

Seeds of Inclusion keynote advises future educators

by Kaylyn Dallman - Tuesday, March 08, 2011

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In fourth grade Jonathan Mooney hid in the bathroom to avoid reading in front of the class because of his dyslexia. By fifth grade he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). By sixth grade Mooney dropped out of school and contemplated suicide.

Mooney shared his personal experience of not fitting into school as the keynote speaker on at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh for “Planting the Seeds of Inclusion: Supporting All Children” conference on March 5.

Mooney went on to graduate from Brown University with a degree in English Literature and authored two books. He also is founder of Project Eye-to-Eye, which is a mentoring and advocacy non-profit organization for students with learning disorders.

Even with these credentials, Mooney said he currently reads at a seventh grade level and spells at a third grade level. He clarified that he did not fix his deficits, he just was able to unlearn that he was “stupid, crazy and lazy” through the help of a few of supportive teachers who focused on his strengths.

Mooney explained that there are three things educators can do to improve their teaching: understand that mindset is more important than skill set, know who teachers that make a difference are masters of connection, and find out what is right instead of what is wrong with the student.

“Every teacher who made a difference in my life put what was right with me at the center of their job; finding it, identifying it and celebrating it,” said Mooney.

Mooney himself was the “bad kid” in class because he could not sit still at his desk and could not focus without movement. He said his teacher did not understand that movement was the opposite of a problem.

“There is a whole emerging body of research that young people move whether they have ADHD or not because movement accesses a physical motor memory that facilitates focusing,” said Mooney. “If I don’t move, guess what turns off? My brain turns off.”

Ostracizing the bad kid by putting them in the hall or sending them to the office creates the label recognized by all of the other kids and therefore defining their path as just another one of “those” statistics.

“That kid in the hallway is the next innovator, is the next entrepreneur, is the next creative thinker,” Mooney said. “You have to celebrate it every day.”

As his grandmother put it best, “Difficult children make interesting adults.”

Mooney suggested educators reorganize their thought process of what “smart” is.

“We think smart people read well, smarter people read well and early, and the smartest people read well, early and fast,” said Mooney.

He explained to the audience that schools are so invested in putting reading as the pinnacle of the intelligence ring at the expense of all the other talents and skills in students.

“Intelligence is not one thing, but many things,” Mooney said. “This idea is a fundamental misunderstanding of human intelligence that you all need to challenge every single day.”

An extraordinary story Mooney used to illustrate the concept of the “dumb” kid was a 13-year-old boy who was arrested for conducting a 50-person drug ring in Los Angeles. After serving his time he came to Mooney and said, “Look, I want to do something different, but I’m dumb and I’m not good at anything.”

As part of Project Eye-to-Eye, Mooney set him up with a design entrepreneurship program and with a GED, the boy attended community college and received a certificate in design. He was able to set up a graphic design business that infused street culture with marketing, which made a profit of \$500,000 last year.

“We are preparing generalists for a world of specialists. You look at the world nowadays and you don’t need to be good at all things, but one or two things,” Mooney said. “We need to invest in scaling strength.”

Nick Olla, sophomore at UW Oshkosh, came to the conference because a friend had told him about Mooney’s book “The Short Bus” and thought it would be beneficial as a special education major.

“I thought it was awesome and very insightful how the role of school and the role of teachers have been so misconstrued,” said Olla.

Mooney stressed that every effective teacher is a master of connection and they must be building meaningful relationships with their students.

“There is no significant learning without significant relationships,” Mooney said.