

Wednesday, September 27, 2000

Teaching that keeps the brain in mind

By **Charlotte Woodham**
River Bend Review correspondent

When Yulee Elementary School teacher Angel Cole applied for a scholarship on brain research, she wasn't sure what would happen. Chosen as first-year teacher of the year three years ago, Cole said she hoped the brain study would make her even better at her job.

She had always been interested in "this kind of thing," Cole said, but she wasn't really sure what brain research was all about.

"I had a vague idea because when I took Psychological Education I really enjoyed that part of that class. When this came available, I was like 'Ooh yeah, that sounds like something I really want to know more about.' "

Cole received the scholarship through the Florida Department of Education. And she had full support from Phyllis Rouse, principal of Yulee Elementary School .



Kirby Kitler does morning stretches before the start of Angel Cole's fifth-grade class at Yulee Elementary. Cole starts off class with dancing and singing which she calls, "Brain Gym", as part of the BrainSmart method.

-- James Crichlow/Staff



Yulee Elementary teacher Angel Cole gets her class warmed up for learning by singing and dancing together at the start of the period. Cole uses a technique called BrainSmart, which uses both sides of the brain.

-- James Crichlow/Staff

"I highly encouraged it because it's a wonderful program," Rouse said.

In June of 1999, Cole spent a full week studying brain research in Orlando.

"In the classes they tell you how the brain works, what makes the brain function, the different areas that make it work and all of that," Cole said.

The participants received a "a quick anatomy lesson of the brain," she said, with emphasis on how to get the right brain and left brain hemispheres to work together and cross over.

"Most people are either right-brained or left-brained," she said. "A right-brained person is a more creative thinker -- like most of our kids are."

The left-brained person, Cole said, is more organized; more meticulous.

"Most teachers teach to the left brain and most kids learn on the right brain. The goal is to incorporate it so the lessons will help them cross over the left and the right brain. The kids need to learn how to outline and to be organized, but yet we need to leave them with that creativity part too."

Rouse said one way Cole has achieved this goal is with the use of music.

"In an activity more than seven minutes, you lose kids' attention if you don't provide a means to keep their attention or re-engage the brain, Rouse said. "We've known for a while that music does re-engage the brain and reactive it."

Cole said another goal of the brain-research program is to teach children to be lifelong learners.

"That's what this brain research has done," she said. "It lets teachers help their kids to be lifelong learners -- not just step into the classroom and teach English or math skills that they soon forget."

For her class, Cole said the methods have helped increase test scores because they helped with memory skills, as well as relaxation skills.

Cole said in addition to music, she uses games and word association to help her students remember what they learn.

And Cole's methods are being used outside Nassau County, too.

According to Marcus Conyers, founder and co-owner of BrainSmart Inc. Professional Development, which conducted the classes Cole attended, teachers all over the world are practicing the strategies. About 500 to 1,000 are doing so in Florida alone.

"We were doing so much work here that we relocated from Canada to Winter Park four years ago," he said. "I would say that you have some of the most talented, creative teachers in the world in Florida."

After participating in his workshops, Conyers said the teachers usually go back to their school and get other teachers involved in the brain-research methods.

"That happened with Angel," he said. "She came back and teachers got so excited about what Angel was doing they invited us for a whole-day workshop at Nassau County."

Rouse agreed that the methods Cole learned are effective. So effective that she would like to see the entire staff at Yulee Elementary employing them, she said.

"Brain research will be required by me as part of our professional growth plan, which is a requirement from the county," Rouse said. "There's lots of interest in it, even though it takes a special type of teacher to take it truly to heart because it takes so much more work."

According to Rouse, Cole is that "special type of teacher."

"Angel's a forerunner and a teacher leader," she said. "She was a strong teacher before. That's why she was Nassau County's Teacher of the Year last year and First Year Teacher of the Year in her first year. But what she's gotten from the workshops has made her even better. She's gone from a strong novice teacher to an even stronger, more outstanding teacher."

For more information about the BrainSmart classroom practices, including weekly strategies for working with children, go to jacksonville.com, keyword BrainSmart.

Books by Conyers, Peak Performance Radiant Health and BrainSmart Early Start are available from BrainSmart Inc. at 127 W. Fairbanks Ave., No. 235, Winter Park, FL 32789 or by calling (407) 740-8095. Conyers' latest book, BrainSmart Strategies for Boosting Test Scores, which he co-authored with BrainSmart co-owner Donna Wilson, will be available at the end of this month. .