

# The Will to Learn

*To the Teacher*  
*who loves all children:*  
*now; then; always.*

# The Will to Learn

## Cultivating Student Motivation Without Losing Your Own

Dave Stuart Jr.



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“How do I get there?” is a much easier transaction than “You must go.”

—Seth Godin

We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere; [we] notice it . . . only when it becomes scarce or polluted.

—Annette Baier

Every day is a learning day.

—Bill Russell

There are only two ways to influence human behavior: you can manipulate it or you can inspire it.

—Simon Sinek





## Prologue

---

*Dear colleague,*

*What you hold in your hand is a book about love.* This isn't much of a claim; after all, all good books on teaching come down to studies on love. Love—the active, earnest, and intelligent pursuit of our neighbors' good. Is this not what we spend our labors on each day in our classrooms with our students?

Schools exist for a single purpose: to promote the long-term flourishing of young people. *Specifically*, we do this by teaching them to master disciplines<sup>1</sup> that they likely wouldn't otherwise. The people who do the work of the school—the teachers, the paraprofessionals, the administrators, those who maintain the building, those who serve the food—help human beings become human. Not just some human beings, but every one of them who walks in the door.

In other words, schools are institutions of love—of this earnest seeking and serving of the fullness and wholeness of another. The trouble, of course, is that most of our schools have lost track of this purpose. Most of us still sense its presence, but it's obscured as if by fog. We've lost our grip on what an education *is*. Thankfully, this can change.

\* \* \*

As a university student in Germany in the 1930s, Austrian-born Peter Drucker witnessed the rise of Nazism. He watched as

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<sup>1</sup>Whenever I say *disciplines* in this book, I mean everything taught in our secondary schools. There are the classic academic disciplines—things such as math and literature and science and social studies. There are the artistic disciplines—things such as painting and drawing and sculpture and theater and music. And there are the “practical” disciplines—things such as home technologies and personal finance and computer applications and construction. In short, we all teach disciplines—ways of seeing, ways of being in the world—and they are all *good, weighty, and important*.

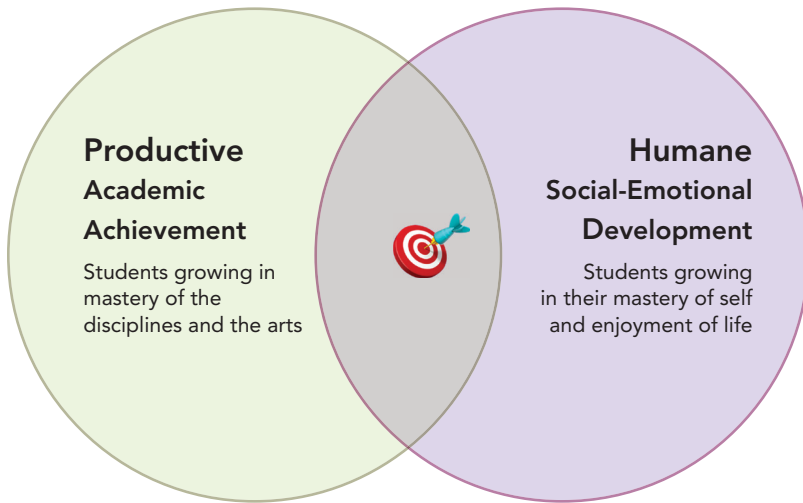
institutions—schools, hospitals, government bureaus, churches—became simultaneously *more* productive and *less* humane. The Nazi machine produced one of the most efficiently mobilized populations the world had ever seen—the productivity of its institutions was unmatched—and yet at its root humanity went missing. Nazism transformed institutions into hideous creatures bent on results and power.

So Drucker, who became one of the most influential management thinkers of the twentieth century, was obsessed his entire life with a simple, deep, beautiful question: How do we help institutions become both more productive *and* more humane? This, to me, is the fundamental question that almost no American schools are asking. We see instead two separate emphases.

On the one hand, we want schools to be more productive. Much talk and energy are spent on student achievement, standardized assessment, teacher evaluation, and the science of learning. On the other hand, we want schools to be more humane. Much talk and energy are spent on social-emotional learning, whole-child approaches, teacher work-life balance, self-care, and mental health.

But you *can't* pick just one or the other. To make a school, you must pursue both. The wise practitioner operates in that tiny slice at the center of the productive-humane diagram. In this book I'll share a theory for student motivation that enables our schools to strike this balance.

## Striking Drucker's Balance: An Imperative for Our Schools



\* \* \*

I don't think we have a very good *internal* picture of what demotivation in a student is like. We've got a great *external* picture of it—head laid on arms on the desk; dull, affectless eyes; broken record renditions of “I forgot” and “Do we haaaaaaaave to do this?” We know apathy well. And yet we're remarkably numb to how apathy *feels* in the heart of a human being.

Something that helps this, rather quickly, is the following exercise. Picture how you feel during a terrible professional development meeting day. I'm talking *terrible*, as in

- the presenter is incompetent or callous;
- the topic is detached from your work as a teacher;
- it's unclear how to even work toward or succeed at what the presenter is saying; and
- the presenter is focused on kinds of work that you are decidedly *not* a part of.

You can picture that, right? We've all experienced this kind of thing. So now imagine doing that *two* days in a row. Now imagine it three days. Five days. Ten working days. In a row. Of that kind of experience. This is what many of our secondary students experience *every day of the school year*. One hundred and eighty repeats. Day after day.

*In short, student demotivation is experienced as pain.* It exerts a pressure on the soul akin to the force found at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

\* \* \*

And students aren't the only ones hurting from this, are they? *Student demotivation is one of the greatest drains on a teacher's spirit.* It's *hard* showing up to work each day and sensing in your soul that you're going to be dragging human beings into doing work that they really don't want to do. It's spiritually exhausting to lean on carrot-or-stick methodologies that cajole or coerce young-yet-total persons into doing things they don't want to do.

In response to this pain, we are reduced to a kind of professional thrashing about. We resort to complex grading systems, faddish pedagogies, "fix my problem" purchases on Teachers Pay Teachers. We complain; we become despondent. In all these reactions, we're like a patient in the hospital who mashes the bedside button for a fresh infusion of pain meds. Once in awhile, we can get the pain to go away, but the *problem's* not leaving.

\* \* \*

What's bizarre about all of this is something fundamental to young human beings in the twenty-first century: *You've never met a student who set out to become demotivated in school.* Every one of your students, down in the roots of their wills, *desires* to desire to learn.

That word *desire* is important to contemplate. It comes from the Latin *desirare*, with *de* connoting "from within, deep down," and *sidere* meaning "from the stars." That's a weird word, right? Etymologists surmise that originally the verb meant something like "to await what the stars will bring."

Let the word's beauty sink in.

Then look out on your classroom and see, deep in those eyes looking back, an unyielding *desire*—an awaiting of what the stars will bring.

\* \* \*

So what's the vision of this book? What am I aiming at for us—me here in my classroom in western Michigan, you there in your classroom in your part of the world? What will this book *practically* allow you and me to know and do?

To answer generally, my writing here aims at what it always does: to help us promote the long-term flourishing of young people without sacrificing our lives on the altars of professional success. I'm a *both-and* kind of guy. I believe being a *great teacher* requires cultivating a *great life*. You can't do one without the other. And to do both of those things, you've got to have time and space to think and practice and grow and sustain.

To answer for this book particularly, this volume contains the best ideas I've learned about creating the conditions that help students *want* to do the work of learning—the conditions that help them *genuinely care* to learn. It is an in-depth extension of ideas I began exploring in the second chapter of *These 6 Things: How to Focus Your Teaching on What Matters Most*. This book is that book's sequel.

Toward that end, I want to help you and me partner with reality by realizing

- that every one of our students *wants* to want to learn,
- that every instance of student demotivation is experienced as pain,
- that every school in the world can be both productive *and* humane—achievement and wellness aren't opposed to one another but instead are friends,

- that you and I have an outlandish (but not omnipotent) influence on the degree to which students in our classrooms experience the will to learn, and
- that the most powerful strategies for cultivating student motivation are far from complicated.

Partnership with reality—that is what we’re after.

\* \* \*

So, dear colleague, are you ready? Then let’s put on our gardening gloves and begin.

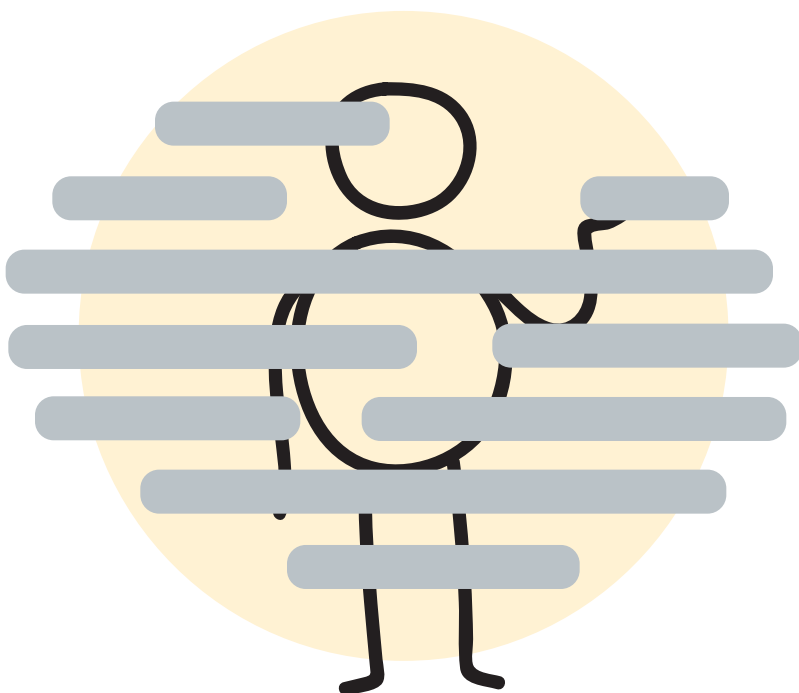
Teaching right beside you,

DSJR

April 2023

## CHAPTER 1

# On the Teaching of Souls Toward Long- Term Flourishing



The trouble with students is that they're invisible.

Not entirely, of course. I can see my students' faces and hairs and fingers and pencils and clothes. Obviously. The trouble is just that these things are such a small percentage of what students *are*.

I can't see, for example, how hungry a student is, or how the food they ate last night is affecting their biochemistry, or whether their body was adequately restored last night via quality REM and NREM cycles. I can't see whether a student's mind and chest are tight with anxiety or weighed down by depression. I can't see the status of a certain student's relationship with her mother, her father, her siblings, her friends. I can't see a student's latest flights of mental fancy, the things that secretly thrill or bother him, the deep, inchoate hopes he has for the fullness of his existence. I can't see what a student learned last year—about my subject, about school, about what it means to learn. And this is true for every student on every roster I teach.

See what I mean? They're invisible creatures. And that's troublesome!

So, our first task in this book is getting down to the roots of our students' hearts, down to the very bottom of the most powerful part of each human being, down into the mostly forgotten world of the human will. What you and I are going to try to do, colleague, is nothing less than impact that place, that center, that heart, in each of our students, using strategies that on their face will seem laughably simple.

That's this book.

It's not about willpower in the brain—we'll talk very little about that fine organ here as there are plenty of folks better qualified to discuss such things with you. We're after volition in the heart, in the very spirit. We're after the genuine, thriving, bright will to learn and how to create the kinds of schools and classrooms that align with the realities of the human heart.

## A Creature of Five Parts

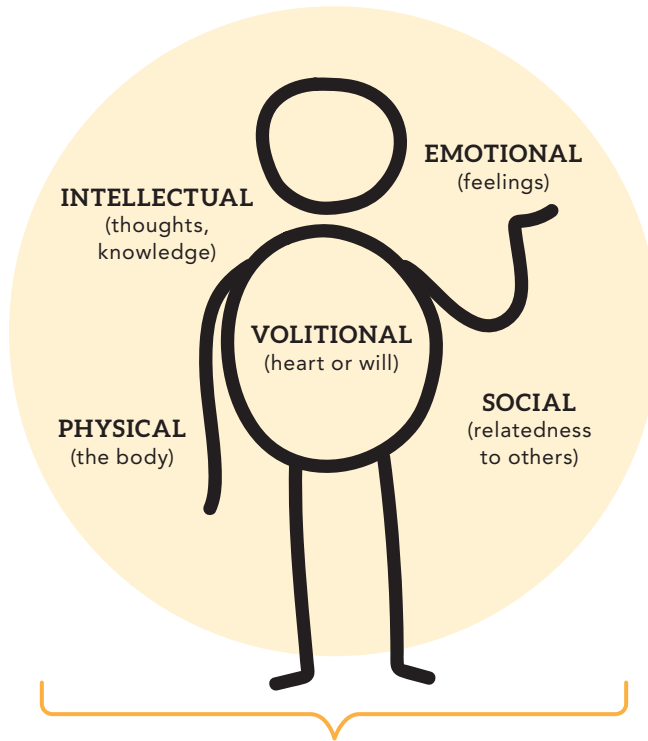
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So here's the deal: I think it makes greatest sense to think of our students as beings comprised of five interrelated parts. And don't give me credit for this model—that goes to a late University of Southern California phenomenologist philosopher named Dallas Willard.

Basically, Willard argued, human beings have five parts:

- the intellectual part—that is, our thoughts;
- the emotional part—our feelings;





**we make more sense when you  
think of us as five-part creatures**

- the physical part—our bodies;
- the social part—our relations with others; and
- the volitional part—our will, our heart, our executive center, the part of us that initiates and creates.

The interwoven whole of these five parts is called, in Willard's parlance, a soul. This is an old-fashioned, multicultural concept that aligns with the invisibleness that we touched on a moment ago. As much as you and I and our students are bodies, we're also minds and intentions and relationships. The long-term flourishing of a human being, then, depends on development in all of these aspects of the soul.

Which starts to get us to the work you and I do as teachers. What's this soul stuff got to do with school?

## Know Thy Lane

---

Some time ago, I was watching a 400m, four-person relay. I noticed two beautiful things:

1. The way each person contributes something critical to the team's success—delete a single runner's contribution and the team only makes it three-quarters of the way home.
2. The way the initial runners have to remain in their lanes but the final runners get to use the fullness of the track.

It reminded me of a question I love to ask: In education, what's our lane? What is our critical contribution?

Here's my take: In every student's life, there are myriad adults who in some way love them—meaning, *who work for their good, who will their good.*<sup>1</sup> There are parents and guardians and aunts and uncles and neighbors and pastors and mentors and coaches and troop leaders and event organizers and teachers . . . just all kinds of people who seek, in ways big or small, to develop young people. You can add in all the caveats you'd like—and I'll grant you there are plenty—but the zoomed-out picture is that the promotion of a child's long-term flourishing *isn't just up to us.*<sup>2</sup>

In short, *long-term flourishing is a group project.*

So, what role do schools uniquely play in this project?

We develop the mind by helping students to grow in mastery of the disciplines and the arts.

Yep, our job is the head.

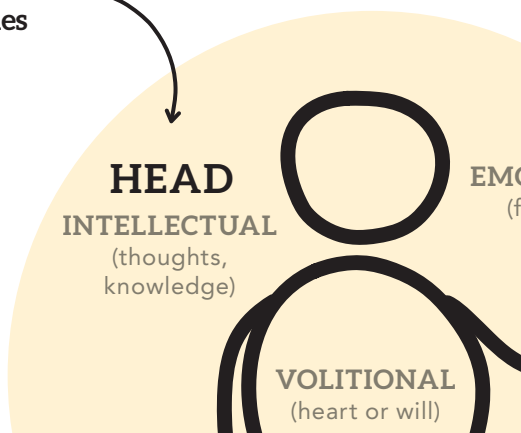
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<sup>1</sup>Willard (2002) defined love as “the genuine inner readiness and longing to secure someone's good” (p. 24).

<sup>2</sup>And woe to us when in hubris we forget this!

A school's primary area  
of responsibility:

**mastery of  
disciplines**



Now, I'm not giving license here to ignore socio-emotional learning (SEL)—by all means, we ought to seek the social and the emotional and the physical development of young people in our schools. Yes, sign me up. Sign all of us up—just a skim of our culture is enough to see how dire are the costs of widespread social and emotional immaturity.

But look: The *intellect* is our lane. If we miss it, we sabotage the relay race.

Consider this:

- Plenty of people in students' lives will seek to teach them healthy conflict resolution—an aspect of social learning—yet who else will teach them literature or history like you do?
- All sorts of folks will contribute to a child's understanding of how to process difficult emotions—a key outcome of emotional learning—but how many will make it their mission to teach health or physics or physical education or geometry?

*Now come on, Dave, you may be thinking. Life's not all about the head!*

Of course it isn't! And a 4x400 relay isn't all about the second lap. Nonetheless, the second runner must be humble enough to run their component of the race, striving for excellence in it alone, seeking to eke from it every last bit of performance they can for the sake of the collective goal.

So here's the deal: I want schools to be good at the development of the mind, specifically by teaching students to master the disciplines and the arts. I want to be good at this in my own classroom, and I want you to be good at it in yours. After all, it's what schools are uniquely designed to do.

But this begs the question that will bring us, finally, to student motivation: What's the best power source for developing the mind of a human being?

## The Two Ingredients in Mastering Anything

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In order for a person to get better at something—for example, writing a report in biology, or playing a note on the flute, or lengthening a long jump, or developing lines of code in computer science class—at least two basic things have to happen. The person doing the growing must

1. do work, and
2. do it with care.

In most conversations I have with teachers, concern rests primarily on the first part: getting students to do work. While researching this book, I catalogued too many systems and methods that have been developed for getting students to do work, the most popular of which amount to carrot-stick combos.

- **Carrots incentivize the doing of work.** Get on the honor roll. Become valedictorian. Get into a good college. Get scholarships.
- **Sticks consequentialize the *not* doing of work.** Get mandatory study hall. Get a phone call home. Miss getting into college. Miss a scholarship. Get placed on academic probation from the team.

Both of these rely on a simple principle about people: *It's possible, through punishment or reward, to coerce behavior.*

But here is the more critical principle: *You cannot coerce care.*

A person who does a thing—who even does it well—is not necessarily a person who cares about what they've done. Instead, the person can be driven by care for the carrots or the sticks. This, I would argue, is the condition of most folks who do well in our secondary schools today: They want the stuff that educational success *gets them*—the degree, the salary, the job—while not being all that interested in *the education itself*.

What I'd like to put forth in this book is that a such a person, regardless of grades or achievement, is actually a poorly motivated human soul. They'll do work, but it won't be done from the fullness of their agency. And so, eventually, they'll find themselves alienated from the fundamental goodness of learning. They'll lose the sensory capacity for tasting and seeing that an education is *good*.

And, counterintuitively, removing carrots or sticks from schools doesn't seem to optimally solve this big problem. In my view, getting rid of all consequences and/or all incentives doesn't magically grow care. You can't subtract your way to a solution here.

The good news is that I've seen teachers in all kinds of systems—including those rife with carrots or sticks—cultivate a deep care for learning in their classrooms.

Before we move on, let me explicitly say that when we rely on carrot and stick combos to get students to do work, we shouldn't be surprised to see middling returns on all that hard work. At the end of the day, you just can't arrive at mastery without *care*.

## What's Care Got to Do With Mastery?

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In all the literature on expertise development (i.e., mastery and its pursuit), there's a term you'll see more than any other: *deliberate practice*.

The late K. Anders Ericsson spent his career studying the development of expertise, but his breakthrough discovery came in the first couple years of his work. In one of his earliest studies, Ericsson found that, through a certain kind of practice over the course of two years, a guy that he was working with went from being able to memorize eight random digits read aloud to memorizing eighty-two.<sup>3</sup>

Eighty. Freaking. Two!<sup>4</sup>

This shattered records from previous studies.

Then Ericsson started looking at other fields where records were being or had been shattered, and he began noticing a pattern: These new levels of mastery were the fruit of a certain *kind* of work. He called this work *deliberate practice*, and by now this is a term many of us educators have heard of.

Deliberate practice involves these steps:

1. Identify a specific subskill that incrementally challenges you.
2. Practice that skill with full effort.
3. Seek feedback on what you could do better.<sup>5</sup>

As I recorded that three-part description, I had a bit of an epiphany. Deliberate practice is something I want my students to do, but it's not something that I spend any time at all talking to them about or teaching them. In my own classroom practice with ninth-grade students in a small midwestern town, it's just not a thing I've spoken much about with my students.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>That's a number that looks like this: 1049827375647283019284758542738492039475869302194857369850234509182745018973456823.

<sup>4</sup>Ericsson tells this story in the first pages of *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (2016).

<sup>5</sup>This language comes from Character Lab's explainer page on the concept.

<sup>6</sup>Now, as we'll see in Strategy 7, I *do* take great care to teach my students how to work hard and smart. But, if you were to ask my students, "What does deliberate practice mean?" none of them would be able to answer you because of anything I had taught them.

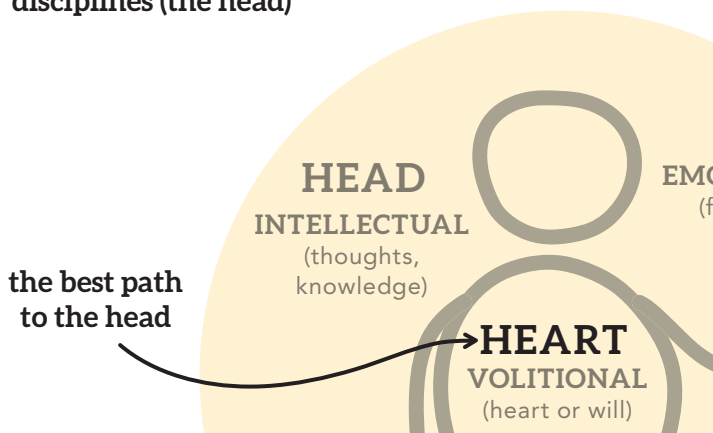
This is because I am interested in a more fundamental problem: How in the world do I help classes filled with diverse students to *care enough* about the work of learning to do things such as identify subskills, put forth full effort, and seek feedback for improvement?

This, to me, has far greater leverage than teaching secondary students something as abstract as deliberate practice. And *that's* because beneath deliberate practice, beneath the kind of work that optimally advances mastery, is *care*, is the *enlisted will*, is the *signed-up volitional core of our students' souls*.

Care is to potential energy in the classroom as the sun is to potential energy on the earth. There's no force in your classroom more laden with power than care.

## A Beliefs-Based Methodology for Motivation in the Classroom (Or: What's at the Root of Care?)

A school's primary area  
of responsibility:  
**students mastering  
disciplines (the head)**



As an educator, you've likely heard about intrinsic motivation. Usually, what we mean by this is a summary of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's Self-Determination Theory. An easy way to understand Ryan

and Deci is provided by popularizer Pink (2009) in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. In the book, Pink summarizes motivation as consisting of three factors: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. When a person experiences these factors, that person will tend to care about the work they are doing. This is Self-Determination Theory in a nutshell.

My trouble with Ryan and Deci has always been, however, that the model for education they describe seems so far removed from the realities of my classroom. The realities of my job place constraints on what I can do with my curriculum, on how my students' days are scheduled, on what my students have experienced in school leading up to their ninth-grade year with me, and on what they'll experience afterward.

It's not that Self-Determination Theory isn't great, it's just that it's not nearly as useful to my classroom practice as the what I call the Five Key Beliefs. So, I'm no psychologist, but for what it's worth I'd like to offer our profession the Five Key Beliefs Theory. If we get good at cultivating these five key things in the hearts of our students, I think all kinds of schools can make better on their promise to advance all students toward mastery. All kinds of schools can be better places to learn and work. This theory can work in places with all kinds of curricula, all kinds of constraints or freedoms, all kinds of cultures, all kinds of demographic formulations.

**So, the Five Key Beliefs.** Yes. These are what I see all across the literature, both within and outside of education; these cry out to me in every one of my classrooms and all the ones I visit. It's a simple but powerful idea: at the root of care are beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Beliefs fuel care-driven behavior. And it's not just any beliefs. It's five in particular.

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<sup>7</sup>What's a belief? We'll get deep into this question in Chapter 2. In brief, however, belief is knowledge held in the will; it's an effortless confidence in a thing. It's a certainty, a trust; it's a readiness to act as if something were true (that last one is Dallas Willard). From what we believe, we assume. Beliefs are so deeply rooted that you'll know them more by what people do rather than what they say they think.



<b>CREDIBILITY</b>	My teacher knows what she's doing. He's good at his job. He cares about this work. She can help me grow. He can take me to the next level. I'm fortunate to be in this class with this teacher.
<b>VALUE</b>	This work matters to me. It's interesting. It's useful. It's beautiful. It's meaningful. I can use it to help others. I won't regret giving this my time and energy. This isn't a waste of time.
<b>EFFORT</b>	If I apply myself, I can get better at this. I can grow in my knowledge. I can make myself smarter. I've not arrived yet; I'm still in the beginning stages, and that's neat.
<b>EFFICACY</b>	I can succeed at this. I know what success looks like, and I can get there—it's possible for me. I'm on the right track.
<b>BELONGING</b>	People like me do work like this. I fit here—in this place, in this moment, with these people, in this work.

These Five Key Beliefs are at the root of student motivation.<sup>8</sup> They explain why markedly different-looking classrooms can have such similar motivational dynamics. What I mean is, let's say you were to find me a dozen classrooms sprinkled throughout the world. In each of these classrooms, students do work with care and are growing in mastery, but that's *all* they have in common. Otherwise, they're completely different—different pedagogies, different physical spaces, different subjects, different student ability levels, different demographics, different teacher personalities.

Sounds a bit chaotic, right? But at the root of all of these places you'll see the same thing again and again: thousands of contextual signals pointing student hearts toward the Five Key Beliefs.

When the heart is all set, the mind is primed for development. And understanding the Five Key Beliefs can help you get the heart set in *all kinds of settings*.

The Five Key Beliefs, in other words, pave the path to the head.

Because the path to the head, it turns out, is through the heart.

---

<sup>8</sup>You'll often see these beliefs written about as *mindsets*. I don't like that term because it muddies the distinct difference that I see between the mind and the will. Even researchers seem to struggle with this distinction; when they define the term *mindset* in their books and papers, they almost always use the word *belief*. But belief is a remarkably muddy concept in Western culture. In the next chapter, we'll filter out the mud.

