

Preface

How would you feel if your teacher greeted you with first-day frowns that suggested, “I sure hope you can learn something in this class, but I doubt it.” “Why did she assign him to my room in the first place?” What would you think if your teacher told you in so many words, “You’re not someone who will ever learn in my classroom”?

Such are the feelings and thoughts of thousands of young children and older students who are greeted with subtle body language and words that say, “I don’t believe you can learn.” It is these children who have to be asking themselves, “What is it about me you can’t teach? My shabby shirts/baggy pants? My accent? My skin color? My braids/locks? Because I’m a girl? My parent(s)’ low income? . . . Just what is it?”

How a teacher answers these questions for any child who feels or thinks them is a critical determinant of how well that child will succeed in that classroom. Ideally, teachers’ first responses will communicate, “There is nothing that prevents me from having the highest of expectations for you.” In a like manner, the second response will be, “And to demonstrate the sincerity of my belief that you can learn anything I have to teach as well as anyone else in this class, I am going to use the best instructional practices that will make your success a reality.”

The first purpose of this book is to show future and present classroom teachers that there are practical instructional methods to ensure that all children have the benefit of the best teaching. The second purpose is to provide teachers who need to expand their instructional repertoires with the tools to best help children who come to their classrooms not quite ready to meet the challenge of high expectations for all. In this way, all teachers can better respond to the question by saying, “There is nothing I can’t teach you or any other child assigned to my classroom.”

We have built this book on a foundation of research especially applicable for teachers working in an urban setting with students whose academic lives are marked by low performance, whatever its reasons. The first research is our own multiyear experience with students, teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators in these settings. The second is the alignment of our experience with the meta-analytic studies of researchers. These researchers have looked at effect sizes and given a statistical rank order designating which instructional approaches are most likely to make a positive, large impact on students struggling to learn in the school

setting. The third, and most important, is the research and effectiveness studies completed on the theory and practices of cognitive psychologist Reuven Feuerstein.

Because we ourselves have learned the importance of understanding well the learning challenges many urban students face, we have organized the text around Feuerstein's theory of Mediated Learning Experience. This theory, based on the concepts of Structural Cognitive Modifiability, which Feuerstein developed as a student of Piaget, holds that intelligence is flexible and changeable, not fixed and static. In the theory of Mediated Learning Experience, Feuerstein details the characteristics of those interactions between teachers and students that will best help all students become more efficient and effective learners. Originally developed with children of the Holocaust who were proving too difficult for their teachers to help via conventional instruction, Mediated Learning Experience has successfully been applied to students with special needs, including learning disabilities, behavioral disabilities, Down syndrome, and autism; African American children of poverty in urban centers such as Cleveland and Hartford; in rural areas such as Bahia (Brazil) and the Aleutian Islands; with Native American (Arizona), First Nation (British Columbia), Inuit (Alaska), Ethiopian (Israel), and Hispanic (Los Angeles, Mexico City) students; incarcerated youth (Bronx); as well as with gifted underachievers and students struggling with reading and mathematics in American schools from Portland (Oregon) on the West Coast to Wilmington (Delaware) on the East Coast.

In this book, we have used the characteristics of Mediated Learning Experience as the organizational guide for the chapters. Each chapter focuses on one of the characteristics and shows how it provides teachers with the tools that best promote "high expectations" instruction. We have selected those instructional strategies that align best with each characteristic. For each we provide the what, the why, and the how so that teachers can understand the characteristic, know why it is important, and understand how to use it in the classroom. Finally, at the end of each chapter, we provide three sample lessons to show how teachers can integrate the strategies into their daily lessons. These models are differentiated to show use with primary, middle, or secondary students.

Chapter 1 outlines the characteristics of the urban learner and details the unique steps necessary to overcome the students' instructional needs.

Chapter 2 reexamines the data on teaching tactics that enable teachers to put high-expectation words into instructional practice. Special attention is paid to the importance of Teacher Expectation Student Achievement (TESA) practices that are viewed as basic tools necessary for every urban teachers classroom.

Chapter 3 takes note of how the teacher's intention to develop each student's thinking skills and to apply those skills to subject matter balances with the teacher's ability to gain strong student engagement or "reciprocity." It identifies important strategies that engage students and maintain reciprocity throughout a lesson.

Chapter 4 targets the mediation of "meaning," an essential characteristic required in every lesson. It discusses the importance of prior knowledge and the design of lessons that help students construct meaning.

Chapter 5 explains the importance of mediation for “transcendence,” in which the teacher enables students to form generalizations and draw conclusions about the facts they are learning. It shows how reciprocal teaching is an effective tool for providing students with the “learning to learn” skills needed to bridge concepts one to another.

Chapter 6 provides insights into the mediation for “self-regulation” that helps students learn how to take control and responsibility for their own learning behaviors. It outlines the tools in Feuerstein’s Instrumental Enrichment programs for older students (STANDARD) and young students (BASIC), which help teachers mediate self-regulation more successfully with low-performing students.

Chapter 7 discusses the importance of using Mediated Learning Experience and Instrumental Enrichment to build the underlying feeling of competency that students need to learn well. It identifies behaviors of students who feel incompetent with and the importance of academic success as the basis for mediation of the feeling of competence.

Chapter 8 shows the connection of the mediation of sharing behavior with the use of informal and formal cooperation as a preeminent strategy for developing sharing behavior in the classroom and the home.

Chapter 9 connects Mediated Learning Experience with Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences to illuminate the need for teachers to individuate student learning. It outlines how teachers can structure lessons so that the locus of control for learning grows strong in all students and shows teachers how to differentiate instruction so that students are the ones who personalize learning experiences to align with their own needs.

Chapter 10 highlights the need for students to frame and pursue their own learning goals and provides a variety of instructional strategies that enable teachers to mediate goal planning and assessment.

Chapter 11 details what the mediator does and avoids doing to create challenges for all students as they build their skills and their competence. It focuses on the three-story intellect as a model for setting increasingly challenging lessons in various content areas.

Chapter 12 discusses self-change, which calls for teachers to eliminate labels that categorize students and lock all put-downs out of the classroom. This is the first step in enabling students to self-talk about their own capabilities and to move to positive reflection and self-assessment that guides them to change their own behavior without the need of teacher mediation. Strategies are provided to facilitate positive self-assessments that will lead to improvements in learning.

Chapter 13 notes that the task of transforming classroom instruction from teacher talk and low-expectations methods to student-centered mediation requires a change in teacher belief. For this transformation, teachers will benefit most from a

comprehensive professional development program that includes intensive coaching and follow-up.

For those who have used the first edition of this book, there are several noteworthy changes. These include the following:

- Updated description of the challenges of urban teaching and learning in Chapter 1
- The addition of Chapter 13 on professional development
- Three sample lessons for each chapter
- The updated description of the new BASIC tools for Instrumental Enrichment
- Clarification of the Mediated Learning Experience and its role as the organizational structure of this book
- Inclusion of updated research with a focus on the meta-analyses on effective teaching strategies that were completed since the first edition
- Key points to remember at the end of each chapter

In this revised edition, we have taken the opportunity to update the material we introduced in 1996. Since that time, additional research on how to best transform urban students from passive learners and low performers into active, engaged learners who are more willing and able to increase their academic achievement has helped us refine our thinking. In turn, we have passed on what we have learned from this research and from listening to feedback from multitudes of teachers throughout the United States and abroad who have told us what worked best to promote higher achievement for these students and what needed refinement in the original text.

More than ever, we are convinced of the need for the contents of this book. It is our fervent hope that what we advocate will make each of our readers stronger educators as mediators. We know that our points, as strongly as they are supported by effectiveness studies and research, run counter to some trends to turn teachers into script-reading automatons unable to meet the most important needs of their students. Quality instruction, especially in those schools where low-performing students struggle to learn, requires strong instructors who are skilled in making important decisions about how they teach each different child. They are the teachers who never have to face the question “What is it about me you can’t teach?” because they have mastered the use of those skills that most announce, “In my classroom, I know there is nothing about you that I can’t teach. I am going to help you transform your learning potential from words to actions. I will refuse to accept any gap in your achievement that separates you from the advantages that any others may have.”

—James Bellanca

—Eleanor Renée Rodriguez