicks away. The second skill for teachers in this brand of learning is how to quickly and easily find some highly engaging enrichment resources. With a little guidance from the technology specialist and thanks to the almost unlimited resources available on the internet teachers now have access to a world of exciting activities. They can do a virtual dissection and preservation of their own mummy when studying about Ancient Egypt, they can design and build their own roller coaster as a science project, or take virtual field trips to presidential libraries, museums, famous landmarks, or recording studios in Hollywood.

The pedagogy of prescription has perhaps unintentionally, but clearly in terms of demonstrated results, withheld from low-income children the exact kinds of thinking skills that

are necessary for successful participation in today's higher education and our growing global economy. The word, "perhaps" is used because I don't think there is a clandestine conspiracy on the parts of policy makers and the textbook/testing cartel to keep low-income children poorly educated, thereby limiting access to economic mobility. But make no mistake, neglect, mismanagement, and a lack of courage to challenge unsuccessful practices is the equivalent of a *bona fide* conspiracy.

If failed approaches have continued to produce dismal results, perhaps it is time to examine a counter-intuitive approach based on a pedagogy that is the polar opposite of the pedagogy that Pavlov used to train his dogs! Accountability for the truly educated mind in today's knowledge-driven economy should first and foremost attend to students' ability to:

- plan a task and consider alternatives
- monitor one's understanding and the need for additional information
- identify patterns, relationships, and discrepancies in information
- generate *reasonable* arguments, explanations, hypotheses, and ideas using appropriate information sources, vocabulary, and concepts
- draw comparisons and analogies to other problems
- formulate meaningful questions
- apply and transform factual information into usable knowledge
- rapidly and efficiently access just-in-time information and selectively extract meaning from that information
- extend one's thinking beyond the information given
- detect bias, make comparisons, draw conclusions, and predict outcomes
- apportion time, schedules, and resources
- apply knowledge and problem solving strategies to real world problems
- work effectively with others
- communicate effectively in different genres, languages, and formats
- derive enjoyment from active engagement in the act of learning
- creatively solve problems and produce new ideas

These are the student engagement-oriented skills that grow young minds, promote genuine enthusiasm for learning, and, as so much research has shown, increase achievement. If we are going to break the strangle hold that the perpetrators of failed practices have had on our

schools and the lives of children, we need some leaders at all levels—legislative, federal, state, and local—courageous enough to explore bolder and more innovative alternatives that will provide all students with a more highly enriched diet—the kind of diet that characterizes learning in the nation’s very best public and private schools. This is not to say that we should abandon a strong curriculum that focuses on basic competencies, nor should we forget to demand accountability data to evaluate returns on investment for alternate approaches to addressing the problem. But we need to move the focus away from memorizing content and toward the kinds of thinking skills listed above; and we need to develop accountability procedures (not just tests) that show us how well students are learning to *apply* their thinking to authentic problem solving situations. This kind of accountability may not put the bubble sheet testing companies out of business, but it will help force the issue of infusing more enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm into our schools.