

**Loving the Exceptional Learner**  
**From the *Why We Learn* Educators' Course**  
**Transcript**

Welcome to your life as a new teacher. You will have more success than you even realize, as long as you think of this one goal when meeting each student, that your priority is to look into the eyes of every learner and see potential—to see that child for the beauty of who they are today and who they are becoming.

In a large classroom of learners, however, it is all too easy to look at the exceptional child and see only the challenges they represent—especially in the case of the student who arrives late, who seems bored or distracted, who never turns in work at all, or who has outbursts in class—or even the one who knows everything about a certain topic and simply disengages when talking about anything else.

Let's see if we can sort out these challenges a bit with some stories.

One of our Full-Circle Learning board members, Dr. Rodney Hume Dawson, began life crippled and unable to walk. Through a series of mishaps, the health care system in his native country was unable to correct the problem. His parents did not give up. They carried him wherever he needed to go and got him the help he needed until he could educate and care for himself. He emigrated to advance his education, and today he is a professor of disabilities studies, teaching at a university in the USA.

Rodney likes to remind his students of the therapy that helped him most: radical love. When it would have been so easy for everyone to give up on him, his mother never did. He was clearly a gifted child with restraints only physical in nature. His accommodations and needs, even now, include only simple acts of consideration, such as extra wait time to get to class, or someone offering to carry his books, so he can walk more stably on braces and crutches, and at times, someone to serve him a plate of food rather than expecting him to juggle it from a serving table to a chair. In a classroom, a student such as Rodney needs physical allowances, love, and the belief that they can and will achieve.

Another Full-Circle Learning advisor, Dr. Kathryn de Planque, once led the special services department of a large school district. After traveling many miles each day and experiencing chronic pain from traffic accidents on her way to work, she decided to change careers. She then earned a doctorate in holistic health and used guided imagery to help children with chronic pain from accident, congenital conditions or disease. She gave radical love to countless children over the course of her career.

Another Full-Circle Learning educator had a student who separated himself from the class and lay on the floor each day or banged his head against the wall for hours. And yet, by the end of the school year, she had appointed him as her teaching assistant, standing in front of the class to lead discussions each day. This boy began with low self-esteem after years of bullying. Gradually, she had learned more about the activities that gave him a sense of release. She gave him a chance to run to the tree and back, for example, at certain intervals if he would complete an assignment. She developed a relationship with him, and in discussions during break time, she helped him realize his own accountability for attracting positive relationships.

Gradually, she gave him leadership opportunities in the classroom, which bolstered his sense of value to the group. She then introduced the idea that as he mastered each habit-of-heart, he could teach it to others. Classmates soon responded to his unique capacities rather than to his disturbances.

Full-Circle Learning teachers and students, working in groups, have trained their communities to recognize and support autistic children and those with attention deficit or physical challenges, giving the extra support they needed. Some schools have also conducted prevention efforts for diseases such as leukemia or cancer. Projects bring the whole class to your assistance in this regard.

As an educator, you can identify ways to love and help the exceptional child, in whatever package the child's need arrives.

You can provide extra leadership and service for the apathetic student and extra project-related research for the one who longs for a greater challenge.

You can offer allowances and accommodations for the ones with physical challenges, such as extra time to get to class and partner to walk the campus with them to ensure their safety.

You can learn the root causes of behavior challenges, the symptoms of autism, attention deficit, and depression. For these, we have listed specific interactions with the teacher and supports the students can also provide to increase that student's potential for a positive learning and giving experience.

You can help classmate become understanding learning partners. They will gain a sense of purpose from embracing the exceptional learner as an equal, once they know how to do so.

You can construct projects that offer variable options for each type of learner to contribute their specific expertise in ways that afford them a peak experience while contributing to the learning goals and community service outcomes.

Also, you can offer a unique style of guided imagery for the whole class, through stories that reduce the stress and anxiety often associated with these challenges. This practice can help students learn to strengthen their own resilience and inner locus of control, while increasing their understanding and capacity in regard to the current habit of heart.

Before you turn to the information sheets, join me in learning this guided imagery exercise. We will provide publisher information for a book of these stories, but you can also generate them yourself. The only students who may be exempt are schizophrenic children.

I encourage you to use the prewritten resilience stories – or to create stories of your own that use deep breath exercises while helping children envision themselves in heroic role by practicing the particular habit-of-heart. Studies have shown that if they experience the same story at least twice a week, until they own it and can tell it in their own heads, they gradually can regulate their own breathing and reduce stress before exams or to ward off conflicts. The exercise also reinforces their prosocial identity as they practice the habit-of-heart.

Today, we will act as if the class were seated before us, and they have been practicing the habit-of-heart empathy. We help them learn to regulate their heart beats with relaxation techniques as we begin the story. Please play the role of the students and I will be the teacher.

[Standard relaxation exercise as the intro, followed by the customized story]

You begin walking home from school. You feel a soft breeze on your cheeks. You hear the sweet melodies of birds in the trees over your head. You stop to take off your shoes to walk on the soft, warm ground, just to feel a part of the earth and all its creatures.

Suddenly, you hear a new sound. Is it a whistling black horn tree? No, it is a soft rustling—over there, in a pile of leaves, where you see a baby bird with an injured wing. It tries to hop, then flops on its belly, tired from the effort. It must have been separated from its brothers and sisters while trying to fly to its nest.

You feel a deep pang inside, extending to your arm. What is that feeling? You were happy a moment ago, but now you feel hurt imagining what the little bird must feel. You are feeling empathy. If you were alone and separated from everyone, you too would feel frightened instead of taking pleasure in the beauty of the sky, the aroma of the flowers and the meals cooking and the echoes of people laughing or singing.

You know are part of a larger family of humans, but what does a baby bird know? Suddenly, you feel a great longing to help the bird. You kneel down by the pile of leaves to give it encouragement. “It will be all right,” you tell the bird. “I am here and I know you are hurting.” You say a little prayer that the bird will find a worm to eat. Then you step back and call out toward the trees, “Mother birds, where are you? This little bird needs love and care? Please help.”

The mother birds suddenly sing back to you. The Drongo bird calls, “Empathy. Empathy.” Others respond with their send their trills and yodels. Some birds chant, “La la la la la la la.” Still others confer in high, cheerful tunes, wondering to which nest the baby belongs. Everyone chimes in. “One bird says, ‘The mother has gone to the river to search for better food.’” At this, the Great Blue Turaco responds by simply

turning her head and saying “Blip. Blip.” Upon her advice, the fast-flying birds rush to find the mother, while the younger birds scurry about fetching worms from the ground and laying them in front of their newfound sister.

The Drongo bird nods approval, saying “Empathy, empathy, empathy.” Yes! You cry out. That’s it! All the birds are showing empathy for the little one. The Drongo nods at you. It’s a nod of thanks, and suddenly you realize that if you had not first made them aware of the plight of this little bird with your own empathy, none would have known.

You pick up a stray feather and keep it as a reminder of this day, and then you move along, feeling the soft earth below your feet, watching the sun move lower in the sky, just as the mother bird soars past to rescue her baby. You will rest well tonight, know that by practicing empathy, you helped a little bird find its way back home. Take another breath and let it out slowly. It is a breath of deep happiness. When you awake, you will be in your own classroom home.