

*The Essential 55*

By: Ron Clark

Hyperion Publishers, 2004

“Make eye contact.” “Do not save seats.” “Perform random acts of kindness.” “Be the best person you can be.”

*The Essential 55* reads like a manual of social expectations. After receiving a deluge of media attention—best-seller lists, bookstore displays, and guest appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show—educators have been flocking to its pages seeking the secrets of one educator’s success. Critics of the book caution us to view the actions of this Disney Teacher of the Year with tentative optimism. After all, many of his strategies seem harsh and resulted in both controversy and strife. But regardless of its perceived flaws, *The Essential 55*, does serve a valuable purpose for its readers and merits the examination of middle level educators.

Like many of us, Ron Clark began his teaching career under less-than-desirable conditions. The rural North Carolina elementary school offered a teaching position that had been vacant for quite a while. Clark initially observed a group of unruly students, many of whom had consistent behavior problems and learning disabilities. As his story unfolds, he was indeed, as Haim Gainot had coined, “the decisive element in the classroom.” His collection of rules sets high standards for students so that they might become successful learners and valued members of society. The reader observes the students’ enormous growth through the eyes of their greatest champion, Ron Clark.

Clark’s book offers to his fellow educators inspiration and to all readers a glance at some of the most essential components of what he perceives as a positive, productive life. Readers cannot view it, however, as a panacea to our educational systems’ shortcomings. What works for Clark may not work for others. He himself refutes using his infectiously optimistic book as a prescription for the perfect classroom.

Instead, we must reflect upon what we value most for our students and what we expect of them. Encouraging educators to develop their own list of essential rules, Clark writes, “I offer these rules as *suggestions*.” Inherently, we know what our students need and how we can guide them. But do we always state those expectations upfront? Steven Covey suggested that successful people “begin with the end in mind.” Is that idea a priority in our schools?

If used literally, *The Essential 55* might be best utilized in the following ways:

1. **A teacher read-aloud.** Because students should view their teachers as models of literacy, young adolescents would benefit from hearing Clark’s vignettes of student success. Some of his stories are quite humorous; others are inspiring.

2. **Etiquette lessons.** Clark provides a truncated version of basic etiquette. As classrooms prepare students for experiences beyond the realm of the school setting, these lessons would serve them well.
3. **A support for a career unit.** Because many of Clark's rules are geared toward making students successful members of society, his tips could compliment a career unit or a career fair.
4. **Discussion starters in advisory.** Depending upon the schools' goals for advisory time, advisees could examine Clark's rules and discuss their implications with their advisor, a visible student advocate and role model.

The book ends with a list of tips for dealing with children, communicating with their parents, and establishing a punishments and rewards system. Although they provided Clark with success, we cannot assume that they would be directly applicable to a middle-grades setting or managed by educators of young adolescence. But perhaps most importantly, Clark's book closes with his most poignant advice for educators, "Guide them as they grow, show them in every way possible that they are cared for, and make special moments for them that will add magic to their lives, motivate them to make a difference in the lives of others, and most important, teach them to love life." Middle school educators must use discretion, common sense, and good, old-fashioned instinct.

Reviewed by Gena Bramlett