

## Every Moment Counts: Five Principles for Boosting the Achievement of Struggling Students

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*by Ari Gerzon-Kessler*

On one hand, students need master teachers who can bring the material alive. But for me there's no denying that to successfully cultivate a child's mind, a teacher must simultaneously connect with the student's heart.

—John Holt, *How Children Fail*

**A**ccepting a job teaching at Spangler Elementary School in 2002 was a shot in the dark for me. Spangler, in Longmont, Colorado, was on state watch for low test scores. After a week of teaching bilingual third-graders in Spanish, my second language, I sat frozen at my desk wondering what I had gotten myself into. Although I had a passion for learning and insights from my own educational experience, I was, in truth, a first-year teacher on an emergency license with exactly three days of elementary teacher training.

I had learned from my mom, Rachael Kessler\*—a pioneer in the field of social and emotional learning—that an educator must cultivate both the mind and the heart. She and her own mother, a self-educated Jewish immigrant who fled anti-Semitism in the Ukraine as a teenager, taught me not only that education is a precious opportunity but also that joy should be an integral part of learning. They told me a traditional story of how some Jewish families would cover wooden letters of the alphabet with honey so that children would identify learning with sweetness. I would often recall this lesson as I began teaching my bilingual students.

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\*See her “Welcoming the Inner Life at School,” immediately preceding.—Ed.

## Fundamental Principles

Despite facing the typical struggles of a novice teacher, my decision to balance rigor and sweetness had its rewards. To my surprise—and the school's—that first year, my bilingual students' rate of reading proficiency on the Colorado Student Assessment Program was 60 percent—a stark contrast compared to the prior year's proficiency rate of 7 percent.

In the second year, students in my reading groups averaged more than two years of growth in their reading level. In my third year, 92 percent of my students were “proficient” compared to 54 percent statewide, and 46 percent were “advanced proficient” on the state writing exam, compared to 10 percent statewide.

With encouragement from colleagues, I began taking notes on the strategies I was using and distilled certain guiding principles. Some of them confirm well-known pedagogical principles; others arose from my own synthesis of best practices that emerged from my experiences in the classroom. Combined, the five principles provide a foundation for educators seeking to meet the needs of low-income, second-language minority students more effectively:

- Convey a sense of urgency
- Develop personal bonds
- Foster a joy for learning
- Raise the bar with high expectations
- Cultivate social and emotional intelligence

## Convey a Sense of Urgency

The majority of my low-income English-language learners arrive at school months—if not years—behind in their academic progress. If a teacher does not extend their learning to evenings and weekends, how will they make the necessary strides to bridge the gap? Time is a precious resource that we can make our ally instead of our adversary. Teachers must convey a sense of urgency to students, parents, and colleagues.

Learning must occur beyond school walls. Students should know that reading and learning are like eating and sleeping—integral parts of our lives. Diligence and discipline are the keys to success. As Aristotle put it, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” If I can help my students develop Zenlike attention to the smallest details, a habit of excellence grows naturally.

Nightly reading is a seven-day-a-week responsibility, and students complete four homework assignments per night that typically include thirty minutes of reading, writing in reading logs, answering comprehension questions, and solving math problems. My students also spend at least 100 hours more than their peers on enrichment assignments at

home. Those nightly tasks are extensions of classroom work and demand critical-thinking skills. Through this process, the students are developing the habits of a good student and a responsible person. My students take pride in completing all twenty homework tasks each week.

A key component of student success is extensive practice with challenging material. For example, Miguel entered my classroom reading at a kindergarten level. But early on, I showed him the types of poems, short stories, and nonfiction passages and questions he would need to understand independently at his grade level for the state test. After six months of extensive practice and frequent feedback, I was delighted when Miguel, with a hunger to match his peers, surprised everyone by attaining proficiency on the third-grade state reading exam.

Without a solid rapport, students may perceive a teacher's sense of urgency as undue and unwelcome pressure. On the other hand, when a caring relationship is present, students perceive this "academic press" as respect.

## Develop Personal Bonds

The road to student growth and achievement runs through the teacher-student relationship. Through humor, sincerity, warmth, respect, and firmness, teachers can forge solid personal bonds with students that fuel their motivation to excel. If they feel recognized and excited about learning, they will rise to meet much higher expectations.

Being an effective educator hinges more on an ability to build relationships than on encyclopedic knowledge of content. Connecting with a child's heart is the best pathway to reaching his mind. I am not my students' friend, nor am I simply their instructor. Like a dedicated uncle, I am a focused, caring, ever-present mentor. But I work to strike a balance between discipline and bonding.

Much of the relationship-building work occurs in subtle ways: a smile, a pat on the back, a joke, extra encouragement, and in my case, leading an after-school sports club where we play basketball, soccer, kickball, or dodge ball and afterward discuss life lessons or values we can take away from our play. Humor, firm behavioral and academic expectations, personal praise, and questions about students' inner lives create a partnership for learning.

I also eat lunch with a different small group of students every other day. I inquire about their lives, and they share information with me about where they were born, the crazy characters in their neighborhood, or their own mischievous escapades. Stories range from Eduardo's story of when his father moved out to Maria's casual declaration that she has three boyfriends.

I also use this time to teach life lessons subtly, whether by urging them to do homework shortly after arriving home, sharing how learning

enriches my own life, or showing them how to listen and include others in a conversation. I have noticed that when students respect their teacher and one another, discipline issues decrease dramatically. Recalling how often adults underestimated me when I was a child, I interact with my students as if they were colleagues, in ways that make them feel respected and valued.

## **Foster a Joy for Learning**

When I genuinely infuse enthusiasm into any activity, students learn more because they are engaged. But how can teachers excite them when their own passion is not sufficient to inspire their enthusiasm? One powerful way to energize students is through daily rituals that they can look forward to.

For example, I shake hands with and greet individual students when they arrive and bid them good-bye when they depart. A bilingual poem awaits them at their desk, to be read first individually, then with a partner, and finally as a whole team. When I read aloud a chapter from our book, we flip the lights off and use a small lamp to make the setting more intimate. If students are working alone on math problems, I put on classical music. And students cheer when I make the announcement that we will play games to learn new ESL vocabulary or practice math facts. Those activities are loaded with integrated academic content, but students are so focused on the ritual that the learning occurs effortlessly.

Rituals play an important role in building community and in helping students feel comfortable enough to participate, be accountable, and excel. They foster a climate that is safe and that fosters learning, making our classrooms feel like a unique culture that hinges on everyone's contributions to be successful.

## **Raise the Bar with High Expectations**

Once students have met high expectations and experienced a taste of success, they will continue to demonstrate a commitment to excellence. Confidence leads to success. Teachers need to celebrate student successes just as a coach might, while clearly outlining what improvements still need to be made. Celebrating successes instills a sense of pride within each student.

I have seen that kids are like rubber bands: you can stretch them and they will meet the challenge. Why should I be content with half the class focusing on and listening to a classmate when the entire class is capable of doing so? Why should I give eight spelling words a week when the majority of my students can be successful learning eighteen words?

Teachers must cultivate a safe, productive, and collaborative culture so that each student feels his voice, interests, and efforts are valued. I talk

with students about how we are like a family, or pueblo. They are empowered as members of our community through their roles and responsibilities: being integral participants in our pueblo fosters a sense of teamwork and accountability. They take on jobs that become vital to the success of our classroom, whether it be recess helper, librarian, or door holder. One of my primary goals is to create a powerful sense of unity.

Kind-hearted and eager to demonstrate their ability to be responsible, most children are simply awaiting the opportunity to do something that matters. Lucia jumped at the chance to put X's next to incorrect words on the spelling tests, and Pedro volunteered his recesses to cut sheets of "money" for our classroom economy. When our bookshelves were a mess, Frida spearheaded an effort to bring order and beauty to our books. Providing students with opportunities to serve strengthens community, fosters character development, and helps our classroom run more smoothly.

Positive discipline is also crucial to improving achievement. I provide consistent expectations and consequences with warmth and firmness for students who fail to honor their responsibilities. And I rely on brief, but frequent, communication with students' families. In essence, I push my students to become responsible and accountable individuals. They learn from experience in my classroom that good decisions lead to freedom and success.

This year I have seen students who have been absent or who have lost assignments go to extraordinary lengths to have their homework ready the following morning. One student who was sick on a Friday had a classmate dictate the spelling test to him over the weekend and arrived on Monday with it completed. Another student copied by hand a three-page story that was followed by comprehension questions.

### **Cultivate Social and Emotional Intelligence**

Educators often find themselves so bogged down by the pressures to cover the curriculum that they focus disproportionately on developing students' academic capacities and fail to address the other dimensions of their being sufficiently.

Teachers all know that students enter each morning and go home each afternoon with their own worries, hopes, struggles, and triumphs. Failing to recognize and give them space to express their inner lives risks stunting their social and emotional growth. Instead, honoring their voices and nourishing their spirits will help them blossom in their social and emotional capacities and aspire to academic greatness.

With my youngsters, I emphasize the five P's (Punctual, Prepared, Polite, Productive, and Proud) and the three D's (Determination, Dedication, and Diligence). I try to provide opportunities for students to reflect on how they are progressing both individually and as a group.

Through experience with adversity, success, and even failure, students can develop these habits to enrich their academic and personal lives.

I place a priority on listening skills by urging all students to focus eyes and ears on the person speaking. To ensure a productive afternoon, we prepare our minds and hearts through a minute of silent breathing each day after lunch. And I encourage students to be introspective and develop greater self-awareness through sharing circles—where, among other things, students may share personal stories and feelings—goal setting, two-way diaries, and journal writing.

Students are particularly able to develop reflective qualities and their inner lives through writing. For example, my students write about what worries them, what makes them happy, what they wish for or are grateful for. Although only eight years old, they write with poignancy about topics ranging from friendship to life goals.

At the end of the day on Friday, my students and I gather in a circle to give compliments, share highlights from our week, and articulate goals for the coming week. By doing so, we honor each other and strengthen both our sense of purpose and our unity.

I remember one afternoon when I was about to send my class home and Antonio's hand shot up. Previously Antonio had spoken only through angry outbursts. Of my twenty-four students, he was the most resistant to our introspective activities. Nonetheless, Antonio walked up to the front of the class and in his slow, adorable stutter said, "I had all my homework today. Next week I want to listen better to Mr. Gerzon and you guys."

The class burst into spontaneous applause. I had goose bumps because I could feel our community uniting behind him. Antonio had often been hardened to the world; it was a triumph to see the shell begin to crack.

## Forging a Culture of Trust

Even a caring learning environment that honors those five principles cannot magically lift all students out of poverty or ensure that they will beat the odds. Nonetheless, I have learned never to underestimate a student's capacity and will to achieve. Through the partnership teachers build with students in the classroom, a new learning culture can emerge that meets the needs of even the most struggling students.

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*Ari Gerzon-Kessler teaches bilingual third-graders at Spangler Elementary School in Longmont, Colorado. Gerzon-Kessler is also the co-author of the book *Have No Career Fear*. To read more of his writing on education, visit his blog, [www.bridgingtheachievementgap.blogspot.com](http://www.bridgingtheachievementgap.blogspot.com).*