

Priming the Brain with Movement: The Power of PACE in a Special Ed Classroom

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I was invited recently to do some demonstration work in a Special Education classroom of an elementary school here in Phoenix. The teacher, Mrs. Cole, had heard about Brain Gym and was interested to see it at work.

When I arrived she was working with a group of twelve third- and fourth-grade students who have a variety of learning challenges. Their “labels” included such things as low IQ, Severely Learning Disabled, Minimally Mentally Retarded, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. As much as this teacher cared, and as hard as she worked to support her students in learning, these children learned very slowly because of their significant challenges. One boy, Brandon, had hardly improved at all over the two years he’d spent getting daily help in this classroom.

I introduced PACE, the four-step Brain Gym warm-up, to this group and, with the fun and giggles that truly engage children, had them do all the steps with me. The children were very cooperative and enthusiastic -- and very awkward in their movements, which is not surprising for learning-challenged students. Many had significant difficulty in accomplishing the Cross Crawl. The entire process of explaining, demonstrating, and doing the movements took about 20 minutes.

Then Mrs. Cole handed out paper so each child could write me a thank-you note. The room became pin-drop quiet as twelve heads bent over desktops and much writing appeared on paper -- and remarkably few asking for help with spelling. Mrs. Cole surveyed the students’ work with an amazed look on her face. She sat next to Hector and asked him, “Do you notice anything different about your writing?” He replied, “Yes - it’s good. The letters are all the right size.”

Then, looking at Brandon’s paper, Mrs. Cole was stunned to see that, *for the first time ever*, all of his letters were actually written on the line, and he had put spaces between his words. She had been working with him for two years on these skills. Not only that, but Brandon was writing and writing, sentence after coherent sentence - this, from a boy who’d never written more than a line to two without help.

I still had a bit of time left, so I taught the children Lazy Eights and then Double Doodle. Many had significant difficulty with these, as well. Mrs. Cole passed out white paper so they could Double Doodle with crayons. Brandon started with Double Doodle and then (believe it or not) began drawing superimposed Lazy Eights simultaneously with each hand going in the opposite direction. I have no idea how he contrived to accomplish this so smoothly, as he has very significant midline issues. Capable people have a hard time doing this!

Brandon kept at this, with total focus, for a full five minutes. Beside him, Hector did side-by-side Double Doodle circles over and over and over with deep concentration. Mrs. Cole couldn’t believe how focused they stayed on this task. She said, “Do kids tend to really apply themselves to things like this that are good for them?”

The group left when class ended, but Brandon stayed behind. He wanted to read to us. This is the boy who’d made little academic growth over the last two years.

Brandon picked up a book and read fluently. He attempted words he’d never tried before, sounded out words with only a bit of help, and paused or stopped appropriately at all the punctuation. He began his reading as he’d always done, holding a card under each line of print to help him focus on just one line of print at a time. After about two paragraphs he set the card aside and used just his finger under each word -- and then he used nothing at all, reading just fine.

All of this after “just” PACE, Lazy Eights and Double Doodle! I actually thought Mrs. Cole was going to cry watching him read -- finally. The entire time I was there, her face was a study as she watched all these children do so many things so well.

By the time I left, Mrs. Cole had copied my PACE instructions off the board, made a simple poster chart of them, and hung it on the wall. She said, “Guess what we’re going to be doing every day from now on!”

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Kathy Brown’s 2012 Book covers topics like this and many more.
Educate Your Brain: use mind-body balance to learn faster, work smarter and move more easily through life.
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