Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why
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Helping Children Succeed marks the continuation of Paul Tough’s quest to bridge the achievement gap between affluent and low-income students. This issue is particularly relevant in light of the 2013 federal data reporting that over half of our nation’s public school students are now classified as “low income.” The title of Tough’s book is a tall order, and in many ways he delivers; but as Tough’s vision of a reformed education system becomes exceedingly clear, so do its limitations.

Over the past few years, the education world has gone aflame with talk about academic mindsets. Educators herald soft, “non-cognitive” skills such as grit, perseverance, and self-control as the missing puzzle piece to student achievement. Tough shares this enthusiasm and optimistically asserts that character strengths are the “critical tools for improving outcomes for low-income children” (4).

The crux of Tough’s book is that developing character strengths is different from developing content knowledge. Whereas content knowledge is built on training and practice, character strengths are the product of our environments. Tough argues that we can best imbue children with positive characteristics by providing them with the supportive learning environments they need to thrive. Tough spends the majority of his book tracing child development from early childhood to late adolescence, investigating organizations and practices that successfully support children with mindset development.

Tough’s focus on environment allows him to paint a hopeful portrait of 21st-century pedagogy. He advocates for restorative school discipline as an alternative to suspension. He warns against behaviorism and the futility of extrinsic rewards to motivate learners. He moves past a myopic focus on test prep in exchange for authentic, project-based learning. He even provides us with glimpses of a constructivist math classroom in which students investigate math collaboratively. All these practices are certain to foster more humane, authentic, and enriching experiences for children.

Who Is Responsible for Reform?

The practices that Tough highlights remind us that parents and educators must lead the charge toward a better school system. Then why does Tough begin his book with the assumption that children must improve their mindsets and bear the burden of closing the achievement gap? Tough even admits that the best educators he observed “never said a word about [academic mindsets] in the classroom” (9). This is because expert teachers don’t put the onus on students to persist; they put the onus on themselves to teach well.

This brings us to an important realization: conversations about student mindsets are not conversations about reform. Proponents of academic mindsets merely ask students to persevere and conform to the pedagogical status quo while Tough calls for systemic change in our educational institutions. Tough’s vision of reform
could have been stronger without the disorienting underpinning of mindset research.

In his final chapter, “Solutions,” Tough concludes that we can fix our broken education system by resolving to do better, modifying instructional practices, and changing education policies. But after reading all 119 pages of Helping Children Succeed, I can’t help but ask myself, “What’s missing?” There is something too clean, perhaps simplistic, about the solutions Tough describes. What issues are left unacknowledged? In my opinion: institutional racism.

What’s Left Out? A Discussion of Institutional Racism

Tough recognizes that our education system fails to meet our children’s needs, but when are we going to start talking about how our education system actively oppresses low-income communities and children of color? How can we talk about discipline practices without discussing mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline? How can we talk about literacy without discussing whitewashed, “canonical” English curricula that marginalize minority perspectives? How can we talk about parent outreach without exploring how we should listen to and learn from the parents in our school communities? How can we talk about lesson planning and engagement without emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive teaching? The achievement gap wasn’t born out of a lack of resources; it was born out of pushing ethnically diverse students through a system that wasn’t designed for them.

Maybe Tough feels that interrogating hegemonic schooling practices is beyond the scope of his book. I would argue, however, that we can’t have honest conversations about serving low-income, urban communities without serious discussions about institutional racism. The public listens to Tough and deserves to know that there are more insidious forces that perpetuate the achievement gap. Once we acknowledge the ways we are complicit in oppressive practices, we can begin rethinking old ideologies and centering socioculturally diverse learners.

Working toward a Redeeming Vision

In sum, Tough cares deeply about students and offers a generally redeeming vision of education reform. He provides concrete examples of organizations and practices that provide children with the authentic instruction, supportive communities, and productive feedback they need. His two limitations, however, are his fixation on mindset development and his reluctance to investigate institutional racism. Fixating on mindset development distracts us from reform and makes us forget that the onus is on educators to facilitate learning that warrants student persistence. Ignoring institutional racism dampens efforts toward reform as students of color continue to run up against oppressive school structures.

As Tough’s analysis of the achievement gap continues to develop, so too will his prescriptions for reform. I look forward to future works by Tough—works that will paint a more complete picture of what it means to help children succeed. Until then, I’ll direct friends and colleagues to targeted passages of Tough’s book, with the caveat that racism exists and adults bear the burden of reform.

Intentional and Targeted Teaching: A Framework for Teacher Growth and Leadership


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The Framework for Intentional Targeted Teaching (FIT Teaching Tool) is a non-evaluative tool that English teachers, the instructional coaches with whom they work, and the school leaders who support their professional growth can use to positively influence student learning. Fisher, Frey, and Hite offer five key components for what they term intentional and targeted teaching that, when internalized, lead to greater depth of teaching practice and student autonomy in terms of academic growth. These components include “planning with purpose,” “cultivating
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a learning climate,” “instructing with intention,” “assessing with a system,” and “impacting student learning” (5). These components are connected to the collaborative nature of our work as English teaching professionals. These collaborative components speak to an English teacher’s intentions around planning and the delivery of reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language instruction; his or her capacity to foster students’ academic growth; formative assessment as a way to gauge students’ understanding and identify ways to adapt teaching practice such that errors in understanding may be corrected; and the presentation of evidence of students’ short- and long-term learning (7). The authors rightfully assume that teacher effectiveness is a byproduct of intentional and targeted teaching that can be more appropriately developed and demonstrated via four levels of rated growth per the five components, essentially moving a teacher from novice to teacher-leader with the dimensions of such development being “Not Yet Apparent,” “Developing,” “Teaching,” and “Leading” (8).

Real-World Classroom Applications

Intentional and Targeted Teaching is replete with real-world, classroom examples of the FIT Teaching Tool in action—anecdotal pieces that are relatable. Seemingly on every page of this text, Fisher, Frey, and Hite provide classroom vignettes with dialogue that illustrates the practical application of the tool, particularly when the authors break down the factors mentioned above to specific criteria, or ingredients, for “success and areas of growth” (6).

For example, going on the strength of highlighting real classroom teachers, we observe a professional learning community (PLC) of middle school English language arts teachers who grapple with coming to a unified understanding of daily learning intentions for their students’ eventual success with composing evidence-based informative writing. The implications of these English teachers’ exchange suggest the range of professional growth that can occur in just one collaborative planning session, whereby the indicators for the criteria of identifying lesson-specific learning intentions, for instance, help to feature the kind of professional learning that is so important among peers. What is captured from that pivotal moment is the transformative nature of professional learning that goes from the creation of a less defined learning intention to one that is more “achievable during a specific lesson” and ultimately strengthened by collegial teacher leadership at the Leading level (23). The authors propose that using the framework in this collaborative sense fosters success in the English classroom of each PLC member across the development dimensions of its members.

The authors offer extensive details about the intersections between the growth levels (“Not Yet Apparent,” “Developing,” “Teaching,” and “Leading”) and what these dimensions actually look and sound like in real classrooms. Fisher, Frey, and Hite have structured the heart of the text (individual chapters on the components of the framework) so readers are provided a clear overview of a given criteria and its indicators. They also offer specific details and dialogue between real teachers and coaches as the teachers improve their practice and offer reflections on their professional learning experiences. The examples from real classrooms make this a rather enriching professional read.

A Tool for English Teachers

What I find most interesting about the FIT Teaching Tool is that it can be used as a self-assessment instrument for teacher effectiveness. Fisher, Frey, and Hite have, over the course of more than a decade, developed and aligned the framework with other widely adopted teacher evaluation models such as the Danielson Framework for Teaching (Danielson) and the Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model (Marzano). The key difference between these and the FIT Teaching Tool is that the latter is “not summative” (12). While the authors discourage adapting the framework into a set of items on a checklist, I find this framework’s rubric to be a useful guide for monitoring my own effectiveness in the English classroom comparatively with the indicators of mainstream evaluation tools.

English teachers may find interesting the authors’ take on setting instructional intentions as it relates to language learning and language support for students. These aspects of the
framework present an integral focus on having students adopt the language of a given discipline or to demonstrate their knowledge of the structure and use of academic language. The authors make the distinction that these instructional intentions around language learning are appropriate for all learners regardless of an individual’s English language background.

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A Blue Convertible in the Bright Dallas Sun

frames 1–56
he’s grinning
a kid in a candy store
Jackie is a raspberry pink truffle
melting on
the hot upholstery
like a kiss
or an almost ghost
spooking pigeons
off of the buildings

frames 88–112
a shady man sits
on a curb
with an umbrella
as the blue car enters
the cross hairs
of metaphor
he opens it
like a nervous door
like a goodbye
like (fatally)
a forgotten Monday morning

frames 133–261
as they turn
the corner onto Elm
top down
he waves
looks surprised
as if his hands
are butterfly wings
as if struck
by a burning question
with no answer

frames 276–
one second
two
the sun explodes
a white fence behind
a knoll
goes up in smoke
epiphany
is everywhere

—Stephen Bodnar
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Works Cited
