

Shannon Simonelli:

Aloha and welcome to Effective Practice Briefings, a series of audio conversations focusing on evidenced based practice in education.

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For more information on this project, you can find us at www.sig2.hawaii.edu.

Our topic today is Thematic Instruction. We have with us Susan Kovalik, a national expert on the topic of Thematic Instruction. Susan has been a classroom teacher for many years and has created an educational model on Integrated Thematic Instruction which she has developed from her years as a classroom teacher as well as her long time involvement and interest with brain research. We also have with us Dr. Julie Smith, who is with the State Improvement Grant.

I'm myself, Dr. Shannon Simonelli, serving as your host and moderator with the Center on Disabilities Studies in the State Improvement Grant.

So I'd like to start by saying, "Hello and welcome" to both Julie and Susan.

Susan Kovalik:

Hello to you too.

Julie Smith:

Good Morning.

OK, Susan, it's nice to have this conversation with you and I am going to get us started by asking you, "What makes your Integrated Thematic Instruction model effective practice for teachers."

That's pretty wide open.

Susan:

It's very wide open but it's the most appropriate question to begin with because I happened upon it accidentally. You know some of the greatest things happen accidentally. It happened to be that I was involved with teaching the gifted and talented in the late 60's, early 70's. It was in those days, we felt that gifted children should be taught in a qualitatively different manner. In other words, we already knew way back then that textbooks and worksheets were not the kinds of things we wanted to give children who were gifted, as we perceived them to be. It was very interesting that in those days we did something, we did pull-out programs. I know there are pull-out programs today for a variety of youngsters. But a pull-out program said I will meet you once a week for three hours and we will have a learning experience.

As I began doing that, and I was working with five schools at a time doing that, it occurred to me that there had to be a better way to orchestrate how I was delivering the opportunities for learning to the children. Because, they couldn't remember from week to week what we were doing. It was at that point that the whole idea of wrapping the information around a theme, that coming up with something that they could hang on to week by week, would enhance their ability to remember and probably more importantly as an educator myself, would enhance my opportunity to orchestrate the learning, to gather the materials, to set up the speakers, to define the learning experiences that we were going to have. So, very accidentally by the way in which I was teaching the gifted children, I began to look at integrating the curriculum around a theme.

The two terms, "integrating and thematic" are two different terms.

Some teachers can say, "Oh I do themes. I do bears, I do holidays." That's not big enough. That's cute but it's not big enough. Integrated Thematic, and I would suppose if I had my druthers and could rename this model twenty-two years later, I would call it, Integrated Conceptual Curriculum. The idea of a theme is to grab something that has the opportunity to peak curiosity, to give them an entrée into the world in which they live, and then to integrate all the aspects of what you need to know as an informed human being.

Today we would say you integrate all of the benchmarks, all of the standards, into content that has meaning and purpose for the youngster. Therein lies the difference for most curriculum that is either mandated or you're given a binder on. It's how to make content meaningful for the youngster. The "discovery" was really a discovery by virtue of necessity to orchestrate the ideas. Today, we say you integrate an entire years worth of curriculum around themes that can be broken up to specific components. They can either be months, or they could be semesters, or they could

be quarters. But you look at your whole year as a delivery system of powerful conceptual curriculum.

Julie:

Great, great. What is it that makes this effective? I know that you are... This model is tied to the brain research and maybe this is a good time for you to make that connection and clarify that.

Susan:

You know what is extraordinary about the human brain is that if you took it out of each person, you took out the brains of the Hawaiians and the Italians and the Portuguese and the African Americans, you could not tell by looking at the brain what their nationality was. You could not tell what their ethnicity is. A brain is structured to learn. The very first questions children ask are, "Why? How come? What's this? Show me." The brain is a learning machine from the moment children are born. The brain is a learning machine.

When we first establish the idea that learning is an inseparable partnership between the brain and the body - that's the first learning principle I want to talk about - it's a partnership. It's not surprising that nature was so incredibly brilliant that children come into the "world" unable to read. They come into the world with highly developed senses, and through these senses they explore the world around them. It's wonderful that they're not able walk right away. Because what they do is they get their bodies in touch with the environment, which they find themselves. It's through this that their brain and their body begin to work in coherence. Their brain and body begin to touch things, understand things. They begin to propel themselves into the world in which they live.

It's not surprising that when you look at what children really want to play with when they're little, it always the pots and the pans in the kitchen. It's always the drawer with the Tupperware. It's always the things that children see adults do. Because the bottom line for the human brain is that it looks around its environment and says, "oh my gosh, that's my mother, that's my father, I love these people. I want to do what they're doing." They watch what you do, and therein they begin this process of developing who they are. It's an amazing phenomenon. Now attached to this phenomena, and this is a huge, giant consideration, emotion is the gatekeeper to learning and performance. Emotion is the gatekeeper to learning and performance. Every single second of our lives from birth is emotionally driven. The emotion that we first are looking at is, "Is it safe where I am? Is it safe where I am?" There's a little gate I show that's in the brain that says, OK, this is the gate. This is going to determine whether or not it's safe here. There have been some wonderful, wonderful research studies done with little tiny children, children who are maybe four or five, six months old. The mothers are playing with them and talking to them, and they're

attuned to their mother's faces, and they're smiling and their happy, and then the mother disappears, walks away. You watch the child's face change and pretty soon you see the child begin to squirm in their bodies. If you let it go any longer, you watch them begin to cry. From the very earliest, children are attuned to the adults in their environment that says, is this a safe place for me to be?

This emotion then carries forth for everything you do. If it's not safe, then a child hovers at the gate, at the gate inside their brain that says, OK, I've got to protect myself. What are my strategies if it is not safe? Can I get away? Can I hit out at something? Can I protect myself? They take all that energy, all that intellectual capacity that they have, and instead of developing it, they have to use it to protect themselves even when they're little. The amazing thing about the brain is that you're not born intelligent. You're simply born with a capacity to be intelligent. Every day, in every experience you have, from the day you're born until the day you die, every experience you have, every day can either enhance your intellectual capacity, stifle your intellectual capacity, or diminish your intellectual capacity. The proof of the matter is, is that years in educational settings more often stifle and diminish intellectual capacity. We don't honor that the brain is curious. It wants to know. It's geared up to learn. It wants to do those things. This whole concept of emotion is huge. The number one strategy a teacher has to orchestrate is how have I created the emotional tone in my room and in my school that these children are safe.

Julie:

Exactly.

Susan:

Now here's something interesting.

Julie:

Oh, sorry.

Susan:

That's OK.

Here's something fascinating. When we go in and do assessments inside the schools, how do you create this perfect environment? Now I'm not saying perfect. Nothing is perfect, but how do you create this environment that says you're safe here?

You know, it has everything to do with color. It has everything to do with light. It has everything to do with clutter. Clutter is visual noise. How much of that do you have in the room? It has to do with what's going to go on in this classroom when I get here?

A room has to speak to you as a learner before the teacher ever opens their mouth. It speaks to them whether or not you plan it. So, if you're a highly orchestrated teacher and you know where you're going, the children get on and go, "This is thrilling. This is exciting. This teacher is ready for me." The emotional brain says, "OK, this is safe, this is good." The brain goes up into the cerebral cortex, and it is within the cerebral cortex where the learning that we do in school is most often recorded.

Julie:

Right, right. I would also add to the actual physical climate, the relationships within that too, how safe kids feel within that. We've known for a while there's research, I'm not sure whose it is, I can't cite it right off hand, but that it's physiologically impossible to learn when you are in fear. We are naturally curious beings. If we can be in a situation that is safe, that is nurturing in that way, that the learning will be better.

Susan:

Let me suggest how we go about orchestrating that. When I left gifted education and went to general education, the very first question that teachers in the general education said is, "What's your discipline plan?" Well, you know I didn't have one. Was that because gifted kids were so perfect and wonderful that you didn't need one? No. What it truly was is that what drove the gifted programs was content. It was always content that was meaningful to the kids. Three of my teammates sat down and said, "What are we going to do if we are going to work with general ed kids and general ed teachers, we've got to come up with a discipline plan." Well, you know it took us eighteen months to decide that's not what we wanted. What we wanted was, how do we lay the groundwork for developing skills and attributes that would guarantee that you would be an excellent spouse. Now that was a new way to look at. In other words, we weren't saying don't run, don't chew gum, don't hit, we were saying, "What conditions do you need to have in place, and do you need to be able to recognize that this, a person, a person you may choose to be with, will value you." Why did we go to that level? Because let's do something really serious and really important especially with an over 50% divorce rate. So we started with things called the five life-long guidelines.

The first one is: Trustworthiness. What does it mean to be trustworthy?

The second is: Truthfulness. You see, you're never going to tell the truth unless you've already been in a situation where you are trusted.

The third was: Active Listening. What does it mean to actively listen to someone?

I always tell the story that I travel so much. When I'm in the airport, I know, I absolutely know who has been married three years or longer. Because the very first thing that moves in a marriage is the willingness to listen to one another.

The third one, excuse me, the fourth one was no put-downs. For years we thought about, should we say it in a positive way? Well, put-downs are endemic in our society. They're endemic in our language, in our body language. They are endemic in how we dress and how we act. So we call them no-put-downs.

Finally we said: personal best. And then we said, how are we going to define personal best. Oh my gosh, well personal best, hmm. Everybody is going to say they are doing personal best.

We came up with eighteen life skills. They range from integrity to resourcefulness, to curiosity to sense of humor, to initiative to flexibility. What we said was that today's children do not have the opportunity, in many cases, to be in structured situations, family structured situations where they see good behavior in action. I remember growing up in San Francisco, you know, when you went to grandma's every Sunday night for dinner. You learned what was the expected behavior for a variety of situations. What we discovered is, it's that kids didn't come to school deciding they were going to be terrible just because that's what they decided. What we really believe is that kids came to school because they didn't know what to do. They didn't know what initiative looked like. They didn't know what flexibility looked like. In order to make this real for them, the place that we begin the training for this is in the faculty room. Because you can't teach what you can't do. So before you take any kind of character ed. program to your students, you have to take it to the faculty room. When we talk to faculties, this is where we have people roll their eyes, like I know what you're talking about. Oh, our faculty room, the put-downs are terrible. You've got to say, teachers, you're an ongoing model every second of every day by what you say and how you say it. The challenge is, "What are you going to do to be trustworthy? What are you going to do to be truthful?" The good news is that we've written a book on how to do that and give some specific, actually 350 specific examples. You have to lay this groundwork before you get to any kind of teaching strategies, or whatever, because a teacher is never going to take their children out of the building on a field study if they don't trust them.

You have to have at the very foundation of your classroom these expected behaviors.

Shannon:

Perfect.

Julie:

As you are tying this whole integrated thematic instruction into the brain research stuff, you started talking about some of the principles. You talked about intelligence, and you talked about the partnership between the brain and the body. Could you maybe now take time to talk about the multiple intelligences or ways of solving problems and then the two steps process that you have in your book?

Susan:

OK, but I'd like to go back to one before that, intelligences is a function of experience. It's critically important before multiple intelligence.

Julie:

All right, OK.

Susan:

A major principle: intelligence is a function of experience. Now, looking at that on its own, you go whoa, what does that mean? Well, it really means we are our experiences. I started by talking about the little child who was crawling, but as the crawling expands the horizon, what happens is, and this is critically important to understand: The human as we know today has anywhere between 19 and 35 senses, not five that the health books say, but 19 to 35. What we are is, we look at the world and these senses bring in all this information. I think especially in Hawai'i, the geo-gravimetric sense is highly developed because it's the sense that can tell the difference between wet sand and dry sand. It can tell the difference between hot water and cold water. It can tell the difference between ice and no ice. Our sensory experiences are huge.

So here's the challenge. The challenge is not in school that these senses will be ignited. It is outside of school where the senses are ignited. As a classroom teacher, the orchestration of curriculum must always begin with a field experience.

If you were to give me all of the money that was given to schools in the United States of America over the past fifteen years for Title 1 students, I could show you that probably 80-90% of that money was wasted. If I were in charge of the world,

every single school would have had its own van that holds 30 kids. Every single Monday, those kids would be in the van, and they'd be off to an experience. Their goal is that each child would come back with two questions about that experience. From those lists of questions you now get from the kids, you begin to develop a content around a location and the location is a theme. You say, "Oh my gosh, look what these kids want to know." Now what you've done here is number one, you've got them physically and mentally engaged in learning and understanding; physically and mentally engaged. Now, you want to understand what these children have learned. This is where the multiple intelligences come in because what multiple intelligences are: different ways to demonstrate understanding. That's really important. It's about solving problems and making progress. But solving problems and making progress are about my different way to understand and to demonstrate to you and to myself that I understand it.

And so we take all the children to the same location and let's say we go to an observatory. Now we have some youngster who wants to come back after our half a day trip to the observatory and they go, "Oh my gosh, you know, I just have to write a poem about that. It was so beautiful. It touched me, the stars, the moon." That child wants to write this beautiful poem. The other child says, "You know what? I want to know more about the solar system. I'm going to do a solar system model that shows all the different ways that we saw the solar system interacting." Somebody else is going to say, "You know what really excited me? It was how they get the coordinates in the sky. I'm going to look at those coordinates and see if I could see something cross the sky, across the universe with those coordinates."

What the youngsters are doing now is, they're saying we've had this common experience and from that we're drawing our own personal way in which to demonstrate our understanding of that experience. How rich that is as opposed to, "Let's go have that experience and here's your worksheet with 15 questions and you know, I know what the answers are and I'm going to hope you do too."

Multiple intelligences are absolutely intuitive, and just for those everyday teachers of... there's always been teachers who have been intuitive, who make sure they did plays in the classroom and they did art in their classroom and they did dancing in their classroom. Those teachers intuitively knew that different children did it in a different way. As parents, every parent knows their child doesn't do it the same way or demonstrate the understandings the same way. So what Howard Gardner gave us was the validation that not only do different ways exist, but they are really in the brain. They are really in the brain. So the more opportunities we give youngsters to demonstrate their understanding, the greater is that learning experience. Now what happens going back to that functional experience, and this is just a generalized statistic, I would say, 95% of gifted kids come from advantaged families. What do advantaged families make sure their children have? Experiences. They take them here. They take them there. They've been here. They've skied there. They've gone

to this. They've gone to that. They've been to the theater. Experiences. What the Title 1 family has done, they have experiences but mostly they're experiences are how to survive, how to pull the resources together to keep your families together. It is not that the Title 1 children do not have the experiences. They don't have the same kind of experiences. So it is incumbent,

Julie:

Maslow's hierarchy and they're in different places.

Susan:

Absolutely, absolutely.

So it's incumbent upon any school or any teacher in the entire world, if you have children who you perceive are socio-economically disadvantaged, and/ or in any other way disadvantaged, then what you give those kids is the gifted program. You give them the opportunity to experience and to use the multiple intelligences.

Shannon:

I'm keeping an eye on our time. I want to make one quick comment on just what you've been speaking about and then I'm going to suggest that we take a break to allow some integration time.

So much of which you are talking about around field trips also links with placed-based education which is very much in alignment with indigenous learning and is happening quite a bit here in Hawai'i and in other places across the country and internationally. I just wanted sort of draw that link. As I'm understanding what you're talking about, it really is very much in concert with what we are doing here in Hawai'i around place.

Susan:

Excellent.

Shannon:

So, OK...

Susan:

And see, let me add something else to this then before we take the break. There are six ways, and this is really critical information. There are six ways that your

body/brain brings educational opportunities in experiences into the system, into the body/brain system.

Now the first is the field trip. The first and the best is always the field trip, but now here you are in Hawai'i, and you want to study the Grand Canyon. You're not going to be able to put 150 kids on a plane and take them to the Grand Canyon. Here's the second best way that the brain gets those kinds of experiences. It's called the immersion. Another name for it, if you were to get a picture in your mind, is Disneyland. If you don't want to go to the Amazon, you do the Amazon boat trip. If you don't want to do the Pirates of the Caribbean, you do the Pirates of the Caribbean boat trip. The reality is, how does a teacher transform the classroom into the environment that they want the kids to get an understanding of? How do they create the desert? How do they use cardboard and cut out all the shapes of the Grand Canyon? How do they use the music of the Grand Canyon Suite? How do they get the flora and the fauna of those canyons into their classroom? An immersion experience is extraordinary, right next to the real thing.

It's again, if you have your classroom orchestrated and your curriculum orchestrated, and again especially in Hawaii, that your experiences may not be as varied as some people on the mainland, but that doesn't preclude you from giving the youngsters the experience.

Down that list, the next most valuable way to understand something is do a hands-on experience. The difference between holding a hamster and looking at a picture of a hamster, it's self-evident. It's between building something, building a water dam and watching water flow or reading about it in the textbook. Hands on of the real thing.

Now the next one that teachers use routinely are hands-on of something representational. Let me just give my favorite example here, and that is teachers have thought for years that if you just got math manipulatives and gave them to the children, they'd certainly be able to understand their math better. But they've given them manipulatives that aren't real. The more real the manipulative, the greater is the understanding.

The next one is second hand information. Videos alone will not transform your intelligence. Videos alone will transform your intelligence if I want to know how to sail and I go out sailing in a boat and I really, I'm really getting the hang of it. Now I can look at a video and based on my experience, I can watch the video to get more knowledge. But showing somebody something on a video doesn't change the physiology of the brain.

The most difficult way to understand information is anything symbolic. That's why math is the most difficult class to teach and for kids to get understanding on. The same with phonics, and the same with parts of speech. Those things that are symbolic in nature and represent something else are difficult for the brain to have a picture of. So when you look at your curriculum, you're saying OK on this hierarchy of six ways to understand where am I spending most my time with my kids. It's amazing. It's wonderful and it's fantastic.

Julie:

And the bulk of what we see in school, and this is a gross generalization because we see wonderful things in schools too, but we see primarily symbolic and second hand without the experiences.

Susan:

And you know what's interesting about that? There's not a state in the Union, not a state in the Union that's not panicked over the learning of their kids. There's not a state in the Union, and now that we've added to it 'let's do accountability and let's do testing and let's get the hard data.' Hard data is we're not giving kids anything worth learning, anything to wrap their heads around.

Julie:

That leads me to my next question after the break and that is addressing that particular topic.

Shannon:

OK, wonderful. Well let's take a break and we'll come back and begin there.

Shannon:

All right, I'd like to welcome everybody back we're in the second part of our conversation with Susan Kovalik and go ahead Julie, take it away.

Julie:

OK Susan, we've been talking about some wonderful things that are available for teachers to use in their classrooms and you are painfully aware that right now teachers are feeling a lot of pressure to raise test scores and to meet state standards. What you are doing might be perceived as flying in the face of "No Child Left Behind," and I'd like for you to kind of address how this can still be used and maintain those accountability standards.

Susan:

Great, that's a great question. It's one that peaks my energy. The reality is, and I say to the administrators now so the children have all taken their tests, so give it to them next week see how much they remember. See, what we've done is we believed that short term memory, if we really cram it and get it into their short term memory, they'll pass the test and we'll be free. But you know what's interesting? Is how many times you go into the schools in September after school has started and you walk through classrooms and teachers say, "you know, these kids were supposed learn this last year. These kids were supposed to learn last year." It's because the way we teach has nothing to do with the way the brain works. Learning is a two-step process, a two-step process. It's involving patterns and programs, patterns and programs. The brain is attuned to identifying patterns. You don't have to teach it how. It has an incredible capacity, and I'm thinking about when first a child decides that all men are daddy and we give them clues that no, that's not true. Daddy's only the one with the mustache. Then all men with mustaches are daddy and then we give them more clues. They understand. They can recognize patterns and make connections in their head. It's an amazing phenomenon. The reality between school is that the patterns that children see in their home that become meaningful to them, because they've either seen your parents do that or their siblings do it, their older siblings, is that for the brain to care about a pattern it has to have meaning. For the brain to care, it has to have meaning. That's why youngsters will say to you, "why do we have to do this? Why do we have to learn this?" And your response, "because it's on the test," is worthless. It's a worthless response. If you want them to understand something, and let me give an example of skills because you know we all got to get the skills. It takes one day to teach a heterogeneous group of fourth graders long division. Single digit divisor, double digit divisor, whole number remainder, fractional remainder and story problems, one day. Because what you do is you orchestrate the day. What we've done is, and we have the video tape and program on it, is called I can divide and conqueror. You get the kids excited about they're going to have one day and they're going to have 20 different ways to get to understand division. We're going to have costumes and we're going to do the multiple intelligence of division. We're going to do exercise with division. We're going to play games with division. We're going to find division experts. We're going to sit down and work out problems. What happens is now you've created the emotional hook to learn the process, the emotional hook. The brain is going "oh man, this is going to be really cool!" Inherent in that, begin to build a mental program for what it is you want them to do. A mental program is the fact that I can do this routinely whatever they're giving me, I can do it routinely.

Let me give you a simple explanation in our own lives. There's a wonderful movie out called Baby Boom and it's a story of this big town, high flying, MBA who inherits a baby. This baby is about twelve months old. She inherits this baby and now she's got her MBA, she's this big wig and now she's trying to diaper this baby. Well she doesn't have a mental program for diapering the baby. The first four examples, she can't get the diaper on the baby. It's like everybody knows who's listening to this right now, knows what a flat tire is. Now can anybody change a tire successfully? To change a tire successfully you have to have a mental program for how to do that.

How do we cook? You have to have a mental program, and a mental program comes from practice of something you deem is meaningful. Now when we give kids unbelievable practice sheets or we time them, how fast they can do something, this has no meaning to the brain. It has no meaning to the brain. So it just lodges in short-term memory. As a matter of fact, this is a part where long-term memory challenges with youngsters who say you know, I'm stupid. I got low grades on those timed tests. The teachers who give timed tests, they're going to go to the timed test afterlife. Because the reality is, first of all, for the brain to take something in it has to be something meaningful. For everyone sitting and listening to this right now, we had to take geometry to get into college and you know you should have gotten a good grade to get in. You couldn't get D's because it wouldn't have counted. So how many of us took geometry? How many of us can apply any of those concepts at all to the real world? Why didn't they teach geometry and have us build a geodesic dome? Why didn't they teach geometry by teaching us to shoot pool? Why didn't they make it meaningful so that we could have a mental program about lines and angles? So the reality is, that for our personal lives, every single teacher's personal lives, they have capacity in those areas that they have a mental program for. For those things that they don't have mental program, well they go, "I'm not good at that or I don't do that, or, I've never been good at that."

The reality is the brain says, this is important. Another great example for kids is driving. From the time kids are little they notice how you drive. They notice how you put your seat belt on. You put in the key. You turn the key. You back up. You look behind you. When it's time for a youngster to get their license to drive, they're excited about it. It's meaningful to them. They had lot of practice watching someone else do it. So their ability to understand driving is already enhanced. When we talk about patterns and programs, if you want youngsters to understand something, you take that field trip. Let's go back to the observatory. It's in the observatory that the teacher now says "now what is it that we want kids to really understand in this skill area? How can I attach that understanding to our experience at the observatory?" How can we then bring that home and practice it so that I can say to them at any given moment, "you know how to do it. You know how to do ratios. Remember when we were in the observatory? Share with us. What did we do with ratios in the observatory?" Every kid now has a mental picture of what we did and now you've given them the mental program for how to do something. The idea I believe, I believe in literacy. I think, would there be anybody in the world that says, "oh no, I don't believe in literacy." I believe in literacy. The bottom line is, I believe in learning. I believe in learning. I believe that this entire world was created, that the Hawaiian culture was created long before literacy had anything to do with what they did. The point is, is that as human beings, we've always had the capacity to develop amazing cultures and systems without ever reading a book. Now, I'm not advocating stop reading books, but I'm saying what is it you want them to understand? Then inherent in that, you teach those skills that are important and you attach it to something that has meaning to them. Otherwise, you can give that test a week later, two weeks later and the results will be different. A standardized test is like taking your blood pressure, it's only recording one moment in time.

Julie:

Exactly. I have to just ask this question. Have you read Jonathan Kozol, Shame of the Nation?

Susan:

Of course.

Julie:

He speaks to this so eloquently about how many kids just end up dropping out or are pushed out of school.

Susan:

Pushed out.

Julie:

The learning is so absolutely meaningless. It does have very reciprocal effect on our society and on education as part of that.

Susan:

So let me tell you a story.

Julie:

OK, please.

Susan:

So my story is when my first-born went to first grade, I got a call from the teacher who said Mrs. Kovalik, Scott is so bright. We want to test him for the gifted program and I said, "Hooo, smart mother, smart father, of course smart child." So they tested Scott in the first grade and he got into the gifted program. Second child comes up; this is Nancy, she starts school two years later. I don't get a call in the first grade but in the second grade I get a call and they say, Mrs. Kovalik, Nancy is so creative we want to test her for the gifted program. I said, "I've been waiting for the call." Third child starts school.; I don't get a call in the first grade. I don't get a call in the second grade, so in the third grade I called. I said, "Excuse me, I was PTA President you owe me, test this child." Tested the child, I was a brunette in those days and so I believed that the test had validity. They said he's got a nice strong average IQ but certainly not the number for gifted. Hmm. I thought OK, same parent, same environment, this is interesting. But you know the school must be right. School must be right. As fate would have it, I got involved with teaching gifted education. Marshall is now fifteen, that's the youngest one, and we're off and I'm doing this thing called

the model teaching where I took fifty multi-age gifted kids. I would teach 50 of them for three hours a day while 50 teachers watched me teach. The bottom line is, this should be a video program because teachers do much better by seeing what it is you'd like them to do. So here's Marshall with me on the second night. We're out with the gifted coordinator and she's going on and on about what gifted kids need and how this and that, and he pulls his cloth napkin into a triangle and puts around his neck and goes "aaaaah." He looks at this woman and he says, "Do you really believe that the only kids who want a good teacher and something exciting to learn are kids who scored on a one hour test?" She looked at him and said, "You're a little bit angry aren't you." He said, "Yes, my brother and sister get all the great teachers and I got the leftovers. Nobody ever asked me." Very insightful. That literally was the last time I taught gifted, and that's when I took the program to general education. Here's the rest of the story.

Scott goes on to High School. He's selected twice from the State of California amongst the 100 most outstanding young leaders in America. He serves on the State Board of Education, which means he spends a week a month in Sacramento making decisions for 4.5 million students. This is the super achiever kid. His brother is now in January of his senior year. He comes home and he says, "Mother, I know what you think. I know what you believe. I know what you talk about. Don't get mad. I'm quitting school." Hmm. You probably want to talk to me about this though, don't you? But he says, "Before we talk you, go sit in my classes for a day. Then we'll talk." I went and sat in his classes for a day. He was an average kid in average classes. I came home. He wasn't home. I called his brother who was a junior at Cal Berkley. I said, "Scott, how come high school didn't make you crazy? He said, "Mom, it's a joke. You tell them what they want to hear. The only thing important is GPA." I said, "Where did they hear that?" It's almost like ENRON saying the only thing important is the bottom line. It's about we've turned numbers into something of value. They have no value! Here's Marshall who's saying the Emperor wears no clothes. My oldest son says, "Tell them what they want to hear. The most important thing is you're not going to let a teacher stand in the way of your life." Now the more we do testing, the more we do numbers, the more we say you are your number, the more we miss integrity, the more we miss initiative, curiosity, risk taking. What we're doing is we are putting the stranglehold on kids. We're saying

Julie:

We're saying something, like it's a learning experience.

Susan:

My oldest son said, "Play the game." My youngest son, I let him take the GED in January of his senior year. He said, "Mom, I can vote. I can enter into contractual agreements. I could go into the military ,and I can write my own notes. I'm not sitting here anymore." You see the story is, the challenge for me after thirty-eight years in education is that the message about the human brain and what it has to offer still is

not getting into every single thing we do. Districts are still buying textbooks and still buying worksheets and still having copy machines in the building. When we're ready to teach kids, we'll eliminate the copy machines. We'll go for experiences. Until we have the courage to do that, you'll get a few teachers who'll get better at what they do, but the other teachers will be intimidated by what's asked of them. They'll do the best they can but you know they're not going to go outside the box. Therein lies our challenge.

Shannon:

I'm going to let that be the breaking point for our second section. We're going to let our listeners digest and integrate and we'll be back in a moment with our last section.

I'd like to welcome our listeners back to the third section of conversation with Susan Kovalik.

Julie:

Susan, I'd like for us to make a little shift in our discussion and talk a little bit about how students with identified disabilities, who are part of natural landscape of classroom diversity and human diversity, how they might particularly benefit from this ITI approach.

Susan:

I want you to clarify disabilities, are you talking about severe physical, severe mental? Are you talking about processing, are you talking about tracking.

Julie:

It's as wide as any other cluster of kids. Even within gifted education, there's not a pigeon hole that says this is the gifted child. But children who struggle more with learning, and we'll leave it with that.

Susan:

We've had such extraordinary success with "youngsters" who have been identified as different learners. The reality is that the more focused you get on testing and textbooks and worksheets, the more you're going to cut out a significant portion of your population. Actually it's estimated that 30% of us are born without the wiring for reading. There are some groups out here now who are helping youngsters to build the wiring. But those youngsters, as soon as we find them, we put them in remediation forever and you wonder when are they ever going to get out of that. They need the wiring for reading and that's a whole different program than just a remedial pull-out program. The brain wants to learn, and the less we use worksheets

and textbooks, the greater is the capacity of all children to engage with something you have on the table. Let's say you have a fish tank at the table. Let's say you have some snails at the table. Let's say you have something real at the table the kids can talk about and experience. It is through the real touching of things that people are awakened to asking questions. True learning is not about what questions you can answer but what questions you can ask. See, a learned person, when I assess a group of teachers from reading my book, I don't ask them questions about my book, I say what questions do you have? The better the question, the greater is capacity for understanding. Unless you give kids a way to ask questions, and I want to tell you about a school district that we just went to in Bismarck, North Dakota. Our goal as an organization is whole-schools, whole districts, whole states. I'm not interested in one more teacher being good in a building all by themselves. I think that's inhumane. I think that's absolutely unacceptable. I think kids are worth consistency and continuity. Without consistency and continuity, they have to play a game every single time they have a different teacher. What does this teacher want? What does this teacher do? What are the procedures in this classroom? Let me share with you how we lay the ground work for consistency and continuity, which then allows children with different ways of processing an opportunity to be successful.

First of all, we highly believe in procedures. We have entry procedures outside the door before they ever come in to the classroom. In other words, we get them mentally ready for what the day is about. They're excited. They look at the procedures. They come in when they're little kids. We have pictures to the procedures. They come in, they get started. We have soft lights. We have soft music. We let their heart rates drop from coming out of the playground and coming in off of the bus. So their heart rates now are going to be dropping down and they're going to be relaxing. They're going to be moving into an area where they go, "whew, this teacher cares about me. This teacher is ready for me. This teacher is letting me catch my breath." That's a thousand times different. "All class, the bell rang. Sit down. Get your books out. What did I tell you? Go back to your seat." All of that, all of that noise, all of that attacking them when they first come in the door tends to exacerbate a child's sense of not being able to do the job. Do we put them into cooperative learning groups? You bet we put them in cooperative learning groups. Do you know why? Because learning in their group enhances what we understand by 40%. When we keep kids in rows, we're saying we are not going to have anybody cheat here. You see it's not about cheating. It's about understanding whatever it is the teacher wants us to understand. Sometimes kids can explain it better than the teacher.

Julie:

That's right.

Susan:

What you orchestrate is a chance for kids to process it and talk about it, and analyze it. Now we've got procedures when they come in. We've got the soft lights and soft music, and then we have a daily agenda. A daily agenda is not page 12 to 13 on such and such and answer questions. It's a circular agenda. It says these are all the things we're going to be involved with today. These are things you get to do individually. These are the things we're going to do as a group. These are the things I'm going to do as a teacher. If things come up, they're going to be on the agenda.

I'll tell you a cute story about an agenda. A school back in New York, the kindergarten teacher was injured in an early morning automobile accident. Not severely, but severe enough to not come in. She called the principal. It was too late to get a sub, so the principal said well I'll go take your class. It's just a half-day class. The principal went in and said Mrs. Hughes got in an automobile accident. She's going to be fine. Let's just get started. The kids were all squirrely. Mrs. Hughes is going to be fine. Finally one little boy said, "Where's the agenda? Don't you know what we're going to do today?" If you don't have something that guarantees them of what we're going to do today, it's like going to Europe and not speaking the language and saying OK, let's go see the city. Everything is a threat. Everything is a challenge.

The next thing for kids is, so we have the procedures and the agenda. The next thing we have is, we have one entire wall that has the year long theme. One entire wall. It is our promise to kids that we're organized. It is our promise to kids that we know where we are going. It's our promise to kids that we want them to select from that year long theme one area in which they become the class expert and really do in-depth researching and questioning about something on that theme that interests them. I believe that every child should come out of the classroom at the end of the year with a binder that says I'm an expert in this topic. It's a topic of my research, my development. Today kids come out of classrooms and what do they have at the end of the year? What do they have?

Julie:

A number.

Susan:

So the year long theme is on one whole wall. They're sitting there and they know that the teacher is organized. They might not be able to put the words to it but they know that it's not another day of guesswork. All right class, this is what we are going to do now in Social Studies. Take out your Social Studies book. All right now it's time for you to go music. It's not about shouting out at them every 40 minutes what the topic difference is going to be. It's about saying that what we're really going to understand this month, thematically. The big concept is interdependence. We're

going to learn the connection between all of the plants and animals in this particular ecosystem. The ecosystem might be the Hawaiian ecosystem. It might be the water ecosystem. It might be the desert ecosystem. Every child, no matter what their IQ is, no matter what their label is, says, "Oh my gosh, interdependence is what we are really going after." Now they have an emotional hook to handle all of the subjects and assignments that they have to this emotional hook.

Shannon:

Well Susan, I just want to interrupt you for a sec, this is Shannon. The thing that this really does for kids also it seems is because you've given them a big picture, it allows them to start to dream and think about and chew on and digest these kinds of concepts and gather information throughout the course of their days and their lives and their weekends and their time with family and friends. Its makes that classroom learning expand, to become very relevant to their lives.

Susan:

Absolutely. I can remember in the old days when you subscribed to National Geographic, you kept them forever. My mother used to say if you cut them, your hand will wither. I was about 38 before I ever cut up a National Geographic. The point is now that you have a theme, now you can go to grandma's house. Now you can go to auntie's house and look at the National Geographic and say we're studying this and this and this and this. You're absolutely right. It brings the family into the picture. It brings the community into the picture. It's an amazing phenomenon. Now what does it do to kids "who seem to have learning differences?" It says I know where we are going. The teacher has procedures an agenda, a year-long theme. Do you know what else this teacher has? This teacher also has up on the board, what we're really going to work on this month. This is our focus for this month. She's brought all kinds of artifacts and books and magazines about this month. I can learn from pictures. I can learn from touching things. I can learn listening to a tape. This is a hundred times different from saying, open the book and answer the questions. We have created learning difficulties by the way in which we present information. It is not uncommon. They have done away with all the pull-out programs for "children who learn differently." What they've done, they have a collaborative teaching model. This is so amazing. I went and watched the model. I can't tell who the classroom teacher is and who the collaborative teacher is. They we're talking about real content. They were doing this whole thing about owls and the ecosystem. I thought, "Oh my gosh, look what's happening here." It's not about a teacher sitting with four kids who have learning differences and trying to interpret what the teacher is saying. It's not about those four kids being pulled out. It's about those four kids being a part of a group that these kids are coming up with a product, with an idea, with question. When they're working, and some youngster needs additional help, they could either get it from their peers or this person is there to help them. It is amazing.

We create these differences by testing them early. We've only known for about 40 years, boys shouldn't be in school till they're seven. Seventy percent of those youngsters in "special programs" are boys. We bring them in too young. We give them reading too soon. We take away their gross motor movement. Then we say they've got ADD because they're moving around the classroom. We set up a way to fail. We've set up a way to fail. Now we have to do something to help these kids. We've got to help these kids. What we need is to take the money that we have invested in those specialists, and they're good people. Say you have ten specialists in the building. That's not uncommon. Let's say their average salary is \$35,000 or \$45,000 a year. You take that \$450,000 and you train the teachers how to be incredible teachers and you won't have kids leaving the classroom. You teach them what we know about the human brain. You teach them what it means to involved with things. These youngsters are dying to learn. They're dying to learn. What happens for every year that they're pulled out and they still don't get it? It is another year that they recognize that they're stupid. They're not smart. They're incapable. So we build till they have no other option but to leave school.

Julie:

And they do.

Susan:

And they do.

Julie:

And they feel no connection to the world because none of their learning experiences have been relevant to their lives.

Susan:

Correct.

We do it to them. It's not about them. They're curious. They're interested. They want to know things.

Julie:

I've always said we teach kids to hate school. They come in with that natural curiosity and they're excited. By about the second grade you start hearing kids say "I hate school." It's because of the way we set it up, as you said.

Susan:

So where are the courageous people in the world? Where are there people who are saying, you know we are not going to do it that way? Maybe Hawaii is going to be the bellwether and say, You know what? We know a great deal about our kids and our community and what we have to offer. Why don't we create a program that shows the rest of the world what's possible?" Maybe this can happen in Hawaii.

Julie:

And we are also trying. That is exactly what we are trying to do.

Susan:

Well, I'm with you.

Julie:

OK, well we hope that you'll continue to be with us and Susan I would like to also plug your book and ask you if I could have a copy of it as well. The title of your book is "Exceeding Expectations, A Users Guide to Implementing Brain Research in the Classroom." It is co-authored by Susan Kovalik and Karen Olsen. It's a third edition.

Susan:

Thank-you.

Julie:

The book is full of so much stuff. And once we are done with this recording. I want to talk to you about getting a copy of it for myself.

Susan:

Here's what I want to say to you. I would love you to find a school that's ready. I've three or four times over the past ten years to get someone interested in Hawaii to do an ITI school. You find a school where there's a principal who's courageous and teachers who care. Let's transform a school. This book is a three to five year program. You know what, and I mean this from the bottom of my heart. It'll never happen by bits and pieces. It has to be a comprehensive model so that there's consistency and continuity throughout the building and everybody's tied in to those things that are brain compatible. You can transform a school. That's what other teachers need to see. They need to go see what it looks like. Look out for that for me because I would love to come over there and transform a school.

Shannon:

OK, and maybe through this someone will give us a call and say Oh, we're ready, come on Julie, get her out here.

Susan:

There you go.

Julie:

We'd love to have you come and do that. We would be much better off for it. I'm sure of it.

Susan:

Thank-you.

Julie:

Thank you Susan for your insight. I'm guessing from Shannon that we're really kind of at the end of our hour.

Shannon:

I want to thank you both for your time and I hope you decide to join us for future Effective Practice Briefings in this series.