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Episode 41: Building Positive Relationships with Students

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners, welcome to episode 41. I'm your host, Becky Lewis and my Cohost for this month is Brittany Fike. Brittany and I are going to be talking about a topic this month that is very crucial to the start of the school year, which is building positive teacher-student relationships.

This is the West Virginia leaders of Literacy Podcast, where we engage in educational conversations to strengthen early literacy in West Virginia. Are you ready to become a leader of literacy?

Hello fellow educators and Brittany, welcome back to the show. I am excited to have you here today to talk about building positive relationships with our students.

Brittany: Hi Becky, I am just as excited to be here and to be discussing such an important topic, one that I am personally, really passionate about.

Becky: Yeah, I know you're very passionate about this topic and I think it's just going to be overall a great conversation today.

So just to let our listeners know our two episodes this month are going to center around the importance of positive teacher student relationships, and we have a couple goals in mind for these episodes and one is to really dive deep into the importance of these positive relationships. Another is to see what these relationships look like, and finally, we're going to focus on how we can accomplish building and sustaining these relationships with our students. Um, this isn't a new or an undiscussed topic, but it is one that I feel is really important and I know you, Brittany, you feel it's really important especially right now with the beginning of the school year starting after what might have been one of the craziest years that both students and educators have ever had.

Brittany: I completely agree, and this um like you said it is and always has been such an important topic but coming off the year that we know everyone has had, it just seems absolutely crucial that we're discussing this today, so we know that

relationships are important, and we know that as educators, we have to be focused on more than just meeting the academic needs of our students, and that we also have to focus on meeting their social and emotional needs. You and I have actually discussed this on the podcast before and here in West Virginia the message is that relationships and the social and emotional well-being of our students are among the top priorities for our school year along with academic needs. Today, though, I'm so excited that we get to have this discussion because although we know how important relationships are, I feel like we often miss discussing the why or the how behind creating those relationships, and I'm hoping that we get to cover some of that today and in her next episode together.

Becky: That is a great point and I feel like that thought will likely resonate with many of our listeners as well. As you mentioned, we know that teacher student relationships are really important. Almost anyone can tell you that, but just simply knowing that isn't enough, we need to look at and really understand what the research says and we need to know how we can make sure we are meeting those social and emotional needs of our students through these relationships that we build with.

With that being said, let's dive into the resource that we want to share today. This resource is a little bit different than those that we have shared in past episodes, but it's a resource that I feel really synthesizes the why and the how that we're discussing when it comes to building positive relationships.

Brittany: Yes, I think so too, and I am so excited to share this resource with our listeners that we're going to be talking through and the information that it presents. That resource is the book *Breaking Bold* and this book breaking bold was written by someone who most of us know and absolutely love in the education world and that is Weston Kieschnick. It is also authored by his wife, Molly Kieschnick, and so you may recognize Weston's name because he has another bestselling book, *Bold School*.

And so again, the book that we're going to be discussing today is his latest book, *Breaking Bold*.

Becky Lewis: Thank you for sharing all of that Brittany and yes, many educators out there do know Weston, um, just because he's been in the education world for so long and doing so many different types of publications.

This is a great resource, and it really fits perfectly with that layout that we just discussed about the show, because it shares the research behind building those positive teacher student relationships as well as the why and the how behind the importance of building them.

To start off our conversation, I think it's necessary that we talk about some of the brain research, the why part. This is the research that the book *Breaking Bold* shares, but it's also research Brittany that you and I have actually discussed in a previous podcast episode on Trauma. It used to be thought that the different parts of the brains worked separately, but what we've actually learned is that in all the different parts of our brain, they kind of come together and work in a harmony. The emotional brain, the thinking brain and the action brain all talk to each other, and they don't function independently. In fact, like we discussed in episode 9, if all three parts of the brain are not working together or communicating as they should, then we aren't able to access the logical problem-solving part of our brains.

Brittany: Yeah, that's right Becky, and so when we think about this in terms of learning, it tells us that thinking doesn't just occur in one area of the brain but it occurs in all three that you were just telling us about. Then when we take it a step further and we think about what this means in terms of learning and relationships, it tells us that in order for the thinking part of our students' brain to function effectively, that that emotional part and the action part of the brain must also be functioning effectively. So, if a student is feeling unseen or unheard for example, or maybe they're feeling like they're not important. then they're not going to be ready to learn. This really shows us how important having positive relationships with our students is and we need to make sure that we have these healthy relationships if we want learning to take place.

Becky: Absolutely, and the research is so powerful, and it tells us exactly what needs to happen.

But while that seems like such pressure put on our educators, building positive relationships with our students encompasses so many different aspects and Weston Kieschnick mentions all of this in the book. The importance of building these relationships is talked about extensively, but the why and the how are often missing pieces when we're talking about building relationships. So, I feel like

we've spent some time talking about the research, the why, and many of us have already previously had that, and I'm happy that the book *Breaking Bold* gives us a new way to share the how part to our listeners as well.

Brittany: Yes, definitely.

Becky: Weston Kieschnick and his wife Molly in the book provide 12 habits that you can bring into your teaching practice in order to support the building of positive teacher student relationships. The goal of these habits is to embody all 12 of them, and I'm going to directly quote the book here for you, Brittany. **“Become masterful in the art of relationships with your students and in nurturing an environment where your students can cultivate them with one another.”**

So, these habits give us the how behind those building important relationships. By embracing all of those habits, putting them into practice that will allow us to teach the whole child, and we know how important in teaching the child as a whole is so Brittany, let's start talking about this. I'm really excited for you to begin introducing our first habit to our listeners.

Brittany: I am too Becky, so excited. So, like you mentioned, building capacity in these habits really puts the how behind building those ever-important teacher student relationships and leads us to teaching the whole child and to make sure that we aren't just teaching to that thinking part of the brain that we were talking about. Just like you mentioned, there are 12 habits broken up into two categories of beliefs and behaviors, and then instruction.

For the sake of time today, we're going to talk about the seven habits that fall under the belief and behavior category, but I definitely encourage all of our listeners to find this book and read about the other habits as well, and who knows, maybe you and I can discuss them in a future episode. But again, for today, the habits that we're going to talk about are the first seven, and those are: perception, vulnerability, compassion, trust, connection, belief in students and clarity.

So, the first habit is perception, and it's all about knowing and really actively remembering that everything we do affects how other people see us. As educators, our actions and our behaviors are words, they all determine how our students perceive us, and then that has a direct impact on how likely they are to

learn from us. So, we have to accept that really, every single thing we do matters and is being watched by our students. The choices that we make and the things that we do really need to support the fact that if our students don't see us as someone who cares about them and someone who's there for them, then it can really keep learning from taking place.

I think too that an important thing to mention with this habit is that this needs to happen of course, regardless of who our students are so any bias that we may have, whether we are aware of it or not, doesn't have a place in the classroom and we need to make a conscious effort to make sure that we are kind of shielding her students from that.

So, in order for our students to have that positive perception, we need to believe that all of them are capable of success and great things.

Becky: Absolutely Brittany, I have personally and professionally experienced how influential and impactful that simply believing that all of your students are capable of great things and success can be. I've had students that just from having that belief personally, have excelled in my classroom or maybe in previous years, they didn't do so well because the teacher didn't believe. So, thinking about first impressions, Britney, did you know that research shows that we are wired to judge someone new that we meet in approximately the 1st 7 seconds?

Brittany: Wow!

Becky: Yeah, so that means that from the second that our students walk into our school buildings and our classrooms, we have to work to make sure that they have a positive perspective of us. The thing is though, that sometimes, regardless of what we do, their perception may not be positive right away and we have to remember that if that is the case, it is up to us to change that perception for them. Just know it's going to take a while for this shift of perception to take place.

Brittany: Yeah, that's absolutely correct, but I don't think this is something that we want to get discouraged about, because like you said, it is something that we can change. So, before we move on to the next habit, I do want to share one way that we can influence our students' perceptions of us. The book gives so many wonderful suggestions and we won't have time to talk through them all, even if

we would like to, but I do hope to share at least one action step relating to each habit that our listeners can take away from our conversation.

So, one way to influence our students perception of us is to reach out to them before the school year starts and share our beliefs and by reaching out to our students we can start to open those lines of communication and begin a relationship where students start to form their perception of us and see us as someone who is safe and cares about them and really wants to get to know them before they're even in the classroom.

Becky: I really like that suggestion, Brittany, because that seems like it's very manageable and it's a simple act and I personally had not thought of doing that prior to the school year, but I really wish that I would have.

So, the next habit we're moving onto is vulnerability and to embrace this habit as educators, we need to be OK with maybe not knowing what comes next and being willing to take risk. It's also about embracing the emotions that come along with doing this. We want our students to learn from us what vulnerability is and we want to show them what it looks like by being vulnerable and modeling that for them. This supports positive relationships because it allows our students to just be themselves.

Brittany: Right, Becky and I know that this habit of vulnerability and embracing not knowing what comes next, is something that I can personally work on myself. To me, this is such a powerful habit that we can not only display to our students, but really help them to build within themselves and I think one way that we can support this is to celebrate everything with them. We can celebrate when they take risks and we can celebrate if they're successful, but also celebrate their failures as well because we know that sometimes not succeeding is a learning experience too.

Becky: I love that suggestion and idea of celebration, especially now because I feel like we really need to be celebrating everything.

Brittany: Yes, definitely. So, the next habit is compassion and what I think the book mentions about this habit that is the most important is that we want to be really careful not to confuse compassion with empathy, and so compassion is the action behind feelings of empathy. So, it's those actions that you take to show

other people that you care and that you understand. And so, as educators, we want to create a compassionate classroom by being compassionate, but also by explicitly teaching what compassion is. Compassion really creates a bond between us and other people, and so that's how it helps us create those positive relationships. And the greatest suggestion that I think the authors give for this habit is compassion has to start with yourself. Research has shown that people who are more likely to treat themselves with compassion are also more likely to demonstrate compassion with others.

Becky: I would greatly benefit from being more compassionate to myself because I know I am my own worst critic. And so, if I'm able to be compassionate, I know that I can be more compassionate to others when I start with myself so.

Brittany: Absolutely, I agree and I love that through this conversation we're both kind of recognizing some habits that we can both work on in our personal lives, right?

Becky: And I think that just being compassionate to yourself is something that educators can do right away, and it turns all of those relationships around, which you know is just even an added bonus.

So, looking at the next habit, it is trust and I think that's really straightforward and what we'll want to think of when we think of trust, it's about doing what we say we're going to do and not doing things we say we won't do.

While that kind of sounds very simplistic, it is so foundational in building relationships, and there's research out there to show this. A University of Arizona study showed that when trust is damaged early on at the start of a relationship, the part of the brain responsible for learning will light up, but if a situation of mistrust occurs later on in the relationship once trust has already been well established, then the decision-making part of the brain will light up.

So, what this study shows is that it's easier to recover from broken trust if a relationship is built on trust in the first place, so if one of those mistakes comes later on. That isn't to say though, that it's OK to break trust once the relationship has been established. What it illustrates is how crucial trust is in beginning those relationships and founding them.

The bottom line for all of us is if our students don't trust us then we know they can't learn from us. We have to earn their trust in order to ensure learning and to promote their trust of others.

Brittany: Yeah, Becky and it comes right down to what you said, that you do the things you say you will and you don't do the things you say you won't and if you ever veer away from that for whatever reason, it's important to engage in conversation with your students about it and offer them an explanation and even an apology as to why that's had to happen.

So, the next habit that we are going to talk about is connection. This habit really is about looking for ways to relate to our students in a way that's meaningful to them and so it's about learning about our students and what they're interested in and using connection as a tool to help build those relationships, but also to help strengthen them.

So, connection helps our students to know that we care about them and the things that they care about. One simple way to connect with students is simply just to talk with them and engage in conversation. Share things about yourself and invite your students to share things about themselves as well.

Becky: I think a very powerful aspect of this is sharing things from your life, school and you know, age appropriate, of course, because it's so important and it really shows so many of the other habits that we've been talking about. It allows us to show that vulnerability and that compassion and it also provides such a great model for our students to then be able to do the same.

Brittany: Yeah, and you know I remember when I was in the classroom and teaching kindergarten that sharing things with my students was such a good way to connect with them and it was always so funny too because regardless of what I would share my students their little jaws would drop and you would see shocked faces sitting all around the carpet because to five year old's, teachers eat, sleep, work and play at school so I remember specifically there was this one time that we were discussing having a growth mindset and as a part of that conversation we were sharing things that we once couldn't do but that we could do now. So, I had shared that before, I wasn't able to ride a bike, but now I can and that it's one of my favorite activities and I'll never forget that this one little guy in my class stood up and seriously yelled "what you know how to ride a bike, me too", and

you know his mind was just so blown that I knew something that he also knew how to do and that he liked to do. Sharing these personal stories really allowed for me to make deeper connections to my students, and then that eventually led to stronger relationships and more learning.

Becky: How awesome is that, that he just got so excited, and you made that connection instantly? It's such a great example of how these habits play into those strong relationships and that we need to know all of them and embrace them before anything else can kind of take place.

The next habit that we're going to discuss is belief in students, and just as the habit suggests, this is all about having the belief that all students have the potential and can do absolutely anything they set their mind to, but it also goes a little step further than that. This habit involves communicating that belief to our students that it's just not enough for us to believe. We have to show them that we believe so eventually they will begin to believe the same things of themselves. As educators we need to be conscious about the things that we do and the things that we say, making sure that our actions match our words and vice versa and I know sometimes, when we're really starting to work on this at the beginning, and we we've heard things from other teachers about different students, it can be really difficult for your actions and words to kind of mesh up.

Brittany: Exactly and every day that we spend communicating this belief to our students through our actions and our words, we continue to build that trust with them, and we also get them to believe in themselves and you know, this is a really great example of how these habits play off one another and how they're really codependent, because here we are talking about trusting and this is one of my favorite parts of the book, *Breaking Bold*, where it suggests to do this through verbal boost paired with circumstances in which a student can succeed and that that's really the key.

Becky: So just to explain, for our audience, can you tell us all a little more about what you mean by verbal boost paired with circumstances where a student can succeed.

Brittany: Yeah, so basically, we don't want to just provide our students with social statements or verbal words of encouragement to make our belief in them visible. So, remember that the goal is for students to eventually have that same belief

that we have in them for themselves, so we can use those positive verbal boosts, but we also want to make sure that they are achievable and realistic or in a circumstance where the student is able to succeed.

For example, I like to do this with my 7-year-old and I think a lot of other parents likely do as well, but when she's feeling discouraged or she seems to be exhibiting some self-doubt when trying to complete a task, I will scaffold what she's working on or identify and provide the support she needs in order to help her be successful. So that way when I provide her with that verbal boost and she is successful, then trust is built between us because she believes me when I tell her that she can do things and that leads to her believing in herself.

You could almost think about it, like when a child is learning how to ride a bike without training wheels. You know you hold onto them in order to support them until they get going on their own, but that support you're providing and holding onto them paired with those words of encouragement helps them to gain confidence that they really needed able to ride by themselves without your help. So, keep in mind though, that this habit isn't suggesting that we never let our students be unsuccessful. It just means that we keep students from situations where they're going to be unsuccessful over and over and over again and get really discouraged.

Becky: I think that's a great example, Brittany, and it also reminds me of the episode that I did with Maggie on positive self. It's almost like the beginnings of that, it sounds like where you are beginning by you, the teacher, are exhibiting those verbal boosts and then in turn getting the students to eventually practice it themselves so they can believe in themselves and set themselves up for success. Another really great point that you made at the end was that productive struggle and we know that a lot of good learning comes from productive struggle or even failures, and that's what we want to make sure that we are doing and we want our students to experience both the successful productive struggle outcome and also learning from your mistakes.

Brittany: Yeah, that's absolutely correct. Leveraging the two and making sure that there is an appropriate balance is so crucial.

Becky: So, our final habit to discuss for this episode is clarity, and I think that this one might be one of my favorites. This habit is all about making sure that you and

your students are clear on the learning that is taking place, why it's taking place, and how they will know if they've been successful with that learning. you know.

Brittany: You know, I have to say that I think this habit reminds me a lot of the reason that we are hosting this podcast episode

Becky: Right, doesn't it? And what a great comparison that we have with those. Like we mentioned earlier in this episode, everyone talks about relationships, and everyone is quick to say how important positive teacher-student relationships are and I think all teachers know that, but what there isn't a lot of is clarity about how to how to build these relationships or the why.

So, when we teach with clarity it does so many things for our students. I want you to just think about that for a minute as students are clearer on learning that's taking place and the purpose behind it, they are less likely to be anxious, and they're more likely to become engaged and invested, and guess what, when they feel calm and engaged, we know that their brain is working in harmony and they are more likely to learn.

Brittany: It is so true and I think if we were to ask our listeners or anyone to think about a time where they felt anxious about what they were going to be learning because it wasn't clear or to think about a time where they had no clue what they were learning or what they were being taught, that they could easily think of an example and I would also bet that they would say that it was not a good feeling for them.

Becky: Right, I can think of several examples off the top of my head and I'm sure there are more that I'm not thinking about, so I completely agree. Providing clarity not only boosts our students understanding, but it helps support our relationships with them by providing that calm learning environment.

Brittany: Yes, definitely. I think that I could spend endless hours talking about these habits and how much I love this why and how that Westin and Molly have put behind building positive teacher student relationships with our students.

Becky: I definitely know what you can because it seems like you have spent so many hours talking about this in the office, so it it's so true. I agree and I'm very happy that we're able to dive into many of these wonderful habits. Like you mentioned earlier, uhm, I just want to encourage any educators or any people out

there who work with children and who genuinely care about their well-being to check out **breaking bold**.

I also want to encourage you to stay tuned to our next episode that is really seen because we have a very special guest who will be joining it.

Brittany: That's right Becky, on the next episode of the podcast, I'm so excited to say that Weston Kieschnick himself is going to be joining us to discuss building positive teacher student relationship and I cannot wait.

Becky: Alright, Brittany, I think you thought you were getting out of it, but we're going to wrap up this episode like we always do, so I want you to think about all of the things that we talked about today and think about what is 1 tip or piece of advice that you could leave with our listeners around building positive teacher student relationship so they can continue to develop as these leaders of literacy.

Brittany: You know, I did think I was getting out of this question, but everything that we have talked about today reminds me of one of my favorite quotes, I believe by Theodore Roosevelt, and that is "they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". I think the one piece of advice that I would give to our listeners or the one thing that I would remind them of is that relationships come first. They are the foundation that everything else we do with our students is built on and before our students are going to be ready to learn, they have to know how much we care. So, take the time to build those relationships and work to make those connections, because without them anything else we do might not even matter.

Becky: For links to all the resources discussed in this episode, and for additional information, please visit our website at www.wvde/leadersofliteracy. Click on podcast and click on the show notes for episode 41.

Want to learn more about being a leader of literacy? Be sure to like and subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss a single installment and the next episode, Brittany and I have the pleasure of interviewing Weston Kieschnick, where we are going to continue our conversation on building positive teacher student relationships. You won't want to miss it. Thanks for listening.