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HEADLINE: Forum focuses on learning gaps

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BODY:

Pediatrician Mel Levine noticed an interesting, but not unusual, phenomenon as he observed an assembly at The Children's Storefront School in Harlem awhile back.

The kindergartners and first-graders, who were sitting in the front rows, were happy, smiling and engaged in the presenter. But farther back in the room, the eighth-graders -- the oldest students at the school -- were distracted and sullen, with hoods up and jackets on.

Levine said his foundation, All Kinds of Minds, might be able to prevent the thing that turns the affable kindergartners into surly adolescents.

"Something happened between [kindergarten and eighth grade] and we don't know what it was," Levine, 65, told a symposium of teachers, parents and educators Thursday morning at a conference in Research Triangle Park. "Maybe we can figure out what it was."

Levine, a professor of pediatrics and founder of All Kinds of Minds, spoke during Connecting Minds, a teacher-training event. He explained his theories to a crowd of several hundred educators from across North Carolina who gathered at the Sheraton Imperial Hotel and Conference Center for the two-day event.

Build on strengths

Levine said helping children; build on their strengths will help them avoid feelings of inadequacy in school -- thus helping them to succeed.

"For a schoolchild, the single most important mission ... is the avoidance of humiliation at all costs," Levine said. "If a girl weighs 200 pounds, let's not make her climb ropes in gym class while everyone watches. If a kid has been misbehaving in class, let's not make him sit in the corridor where everyone can see him."

Levine, an author of 10 books who lives on a farm in Orange County has been working to discover how children's minds work for decades. In 1995, he and financier Charles Schwab founded the Chapel Hill-based All Kinds of Minds, which grew out of Schools Attuned, Levine's teacher training program. Since then, Levine has appeared on Oprah Winfrey's show, The Today Show and in numerous national magazines.

Through his foundation, Levine aims to help teachers understand the "neurodevelopmental constructs," which explain the complex ways different children learn.

Thursday, he said that many students' behavior problems stem from the frustration of feeling stupid or misunderstood. By understanding students' strengths, teachers can help them to overcome their weaknesses -- thus eliminating the potential for humiliation, Levine said. Fear of humiliation can lead to withdrawal, anxiety or acting out, he added.

"It's called, 'I'd rather be perceived by the school as a behavior problem than a dummy,'" Levine said. "Bullying is a form of acting out. You're actually acting out to cover your own feelings of inadequacy."

'Evaluate the past'

Other children, he said, may have behavior problems stemming from a lack of development of one of the neurodevelopmental constructs. For example, some children may have diminished "reinforceability" -- or lack hindsight, and the ability to regret doing something. They also might lack foresight, or "previewing," Levine, said.

Teachers should help those children develop good decision-making skills, and, perhaps, keep a log of behavior to review, Levine said.

"You have to evaluate the past for them," he said. "They're not doing it spontaneously."