



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on examining beliefs about and practices for working with struggling learners.

Unlocking Potential



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

As Paula Rutherford emphasizes in her book, *Why Didn't I Learn This in College?*, “Much has been written about the necessity for all educators to believe in the capacity of all children to learn. This is an extremely important belief system that all educators need to examine. Equally important, however, is our belief in our own capacity to teach these children so that they achieve at a high level.” It is easy for us to believe in children who come to our classrooms highly motivated with all the prerequisite skills and knowledge that they will need to tackle new learning. But, the reality is that some children will enter our rooms with gaps in their learning; they may not be able to grasp concepts or ideas as quickly and in some cases, they struggle as they try to keep up. Often these struggling learners become labeled as slow, underachieving, unmotivated, or eventually disabled. Out of frustration, some teachers reach the conclusion that these kids just cannot learn what they are supposed to teach them. This reasoning is often premature and shortsighted primarily

because these teachers have not yet learned how to address the learning needs of these students. There is a knowledge base about how to work with struggling students and it is the responsibility of today's educators to seek out information and resources and use that knowledge to unlock the potential of all students.

In this age of accountability, all children have access to the same curriculum, and all students are expected to demonstrate competency on state-mandated tests. Educators must honestly examine their practice, confer with colleagues to learn new approaches, and most importantly, keep an open mind about the capacity of all students to learn. In short, we must not only have the knowledge and skills to work with all students, but we must also believe in the capacity of our students and ourselves to be successful in this important work.

Use the ideas below as discussion starters; one or more may help teachers discover new ways of thinking about their work with struggling students.

Look at each student as a unique individual who sees the world in a creative way instead of a person with a disability or a deficit.

Far too often, children are made to feel damaged or incapable of learning. They are placed in small classes where they are supposed to be fixed but often continue to face frustration. Other students may sit passively in regular classrooms where their repeated efforts fall short and they become mired in failure. The best

classrooms are places where teachers view struggling students not as challenges but as opportunities to make a real difference in the lives of children. These teachers create classroom environments where every student comes to believe as Anne Wescott Dodd says, “I count, I care, I can.”

Adopt a permanent positive attitude about a child’s capacity to learn and use affirmative words to describe each student.

As teachers work with their students, they should move away from emphasizing their deficiencies; instead they should focus on each child’s level of readiness to take the next step in learning. Some teachers refer to a specific child’s low or high ability when the preferable approach is to describe the student’s current level of achievement. Most importantly, as teachers think and talk about their students, they should remember... person first, disability second.

Focus on each child’s predominant learning style as an entry point to teach content and skills.

It is also important to learn about each student’s personal interests and use these interests as a source of content to promote learning. For example, a teacher can use sports statistics to teach math, allow students to choose what they want to read to promote literacy, or use natural occurrences right outside the classroom window to teach science. Finally, when a teacher makes learning intriguing and relevant, students’ attention is captured and the learning possibilities open up substantially.

Believe that a child’s failure to learn might mean that the teacher has yet to find the right way to help him or her.

It is the responsibility of adults to keep open minds and seek out the routes by which each child learns in order to discover the student’s strengths and interests, and to continue to experiment until a successful technique is found. It is therefore essential that professional educators expand their repertoire of instructional techniques in order to match the necessary support to each student’s learning needs. The educational term to describe these supports is scaffolding. In the latest editions of both *Why Didn’t I Learn This in College?* and *Instruction for All Students*, Paula Rutherford includes a wide array of scaffolding strategies to support students who may have difficulty with reading, writing, attention, participation, organization, self-confidence, or social skills.

Make sure that efforts to recognize achievement are genuine.

Children know whether comments about their accomplishments are deserved or simply empty praise from their teacher. When teachers give students multiple opportunities on assessments as well as different ways for students to show what they have learned, children can experience authentic success. Eileen Dame, a successful reading teacher, cautions against using “bogus mercy grades.” Even students who struggle with their work fully know when efforts to recognize their achievement are legitimate or contrived.

Individualize homework based on a child’s learning plan or specific needs.

There is no written rule that every student must do the exact same homework. Some students catch on to new learning quickly while others require more time and practice. A wise teacher will assign follow-up work to advance each child’s learning and not simply make a blanket homework assignment. Homework can often be a frustrating experience for students because they are overwhelmed by the sheer volume, they are lost because they did not understand the classroom instruction upon which the homework assignment was based, or they are ready for a far more rigorous assignment. Teachers should make every effort to ensure that students are adequately prepared to complete homework assignments so that they are not practicing errors or engaging in a futile or unchallenging endeavor.

Be tenacious, do not lose heart, and keep searching for a child’s key to learning.

There are innumerable stories in the annals of education about that teacher who discovered the secret to a child’s ability to learn. I am always inspired when I read a testimony from an adult about a particular teacher

who was memorable because she believed in him when he was a student. In many schools across the country, teachers are working in learning communities where they are able to regularly collaborate with their peers. These collaborative teams are among the best sources for innovative or novel ideas to promote student learning.

Help students build healthy self-concepts.

As adults, none of us likes to feel inadequate or incompetent; neither do children. We should not give students empty praise but instead build their confidence about their capacity to achieve and learn. We can let children know that they are worthy by providing encouragement and praise based on effective effort. Children will continue to work hard as long as they know that they are still in the game and not hopelessly relegated to being a permanent bench warmer. When a child gives an incorrect answer, we should ask that student to explain her thinking. She might surprise us with her creativity and insights!

View parents as partners in the learning process.

No parent wants to have to rely on therapists or tutors to help their child learn. They do not want to witness the heartbreak of nightly tears brought on by frustration and feelings of inadequacy on the part of their child. As we work with children, we should communicate openly with parents letting them know the strategies we are using so that they, in turn, can use the same ideas at home as they work with their child. We should also rely on parents as a source of data about their children and be open to suggestions they provide. When all the adults in the life of a student unite in their support for a child's learning, the likelihood of success is enhanced and more likely to occur.

In parent surveys, parents place high value on schools helping their children be happy, fulfilled individuals who are positive about the learning they are experiencing. They also want schools to provide safe environments where their children are accepted and challenged. In order to provide these successful learning environments for children, teachers must believe in their students' capacity to learn, believe in their own capacity to teach all children, and believe that they can convince children to believe in themselves.

As I reflect back on my 40 years in public education, I can still envision the faces of some of my struggling students when they finally "got it." The joy they experienced was worth the effort they put forth as well as the time and attention I invested in them. There is no greater satisfaction for teachers than when they unlock the potential in a student and can watch from the side as the student soars to greater heights.

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