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TRANSFORMING DEFICIT MYTHS ABOUT LEARNING, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

BARBARA FLORES, PATRICIA TEFFT
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Too often it is assumed that children who come from non-mainstream backgrounds are at risk just because they are from non-mainstream backgrounds. This article puts to rest the deficit myths about such children and proposes alternative ways of seeing the strengths they bring to the language arts classroom.

For years our school system has identified students who differ from the mainstream with certain labels. As the decades change, so do the labels. But the same kinds of children are identified as slow learners, learning disabled, culturally deprived, semi-lingual, limited-English speaking, or the label of the late 1980s and early 1990s—*at risk*. Who are these children? They are largely the children of minority groups, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, children who are bilingual, or children who speak English as a second language.

We can look back historically and see the development of categories that have been used to identify and stereotype each of the minority groups represented in this population—Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, African Americans, immigrant Asians, and Native Americans—and more generally, the students who are identified as learning disabled. And we currently have a situation in which many students are doubly labeled—as linguistic minorities and as special education students (Cummins, 1984, 1986; Hume, 1988; Ortiz & Yates, 1983; Stone, 1991).

The category *at risk* continues to be used, like the categories of the past, to separate and classify

certain groups of students. Students are identified as at risk for failure from the day they enter the school doors—and this label is used to rationalize their failure if they do encounter difficulty in school (Oakes, 1985).

In this article we critique the label *at risk* and discuss four myths or habitudes, habitually unexamined attitudes, which form the basis of this deficit view of students who are not from an Anglo middle-class world. Underlying these myths are the historical, social, political, and economic policies of those in power that are used to control those who are not in power. These policies establish a subordinate role that these groups are expected to conform to and accept.

We compare these myths with alternatives based on different conceptions about children. We cite research from our own work and that of colleagues which indicates how education for students can be meaningful and successful when the basic assumptions underlying these myths are challenged and replaced with other more constructive beliefs. We argue that teachers are the key to successfully reinterpreting the identification of children “at risk.” Educators who have rejected these deficit myths and nonproductive beliefs have been immersed in settings in which they learn to critically reflect on these traditional ways of looking at students and replace them with a more positive view. It is only through the process of changing ourselves as teachers that we are able to view our students from a different perspective.

Critiquing the Label *At Risk*

The label *at risk*, like other labels, is socially constructed through society’s designation of patterns of behavior that are considered acceptable or

nonacceptable (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tomlinson, 1981, 1982). Yet we often accept the label as truth and tend not to connect a label with the social, political, and economic atmosphere in which the label is born and used. Fine (1990) argues that the term *at risk* is an ideological diversion. "It satisfies both the desire to isolate these people, by the Right, and to display them, by the Left" (p. 55). The term is used deceptively to explain failure without considering "class, race/ethnicity, and gender inequities" (p. 65). From Fine's view, the use of such a term "keeps us from being broadly, radically, and structurally creative about transforming schools and social conditions for today's and tomorrow's youth" (p. 65).

A wealth of evidence exists about the effect of these labels. All of the groups that tend to be labeled as *at risk* make up a large percentage of the drop-out population. A study by the American Council on Education indicated that "the proportion of Latino students completing high

The at risk label perpetuates the language and cultural deficit myth . . .

school slid from 60.1% in 1984 to 55.9% in 1989 . . . the completion rate for blacks rose slightly during the same period from 74.7% to 76.1%" (p. 1). In California, one state with a large minority population, the high school completion rate was 67.3% in general. For Latinos, it was 53.7% and for African Americans, 53.5% (Merl, 1991). Those students in special education are in double jeopardy. The Department of Education estimated that the drop-out rate among students in special education is at least 19% greater than for nonhandicapped students (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Zigmond, 1990).

Many children of color are also identified as special needs learners. Classes designated for the learning disabled and mildly retarded are disproportionately made up of children from low-income and minority families (Cummins, 1984, 1986). The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights reported on data from the 1986-87 school year: "While minority students constituted 30% of all public school students, they accounted for 42% of all students classified as

educable mentally retarded (EMR), 40% of those classified as trainable mentally retarded (TMR), and 35% of those classified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED)" (Hume, 1988, p. 5).

Thus, we have entrenched social and political policies that have had negative effects for children. We argue that these policies are based on habitudes rather than realities. Only by examining these habitudes are we able to consider how, through our language and actions, we continue to perpetuate policies that have a destructive effect on children.

Critiquing the Habitudes That Guide A Deficit View

Myth 1: "At risk" children have a language problem. Their language and culture is deficient. They lack experiences. These deficits cause them to have learning problems.

The *at risk* label perpetuates the language and cultural deficit myth because variables such as non-English speaking, immigrant, low-income households, poorly educated parents, etc., are often listed as characteristics for identifying "at risk" students. Implicit in such a list are the deficit views of biological and cultural determinism.

Language Deficiency and Biological Determinism

One of the most pervasive and pernicious myths about "at risk" students is that they have a language deficit. This myth is reserved not just for bilingual and non-English-speaking students. It is also commonly held about African American and other minorities. It is not possible to trace fully the original source of this myth in this article, but we can point to specific places in the research literature where language differences are associated with deficiencies.

Prior to a beginning enlightenment in the 1960s, there was an extensive body of research literature that examined the relationship between language and intelligence as measured by IQ tests (Gould, 1981). A great deal of the research has focused specifically on the effect of bilingualism on intelligence (Hornby, 1977). The historical context in which this research took place, however, preordained the results. During the first half of this century, much of this research was conducted with recent immigrants to the United States who were seen as coming from inferior races and cultures (Hakuta, 1986). The results of

the IQ tests, which were seen as valid measures of intelligence regardless of language and cultural differences, confirmed the pre-held beliefs of scientists—immigrants were inherently less intelligent. Indeed, the cause of this intellectual deficiency was not related to language; rather, it was the other way around. The “language or bilingual handicap” was the result of a general “genetic inferiority” within the immigrants. The linguistic deficiency was a secondary and necessary outcome of “hereditary deprivation.”

Vestiges of this belief persist in our society and schools to this day. Although not usually publically voiced, this view often underlies attitudes and behaviors of teachers and others toward non-English-speaking immigrant students.

Language Deficiency and Cultural Determinism

The language deficiency myth is also perpetuated by a culturally deterministic perspective which argues that differences in social class or ethnic group experiences expose students to linguistically different environments. In this view the language of students from different cultures is seen as inadequate for dealing with the complex uses of language required in educational contexts. The more benign form of cultural determinism admits that both a basic cultural deficiency and social factors such as prejudice and social class hamper student performance.

Teachers who describe their students as “a-lingual” (they don’t speak *any* language well) or who explain poor student classroom performance as a function of cultural or home deficiencies are actually resorting to an extreme form of the cultural deprivation explanation. It is this perspective that negates and invalidates student experiences and permits educators to demand that students (and parents) give themselves to school to be made over and properly acculturated. Such language/cultural deficiency can only be cured by having the student change, to “learn English and be American!”

Myth 2: “At risk” children need to be separated from the regular class and need a structured program based on hierarchical notions of language development.

Our schools have institutionalized methods for working with students who encounter difficulty within the mainstream so they are no longer seen as the “problem” of the regular classroom teach-

er. Educators, policy makers, and parents have complacently accepted that if a child has a problem, the explanation for the problem is found in the child. We often do not question the teaching that has or has not taken place. Instead, the student is identified and placed in a categorical language or special education program. An entire bureaucracy has evolved as a result of our focus on finding deficits in the child’s learning ability, language, and culture.

Certainly, some children need some additional support; but categorical programs necessitate identification, labeling, and separation for the student to receive help. This process often negates any possible positive effect from the extra help (Taylor, 1990a). Instead it renders hopelessness, voicelessness, and despair. Such separation also conflicts with our understanding of how cognitive

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development is best supported. Vygotsky postulates that since cognition is a social process, individuals become proficient learners by engaging in social interactions and experiences under the direction of those more proficient than themselves. Since knowledge is socially constructed, individuals must be exposed to demonstrations by more proficient learners—both peers and adults—to understand the actual use of a particular cognitive process. When the less proficient learners are separated from the proficient learners, the demonstrations taking place in the classroom are decreased or provided by others who are also confused by the process being discussed by the class.

We must also raise questions about the curriculum delivered in the separate program. There has been an assumption that the specialist will provide programs that are more individual, more supportive, and deal more explicitly with student needs. Yet, data from evaluations from special education and Chapter 1 programs indicate that

frequently this is not the case (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989).

Instruction in the categorical programs designed for these students has been typically based on a different model—a hierarchical model focusing on subskill mastery. The content of the lessons is often so fragmented that the intended goal of the lesson is obscured by its perceived simplicity. That is, the teaching is organized at low levels of cognition based on the (mis)assumptions that “these” children need more direct instruction on the separate parts in order to later understand the complexity of the whole. Unfortunately, this additive perspective results in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The students are confused and do not become proficient language users, not because of their inability to learn, but rather because they do not have opportunities to practice the whole process.

Myth 3: Standardized tests can accurately identify and categorize students who are at risk for learning/language problems.

We have a long history of using standardized assessments to identify and classify students. Reading and math assessments are the yardsticks that are used to measure academic achievement. Basically, “at riskness” is determined by these measures. Current tests used to identify and classify students encountering difficulties measure the complex cognitive processes of language, reading, writing, mathematics, and reasoning through simplistic means. Many question the construct validity of almost all of these assessments, including tests of intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Gould, 1981; Rogoff & Lave, 1984); reading and language (Meier, 1981); and mathematics (Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Although there are attempts to construct measures that are more valid, measures that capture the complexity of human thinking have not yet been defined.

Myth 4: “At risk” children have problems because parents don’t care, can’t read, or don’t work with them.

Blaming the children’s parents, the culture, and their language for their lack of success in school has been a classic strategy used to subordinate and continue to fault the “victim.” This “blaming the victim” strategy is not a useful one. Fine (1990) argues that as part of this strategy, public schools represent themselves “as the means for low-income students to escape their local communities” (p. 62).

In a study conducted by Trueba, Moll, and Díaz (1982), interviews revealed that teachers considered Latino parents to be unconcerned about the academic progress of their students. Teachers arrived at these conclusions on the basis of the lack of parent-initiated contact with teachers, especially when students were considered to be academically marginal. Interviews with parents, however, revealed a completely different perspective. Parents were extremely concerned about the education of their children, but they were reluctant to contact teachers and school personnel about this for several reasons. First, as recent immigrants from Mexico, they still held the perspective that the classroom was the teacher’s domain. Any attempt to influence what took place, especially on pedagogical basis, was seen by parents as an intrusion into the professional arena of the teacher. It would be considered rude and insulting for parents to presume to “interfere” with the teacher. Parents felt that their role was to support the teacher at home, especially in matters of discipline.

Despite this view, parents were still very concerned about the impact of school on their children and the relative lack of knowledge they had about this institution in the United States. In an attempt to learn more about the schools, parents organized “Cafes de Amistad” (Friendship Coffees), to which all interested Spanish-speaking parents could come and discuss school and share knowledge. The discussions were very pragmatic. “Why does my daughter have to dress for P.E. even if I request that she not dress due to slight illness or menstruation?” “Why are there no doors on the bathroom stalls?” “Who do we see about finding out about our child going to college?” These discussions revealed a significant knowledge gap in their understanding of school but were manifestations of their extensive concern with knowing more about school.

A second reason stated by parents for not contacting the teacher was their English language fluency and the possibility of embarrassment or miscommunication. Not surprisingly, teachers had interpreted parental silence as a lack of concern or interest. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. The problem was not with the parents but with school personnel who misinterpreted parental behavior through the lens of a perspective that reflected only the view of the institution.

New Assumptions

Based on our beliefs and knowledge about the learning and teaching of language and the role of culture in learning and language, we propose the following four alternative views about children. We believe these assumptions apply to all children, and we have applied them in our experiences in schools. Underlying these beliefs is a philosophy of learning and teaching that focuses on knowledge construction and language as a means of mediation (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Siegel & Carey, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978). It uses

There is extensive research that documents the intense interest that parents of minority students have in the education of their children.

new frameworks—socio-psycholinguistics, socio-historical psychology, socio-psychogenesis, and the socio-political philosophy of learning and teaching—to give the teacher the understanding necessary to restructure the social organization of the learning and teaching of language and literacy through mutually constructed social contexts (Flores, 1986). This new knowledge challenges the status quo literacy and biliteracy curriculum and asks teachers to revalue their habitudes and practices related to the traditional way of teaching language and literacy (K. Goodman, 1991).

Assumption 1: Children are proficient language users and bring many experiences into the classroom.

When we accept our children's knowledge about language, learning, and culture, we not only validate their being but acknowledge their self-worth. We do not disrupt, impose, or threaten their learning processes. Many research studies from multiple disciplines have demonstrated the language and cultural strengths that language learners bring to school (e.g., Anderson & Stokes, 1984; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Edelsky, 1986; Emig, 1983; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Goodman & Goodman, 1978; Y. Goodman, 1990; Graves, 1983; Halliday, 1975, 1978; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Heath, 1983; Lindfors, 1987; Moll, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989; Wells, 1986).

Whole language pedagogy is using this research base as a foundation from which to support students in becoming proficient readers and writers in school. These knowledge bases are being applied to all students, including those who are usually identified as "at risk." By building on the language experiences brought to school by the students, teachers validate students' present knowledge and use it as a stepping stone for the development of more complex understanding.

Assumption 2: Children need opportunities to learn language in rich, integrated settings and can be successful in regular classroom programs.

Creating social contexts in which children engage in authentic language and literacy use is a fundamental theory-in-practice guiding the organization, facilitation, monitoring, and assessment of language learning and teaching (Edelsky, Draper, & Smith, 1986; Freire, 1970; Halliday, 1978). Among the many practices or social contexts that provide opportunities for children to learn language and teachers to teach language are Daily Read-Alouds, Reading Partners, D.E.A.R. Time (Drop Everything and Read), Pen Pals, Literature Studies, Theme Cycles, Writers' Workshop, Interactive Journals, Learning Logs, Collaborative Stories, Inquiry and Research, and Scientific Method. Other contexts remain to be created, developed, and refined.

The teacher acts as a cultural mediator, organizing the learning in order to mediate levels of knowledge between the teacher and the students and among students themselves (Díaz & Flores, 1990). By the teacher's deliberate demonstrations of how written language is used in the social context of authentic dialogue, children's acquisition of literacy knowledge will be facilitated and not impeded (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Flores, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). When the teacher deliberately organizes and establishes the social context for authentic oral and written dialogue, she co-creates and mediates knowledge through zones of proximal development as the children "come to know" written language through meaningful social interaction with more capable peers and adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Bilingual children are not only learning literacy in one language, but in two.

Assumption 3: The language development of these students can be effectively monitored by observing their language use in authentic settings across the curriculum.

We propose that primary sources—actual samples of children's work—be used to document their growth and/or regressions, the peaks and valleys. Much work in authentic assessment and portfolio assessment has taken place already (Bartoli & Botel, 1988; Goodman, Goodman, & Hood, 1988; Harp, 1990; Linek, 1991; Valencia, 1990).

Evaluation based on the perspective of the learner considers the larger social, political, and cultural contexts in which the student lives, learns, and uses language (Taylor, 1990b). It also places us face-to-face with our previous assumptions about evaluation and testing. "Observations of abilities that contradict test scores should not be denied. Rather, they should be accepted as evidence of the complexity of the student's learning and a challenge to the limitations of standardized tests" (Taylor, 1990b, p. xiii). Like our other new assumptions, the change in evaluation is not just a change in practice, but rather a shift in our basic perspectives regarding how we look at a child's language use and development.

Assumption 4: The parents of these children are interested in the achievement and success of their children in the school setting and can be partners in the educational experience of their children.

"Fundamental to a strong school-community relationship are certain beliefs . . . that low-income parents and communities are precisely the "public" and the constituency to whom public schools are accountable" (Fine, 1990, p. 62). There is extensive research that documents the intense interest that parents of minority students have in the education of their children. The following are but a few examples of the many efforts in which parents have collaborated with teachers and researchers to learn about working with their children. Cummins (1989) cites the work of Alma Flor Ada with migrant parents in a family literacy project. As part of this work, 50 to 60 Spanish-speaking parents met after their working day to select and read children's books to and with their children and to discuss these books with other parents. The program was very successful and well-attended. Parents became familiar with school expectations for their children and learned how to be supportive of school efforts. Trueba and Delgado-Gaitan (1989) established a similar after-school literacy program for elementary students and parents and found parents to be eager and willing participants.

Heath's (1983) well-known work in minority schooling was initiated in great part at the bequest of African American parents in the black community. They were concerned about the poor performance of their children and wanted to have an explanation. Similarly, Trueba, Moll, and Díaz (1982) found that Spanish-speaking, immigrant parents in a California border town were extremely interested in how schooling affected their children but were reluctant to contact teachers because of fears of encroaching on teachers' professional jurisdiction. In recent work by Moll and Greenberg (1990), teachers are incorporating the "funds of knowledge" of parents from the Latino barrio in order to integrate home and school. As these cases show, parents are greatly concerned about how their children do in school and are willing to sacrifice their time after an often grueling work day to help the children do better in school.

A Practical Application of These Assumptions

It is easy to criticize, and it is even easier to speak in generalities about what "should" be done to make education better. In this section we present a brief, anecdotal sketch of an inner-city school in transformation. The transformation is occurring through the application of the assumptions described above. Mark Keppel Elementary is prototypical of large urban school districts across the United States. It serves 600 students, of whom 84% are Latino; 7.5%, African American; 2%, Asian American; and 1%, Anglo American. Every parent, with only a single exception, is classified as an unskilled laborer. Like other schools of this type, this school scored very low on standardized achievement measures, at the 1 percentile of all schools in California on the California Assessment Program (CAP Test) and at the 3 percentile when compared to schools serving similar neighborhoods and students.

The transformation process began 3 years ago as part of a project that sought to implement successful elements of bilingual programs (Spiegel-Coleman & Acosta, in progress). The principal and teachers agreed to implement a curriculum that incorporated the assumptions described above and that focused on whole language pedagogy (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1990; K. Goodman, 1986). The Los Angeles County Case Studies Project targeted 6 schools that would be committed to long-term staff development and

curricular shift from a very traditional “hierarchical skills” instructional model to a “holistic” pedagogy. The Los Angeles County consultants, along with the site principals, collectively planned and coordinated the staff development that was conducted by the first and third authors.

Teachers’ pedagogical knowledge (intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal) about the learning and teaching of language and literacy was the focus of the on-going staff development. The members of the group collaboratively committed themselves to engage in a long-term transformation in beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, and attitudes. The teachers and the principal, Howard Bryan, worked on accepting the new assumptions and applying them in the classrooms and in the school every day.

They replaced their myths with these new assumptions: (1) Our children bring many strengths

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to the classroom—ability to learn, proficient language use, and cultural experiences; (2) The teacher can organize the daily social interactions with a multitude of opportunities for language and literacy use; (3) Teachers know how to monitor the children’s development across many settings on a daily basis; and (4) Parents are interested in their children’s schooling success. The educators at this school faced the deficit myths head-on, rose above the power of such myths, and applied their new pedagogical knowledge about language and literacy development. It took courage, commitment, a willingness to take risks, and hard work.

In a nutshell, here is part of their story. When we started working together (teachers, principals, consultants), many staff members lamented the children’s “lack of experiences,” “lack of paren-

tal support in reading,” and “lack of language” as the culprits for the children’s “inability” to learn how to read and write “at grade level.” The underlying beliefs and assumptions related to these statements were the myths that governed the language and cultural deficit knowledge about “these” kinds of children. The change process began with a focus on three areas: staff development; demonstrations, observations, and coaching; and study groups.

Staff Development

Traditionally, staff development is presented to teachers, and they magically are supposed to implement it. Given that we were venturing into a long-term commitment of collaborative teaching/learning/research, we started by organizing and planning day-long staff development meetings by grade levels and teacher needs. However, this traditional social structure left teachers frustrated because they could not use the practices suggested in the meetings. It was not enough to support teachers in changing practices in their classrooms. It was by listening and acknowledging the frustrations and dissonance that led us to pose the problems of the dialectic between learning and teaching for ourselves. Faced with the simultaneous challenges of creating new knowledge and constructing new social contexts in the classrooms for authentic literacy uses, the teachers resisted, confronted, and explored. The frustrations and curiosities led to creating new ways to deal with their uncertainties and struggles for understanding how the teacher plays the major role in the learning/teaching process. This mediation of teachers’ knowledge mainly took place through demonstrations, observations, and coaching.

Demonstrations, Observations, and Coaching

Teachers mediated their students’ understandings about language, and the teacher-researcher mediated the teachers’ understandings about language learning and knowledge construction. The demonstrations by the teacher/researcher were based on teachers’ questions, concerns, issues raised, and need to know. For example, the primary-grade teachers had several concerns about interactive journals. They wanted to know: (1) how to respond to the children’s journal entries more authentically, (2) how to mediate between the children’s levels of knowledge, (3) how to get reluctant children to write, and (4) how to

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orchestrate the multiple responses during a given time period.

Authentic responses were difficult because teachers were not accustomed to engaging in authentic dialogue using written language with the children. Sharing personal experiences, emotions, feelings, and commentaries were not the norm. Thus, demonstrations in the classrooms served as a mediation between the teacher-researcher's intent and the teachers' growing understanding of this intent. These demonstrations provided an impetus for further discussion and reflection among the teachers and led to the establishment of study groups. These study groups provided the forum for structured debriefing.

Study Groups

Initially, a small group of interested teachers began to meet voluntarily, but this structure did not work. They called it a study group, but it had no organized structure or meeting time. The commitment and need were there, but meeting "whenever" for "whatever" blocked the initial intent, intellectual sharing, sparring, and debate. Faced with this problem, both the teachers and the principal decided to structure formally these study groups so that they met regularly within the traditional school day. This led to reorganizing faculty meetings from the traditional, mundane, everyday-business-as-usual meetings to very lively, dialogic encounters about theories and practices related to their growing understandings, disequilibrium, frustrations, and inquiries about language and literacy learning and teaching. Teachers needed time to think, to develop, to share, to plan, to debate, to question, and to reflect critically with each other. Eventually, this need became so apparent that now every Wednesday is a shortened school day for children, and teachers can use the time to meet in their study groups at least twice a month.

During these study group sessions, the teachers read research articles, books, or chapters. They use these to expand their intellectual understanding. The other Wednesdays are devoted to various leadership teams' needs such as student reviews, assemblies, athletics, parent/community issues, grade-level needs, school politics, and budget allocations. The institutionalization of the study group not only shifted the teachers' social relations about the value of collaborative learning but also (simultaneously) shifted the power rela-

tions between administration and teachers. The principal and teachers co-created new social structures to share the work needed to accomplish the multitude of tasks in schooling.

Within a few months of questioning myths, reorganizing the teaching of language and literacy, and focusing on the children's strengths, teachers were amazed to see the differences in the children's knowledge and use of written language.

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They compared what they used to do with what they were now doing. These continuous critical reflections initially resulted in guilt about how they had harmed the children previously. But, they had only done what they thought was in the best interest of the children.

Now, 3 years later, when asked about the impact of their change process, many of the teachers at Mark Keppel School commented that their beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, attitudes, and instructional practices had significantly shifted. Related to their perceptions of the children's language (oral and written) and experiential capabilities, they critically reflected with the following comments:

"I have more contact with the children on a daily basis and know where my children are in their knowledge construction about written language."

"I understand how the children 'come to know' the alphabetic principles of the English and Spanish languages."

"We also know that our teaching impedes or facilitates our children's learning."

"I am learning how to mediate between my kids' levels of knowledge and the knowledge that they need to acquire."

"We accept our children's language, experiences, and knowledge about the world; and we begin with that."

"We know that the teacher makes a significant difference in the success or failure of our students."

Making a positive difference in the lives of our children while they are in school is the challenge at hand for all teachers. "Seeing the success that the children are having gives me more confidence to continue" was another of the many comments that several of the teachers reiterated.

The principal's leadership role and willingness to shift power relation was also essential to this transformation. One of his fundamental goals was to change attitudes. He commented:

As the curricular and administrative leader of the school, I wanted to facilitate attitude change. I told teachers that we don't accept low expectations. We can't afford it any longer. If you allow children to do poorly because of outside influences, then you are making an excuse for their failure. The teacher's attitude is more important than her ability to teach.

With such commitment and leadership, the school transformed from a low-academic-achieving school to one with a significant academic performance record. For example, the third-grade CAP scores had risen to the 33rd percentile in comparison to all California schools and to the 82nd percentile for similar schools. These scores reflect significant gains, gains that all involved attribute to the restructuring of attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about "at risk" students. Commitment, collaboration, destruction of myths, hard work, and the courage to change made a significant difference in children's lives in school.

Conclusion

The myths about children of color, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and children identified as learning disabled need to be exposed and discarded from our beliefs, our expectations, and from our everyday practices. Debilitating myths imprison the mind and render people voiceless and therefore powerless. This voicelessness and powerlessness perpetuates the cycle of oppression, the cycle of inadequacy, the cycle of failure. We can no longer believe in these myths; we can no longer tolerate their intellectual presence; we must begin to *transform* ourselves by not participating in their daily use. We believe in the philosophy articulated by Stenhouse (1985): "It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it" (p. vi).

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CALL FOR STARTER SHEETS

The SLATE Steering Committee invites submission of Starter Sheets on the following topics:

1. Tracking (October 15, 1991)
2. Testing of Teachers (December 15, 1991)
3. Collaborative Learning (March 15, 1992)
4. Intellectual Freedom (June 15, 1992)

The Steering Committee also welcomes Starter Sheets on any topic of current interest and concern to English language arts educators at all levels.

The Steering Committee has decided that manuscripts will go through a review process so that the Starter Sheets will be consistent with other refereed NCTE publications. All submissions will undergo a blind review by at least two outside reviewers who have demonstrated expertise in the area. Please submit four copies of the manuscript, typewritten, and double-spaced on 8½" × 11" with one inch margins. Use your name and academic affiliation only on a title page, but not on the manuscript.

The format for Starter Sheets should include, but is not limited to, the following: 1. presentation and background of the issue/topic; 2. general discussion or exploration; 3. recommendations for action or further examination; and 4. extensive list of references. The length of manuscripts should be between 2000 and 4000 words.

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