

Choosing Which Right to Believe

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If you think you can or you think you can't, you will ALWAYS be right.
Henry Ford (Ford, n.d.)

Henry Ford stated, simply, a very important and timeless concept. The Pygmalion Effect, the self-fulfilling prophecy, a belief so powerful that the belief becomes reality (McNatt, 1998). Volumes have been written on the topic. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of studies on the effects of belief have been published. Great literature works, even movies, have been built around this theme such as Dickens' Great Expectations (1861) and My Fair Lady, an adaptations of George Bernard Shaw's play, Pygmalion (1964). Walk into most public schools, bring up the topic of standards, and you will certainly hear many comments from teachers such as, "Standards are too difficult for most of my students. They just can't learn them, given their home backgrounds (or ethnicity, or poverty level, or ELL status...)." If, according to Mr. Ford, these teachers believe these statements, then the statements are true. If true, then how will educators ever meet the demands of the newest Elementary and Secondary Education Act, No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), which states that all children will be proficient on grade level standards by 2013-14? How will they ensure that all children are given an equitable opportunity? They won't.

Most educators are familiar with reports such as the Coleman Report and A Nation at Risk and any number of other negative outlooks on American education (Marzano, 2003; Senge, 2000; Jamenez, 2002). Add to this the shuffling of curriculum, pedagogical theories and materials over the last few decades and you get the boy who cried wolf scenario where anything new is almost automatically dismissed as what Dewey identified as "transitory fads" almost one hundred years ago (Dewey, 1915). Now we have standards. Teaching to standards is contrary to traditional practice. Teaching standards requires that we start with the end in mind. (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Additionally, expecting grade level proficiency in rigorous standards for all students, not just a select few, is something most educators have never conceptualized and were certainly not trained to believe or do (Walqui, 2001, November). Is it any wonder, then, that educators have trouble believing in the promise of the standards movement?

Why do we need standards? Times are changing. The 21st century will require all citizens to perform to unprecedented high skill levels. Consequently, students will need to know how to use technology, problem solve, and how to learn on their own as adults (Hershberg, Rosenblum, & Simmon, 2003, February 19). Peter Senge (2000) has stated that the bar has been raised. Economics and the global economy have changed the job outlook. Even those who end up in a factory-type job will have to be familiar with statistics (quality control), have high level reading ability to read the complicated manuals, have backgrounds in physics, a little programming, and perhaps even a second language. The growing diversity of the American population further complicates the new century. Standards, and being held accountable for teaching and learning them, is one of the best ways to ensure educational equity for this diverse population, according to Lisa Delpit (1995). She believes that having high expectations for children, especially those traditionally under-taught such as minorities, English language learners, and children of poverty, is non-negotiable and doable. She cites success stories like Jaime Escalante's Stand and Deliver in East Los Angeles and Marva Collins' powerful effect in Chicago. Others are currently making their mark. Erin Gruwell out of Long Beach, California, has taken a group of 150 "throw-away" kids and turned their lives around by teaching to high standards in fun and creative ways. Her students have since traveled the world, written a book, The Freedom Writers, and will have their story told in an upcoming feature film (Freedom Writers, Gruwell, 1999).

Have you heard about the Texas Miracle? Texas has a large and growing number of high-poverty, high-minority schools earning the highest ranking in the Texas school ranking system of "exemplary." One of the miracle workers is Dale Skinner. Dale is a principal in Texas who has taken two schools to exemplary status where they have remained for several years (personal communication, July 17-18, 2002). Dale attributes this success to two factors: belief in the students and focusing on the standards. These two factors are powerful, he attests. His teachers agree. His school's assessment results verify.

Jaime, Marva, Erin, and Dale and his teachers all believed that their students could master rigorous academic demands. These were not the predictable upper-middle income, white students coming from two highly educated and involved

parents. Nor were they necessarily students with proper nutrition and healthcare, or emotionally nurturing, intellectually and culturally stimulating home lives. Yet these students succeeded. The greatest common factor was that the educators in these students' lives believed in them and held them to high standards—no excuses. The teachers never gave up, used every creative, differentiated, powerful, and motivational teaching method they could. These educators believed that they were empowering their students with a foundation to lifelong learning (Skinner, 2002; Jamentz, 2002). Again, Mr. Ford was correct. These teachers believed that they could successfully teach the rigorous content to their students and that their students would learn—so they did. Belief is powerful.

If we are to meet the demands of No Child Left Behind and do what is right for all our children, it will be necessary to choose to believe it is possible. It will be necessary to look at the mental models that exist, the beliefs that we hold (Senge, 2000). "When teachers do not understand the potential of the students they teach, they will under-teach them no matter what the methodology." (Marzano, 2003, p. 175). Understanding the potential of students is directly correlated to believing in their potential. Under-teaching any student is no longer acceptable, legally or morally, so it is time to start thinking we can succeed. There are folks, like Dale, Erin, and many others who are showing the way, proving it can be done. It is up to us to "...think we will succeed" – and be right.

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