

Mentor Statement:

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In her dissertation, and in her essay in this publication, Constant Albertson develops a number of intriguing ideas about teaching, the arts and people living with dyslexia. Albertson focuses on seven outstanding professional ceramicists who, through deep involvement with their art, have steered their lives in a positive direction in spite of the significant obstacle of dyslexia. In focusing on successful lives, Albertson is charting a course parallel to that of the newly emergent "positive psychology" movement. In a recent publication, Seligman, and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describe this enterprise:

A science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless. The exclusive focus on pathologies that has dominated so much of our discipline (psychology) results in a model of human beings lacking the positive features that make life worth living. Hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance are ignored, or explained as transformations of more authentic negative impulses.... (p.5)

Albertson has collected first-person biographical accounts from seven successful artists who work in clay-and who started out their careers as stigmatized and poorly performing dyslexic children in the schools. The positive stories that these artists tell, are testimonies to their capacity to endure and thrive in the face of a largely unsupportive educational environment. Each person had to discover for themselves that it was their artistic practice that held the keys to many things that make life worth living: a sense of self-worth, the acquisition of self-discipline and the confidence to successfully take on the difficult tasks that awaited them in the academic classroom and beyond.

The general argument of Albertson's thesis is that by studying these lives, one

can learn a lot about some of the optimal conditions for learning in general. In other words, the very things that helped these seven people to overcome difficulties in school, are in principal the same things that will also help less compromised students to achieve success. In Albertson's opinion, these stories indicate the road to academic success for all students. She maintains that those who learned to cope successfully with dyslexia, have in so doing , also learned a number of other extremely useful skills that can be generalized to other sorts of learning situations. The seven artists were forced to focus, acquire good work habits and above all, to intensively pursue a goal of their own choosing. The *sine qua non* of everything that followed, says Alberston, was the individual's choice of a field and a practice that was challenging and rewarding on a number of levels. This choice always took place in the context of a rather bleak academic landscape--one that failed to valorize the students in any way. So typically, the seven individuals were thrown back on their own resources--and discovered that they had the inner resources to survive and succeed. One of the great strengths of this thesis is the way in which personal narratives are presented in their own right, but are also used to underscore Albertson's more general points. In her essay, she gives the case of Alan Bennett, an internationally known ceramist living in New York State. He reports that his teachers mostly failed to identify his strengths and held him accountable for his academic weakness--as though he had chosen his handicap on purpose. Because of his undiagnosed dyslexia, school was a frustrating and debilitating experience. Art was the only point of light in the gloom of academic study. Even Bennett's art teachers at the primary and secondary levels failed to recognize how important art was to Alan. Alan noted in retrospect, that the poorer teachers actually did him little or no harm, but they did miss the opportunity to help. Albertson notes that Bennett's inherent pleasure in art-making is typical of the artist as "problem-finder". This designation, developed by Csikszentmihalyi in his 1970's studies, applies to prototypical artists who characteristically love the struggle with a problem rather than

the contemplation of the finished work. It was Allen's "problem finding" disposition that helped him to survive in school until he finally encountered a teacher worthy of the name at the University. This teacher, who was himself a dyslexic ceramist, was a dedicated professional, deeply involved with the discipline and he devoted himself to helping Alan discover new techniques and ideas. A respectful and mutual relationship grew between Alan and his teacher/mentor at the University. This sort of relationship, says Albertson, is another crucial aspect of successful education-and one that has very wide applicability. The good teacher has an instinct for helping students to become accomplished "problem finders". Many of the seven artists encountered teachers who were at pains to involve them with the discipline. And, this welcoming concern was experienced by the students as proof that the teacher cared for them. Many teaching professionals know that in order to learn, students must "give permission" to those who want to instruct them. Where trust between student and teacher is lacking, real learning is unlikely.

Trust and mutuality loom large in the stories that Albertson documents. Without experiencing such relationships somewhere along the line, the 7 artists might have had rather different tales to tell. Here again, Albertson's observations resonate with work now being done in the educational field. The Community School co-directed by my brother, and documented by Day (1994) implements a "relational" approach to education. This means that students deal with academic and personal issues in a class setting. As Lievow (1999) puts it, "Both tasks, addressing the personal issues and tackling the academic class are regarded as opportunities for cognitive engagement, problem solving, reflection and growth. As students relate to others with trust and engagement they begin to relate to the world socially and intellectually with the same confidence and capability." The school has received national recognition for its performance with drop outs over 27 years and its success is in part due to the trusting

and respectful relationships that exist between students and teachers. Deborah Meier, (1994) a noted educator and founder of the Central Park East High Schools recently commented about education: “Respectful affection is the key to learning math

as well as learning to be a grown-up” (Pariser, 1999, p.12). Meier is an innovator who has created successful public schools populated mostly by African-American and Hispanic children. In these schools it is in fact possible for students and teachers to experience “respectful affection” and this climate of trust and respect has had a dramatic effect on positive academic outcomes. It is this same experience of respectful affection that many of Albertson’s interviewees report in their contacts with the first teachers who built on their artistic strengths rather than chastising them for their weaknesses.

According to Albertson, the dyslexic artists learned some important lessons as they struggled with and overcame their potentially debilitating and little understood handicap: They learned that they could experience success via art, and that they could reap social rewards through their artwork. They learned the value of self-discipline and setting goals. They learned to successfully initiate and bring to fruition projects of their own choosing. The art teachers who played significant positive roles in the lives of the dyslexic artists were models of excellent practice, for these instructors embodied the caring, knowledge and respectful affection that should be a model for all teachers- regardless of the discipline and regardless of who is in the classroom.

References:

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