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Hanging In

Strategies for Teaching the
Students Who Challenge Us Most



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Introduction

I was chairing an hour-long meeting with school administrators, teachers, therapists, and support staff. The group had convened to deal with a single issue: how Dean, a volatile 4th grader, could more successfully transition from class to class. Dean insisted on being first in line, argued over every expectation, and swore at staff as he quickly lost his temper. He was exhausting his teachers, classmates, and everyone who was called in to de-escalate him and then assess his readiness for rejoining his class. We hypothesized what triggered Dean's reactions. We reviewed his complex family history, his ability to cognitively understand directions, and his ability to physically manage the passage from one room to another. We reviewed what staff had been saying to him, what rewards and punishments had been tried (all so far without lasting success), what the quality of his relationships was with peers and school staff, and what our overlapping goals were for Dean and the school. By the end of the hour, we had synthesized our perspectives and developed a plan (the focus of Chapter 2 in this book). At that point, the principal turned to me and said, "That should do the trick." I sighed and responded, "There are no tricks."

There are no tricks to working with our most challenging students. If there were simple solutions to support their growth, the

students wouldn't be challenging. The professionals most responsible for dealing with these students—among many and most often, special education teachers, social workers, occupational therapists—do not have a secret cache of techniques. These professionals have received training in identifying disabilities and employing common interventions, but our most challenging students confound common solutions. These students crisscross categories of disabilities, challenging us to develop new and complex interventions, in combinations we have never tried before.

In examining the effect solely of trauma on students, Cole and colleagues (2005, p. 4) identify a long list of potential problems: decreased concentration, fragmented memory, poor organization, language deficits, perfectionism, depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior. It is reasonable to add to this list excessive absences, uneven skill development, and deficits in content knowledge. Now add a learning disability and all its possible presentations. There are no textbook cases that point to absolute interventions for students with such layered lists of issues. Each child is truly unique, and we can't "fix them" immediately.

The challenge for the staff is to hang in. Students like Dean can shed maladaptive behaviors for better ones, but not overnight. These students remind us that humans don't change as much as grow. We grow through support, useful feedback, trust, safety, and time. There is no guarantee that any intervention will work, and there are no guarantees that growth will happen within a given period of time. Hattie (2009), in summarizing his extensive studies on student learning, writes:

Learning is spontaneous, individualistic, and often earned through effort. It is a timeworn, slow, gradual, fits-and-starts kind of process, which can have a flow of its own, but requires passion, patience, and attention to detail. (p. 2)

With no reliably predictable timetable for success, these students try our patience, arouse our emotions, and often bruise our

professional pride as teachers, problem solvers, and caretakers. Dean's difficulty transitioning between classes triggered anger in some staff. For others he provoked sadness—"When Dean is like that, I'd rather be any other person in the world than that little guy." For many, Dean brought up feelings of incompetence and despair. They were professional helpers, and Dean would not let them help; his failure became their failure. We have been schooling children for many centuries, yet a 10-year-old was baffling the experts. Mary Haywood Metz (1993) notes that students "can confirm or destroy" a teacher's "pride in craft." She explains the students' power: "Because teachers' work consists of affecting their students, they are dependent on their students both for the actual success of their work and evidence of that success" (p. 130).

We are in the infancy of understanding what works for every child, at the beginning stage of identifying practices that can cut across community, cultural, and personal contexts. Dean has no researched cohort—in his case, an upbringing in poverty with a single mother, a disabled older sibling, attention deficit disorder (ADD), advanced language skills, and the experience of having switched schools three times. His case is unique. So we hang in, take actions, reflect on progress, recalibrate, take more actions, collect our stories, and recalibrate again. We hang in. We may have to hang in through as many as 100 repetitions for a student to grow into new skills and for us to learn what works (Benson, 2012).

Everyone who hung in with Dean learned a lot, and we are all better at what we do because of that work. A challenging student provides one of the best means of reaching mastery in our field—but only when teachers themselves get support and safety, and when they are not dealing with many such students in isolation. Hanging in with challenging students can be so meaningful and reveal to us the richness and novelty of human relationships. What we experience in schools reinforces our uniquely human capacities to accommodate, synthesize, learn, and grow.

Toni

Absolutes and Teachable Moments

Schools embody particular minicultures. That is a good thing—when we enter a school, we want to feel that we are in a special place, that we have stepped from the street into an environment that offers students opportunities that they don't experience elsewhere. The confluence of the staff, the community, the history of the program, the physical characteristics of the building and grounds, and the regulations from the government create a unique school culture. That culture and the special opportunities that it generates are secured by the school having predictable rules and expectations, and the adults having predictable emotional responses to student activity. This story centers on a student, Toni, whose needs bring into question which elements of the school's culture are absolute and which can bend.

Challenges for Toni:

- Trauma history
- Substance use
- Learning disabilities and diminished skill set
- History of school failure
- Lack of trust

- Racial isolation
- Explosive outbursts

Challenges for the adult team:

- Maintaining caring when verbally abused
- Not holding grudges
- Rethinking absolute school rules
- Maintaining school safety
- Being alert for teachable moments
- Carefully measuring responses
- Developing reliable plans
- Acknowledging student emotions and frustrations
- Communicating as a team

The Capacity to Trust

When Toni came to the therapeutic school for her initial intake appointment, she was too scared to be alone with us, and so was accompanied by her state-appointed social worker. Toni was not a likely candidate for success. The toxic combination of her learning disabilities, her many gaps in basic academic skills, her post-traumatic stress disorder, her persistent marijuana smoking, and her difficulty in trusting others might never allow her to take the healthy risks necessary to succeed. But there was something in Toni's willingness to hang in that was compelling. During our initial conversation, she flashed an occasional bright smile and gave serious consideration to what she was hearing. Her testing reports revealed a keen intellect, now muffled by her many difficulties. Most importantly, her relationship with her social worker hinted at a lingering ability to connect; if she could trust one consistently caring adult, she might trust the school staff and the other students in the school community.

Above all else, the foundation of schools that hang in with challenging students is building trusting relationships—relationships

that allow these often overwhelmed young people to try again. Atwool (2006) notes that for students like Toni, success in school will be “unlikely to develop . . . without a relationship with at least one . . . adult in which they feel worthy and loveable” (p. 322).

Toni would need from us the fundamentals we provided all of our challenging students—namely, the six essential elements of hanging in shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1	The Six Overarching Elements of Hanging In
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="336 719 1070 1018">1. <i>Exquisite respectfulness</i>: All students, parents, and educators must be treated with the greatest degree of human dignity and respect, in every room, every activity, and every interaction. This is not easy to do, and so exquisite respectfulness is practiced by all. If we should have a bad moment and speak sarcastically, angrily, or impatiently, we get back to the other person (whether teacher, administrator, parent, and especially student) and apologize. Respect is nonnegotiable. If a doctor’s credo is “Above all else, do no harm,” an educator’s is “Above all else, do not shame the student.” <li data-bbox="336 1033 1070 1399">2. <i>Working from student strengths</i>: For many challenging students, the hard circumstances of their lives have diminished the fullest range and expression of what they might have been able to do. While teaching these students the skills to manage what is hardest for them, we must recognize any and all strengths that can be building blocks of a successful life. Not every student in the world will reach mastery in trigonometry or Latin or essay writing, but all have strengths and talents. Students must experience school as a generative environment. The sum total of a day in school should not be an overwhelming reminder of what students cannot do. Ensure that all students have a school adult or activity that connects them to their best possible selves. <li data-bbox="336 1414 1070 1685">3. <i>Opportunity for student reflection</i>: “Aha” moments of learning are idiosyncratic. Challenging students come to school with jagged profiles of competencies and experiences. There are many lessons about school and life that challenging students have not been able to grasp yet. We should be consistently checking in with challenging students about what they are seeing and understanding. In those moments of conversation with a caring adult, students have the opportunity to crystallize a previously elusive notion, to say in many ways, “Oh, I get it now!” 	

continued

Figure 1.1**The Six Overarching Elements of Hanging In** (*continued*)

4. *Learning from errors:* The path to competency, especially in the social and emotional domain, is filled with missteps. Students will make the same error more than once. We must make sure that consequences for their errors are not damning. Consequences for mistakes (including punishments) should be time-limited and offer a realistic way to regain trust. As much as possible, and as soon as possible after the misstep, offer ways for students to demonstrate and practice the replacement skill.
5. *Allowing multiple interests to inspire diverse solutions:* With challenging students, there is rarely one issue, one stakeholder, one obvious path. The students' struggles affect their educators, their peers, their families, the community at large, and most significantly, their own growth into adulthood. It is important to keep the multiple interests on the table and not get stuck in the trap that in order to satisfy one interest, the others must be sacrificed. The school community will grow by developing a rich menu of strategies.
6. *Working as a team:* No one effectively does the work of teaching challenging students alone for very long. Teachers and professional staff must have multiple venues to vent, ask for advice, brainstorm strategies, and celebrate successes. All educators bring to the work the experiences and skills that may be critical to the success of a single student and to the growth of the programs—make sure that meetings and other forms of communication access the full range of team input. Everyone who works primarily with challenging students should have an ally, a supportive supervisor, a coach.

Toni Reacts

When Toni started at our school, she found the culture created by our six overarching elements disconcerting. As with many students on the verge of dropping out of school completely, she had tried a year or two of public high school and failed to bear up to its anonymity, stress, and the intense social cauldron. Toni often reacted explosively to situations she found stressful or scary. She could look