

# The Brain of the Struggling Learner

## Metacognition ... How We Learn

Metacognition - knowing WHAT to do as well as HOW and WHEN to do it.

More specifically, thinking about learning, knowing what you know and don't know and monitoring and adjusting one's learning.

### Special points of interest:

- Learning is Intentional!
- Success is Possible!!
- Empowered students succeed!

In plain English, Metacognition means knowing yourself as a learner including identifying your own strengths and weaknesses.

Struggling learners must be taught metacognition strategies; they do not have the built-in ability to monitor their own learning.

To teach students these strategies, we as teachers must have them answer the following questions on a regular basis:

- What's my plan?  
(What strategies do I use

for this subject and this teacher?)

- Am I really paying attention?  
(and making good use of my time?)

- Am I really learning this?  
(or am I fooling myself?)

- How did my plan work?  
(do I need to make changes for next time?)

Struggling learners need teachers to be specific and intentional with them.

Teachers can do the following to help foster metacognitive processes in their students:

1. Model Self-Talk focusing on strategies to help with problem areas.



2. Teacher students to ask themselves the questions (such as the ones listed previously).
3. Provide students with procedure cards for especially difficult tasks.
4. Have students keep a strategy notebook to refer to when they find themselves not knowing what to do next.
5. Have them identify the top three things that give them difficulty and address those immediately.

## Motivation and the Struggling Learner

Self-efficacy is believing in your own ability to be successful.

Struggling learners have little or no self-efficacy; they believe they cannot succeed.

To increase self-efficacy in these students, teachers can:

- Create and nurture a desire to learn
- Provide students with a safe learning environment

- Deal with student anxiety in positive and productive ways.
- Help students believe they can succeed.

Empower the students with tools and strategies to become successful.

## Build a Relationship with each Student

Building a relationship with each student is key to ensuring their success.

This is especially true of struggling learners because they have trouble believing in themselves and their ability to be successful.

Students who believe that you, the teacher, strongly believe



Students who feel valued and safe in your classroom will become more resilient.

lieves in them and their abilities will be more likely to implement learning (metacognition) strategies, become more motivated both extrinsically and intrinsically, engage more readily in learning and build their resilience. Students who get positive individual attention from their teachers feel more important and have a personal interest in succeeding because of the teacher's belief in their abilities.

Students in your classroom are more motivated by the social anxiety theory than they are by any other factor.

The Social Anxiety Theory says that a student's

motivation to fit in and belong coupled with their fear of not fitting in is the greatest factor in each one's behavior and learning in the classroom. The bottom line: students are more afraid of their peer than they are their teachers and when social anxiety goes up, performance goes down!

Building a relationship with each student and fostering a safe learning environment for everyone will reduce anxiety in the classroom and allow learning to take place.

**“When you believe in yourself, anything is possible.”**

**-Anonymous**

## Mismatched - Students and Teachers

Often, there is a mismatch between student's skills and teacher's demands.

Academic success is directly linked to Executive Function in the brain. Executive Function is a set of mental processes that helps us connect past experience with present action, allows us to override

immediate demands in favor of longer-term goals, helps us create a picture of a goal, a path to that goal, and the resources to attain that goal (no matter how far away that goal is). In short, EF allows us to plan and set goals, organize and prioritize, initiate and sustain effort, regulate emotion shifts, and ultimately self-monitor.

For struggling students, their poor academic performance is often due to weakness in executive processes; thus, the mismatch between their skills and our demands.

To manage the lack of EF in our struggling students, we must intervene at the level of the environment and the level of each individual.

## Promoting Executive Skills

To help struggling learners develop the Executive Functioning Skills they lack, teachers must realize that these skills follow a developmental progression from external to internal. As a result, it is the job of the teachers to act as the student's frontal lobe. To accomplish this goal, we must present skills externally first and gradually fade the instruction, supervision, and cues necessary for that stu-

dent to retain the skills they learn. Students will need direct instruction in some or all of the following areas:

- Planning
- Goal Setting
- Organizing
- Prioritizing
- Initiating

- Sustaining Effort
- Regulating Emotion
- Shifting Tasks
- Self-Monitoring



**Each area of the brain is responsible for a different activity.**

Goal-Setting and Coaching sessions should be held regularly with these students to keep them on track.