

Using Literature and Success Oriented Skills to Mentor and Engage Challenged Learners

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This presentation will focus on techniques for using award-winning literature and success oriented skills to mentor challenged learners. The primary focus will be on Kindergarten through 5th grade. We will include tips on reading with students not to them, how to teach encouragement and positive relationship skills, and what success oriented skills look like. We will also discuss the concept of Triad Mentoring in an interactive and positive setting where all participants (mentor, parent/guardian, and child) are involved and engaged. Among the areas discussed will be how mentoring helps not only the student, but also the parent/guardian and the mentor to learn the techniques of praising and encouragement, as well as other key components of making a successful connection. This presentation is based on a proven mentoring strategy called Mentoring-Success and will demonstrate to participants how these unique concepts can be used in all types of mentoring programs.

To help explain what has motivated the authors of this paper to develop our Mentoring-Success approach let us provide two real examples of young people we have recently worked with in either a coaching or mentoring relationship.

David (not his real name, but a very real person)

David is a star high school basketball player that one of us has had the opportunity to coach. He is getting ready for his senior year in high school. With his tremendous athletic ability David has college coaches gushing over his raw athletic talent. But despite all of his great athletic talent, we have often observed David struggling each day at school. We often see him either staring blankly at the book in front of him or gazing out the window with a blank look on his face. When we ask David a question about what he is doing he replies, "I was just thinking about what I was reading." But when you ask David specifically about what he was reading he is unable to tell you. With a little more probing we have found out that the reality is that David cannot read at a high school level. Upon working with him further, it appears he maybe has a fifth grade reading comprehension level. As we checked into his background we found no evidence of learning disabilities. He was just passed on grade to grade. He was too good an athlete to hold back, no other help was offered, and this started well before high school.

Sylvia

Sylvia is a bright and charming young lady who is just getting ready to graduate from high school despite some serious attendance and tardiness issues. She is eagerly looking forward to her future. Sylvia hears other students around her talk about going to college or about getting a job. Sylvia continues to talk to her mentors about wanting to get a job herself, and about some of the other immediate goals she has for her life. But as we continue to talk with Sylvia, we soon discover that no one in her immediate family has ever held a job, and she can think of no one even in her extended family that has ever held jobs. It becomes clear that Sylvia is not really sure what she needs to do to get a job or even what having a job involves. It is also clear that she has few 'job related' habits or skills, and she probably won't do well on an interview despite her likeable personality, and has a low probability of success unless something dramatically changes.

The stories of David and Sylvia might seem like fictional tales to anyone not involved in education today. But the harsh reality is that both are painfully true, and represent what is unnecessarily happening to too many of our students. It is our experience that a carefully trained mentor, given the right structure and direction can have a positive and life changing impact on students like David and Sylvia. It won't be easy and it will take a lot of commitment from both mentor and protégé.

Why wait until the student is in high school and already has experienced years of failure? Is there a way to prevent this from happening?

At Mentoring-Success we try to catch the David's and Sylvia's of the world before they reach their current desperate situations. We believe that the sooner students are engaged the more likely they will have a chance to reach their potential. This is why we want to engage them at the earliest possible age. We want

to prevent these problems before they occur, setting children up for success as soon as we can before they experience so much failure that they give up. While we applaud and encourage mentoring programs for older students our focus at Mentoring-Success is Kindergarten through 5th grade, with some focus on pre-school. The sooner we can reach out and engage them, the better.

There are many challenges and obstacles for challenged learners and we will discuss some of the more pressing ones in this paper. We will touch upon them to provide the necessary background, but we will also share with you how we think our mentoring strategy can address many of these persistent issues and help overcome many of the challenges our learners face.

A big challenge many of our students experience is an unstable home environment. Research tells us that socio-economic-status (SES) can play a part in some of the obstacles that challenged learners face. We realize there are exceptional families in all levels of SES, but we must also face the reality that, more often than not, low SES level and associated factors can be an indicator of some serious problems. A 1995 study conducted by Betty Hart and Todd Risley titled: "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of Young American Children," recruited and examined 42 families. The families represented all three SES classes (13 families were high SES and mostly professional people, 10 families were middle SES or working class, and 19 were low SES). The researchers observed the verbal interactions they had with their children. They specifically looked at the number of words in each child's life by the age of three. The researchers also noted that not surprisingly each child took on the speech patterns and also the vocabulary of their caregivers. The results they found were disturbing to anyone concerned with early childhood education. By the age of 3 there was a huge gap in the number of words that the children were exposed to depending on their SES level (Hart & Risley, 1995)¹⁸⁶.

What they specifically found was that while children from higher SES settings hear on average 2,000 words an hour from their parents or other significant adults, middle SES or working class children have heard 1,300 words per hour directed to them. In contrast, the average low SES or students heard less than 1,000 words an hour. By the age of three high SES children have heard over 30 million directly spoken words, while middle SES children have heard over 20 million words, and the typical low SES children in most cases have heard less than 10 million total words directed individually to them (Nesbitt, 2009). This initial study has been replicated several times with many more subjects, and in a 2003 printing it is dramatically referred to as: The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap.

Things do not get better as the children approach school age. By the time the children are 4 years old, the gap has grown much larger. Studies have shown approximately 45 million words for high SES, 26 million for middle SES children, and about 13 million for typical low SES children (Hart and Risley 1995).¹⁸⁷

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 "Whatever 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.

Not only do low SES children often experience fewer words and face lower expectations, but also the quality of words seems to be different. Why do we emphasize the quality of the words? Researchers have proven that the potential success and productivity of the individual can be accurately predicted by analyzing the person's ratio of encouraging words and experiences to negative words and experiences. This is referred to as a positivity ratio. The Brazilian psychologist Marcial Losada has discovered what is now called the Losada Line. He says the tipping point is 2.9013 to one of positives to negative. It takes approximately three positives to make up for one negative interaction. Losada 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 (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

From our years of observing low SES family interactions, we believe that besides the reduced number of words in a lower SES environment that there is also a great disparity in the type of words lower SES children often hear compared to middle and higher SES children. We believe their positivity ratio is seldom 3 to 1.

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We believe successful children hear a ratio of 5 or 6 positive encouraging words to every one negative, while middle SES children are on average somewhere around 3 to 1, which is considered to be the break even point. From our observations we believe that lower SES children often hear one positive to every two or three negative words. We realize this is not true of all homes, but the observed behavior of children leads us to believe it is more often the situation than not. Psychologists have known for years that the degree of encouragement a child receives encourages intellectual exploration and confidence, while discouragement leads to frustration and lack of confidence. We believe this is an exciting area for research. In Toughs latest book, *How Children Succeed* he also shares research on how the stressful environments, many low SES children, come from cause heightened cortisol levels, and can result in lower learning retention rates.

What do these interactions look like? A positive interaction would be described as encouraging, constructive or instructive, and respectful. A negative interaction would be one that is discouraging, destructive, and full of contempt.

More evidence of the impact of positive versus negative interactions comes from John Gottman 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 the next ten years. His magic ratio was 5-1 positive to negative to have an effective relationship (Gottman, 1993).

As if hearing fewer words and having an inverted positivity ratio were not tough enough hurdles to overcome, it is also true that many of our lower SES students come from homes with few if any books. In the typical middle SES home there are 15 age appropriate books for reading to a child, while in a lower SES home there may be only one book, if any, that is age appropriate to read. (Bazillion Books for Kids, 2012). But the issue of not having books in the home may be taking on an even more daunting twist. Many parents today consider handing their child an electronic device a suitable way to occupy them, especially in restaurants or in idle time at home that used to be used for discussion or play. What can be wrong with that?

In his recent article in *Scientific American*, Ferris Jabr remarks that as we continue to grow and engage technology, it appears we are beginning to neglect reading books and magazines. When we use electronic devices like Notebooks and iPads our brains do not function at the same levels or in the same ways as when we read hard text from books and also when we engage in the activity of writing. Part of the problem is that screens do not have the defined pages and completeness that books do, and so our brain does not make the visual connections of the size of the book if we are reading it in electronic format. In addition, other studies he describes have shown that when we use electronic devices for reading and information, it appears that instead of reading for knowledge we tend to scan or just glance over the material in front of us. The result is that our comprehension decreases and we have trouble remembering what we are reading and the content of that reading. His subtitle, "Why paper still beats screens," says it all (Ferris, 2013).

So far we have discussed the challenges of fewer words for challenged learners, the often negative type of words they hear and attitudes they see, and then the lack of books or the dependence on electronic babysitters they often face. The other issue is one of what parents actually do with their young children. For example, in their book, *Think Like a Freak*, Levitt and Dubner raise the question of what would really get us headed in the right direction in learning and life is not so much more dollars, or even better teachers, but better parents and mentors (Levitt & Dunbar, 2014). With *Mentoring-Success* we believe that a carefully trained mentor and parent triad team can help close the achievement gap with focused mentoring, using quality literature to enrich the environment and learning experience. We feel the impact can be massive. The Dutch scholar Jemeljan Hakemulder reviewed dozens of scientific studies indicating that reading fiction has positive effects on the reader's moral development and even sense of empathy (Hakemulder, 2000).

But perhaps the greatest challenge of all is that people don't take the time to read stories to children any more. It used to be television, then video games, but now electronic gadgets of all sorts are used. We seem to be losing the importance of story sharing and telling that seems to be crucial to good social development of all children from every culture and every SES level. Jonathan Gotschall in his book *The Storytelling Animal* says this about the similarities of stories across all cultures: "Why do stories cluster around a few big themes, and why do they hew so closely to problem structure? Why are stories this way instead of all the other ways they could be? I think that problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story" (Gotschall, 2012). Other people who have studied humans in all of our settings across the world also find story telling and sharing to be not only a universal human trait, but also a key activity where it seems people go to practice the key

skills of human social life. (Boyd, 2009). This is why we stress not only storytelling and sharing but also key success skills in our Mentoring-Success program.

Probably one of the most exciting breakthroughs in science is the new area of brain research opened up by the new technology for transcranial electromagnetic scanning (TES). Much of what we have written above can now be observed using many of the new scanning devices to study the living brain. One thing we do know now for sure is that the human mind is very plastic, i.e. open to change. This whole concept of neural plasticity is beginning to reveal that interactions such as reading with students and connecting with them through mentoring can have a dramatic impact. For example, a 2013 study from the “Case Western Reserve Brain, Mind, and Consciousness Lab” using state of the art fMRI scanning indicated that coaching and mentoring that emphasizes compassion for the individual’s internalized definition of success, their hopes and dreams, has a significant impact. It has been shown to enhance and sustained brain structure and behavioral change (Jack, Boyatzis, Khawaja, Passarelli, & Leckie, 2013) in subjects receiving the positive form of coaching/mentoring. Such positive encouragement seems to increase visioning in the brain and engages the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), and this is what actually creates sustained observable changes in the brain structure. They contrasted this positive approach to another that emphasized externally defined criteria for success and focused on a person’s weaknesses. There were no sustained behavioral or brain structure changes using this approach. While this research was conducted with older subjects, we are hopeful the same impact will be found as more studies are done using this exciting technology. We also realize there can be questions about correlation and causation referring to this study, but we believe future studies using such new technology should reveal exciting ways that positive mentoring impacts the brain and behavior of protégés. We have often observed it ourselves and now science is beginning to catch up with the powerful positive impact of effective positive mentoring!

What Can Be Done?

Using a concept called Triad Mentoring we think we can remedy many of the negative aspects facing lower SES children described above. In Triad Mentoring we train a mentor to work with the protégé, and their parent and or guardian. We teach mentors and the parent/guardian as well as the student as we enrich the learning environment with carefully chosen literature. We teach techniques of encouragement, recognition, and praise, while also practicing active authentic listening. Most importantly we will teach the parent/guardian how to set goals with the child and read with and not just to them. We will share several of these techniques in the following pages of this article.

As a framework for our mentor training we utilize what we call our Mentoring-Success SHARE Mentoring Model, which includes the following concepts:

Serve: The mentor must have a sincere desire to serve.

Heart: Love is a verb. Our actions must show that we care.

Authentic Listening: We must focus on the protégé and make them feel like there is no one else more important in the world. This is a key skill to model and teach the protégé and the parent.

Recognition: Strive to catch the protégés doing something right and tell them all about it. Proper praise and recognition is another powerful skill to model and teach.

Engage and Encourage: Share as many positive interactions as possible.

The first thing we do is actually teach our mentors and parents what effective mentoring looks like. In 2001 Mark Lepper and his colleagues studied mentors of elementary students and found they ranged from virtually ineffectual to extremely effective. He and his team discovered some common characteristics of the effective ones (Lepper & Wolverson, 2001). He boiled the effective mentor characteristics down to what he called the five Cs.

- You provide the student a sense of control. This can be done by letting the student pick out their own book or an activity from a list of appropriate materials.
- You challenge the student, but carefully use a level of difficulty that does not frustrate them.
- You build the learners confidence by use of specific praise and by minimizing failure and searching for what they have done right. The most effective mentors try to head off or prevent mistakes before they occur.

- You encourage curiosity by asking leading questions and getting the learner engaged in the subject they are discussing or learning. The most effective mentors spend most of their time asking questions and/or asking students to explain their reasoning.
- The most effective mentors contextualize by using real-world examples from their own work, the child's school experience, or even from movies or sporting events.

Given what we know about the power of positive words and having a good positivity ratio (Losada & Heaphy, 2004), we also spend quite a bit of our training time teaching mentors, parents and students how to encourage each other and some simple rules of praising, such as:

- Always be sincere. Many of our children are experts at spotting insincerity!
- Be as specific as possible telling the protégé exactly what they did right.
- State the benefit. Let the learner know how this can help them do better in school or life in general.
- Build on their strengths. Always look for ways to build up the student.
- Shape the praise. Find out how the protégé likes to be praised and use this.
- Make it as soon as possible. Catch them doing things right and tell them about it right away!
- Strive for at least a 5-1 ration of praise to correction, and make the corrections as encouraging, instructive and respectful as you can!

We also teach active authentic listening skills to the mentors, parents, and students. There are lots of activities that can be used, but for the most part we emphasize the importance of body language when it comes to listening. Research by Albert Mehrabian at UCLA on how people communicate produced some startling results that are now commonly accepted, as they have been consistently replicated in many other settings. Mehrabian (1981) found that 93% of what we communicate is not dependent on the meaning of our words. Such things as facial expressions, eye contact, body language, gestures, tone of voice, all were more important than our actual words. In other words, what we say is less important than how we say it. People believe the expression they see more than the words they hear. Who you are speaks so loudly some times people can't hear the words you speak. Trained actors would say the very same things to similar groups of people, and by just varying one of the several non-verbal cues listed above could completely alter the reception and retention of the audience. Often overlooked, but of major importance, was the fact that few people have ever experienced being actively and authentically listened to themselves, or even knew how to listen.

When people are actively and authentically listened to it can be a startling and life changing experience. When a person effectively practices active and authentic "laser" listening the other person will learn to trust them. Without trust you can't interact well with another. You certainly can't create a positive mentoring experience without it! What is involved in active and authentic listening?

- Sincerely and intently listen with your eyes and ears. Lack of attention indicates lack of caring, and kills communication.
- Always take action as soon as you can. Attention to detail, a sense of urgency, and follow through prove that you care and that you heard them.
- Be careful not to interrupt, unless it is to better understand.
- Occasionally repeat back what you think is being said by the other person. This helps you to know if you understand, and encourages them to continue. "Seek first to understand, and only then to be understood."
- Clarify when necessary. "Here is what I hear you saying."
- Ask questions until both of you clearly understand.
- Summarize 'straight forward' what you think both have said during the conversation. Try to get agreement.

An active, authentic, straight-forward listener makes the other person feel like no one else exists in the world. Most people are never listened to in such a way. It builds lasting and positive productive mentoring relationships. We always encourage people to listen to the other person as if they are the most important person in the world—because they almost always are the most important person to someone, or should be!

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 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, Shoda, & Peake, 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 (Bandura & Mischel, 1965). 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.

- Good goals are carefully defined dreams with due dates attached.
- They are specific. This means they are concrete in nature with details.
- They are measurable. 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.
- Attainable. They must be within reach of the protégé. They must be doable.
- 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!
- 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. Imagine what this can do for a parent that has never set goals, and now working with their child and a triad mentor can learn this skill for perhaps the first time. Remember the positive coaching fMRI study by the Case Western Reserve researchers we cited earlier? When mentors worked with subjects on personal positive goals, built on their strengths there was sustained, and enhanced brain structure change and behavioral change.

As mentioned earlier, we believe using award-winning literature is also a key element to setting the students up for success. We've already shared the research on the value of paper versus text and the paucity of books in many low SES homes. So how do we teach parents and mentors to read with, and not just to the student? We have developed a simple system that does not teach people how to teach others to read, but rather how to read with someone. This includes subjects such as:

- How to sound out words.
- What to do when a child sounds out every word.
- How to figure out new words during reading.
- What to do when the student ignores punctuation.
- How to ask good questions to get students to interact with the book.
- What to do before, during, and after reading.
- What to do when your student makes a mistake.

What to do when a student can't answer questions about the reading.

And of course, what to do when your student does a great job of reading!

We try to avoid the whole language versus phonics controversy by just saying we are not teaching reading as such, just how to help mentors and parents read with children.

As mentioned earlier, we coach the mentors to continue to work with both the protégé and their parent or guardian on using the success skills as well as certain character traits in the materials. We always stress that we use carefully selected award winning literature as we teach them to read and work with their child. The positive interactions that this Triad Mentoring strategy produces are beneficial to everyone. By having a mentor who is trained to be an active listener and to give encouragement and positive feedback we take the child/student and parent to a higher plane of learning. The mentor as well as the parent/guardian model the behaviors of success, which help to reinforce the teaching of character traits and success strategies. This influences a positive learning environment. Remember, that this may be one of the first times that this child and perhaps the parent/guardian have had a positive interaction regarding learning. Our big hope is that as we continue to work with both the protégé and the parent/guardian in this setting, the positives of the exchange will begin to carry over into the home setting and other children, perhaps better preparing them to begin school. The result of this interaction is not only powerful, but also life changing. With continued positive interaction the mind is able to open up and free itself. 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. As we saw in Tough's "How Children Succeed" research (Tough, 2012) 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 can be the stress of high expectations. With lower SES children it is often the stress of just surviving 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 rich or poor, is a strong indicator of being able to achieve a successful life.

We have shared some of the research that we feel makes a strong argument for using interactive reading with mentoring to help challenged learners succeed. Over the last thirty years there has developed a rich body of research that supports interactive reading, i.e., reading to a child in a way where you are asking questions, exploring their reasoning, in other words a very active and participative approach. But while we know this works, we are in danger of being swamped by the electronic or digital age. A great book that summarizes some of this research and approach is *Born Reading* by Jason Boog, just released in July 2014 by Touchstone. Its subtitle is: "Bringing up bookworms in a digital age—from picture books to eBooks and everything in between" (Boog, 2014).

We should not be shocked that the brain is vulnerable. Marshall McLuhan way back in the 1950's was perhaps the first to say that media changes our brains, irrespective of the content. He was essentially saying that each medium reorganizes our brain in its own unique way and that the consequences of these changes are for more significant than the content of the message. McLuhan (2001) Recent research suggests that extensive television watching correlates strongly with brain problems. As of ten years ago 43% of US children two years or younger were watching television daily, with a quarter having TVs in their bedrooms when surveyed in 2004 (Healy, 2004). Since 1990 we have been seeing an upward trend of high levels of restlessness and attention deficit issues. Jane Healy documented these changes in her book *Endangered Minds: Why our children don't think* and makes a strong case for the fact it is due to plastic changes in the children's brains (Healy, 1990). This was long before the advent of all the new transcranial electromagnetic scanners (TES) and our newfound ability to look inside the brain, but was very predictive of what we are now seeing. Add to it the growing number of digital toys and readers and the age of paper and real books is precarious. This is why we feel a powerful, research based, early intervention, structured mentoring program like Mentoring-Success is essential to helping our challenged learners succeed.

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