No fail learning, a failure?

Bill Boylan, Principal Tapping PS states the case against our last issue's cover story

The No Fail Learning model (NFL), which is closely aligned to the Fleming Explicit Instruction model, involves all the students in the class, regardless of ability, doing the same thing at the same time. Learning is broken down into small steps that errors are not experienced. It is giving kids one isolated brick at a time, thinking that when they leave school they will have a house. But all they leave with is a pile of bricks and they won't even have that for long.

You cannot learn effectively, particularly in a way that involves serious thinking, if the primary purpose is to avoid mistakes and get everything right. Thinking is messy and it goes against the orderly and specific checklist outlined by "No Fail Learning". This model, as with the Flemming Explicit Teaching model, implies that we can make students learn by sheer force. (I do, you do, we do etc). It is based on the 'transmitting model' (Jug and mug). It requires minimal student effort and limits student ability. To me this equals mediocrity. It is an attempt to teacher proof teaching. This is not how humans learn. Learning is an interactive process. In fact the whole NFL model lacks any reference to thinking, locating information, analysing and critical thinking. No Fail learning is only concerned with getting the right answer not finding a better way to learn.

Furthermore, the NFL model implies that you cannot do the thinking stuff without the basics in place so we need to really hammer the basics. This is called vertical relevance and it's simply not true. Sometimes you need to start with the house then work backwards so the bricks are not placed anywhere but in context of the whole. Leading early childhood educators Contance Kamii and Joy Donlin put it this way "It is contrary to what we know about the way children think to begin with countless computation and

only afterwards move onto applications of what that know-how is in the real world".

Another key principal of the NFL model is that all students are moving towards the same instructional objectives and move at the same pace. However effective teaching and learning is where some students move at a quicker pace or with greater independence, others will move with more foundational tasks or tasks structured with greater support mechanism.

The NFL model is a more passive approach to learning. Effective teaching and learning is active where learning occurs within a social context linking new experiences and ideas into existing schema. Learning is reflective, constructed and self-regulated. It is active inquiry based process where the teacher provides whatever support is necessary, increasing structure, varying resource, modifying the complexity of the context and so on. These variations are made in response to carefully collected pre-assessment and formative assessment data.

In the NFL model there is one avenue for kids to engage with the learning. In an effective learning classroom multiple avenues are provided for students to engage with new information, make sense of it, and demonstrate their level of mastery of this new information.

Unfortunately, I believe that models like NFL and the Fleming Explicit Instruction model, which are the most counterproductive approaches, are enforced most rigidly in schools serving the most disadvantaged. It appeals to these schools because they have low expectations for disadvantaged kids. They believe that at-risk students are served best by a directive, controlling pedagogy. However what they need is dynamic classroom environments where they are taught to compare, analyse, synthesise, evaluate, generalise, and specify in the process of developing thinking skills. The effort to educate thoughtful people should be guided by school activities that involve thought as the successful completion of anything worthwhile rarely occurs in a single trial.