

Sorting Versus Education

ALL CHILDREN ARE GIFTED. ALL CHILDREN ARE GIFT.

23 years ago I published my text in which I wrote about how our schools don't need reform. Instead, what's needed is transformation; a complete change in state.¹ This will require a significant change (a transformation) in the traditional approach to managing variation in student learning and achievement. According to Frank Newman, past president of the Education Commission of the States, the traditional approach has had a negative and devastating effect: "The prime job of the education system is sorting more than education."²

This sorting begins at a very early age. A number of states start to use standardized tests of students in second grade, with seven-year-olds. Those test results, together with other inputs, are used to assess and determine the distribution of student achievement levels.

Often, this information is used to identify low-scoring students for special programs. These students, beginning at the age of seven, get to stand up five days a week during normal school hours and figuratively hang a sign around their necks that reads, "I'm stupid!" Then they head off to their "special" programs for the "stupid kids."

I met one of those students years ago at a Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) facility in upstate New York. I was in the Staff Development Center one morning, setting up for one of my workshops in statistical methods for teaching and learning processes. A child entered the lobby. He looked to be about 12 years old and he was there to attend a summer school class. I introduced myself and told him what I was doing there. When I asked who he was, he replied, "I'm a BOCES student."

That child had no name! I didn't ask him, "What are you?" I asked him, "Who are you?" He did not reply with his name; he replied, "I'm a BOCES student."

I asked him, "What's a BOCES student?"

He replied, "We ride the short bus with the seat belts."

Look what the system has done to that child. At an early age, it sorted him out for the special BOCES programs and it took away his name. His identify was no longer a beloved child of God; it was a BOCES student.

Evidence of Giftedness

Later, I pondered the conversation I had with that youngster. I imagined that I was engaged in a graduate research project on higher-order thinking skills. As a part of that project, I was

conducting interviews and looking for evidence of employed higher-order thinking skills among my interviewees. I asked a boy, “What’s a BOCES student?” and he didn’t reply with a literal description of the BOCES program. Instead, he replied, “We ride the short bus with the seat belts.”

Would I or would I not record that response as anecdotal evidence of employed, outside-the-box, higher-order thinking skills? *Yes, I would!* That child is gifted, and I would have solid anecdotal evidence to support that conclusion.

But he doesn’t know he’s gifted. By the age of 12, he no longer even had a name.

I have always been disturbed by educators’ obsession with “gifted and talented” programs for “gifted” students. I’ve never met a child who wasn’t gifted; I’ve never met a child who wasn’t gift. Let’s hope that leaders will emerge throughout America’s schools that will have the courage to change; leaders who will restore dignity and his name to that little boy in the BOCES program.

Notes

¹ J.F. Leonard, *The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America’s Schools*, ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI (1996).

² F. Newman, “Commencement Address,” (remarks to graduates of the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA, May 18, 1981).

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