

## Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

### Reject the Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations

poor baby  
bless her heart  
pobrecito

*“...Bigotry comes in all shapes and sizes but one of the most insidious forms is the soft bigotry of low expectations.” -Tavis Smiley, 2011*

We hear it every day. In Chicago you might hear the teacher say, “poor baby.” In Mississippi it is expressed as “bless her heart.” In Los Angeles, it’s “pobrecito.” These are just different ways of saying the same thing—we don’t expect much from some kids.

Children come to school from different homes and with diverse backgrounds. Some live in ‘learning enriched’ environments where parents eagerly provide their children with support and encouragement for learning. Others live in less advantaged homes with fewer opportunities, in environments we might describe as ‘learning impoverished.’ In these homes, parents may not have the time, energy or ‘know-how’ to successfully encourage their children to learn.

Differences in our students’ backgrounds manifest themselves in many ways. For example, children from learning enriched environments enter kindergarten with working vocabularies that are 50 percent larger than those of children from learning impoverished backgrounds. Researchers have reported similar findings for mathematics.

We know that the socioeconomic background of a child matters but according to John Hattie, there are 32 other factors that matter more or have a greater influence on

student learning than the home a child comes from—and more importantly—nearly every one of those 32 factors is within the control of the classroom teacher. So how do schools overcome the challenges faced by some of our most disadvantaged learners?

*“... The collective efficacy of the staff is a better predictor of student success than the socioeconomic status of the student.” -Richard DuFour, 2012*

In schools functioning as Professional Learning Communities, teachers do more than pay lip service to the belief that ‘all kids can learn.’ They translate these words into actions and raise the expectations for all students at their school.

In PLCs, teachers demonstrate their beliefs about learning in very specific ways. They collaborate to implement proven instructional strategies such as a guaranteed and viable curriculum that all students will learn, common assessments that identify how well students have mastered the curriculum, and comprehensive pyramids of intervention to provide more time and support to students who do not learn as expected. Teachers in these schools ensure the right structures are in place.

These teachers also carefully examine the culture of their school and promote high expectations for themselves and their students. Researchers have found that in schools with high levels of collective efficacy, teachers embraced a ‘no excuses’ approach to teaching and learning. The faculty of these schools believes that their actions—both individually and collectively—make a difference in the lives of their students.

*“...It’s one thing to say all students can learn, but making the kids believe it—and do it—can require a 180° shift in students’ and teachers’ sense of themselves and one another.” -Sarah Sparks, 2013*

In addition to implementing proven instructional strategies and embracing high expectations for all, the most effective schools show students that they have within themselves the capacity to overcome significant obstacles. As Shriver points out, “The good news is that we can teach things to our kids that we never thought we could teach them. Things like perseverance, persistence and problem-solving.”

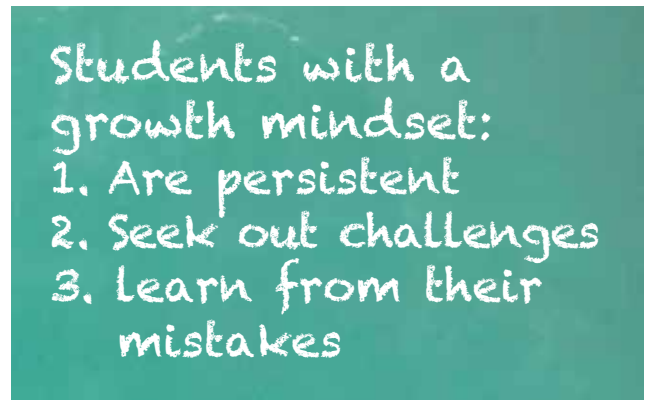
Carol Dweck and others describe this concept as a ‘growth mindset’ and it is clear that regardless of their socioeconomic background, students who believe learning can be improved by effort and experience “improve in academics and other skills, and can even be less aggressive and more socially engaged.” According to Sarah D. Sparks, students with a growth mindset tend to be more persistent, seek out challenges, and learn from their mistakes.

Sparks suggests teachers who begin their lessons with, ‘Let’s start out with an easy problem,’ may actually discourage students who initially struggle or get the problem wrong. Instead, she recommends teachers introduce the same problem with, ‘This might take a few tries’ and continually encourage students to try different approaches when faced with adversity.

*“... We have to convince kids that, despite the formidable obstacles they face, it is imperative that they do well in school.” -Tony Danza, 2012*

The construct of resilience also has implications for teaching and learning. Jane McGonigal identified four categories of resilience and suggests that much like a muscle, resilience gets stronger with use. She argues that wrestling with even simple problems without giving up can have a positive impact on a student’s mental resilience and promotes greater focus, discipline, determination and will power.

Encouraging students to ‘do their best’ validates the notion that it’s okay to abandon their efforts to solve the problem when it becomes difficult. Likewise, when schools



fail to provide more time and support for kids who do not succeed the first time or promote a ‘one and done’ mentality with our grading practices, we send the wrong message. Consider the consequences for students who hear that school is too hard, that they can’t learn, or that it is acceptable to give up. If a student hears even *one* of these messages each day, he or she will receive hundreds of messages every year—perhaps thousands over the course of their academic careers—that will negatively impact their ability to become more resilient learners.

*“Children from learning enriched homes make jobs easier, children from learning impoverished homes make our jobs important.” -Barbara Coloroso*

It is true, a child’s home environment has an impact on learning but there are things we can do to overcome those disadvantages. Inherent in the belief that all children can learn, is a belief that we can teach all children regardless of their previous experience or socioeconomic background. Thus, the question we should ask is not, ‘are there differences in a child’s background that effect learning?’ but rather ‘what are we doing about those differences.’ Said another way, are we willing to accept learning as an optional activity or will we reject the soft bigotry of low expectations and insist on high levels of learning for all? ■

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#### Resources

- DuFour, R. (2012). *A School Leader’s Guide to PLC at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- McGonigal, J. (2012). *The Game That Can Give You 10 Extra Years of Life*. TED. Available at [http://www.ted.com/talks/jane\\_mcgonigal\\_the\\_game\\_that\\_can\\_give\\_you\\_10\\_extra\\_years\\_of\\_life.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_the_game_that_can_give_you_10_extra_years_of_life.html).
- Sadowski, M. (2006, July/August). *The School Readiness Gap*. Harvard Education Letter. Vol. 22. No. 4. Available at <http://hepg.org/hel/article/307>.
- Sparks, S. D. (2013, September 11). *Growth Mindset Gaining Traction*. *Education Week*. Vol. 33. Issue 03. pp. 1,21.