BREAKING THE SHELL

Overcoming Learned Helplessness and Fostering Student Agency

MAMMOTH SCIENCE PUBLISHING

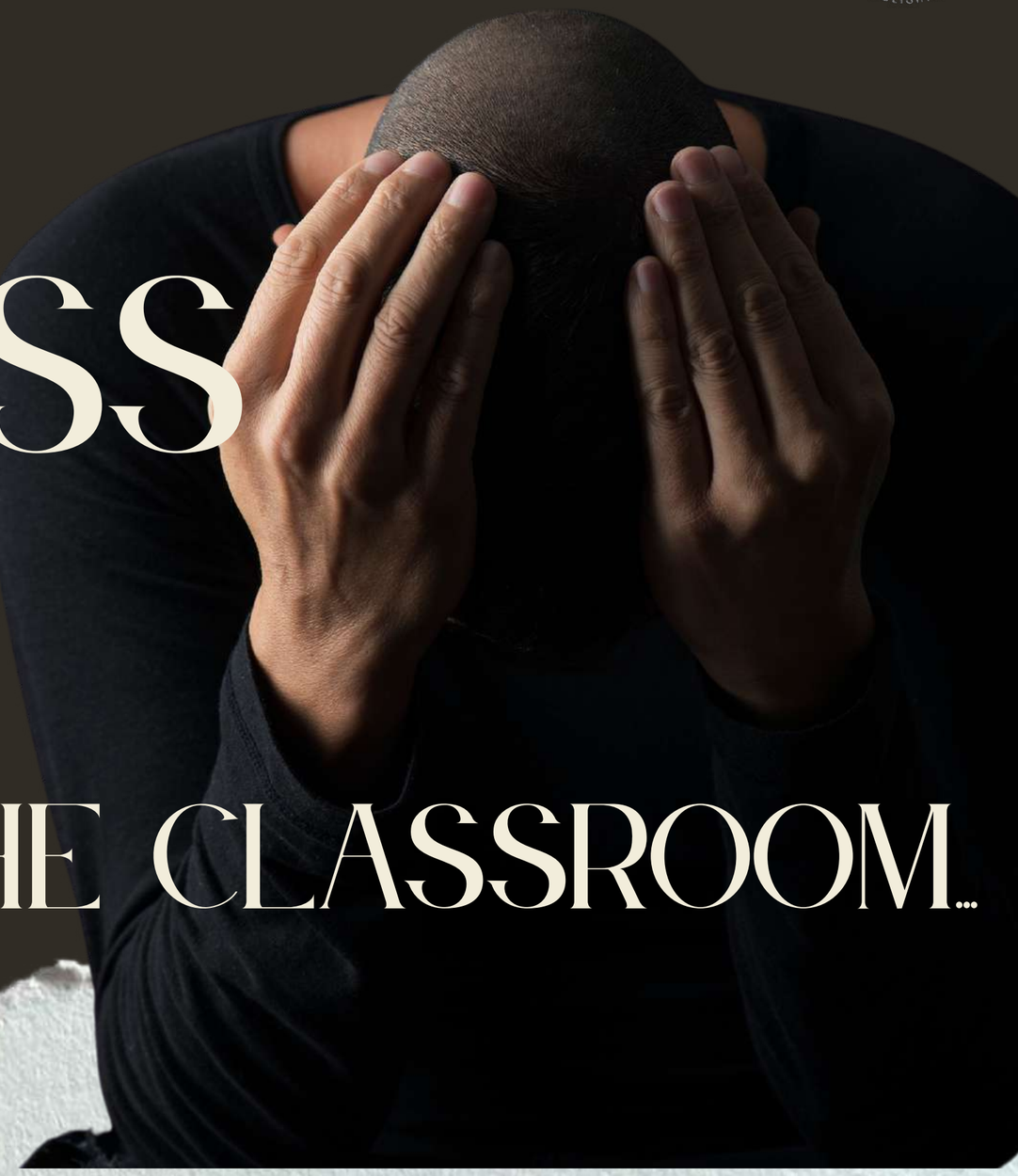
OVERVIEW

We will explore the concept of learned helplessness, particularly in the context of post-COVID educational challenges. The disruption of routines, decreased social interaction, and increased reliance on adults have contributed to a rise in learned helplessness among students.

OBJECTIVES

- Understand the impact of post-COVID trauma on student independence and learning behaviors.
- Analyze the "chick and egg" metaphor as it relates to learned helplessness.
- Implement the "3 Before Me" strategy to promote resourcefulness in students.
- Develop classroom systems and anchor charts to support student independence.

HOW LEARNED HELPLESSNESS MANIFESTS IN THE CLASSROOM...



REFUSAL TO ACCEPT HELP

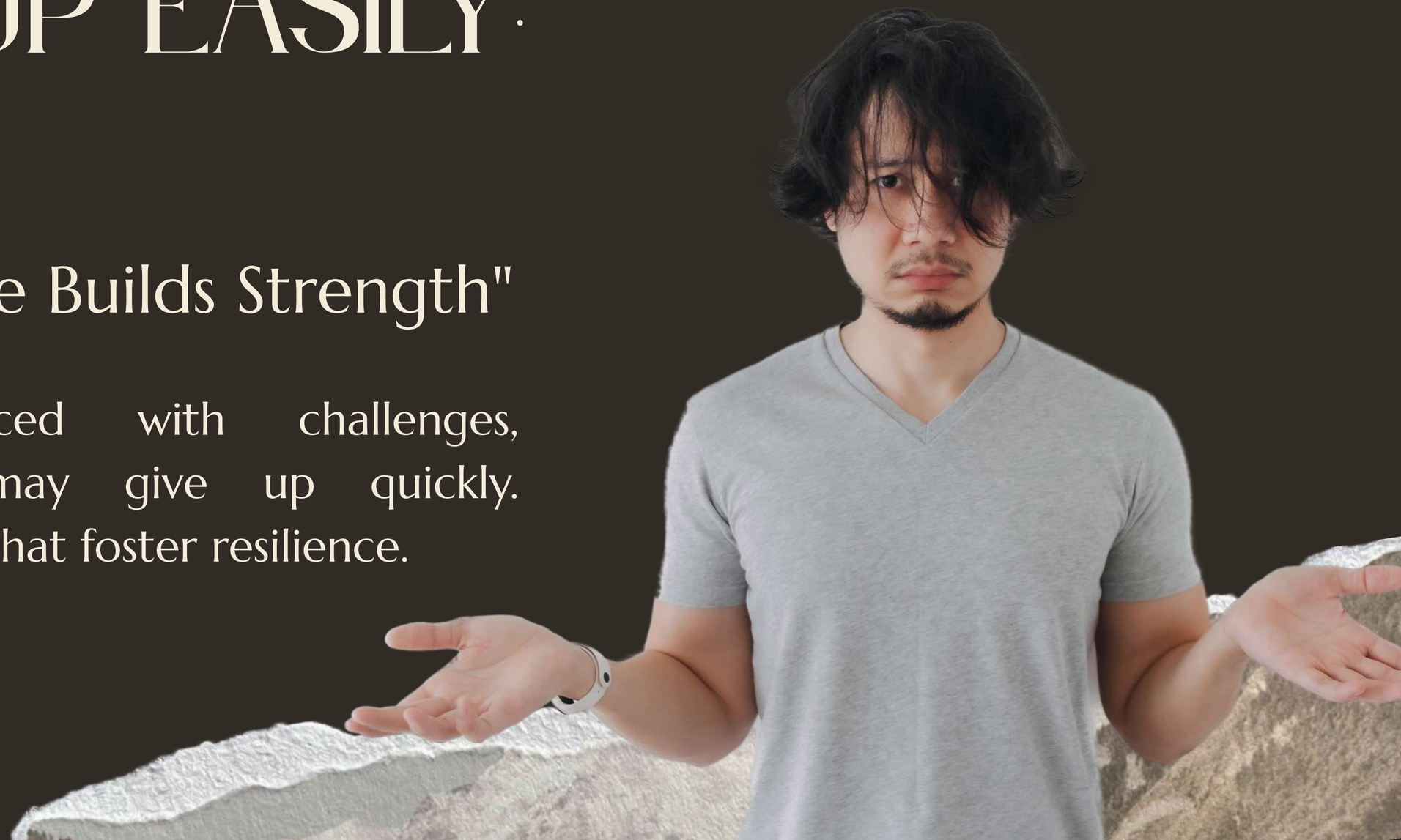
"Help me help you"

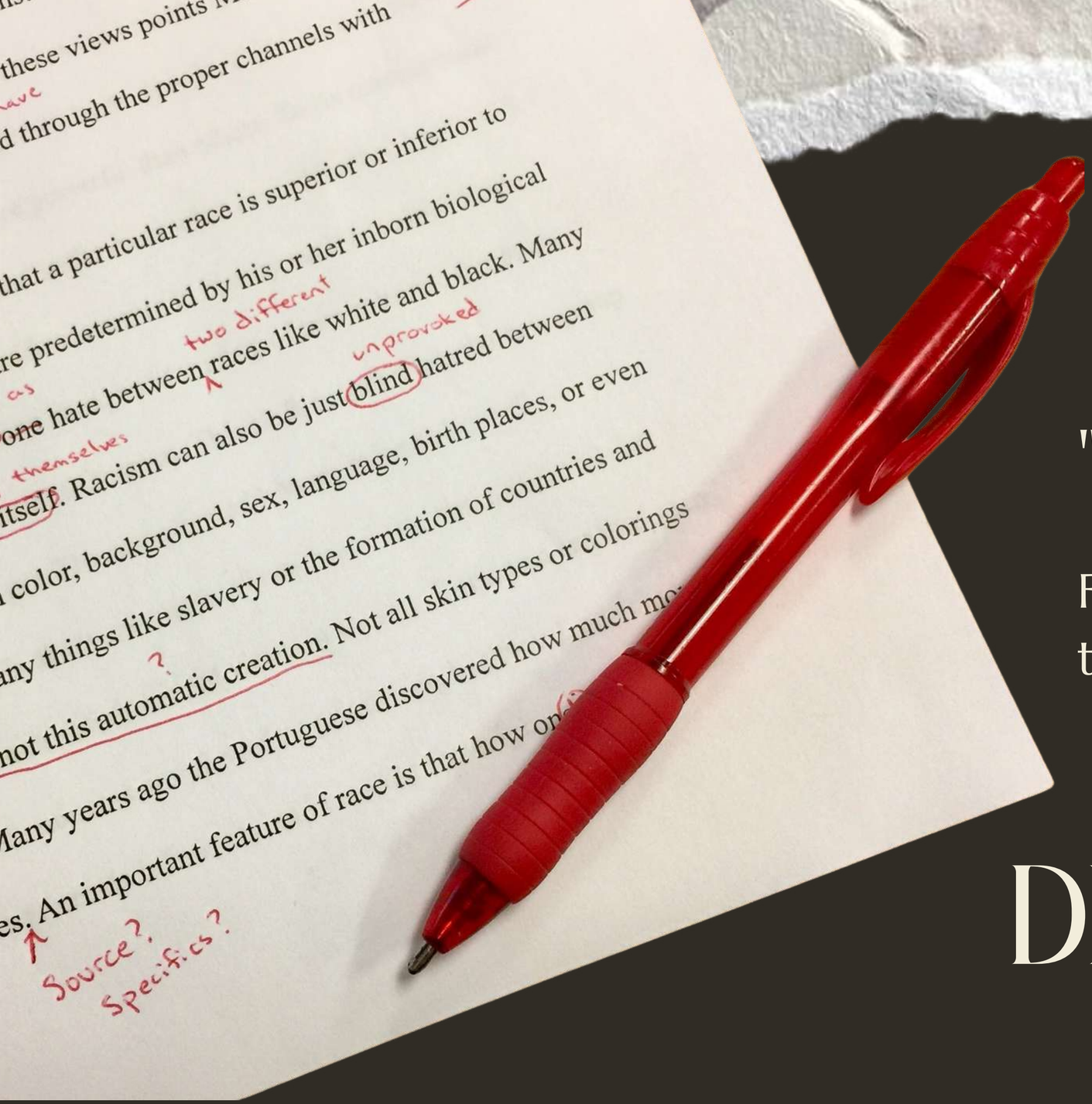
Even when help is offered, students may decline it, signaling an unwillingness to engage in problem-solving.

FRUSTRATION AND GIVING UP EASILY:

"Struggle Builds Strength"

When faced with challenges, students may give up quickly. challenges that foster resilience.





"Mistakes Mold Mastery"

Fear of failure often leads students to disengage from tasks.

DISENGAGEMENT FROM EFFORT

LACK OF MOTIVATION TO SEE SOLUTIONS

"Curiosity is Key"

Students may avoid trying new strategies or solutions.

OVER-RELIANCE ON EXTERNAL HELP

"3 B4 Me..."

Students who have been "rescued" in the past may lack the confidence to solve problems independently.

A young farmer once watched his chicks as they struggled to break free from their eggs. Seeing their tiny beaks tap against the hard shells, he felt a pang of sympathy. "Surely they must be in distress," he thought. Wanting to help, he gently cracked the shells and freed the chicks. At first, he felt a sense of pride—he had saved them from their struggle. But as days passed, he noticed something troubling. The chicks were weak and frail. They couldn't stand or spread their wings, and many struggled to eat.

He soon learned that the act of hatching wasn't just about escape; it was essential for building their muscles, strength, and survival instincts. In his eagerness to help, he had unintentionally hindered their development. This story serves as a metaphor for the classroom: when teachers do too much for students, we rob them of the opportunity to grow, problem-solve, and become independent learners.

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- How does this metaphor apply to our classroom practices?
- In what ways might over-assistance hinder long-term student growth?

DISCUSSION

SO...
WHAT CAN WE DO?

- “What have you tried?”
- “What can you remember from...?”
- “Can you explain your thinking here?”
- “Where do you think you can find...?”

- Explanation: Encourage students to view assistance as a partnership. When they ask for help, prompt them with questions like, "What steps have you tried so far?" or "What do you think the next step could be?" to build problem-solving habits.

- Policy Prescription: Build rapport and trust by framing help as collaborative problem-solving rather than corrective. Use open-ended questions to guide students instead of providing direct answers.

Question to Discuss:
How does this take shape in your classroom, and what might this policy recommendation entail? Could you also share your own ideas?

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- Explanation: Use this phrase to normalize perseverance. When students express frustration, remind them that struggle is part of learning. Celebrate effort and small victories to keep them motivated.

- Policy Prescription: Teach and model growth mindset strategies. Provide "just-right" challenges that are attainable but require effort, and celebrate persistence rather than just outcomes.

Question to Discuss:
How does this appear in your classroom, and what form might this policy suggestion take? Could you contribute your own thoughts as well?

- “Sure Id love to help! Where do you think we might find...?”
- “Absolutely, but before I answer, can I ask you....”
- “Great Question! Can you tell me anything else about that?
- “Have you asked an expert classmate?”

QUESTION TO DISCUSS

- How does this appear in your classroom, and what form might this policy suggestion take? Could you contribute your own thoughts as well?

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- “Great guess! Lets see if we can add to that...”
- “Thank you for being willing to share. I see where you were headed, lets see if we can get there!”
- “Awesome work! I think we can make this a little btter...lets try!”

- Explanation: Reinforce that mistakes are valuable. When students disengage, highlight how their errors can guide improvement and use examples from your own learning journey to inspire resilience.

- Policy Prescription: Normalize mistakes as part of the learning process by sharing examples of your own challenges and how you overcame them. Use reflective practices like journaling or class discussions to help students see progress.

Question to Discuss:
How does this manifest itself in your classroom and what would this policy prescription look like? Could you add your own?

QUESTION TO DISCUSS:

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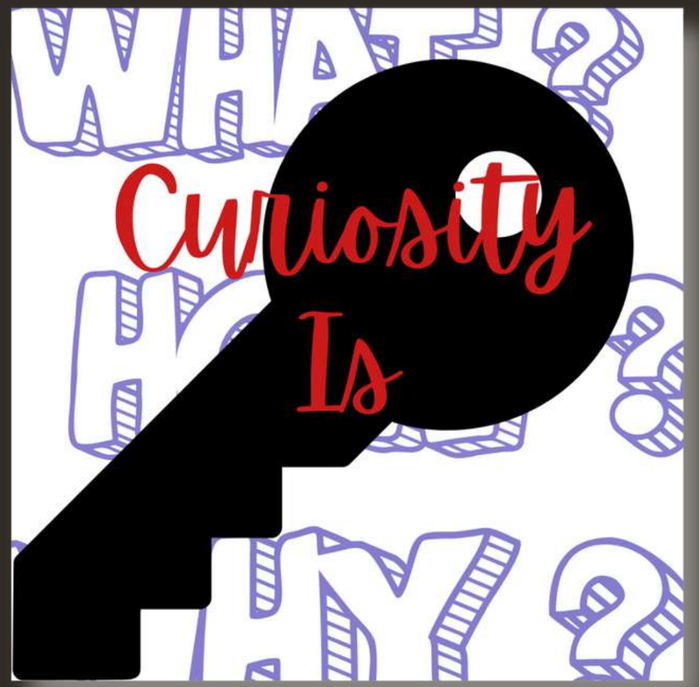
- Explanation: Foster a culture of inquiry by framing tasks as opportunities to discover and explore. Encourage students to approach challenges with curiosity and emphasize the value of trying different strategies.

- Policy Prescription: Create a classroom culture where curiosity is valued by incorporating inquiry-based learning and offering choice in how students approach tasks.



- “What do you think about...?”
- “When I say...what are you thinking about?”
- “How does this concept apply to...”
- What might an example look like? A Non example?

Question to Discuss:
In what ways does this come to life in your classroom, and how might such a policy be implemented? Do you have any personal suggestions to add?

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- “I like how you did...”
- “Great first step! Now how far can you go?”
- “Keep building on that!”
- “Where do we go from here?”

- Explanation: Help students recognize their incremental progress. Use this saying to remind them that tackling tasks one step at a time builds confidence and success.

- Policy Prescription: Counter negative self-talk by teaching positive affirmation techniques and encouraging students to identify their own strengths. Use scaffolded supports to build confidence incrementally.

Question to Discuss:
How is this reflected in your classroom, and what might an approach to this policy look like? Could you also provide your own input?

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- Explanation: Encourage self-reliance by affirming their ability to problem-solve. When students seek unnecessary help, guide them back to their resources with confidence in their capability.

- Policy Prescription: Implement the "3 Before Me" strategy consistently to encourage self-reliance and reduce

Question to Discuss:
How does this play out in your classroom, and what might the advantages and challenges of such a policy look like? Could you also share your own perspective?

- “Have you checked the Board?”
- “Have you checked Canvas?”
- “Have you checked our class calendar?”
- “Have you checked your resources - notes...your friends?”
- “Have you checked your email?
- “Have you tried to google it?”

QUESTION TO DISCUSS:

- How does this play out in your classroom, and what might the advantages and challenges of such a policy look like? Could you also share your own perspective?

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STRATEGIES

- **Frame Help as Collaboration:** Use phrases like "Let’s figure this out together" or "We’re a team in this" to encourage a partnership in problem-solving.
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions:** Instead of offering direct help, ask, "What steps have you tried so far?" or "What do you think is the next step?" to guide their thinking.
- **Normalize Seeking Help:** Regularly reinforce that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness. Share examples of successful people who sought help.
- **Build Rapport:** Spend time getting to know the student. Celebrate their small victories to foster trust and confidence.
- **Provide Scaffolding:** Break tasks into smaller steps and guide them with resources like checklists or templates, giving them room to problem-solve.
- **Use Reflective Conversations:** After offering help, ask, "What worked well for you today?" or "How can we approach this differently next time?"
- **Encourage Self-Advocacy:** Teach students how to ask for specific help, like "Can you help me understand this part?" instead of just saying "I don’t get it."
- **Model Help-Seeking Behavior:** Demonstrate how you ask for help or collaborate with others in your teaching practice to show it's a normal and effective part of learning.

- **Normalize Struggle:** Use the phrase "Struggle builds strength" to remind students that frustration and challenges are natural parts of the learning process.
- **Celebrate Effort, Not Just Outcomes:** Acknowledge the effort students put into a task, regardless of the outcome. Celebrate small victories and progress.
- **Model a Growth Mindset:** Share examples from your own experiences where persistence and effort led to success, even after initial struggles.
- **Use "Just-Right" Challenges:** Provide tasks that are slightly above their current level, so students feel challenged but not overwhelmed. Ensure they are achievable with effort.
- **Praise Persistence:** Focus on praising how long a student persevered rather than just whether they finished or succeeded, reinforcing the value of effort over results.
- **Promote Self-Talk for Resilience:** Teach students to use positive self-talk when frustrated, like “I can keep trying,” or “This is hard, but I’m learning.”
- **Provide Breaks and Encouragement:** If frustration is too high, offer short breaks to reset, then return with encouragement to try again.
- **Encourage Problem-Solving:** Guide students to reflect on alternative strategies when they hit a roadblock: “What could you try differently?” or “What can you do next?”
- **Pair with a "Content Expert":** Pair struggling students with a classmate who understands the material well. This encourages peer learning and provides a supportive model of perseverance through collaboration.

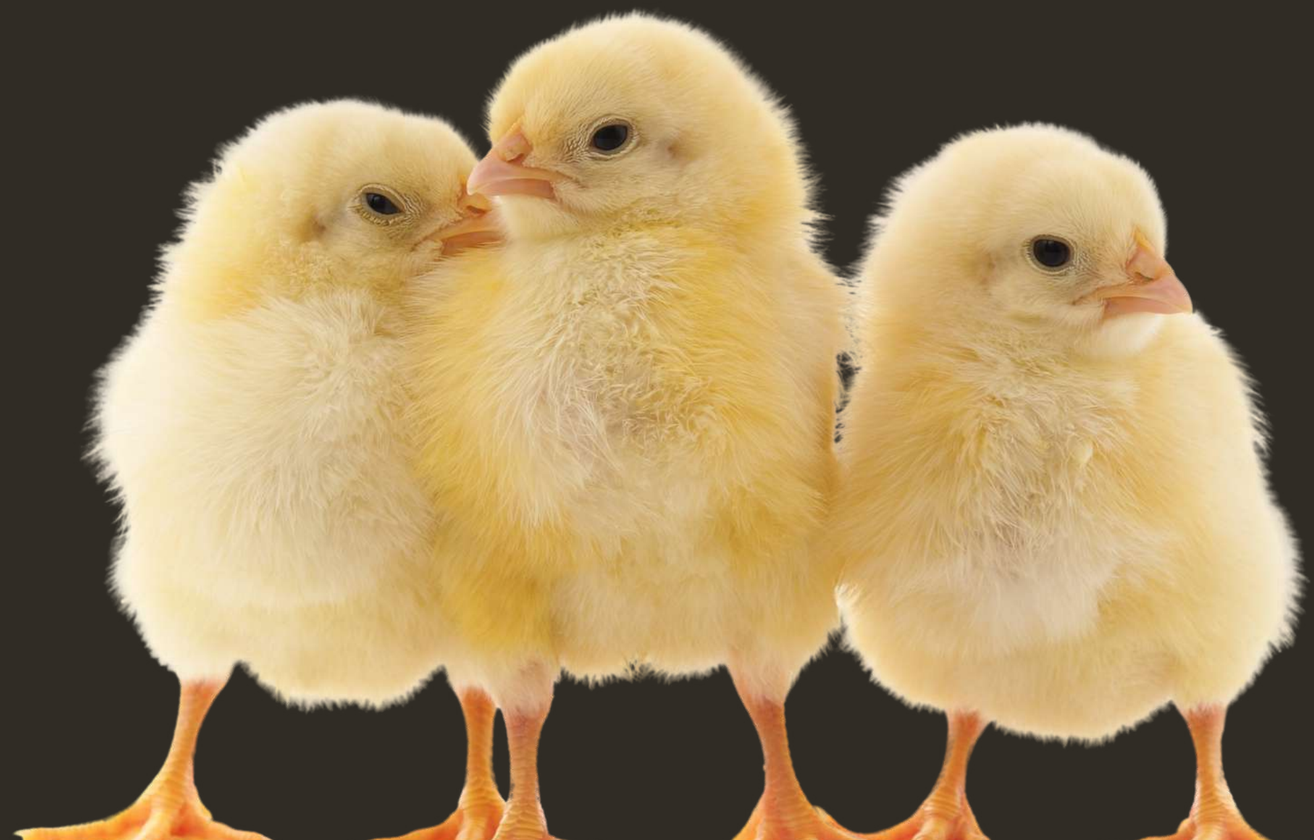
- **Normalize Mistakes:** Use the phrase "Mistakes mold mastery" to reinforce that errors are a valuable part of learning and growth.
- **Share Personal Struggles and Successes:** Share examples from your own learning experiences, showing how mistakes led to eventual success, and model resilience in the face of setbacks.
- **Celebrate Effort Over Perfection:** Praise students for their effort and progress rather than just their successes, reinforcing that mastery comes through trying and learning from mistakes.
- **Encourage Reflection:** Use journaling or class discussions to help students reflect on what they've learned from mistakes and how they can improve next time.
- **Foster a Growth Mindset:** Emphasize that intelligence and skill are developed through effort and perseverance, not fixed traits. Encourage students to see challenges as opportunities for growth.
- **Create a Safe Environment for Mistakes:** Establish a classroom culture where making mistakes is seen as an essential part of the learning process, not something to be ashamed of.
- **Provide Encouraging Feedback:** When students make mistakes, offer constructive feedback that focuses on what they can learn from the error, and how they can apply that knowledge going forward.
- **Reframe Failure as Progress:** Help students understand that each mistake is a step forward in their journey toward mastery. Encourage them to ask, "What can I learn from this?" instead of "Why did I fail?"

- **Frame Tasks as Discovery:** Present assignments as opportunities to "unlock" new knowledge or solve a mystery, using phrases like "Let's explore this together" or "What do you think will happen if...?"
- **Encourage Small Risks:** When students hesitate to try something new, suggest starting with a small experiment. For example, "Try this one new approach, and let's see what happens."
- **Give Choices in How to Solve Problems:** Offer students options on how to approach a task. For example, let them choose between brainstorming ideas, creating a mind map, or using a digital tool to find solutions.
- **Use Inquiry-Based Questions:** Ask guiding questions like, "What happens if we try it this way?" or "What do you think would work better here?" to encourage students to think critically and explore different solutions.
- **Model Curiosity:** Share your own thought process when solving problems or learning something new. For example, "I'm not sure how this will work, but let me try this first and see what happens."
- **Celebrate Effort, Not Just Results:** Praise students for attempting new strategies, even if they don't succeed. Say, "I'm really proud of you for trying a new method—let's see how we can improve it together."
- **Create Low-Stakes Opportunities to Experiment:** Provide students with practice activities where the focus is on experimenting with new ideas without the pressure of a grade. For example, give them a "try it out" assignment with no risk of failure.
- **Incorporate Group Problem-Solving:** Let students work in small groups where they can brainstorm and test different strategies together. This collaborative approach helps reduce fear of failure and encourages **collective curiosity.**

- **Focus on Small Wins:** Use the phrase "Small steps, big wins" to remind students that progress happens gradually and that each small success builds toward larger achievements.
- **Encourage Incremental Progress:** Break down tasks into manageable steps and celebrate each small milestone. For example, "You made it through the first part—let's keep going with the next step."
- **Counter Negative Self-Talk:** Teach students to replace negative thoughts like "I can't do this" with positive affirmations like "I've solved problems before, and I can do this too."
- **Provide Scaffolded Support:** Offer structured support that gradually decreases as students gain confidence. For example, start by providing more guidance, then slowly encourage them to complete tasks independently.
- **Highlight Strengths and Past Successes:** Regularly point out students' past successes or talents. For instance, "Remember how you figured out that tricky problem last week? You can do it again!"
- **Use Positive Affirmations:** Incorporate affirmations into daily routines, such as having students say, "I am capable," or "I can handle challenges." Reinforce these with examples of times they've succeeded before.
- **Provide Encouraging Feedback:** Focus feedback on effort and progress, not just outcomes. For example, "You really worked hard on this, and I can see how much you've improved!"
- **Set Achievable Goals:** Help students set small, realistic goals that lead to a sense of accomplishment. For example, "Today, let's focus on getting through the first two questions together."

- **Implement the "3 Before Me" Strategy:** Encourage students to solve problems independently by following the "3 Before Me" rule: they must first try three different strategies or consult three resources (e.g., notes, peers, online tools) before asking for help.
- **Encourage Problem-Solving:** When students seek help too early, ask guiding questions like, "What do you think you could try next?" or "What resource could you use to find an answer?"
- **Build Confidence in Self-Reliance:** Reinforce that they have the ability to solve problems on their own. For example, say, "I know you can figure this out. Let's see what you can do before asking for help."
- **Provide Checklists and Resources:** Offer students structured resources, such as a checklist of steps or a reference guide, to help them approach tasks on their own before seeking assistance.
- **Praise Effort and Independence:** Acknowledge and celebrate when students successfully work through challenges on their own. For example, "You did that all by yourself—great job!"
- **Model Problem-Solving:** Demonstrate how to approach problems independently. For example, think aloud while solving a problem, showing how you gather information, make decisions, and test ideas without seeking immediate help.
- **Set Expectations for Independent Work:** Consistently remind students of the importance of trying on their own. For example, "First, let's give this a try on your own, then I'll check in to see how it went."
- **Encourage Reflection:** After a student seeks help, ask them to reflect on what strategies they tried first and what they might do differently next time. This reinforces their ability to solve problems independently.

IT'S A WRAP...



Let’s reflect on the key takeaways designed to empower both educators and students. The metaphor of the farmer and the chick highlights the unintended consequences of over-assistance and reminds us that struggle is essential for growth. By understanding learned helplessness and its post-COVID impacts, teachers are better prepared to address these behaviors and build student resilience.

This session introduced practical strategies to foster independence:

- **Help Me Help You:** Encourage collaborative problem-solving by prompting students with guiding questions like, “What steps have you tried?” or “What do you think the next step could be?” This builds problem-solving skills and fosters trust.
- **Struggle Builds Strength:** Normalize perseverance by celebrating effort and small victories. Reinforce the idea that struggle is a vital part of learning and model a growth mindset.
- **Mistakes Mold Mastery:** Help students reframe mistakes as valuable opportunities for learning. Use personal examples and reflective practices to highlight progress and resilience.
- **Curiosity is Key:** Foster a culture of inquiry by encouraging curiosity and offering choices in task approaches. Inquiry-based learning promotes intrinsic motivation and creativity.
- **Small Steps, Big Wins:** reminds us to celebrate incremental progress, helping students see that tackling tasks one step at a time builds confidence and long-term success.
- **3 Before Me:** Redirect students toward self-reliance by encouraging them to consult three resources before seeking help. Classroom systems and anchor charts can visually support this strategy.

THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS