



[Buy this issue](#)  
[Share on Twitter](#)  
[Share on Facebook](#)  
[Share on LinkedIn](#)  
[Share on Google+](#)

- [Read Abstract](#)

December 2010/January 2011 | Volume 68 | Number 4  
 The Effective Educator Pages 70-73

## Once a Struggling Student...

*Sara Fry and Kim DeWit*

**Teachers who faced tough challenges as K–12 students tell what they learned from their experience.**

Lois recalls feeling stupid as early as 1st grade. Her teacher would write three numbers on the board and ask, "Which is biggest?" Lois would sit and stare and feel ashamed because she didn't know. Instead of asking the teacher for help, she hid her confusion because she was embarrassed. Lois's confusion had a simple explanation: She did not understand the difference between size and value. She recalls, "I didn't understand that a 10 was bigger than a 5 because I was thinking 'She wrote the 5 the biggest.'" Lois remained anxious about math for her entire school career and into adulthood.

Maisie faced a different set of challenges. A teacher once said, "Maisie, you're so intelligent—I don't understand why you don't do better in school!" The teacher didn't know Maisie was growing up in poverty. Her dad was an alcoholic, paychecks were unsteady, and her mom struggled to support Maisie and her siblings. She looks back on her childhood and recognizes that, for a period of about five years, her home environment made it hard for her to believe in herself and develop basic skills.

Anne prided herself on getting a discipline referral every semester from 7th grade on. Her parents and teachers were constantly telling her she was smart, with the insinuation being, "so why are you messing up and getting poor grades?" Anne realizes now that she was bored and not challenged academically. Social isolation further disconnected her from school, making it a place she preferred to avoid.

By the time Carrie was a freshman in high school, she had moved approximately 50 times. Both of her parents had significant substance abuse problems, and her mother was mentally ill. Her family was frequently homeless, and she missed a lot of school. When she was in school, Carrie was often hungry, tired, and unable to focus on learning. Despite the difficulties, Carrie found that "school was a safe haven, and teachers were models of all that could be good in this world."

In addition to struggling in school, Lois, Maisie, Anne, and Carrie have something else in common: They all are highly qualified, dedicated, and effective teachers. They are among 46 preK–12 teachers from across the United States whom we interviewed in a recent study of teachers who struggled academically or socially as students.<sup>1</sup> The teachers we interviewed had between 5 and 40 years of experience and taught a variety of grade levels and subjects, ranging from elementary education to art to special education to middle-level mathematics to music. We asked them to tell us about their struggles in school as students and how those experiences influence their teaching.

## Four Characteristics of Effective Educators

Four common characteristics of effective educators emerged in our interviews. These qualities reflect the belief that all children can learn. This disposition comes naturally to the teachers we interviewed because they know exactly what it is like to be the student who can—and did—learn despite facing challenges. On the basis of their collective voices, we describe effective educators as having the following characteristics.

## 1. They have caring relationships with students.

The teachers we interviewed emphasized how important it is not to get so caught up in the minutiae of our profession that we forget to create a safe and welcoming environment for students.

Stella is a high school art teacher whose father was an alcoholic. As a student, she isolated herself from her peers and immediately left school each day to babysit younger siblings. She advocates on behalf of kids like herself:

*School is not their first priority. It's not because they choose to mess up. There are things going on in their lives that are bigger and more demanding of their attention and their energy than school.*

Stella keeps an eye out for students who are clearly miserable and lets them know that she understands what they are experiencing. Stella told us,

*When you're isolated in that kind of a family lifestyle, you don't know there are other people who have experienced those things. When you're a kid, you think you're the only one.*

Candace is a high school English teacher who was also disconnected from school as a student. She was bored and didn't see how school was helpful. When she was in 10th grade, she ditched her classes for two months, and none of her teachers called home to check in:

*You really get this sense like "Well, do they even notice that I'm not there? Am I invisible?" So I form personal connections with my kids so that they do know. I say "Hey, you weren't here yesterday. What's going on with you? We miss you when you're gone. We notice."*

Candace knows her approach has made a difference with individual kids.

## 2. They set high standards and help students reach them.

The teachers we interviewed were adamant that caring does not mean lowering standards. Ultimately, caring relationships support students' learning because teachers who care help students meet their high standards. None of the teachers watered down their curriculum; on the contrary, they focused on maintaining high expectations while discerning what kind of help students need. Some students need more time, others need specific scaffolding, and some need to experience a success or two so they can find value in the curriculum or discover confidence in themselves.

Many of the teachers' approaches are influenced by memories of their own academic struggles and the support they did *not* receive. For example, Stella, whose parents required that she return home directly after school to babysit, sometimes needed help with assignments or more time to complete them. She couldn't stay after school, which was when her teachers typically provided help and extra time. Today she works with students who can't stay after school in the mornings before school or at lunchtime.

Angelle overcame her struggles in math at her innercity school, and today she is a successful elementary special education teacher. She advocates giving students extra time and support, not consigning them to failure because of early struggles:

*Just because you are a struggling reader in 1st and 2nd grade, it doesn't mean that at the end you'll end up being a drug dealer. You'll catch up. Somehow the mental ability, the want to be something in life, and the prayers and dedicated teachers all fit together, and it creates a child who will be successful. But they need a teacher who is going to start engaging them and actually teach them, not scoot them along with everyone else. Take time out one-on-one on your lunch period or after school. I think that is the greatest gift you can give a student who can't read.*

For many of the teachers in our study, helping students meet high standards involves talking to them about their thinking, learning, and behavior. Marie is an elementary math specialist, despite almost not graduating from high school because of her struggles with math. She explained the importance of asking students what they are thinking: "I can guess and surmise all day long. But if you ask them, they can tell you."

Lois also asks students about their thinking, particularly in math, because she realizes that her own lifelong math anxiety might have been avoided if her 1st grade teacher had asked her direct questions that were grounded in contemporary math pedagogy. Such questions might have uncovered the roots of her confusion before she became hopelessly frustrated:

*I ask "How did you get this? Tell me about it." And I don't always make them write how they got their answers even though that is the state mandate. I also want it verbally because a lot of times [my elementary students] can't communicate their faulty thinking through writing.*

Sabina, who has taught elementary grades and English as a second language (ESL), now works as a curriculum support teacher. She explained how important it is for teachers to persevere and help students reach high standards. She refuses to look at her classroom as a place where she should reproduce the bell curve and finds the mentality that "As long as I have six As, two Bs, and three Fs, I'm happy" unacceptable. She told us, "If I have three Fs, I still have to figure out what I can do to help these three be successful."

### 3. They connect the curriculum to students' lives.

Students often need to feel the material they learn is applicable to their lives and the world around them. Angelle uses personal examples to help her elementary students in special education see the value in what they are learning:

*I explain to them how I had to take remedial math. I bring my remedial math book to school, and I show them the things I had to learn in college. I correlate that to what they're learning right now, and I tell them you don't want to be a student entering college taking remedial math. You want to be able to test out of this.*

Her approach sets the expectation that her students can go to college. Angelle also explains how the skills her elementary students learn now are the foundation for learning in middle school. She knows that once her students "connect content to a real life issue, it becomes important to them." Candace looks back on her school experience and realizes she didn't see the value of school:

*Everyone seemed to be under the impression that education was valuable just for education's sake. You go to high school and do these things, because that's the way it is. There's value in doing it the way it's always been done. Don't question it. Don't ask, "Why should I be doing this?" Just do it. And that didn't work for me. For the majority of my students, it doesn't seem to work either.*

Candace helps her students connect content in their high school English class to their backgrounds. For example, she makes her ESL students comfortable by explaining that her family didn't always use correct English grammar. "I give them examples like, 'Back home this is how we would say this ... .' And they tell me, 'In Spanish, this is how we say that.'" By honoring students' sense of self, Candace helps them see the school and curriculum as related to their lives.

Maisie currently teaches kindergarten in a large U.S. city with a high crime rate. A high percentage of her students are new to the United States. Maisie makes school relevant by reaching out to families and helping them experience all their communities have to offer. She helps parents find out about affordable and enriching local opportunities by regularly sending home a catalog that gives information about free days at museums and other events. Maisie has started writing grants to help families start their own home libraries. Grants also fund field trips

*so my children can go to different places. We're not far from the ocean, but I have kids who have never seen the ocean. How do we teach kids about things that they've never seen?*

### 4. They participate in ongoing professional development.

Our study participants value learning experiences that help them stay current on education research as well as experiences that facilitate reflection on their teaching. This combination helps them scrutinize how they teach, analyze their instructional methods, and consider new practices.

Many of the teachers attributed their commitment to learning to their own experiences as struggling students. For example, today Zan is an elementary teacher, but she felt shame at her struggles with math until she took a math class for teacher candidates in college. She finally understood geometry and credits her talented professor, who used manipulatives and literature about math. She remembers thinking, "There just has to be more than one way to teach, and teachers need to know as many ways as possible."

Zan's interest in multiple instructional strategies led her to get a master's degree in special education, not because she wanted to teach special education, but because she wanted to learn more about learning disabilities and about how she could adapt instruction for her students. Her words, "If the child isn't learning, it's my fault. I need to change something," reflect Zan's commitment to helping students avoid the shame and helplessness she felt as a student.

Barbara's commitment to professional development is tied to her experiences as a student for whom learning never came easy. She remembers having teachers who were kind and understanding but who "didn't teach in a way that I learned." She is now an effective educator with nearly 20 years of experience in the general elementary classroom and special education. Barbara believes the key to success with struggling students is to engage them in fun, motivating learning activities. Professional development helps her learn effective, engaging instructional techniques and keeps her informed of the research that she can use to support these approaches if her principal ever asks her to justify why her instruction is so different from other, more traditional approaches.

Continued professional learning is more important than ever in the 21st century when changes seem to happen overnight. Laurie, a middle school English teacher, told us she needs to keep learning so she can keep up with her students. She doesn't really like computers, but she believes putting kids first means continuing to learn, even if it means learning about instructional tools that she doesn't enjoy using. She explained, "Times change and you have to change with them, at least in the classroom."

## A Well-Rounded Definition

The teachers we interviewed all faced and overcame struggles in school. Many of them had learning challenges that persisted into their college education, leading some to take remedial college math courses multiple times before passing and others to select a major that allowed them to completely avoid a troublesome subject.

Their stories of perseverance and records of effective teaching offer us a well-rounded definition of an effective educator. Excellent teachers put students first, help each student meet high expectations, and advocate on behalf of students and families. They interact with their students and ask questions that enable them to understand students' thinking. They keep learning, and they relate course content to students' lives. Most important of all, effective educators truly believe *all* children can learn.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> *Participants in the study were either National Board–certified teachers or going through the certification process.*

**Sara Fry** is assistant professor of education at Boise State University in Idaho; [sarafry@boisestate.edu](mailto:sarafry@boisestate.edu). **Kim DeWit** is a former secondary school teacher; she currently teaches English to international students at Boise State University and is completing a master's degree in bilingual education.

## KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

[teachers](#), [student teacher relationship](#), [student motivation](#), [reflective teaching](#), [teacher quality](#)

Copyright © 2010 by Sara Fry, Kim DeWit

## Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy, electronic and online access, and republication requests**, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
- To **translate** this article, contact [permissions@ascd.org](mailto:permissions@ascd.org)