
ORDINARY MAGIC

GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

ORDINARY MAGICIANS

Understanding “Ordinary Magic”

- Gregory M. Walton defines “ordinary magic” as “the ordinary experiences that help us set aside the ordinary worries of life to unleash extraordinary change.” When have you experienced ordinary magic in education, either as a teacher or as a learner? Share your story.

No Monopoly on Wisdom

- At the beginning of the book, Walton writes, “We’re not going to put a select few magicians onstage as models for the rest of us to marvel at. No one has a monopoly on the kind of wisdom needed to make change happen.” Reflect on a time you made a “small” change in your teaching approach that led to a noticeable improvement in student engagement or learning. What was this change? Why did it matter for your students?

Faith

- Perhaps the most important role an educator can play for a student is to help them see the good and competent person they can become, even when they are struggling. Urie Bronfenbrenner says, “Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.” This irrationality, Walton writes, is “a grace, a faith in possibility, treating people as they might become, even when nothing yet justifies that hope.” At “the darkest hour,” how can you tell and show students the good and accomplished people you believe they can become? How can you support them in that becoming?

Case Studies and Applications

- Walton writes, “At every juncture, wise educators can make changes to free students to succeed.” Discuss a case study from the book where a “small” act led to a significant improvement for students. How have you or can you take this example to your own teaching practice? How can practices like these be systematically incorporated into education?
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GETTING WISE WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Understanding Student Questions

- Walton says students regularly face key questions that can prevent them from realizing their full potential in school. Questions like: “Can I do it?” “Do I belong?” “Can I trust you?” and “Does it matter?” When might your students ask a question like one of these? Consider who asks what, when, in what form, and why this question is reasonable.

Learning from Tifbits

- How can you learn from tifbits (tiny facts, big theories) what question(s) your students face? When do your students have “large” reactions to “small” events? What does this tell you about what that event might mean to them? How can you learn more, for instance by asking them in a way that will help them share, a time when you can listen well?

Helping Students Answer Questions, with Grace and Dignity

- Once you understand the questions your students face, how can you help them answer these questions well, in a way that will be adaptive and authentic for them and help them succeed? For example, by sharing your own struggles in learning, and how you overcame these; by creating the right space for older students to share their challenges and growth; or by telling students directly why you hold them to high standards (because you believe in their potential to reach those standards with feedback and work). Remember, the questions students face are legitimate, so you can't just will them away: “Teach it, don't preach it.”

BELONGING AND RELATIONSHIPS

Belonging and Academic Success

- How does Walton address the issue of students worrying about their belonging in academic environments? Why is it so important for all students to know that it's normal to worry at first about whether you belong in a new school but that typically gets better with time? How do interventions like this help students feel a greater sense of belonging and succeed, even years later?

Personal Experiences

- When have you questioned your belonging in an academic or professional setting? Why did you have that feeling? Why was that reasonable for you, at that time? How can you support colleagues who might be having a similar experience?
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Turning Points

- Walton talks about “turning points” in the relationships between teachers and students—times when trust is at risk and a downward spiral could start. For example: When students receive critical feedback on their work; during school transitions; and when there are conflicts. When are the important turning points for your students? What ideas and practices can you take from *Ordinary Magic* to make these turning points go right?

Lifting the Bar

- Walton describes Lifting the Bar, the intervention with students returning to school from juvenile detention, as “the single most powerful approach I know to remedy mistrust in school.” How does Lifting the Bar work? What lessons can you take from Lifting the Bar to strengthen relationships with your students? What would it mean to take a systematic approach to building strong relationships in your school, especially when this is difficult?

A WISE SCHOOL

We Have a Dream

- Walton describes his dream to create psychologically “wise” schools. What does a wise school mean to you? What role can you play in making your school more wise? How can students and educators, parents and administrators, and researchers and policymakers work together to create psychologically wise schools? What could that do for everyone?

A Collective Responsibility for Mindsets

- Walton describes how some students are told they “should have” a growth mindset, as if it’s their fault if they don’t. How can educators take responsibility for the school environment we create for students?

A Sacred Space

- Walton writes, “I think of school as sacred. It’s what we create to help people become.” Yet as he says, “Many of us have complicated relationships with school. Some wonderful experiences, but some very painful.” How can we maintain the joy for learning that babies bring into the world at every stage of education, for every learner?
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