

Strategies for Reaching Achievement

Gwendolyn V. King, Assistant Professor, Alabama State University

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the effects of the 3 Ps: Planning, Preparation and Perseverance, in reference to cognitive and social development within America's society. When employed as learning tools, these 3 Ps play a vital role in reaching achievement, and are essential in the accomplishment of successful growth and development.

Data was collected among university students to analyze and support this theory. The data results indicate that 50% or more of the sampled population are strategic readers with a strategy base and the appropriate schema to make sense of the text they read. More than half of the sampled population values reading literacy.

Introduction

Implementing advanced academic curriculums and programming frameworks are critical elements for a nation's educational structure. As technological devices become increasingly popular, students are relying less upon cognitive abilities for comprehension and problem solving techniques. Guiding students to utilize mental computation and decision making skills continues to promote the fundamentals of higher order thinking. Evidence shows that a child's early years are particularly important for mental development, and investments in these years are likely to pay for themselves over the coming decades (Bendor, Bordoff, & Furman, 2007). An adolescent's intellectual qualities and characteristics are developed through experiences which impact one's life. Providing children with opportunities to identify, cultivate, and express intrinsic ideals and goals ignites the desire to strive for prosperity and achievement.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, "The job of the school is to teach so well that family background is no longer an issue." In his remarks, Dr. King suggests Americans have high expectations of the educational system, and for the quality of student which is produced (Rouse et al. 2006). Since education is closely linked to income, occupation, and societal status, learning institutions and families have a vested interest in the progression of student achievement. All things being equal, educating students with codified and tacit knowledge skills is a life long ebb and flow process that requires influential players and strategic practices.

Early Environments and Achievement

The human brain grows and changes at an astonishingly rapid rate during the first few years of life (Friedman 2004, Shonkoff and Phillips 2000, Knudsen et al. 2006). The

Forum on Public Policy

brain's unusual "plasticity" seems to make young children unusually responsive to environmental influences. Psychologists often refer to these early years as a sensitive period because a child's early environment has a direct influence on cognitive growth and development (Nelson 2000a and 2000b). For example, compared with kindergarteners from families in the bottom fifth of the socioeconomic distribution, children from the top fifth of all families are four times more likely to have a computer in the home, have three times as many books, are read to more often, watch less television, and are more likely to visit museums or libraries (Lee and Burkam 2002). Differences in early environments contribute to large gaps in test scores, as numerous studies have compared the outcomes of preschool children from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

These findings have exhibited variations in cognitive skills in children as young as three or four years of age (Jencks and Phillips 1998, Fryer and Levitt 2004, Lee and Burkam 2002, Rouse et al. 2005, Rock and Stenner 2005). Despite environmental differences, every child has the possibility to excel. Although student achievement and learning capabilities vary, academic acceleration is an attainable goal and objective for all. Young children must be taught to believe in themselves and learn to master their inherent skills and abilities. Moreover, early educational opportunities and responsibilities are directly and inadvertently taught by parents since most of a preschooler's time is conducted in the home.

Since fewer than 50 percent of three and four year olds are enrolled in preschool, parents are the first teachers and role models of tomorrow's students (U.S. Census Bureau 2006, p. 16). For example, evidence concludes that children benefit when they live in homes with a supportive learning environment, as measured by the number of

books in the household (Fryer & Levitt 2002). Parents can nurture early literacy and comprehension through stimulating conversations, hands on games, and story time, making literature and realistic activities integral parts of daily family life (Baker & Schiffer, 2007). The early years also appear to be a sensitive period for the development of non cognitive skills, such as those relating to emotion and affect (Nelson 2000a, 2000b).

Non-cognitive skills are important because they assist in determining a child's social and behavioral conduct. The abilities, for example, to sit still, pay attention, and get along with others

are central to success in elementary school. Attributes which make children eager learners in school may also influence the willingness of parents to engage them in learning activities in the home. These early gaps in cognitive and non cognitive skills tend to persist through the school years and later in life (Rouse et al. 2005). For example, by the end of high school, the size of the gap in achievement test scores between White and African American children is not much different from the size of the gap among those groups of students in preschool (Phillips et al. 1998). The aforementioned statistics do not necessarily define the futures of children who score below average in performance. However, the information does provide an important outlook on underlying problems and impervious dilemmas that some children will endure if progressive early intervention changes are not conducted in their living environments.

Literacy Development

The basis of comprehension and achievement are intertwined in one's reading abilities. Beginning as sight readers of picture books, children learn to recognize people, places, and things. Furthermore, they understand how to recall, retell, and reenact picturesque scenes from stories and plays. This process of learning transitions non readers to beginning readers as they become aware of literary content. Dysfluent beginning readers are identified by their excessively slow, laborious reading, which in turn, impairs comprehension (Schwanenflugel et al 2006).

By nature, children have a love of reading as listeners and participants. When frequently exposed to vocabulary through literature, pronunciation skills, complex sentence structure and ordering, and intellectual capacities to decipher text and scenarios are cultivated. Through continuous reading practices, the ability to fluently connect words and sentences transitions a beginning reader to a fluent reader. The development of fluent and automatic reading skills is considered a primary educational goal for elementary school children.

Although there is no single definition of reading fluency, a general consensus exist that fluent reading incorporates the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with expression (NICHD, 2000b & Schwanenflugel et al 2006). The theory of automaticity in reading suggests that proficient word recognition skills underlie fluent reading and adequate comprehension of text (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). Readers with speed, accuracy, and autonomy are typically characterized by their automaticity skills. Thus, these children have moved from relying on slow letter by letter decoding to retrieving cued words in their long term memory (Logan, 1997).

Children who have efficient word recognition skills are able to read connected text fluently and better understand what they have read (Schwanenflugel et al 2006).

Literacy Analysis

In the United States, annual assessments are conducted to provide data analysis detailing the progression or regression of student achievement (Loveless, 2006). Utilizing data from sources such as The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), researchers are able to determine academic deficiencies and growth across race, class, and gender. More importantly, empirical evidence assists researchers and educators in developing more effective and efficient curriculums, programs, and strategies to improve teaching instruction and student learning. According to data listed in the Brown Center Report on American Education, the latest NAEP reading statistics identifies dominant declining trends in reading tests scores for elementary and secondary students.

Between 1990 and 2005, student reading achievement staggered behind in comparison to mathematics and science tests scores. Long-term trends documented in the Brown Center Report showed less than one year's gain (0.8) in learning for nine year olds since 1990. Seven out of the 10 points in the gain came in the 1999 to 2004 period. For 13 year olds, the scores have barely changed since 1990, up only two scale score points or about two months while the scores of 17 year olds declined 5 scale score points from 1990 to 2004 (Loveless, 2006).

Research indicates there are multiple reasons for the meager gains and advancements in student reading achievement over the past decade and a half. Some reports theorize the enormous populations of students who speak English as a second language (ESL) in the public school systems have tremendously depressed reading achievement scores. The Brown Center Reports also points out non English speaking students have greater difficulties comprehending and translating contextual materials. Hence, many ESL students read slower and without fluency as a result of the language barrier. Other national reports have re-examined the gender gap theory recognizing higher test scores for girls, as they reportedly read more frequently than boys (Loveless, 2006).

Moreover, the gender gap contracted from 1992 to 2005 in fourth and eighth grades as girls' scores stayed flat and boys gained a few points (Mead 2006, Sommers 2006). A third explanation rests on how reading is taught. In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) released

a report reviewing the scientific evidence on reading instruction. NRP's report indicated that teachers are not adequately trained in educational programs regarding the concepts and techniques of phonemic awareness and phonics, thus, hindering their abilities to effectively teach the skills to children. Among the panel's conclusions were that phonemic awareness is instrumental to teaching young children how to read. Furthermore, systematic phonics instruction is needed to help youngsters with reading difficulties (NICHD, 2000a).

Motivation

Motivation, the act of giving someone an incentive or reason to perform, is a strong benefactor in reaching achievement. Whether motivation is intrinsic or external, it is an essential tool for academic, social, and professional acceleration. Educational institutions and employers implement numerous motivational mechanisms to encourage prospective candidates and current students or employees to perform above and beyond expectations. Motivation begins the cycle of success by becoming the genesis to progression. As the genesis, motivation ignites interest to excel, attain, and/or accomplish an ultimate goal.

Students today live within a techno savvy, rapidly paced society, which offers many instant gratifications and conveniences. Motivating students to study, participate in extracurricular activities, or attend a traditional four year college are difficult tasks. Educators and schools are striving to create and introduce more interesting techniques to entice students to actively engage in the learning process. For example, it is not

uncommon for elementary teachers to award stickers, happy faces, healthy treats, or cheerful chants when recognizing students' successes. Secondary schools frequently acknowledge academic and extracurricular achievements with trips, dances, and congratulatory messages on the school's marquee.

A 2004 national commission on the future of the twelfth grade NAEP test recommended several incentives to motivate students and schools. Among the recommendations were college scholarships for randomly selected students (two per state), redeemable certificates for merchandise given to all participating schools and students, and letters of recognition from the President of the United States to participating students and their principals (Loveless, 2006). A spring 2006 study highlighted the national problem of high school dropouts and contends boring school work discourages students from coming to school. It suggests if students were more

confident in their abilities, enjoyed the content and subject matter, and were convinced of the relevance of schoolwork in everyday life, American schools would flourish (NCTM, 1989).

Regardless of the procedures, educators and parents have to continuously strive in teaching students to believe in themselves. Although motivation is an inherent sense, sometimes, it is unknown or unrecognized by those who are not apt to utilize the ability. Beginning in the early years, children must be taught and shown displays confidence, affection, and self pride. These attributes encourage feelings of self worth and assist children in embracing their capabilities and deficiencies. Intrinsic inspiration, personal acceptance for errors, analytical thinking processes, and coping skills are necessary for personal and academic motivation.

The 3 “Ps” (Planning, Preparation, and Perseverance)

Planning is an intricate portion of educational advancement. Early on, students are taught planning techniques for using materials, timed exercises, extracurricular activities, and other components within a classroom setting. These lessons are usually taught indirectly as a part of class instruction. Nevertheless, the concept for devising a course of action has been initiated. As children mature and learn how to process the meanings of policies and procedures, their automaticity skills invoke routine or systematic operational tasks innately (Schwanenflugel et al 2006). Modeling and demonstrating planning practices exhibit how to effectively use thought processing, scheduling, establishing goals and objects, and strategizing.

For example, high school students are taught during their freshman year to plan for college. Educators and parents constantly reinforce the importance of good grades and social well roundedness. By junior or senior year, many students have intrinsically put forth planning efforts to select a college, complete applications, and take aptitude tests to satisfy entrance requirements. If students are frequently shown how to and participate with making plans, the act becomes second nature. Ultimately, these learned skills become a part of everyday endeavors and assist in creating successful students and adults.

Throughout education, planning has been a key factor for the success or failure of student achievement. Data and statistics indicate flat or below average performances when inadequate planning for students with disabilities, ESL language barriers, or other issues is not taken into account (Loveless, 2006). As previously mentioned, a child’s early cognitive growth and

development is at risk when parents do not plan for preschool attendance, literature and technology accessibility, and cultural exposure (Lee and Burkam 2002).

Motivation is the alpha to progression, as preparation is the beta to planning. Of the 3 “Ps,” preparation is the most important step as the student sets forth efforts to gather information and resources to pursue an endeavor. Once again, data analysis has proven that preparatory measures assist to ensure present and future success in student achievement. Referring to the National Reading Panel’s 2000 report, teachers who were inadequately trained in the content areas of phonemic awareness and phonics, were unprepared and ineffectively taught the subject matter. A chain reaction to such events could consist of below average student comprehension, prolonged student oral and written deficiencies, elongated phonemic and phonics lessons due to incorrect instruction, and the list could go on.

In addition to recognizing planning goals and objectives, preparation allows for students to predict and foresee potential outcomes. This mechanism not only works as a motivating factor, but, also sets a precedent for developing future goals, objectives, and initiatives for pursuit. Research has shown that students who engage in preparatory college entrance exams courses typically score higher and are awarded more scholarships and grant funding (Loveless, 2006). Furthermore, these students tend to perform above average and go on to pursue post graduate degrees after completing an undergraduate program. As noted in the Rouse studies, children who are academically and socially unprepared early on in life are more likely to face the same hurdles and obstacles throughout their education and adulthood. The same theory holds true for children who received preparatory skills. They progress through school and migrate into careers with minimum challenges and fewer problems as a result of academic and social preparedness (Rouse et al. 2005).

In order to assist with understanding how important it is have proper preparation, recently a 20 question Reading Self Assessment survey was administered to 54 college students (a mixture of graduate and undergraduate) (Table 1). Metacognitive strategies and critical thinking skills used by “strategic readers” were presented to the survey respondents. They were asked to respond to each question using the following rubric: Often, Sometimes, and Never. Data results indicate that 50% or more of the sampled population are strategic readers, for they have a strategy base and the appropriate schema to make sense of the text they read. In addition, the data reveals that this sample population has had strong vocabulary development and is fluent at

the independent reading level. It is estimated that 50% or more of the sample population values reading literacy.

Perseverance is the omega to success in the pursuit of student achievement. The most complex attribute of the 3 “Ps,” perseverance has a rigorous and tough exterior. It requires dedication, sacrifice, and sometimes tears to conquer a task. The cycle of success has come full circle from motivation to perseverance when a student has mastered and achieved the ultimate goal. Perseverance entails diligence, pride, determination, intrinsic belief, and most of all discipline.

Students of all ages can persevere regardless of socioeconomic status, cognitive deficiencies, and other life altering circumstances. When students are taught to believe in themselves (motivation), envision the highest dream (progression), strategize (plan), pursue goals (prepare), and never give up (perseverance), a success story has evolved. As children learn, the realization of winning becomes prevalent in their minds. From earning an “A” on a test to making the baseball team, perseverance allows students to strive to aim for the top. If positive outcomes, opportunities for praise and reward, and intrinsic and external motivation are exhibited, students will attempt nearly any feat that is placed before them.

Perseverance ignites a hunger and thirst to achieve beyond expectations. It fosters ideas of self worth and pleasure, but at the same time, it incorporates feeling of personal and social pride. Oftentimes during graduation ceremonies, valedictorians thank parents, teachers, and others who helped to keep them motivated and on the right track. The premise behind the speech is to acknowledge the graduates’ desires to persevere, not only for self, but, to please those who were important in their lives. Perseverance and success are conjoined as one can not be achieved without the pursuit of the latter.

Conclusion

Numerous practices and strategies are implemented in educational institutions to develop and enhance student achievement opportunities. Some have proven to be successful, while others have caused detriment and educational delays. This paper has attempted to demonstrate the need for educational guidance in the areas of planning, preparation, and perseverance. As previously mentioned, students depend on parents and educators to provide them with the necessary essentials to promote and foster the highest level of academic instruction possible. When environmental, social, and economic interferences prevent these occurrences, the results are

Forum on Public Policy

punitive and stifling. Lastly, students have the capabilities to excel academically and socially. Most desire to become competent productive citizens of society. Now, educational institutions and parents have a responsibility to provide them with the essentials of life to persevere and do so.

Forum on Public Policy

#	Question Stems	Often	Sometimes	Never
1.	I re-read when I don't understand.	96%	0%	4%
2.	I skim for main ideas and key phrases when I start a new chapter in a textbook.	64%	32%	4%
3.	I read more slowly when I don't understand.	83%	17%	0%
4.	I recognize the topic sentence of paragraphs.	84%	16%	0%
5.	I read confusing phrases and sentences out loud.	68%	28%	4%
6.	I try to figure out the author's purpose for writing (Is the author writing to give me information, persuade me, entertain me, or is he telling a story?).	50%	46%	4%
7.	I make predictions about what may come next.	64%	36%	0%
8.	I look for the author's main point, idea or thesis.	79%	21%	0%
9.	I activate my prior knowledge when reading (I ask myself "what do I already know about this topic or main point"?).	79%	17%	4%
10.	While reading, I make connections with my own experiences or experiences of others (I connect what I am reading to my personal life experiences, I connect what I am reading to another book or text I have read, and I connect what I am reading to events that have happened in the world).	80%	20%	0%
11.	I talk with other readers about what I am reading.	50%	42%	8%
12.	I summarize the main points of what I am reading while reading as well as after reading (during and after the reading experience).	58%	42%	0%
13.	I try to figure out how the text is organized (e.g. cause and effect relationships, sequence, time order, etc.).	50%	50%	0%
14.	I take notes and/or highlight for understanding when I read.	68%	32%	0%
15.	I use my imagination (make mental pictures or visualize the text) to help me understand what I am reading.	73%	23%	5%
16.	I can make a good guess about the meaning of an unknown word by making sense of what is being said in context.	67%	33%	0%
17.	I use my knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, and root words to help me figure out the meaning of words (morphology).	71%	29%	0%
18.	When I read for pleasure, I select books, in which, the words are automatic for me, and I do not have to guess at their meanings or pronunciations (fluency).	50%	33%	17%
19.	I question the author the author as I read (I ask questions of the text, then I answer those questions in my head throughout the reading of the text-metacognitive strategies).	54%	38%	8%
20.	I read 15 minutes or more per day.	67%	29%	4%

Table 1
Reading Self Assessment

Forum on Public Policy

References

- Baker, Isabel. and Schiffer, Baker Miriam. 2007. The Reading Chair: Beyond the Journal. National Association for the Education of Young Children..
- Bendor, Joshua, Bordoff, Jason. and Furman, Jason. 2007. An Education Strategy to Promote Opportunity, Prosperity, and Growth. Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institution.
- Friedman, Dorian. 2004. What Science is Telling us: How Neurobiology and Developmental Psychology are Changing the Way Policy Makers and Communities Should Think About the Developing Child. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.
- Fryer, Roland G. Jr., and Steven D. Levitt. 2002. Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap in the First Two Years of School. Working Paper 8975, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA (June).
- Jencks, Christopher, and Meredith Philips. 1998. America's Next Achievement Test: Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap. *The American Prospect* (40): 44–53.
- Knudsen, Eric I., James J. Heckman, Judy L. Cameron and Jack P. Shonkoff. 2006. Economic, Neurobiological, and Behavioral Perspectives on Building America's Future Workforce. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.
- LaBerge, D and S.J. Samuels.1974. Toward a Theory of Automatic Information Processing in Reading. *Cognitive Psychology*, 6.
- Logan, G.D. 1997. Automaticity and Reading. Perspectives from the Instance Theory of Automatization. *Reading and Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*, 13, 123-146.
- Lee, Valerie E., and David T. Burkam. 2002. Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School. Economic Policy Institute, Washington, D.C.
- Loveless, Tom. 2006. How Well Are American Students Learning? The Brookings Institute, Washington D.C. 2 (1).
- Mead, Sarah. The Truth about Boys and Girls. 2006. Education Sector (June).
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM).1989. Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics. The Oprah Winfrey Show: Oprah's Special Report: American Schools in Crisis, first broadcast 12 April 2006 by Harpo Productions, Inc. John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio Jr., Karen Morison, "The Silent Epidemic," (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006).
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). 2000 a. Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction. Report of the National Reading Panel. Government Printing Office.
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). 2000 b. Report of the Subgroup: Report of the National Reading Panel. Government Printing Office.

Forum on Public Policy

Nelson, Charles A. 2000a. Neural Plasticity and Human Development: The Role of Early Experience in Sculpting Memory Systems. *Developmental Science* 3 (2).

Nelson, Charles A. 2000b. How Important are the First Three Years of Life? *Applied Developmental Science* 3 (4).

Phillips, Meredith, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg J. Duncan, Pamela Klebanov, Jonathan Crane. 1998. Family Background, Parenting Practices, and the Black-White Test Score Gap. In *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Rock, Donald A., and A. Jackson Stenner. 2005. Assessment Issues in the Testing of Children at School Entry. *The Future of Children* 15 (1).

Rouse, Cecilia, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Sara McLanahan. 2005. Introducing the Issue. *The Future of Children* 15 (1).

Rouse, Cecilia Elena and Lisa Barrow. 2006. An Education Strategy to Promote Opportunity, Prosperity, and Growth. *Future of Children* 16 (2).

Schwanenflugel, Paula, Elizabeth Meisinger, Joseph Wisenbaker, Melanie Kuhn, Gregory Strauss, and Robin Morris. 2006. Becoming a Fluent and Automatic Reader in the Early Elementary School Years. *Reading Research Quarterly* 41.

Shonkoff, Jack P., and Deborah A. Phillips. 2000. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Academies Press, Washington, D.C.

Sommers, Hoff Christina. Where the Boys Aren't. 2006. *The Wall Street Journal* (July).

Tremblay, Richard E., Daniel S. Nagin, Jean R. Séguin, Mark Zoccolillo, Philip D. Zelazo, Michel Boivin, Daniel Pérusse, and Christa Japel. 2004. Physical Aggression During Early Childhood: Trajectories and Predictors. *Pediatrics* 114.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2006. Nursery and Primary School Enrollment of People 3 to 6 Years Old, by Age, Mother's Labor Force Status and Education, Family Income, Race and Hispanic origin: October 2005. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/school/cps2005/tab03-01.xls>.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.