Chapter 27:
Mike the Knife

All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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Perhaps the biggest concern in education today is the massive failure of U.S. schools to extend educational opportunity to students from atypical populations. Students who differ from mainstream children make up the bulk of underperforming students. The relationship between socio-economic class and school performance is so close, that of all variables available to social scientists, economic class is the best predictor of school success. I have long believed that the reason for this is not a deficit in atypical populations, but rather a deficit on the part of the school. Schools have little understanding of cultural, language, social and mental characteristics of atypical children and consistently interpret minority or disadvantaged children's differences from mainstream populations as lack of mental capability. The inevitable placement of culturally, linguistic or economically different children in remedial programs with low level, slow paced, repetitious and boring instruction leads to the misdiagnosis becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, with an increasing cumulative deficit that leads to frustration, failure and withdrawal. The following anecdote about a mainstream student illustrates the impact that a unique characteristic may have on school perceptions.

"You have to attend the PTA meeting tonight," said my wife.

After a hard day's work, the prospect of sitting through a PTA meeting was not very appealing. Over the years as an educator and as a parent I have formed some mixed opinions about PTA. On the one hand, I have a lot of respect for PTA. In the history of U.S. education, it has made an important contribution to the status of education as a local, state and national priority. PTA has always been and continues to be supportive of children, schools, teachers and educational systems in general.

On the other hand, individual PTA meetings are not always the most interesting way to spend an evening. One can opt to stay at home and watch dust settling on the mantelpiece and get more excitement and enjoyment than at a PTA meeting. I once attended a PTA meeting in which 45 minutes were dedicated to a heated discussion as to whether the laminating machine purchase committee had been authorized to select and purchase a new laminating machine or whether the committee had been authorized to look into the purchase of a laminating machine.

In some schools, the PTA serves as a valuable vehicle for parent communications with the school. In other schools the PTA serves as a vehicle for channeling parental interest and concern into trivial, irrelevant, time consuming and non-threatening activity.

I consider parental interest, concern, and involvement as desirable characteristics for enhancing student performance, though I have some severe doubts about the extremely high value being placed on parental behavior as a basic necessity for school success. Certainly not to the extent commonly stated nowadays, that it is impossible to educate a student if the parent is not interested. I have never known orphans to present any insurmountable educational challenge, nor have I ever seen any research studies to substantiate the assumption that parental interest is an essential element for school success.

I'm more prone to believe that schools, unable or unwilling to be accountable for student failure, tend to extend the student deficit model to the parents, thus using the family as a convenient scapegoat for the school's failure.

There are a lot of studies in the literature that indicate that the involvement of the parents in meaningful school activities leads to improved performance on the part of the student, but I find it difficult to assume that attending a PTA meeting is very meaningful.

My spouse has always contended that if a student's parents fail to attend PTA meetings, the student will be penalized by the teacher, particularly if the student is in a self-contained class or homeroom in a school where teachers are pressured to produce good PTA attendance. My spouse also contends that it is necessary for parents to participate in a lot of school activity because school personnel give preferential treatment to students whose parents are well known, are active in school affairs or simply spend a lot of time in and around the school.

In teaching graduate courses in testing, measurement, statistics and research, I have found that one of the most common errors committed by neophyte statisticians is in once having determined a correlation between two variables, assuming that the relationship between the two variables is causal, i.e., that the relationship is a cause-and-effect relationship, and in many cases even assuming which variable is the cause and which one the effect.

In observing the correlation between parent involvement and student performance, it is very tempting to label parent involvement as the cause and student performance as the effect. Yet it is possible that a reverse relationship exists, that is, students who perform well in school are the cause for their parents being involved with the school. Or, in keeping with my wife's observation and behavior, the relationship between parent involvement and student success may be an indirect relationship, with each of the two variables being related to a third variable not commonly considered. The hypothesis for this indirect relationship would read, "Parents who are involved with the school cause the school to give preferential treatment to the child, which causes the child to perform better in school."

Anyway, I did attend the PTA meeting, which turned out to be very interesting. The superintendent of the school district made a presentation about an upcoming bond issue election, and I found his enrollment projections, facility needs and financial information much more interesting than the typical PTA program.

It was announced that there would be an open house after the meeting, and parents were invited to go to their kids' classrooms where samples of their work would be available for their perusal and an opportunity would be provided for parents to speak to the teachers about their children's performance. I visited several classrooms and eventually wound up in my son's classroom. I reviewed Mike's materials and capitalized on the opportunity to speak with his teacher.

"I'm Mike Cárdenas' father."

"Oh, yes. Mike is such a dear child. It is a pleasure having him in my class." While she spoke glowingly about my son, I was thinking of a research study I had recently read that said teacher-parent interviews tend not to be very successful because of three weaknesses in the discussion. First, teachers tend to speak very positively about the student and are very reluctant to bring up problems. Second, teachers fail to provide concrete evidence of student performance, generally speaking in general and abstract appraisals that provide little meaningful information to the parent. Third, teacher-parent interviews tend to stray into discussions of other children and parents rather than being focused on the child of the parent participating in the interview.

“Mike is doing so well in school,” she concluded.

“I’ve been monitoring his work, and I have just gone over samples of his work, and it doesn’t appear he is doing all that well in school this year.”

“Well, I’m glad you brought that up, because I have been wanting to schedule an interview with Mike’s parents. Do you have time to talk now?”

“I’ve got all the time in the world,” I answered, not being overly concerned about missing the punch and cookies being served in the school cafeteria.

“Well, Mike is doing very well in school when you consider his limitations. Please understand, Mike is not mentally retarded, he is just a slow learner. A slow learner is a child that is not mentally retarded, but on the other hand does not have all of the learning capabilities of an average student. Mike will never do well academically, but he can profit from schooling if we don’t expect too much from him. That’s the reason I have been wanting to speak with his parents. Expecting a high level of performance from him can only lead to frustration. My recommendation is to be satisfied with how he is doing and not push him. The most important thing for you to remember is not to push him. He is very slow in responding, but he generally tries.”

I strongly disagreed that my son, Mike, was a slow learner and attempted to argue with her diagnosis. I knew that Mike was slow in responding in both oral and written communications, but I knew the reason for it. Mike has always been rather unique in that he likes to think before speaking. Considering how many people I have met who are prone to speak before thinking, I had never considered Mike’s characteristic as a liability but rather as a unique asset.

“Look, I know that you are obviously disappointed, but you don’t seem to understand. Frankly it is difficult to explain in language that you can understand. It requires a background in education to understand concepts about capability, maturation and motivation, but take my word for it, Mike learns slowly, and above all don’t push Mike into trying to perform above his current level.”

I didn’t have the heart to inform the teacher that I was the chairman of the education department at St. Mary’s University and was more than familiar with concepts of capability, maturation and motivation. I didn’t pursue the matter, didn’t request a change to another classroom, and I certainly did not ease up in pushing Michael toward improved performance in school.

Twenty-seven years later, I look back on the day I was informed that he was a slow learner and his subsequent education. He did well in the rest of his elementary school grades, did well in middle school, made National Honor Society in high school. Like Jaime Escalante’s kids in *Stand and Deliver*, he placed out in calculus and then went through The University of Texas at Austin in three years, graduating with honors. Mike was recruited by several medical schools and finally chose Southwestern in Dallas. He is now a very successful surgeon, doing extremely well personally and in his chosen profession.

I point out Mike’s achievements with the typical pride of a parent, but I also point them out because I am still haunted by the “what ifs.”

What if I had accepted the teacher’s erroneous diagnosis? What if my son had performed at the teacher’s level of expectancy? What if I had accepted a lower standard of performance for my son?

What if cultural, language and socioeconomic characteristics are similarly interpreted by the school as lack of capability?

After more than 40 years of professional experience working mostly with atypical school populations, I am firmly convinced that the basic reason for the general under performance of minority, disadvantaged, limited-English-proficient, migrant and immigrant students can be attributed to the tendency of the school to confuse unique and different characteristics of students with lack of mental capability. Low levels of expectancy for these students are quickly internalized by the student and family and result in the poor performance that presents the most formidable barrier for drastic improvements in the United States' system of education.