

Fortune Cookies – Gotta Love ‘Em

I have come to love Chinese Restaurants, especially the kind with the many faceted buffets. In one school district where I worked, the school psychologists throughout the county periodically met in one such restaurant to discuss things psychological and keep abreast of what was happening around the area. It was a good time to commiserate with colleagues about the less than logical world of public education. And I distinctly remember enjoying the fortune cookie at the end of the meal. It is probably a carry over from childhood but there is always something alluring, mystical, and even voyeuristic about seeing into the future, even if it sounds like astrology as told with a foreign accent. In yet another school district in another part of the state, I was introduced to the idea of making fortune cookies even more likely to be correct, or at least much more entertaining, by adding the phrase, “in bed” to the end of each fortune. Needless to say, I cannot read a fortune cookie today without adding that particular phrase.

It would be great to be able to foresee coming events and trends, even if it were rather fuzzy and did not lead to instant riches. If we could just position ourselves to make sure we were not surprised by new directions, I could enjoy a happy career. With the addition of years and life experiences we talk about that “pendulum thing” in education. How there really are no new ideas, just reread causes that get tweaked or even funded and now sway the day. I have seen it happen. But pendulums mean there is a fixed point from which to suspend the blade. And swinging has its limits. Much like politics, conservatives win the argument in most educational circles and real change does not happen easily or frequently. So it is with some hesitation that I mention the current discussions which have caught my eye: no more discrepancy score calculations to determine the presence of a Learning Disability; and the growing disdain for the use of intelligence or ability testing.

Some have joined the argument passionately and it harkens to the old saw questioning whether psychology, as a discipline, is an art or a science. To those of us who would argue vigorously for the science angle, statistics are our friend. Without psychometric testing, how do we get to things statistical? And what better psychometrics to hang our hat upon than intelligence tests? They have the longest tenure in usage and the most statistics with which to work. Sure they began as a way to differentiate mentally retarded French children from non-mentally retarded French children. But they did differentiate. We have decried their limitations and cautioned against tattooing numbers on children’s foreheads until we have come close to effectively throwing out the baby with the bath. I am not advocating any of the former arguments but the instruments we use which instills the greatest confidence in my mind is intelligence testing. If we are to talk the language of statistics (and it was not all that long ago that universities were recognizing statistics as a foreign language), how can we dismiss the root from which most other words flow?

Now there are many who believe that such talk is utter nonsense; that there is no way intelligence or ability testing will go the way of the dinosaur. I would agree but for some other reasons than, “I can’t live, if living means without you.” (Nilsson, 1971). As evidence, I would submit the following observations: There are three revisions currently in the works from the WISC IV, through the K-ABC 2, to the S-B 5. If there was not a market for intelligence testing, Riverside, Psychological Corporation, and their competition would not be investing the money

to make these happen. We also hear of a new release by Cecil Reynolds which ties statistical analysis with speed of administration; two aspects of the practice of school psychology which will always be with us. And let us not dismiss the work of Kevin McGrew and Dawn Flannagan with the W-J III Cognitive Battery. David Sattler is up to at least a fourth edition of Intelligent Testing. How many different report writing software programs are currently available and put into use by private practitioners? So I do not believe we will see an end to intelligence testing anytime soon. We still must test intelligently and if ability testing results do not add to crafting successful interventions, then we must all question their use.

Determining whether or not a child suffers from a Specific Learning Disability has become more nebulous. And we really did not need more ambiguity, now did we? I have always bemoaned the fact that the district a child attended school could also determine whether or not academic difficulty rose to a finding of a handicapping condition or not. I once heard the term "Greyhound Therapy" used for an adult population of mentally ill transients. I have heard the term HTM applied to students who one "Hoped They Moved" so as to not negatively affect a class or building's achievement record. And this was before High Stakes or Proficiency Testing. If it doesn't walk like a duck and sound like a duck, it must not be a duck, right? Where is the litmus test for a Learning Disability? We fine-tuned statistics to the point of calculating scores to help us decide what was a "significant" amount of discrepancy but left that final decision up to the local district (sometimes school building) of attendance. Now, we are advocating "response to intervention" as the latest, greatest, best practices way of determining a child's eligibility for special education programming. Any change in the way of doing things that is presented as being new and improved must address the shortcomings of previous practices. Will "response to intervention" be a better descriptor of a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language that is operationally defined as a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement? I hope so and I do grant face validity to the percept. However, I must admit to a good deal of confusion as to how this will be a better practice than what we have previously been doing. Is there a need for change? Always. Will the proposed change make life better? That is the question.

Getting back to our age-old debate, I have come to appreciate the art in psychology. Many times have we all said that book learning is one thing but it is what is inside of a person that makes them good at what they do. No matter what training program we have graduated from or who was part of the faculty when we were students, good school psychologists do not seem to be the direct result of some formula. And when we do the most good, it is usually not when we are backed by some very intricate statistical analysis. It is when we follow our basic training in working with children. It is when we feel certain about our recommendations for a student or family. It is when we have no doubt about this change being for the better. We know many things about learning and child development and we are often the only mental health advocates for children in any given school. Let us borrow a line from Paul Newman in a good movie where he says, "We are taught to act as if we have faith." Whether our faith comes from statistical formulas, standardized tests, or in responsiveness to interventions, we act on behalf of children and families. We are sometimes the only advocates they will have.

So we are left with Chinese Fortune Cookies again. I have often heard it said that there is a classic one that goes, "May you live in interesting times." I just do not know if it is a Chinese blessing or a curse. In bed or not.