**The Power of the Positive: Four Rules for Success**

*Ron Clark*

I spent early parts of my life bungee jumping, rappelling off cliffs, streaking across football fields, and working in London as a singing and dancing waiter. All I wanted out of life was adventure, and I was willing to do anything to find it.

After I graduated from East Carolina University, I began to backpack across Europe . I went from country to country and ended up staying with a family of gypsies in Romania. While there, I ate some questionable food that turned out to be rat, developed a horrible case of food poisoning, and had to be flown to my tiny hometown in rural North Carolina.

As I lay in my hospital bed, my mother finally said it: "Ron, your father and I can't take these adventures anymore. You have got to settle down and get a job."

The school system was having a difficult time finding a replacement for a fifth grade teacher who had passed away during the school year. My mother begged me to consider the job. I was definitely not interested, but at my mother's insistence I visited the school to speak with the administration.

I remember the principal saying, "Ron, this is a very challenging class full of all different types of learning levels, so you'll have your hands full." Although I told her that I really wasn't interested in the job, she convinced me to at least meet the students.

When she opened the classroom door, the students were throwing paper, laughing, and not paying attention. The poor substitute teacher was floundering at the front of the room, her wig slightly off to one side. It the midst of all of the chaos, I noticed a little boy sitting in a desk by the door. He looked up and quietly asked, "Is you gonna be our new teacher?" I stood there for a few seconds and then was shocked to hear the words "I think so" coming out of my mouth.

The next day I began teaching, and I discovered that although I had been looking all over the world for adventure, the best experiences, the biggest challenges, and the most fulfilling rewards were all located right within the four walls of that classroom. I fell in love with teaching. It was what I was meant to do.

**My Calling**I taught at Snowden Elementary for five years, and I thought I would never leave. One summer, however, I saw a TV special about schools in Harlem that had overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of good teachers, and students who had no passion for life or learning. Moved by the comments of the students, I decided right then that I was going to move to New York to teach. I packed up my car and headed to the big city.

Throughout my early teaching experiences in both North Carolina and New York City , I was bothered with disciplinary problems and a lack of respect the students had for each other. I decided to write a list of expectations for my students dealing with how to handle themselves in all situations, how to treat me as their teacher, how to treat each other, and how to become a better student. Every year I spent time during the first week of school explaining the rules, role playing with the students, and practicing different ways they were to show respect to their parents, their fellow students, and me.

Usually by November my students were focused, polite, receptive, optimistic, and extremely supportive of each other. Time and again, other teachers asked me for my rules. I finally put them into the form of a book so that other teachers and parents could use them as well. Never in a million years did I think *The Essential 55* would be so successful.

After Oprah endorsed the book and invited me to be a guest on her show, my life turned completely upside down. I traveled across the country to talk about manners, respect, and discipline and to learn more about education in America.

I have seen, learned, and experienced more than I ever could have imagined. Dedicated parents and teachers have shared their strategies and techniques for motivating and educating kids in ways that work. All in all, after visiting many schools and classrooms, my greatest lesson is that the key to improving education in America has little to do with test scores, textbooks, bigger libraries, or technology. The key to great education lies within the individual teachers in each classroom. When a classroom teacher is enthusiastic, passionate, and prepared, anything is possible.

I have met so many teachers in rural and financially challenged areas who are doing so much with so little. They are bringing education to life and lighting a fire in the hearts and minds of their students. That is the key to great education in America. I have learned from watching these teachers—successful and struggling—that all teachers can do four things to make an impact on the lives of the students we teach—regardless of those students' ethnicity, background, age, abilities, or learning styles.

**#1. Don't underestimate the power of your words.**As teachers, one of the most important things we can do is watch the way we talk to our students. If we tell them over and over that they are discipline problems or that they aren't good in math or that they never do their homework, the students will start to adopt those characteristics as part of who they are. We must, therefore, make sure what we tell our students and what qualities we choose to highlight are positive and focus on their talents and abilities.

The first year I taught in New York City , my students had very little confidence. Every student in the fourth grade had tested below grade level in reading and math on their end-of-grade tests; many of them said they hated school. It was said that this was the worst class of students the school had seen in the past 30 years in terms of academics and discipline, and from the looks on the students' faces, even they believed it.

To get them to believe in themselves, I had to show them how much I believed in them. I pointed out all of their successes, their strengths, and their talents. It wasn't hard for me to convince them of their worth because I saw a world of potential in every student in that class, and when I told them that, they knew I meant it.

At the end of the year, that class was the highest scoring class in the entire school. Each child was on grade level in reading and math, and they even outscored the "gifted" classes in the school. We all cheered and celebrated. I will never forget the looks on their faces and how they all glowed. No matter where those kids go in life, I know they will take that moment with them. It showed those students just how talented, intelligent, and gifted they really are.

Children see themselves as reflections in our eyes. We have to lift them up, show them we believe in them, and tell them about the many wonderful talents and abilities that they possess. Placing pride within the hearts and minds of our students is half the battle.

**#2. Teach to reach all students.**We all know that no two students learn in the same way, and that we must present information in a variety of ways. I have met many wonderful teachers who were masters at reaching all of their students and making learning an exciting and fun process. I also visited classrooms where teachers sat at their desks as students worked silently on worksheets or where teachers lectured to a class of unmotivated, detached students.

Some students will still be successful in any environment, but many of our students will fall through the cracks if their day consists of lecture after lecture. They need to touch, taste, see, and smell the lesson. They have to live it themselves, to feel a part of the learning experience.

A math teacher recently shared that providing a variety of teaching strategies was good for some subjects, but not for math. "Math is pretty cut and dried, and it just requires sitting there and learning it." That cannot be farther from the truth. I have seen students measuring monkey bars and plotting slopes, doing calculus equations in chalk on tennis courts, weighing the portions on each tray in the lunch room, working in groups to develop budgets for businesses, and using all types of manipulatives to truly understand the mathematical properties they were learning.

The methods by which we present information to students are only limited by our imaginations. No matter what we are teaching, we must find ways to deliver the content in as many different ways as possible.

**#3. Create the best possible learning environment for all students.**All the successful schools I visited this year had one thing in common: When I walked into those schools, it felt like a home. Everyone was smiling. There was no tension. The principal's door was open. The principals called students by name, asking them about specific tests and how they were doing in their classes.

As we entered the classrooms, the teachers were obviously enjoying teaching and each other. The environment was positive and everyone had the same goal: helping the students achieve.

Students perform best when they are in an environment where they feel safe, supported, and loved. So much goes into the success of students beyond the curriculum, textbooks, and instruction. Students succeed when they feel proud of their school, secure in their surroundings, and confident that the teachers and faculty members care about them.

**#4. Nurture the relationship between teachers and students.**When I first started teaching in New York City, I presented my 55 rules to my students and was really working hard to develop my disciplinary system. I was drilling those rules hard and doing everything I could to get those students to behave and take school seriously, but it just wasn't working.

One day after school I was talking to the most intelligent and powerful person in every school, the secretary, and she said to me, "Mr. Clark, you are having so much trouble with those students because all you are focusing on are the rules. You have got to find a way to get those students to like you, and then they will listen to your rules."

She was exactly right. We have to create a balance. We must be firm and consistent with discipline but find a way to get our students to enjoy being in our classrooms and to like us as people.

In New York City I experimented with all kinds of ways to relate to the students. I rapped my lessons, learned to double-Dutch, stood on chairs, and did everything I could to bring my lessons to life. But I didn't back down from my discipline plan; I remained firm and consistent. Creating that balance is tricky, but once it is achieved the students not only show respect and work harder, but they begin to enjoy learning.

Speaking to our students in a positive manner, reaching all learning styles, creating the best possible environment, and developing a positive relationship with our students are wonderful ways to ensure success for all of our students. The most important thing we can do as teachers, however, is to walk into that classroom with enthusiasm in our step, passion in our hearts, and the determination to make a difference in the lives of all of our students.

The key to great education lies within all of us, and we must do whatever it takes to see all of our students succeed.