

Insights and Strategies for Teaching At-Risk Kids

*“Teaching Kids Who Can’t, Won’t, or Don’t Even Try To
Learn, Behave, Cooperate, or Follow Procedures.”*

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Presentation

By

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AT-RISK STUDENTS:

A Presentation, a Handout, and a Summative Statement

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I. Failing At-Risk Kids Is a Failing Strategy

“At-Risk Students: Children expected to fail because teachers cannot motivate, control, teach, or interest using traditional teaching methods and pre-determined, grade level curriculum.”

Students with a history of struggle and failure accept the inevitability of continued struggle and of ultimate failure. They do not respond as normally expected to class management strategies such as rewards, punishment, threats, grades, and flunking, however effectively teachers may use such strategies on other students. The at-risk students’ misbehavior, disruption, and lack of cooperation are a constant, daily hassle for everyone: administrators, teachers, other members of the class, and the misbehaving students themselves.

Teachers, concerned with class management, group instruction, increased achievement, covering the course material, school expectations, and improved test scores, react to the misbehaviors as causal factors instead of responding to them as symptoms of deeper, underlying problems. Well-meaning teachers punish the offenses rather than recognize and acknowledge the behaviors for what they are; defense mechanisms. Teacher mistreatment and lack of understanding prevents the acknowledgement of the underlying cause and effect, and exacerbates the at-risk kid’s defensive misbehavior.

Students currently failing, those who have previously failed, and those at risk of failing, suffer pervasive pain, embarrassment, and anguish inflicted by fear of failure and repeated failure. Compelled to attend classes they find boring, threatening, meaningless, difficult, too advanced, or impossible, at-risk students are embarrassed, scared, unmotivated, and resigned to failure.

Unwilling and unable to admit their hurt, fear, and shame as failures, they cover their feelings with bravado, swagger, and “an attitude”. They live in fear—fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of judgment, fear of having their lack of ability exposed, and fear of being labeled “dumb”. Most of all, they fear they may actually *be* dumb, making defensiveness a desperate matter of ego and psyche survival.

A Mismatch

The challenges of teaching students who don’t learn can be daunting, but by the time at-risk kids languish in classes year after year, they compound learning problems with their defeatist attitude, defensive cover-up, and “failure identity”. Teachers can quickly become overwhelmed and overburdened by their incessant misbehavior, apathy, or interference.

This mismatch, and the notorious social, emotional, psychological, physical, developmental, and hormonal influences on students impair student learning and frustrate their teachers. Moreover the failure of many impoverished and deprived students was predestined, and could have been predicted pre-natally

Kids begin their mandatory schooling on the basis of their sixth birthday occurring in relation to the beginning of the school year, thus there is a full year or more difference in the youngest and oldest children in the same class. Just one of many factors noted by Educational Testing Service—E.T.S., the company that administers 50 million tests annually, concludes in its study, *The Family: America's Smallest School*, www.ets.org/family report:

“By age 4, the average child in a professional family gears about 20 million more words than the average child in a working class family, and about 15 million more words than children in welfare families.”

And concluded at the heart of the report: “By the time these children start school at age 5, they are far behind, and tend to stay behind all through high school. There is no evidence that the gap is being closed.”

“Kids start from platforms of different heights and teachers don't have a magic wand they can wave to get kids on the same platform.” Said Paul E. Burton, a senior researcher, “If we're really interested in raising overall levels of achievement and in closing the achievement gap, we need to pay as much attention to the starting line as we do the finish line.”

Caused by a mismatch between school's teaching objectives and the student's lack of prerequisite knowledge, interest, parental help, and learning skills, failure becomes agonizingly “at-certain” for most of them. Suffering failure, embarrassment, and pain, students resort to defensive ploys such as clowning, disrespect, passive aggression, anger, violence, disruption, defiance, apathy, retaliation, vandalism, bullying, and hostility to conceal their discomfiture. Being “bad” and uncooperative is preferable to being dumb. Defiance and hostility preclude exposure of their incompetence. Apathy or clowning avoids the pressure of participation. And, misbehavior gets attention, peer approval, and relief from boredom. While such behavior is self-defeating, at-risk kids consider the false front preferable to the reality of displaying their inadequacies and revealing the pain of their anxiety and shame.

Many good teachers, with the best of intentions, fail to recognize and accept misbehavior as defensive cover-ups. Reacting to symptoms rather than responding to the underlying causes of defensiveness, teachers unwittingly exacerbate the troublesome misbehavior. However well intentioned and caring are the teachers, unless and until teachers understand and accept the embarrassment, fear, and defensive ploys, they will continue to contribute to the problem. No amount of punishment or disciplinary action will counteract the student's deliberate, desperate, subterfuge.

Schools Have Two Reasonable Responses

Two realistic choices are these: 1.) Remove the kids from class. Removal may help the teacher, but research indicates that it is disastrous to the student as well as ineffective as a remedial procedure. 2.) Change the failure-punishment procedures that condemn, stigmatize, and marginalize the hapless kids, guilty only of defending themselves against the ravages of failure and punishment.

Such defensive behaviors are difficult for people who use reason and logic rather than understand emotions, feelings, and fear. However difficult change may be for teachers, changing the student-teacher relationship and teaching strategies are the only viable solutions, given the current school structures, and the accompanying research on embarrassment, failure, and negative motivation. It is unreasonable that educated, experienced, professional adults ask defenseless students to change totally while the teachers can't change enough to accept that the student can't change.

Removing the students always begs the questions, to where and to what? Furthermore the separate education, and grouping of similar students has proven a dismal failure for anything except the convenience to the school and the teachers. Failure is never an acceptable option. If school attendance is mandatory, teaching is mandatory. The first alternative is for teachers to feel empathy for at-risk student's pain, accept their unfortunate circumstances, and understand their defensive ploys. The second is to build a classroom community where all learners are engaged.

If the schools cannot or will not provide problem students with basic human understanding, acceptance, belonging, and communication, that void in student's needs may be filled by misguided, illicit, undesirable behaviors, and by unknown individuals. Having devoted a considerable amount of my career, time, energy, and professional effort toward solving "at-risk" problems, I recommend the following ideas; considerations, approaches, and procedures that I have found make a difference in changing at-risk student's attitudes, self-image, identity, and achievement.

Schooling Is For Everyone

Not every student has caring parents, a home, adequate living conditions, extended family, friends, a scout troop, a religion, supervision, discipline, or enough to eat. School is the *only* experience that every student shares in common. For most of these children, their schooling and their teachers are the last best hope for finding acceptance, understanding, belonging, meaning, and anyone in their lives who cares. For teachers classroom interaction is a chance to salvage their ravaged lives and make a real difference in this crucial, formative time in a student's development. Outside of family members, teachers are likely to be the most influential person in a kid's life. Students who are unloved, untaught, and unwanted at home must not be subjected to more of the same by the school policies. Parents may not know better but professional educators certainly do.

Perhaps teachers should have a Hippocratic Oath like physicians take of "Do no harm" as a priority commitment to students. In their responsibility for student achievement, teachers are naturally concerned about conditions conducive to learning and to factors that impinge on student's ability to learn. Often they are concerned with the needs of the group to the exclusion of the individuals who present obstacles. Teachers must never forget that the students with the most unlovable personal characteristics need loving responses, accepting behaviors, and smiling approval the most. Until the bureaucrats get school right for at-risk kids, it is up to overworked individual teachers to begin making a difference—kids, all kids, are worth whatever it takes.

Dropping Out Can be Predicted and Prevented

Dropping out does not begin in high school; that is simply where most students are when they reach the dropout age. Delinquent behavior begins in elementary school and is a process through which

at-risk students proceed through school. For many students it begins with impoverished homes, poor parenting and deplorable life circumstances. Barbara Kingsolver offers this definition of at-risk children: “Students whose parents are too immature themselves to guide wisely; too diminished by poverty to nurture; too far from opportunity to offer hope.” To which I add, “too far below grade-level to comprehend lessons, too far behind in prerequisite knowledge to acquire new information, too demoralized to care, too embarrassed to acknowledge the problem, or too preoccupied with defending his or her dignity to pay attention.

The kids were normal babies when they arrived on earth. What has happened since then occurred in an adult-managed world. For many students, failure and labeling started on their first day in school. For students, who have acquired coping skills and survival strategies that are self-defeating, schools have the obligation to teach and re-teach them acceptable behavior, not compound the unfortunate problem.

Schools have students for ten years of their formative, vulnerable lives. Schools control and provide for virtually every minute of kids lengthy schooling experiences. But, until teachers recognize the student’s pain, fear, and the life-altering shame of failure, they will continue contributing to at-risk students’ anguish. The students, devoting full-time to defending their egos, avoiding exposing their incompetence, and concentrating on their bravado and swagger, acquire even greater behavior problems. They are on a slippery slope toward dropping out to wasted life and a dismal future. Schools are the way they are because those in power made them that way and only those in power can change them. Students can do little or nothing about their pending fate except to live with it now and forever.

II. Beliefs and Assumptions to Ponder

Nothing succeeds like success; nothing fails like failure. Kids rarely profit from F’s or being told they are failures. Failure as an educational technique is a failure—unacceptable, unnecessary, and, for at-risk students, counterproductive. Tragically, failing grades in school are also traditional, emotional, accepted, and expected.

Students who have acquired a “failure identity” cannot reverse their plight single-handedly, or suddenly “get to work” without significant intervention by someone who can empathize and take the initiative and responsibility for gaining their trust and respect. (Mutual, of course.) Kids at risk cannot “pull themselves up by the bootstraps”. They have no boots. The same dynamics that created their failure prevent them from overcoming their failure.

An outstanding characteristic of at-risk children is that they feel no responsibility for what happens to them. They are likely to see themselves as victims – helpless, hapless dupes. They see their fate as being unlucky, hopeless, or outside of their control. Until students begin to participate in factors that directly affect them, reflect on their future, and accept help, they cannot change. Teachers cannot “give” responsibility, but they can give participation and include these marginalized students in class activities to make them part of the participating class group.

Failure, tests, grades, and report cards are school’s ultimate, conspicuous, public rejection of at-risk kids. “Everyone“ knows who is “dumb”, who is failing, and who has previously failed. Being in the

same class for 180 days, observing the teacher, hearing the interaction, witnessing the behavior, and knowing their own reactions, most kids could rank order the class accurately according to their grades. Talking with a kid in a math class, I asked, “Are you the smartest kid in this class?”

“No.”

“Are you the second smartest?”

“Un-un”, shaking his head side-to-side and pointing, “She is.”

“Are you the dumbest kid in this class?” I asked, deliberately, unemotionally, in a matter of fact tone.

“Un-un”

“Who is the dumbest?”

“Those two are.”

“Really, they are both the dumbest?”

“Yeah, they are about the same.”

”Who’s the next dumbest?”

“That kid over there?”

I have no doubt that he was pretty sure he knew where he and other kids would rank. The emphasis on grades, grading, scores, marks, errors, and the “Wadjet” syndrome make classmates progress and ranking well known. Peer interest, associations, comments, and grades as a priority interest, make grading and ranking public knowledge and concern.

For children at-risk to see themselves as capable, the classroom grading and marking procedures must be changed to give the students a chance to experience success—otherwise why try? Shall a student with three of twenty spelling words spelled correctly, work to get a higher F by getting six more right? Or a kid with zero in math endeavor to raise the grade to 40 percent correct and still be 25 points short of D-? Kids need the opportunities for success. They do not need to be “given” anything, especially pity or a dumbed-down curriculum.

Nothing is more unfair than the equal treatment of un-equal students. A grossly unfair teaching and grading procedure is treating every student alike. *Fairness in teaching lies in the equality of the goal not in equality of the procedures for reaching the goal.* Giving all kids the same test after the same exposure, to the same material at the same time and scoring it all the same is blatantly unfair. All need to achieve the same educational objectives but not with the same level, beginning point, procedure, assignments, time, tests, grades, or progression. Students learn what they experience. If they live on a ranch, they learn about horses. If they live among people who use profanity, they use profanity – children learn what they live. At-risk students don’t know they are at-risk and don’t want to be at-risk. The question is, “What experiences might teachers offer to help students learn skills and behaviors that will lead to learning prerequisite material, developing a better attitude, and seeing themselves as capable.

At-Risk children don’t need grades; they need to be taught. Failure must never be used as a replacement for learning and teaching. Teachers can use meaningful assessment procedures that won’t hurt or embarrass students. *The alternative to flunking students is teaching them.*

Assessment normally consists of three elements: measurement, evaluation and symbol for reporting achievement. For example: Measurement: That apple is big as a basketball. Evaluation: Wow!

Symbol: Super-doooper Humongous or SDH. In the classroom: Measurement: S/He got one of ten division problems right. Evaluation: S/He doesn't understand the process. S/He needs to review previous lessons with diagnostic help. Grading is unnecessary. S/He needs to learn division, period. When s/he learns to do the ten problems, you report a 100 or an A. An interim report is unnecessary. If it is necessary, it should be a P for "progressing" or "in the process of learning".

II. Insights Teachers Need To Ponder

Insight is the act of looking into the situation not just seeing the behavior or the current actions. Teachers are busy and do not have time to study the factors behind all classroom problems, but there are predictable or reoccurring situations of at-risk kids that can be anticipated and understood. Perhaps by reviewing some situations, looking with new eyes from the students' perspective, and pondering the deeper meaning of the classroom behaviors and misbehaviors teachers can be more helpful in dealing with the kids-at-risk.

Insight 1: Kids with a History of Failure Require Different Responses

For kids who flunked last year, this coming school year will be even worse, unless teachers deliberately change factors that can make a difference. With grading leverage no longer of value for teacher use and the defeatist attitude of the flunker more manifest--three things are certain: (1) The worst kids, now feeling the reality of continual failure, are not going to change one whit except, perhaps, to get worse. (2) Teachers under achievement test pressure, are going to struggle even more with the "do-nothing" kids who hold the class back and interfere with teaching plans, and who have already accepted failure and have nothing more to lose. (3) Now for the good part, "It's never too late!" Giving the kids a fresh start is the answer! Offer a "no-grade" month to start the year. Give kids the opportunity to go back to learn the prerequisite material by working together and breaking tasks into smaller, shorter parts, frequent diagnostic tests that relate directly to their deficit and can be retaken as they learn and progress. Count tests as "practice", count assignments as review, give kids a chance to work and learn before giving them low grades, offer incompletes as you offer a chance to learn the material previously failed. Give grades only for interim steps in the learning process.

Insight 2. At-Risk kids Need Empathy Not Punishment

When students, who have been deprived of belonging or acceptance, or act out negatively in groups, too often the reaction is separating and punishing them further by removal from the group and from the possibility of learning group dynamics. Through prestige, role reversal, or reflection they can learn how to function in a group. But, they have to be taught as part of the classroom learning community, not marginalized or isolated. Since problem behavior is pain-based, it makes better sense to provide children with what they need—acceptance. It's what we ourselves would want in their place—rather than returning pain-for-pain. "The day teachers forget that under some life circumstances they, themselves, could have ended up like their most troubled students is the day they should quit. Those teachers will have lost their ability to respond with empathy." Spend some time in students' moccasins. Feel their pain and embarrassment. Feel their hopelessness. Understand their defeatist attitude and their defensive ploys. They cannot change their feelings, failure, or future—teachers can!

Insight 3: Distinguishing Work from Learning

Learning: a course of study. I use a few days at the beginning of the school year to teach and discuss the process of learning, using discussion, research, and experimentation. I begin with the idea, “At one point in your life you knew absolutely nothing. When you were born you didn’t have a name, know your mother, know anything, or have a one-word vocabulary. How did you learn whatever you now know? Inevitably, the discussion leads to the difference in motor learning, memorizing, comprehending, thinking, problem solving, and possibly to Bloom’s Taxonomy. It can lead to experimenting e.g. multimodality input, timing intervals, attention and distractibility, trials, comparing notes, and discussing. The discussions leave the question on going.

In my classroom, we usually deal with the difference between work and learning, prerequisite learning, ability to recall, and test taking skills. We may bring in memory books. My discussions have always resulted in the conclusion: “Being dumb is when you don’t know what’s expected of you (for whatever reasons). Being average is knowing what is expected. Being smart is knowing more than is expected.” From there we use the concept of expectation to analyze what we have to do “to get smart”. One definition is that learning is moving from inability to do a task, to ability to do that task. If you previously couldn’t do something and now you can; you’ve learned. And, you can’t learn something you already know. We call that busywork.

Insight 4: Struggling Kids Require New Assignments

If kids are struggling, they cannot be learning. The brain cannot learn or retain nonsense, information that is confusing, or knowledge that doesn’t fit existing knowledge. Struggling normally indicates a lack of prerequisite knowledge. Kids’ entire brain process is on the struggle not on the material they are struggling with. Do not let students struggle. It is self-defeating, demoralizing, and of no value for learning. Instead, apologize for letting them struggle and help them back up to a point of understanding. Reestablish a sequence of meaning and necessary background information. Divide the task into smaller parts so that each part has meaning. All students learn from struggling with a lesson is the futility of struggle or how to avoid the struggle and the lesson.

Insight 5: “Hands-On” Lessons Are Necessary Not Optional

“What teachers do in the classroom — such as conducting hands-on learning activities and emphasizing higher-order thinking skills — matters more to student achievement than do other measures of teacher quality, such as professional development and years of experience. The Milken Foundation analyzed three measures of teacher quality with student performance data gathered from more than 14,000 eighth grade math and science tests conducted from classroom practices. Students whose teacher conducted hands-on learning activities outperformed peers by about 70% of grade level in math and 40% of grade level in science.” ...A brief report that appeared in USA Today. Teachers may get away with lecturing or with didactic teaching with “good students”, but at-risk kids need involvement.

Insight 6: Failure Is an Attitude Problem, Too

Attitude is overriding. If a kid says, “I hate math, it stinks, and I ain’t gonna do it”—that’s an attitude. I can guarantee that you will not teach him any math, either, unless he changes that attitude. How do you change a kid’s attitude? The answer is: you don’t! Only the kid can do that. There are two ways research indicates that attitude can change. (1) **By my own attitude:** One thing every one of my students has learned from me is I—I’d like to say me, but that’s incorrect. My kids know whether I like them, whether I like my subject and how I feel about homework. If I think it’s too late for them, why would they think differently? (2) **By seeing the situation in new and better ways:**

If a kid sees that math can be broken into smaller units, sequenced differently, related to more familiar knowledge, or that s/he can learn enough of the prerequisites to see it makes sense, s/he might begin to see it as easier than s/he thought. S/he might even work or practice enough to achieve some success and make continuation easier and satisfying. This situation is a prime example of the aphorism, “If you do what you did, you’ll get what you got.”

Insight 7: Teacher Actions Are Manifestation of Beliefs

I need to examine my beliefs not my actions. Whatever I believe, determines what I do. My actions are symptoms of my beliefs. If I believe it is the kid’s fault that he failed the test, I feel justified in giving the “F.” But, if I believe it to be my fault, then I need to change my teaching procedures. If I believe “F’s” motivate kids to learn, I give lots of “F’s” to motivate them extra. But if I determine they need encouragement, instead of giving F’s, I find ways to react positively. If I believe that failure is not an option, than I get concerned. I change my approach. I create and find acceptable options. Deciding, changing, and creating learning activities are the responsibilities of professional teachers. And, so is the reflection and self-critique that goes with the responsibility and the examination of the beliefs that underlie teacher behaviors.

Insight 8: The Importance of “Appropriate Lessons”

What are the chances that any given book, regular lesson, or specific task could be appropriate to every kid in class? Could any teacher go to the board and write a problem that would be appropriated to every kid? To most of the kids? Isn’t it likely that any given material or task would be too easy for some kids and beyond the capability or readiness of others? One way to have appropriate material is to let students make their own—study material, quizzes, tests, and keep their own records. By understanding the goals in terms that are meaningful to them and knowing the procedures and reasons, students can create diagnostic, practice and assessment material. The creation of material is an integral part of the learning process.

Effective lessons require an understanding of the task and its purpose. For example, as students read a story or portion of the text, the teacher requests, “When you read a part that you believe anyone who reads it should be held accountable for remembering, write it in the form of a question, and get two classmates to sign that they agree it is important. These questions will form the basis of a “test”. Or in lieu of homework, you announce, “It is important that you have an opportunity to practice the concept on which we just worked. In your pair-share or small groups, I want you propose what and how you prefer to “practice”. By discussing and writing ideas, they’ve probably already learned and

reinforced the necessary learning.

IV. What Can Classroom Teachers Do?

Teachers are not responsible for the mandates and policies that create so many of the problems for students at-risk, and they cannot implement reforms on their own behalf. Teachers can, however, differentiate assignments (there are numerous books that tell how.) They can take immediate steps to improving teacher-student relationships in their own classrooms by empathizing with the student's dilemma, understanding the causal factors of their misbehavior, and recognizing the defensive measures used by at-risk students to hide their problems, embarrassment, pain, and anguish.

Imagine the agonizing boredom of kids sitting through hour after hour, day after day having no involvement or interest, worrying that you might appear incompetent or stupid, and, thinking that school will never get any better, only worse. As a starting point, teachers can take responsibility for accepting and teaching all students including those most at risk, and they can use the responsibility, decisions, and options, within their purview, to:

- Adjust their teaching methods,
- Apply proven, more current, techniques,
- Develop new procedures,
- Utilize differentiation strategies,
- Increase student responsibility for learning,
- Examine existing attitudes,
- Encourage more student participation,
- Critique their teaching-learning interaction,
- Give students more input and opportunity,
- Communicate more meaningfully with the parents
- Utilize new brain-mind research
- Review and renew educational priorities,
- Recommit to student-centered learning,
- Conduct class meetings and discussions.
- Involve all students in the decision making.
- Utilize new technology,
- Use a team approach,
- Use pair-sharing & study buddies

- Use multi-modality learning,
- Use errors as help rather than evaluation.
- Offer reprieve and second opportunity
- Introduce authentic learning,
- Use production-driven activities,
- Create a community concept
- Use unit and project activities,
- Use hands-on activities,
- Use small group interaction.

Although many ridiculous, mindless, bureaucratic procedures are nightmares rigged against effectively teaching and helping at-risk students, the obvious, simple fact is this; *students are compelled to come to our classes*. They have no choice. Teachers are obliged to teach the required curriculum to all students assigned to them. There is no choice reasonable choice. There is no viable alternative on either side except for teachers to change the teaching-learning conditions. The kids cannot change what, when, or how they are taught. They just show up as required. The teachers' job is to teach all students, who are accepted by the school and placed in their classes--no exceptions, no excuses.

V. Strategies That Work

Once the teacher decides on the lesson and goals for the day and for the teaching unit, s/he focuses strategies for achieving the desired goals. While the strategies are complex, they always involve the students and the lesson content to be accomplished. Lessons can be planned independent of the students but to be efficacious they must involve all of the students and must gain their attention.

Students are always paying attention, but always to the strongest stimulus. For this reason, students must be drawn into the lessons in ways that require their attention or else they will be distracted by competing “attention getters” around them. This is the reason why a principal's evaluation of a teacher should consist of observing the students. If the students are engaged, they are learning. Following are some strategies for student involvement in class lessons.

Strategy A: A Simple but Multimodality Approach to Learning

Tony Buzon, (just “Google” Buzon or Mind Mapping) creator of mind mapping, a beautiful alternative to outlining, brainstorming, organizing, and individual learning (when you have time to read about it, of course), suggests a learning technique of “a colored pencil”—it's an amazing learning gimmick. Here's how I use it: Pass out (I have an at-risk kid do it) one colored pencil (I paid \$1.89 for 24 assorted at K-mart) to each student. The gimmick uses anticipatory set, tactile-

kinesthetic, visual, and auditory (self-talk) senses and multi-neuron input and pathways to commit the task to memory.

1. On spelling words when the kids come to the confusing, silent letter or hard part of the word, they exchange the regular pencil, for the colored pencil, write those letters in color and then return to the regular pencil. From a mind/brain standpoint, the focus on the difficult part, the physical act of exchanging pencils, and the color bringing in the right hemisphere, make it a memorable act—simple, effective, and enjoyable.
2. In note taking, important facts, names, and dates are written with the colored pencil, for the same reasons and with the same use of proven brain/mind input and recall.
3. For a historical date, such as “England’s sinking of the Spanish Armada in 1066”: instead of “Armada” draw a ship with the colored pen and put a Spanish word (even if ^taco” is the only one you know. Draw a football jersey around the 10 part of the date and one around the 66.
4. In math, declare a “denominator” day where every time one is written it is in color. The “lowest common’s” are marked by check marks to show you checked to see if it was lowest and a circle around it to show you are sure it couldn’t be lower. You could, of course, also drop it down a line to show it lower than the last line of the problem.
On times tables, kids need to study the ones they don’t know. On the seven’s they probably know the one’s, two’s, three’s, five’, and ten’s. Let them write the one hardest to remember in color and devise an association such as a numbered football jersey for one factor, a street name (49th street sign), etc. It needs to be their own device.
5. Let them exchange colors with others to have more color choices for an added brain dimension to the gimmick.
6. Extend the idea to the first stages of “Mind-mapping.”

Strategy B: A Fresh Look and Reminder of The Pair-Share Idea

A well-known truism that teachers know and love is: “The best way to learn something is to teach it.” The Pair-share, Study Buddy fills the bill. Instead of one teacher talking and 26 students listening, there are 13 teaching and 13 listening and waiting their turn to teach. There is no better way to learn, practice, reinforce, and memorize than the pairing method. It uses speaking, listening, discussing reflecting skills, and offers immediate feedback.

Used properly, it is the best classroom strategy I have ever used
It’s a good way to review; it lets kids talk, one-on-one
It offers responsibility, involvement, participation, engagement and interaction
It’s good for practice or repetition—both partners are 100% active, there is no passivity
It’s great for rote learning. The giver uses speaking, listening, seeing modalities, while the receiver uses speaking, thinking, and feedback. Then it’s reversed.
It gives everyone a chance to talk, participate, and be active all at the same time.

It is good for anticipatory set and for reflection/discussion at points along the way.
It is excellent for reviewing units and notes for tests.
It frees the teacher to work with those who don't participate, use their partner and really need teacher help.

To make pairing really workable,

- (1) Be sure students understand the reasons for pairing
- (2) Be sure it is voluntary and that they understand the importance of the reciprocity
- (3) I choose the ones who "don't get it" as my partners
- (4) The tutee is always in charge, not the tutor
- (5) Accept failure to take the pairing seriously as failure to understand the reason for it
- (6) Don't expect pairing to work for all kids—it won't! Be prepared for and alternative for those few

The same elements and advantages of pairing are also involved in most small group collaboration, activities, and teaming.

Strategy C: Kids Making Their Own Test, Worksheets and Review Materials

I have found that the making of materials is more fun and useful than nearly anything that can be provided. Students learn more by making a worksheet than they do by working a worksheet that has been made for them. My first year teaching, the only text book available was inappropriate, so the students made their own. By stapling half sheets of paper together, working together and using a variety of books acquired from, home, other schools, and teachers, my kids determined what they knew, what they needed to know, and what would help them learn what they needed. Best of all, the process caused me to change my role to that of a resource helping them to plan and create, rather than try to be a task master making them do my lessons, my way.

Picking sentences out of a reading book to put on a worksheet on direct objects requires more understanding than working a worksheet of direct objects. An opportunity to have students check each other's papers can result in on the spot teaching/learning. Furthermore this type group activity gives me time to work with the reluctant learners and give the students years behind a more appropriate activity that need not be noticed by anyone else, and permits me to give needed prestige activities to those who would be noticed with every one doing a group activity with the same worksheet.

Strategy D: Building a Kit to Accommodate Everyone's Needs in the Class

A learning kit (for you veteran teachers, an SRA Kit), which offers separate removable pages and permits many levels of learning by enabling kids to choose and work on many different parts of the kit at once. The kit even includes evaluation techniques. Here are some kits my kids have made:

A Reading Comprehension Kit: Using Newspapers we tabbed sections in a cardboard box for folders holding front page, feature, editorials, all the way down to cartoon strips, movie ads and classifieds. Pasting the article on one side of the folder, the kid writes questions that s/he believes anyone who reads the article should be able to answer from memory and pastes it on the adjacent

side of the folder. Answers are on index cards in a recipe box. Before the folder can be placed in the box, two people must sign their names confirming the questions and answers are reasonable and acceptable. My at-risk kids do letters to the editor, holiday and entertainment sections. A classified ad for a car can be pasted on with questions like, “what does fully loaded, all-power or creampuff mean.” Some ESL students can be in charge of checking for signatures and organizing and decorating the box, and being responsible for newspaper distribution, care of the answer box and maybe a “foreign language” counterpart.

A Map and Globe Skills Kit: Kids learned a lot about maps just gathering them for the kit, for example. They had to reconcile differences:

Two maps of St. Louis one showing the depth of the Mississippi in shades of blue, and the bluffs of bluffs on the Illinois side in shades of green, the other does not. Two maps were different in size: one four feet square, one 8 inches square both showing the same area. Some maps have detail enough to count the blocks between home and school. Some showed parks, churches and schools, museums and city building. Just the color and size of printing and symbols and abbreviations were lessons in themselves.

The assembling of the kit, the disagreements, comparisons, and problems organizing it are all the kids need for both motivation and learning. However, my 8th grade kids made one and used it to teach 4th graders. I can give extra help to the at-risk kids while most kids are working on the kit. They made mini-kits for special problem areas of the world, and ocean areas for our air craft carriers to bring in our

A Math Kit. Using the organization and layout of our class math book. We each made our own book with paper stapled together and newspaper ads—grocery, hardware, Walgreens, etc, cut out and pasted on the left with question based on the ad items on the right and answers on the back. Small group editing/copy reading can give it meaning. Categories such as subtracting fractions, multiplying decimals, or counting change were chosen for setting up problems.

A Math Word Problem Kit: Analyzing and dissecting word problems from a regular math book, the kids itemize the parts, and do whole sections based on each component. A section of questions only; how many were left? How much change was left from \$20? How many sq ft will it cover? What is the average? Kids have to make the questions. Sections on two-step problems, problems requiring formulas, or requiring conversions of measurements, improper fractions can teach students about word problems.

Strategy E: Remembering information

The Brain is bombarded with incoming information. Acting more a sieve than a sponge, the brain lets most information pass right through. The only things that stop long enough to get noticed is information that is meaningful and that makes sense. Unless “something” is done with the information immediately after it is received, it will not be remembered. The “something” includes teaching strategies such as these:

1. Say it, write it, rephrase it, associate it, discuss it, repeat it, apply it.

2. Mind mapping variations: graphic display, tree structure, fishbone, web, links, tree branches.

Strategy F: Making Learning Meaningful

The brain learns in a context—it responds to “the reason for learning”. The reason is not only as important as the process of learning—it must precede the process. The brain learns only things it understands, and understanding is enhanced by activities such as these:

Interacting, questioning, discussing, emphasizing, arguing, contrasting,

Organizing, explaining, elaborating, applying, relating, associating,

Discovering, comparing, responding, reflecting, rephrasing, etc.

(Hint: let the kids know the value of these procedures, let them identify the type of activity and let them help.)

Strategy G: Toward Higher Levels of Thinking

Anything worth learning is worth remembering. Nothing is likely to be remembered unless it uses thinking skills beyond memorization, rote learning and simple acquisition of information. Such tasks are just short-term or temporary knowledge. With every concept, lesson, and idea to be remembered, the levels of thinking beyond memorization are crucial: (Most people use Blooms Taxonomy as the hierarchy of thinking levels.) Here is the one I use as a variation.)

Levels of Thinking from Lowest to Highest

1. Facts, answers, knowledge, objective tests
2. Understanding comprehension, explanation
3. Applying, using information, solving a problem
4. Analyzing, formal reasoning, use of logic, deduction, induction
5. Synthesizing, combining, originating, creating
6. Evaluating, making judgments or selection
- 7 Transferring, making other applications
8. Generalizing, making it a principle or rule

Strategy H: Having Students Participate in the Learning Process

Our most powerful memorizing device is understanding and its related elements; meaningfulness, making sense, relevance, and organization or pattern.

The best, surest, and even easiest way to make information meaningful is to have students participate in their own learning process and have involvement in all of the decisions related to learning from the initiation to the assessment.

Check what they know before you attempt to teach it

Help them understand the goal and let them suggest the means to the goal

Experiment with effectiveness and learning styles and modalities

Let students share their plans and their findings

Expect and celebrate errors and mistakes. It's the way we learn.

Strategy I: Research on Retention of Information

The National Training Laboratory in Bethesda, Maryland studied the ability of people to retain information in the long-term memory by how it is learned and processed. This is the average retention a few days after the lessons were presented. The statistic of “They retain 25% of what they hear” is for retention immediately after a lecture. It goes down hill quickly. Here are their research findings: And, I'll bet it doesn't surprise you. I'll also bet it is mostly a (needed?) reminder

Lecture.....	5% retention
Reading.....	10% retention
Audio-video.....	20% retention
Demonstration.....	30% retention
Discussion.....	50% retention
Hands-on.....	75% retention
Instructing (Student as teacher)....	95% retention

Knowing the aphorism, “The best way to learn something is to teach it”, consider the need, importance, potential, and value of the following teaching strategies.

Partners: As described earlier, this could be the most valuable teaching time offered in the course of a lesson or unit, because of the discussion and mutual teaching involved.

Teams: Small groups of students cooperating together toward a common goal, joint project or group presentation for the sake of mutual learning. The learning is in the process not in the end result.

Peer tutoring: Using students who have learned the material to help others. Remember my rule that the tutee is in charge—their involvement IS the learning.

Cross-age and cross-grade tutoring: Having students in different grades work cooperatively, exchange ideas, exchange papers and prepare materials for others.

Strategy J: Adding Feelings and Emotions to Learning

Have a discussion: Learning is a process, not a thing. It occurs in a complex, group context, and it is always composed of motivation, cognition, feelings, emotions, interests, prior experiences. These elements are always present, always influencing learning, and must always be taken into account at some level.

Can you change a kid's attitude toward grammar, school, or homework?" How?

Can you change your own attitude—toward raw oysters, your mother-in-law, or class clowns and hostile eighth graders?

Strategy K: Kids Are Always Motivated

A fresh look at "Motivation", beginning with the understanding that kids are always motivated—often to do nothing or to do his or her thing not mine.

Motivation is only half a word. The other half is, "to what"?

Doing it "for real" instead of "for phony".

Motivation equals reason—as in "having a reason".

Strategy L: Appropriate materials for every student

The best book I've ever used—it's the same book for every class, with virtually every student in every subject. And, what's more, it's free:

1. School Supplies Catalog: "Anything anyone has ever created or discovered that will teach or show anyone anything is in this book. But, you don't need to buy it. You will need to adapt it and apply it to your specific needs. For instance, you don't need a set of times tables flash cards—make your own. Make them small enough to carry in your pocket, so you can study them on the bus and don't include ones you already know—just the ones you want to study."

2. Low Tech Teaching Machines. Defined as, "anything that asks a question (provides a stimulus); withholds the answer until you have a chance to think, try to remember, guess, or give up; then, tells you the answer so you know if you are right or know what is correct if you are wrong." By this definition, a teacher can be a learning machine at times. So can flash cards and so can hundreds of other easily made devices.

3. Drawing on the floor: Nearly anything that can be put on a handout sheet from the body's circulatory system, to a map of pre-war Europe, or a Greek Column Design can as well be drawn on the floor (in colored chalk). And, the drawing is the learning.

4. Two-dozen more ideas (teachers have been using for years) for having the kids make their own learning materials out of spring clothes pins, Styrofoam, foam rubber, ceramic tile, twigs, file folders, paper plates, counting cubes, yarn, etc.

5. A variety of uses of portfolios along with each student utilizing and maintaining as many as three or four portfolios for their own learning purposes.

6. Music: lots of it, all kinds, used creatively.

With joy in sharing, Bill Page, I enjoy an exchange of ideas, answering questions, and offering ideas on classroom problems. Please feel free to email me at <mailto:billpage@bellsouth.net> any time.

Bill Page's 2009 Second Edition New Book Now Available

At-Risk Students

Feeling Their Pain

Understanding Their Plight

Accepting Their Defensive Ploys

Available on-line at Bill's Web Site: www.TeacherTeacher.com/ \$19.95 including postage or at Amazon.com, AbeBooks and RLD Publishers. See <http://www.teacherteacher.com/> for Description of contents

A Book Review by Michael Shaugnessy: <http://www.educationnews.org/>

“Bill Page has written a wonderfully challenging, humorous and helpful book about working with “at-risk students”. Providing insights into “those kids” who can’t, won’t, or don’t learn”, he has done what ivory tower theorists have not done -- provide insight and understanding into the minds, souls, hearts and cognitive structure of students who struggle and fail.

This is the kind of book that really, really good teachers learn from, and that makes good teachers even better. This is the kind of book that principals should have in their office to hand to struggling teachers, and this is the kind of book that is truly helpful, and may I add, well written. In my national interview with Bill, he responded to situations in the classroom with students who are labeled “at-risk” or who are “at-risk simply because school policies place them at risk—of not being taught.”

Annotated Contents

from

Bill Page's new book, “At-Risk Students:

Feeling Their Pain, Understanding their Plight and Accepting Their Defensive Ploys”

The 30 articles, essays, and vignettes in Bill Page’s new book are independent from one another and cover a wide range of styles, ideas and purposes. The following notations and descriptions are offered so readers can select among its diverse content in random order.

1. Teaching: An Awesome Responsibility

I make the decisions in my classroom – all of them, always

Whether I have a “good” class depends on me, not on my students. Whether at-risk kids get involved, learn, and enjoy my class depends on me. How they behave depends on how I behave; I am 100% responsible for my classes.

2. At-Risk Students: A Point of Viewing

A summative position on the reasons and remedies for at-risk problems

At-risk students cannot be expected to increase their achievement unless teachers improve their effectiveness. And teachers cannot improve their effectiveness unless they are willing to abandon teaching procedures that have failed and adopt strategies that take into account that at-risk students begin their schooling with different experiences and different perception of themselves, school and the world.

3. Wealth Accounts for Achievement Gap

Bill Page responds to an Alpie Kohn Article

“Wealth accounts for differences in test scores” so says Alfie Kohn, who goes on to show, “We’ve got proof.” Bill Page agrees and offers his responses and explanations. Since poverty correlates to differences in test scores, it follows that poverty needs to be “fixed” before worrying about test scores, but schools do not have that option.

4. Take a Seat at the Bottom of the Class

But don’t plan to stay too long, It will be too painful.

Fifty percent of the students in class are below average and additionally; there is a bottom ten percent in every class. Consider what it might be like for students who spend day after day at the bottom in boredom, condescension, low scores, in competition with the top ten percent and in fear of being ridiculed and appearing stupid.

5. “We Get What We Get”

The bottom line in parent accountability and teacher responsibility

A blunt, undesirable, but definitive answer to the dilemma of teachers’ expectation of parental cooperation in their child’s schooling and the problem of parents who refuse take responsibility for assignments, homework, learning, and behavior in school. The bottom line: Teachers teach unconditionally -- no excuses, no exceptions.

6. Successfully Teaching At-Risk Students

Understanding, accepting and repairing the damage

An estimated 25% of children arrive at school having been reared in poverty and undesirable conditions all their lives. It is not their fault. The children were okay when they were born. They were “damaged by an adult created-managed world. The “at-risk” label is pinned on them by schools indicating they are at-risk of not being taught. It is an insidious means of blaming the victim.

7. Failure Is Never An Option

The alternative to flunking students is teaching them

Students do not *just* flunk – they flunk something, and the something they flunk is what I, as the teacher, am in charge. It takes two to “Tango”. You can’t have a “flunkee” without having a “flunker”. So long as teachers are in charge of teaching, testing and evaluating, they choose whether students learn or flunk.

8. Discrimination Against Low Achievers

Powerful, proven research that shows pervasive injustice

A short, meaningful article from the London Times grabbed my attention and, to this day, never let go. The writer of the article asks, “How many of us really do try to give an equal chance to all members of the class?” Incredibly, a federal project modified teacher techniques so that discrimination against low-achievers could be eliminated.

9. Remediation Doesn’t Work – At All, Ever

The remedial concept, not just the procedures, does not work

If remediation works, why not take students who are behind and catch them up. Why is it schools keep remediating the same students year after year? And, they do, sometimes for their entire aborted career! If schools are still remediating them, that shows it doesn’t work. In fact if remediation works, why not use the techniques in the first place rather than after a student has encountered difficulty? Why not have *all* teachers use the procedures instead of just remedial teachers?

10. Teacher Characteristics That Correlate With Student Achievement

Each teacher has unique characteristics. Here are three that make the most difference.

A teacher is a human being with unique characteristics, personality, interests, individual differences and abilities and knowledge. In reflecting on the three best teachers I ever had, I note that they were not all alike, they did not all have the same teaching characteristics – they were not even similar – each teacher was unique. Here are three characteristics that “good teachers” possess.

11. Student Self-Concept and Achievement

Do we really believe in the importance of self-esteem?

Each day, a number of unfortunate students are told in many ways they are inadequate. The most basic elements of school structure from the lockstep grade levels, to the formal, informal and subtle evaluations, to the competition, and constant comparisons are inescapable. Once a student hits the slippery slope toward failure, the only teachers who could help are often the ones who hasten the slide.

12. A Remarkably Successful Program For At-Risk, Middle Level Students

A tremendously effective program using a tremendously effective procedure that works

A self-contained class of the lowest achieving seventh-graders in a large school gained three to four years in achievement scores by a role reversal. Class members, themselves poor students, became tutors helping elementary students rather than being the ones tutored. Not only does the aphorism “The best way to learn something is to teach it” applicable, but the self-concept of being “a teacher” was an obvious personal gain.

13. Murphy, the Student Tutor

The wondrous story of a changed life

Murphy C. had been in special education in inner city St. Louis Schools all his life. At nineteen years old with good attendance but with no credits in high school he moved to a suburb that had no special education program. Becoming a part of an at-risk group of junior high students involved in tutoring early elementary level students. The tutoring program transformed his life.

14. Labels Are for the Jelly Jar

Labels have many uses but not for pinning-on students.

If a diagnosis or its label does not lead to remediation or is not within the realm of one's responsibility, it becomes a useless, possibly damaging bit of information. Labels can be useful in communicating *about* a student, but they are useless, even detrimental, in working with a student. I have never used a label of any kind to help change a student's behavior. In lieu of a label, I use an accurate, detailed description that produces an accurate specific plan of action.

15. The Teacher Is the Difference

Many factors make a difference, but the teacher is the difference

Whether students learn a little or a lot; whether they have a good day or bad; whether they improve their achievement depends on the teacher. Textbooks, classroom conditions and administrative policy can *make* a difference, but the teacher *IS* the difference.

16. Kids Are never NOT Learning

Only nine percent of a kid's life is spent in school, but they are always Learning

Every kid *can* learn is not accurate. It should read, every kid *does* learn. What they learn is what they experience. If they live on a farm they learn about farms; if they live in the ghetto they learn about ghettos. I've noticed that kids who come from Catholic homes are usually Catholic and those from Baptist homes are usually Baptists.

17. My Personal Teaching Creed

My credo is a public announcement and application of my beliefs

My creed serves as a summative applied part of my beliefs, experiences, knowledge, and expectations. I developed it as a statement by which all of my classroom behavior could be measured and understood. My beliefs determine my actions. Upon examining my beliefs, I then make a public commitment to my behavior as a teacher.

18. Teachers Are Individuals Too

Neither students nor teachers can be standardized

In teacher training, they forgot to allow for individual differences in teachers. They seem to assume that all teachers have the same abilities, personalities, interpersonal skills, competencies and teaching styles. In my twentieth year of teaching it struck me that the school system did not regard me differently from a first year teacher. I had the same number of kids, same supervision, same preparation time, and same faculty meetings as though there was no difference.

19. Marching To a Different Paradigm

Student achievement is via teacher effectiveness

Teacher effectiveness is through a relationship that acknowledges the independence of both the teacher and the student. Each functions independently; yet both are responsible and accountable to each other. The result of the merger of the teacher and student as autonomous learners is like a hybrid interaction and interrelation creating an *Interdependent Paradigm*.

20. School Learning Occurs in School

*Children learn all their lives but the learning for
Which school is responsible, occurs in school*

Teachers don't just *Make* a difference; they *Are* the difference in student learning. And the keys to improving their effectiveness in increasing student achievement is first, teacher empowerment and second, embedded staff development provided by building administrators as instructional leaders

21. My Reactions to an Incident Reported in the St. Louis Post

Maybe the problems are really just symptoms.

One of every three students is absent each day, and “mobs of students in the halls being disruptive and refusing to go to class” is a problem at Vashon, an inner city high school in St. Louis, Mo. The problem made the front page, feature page, pictures, columns, editorials and letters to the editor in the newspaper. What they call problems; I call symptoms.

22. A Great Model of Differentiation

*To find motivated kids, individualized learning, success with a-risk kids and differentiation too –
check out the extra curricular activities*

No two students are alike, learning is personal and learning is individual –so how do teachers go about teaching lessons for a group. This article offers a list of the characteristics of differentiation and how it works for all students.

23. On Florida's Flunking Thousands of Third Graders

More than fifty ideas and thoughts as alternatives to flunking 50,000 third graders

These nine year olds were okay when they came into the world, whatever happened to them since then is not their fault. Don't blame and punish the victim. Each child is living the only life he or she has the least the schools could do is not diminish his or her life by declaring him or her to be a failure.

24. If You Ask the Wrong Question; You Get the Wrong Answer

The question frames the answer and so always constrains the answer.

Every question contains a set of assumptions with built-in limitations in the parameters of our thinking about the answers. Therefore, we should always “question the question before we answer the answer.”

25. Kids Are Always Learning

There are seven categories of learning, which every kid experiences continuously

All seven categories are a continuous part of every kid's learning experiences. The seven categories influence varies but it is never zero. And, it is an integral part of the school context, climate and culture

26. Teacher Self-Reflection

I am the only one who can change me. That is not an easy task, but it can be done

Self-reflection is the most powerful behavior changer teachers can use. It requires teachers being able to “step outside themselves” -- becoming objective observers, seeing themselves from a new perspective.

27. Imposed Authority Versus Natural Authority

*There is a way to get a kid to sit down, shut-up, pay attention, follow directions and want to learn;
but schools still struggle with the failed stick and carrot method.*

There are only two ways to control kids or make them behave – and one of them doesn't work. Schools use the one that doesn't work. If reward-punishment worked there would be no discipline problems in school, and yet discipline is still the number one problem year after year.

28. Mandating versus Teaching; People Versus Products

Running schools like “bottom line businesses” not only won't work; it can't work.

The analogy that equates the worker to the teacher and the product to the student is asinine. Kids are not products; they are human being and contrary to school policies they act like humans –there's the problem. The goal is to teach students to behave , not to make them behave. That cannot be mandated.

29. Just Ask the Kids

Do students have a voice? Do they evaluate their teachers? Are they consulted?

One of the most powerful devices for gaining the cooperation of students; developing responsibility and motivation is getting the kids involved in feedback and decision making. At least they can talk about it!

30. An Afterword

What could have been a foreword but was too radical for some readers

Probably a more honest and complete story about how this book came about, its purpose, and what the reader should know about the author, his purpose and his point of viewing.

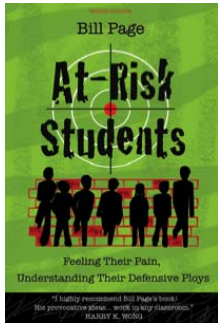
Information, questions, and comments and are welcome and are answered.

<mailto:billpage@bellsouth.net>

Announcement

Ms. Bettye Davies, Executive Director of Teaching for the 21st Century, Staff Development Organization announced that At-Risk Students, 2nd Edition, 2009, has been presented with its Faculty Focus Group Award. “Bill Page’s one-of-a-kind book with 31 personal essays and vignettes provide a unique guide to reflecting, individually or collaboratively, on the daily experiences that are the heart of teacher’s lives and the essence of students learning--all students. It is designed for Faculty Focus Groups.”

For Book Information and preview: www.teacherteacher.com



At-Risk Students: Feeling Their Pain, Understanding Their Defensive Plays.
“Insights and strategies for kids who can’t, don’t, or won’t learn, try, follow procedures, cooperate, or behave.”

At-Risk Student: One whom teachers cannot motivate, interest, control, or teach via traditional techniques.

The term “At-Risk refers to being at risk of failure, but it has come to mean “at-certain” of not being taught.

This article is chapter 14, one of the 31 chapters in, *At-Risk Students*. The groundbreaking book is currently in its Second Printing and will be released December 31, 2008, 280 pages, \$24.95 including P & H, Educational Dynamics, Nashville, TN, Visit <http://www.TeacherTeacher.com> for information, preview, and orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. Send to billpage@bellsouth.net for quantity discounts on books for Teacher Study Groups. The book is also available from Amazon, Abebooks, and RLD, Publications.