

BARRIERS TO LEARNING

Not All Problems are Biological in Origin

By Harvey Lee

In the mid 1990s, UCLA researchers attempted to broaden the perspective of school improvement by addressing barriers to learning. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, co-directors of the Center for Mental Health in Schools, convened a group to examine ways to improve student learning “by enhancing policies, programs, and practices relevant to mental health in schools” (smhp.psych.ucla.edu/describ.htm). One concern was the overuse of the term “learning disabled” to describe students with learning problems resulting from a variety of different causes.

In the Summer 2002 edition of their newsletter *Addressing Barriers to Learning*, Adelman and Taylor discuss a causal continuum (see diagram above) that they created to better define the different types of barriers for students with learning problems. At one end of the continuum are Type III learning problems, which are caused by minor dysfunctions of the central nervous system (CNS). This type of learning problem can also be called a learning disability (LD). At the other end of the continuum are Type I learning problems, which include poverty, overcrowded schools, and psychosocial problems. Type II learning problems, which fall in the middle of the continuum, result partly from the student’s individual “differences and vulnerabilities” and partly from the learning environment’s failure to accommodate them.

Educators need to remember that not all learning problems are of a biological origin. Other causal factors can include overcrowded classrooms, poverty, and hostile learning environments. Learning problems can also result from poor teaching practices or inadequate instruction due to substance abuse or other difficulties faced by faculty members.

The key to school improvement is strong school leadership. The principal has to “read to lead,” a philosophy popularized by Jeanne Gibbs, author of *TRIBES*. Principals need to keep current on new curriculum and instruction strategies and work to create a safe and caring school with role models who promote learning in the classroom.

Finally, the principal needs to develop a collegial community in which staff are not afraid to share ideas, exchange lessons, and coach each other. In our Pacific region, communities are traditionally cooperative and collegial. School leaders can draw on these assets to create a nurturing environment that promotes learning.

For more information, visit the School Mental Health Project website at smhp.psych.ucla.edu, or consult Jeanne Gibbs, *Guiding Your School Community to Live a Culture of Caring and Learning*.

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Type I learning problems	Type II learning problems	Type III learning problems
Caused by factors outside the person	Caused by person and environment factors	Caused by minor CNS dysfunction =LD

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PRO Website Provides Online Education Resources

Pacific Resources Online (PRO), a website that provides free resources for Pacific Islanders, was launched at the Pacific Educational Conference (PEC) on July 22. Developed by the Pacific Regional Technology in Education Consortium (PR*TEC) at PREL, it is available at www.pacificresources.info.

PRO offers a wide variety of online services for Pacific educators. These include a list of grants and scholarships,



annotated links to education websites, a calendar of education conferences – and most importantly, free access to the EBSCO databases.

Through PRO, not only Pacific teachers, but also parents and community members are

able to use EBSCO Information Services. EBSCO provides access to 6,000 full-text journals and magazines on education, health, business, computing, and current affairs. This powerful research tool enables users to email, view, or print out full-text journal articles directly from their desktops at home, work, or school.

To log on to EBSCO, go to the PRO home page, click on “EBSCO Database,” and enter the password. Each Pacific island state or territory has its own password, which is now available through the local PREL Service Center.

By the end of July, EBSCO had received a total of 797 logins and 2,296 searches. This research tool is of great benefit to the Pacific, and its use will certainly grow. Training courses were provided at PEC, and will be offered again at the Pacific Islands Association of Libraries and Archives (PIALA) conference November 3-8 in Pohnpei.

For more information, contact askprel@prel.org or the PREL Service Center in your entity. PREL staff will be happy to provide you with further information about this new educational service. ★