

# WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE SUCCESS OF all



Principe 1

# We must hold

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PRINCIPLE 1

# We must hold high expectations

“According to specialists, based on the principles of aerodynamics, the bumblebee cannot fly. Its size, weight and body shape in relation to its wingspan make flying impossible. But since no one has ever explained these scientific principles to the bumblebee, it goes on flying anyway!”

Pascal Perrat [Translation]

When it comes to explaining the difference between the performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and that of students from more privileged backgrounds, there are several factors involved, many related to experience: for example, the students’ relationship with writing, knowledge or school may not be in keeping with the school’s expectations. One aspect that is not at issue, however, is these students’ capacity to learn. To learn, all students must employ the same cognitive processes. Moreover, research on effective schools shows that in schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that have high student success rates, teachers<sup>1</sup> expect a lot of their students.

<sup>1</sup>Student success in disadvantaged neighbourhoods depends on collaboration: collaboration between the family and the school, between the school and the community, but also among school staff. In order for an educational community to take shape within a school, student success must be the top priority for all personnel. In the interests of brevity, the following text refers mostly to teachers; however, all the reflections and interventions suggested can also apply to other members of the school team (daycare workers, administrators, non-teaching professionals, etc.).

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# In

Teaching in a disadvantaged neighbourhood involves a certain number of challenges. Of these, maintaining high expectations for all students is both a challenge and a necessity. Given that students' knowledge and experience may not correspond to the school's expectations, teachers have a responsibility to offer learning contexts and situations that will help students enhance this store of knowledge and experience and, in this way, have greater potential for success.

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Maintaining high expectations for students in disadvantaged neighbourhoods means, in particular, finding ways to ensure that students perceive and use written and oral communication as tools to help them think, offering students challenging texts, designing tasks that enable students to meet these challenges, encouraging students to use precise vocabulary that has been developed through rich and meaningful learning situations, and making optimal use of teaching time. There is no doubt that this is a demanding program that requires continuous commitment, on the part of both the students and the teacher. To achieve this goal, teachers must therefore plan support measures to help students accomplish the tasks they are given.

# WHAT

The learning situations and contexts that teachers choose to present to a class are influenced by their level of expectations. Teachers who expect a lot of their students will present richer, more demanding learning situations than teachers who believe their students do not have what it takes to succeed. Holding high expectations for students therefore requires school staff to believe

in the children's ability to learn and to succeed. their prospects for academic and social success. This is one of the conditions for student success where teachers have some influence. It also means presenting learning situations that draw on high-level cognitive skills and supporting students in developing these skills. Depriving students of these kinds of experiences and failing to hold high expectations for them is equivalent to limiting their prospects for academic and social success.

# WHY

There can be a tendency, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, to make certain assumptions about the students: they're not capable, they don't have the required knowledge and experience . . . . To compensate, well-meaning teachers will often lower their expectations and ask less of their students. It is thus understood that these students will learn less and that their success will be limited. In this way, the performance gap between students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and those from more privileged neighbourhoods begins to form.

It is also important to emphasize that teachers' expectations for their students affect not only the students' learning, but also their behaviour, their motivation, and their perception of themselves as learners, which in turn has consequences for their success.

In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the economic and social aspects of poverty are often the aspects that school stakeholders are most concerned about. Yet, we must recognize that even if the school and the community take action on these fronts, their actions alone are not enough to ensure greater success for these students. For teachers who truly want to improve the success of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the top concern should be about learning.

To have an impact on the success of students from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, we must become aware of our perception of these students and their families, so that we can make sure it does not negatively impact our pedagogical choices. It is essential to aim for the success of all students by maintaining a high level of expectations for all of them, **especially when it comes to the development of written and oral communication skills<sup>2</sup>**.

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<sup>2</sup> It is now recognized that learning to read depends on language development and therefore benefits from being associated with learning to write. This is why, in this text, we have chosen an approach that combines the development of written (reading and writing) and oral communication skills.

# HOW

Reading, writing, and oral communication skills are tools for learning, communicating and thinking. They enable us to take part in society and to benefit from it fully (for our health, for recreation and, eventually, for work). It is therefore vital that schools focus on developing these competencies sufficiently.

In this context, maintaining high expectations for all students calls for the following:

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1



**Find ways to ensure that students perceive and use written and oral communication as tools for thinking.**

2



**Offer students challenging texts.**

3



**Design tasks that enable students to meet these challenges.**

4



**Encourage students to use precise vocabulary that has been developed through rich and meaningful learning situations.**

5



**Make optimal use of teaching time.**

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## Make optimal use of teaching time.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes have fewer opportunities to learn certain things at home, whether before starting school or during their schooling (becoming familiar with the written word, discussing books, justifying their point of view using arguments from a text, etc.). In this context, it becomes essential to make optimal use of teaching time so as to maximize the number of learning opportunities for these students. In particular, these students need to read, write and communicate a lot, on a regular basis.

Teachers with high expectations for their students make sure that every minute in the classroom is used in the best way possible to foster learning for all students. This means making sure that all students are active (not just those who participate and answer the teacher’s questions) as often as possible. It is therefore important for teachers to think about whether, over the course of a day, the time devoted to activities where students are truly cognitively active (engaged in a task, thinking, making connections, asking questions, learning something they can name and reuse, etc.) is optimal.

### Teachers who make optimal use of teaching time:

- take advantage of every opportunity to teach reading and writing (in every subject)
- manage their classroom well (expectations are clear and understood by the students, relationships with the students are positive, idle time is avoided, etc.)
- plan learning activities according to the students’ needs rather than according to instructional materials
- give priority to teaching reading and writing using tasks where students can communicate among themselves and reflect on their learning
- focus on the essentials: they eliminate activities that take a lot of time but yield little in the way of learning, and they devote most of class time to meaningful learning
- alternate between large-group discussions and discussions between the students themselves (this fosters active cognitive participation of ALL students, which is not always the case during lecture-style teaching, where just a few students interact with the teacher)
- make sure the learning situations presented are effective in generating new learning (e.g. by having students underline passages they don’t understand in a text and discuss them with a peer to share and try to overcome their difficulties) and are not just ways of practising a concept that has already been learned or a disguised way of evaluating learning (e.g. by filling out a reading comprehension questionnaire)
- refer to events that occur outside the classroom and the school, and turn them into learning opportunities for the students

### Avenues for reflection:

- Does my planning optimize teaching time?
- Do most of the tasks or learning situations allow my students to learn new things?
- Are some of my methods too time-consuming for the results they produce?

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**Encourage students to use precise vocabulary that has been developed through rich and meaningful learning situations.**

Teachers with high expectations give their students opportunities to hear and use a rich and varied vocabulary. It is not enough for teachers to simply use this vocabulary; in order for students to internalize it, they must have a chance to use it themselves in situations where they are interacting with their peers (in pairs or small groups), so that they can construct the meaning of the words and apply them to other contexts. It is important to foster discussions among students themselves rather than focusing solely on interactions between the teacher and the students.

It can be very beneficial to use oral communication, not only for the purpose of mastering spoken language (vocabulary, syntax, etc.), but also as a tool for learning and thinking. In this respect, teacher support before, during and after the discussion is crucial to help students develop the appropriate behaviours for speaking: the teacher should specify the goal of the discussion, suggest ways the students can express themselves to voice disagreement or to ask for clarification, help them take into account the reactions of the people they are addressing, reformulate their statements, ask each other for more details, etc.

In addition, students will benefit most from learning situations they perceive as meaningful and authentic (connected to real life). This means presenting learning situations that have a clearly identified goal, that respond to students' needs or questions, that are in keeping with their interests or concerns, etc. Not only will students be more engaged in their learning, but they will also learn much more.

**Examples of interactions where students use rich and precise vocabulary:**

**Example 1:**

"Here's my opinion: I'm against school uniforms. In the text, they say the uniforms are made by children, in China."

"I don't agree with your argument because we already wear lots of clothes that are made in China."

"Yes, but if all children wear uniforms, all our clothes will have been made in China."

"OK, I understand your point of view."

**Example 2:**

"I just received an invitation from the team at the community centre. They're holding an event to launch their new programming and they're inviting families to come. Who knows what 'programming' is?"

"..."

"Does it remind you of something?"

"TV programs."

"If I'm talking about the CBC's programming, what does that mean?"

"The list of programs, or maybe the program schedule? It's like a kind of schedule you can look at to choose."

"Yes, and what might a community centre's programming contain?"

"..."

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**Find ways to ensure that students perceive and use written and oral communication as tools for thinking.**

Teachers who have high expectations make sure they teach the principles of written and oral communication above and beyond usage rules and conventions. Every day, they place their students in situations that require the use of writing (e.g. writing to understand, writing to organize their thoughts, writing to communicate, writing to remember). The activities are part of authentic projects that are meaningful for students and have real communication purposes. In the same way, teachers who have high expectations for students will make sure they teach reading beyond the basics of decoding text, finding information and understanding it on a superficial level.

To be considered as tools for developing thinking, skills in oral communication, reading and writing must require students to explore or explain their thoughts. In addition, it is important to remember that learning to read and write requires mastering spoken language, and that the two mutually enrich each other.

**Examples of situations where students can use written and oral communication as tools to develop thinking:**

- Have a team debate, each team taking a stand on a controversial topic.
- During a debate, question an opinion that is based on prejudice.
- Explain to a peer what you've understood or retained from a text.
- In pairs, propose ways to solve a problem.
- Communicate to a peer your way of doing something.
- In teams, critique a text that uses unreliable sources.
- Give constructive feedback to a peer on one of his/her texts.
- Write to gain a clearer understanding (take notes, add comments in the margin of a text, number the items of information, put data into a table, summarize in your own words, etc.).
- Write to organize your ideas (draw a diagram to represent what you've learned, write what you've learned in your own words, make a plan to organize an event or an outline for a presentation, explain your point of view, write down your questions, write a summary, etc.).

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## 2



## Offer students challenging texts.

*“A good book is one that sows an abundance of question marks.”*

Jean Cocteau [Translation]

Reading a text is, in essence, making meaning of it. This involves more than simply recognizing and stringing together the words of which it is composed. A text usually contains blanks, implicit links, the repetition of information in different terms, references to unfamiliar concepts and much more. To understand a text, the reader must employ various processes that require a series of related strategies. For example, when readers encounter something they don’t understand, they can continue reading, reread the passage before it, or make a hypothesis, look at the pictures, illustrations or diagrams (see Appendix A). Teachers who wish to develop their students’ reading competency will therefore give them texts that contain challenges, so that students will learn to set these reading processes in motion and to use these strategies to overcome obstacles.

Because some teachers believe their students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the required aptitudes to tackle this kind of text, they may tend to give students only texts that have the following characteristics: short sentences, simple vocabulary, few substitution words or relational vocabulary, few elements that need to be inferred, etc. This way, students are exposed to texts that do little to develop their reading competency; as a result, they may have even greater difficulty when they encounter a text that goes beyond these well-marked paths.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have much to gain from using texts that allow them to activate the cognitive processes associated with reading and to use the various reading strategies, in order to gain access to the same opportunities for success as their peers from more privileged backgrounds, who may have had greater exposure to such texts. It goes without saying that the level of support and guidance provided by the teacher should be in accordance with the level of support required by the students (see Principle 2). Furthermore, this type of text should be alternated with less complex texts for tasks when the teacher provides less support, for example during independent reading.

### Examples of challenging texts:

- popular texts (informational, procedural or persuasive texts) with more challenging structure or vocabulary (specialized or abstract, for example)
- texts that require readers to work to understand them (disrupted chronological order, use of flashbacks, presence of two narrators, illustrations that contradict the text, use of wordplay, stylistic devices or expressions, etc.)
- texts with several levels of meaning (philosophical books, songs, proverbs, poems, picture books or novels with gaps and ambiguities)

## 3



## Design tasks that enable students to meet these challenges.

*“The most productive form of learning is problem-solving.”*

Arthur Koestler

Not only should students be given texts that involve challenges, they should be given tasks that will enable them to meet these challenges. This means going beyond having students simply read a text and answer questions that require them to find information. Having high expectations means choosing tasks that allow students to make meaning of the text and to effectively develop the reading competency, that is, to use reading processes and strategies in order to solve the problems or meet the challenges posed by the text. To this end, social interaction situations where students are asked to work together to construct the meaning of a text are rich learning opportunities, especially when students are invited to explain their processes and strategies to justify their understanding, and to reconsider their understanding in light of their peers’ explanations. In this way, students’ competency to communicate orally takes shape and fully plays its role in developing thinking.

In all cases, it is important to avoid confining students to individual and repetitive tasks (in workbooks, for example) which have, in fact, little to do with reading and writing as they are practised in everyday life. Instead, teachers should choose situations that encourage students to read for fun or in order to answer their own questions, to learn about a topic, to understand the rules of a game, to make a choice between three possible field trips, etc. Finally, paper-and-pencil tasks should no longer be considered the only means of teaching and evaluating reading.

By the same token, writing tasks may be appropriately tied to reading tasks that require the use of the same strategies. Examples include writing to better understand a text (underlining, summarizing, giving titles, writing down one’s reactions, etc.), or writing to organize the information in a text so as to better remember it (grouping ideas into categories, making a diagram, etc.).

### Examples of texts:

- In pairs, compare two opinion texts with opposing views and use the arguments in the texts to form your own opinion.
- During a reading activity, work as a group to fill gaps in comprehension (help each other to improve understanding, explain the strategy used, point out helpful passages, etc.).
- In response to an open question, process information from information texts (annotate texts, compare to prior knowledge, identify main ideas, reformulate, ask questions, doubt, etc.) and take notes in a learning log.
- During a group reading activity, debate a philosophical or social issue, basing arguments on examples from the text as well as on personal experiences.
- Discuss ideas with peers to better understand a text or passage that may be interpreted in different ways (an open ending, clues suggesting that a certain character is guilty, etc.).
- As a team, decode the message of a song.
- Discuss a poem with peers to interpret it and identify passages that support this interpretation.