

From the Womb to the Classroom

First you have to *capture* them
Next you have to *inspire* them
Then, and only then can you *teach them!*

Stephens Peters (2001)

By
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Dr. Jeff Howard of the Efficacy Institute wrote an article in which he asked the following question of teachers “Whose children are these?” He asks the same question of educators during his workshops. He says if your response is “the parents” then you have not committed yourself to high levels of learning for all students. Understand, teachers and school administrators cannot and should never take the place of parents but when a child is in your physical, social, and academic care for at least seven of his or her waking hours on a daily basis you learn quickly to treat him like he is a member of your family. Many of my colleagues who are or were principals or teachers take this stance. The research shows that high performing schools and principals know the importance of establishing relationships with their students. They do not allow the students or their staff to engage in what national researcher John Hattie calls “self-fulfilling minimalist expectations.” Years of research on high performance indicate that a level of nurturing and challenging the intellectual and imaginative capacities of children result in children who want to do more than pass a surface level test but they become self-regulated learners who accept the invitation to “stay in learning” John Hattie (2011).

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting Suzanne Blais, my custodial manager during my tenure as a principal. She is now making plans for retirement. Suzanne was what I like to refer to as a “professional.” Professionalism has little of nothing to do with your degree status but much to do with work ethic combined with high expectations. Our school was sparking clean whether we wanted it or not. In fact there were times that the floors looked like glass and were equally as slippery. She and I were reminiscing about our relationship and she reminded me of her observations during Back to School Night Programs. She said, “I will always remember what you said to parents on those nights. You said I am *honored* to serve your children.” I would like to say that I am the only principal who conveyed that to parents but I hear it all the time as a board member. The job of school, from the moment a child enters is to maximize his potential for later learning, post-school education, training, and employment and life itself. The goal is for students to become their own teachers, or the frequently heard term “life-long learners.”

Here is the good news. Parents, regardless of their income, background, or educational level have the innate skills to establish a level of readiness for school. If you have taught your child how to walk and talk you can provide the support they need for high performance in the classroom. I am the product of parents who had very limited reading skills. Like many of you I am the first college graduate in my family. It is what drives me to give back. What I did have was the “language of home” and more importantly, some teachers who did not devalue that language, which was laced with dialect. In fact my sister and I had a daily discussion of what were “real words” and which were not to be used at school. The editor of this paper says my writing style is like “sitting down and have a conversation” with readers. This, I have recently concluded, was a result of having a father who was not able to read print materials but told stories while we sat on the front porch every night. He developed what Bill Martin, nationally recognized children’s book author, calls “image-gination.” When conducting workshops for teachers or principals I remind them not to “Confuse *parent attendance* at school with *caring*.” My parents were not coming to school because they too were embarrassed about their lack of what researchers call “The language of school.” Number one for teachers is not to confuse the lack of a child’s familiarity and use of the *academic language* with his *academic potential*.

This is what we know about early learning of children. From the moment they come out of the womb they are assessing their environment and responding. Some of you have heard that I started reading to my girls the moment I brought them home from the hospital and later while in the car. I quickly noticed that as infants they responded differently to my speaking voice and my reading voice. Most parents know that children take in thousands of words before speaking one (receptive language). Then, out of the blue they speak in two-word combinations, followed by phrases that evolve into full-blown sentences. No, we did not break it down into subject, verb, or object. They were saturated with speech on a daily basis. We spoke *above* their speaking level. The same has to happen with early and later age reading. The difference is what we do as parents when we teach our children to speak is not what we do to teach them to read. We made learning to talk fun and did not apply pressure. Early reading by parents on the other hand includes the constant breakdown of words into their phonetic parts and constant pressure to “Sound words out.” Do they need to know phonics... yes! Do they need to hear reading and develop that sense of what good, fluent reading sounds like, similar to what we did when teaching them how to talk ...Yes! I read *Goodnight Moon*, at least a couple hundred times. Soon, self-regulation took place and they became the reader. For parents who like my parents are not readers, let them listen to books on tape. There was never a day in your child’s life when he did not hear speech. Similarly, there should never be a day that he does not hear reading. Reading is nothing more than “Speech on paper.” They need to hear reading everyday. It is said a student needs to hear a word at least thirteen times before it becomes a part of his repertoire. Listening comprehension improves if you read at least one or two grade levels about your child’s reading level. Again, you taught him or her to talk by talking above his speaking level. Apply the same principle to reading.

Dr. Stephens Peters says that first we must “Capture them.” Any mom or dad will tell you that sometimes a child says “da-da” or “mommy” when he is good and ready. Their willingness to demonstrate walking skills fits into the same when I am ready principle. We also know that we will go to any means to *capture and inspire* our children to perform, to include bribery. Most of the time it works, other times it does not. I recall enticing one of my girls to walk because I had guests. She took a few steps and we applauded and cheered...very loudly! Then she proceeded to sit for the next three weeks. Then one day walked and continued to walk without support. This is what we call self-regulation. Schools have to pick up where parents leave off. Once that child puts his foot in the door he is yours, treat him like he is because I can assure you he knows when he is not being treated like a member of your family.