

Guest Editorial

HELENÉ HODGES

I Know They Can Learn Because I've Taught Them

Ronald S. Brandt
Executive Editor

Barbara Kres Beach
Managing Editor

Al Way
Art Director

Jo Ann Irick Jones
Associate Editor

Cheryl J. Weber
Editorial Assistant

Teola T. Jones
Advertising Coordinator

Deborah A. Johnson
Administrative Assistant

March 1987

Volume 44

Number 6

Educational Leadership is intended primarily for leaders in elementary, middle, and secondary education but is also for anyone interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in schools. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this publication are not necessarily official positions of the Association. Copyright © 1987 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.

ISSN 0013-1784
March 87/Stock No. 611-87010

My first sight of Junior High School 22 in New York City, to which I had just been assigned that day in 1975, was not reassuring. The building was covered with graffiti. And although it was 10:00 on an October morning, the sidewalks and schoolgrounds were swarming with 12- to 16-year-olds dressed in their "colors" (jackets displaying a skull and crossbones, the emblem of the ruling gang in that neighborhood). Some were fighting, some smoking pot.

I was to teach 180 boys remedial reading in an old electricity shop. When I asked the superintendent if he cared what teaching methods I used, he said, "I'll be grateful if you can get them out of the corridors and into your classroom." I had taught such students before, but I wondered if this time I had taken on too much.

The next morning I went out to the courtyard and into the corridors and invited my students to learn about aerodynamics. "What's that, a new dance?" they asked. No, I told them, it was how airplanes fly. I brought a model airplane (no books), and we started. Soon more and more students were coming to my shop (sometimes when they were supposed to be in other classes). And they began learning basic skills, always in connection with learning about flight. For example, they designed and built rockets, which required reading about how to make them, figuring dimensions, and so on. When they were ready, we took the rockets outside and fired them, calculating trajectories and carefully measuring the distances they flew.

Although my students were sometimes quite agitated when they came from elsewhere in the school, they did not misbehave in my classes. In the spring they won first prize in a city-wide model airplane construction contest sponsored by the New York Bureau of Industrial Arts and the Aviation Development Council.

The next year I was given permission to start an alternative school sev-

eral blocks away for 20 of the most "incorrigible" students of Junior High School 22. We spent the first three weeks cleaning and painting a rented basement, throwing out garbage and dead rats. Soon Madison Prep, as we called our school, had become a place of learning for these "delinquent nonachievers."

For 14 years I taught such students successfully in every ghetto of New York City. I found that they can and will learn, but not from the analytical, lecture-and-recitation type of teaching found in most classrooms. Learning style tests show 43 percent with fair to poor auditory capability and 53 percent with fair to poor visual, but 88 percent with strong tactal and 99 percent with strong kinesthetic. They need global, tactal-kinesthetic experiences: high interest activities that seem real, require movement, and involve working with others.

Ten years ago many administrators were skeptical, but now there is greater acceptance because the data are so convincing. For example, at the Key School, which I directed from 1982-1985, none of our 90 students passed the New York City proficiency tests in writing the first year. The next year, however, 80 percent passed.

Millions of young people are "at risk" because, to be full-fledged participants in our society, they desperately need an education. It is simply not true that we don't know what to do about it. We do. We must teach them in accord with the way they learn. □



Helené Hodges is ASCD's Director of Research and Information.

Copyright © 1987 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.