

Changing the Way We Look at Change: Three Ideas to Transform Learning and Teaching

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“OMG. I have to share the most spectacular conversation I just had with two teachers,” began a recent e-mail from the principal of a historically underperforming school where we just started a partnership. Her e-mail went on to chronicle—with exclamation point-rich details—the joyful transformation unfolding for teachers and students as they transition into the Pedagogy of Confidence. The Pedagogy of Confidence—the fearless expectation and support for all students to demonstrate high intellectual performance—is a vast departure from the way learning and teaching in underresourced, chronically underperforming schools go about their business. Excitement? Risk taking? The need to share? Not the normal stuff of schools in transition, but they could become so.

Aim for Transformation, Not Change

Change is a word with emotional baggage and, quite frankly, not much power. Change one’s clothes, one’s décor, or one’s route to work and the person and the room are essentially the same. New route aside, one still ends up in the same place. We rarely use the word change when we aim for complete transformation of beliefs, practices, and structures. We rarely use the word transformation, either. Change is hard and threatening and, it’s been said, akin to grieving. We talk about moving to the next level of practice. That seems doable and even a little noble. It certainly recognizes where people are, and it’s nonthreatening.

Aim for “Gifting,” Not Minimum Competency

One of the first questions we ask when we meet a group of teachers is, “How many of you are gifted teachers?” The question knocks them off balance and produces few raised hands. The Pedagogy of Confidence is based on the notion that all learners have gifts, but that only certain learners continue to be “gifted.” Educators recognize viscerally what this means. Opportunities, access, and beliefs are very different for students depending on their ZIP codes. Finding ways to “gift” historically underperforming students has great appeal. Meet the Common Core State Standards? No, thank you. Our students will exceed them. Minimum competency? No, to that, too. We will search for, draw out, and nurture students’ strengths. We are, after all, gifted teachers.

Aim to Reduce Cortisol, Not Increase It

Fear is the enemy of innovation, and cortisol is a hormone that feeds off fear and fuels stress. Educators in underperforming schools are accompanied daily by fear and stress. Jobs, lives, and learning hang in the balance. We reduce fear and stress by replacing cortisol with endorphins, neurotransmitters that foster learning, that make us feel good, that push us to the frontier of our minds. Our sessions, and the learning environments that we aim for participants to create, are purposefully designed to be fun, to be communal, and to be stress-free zones.

We aim to change learning and teaching through affirmation, inspiration, and mediation. We affirm that change is difficult and not necessarily very productive. We inspire teachers to think differently about their students and their goals for them. We mediate their learning by reducing stress and by providing them with the tools to do the same in their classrooms. This is the stuff of transformation.

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