

Rescuing and Restoring the Lost Generation

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BEWARE of THE GAP!! The latest research by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2014) shows that while the achievement gap has narrowed, overall improvement is not dramatically better, when comparing white and black students. Mentoring can close the gap! We will share proven research based strategies that you can use to enhance any mentoring effort. We will share how to use these strategies to support low SES children, while enriching the learning environment. By comparison high SES children usually receive strong encouragement and positive reinforcement at home in addition to their interactions at school. Structured mentoring and encouraging support can lead to positive interactions conducive to improved learning. With the use of award winning literature and effectively prepared mentors you can teach goal setting, decision-making, social skills, and encouragement. We will be using research from the new Walter Mischel "The Marshmallow Test" about delayed gratification and self control. We will also explore Carol Dweck's research and book "Mindset" (growth versus fixed mindset) to illustrate how learning is malleable and not fixed. All of this is combined to create an environment of stimulation, sometimes referred to as mental vitamins, for even the youngest learners in a K-5 setting. The participants should leave with additional insights into how they can adapt these concepts into their own mentoring programs.

Susan (not her real name, but a real person):

Susan is a bright and engaging 3rd grader, who has demonstrated by her performance in school and on tests that she is a top performer. Susan would be considered high SES (Socio Economic Status). She reads with a high level of proficiency and is said to have a comprehension rate of 99% in relationship to the material that she reads. Susan is the product of a two-parent home and grandparents who pour into her life on a daily basis. Her grandmother has been reading to her since she was twelve weeks old. Puzzles, games and constant interaction have been a part of her life.

The number of words that a child hears is very important to their development and future as it relates to learning. High SES children hear on average 2,000 words per hour while low SES children hear less than 1,000 words per hour (Nesbitt, 2009). In the just released (2014) statistics by the U.S. Department of Education's center for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP) the results point out that although test scores improved overall, that the distance in the achievement gap between white and black students in the fourth grade did not close from 2011 when the gap was 25 points, and 2013 when the gap was 26 points (NEAP 2014), when looking at the reading scores of 4th graders on a 500 point scale, with the average national test score being 268 points.

The real question is what can be done to close the gap? The answer is simple, but implementing an effective structured, focused mentoring program takes effort and planning. In his book "The Motivation Breakthrough" writer Richard Lavoie talks about the ability to connect to your child in a positive way. (Lavoie, 2007) Among the steps he suggests to do this are:

- Read aloud to your child
- Be a reading role model
- Make reading materials available
- Encourage your child to tell stories
- Make regular visits to the library or bookstores
- Read the same book your child is reading
- Encourage the child to read to a younger sibling

These steps for engagement are particularly necessary for children from low SES environments, but unfortunately the steps mentioned above as ways to motivate and also stimulate your child seldom take place. In other words, in the setting where such an interaction could be the most positive and effective is the place where it is least likely to occur. As much as we might want to dismiss the role of socio-economic factors, and we realize and have observed there are exceptions in every SES level, they in fact can give us an insight into the challenge we face. For example, let's look for a moment at the environment that lower SES children often come from. According to research reported in What Ever it Takes by Paul Tough (Tough,

2008), there is a big difference in attitude towards learning between most high SES and low SES families. Low SES families often don't see life as a constant series of educational opportunities as many middle class and upper SES parents do. Instead there is often a fatalistic or negative attitude toward school or work. There is also frequently a lack of positive adult role models to show children what success looks like.

One key to turning a low SES child into a performer can take place in a mentoring program that focuses on the needs of the student. The mentoring program should contain three essential elements: it should be Structured, Customized, and Focused.

Structured- Unstructured, free form programs help no one. Structure promotes accountability, helps attract and retain greater community involvement (volunteers) and provides guidance for student activities and learning assignments. It is important to note that low SES students often lack structure at home.

Customized- The program and learning assignments should be tailored to the Protégés interests, age, reading level, character traits, etc. 'One size fits all' programming is not necessary in a one-to-one setting, and indeed is often detrimental. Low SES students are often literally dying from a lack of personal attention, and customized one-on-one learning can be a life changing experience. This can be the one time in their lives that low SES students can have one-on-one undivided attention and encouragement from a caring person.

Focused- Intentional, purposeful Mentoring to teach low SES children strategies and skills that high SES students often learn at home. This includes not just academics but success oriented strategies as well.

An effective mentoring program also should have a defined goal, purpose, and a target group for the programs participants. There must also be a way to measure the program's effectiveness, by using test scores or some other form of defined measurement (outcomes). Lets examine what makes a young person of today an effective adult in the future. One of the key contributors of future success according to psychologists is that the child has to develop a work ethic. Sounds simple, but in many low SES homes there is often times only one parent, and one if not two or more children. The adult is simply overwhelmed with the activities of each day, and the children are often times left to fend for them selves. Not just for preparing their own food, but there is also little or no supervision in addition to very little structure.

It has been proven that in order for children to thrive that structure should be an essential element of their daily routine. The routine should be something that is done everyday, not just once in a while. Children should have a scheduled mealtime for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Bedtime needs to be established and during the school week the routine/schedule should be followed as much as possible. We do realize that life happens, and that there are adjustments to the schedule, but the key piece here is structure. Which should also include a homework schedule, and a recreation or TV schedule, but not to excess.

Children also have to feel safe, and that there needs are being met or at least made aware of to the parent, guardian or caregiver in their life. When this does not happen children will often times become withdrawn, and harder to engage in any type of activity much less learning. In a longitudinal study conducted by the University of Minnesota starting in 1972 and chronicled in detail in the 2009 book *The Development of the Person* (Srout, Collins, England, Carlson, 2009) it is noted that if a mother or significant caregiver is attentive to the cries of the infant, when the child grows older they are more independent and also more secure in their relationships and interactions. Unfortunately, the child whose cries were ignored has a more difficult time, and not only has behavior problems, but is also more disruptive and often times placed into special education. The odds of the lower SES student being the one ignored are enormous. What is the remedy? Children coming from a single parent, multiple-child setting can benefit greatly from a setting where they are cared for and their developmental needs are addressed, hopefully within the home, but if not then another learning environment is critical.

Which brings us to the question: Is there a way to meet the needs of children who come from low SES environments or other tough situations, so that they will not become part of the lost generation? Author Paul Tough in *How Children Succeed*, talks about character and decision-making. These are often referred to as "Executive Functions," which has become the buzzword in higher SES school districts. Two of the most important executive functions are cognitive flexibility and self-control. It is now known these can both be inhibited by excessive stress. Research findings say that one of the largest determinants of success and learning is the amount of stress the learner encounters. Children from both high and low SES environments struggle with stress but often in different ways. With high SES children it is the stress of expectations, while with lower SES children it is often the stress of living in a poor or less affluent situation, where it is a struggle to meet the most basic of human needs and violent crime may be more prevalent. Simply being

able to manage stress and exhibit self control, regardless of whether or not you are richer or poorer, is a strong indicator of being able to achieve or function. Executive function is malleable, and the less stress that someone has in his or her life in early childhood, the better are the chances of achieving at a higher level of executive function (Tough, 2012).

In her book *Mindset*, author Carol Dweck talks specifically about two mindsets, one that is fixed, and the other a growth mindset. In the fixed mindset, there is the belief that your ability to continue to learn is carved in stone. "Very little in my life will change." Thus creating a mindset where you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain level of moral character, and a certain level of personality. Basically, having just one tank of gas if you will, or a limited supply of intelligence. Because of this belief that you only have a certain "limited" level of intelligence (smarts), you will continuously try to prove that you are the smartest person in the room when you are in social or other settings with other people. But instead of appearing as intelligent or knowledgeable, you will actually come across to other people in the room as not being very smart. This type of behavior has the opposite effect of its intention.

While those who have a growth mindset believe that their basic intelligence is something that can be cultivated through effort and that their initial aptitude, interests, and behavior can change and grow through application and experience (Dweck, 2006). They believe continuous learning and proper mentoring will help to expand one's knowledge base.

What if there were carefully selected, award-winning children's books being read to and with them by a carefully trained mentor? What if the student had chosen his or her own interest areas from over 120 possibilities (animals, sports, space, etc.) and the books were carefully calibrated by reading level so the student was able to confidently read the initial book with ease, and only then gradually moving up to his/her instructional level? What if the book also was chosen to teach the student a character trait (honesty, courage, empathy, etc.) or a life skill (decision making, problem solving, team work, etc) that will help them learn success-oriented behaviors? What if in this carefully structured, but student centered learning environment, both the student and the mentor have been trained on giving positive, encouraging and instructive feedback to each other? What if, in other words, for this mentoring moment the learning was truly student centered, based on their individual interests and needs? To provide this is why we created Mentoring-Success.

So what can be done? We believe that early intervention with structured, customized, focused mentoring that teaches some key life skills to help children deal with stressful environments can help rescue and restore a lost generation. We use the word restore because who can deny watching a busy pre-school child of any culture eagerly exploring the environment that we are hard wired to acquire skills, to work, to want to accomplish things? We need to do all we can to provide as many children as possible with the positive encouragement and life skills that high SES children often receive in their environment. It creates most teachable, most reachable moments that provide the student with motivational insights into themselves and their ability to learn. It dispels the myth that nothing can be done to close the achievement gap between low, middle and high SES groups.

Can these elements of success be taught? As described earlier, in Mentoring-Success we use award-winning children's literature, carefully selected to provide an enriching and fun reading experience. Each resource must be analyzed for proper reading and comprehension level as well as age, gender, ethnicity, interest area, and life skill or character trait. These are matched to the student's reading level as identified by the school. By talking to the student we also identify their special areas of interest such as sports, animals, etc. Then in conjunction with the teacher and/or parent(s) we also identify life skills and character traits they may need help in learning. Once this requirement is met, recent breakthroughs in neuroscience research on mirror neurons and brain plasticity tell us that yes they can learn such topics. The exciting research on mirror neurons tells us that a complex system of mirror neurons in our brain helps us learn by observing as well as by doing. As our brain observes activity it actually rewires itself. Children may not have the words to express complex activity, but their brain can observe it as they read and interact with mentors. The impact of positive role models and mentors can be dramatic.

By having a mentor who is trained to give encouragement and positive feedback we take the student to a higher plane of learning. The mentor is also modeling the behaviors of success, which also help to reinforce the teaching of character traits and success strategies, and influences a positive learning environment.

Some of the ones we teach in our Mentoring-Success program are:

- Encouragement skills (praising, providing feedback, receiving feedback)
- Critical Thinking (Higher order thinking skills)

- Problem Solving/decision making, using good judgment
- Conflict resolution
- Productivity/team work/collaboration
- Skills of resilient learners (Adversity Quotient), social skills (Emotional Quotient), learning how to learn.
- Study skills
- Goal Setting

One last skill we emphasize is goal setting. This could very well be the most critical skill we teach. Researchers have known for years that delayed gratification is a key element of long-term success. The life-long work of Dr. Walter Mischel of Stanford on this subject has created lots of controversy and discussion. He has been asking the question of whether the ability to delay gratification is a fixed part of our underlying character, a hardwired genetic trait, or is it something we can learn at any time. His infamous marshmallow studies and book “The Marshmallow Test” (Mischel, 1988) seemed to establish early on that delayed gratification, or the ability of children to demonstrate self-control at an early age, would predict greater success later in life because of that trait. His research in the 1950’s and 1960’s seemed to also indicate that if a child didn’t master or hardwire self-control early on they would not master it later in life. Indeed, longitudinal studies did go on to prove this was an important skill for individual success (Mischel et al., 1988) However, his perspective on the ‘plasticity’ of this characteristic changed later on when he collaborated with Albert Bandura on a modification of his marshmallow studies. It included having the ‘greedy grabbers’ being exposed to an adult model who demonstrated delaying or self-controlled behavior. After only a single exposure to this self-controlled, adult role model children who had previously been ‘greedy grabbers’ turned into self-controlled stars. Even more importantly, in follow-up studies the children who had learned delayed gratification or self-control retained much of what they had learned (Mischel & Bandura, 1965)⁶⁴. Such a key success skill can be learned. What does it look like? We keep it simple and have mentors or parents practice it with the student.

1. Good goals are carefully defined dreams with due dates attached.
2. They are specific. This means they are concrete in nature with details.
3. They are measurable which means they must be measured to be managed. The key is to pick a few good measures that will let you know when you have reached your goal.
4. Attainable. They must be within reach of the protégé. They must be doable.
5. Relevant. They must be something the student really, really, really wants to achieve, not necessarily something others want for them. We want the protégé to own the goal. Be enthusiastic about it. This is probably the most important part!
6. Timely. The goal should be achieved within a set time limit.

We have found that even many of our mentors are challenged by this to look at their own goals. Are they SMART goals? Students seem to grab on to this easily, setting goals for number of books read, sports activities, even improved classroom behavior. As Mischel’s longitudinal studies have strongly indicated, just learning this one skill from an adult mentor can have a tremendous impact on a young life.

As mentioned earlier, we believe using award winning literature is also a key element to setting the students up for success. Research also seems to indicate that the more words a child has in their life the more positive their interactions will be with their parents. The more secure they are the better they are able to adapt to others and different situations. The more cognitive flexibility and self-control they have, the stress level also seems to be reduced.

There are numerous children’s books that also deal with all of the success skills we teach.

Each skill has been broken down into deceptively simple steps that can still teach the essence of the practice. Then each skill is cross-referenced to an appropriate book or game. Such a simple recipe can be taught to children as early as kindergarten as long as it is acted out and modeled for them. They then practice this with each other and their mentors and we hope they would get the practices reinforced in the classroom.

Can the character traits and strengths we refer to above really be taught? Paul Tough in his classic *How Children Succeed* says the following: “...the character strengths that matter so much to young people’s success are not innate; they don’t appear in us magically, as a result of good luck or bad genes. And they are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded, in measurable and

64 Citation not listed in References by author.

predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up. That means the rest of us—society as a whole—can do an enormous amount to influence their development in children.”

There is much more that can be said about establishing effective mentoring programs for young children. But the good news is that early intervention of the right kind can have a significant impact. A well-structured, customized, focused approach can do much to determine whether a child’s future will be hopeless or hopeful.

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