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Students Reaching Their Potential

Mrs. Jill Moningham, a primary grade coordinator, paused for a moment outside Sunrise Elementary school, which for several years had been designated as needing to improve the academic success of its students. The school sat in an area of a mid-sized city where few students had ever received any pre-K preparation. Most of the families had few if any books for their children and academic attainments fell below expected standards year after year. On this bright, sunny, warm day in May, Jill proceeded to her office to gather the materials she would need to continue to oversee the end-of-year testing. Her principal, Mrs. Donaldson, had appointed her to monitor all the school's testing to maintain the integrity of the process. Throughout the process she had noted, as she had in previous years, the anxiety of most students and many teachers. However, a week earlier she noted an exception. The students in Laura Gilmore's second grade class were confident, composed, and looking forward to showing how much they had learned. That difference caught her attention, but the results were even more remarkable. Laura's second grade class had outscored every other class in the school. The school evaluated all students in reading, math, and writing with percentile ranks assigned to every student. At the beginning of the year all of the second grade students had scored at or below the 50th percentile. In fact, the average percentile score for the school was 37 and the average score for second graders was the 34th percentile. Laura's class in particular had averaged at the 32th percentile at the beginning of the year. When all the testing was done and scores recorded, school wide the scores had improved slightly,

but again had fallen short of the goals set by the new principal. However, in Laura's class, 96 percent of the students had exceeded the 65th percentile. The average percentile rank in her class was 83. Throughout the school, including the other second grade classes, only a few classes had half their students score above the 50th percentile.

The teacher, Laura, was new to the school that year. Mrs. Donaldson, the principal, knew her from before and had encouraged her to apply when the position opened. Jill wondered if some difference in teaching accounted for the better academic results. However, since the school year was coming to a close she would have to act fast to find the answer. First she looked back to previous years and found that in her previous schools, Laura's classes had consistently out-performed other classes. These differences begged the question: was Laura that much better at teaching than the others?

Once the testing was complete, Jill Moningham made time and conducted observations of many teachers, including Laura. She found no difference in how dedicated the teachers were. Nearly all the teachers were dedicated professionals who worked hard and wanted the best for their students. Was this one teacher using some special technique that could result in such differences? While that question proved more difficult to answer, nothing stood out as a special teaching strategy. Was this teacher somehow doing everything better than the other teachers? That was not so either.

In fact, it turned out Laura was doing many things very differently than other teachers. Jill found that nearly all of the other teachers were conscientiously using standard methods. They were teaching the way they learned to teach, following the recommended guidelines from both district and school administrators. She did not have to study the broader picture, she knew the teaching methods in their district were widely recommended throughout the country. However, in that one second grade classroom where the students had done so much better, some aspects of the teaching process were very different from what other teachers were doing. As Jill pursued this difference, she found some teachers felt that Laura did not do some things the recommended way, but somehow it always worked out for her. Her students always excelled and she never had major behavior problems.

Jill could have dismissed the whole thing as inexplicable. To her credit she did not do that. She believed, or at least strongly suspected, that the success was dependent on the teaching process. She approached Laura and struck up a conversation.

"I notice your students did very well on end of year evaluations," she said.

"Thank you. I was pleased with how they did," Laura responded.

"I took the liberty to look back and found that your results have been very good for all of the 14 years you have taught."

"Yes, that's true."

Jill explained, "I'm trying to figure out why that is."

"I think it is because of the way I teach."

"But I notice you don't use many of the standard methods we recommend," Jill continued.

Laura acknowledged that to be true: "Every method I use, and don't use, is purposeful. Everything I say to every student is designed to help them become more successful."

"It seems like you got lucky and didn't have any students with behavior problems this year."

At this point Laura reminded her that through the year the principal had moved several difficult students into her class. In fact, two of those students had caused so much disruption in their original class they had made learning impossible. Jill acknowledged that she remembered how difficult those students had been.

Laura explained, "My teaching methods reduce the behavioral issues by increasing cooperation and creating a desire to succeed."

"But when I observed your class, I didn't see any procedures directed at reducing behavioral problems," Jill replied.

"On the contrary, I use methods designed to help children learn to behave so they can excel at learning."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Jill answered.

"I can't explain it in ten minutes or even an hour. But I have been using these techniques for nearly 20 years, and my results are always the same." (The 20 years included her experience in preschool and special education.)

Laura continued, "Despite which students are in my class they always succeed. I think what you are seeing in other classes are procedures designed to intervene when problem behavior occurs. In contrast, I direct nearly all of my attention to developing students into better learners. I have to get to class now, but maybe we could talk later."

After more than a decade of the 21st century, only a little more than a third of all eighth grade students in this country are proficient in reading and math. This represents a major failure of education and problem for society and has not been solved by increasing school budgets, teacher training, or putting more pressure on teachers. Some schools, with the blessing of state and federal bureaucrats, have attempted to address the problem with policy changes including smaller class sizes and more frequent testing of students. Some of those may have helped a bit, but national test data suggests none have had a major impact on academic performance. Many observers have blamed society, parents, or students themselves. However, placing blame cannot and will not help students achieve academic excellence. After careful consideration, we believe the only solution for advancing all students to academic proficiency is to adopt new methods of teaching. New methods in a couple of classrooms in a few schools will not solve the enormous problem facing our country. Pressuring teachers to do better with current methodologies will frustrate teachers but will not solve the problems. Finding effective methods of producing academic excellence is essential.

The conversation continued a few days later.

Jill asked, "What are the most important parts of your teaching methods?"

Laura responded, "I want my students to take as much responsibility for their own learning as I take for teaching. From the first day, I am developing all students as effective learners. No benefit can come from expecting students to learn until they learn how to learn and help each other learn. My methods must enhance the personal and academic development of all students. Also, I have to get them to work together and help each other. The bridge they have to cross is very wide, so the only thing they can do is to grow a little bit every day."

"But I still don't understand how you get all the material to them."

Laura explained, "Teaching must be about getting students to learn and take responsibility for learning. Imparting knowledge is a small, easy part of it. The hard part is getting 25 students to work together as a team."

"Well, I don't see how any other teacher could, if necessary, step in and teach your class," Jill responded.

"Remember, when I was gone on family business for a week in March? These students did beautifully for the substitute."

"Yes, now that you mention it, I do remember that," said Jill.

Laura further explained, "The students had learned how to behave. They were not behaving to impress me, but behaving to benefit themselves and each other."

"I must admit, you have had success with some difficult students. But I still don't think it will work with all students," Jill argued.

"Of course it works with all students. The entire concept is built on the science of human behavior and neuropsychology. If implemented correctly, it can't fail any more than an apple can fall toward the sky."

"It all sounds good, but I can't train other teachers to teach the way you teach," Jill complained.

Laura said, "On the contrary, I was trained more than 20 years ago while teaching in a preschool. It took me just a few days to see results and less than six months to become proficient at the process."

"We can't all go back to teaching preschool to learn what you learned."

Laura further explained, "The man I learned from has trained teachers from preschool through eighth grade. He has trained regular teachers and special education teachers. He has worked in suburban schools, inner city schools, and even in schools integrated with treatment programs for children with behavioral and emotional disorders."

"Who is this guy?" Jill asked.

"Dr. Art Willans. In fact, he is collaborating on a book for elementary teachers with a teacher in Reno. That is where his program is located."

Mrs. Moningham said, "I would like to meet him."

A Small Beginning for New Methods

For someone to understand Art, they must understand how determined he is to find ways to help children. He never accepts that a child cannot

learn. Perhaps that characteristic is best illustrated by a story from his early years as a professional. Many years ago and before receiving his doctorate, he got a request from a preschool to help with a four-year-old nonverbal boy. Most people who knew the boy assumed he was seriously disabled intellectually, which was plausible because his mother had an intellectual disability. In his four years, the boy had said only two words. He did not run or play. If handed a toy, he would look at it momentarily and lay it down, but reportedly had never picked one up on his own. Even though he could not use a spoon or fork, he could drink from a baby cup and feed himself when provided finger foods. The preschool personnel hoped Mr. Willans could teach the boy to say and understand a few words. Art researched the recommended methods for addressing the issues.

For the first session he scheduled a room in the church that housed the preschool. At first he made no progress, but Art refused to accept that the boy could not learn and soon abandoned the widely accepted methods recommended in the literature. He concluded that to help this boy, he would need entirely different methods. At that point he had less confidence in his intuition, but believed that if he could get the methods right the boy would learn. After formulating a new plan he immediately got to work. In just three days the boy said his third word — truck — which he repeated hundreds of times that day. Within two weeks he was beginning to participate in preschool activities. These intuitive methods that were not described in the literature proved effective. Art wanted the boy to see, touch, and hear everything possible while Art described it all in simple language. The boy learned to talk, play, and participate in activities alongside his classmates. His preschool teachers soon learned the methods. In just a few weeks, they discovered the boy was intellectually gifted, not disabled. Soon the one-on-one process gave way to a very early version of the group process described in this book. Despite his mother's intellectual disability and their impoverished living conditions, many years later the boy graduated from high school with honors. Art could have accepted the ready-made excuse that the boy could not learn like other students. The accepted methods of the time, which were not that much different from the accepted methods now, would have

fulfilled everyone's prophecy. However, he found new methods and averted a tragedy. Art still subscribes to the philosophy that when teachers get the methods right, students will learn.

A few years later, Art commenced work on his doctorate. His professor shared his belief that given the correct methods, students will learn. This philosophy has the inherent advantage of never allowing excuses. Poverty, lack of parent involvement, disabilities, budget cuts, inadequate classrooms, behavior problems, students with mental health problems, and administrators who are not supportive, cannot prevent student success. The only issue that prevents students' success is the ineffective methods provided to teachers. Over the last 20 years, the authors have repeatedly proven that every student can excel. Universally effective methods mean that every teacher can be successful.

We want to clarify: when we describe the accomplishments all students can make, we are referring to regular elementary education classrooms. We do not have similar verified data from special education classrooms; however, the methods would apply and be effective in most special education programs. We have known teachers who have successfully used some parts of this methodology with various special populations. However, we do not have access to any actual results of academic accomplishments from such classrooms. Differences would be inevitable, because results comparable to what we are reporting could not be attained with students with severe intellectual disabilities or a deaf/blind population. While Art did, at one time, work with a deaf/blind population, he did not use this methodology with that group. Currently, Art is serving preschool children with severe behavioral and emotional difficulties. He is using all of the methods described in this book, but those results and variations in the application are beyond the scope of the current book. Because many students are failing to reach grade level criteria, this book is dedicated to promoting methods that can help regular schools.

Like Laura, Cari learned Art's methodology from him years ago. Most of the time since then the authors have worked separately, but both have had remarkable results. This book is dedicated to describing the methods necessary to make academic accomplishment possible for elementary students. Because most of the verifiable results achieved by

Dr. Willans have been in an early childhood mental health program, we will focus on the results Mrs. Williams has achieved in elementary schools. For most of her career, she has taught in Title 1 or underperforming schools. (To qualify as a Title 1 school, the school must have a large concentration of students from low income families.) However, in her classes, every student makes excellent academic progress. Good-to-excellent progress is common in many suburban schools throughout this country. A man both of us respect greatly once explained that without knowing anything about a community, he could fly over a city and pick out the highest performing schools. His point was that a very high correlation would exist between the best schools and the better socioeconomic areas that could be identified from the air.

While we could not disagree with the correlation, this does not explain how every year Cari gets results comparable to the best schools in the state. When such results do occur, they may be ignored. Educators and bureaucrats frequently miss the solution because their attention is directed to fixing what is wrong, instead of replicating what is right. Because the same students are failing every year with different teachers, the problem appears to be outside the control of schools. Educators may disregard isolated success because they do not recognize it being related to teaching methods. Because educators can do nothing to change the socioeconomic areas of a city, the unfortunate, but misguided, conclusion is that little can be done to effect change in underperforming schools.

Working in the shadow of systemic excuses, some teachers do face an uphill battle. Fortunately, many administrators have refused to accept defeat, and have spent considerable amounts of money and directed resources to find solutions. Unfortunately, most efforts have at best produced modest gains as measured by academic achievement. We have found that many of the typical methods described in hundreds of books hinder successful learning. This lack of success using standard methods has caused much blame to be directed at teachers, parents, students, administrators, and schools. As a result, effective solutions have not been found. Despite all efforts the same students continue to fail and the same schools continue to underperform. Unless a new perspective can

resolve the issue, the conclusion that the problem lies with the students and/or their parents is likely to continue. Fortunately, this book not only provides that perspective but precisely describes the exact process necessary for every school to be successful. With small changes in teaching methodology, students in our best schools could do even better than they are now and students in Title 1 schools would make outstanding progress. Administrators do not have to settle for teachers struggling to maintain order and failing to educate many students. The alternative is to give teachers methods that will promote cooperation and develop students who are self-driven to excel. Meeting academic standards is within the reach of every student.

Most educators link academic problems in our schools to classroom behavior. Without a doubt, behavioral issues in many schools consume too much time and adversely affect achievement. Teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents all become engulfed in attempting to solve a stream of behavioral problems. Many teachers spend an hour or more per day on behavior issues, and many principals average an hour per week per teacher on them. When teachers master the teaching process we will describe, principals will find they are spending much less time on behavioral problems. For instance, for Cari the cumulative number of hours in the last ten years that a principal or other professional has spent in response to a behavior issue in her class is zero. Perhaps readers should take an extra moment to consider the previous sentence. In ten years of teaching, in underperforming and Title 1 schools, she has handled every behavioral event internally. Furthermore, in ten years of teaching she has never convened an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for a behavioral issue. The point is not that she has some magical way with students. The difference is nothing more than the methods she is using.

Good behavior is not for the convenience of the teacher. Students must behave appropriately to maximize learning. Success in school is in part dependent on appropriate conduct behavior, but teachers must accomplish their goal without impeding academic accomplishments. With the use of the methods we will describe, students begin the school year working on both developing appropriate conduct and mastering their academic assignments. Nevertheless, even during those few weeks,

more learning will occur than is evident in other classrooms. In just a few weeks, as students learn to work together, the time spent on academics will exceed most other classes. Because students are behaving cooperatively, they quickly develop the behaviors necessary to become effective learners, and academic accomplishments soon follow.

In her career, Cari has shown how much students can achieve. Besides excellent conduct behavior, year after year in Title 1 schools her students excel academically. We will examine the current school year, 2016, in particular. For instance, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is scaled so that the expected level at the end of kindergarten is a score of three. However, the district in which she was teaching had arbitrarily set an expected level of four. In a typical school, educators would expect less than 40 percent of the students to reach or exceed a criterion increased by 33 percent. Given that she was teaching in a Title 1 school, the expectation would be for less than one third of the students to reach or exceed an elevated criterion. However, 85 percent of her kindergarten students met or exceeded level four in reading. The same 85 percent scored at or above criteria in math. Two of the three students who did not meet criteria joined the class in the second semester. Also, those two students reached the national criteria of three, but missed by one point meeting the arbitrary criteria. In a Title 1 school, 95 percent of her students met or exceeded national criteria in reading and math., Students have achieved similar results in Cari's classes every year. District administrators have said her results are comparable to those students from the best schools in the district. Recently an administrator said that she had blown away district averages. Students in Title 1 and underperforming schools can attain academic accomplishments like these every year.

We have seen enough instances in various programs to conclude that all students served in classrooms using these methods will attain — or even far exceed — grade level criteria. Many students can reach levels that suggest they are achieving to the limits of their potential. Psychologists call this "actualization." However, the term has always been used to describe adults who have apparently reached the limits that could be expected. Students in elementary school who have scored exceedingly well on achievement tests have not reached the limits they can achieve

in adulthood. We have, therefore, coined the term, "developmental actualization" to refer to accomplishments that evidently are as good as could be expected, given the age and development of the individual. The point is that we have watched with amazement as students have attained unbelievable success. We have struggled to explain to parents and other professionals how students, who came from a home of barely functioning adults, could outscore the students from the most elite schools in the state. We were never satisfied with our description of what we were seeing until we came up with the new term.

One does not have to wait ten years to identify good teaching. Once a teacher is using effective methods, her skills and the resulting progress of students can immediately be recognized. For instance, Cari was identified as having excellent skills 20 years ago. In 1996, Art had a consultant friend, Dr. Stan Paine from Oregon, come in and evaluate his teachers. This consultant, who had been named elementary principal of the year in Oregon, considered Cari an outstanding teacher. He recognized the skills she used and the success she was having with students. She has improved her use of the methods every year since. Continuous improvement over several years is typical of many teachers using these methods. While Art developed much of the methodology we describe, Cari should get credit for showing how every student can achieve developmental actualization.

When a teacher in a Title 1 school can repeatedly get such results with virtually every student assigned to her, the only reasonable conclusion is that something is happening that cannot be ignored. Every district in the United States has a moral responsibility to replicate these methods. When teachers get it right, the results will follow. Unfortunately, observers in many outstanding classrooms are unable to recognize what they are seeing. Jill saw no behavior problems and noticed the teacher was not using standard procedures for dealing with inappropriate behavior; therefore, she assumed Laura had gotten all the best students. She failed to recognize that all students had learned to behave appropriately during the first three weeks of the school year. Very few educators would believe that with the appropriate methods, all students can learn and maintain appropriate behavior throughout the school year. Nevertheless, that is

exactly what Laura had accomplished. Had she used standard methods, establishing the cooperative behavior would have been more difficult and maintaining such behavior would have been impossible. To most observers, including Jill, the differences are not always perfectly obvious. When observers notice good behavior, they think it might be the students or the timing. All students behave themselves sometimes. In Laura's class, observers might have noticed a few more positive interactions, but they could assume that to be correlated with having better kids. They might miss recognizing that different teaching methods were responsible for the better behavior. Unless an observer specifically knows what he is looking for, like the principal from Oregon, the teaching methods might seem like typical methods. However, readers should understand that a process that is so easily overlooked, is still easy for teachers to learn.

A review of data from public schools across this country reveals that students in some schools are achieving academic success. Unfortunately, it is also true that many students in our nation's schools are not being successful either from an academic or behavioral perspective. We will address this problem and show that every student, served in regular education classrooms, can meet or exceed grade level proficiency. In fact, with these methods schools could serve nearly all students in regular education classrooms. The teaching process we describe has proven successful with virtually every student from preschool through eighth grade. Art has successfully trained hundreds of teachers who have ranged from having a high school diploma to graduate degrees. Besides typical students, these teachers have served students with learning disabilities, behavior disorders, mental health issues, and many types of special needs.

This is not a dream of what schools will be like a thousand years from now. Teachers can produce these changes in just a few weeks. Success in classrooms does not need to be dependent on which students are assigned to the class. A teacher's career, or her happiness, is not dependent on getting promoted to a suburban school. Success can be completely dependent on the methods a teacher uses. The book you are holding contains the answer. When we talk to teachers, we suggest they envision how they want their students to behave and what they want them to

learn. They always have ambitious ideas for their students. This book describes how they can realize those dreams and get the best from students.

We will end this chapter by explaining how this book will take readers on a journey describing a set of unique methods that teachers have never heard of, or seldom used. Readers will also find that while some aspects of behavioral science have been described perfectly throughout the educational literature, other aspects have been misrepresented and therefore misused. Some important findings of behavioral science, for instance, classical conditioning, have been considered irrelevant to teachers, but actually describe much of what is happening in classrooms. This book will, in simple language, describe some aspects of neuropsychology which in recent years have been the basis of books on social and emotional learning. However, our readers will further learn how neuropsychology explains why some students do not respond favorably to many standard classroom procedures and how teachers can use the current methods to be successful with every student. Teachers almost always work with a group of students and are too often expected to do so with little or no understanding of the dynamics of groups. For these reasons, readers will have to let the unique nature of our methods, and the surprising reasons behind them, unfold as they read. We think you will enjoy the journey and discover why Jill could not recognize the process Laura tried to describe to her.

Summary

- When the correct methods are used, students will learn.
- Fortunately, the methods are universal. All students respond to the same methods.
- The methods described later in this book will solve both behavioral and academic problems.
- Even with disadvantaged students behavioral and academic results will be higher than most educators have ever seen.
- Every year students evidently achieve near the limits of their potential. To describe that phenomenon, we coined the term developmental actualization.
- These methods are within the capabilities of every teacher.