Education should no longer be mostly imparting knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potential.

—Maria Montessori

Todd was a classic underachiever with a long history of behavioral and motivational problems that reportedly had caused him to struggle throughout grade school. After multiple detentions and suspensions in high school, he dropped out with a 0.9 GPA. As if school wasn’t difficult enough for Todd, he had the added responsibility of taking care of his pregnant girlfriend and their forthcoming child. He ended up taking a job paying less than $5 an hour and subsidizing it with welfare checks.
Those who knew him said that he was a good kid, that he was smart, and that he had a lot of potential. Clearly something had gone wrong at some point along the way. “I was a square peg in the round hole of our school system,” he reflected years later.

I often hear people describe kids who struggle through school, get bad grades, or drop out with words like lazy, or dumb. Those who are more sympathetic might instead cast the blame for kids like Todd on his parents’ lack of attention, poor teachers, or a perhaps a lack of funding for intervention programs. “But what if kids like Todd are our fault?” I sometimes ask during the speeches I give to educators and school administrators around the country.

A lot of confused faces stare back at me. “How could he be our fault?” they think. “After all, we don’t even know Todd!”

That is true. They don’t know Todd. But after hearing just a few cherry-picked facts about his life, they, like many of us, would have jumped to certain assumptions about him, or about his family or teachers or available resources. But I see the real problem not being to whatever we attribute his failings, but rather our tendency to make assumptions about him at all. This is the primary failing in our current system of learning and teaching: we limit students’ potential based on what we assume they are capable of, rather than making it possible for them to show us.

**STARTING FROM WITHIN**

Successfully rewiring education begins not with technology, but with psychology. There are persistent misunderstandings about kids’ potential to succeed and we must take these into account before
trying to help. What happened with Todd is that we often fall victim to a psychological phenomenon in which our minds have a way of oversimplifying complex things we don’t understand. This phenomenon, which psychologists call the fallacy of the single cause, causes us to look for one easy-to-understand answer to a problem that is actually quite complex. Often this answer is the first thing that comes to our minds as the “cause” of a problem after we’re first made aware of it, but before we know all the surrounding circumstances. We may not even know that we don’t know all of these circumstances; it’s as though the further we are from something, the simpler it seems to us. For instance, we may have read a news article about Todd and suddenly consider ourselves fully informed, not realizing that articles and news clips on TV also carry this bias.

The fallacy of the single cause is related to another phenomenon called cognitive bias, which is when we make judgments about people or things based on our own personal experiences or circumstances. For example, if we dropped out of high school because our teachers were not very good, we might hear Todd’s story and, without realizing that it’s ourselves that we’re thinking about, subconsciously blame poor teaching for his woes as well. A social worker may blame socioeconomic factors, because they witness them on a daily basis; a psychologist may blame mental or emotional issues; and a successful person who found a way to succeed in school in spite of the odds may blame Todd himself for just not trying hard enough. And they all think they know this through experience!

The reality is that none, a few, or all of these may be the actual cause of a person’s failure. Cognitive bias is dangerous if we’re