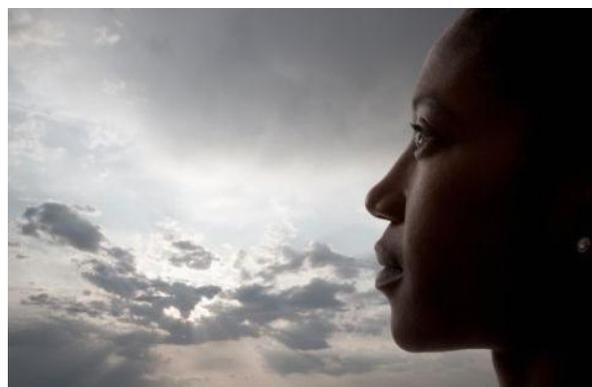


The Role of Belief in Education

By Horacio Sanchez

The commonly used adage “*that all students can learn and excel*” provides an interesting paradox when viewed in light of brain science. Brain science calls into question if many educators really believe what they are saying. True belief in the human brain is always evidenced by action.

It has been established that the amygdala is the initial filter of the human brain and the holder of beliefs and values. The fact that it is the initial filter means that the screening of all stimuli is first emotional then cognitive. Strongly held values and beliefs alter daily perceptions by helping us all focus on any stimuli encountered that support existing positions. Many studies have shown that people hear speech differently dependent on their perceptions concerning the person speaking. Howard Nusbaum, University of Chicago, explains that listeners’ expectations are just as powerful as acoustic cues. All beliefs held by the human brain work in this same manner, shaping perceptions and altering the chemical experience (Branan 2007:11). Humans are built to continuously strengthen existing positions. For example, a function of the human eye associated to the amygdala scans every situation and draws attention to anything that relates to existing values.



The amount of passion associated with a held belief or value can also alter perceptions and prevent rationally resolving contradictions. This means that humans have a tendency to misperceive stimuli to better support existing beliefs. If someone believes that all children can learn, they will see evidence of that position daily. However, if someone truly does not believe that all children can learn, they too will see evidence of that daily.

Since the amygdala is an action system all strongly held beliefs are usually evidenced by some level of action. The stronger the belief the more dramatic the action and the more committed the individual is to maintaining the behavior. Therefore, a true belief that all students can learn and achieve should be easily evident to even the causal observer. All teachers consistently bear witness to their views on education. Teachers who believe all students can learn will consistently dedicate themselves to maintaining effective practices and to the never ending search for new strategies to meet the challenges of an ever changing student population. The teacher who does not believe that all students can learn is content in the fact that a significant number of students are learning, therefore the failures of a few are the fault of the students who are falling short.

The only conclusion that can be drawn when there is no evidence of the search and commitment to practices that allow all students to maximize achievement is that there is



no true belief that all pupils can learn. Belief seems to be the distinguishing feature in teachers that eventually validates the conviction that all students can learn and achieve. Belief is not just the motivator of behavior but it is also the source of unspoken communication between teacher and pupil. It is this unspoken language that speaks loudly to every student that has not experienced success to try. Remember, it is the amygdala that governs nonverbal cues exhibited by all strong emotions. Teachers who truly believe that all students can learn will loudly proclaim to every student on a daily basis “I believe you can learn.” The student will see it in the teacher’s face, gestures, postures, hand movements, and tone of voice. The student will be influenced by the

dedication to practices that the teacher knows to be effective. To the student who does not believe in his or herself, it is the belief of the teacher that initially motivates the courage to attempt work and face failure yet again.