INTRODUCTION

Amelia is in her fifth year of teaching—and probably her last. She became a teacher because she dreamed of being the kind of teacher she had growing up; someone who cared about her and showed her a new world of possibilities through education. She hoped to change the world by inspiring the next generation to envision a bright tomorrow and find tangible support to accomplish their dreams. What better way to spend her working hours than making the world a better place?

But in the last few years, Amelia has been disheartened and dismayed. She's trying to do everything she's supposed to do—everything she learned about in books like *Teach Like a Champion*, the tips she learns on Instagram, and at her school district's in-service professional development (PD) days. She posts her learning outcomes and success criteria, has a warm-up ready before class so that students are engaged the moment they walk in the door, and gathers exit tickets from her students on their way out at the end of class. She tries making her lessons relevant and engaging, and she works hard to incorporate technology—but she has so little time for actual teaching.

Most of her time is spent trying to make sure every student has what they need, is prepared for the day, can follow instructions, and knows what to do next.

Her sixth graders have been in and out of the school building for the past two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The last time they were consistently in school, they were third graders! This gap, or interruption, in their schooling is impacting their ability to focus and pay attention in her class, and it will certainly influence their academic career for years to come.

Amelia spends more time helping them re-learn how to "do" school than she does teaching the social studies curriculum she was hired for. She is fatigued from spending a significant amount of time managing student relationships and interactions, and at times, attempting unsuccessfully to manage chaos.

In the past two years, most of her students grew accustomed to sitting passively on Zoom (if they joined at all) and doing low-level worksheets at home. Now they struggle to engage in more meaningful learning experiences, like high-quality dialogue or collaborative projects—if she can even get to her daily lesson plan. Amelia can see her students disengaging—and feels herself disengaging, too.

Amelia knows the gap between where her students are today and where they should be will continue to widen. She stays late every day to offer her students opportunities to make up work and tutor individual students who need direct support. At the end of every day, she comes home from work feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and increasingly discouraged about her impact on her students' lives.

This is not what she imagined teaching would be like and she struggles with a feeling of betrayal. Teaching the next generation was her dream—more than a career; it was her calling. But now she keeps thinking that it's not too late to change careers and apply for her degree somewhere else. Many of her friends enjoy setting their own schedules, working remotely, and of course, earning a much higher salary. In the age of the Great Resignation,[1] why not make a shift out of teaching? ●

I imagine you know a teacher like Amelia. You might even *be* Amelia. I have been there, and it is tough. Every day, I meet teachers like Amelia and observe classrooms just like hers—increasingly since COVID-19. What I have discovered in the last two decades of doing this work is that oftentimes Amelia's problem has nothing to do with her number of years in education, her ability to deliver or teach the content or standards, her classroom management skills, or even the pandemic.

What is plaguing Amelia's students is that they are suffering from **executive dysfunction**—a problem that has existed long before COVID-19, although it's been worsened in the last few years—and it's leading to an epidemic of disengagement. **Executive functioning skills** are associated with a person's ability to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully. Every teacher I have asked, as we return to post-pandemic classrooms, has reported a significant reduction or loss in their students' ability in these areas. Instead, they share stories just like Amelia's, a surge of disinterest, lack of engagement, and underachievement.

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[1]The Great Resignation, also referred to as the Big Walkout, the Big Quit, and the Great Reshuffle, occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic when workers voluntarily resigned from their jobs.

If you are like me, you got into teaching because you wanted to change the world. For me, life is simply too short to spend in pursuit of anything that does not at least attempt to leave the world in a better way than when I found it. I like how Derek Sivers explains it in his book *Anything You Want*: "Don't be on your deathbed someday, having squandered your one chance at life, full of regrets because you pursued little distractions instead of big dreams" (Sivers, 2015).

There are many ways to make a positive impact on the world, but my plan was to do so by influencing and changing the lives of individual students. I wanted to make those small imprints on young lives that become inflection points, most of which we only notice when we look back on our lived experiences. We have all experienced these moments crafted knowingly, or unknowingly, by caring teachers—that was what I wanted to do! That was my big dream!

Like you, I will never forget my first-day teaching. I was ready, or so I thought. I stood at the door welcoming my students into the classroom. The bell rang, I walked into the room, closed the door behind me, and it was then that I realized I had no idea how to "do" teaching. I knew my content and curriculum, of course, but how was I actually supposed to "teach" it to my students? This was a frightening moment, one that I will never forget.

What I learned in the coming weeks, months, subsequent school years, and now after close to two decades of teaching, as well as visiting classrooms around the country and internationally, is that many students, like me that first day, don't know how to "do" school either. One of the major culprits is that most students, through no fault of their own, lack the basic skills and habits that are the hallmarks of effective learners. Those seemingly elusive factors that allow students to dive headfirst into their education with both a sense of agency and dexterity—what researchers call executive functioning skills.

A second observation I have made is that when teachers lack these skills and habits, the problems are amplified. In other words, when a teacher's lessons consistently lack structure or routine, or a teacher is disorganized, it serves to exacerbate the challenges with executive functioning that students are already facing.

The truth is that historically we have left the development of these executive functioning skills up to chance, as if students will simply pick them up as they make their way through life. But just as we would never leave learning to read or do math up to chance, we can no longer afford to leave the development of these skills and habits up to chance.

Lost in the Wilderness

Imagine guiding your students' education by using a compass to navigate to a destination. We would, of course, equip students with the resources, materials, and devices they need for a successful journey—things like a map, compass, ruler, a pencil to triangulate, and anything else they would need to navigate to their destination. Then, together, we would pick a destination (educational success) and we would set out together on their trek.

In the modern world, one might suggest plugging a destination into GPS, or a navigation app, and simply following the directions to the destination. However, for many of our students, in particular, those who have historically struggled and students faced with over two years of interrupted learning—in other words, *all* students—their experience is like being far out in the wilderness. So far out that there is no GPS, no signal to rely on. Sure, we have equipped them with these resources and devices, and dare I say at times over equipped them, but if they have no idea how to utilize these resources, they are less likely to successfully navigate to their destination.

What good does a compass do if you have not had practice with it before you find yourself in a life-or-death situation? It is worth pointing out that a compass, in and of itself, is just a tool. It will not navigate a person to a destination; it simply points to magnetic north. Similarly, we can make the mistake of thinking that a particular resource or device will somehow translate into learning, when, in fact, technology should be seen as just another tool in a teacher's toolkit. Apps are designed to do things for us—but executive functions must be practiced if kids are going to hone them.

The same is true for most students today. With the best of intentions in mind, we supply students with the resources, materials, and devices we have determined are best to help them

succeed. But if students don't know how to wield them in specific situations, it just ends up being more "stuff" they have to carry on their journey.

Speaking from my own journey through K-12, this is an isolating experience for students. Students have all this "stuff," but have no idea how to jump into their education with agency and dexterity. In other words, they lack the executive functioning skills that are required to step in with confidence.

As a student, I lived this day in and day out in the classrooms of my personal K-12 journey. I was fortunate enough to get through school successfully and graduate from high school, largely as a result of my privilege and lived experiences. But if I had to sum up my K-12 experience, I often felt like my education was happening all around me. I was there, in the classroom, but I was passive, not active. This was not the result of disinterest; it was that I had no idea how to step into the process. What I remember clearly is that many of my peers seemed to know how to jump in, but I had no idea.

On occasion, I would find myself in a situation in a class where I felt like I was in control—moments when I knew exactly what to do to be successful. I remember these instances with so much clarity because they felt so good.

I felt strong. I felt safer. I liked being in class and at school. I had agency.

But most days, my experience as a student was far more often that of a passive object, rather than an active subject. To summarize Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), subjects denote those who know and act, while objects are known and acted upon. Subjects have agency; objects do not.

Let's be clear, this lack of engagement hurts. My friend and fellow teacher, Dave Stuart, once told me that students experience disengagement as pain—*physical pain*. I agree. We humans experience disengagement as pain. There is no one who wants to live life disengaged.

But what are students to do? What are teachers to do? How can we rewrite this narrative? We have equipped students with the resources, devices, and means of engaging in their learning, but if they lack executive functioning skills, they are less likely to experience success.

Carol Dweck said it best: "Simply raising standards in our schools, without giving students the means of reaching them, is a recipe for disaster. It just pushes the poorly prepared or poorly motivated students into failure and out of school" (Dweck, 2006). Making a point to help students develop these skills and habits is one promising way to increase student engagement and success.

Navigating With Executive Functioning Skills

What *all* students benefit from is the daily opportunity to see executive functioning skills modeled for them and to get daily practice employing them in a no-stakes fashion in a safe learning environment.

School is a better experience for students when they have the sense of agency that comes with honed executive functioning skills. This is because they are actively engaged in the process of learning, as opposed to spending their mental calories trying to navigate the school day or class period.

Take, for example, the experience my wife has while cooking compared to mine. She is a great cook, true, but she still, at times, follows a recipe. If there are directions, shouldn't I be able to replicate the dish? Sure, and sometimes I do, but my *experience* is quite different. My wife knows the *stuff* the recipes don't explain. She knows where everything is in the kitchen, which measuring cups are best for the ingredients you are measuring, what "medium" heat actually looks like on our gas stovetop, and the list goes on and on. She can jump right into the process because she has all the skills and knowledge to do so.

I, on the other hand, spend more time and energy navigating my way *through* the recipe than I do in some chef flow-state. Where is the cumin? Is that a teaspoon or a tablespoon? Medium heat – check. Then, I turn to get my next step from the recipe and overheat the pan and burn the garlic. By the time I am finished preparing the meal, if I even get there (many times I tap out and let her takeover), I am exhausted and I am

usually NOT having fun, not to mention the meal is often subpar, at best. Sorry, kids.

The same is true for students experiencing school. Those equipped with the skills and habits that set them up for success dive right in and appear to do so with little effort. They are engaged and having fun! For those who lack that certainty, the experience is much more like my cooking. These students extend a significant amount of cognitive energy simply getting through the school day, and they are more discouraged by the outcomes.

So, what should we do?

Schools that realize executive functioning is a need, attempt to outright *teach* these skills to their students. But executive functions should **not actually be taught** in a traditional, or didactic sense. Rather, they are **best learned** when they are explicitly modeled and practiced in context.

This is why most curricula designed to teach executive functioning skills don't work and fail to engage students. These types of curricula are typically rolled out in advisory or support classes and oftentimes are perceived, by students, as not "real" school. So, from the start, engagement is low.

For many students, it would be far less engaging to receive a lesson on the importance of goal setting, for example, than to practice **actually** setting personal academic goals within the context of their grade level or subject matter. Real-life relevance and immediate application are keys to making executive functions "stick" for students. The goals they set for themselves in math, for example, are likely to be different from their goals in English or History or Art or Physical Education (PE) (the same holds true for grade levels).

When it comes to learning executive functions, *context matters*.

The Two Challenges With Teaching Executive Functions

There are typically two challenges for teachers when it comes to teaching executive functions. The first, and most immediate, is

time. Have you ever met a teacher scheduling a meeting with their principal to ask for extra duties or responsibilities? Can you picture a teacher walking around school looking for something else to do? No way! Most teachers do whatever they can to avoid anything extra, not because they don't care or don't want to contribute, but because they don't have enough time in the school day and the school year to teach the content standards or objectives of their class(es) in the first place.

If teachers don't have enough time to begin with, when are they going to carve out the time to teach the skills and habits that will actually help students be *more* successful?

The second challenge has to do with a teacher's **zone of genius**. Teachers are hired to teach a specific grade level, student population, or subject area. That is their sweet spot.

What most teachers are not experts in is teaching executive functions. That is not most teachers' zone of genius. In fact, students are not the only individuals who struggle with executive functions—many teachers do, too!

Even if a teacher recognizes that *all* students are more successful when they hone executive functions, they often lack the time and the expertise to successfully equip students with these skills.

Thankfully, the solution to these challenges is not found in somehow uncovering more school or class time, or even using the time we have more efficiently or differently. The most effective way for teachers to teach executive functioning skills is by *modeling* and giving students *practice employing them* by virtue of participating in a predictable daily **routine**.

Why Predictable Learning Routines?

Students expend less cognitive energy in learning environments with clear routines, expectations, and agreements (Oakley et al., 2021). Doug Lemov, in *Teach Like a Champion*, posits correctly that one unmistakable driver of students' achievement is carefully built and practiced routines (Lemov, 2014). *For most* students, in particular in post-COVID-19 classrooms—simply navigating the school day can be exhausting.

This was driven home for me years ago when I attended a professional learning opportunity for teachers, hosted by the world language teachers in our district. We gathered at the district office in a sterile conference room and my colleagues who were leading the session had it decorated with *papel picado*. At the time, I had seen this Mexican folk art, which I likened to a string of Tibetan or Buddhist prayer flags, but I knew nothing about it, let alone how to make it.

When our session began, like any other PD, our trainers introduced themselves and explained the aim of the workshop...but they did so entirely in Spanish. I grew up in a half-time Portuguese-speaking home (on my mom's side, my ancestors immigrated from the Azores, and my mom is the firstborn in the US), but I was not fluent. I strained to pick a word or two here and there as my colleagues continued but mostly, I watched what they were doing with their hands, but I was lost. They got to the point in the session when it was our time to create our own *papel picado*. One of the teachers leading the session held one of the flags in her hands and kept motioning to us in Spanish, but none of the English-speaking teachers in the room knew what to do.

Their point was crystal clear and poignant! Our student population was largely Spanish-speaking kids who had migrated from Mexico and other countries in Central America. Many of them were doing their best to learn the English language while keeping up in their content-area courses as well. Every single day I had students who experienced my class just as I had experienced this workshop. Now, exacerbate that issue by five to as many as 10 different classes each day, all with different expectations, routines (if any), and content. It is overwhelming, to say the least, and that is why students are exhausted by the end of the school day. They are spending a significant number of mental calories just trying to navigate the school day, what I call the Learning Labyrinth. ●

The same is true for many students, not just our multilingual learners.[2] Students with learning differences, for example, may struggle to keep up in class. Data are clear that students making the transition from elementary school to middle (Evans, 2018) and middle school to high school (Rosenkranz et al., 2014) struggle to keep up in the new learning environment. The

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[2]I will be using the term multilingual learners to refer to any student who is acquiring a second language in school. While the term used to describe students in this situation is traditionally "English Learner," (and that term still has a place federally in order to ensure certain students receive testing and support services) I want to acknowledge the recent critique of this term being deficit-based since it implies that these students are "lacking" English when they are actually acquiring a second language to their repertoire.

learning interruptions over the last two years have created new challenges and widened existing gaps that we can only address by helping our students hone their executive functions.

That is why a predictable learning routine, ideally one that is shared in common from classroom to classroom across school systems, can be a game changer for these students. If we can implement a consistent and dependable routine, we liberate this cognitive energy for students to use to focus on what they are trying to learn. Consistent practice with a skill, by virtue of a predictable routine, allows it to transfer to a student's subconscious, creating more bandwidth to focus on learning (Sweller, 1988).

Let's take this one step further, because the opposite is also true. When expectations and routines are inconsistent or ambiguous, teachers increase the **cognitive load** on students, which ultimately interferes with or inhibits their learning. And this is regrettably more often the case in classrooms. For students already struggling with executive dysfunction, this problem is magnified.

I recall a visit to a school in Michigan a few years ago. I was invited to the school to speak to the faculty for the day about strategies for developing executive functioning skills. During our lunch break, a disgruntled teacher approached me complaining that he had purchased binders for his students, but that *they don't work!* He lamented that his students were still disorganized.

I asked if he would take me to his classroom so I could see his set-up. When we arrived at his classroom, he walked over to a cupboard beneath his whiteboard and opened it to reveal a bunch of binders haphazardly thrown in. Papers were falling out; some binders were not even closed—it was a mess. When I asked him about it, he shared that his students just didn't care about being organized—while he pointed at the mess.

I asked him, "Have you shown students how to set-up or organize their binders? Was there a class example for them to review? Was there time to re-organize their binders periodically throughout the school year?" Sadly, he confirmed that there wasn't. This teacher, with the best of intentions in mind, had purchased binders for his students and hoped that by simply receiving a free binder, students would magically know how to get and stay organized. There was no guidance, modeling, or structure to the new tool they had received. Therefore, the students had no idea what the expectations were, and since they clearly had not practiced the skill of organization, this new tool did very little for them. ●

Remember our compass analogy from earlier. Just equipping students with resources and tools without giving them the

opportunity to learn how to use them is pointless; we have to model for them how to use the tools.

I refer to these as "gray areas" in our lessons or teaching practice. In these gray areas, students, especially those with weak executive functions, get lost. For clarity's sake, our charge is to paint the gray areas black and white.

Three Keys to Teaching Executive Functions

Like Amelia, you may be wondering how to better help your students learn executive functioning skills—and maybe save your sanity (and your career) in the process. In the chapters ahead, we are going to unpack the three keys to teaching executive functioning skills:

1. Clarity

2. Modeling

3. Routine

My goal in this book is to teach you how to bring about clarity by establishing a predictable daily learning routine that explicitly models executive functioning skills. With these three keys, teachers will be able to help students unlock and improve their executive functioning skills and as a result watch as students dive into the content in new and more profound ways.

We'll start in Chapter 1 by unpacking the core problems of disengagement and executive dysfunction. The costs of these problems are disastrous for students, and teachers suffer as a result. Throwing money at the problem with Chromebooks and other shiny new "tools" usually doesn't help to solve it, unless specific assistive technologies are needed. The answer is in explicitly creating safe and predictable learning routines that give students daily practice with executive functions—the topic of Chapter 2. Chapters 3–8 will cover each executive functioning skill in-depth.

You can do this! I promise. Not only is it possible; it is quite easy and fun. You will find that your students are more successful, you feel better, and that you actually have more time to do what you got into this in the first place to do: teach!