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## CHAPTER 2

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# *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

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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

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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

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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.

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***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*

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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.