

EDUCATION WEEK TEACHER



OPINION

Classroom Q & A With Larry Ferlazzo

An award-winning English and Social Studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif., Larry Ferlazzo is the author of *Helping Students Motivate Themselves: Practical Answers To Classroom Challenges*, *The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide*, and *Building Parent Engagement In Schools*. He also maintains the popular [Websites of the Day](#) blog. In this EdWeek blog, an experiment in knowledge-gathering, he will address readers' questions on classroom management, ELL instruction, lesson planning, and other issues facing teachers. Send your questions to lferlazzo@epe.org. And offer your own thoughts and responses in the comments section.

Response: 'Making an Inclusive Classroom Work'

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on April 16, 2018 3:30 PM

(This is the last post in a two-part series. You can see Part One [here](#).)

The new "question-of-the-week" is:

What is the best advice you can offer to teachers who have students with special needs in their classes?

Today's commentators are Donna Wilson, Marcus Conyers, Barbara Boroson, John McCarthy, Louise Goldberg, David Bateman, Jenifer Cline, Dr. Richard Villa, and Dr. Jacqueline Thousand. There are also many comments from readers.

Response from Donna Wilson & Marcus Conyers

Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers, founders of BrainSMART, are international education consultants and authors of over 20 books. To learn more, see *Five Big Ideas for Effective Teaching: Connecting Mind, Brain, and Education Research to Classroom Practice* (Teachers College Press, 2013) and *Teaching Students to Drive Their Brains: Metacognitive Strategies, Activities, and Lesson Ideas* (ASCD, 2016):

We have learned that one of the most important things educators can be encouraged to do is to have high expectations for all students to be able to learn knowledge and skills at school that are of value. It is often a teacher who helps students who have learning challenges realize their learning potential. In fact, many students are simply not able to assess what their own potential might be, and often those who are having learning challenges give up and are no longer motivated to even begin an academic task. By the same token, students often experience delight when they demonstrate potential they didn't believe they had by succeeding at learning in classes with high expectations for all!

Teachers can use a variety of instructional strategies and approaches to guide students to achieve more of their learning potential.

- *Plasticity-powered capacity to learn: Consider teaching students about how the brain changes as they learn--for example, by having students create models in class to learn how synapses form or by drawing on online resources that illustrate the brain's ability to grow through learning. By developing their understanding that learning changes the brain, students are more likely to persist through learning challenges, more confident in their abilities to succeed.*
- *Access to Opportunity: Challenge students and hold them to high expectations so that they are required to improve and reach their potential. Use formative assessments to determine when children need additional support and provide those opportunities at the appropriate time so students with learning challenges are not so apt to become discouraged.*
- *Persistent Effort: Continue to provide additional support and interventions so that students are constantly challenged to practice. Helping students identify what motivates them internally is also a great way to get them to keep working; studies show that internal motivation is more powerful than external rewards.*
- *Support and Encouragement: Take the time to relate to every student, and make sure that you communicate the value of effort, not just results. Praise for their efforts helps to fuel persistence. Offer encouragement throughout a project or lesson, focusing on the process in addition to the result, noticing the students' efforts and guiding them to assess their work. Share stories about other students and role models who succeeded through hard work and persistence. Take the time to continually assess student progress, celebrating improvements and making changes in instructional strategies as needed to keep pace with students' learning.*

The teacher's display of faith in the student's potential, which overcomes the student's doubt, can be the difference between student success and failure. For all students --and especially those who have learning challenges--such faith can make an enormous positive change in the direction of their lives.

"The teacher's display of faith in the student's potential, which overcomes the student's doubt, can be the difference between student success and failure."

- Donna Wilson & Marcus Conyers in Ed Week Teacher

Response from Barbara Boroson

Barbara Boroson is a nationally-recognized keynote speaker and professional development provider with over 25 years of experience in autism spectrum education, the mother of a teenage son with ASD, and author of [Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Inclusive Classroom: How to Reach and Teach Students with ASD](#), published by Scholastic. Contact her at www.barbaraboroson.com:

*This is a big question for a small space. (It took me 234 pages to answer this very question in my book!) We all know that having students with significant challenges in your inclusive classroom is never easy. **Their challenges challenge you.** So, since I get to offer only one piece of advice here, I'd say this: Use that mutuality of challenges not only to help you teach, but also to help you grow.*

If you're really committed to making your inclusive classroom work, you will probably struggle to differentiate your curriculum to meet the varied learning needs of your diverse population. You will agonize over how to facilitate a peer community that is supportive and accepting. You will worry about pre-empting difficult behaviors and you will second-guess your responses to behavioral outbursts.

If you're really committed to making it work, you will take advantage of supports that are offered to you, such as interdisciplinary team meetings, Rtl guidelines, special ed personnel, and professional development opportunities. Some you'll find helpful, some not so much.

You will do your very best to compensate for the special challenges you confront.

And, despite it all, you will get it wrong sometimes. Even with all of your effort and hard work, there will still be days when your best-laid plans go awry and your carefully calculated interventions backfire. Those days will be frustrating, demoralizing, even defeating. You may even want to give up.

But before you do, pause to consider how a day feels for your students with special needs. Just like you, they have been doing everything they can to get through the day, but without the benefits of experience, maturity, or education, and without the coping skills that you have.

Like you, they struggle. They struggle to process content in the face of auditory or cognitive processing challenges. They struggle to engage, focus, or sit still; to think abstractly or metacognitively; to compensate for specific academic dys-abilities (eg. dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyslexia); and to circumvent all of their other barriers to learning.

Like you, they agonize. They agonize over how to fit in, how to make friends, and how to stay under the bully-radar, even as they try in vain to decode the encrypted language of socialization.

Like you, they worry. They worry about falling apart, freaking out, and losing control when their sensory system is triggered and their regulatory system fails.

Like you, they will take advantage of supports that are offered to them, such as IEP-mandated modifications and accommodations, assistive technology, social skill groups, and push-in and pull-out therapeutic services. Some they'll find helpful, some not so much.

Like you, they will do their very best to compensate for the special challenges they confront.

And like you, they will get it wrong sometimes. Even with all of their effort and hard work, there will still be days when their best-laid plans go awry and their precariously calibrated equilibrium melts down. Those days will be frustrating, demoralizing, even defeating. They may even want to give up.

And so, my best advice is simply this: Acknowledge that you and your students are experiencing a mutual, even symbiotic process; each of you finding your way along a bumpy road. Celebrate your strengths and triumphs just as you celebrate those of your students. Address your own challenges with sensitivity, energy, and optimism, just as you address those of your students. Get the help you need, to give them the help they need. When you stumble, forgive and learn from your missteps, just as you forgive and learn from theirs, and keep moving forward, side by side, with courage, pride, patience, and humility. And when the going gets tough--which it will--give your struggling student a hug, and give your struggling self a break.

"When the going gets tough – which it will – give your struggling student a hug, and give your struggling self a break."

- Barbara Boroson in Education Week Teacher

Response from John McCarthy

John McCarthy is the author of [So All Can Learn: A Practical Guide to Differentiation](#) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). Each chapter connects pedagogical ideas with practical ways to execute them. With over 25 years of experience in Education, John is a teacher and an education consultant who works with teachers and administrators across the United States and internationally. Find many resources related to his book at <http://johnmccarthyeds.net/soallcanlearn/>:

Students with special needs can thrive in any classroom if the right conditions are provided. Fortunately, what's needed is within the skills of teachers who believe that all students can learn. Differentiation is not only possible--it exists in most classrooms and [needs to be more intentional](#).

1. Patience

The first step is powerful in its simplicity: Show patience. Students learn at different paces. Those who learn quickly need previously prepared tasks that stretch their understanding, without being assigned busy work. Those who take longer to learn need additional tasks that address skills and concepts in at least 3 different ways. Use formative assessments to anticipate needs and then include the supports during planning of the lesson. Use Tiered activities where each student works in like-skilled groups. [Think Dots](#) and [other learning strategies](#) fit this need. Stations is another strategy where

students work through various tasks throughout the room and/or online. The teacher sits at one station to work with students for 5-10 minutes based on their specific needs.

2. Get to Know the Learners

Understanding students' interests and home life is as important as their academic skill levels. Connecting a learner's interests with curriculum skills helps students build context. Skills are no longer abstractions. They become meaningful. [Learning Profile Cards](#) helps teachers gather information about the whole child. It involves the students in completing the index cards with guided explanations by the teacher. Learn more about Learning Profile Cards in [So All Can Learn: A Practical Guide to Differentiation](#).

3. Challenge All Learners

It's amazing what students can do if given the opportunity. Every student can use critical thinking skills. A mistake happens when students with learning challenges or special needs are made to focus only on basic knowledge and skills, with low level applications. The result can be unmotivated students who find the work to be rote and disconnected from their complex lives outside of school. If we trust in a student's capacity to take on challenges through problem solving, critiquing, and creating new ideas, they will do their best not to disappoint. Supports may need to be available, from organizers, guided steps, and coaching. Any learning experience can be differentiated [using the right tools to support](#). With practice, students will develop confidence and experience. Motivated, they are likely to persevere with difficult tasks.

Relationships Matter

The discussed three components can elevate student learning. Using time as a process, not fixed deadlines, getting to know each learner, and believing in students' ability to step up to challenges, sends the message to students: "I believe in you. I know that you can rise to the occasion, and I'll be with you each step that you need me." The results are powerful. Students transform from passive receivers to learning how to persevere through the struggle to success so all can learn.

"It's amazing what students can do if given the opportunity."

- John McCarthy in Education Week Teacher

Response from Louise Goldberg

Louise Goldberg has been a yoga teacher and educator for over 35 years. She is the author of *Yoga Therapy for Children with Autism and Special Needs* (2013), *Creative Relaxation® Yoga for Children DVD* (2004), and co-author of *S.T.O.P. and Relax, Your Special Needs Yoga Toolbox* (2006). Her latest book is *Classroom Yoga Breaks*. She is the director of the Yoga Center of Deerfield Beach, Florida, and is a licensed massage therapist. She leads trainings in Creative Relaxation yoga for children to educators, therapists, and parents nationally. Louise has been a reading specialist and has taught English at the middle school, high school, and college levels:

Students with special needs tend to have high levels of anxiety, living much of their lives in fight-or-flight mode. As stress levels escalate, their capacities to attend and retain information decline, creating even greater obstacles to learning and connecting with others.

Children need to feel safe. They want to have a sense of control. The key is to mitigate their anxiety at regular intervals throughout their day, before it escalates.

Armed with a few relaxation techniques, you can change the atmosphere of your classroom. Remember, however, that your words will be only as meaningful as the manner of your presentation. Special kids are often sensitive to nonverbal cues and the moods of others. It's important to observe the messages of your own body.

Before you enter your classroom, scan your body for a moment. Notice if your jaw is clenched, your shoulders hunched or slumped, your fingers soft or fisted. Are you aware of your breathing? Is it fast,

shallow, irregular? Take a few seconds to yawn, open your chest, and jiggle your arms and hands. Inhale to the count of 5; exhale to the count of 5. Now you are ready to convey the message that all is well.

Serving as a model of calm for your students, you will enhance their sense of security. Next, implement simple relaxation exercises to create a more predictable environment. Change is stress-making, especially for those who are already tense. And the school day is always changing. You may use relaxation tools to offer consistency and ease the transitions between activities.

Before beginning classwork, for example, ask your students to take three "huh" breaths, shrugging their shoulders up toward their ears with an inhalation, dropping them down with the exhalation. This shoulder release deepens their breathing and signals that it's time to settle down to work.

When there's a change in the schedule--rotating to a different class or from center to center, take a pause before asking the students to make the shift. Use "bellows" breath for this one. Interlacing the fingers behind the head, inhale and look up; exhale and look down. Repeat. If they are exceptionally tense, stay in the downward position for a few breaths, as this triggers calming centers in the brain. Then proceed to the next scheduled activity.

If students are having difficulty paying attention, give them a moment to "follow the thumb." They extend their right arm straight in front of them with the fingers closed and the thumb upright like a hitchhiker. Instruct them to watch their thumb as they sweep the arm out slowly to the right; slowly to the left; then in a large circle. You may repeat with the left arm or save that for next time. Training them to direct their gaze to a specific point will help students rein in their wandering minds.

Near the end of class when students become fatigued, implement the "parachute" breath. Start with arms relaxed by their sides. Inhaling, turn the palms out and sweep the arms out to the sides and up overhead, palms touching. Exhaling, turn the palms out and float the arms back down to their sides. Repeat. Deep breathing will give them a little spurt of energy to get through the remainder of their day.

Whenever something completely unpredictable occurs, use one of these exercises as a go-to for self-calming. You may lead the entire class in a specific exercise or encourage individuals to use their favorites.

Empowering special needs students with tools to self-regulate during shifts in their day will mitigate tension and facilitate learning, making your classroom a more peaceful space for all.

"Empowering special needs students with tools to self-regulate during shifts in their day will mitigate tension and facilitate learning, making your classroom a more peaceful space for all."

- Louise Goldberg in Education Week Teacher

Response from David Bateman & Jenifer Cline

David Bateman, PhD is a professor of special education at Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania where he focuses on providing appropriate services to students with disabilities. He is the co-author of many books, including *A Teacher's Guide to Special Education*.

Jenifer Cline, MS, works in the Office of Public Instruction for the state of Montana. She is a former speech pathologist and a special education administrator. She is the co-author of many books, including *A Teacher's Guide to Special Education*:

The best advice we can offer to teachers who have students with special needs in their classroom is to understand the students' disability (their educational needs) and fulfill their role in planning for, preparing, and carrying out the student's educational program. Many general education teachers are not confident and comfortable working with students with disabilities and/or within the special education processes and regulations. At times it can feel very daunting, however, there are a number of resources both in your school and outside the school that can help with this.

When you have a student with a disability in your classroom, the first step is to meet with the student, parent, and the special education teacher to understand the disability and how it impacts the student's

education. Also work to understand the strengths of the student and the unique qualities and skills they have that will strengthen your classroom environment. Teachers then need to work to understand the special education process and the intent of each step in that process. Laws and regulations can often make us leery and we become worried that we are going to do the "wrong thing." If you can work with your administrator and special education staff to understand the intent, you will then be empowered to play your role in the process and work as a team to develop an appropriate educational plan for the student.

General education teachers play an imperative role and need to be empowered to do so. As the general education teacher, you are the curriculum expert. You are the person who understand the dynamics of your classroom and can speak to the specific accommodations and or modifications the student will need to be able to be successful in that setting. As the general education teacher, your input on the Least Restrictive Environment the student could be educated in is imperative. The intent of a team of people developing a plan for a student with a disability is to use the expertise of each individual to develop the most appropriate program. Therefore, your role as the general education teacher is just as important of the other team members (parents, special education staff, administration).

"Work to understand the strengths of the student and the unique qualities and skills they have that will strengthen your classroom environment."

David Bateman & Jenifer Cline in Ed Week
Teacher

Response from Dr. Richard Villa & Dr. Jacqueline Thousand

Dr. Richard Villa, President of Bayridge Consortium, is a highly sought-after district, state, national and international professional development presenter, consultant, and coach. He is recognized as an educational leader who inspires and works collaboratively with others to implement current and emerging exemplary educational practices. Dr. Villa is known for his knowledgeable, enthusiastic, audience-engaging, and humorous presentation style.

Dr. Jacqueline Thousand, Professor Emerita in the School of Education at California State San Marcos, is an internationally known teacher, author, systems change consultant, and disability rights and inclusive education advocate. She has authored numerous books and articles on inclusive education, organizational change, differentiated instruction, co-teaching, cooperative learning, collaborative teaming, and creative problem solving:

Today's teachers are educating an increasingly diverse student population. Some struggle to successfully teach these learners because they attempt to "fit them into" experiences never designed with these learners in mind. A powerful process to assist teachers in determining what to do is the retrofit mismatch process.

Since the word "retrofit" is derived from architecture, an architectural analogy may help to clarify the term. Think of a school building that was built in the 1950s. Was it constructed to allow access for everyone? The answer is likely "no." That building is made accessible by performing a retrofit - widening doorways, changing bathroom configurations, adding ramps and elevators, and so on.

Similarly, educators may need to apply a retrofit approach to correct the mismatch between learner characteristics and classroom demands and assist students to access the curriculum by altering preexisting curriculum, instructional, and assessment methods.

With the retrofit approach, teachers gather "facts" about a student's strengths (e.g., learning styles, learning preferences, and interests) and challenges and compare this information with the content, process, and product demands of the classroom.

The Retrofit Mismatch Problem-Solving Template below identifies the data to be collected and used to identify and address potential mismatches between a student's attributes and classroom demands. An individual teacher can use this retrofit problem-solving tool or a team (e.g., grade level team, IEP team, RTI/MTSS team) to correct mismatches for any learner.

- *The left column prompts the teacher or team members to first gather positive information as well as specific goals and needs regarding the student of concern.*
- *The second column prompts the teacher or team to examine the typical demands of a lesson, class, or unit of instruction, with particular attention to the content and materials used, products generated along with assessment and grading practices, and the typical instructional processes employed.*
- *The third column prompts the teacher or team to compare the information in the first two columns in order to identify mismatches between the student's attributes and the typical classroom demands.*

There may be mismatches between how the student best accesses information and how content is typically delivered, between how a student best shows what s/he knows and how achievement is typically assessed, or between how the student makes sense of learning and how instruction typically has been delivered.

- *Once mismatches have been identified, the fourth column is used to generate and record multiple options for addressing each mismatch. Teachers and teams are strongly advised to consider and use the strengths, preferences, and interests of the target learner when generating potential solutions to mismatches and to generate at least 3 to 5 ideas per mismatch. The more challenging a child is perceived to be, the more important it is to use that child's strengths to craft solutions to mismatches. Remember, teams are more likely to generate a large, diverse pool of potential solutions. So, find a partner or two when using this process.*

The Retrofit Mismatch Problem-Solving Template

Facts About the Student Name:	Facts About the Class/Lesson Class:	Mismatches Between Student Facts & Class, Lesson, Unit Facts	Brainstormed Potential Solutions to Mismatches
<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Content demands and materials used</i>	1.	1a. 1b. 1c.
<i>Interests</i>		2.	2a. 2b. 2c.
<i>Learning style(s)</i>	<i>Product expectations including how students are graded</i>	3.	3a. 3b. 3c.
<i>Multiple Intelligences</i>		4.	4a. 4b. 4c.
<i>Important relationships</i>	<i>Process demands</i>	5.	5a. 5b. 5c.
<i>Goals/concerns</i>			
<i>Other information</i>			

For examples of the retrofit problem solving process in action as well as examples of the proactive Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to differentiation, see Thousand, Villa, and Nevin's

(2015) 2nd edition of Differentiated instruction: Planning for universal design and teaching for college and career readiness published by Corwin Press.

"Educators may need to apply a retrofit approach to correct the mismatch between learner characteristics and classroom demands and assist students to access the curriculum by altering preexisting curriculum, instructional, and assessment methods."

- Dr. Richard Villa & Dr. Jacqueline Thousand in Ed Week Teacher