

“Help! I don’t understand!” About twenty years ago, a young special education teacher walked into his mentor teacher’s room to begin student teaching. The room was at the end of the dimly lit hall and the smell of convenience store coffee filled the air. A chalkboard full of math problems was scribbled on a dusty green board and a crooked sign hung on the wall screaming “I’d rather be golfing!” Behind the cluttered desk sat the mentor special educator; he had a white mustache that was stained with whatever flavor he chose to savor. The old teacher brought his head up from the computer screen and peered at the young college student. “Are you sure you are ready for this?” he snarled through his burly mustache, uncovering a grin of imperfect teeth. The aspiring educator responded, “I don’t even know if I am in the right classroom!” The walrus-like man let out a deep-bellied laugh and barked, “Grab a chair!”

Soon, Mr. Kirk started to unveil his “philosophy” of how the educational system worked. He listed off some acronyms that he found little to no use for and then talked about what he thought worked and what he thought was a big waste of time. The mentee listened intently and even started to write down notes. Mr. Kirk stopped mid-sentence and told the teacher, “You don’t need to write this down!” With fear of forgetting sage wisdom and sound protocol, the young teacher lowered the pen and closed the notebook begrudgingly. Mr. Kirk then asked, “Did you notice the sign above the door before you walked in?” The teacher responded hesitantly, “I think it said, “Mr. Kirk?” Mr. Kirk peered into the young educator’s eyes and said, “Good guess!” He then said, “the sign reads, ‘Help’” and then explained that you can add whatever punctuation you want at the end of it—be it a period, an exclamation point, or for that matter, a question mark.

Then the moment of true enlightenment came as Mr. Kirk began to unveil the magic behind his approach to teaching and learning. He pointed at a student in the room and asked the young teacher, “Do you know that student?” “No,” the young teacher replied. Mr. Kirk then explained, “His father took his life and his mother is an addict, and guess what else... He isn’t very good at math!” As loose as some of Mr. Kirk’s professional demeanor could seem, his grip on reality was air-tight. Mr. Kirk then summed up the lesson for the student teacher: “Every student in this classroom needs help and it is my job to help them.”

The time spent with Mr. Kirk became a turning point in the young educator’s career and life. His focus had now shifted directly to the students. Are we helping them stay safe physically and emotionally? Are we helping them to understand rules and natural consequences? Are we helping them to understand by modeling what we expect? Are we helping them to critically think? Are we helping them to navigate a tricky life situation and maintain learning at the same time? Are we helping them move one credit closer to graduation?

In school, we learn many valuable lessons in content areas. For example, we learn that the word “help” can be defined in different ways. It can be used as a verb: “The teacher helped the student find her missing ipad.” It can be used as a noun: “The student asked for help on her homework.” The word “help” can even be used with exclamation as an appeal for urgent assistance: “Help! I don’t understand!” However, beyond this valuable grammatical content lies an even more valuable life lesson that each student and aspiring teacher must learn: Everyone needs help to become the interdependent lifelong learner that schools, families, and societies must have to survive. Caring teachers, administrators and staff are the mentors and helpers who must build the bridges of understanding for our students to receive that help. As I learned

twenty years ago in a dimly lit classroom: "Do the best you can to help them, the best you know how."