**HOPE AND JOY THROUGH READING**

Posted by Toni Gerber

Can you read the book to me again? It made me laugh,” asked Adriana. “Of course, I was hoping you would ask,” I answered.

As a member of a State Support Literacy Team, I was assigned to work at two elementary schools in the central city. Being a retired principal, my role was to work with principals, teachers and students. After meeting with teachers and principals, I wanted to work with students in K-3 grades. My goal was to show them how books could bring joy, hope and skill to students who “tested” in the lowest levels.

Being a principal for thirty-two years, I am well aware of what a successful literacy community looks and feels like. I met opposition from some teachers. “You can’t have them read your books. They can’t read. They’ll cheat and look at the pictures,” said one teacher. “Using the pictures is a strategy in reading for meaning,” I replied. “Well, we need to prepare them with these worksheets so they pass the test,” she replied. Her comment saddened me though I understood the pressure that was on her and the other teachers in the lowest performing school in the central city school district.

One school declined support as the teacher leaders wanted someone to run drills with the students. The other school was open to my approach. I began pulling out individual students who had the lowest literacy scores in their grade level.

With the use of read-a-louds, leveled books and much conversation, the students made rapid progress in climbing the levels. We worked on phonics and comprehension. We read. We wrote. We talked and laughed. I learned about their families. We talked about their hopes and dreams.

Hope is a hard one. When I would drive to the school each morning, I would wonder how do you encourage hope. Streets were pot-holed disasters. Houses were boarded up. There were no community buildings, grocery store or library. There were five shootings in the neighborhood in the limited time I worked at the school. Almost every student that I worked with had a Rotweiler dog as a pet. “My mom said that Joe will keep us safe,” said Maya. The only sign of hope was a Lottery sign in the window of a run-down carryout.

I didn’t offer prizes or treats. I read books with them and I made them feel valued and capable. After being there a week, other children began to ask if I could take them, too. Some of the children I worked with would ask me if I could meet with their brothers, sisters and even cousins.

Maya and I were reading a book about friendship. She asked me if I knew what a BFF was. “Of course, I do. Can you tell me who your BFF’s are?” I asked. She named three girls and then added with a smile, “And well, you!,”

When I went to pick up a girl in second grade, the teacher whispered, “You can cross her off your list. She’s a selective mute. She hasn’t talked in her three years at the school.” I told her that I still wanted to take her. As we were leaving the classroom, the students in the class shouted out that I shouldn’t take her because she didn’t talk. I took the hand of a young girl whose eyes looked only at the floor as we left the room.

Oh, joy! She did talk to me. How did I get her to talk? I read her two books about families. One was funny and the other book was more touching. “It’s totally fine if you don’t choose to talk to me, but I really want to know about your family. Can you draw pictures of them?” She nodded. Little did I know that she had seven brothers and sisters! After drawing the pictures, she answered my questions about all of them. The biggest surprise came when I found out she could read. She had kept that a secret.

I met with a first grade boy who was very focused and diligent to the tasks at hand. He made exceptional progress working through the leveled books. “William, you are becoming such a great reader. You are a very smart boy.” I shared. Big brown eyes stared at me but he didn’t say a word. “Has anyone told you that before?” I asked.

“Just my Mama,” he said quietly.

Well, do me a favor. Please tell your mom that I agree with her,” I offered.

“Would you write it to my Mom? And I could take it home to her,” he asked quietly.

I told him that I would love to and I wrote it right there with him. I had him read it back to me, too. He folded it very carefully and put it in his pocket.

When I arrived at the school office on the next day. The secretary said that William’s mom was waiting for me. “I just wanted to thank you for writing that my son is smart. It means the world to William – and to me,” the mom said with tears in her eyes.

Sharing a good book with a child is an intimate experience. You can open any door on the world with the right book. You can bring joy, laughter, knowledge, and yes, hope to a child’s world.

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