Every Student, Every Day: How to Support Mental Health and Learning Readiness in your Elementary Students

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Kids do well if they can.

As a mother of two and long-time educator, I can't help but believe that every student has a need to experience success at school. The definition of success looks different for every student, though. Some students see success as writing the best darn story they've ever written; some see it as finding a new friend or social circle; and others still might simply see it as putting their hand up just one time at the carpet to share their idea; or finally remembering how to spell that tricky word all on their own. While success is something that we each define for ourselves, the unifying factors that span all definitions of success are twofold: a sense of self-efficacy rewarded by the feeling of accomplishment. Those are powerful things! I have a name for those amazing snapshots in time that we as teachers are lucky to witness from time to time - those wonderful flashes where our students get to feel the satisfaction of success. I call them Mighty Self Moments.
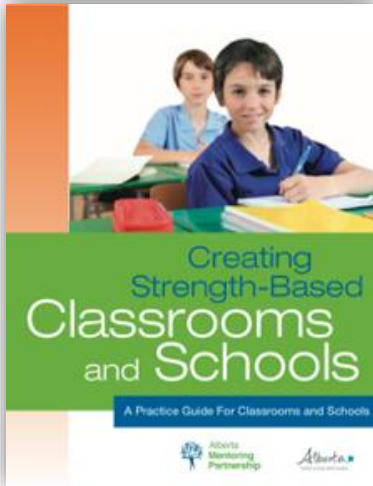
Ross Greene says that **"Kids do well if they can"**. While I love his message, there's one little word that sits at odds with me in it: *if*. The word *if* feels somehow like a word that allows too much room for *can't*. Instead, let's think about this:

Kids do *as well as* they can.

With this hope-filled reframe, teachers can take action and support Mighty Self Moments for every student, every day in classrooms. When we embrace the idea that students do as well as they can, we are able to ask the questions that help ourselves and our students to understand their needs, grow their skillsets and steep learning experiences in opportunities for efficacy, advocacy, and reflection. Here's how:

1. **Assume that every student absolutely without doubt actually _CAN_.**
… and that educators have the wonderful opportunity to support them in standing all on their own to claim their Mighty Self Moments. The Creating Strength-Based Classrooms and Schools Guide created by the Alberta Mentoring Partnership reminds teachers that every student holds the key to their own change process. When looking to support students in their growth, the first question supportive teachers can ask is: '*What does success look like for this student?*' … And the only way to find out the answer is to ask the student! When we give students a voice in defining success, allowing them to co-construct positive change or growth alongside us, we ignite their belief that they can, and that they have a network of supporters willing to grow along with them.

2. **Remember that students can only use the tools that they have.**
Students use the tools that they have. Think about it. The next time you see a student avoiding work, or more focused on the fraying carpet than the story you're reading, ask yourself: '*What does this student need so they can find greater success?*' Is it a skill that I can teach them, a strategy that we can learn to use together, opportunity to access the learning in a different way or greater scaffolding of the work that's been asked of them? When you teach students enabling skills, and give them a learning environment that helps them to 'get it' – to know what works for them and what doesn't – they flourish. Approaching learning designs using the Universal Design for Learning Framework helps teachers to do just that. These guidelines offer a concrete approach for considering student needs so that every student every day can access and participate in meaningful learning.

source: http://udlguidelines.cast.org

3. Become needs detectives.

Without an awareness of our needs, it's easy to get stuck in a rut of 'can't'. Success is an active process that requires understanding of our strengths as well as those imaginary bullies that trigger an 'I can't' response in our brain. We can take back power from these brain bullies, with inspiration from Dan Siegel's saying "name it to tame it". YES! When we provide students with the language they need to express what is problematic for them, and the ability to understand how they can get back on the road to learning, we give them a sense of power and an ability to take action. As we work with students to uncover what those 'I can't' triggers are, our question becomes: *'What does it look like and feel like when this student starts to believe that they can't?'* Stuart Shanker does some wonderful work in self-regulation, and explains that regulation occurs across five interrelated domains: biological, emotional, cognitive, social and prosocial. He calls those 'I can't' brain bullies stressors, and helps us to understand that stress comes from multiple sources across all five of the domains, interrupting the flow of energy in our brains. When students can recognize what their unique stressors are, they can take back control of their energy flow and respond to the stressor to return to learning readiness. In my work with young students, I always found that the best pathway to awareness was drawing attention to physical responses – helping students to recognise what dysregulation feels like in their bodies. This would often be a process of gradually releasing responsibility to the student, which started with another important question for the student: *'When I see (name behaviour), what does it feel like in your body? What should we call that feeling?'* Connecting students to their physiological responses to stressors gives them power to recognise that a brain bully is on the prowl and affirms for them that they can use tools or strategies to take back control, staying on the 'I can' path.
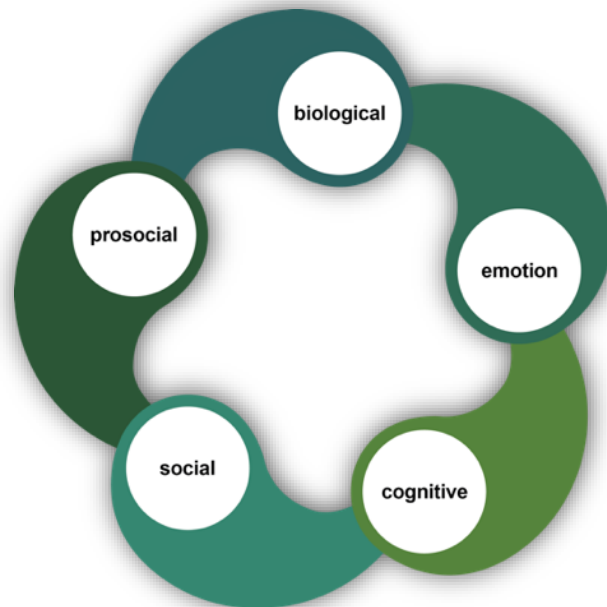
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4. Empower, empower, empower!

Shelley Moore provides teachers with a powerful question to frame growth in positive ways as we work hand in hand with students to create space for Mighty Self moments: *'Where are you now, and what's your next step?'* As Shelley Moore says, we need to stop should-ing on our students!! She calls our attention to the important ways that language can limit student growth. Instead of comparing students to where they 'should be' or what they 'should be doing', its more productive and empowering to embrace students where they are, and get rid of the 'should's'. Shelley's Strength Based Student Profile is a great starting place to invite student voice in to the process of designing their own growth. Framing self-reflection in strengths and stretches, she invites students to articulate their goals in the academic, social and personal domains. These articulations provide a wonderful pathway to conversations with students that empower their ownership of the process using the question *'Where are you now and what's your next step?'*

Summary: Making Magic Happen with Mighty Self Moments

Remember: *Kids do as well as they can*. You can grow their 'I can's' by:

Step	Guiding Questions	Thought Leader	Resources
Assume that every student absolutely without doubt actually CAN.	*What does success look like for this student?*	Alberta Mentoring Partnership (AMP)	Creating Strength-Based Classrooms and Schools Guide
Remember that we can only use the tools that we have.	*What does this student need so they can find greater success?*	Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST)	Universal Design for Learning Framework
Become needs detectives.	*What does it look like and feel like when this student starts to believe that they can't?*	Stuart Shanker	Self-Regulation: 5 Domains of Self-Reg
Empower, empower, empower!	*Where are you now, and what's your next step?*	Shelley Moore	Don't Should on Me video Strength Based Student Profile