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Sticking With Students: Responding Effectively to Incorrect Answers

By **Brooke McCaffrey**

"Who can tell me the name of the spider's anatomy that it uses to spin a web?"

A number of hands shot up. "Sarah? Can you tell me?"

"The spider's abdomen?"

"Oh. Very close, but that's not quite right. Who can tell me the correct name?"

More hands shot up. Sarah slouched visibly. Another student gave the right answer ("the spinnerette"), but it did not seem as if Sarah even heard it.

This scene is taken from my visit to a veteran teacher's 1st grade classroom. It represents interactions I have seen many times while observing teachers, as well as in my own teaching: A teacher poses a question, the student offers an incorrect answer, and the teacher moves on to another student to provide the correct answer.

I recently read the book *The Skillful Teacher* by Jonathan Saphier, Mary Ann Haley-Speca, and Robert Gower, in which the authors discuss the concept of "sticking with a student." With this method, instead of the typical response of moving on, the teacher keeps his or her attention and focus with the student who provided the incorrect answer and uses a variety of strategies to help that student reach the right answer. For instance, the teacher might validate what is right or good about an incorrect answer and then offer the student a cue.

In the above example with Sarah, here's a way that the teacher might have responded in order to stick with her:

"Wow, Sarah, that's excellent thinking. The body part that the spider uses to spin webs is located in the spider's abdomen, so you were very close. However, the answer was not quite right. It's a long word and it starts with /sp/. Would you like to try again?"

Other ways of sticking with a student, according to the authors, include restating the question and giving additional think time before asking the student to try again.

A Positive Message

After reading about this idea of sticking with a student, I began incorporating the authors' strategies into my own practice. When I tuned into my internal reaction when a student gave an incorrect answer, I noticed that it caused a slight feeling of anxiety in me. It can be an uncomfortable moment for a teacher

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when a student demonstrates confusion, and the natural inclination is to diminish that discomfort for both the teacher and the student. Moving on to another student makes an awkward moment pass quickly and allows the lesson to move along.

However, as I began observing teachers and paying attention to the body language of students whose teachers did not stick with them, I began to realize the damaging effects of moving along. Conversely, I saw that when a teacher sticks with a student, the student receives a positive message: "I believe in you. I will not give up on you. I have high expectations for you."

In my own teaching, however, I found that when I stuck with a student, I had to pay attention to my body language, tone of voice, and rate of speech. If I conveyed any sort of urgency or frustration, sticking with a student began to feel more like putting a student in the hot seat. It became a high-pressure interaction, particularly when a student legitimately did not know the answer, regardless of the amount of cueing I provided.

In a successful sticking-with-a-student session, I first praised the student's thinking in an excited tone, and then presented my cueing—and eye contact—in a way that addressed all students (i.e., "Let's all think a little more about that"). I also worked hard to keep my expression and body language relaxed so that the student did not feel any tension. Sometimes, especially with math problems, I took a moment to do a quick review of the steps a student could take to arrive at the correct answer, as it was likely that other students were experiencing the same kind of confusion.



Changing the Classroom Energy

I realized there were also steps that I could take preemptively to help my students avoid these wrong-answer moments entirely. Providing wait time before calling on anyone was one effective strategy, particularly for my students who were English-language learners. To ensure I provided enough wait time, I counted to seven in my head, and observed how many hands went up.

I also found that having students take a moment to do a "turn and talk" with a partner before I called on anyone gave them time to process the question and practice their responses. A turn-and-talk session also gave me an opportunity to listen in on the responses of multiple children, as opposed to just the one child I called on. Giving students individual whiteboards to hold up also took the pressure off of them to produce verbal responses.

When all else failed I had to know when to give the student—and the rest of the class—the correct answer. And, again, when I supplied the correct answer I made sure to do it with a facial expression and tone of voice that did not inadvertently convey any sort of frustration or displeasure. In some instances I would have everyone repeat the answer with me, and then make mental notes for reteaching. Incorrect answers can provide helpful feedback on how well a lesson has been absorbed by the class, as more than one student will tend to make the same mistake.

In sticking with students, I found I changed the energy in my classroom. The quiet, shy students began taking more risks because it was no longer scary to supply a wrong answer. Wrong answers became opportunities for growth for all of us. I even began to occasionally make purposeful mistakes in my

teaching, only to have my students gently correct me (with many giggles). "See?" I would say, "Even teachers make mistakes. It's how we learn and get better at things."

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