

Being the learners we want our students to become

by Kenli Okada
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As a social entrepreneur, I use my background in data analytics to help schools utilize data. However, school leaders and teachers often have a hard time hearing what the data has to say. This is not nefarious or ill-intentioned. Quite the opposite. It is when people care the most that they are afraid the data may tell a negative story. When education is your calling, it hurts deeply to discover you are not reaching your goals. That is why I believe we as educators need to learn those same social and emotional learning skills that we try to develop in our students.

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In classrooms, we tell students that failure is an opportunity to learn and grow. We tell students to reflect on their experiences, adjust their approach, and work hard—all without being too hard on themselves. We tell them those things because we know that [growth mindsets](#) and reflective practices lead to improved outcomes. Accepting failure helps us take on important challenges while still being able to learn, grow, and ultimately become successful. But why can't we follow our own advice?

I believe the answer is deceptively simple: we lack practice. When the current leaders of schools were growing up, the benefits of strong mindsets and reflective practices weren't fully understood. And even though practitioners may have known about them to some extent, these practices weren't at the forefront of education like they are today. We learned similar lessons in other ways, but we didn't have a chance to explicitly practice these skills.

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One teacher I work with utilizes challenging writing assignments to prompt students to reflect on their writing and analysis. The students not only use a process of drafts, feedback, and revision to improve their writing, but they also discuss how their approaches to challenges shapes the way they work. They explicitly observe their own learning processes and connect their challenging writing assignments to other aspects of their lives—how they will approach challenges in college and beyond.

I know that educators can follow a similar approach to use their existing challenges as opportunities to develop their own skills.

School leaders need analysis, synthesis, and communication skills, but before all that they need the ability to reflect objectively on their progress and to learn from failure. Without reflection, all their hard work might be in the wrong direction. Without the ability to learn from their experiences, they are likely to repeat the same mistakes.

These are critical skills for our students, and they are also important for us. The lesson I remind myself each day when I see inspiring teachers and students is that we can still be the adults we want our students to become: learners who embrace and learn from both successes and failures.

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