

PULLING STUDENTS BACK FROM THE BRINK: THE ROLES OF ACADEMIC RESILIENCE AND GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

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Why are some students debilitated by educational setbacks, challenge, poor performance, stress, and study pressure while others pick themselves up, recover, and move on? Why do some students get caught in a downward spiral of underachievement while others respond proactively to poor performance and break this downward spiral? Why do some students buckle under the pressure of school while others are energised and embrace the challenges before them? Why do some students who experience difficulty or disability persist in the face of their challenges while others have a much tougher time of things?

Research shows that there are many factors that make the difference between students that cope with academic adversity and those that do not. Some of these factors (e.g., biological, medical, temperamental) are to some degree beyond students', parents', and teachers' control. Importantly, however, there are factors that are controllable – and it is these controllable factors that are vital pathways to helping students pull back from the brink of actual or potential disengagement. Two factors under focus in this article are academic resilience and good relationships.

Academic Resilience




Academic resilience is students' ability to deal with academic setback, challenge, adversity, difficulty, and pressure in the academic context. Examples of academic resilience include:

- Persisting in the face of personal challenge, difficulty, or disability.
- Working to one's potential in the face of minor or major obstacles.
- Striving for personal excellence even when many others outperform you.

- Bouncing back from a poor grade or a run of poor grades.
- Dealing with stress and anxiety leading up to exams and major assignments.
- Resolving a poor relationship with a teacher.
- Effectively resisting peers' negative attitudes towards school.
- Dealing with multiple pressures in school life.
- Dealing with high expectations and pressure from parents and others.
- Managing school-related disappointment effectively.

In my research into academic resilience, I have found five significant predictors of students' academic resilience. I have called these predictors the '5Cs' of academic resilience: Confidence, Control, Commitment, Composure, and Coordination.

In terms of confidence, I suggest the following strategies:

-  Challenge negative thinking traps – there are some negative thinking patterns that reduce students' belief in themselves, including biased thinking, turning positives into negatives, and blowing negative things out of proportion.
-  Build more success into a student's life through chunking – this involves (a) breaking schoolwork and study into bite-sized chunks and (b) seeing the completion of each chunk as a success.
-  Build more success into a student's life through expanded views of success – seeing success not only in terms of marks but also in terms of improvement, skill development, personal bests, understanding new things, learning new things, solving problems, working well in groups, and creativity.

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In terms of control, consider the following:

- ✓ Focus on effort, strategy, and attitude – effort (how much work a student does), strategy (the way he or she does that work), and attitude towards school and schoolwork are three very controllable things in students' lives. The more they focus on these, the more empowered they feel. Things like luck, marking, test difficulty or ease, teaching style etc. are beyond a student's control and so should not be a focus.
- ✓ Develop improvement views of intelligence – there are many aspects of school-related intelligence that can be improved. These include thinking skills, analytical skills, mathematical skills, writing skills etc. The more a student focuses on these the more control and optimism he or she will feel.
- ✓ Provide some opportunity for input, choices, and decision-making – having a stake or say in what happens in one's life empowers that person and increases their control. Students are no exception.

In terms of commitment (or persistence), try the following:

- ✓ Examine times when the student has persisted before – get the student to think about when he or she has persisted before and identify the things he or she thought and did to get through.
- ✓ Effective goal setting – encourage the student to develop goals that are clear and specific, achievable, desirable, challenging, and time-bound.
- ✓ Effective help seeking – it is important that the student sees help seeking as part of persistence and that it is not giving up. Effective help seeking involves identifying what is and is not understood and then going to a teacher or parent with focused and sensible questions.

In terms of composure (or low anxiety), I suggest the following:

- ✓ Tackle negative thinking.
- ✓ Ground the student in the here and now – not what things can go wrong in the future (and which has not happened yet).
- ✓ Develop effective relaxation techniques (e.g., meditation, exercise).

✓ Prepare for tests and exams early and effectively.

✓ Develop test-taking skills.

In terms of coordination (or planning), encourage students to:

- ✓ Get it clear in their minds what the assignment or homework is asking.
- ✓ Spend time thinking out how to do an essay or project.
- ✓ Spend a couple of minutes at the start of the exam planning out an answer.
- ✓ Prepare a plan for an assignment or homework before getting stuck into it.
- ✓ Think through the steps involved in preparing for an upcoming test.
- ✓ Plan a study timetable for the week.

Good Relationships in Students' Lives (Connective Instruction)

Relationships are another means of greatly assisting students who experience academic difficulty. Good relationships are a key ingredient in most major studies of children's and young people's happiness, resilience, engagement, achievement and general life effectiveness. Most research into relationships focuses on interpersonal relationships – and there is no doubting that good interpersonal relationships are essential. However, in the academic context, I propose there are actually three key relationships that are vital to students' academic engagement (and an important antidote to disengagement). These are:

1. The interpersonal relationship (the connection between the student and the teacher him or herself).
2. The substantive relationship (the connection between the student and the subject matter and substance of what is taught).
3. The pedagogical relationship (the connection between the student and the pedagogy/teaching).

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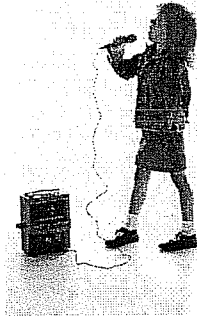
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I call this 'connective instruction' – that is, instruction that connects to students at the three levels needed to fully engage academically. Connective instruction shows us that a great lesson can be likened to a great musical composition, comprising the song (the substantive), the singer (the interpersonal) and the singing (the pedagogy). When the student connects in all three ways, there is a solid foundation for high quality engagement in the classroom.

The Singer

The first key connection is that between the student and the teacher him or herself (the singer). The key characteristics of good interpersonal relationships in the classroom include:



- Actively listening to students' views.
- Allowing student input into decisions that affect them.
- Getting to know the students.
- Showing no favouritism and affirming all students.
- Accepting students' individuality and differences.
- Having positive but attainable expectations for all students.

The Song

The second key connection is that between the student and the actual subject matter, the substance, and the nature of tasks in the classroom (the song). The core elements of substance and subject matter that facilitate students' connection to teaching and learning include:

- Setting work that is challenging (so it moves them ahead) but not too difficult.
- Assigning work that is important, relevant, and significant.
- Building variety into content and assessment tasks.
- Assigning interesting work.
- Drawing on material that is fun to learn (where possible and appropriate).
- Utilising material and assigning tasks that arouse curiosity.

The Singing

The third key connection is that between the student and the teaching or pedagogy itself (the singing). Some key elements of effective pedagogy include:

- Maximising opportunities for students to succeed and develop competence.
- Providing clear feedback to students focusing on how they can improve.
- Explaining things clearly and carefully.
- Injecting variety into teaching methods.
- Encouraging students to learn from their mistakes.
- Clearly demonstrating to students how schoolwork is relevant and/or meaningful.
- Ensuring all students keep up with the work and allowing for opportunities to catch up.

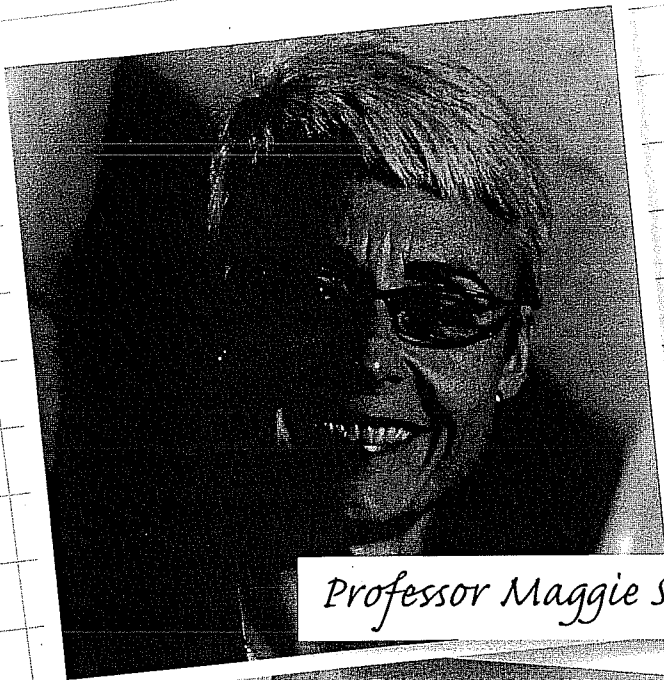
Teachers make a real difference to students' lives when they deliver pedagogy in a way that enables the individual student to connect in personally meaningful ways to three key elements of that pedagogy: the substance of what is taught (the song), how it is taught (the singing), and who is doing the teaching (the singer). These, it is proposed, are the three cornerstones of connective instruction – instruction that maximises students' personal connections in the classroom. When students are more personally connected in the classroom, they are more engaged and motivated to work and achieve to their potential. Connective instruction can also be extended to parents. The strategies listed above can, with some flexibility, be implemented by parents as well to help their children work to personal potential.

The ideas in this article are drawn from Associate Professor Martin's books, "How to Motivate Your Child for School and Beyond" (Bantam, 2003) and "How to Help Your Child Fly Through Life: The 20 Big Issues" (Bantam, 2005). These books tackle the big educational issues and decisions facing teachers, schools, and parents including motivation, engagement, delaying children's entry to school, boys' and girls' education, academic resilience, coaching and tutoring, dealing with performance anxiety, choosing a school, homework, extracurricular activity, selecting school subjects, choosing a career, going to university/college, and having a gap year. They are available from bookstores or through www.lifelongachievement.com

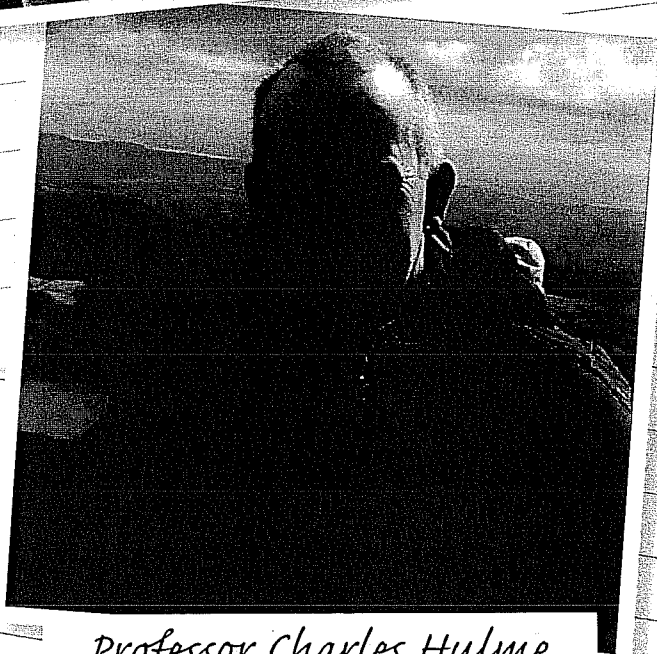
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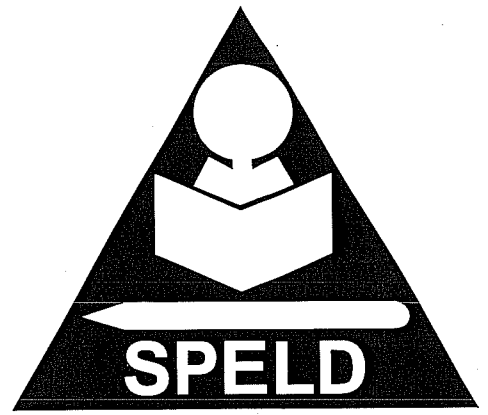


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