

Collecting Gaps

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When taking the 30,000 feet strategic view of our students, we see the long progression of children moving through the educational system, gathered together by age groups and increasing in knowledge, skill and sophistication. As teachers, we hope our students are further advanced academically at the end of the year than at the beginning. They should have matured in their relationships with others, and learned gratitude and kindness. We pray they are better prepared to be thinking people with greater control of their emotions.

But the pattern of teaching and testing among the teachers of these students often echoes how the teachers were themselves raised. Generally, a teacher will instruct a section of the curriculum, review the basics with the students and then give a test. Tests are graded and students are informed of their grade. Then, regardless of the scores, the teacher moves on to more complicated curriculum. Let's imagine one student gets an "A" with 95% on the test, then others get 75%, 82% and 87%. Anything shy of 100% on the test indicates the student is not understanding some percentage of the curriculum taught, but this "gap" in the student's learning is rarely addressed by the teacher or school administration. The student is regularly accumulating new academic knowledge and skills, along with collecting gaps in their learning. Unaddressed, these gaps may lead to a total collapse of the student's confidence and emotional stability as they encounter more difficult content. As an example, I still struggle to this day with

two simple addition/subtraction problems. Whenever I need to add $8 + 5$, or $7 + 5$, I must pause and do the mental equivalent of counting fingers to arrive at an answer. Perhaps I was missing that day in elementary school when these addition facts were introduced, and fortunately it was not a gap that was insurmountable, but a gap nonetheless. Students collecting gaps may come to the point in school of just tuning out completely, assuming they do not have the “smart genes” that other students have. Unless their teachers detect the signs of a failure mentality and intervene, that student may suffer irreparable loss and life vitality. This becomes the troubled child that may display aberrant and antisocial behavior.

Teaching is a second career for me, so my clinical practice as a teacher candidate is fresh in my memory. Once I was asked to observe another science teacher’s class. Before entering the room, the host teacher informed me that, “These kids are just savages! Most of them are headed to jail.” I was speechless. I sat through the class, and afterwards the teacher commented, “See what I mean!” Once again words escaped me, feeling that if I said anything, it would not be to that teacher’s liking. What I saw were just kids, kids who could have learned something with a teacher who even remotely liked working with them, but they had no chance with that teacher. They were doomed to failure from the beginning, perhaps proving what others had said to them about their inability to learn, how stupid they were and how they were losers that were destined to live out their lives in prison. Along with my feelings of deep sorrow for these students, was also grief for the teacher. Perhaps he started his teaching career with great hopes and ambition for helping children to learn and grow up with wholesome values, yet somehow he ended up with a twisted and perverse mind set, cynical about “kids nowadays” and their poor prospects for success.

The children who walk into our classrooms at the beginning of the year, come to us as a complete mixed bag of academic achievement, mental and emotional IQ, with family experiences that range from loving and supportive, to totally dysfunctional, to an abyss of child neglect and abuse. We have relatively little grasp on their backgrounds, even with the IEPs and 504s that accompany some students. We keep wondering, “Where are their gaps in learning? What ground to I need to repeat for them to bring them up to the level of the rest of the class? How can we all get “on the same page, at the same time?” There are many factors in a child’s life over which we have no control, and yet we still need to take everyone at face value, and help them to succeed in school. There have been several times I have felt completely at a loss to know what could be done to help a specific student. Now, I am faced with a student’s crisis who has a pattern of cutting herself and attempted suicide through an overdose of medicine. She confides in me and shared that she had been abused when younger, whatever that means. Each time I spoke to the vice principal and/or counselor, to hear that everyone knew these facts already, yet nothing seemed to be improving, rather they were deteriorating. With her recent report of prior abuse, I was obliged for the first time to file a report with Child Protection Services (CPS). This student was “screaming” for help, and I could not just sit on my hands and wait to see what would happen.

So, there are many “gaps” in a child’s life over which we have no control, but in the classroom, we hold sway. We have a choice in our instruction whether we leave a child with intellectual gaps and hope some other teacher or circumstance fills in the void, or we can plan to leave no gap unfilled.