

Pity and Low Expectations . . .

Can we look at our students without seeing them as “forever damaged”? It can be challenging when we are familiar with a student’s trauma history; when we are intimately aware of the abuse, neglect, or traumatic events that our students have suffered, it all becomes more real to us. Empathy is a good thing, but all too often, I hear doubts about a student’s learning capacity or ability to “overcome the odds” creep in, as though trauma equated directly with school failure, and I wonder who gave us permission to quit. Do we give up because we’re afraid that this student’s experience may be his or her truth? Are we afraid that we are not able to help, so quitting is our attempt to manage that overwhelming sense of hopelessness? How can we empower our students as well as ourselves to see their potential?

Can you identify your struggling students within the first month of school? If you work in an early learning environment, you are probably particularly attuned to which of your students will be the hardest to work with and who will struggle more in life. Can you look past these students’ challenges, or at least leverage them as learning and growing experiences? Which do you see first, the deficit or the strength?

Many of us get hyper-focused on what happens during the 14 to 18 hours our students aren’t with us. We feel frustrated by the choices that students’ caregivers make and by what can feel like blatant sabotage of all the hard work we are doing in school. Sometimes we experience a sense of utter helplessness that threatens to destroy our motivation to keep going. So I want you to stop and think about the 6 to 10 hours you *do* have with those students. I want you to focus on the amazing things you can accomplish in those hours, because that is what you can control. We have an incredible opportunity in this period to show students what they are capable of, to expose them to different ways of being, to teach them healthy ways of managing, to empower them to

learn and grow in productive ways, and to love them both for who they are and for who they may become.

. . . Or a Focus on Strengths and Potential?

Once we identify our students who struggle, how can we help them heal and develop in ways that will set them up for success? Can we focus on our students’ strengths rather than their deficits? Can we view our students as overflowing with potential rather than doomed to failure? It’s up to us.

What would it look like if we shifted our efforts from focusing on students’ struggles to developing their strengths? At the end of each day, do you fixate on the mistakes you made, the work you didn’t accomplish, and the unpleasant interaction you had with a colleague or student? Or do you end the day with gratitude, affirmation, and a little toast to your accomplishments? Which is more helpful? According to research, a positive mindset would help you feel happier, more satisfied with work, and more patient as well as lead to an increased willingness to help others and try new things. Sounds like something worth pursuing.

One of my favorite movie scenes comes from *Moneyball* (you can view it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn7C6jgl0RI>) and features Oakland A’s catcher Jeremy Brown’s famous home run. Brown has convinced himself that he could never run all the way to second base on a well-batted ball. His negative self-image, an incarnation of the idea of being “forever damaged,” seems to consume him. When he hits a long drive, he knows he should go for the double, but he slips rounding first base. Was his fall subconscious self-sabotage? Was it a result of his self-imposed limits? He scrambles back to first base in the hope that he hasn’t caused an out for his team. He seems surprised when the first base coach and even players from the other team

encourage him to get up and continue running. It takes seconds before he even realizes that he had hit a home run over the fence.

Many of us, along with our students, develop a notion that “I can’t,” “I’m too stupid,” or “I will never be good enough.” Trauma-affected individuals sometimes use their trauma as a rationale for imposing low expectations on themselves or dismissing the idea of achieving success. That negative self-talk sometimes overrides our capacity to recognize the times when we *do* succeed. It can make us blind to the home runs that our students and we ourselves are hitting. It gets in the way of our ability to see the good in ourselves and in others.



Take a moment and think about some “home runs” that you and your colleagues have hit this year. What unexpected strides did you make? Did you exceed your own expectations at all? Write down some of these key professional accomplishments.