

Success Against All Odds

Lessons Learned from Successful, Impoverished Students

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### Abstract

The effects of poverty on students' education have been well documented and a positive correlation can be seen between these effects and their academic success. What is unclear, however, are the exceptions to this correlation. How do students from low-socio-economic status (SES) families succeed despite the seemingly insurmountable odds they face? The literature from a wide variety of longitudinal—and interview-based studies from the past three decades suggests that character traits such as persistence, determination, and curiosity are key to their success. Schools with a majority student body from low-SES homes have found success in meeting and exceeding state standards through fostering an encouraging atmosphere and incorporating these necessary character traits throughout their curriculum. Mentorship in developing these traits is what makes all the difference in both the individual students' lives and in the school setting. Thus, in order to sustain the development of academically successful students, it is imperative that students not only believe that they can succeed, but that they are given avenues and resources through which they can succeed.

### Success Against All Odds: Lessons Learned from Successful Impoverished Students

This generation lives in a technological and data dependent age. Information is literally at their fingertips as almost anything can be found that is typed into search engines that will return data in less than a second. Now more than ever, students have the ability to delve into a world of knowledge in school that their parents and grandparents never had. With access to this wealth of subject knowledge, why then is there such a disparity in academic achievement between the U.S. and other nations? The achievement gap between students is often attributed to a student's lack of opportunity, poor schools, a deficiency in leadership of the administration or teachers, socio-economic status, and other similar problems. With such seemingly debilitating circumstances, how are students expected to succeed academically? As one educator suggests, "[s]uch a conclusion ignores the fact that millions of impoverished students succeed academically every day" (Bligh, 2013, para.2). The next logical step is to examine what factors allow these students from impoverished conditions to succeed. It would be easy to attribute lack of resources and opportunity as a reason for failure for students from poverty as opposed to those who academically succeed who come from families that belong to a higher socio-economic status. The more interesting and helpful comparison is to compare students of the same low socio-economic status to determine factors that relate to why some students still achieve success. While it is widely known that poverty tends to be a common thread connecting students that fail academically in the school setting, by capitalizing on the seeming anomaly of those who succeed from an impoverished background, it can be seen that the development of character traits commonly attributed to successful people such as

perseverance, focus, and ambition are major influences as well as positive reinforcements in students' lives.

### **Defining Success**

The word *success* is thrown around in schools and board meetings alike, but what truly defines this highly sought after goal? In other words, for what are schools preparing their students? Do educators really believe that all of their students will graduate from high school, go to college, or move on to a lucrative job making tens of thousands of dollars, even hundreds of thousands to support themselves for the rest of their lives? Even supposing that this is one's definition of success would border on the absurd. Success is so much more than just earning a paycheck; it is about reaching one's goals and being able to exceed them. To redefine success, however, so as to reformulate it clearly without the expectation of being able to measure it in quantity (because of lack of research/data/measurability) like an IQ test on cognitive ability, seems to betray modern education. And yet, it is not so modern after all. Success is rather about helping students reach a level of autonomy in being able not only to attain cognitive abilities, but also to in their demeanor and in their character become people of stature. For if educators only focused (as the current education system seems to be pushing) on cognitive abilities in favor of these less measurable ideals of character, what more is being created in school systems but robots that follow a designated path depending on how much supposed knowledge they have according to a paper or computer test? Standardized tests have their place but not in replacing the view of the student as a life-long learner.

### **Character Development**

One of the foremost factors separating impoverished students that succeed and those who fail is indicated by character development. While it is recognized that impoverished students already have a major disadvantage due to lack of resources and other major stresses on their lives, direct involvement with teaching students character and behavioral skills such as perseverance, focus, and resiliency increases the odds of students continuing their education and performing better academically throughout their education.

While character development has started to become a more important focus in education only within the past couple of decades, research already indicates positive results. In order to understand this theory of character development improving students' success in school, one must note the findings of prominent psychologist Abraham Maslow and his discoveries in the mid-twentieth century.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

In developing his theory of human behavior, psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954) studied the behavior of healthy people as opposed to the behaviorists' analysis of animals and the psychoanalysts' observation of neurotic behavior. Along with other psychologists, Maslow was focused on the positive and inherent growth characteristics of human behavior. Psychologically healthy people, according to Maslow, have character traits that include being realistic, autonomous, ethical, creative and accepting of oneself. These all correlate to the highest order of his hierarchy of needs pyramid which embodies Maslow's theory and is a helpful guideline to understanding character development in a student. Simply put, if a child's basic needs are not met as is the case of many impoverished children, further success in development of appropriate behavior and

reactions to situations does not develop appropriately in the child. However, it is when these needs are met or at least recognized and an effective plan is made to support students in healthy development of character that they have the ability to reach their full potential and to succeed. As a number of studies in the early nineties indicated, “resilient children do not appear to possess mysterious or unique qualities; rather, they have retained or secured important resources representing basic protective systems in human development” (Coatsworth & Masten, 1998, p. 212). Those resources are typically the result of a mentor in the life of the child that in spite of the adverse conditions that the child is being raised in can reverse the usual ill effects of such an environment. Thus, even students who have not acquired the normal basic needs as suggested by Maslow to reach a level of self-actualization can succeed in attaining these higher levels when a mentor develops the necessary traits of perseverance and resilience that help them to succeed regardless of their circumstances.

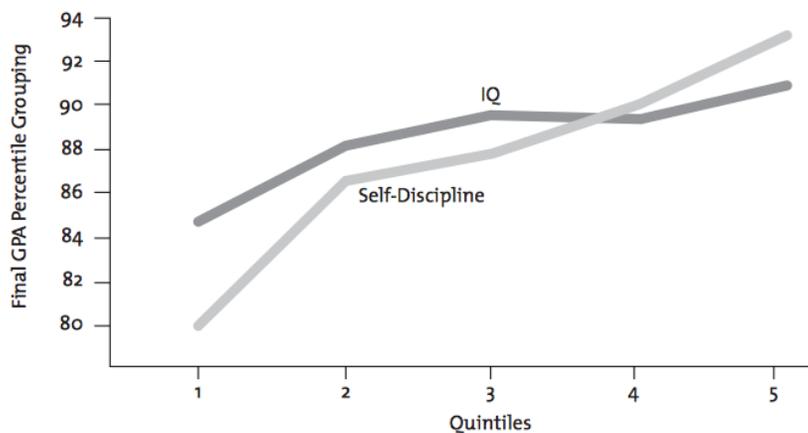


**Figure 1:** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Source: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, *The Gale Encyclopedia of Nursing and Allied Health*, Krapp (2002), p. 1501.

## Development of Character

The idea of character development and its effect on students after high school graduation was not a new idea brought to light by 21<sup>st</sup> century educational reforms. This can be seen primarily in the research findings presented by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986 informing the public that “[b]elief in the value of hard work, the importance of personal responsibility, and the importance of education itself contributes to greater success in school” (Finn, 1986, p. 27). A similar study showed that “[m]any highly successful individuals have above-average but not extraordinary intelligence. Accomplishment in a particular activity is often more dependent upon hard work and self-discipline than on innate ability” (Finn, p. 26). Another source corroborates this and can be easily seen in the provided diagram of a two-year study of eighth grade students which showed that self-discipline was a better indicator of academic performance than intelligence quotient (IQ) (Jensen, 2009, p. 72).

4.1 Self-Discipline Beats IQ



**Figure 2:** This graph depicts final grade point average as a function of ranked quintiles of IQ and self-discipline. Source: Adapted from “Self-Discipline Outdoes IQ in Predicting Academic Performance of Adolescents,” by A. L. Duckworth and M. P. Seligman, 2005, *Psychological Science*, 16(12), pp. 939–944.

While it is true that many longitudinal studies on the effect of students developing the aforementioned character traits and on the effect on their adult lives are in their beginning stages of study, early positive results can be seen in such schools as KIPP, Amistad Academy, Roxbury Prep, and North Star Academy (Tough, 2012). In these schools, noncognitive attributes such as conscientiousness, resilience, perseverance, and optimism are incorporated in daily lessons. In some of the above-mentioned schools, character report cards are even given out with their academic report cards. The idea behind character report cards is that in “presenting character to students not as a set of fixed traits but as a series of constantly developing attributes will inspire them to improve those traits” (Tough, 2012, p. 98). Now, more than ever before, it is being discovered that the best indicator of the likelihood of dropping out of high school, drug use, and criminal activity is not the students’ scores on a standardized test or their cognitive ability. The best indicator is student character. In the past decade, Brent Roberts (as cited in Tough, 2012) has explored such character tests for conscientiousness and has seen that “[p]eople high in conscientiousness get better grades in high school and college; they commit fewer crimes; and they stay married longer” (p. 71) among other positive outcomes. While recent studies on character and its implementation in schools have indicated a major impact on the lives of low-SES students, it is the way in which students positively handle and overcome failure that has been found to deeply embed these character traits in the student.

### **Developmental Challenges Impoverished Students Face**

If the “character hypothesis” seems to have more to do with the success of a student than cognitive abilities, whose responsibility is it to teach a child how to

overcome failure and how should it be done? As Ronald Reagan (as cited in Finn, 1986) once said, “We know that education begins in the home and flourishes when it draws upon the combined efforts of children, parents, teachers, and administrators” (p. 4). Like a three-legged chair though, students that do not receive the mentorship and support they need at home in order to face the incredible emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues that stem from their low-SES status, creates a serious disadvantage to their development. Some studies of risk and resilience in students have shown a correlation between family income and academic success (van Ijzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004). Though this may be a strong correlation, it is not the income of a child’s family that causes success or failure in school. These are, however, the stressors that these students are more likely to face as a result of living in low-SES situations and the response to these stressors that create this achievement gap. The ripple effect from these stressors normally predicts that the student is then more likely to drop out of high school. In evaluating these challenges, it is important to note the areas in which students succeed in spite of these obstacles in order to better enable other students to succeed as well.

**Emotional/social challenges.** Numerous studies cited in the literature of longitudinal-based research findings have shown that children who grow up with a healthy secure attachment to their guardian figure are more likely to behave well in school and succeed academically (van Ijzendoorn et al., 2004; Brent & Pelletier, 2002). It seems simple then that the ideal solution to help foster academic success would be to ensure that children have a loving, caring, and supportive caretaker. While this may be difficult in terms of implementation, it lends itself to the idea of education. Educators and

psychologists alike tout the idea that education is the way in which to break the cycle of poverty and in the long term this has been shown to be true in many developing third world countries. As has been shown through studies and surveys, children from low-SES families are more likely to have parents or guardians who either did not finish high school or do not have a high level of educational attainment and thus these parents are not confident in their ability to become involved in their children's education (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Therefore, educating these parents, especially while their children are young, about the effect of their attachment to their children as well as ways in which they can help their children develop the social and emotional skills necessary for adult life may be a part of the solution. In the long term, however, programs that implement this strategy through home visits and preschool programs have been shown to have some, but not a major positive effect on children (Mann, Reynolds, Robertson & Temple, 2001). In part, this is due to a focus on sections of a child's life. If researchers were somehow able to complete a longitudinal study on the effect that constant attention and care to low-SES children's development over the course of their preK-12 education had on their lives in the long-term, it may show that these children live more successful lives than their peers despite the normal effects of poverty.

While it is naturally the caregiver's responsibility to mentor his or her children and teach them the proper emotional and social skills needed for life, when students come to school without these skills, it is important for the teachers to step in and help foster these skills in order for children to succeed academically. As Jensen (2009) has shown, "every emotional response other than the six hardwired emotions of joy, anger, surprise, disgust, sadness, and fear *must be taught*" (p. 19). He also found that the schools that

were most likely to succeed were schools that implemented formal and informal strategies that influenced their students' peer socialization, reliability of relationships, and importance of social status. Through investing in the emotional health and well-being of their students, teachers can then help children succeed to their fullest potential academically.

**Acute and chronic stressors.** Low-income families often have to live daily with several stressors at a time including overcrowded and substandard housing, community violence, financial instability, and an unstable and shifting family structure (Evans & English, 2002). While it is true that some stress is good for the development of resiliency, a character trait shown to be indicative of success in life, too much stress, especially early on in life, has been shown to be very detrimental to students with effects reaching into adulthood. Among other damaging effects, it has been shown that stress significantly hinders one's ability to be creative, to reason logically and to remember concepts (Lupien, King, Meaney, & McEwen, 2001).

One of the most critical areas in which successful low-SES students will differ from their failing low-SES peers is in the amount of acute and chronic stress, how early it is developed, and whether or not there is a mentor or someone that helps coach them through coping with the stress. Interestingly enough, the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that regulates character development is also the one that is most affected by early stress. In a study done by Nadine Burke Harris (as cited in Tough, 2012), a medical doctor with a majority of patients from low-SES families, she found that there was a strong correlation between Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACE) scores and a student's difficulties in school. Only three percent of the students she examined who had

scored in the percentage of the least amount of stressors in their lives had behavioral or learning problems. In staggering contrast, fifty-one percent of the students with four or more stressors in their lives had behavioral or learning problems (Tough, 2012). While the stressors defined in the ACE study overlap with health and safety issues as well as emotional and social issues, it is easy to conclude from these studies the difficulties these students will have achieving academic success. In school, one is expected to sit still, concentrate, and follow directions, but for students with a large amount of stress at home, it is hard for them to follow any of these directives. This then directly relates to how they perform in school; in other words, whether they succeed or not. Success, however, can be achieved despite these emotional and social issues when children are mentored to be able to persevere through these challenges to attain their educational goals. This factor of grit or persevering to obtain these long-term goals was even shown to be the distinguishing factor among highly successful adults (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Solutions for alleviating the stressors or counseling students about handling these stressors are daunting tasks. Two common reactions toward stress in low-SES students' lives are either to turn inward, which is manifested in self-doubt, self-destructive behaviors, anxiety, fear, and sadness, or else to turn outward, which manifests itself in fighting, acting out, and breaking the law. The mentor program known as Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) benefits students that face great adversity (Tough, 2012). While YAP certainly seems to be a successful program, it would be hard to implement nationwide due to the budget required and the amount of workers, paid or volunteer, that would be needed as mentors for students. However, even in the classroom setting, tools that YAP mentors implement can be utilized through empowering students in helping

them know how to act differently given a situation, as well as helping to alter their environment. For example, many low-SES students do not have a quiet place to study or do homework at home. Giving more time in class or after class for homework and asking questions could make a marked difference in students' success or failure. Educators around the country lament the hard fact that some or even a majority of their students do not have the privilege of a two-parent home, support, and love that all children need in order to thrive. While it is not the place of the educator to be their students' parent, it is the place of the educator to wake up every morning asking "What can I do that will make a difference in the lives and development of my students today?" Change does not often happen overnight, but with an optimistic outlook to the future and a belief that all students can learn and that they are malleable in their development, students can be taught to overcome great difficulties and challenges of early life.

**Cognitive lags.** The effects of poverty "often set in motion a vicious and stubborn cycle of low expectations" (Jensen, 2009, p. 38). Low expectations often follow underachievement, which can ultimately demoralize a student's self-esteem (Jensen, 2009). This cycle then increases the achievement gap between low-SES students and their peers from high-SES families. The achievement gap has long been studied and debated over the last couple of decades manifesting itself in such educational reforms as No Child Left Behind and Head Start programs. These programs, while well intentioned, are not the overall solution to this gap. Most teachers would agree that their primary responsibility in teaching students dwells within the cognitive realm, but in reality, it is a mixture of both cognitive and noncognitive skills that produce academic success. As one study has shown between low-SES students who succeed in school as compared to their

low-SES peers that eventually drop out of school or do not meet state standards on cognitive ability tests,

if a student holds a positive self-view and routinely exhibits these behaviors in their positive forms—for example, attends school regularly, participates in extracurricular activities, completes required work in school and out—these may serve as protective mechanisms that improve a student’s chances of school success in spite of being a member of a risk group. (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 222)

Thus, it would seem that based on this research, a mentor’s role in the life of a student cannot be underestimated in that a child can learn to succeed through encouragement to participate and engage in learning.

Another study (Bloom, 1985) on people who have reached high goals and developed immense talent in a certain field demonstrated that no matter what their initial ability was, that “unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training, the individual will not attain extreme levels of capability” in the field that they pursued (p. 3). This will be seen and further discussed in a later section on examples of students and mentors who have done just that and have experienced success. Interestingly enough, a 1985 survey (Ginsburg & Hanson, 1985) concerning these very same issues evaluated the values of 12,000 high school students from low-SES homes and the effect it had on their overall education. The survey found that a high percentage of low-SES students that succeeded in school were more likely to have friends who thought well of students with good grades, that it is important to plan ahead, and they were more likely to have a maternal figure who encouraged them in the importance of a college education. This is quite familiar to current research on the effect

a mentor has on the life of a student in instilling important value traits that commonly lead toward success in high school completion. As has been suggested as solutions to other stressors in students' lives, having a mentor that provides hope and optimism while helping them to develop social and problem-solving skills is crucial for students' academic success.

**Health and safety issues.** It should come as no surprise that health and achievement overlap. In order for one's body to function optimally, it needs to be healthy. Students need to have good nutrition and safe environments, which is something that is not as easily accessed by low-SES families. Thus, health is another major stressor on a student's life that can cause behavior issues and underachievement in school unless they have developed resiliency from their circumstances through a mentor. As adequately portrayed in his overall study of various risk factors on a students' health, each and every factor from inadequate housing to environmental hazards compounds on itself to create an overall negative effect on the student academically (Jensen, 2009). With all of these factors, what truly makes the difference? Schools have often provided communities with resources to pediatricians, dentistry, and other types of resources and assistance. However, more recent studies by Clancy Blair and Gary Evans have each shown separately in their research that the effects of poverty (environmental-risk and health hazards) on a child's stressor level were almost negligible if the mother was especially responsive to her child (Blair et al., 2008; Evans et al., 2007). This points back to the secure attachment children have to their parent or guardian figure from an early age and that this figure is a mentor in their lives. While schools may not be able to help low-SES

families move into better houses or have better health care plans, the one thing they can provide for children in those families is a support system.

**Consequences.** The severity of the stressors and challenges low-SES students face on a daily basis have severe consequences in the long-run if there is minimal to no intervention in the lives of these students. The National Education Association (NEA) reports that economically speaking, high school dropouts are incarcerated at twice the rate that high school graduates are, each group of dropouts cost \$23 billion in health care costs, and they create a potential loss of \$58 billion in income tax revenue for the government (Dianada, 2008). One solution may be to focus more funds into institutional programs that have been shown to work with low-SES students so as to cut the cycle of poverty at its root. A well-known longitudinal study (Nores, Belfield, Barnett, Schweinhart, 2005) of the High/Scope Perry Preschool initially aimed to show cognitive development as shown through IQ scores between the group that received special attention and direction compared to the control group that received a normal day of preschool activities. Their initial goal at proving their hypothesis was limited in that significant IQ differences between the two groups only lasted for the first couple of years after the preschool program. Something that is clearer today, however, now that the cohort is over forty years old is that it can be seen that there are significant differences between the Perry Preschool group and that of the control group in their educational attainment, criminal record, and job earnings among other factors. While in the short term, the study did not initially show positive results, in the long run not only did the Perry Preschool students reach a higher attainment in education, but the study also reflected that both cognitive and noncognitive developments lead to success (Nores et

al.). More possibilities include outreach in the community and training teachers not only in their field of study, but to recognize and develop character in their students in order to highly motivate them toward success.

### **Role of School and Community in Character Development**

Thus far, a great deal of research has been reviewed that argues the case for improved mentorship of students in developing their character that make the difference between success or failure for students from low income families. While their basic needs may not be met, developing the character traits and resiliency to withstand these stressors can offset the typically negative effects of their low-SES situation. What then, is the role of the schools in being part of the solution? One case study done on 15 high schools with a diverse student population and with half of the schools that are in districts that are in the top quartile in terms of need showed that the best practices of these high-performing schools are “rigorous curriculum and expectations, innovative instructional programs and practices, transparency, evidence-based decision making, and strategic targeting of resources” (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011, p. 14). Similarly, it was also found that what made these schools stand apart was that they created a curriculum that met or exceeded set standards for their age level (Templeton, 2011). In other words, they set goals for their students and then developed ways in which those expectations could be achieved. This type of curriculum needs to permeate throughout the school, and the best place to start is with those who have the closest contact with the students: the teachers.

### **Teachers**

Parents are their children’s first and foremost influential teachers, and the parents’ contribution to the development of their children at an early age is oftentimes more

important to their success in life than their SES. When parents are not involved in their child's life, though, how can the school fill the gap? In a study (DiStasi & Hagelskamp, 2012) of a diverse range of high-poverty level, but high-succeeding schools in Ohio, it was found that a common strand ran through each school: that teachers and administrators truly believed in the success of their students and were committed to making a difference in the lives of their students. Along the same lines, students interviewed in these schools expressed that their personal connection to their teachers as both mentors and confidants was what made them feel valued and loved, which in turn challenged them to succeed. Among the strategies employed to sustain academic success in their schools was to engage the teachers in true collaborative work as well as to make sure that the teachers hired were completely committed to the school's vision and mission. Also interesting to note in the study was that administrators pay special attention to and give the support needed to teachers who may become overwhelmed with the level of stress in their job (DiStasi & Hagelskamp). All of these are affective strategies. In effect, these schools had a strong core of leadership supporting their teachers that gave them a level of respect and concern for these teachers to succeed which in turn helped them to be effective teachers for their students.

### **Community**

As has been suggested in this thesis, any gains in helping students succeed must be consistent throughout their education. Balfanz and Legters (2004) make the same suggestion in their study of schools with a high percentage of student dropouts. They also corroborate that poverty seems to be the significant factor that correlates high schools with the percentage of dropout students. Nevertheless, as was seen in the Ohio study,

high-poverty schools that succeeded in having a high percentage of their students score proficiently or advanced on their state examinations cited community and business involvement in their schools as a contributing factor to their success.

Even though community aid was only cited as a beneficial tool to the school and that some of the schools in the study that succeeded had minimal support from the community, there is an important lesson to be learned. In this ever widening circle of influence around the success of children as they grow as students, no amount of positive influence can be discounted. So often, a community may choose to take a back seat to their children's education because they believe that it is the responsibility of the school to educate their children. It is the school's responsibility, but it is also the responsibility of the community as well. In a circle of life scenario, community support in the school is what gives the school and teachers the support necessary to better influence the students and help them develop which engenders successful development of the community as a whole. Thus, if that link is broken, the school can still operate, but not to the full capability that it could potentially have if it had the support of the community in developing characteristics essential to becoming responsible adults.

### **Examples from Life**

What is the desire for success, but a hope for a better tomorrow? What is a dream, but a purpose toward something more? Nearly everyone hopes for the same kind of success stories as those of Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, and so many others. While statistics and research can show a multitude of common factors or relationship trends between poverty and becoming successful, so also do the

testimonies of those who have defeated the odds of poverty in favor of a hope for a better tomorrow. Such can be seen, for example, in the life of Dr. Ben Carson.

**Dr. Ben Carson.** Raised by a single mother who wanted to see her sons break out of the cycle of poverty in which they lived, she determined to encourage them and help them reach their full potential. Although she only had a third grade education herself, she developed the desire to learn within her sons through encouraging them and not letting any excuse come between them and their education. Dr. Carson even says of this time in his life,

When I was in the fifth grade, I thought I was stupid, so I conducted myself like a stupid person and achieved like a stupid person. When I was in the seventh grade, I thought I was smart: I conducted myself like a smart person and achieved like a smart person. What does that say about expectations, and about human potential? This is what we must learn to develop. (UD, 2000, para.13)

Learning to develop self-confidence and a confidence in education is a key to helping students succeed, especially those with otherwise little opportunity to better themselves.

Though Dr. Carson is a world-renowned public figure, success is also found in the everyday graduation of a student expected to fail as well. Such is the case of a young man, Terrell Parrish of New Jersey.

**Terrell Parrish.** At ten years of age Terrell was rescued from an abusive foster care home weighing only twenty-eight pounds. Though doctors expected him to have developmental issues due to malnourishment and abuse, his adoptive parents cared for and helped him develop. Terrell graduated from his high school with honors. His life is a

testament to the idea that “with resilience, and caring, dedicated adoptive parents, children can move ‘beyond trauma’ and have a successful life” (Cornbluth, 2013, para.7).

**E. L. Furr High School.** Not only have individuals succeeded against all seemingly insurmountable odds they have faced, but so also have communities come together to create a positive change in the lives of their students in order for them to succeed. Such is the case of E. L. Furr High school in Houston, Texas. Once a high-achieving school, because of the influx of new students and gang members into the community, the school was nicknamed a “throwaway” school by those in the community because of the lack of discipline and behavioral issues that the teachers had to face daily with the students let alone try to help them succeed academically (Costa & Kallick, 2008). While the situation looked grim for the school, a total perspective change on how the teachers viewed the students as well as how the students viewed their work and behavioral issues occurred over the course of a school year (Costa & Kallick). The new principal had been called out of retirement to help the floundering school and she implemented the Habits of the Mind curriculum into the school curriculum (Costa & Kallick). Teachers were being supported and students were being encouraged to evaluate their behavior and given necessary skills in learning how to overcome their impulsive behavioral outbursts to gain perseverance and resiliency. In turn, gang fights, which had previously been a common occurrence in the school, got to a point where the school has not seen a gang fight in three years (Costa & Kallick). Not only does this show character development among the students as a whole, but it is a positive impact on these students’ lives because the lessons they are learning now in developing their character produce better study habits that will in turn help them to succeed academically in accordance with

state and national standards. This was only one school: one success story, hardly a concrete proof for character development in students. However, it is in this story that one finds hope. Transforming these students' lives through persistent care and attention to their needs and character development can lead to a success for the community as a whole. It is in this school's example that other schools can follow in its footsteps to improve upon and implement programs and innovative ways of developing their own students' development so as to further engender success in their schools as well.

### **Observations in the Field**

Through tutoring students in math during an after-school program as well as in private sessions, it was very easy to pick out the students who were still persevering and those who had just given up. Like Dr. Carson, these students thought that they were "stupid" and did not need to try except to be passed along until they could leave school. In short, it was heartbreaking. After three months of working with the same third grade student simply adding and subtracting by trying to encourage him and help him see value in what he was doing and in himself, there was a breakthrough. Sure, it initially took an hour to finish a homework assignment that would normally take a student fifteen minutes to finish, but it was in those three months that he learned through constant attention that he did not have to struggle on his own, that he had potential, and that he was valued. He did not become a math genius overnight, but he at least had the seed of a growing confidence that he could succeed. While not conclusive evidence that mentorship has an effect on the success of students, it provides a powerful illustration of just how important and critical it is in their lives.

### **Academy Teaching**

A three-month teaching placement at a private academy further illustrated this picture. While teaching math twice a week at this academy, I not only taught the students the skills they needed to know in math, but I also invested in them personally and encouraged them in persisting through their studies. When I first started, the age-old question “What does this have to do with real life?” was a popular question. Instead of telling them it was important for later study and leaving it at that, I encouraged them to think through their own question in order to find an answer. Giving them avenues to find this answer as well as applying it to their beloved sport of basketball (the assigned students all formed a basketball team) also intrigued them. Toward the end of the second month there, students would excitedly come into the small classroom telling me how they had just passed an exam or understood a concept that was particularly difficult for them the previous week.

Observing the students begin to help each other through particularly tough lessons also increased as time went on. The capstone of it all was when after a particular work session in geometry, a student said, “Ever since you came here, you have been changing our lives. I actually feel like I can do this, no, I am confident I can do this [geometry] now” (personal communication, April 10, 2014). While this was only one recent experience and by no means is intended to indicate a hard and fast method of teaching, the experience embedded a sense of commitment and persistence that through encouragement and mentorship, even the toughest academically underachieving student-athletes can learn if given the opportunity and avenues to succeed no matter what their background. There are numerous resources available. Utilizing these resources and teaching students how to find and use them as well is what generates success.

**Practicum Observation**

Another experience that was observed over the course of half of a school year was in a seventh grade math class in a private school. While only observing and assisting the teacher by grading papers, it was noted that one of the more conscientious students who always turned assignments in and typically earned good grades on assignments had stopped turning in homework and was doing poorly on quizzes. The student later shared that her parents were divorcing and that she was not able to study much at home. The teacher in this class came along side this student and stayed after class to help her with assignments and gave her the time to finish them before she had to go home. In this way, the student's grades steadily improved again. While the student was not from a low-SES home, working with this student throughout half the school year indicated that when a student's home environment and support system crumbles and stressors increase in his or her life, the student's academic achievements decrease. Only through rebuilding that support was the student able to overcome home environment stressors to continue to succeed academically in school. This was only one case that was personally observed, but this student's case is unfortunately not unique. Thousands of students deal with stressors and blows to their support system across the country and if not recognized by a teacher or another mentor, these students may slip through the cracks to become a statistic as one of the many students who fail to complete high school or who fail to develop the appropriate skills necessary to become competent adults.

**Solution**

The field of education is complex and it is difficult to draw logical conclusions from studies. For every research study that portrays some sort of result based on a

sufficient collection of data, there exists some sort of counterexample to the study. The same would probably be true if a proof of the opposite of the hypothesis of this thesis were attempted. Fortunately, a completely logical hypothesis that would reveal the “formula” to help low-SES students succeed is not what is sought. While it is true that success in some skills are mechanical and only require time and practice, learning character traits that develop one’s character is not one of them. Character must be taught, and while that does involve some practice and time, it is only a small part of the development of skills necessary for success. It is also difficult to create a holistic panacea because each child is as unique as the DNA with which they were born. Each child experiences an environment that may be similar, but is unique to the understanding of that child. Essentially, by chipping away at what the solution is not, a clearer sculpture of what the solution is emerges. Relationships are the key to a student’s success. Whether that is through the motivation of a parent, guardian, neighbor or teacher, it is one of the most influential factors bearing on a child. A solid relationship where the child felt supported and loved was cited in each of the examples of individual lives as well as holistic studies on school wide implementations of a mentorship program or influencing a positive attitude of support and community in a school. The fact that this result was found in separate studies across the nation confirms, but does not completely show that this key is a solid weapon for fighting the typical effects that low-SES has on a student. Just as each student is different and faces various environmental changes, so also must one’s approach to the solution vary. While mentorship is an overall umbrella solution, it will only achieve its purpose of success in students when implemented in a way that meets the perceived needs of the students on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, it is of utmost

importance to promote through action the belief that all children, no matter their background or stressors, can learn and make a significant impact on their education through developing in them character traits that lead to success against all odds.

### **Conclusion**

The enormous amount of research and numerous studies on low-SES families can seem daunting. Which study has the magic formula with results that help low-SES students break the cycle of poverty in their families? No study, yet all at the same time. The more that is read on this topic, the more it becomes apparent that no one study, researcher, or psychologist has the breakthrough solution that will improve the lives of these students. The worldview and perspective from which the researcher comes, points to various reasons for a child's underachievement in school. At the same time, each psychologist, neurosurgeon, educator or doctor that completes innovative studies like the ones presented in this thesis hold a piece of the puzzle that makes up the mystery of underachievement. The more one studies and observes students from low-SES families, the more one begins to realize that all of these factors: stressors, health issues, cognitive lags, and emotional and social challenges roll into one big entangled ball that inhibits the development of character and produces underachievement in students. There is one notable exception: mentors. Whether the mentor comes in the form of a parent, teacher, administrator, or neighbor who takes an interest in a student's life; he or she can make a direct impact on the potential for success of a student in spite of economic constraints.

The reason well-intentioned programs succeed or fail in helping low-SES students succeed is in their development of leadership willing to step into the lives of their students to help them succeed: to give them a reason to hope and achieve. This is easier

to implement at younger levels than when the student is older and more scarred by the effects of long-term poverty without a support system, but nevertheless can still be reached through persistence (which has been shown to be a character trait that influences one's success). This is why schools such as KIPP with a majority of low-SES students succeed: with a small student body they were able to develop character traits for success in their students that increased the rate of high school graduation as well as those that went on to complete a four year college degree. Not only do teachers and administrators need to have the training or ability to mentor these students for academic success, but it is the responsibility of the nation, beginning in the community to reach out and not just hand out support, but to provide a way of education and opportunity for students to develop the drive and the character traits to succeed. It is not enough to affirm that these problems exist and that students should have the right to an education that helps them to develop successfully. To affirm this and yet do nothing is a travesty. It is the responsibility of all to bring up the next generation, for with them lies the success or failure of us all.

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