

# Purpose & Hope - Teaching in Light of Each Student's Future

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## Introduction

Over the past few decades, there have been many dramatic changes in how we deliver classroom instruction. Pedagogical practices are much different now than they used to be as a result of research in the areas of assessment, psychology and technology. There is no doubt that the classroom looks very different today than it did 30 years ago. What hasn't changed enough, however, is the way the classroom feels. Too many students are still sitting in classrooms disinterested. While advancements in the areas mentioned above do help engage learners, we still have too many students who lack passion for their education, and this needs to change.

Imagine a classroom where students understood the "why" of each task they completed, and could articulate how that why went beyond the curricular content. Imagine a classroom where students engaged in tasks which intentionally prepared them to enter a competitive world by supporting the development of skills necessary for reaching full potential. Imagine a classroom where students can articulate how each task is an opportunity to learn and grow in light of their futures. It's exciting to imagine classrooms in these ways, and it isn't wishful or naive thinking.

The purpose of this paper is to present a new strategy which personalizes education for each student. Something which makes this strategy so special is that it can be applied immediately within our current classroom structures. It is a strategy which enhances programming that we are already providing for our students.

This strategy is centred on providing students with *purpose* and *hope*. **Purpose is the reason why we do things, while hope is the expectation that the things we do will result in something meaningful and positive.**

One of the first words that babies learn is "why". At a very young age they need a purpose. A key to combating stress and anxiety is to provide students with a sense of purpose and hope. We must enable them to develop a greater understanding of the purpose for the tasks they complete in classrooms, and instill in them a hopeful anticipation for how they will be able to use the skills they gain in the future.

For the remainder off this paper, "future" will refer to any time after the present moment. Future could be 2 hours from now, 2 weeks from now, 2 years from now or 2 decades from now. Applying these strategies within the classroom are about helping students understand how their engagement within the classroom will affect their very near and distant futures.

**When we provide purpose and hope for students we are teaching in light of our students' futures.**

## **Connecting Classroom Experiences to Student Futures & Enhancing Well-Being**

Teaching with a focus on the future means being aware of the skills and attitudes that students will need for their futures. When we are mindful of what these skills are, it will allow us to recognize when and how to implement them into our classroom instruction. This paper will provide teachers with foundational knowledge on what these skills can look like, to ensure that our instructional practices effectively support such skill development. As we have engaged in professional dialogue with educators, it has become clear that our current instructional practices do not address these skills.

As educators, we teach curricular content, we assess curricular content, and as a result, the focus of our classrooms becomes the curricular content. This is precisely what we propose needs to change. By focusing solely on curricular content, we are preventing from developing deeper, more rich and engaging learning environments. We are only scratching the surface of what we could actually be providing the students we serve. When we dig deeper into the richer environments, we will find that they provide the means to not only enhance student achievement and well-being, but actually allow us to go on the offensive against the stress and anxiety which is plaguing our students.

We must teach students the skills that they are going to need for their futures. We can purposefully create tasks and environments which allow students to develop skills and attitudes that will, as Dr. Tim Kimmel puts it, “Propel them into their futures”. Developing lifelong learners is so much more than teaching students how to learn content. It is even more than teaching them how to learn. It is teaching them to recognize *what* they need to learn, *why* they need to learn it, and *how* they can gain this knowledge in a way that adds value to themselves both in the present moment, as well as their futures.

Allow us to illustrate. What allows people in the “real world” to reach their full potential? Is it content they learned in elementary school, high school or even college/university? Nobody can argue that such content was meaningless, but it isn’t what allows someone to reach their full potential. Skills, attitudes, behaviours, habits and character are what propel us toward getting the best out of ourselves. The classroom provides us the opportunity to teach both content, and skills, but we must start being more deliberate so that we can ensure that students are getting both. And when we do, we will provide a greater sense of purpose and hope, as well as combat stress and anxiety in students. Purpose and hope is the avenue for teaching content through a framework that provides the skills needed to complement such knowledge in the real world.

While adults today may not be able to say that the content they learned in elementary and high school propelled them toward reaching their full potential, it is our hope that one day the next generation of adults will be able to say that the *lessons* and *experiences* that they

engaged in during classroom instruction did in fact provide a foundation for their future successes.

International author and educational adviser, Sir Ken Robinson, is a strong proponent that our educational systems need radical change. He argues that our classrooms stunt creativity because we place students in a linear system of getting them from point A (Kindergarten) to point B (graduation). He believes very strongly that our systems must be much more “organic” - tailoring instruction to the individual strengths and passions of students. While we agree that change is required, we believe that providing students with purpose and hope allows for change that is extremely meaningful, without being radical. The change for which Robinson advocates will take time, but the change we are proposing simply involves being deliberate, can have immediate impact, and will serve as a stepping stone for transformational change deemed necessary in the future. When we apply the purpose and hope model, we are keeping current instructional frameworks, but supporting the passions and interests of students by affording the opportunity to develop attitudes and skills that they will use within their passions. Purpose and hope not only combats stress and anxiety, it promotes more meaningful learning.

We know that our children are currently experiencing significantly higher levels of stress and anxiety as have been documented in the past. During his keynote address at the 2017 Quest Conference, Dr. Michael Ungar shared that the instances of children ages 5-24 entering hospital emergency rooms for mental health issues is up 44% since 2006-2007. In that same time frame, hospitalizations for mental health issues is up 30%. In the words of Dr. Ungar, “We are making our kids sick”.

Nobody can say that these rates are as a result of current educational programming. This is a societal issue, and one which must be addressed. Since the job of our education systems is to serve our children and help them reach their full potential, who better than our schools to jump in and make positive change. When we provide students with purpose and hope, we provide excitement rather than stress and anxiety - we provide students with the belief that the best is yet to come because they are learning, growing and therefore have a lot for which they can look forward. Our students need purpose and hope, and as educators we are in a position to make an impact. While this is a privilege, it is also our responsibility.

We know that too many students struggle to see the “why” in their educational experiences and therefore do not have a strong sense of purpose while learning in our current educational models. For years we have understood the importance of individualizing instruction, and experts (such as Sir Ken Robinson) are now recommending that this must be done in ways which not only support the unique learning styles of students, but the unique passions of students as well. Our current structure of education does not adequately align with these recommendations. Our forms do not align with our functions. Our systems do not align with our principles. Since our principles are to promote lifelong learners, support student achievement and well-being, and prepare students to reach their full potential both now and in their future, then we must begin the process of change. We must adopt pedagogical models which align with our principles. Providing purpose and hope for students is a very logical and meaningful step in the right direction.

Please do not misinterpret our message. None of this is meant to be negative, but rather ignite a sense of hope and excitement for what we can realistically provide for students. Change is necessary, as it always is with growth, and growth is a continual process in any area where improvement is being consistently sought after. What we are proposing is simply what we believe are some of the next steps necessary for change, and we are seeking to be very clear as to why such change is necessary.

## **Purpose & Hope - Why It Works**

Too many students come to school and have a limited understanding of the purposes behind their presence in the classroom. They provide general reasons such as “I am here to learn”, or “I’m here so that I can get a good job someday”, but rarely do these reasons ignite passion. Passion is created when a student understands purpose, and combines it with hope. As educators we must cultivate both.

At first this may seem like an impossible task. After all, purpose and hope must be individualized, and the factors which contribute are as varied as the number of students in each classroom. But there are three reasons why this task is not as lofty as it may first appear:

1. All students desire purpose.
2. All students desire hope.
3. All students desire growth.

At a deep level, even children who appear to have no drive, determination or motivation desire these things. We are talking about providing students with that which they already desire. Once we provide it, we will have motivated students, school culture where students have a deeper understanding of why they are in classrooms, and students who possess hope for what is to come in their futures.

The benefits of such a culture do not end with purpose and hope, for a culture centred on purpose and hope welcomes all that promotes learning, growth and overall well-being. A culture centred on purpose and hope is one which promotes understanding and acceptance of differences. It recognizes that everyone has their own unique skills and challenges, and that we are all on a growth continuum. It promotes collaboration, servitude, humility and other factors which enhance one’s sense of well-being. Purpose and hope provides so much more than just purpose and hope.

### Fig.1.1 - Effects of providing students with purpose & hope

1. Intrinsically motivated students
2. School culture where students have a deeper understanding of why they are in classrooms.
3. Students who possess hope for what is to come in their futures.
4. Deeper sense of well-being.

We agree with Dr. Unger when he says that our culture has made our children sick, but we also believe that pursuing purpose and hope in our classrooms is a great place to start as we go on the offensive against these concerning trends.

The purpose and hope strategy is designed to be simplistic and easy to apply in any number of situations, environments and circumstances. Growth always involves change, but change does not always need to be complicated. This strategy can be applied wherever you currently are as an educator.

## **Purpose and Hope - Applying the Framework**

Our framework for providing purpose and hope for students is as follows....

1. Success
2. Skills
3. Attitude
4. Comfort zone
5. Growth Mindset
6. Priorities

Now that we have defined what purpose and hope is, let's examine how to apply this strategy by examining each of the pillars in its framework.

### **1. Defining Success**

One of our many responsibilities as educators is to support our students in reaching their full potential. Promoting purpose and hope allows for this to happen, for it sets a culture which points them toward success. With this said, if we say we are pointing our students toward success, we must also establish a very clear definition for what we are referring to when we use the word. Success can mean many different things, to many different people. It is not our job as educators to tell our students and their families what success is, and what it is not. Doing so would be inappropriate and inequitable because it does not take into consideration the various experiences, beliefs and cultures within our communities. We do however need to define success very clearly within the context of our classrooms and pedagogical practice.

Our definition is an inclusive one, for it supports each individual student and allows them to apply that which they value to their own pursuit of success.

John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach from UCLA created a definition of success that has been used in the fields of education, business, sport and beyond. He stated that, **"Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming."** In other words, our students accomplish success when they achieve their personal best. As we progress through the rest of this framework, you will see that achieving purpose and hope involves pointing students toward deliberate learning and growth that will allow them to accomplish their personal best.

Once again, it is not our place as educators to tell students and their families how they must define success, but the beauty of this definition is that we can provide a very clear definition for what success means within our classrooms, and students can tailor that definition to fit their own identities. For instance, some families define success by the amount of material wealth one possesses. Many teachers may agree with this way of thinking, but we expect there would be many who would not. Regardless of how you feel personally about such a worldview, we can serve our students by providing them with the tools to achieve their best, and they can decide how they will use them. In the place of a student who views material wealth as having achieved success, they can use the skills we provide for them to pursue these passions. Their understanding that these skills are preparing them for their future endeavors provides them with purpose and hope. For a student who defines success as the ability to serve those who are less fortunate, and could care less about material wealth, they apply their learning to achieve their own version of success. **As educators, if we provide students with the means necessary to accomplish their personal best, then we are pointing them toward success.** It's not our job to decide for them how they will use these skills, it is our job to simply support their cultivation.

## **2. Skills Needed for Accomplishing Success**

Now that we have defined success as the peace of mind that comes from knowing that one has put in the work to become the best that they are capable of becoming, we must now determine what this pursuit of success actually looks like.

The pursuit of success always involves growth, and growth involves skill development. If we want to grow at something, we must develop the skills necessary to succeed in that arena. As educators, we can point our students toward success both in and out of the classroom, by providing them with the opportunity to develop skills that they can use in any variety of situations.

John Wooden developed such a list, and serves as a tremendous starting point for any classroom teacher. Below is a copy of Coach Wooden's "Pyramid of Success".



Figure 1.2 (Credit: Inch & Miles: *The Journey to Success* - by John Wooden)

Coach Wooden developed his Pyramid of Success to illustrate the skills that one must develop in order to achieve their personal best. One of the beauties of this framework is that the skills can be applied universally in a variety of situations. Regardless of what you seek to accomplish, these are skills that will support your pursuit.

This is not to say that these are the only skills we should be helping students develop, for there are certainly other skills that promote purpose and hope. Many provinces and states have similar lists, and the instructional methods we are proposing can be used to develop these skills. For instance, the province of Ontario has a “Living Skills” list in their Health curriculum document (please see figure 1.3 below). This Living Skills list, the Pyramid of Success, or any other similar list can serve as a starting point for the skills students can begin to develop within the classroom. Educators can also blend ideas from various resources to create a set of skills that are meaningful for their classrooms, and some of these skills may come from ideas that they and their students co-create as they discuss the skills they need to achieve their personal best in the things they are most passionate about.

Figure 1.3

Living Skills (p.24 - Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 - Health & Physical Education, 2015)

<u>Personal Skills</u>	<u>Interpersonal Skills</u>	<u>Critical &amp; Creative Thinking</u>
<p><b>Self-awareness and Self-monitoring Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a realistic understanding of their own strengths and areas that need improvement</li> <li>• Monitoring their progress in developing skills and understanding</li> <li>• Recognizing stress and learning to identify its causes</li> <li>• Taking responsibility for their actions and for their learning</li> </ul> <p><b>Adaptive, Coping, and Management Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using adaptive skills, such as being flexible, making connections, and applying problem-solving, stress-management, and conflict-resolution skills, when confronted with challenges and change</li> <li>• Using coping skills, such as relaxation techniques, adopting an optimistic attitude, trying out solutions to problems, expressing emotions, and seeking help, when dealing with difficult or stressful situations or emotions</li> <li>• Using time-management and organizational skills to develop greater control over</li> </ul>	<p><b>Communication Skills (verbal/non-verbal)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receiving information – observing body language and non-verbal signals (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice); active listening, including paraphrasing, clarifying, questioning, responding</li> <li>• Interpreting information – reflecting on messages, analysing messages</li> <li>• Sending information – signalling intentions; clearly expressing information and ideas; expressing responses and providing feedback; using persuasive skills, assertive skills, negotiating skills, refusal skills</li> </ul> <p><b>Relationship and Social Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showing respect for others and the environment</li> <li>• Appreciating differences in people</li> <li>• Demonstrating fair play</li> <li>• Demonstrating teamwork skills by working collaboratively with a partner or in a group to achieve a common goal</li> <li>• Applying conflict-resolution skills</li> </ul>	<p><b>Planning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generating information/ideas</li> <li>• Organizing information/ideas</li> <li>• Focusing and clarifying ideas or strategies</li> </ul> <p><b>Processing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpreting, making connections, analysing</li> <li>• Synthesizing</li> <li>• Evaluating</li> </ul> <p><b>Drawing Conclusions/ Presenting Results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arriving at a decision, conclusion, goal, or solution</li> <li>• Presenting results (e.g., orally, in writing, through a demonstration or performance)</li> <li>• Sharing the strategy</li> </ul> <p><b>Reflecting/Evaluating</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflecting on what could have been done differently</li> <li>• Transferring learning to new situations</li> <li>• Planning next steps</li> </ul>

their own lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Showing leadership</li> </ul>	
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We have provided two possible lists of skills that you can use to provide purpose and hope for students, but again, these lists are not exhaustive. Educators will continually identify other skills they feel will benefit their students and their unique communities (see below for additional skills which can be developed through classroom instruction). What the pyramid and living skills list do provide are frameworks that allow us to get started in an intentional manner. **It provides an entry point to connect the dots between the work students do in the classroom, and the passions they enjoy outside of it.** With time, many teachers may actually create their own frameworks and lists which they have discovered best serve their students.

Figure 1.4

<u>Additional skills which can be developed through classroom instruction</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perseverance</li> <li>- Commitment</li> <li>- Organization</li> <li>- Communication</li> <li>- Empathy</li> <li>- Motivation</li> <li>- Attitude</li> <li>- Goal setting</li> <li>- Self-talk</li> <li>- Mental imagery</li> <li>- Concentration</li> <li>- Dealing with anxiety</li> <li>- Dealing with disappointment</li> <li>- Dealing with emotions</li> <li>- Dealing with failure</li> <li>- Learning from errors</li> <li>- Grit</li> <li>- Grappling</li> <li>- Responsibility</li> <li>- Initiative</li> <li>- Collaboration</li> <li>- Choosing friends wisely</li> <li>- Being a positive influence</li> <li>- Guarding against poor influences</li> </ul>

These lists of skills are not new to educators. We have always recognized the importance of developing such abilities, but many struggle to weave them into our pedagogical practices.

We recognize them as important, but get distracted by other priorities such as achievement-based indicators - for instance test scores. If we are serious about serving our students and helping them reach their full potential, while at the same time going on the offensive against stress and anxiety, then we must purposefully support the development of these skills by making them relevant for our students. This is very exciting for educators, for it provides entry points for more purposeful engagement within the classroom.

Let us illustrate this idea through a scenario. Josiah is a young man who loves hockey, but could care less about school. He is not motivated by the idea of learning to write a persuasive essay, understand how the digestive system works, or by the idea of growing in his ability to think mathematically. What Josiah is motivated by is playing hockey, knowing hockey, understanding hockey and becoming the most proficient hockey player he is capable of becoming. Josiah has passion, but that passion is not yet found in curriculum instruction. What Josiah needs is for his passions to be brought into the classroom so that he can grow within those passions. What he needs is for there to be a very meaningful alignment between how he grows in the classroom, and how he grows at the arena. As educators, we can make this happen when we promote the development of skills such as those found on the Pyramid of Success. Each skill on the Pyramid of Success is one that Josiah will require in order to become the best hockey player that he is capable of becoming. And each skill is one that he can practice on a daily basis through his academic experience in the classroom. What Josiah needs to realize is that if he is serious about becoming the best hockey player he is capable of becoming, then he will be willing to develop these skills. And if he is willing to develop these skills, then he must be willing to develop them by any means necessary. And if he is willing to develop them by any means necessary, then he will be willing to practice them in the classroom. And once he practices them in the classroom, not only will he become a better hockey player, he'll become a more engaged student as well. It will be a natural consequence of the process.

We understand that not every student will have the same level of passion about their area of interest as Josiah has been described to have for hockey. There will be students who struggle to know what they are passionate about, and may need some support in finding these passions. Regardless, this does not change the fact that every person enjoys growth. Every person enjoys getting better at something, for improvement is an enjoyable process. What we hope you see through the illustration above is that we can bring student passions into the classroom, and point students in the direction of skill development that leads to growth in those areas of passion. And we aren't just talking about bringing those passions in for a moment through an individual task or assignment. We are talking about bringing those passions into the classroom so that they become a part of their daily educational experience in order to create cultures which are engaging for learners on an individualized level.

In the case of Josiah, we described a student who doesn't enjoy school, but we realize this represents a very small sample of the student population. The reality is that many students love school, are deeply engaged, and it is often a direct result of teachers who create educational experiences which are safe, fun and interesting. However, another benefit of providing students the opportunity to pursue the development of skills that they will be able to apply anywhere in their lives is the fact that it adds value to any classroom environment

and to every student, for it provides them with purpose and hope. While safe, fun and interesting learning environments are engaging and provide purpose, they don't always provide hope. **Students experience hope when they know that the skills they are developing are preparing them for their future, and preparing them to enter a competitive world.** It is great to have purpose, and it is great to have hope - but the strongest cultures are created when students experience both simultaneously.

In order to make this personal for students, we must help them identify what they are passionate about. The following serves as a framework for doing this:

#### Ask...

1. What things are you genuinely interested in?
2. What are some things you are good at? What are your strengths?
3. What things really bother you? What are some things you would like to see changed in the world around you?
4. What are your hopes for the future (near and distant)? What would you like to accomplish?
5. Based on your interests, hopes and current vision of your future, how do you think school can help you get there?

These are questions which help students narrow in on what they are passionate about, and provide an entry point for teachers to introduce the fact that school presents the opportunity to develop skills that provide purpose and hope for one's future. Identifying the things that excite students as well as the things that make them sad, can allow you as their teacher to help your students identify what at least interests them. These may not be their passions, and may not involve the things they are likely to be involved with in the future. They may be simple momentary interests such as their current hobby. You may get students who say that they want to be the best Youtuber or who want to become an amazing break dancer or magician. They may use these talents in the future, or they may not, but that isn't the point. The point is to help students identify an area of passion - or at the very least an area of interest - that we as educators can use to more purposefully engage them in the classroom. The area of passion is not what is most important; it is the skills that are most important. **The area of passion serves as the avenue to develop the skills, while the development of skills serve as the means for providing purpose and hope for the future.** Passions may change with time, but the skills they develop can be used in many different circumstances in their future, and by allowing students to recognize this, we provide them with enhanced purpose in the classroom, and a sense of hope for their futures.

### **3. How Attitude Affects Skill Development.**

While providing purpose and hope is not difficult, it does involve being deliberate, and as such, there are some factors which we should consider in order to apply these practices effectively. When teaching students skills that promote purpose and create hope, educators are encouraged to consider the following....

1. How attitude affects skill development.
2. How comfort zones affect skill development.
3. How growth mindset affects skill development.

All growth starts with our attitudes. Let us explain.

We have defined success as the peace of mind which comes from knowing that one has put forth the effort to become their personal best. Nobody is born possessing their full potential, for potential must be intentionally pursued and developed. We have also identified many of the skills which students can develop that will allow them to accomplish their personal best. If you want to be your best, you must develop the skills that will allow you to grow so that you can achieve your potential.

This is where attitude comes in. **We cannot grow intentionally if we possess attitudes which do not intentionally support that growth.** Our attitudes provide the foundations for our pursuit of growth, and if we neglect this reality, we choose to hinder the realization of full potential. The figure below further illustrates this.

Figure 1.5:

**ATTITUDE** leads to....  
**HABITS** leads to....  
**BEHAVIOUR** leads to...  
**SKILL** leads to...  
**GROWTH**

As figure 1.5 illustrates, all growth starts with our attitude. If you don't get in the *habit* of changing your *attitude*, then you will not change your *behaviour*. If you don't change your *behaviour*, then you can't develop *skill*. And it is through the development of new *skills* that we experience growth. An understanding of this process is a meaningful component of programing that creates purpose and hope for students.

We can create environments which support purpose and hope for our students, but if we neglect the process of supporting the attitudes our students have toward the various areas that they are seeking growth - particularly when things get difficult - then we are allowing students to sabotage the growth process because all growth stems from a positive attitude.

Purpose and hope is about supporting growth in an intentional way, and intentional growth cannot happen without being intentional about developing attitudes that will support that growth. **The best way to do this is to ensure that we promote consistent messages that will promote positive attitudes. Doing so helps students develop the habit of positive thinking, and promotes accountability in these areas,**

In her book *Grit: The power of passion & perseverance*, Dr. Angela Duckworth accounts her experience interviewing the coach of the Seattle Seahawks football team, Pete Carroll. Carroll believes that the way to establish culture within a team is to promote the use of deliberate words and phrases. He believes that when everyone within a team is using the same words and phrases, and using them often, it will create a culture where everyone is on the same page, pursuing the same objectives. For instance, on Carroll's team, they often use the word "compete", and define it as meaning to "strive together". This definition comes from the original latin meaning and is different from the way most of contemporary society would define what it means to compete. The point is that Carroll has created a culture within his team which values striving together toward common goals, and he strategically chose a word for every member of his team to use to ensure that everyone was on the same page as they "strive together" toward those common goals. Everyone on the Seattle Seahawks knows exactly what is meant when someone uses the term "compete". And clearly defining this word was extremely important, for if they had not done so, many members of the team may have heard an individualized message, rather than a collective message. To create culture we must all be speaking the same "language".

We believe that promoting positive attitudes within our classrooms works the same way. In order to promote positive attitudes, we must provide students with consistent messages that they can use whenever faced with the opportunity to practice a particular skill they are working on. For instance, if a child is struggling to pay attention in class and demonstrate the skill of self-control, it would be helpful if they had a message that they could always fall back on in order to refocus their attention. One such message may be, "I will demonstrate self-control so that I can grow through this lesson". Or perhaps you could use, "Self-control allows me to grow". These are simple but deliberate messages. There are many other ways to stress the importance of self-control, but when a student chooses a different way to tell themselves a similar message, and chooses a different message every time they remind themselves to demonstrate this skill, it decreases the chances that the positive habit will develop because there is a lack of consistency in the message. Consistency promotes the development of habits, and as we've identified, positive habits are what lead to the development of skills. We want our students to have messages to fall back on, so that they can do so on a consistent basis. This way they develop positive habits and skills.

The skill sheets that we have created to support this paper are a wonderful tool for establishing what these messages will sound like in your classroom. The action statements have been formulated to promote positive thought and action and to develop consistent messaging within the class. When every student and teacher in the classroom understands what a skill is, what it looks like, and have an action statement to focus their development of the skill, it simplifies the growth process because everyone is speaking the same language..

You may also choose to develop a list of words, phrases and/or statements outside of skill sheets. They may be posted in your room, on classroom communications to parents, or at the top of assignments. There are many creative ways to ensure that common messaging is being established and promoted. However you choose to do it, the focus must be on

ensuring that students have messages which they are consistently hearing and understanding so as to promote positive action toward developing those habits and skills.

Below are a variety of phrases which serve as further examples. Also included are quotes which can serve as phrases, or be developed into phrases, to serve our learners.

***We identify the purpose in everything we do.***

***We find ways to serve others, because there is always purpose in serving others.***

***A mistake is only negative when I knew better.***

***I grow when I do the things I should, and still fail.***

***I grow because I am willing to fail.***

***I grow because I evaluate experiences where I failed.***

***I grow because I maintain a positive attitude.***

***I grow because I practice deliberately.***

***We practice deliberately.***

***A growth mindset encourages hope, and hope encourages a growth mindset.***

***I display courage rather than fear.***

***I display grit rather than frustration.***

***I display grit rather than frustration...frustration can bring me down, but grit always builds me up.***

***I display excitement to grapple rather than frustration.***

***I work at everything with an attitude of determination & perseverance - for I know that perseverance produces character, and character produces hope.***

***I always “compete” - I work to get better, and help others get better. (Compete comes from latin which means “strive together”).***

***I believe in myself, because it helps me accomplish my best.***

***“Maturity is doing what you are supposed to be doing, when you’re supposed to be doing it, no matter how you feel.” - Dom Capers - NFL Coach***

***“Acting on the right emotion will lift you to success. Action on the wrong emotion will lower you to failure.” - John Maxwell***

***I “do” rather than “try”. Try is a passive word which encourages simply going through the motions. - Derived from ideas of John Maxwell***

***I don’t procrastinate. I “do it now” because that promotes growth.***

***I am willing to try even if it means making an error publicly because my error will help others feel more comfortable to make errors. Therefore, my errors are a way to serve others, because we grow through our errors.***

***Humility allows us to let go of perfection & keep trying - John Maxwell***

***Humility allows us to make the most out of our mistakes - John Maxwell***

***I admit my mistakes, accept responsibility for my actions, evaluate errors and learn from them.***

***I cannot control every situation, but I can control how I respond. When I respond well, I learn, grow & make the most of the situation.***

***“I am responsible for who I am, and where I am today. My present circumstances are a direct result of my past choices. My future will be the result of my future actions and choices.” - John Maxwell***

***“Positive thinking is how you think about a problem. Enthusiasm is how you feel about a problem. The two together determine what you do about a problem.” - Norman Vincent Peale***

***It is one thing to tell people that you care, and it is another to show them - but the greatest impact is when you show and tell. Words and actions apart from each other can be empty, but words paired with actions are powerful.***

***When I develop skills I add value to myself. Those skills make me more valuable in environments where I can use those skills to make a difference, but skills and performance are not what make me valuable. I am valuable, because I am a human being.***

***Life is not easy, and it is rarely fair. Even when things are difficult & unfair, I persevere to find a way to learn and grow.***

***“Real success is a journey. We have to approach it with a long-term mind-set. We have to hang in there, stay focused, and keep moving forward. Excuses are like exits along the road of success that lead us nowhere. Taking the exit is easy, but it gets us off track. It is impossible to go from excuses to success.” - John Maxwell***

***“Success does not always bring growth, but personal growth will always add to our success. The highest reward for our toil is not what we get for it but what we become by it. The most important question is not “What am I getting?” but “What am I becoming?” -John Maxwell***

***I focus on the process rather than the end result. I grow the most by focusing on the process, while at the same time increasing the likelihood that the end result is a desirable one.***

***“Becoming is better than being” - Carol Dweck***

***“Did I win? Did I lose? Those are the wrong questions. The correct question is: Did I make my best effort?” If so, he says, “You may be outscored but you will never lose.”  
- Carol Dweck***

***“No matter what your ability is, effort is what ignites ability and turns it into accomplishment.” - Carol Dweck***

***“You have to work hardest for the things you love most.” - Carol Dweck***

***“I derive just as much happiness from the process as from the results.” - Carol Dweck***

***Mistakes are not failures, they are proof that we are making an effort - John Maxwell***

***I seek out feedback and advice. I want to know where I can do better so that I can improve and grow.***

***“A mistake simply shows you something you didn’t know...A mistake isn’t bad, it’s there to teach you something” - John Maxwell***

***“If you see a failure as an opportunity to learn and get better, it will be. If you perceive it as a mortal blow, it will be.” - Jim Loehr***

***“Fail early. Fail often.” - Will Smith***

***“If I had my life to live over again, I’d make the same mistakes, only sooner.” - Actress Tallulah Bankhead***

***“We first make our habits, and then our habits make us.” - John Dryden***

***“Success is a lousy teacher. It makes smart people think they can’t lose.” - Bill Gates***

**"Don't wait until your wings have developed before you jump. Make the jump and let your wings develop as you learn to fly". - Paul Martinelli (revised quote)**

As you read through these statements, you likely found some that you feel could benefit you and your students. Maybe you found some that you can adapt to serve the needs of your learners. The sayings that are being used must be intentionally chosen to serve the individual learners within your classroom. And involving your students in the choosing, developing and/or revising of phrases and messages can be a very meaningful step to ensure that students see themselves in the messages. It's important for students to understand, but if they don't value the messages, there will be no buy-in. We need to ensure that the messages that we choose or develop are ones that students can see themselves in. They must understand what the messages mean so that they can apply them, but they must also understand why the application of those messages will provide purpose and hope so that they will *want* to apply them.

We mentioned the skills sheets as an example of how to promote these skills and attitudes, but another method may be to develop with your students your own pyramid of success, and choose or develop key phrases which promote the skills that make up your pyramid. This could be a class endeavor where students choose the skills they want to work on as a group, or it could be an individual assignment where students strategically choose the skills that relate to their own desires and pursuits. Either way, choosing skills and developing the consistent messages which will promote those skills is an important part of ensuring that skills are promoted and developed in a habitual manner.

#### **4. How Comfort Zones Affect Skill Development.**

The U.S. Navy seals have a saying, "You have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable". This is a mentality which applies to any area of skill development and growth.

Discomfort comes anytime we step out of what is normal, safe, or - for lack of a better term - comfortable for us. As international leadership expert John C. Maxwell teaches, people don't grow unless they deliberately step out of their comfort zones.

If we want our students to grow, we must help them out of the prisons which are their comfort zones. Staying where they are comfortable means they are sticking with what they already know, and can do. They are not improving, they are not growing. Stephen Covey, author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, encourages people to "Live life in crescendo. Your most important work is always ahead of you". **We want this for our students. We want to see them grow, we want to see them succeed. But it will never happen unless we teach them how to step out of their comfort zones, get comfortable with being uncomfortable, and recognizing that this means getting comfortable with making mistakes.**

## **5. How Growth Mindset Affects Skill Development**

Getting comfortable with making mistakes is a process, and a difficult one - but it is in no way impossible. The work of Dr. Carol Dweck in the area of growth vs. fixed mindsets has proven that it is entirely possible to develop the ability to get comfortable with the mistakes that we make, and to even welcome them. She teaches that a fixed mindset is one which believes that there are limitations on one's abilities, and as such individuals with fixed mindsets hesitate to engage in sustained effort over time - especially if that effort could lead to errors, mistakes or failures. Individuals with growth mindsets believe that continual growth is possible when one welcomes and persists through the challenges that new learning presents. Some have a natural tendency toward a growth mindset, but any educator can attest to the fact that many students tend to have mindsets that are fixed.

The first way to combat the fixed mindset, and help students step out of their comfort zones, is to allow them to understand the value in mistakes. Dr. Dweck's research has shown that our brains actually "grow" when we make errors and reflect upon them. The problem however is that many students never allow their brains to grow like they could, because they are too concerned about how making errors will make them look in front of others. In order to combat this, we must develop a deep understanding of how those very concerns prevent growth.

On previous pages we included quotes by Dr. Dweck, and other meaningful sayings which can help develop this understanding, but it is important to remember that this will be a process. Having consistent messages pertaining to growth mindset is important, but so too is keeping students accountable in this area. It is not enough to simply teach them that their brains grow and develop through errors and as such they should value and even seek out challenges that will likely lead to mistakes - we must also kindly pull them out of their comfort zones and give them opportunities to *experience* these realities in personal ways. Once they experience the benefits of stepping out of your comfort zone and embracing the challenges that come through the process, they will go from having an understanding of why it is important, to an intrinsic motivation to make it a part of their daily practice. The key to helping students embrace the growth mindset is to go from teaching them why it's important to providing them the opportunity to experience why it is important. It will be through the experiences that they will actually grow, and growth is the fuel that will continually feed their hunger for more.

Once again, this will be a process. We need to kindly point out when a student is displaying a fixed mindset by believing that they have fixed abilities, or when they are more concerned about what others think than about their own growth and learning. We need to celebrate when students are stepping out of their comfort zones to take chances and try new things. We need to publicly recognize when students demonstrate a willingness to be wrong or make an error within the classroom because that error allowed them the opportunity to further grow, but it provided the same opportunity for their peers because it allows others to learn from the error, and helps others feel safe to step out of their comfort zones too.

As students see us celebrating mistakes, it is important that they understand the difference between errors of omission and commission. Errors of omission are the mistakes we make as a result of failing to do the things we already know we should be doing, while errors of commission are the mistakes we make despite the fact that we are doing the things that we know we should be doing. Errors of commission are those made when stepping out of our comfort zones and taking a chance, knowing that regardless of the outcome, there will be something valuable to learn. When we speak about celebrating mistakes, we are referring to errors of commission.

Finding the balance between encouraging mistakes and classroom assessment practices can be a very hard balance. As we write this, there are studies which are seeking to try and correct some of the misalignments between what we know about growth, and how we assess it. **We believe one of the most important things a teacher can do is to ensure that their assessment practices align with the messages they deliver to their students.** One of the biggest reasons why students have fixed mindsets is because they believe success comes through grades. As a result, they don't want to risk stepping out of their comfort zone and taking risks if it could cost them marks.

Once we help students understand the value of mistakes, and begin celebrating them, we must make sure that our assessment practices don't contradict our messages. Students will still lose marks for errors, but we need to be intentional about the messages students receive when losing those marks. For instance, when little Aivry loses marks on her oral presentation because a strategy she got creative attempting didn't turn out the way she would have hoped, we must ensure that we are the first voice she hears when receiving her final mark. We must ensure that what she hears from her teacher is consistent with the messages she's heard previously. **We must ensure that she understands the value in the mistakes, and that while she has lost marks, the learning that has come from the experience are much more valuable than those extra marks could ever have been.** This is another area where consistent messaging can come into play. Having clear, consistent messages for scenarios such as these ensures that students are hearing the same message about the errors they have made, hear those messages *clearly* every time, and continue to understand the value those errors play in the growth process. Some messages might include...

*"You are now a stronger writer because you made this error."*

*"I love that tried this strategy. It didn't work yet, but try this next time."*

*"I'm excited about what you will learn from this error"*

When students make errors on tasks and assignments, It is important that those errors are reflected in their marks. This is the way life works - when you make mistakes, there are consequences. When you step out of your comfort zone and make mistakes, there are very real consequences. Just because you demonstrate courage in your decision to take a chance does not mean that an error will not bring about a consequence. If they didn't, then stepping out of your comfort zone would involve zero courage.

As educators, we must fight the temptation to reward students for stepping out of their comfort zone with marks. There may come a day where assessment practices are altered so that we can provide marks for such behaviours, but that day is yet to arrive so it sends an inconsistent message when we provide those marks on assessments which are meant to evaluate the actual products completed. Doing so weakens children's resilience, and does not provide hope for their futures. The world rarely rewards effort. The world rewards products. When we teach children to step out of their comfort zones from a young age, we are allowing them to experience the reality that developing this habit will lead to continued growth over time. We are teaching them that failures have value when, as John C. Maxwell puts it, we teach them to evaluate those failures so that they can find the rich teachings within them. **But when students step out of their comfort zone and make mistakes, if we reward them as if they never made the mistake, we defeat the entire purpose.**

Please allow us to illustrate. In the 2018 Winter Olympic Games, American Shaun White was out of the gold medal position in the men's halfpipe competition as he approached his third and final attempt. Overtaking the top spot would require one of the runs of his life. It would require him to put it all on the line. He would need to get out of his comfort zone to attempt the riskier tricks, and land them. As it turns out, this is exactly what White did, and he won the gold as a result. But what if he hadn't? What if he put it all on the line, got out of his comfort zone, demonstrated confidence and perseverance through the entire process, only to fall on his last and final jump? Should he be commended for his determination and effort? Yes. Will he learn valuable lessons from this experience? With evaluated reflection, absolutely. Should he be given the gold medal because it could be argued that he took more chances, and tried harder than the athlete who scored higher than him? Absolutely not. That's not how the world works.

When we reward our students with marks for their effort rather than their performance, it is the same as rewarding an Olympic athlete with a medal based on effort, rather than performance. Assessing students in these ways is not doing them any favours. It is setting them up for failure, because we are getting in the way of the lessons that stepping out of one's comfort zone and getting undesired results provides. **It doesn't help students, it creates helpless students. It creates a false sense of hope.**

Teaching students how to step out of their comfort zone from a young age is important. We must teach our students how to make errors, evaluate errors, and evaluate when it makes sense to take a risk versus playing it safe. Part of learning how to step out of your comfort zone involves identifying when it isn't wise to do so, and the earlier students begin stepping out of their comfort zones, the sooner they will figure out when it makes sense to do so, and when it doesn't. As mentioned, evaluated experiences is the best teacher. The evaluation of our errors doesn't just teach how to do better next time, it also allows us to understand our own strengths and needs so that we can make educated decisions pertaining to when it makes sense to step out of our comfort zone, and when it makes sense to be more conservative with our strategy.

Engaging in these experiences as an elementary student is important, for the lessons can be learned in very meaningful ways, but the cost of mistakes and failures are low. The older students get, the more costly lack of performance becomes. A student can take chances on an assignment in 8th grade and the consequences likely won't exceed a less than desirable grade on the report card. A student who does the same thing in 12th grade will have much more costly consequences. It is entirely possible that such an error could prevent them from being granted admittance into their preferred college or university. We must teach students to get out of their comfort zones from an early age. They must experience setbacks which result from stepping out of their comfort zone and getting less than desirable results so that they can begin to identify when it makes sense to take chances, and when it is wise to be more conservative.

It is important for students to recognize that their performance does not define them, and it is not what gives them meaning. Giving into this way of thinking hinders the ability to take chances, make mistakes, and learn. A student who believes that their value is found in their performance will stay in their comfort zone instead of stepping out and taking chances. They don't value failure because they find their value in success. It is also important to watch out for the students who find their value in their willingness to make mistakes. They tell themselves that they are valuable when they apply principles which will allow them to grow, and a willingness to fail is one of those principles. At first, this may seem admirable, but it isn't healthy. A student must never link their value as a person to their performance or behaviours. Personal value is not something that should be earned, it is something which should be received unconditionally. We as teachers and parents must ensure that children feel valued for no other reason besides the fact that they are a human being who deserves to be loved and cared for. We value them because it is a basic human right. We value them with no conditions. And we must actively show them that they are valued by cultivating caring environments which provide students the opportunity to feel valued, and see that they are valued.

Creating environments which promote purpose and hope displays to students that you as their teacher value them as an individual. You are supporting them as they pursue their full potential by supporting their development of skills which align with their interests in emotional and psychologically healthy manners. This supports student achievement and well-being in very tangible ways. We are supporting students in the present by preparing them for their futures. We value our students when we care enough to provide them with environments that promote purpose and hope.

## **6. Prioritizing Purpose & Hope**

The pursuit of purpose and hope in your classrooms is a pedagogy, not a strategy. Strategies can be "one offs" which you try, while pedagogies are actions which consistently guide all of your professional practice.

**We cannot compartmentalize the pursuit of purpose and hope into specific subjects or times of the day. It must permeate all that we do in order to be effective.** As previously mentioned, purpose and hope displays for students that we value them, and this means we must value purpose and hope. It must be a priority within our professional practice. Unless the lessons that we teach, the tasks that we assign and the assessments that we evaluate serve as an avenue for providing purpose and hope, these pursuits will not be successful. When students have purpose, they are engaged. When they have hope, they have an excitement and healthy anticipation for their future. This is a definition of student well-being, and this definition will actively support student achievement. Purpose and hope provides the framework for all that we want to provide for our students, and because of this, it deserves to be prioritized throughout our professional practices.

John C. Maxwell states, "The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda". In other words, how you spend your time displays what you value. If we value our students, we will create intentional structures which provide purpose and hope, and if we value purpose and hope, these structures will be evident in all instructional practices. They will be evident in....

**The lessons we teach.** *(Are we teaching solely for content, or are we using the learning of content as an avenue for practicing skills that students will need as they enter a competitive world?)*

**In our success criteria.** *(Are we asking them to only demonstrate understanding of content, or are we prompting them to demonstrate skills that will support the development of content understanding? Are we prompting them to demonstrate skills that will support learning in the current moment, but also provide hope for their futures?)*

**In our assessment for learning.** *(Are we reflecting on what our students need to know academically, and identifying the skills which can support their learning? Are we communicating with students how these skills will support their learning now, but also support additional pursuits in their futures?)*

**In our assessment of learning.** *(What message is our descriptive feedback sending? Are we promoting a growth mindset? Are we encouraging students to continue to take evaluated risks and get out of their comfort zones?)*

**In our assessment as learning.** *(Are we encouraging students to reflect on the skills they have been developing, and to reflect on how these skills have allowed them to grow as a learner and as a person?)*

**In our descriptive feedback.** *(Are we holding them to high standards? Are we clearly identifying their errors, but valuing the learning that is coming through those errors? Does our feedback encourage or discourage the learning/growing process? Does our feedback encourage and inspire them to keep persevering? Does our feedback reflect a knowledge of who they are, what they value, what they are pursuing, how they have grown, and a clear belief that they will continue to grow?)*

**In our communication with parents and community.** *(Are we assuming that they understand growth vs. fixed mindsets or are we engaged in respectful conversations about these mindsets? Is our knowledge of what their child and their family values reflected in our communication? Are parents/guardians an active partner in the growth process for each student?)*

**In the extracurricular activities that we lead.** *(Are we ensuring that the messages we send as coaches/leaders are consistent with messages that create purpose & hope? Are we sending consistent messages in clubs or teams than we are sending in the classroom? Are we making sure that we allow students to strive to “win” but that we evaluate experiences when we “lose”? Are we valuing “losses” as meaningful experiences that allow us to grow? Are we making sure that we value growth more than winning? Are we ensuring that students understand that evaluating losses provide you with lessons that prepare you to experience more “wins”?)*

**The list could go on, but the message here is that if we want our students to understand the value in finding purpose and hope through classroom practices, then purpose and hope must be supremely valued. It must be evident in all that we say and do.**

## **Conclusion**

When we focus on providing students with purpose and hope through classroom instruction, we are demonstrating clearly that we value each student and care deeply about their well-being by creating inclusive environments which value that which they value. Students can see the things that they care about as an integral part of their learning experience. Through the process of learning curriculum, they are developing skills that will support their learning in the classroom, their current pursuits outside of the classroom, and their pursuits in the future.

Students see that their teachers care about them, when their teachers value them enough to value the things that they themselves value. Students see their teachers caring when they see their teachers serving them, and students see their teachers serving them when they see their teachers actively supporting the development of skills that will both support them now, and in the future. Student achievement and well-being is enhanced when we provide students with purpose for their learning, and align those purposes in a way that provides hope for their futures. Student achievement and well-being is enhanced when we point students toward purpose and hope.

When we provide students with purpose and hope, we are not only providing them with inclusive environments, but inspiring ones. We afford students the opportunity to pursue those things which they are passionate about while learning mandated curriculums.

Providing students with purpose and hope provides every student with the opportunity to engage within each lesson and task in a way that is purposeful for them. And that purposeful engagement is supporting the development of skills which provides hope that is personalized for their lives.

It is true that many students do not know exactly “what they want to be when they grow up”. Many have no idea what their future may look like - and that’s okay. When we provide students with purpose and hope, we are meeting them where they are right now, and actively supporting them in the development of skills that they can use for the things that interest them now, and will be able to use in their futures regardless of where the road of life takes them. We provide them with skills that will serve as assets so they can accomplish their personal best regardless of what arena they find themselves in. Students may not know what the future holds, but as educators we can instill an optimistic anticipation that comes from knowing that they are prepared for whatever road they travel.

We often say in the world of education that we want to develop “lifelong learners”. This is a wonderful goal, but we believe we can offer so much more. We believe we can develop lifelong learners who are prepared to enter a competitive world armed with skills that will help them accomplish their full potential. The lifelong learners we are currently developing in schools are often academic based. Academic learning is necessary and important, for students must know how to learn in these ways, but they also need to know how to develop skills which will allow them to take their knowledge and intentionally use it to add value to the pursuits they are engaged in. We are doing our students a disservice if we only develop academic learners. Purpose and hope develops learners which are more well-rounded and prepared to continually grow and accomplish their personal best in all circumstances.

If we want our students to be truly engaged in the classroom, then we must allow them to experience education in a way that is meaningful to them. Our students must understand the purpose behind what they are doing, and be able to clearly articulate how that purpose is relevant to their lives. We have the opportunity, and responsibility, to provide this for each and every student. When we provide purpose and hope, we create classrooms where students walk through the door with excitement for the opportunities today will provide. When we teach in light of each student’s future, they learn in light of their future - and are prepared to step into their futures with anticipation and hope.

One day, the students who sit in our classrooms will be sitting in front of someone who will ask them, “Why should I choose you?” This may come in the form of a job interview, a tryout, an audition, a business deal or any number of other similar circumstances. As educators, it should be our goal to provide them with an education that prepares them to answer that question. By teaching in light of each student’s future, we prepare them to respond with, *“I’m glad you asked, because from a young age I’ve been preparing myself to answer that very question”*.

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