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13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

MOTIVATION and MASTERY

STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT LEARNING

By Tracy Crow

What does it take to be really good at something? That's what Kathleen Cushman, of the nonprofit organization What Kids Can Do, asks students to ask themselves. "Our goal is to get students and teachers talking about this question together," said Cushman. She'd love to see cross-generational, respectful conversations about what it means to learn how to do something well, in the hopes that such dialogue can transform school practices.

Through the Practice Project, an initiative of What Kids Can Do, students learn that what it takes to get really good at something is hard work — hours and hours of the right kind of practice. As part of an effort to



explore motivation and mastery, Cushman has worked with teachers in schools around the country to enlist their students on this exploration of expertise. A writer and speaker whose work on the project aims to elevate student voices, Cushman has written a new book with students about the project, *Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery* (Jossey-Bass, 2010). A MetLife Foundation grant to What Kids Can Do has supported the Practice Project and the sharing of its perspectives and methods with teachers across the country.

"This project speaks to the kids' strengths that aren't necessarily academic," said Felice Piggott, teacher librarian at The Young Women's Leadership School of East

**What's
inside**

NSDC tool

Explore talents and interests.

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Lessons from a coach

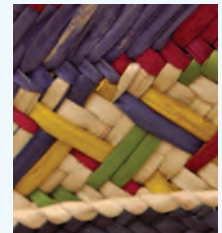
The administration and coach need clear goals, says David Holden.

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Focus on NSDC's standards

Complexities of quality teaching weave an intricate tapestry.

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NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

Harlem. “This is a great way for those students to shine.”

Piggott volunteered to be part of the project when Cushman came to her school. She noticed that at the beginning of the project, students say that they aren’t really good at anything. Once teachers and Cushman open up the discussion and students realize they can talk about what they do outside of school, beyond their academic lives, they reveal all kinds of strengths, strengths that they might not have thought “counted” in school. “By paying attention to a wider spectrum of their development, all students could point to, and analyze, something they did well,” said Cushman. “When they get recognition,” Piggott said, “they puff up.”

Piggott recalled one student, a quiet girl who didn’t speak up much in class.

“I didn’t really know anything about her.” It turned out she was an expert double dutch jumper and had competed with a group. She “didn’t think it was an important thing,” said Piggott, “and we’re all impressed, saying, wow, you can do that? I can’t do that.” Piggott said she could see how her confidence from that experience carried over to her other classes.

Piggott’s students aren’t unusual for seeking a connection between the real world and the work they do in school. In the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success* (2009), large numbers of students agree somewhat (45%) or disagree (23%) that their teachers give examples of what they are learning in school can be used in the real world, including 26% of secondary students who disagree. Eighty percent of the teachers and principals surveyed agreed that connecting classroom instruction to the real world would have a “significant impact” on improving student achievement.



What it takes

Together in their discussions of what it takes to excel, Cushman and more than 150 students unfolded the process of getting good at something. The passion to get good starts with a spark, an interest in a new skill or activity. As kids develop their skills through practice, the moments of success and of frustration are both critical. What do learners do when they run into problems? Do they give up? Or do they persevere? And what factors push learners through the challenges? When Cushman asked students to think about these questions, they described the importance of a relationship with someone who was supporting them in their learning journey.

A critical piece of these students’ investigations into mastery was interviewing adults they considered very accomplished in some field. Each selected an expert from the community, whether in music, car repair, or medicine, and asked the same questions they had explored in their own areas of interest. From the interviews came similar insights: the role of opportunity, encouragement, and feedback; having successes and challenges at the right times; the importance of persistence.

Honor Moorman, internship coordinator at the International School of the Americas in San Antonio, noticed that her students, all seniors, were “really invested in the idea that they were uncovering wisdom about this question.” They were honest and open about the question and excited about seeking insights about what were real-life authentic challenges to them.

“My impression was that the students’ sense of efficacy, their own confidence in being able to tack-

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LEARN MORE AT www.firesinthemind.org

See Fires in the Mind online for the Practice Project blog and other content tied to the book.

- ✓ Short videos show students talking about developing mastery in different areas.
- ✓ Practical tips on “getting good.”
- ✓ Teachers contribute ideas and examples.

le anything really grew. It was an intellectual pursuit into nonintellectual kinds of things,” said Moorman. She was intrigued to see that Cushman was building bridges from nonacademic areas of mastery to encourage students to see a similar learning process in mathematics or English class. “Some of the kids already had a strong sense of metacognition and reflection; others weren’t as strong,” said Moorman. “They gained a greater ability to apply deep reflection and introspection to their own learning process by listening to these adult experts and thinking about these out-of-school expertise areas.”



been teaching a long time and I have that ‘senior teacher’ stance.” For Piggott, that stance includes clear boundaries with students. The project gave her a structured way to get to know the personal side of students. “It’s helped me grow that way as a teacher,” she said. “I’ve been teaching long enough so I have a lot of the management stuff down. I tend to be very much all business in the class-

room. This helps me get to another side of kids’ lives.”

Students are likely to appreciate teachers’ inquiry into their abilities beyond schools. The 2009 MetLife survey revealed that a majority of students (53%) report that their teachers speak to them one on one about their interests and things important to them a few times a year (28%) or never (25%).

Moorman found that she was on a similar journey of exploration while her students were learning about the concept of mastery. In her development as a teacher, she started with the idea that she had to know the content and impart the content. Over several years, she re-envisioned her role. “I moved more into thinking in terms of facilitating the students, creating opportunities, locating resources, creating a context for them to uncover knowledge and develop skills,” said Moorman. Now, she finds she’s still transitioning, seeing herself more as a connector and a facilitator, “but not in the sense that I have a structure and I know the outcome, but that I’m on a journey with the students,” she said. “I’m discovering that being an expert teacher is not about imparting expertise to students; it’s about guiding them to develop expertise for themselves.”

References

Cushman, K. (2010). *Fires in the mind: What kids can tell us about motivation and mastery.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
MetLife. (2009). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Collaborating for student success.* New York: Author. ◆

As simple as the process sounds, what Cushman and the kids discovered aligns precisely with what cognitive scientists have discovered about how we learn. Even the popular press is recently buzzing with the figure 10,000 — 10,000 hours of practice is what scientists agree is essential to becoming great at something, a figure popularized recently by both Malcolm Gladwell (*Outliers*, Little,

Brown, 2008) and Matthew Syed (*Bounce*, Harper, 2010) and taken from the work of researcher K. Anders Ericsson.

Ultimately, Cushman hopes the reflection on what helps students become proficient at what they care about will translate into recognition that being good at school takes the same attributes, including hard work at the right things and a relationship with someone who provides both challenge and support.

Teacher learning

In considering how the project changed her own practice as an educator, Piggott noted, “It’s made it easier for me to take risks with kids. I’ve

More from the MetLife survey

CREATIVITY

When asked if students in their school get to be creative and use their abilities in school, student views vary by level:

Strongly agree

- ✓ 32% overall
- ✓ 39% elementary school
- ✓ 27% secondary school

Disagree

- ✓ 19% overall
- ✓ 15% in elementary school
- ✓ 22% in secondary school

RESPONSIBILITY

- ✓ 96% of students across grade levels believe they have the responsibility to pay attention and do the work it takes to succeed in school.
- ✓ 42% of teachers believe that all or most of their students have this sense of responsibility.

The entire 26-year series of the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* is available online at www.metlife.com/teachersurvey/.