

CHAPTER 2

Should Is a Futile Word

Build Your Students up With Principles

When I was younger, I hated being told what I *should* do. I now realize that my aversion was a response to the feeling that I was being relegated into submission. That feeling never really goes away, even as an adult. I recently experienced it while in conversation with a friend about something as mundane as replacing the tires on my car. I had already scheduled an appointment with a nationally recognized and reputable auto service establishment, but when I mentioned this to my friend, he took it upon himself to tell me, “You *should* take it to my cousin; he can save you a lot of money.” That one word—*should*—instantly put me in a different headspace. I no longer felt that I was having an equal conversation with my peer; rather, it felt like I was being scolded. I was made to feel that my choice was not valid, although taking my car to his cousin had not even been an option until he brought it up in the moment.

Part of being human is that we sometimes find ourselves in positions where our natural inclination is to fight or flee. When things get tough or scary, or we feel backed into a corner, we become argumentative or we abandon the situation altogether. In this case, when I was told what I *should* do after I had done my research and felt comfortable with my own decision, my fight or flight response was to grow defensive.

In this case the word *should* was my trigger. Even if my friend had good intentions (and I assume he did), his language had a very different impact on me. I read it an attempt to *force me into a decision by being judgmental*.

Even if we think we know better than our students, when you impose your own view of what others *should* do upon them, expect to be disappointed. Oftentimes, the limitations of our own perspectives result in false assumptions about our students and, in the worst case, we create self-fulfilling prophecies of predictable failure. In this chapter we take a close look at how the disparities between educator and student perspectives can have unintended, even devastating consequences.

Most educators have been exposed to the ideas of Charles Darwin. Darwin's premise that *only the strong survive* is just part of the story. The second part is *adaptation*—the idea that, in order to survive, species must adapt (or evolve) in response to changes in their environment.

People, according to Darwin, are no different. We adapt or we perish depending upon whether or not we are able to adapt to change. But let's face it, *change is hard*. And what about unpredictable and sudden changes to our environment, such as floods, famines, and hurricanes? When we encounter such sudden outliers, we either quickly adapt—e.g., flee our immediate surroundings—or fight it out in the hopes of surviving. This metaphor can also be applied to our students. When students feel like they are being backed into a corner and bombarded with messages that they *should* act in a way that is different from how they have always acted in order to survive, a fair amount of dissonance is inevitable.



SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

I grew up in a family where merely surviving took precedence over formal education. I have vivid memories of the messaging from my early childhood: *Get a job to help support my family as well as myself*. I was never told that education was a key to a better life. The perspective I grew up with was one that prioritized landing a job and earning a living. In fact, there was no other choice in life for people like me. Our survival depended upon making money, and the relationship between formal education and earning good wages was never acknowledged. This perspective simply didn't jive with the messaging that I later received in school, all of which focused on the actions I *should* take to become a better student. Again, I could see no connection between spending hours in a classroom and making sufficient income to survive. There was no way for me to conceptualize a payoff ten or twelve years down the road when I needed to eat *now*. However, like most things in life, my school experience was nuanced. There were times that I did

tune into school and even completed some assignments. Yet I didn't apply myself to what I was told I *should* be doing to succeed in school. To extend the Darwinian metaphor, in a world in which only the "fittest" survive, school was not part of what made me "fit" to survive my family or my neighborhood. Only later, when I finally felt I was being heard, was I able to change my perspective.

I have a clear childhood memory of being asked to complete a math assignment in school. Initially, I did not understand the assignment, and before I knew it, my teacher said out loud, "You should know this; we went over it yesterday." Her meaning was clear: She was making light of the fact that I had not been in school at all that week. But in fact there was nothing funny about her remark. She made no attempt to understand why I had not been in school the previous day (I had had a good reason to be absent). Because I had already been labeled as a problem, she wanted to further demoralize me with yet another *should*—in this case, what I *should* already know. Of course, the absurd expectation that I should be familiar with this new content only existed in the teacher's mind, not mine. So, predictably enough, I shut down completely. I relive this painful story only to reinforce why I believe *should* is a potentially harmful word that we should banish from our vocabulary.

Not only is this *should* type of thinking damaging to a child, it is also dangerous. I was not shown how; rather I was just told what I *should* be doing. But how could I know what to do when the *should* in question didn't fit my perspective, a perspective that was based on my need to survive? It did not even exist in my mind.



SHOULD HASN'T EVEN HAPPENED YET

In the above example, my teacher openly compared me to other students. I now understand that just because other students clocked in more school hours than me did not make me less than them. I was trained to be a hustler, and comparing me to others who didn't need to struggle to survive created an unfair judgment. Most educators concur (at least in theory) that differentiating our teaching to meet a spectrum of diverse learning needs is a best practice. In contrast, the assumption that all students share a common perspective is misguided and leads to the assumption that the teacher's expectations (the *shoulds*) are shared by every student.

Let's look at some basic behavioral expectations: *This kid should walk in a straight line. This kid should not sleep in class.* Although such expectations are commonly held, have you ever thought about why that one child is impulsive and has difficulty walking in a straight line? Or about how another student juggles multiple jobs at night, making it difficult for her to stay awake? In such cases, even what we consider the most reasonable of expectations may place undue strain on the student in a manner that makes school feel like a correctional institution. For those of you who think this is far-fetched, consider the national data on the *cradle to prison pipeline* (Delale-O'Connor et al. 2018)—a system of oppression that has been with us for generations.



CHANGING YOUR BELIEF SYSTEM

I'll say it again: Banish the word *should* from your belief system. Basing behavior on common expectations for each child is unrealistic and damaging since every child grows up in different circumstances and holds a unique perspective. Those of us born into generational poverty where the fight for bare survival supersedes all other needs are driven by a different imperative than those with privilege. This doesn't mean that we lower our standards or push some children into remedial course work (another form of "imprisonment"). However, as stated previously, before we jump to impose our *shoulds* on our students, we must first shut up and listen, which builds the bridge to understanding where each child is coming from.

Should is a futile word. It's about what didn't happen. It belongs in a parallel universe. It belongs in another dimension of space. — Margaret Atwood

This quote, from the renowned Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, popular for her award-winning novels, short stories, and poetry, including the dystopian novel (now a TV series) *The Handmaid's Tale*, provides us with a unique perspective on why *should* is a word that has an expiration date, especially when we continually provide rules of engagement with students within a classroom.

Atwood mentions that *should* cannot be measured because it is an opinion. *Should* does not exist in objective reality; rather, it is just in the mind of the speaker. As Atwood alludes, *should* makes us become defensive and puts us on our guard. It also can make us feel inept or inferior when, in fact, the *should* only exists in the imagination of the accuser. The *shoulds* of school connote an imaginary "model student" and are often based on a set of imaginary rules.



TEACHING PRINCIPLES RATHER THAN RULES

In school we learn that rules rule—a belief that is typically unquestioned. But, at their core, most rules are set for mere compliance and are a byproduct of *should* belief systems. As previously discussed, harping on the *should* can immediately place students in a glass box they can only escape by punching their way out (fighting) or by jumping out and leaving altogether (fleeing). Again, the mismatch between teacher and student perspectives sets false expectations for all parties involved.

In *Life Learning Magazine*, Robyn Coburn (2020) eloquently details how rules can set false expectations for children and can easily be shaped into principles:

Rules are a two sided, oxymoronic coin—on one side the expectation of automatic compliance, on the other side the punishment for breakage. Rules for children are often not designed to be useful in themselves but function as molds, designed to teach some idea, especially the idea that rules must be followed, without defiance or even contemplation.

These are the skills that they then bring into adult life. The few rules in a child's life that might be useful, such as "don't turn on the stove when Mommy is out," can be simply and easily converted into principles that can allow for empowered exploration and make real sense to a freely living child. These only reiterate how ineffective and inefficient arbitrary rule making (or expressing rules in a manner that makes them seem arbitrary) is in itself.

Coburn suggests that the *shoulds* are typically formed from rules that sustain oppression. A rule to walk on the right side of the hall holds less weight than that of a taught principle to avoid running into someone else and getting hurt. Teaching a child a principle to avoid harm allows them to have life skills rather than being bound by rules that may not match their conception of the real world. For example, instead of saying, "Be quiet in the line—stay in a straight line— don't get out of line in the hall," break down the principles of showing others around you respect and how to have empathy for other students' needs.

Also, explain how it could hinder other people's learning when there is too much noise in the hall, or how character is

demonstrated when we move together as a unit to the lunchroom. Such examples of teachable moments depict how to positively influence a child rather than impose superficial rules without explanation.



PRINCIPLES HELP BUILD UP A CHILD

Coburn goes on to state that domestic life for many children is defined by petty, unaccommodating rules that treat them as dishonest or intrinsically deceitful. Because the adults in these households don't have to follow the same rules, children quickly perceive that such rules are meant to be "followed," and do not connect them with the principles upon which they are based. Principles, on the other hand, are meant for everyone in the household and extend into daily life at school and elsewhere. Children best learn principles like courtesy and kindness not when they are instructed to "be good," but when they see adults modeling that behavior.

You must admit that it's hard for us as adults to obey the rules we set, so just imagine how difficult it is for the students. For most adults it's hard to be quiet after sitting in silence for hours. Even for me, if I can't talk in the lunchroom while I'm eating, or in the hall as I pass my colleagues, when do I get to release? If you think about it, it is unnatural to be forced to pass your friend without speaking, so why force your students to do the same? Students shouldn't feel like they are sentenced to twelve years in school; school is not forced incarceration. However, the manner in which we enforce our arbitrary rules makes it seem that way.

One day I had a speaking engagement at a school in California where I noticed an unusual lunchtime scene. The kids were outside on their skateboards, listening to music, dancing, and lying on the lawn. It was more like a college setting than any K-12 school I had visited. I asked the principal, "Why do these kids have so much freedom and how do you keep them in line?" His response was, "That's the thing: We don't try to keep them in line, we teach them respect and we build a system that lets them be themselves and be under less pressure." I thought to myself, *Wow, this is what school can be!* When the kids were done socializing, they went back to class and continued to complete their work. No yelling, no violence, no issuing demerits, just a seamless transition. That's because the school as a whole worked; the adults had laid a solid foundation down that was enforced by principles.

The principal also told me that the students rarely fought outside, and I thought to myself, *This couldn't happen where I'm from*. But I then caught myself. I realized that I was articulating a mindset and a set of beliefs that something was impossible to achieve. When this becomes a cultural perspective, we limit our creativity due to the limitations of our own beliefs and imagination. I had to realign myself and see that there was nothing different between these students and the students I interacted with back home. The only thing that was different was their perspective.

I was also amazed that the staff wasn't outside. The principal told me that his teachers took their break together; that was their time to release also. "We teach our students that people shouldn't have to stand over them for them to act right," he said to me. At that point, I had an epiphany: That principle, based on agency and self-sufficiency, gave the kids freedom and also made them look forward to coming to school—it allowed them to have fun and not be threatened by the fear of breaking arbitrary rules.

The secret to changing our students' perspectives begins with changing the system that they inhabit. Substituting rules with principles is one example of such a change. As Coburn (2020) states, "Children who live surrounded by rules, instead of learning about principles, end up becoming adept at getting around rules, finding the loopholes in rules, disguising non-compliance or deflecting blame for non-compliance (i.e., lying about what they did)."

Dos and Don'ts

Ironically, our list of Dos and Don'ts may be reminiscent of the very rules we have critiqued in this chapter. However, their purpose is to remind educators that checking our *should* at the door will ultimately liberate our students from the incarceration of oppressive systems and allow them to become their best selves.

DO:

- Teach principles rather than rules.
- Build a child up through explaining the importance of principles.

- Hone your understanding of the damaging effects unrealistic expectations have on a child.
- Remove *should* from your vocabulary when talking with your students.
- Look at each student through a fresh lens and take that student's background and life experiences into consideration when communicating.
- Remember that many urban and marginalized students come from a place of survival and "doing school" does not mesh with such a perspective until you work to shift it.

DON'T:

- Relegate your students to what they *should* be doing.
- Create baseless rules for mere compliance.
- Compare students to each other in terms of ability.
- Assume you can ascertain a student's perspective with respect to what is important in that student's life.
- Assume that all students share your expectations.

Chapter Reflection

This chapter has explored the danger of *should* in our schools and classrooms. We can't possibly build connections with our students if we hold them to a predetermined paradigm that is likely at odds with their perspectives, particularly if those perspectives are built on their assumptions of what it takes to survive. Take the time to reflect on the questions below. Now is the time for us to think and to write.

Think and write about a time when you told a student what that student should be doing. How was that expectation received by the student?

Was there ever a time when you could have been more open to learning about a student's family or home life? Can you now see if that student was responding to you from a survival perspective?

Where in your lessons can you build in a time to gain insight into a student's home life and neighborhood to fully grasp if that student is responding from a survival perspective?

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