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Hey everyone, this is Katie Novak, and you're listening to the Education Table, a micro podcast where we tackle big ideas and inclusive education in 10 minutes or less. Today, we're diving into some of the most important skills we can teach our students. Executive function skills. These life skills are essential for learning problem solving and navigating the world independently. I will share a funny story about my teenager's moment of being totally flummoxed by a problem, why executive function is critical for a learner agency, and how we as educators can scaffold it for both students and ourselves. So let's dive in. So let me set the stage. Last spring, my neurotypical teenager came to me with total confusion because he needed to sign something and did not know what a signature was. Now I get it.

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We don't teach handwriting or cursive anymore, so the confusion was understandable. But what struck me wasn't just that he didn't know cursive, it was that his only strategy for solving the problem was to ask me. We had a lot of laughs about it, but I couldn't stop saying, do you think there's any other way to solve this mystery? And pretty soon he got distracted and I asked him if he figured out the mystery, and he was like, what mystery? And so if you have teenagers or work with teenagers, you can feel my pain. But honestly, it hit me. We need to teach our kids how to be purposeful and strategic, how to set goals, and how to leverage resources to accomplish their goals beyond asking the nearest adult or Siri for the answer.

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Now all of this takes serious executive function skills like planning, prioritizing, problem solving, and staying organized. Watching him struggle, and ultimately he did figure it out, made me realize how much these skills are learned and not innate. And they don't just help students, they're also really critical for us as adults. So let's dive into some of the research and then we'll get to the strategies. Executive function refers to the cognitive processes that help us set goals, plan, and manage tasks effectively according to the UDL guidelines 3.0. The updated version, fostering executive function is a core component of promoting purposeful and motivated learners. When we give students tools to develop executive function, we're not just helping them in the classroom, we're preparing them for life.

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Research consistently shows that students with strong executive function perform much better academically and socially because they know how to manage their time, manage distractions, and persistent through challenges. They commit to figuring things out and have the strategies to do that. But here's the Thing, these skills don't always magically appear. They often need to be explicitly taught and scaffolded. In fact, studies have found that structured strategies like goal setting and self monitoring can significantly improve students ability to manage their learning independently. And yes, the same strategies apply to us as adults because we're not always great at that either. So knowing that executive function allows people to be more successful, what strategies can we leverage to try to get better at this? Now, here are three ways to scaffold executive function and build more learner agency in your classroom. And maybe for yourself too.

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Number one is teach goal setting and reflection. Students cannot develop agency if they do not know how to set meaningful goals. So start by teaching them to break really big tasks into smaller, more manageable goals. For example, if students are working on a research project, have them set a daily goal or even a weekly goal for what they want to accomplish. Like one day they might say they need to complete their outline, or they might have a goal to draft one section of their paper. Pair this with reflection questions like what was your goal? And then what worked really well today? What helped you to work towards your goal? Or what do you need to do to adjust for tomorrow? So

it's not enough to set the goal, but the reflection on whether or not they met the goal and why.

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This is really important to help learners monitor progress and then create new goals and figure out what strategies allow them to be successful. Now, for adults, you can use this same approach in professional development. So if you are working with educators, it can be really valuable to encourage teachers to set their own goals. What is it that you want to accomplish today in this session? What is it that you want to learn? And people can do that independently or professional learning communities, because when we have a target, we can make much more responsible decisions to stay focused on accomplishing what we set out to accomplish. Now the second strategy is to leverage scaffolds, leverage those visual and digital tools.

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So while people are working towards their goals, whether it's students or whether it's adults, make sure that we have checklists, graphic organizers, calendars to help learners stay on track. Digital tools can make a really big difference. So having calendar reminders, having a to do list, having all of the resources together in a learning management system, this really can help learners to stay on the path to reaching their goals. And these tools model real world strategies that they will use as adults. Now, if you haven't explored an AI tool, it's called the Goblin tool. It is a magic checklist maker and you can use this with students or you can use it on your own. Basically, you can share a goal with Goblin Tools and it will break it down into a magic checklist.

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If you want to accomplish that goal, here are all the checkpoints that you can set for yourself. And as many interactive tools, it will allow you to give feedback and to readjust it. So that might be a fun one to try. The third strategy is to encourage problem solving and resourcefulness. Instead of giving students all the answers, jumping in to help them, which I, even as a teacher, had such a tendency to do, we're wanting to help them, encourage them to explore other resources, teach them to brainstorm solutions, use reliable search engines or printed resources effectively. I stress the word reliable here. And encourage them to collaborate with peers to solve problems. Because I think a lot of the time students are struggling and we walk over and we're like, okay, what's the problem? And we're like, hey, why don't you try this?

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And instead ask students to start thinking about what are a couple of things you could try. Who is someone you could ask, is there any way that you could solve this problem? So, for example, if a student is stuck on a math problem, instead of providing the answer or giving them a hint, say, you know, can you think of a place that we've been to as a class that provides online tutorials, maybe that could help you? Or have you tried it, you know, with one of the tools over there and have them really think about, would it be helpful to grab some manipulatives or, you know, some fraction tiles? For adults, this is also really important because sometimes when we're providing professional development to our colleagues, we try to always create this curated list of resources, which can be really valuable.

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But also we can say, I want you to work together to find a really good answer to this question. What are the sites that you trust and what are the research tools that you use and really help them to collaborate collaboratively, create ideas, and then they can compare and contrast them to curated resources. So when I'm working with adults, they'll often have questions about udl, and of course I can answer them and provide some guidance. But sometimes it's really valuable to say, you know, why don't you take a couple minutes and build your background by exploring some blogs, so many podcasts like this one, try to find some really great videos, and then try to come up with a question that really gets to the heart of what you're hoping to explore.

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Now, I know that it can be really tempting to just give those answers. But when there is a clear goal and we have really supported our learners to figure out how to use the resources available, they can come up with a good answer and then we can come in and provide feedback, help to clarify, help them reflect and bring them to a higher level of deeper learning. And when there are checklists and tools and timers to keep us all on track, the more we can accomplish together. So what is the takeaway of this mini episode? We have to teach our learners how to set goals, how to leverage existing high quality resources, and how to constantly reflect on their practice. And we're not just doing this to prepare them for a test.

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We're really helping them to figure out a strategy to set their own goals and to achieve what they want to in life. Because goodness knows, the distractions are all around us and we really have to build strategies to help us stay focused and to move towards where we want to go. And as educators, we need to remember that these strategies work just as well for us. Thank you so much for tuning into the education table. Do not forget to check the show notes for bonus resources. And as always, onward.