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**Dr. Anael Alston:**

*“We have control over our attitude towards children in poverty. And the question that I would ask him, what do you believe about this child?”*

*Vicki Davis*

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VICKI: Happy Thought Leader Thursday, educators. Today we have with us Dr. Anael Alston, (Twitter: [@DrAAAlston](https://twitter.com/DrAAAlston) <https://www.linkedin.com/in/draalston/> he is a turnaround principle. Now, Anael, you think many of us educators thinking wrongly about kids in poverty, how is our thinking off?

ANAEL: So, I think there is what some would call the soft bigotry of low expectations when it comes to students in poverty and that is, we know it’s more difficult to educate them and to get them to achieve at higher levels. But if we ascribe it to poverty I would say you’re down the wrong track. How is it that Tyrone in a really poor neighborhood and Brian in a very poor neighborhood, very similar non-traditional homes – on public assistance Brian comes to work and does very well, Tyrone doesn’t.

The difference there is not poverty. The difference is in attitude or mindset. And so if we continue to focus on poverty and not the things that drive successful kids who are in poverty to do well in school and go far and beyond, we’re barking up the wrong tree.

VICKI: So, you’re saying because there are some kids who are successful it means that the whole argument of poverty has to be thrown out the window, is that what you’re saying?

ANAEL: What I’m saying is that we’re not looking at the motive behind the people who are successful and studying them. And I will argue as Baruti Kafele <https://twitter.com/PrincipalKafele> would do, and he did brilliantly in his book, *Closing The Attitude Gap* <http://amzn.to/2lZp1vHis> that it has more to do with attitude. And I can break that down a little bit deeper.

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VICKI: Yeah, go ahead. Because I know one of the criticisms that people say when you say, “Okay, go talk to a kid in poverty and tell them they have to have grit” when they’re the ones getting their brothers or sister dressed in the morning and they’re the ones

who are feeding the family. And they've got lots of grit, they're just exhausted by the time they get to school.

ANAEL: And they very well could be. But what can a teacher control? So, one of the things that I have always advocated for is for professionals to really focus on the things they have control over. So here are a few things we have control over. We have control over our attitudes towards children in poverty. And the questions that I would ask is, "What do you believe about this child?" Because what you believe as a teacher matters tremendously. Do you believe this kid has the capacity or the opportunity or the built-in genius to go ahead and go beyond his current circumstance? What relationship do you have with this child in poverty? Do I know this child? Do they know me? What level of compassion do you have? Do I care about you? Do you care about me? Does the child in poverty perceive that you care about them because that's probably more important than if you do care about them?

If the child has the perception that you don't care about them, it is very difficult for them to tap into the will to try and please you or to do better. So much of this is tied to relationship. So I think the achievement gap is really an area that's taken so many teachers and leaders down the wrong road. I think Baruti Kafele really brilliantly put it in his book, *The Attitude Gap*, and what I've come to know as a turnaround principal and now a superintendent is that the issue is not the achievement gap.

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The issue has more to do with the mindset and attitude of children. So, for example, you can have two children who live in very tough neighborhoods, very tough home lives and one does extremely well in school and the other doesn't. Well, that's the difference? They're in the same environment however the gap is really between the students who have the will to strive for excellence and those who don't. And so you would say, well, how do you teach will? There are things that as teachers and leaders we have control over and there are things we can influence and there are things we have no control over.

We do not have any control over the fact that a child comes to our school in poverty. But you know what? We chose public education and our moral commitment – internal and external – is to make sure we educate all kids to the best of our ability. And there's areas that we have control over. We have control over our attitude and mind set toward children in poverty, which begs the question. As a teacher of a child in poverty, what do I believe about them? What do I believe about their possibilities in life? What do I believe they bring to the table that can enhance me as a person and them as student leaders?

We have complete control over the relationship which begs the question, what do you know about your child in poverty or any of your children for that matter? But what do you know about them and what do they know about you?

VICKI: You've touched on so many important points here because we know that – and something I talk about when I travel and speak is that you have to believe before you receive, whatever you expect from that class is what you're going to get from that class. But you also know that it's hard. A lot of folks in this situation, a lot of teachers are completely exhausted.

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What is your message to the exhausted teacher who says, "I'm scared, I'm afraid, I'm tired, I'm giving everything I have and it's just not enough."

ANAEL: I would say, as I'm learning as a superintendent, every day they give a big pie for me to eat. And I use that metaphorically, take one bite at a time. So just deal with the relationship piece and self-evaluate yourself in terms of how am I doing with this relationship? Do I know my students? Do they know me? So it is very easy to become overwhelmed. But what in life is significant and easy? It wasn't easy to get through the teacher certification program either, was it? No.

So it's difficult but we've developed strategies and we go to this venue to get insights on how to do better. So yes, I understand that you're tired and there are ways to deal with that. But you deal with it by just picking on at a time.

VICKI: So you've given us so much to dig into. Give us a one minute elevator pitch, you're talking to teachers who have students who are struggling, they have many things outside. We don't really even understand the lives they're living outside our classroom. They have so much going on and that teacher is trying to re-believe in that child, that teacher is trying to say, "Okay, I'm going to start again." What is your message to that teacher who's trying to reach that child and tempted to make an excuse, "Well, they're from a poverty situation so I don't know if I could do anything."

ANAEL: My message to that teacher is; one, you deserve ten minutes of your day in your room where you just focus and meditate for five minutes on the front end and five minutes on the backend.

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That's just for you to kind of channel into the very important work that you're about to undertake. The five minutes is to focus on how you will build the relationship in different circumstances with your students today. How will they know me and how will I know them? The more you know them – and think about it because, then, it becomes unconscious as you go through your day you will make the connections and be able to inspire them. And I will tell you, that will shift the attitude in terms of what you can believe about these students. You will find the glimpses of brilliance in these children no matter what their backgrounds are.

So there's five minutes for you on the front end, five minutes for you on the back end just to tone down and zoom into yourself, meditate five minutes. I do it in my own office.

And then there's five minutes at some point during a day where you are very intentional about the relationship that you have with your classroom. That's my recommendation.

VICKI: And that's great advice, I know just sitting still and pondering our students – I really want to address this since it's Thought Leader Thursday, educators, as we finish up. Anael said something earlier on. He said the soft bigotry of low expectations, that really flies in the face of what many think about high poverty situations. Yes, it's difficult, yes, it's hard but we really need to think about what are our expectations for students and are they just living up to our expectations? And you have to relate before you create. You've got to get to know those students because that's the heart of being a remarkable teacher. Get to know the students.

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