

# Thinking Success

By Robert L. Gervais

**T**wo principals are hired with nearly equal backgrounds and training. One will greatly improve his school, the other will leave his school in the same or worse shape than before he arrived

What makes the difference? Does one principal have better teachers and students, or more parental and church support? Ask the principals this question, and they will both say Yes!

However, closer examination reveals that the schools are nearly equal. The primary difference is that, before he came, one principal heard good things about his new school. He expected good teachers, hard-working students, and enthusiastic church and parental support. As a result, he got it!

The other principal heard rumors that the teachers were uncooperative, the students were underachievers, the parents were troublemakers, and the church was hostile to the school. He went to the school expecting trouble, and he wasn't disappointed! Most individuals live up to the expectations others hold for them.

School administrators can influence student achievement without ever entering the classroom. If the principal believes that students cannot or will not excel academically, chances are that many will not. Teachers will embrace the same attitude, and a number will believe that, in fact, these students are doing as well as can be expected.

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Indeed, even though student achievement is below grade level, the teachers may think that considering the abilities of these students, they are doing pretty well!

These negative attitudes are especially harmful when dealing with minority or low-income children. Conventional wisdom suggests that black or Hispanic children are more disruptive and perform more poorly in school than whites, and that children from homes in lower socio-economic classes are less successful academically than children from wealthier families. Therefore, teachers and administrators may expect less of these children, thereby perpetuating some unfortunate stereotypes.

The opposite attitude also holds true. When administrators believe they have above-average students who will do well, they do. Administrators receive exactly what they expect.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has been with us for centuries.

In past years, women and minorities were so frequently told that they had severe limitations that they all too often lived up (or down) to these expectations. Even today, girls often believe they can't excel at mathematics and science. Unfortunately, many girls not only do poorly in these critical areas, they don't even try.

Somehow boys have come to believe that they are not expected to do well in language arts. Boys do significantly less well in this area than girls. Is there a biological difference between girls and boys that accounts for this behavior, or does

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"Virtue" provides a good example:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky:  
The dew shall weep thy fall \_\_\_\_\_,  
For thou must \_\_\_\_\_.

The same is done for the three remaining stanzas. Students read the poem more closely as they try to find the most suitable words to fill in the blanks. Studying the rhyme can also lead to working with other aspects of the sound pattern of the poem—for example, the repeated word *sweet* in its various denotative and connotative meanings.

Imagery is tied in with the sights and sounds of poetry. It offers another avenue for eliciting student reaction. Exploring such poems as Browning's "Meeting at Night," Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," and Keats' "To Autumn" can heighten students' awareness of imagery and help them understand more clearly how their language works.

Here, too, good oral reading helps to bring the images to life. Employing my best intonation, I once read to a college class the highly imagistic description of the fog in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the  
windowpanes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the  
evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in  
drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls  
from chimneys,  
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden  
leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October  
night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell  
asleep.

(lines 15-22)

I wanted the students to see, feel, and react, but I was quite unprepared for the "Mmmmm!" that followed my reading, signaling their complete involvement with the scene that T. S. Eliot had created. Through the reading and animated discussion that followed, the poem became theirs.

### The Bible as Poetry

The Bible, itself a repository of some of the greatest poetry ever

written, is an inexhaustible source of poetic images expressed in figurative language. The Psalms in particular encourage the study of imagery. What a forceful picture Psalm 93:3 presents in the floods "lifting up their voice." Then there is in Psalm 102:6 the moving image of the man or woman in deep distress feeling "like a pelican in the wilderness" and "like an owl in the desert." Psalm 137 makes an excellent piece for team teaching, as the English teacher joins the Bible teacher in providing the students a rich experience in Hebrew history and poetry.

### Using Hymn Poetry

The study of imagery and metaphor can be extended to hymn poems. Some of the greatest hymns of the church make their impact through bold images.

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## Students must be allowed to interact with a poem.

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Enlisting the help of the music teacher for a lesson in hymn singing as well as hymn reading, the English teacher can provide an enriching experience for students.

At this point you may be asking, How do I begin whetting my students' appetite for poetry? Generally speaking, today's students are reluctant readers of poetry, so at the outset they may not respond to a long trek through "Hiawatha."

Instead, they may be teased into welcoming poetry through a short unit on "Little Poems." These "little poems" are pieces from four to eight lines with playful rhythms, strong images, and readily understandable meaning. They are easy to memorize and lend themselves to imitation and illustration. Among such poems are the picturesque "Dawn," by Paul Laurence Dunbar; "The Shepherd," by William Blake; and "Fog," by Carl Sandburg.

Teaching poetry presents us with an opportunity to stimulate our students' interest in the sub-

ject by making them participants in the poetry experience. We should ask the same question that John Ciardi poses in his famous book title, *How Does a Poem Mean?*

To find the answer, we must follow Ciardi's lead and involve our students fully in the experience of poetry. In so doing, not only will we give them enjoyment while they study with us, but we will also achieve the more important objective of making them lifelong lovers of poetry. □

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### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Henry Taylor, "The Strange Case of Modern Poetry," *The Washington Post* (July 26, 1987), p. B3.

<sup>2</sup> Russell A. Hunt, "Toward a Process Intervention Model of Literature Teaching," *College English*, 44:4 (April 1982), p. 348.

<sup>3</sup> Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Noble and Noble Publishers, 1976), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Whiting, "Making Poetry Come Alive," *Language Arts*, 60:4 (April 1983), p. 456.

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society expect girls to outperform boys in language arts and do poorly in mathematics?

How does one explain the fact that certain teachers and administrators always preside over well-behaved students? Could it be that these individuals expect good discipline? This message is conveyed to students and parents, who come to believe it, and cooperate to achieve the desired result.

Individuals *do* live up to what is expected of them.

### Belief in Self

The power to think yourself into a winner has been shown repeatedly in the field of sports. Bruce Jenner, champion of the Decathlon event in the Olympics really won the events in his head prior to the games.

The Bible offers many examples of the power of faith. Consider Paul, who had severe physical limitations as well as problems with church leaders. He was literally

run out of almost every town he visited. Yet Paul believed so strongly in his mission that he is recognized today as one of the greatest evangelists of all time. The Bible also says that as we sow, so shall we reap. If we think positively, and work to achieve our goals, we will be rewarded with success.

The difference between a successful principal and a not-so-successful one is that the former believes the school has better teachers and students, but more importantly, he or she *helps* teachers and students believe they are better.

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### **School administrators can influence student achievement without ever entering the classroom.**

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Easier said than done, you're probably thinking. Consider this quote from the dean of positive thinking, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, "When the mental picture is strongly held, it actually seems to control conditions and circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

#### **Goals**

Developing a positive mental outlook in yourself and others is an ongoing process that is not easily accomplished. However, if this attitude is lacking in your school, ask yourself these questions:

"What are my long- and short-term goals for this school? What goals do my teachers and students have?" The goals of these groups must be compatible. Little progress would be made if the principal desired prison-like discipline while the teachers were working for a child-centered atmosphere.

Goals must be written, specific, and internalized. Broad, sweeping goals such as wanting a "good school" are next to worthless. Wanting a good school is an admirable objective, but it is vague and intangible. How will you accomplish this goal? To accomplish an objective it must be made specific.

For example, "I will conduct a series of workshops to help teachers develop better classroom management skills," is a specific goal that can be achieved.

Recently a superintendent of a medium-sized public school district was shocked to discover that only three administrators in his district had specific goals. Little wonder that this district is making slow progress. These administrators have failed to take the first and most basic step in school improvement: developing a set of goals.

Goal setting is especially important in defining a mission statement for a Christian school. Academic achievement can be attained in public as well as private education. So why should parents pay tuition to send their children to a church-sponsored school when public education is free? A sound answer to that question is this:

"We have high expectations here. We expect our students to achieve academically. We practice Christian behavior and expect our students to do so, both in and out of school.

"We believe in our students and take steps to help them develop a positive self-concept.

"If you contact your child's teacher, he/she will be happy to show you the goals that we have established for your child's class."

How can you ensure that your school will be a model school? I believe that emphasis on the three areas listed above—high expectations, positive self-concept, and specific goals—will greatly improve any school program. Student achievement should soar while discipline problems diminish. Teachers and administrators can expect greater parental and constituent support.

If you emphasize the traits mentioned above, your school will be a better place when you leave than when you arrived! □

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1968), pp. 133-147.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), p. 122.

## MOTIVATING THE UNDERACHIEVING STUDENT

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Comparing several analyses will reveal the methods that require the least amount of repetition. These methods should be used most frequently by the student.

In order to facilitate learning, teachers need to recognize that students learn in different ways, and use a variety of methods to ensure student mastery of the concepts being presented.

#### **Practical Implementation**

The teacher needs to walk a delicate balance between expressing confidence in the student's abilities and monitoring the results of the child's efforts. Usually underachievers lack the skills and perseverance to organize themselves and do what is necessary to achieve their goals. Therefore, adults have to take the responsibility for teaching them organization and self-discipline. This is the time to enlist the aid of parents.

Involving parents will not only give the teacher more time, but can also reinforce the lessons he or she is trying to convey in the classroom. Parents usually want to help their children, but they sometimes feel inadequate or helpless, even though they are aware that there are problems. They are often happy to receive some kindly suggestions about methods that will help their offspring to succeed in school. *Suggestions*, not criticism! Too often frustrated teachers criticize the offspring of frustrated parents, sparks fly, and nothing positive results.

Let's see how Mrs. Smith used parental participation to help solve the problem of Jan's underachievement.

Mrs. Smith met with Jan and her parents one afternoon. She explained that together they were going to devise a program to help Jan overcome some of the bad