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## CHAPTER 1

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# The Dynamics of Confidence

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*“Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement;  
nothing can be done without hope.”*

*—Helen Keller in Optimism (1903)*

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In this book, I delve deeply into a dynamic of American life that is almost never addressed in our public or private discourse about the rearing and education of our children. Yet this facet of early learning has a profound impact on each of us both in school and far beyond. I address the emotional dynamics of learner success and failure in the classroom and the impact of those dynamics on each learner’s developing confidence or self-doubt. We all remember the constant evaluations we experienced in the classroom as well as at home. Sometimes those judgments were communicated privately while others became very public. Sometimes they were positive indications of success; sometimes they revealed that we fell short. Regardless, we always felt their emotional impact within, and, over time, those experiences shaped our beliefs in ourselves as learners. These are the dynamics that I examine herein.

As you will see, I begin this analysis by sharing the early successes and failures that shaped my learning life before, during, and after school. I share these experiences in the

hope that they will trigger your memories, thus allowing us to develop a mutual understanding of how success, failure, confidence, and doubt affected our own lives. These understandings are critically important today because those dynamics continue to impact the lives of our children and because recent research on keys to effective teaching and learning has revealed ways to help every child attain the levels of success needed to grow into a confident lifelong learner.

In the presentation that follows, I invite all concerned about the well-being of our youth to team up and plan for the development of schools that raise generations of confident lifelong learners. I urge teachers and parents to team up with their students in a village-wide effort to build the confidence of every child. If our children are to be prepared to prosper in these times of rapid social, technological, and economic change, schools and families must take on the two-part mission of ensuring that *all children* (1) master the *knowledge and skills* needed to succeed in college or workplace training and (2) develop the *self-confidence* needed to meet whatever learning challenges life presents to them in school and beyond. The ideas I offer for accomplishing this and the stories I tell about the impact of those ideas constitute a practical exploration of how to place students in charge of their success both in the classroom and beyond as they face the learning challenges life presents.

## THE ORIGINS OF CONFIDENCE AND SELF-DOUBT

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Confidence is a very fragile emotion in a third grader, and, if it is lost, it can be very difficult to rekindle. This is graphically illustrated in the following story. In this case, the student's story is mine. This book is about how to keep learners from giving up in hopelessness as I did. As you read, take special note of how my thinking evolved over time and drove my judgments of myself.

*Visualize little Ricky, a third grader at Canandaigua Elementary School, in Miss G.'s classroom where twenty-five of us are seated in*

straight rows and in alphabetical order. So, Eddie A. is at the head of the first row over by the windows. Next comes Jim B., then Judy C. Now, my name is Stiggins, so I am near the end of the last row away from the windows—way over by the bulletin boards. Dave W. is the only one behind me, and Terry S. sits right in front of me.

At reading time, Miss G. would instruct us to take out our reading books and open to a particular page of the story we were to read that day. She would turn to Eddie A. and nod—he knew his job was to rise from his desk, stand with proper posture, and read the first paragraph of the story aloud for all to hear. When he finished, Jim B. would follow, and so we would go down the rows.

Now, for reasons that we understand today but didn't back then, I have great difficulty with oral reading fluency. My eyes, brain, and mouth are not “wired” to work effectively together—a reality that has stayed with me but that I have accommodated as an adult. But back in third grade this was a very big problem. I was constantly embarrassing myself in a very public way. So, I needed a way to manage the risk—a way to minimize the embarrassment. The one I adopted was a strategy of fooling everyone into believing I could read (it's amazing how many people over the years have told me that they did this same thing). I would count the number of students in class that day, count down the same number of paragraphs to find mine, and practice reading it silently by myself. I found that, if I could spend a few minutes with my passage, I could almost memorize it and then stand beside my desk and smoothly recite it—no stammering, stumbling, or embarrassment.

However, as we were working down the rows taking turns reading, sometimes Miss G. would ask a comprehension question, and, if she happened to call on me to answer it, I wouldn't be able to—I wouldn't even know what the question was because I wasn't listening. I was practicing my passage. But Miss G. didn't know this. All she knew is that Rick was not getting this, and so she filed this evidence away for later consideration.

So back to class. As we proceed down the rows a paragraph at a time, Terry S. (right in front of me) is reading his paragraph. At that moment, the fear that is raging within me is profound because I'm next—sweaty-palm, heart-pounding stark terror. Seriously frightening . . . every time . . . not funny.

Terry finishes. Rick, you're on. As I am about to rise from my desk, Miss G. says, "Terry, you read that so well, and your paragraph was so short. Would you read another one for us?" Oh crap! I'm a dead duck! He reads my paragraph far better than I ever could have even with practice, and I am compelled to stand and try to read an unpracticed piece. During my reading, the anxiety overwhelms me. I can't think, let alone function. I'm embarrassing myself once again. My heart is about to explode from my chest.

Oh, and my worst nightmare was when Miss G. didn't ask us to take turns reading down the rows, but rather decided to do what I used to call "reading roulette"—where she would call on us at random to read. I knew I was going to get slammed, it was just a matter of time, and I was powerless to prevent it. What's the exact opposite of confident?

As I fumbled through the paragraph after Terry's, Miss G. would collect even more evidence of Rick's reading problem. She sent notes home to my parents informing them essentially that "Rick can't read." Now I was a good enough reader to read these notes, and I anticipated that a serious problem was brewing. At the next parent-teacher conference, Mom and Dad learned about the prospect of a failing grade in "Reading." Her purpose for sending this message was that it informed my family of my low achievement, and, when it comes to oral reading proficiency, it was not wrong. Also, it was supposed to be a motivator to get me to work harder so I could get a passing grade. It was supposed to be a kick in the pants (Dad took that part literally).

Mom, Dad, and Miss G. launched a frontal attack on Rick, the nonreader. "You have to try harder," they admonished. "We know you can do it if you just apply yourself." Nevertheless, my reading skills didn't improve, and, over time, a trend or trajectory of failure began to take control of me. It all seemed so inevitable—so hopeless—to me. And, you know, it has surprised me how many adults with whom I have worked over the years have told me they had the same experience.

As we continue with this story, please set aside Mom, Dad, and Miss G. for a moment. Center on me. The next crucial data-based educational decision was mine. At some point in the progression of fear, anxiety, and failures, I said to myself, "Rick, you're a nonreader.

It will always be so. Get over it.” And I stopped trying. I gave up in futility. Do you think that was what Mom, Dad, and Miss G. wanted me to do? Of course not. They wanted just the opposite. So did I! I so wanted to read well—to not be humiliated anymore. I didn’t know why I couldn’t do it, but I know that it wasn’t for a lack of desire. I was in a very real personal crisis, and just telling me to try harder made it worse.

There’s another thing about my early reading experience that, as I look back at it, is both embarrassing and clarifying: From my first reading experiences in those early grades, the key lesson I learned was that good reading means you say each of the words that appear on the page aloud, smoothly and in proper order. It’s a spoken thing. This was a scary thing for me because, right from the start, I missed words, stammered a lot, suffered public embarrassment, and could find no way out. Nobody seemed to care about that part. They thought I was just being lazy. Reading seemed to be so easy and fun for my friends. They were always talking enthusiastically about the books they were reading. This made no sense to me.

In those very early years, the thing I missed was that, when you read, there is something you’re supposed to “get” from the text. I struggled so hard just trying to mentally process the words and say them properly that I had no mental wavelength left to think about the ideas hidden within those words, phrases, and passages. The mental process of comprehending literally escaped me. I didn’t tune into “getting the meaning” until much later when I began to try to read the fishing stories in *Field & Stream* magazine. Yup, it’s fishing to the rescue!

But even when I finally began to tune into “getting it,” I struggled. Still, the challenge of mentally processing the text, even while reading silently, left little mental space to piece together the ideas within the text in a comprehension sense. It took me forever to read anything and follow the story. Reading in any form was a challenge for me in school, and in high school everything began to depend on reading ability. I was disarmed and hopeless.

When I got to high school, the testing and grading process almost immediately began to take its toll. It’s important to remember that, back then, one assignment for high school faculty was to begin

the process of sorting us out based on achievement. Anyway, I accepted my fate, gave up in hopelessness, and finished relatively low in the rank order of our senior class.

But back to the matter of emotional dynamics: Sure, my foundational problem always was reading difficulties. But in my thinking, I didn't leave it at that. I generalized from my reading problem to a much broader judgmental generalization that I was not wired to succeed in any facet of school. I gave up on learning as a whole. I accepted that it was hopeless for me regardless of the learning context.

Please make careful note of who the key decision maker was here—who was doing the judgmental thinking? It was me, and no one else.

As my classmates took entrance exams and applied to colleges, I didn't bother. What was the point? Why trigger even more embarrassment?

Later, I'll describe when and how my self-doubt and hopelessness were transformed into confidence. That, after all, is the very point of this book. But first, I want to establish why it has become essential today that we prevent such hopelessness from taking over the lives of any of our children.

## **THIS IS A CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL PRIORITY FOR MANY REASONS**

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Reason #1 is that, over the past two decades, programs of research conducted around the globe have revealed exciting new ways to revise the teaching and learning process in specific ways both to cause achievement to skyrocket and potentially to bring *all children* to a place where they regard themselves as confident and proficient lifelong learners in both cognitive and emotional terms (Black, 2013; Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Wiliam et al., 2004). This book spotlights those breakthroughs. They center on students teaming up with their teachers to monitor, manage, and feel in control of their own growth.



One colleague, Dylan Wiliam, a leading researcher in this space, has contended in print that consistent use of the new practices featured herein can help us quite literally double the rate of student growth in our schools (Wiliam et al., 2004). Given the profound slippage in achievement that has become apparent due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the power of these innovations to boost achievement is a very big deal. Our deepening understanding of these new practices can help us develop supercharged home, in-school, and adult learning environments.

Reason #2 is that we have experienced extremely rapid technological and social change in recent decades, this is likely to continue, and our schools must evolve if they are to prepare our children to handle even more rapid change coming down the road. For this reason, civic leaders are directing schools to fulfill a new social mission. It is critical that educators and members of school communities understand this evolution. Let's analyze it.

Historically, as mentioned earlier, one primary social mission of schools has been to begin the process of sorting us into the various segments of our social and economic system. The assessment and grading system served what might almost be thought of as little more than a triage function, ranking us based on achievement at the end of high school. In that system, those in the highest ranks carried their growing confidence off to college. The others either gave up on complete hopelessness and dropped out or lost confidence, stayed in school, and accepted low ranks before ending their formal education.

However, early in the new millennium, civic leaders began to realize that there are certain lifelong learner proficiencies that have become absolutely essential for survival in our society because they form the foundation of healthy functioning adults. In response, the U.S. Department of Education directed educators to “leave no child behind” in terms of their mastery of these essential proficiencies. Later, schools were instructed to be sure “every student succeeds” in those terms. And now, society directs that “every student be made ready for college or workplace



training.” In other words, schools are charged with gearing *all students* up to thrive in times of rapid change. So now, educators are held accountable for delivering universal competence defined in these specific terms.

If schools are to deliver on this assignment, *we can no longer have any students giving up in hopelessness*. We must help all children believe in themselves, knowing they can succeed if they keep trying. This calls for a totally new set of emotional dynamics surrounding the evaluation of student progress. Regardless of their rate of attainment, children need to be academically self-confident—*all of them*. And the extremely good news is that we can do this, and I will describe how in the chapters that follow.

Further, as a society we face issues of racial inequality and equal educational opportunity. In that context, nothing is more important than making certain that all children come to believe in themselves regardless of their racial heritage or socioeconomic background. As we aspire to narrowing achievement gaps, we can and must come to see assessment not merely as a source of evidence of those gaps, but as an instructional tool capable of causing them to narrow. It can do both, and I will show you how.

Even further and in this same spirit, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are facing a much wider range of achievement in their classrooms than ever before because young learners have responded differentially well to remote learning and because home support for remote learning has varied immensely. Once again, to meet the classroom challenges of accommodating the wide-ranging individual differences in student achievement, of accommodating the unique demands of children with special needs, and of fulfilling the assigned mission of bringing all children to lifelong learner competence, we must seek to instill confidence and hope in them. This will require very strong and trusting student–teacher teams combined with parent–teacher partnerships as this team collaborates in the service of learning success. We have the tools in hand today to help each student find their own gifts.

This list of reasons why we must attend to the emotional dynamics of successful schooling goes on. For example, experts in developmental psychology have established the importance of early childhood education programs. One purpose of these emerging programs is to send children into kindergarten having already experienced some learning success, thus developing within them the emerging self-confidence needed to press on with their learning even when it's hard. For many early learners, initial contact with school can be scary. It can trigger anxiety, an enemy of successful learning. We need to help them see school as a safe place. Early successes can help with that. I will describe why and how as my presentation unfolds.

School psychologists have helped us understand that many adolescents are experiencing overwhelming emotional crises. Often, they have lost their way in school, within their families, and in their sense of their place in the world. It may be possible to remedy some of this doubt by helping these students learn how they can claim credit for their own academic success in the classroom. This is a strong confidence builder.

Referring once again to the impact of the pandemic, we know that increasing numbers of families have decided to homeschool their children. This relocation of the learning makes it critical that parents assume responsibility for building the academic confidence of their students. The research referenced earlier on how to build both academic success and confidence applies whether learning happens in school or at the dining room table. Parents, like teachers, are in a unique position to help their children to believe in themselves as lifelong learners.

All of these realities bring us to the critically important realization that, in these challenging times, our children, their parents, and their teachers need help in developing the whole child. The tenor of our times requires that they get that help. Local teachers and school leaders are fully aware of this. Parents see the effects of these crises firsthand, and many are desperate. We have arrived at a watershed time in American education, a time when educators

and their school communities must play critical roles in bringing our students successfully through this crisis. We have tactics and strategies ready to go to meet this challenge. Read on.

We know children don't all bring the same levels of learning desires or power to the schooling process. Further, we know all children don't receive the same levels of educational support from home and family. This reality has emerged with new clarity as schools worked through the remote learning experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students don't all learn at the same pace or attain the same levels of achievement. Further, we know their interests and aspirations vary widely as they ascend through the grades. So, the pathways they wish to pursue in their learning and, therefore, the learning targets that become important to them will diverge as they mature. *But in the midst of all this diversity and complexity, we can and must hold to the value that all children are entitled to believe in themselves as learners, because only then can they master lifelong learner skills needed to pursue their dreams with hope of success.* This book is about how to help all of them find the kind of motivation and belief in themselves to which they are entitled.

## LEARNING SUCCESS TEAMS

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For all of these reasons, I urge that we build learner success teams to include all who care about and share responsibility for learner academic success and self-confidence. This includes teachers, students, parents, local school leaders, and educational policy makers at all levels. I urge all players to join in a village-wide discussion about how best to fulfill our shared responsibilities for the development of student competence and confidence. The problem has been that, historically, the most critically important villagers have been left out of such discussions. More about this will follow. But for now, I invite all who care about effective schools and student well-being to gather here and think with me about the powerful heretofore untapped potential sources of learner success.

Learning success team captains must be parents and teachers *working in partnership*. I want (we need) you to be in charge because, of all the players addressed herein, you are best positioned to promote the individual well-being of children. You have the most investment in and commitment to the development of the emotional dynamics involved in helping students become confident, competent lifelong learners. Teachers and parents have the most extensive personal contact with children by far and, therefore, have the most frequent and powerful opportunities to impact the development of students' confidence in themselves as learners. If our children are to find and build on their gifts, it will be because of the help you offer them, teachers and parents. Throughout the book, I will include sections titled "Teacher-Parent Teamwork Suggestions" to assist you in taking charge.

Teachers, I realize that you will not be able to fulfill your role without the full support of your local school leaders. You need policy priorities and resources to address learning success and self-confidence goals. I will offer you concrete advice and assistance herein for bringing them onboard. I have reason to believe that they already are on our side. Further, I realize that you are constrained by educational policy and resource priorities at local, state, and federal levels. I will show you how you can take the lead in partnership with parents and local communities to align local and state educational policy with lifelong learner priorities.

Parents, I believe you are among those who have been left out of discussions of pathways to learning success. School communities of parents absolutely must communicate and demand what you know is best for your children. I will show you specifically how to become enthusiastic partners with teachers to lead the village-wide movement toward the development of confident, competent lifelong learners.

*Now for the big surprise of this book:* I want the learners to be members of the starting lineup of our own learning success teams. They, too, have been left out of discussions of keys to their own success. I want them to be active players working in the service of that success. It is time to share the keys to

the kingdom of academic success with them. Those keys unlock three interconnected gifts that underpin long-term learning success and the development of academic self-confidence: (1) a clearer and more complete understanding than ever before of their own intended learning targets, (2) consistent access to information upon which learners continuously can monitor their own progress toward meeting those achievement expectations, and (3) specific learning strategies *they can use* as learners to take charge of closing the gap between where they are at any point in their learning and what they need ultimately to achieve.

These three gifts allow students to take charge of their own learning successes, to feel in control of those successes, to take corrective action when needed, and thus to become confident learners. They allow students to remain continuously aware of the current status of their own learning, literally watching learning happen within them and developing the confidence to face new challenges. If we don't define "lifelong learner skills" in these terms, I don't know how to define them!

Consistent reliance on the three keys listed earlier has led to profound gains in achievement in schools literally around the world, including many in America (Black, 2013; Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Wiliam et al., 2004). They help children come to believe in themselves by helping them watch themselves improve academically from one day to the next. The cumulative positive self-awareness arising from this ongoing progression of small learning successes, mixed with immediate course corrections in their learning when needed, can build in students a strong belief in their own academic capabilities. By helping students know where they are headed, where they are now, and how they can close the gap between those, teachers can help their students initiate and maintain extended academic winning streaks.

## HERE'S WHAT'S COMING

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In the next chapter, I continue to rely on my own learner stories to define the emotional (confidence–doubt)

dynamics of the learning process in richer detail. I share more stories from school, as well as from the military, college and graduate school, and my professional learning. I chronicle how the progression of my discouraging and confidence-building experiences influenced evolving thinking. My purpose in sharing in this way is to make these dynamics come alive for you in very real-life, sensible, and practical terms.

Further, in subsequent chapters I rely on additional stories from the classroom to illustrate key points I wish to make about effective instructional practices. These stories come from my experience or have been shared with me by teachers and professional colleagues. I have shared these stories in presentations and instructional programs throughout my entire career. They are here for you to share in promoting sound practice in your context.

In Chapter 3, I discuss that vision in terms of learning, assessment, and teaching practice that differ so fundamentally from what most of what we adults of today experienced in our schooling years. I label this vision “student-involved classroom assessment *for learning*” and link it to very practical classroom strategies that are backed by ongoing international research revealing gains in student confidence, motivation, engagement, and achievement.

Chapter 4 speaks to *teachers* because you are in the very best position to give students the gifts identified earlier. In your chapter, I urge you to develop a powerful new kind of relationship with your students—a partnership in which you share responsibility with your students for their learning success by bringing them into a rich self-monitoring process while they are learning. I ask you to offer students a new role in the classroom, that of partnering with you in managing their own success. When we use assessment *for learning*, everyone wins. Teachers, your chapter also includes specific advice on how to establish partnerships with your students’ parents and the larger school community.

Chapter 5 offers parents and the school community at large powerful roles they must play in this student success initiative. It informs *parents* about the contributions they can make to the development of strong student–teacher relationships. This chapter, or at least the ideas offered therein, is perfect for sharing with local PTAs or into other channels. I ask parents to become members of their child’s learning success team, supporting their learning success in concrete and specific ways. We know that our communities care deeply about student success. This chapter offers ways for them to make powerfully positive and constructive family contributions to their student’s teacher–student partnership and learning success.

In Chapter 6, I describe why it is essential to add *local school and district leaders*, as well as *educational policy makers*, to the village team charged with developing a new and productive post-pandemic classroom assessment–learning environment. Teachers and parents, I enlist you as the diplomats who will bring them on board. Teachers, I will show you how to introduce these ideas to your building and district leadership in positive and product ways. Parents, please remember that you are the constituents of school board members and legislators. You can make demands of them, and they will be listening to you. This chapter details what you can demand of them.

As you will see in Chapter 6, we need local school district and building leaders to create balanced local school district assessment–instruction systems that allow a student–teacher monitoring partnership to flourish without abandoning accountability. School leaders are most likely to engage in this village-wide effort if they see that their faculties and parent communities have teamed up to encourage them to become involved. In this chapter, I explain what such a “balanced system” looks like, why it’s crucial to the success of student–teacher–parent assessment teams, and precisely how to build such systems.

Further, if policy guides practice, we need sound policies that link the monitoring of student progress directly to teaching and learning as it unfolds day to day in the



classroom—something that has been missing in our schools for decades. Annual accountability testing has not, indeed cannot, do this job. Those who set policy must come to understand that we have in hand today the depth of understanding needed to set far more productive policies than ever before, and I show you how to help them see what this means. They must see that we are in *desperate need of breakout policy leadership* here at local, state, and federal levels.

We are in a position today to give every learner the gift of confidence. In the chapters that follow, you will read about the unique contributions that each team member can contribute to the confidence and learning success of each student. The transformation in teaching and learning values and practices I call for will not be quick or easy. We confront headwinds coming from a very narrow, decades old, and deeply entrenched vision of assessment's role in effective schooling. But we have it within our power to blow past this long-standing historical school testing barrier with the potential for stunning results for all students.

## Teacher–Parent Teamwork Suggestions

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**Please note:** Beginning here and at the end of each chapter, I will offer ideas for specific ways parents and teachers can interact with each other, school leaders, policy makers, and the school community in general in ways that promote the development of student academic competence and confidence.

In addition, I identify resources for educators and policy makers who wish to form local learning teams for further professional development in support of sound classroom, school, or district

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practices as defined herein. Be advised that royalties I receive from sale of these materials go to an endowment at Michigan State University that supports research on those practices.

- 1.** Historically, our local communities have counted on state and federal education agencies to set policies and allocate resources in ways that maximize school quality. However, in this case I am advocating a different leadership model. I want you, teachers and parents, to take the lead in learning about, embracing, and implementing a bold new set of ideas proven to enhance school quality. To reach this goal, you will need to take the lead in making sure school leaders and policy makers learn about, embrace, and support implementation too. You will need to speak truth to power in this arena. You must decide if you will take on this challenge. This book provides the details you need to make that decision. Please talk together about this, teachers and parents, as you decide.
  - 2.** As the beginning step in the building of your team, I recommend that all local teacher–parent collaborations around my ideas begin with participants reading and discussing this book—in pairs or groups; in person or online. It conveys only commonsense ideas communicated in a welcoming, jargon-free voice. It has no political agenda. As you read and discuss, strive to establish the importance and potential value of those ideas for your local situation. Bring local building and school leaders into your collaboration if you wish. As the chapters unfold, I will describe why their involvement is essential, and I will share ways to welcome school leaders and policy makers into your team.
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