

## **Mentoring Success: Teaching Success Strategies to Young Children**

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The following paper outlines the staggering challenge ahead of us to rescue and restore resilient learners. Mentoring-Success is a structured, customized, intentional mentoring program designed to help children defeat the cycle of failure. It focuses on early intervention in grades k-5. The article shares much of the research behind the program and a description of its unique approach to solving the challenge.

There is a tremendous need in America to reach a large segment of our student population who are falling behind in educational attainment. The current industrial model of education, with its one size fits all, dump truck mentality, is failing to help our students and keep our country competitive in the world. This is especially true for children from the low SES (socio economic status) population. For example, in a report released by the Council of Great Cities Schools (November 9, 2010) *A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools*, (1) we see the following dismal results. The achievement 'gap' for minority students continues to grow. Among the 'highlights' that the report shares:

- In the report on black male achievement at the national level analysis of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals that on the 2009 fourth-grade reading assessment only 12% of black male students nationally and 11% of those living in large central cities performed at or above proficient levels, compared with 38% of white males nationwide. In eighth grade, only 9% of black males across the country and 8% living in large cities performed at or above the proficient level in reading, compared with 33% of white males nationwide.
- Moreover, the average African-American fourth and eighth grade male who is not poor does no better in reading and math on NAEP than white males who are poor; and black males without disabilities do no better than white males with disabilities.

In the just released 2011 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP)(2) the results for fourth grade and eighth graders as it relates to minority students shows only slight overall improvement from 2009 and is definitely not encouraging.

- Only 17% of African Americans performed at or above proficient levels in reading, while 51% were below basic levels in reading.
- Only 18% of Hispanics performed at or above proficient levels in reading, while 49% were below basic levels in reading.
- Only 18% of American Indian/Alaska Natives performed at or above proficient levels in reading, while 53% were below basic levels in reading.
- Conversely, 44% of white students performed at or above proficient levels in reading, while only 22% were below basic levels in reading.

More disturbing for African Americans is that while other minority groups at least show slight improvement by eighth grade, black achievement declines even further.

- Only 15% of African Americans performed at or above proficient reading levels by 8th grade, while 41% were below basic reading levels.
- Only 19% of Hispanics performed at or above proficient levels in reading, while 36% were below basic levels in reading.
- Only 22% of American Indians/Alaska Native performed at or above proficient levels in reading, while 37% were below basic levels.
- 43% of white students were at or above proficient levels in reading, while only 15% were deemed to be below basic levels in reading.
- 49% of Asian/Pacific Islanders were at or above proficient levels in reading, while only 20% were below basic levels.

While the statistics are quite alarming to say the least, we believe that there is a proven way to reverse the trend of sub-par achievement. Through our experience of over 25 years of successful mentoring in over 1000 schools with diverse student populations we have found that Structured, Customized, Intentional Mentoring is the most effective tool to change the course of failure and disappointment that not only affects African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indian/Alaska Native but every culture in this country as well. We purposely italicized each word to draw attention to them.

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, and so forth. '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 low SES students can have one-on-one undivided attention and encouragement from a caring person.

Intentional- Intentional, on purpose (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.

Mentoring- This means one-to-one, not small group, personalized attention from a trained mentor who knows how to encourage them, set goals, and model success oriented behavior. This may be the only positive interaction with an adult they ever receive.

Our mentoring program is specifically focused on pre-school to fifth grade. Why wait until the student is so far behind and probably demoralized before stepping in to help them be successful? Other programs are designed to address the older students and arguably do a good job with these students. Our goal at Mentoring-Success is to act when ever possible prevent problems before they occur. Our goal is to start as early as we can and set students up for success not failure. The best way to avoid the cycle of failure is to avoid it altogether.

As perhaps a review, let us highlight some of the problems low SES (Social Economic Status) students often face. According to Richard Nisbett the problems begin long before the student approaches the school building. In his classic book *Intelligence: How to get it* he cites research that indicates that while high SES students hear 2000 words an hour from their parents or significant adults, middle SES 1300 words per hour, and low SES students less than a 1000. By the age of three high SES children have heard over 30 million spoken words, middle SES 20 million, and low SES children perhaps as few as 10 million. This is before we even consider the nature and value of the words. Why do we bring this up? Also cited by Nisbett (6) is the sorry fact that while successful children hear a ratio of 5 to 1 positive encouraging words to negative, middle SES children are somewhere around 3 to 1, which is considered break even. Lower SES children hear 1 positive to every 2 or 3 negatives words. Psychologists point out that the degree of encouragement a child receives encourages intellectual exploration and confidence.

In research that has significant impact on these numbers, Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman studied the average waking day and found a person has 20,000 different interactions or individual moments of awareness. These moments last only 2-4 seconds. Most of these are neutral and are soon forgotten. Others are either positive or negative, and these are also often quite memorable. As our brains record each moment in our day, our mood and receptiveness to learning is defined by the ratio of positive to negative moments. It has been determined by researchers that the potential success and productivity of the individual can be accurately predicted by analyzing the person's positivity ration. Marcial Losada (Losada & Heaphy, 2004) has discovered what is called the Losada Line, 2.9013 to 1 of positives to negative. It takes three positives to make up for one negative interaction. He can walk into organizations, measure the positive or negative interactions taking place, and accurately predict the productivity, turnover, and profitability of the organization. He says the magic ratio is 6-1 for maximum success.

More evidence comes from John Gottman (1993) who video taped engaged and newly married couples for 15 minutes and then counted the positive and negative interactions between them. He was able to predict with 94% accuracy which couples would stay together versus divorce over ten years. His magic ratio was 5-1.

Now look again at our low SES future scholars. Not only are they hearing on average only 1/3 the words of the high SES children, the ratio of positive to negative is often not working in their favor, often being 1 to 3 positive to negative.

These research findings and others we could enumerate have led us to believe that only early intervention with structured, customized, intentional mentoring can really help rescue and restore resilient learners. We purposely use the word resilient 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 receive.

What are some of these skill sets? What is communicated in those 30 million words that help improve the success rate of children? Some scholars refer to them as 21st Century Life Skills. We call them strategies of success. There is no doubt that to succeed in the rapidly evolving information age these skills will be even more valuable than they are today. We can find little evidence that they are being taught to any degree in most school settings today. Most of them are passed on in the 30 million words of encouragement high SES and successful children hear and observe.

- Encouragement skills (praising, providing feedback, receiving feedback)
- Critical Thinking (Higher order thinking skills)
- Problem Solving/decision making, using good judgment
- conflict resolution
- Goal Setting
- Productivity/team work/collaboration
- Skills of resilient learners (Adversity Quotient), social skills (Emotional Quotient), learning how to learn.
- Study skills (10)

Can these elements of success be taught? First, each resource must be at the proper reading and comprehension level for the student. Once this requirement is met, recent breakthroughs in neuroscience research on mirror neurons and brain plasticity tell us 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 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. The impact of positive role models and mentors can be dramatic.

The use of proper literature can be another amazing way to teach, model and mentor these concepts. Read this below from some of the fantastic words of Dr. Theodore Seuss Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss (1904-1991) in his last book,

“Oh, the places you will go!”

You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes.

You can steer yourself

any direction you choose.

With your head full of brains,

And your shoes full of feet,

You're too smart to go down a not-so-good-street.

Out there things can happen, and frequently do,

To people as brainy and footsy as you.

And when things start to happen, don't worry, don't stew.

Just go right along, you'll start happening too!

In the hands of a trained mentor this little book can be used to instill much wisdom about goal setting and resilience, all coming from a carefully selected and caring role model. At Mentoring-Success we are designing a database of award-winning children's books all selected by theme, interest, reading level, success strategy, and so forth. that will teach these skills. Another example of what we use is the children's classic *Amelia Bedelia Plays Ball* by Peggy Parish which contains tremendous lessons on team building and team work. Young children love the sports oriented story and really get engaged when the right questions are asked. Children's literature is rich with such material, just lacking the structure and guidance to help mentors extract the gems of knowledge they contain.

What else will be taught? A key skill for any mentor is to be an encourager—a person who can offset the negative words often coming toward low SES children. Positive praising will be taught and practiced both by mentors and protégés. The following simple recipe has been developed by The Leadership Mentoring Institute of Vancouver to help us teach this essential mentoring and life skill to both mentors and protégés.

- Be sincere. If you can't be sincere say nothing at all!
- Be specific. Detail exactly what was accomplished.
- State the benefit. Exactly how what was done help or improve the situation?
- Shape the praise. Some people like verbal praise, some a pat on the back, others a simple note. Study the person and tailor the praise to the person.
- Make it as soon as possible. "Catch them while they are still sweating!"
- Share the praise. Let other people know about good performance.

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 we would hope get it reinforced in the classroom. 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 still teach the essence of the practice. Then each skill is cross-referenced to an appropriate book or game. Just check out all the titles for *Berenstain Bears* for example and look at the ones that teach young children conflict resolution, decision-making, problem-solving, and so forth.

What does the Mentoring-Success process look like? We closely follow the method described by Mark Lepper and his colleagues in his studies on effective one-on-one interactions (Lepper & Wolverson, 2001). They found that in effective one-on-one interactions mentors follow what they referred to as the 5 Cs. These are:

1. First you create a climate of control where the person being mentored feels they have some input and command of the material and situation. It is a voluntary relationship, not a mandatory one. This builds commitment to the process. This is difficult with the youngest children, but as they learn how to function in the relationship they really come to like having some input in directing their own learning.
2. Then you challenge the person being mentored, but at a level of that is within their capability. This is where proper reading levels are essential as well as good judgment in learning materials.
3. You build confidence by helping them be successful and minimizing failure.
4. You engender curiosity by asking leading questions. Indeed Lepper found most of what effective one-on-one leaders did was pose leading questions and then ask the participant for his or her reasoning.
5. Effective mentors also contextualize by using real world problems or case studies. This is where carefully selected children's literature can really help.

Of course the other important thing is for mentors to be nurturing or empathetic. Even though this initial research was done with younger students, we have found this same 5-C model works just as well with protégés of all ages.

There are many challenges to setting up a successful mentoring program. We can't deal with them all here, but we do have resources for recruiting mentors and training them. One of the key benefits to recruiting for young students is that it is much easier to get mentors for young children. As active participants in *Foster Grandparents* we know the territory. The challenge is finding the right type of supportive school and principal.

Let us end with another quote from the wonderful Dr. Seuss.

The more that you read,

the more things you will know.

The more that you learn,

the more places you'll go.

Young cat! If you keep

your eyes open enough,

Oh, the stuff you will learn!

the most wonderful stuff!

you'll miss the best things if you keep your eyes shut

Don't keep your eyes shut to the great things we can do together for children. Most children can be resilient learners. They just need to get the right start and support from people who care.

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