



The seven superpowers of successful students

Diana Graur

studies character-building in the English classroom.

I grew up thinking that when it comes to being good at something, you either have it or you don't. It's a belief I held on to all through my childhood and well into my teens, with some undue support from teachers and even family members who, more or less openly, entertained the same ideas.

You see, it wasn't that I didn't study maths, chemistry or physics enough, or challenge myself to see how these subjects could fit into and enrich my life. It was, apparently, a lack of talent. I hadn't been endowed with a gift for the sciences. Fortunately, the arts and humanities gods had been kinder. I was repeatedly told I was good at languages, music and painting, and that was what I had to make the most of. I'd never be one of the chosen few to shine in STEM subjects. Sadly, I just didn't have it.

Fast forward to the present day. The teaching profession and, well, life have taught me that school subjects were never meant to be treated as separate

entities, that all information builds on itself, and that labelling someone as good or bad at something is, at best, inefficient and, at worst, completely crippling. And with that realisation began my work of self-healing.

Rediscovering learning through CLIL

Three years into my teaching career I started my master's in TESOL and materials development at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. I explored CLIL in my dissertation, more specifically, how secondary students could be taught about nutrition through English. This meant working with concepts I had once grappled with in school, like equations, pie charts and graphs.

I learnt a lot from my exploration of CLIL, not only about the happy marriage that could exist between English and other subjects, but about myself as a lifelong learner who is excited about everything and anything knowledge related, finally

free from self-imposed limitations. When I returned to teaching, I began to experiment with holistic teaching, combining what I now knew about content and language integration with social-emotional strategies.

SEL in practice

The school I currently work for, Shakespeare School Bucharest, has a long history of promoting social and emotional learning (SEL), an approach I find essential for building rapport and strong relationships with Young Learners and teens, the age groups I have taught most. In recent years, we've integrated mindfulness moments into our lessons, helping children name and cope with big emotions through breathing and visualisation techniques. We've also talked about emotional intelligence tools, referencing *The 5 Love Languages of Children* (Chapman & Campbell, 2012).

Although generally well received by students, teachers and parents, there

was one important aspect where our approach fell short: structure and organisation. A SEL curriculum felt necessary to bring everything together – past, present and future research and ideas we wanted to integrate into our teaching practice.

The birth of the seven superpowers

This is still a work in progress, but my inspiration came from the character education initiative pioneered by the founder of Positive Psychology, Dr Martin Seligman, and psychologist Angela Duckworth. This framework forms the backbone of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a network of US charter schools that serves underserved communities. It supports students in achieving success in and beyond school by fostering seven character strengths: self-control; zest; grit; optimism; social intelligence; gratitude; and curiosity.

Prompted by their research, I embarked on a one-year journey with my secondary students, exploring how I could help them, and myself, develop what I coined the ‘7 Superpowers for Success’ in the classroom and beyond. My 14-year-olds were preparing for major national exams while juggling school, extracurriculars and their social lives. I wanted them to get more than English out of our time together. I wanted them to feel ready to take on the world.

What started as a long shot, getting teens excited about character education, gradually turned into something we all looked forward to. Each superpower was introduced gradually and revisited throughout the year in a spiral approach, applied to both our coursebook content and the real-life challenges students brought to class.

Grit

We began with ‘Grit’. I was especially keen to explore this one, as I believed tapping into students’ passion and perseverance would do wonders both personally and academically. We started with *The Grit Workbook for Kids* (2020), including a quiz that showed most of us scored around three out of five. That meant room to grow.



Angela Duckworth’s ‘Hard Thing Rule’ inspired us to pick something challenging and stick with it until a natural end point, like the end of the school year. Students discussed things they wanted to quit – extra language classes, piano practice and football training. In groups, they explored reasons to give up versus reasons to persevere. They used a boardgame template to present their findings and spark conversations with classmates.

Curiosity

Next came ‘Curiosity’. This is not something traditionally cultivated in schools where knowledge is often poured into learners like water into empty bowls. I started using KWL charts more often, followed by visible thinking tools like See-Think-Wonder and The Five Whys (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011). Students were encouraged to observe, hypothesise and dig deeper. We explored real-world problems such as bullying and theft, and students began to ask better questions, not just give the ‘right’ answers.

Zest

‘Zest’ was trickier. Enthusiasm is a difficult thing to manufacture, especially, with teenagers. So we worked

backwards. Students reflected on the most memorable learning experiences they had, and we broke them down: curiosity and competition; fun and humour; trending topics; personal interests; surprise; and hands-on discovery. To this, I added choice. Even if we can’t always choose what we learn, we can choose how we engage with it and what we bring to the learning space.

We introduced student-created quizzes and used six-word stories to reflect on readings, grammar points or even the course as a whole. It was challenging, but also fun, and students responded with real energy.

Self-control

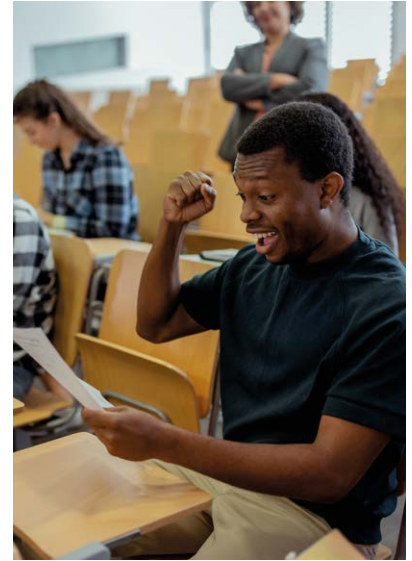
For ‘Self-control’, I turned to *The Zones of Regulation* (Kuypers, 2011), which I adapted for both Young Learners and teens. With younger students, we used visuals and characters from the film *Inside Out* to explore emotional states. For older learners, *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* (Buron & Curtis, 2021) helped us talk about feelings, energy and voice volume in a more age-appropriate way. We also explored expressions like ‘over the moon’ or ‘feeling blue’ as entry points into emotional awareness through language.

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Plot Twist: A Reframing Game



- **How:** Challenge students to reframe tough situations by asking positive “What if...?” questions and flipping their perspective.
- **Why it works:** Helps students shift from negative thinking to possibility-focused thinking - boosts optimism, resilience, and creative problem-solving.
- **Tip:** Have students come up with their own tricky situations.



For more useful images go to Online Resources https://pavilionelt.com/wp-content/uploads/MET34.5_Online-Resources_SevenSuperpowers_Graur2.pdf

Gratitude

‘Gratitude’ came next, just before winter break. It was a natural time to reflect on what we were thankful for. Students wrote letters to their future selves, which I scheduled to email them the following Christmas. Others created gratitude cards for their parents. Inspired by *Gratitude Works* (Emmons, 2013), we also designed a virtual gratitude garden on Padlet. Students were invited to sit silently for two minutes, notice any negative thoughts, and then pull them like weeds. In their place, they planted thoughts of gratitude illustrated with images of flowers. Later, we tried a similar activity with a snapshot gallery using real-life or online photos.

Optimism

The new year felt like a perfect time to focus on ‘Optimism’. Students created visual goal boards, then broke goals into steps: what, how and when. In groups, they explored what might go wrong and how to stay on track. We also practised reframing challenging situations using positive ‘What if’ questions. Instead of ‘what if I fail?’ students started asking: ‘What if this is the start of something great?’

Social intelligence

Last, but definitely not least, we explored ‘Social intelligence’, a superpower as eye-opening for me as it was for my students. We created a ‘Better Conversations Toolkit’ with strategies like ‘End with kindness’ and ‘Yes, and . . .’ (Abrahams 2023)

to promote collaboration and respect without compromising wellbeing.

I also introduced ‘Empathise, Share, Collaborate’ (ESC) (Ablon, 2018), a tool I use often. Inspired by his mantra ‘be curious, not furious’, we challenged the idea that misbehaviour is a choice. Instead, we practised collaborative problem solving: listening to student concerns; reflecting them back; and working together to find solutions that meet everyone’s needs.

A final thought and a question

This journey has been transformative – for my students and for myself. What began as an attempt to enrich English lessons has turned into something far more valuable: the chance to build lifelong skills and confidence through meaningful character development.

So here’s my question to fellow educators:

What ‘superpowers’ are you helping your students develop? And what limiting beliefs might still be holding them – or you – back?

Let’s keep learning. Let’s keep growing. And let’s help our students do the same – not just for school, but for life.

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