

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Amanda Burns | College of Education | Washington State University | Master in Teaching 2024-2025 | Elementary Education



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

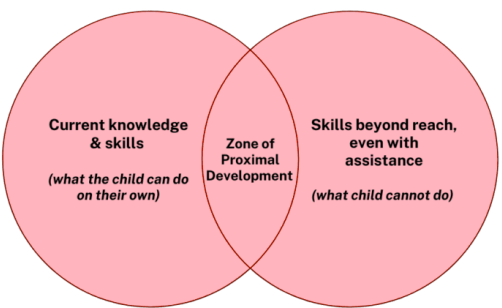
What is Productive Struggle?

Definition: Productive struggle is the process of allowing students to experience difficulty and frustration within a task that is just within reach—supporting them without removing the challenge—so they can develop understanding, confidence, and independence.

- Productive struggle helps students develop a **growth mindset**, deepen their understanding, and become more engaged in their learning.
- It is not the same as letting students fail without help. Instead, it's about **offering support that encourages thinking rather than giving answers.**

Zone of Proximal Development

The Zone of Proximal Development is the space between what a student can do independently and what they can achieve with support. Productive struggle happens in this zone when tasks are challenging but achievable with guidance. Teachers can scaffold learning by offering support through questioning, modeling, and feedback. This approach promotes deeper thinking, skill development, and student agency by allowing learners to take ownership of their progress. By working within the ZPD, students develop independence and confidence as they gradually take control of their own learning process.

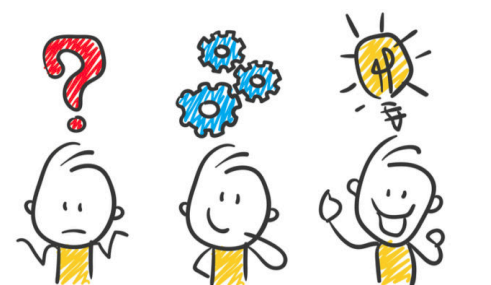


Shifting Student Mindsets: "I can't do this" to "I can't do this yet."

Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset theory emphasizes that intelligence and ability are not fixed traits, but can be developed through effort, effective strategies, and persistence. This belief is foundational to fostering both productive struggle and student agency in the elementary classroom. When students experience difficulty and are supported without being rescued, they begin to **internalize the idea that effort leads to growth.** By fostering a growth mindset, teachers help **students view struggle not as a sign of failure, but as a pathway to growth.**

Inquiry Questions

- How can elementary teachers support student agency through the use of productive struggle in the classroom?
- What classroom strategies help to maintain student motivation during challenging tasks?



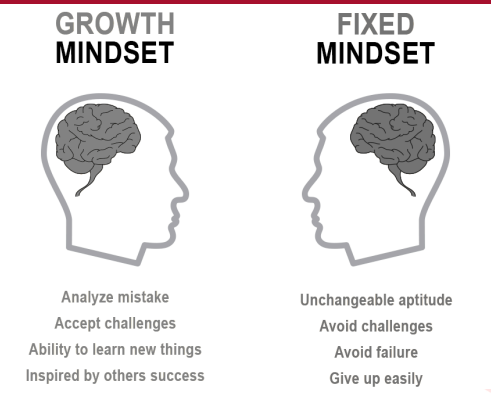
Supporting Productive Struggle in My Future Classroom

Normalize Struggle as a Path to Growth: Make struggle visible and valued by teaching students that confusion, mistakes, and persistence are key parts of learning.

Design Rigorous, Supportive Learning Experiences: Provide tasks that promote critical thinking and resilience, using scaffolds like peer collaboration and guiding questions.

Foster Reflection and Student Agency: Embed opportunities for students to reflect on their learning process, helping them build confidence, independence, and ownership of their progress.

Adopt a Warm Demander Approach: Combine strong relationships with high expectations to create a classroom where students feel safe, valued, and challenged to persevere.



Nurturing Student Agency

In elementary settings, it's easy to want to "rescue" students when they struggle. What if that struggle is where the most powerful learning happens? My goal is to explore how allowing space for that struggle can actually benefit students in developing important skills like problem-solving, perseverance, and self-direction. Students who experience productive struggle are more likely to develop grit and resilience, two skills that are essential not only in school but in life. Struggle is often avoided in classrooms, but when supported properly, it leads to deeper learning and increased engagement.



Connecting Productive Struggle to Being a Warm Demander

A warm demander is a teacher who builds strong, respectful relationships with students while holding them to high academic and behavioral expectations. This approach creates the ideal conditions for productive struggle.

- Productive struggle requires a balance of **challenge and support**, which is exactly what a warm demander provides.
- Students are more willing to engage in difficult tasks when they feel **seen, respected, and believed in.**

Accountability with Care: Warm demanders lovingly push students to meet expectations.

- A warm demander doesn't remove the challenge, but instead **encourages students to rise to it**, with clear guidance and genuine care.

Teacher and Principal Evaluation and Growth Program (TPEP) Alignment

- Criterion 1:** Centering instruction on high expectations for student achievement
- Descriptor:** The teacher communicates and reinforces high expectations for student learning, designs instruction that challenges all students, and supports students in meeting rigorous learning goals. The teacher establishes a learning environment where students are expected to persevere, take academic risks, and take ownership of their learning.

Tools

Scaffolded Tasks: Break larger tasks into smaller, manageable parts while still keeping the challenge. Provide guiding questions instead of direct answers.

Time to Unpack: Give students time to process their thinking before offering help or moving on. This encourages persistence.

Discuss and Reflect: Have students reflect on what felt hard, how they got through it, and what they learned from struggling.

Collaborative Learning: Encourage students to work together and explain their thinking. Struggle can be more manageable when shared.

Positive Feedback: Focus feedback on effort, strategies used, and growth

