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Several summers ago, I invited Abu the Flute Maker to visit the Maryland Writing Project's Invitational Summer Teacher Institute. I wanted to introduce to the teachers gathered for our workshop a person who had found his gift, his talent, in spite of school rather than because of it. What might we learn from him to take back to our classrooms, making them into spaces where students can uncover what they do best? We discovered that afternoon lessons that we often have to look for our gifts inside as well as outside of the school room.

As a child, Abu discovered his ability to create music out of almost anything – a chair, a bedpost, a clothes hanger, for example. He could also make flutes. With his perfect pitch

and uncanny ability to know just where to place the openings for air, his flutes create music with an ethereal quality. This talent, of course, "didn't count" in school, and he eventually dropped out. Now, however, he has his own band that makes music from a variety of home-made instruments.

He is a musical master craftsman and a treasured resource in Baltimore, traveling from school to school attempting to nurture the creative ability in each child he meets.

"When I was coming up in school," Abu says, "I was slow, and I was a class clown. Now I want to teach kids, even if they're not academically gifted, not to give up hope in themselves. God gave everybody a talent or gift, and you can sharpen it and make a living, using your hands and your

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imagination, and learning to use as many tools as possible."

Abu's visit to our Summer Teacher Institute demonstrated to us the strength of the human spirit, but we learned another lesson that day as well. While Abu was setting up his instruments, I walked across the hall to the student daycare center that was housed in the same building as our Institute and invited the teachers to bring the children to Abu's concert. They were thrilled, but asked if they could bring the students in after they awoke from their naps. I didn't think Abu would mind the interruption.

When I returned, Abu was ready to begin. At the front of the room he had set up huge home-made conga drums as well as some smaller percussion and string instruments, also home-made. "Who is a musician?" he asked us. "Who is a drummer?" No one spoke. "Come up!" he entreated. "Come up and play the drums! Choose an instrument!" No one moved. The teachers' expressions said, "Who me? Don't look at me! Choose someone else. I'll make a fool of myself up there." Abu was beginning to become frustrated when the door to the room opened and the children from the day care center poured in. As soon as they saw the instruments, they ran toward them, surrounding Abu, whose eyes lit up. "Who's a musician?" he asked again. Every child responded: "I am! I am!" Some of the children didn't bother to answer. They just walked up to the drums and began playing. Others began dancing spontaneously to the music their classmates were creating. The adults in the room looked sheepishly from one to the other. I thought to myself, "What has happened to us?"

As demonstrated by the children from the daycare center, we can see that most children do not enter school anxious. They are not afraid to answer a question or take a chance at something new. Children at this age assume they are creative. They assume they can, not that they cannot. Unfortunately, most anxiety, and most hesitance at speaking up, has its roots in the classroom environment. Abu learned the hard way that he had to develop his talent not in school, but out of it.

What can we as teachers do to help students find what they can do best rather than unknowingly create an atmosphere in the classroom that causes anxiety? Studies have shown, for example, that students who take more writing classes tend to be more apprehensive about writing than those who take fewer writing courses. In their study *Exploring the Relationship between Writing Apprehension and Writing Performance: A Qualitative Study*, Badrasawi, Zubairi, and Idrus (2016) found that "writing apprehension has a negative influence on students' writing performance; the sources of contributing factors could be instructors and the teaching-learning setting." Other studies have proven that students do not become anxious

right away: anxiety builds up with each successive year in school, significantly impacting a student's ability to learn and perform up to his or her capacity (Stack, 2018). Unfortunately, as can be seen in the reaction of the teachers themselves when they were asked to participate in music-making, the effect of repeated failure takes its toll, not only in elementary school, but in high school, college, and beyond. The patterns of fear and anxiety started in kindergarten grow in high school and become deeply ingrained by the time students find themselves in a post-secondary setting.

By the time students are preparing for college or the world of work, a consistent tendency emerges in their levels of anxiety. Part of this trend can be attributed to the normal self-consciousness that develops as children mature, but the school setting must take a major portion of the blame. Even though students who are affected by anxiety are usually quite capable intellectually, poor self-esteem and anxiety can interfere with their ability to produce work comparable with their abilities. Joseph Chilton Pearce, an American author of several books on child development, writes in his book *Magical Child*, "Anxiety is always the enemy of intelligence. The minute anxiety arises, intelligence closes to a search for anything that will relieve the anxiety." (Pearce, 1977, p.99) Abraham Maslow confirms Pearce's point in his seminal work *Toward a Psychology of Being*: "All those psychological and social factors that increase fear will cut out the impulse to know; all factors that permit courage, freedom, and boldness will thereby also free our need to know." (Maslow, 1988, p. 15)

When I think back to my own early educational experiences, I remember rules and restrictions, standing in the corner if my spirit began to emerge, being taught what I now realize was "sight" reading and after guessing a word incorrectly, not trying to answer at all. After a steady dose of these experiences, I learned to wait for someone else to answer, even when I was sure I was correct. There were no opportunities for exploration in the public schools I attended, and risk-taking was discouraged. I never felt safe when it came to participating in class discussions. My third grade teacher, Mrs. Bodine, actually told me that I asked too many questions! I saw that hesitance in the faces of the teachers on that summer morning when we gathered to meet Abu, and I see it in my own college students. They sit in class terrified that they will be called on, afraid they will say something stupid and be ridiculed. "I'm on your side," I tell them, but it takes at least a month into the semester before I can encourage them to trust me enough to make that leap, even in a revision-based classroom. One of my colleagues once referred to grading as "de-grading." As I am reading their final drafts, I always keep

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that term in mind.

My school memories illustrate where my creative child went, but because of my own will and several important adults in my life, I was able to discover a way to, as Maslow says, “free our need to know.” At the age of eight, I was left alone after school to care for my five-year-old brother while my parents were at work. I would pick him up from his kindergarten class and walk him home, waiting until the last possible minute before unlocking the door and stepping into our empty apartment. One afternoon, I took a long walk through the center of town before heading home, reading out loud to my brother the words printed on every door we passed. It kept him amused. When we came to the one that said “Free Public Library,” I cupped my hands around my eyes and looked in through the glass door. Instead of the inside of a store, I saw people reading. There were row upon row of books, and adults and children, reading and browsing. The friendly librarian smiled at me, beckoning me to enter. I took my brother in one hand and tugged on the door with the other. She led us to the children’s section and pointed out to me a separate bookcase labeled “biography.” I chose a volume entitled *Amelia Earhart, Aviatrice* and began to read.

My life took a turn that afternoon that has made all the difference for me – and for my brother, who is also an avid reader, both of us encouraged by what turned out to be our daily stops at the library after school. I don’t know if I’ll ever understand such forces in the universe, but I will be eternally grateful for the one that brought me to that door. My library card is still one of my most prized possessions. Whenever we moved to a new town, the first place I located was the public library. I am drawn to books and am happiest when I am curled up, lost in one.

As I read my way through that library, I began to understand that there was a distinct difference between going to school and learning on my own. After immersing myself in reading, I naturally began to write my own stories and started keeping a journal, filling it with poetry and writing ideas. My elementary school music teacher, Miss Doris Hollenbach, even put one of my poems, “The Wind,” to music for the glee club to sing at a school assembly, and my picture and an article about “the young poet” was published in our local newspaper.

My trips to the library plus a teacher who saw a spark in me (Thank you, Miss Hollenbach!) helped me recognize my self-worth. I developed a growing understanding of my potential and began to understand that there were people out there who might help me find my own happiness. I discovered a world beyond Dick and Jane, a discovery that deepened and sustained my love of reading and writing. How I felt in the

library and how I felt writing in my journals influenced my ability to learn in ways I am still just beginning to understand. From that point on, too, I began to speak up in class, express my opinions, and make an impression on my teachers, who knew they could count on me to make a contribution to class discussions, a pattern that continued through secondary school and then into college and graduate school. When I started teaching, I wanted to be “that teacher,” that Miss Hollenbach, for my students, the one who helped guide them into uncovering their own self-worth.

What is it that we can learn from Abu that we can pass on to our post-secondary college students and future businessmen and women? Like Abu, we, as teachers need to help them, even if they are not academically gifted, not to lose hope in themselves, to help the spark grow into a flame. We should not be asking IF a child is intelligent, but instead asking HOW a child is intelligent. As educators, we need to be better risk takers ourselves, trying out new methods, pushing the limits of discovery. If we are going to help our students uncover their gifts, help them learn that it is OK to color outside the lines, we will need to start teaching outside those lines ourselves, helping to nurture every learner.

By the end of that summer morning at the Summer Teacher Institute, every one of the teachers had been lured onto the stage through Abu’s magic and the preschoolers, who were having such a wonderful time. They took a chance playing the instruments along with the children, everyone pounding, strumming, and squawking. The final moments turned into a fabulous concert, with everyone laughing and singing. There were so many of us wanting to be musicians that there weren’t enough instruments for everyone, but Abu made sure that there would be another round of playing, and then another, until everyone had a turn, every one of the teachers experiencing the openness and courage to explore outside of his or her comfort zone.

Creativity is often described as a spark or a seed. And as we know, sparks quickly burn out unless fanned into flames and seeds die if not exposed to sun and water. Perhaps that is Abu’s lesson: “Everyone has a spark, a seed, and gets a turn to show it off.” And the librarian’s lesson? “Come in! There’s a place for you here.” And Ms. Hollenbach’s lesson? “I will help to fan the flames. I will provide fertile ground for you to grow.”

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