Getting Past "I Can't"

Teaching Children to Persevere When the Going Gets Tough
From Andy Dousis as told to Roxann Kriete

When I taught fourth grade, I introduced two-digit multiplication around the middle of each year. This would always stump a number of students who had breezed through math up until that point. Patty was a classic example. Frustrated when her initial attempts at this new level of math failed, she declared that she just couldn't do it, not now, not ever.

For students like Patty who get stuck when math, or writing or P.E. or any other subject, gets harder, the success

of their current and future schooling depends on teachers helping them get past "I can't do it" to "I can if I try a different way" or "I can if I get help." Here's what this looked like with Patty:

"I'm not doing this, Mr. D."

The day I introduced two-digit multiplication to the class, I modeled the new algorithm and we worked through a number of examples as a whole group before I sent students off to work with partners. As I circulated, I noticed that Patty wasn't saying much to her partner Alex. When Alex got up to go to the bathroom, I sat down in his chair to give Patty a little one-on-one coaching. By the end of our math time, I was satisfied that everyone, including Patty, was ready to handle a homework assignment involving our new multiplication problems.

The next day, while students were again practicing this kind of multiplication independently, I noticed Patty with her head down on her desk. Crouching next to her, I asked quietly, "Hey, Patty, what's going on?" Silence. I waited. Eventually an upset face surfaced, first sideways, still on the desk. Then, she lifted her head, glared at me and made her best attempt at defiance. "I'm not doing this, Mr. D." It would have been more convincing if her voice hadn't quavered.

I nodded, accepting her statement matter-of-factly. "Yup, I can see that. How come you're not?" I kept my voice quiet, but did not move closer to her. Sometimes in an attempt to be comforting or to keep conversations private, we crowd children at the very times when a bit of physical space can be helpful for dissipating the emotion. A few quiet tears rolled down Patty's cheeks, and she swiped at her eyes with the cuff of her sweater. "I can't do it."

Providing a respite for calming down

There it was. Those words “I can’t.” There are many

possible reasons for this defeated attitude in children. Perhaps some are victims of low expectations that they come to internalize. Perhaps our instant-gratification culture conditions them to give up quickly. Perhaps over-scheduled lives deprive them of the time to persist. Whatever the reason, the “I can’t learn” belief, if allowed to linger, has grave consequences. By the time students reach high school, they’ve usually constructed self-narratives about themselves as learners—or non-learners—and reconstruction of these narratives is not easy.

I knew I had an opportunity here to help one child get one step closer to a narrative of herself as a learner. My task was to teach perseverance. Perseverance, like so many other important life skills, is not simply a character trait that some have and others do not. I believe that like multiplication, classification, and long division, perseverance can be taught, not by stirring speeches or inspirational posters on the wall, but in the ordinary, everyday encounters that classroom life offers in abundance.

I did not always see things this way. Early in my teaching career, my students’ frustration only fed my own, and their sense of failure often triggered a mirror response from me. When they said “I don’t get this,” my inner voice responded “Must be I can’t teach.” But I’ve come to see these moments very differently, and I’ve taught myself to relax into them and let my teacher’s heart smile.

So in reply to Patty’s “I can’t do it,” I asked, “What makes you think that?”

“I can’t. I just know I can’t.” The tears were coming more freely now. I grabbed a few tissues from a box on the nearby windowsill and handed them to her. “We’re gonna talk about this later today,” I said. Because her frustration was escalating, waiting until her mood was calmer before problem solving seemed like the best bet. “For now, here’s what I want you to do.” I turned to a page that reviewed single-digit multiplication and directed Patty to complete a row of problems that I knew she could handle. Then I moved on, checking in with other students as they worked.

Patty did the problems and turned them in when I collected the class papers. While her demeanor was subdued, she had regained her composure by the end of the work time.

Returning to problem solve

Later that day, I conferred with Patty privately. “So tell me more about what’s going on for you in math now,” I began.

Now that the pressure of the math lesson was over and a little time and space had intervened, Patty was able to describe what was going on. “Yesterday in class when you were doing those problems I followed it. And when I worked with Alex we did all the problems and I was fine. And then last night when I tried to do the homework, I couldn’t remember and Mom helped me. But then in class today when I saw the math sheet, I just couldn’t remember how to do it.”

While Patty had begun with a strong, sturdy voice, her delivery was faltering. By the end I had to lean in to hear her. “I just can’t do it,” she concluded mournfully.

“It’s hard when you think you have something and you lose it,” I acknowledged.

“We’re going to do some more practice together.” I pulled a worksheet out of a folder. “Okay. 33 times 6.” I talked my way through each step, writing carefully as I talked.

“I’m going to do another one. Watch me and tell me what you notice.” This step was important because watching me allowed Patty to re-establish her mental map of this math process, and listening to her allowed me to analyze where the holes in her understanding were.

We did a few more together. Each time, I handed more responsibility for the thinking to Patty. “This time you tell me where to start. Where do I write that?”

And then “You do this one, and I’ll tell you what I see you doing.”

And finally, “Want to try another one? This time I’m not going to say anything. I’m just going to watch.”

“Yes! You got it. Now I’m going to walk away, and you do the next two. I’ll check back with you in a few minutes.”

It’s important to note that this interaction with Patty was successful in large part because I’d taken the time since the beginning of the year to build a personal connection with her and to gain her trust, as I try to do with all students. This begins with getting to know each student as a person.

In Patty’s case, I knew that she was on the gymnastics team at the local YMCA and that she liked to read books about “real people.” I noticed specific things that she was good at and commented on them. I made sure, as with all students, that she was comfortable approaching me for help. All this conveyed that I cared about her and believed in her general competence. That foundation of trust made it possible for this problem solving instance to go smoothly and productively.

Over the course of the year I worked with Patty in similar fashion when she faced other “can’t do” moments. My hope is that she will eventually learn to flag her frustration breakpoint herself, stop before getting to that point, and identify resources, external or internal, that can help her get over the hump. I know this shift will not happen quickly, but over time.

Effective responses to “I can’t”

The individual children I've taught and the types of challenges they've faced have varied, and the details of my interaction with them have varied accordingly. However, I've found certain responses to be generally effective

Acknowledge that there's a problem and listen to the student's perception of it. ("Hey, Patty, what's going on?")

* Provide a respite to allow emotion to subside if needed.

* Provide a doable task both to aid in regaining composure and to remind a student of his or her competency.

Return soon to problem solve and provide support.

* Validate the student's frustration. ("It's hard when ….")

* Gradually have the student do more and more of the task without help until he or she is ready for full independence.

* Maintain matter-of-fact language and body language throughout the process.

My goal is to help children learn how to seek and receive help, how to try and try and try again until they can, in fact, do whatever it was that they couldn't. I believe that the slow, consistent accumulation of many small learning triumphs helps them develop faith in themselves as competent learners—undaunted and undeterred by that which they do not yet know.