

Changing Children's Possibilities

By Paul Houston | Categories: Uncategorized

Wayne Dyer was fond of saying that if “you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” This is sound advice for any aspect of your life but it is particularly appropriate for educators. Our expectations shape how we go about our jobs and also shape how we see our students. When we change our expectations, we can open the world to our students and to their possibilities.

There are several key words that we can remember as we try to recalibrate our students' self-concept and their belief in who they are. The first, of course, is “yes.” Yes creates all sorts of possibilities for us. The teachers who made the biggest difference in my life were always saying yes to me. When you tell a child “no” you shut down what they can think about and what they can do. “Yes” opens them up. We all should be “yes men and women” if we want our students to succeed.

The other big word for educators is “yet.” It is hard to believe that such a small word can make such a huge difference in a child's life. How often have we heard someone say, “Oh, I'm not good at math” or “I can't understand this or that?” If teachers would just repeat that sentiment and then add “yet” to the phrase it would revolutionize how children see themselves and their future. “You aren't good at math, yet.” “You can't do that, yet.”

This is much more than a cheap trick. Education is a journey that, if carried out properly, never ends. Where we happen to be at a point in time is simply a stopping off place on the road to a bigger destination. When we travel, we don't stop in the middle of the trip and say, “Oh, I'm not in St. Louis.” Of course you aren't, yet. You have stopped a few miles short. Keep driving. In the case of children, we must make sure they don't stop short of being all they can be. We have to empower them to understand that where they happen to be isn't where they will end up.

The other key phrase that educators should put at the top of their tool kit is “have you ever thought about...?” This was brought home to me when I was in tenth grade. My school career up to that point had been spotty at best. In fact, I had barely survived ninth grade English by making a D-. Imagine my surprise when I got to Mrs. Crum's tenth grade English class and after a few months, she walked by my desk, leaned over and whispered to me, “Have you ever thought about being a writer?”

Surely she was kidding. I was the kid who had barely made it out of Barboursville Junior High because of my English performance. But she saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. And she planted a seed in me so that now nine books more than 400 articles later, I guess you could say I am a writer. That, “Have you ever thought about” got me thinking in a whole new way about what I might be and what I might become.

With one question, Mrs. Crum had changed my world and my trajectory. The truth is that often children haven't thought about what they might do and more importantly they usually have no idea of their potential. Teachers who believe in a child's potential to go beyond where they are to a higher place find ways of empowering them by asking them simple questions that open new learning vistas.

Mrs. Sang, who was my Latin teacher in high school, asked me one day where I was going to college. I informed her I wasn't college

material. Although at that time I was doing well in high school, because of my earlier failures as a student, I had decided that I was not college material. She begged to differ and we had a number of "discussions" about whether and where I should go to college. I thought maybe if I went at all, I would go to a local college. She thought I should apply to Harvard. Ultimately, I did apply to Harvard, and was rejected without great surprise to me. But she had helped me raise my expectations and I did go to a major university a few hundred miles away from home-which was my way of breaking out of the little valley in rural West Virginia where I lived.

Years later, I went to visit her classroom and she made me sit in front of the class while she asked me a series of questions:

"Did you go to college?"

"Yes I did."

"Where did you go?"

"The Ohio State University."

"Do you have a master's degree?"

"Yes, I do."

"Where did you get that?"

"The University of North Carolina."

"Do you have a doctorate?"

"Yes, I do."

"Where did you get it?"

"Harvard University." (Yes, I had finally made it there.)

Then she started in on what jobs I had done, so we went through teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent.

Next she wanted to know where I had traveled, so we went through my world travels.

Finally she asked the money question:

"Where did you go to high school?"

"Well, I went right here."

And the class erupted. *"No way."* *"No he didn't."* And so on and so on.

Mrs. Sang stopped them to ask why, when I had told them that I went to that high school, they didn't think I could have.

One of the students answered by saying that "People who have done what he has done, don't go to this school."

Of course, Mrs. Sang knew that was their attitude and belief system and she was simply using me as an advanced audio-visual tool to let those kids know that they didn't have to limit their dreams by the height of the hills that surrounded their school.

The poet William Blake wrote of the “mind-forged manacles” that keep us captive to the beliefs we have. The role of a teacher is to break the manacles and to let children know that they can do and be all sorts of things they haven’t considered. All it takes is changing the way we, and our students, look at things and at themselves.