

EPILOGUE

ASSETS SCHOOL: BECOMING WHO WE ARE, ON OUR JOURNEY TO THE SEA

by Lou Salza

On the sun-drenched Island of Oahu, in the gentle trade winds that drift down-slope off the Ko'olau mountains, tucked between Hikam Airforce base and Honolulu International airport sits ASSETS School. It is an unusual, perhaps unique K-12 school for 405 gifted, dyslexic, and gifted-dyslexic students. ASSETS is the proud product of many hands, hearts and minds brought together over the years by a spirit of aloha and concern for children whose approach to solving problems requires a different learning environment from those available at most schools.

ASSETS was founded almost 50 years ago to serve children of military families stationed at Pearl Harbor, and this marvelous school's modern mission began one question from a parent of a child with learning disabilities to Mr. Max Templemann, Civilian Director of Educational Programs for the Armed Services. Max recalled the question was probably something like "What programs are there here in Hawaii for my son who is smart, but can't learn to read in school because he has a learning disability?" Max did some homework, found that this same question was being asked across the country by worried parents, and attended a conference on the mainland where he met Dr. Samuel Kirk. Max found Dr. Ronald Yamaoka, a neurologist at

Tripler Army Medical Center, and they got together with a Speech and Language Therapist and a group of officers, and decided to make a program and a place for these children. They established the Armed Services Special Education Training Society (ASSETS). Max told me that the name came from their shared value that the children they would serve in this new school were bright but lacked reading skills. Their motto: "Children are our greatest assets" lives on at ASSETS and adorns the school's sign out front.

The first year (1969), there were only a handful of students, all funded by the Military. But by the mid seventies the school had established itself as an independent nonprofit school housed in a marine barracks on Naval Station Pearl. By 1992, ASSETS had a new home on its current three-acre campus and had added grades 9-12. Of the 23 seniors ASSETS graduated in 2004, 21 matriculated to colleges or universities. Half of our 8th graders transition to public and private schools across Oahu. They do well at the schools and colleges they choose.

Gifted AND Dyslexic!

Barrett McCandless joined the staff of the school in 1971 as a diagnostician, was promoted to principal, and then served as Executive Director until her retirement in 1995. Barrett and her dedicated staff and supportive Board of Trustees are credited with shaping the modern mission of the school. Barrett's vision then was a foundation upon which built the unique curriculum that ASSETS uses so successfully now. Her keen understanding of

the needs of gifted children and children with dyslexia are evident in the daily life of ASSETS School today. She realized that dyslexic and gifted children shared similar needs for hands-on, theme-based, small-group, differentiated-integrated curriculum. Dyslexics need direct instruction in developmental skills while gifted students need acceleration and intellectual challenge. The genius of those who built ASSETS' curriculum over the years is that they accommodated children's differences through specific choices in a design integrated across disciplines and differentiated according to a child's needs. A group adaptation of the Orton-Gillingham approach became the foundation for the literacy and language arts program. Sandra Kaplan's and Joe Renzulli's work regarding curriculum development for ALL students.

Since it began there working with gifted and dyslexic students over twenty five years ago, ASSETS has continued to ask a version of the very same question that resulted in its founding: "What kinds of programs do we establish for children who are not served by the current industry standard in education?" Perhaps programs like the one developed at ASSETS will inspire a change in the way we regard children who are not served well in the standard school setting. Perhaps schools like ASSETS can advance the notion that we can change the environment we ask ALL students to inhabit as learners.

It Takes a Village with a Clear Mission.

If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community of learners

focused entirely on the needs of students to raise a school in which children thrive. While our hearts for children lead the way in this community, teachers think that talk continually about the research into learning. Over the years the school attracted a cadre of talented, hard working, creative teachers and administrators. An Administrative Advisory Team (AAT) routinely provides focused support to the teachers and students who make the program work in the classroom.

Classrooms of 16 children, usually representing two grades with two full time teachers, provide a “regular” school environment with lots of individual support and assistance. In the high school, teachers work with small group classes and meet daily in staff meeting to analyze case studies and to talk about attention, memory, language and other key factors that impact student learning. They make adjustments to the learning process or environment. They involve students in the identification and discussion of their strengths and challenges as learners. The environment is one that honors learning and acknowledges differences without defining students by their deficits. Study and organizational skills are integrated throughout the program, and a recent emphasis on advocacy has paid handsome dividends throughout the school, even for children in primary grades. Art and technology are now integrated throughout the curriculum in recognition of our students’ talents and gifts.

Resilience: The Key to Life Long Learning.

Recent research tells us that

people who can experience setbacks without feeling defeated, and who can learn from the challenges they encounter, develop resilient responses to adversity. We need, then, to pay as much attention to teaching children about themselves and others as emotional beings, as we do to teaching reading and writing. Children need friends, and they need adults in their lives who can offer them support.

The, Human Development Program by Harold Bessell, published in the 70’a was selected early in ASSETS life as a foundation for a campus wide individual and group counseling program integrated into the classroom curriculum. It includes “Magic Circle” and “Class Council,” a problem solving process to help students identify and express feelings in a forum designed to help them gain a measure of control through advocacy and communication. Adoption of a uniform approach to classroom and campus wide behavior management virtually eliminated the need to scold children or to disrupt the flow of instruction in classrooms when children needed to be redirected. This “affective curriculum” provides ASSETS students with frequent data points to measure their adaptation in different social situations just as our multi-sensory literacy program provides data points in language learning.

Play is Child’s Work!

Again borrowing from the literature on gifted children, enrichment courses are an established feature of the curriculum for all children in the school. Enrichments create space in the day and in the life of the school for serious play, fun

problem solving, and real demonstrations of multiple intelligences in action. Enrichments create joy in learning, celebrate talents and gifts, and promote teamwork and collaboration. In the high school, students disperse to internships across the Island every Wednesday to rehearse, practice, and experience what employment and a profession will be like.

E Ho’omau! (Be Who You Are)

Self-esteem is not something that can be imparted to a child with pats on the back, good grades or compliments. Self-esteem is a conclusion that children draw about themselves from the data available to them in school and in their families. ASSETS features an integrated learning environment where teachers accept children for who they are, challenge them to find their strengths, and support them with strategically designed academic and affective curriculum. The feedback they get about their learning and social adaptation is real data. The environment nourishes students academically, personally and socially. The environment reinforces the message to “know and be who you are.”

Holomua I Ke Kai! (Journey to the Sea)

Over the past few years Honu, the Green Sea Turtle has become a symbol of our mission. As she lumbers and heaves herself awkwardly across the sand, Honu may look clumsy vulnerable and ill suited for her task. Observed in the open water though, Honu swims gracefully and dives deep and long. When she comes up for air, she is practically dry! Here in

Hawaii, Honu reminds us that our job is to refrain from drawing conclusions about our students' capacity if they lumber through some of their studies. Our mission is to help them cross the sand on the journey to their own sea, and to be sure they find the deep, open waters of their lives.

With gratitude for the insights of Max, and Barrett, and all those who came before us in our school, we acknowledge the courage and resourcefulness, the patience and the persistence of our students through whose eyes and experiences we have been privileged to learn and grow.

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