

Encouragement leads to success

I recall a conversation I had with a schoolteacher friend of mine. The discussion was focused on the broad subject of education. We ultimately began to talk specifically about labeling children.

My friend, a 20-year veteran of our public-school system, noted that she could easily tell within the first two weeks of a new school year which of her students would do well and which would struggle.

My first reaction was, "Well, that makes sense." After all those years in the classroom teaching thousands of children, one would think a seasoned educator would be in a position to predict the outcome of a student's success or possible academic failure.

A lightning bolt then struck me. I remember from my college days learning about the Pygmalion Effect, a series of studies that had demonstrated time and again that teacher expectations profoundly affected student achievement. I couldn't help but consider the words of my friend and whether her impression of her students would or could seal their fate in her classroom, good or bad.

Over the years, I have become quite sensitive to the words adults use to describe children. A more recent experience occurred in a class I teach at Arizona State University. I was describing the many ways we unconsciously portray children. Good, bad, smart, learning-disabled, at-risk, hoodlum, gang banger, nerd, lazy, juvenile delinquent and so on.

Like any teacher, I wondered if I was effectively conveying my

thoughts. After the class, I received an e-mail from one of my students who serves as an intern with a state agency responsible for transporting juveniles who have been arrested from "jail" to a group home or other appropriate facility. She noted that, prior to taking the class and understanding the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy, she would automatically label these wards of the court as hoodlums deserving none of her energy other than to move them from one destination to another.

This particular evening, my student was transporting a 15-year-old shoplifter from a Durango holding facility to a group home. Unlike her previous encounters, my student smiled at the vulnerable teenager and they struck up a conversation. This was a simple act of kindness between a caring adult and a kid. She learned that the girl's father had abandoned her while still an infant. Her mother was disabled and this young girl was responsible for four siblings.

My student's preconceptions were shattered. She saw the girl overcoming great obstacles and still "surviving." "You have tremendous potential and strength," she told the teenager. Before getting out of the car, the teenager thanked my student for the ride and said she hoped to grow up to help kids like herself make better decisions.

In the end, I've realized it's a simple concept. I think Eliza Doolittle, in the musical *My Fair Lady*, explained it to Professor Higgins best when she said, "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated."

Rick Miller is the founder of Kids at Hope and a faculty associate at ASU West. Contact him at rick@kidsathope.org.



Rick Miller

Special for
The Republic