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21 + 15 + 9 = **BETTER TEACHERS**

Educator Julie Potts applies CrossFit training principles to help her students succeed.

BY JULIE POTTS



A few months ago, I walked into a CrossFit box hoping to learn new ways to get in shape. What I did not expect was the insight CrossFit would give me into my career as a kindergarten teacher.

Watching a CrossFit class is like witnessing the most perfectly differentiated and inclusive classroom. Every athlete is completing the same workout, but all work at very different levels. Some do pull-ups while others do ring rows, and some squat with 75 lb. while others lift 200 lb. or more.

The structure allows me, a beginner, to attend the same class as a competitive CrossFit athlete. I don't feel threatened or unsuccessful, and he or she doesn't feel bored or unchallenged. This structure is what I strive to achieve every day in my classroom.

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Imagine if I had walked in on my first day of CrossFit and the coaches told me to do as many pull-ups as I could. I am hardly strong enough to hang from the bar, much less attempt pull-ups. What if they did not give me an alternative or became frustrated with me for not trying? No matter how angry they might get, I just can't do a pull-up.

I think of my students and how some activities are simply not appropriate for certain learners. No matter how badly I want them to read or write at a certain level, they might not be ready, and forcing them to attempt tasks that are inappropriate is only going to lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure. Just as I would have walked right out the door if coaches insisted I do pull-ups, children will give up if we give them tasks that are out of their reach.

My definition of having high expectations for my students has changed since starting CrossFit. I used to think "high expecta-

The key to learning is ensuring students are challenged at the right level. If a task is too easy, boredom is likely. If a task is too hard, some students will become very frustrated.



All students learn differently, whether they're in a school or a CrossFit gym. Smart teachers and coaches find ways to connect with individuals to produce the best results.

tions” meant a goal for all students to read at a certain level or achieve a certain score on a writing or math test. What I’ve realized is that I can have high expectations for all students, but those expectations do not need to be the same for every child.

Just as I can have a great workout that will not come close to the level of the competitive athlete at the rack next to me, a struggling learner can complete an incredible piece of writing that might not contain many letters or words. I am still working the same muscle groups and becoming stronger every day, just as my students are becoming better readers and writers every day, even if some aren’t yet reaching the milestones the department of education would like.

I needed introductory training sessions to teach me the basics, and I still need the coaches to check in with me more frequently during class workouts. I am not ready for some exercises, and for each I have an alternative to strengthen the same muscle group. It’s not embarrassing to do something slightly different, as everyone knows we all work at different levels.

I have already made changes to my classroom activities and expectations, and I look forward to continuing to develop a learning environment similar to the one I experience when I attend CrossFit classes.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky taught us to keep tasks within a child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD), providing her with experiences that challenge her just enough to move forward but not so much that she becomes frustrated. Success is unlikely if a child is constantly pushed past her ZPD and into frustration and failure, just as it would be impossible for me to succeed if pushed past my physical limits or given a task my body simply cannot perform.

Will I be able to do a pull-up eventually? Yes! When my body is ready for it, just as all my students will read and write when their minds are ready. ■

About the Contributor: Julie Potts is a kindergarten teacher in Massachusetts. She started CrossFit in January 2016 at **The Fort CrossFit** in Hampstead, New Hampshire.