Can Effort Create Success?

By Rob Gira
Executive Vice President, AVID Center

Since AVID’s founding in 1980, we have stressed that individual determination and hard work will lead to success. Our students hear this as soon as they are recruited into AVID and this philosophy underpins almost every aspect of the AVID program as they progress. The data regarding AVID students, both quantitative and qualitative, indicate that circumstances of birth, environment, and socioeconomic status can be overcome. Numerous AVID graduates tell us this in their stories at our Summer Institutes.

We also know—and researchers have affirmed this—that the AVID environment, including the academic elective class, provides academic and social scaffolds that build AVID students’ social and academic capital so that they are willing to constantly take on intellectually challenging opportunities. They leave us with a lot more than they arrived with.

Still, do our students and all of our AVID site team members uniformly believe that background and environment don’t matter? This past summer, while teaching the administrator and coordinator strand at the AVID Institute, I heard from participants that some site team members believed “Those kids really can’t do it. We are asking too much of them.” In addition, I have heard younger AVID students say things like, “I really can’t do this; I stink at math,” or “It doesn’t matter what I do; that teacher just doesn’t like me.”

When site team members or other faculty from an AVID site attend an AVID Summer Institute or read the research, they are often convinced by student stories that effort, when combined with support, indeed leads to success. In recent years, as the controversy of IQ and social status versus the power of effort has escalated, a number of authors and researchers have made compelling cases that success can result more from individual effort and support than from inherent traits and social circumstances. Some of the following researchers and writers might be beneficial for study by AVID site teams, and for discussion at staff meetings.

Lauren Resnick

One of the most veteran voices about effort creating success, Dr. Resnick has published many research studies on the cognitive science of learning and instruction. Since the 1970s, Resnick, the former president of the American Educational Research Association, has examined the nature of intelligence in numerous articles and books. A good introduction to Resnick’s work for AVID site teams is her paper “Making America Smarter,” (1999) in which she notes, “In practice, though, it is proving harder and harder to meet the twin goals of equity and higher achievement. This is because our schools are trapped in a set of beliefs about ability and aptitude that make it hard to evoke effective academic effort from students and educators.” Resnick makes a number of other compelling assertions, including:

- Americans assume that aptitude determines what we can learn, and our schools are still too often organized around this principle.
- IQ tests, or their surrogates, are still used to determine access to enriched curriculum.
- Persistent beliefs about the importance of inherited aptitude result in a self-sustaining cycle. Students who are held to low expectations do not try to break through the barriers because they believe that inherited ability matters most and they did not inherit enough capacity. The design of too many of our school systems perpetuates this belief.
- Resnick argues that school systems can and should be designed to create intellectual effort, and that “effort-based” schools will help students believe that intelligence is not fixed, but is something that grows. In these kinds of environments, students will see the importance of effort and its connection to their development.
- Cognitive researchers have turned their attention toward educational strategies that immerse students in long-term, intellectually demanding environments. Resnick notes research shows that, if students are treated as if they are intelligent, they actually become so.

Resnick’s long list of work can be found via an internet search. If you would like a matrix showing connections between her theories and AVID, please contact me at rgira@avidcenter.org.
Daniel Willingham

Willingham, a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Virginia, writes regularly on the brain, the complexities of thinking, and challenges our students face. In his new book, *Why Don’t Students Like School?* he offers insights into the design of our brain and how our wiring makes complex thinking difficult. A good starting place with Willingham’s work for AVID site teams is his work for the *American Educator*, “Ask The Cognitive Scientist.”

In an excerpt from his book, Willingham quotes Henry Ford, who said, “Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few people engage in it.” Willingham goes on to say that reasoning is what sets us apart from animals and that humans are good at certain types of reasoning. However, he adds, “Humans don’t think very often because our brains are designed not for thought, but for the avoidance of thought. Thinking is not only effortful…but slow and unreliable.”

No wonder our AVID students sometimes go “over the edge” with all of the complexities we push at them. Other points from Willingham that make his work compelling:

- **Our brain serves many purposes, and thinking is not the one it does best.** Compared with its support for thinking, the brain has a much easier time with tasks such as seeing and moving. (Which is why many of our AVID teachers and staff developers include movement in their AVID lessons.)
- **Thinking is slow, effortful, and uncertain.** Despite this, however,

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**Book Review**

**Mindset: The New Psychology of Success** by Dr. Carol Dweck

By Rob Gira
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Dweck examines the way we think about our destiny, how much we believe in our innate abilities versus hard work. Currently a professor of psychology at Stanford, Dweck proposes that human beings fall into two categories: those with a fixed mindset, and those with a growth mindset. Those with a fixed mindset believe they can go only as far as their natural endowments. These type of individuals are less willing to risk, less willing to change, and, while they may be successful, are less curious and take less responsibility for their own development. Growth mindset individuals, which Dweck has researched at many different age levels, including elementary, junior high, and college, welcome a challenge, and, in fact, expect it. Failure, for the growth mindset types, does not measure them or determine their fate. Instead, they welcome new challenges and adapt their strategies. As part of her argument in favor of helping individuals develop a growth mindset, Dweck discusses her own struggles, including relationships and education. In junior high school, Dweck was in a class where the teacher knew all of the students’ IQ scores and seated them accordingly, and gave important tasks only to the students with high IQ scores. Dweck recalls the impact this had on her own progress and the challenges that some students faced as a result. Later in her education, during high school, Dweck, who had been a “math whiz,” encountered a teacher who believed that girls could not do math. She gave in to the stereotype and left the math course. Dweck mentions the research by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (former AVID Summer Institute keynoter) around “stereotype threat,” the notion that having to check a box on a test form indicating your gender may cause a performance gap. Dweck’s key points. This comes through very strongly in her chapter on sports. She describes the failures that Michael Jordan, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Pete Sampras and others had to overcome and, in fact, use as motivators. AVID students are continually being pushed into new and challenging areas. How they learn from their failures and welcome new challenges is vital.
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we still like to think and reason. However, conditions must be right for our curiosity to thrive. Thinking is so hard; it doesn’t take much for us to shut down.

• Thinking occurs when we combine information from the environment and from long-term memory in new ways. For educators, designing the right kinds of challenges for students is critical. If we make the tasks too easy, they become bored. If we overmatch them, they can shut down.

Willingham also examines how students learn facts best, how they can be engaged in problem solving, and, like Lauren Resnick notes that “Americans, like other Westerners, tend to view intelligence as a fixed attribute, like eye color.” This contrasts with the Eastern view in countries like China and Japan, who see intelligence as malleable. Willingham also agrees with Resnick about sustained hard work, noting research that indicates “intelligence can be changed.” In his book, he outlines some suggestions to make school more enjoyable for students—even complex thinking. These are just a few samples:

• Praise effort, not ability (see our review of Carol Dweck’s Mindset)
• Tell students that hard work pays off
• Treat failure as a natural part of learning
• Don’t take study skills for granted
• Catching up is the long-term goal
• Show students you have confidence in them

Willingham’s work connects well with AVID and should make good reading for our site teams, especially for a Socratic Seminar. If you read the article excerpted from Why Don’t Students Like School, take particular note of how students “catch up,” and how we can level the playing field for “slower learners.”

Willingham can be reached at www.danielwillingham.com.

Malcolm Gladwell
In my opinion, Gladwell is one of the most “out of the box” thinkers of our time. His books Blink and The Tipping Point were very good and should be read twice to get the full effect. I have read The Outliers: The Story of Success twice and will probably need to read it again.

This is his best work and has strong connections to our AVID efforts. In brief, Gladwell sees success as a combination of factors: luck, environment, and, most importantly, effort. Be warned: The book is packed with research references, and you will find yourself mining those as well. But the examples he provides of both success and tragic failure are powerful as well. Why do the Chinese do so well at math (you’ll be surprised)? Why did the Beatles become a major musical force? Bill Gates, and other computer software geniuses—what was their secret? What separates the best classical musicians from those who never achieve at the highest levels? It might be 10,000 hours of effort. And, Chris Langan, “the world’s smartest man,” who never got a college degree—his story has a strong AVID connection.

Carol Dweck
Perhaps the most significant current voice on effort creating ability, Dweck has written voluminously on the subject and provides a great deal of research to back up her points. She is currently a professor of psychology at Stanford University, and is also a frequent lecturer throughout the world. She has worked with sports teams, educators, and others, to develop an understanding that IQ, social circumstances, and environment are only a part of the picture in our intellectual destiny. A few of her articles and interviews worth reviewing are: “When Bright Kids Get Bad Grades;” “The Secret to Raising Smart Kids;” “The Perils and Promises of Praise;” “The Effort Effect;” and (excerpted from her book) “Developing a Growth Mindset.”

A good start for a site team is “The Perils and Promises of Praise.” (Educational Leadership, 2007). Please see the review of her book, on the previous page.