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ALL HELL HAS BROKEN LOOSE IN EDUCATION

And here's what you're
going to do about it



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The Focus on Soft Skills Will Be Our Undoing

When we teach, we teach the hard skills that are required for students to get to grade level benchmark. Those hard skills are things like the skill/ability to be able to summarize what you've read, the skill/ability to solve a specific problem using a math operation or the skill/ability to produce a piece of artwork in an art class.

Soft skills are those "skills" like patience, the ability to work well in a group or self-confidence. They are less easy to define and certainly not easy to assess.

In the last decade or so, education has become obsessed with the soft skills. I recently read an article with the title of "Which states nurture their students the most?" And my first thought was "who cares?" I mean, do I think students need to be nurtured? Of course. But do I think that how well a school nurtures students is the measurement of how well the system has done its job? I certainly don't.

There is the talk of equity in the classroom, student agency as a goal and helping students improve their self-esteem through outside programs that become part of the curriculum.

Can I ask what I think an obvious question is: what does this have to do with our main job of teaching kids to get to the grade level standards?

Let me give you a little sampling of what I'm reading that education organizations (including the teacher's unions) are telling me I need to learn more about:

- How white teachers need to take courses to lead non-racist classrooms
- How my celebration of Black History month is oppressing black and brown students and I am a racist
- How students need to feel like they have choice in what they learn and I should act as a consultant in their learning, not a teacher
- How I need to prioritize connecting with my students so that I can get through and actually teach them
- How, in order to reach my students, I need to build my personal education brand

This is all ridiculous noise. I can't think of any reason why these types of topics are coming hard and fast at us other than to confuse and keep us from the task at hand: excellent teaching.

It is a sign that we are in trouble if we are solving learning issues through non-learning means or using non-learning topics to distract us from the power that we have. I have to wonder why this is?

Let me be really clear here: students build their self-esteem by impressing themselves. Self-esteem is built when a student masters a skill and is able to successfully do it again. That is the teacher's job every day.

Let's walk down the road and see what this will look like if we continue...

Say that I work in a struggling school and to help our staff members cope with the struggling nature of the school, I bring in professional development that teaches teachers how to get students to have agency over their school life. What this means is that students take ownership over what they learn and to have a growth mindset. I'm not sure what this means. And I certainly don't know what it looks like to teach it. But let's keep going.

As a teacher in that school, I have a curriculum that I have been trained in that teaches me to give students choice because choice is a way to build student agency. The next thing I do is to determine a personalized goal with each student. Finally, I am going to encourage the student to take action toward that goal. Yet another step in getting students to feel in control of their education and like they can put their mind to something and accomplish it, so they say.

None of that sounds wacky or weird, right? Nope. Not unless that student doesn't have SKILLS to accomplish the goal that they have set themselves. So, a student could set the goal of reading every Harry Potter book in the library but not have the reading skill level to even decode the words. It might sound odd that a student would choose a goal that they don't think they can achieve, but it is actually quite common with struggling students as they want to look like everything is under control.

This whole agency movement just relegates the teacher to a mini-psychologist or student consultant role when the most important job the teacher has to do is TEACH.

A couple of years ago, flexible seating became the hot thing. Evidently kids were not hitting the grade level benchmark because they had to sit in regular chairs. So teachers went out and spent their own money to buy bean bag chairs, yoga balls, mats, bar stools and high tables so that students would have a choice of where to sit. As a forty-six year old woman, all I can think of is, "Won't their backs hurt?" Ha!

Did the fervor around flexible seating actually solve any learning problems? Likely not. I didn't hear any student say, "Because I got to bounce on that yoga ball while I did my math, I became really skilled at multiplication tables!" It just doesn't fully compute.

While the yoga ball shenanigans are kind of funny, there is also a way more sinister and dangerous movement to, theoretically, help students take control of their learning: Mastery-Based Learning. (Sometimes called Competency-Based Learning or Proficiency-Based Learning)

This is a system of learning that puts the students in charge of what they learn, how fast they learn it and whether or not they've learned it. Student choose which subject area they want to learn about and go and work on that. (Think back to yourself as an 8th grader...can you imagine?) The idea is that if the students take control of what they learn and how they learn, they will grow in confidence. Remember, confidence is a soft skill that means very little if students can't reach the grade level benchmark.

Newsflash: Mastery Based Learning typically measures growth, not necessarily growth against a grade level expectation. This is a problem: "But the method is also growing in popularity among high-performing, progressive schools, as well as those catering to gifted and talented students and newly arriving immigrants." Click here to read [more](#).

I could go on and on about the little and big shenanigans we are up to, but the big point is, we are going down a path of no return if we make education mostly about feelings and ownership and agency and self-esteem.

Education has to be about learning things by a certain time or grade level. And then learning the next thing in line that connects to what the student just mastered. Or so we thought.

I got this email just last week from a 22 year veteran educator friend who needed talking off of the ledge because all of these shenanigans got her twisted and downright confused:

"Can I ask you a quick question about core instruction? My understanding for 22 years of experience has been that each grade level has core standards and benchmarks that we are to

deliver to the whole class sometime that grade level year. Have things shifted and I'm not aware!? A lot of our teachers say that they are teaching core in small groups but really it's differentiated groups. For word work, for example, the teachers teach in response to what the kids need. However, another example, our 2nd grade teachers haven't introduced to the whole class anything that's listed in their standards and benchmarks for 2nd grade like syllable types, inflected endings, etc. We are creating even more gaps! Yikes."

My response: You are not crazy...people are creating gaps when they are not teaching to grade level standards...essentially there is no Tier 1 if you aren't teaching everyone to a grade level standard. The whole thing should be (though it is hotly contested and I just don't understand it) that we teach grade level standards...that is our job as teachers. THEN, as kids struggle to reach those grade level standards, we find out what they're missing and then do small group instruction IN ADDITION TO THAT GRADE LEVEL INSTRUCTION to fill the gaps and get them back on track for crushing the grade level standards. If we do what you described people doing with pulling groups and doing small group stuff we have kids ALL OVER THE PLACE and have completely lost sight of the grade level expectations AND we create larger gaps, oftentimes, than we started with.

I get how "differentiating" instruction is crucial, but this is not differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction has to be done against a grade level standard.

Come off the ledge. Ha!"

All of these feelings-oriented initiatives simply ignore the power of a teacher and the power of explicit instruction. Nothing (and I truly mean nothing) covers for a well-thought-out lesson taught by an expert teacher who acts like she really like the students and the content.

And when we make education about more than that, we can be sure that we are losing control of what matters.

This all seems weird...I think something's up. You better investigate.

I have decided to write a series of six articles that detail and expose how all hell has broken loose in education with the goal of identifying where we have gone so wrong and what we're going to do to fix it.

I am certain that the changes that need to be made in education must start from the inside out. If our government, state boards, district and site leaders were going to get it all right and had all of the answers, we wouldn't be at this point. The power to change is right with the most important players in education: the teachers.

Let there be no mistake: Nothing (absolutely nothing) is more important than a well-skilled, enthusiastic teacher who knows his/her content. That alone is how we get real results with students. The rest is just shenanigans.

This is article 5. To get caught up on articles 1,2, 3 and 4, [click here](#).

Also by Jill Jackson

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How to Teach Students to Write Informational Text

How to Coach Teachers to Teach Almost Anything

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