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Ivy: Removing invisible but real barriers to a child's success



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For the past seven years, my daughter has taken dance at various studios. I have watched her struggles. I've observed classes where she was completely misaligned, but the teacher passed her by to correct the posture of another -- one, perhaps, with more promise.

Interestingly enough, although my daughter had begun to hate dance class, she seemed agreeable when I told her she was going to attend a Debbie Allen dance camp. From Day One, she was so engaged that she practiced her choreography at home and even purchased the dance music for her iPod. "I have to practice," she whispered. "Even in the beginner class it's not sunshine and roses."

On the day of the recital, I didn't know what to expect, but the performance was magical. Dancers of every size and ethnicity were performing with confidence and grace in a way that defied belief. Plus-size dancers were featured in ballet and fair-skinned ethnicities were featured in African numbers.

Every toe pointed and every hand moved in unison. When my own child took the stage, I was mesmerized. She was spectacular. She glowed with confidence and graceful movement. She sparkled. She was, at times, even in the front row.

After the performance was over, I tried to piece it all together. What had been so different about the instruction at this camp? How could my daughter have made more progress in two weeks than she had in seven years?

I asked the question and my mother replied, "Belief. The power of belief." I looked puzzled and then I understood. Those dance masters believed that those children could dance and therefore they did -- all of them. No one was at risk that day.

"At risk" is a term used in public education to define those students whose achievement is below other students of their age or grade level; it is used when it looks as if failure will be their final destination. Research has shown that when a teacher does not believe a student can learn, they call on them less frequently, monitor their progress inconsistently and sometimes fail to interact with them at all.

Over time I had watched my own child fall into the "at risk" category in the world of dance, and I had been powerless to stop it.

As a teacher, that gave me pause. If the power of belief could so greatly effect dance instruction, what effect did it have in the traditional classroom? If students came to class without predetermined cultural and intellectual skills -- did that mean teachers were giving up on them before they even got started?

Hidden expectations come from traditions or biases so deep it seems as if they cannot be removed, but they must. If a child is marginalized by a person charged with his education, then he is limited before he has begun. It does not matter if the teacher is kind or well-meaning. Any disbelief results in a loss for that child.

I will remember the lesson learned from that magical two weeks my daughter spent at dance camp. It is a model by which teachers all over the nation should re-evaluate their expectations. What happens when we do not fully believe in the abilities of the children with whom we have been entrusted, and what happens when we do?

For the last 12 years, the Fort Worth area has been fortunate enough to be graced with the Debbie Allen Dance Institute, a summer seminar for youth dance born of collaboration between Fort Worth Imagination Celebration founder Ginger Head Gearheart, iconic performer Debbie Allen and a powerful force of professional dance masters. For a few weeks of summer the TCU campus becomes "FAME Fort Worth," and area children are given an unparalleled experience in discipline, excellence and the power of belief.

This year, my daughter was one of them.

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