

To Touch the Hearts and Minds of Students with Learning Disabilities: The Power of Mindsets and Expectations

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We all possess assumptions about ourselves as well as others. We may not think about or be aware of these assumptions, but they play a significant role in determining our expectations and behavior. Even seemingly hidden assumptions have a way of being expressed to others. Not surprisingly, people begin to behave in accord with the expectations we have of them, and, when they do, we are apt to interpret this as a sign that our expectations are accurate. What we fail to appreciate is the extent to which our expectations subtly or not-so-subtly shape the behavior of others. In this article, the mindset of effective educators is described, especially in the process of teaching students with learning disabilities. An appreciation of this mindset can direct educators to become more skilled in reaching both the minds and hearts of youngsters with learning disabilities and helping them to become more motivated, successful, hopeful, and resilient.

Parents of a high school student, John, contacted me several years ago. They asked that I serve as a consultant to his school program. John had learning disabilities and was experiencing difficulty academically. I met with his teachers and asked each to describe him. One teacher immediately responded, "John is one of the most defiant, oppositional, unmotivated, irresponsible students we have at this school!"

Another teacher looked surprised at this assessment. In a manner that was respectful of her colleague's opinion, she said, "I have a different view. I think John is really struggling with learning, and we should figure out the best ways to teach him."

In a brief moment I heard two markedly contrasting descriptions of the same student from two adults who interacted with him on a daily basis. It seemed as if they were talking about two different students.

After this meeting I interviewed John. I asked him to describe his teachers. I did not reveal what any had said about him. In describing the teacher who portrayed him very negatively, John said, "She hates me, but that's okay because I hate her. And I won't do any work in her class."

Before I could even ask John to elaborate about their obviously strained relationship or to question the wisdom of his refusal to meet her class requirements, he said, "And don't tell me that I'm only hurting myself by not doing work (he must have heard that advice on numerous occasions). What you don't understand, Dr. Brooks, is that whatever I do in her class is never going to be good enough. She doesn't expect me to pass, so why even try?" He added that from the first day of class he felt "angry vibes" from her.

"She just didn't like me and soon I didn't like her. I could tell she didn't want me in her class just by the way she spoke with me. Right away she seemed so angry with me. I really don't know why she felt that way. So after a while I knew there was no way I could succeed in her class so I just decided that I wouldn't even try. It would just be a waste of time. She told me I was lazy, but if she was honest she would have to admit that she doesn't think I could ever get a good grade in her class."

John's face lit up as he described the teacher who thought that the primary issue that should be addressed was his struggle with learning. He said, "I love her. Well, you know what I mean. She really likes me. She actually told me that she thought I was smart and she had to figure out the best way to teach me. She's always there to help."

After hearing John's views of these two teachers, I could understand why he was a discipline problem with the first teacher but not with the second. His behavior with each of them reflected what he believed to be their expectations for him.

I recognize that it typically takes "two to tango" and most likely at some point John was responsible for adding fuel to the "angry vibes," thereby confirming the first teacher's negative perceptions of and expectations for him. However, as I will emphasize in this article, if we wish children and adolescents to change their attitude and behavior, the adults in their lives must have the courage and insight to change theirs first. This belief is important in raising or teaching all children, but perhaps more so for children beset by learning disabilities who are often burdened by feelings of failure and defeatism.

MINDSETS, ASSUMPTIONS, AND EXPECTATIONS

I discuss John and his two teachers in many of my workshops to illustrate what may seem obvious but in many ways is not, namely, that we all possess different mindsets or assumptions about ourselves as well as others (Brooks, 2001a,b; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003). These assumptions, which we may not even think about or be aware of, play a significant role in determining our expectations and behavior. Even seemingly hidden assumptions have a way of being expressed to others. Not surprisingly, people begin to behave in accord with the expectations we have of them and when they do, we are apt to interpret this as a sign that our expectations are accurate. What we fail to appreciate is the extent to which our expectations subtly or not-so-subtly shape the behavior of others. We vividly observed this dynamic operating with John and his two teachers.

If we examine the school environment, it should not be surprising to learn that different educators possess many differing assumptions about the process of education and about students with learning disabilities. Given these divergent

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views, a question can be posed, namely, “What is the mindset of an effective educator?” or, worded somewhat differently, “What are the assumptions and behaviors of an educator who is more likely to touch the mind and heart of students with learning disabilities and reinforce their motivation and hope?”

In attempting to answer this question in this article, I will draw upon the many interactions I have had with educators as well as my experiences as a principal of a school in a locked-door unit of a psychiatric hospital, as a consultant to both public and independent schools, and as a therapist for numerous children and adolescents with learning disabilities. My journeys have introduced me to teachers, school administrators, and other school staff who are skilled in affecting both the hearts and minds of students, who appreciate the need to focus not only on nurturing the intellectual lives of students but also their emotional lives, and who, through their words and actions, demonstrate a profound commitment to creating school climates in which all students will thrive.

These talented educators possess a mindset that guides their teaching style and their interaction with students, a mindset that fortifies a love of learning, even in those children and adolescents struggling with learning problems. The more aware educators are of the tenets of this mindset, the more they can rely on constructive guideposts in their work with students.

THE ASSUMPTIONS AND MINDSET OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATORS

The following are several of the key features that comprise the mindset of effective educators. They serve as the foundation upon which our practices are based. I believe that educators should learn, embrace, and incorporate this mindset into their teaching activities. If they do, the result will be that many more students with learning disabilities are saved from low self-esteem and failure and are assisted to lead more productive, fulfilling lives.

Addressing the Social-Emotional Needs of a Student Is Not an Extra Curriculum Activity

At one of my workshops, I was discussing the significant influence that educators have on the social-emotional life of students. A high school science teacher challenged the emphasis I placed on social-emotional factors by contending, “I am a science teacher. I know my science and I know how to convey science facts to my students. Why should I have to spend time thinking about the student’s emotional or social life? I don’t have time to do so, and it will distract me from teaching science.”

I know that there are many teachers and school administrators who would take issue with the views expressed by this science teacher, who believe as I do that focusing on a student’s social and emotional development may be as integral to education as are teaching specific academic skills and content (Brooks, 1999a; Cohen, 1999). However, I am also aware that there are many others who would concur with this teacher’s opinion. I believe that it is unfortunate that a dichotomy has emerged prompting some educators to perceive that nurturing a student’s emotional and social health is mutually exclusive from the task of teaching academic skills.

I am convinced based on my own experiences as well as the observations I have heard from many educators, that strength-

ening a student’s sense of self-esteem is not an “extra” curriculum; if anything, a student’s sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in a classroom provides the scaffolding that supports the foundation for enhanced learning, motivation, self-discipline, responsibility, and the ability to deal more effectively with obstacles and mistakes (Brooks, 1991, 1999a).

This focus on social-emotional factors is of special importance when working with children and adolescents with learning disabilities. These youngsters, given their history of learning difficulty and failure, are especially vulnerable to feelings of frustration, low self-worth, and helplessness (Brooks, 1999b, 2001a; Canino, 1981; Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992; Licht, 1983). These feelings were vividly captured in interviews and therapy I conducted with students with learning disabilities. The following are a representative sample of their comments when describing their learning disabilities:

“I was born to quit and God made me that way.”

“It (learning disability) makes me feel terrible. It makes me realize that there is a barrier that stops me from having a happy and successful future.”

“I always get confused. I don’t think I’ll ever learn. I must have half a brain.”

“I have no friends. Everyone teases me. I wish I was never born.”

“Sometimes I feel unrespected, unconfident, lower than other people. I also feel I could never do half the stuff I want to do and that makes me feel frustrated.”

Caitlin was seven years old when I first met her in therapy. She had reading and attentional problems and was referred by her parents and teacher because of her lack of confidence, her frustration and disappointment about not learning to read as quickly as her peers, and her reported headaches. In therapy I invited Caitlin to write a story about her difficulties. I told her, as I do all my patients, that I often read stories written by children at my workshops so that parents, teachers, and doctors can gain a better understanding of how children feel and can be more helpful to them.

Caitlin was motivated to write such a story with my assistance. She decided to use as a main character a dog named Hyper who had difficulty learning and concentrating, an obvious representation of herself. The theme of low self-esteem was evident at the beginning of the story when she wrote:

Hyper told herself that she would get over this problem some day, but she wondered if she really would. She was worried that when she grew up and her own puppies asked her something, she would not know the answer and they would wonder why their mother was not very smart. Thinking about this made Hyper feel very upset. She wasn’t sure what to do about it.

Caitlin’s words poignantly captured not only her low self-esteem, but also a fear expressed by many children and adolescents with learning disabilities, namely, that their condition in life will not improve. In essence, they have lost one of the most important gifts there is, the gift of hope.

I met Matt when he was a young adolescent. He was diagnosed with both learning disabilities and ADHD, was depressed, and entertained little hope for the future. His description of

school reminds us of the way in which many youngsters with special needs experience school and should prompt us to become even more committed to creating school environments that truly provide accommodations for and accept students with learning and attentional problems. Matt wrote:

School has been and still is something I dread profusely. Going to school has been like climbing up a tremendous, rocky mountain with steep cliffs and jagged, slippery rocks. This mountain is very grey and always covered in dark, murky, cold clouds. I step forth to take on this task of climbing this huge mountain. Each step is a battle against strong, howling, icy winds. The winds contain frigid rain that slams against my body, trying to push me down. I keep battling my way up. Sometimes I am knocked down and sometimes I have to stop to regain my strength. My body is numb. My hands shake like leaves in the wind as I claw myself up the mountainside. Not being able to open my eyes, I blindly claw myself up the steep cliff. I stop because I am in such great pain. I look up and see that my struggle has hardly begun. Sometimes I just do not want to go on any further.

In college, Matt, feeling more self-confident, expanded on his story of “The Mountain” and noted that the mountain could become “your grave or your greatest triumph.”

As you reflect upon the words of Caitlin and Matt as well as other youngsters with learning disabilities, place yourself in their shoes as they sit in a classroom. If we do not address their social-emotional concerns, their negative feelings about learning, and their sense of helplessness and hopelessness, they will not benefit from our instruction. I am not advocating that teachers become therapists, but that they recognize that the emotional state and psychological readiness of a student to learn are integral parts of the educational process.

Empathy Is One of the Most Vital Skills of an Effective Educator

I believe that one of the most important skills for a teacher to possess is empathy. Empathic educators are able to place themselves inside the shoes of their students and perceive the world through a student’s eyes. Goleman (1995) highlights empathy as a major component of emotional intelligence.

Being empathic invites us to ask, “Whenever I say or do things with students, am I saying or doing these things in such a way that my students will be most responsive to my message? Would I want anyone to say or do to me what I am saying or doing with my students?” For example, a teacher may desire to motivate a student with learning disabilities by exhorting the student to “just try harder.” While the teacher may be well-intentioned, such a remark is frequently experienced in a negative, accusatory way. When students feel accused, they are less likely to be cooperative. Consequently, the teacher’s comments are not likely to lead to the desired results.

However, if this teacher had been empathic, he or she would have wondered, “If I were struggling in my role as a teacher, would I want another teacher or my principal to say to me, ‘If you just tried harder you wouldn’t have this problem?’” I believe that the teacher would answer “no” to this question.

To highlight the significance of empathy, I have asked educators at my workshops to think of a teacher they liked and one that they did not like when they were students. I next ask

them to think of words they would use to describe each of these teachers. Finally, I comment, “Just as you have words to describe your teachers, your students have words to describe you? What words would you hope they use to describe you? Why do you hope they use these words? What words would they actually use?”

Teachers who appreciate the importance of empathy as a critical teaching skill, regularly ask these questions of themselves. I have met teachers who have assumed a proactive stance by requesting anonymous feedback from students; they have had the courage to ask students to draw and describe them, to list what they like about the class, and what they would like to see changed. Such an exercise communicates the message to students, “I respect your opinion, I value your input, you are a vital participant in the learning process.” Empathic educators connect more effectively and constructively with students so that learning is enhanced.

Labels that Accuse and Blame, Hinder Education

Closely linked to the concept of empathy is the avoidance of labels that might be interpreted as accusing or blaming students. An example was noted above of telling students to “try harder.” Another well-known word with strong negative connotations is “lazy.” The mindset of an effective educator constantly echoes the refrain, “I believe that all students come to school wishing to succeed. If they don’t, we must figure out how best to help them.”

I am sensitive to the issue of blaming since at the beginning of my career when children or adolescents did not improve in therapy with me or in the school at which I was principal, I was quick to label them “resistant,” “oppositional,” “unmotivated,” and “manipulative.” My use of such pejorative terms essentially served to blame the very youngsters I was supposed to be helping. One of the most noteworthy changes in my mindset or perspective occurred when I began to accept the notion that whether or not a child benefited from therapy or learned in school has as much, if not more, to do with the attitude, style, and behavior of the therapist or educator than what the child brings into the situation (Brooks, 1997).

I am not implying that we should blame ourselves when our techniques are not effective with a challenging student. Rather, I am advocating that instead of blaming the student through the use of accusatory labels, we should ask what it is that we can do differently so that the student may become increasingly cooperative and more comfortable engaging in the process of learning.

As an example, I worked with Billy, an angry and depressed 10-year-old with learning disabilities. He dealt with his anxieties about school by hiding behind the bushes of the school instead of entering the building. In our first meeting, Billy informed me that he hid behind the bushes because he liked the bushes better than he liked school. Rather than engage in a debate about the merits of bushes versus schools, I shifted my focus to his perceived strengths and asked him what he liked to do and thought he did well.

Many youngsters respond to such a question with a shrug and “I don’t know.” If that is their response, I simply say, “That’s okay, many kids aren’t sure what they’re good at but it’s something we can think about”—I never want to put children on the spot, especially with learning and/or language prob-

lems, by insisting they answer quickly. Billy's face lit up as he said, "I love to take care of my pet dog." Billy proceeded to spend much of the session in an animated fashion describing how to treat pets.

With Billy's permission, I spoke with the school principal who asked Billy to accept the "job" of "pet monitor" of the school, which entailed his ensuring that the pets were cared for, writing a short story with the assistance of his teacher about pet care (the book was bound and placed in the school library), and lecturing in each class of his elementary school about the care of pets. Billy's motivation to be in school, to write, and to learn increased noticeably. He was fortunate to have a teacher and principal with the courage to change their approach or script rather than the expectation that he would make the first move. Once they provided opportunities for him to shine, his seeming "resistance" disappeared.

All Students Learn Differently, and We Must Teach Them in Ways in which They Learn Best

A vast array of research in the fields of education, developmental psychology, and the neurosciences indicates that each child is different from birth, that children have different temperaments, learning styles, and kinds of intelligence (Brooks, 1998; Chess & Thomas, 1987; Gardner, 1983; Hallowell, 1996; Levine, 2002). Yet, even with this burgeoning amount of research, I hear some well-intentioned educators say, "We must treat all students the same. If we make an accommodation for this student, what will the other students feel? We must be fair."

I would not want any student to feel that a teacher is being arbitrary and unfair. However, we must recognize that fairness does not imply treating each student the same or expecting the same amount of work from each student. It has been my experience that if at the beginning of the school year, teachers assume a proactive stance and explain to their students that we all learn differently and that these differences require the implementation of a variety of accommodations, students will be less likely to feel that the teacher is unfair. What is unfair, and a prescription for frustration, anger, and failure, is to require students to learn and perform in identical fashion although they possess different learning and temperamental styles.

Some educators have expressed concern that making accommodations will be very time-consuming. However, in my consultations and workshops, when I describe the most common types of accommodations I have recommended for students with learning disabilities, most educators have remarked that these are realistic and achievable and do not require significant modifications in the classroom. Some of these accommodations include, but are not limited to:

1. Allowing students to take untimed tests.
2. Establishing a maximum time for homework each night so that the student does not burn out or experience a meltdown. Parents can verify that their child has worked for the maximum amount of time.
3. Providing assignments for the entire week on Monday (or at the end of the previous week) so that parents can help their children organize their time and their work.
4. Allowing students with attentional and learning difficulties to have two sets of books, one at home and one at

school, to lessen the pressure they experience about the possibility of losing books.

5. Permitting students with writing difficulties to use computers for all written work.

Effective teachers realize the "one size fits all" approach promotes not fairness but frustration and anger.

Educators Have a Lifelong Impact on Students and Their Resilience

As noted earlier, many students with learning disabilities are burdened with feelings of doubt and anxiety about their future. Effective educators understand that what they say and do each day in their classrooms can have a lifelong influence on their students (Brooks, 1991; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). This understanding of their impact adds meaning and purpose to their work, empowering them and lessening feelings of burnout.

In the past 15 to 20 years, effort has increased to define those factors that help at-risk youth to overcome adversity and become resilient (Brooks, 1994; Brooks & Goldstein, 2001, 2003; Katz, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1992). Schools especially have been spotlighted as environments in which self-esteem, hope, and resilience can be reinforced. For example, the late psychologist Julius Segal (1988), in discussing resilient youth, writes:

From studies conducted around the world, researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable such children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. One factor turns out to be the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult—a person with whom they can identify and from whom they gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that person turns out to be a teacher. (p.2)

A basic belief that permeates the mindset of effective educators is that they are in a unique position to be a "charismatic" adult in a child or adolescent's life, and they actively seek opportunities to do so. These educators recognize that all their words and actions in the classroom can have a profound impact on students, an impact that goes far beyond today, next month, or next year. While this influence relates to all students, it has special relevance for students with learning disabilities who are often weighed down by feelings of vulnerability and hopelessness.

How does one become a "charismatic" adult in a student's life? There are many ways, some very simple. For instance, in research I conducted in which I asked educators to recall their most positive memories of school when they were students, I discovered it is often the seemingly small gestures that have the most longlasting impact (Brooks, 1991). A smile, a warm greeting, a note of encouragement, a few minutes to meet alone with a student, and an appreciation and respect for different learning styles are but several of the characteristics that define a "charismatic" teacher. These gestures are powerful demonstrations of acceptance and caring.

When I emphasize the need for educators to be the "charismatic" adults in the lives of students, I am not minimizing the importance of educators being very well-versed and knowledgeable about the subject matter they are teaching. "Charismatic" teachers possess expertise in their subject areas

but they also appreciate that if students are to learn from them, they must touch their hearts as well as their minds.

The theme of teachers as “charismatic adults” was vividly captured in a poem written by 13-year-old Nickolas Walker, a poem about Ms. Alex Scott, one of his eighth grade teachers. His mother, Tammy Young, is also an educator. She told me about the impact that Ms. Scott had on Nickolas, a very articulate, likeable young adolescent who has struggled with learning and attentional problems. Nickolas titled the poem “The Black Sea,” and he wrote a very moving dedication—“Dedicated to Alex Scott, the teacher who saved me.”

The following is Nickolas’ poem:

Before I met you,
I lay trapped beneath the Black Sea,
Where the ordinary was mandatory.
You pulled me up—unconscious,
And waited for me to awaken.
It took me some time,
But I did pull through.
You taught me so much,
Now I must move on.
Your job, however, is not complete,
For others lie stranded
Beneath the Black Sea.
Waiting for you,
To reach them—like me.

Ms. Scott was obviously a “charismatic” adult for Nickolas, a teacher from whom he gathered strength. I believe that every educator can serve in this capacity, working closely with parents to nurture self-worth, confidence, hope, and resilience in children and adolescents.

Students Will Be Increasingly Motivated to Learn from Us if We First Meet Their Basic Needs

Effective educators recognize that if learning is to take place in their classrooms, their first task is to create a safe environment in which all students feel secure, comfortable, and motivated to learn. This task assumes greater importance when interacting with students with learning disabilities. Such students have often encountered more frustration and failure in school than their peers who do not have learning problems. Consequently, they feel more vulnerable when exposed to classroom assignments. As one teenager reported, “School is the place where my deficits rather than my strengths are highlighted.”

Psychologist Edward Deci is one of the foremost researchers in the area of motivation (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992). Deci suggests that students will be more motivated to confront and persevere at tasks when certain basic needs have been met. Deci has highlighted three such needs for fostering motivation in children with learning and attentional struggles. They are: (a) to belong and feel connected to the school (I would also add the words “to feel welcome”), (b) to feel a sense of autonomy and self-determination, and (c) to feel competent.

Let’s examine these needs and their application more closely.

To Belong and Feel Connected: Educators should ask themselves, “How do I help each student feel welcome in my classroom?” When I queried students of all ages about what a

teacher or school administrator could do each day to help them feel welcome in school, the two most frequent responses “were being greeted warmly by name” and “having a teacher smile” at them. Obviously, seemingly small gestures can go a long way toward helping students feel welcome.

Also, if students are to feel welcome and connected, we must teach them in ways in which they can learn most effectively. As noted earlier, this requires that we provide appropriate accommodations.

The importance of feeling welcome and known by staff was reinforced in a report about safe schools issued by the U.S. Department of Education (Dwyer, Osher, & Wagner, 1998). They note:

Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing school violence. Students often look to adults in the school community for guidance, support, and direction. Some children need help overcoming feelings of isolation and support in developing connections to others. Effective schools make sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality, personal time with children. (pp. 3-4)

A Massachusetts Department of Education (1988) report about at-risk students also captures the significant role an educator can assume:

Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone within school they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them. (p. 17)

In this regard, I met a high school teacher who informed more than 150 students in his different classes at the beginning of each school year that he planned to call each of them twice at home in the evening during the school year to find out how they were doing. He said that the calls took only about 7-8 minutes an evening and had very positive results, including students being more respectful and more disciplined in class and doing their homework with greater regularity. This teacher was very skilled at welcoming students into his life.

To Feel Autonomous and Possess a Sense of Self-Determination: At the core of most theories of motivation and self-worth are the concepts of ownership and self-determination (Adelman & Taylor, 1983; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Kohn, 1993). Motivation is reinforced when students feel that their voices are heard and respected, and when they feel they have some control over what transpires in their lives. To practice self-determination requires solid problem-solving, decision-making, and organizational skills. Since these skills are often lagging in youngsters with learning disabilities, they are at a disadvantage in developing a sense of ownership. Exacerbating the situation is that adults who are more likely to tell these struggling children and adolescents what to do than they are to advise youngsters without learning problems.

Thus, while children with learning disabilities yearn to accomplish things on their own, their limited skills in key areas make it difficult for them to do so. They feel that they are constantly being told what to do (often, they are) and that their lives are being directed by others. Consequently, they are less

likely to be cooperative or engage in activities that they feel are being imposed on them. If anything, their main motivation may be to avoid what others wish them to do, and a power struggle is likely to ensue.

Educators working with students with learning disabilities appreciate that, as an initial step, they must de-mystify for students with learning disabilities the nature of the disability. Once this understanding is in place, the next step is to teach students to set realistic short-term and long-term goals, to develop and implement strategies to achieve these goals, and to establish new goals or attempt different strategies when necessary. In addition, it is essential that educators provide these students with ongoing opportunities to use and nurture these problem-solving skills (Shure, 1994).

The following are a few examples:

A group of students with special needs was engaged in conducting research about existing charities. Based on their research findings, they determined which charity to support and the most effective ways of raising money. These activities enhanced their self-esteem and reinforced the academic skills involved in the project.

Teachers can give students a choice of which homework problems to do. For instance, if there are eight problems on a page, students can be permitted to choose for themselves which six of eight to complete. In feedback I have received from educators, they report receiving more homework on a regular basis when allowing their students some choice.

The question of ownership is also strongly implicated in effective discipline techniques. Included in the mindset of effective educators is the understanding that a major goal of discipline—in addition to establishing a safe and secure environment—is to develop self-discipline, which requires teaching and educating students, not humiliating or intimidating them (Curwin & Mendler, 1988, 1997; Mendler, 1992). Self-discipline and self-control are significant predictors of readiness for, as well as success in, school (Blair, 2002; Strayhorn, 2002a, b).

Yet, many children with learning and attentional problems, especially those with a diagnosis of ADHD, demonstrate major difficulties developing self-discipline. Adults describe such children as “acting before they think”; and, unfortunately, these children, who are most in need of limits and structure, are quick to experience such limits as unfair and arbitrary impositions on their life. Thus, if teachers are to help these students develop self-control, they must help them understand the purpose of rules and engage them within reason in creating rules, guidelines, and consequences that govern the classroom.

One strategy I often recommend for accomplishing this feat involves teachers at the beginning of the school year reviewing several nonnegotiable rules with the class (typically involving issues of safety and security). Next, teachers can ask students what additional rules they believe are necessary for both students and teachers in order that the class run smoothly, the best ways to remember and/or be reminded of the rules so students don't feel they are being nagged, and what the consequences should be if someone forgets a rule. Students are more likely to remember and adhere to rules they have helped to create. Skillfully involving students in this process does not result in anarchy, but in an increased appreciation of the necessity for rules and an increased motivation to follow the

rules (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). The process reinforces a feeling of ownership, a vital feature of motivation.

Before leaving the topic of self-determination and autonomy, it is important to note that when individuals become proficient problem solvers, they develop an increased sense of control of their lives. This feeling of control is a dominant part of the mindset of adults with learning disabilities who are leading successful lives. As Gerber, Ginsberg, and Reiff (1992) discovered, “Control is the key to success for adults with learning disabilities. . . . Control meant taking charge of one's life and adapting and shaping oneself in order to move ahead. . . . Control was the fuel that fired their success” (p. 479).

To Feel Competent: The third basic need described by Deci is the need to feel competent. As we noted earlier, many children with learning disabilities have low self-esteem and do not feel competent. Feelings of incompetence prompt these students to retreat from challenges and engage in avoidant behaviors that serve to intensify an already difficult problem.

Effective educators recognize that if students are to feel competent, they must receive realistic encouragement and feedback. Students know when we do not believe in them, when we expect them to fail, as was vividly demonstrated by John, the high school student described at the beginning of this article. Students with learning disabilities, confronted with many frustrations and failures, typically require encouragement even more than their peers in order to bolster their fragile self-esteem. A focus on encouragement should never be mistaken for giving false praise or inflated grades; students are quite perceptive about knowing when they are receiving undeserved positive evaluations (Brooks, 1999b).

To assist at-risk students to feel competent, educators must identify and reinforce what I have termed each student's “islands of competence” (Brooks, 1991). These islands are areas that are (or have the potential to be) sources of pride and accomplishment. We witnessed that with Billy when he was enlisted to display his interests in dogs through the role of a “pet monitor.”

Researchers and clinicians have emphasized the important of recruiting selected areas of strength or “islands of competence” in building self-confidence. For instance, Rutter (1985), in discussing resilient individuals, observed, “Experience of success in one arena of life led to enhanced self-esteem and a feeling of self-efficacy, enabling them to cope more successfully with the subsequent life challenges and adaptations” (p.604). Katz (1994) stated, “Being able to showcase our talents, and to have them valued by important people in our lives, helps us to define our identities around that which we do best” (p. 10).

There are numerous ways of helping students with learning disabilities feel more competent. One of the most obvious is to teach them in ways in which they can learn best in order to master the material. Another strategy I frequently use, which can be linked to academic tasks, is to provide these students with an opportunity to help others. Helping others promotes a sense of ownership and pride. For example, students experience a more positive attachment to school and are more motivated to learn if they are encouraged to contribute to the school milieu (Brooks, 1990, 1991; Rutter, 1980; Werner, 1993).

Billy serving as “pet monitor” and teaching others about the care of animals illustrates the power of what I call “contributory

activities.” Other examples include: older students with learning disabilities reading to younger children; a hyperactive child being asked to assume the position of “attendance monitor,” which involved his walking around the halls to take attendance of teachers while the latter took attendance of students; and the use of cooperative learning in which students of varying abilities work together as a team with each bringing their unique strengths to different projects (Brooks, 1991, 1999b).

One of the most powerful approaches for helping students feel competent is to lessen their fear of failure, a fear that is magnified in students with learning disabilities. Many of these students engage in self-defeating coping strategies to avoid the risk of failure and humiliation. I have worked with many students who would rather be a class clown or a class bully than appear stupid. In their desperate attempt to avoid failure, they go down a path that takes them farther away from possible success.

As I have emphasized, effective teachers start with the assumption that each student comes to school wishing to learn and be competent. If students appear unmotivated, it is often a sign that they have given up. I believe that the fear of failure and humiliation is one of the greatest obstacles to learning and is more acute when children struggle with learning disabilities. This fear permeates every classroom and, if it is not actively addressed, it remains an active force, compromising the joy and enthusiasm that should be part of the learning process.

An effective intervention for overcoming a fear is to address it directly. For this reason I advocate that at the beginning of the school year teachers ask their class, “Who feels they are going to make a mistake or not understand something in class this year?” Before any students can respond, teachers can raise their hands as a way of initiating a discussion of how the fear of making mistakes affects learning. Teachers can share some of their own experiences about making mistakes when they were students. They can involve the class in problem solving by asking what they can do as teachers and what the students can do as a class to minimize the fear of failure and of appearing foolish. Issues of being called on and not knowing the answer can be discussed.

Openly acknowledging the fear of failure renders it less potent and less destructive. We can teach students with learning and attentional problems that not comprehending certain material is to be expected and that the teacher’s role is to help them to learn. One teacher reported that when she engaged her class in this kind of discussion at the beginning of the year, she had the “most discipline-free year” she had ever had. Students are less likely to misbehave and more willing to take appropriate risks when they do not feel vulnerable.

Effective teachers recognize that if children and adolescents with learning disabilities are to succeed and become more hopeful in school, their basic needs to belong and feel connected, to be active participants in their own education, and to experience the joys of competence and accomplishment must be met. Teachers with such a mindset realize that it is their responsibility to provide the climate in which these needs can be satisfied.

Parents Are Our Partners, Not Our Adversaries

Effective teachers strive to develop and maintain close working relationships with parents, appreciating the impor-

tance of this bond in the child’s success. Not surprisingly, this task is smoother when the children involved do not present major learning or behavior problems in the classroom. However, when children do display these problems, nurturing teacher-parent relationships that are free of blame and accusation is a more formidable challenge. For the sake of the child, that challenge must be confronted.

I have witnessed many situations in which teachers and parents have slipped into the roles of adversaries, and the child is the one who suffers. I have also visited schools in which a strong effort was made by both parents and teachers to ensure a collaborative and respectful relationship. For instance, in one elementary school, teachers called each parent the day before school began to express their desire to work closely together; they encouraged the parents to call should they have any questions or concerns, and they conveyed the wish for a positive relationship throughout the year.

The teachers in this school told me that they initiated the practice of calling parents before the beginning of the year when they realized that typically the first time they contacted parents was when there was a problem; thus, their initial contact centered around a negative issue, more likely adding tension and mistrust to the relationship. They reported that communicating with parents in a more positive way enhanced their relationship with parents and, very importantly, had a beneficial effect on the learning and motivation of the students. While this trusting, respectful relationship is important for success of all students, it has special relevance for parents of children experiencing difficulty in school since as one parent told me, “I am always poised for criticism when a teacher calls or I go to a school meeting. It is a very painful time for me.”

It is obvious that when parents and teachers make an effort to establish a respectful relationship, the children are the beneficiaries.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS: SPECIAL NEEDS OR NEEDING TO FEEL SPECIAL

In ending this description of the mindset and expectations of effective educators, one other component requires highlighting, and in many ways, is interwoven with several of the others. I realize that for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is securing accommodations and funding, we must use the label “special needs.” In my conversations with educators who touch the minds and hearts of their students, I am left with the impression that it would be more in concert with their philosophy and approach if we replaced the term “special needs” with the words “every child (and I might add, every adult) who enters school needs to feel special.”

I believe that the mindset and accompanying expectations and behaviors of effective educators are dominated by a motivation to help all students feel special, appreciated, and successful. We can accomplish this by being empathic, by treating students in the same ways we would like to be treated, by finding a few moments to smile and make them feel more comfortable, by educating them in ways in which they learn best given their learning styles, by painstakingly avoiding any words or actions that might be accusatory, by minimizing their fears of failure, and by identifying, reinforcing, and displaying their islands of competence.

When we can achieve these goals, we will truly become the “charismatic” adults of children and adolescents with learning disabilities. We will have touched their hearts and minds and, in the process, they will learn from us and carry the gifts of knowledge, acceptance, and resilience into their adult lives. What a wonderful legacy the effective educator bestows upon the next generation.

As we commit ourselves to developing a positive, hopeful mindset and high and realistic expectations, let us keep in mind the words of Goethe: “Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them become what they are capable of being.”

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