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# **The social contexts of tutoring: Mentoring the older at-risk student**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative research study targeted fourth grade at-risk children in a culturally diverse elementary school in a mid-sized city in the southwestern United States. The purpose of the study was to describe the nature of social interactions within the context of tutorial sessions and to identify common characteristics of highly-effective tutors in their interactions with older, at-risk readers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Much attention has focused on the needs of at-risk students and the necessity of early intervention programs to circumvent the cycle of failure before a child reaches the intermediate grades. (Clay, 1979, 1985; Johnston & Allington, 1990). Chapter One research (Carter, 1984; Kennedy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986) confirms that premise and suggests that remediation of learning problems after the primary grades is generally ineffective. This research contributes to new understandings about the importance of the early childhood years and gives impetus to President Clinton's America Reads Challenge. This nonpartisan effort involves community volunteers in one-on-one tutoring to assure that all children have every opportunity to become literate before the end of grade three.

Although the ideal is to assure early intervention for all at-risk readers before they reach the fourth grade, there are many upper elementary and middle school students who are denied successful early intervention and are failing to develop essential literacy skills. Barriers such as negative attitudes toward reading, lack of motivation, internalization of poor habits, and lack of solid word recognition strategies make it unlikely that research studies will be able to post significant gains with students beyond grade three (Cloer & Pearman, 1993). Perhaps these difficulties older with children account for the scarcity of effective research-based models of delivery for successful tutorial

programs with older, at-risk readers. Wasik & Slavin (1993) conducted an extensive analysis of one-on-one adult-delivered instruction for at-risk children, discussing precise models of delivery. Their review found a preponderance of studies focusing on early intervention while only three studies targeted students in grade three or above (Bausell, Moody, & Walzl, 1972; Fresko & Eisenberg, 1983; Shaver & Nuhn, 1971).

Reading researchers identified several key components as essential for effective tutoring or one-on-one compensatory supplemental programs; however, most research focuses on early intervention. Wasik (1998) discussed the important factors of consistency and intensity in tutoring younger children. It is important that a child form a trusting relationship with the tutor, so most programs assign the same tutor to meet with a child each week. In fact, some researchers identified this positive, caring relationship between child and tutor/caregiver as the single most important factor in the success of supplementary programs (Vendell, Humow, Posner, 1997). Successful tutors, it seems, are aware of the critical importance of building positive relationships based on trust and respect. These tutors understand that affirming interactions result in a desire to please the tutor, increased motivation to learn, and more cooperative attitudes.

The importance of social interactions for reading development is well established (Guthrie et al., 1993; Slavin, 1990; Wood, 1990; Mullis et al., 1993). Gambrell (1996) connected social interactions and motivation for reading. When students in her research study were asked what they liked best about a challenging, new reading program designed to increase young children's motivation to read, frequent responses focused on social interactions related to books and reading. Very little research has identified the essence, content, and characteristics of social interactions, particularly as they relate to the tutoring relationship, mentoring style of the tutor, and their effects on the child's literacy success. In one of the few research studies published to date, Juel (1996), addressed the aspect of social interactions and tutoring. She studied factors which contributed to effective literacy instruction in a tutorial program for thirty first-grade, at-risk children. Juel pointed out that children in the more successful dyads experienced significantly more scaffolded reading and writing experiences than the children in the less successful dyads. Juel (1996) also pointed out that this scaffolding, an essential element for effective literacy tutoring, occurred through social contexts and interactions.

Given the strong research base with respect to the importance of social interaction in reading acquisition for younger children, there is a need for more research which focuses on the role of that factor in successful tutorial programs for older reluctant readers. Closer analysis of the social interactions between tutor and child may determine what, if any, relationship exists between the mentoring style of the tutor and the child's willingness to cooperate with his/her tutor,

and the child's motivation to read and/or write during tutorial sessions.

In an effort to provide a closer analysis of the social context of tutoring with older readers, this research reports on targeted fourth-grade, at-risk children in a culturally diverse elementary school in a mid-sized city in southwestern United States. The study sought to answer the following questions: 1) what is the nature of social interactions within the context of tutorial sessions with older, at-risk readers; 2) how can naturally occurring social interactions between highly effective tutors and tutees be described? and 3) do highly effective tutors share common characteristics as they interact with at-risk children?

This article will describe four literacy success stories, four case study pairings of Caucasian college student volunteer tutors and at-risk children: two African American boys, one Hispanic American boy and one Caucasian girl. The efforts of these tutors and their students all resulted in significant literacy gains. This article will describe, in detail, the social interaction of these dyads and then identify common themes, characteristics, and categories, which emerged from data analysis.

#### THE SCHOOL SETTING AND THE TUTORS

Scott Elementary School (pseudonym used) was the setting for the volunteer literacy tutorial program involving a group of seventeen college students, nine athletes, who were non-education majors, and eight preservice teachers. The athletes came straight from class and had heavy practice schedules for their respective sports. Many of the preservice teachers also came from class and had to return to campus for class or go immediately to after-school jobs. Their hectic schedules and the fact that all were volunteers who received no pay or course credit for their services, limited the time available for ongoing training seminars. These seminars were held on a monthly basis and were about an hour in length. The athletes who participated were recruited by their academic advisor with the expectation that involvement in literacy tutoring would improve the athletes' literacy levels. The preservice teachers were all volunteers who wanted the extra experiences in teaching a diverse population of children.

Recent publicized standardized test scores found Scott Elementary ranking at the bottom of the district. Faculty and the principal were eager to participate and welcomed the tutoring from the college students on a biweekly basis, for thirty minutes each session, during ten weeks of the fall semester. Fifty percent of the fourth-graders were reading below grade level at the beginning of that school year. Fourth-grade teachers identified literacy as a weakness for their team. They used an eclectic approach to teaching reading with a state adopted basal reading series as the primary materials, supplemented

by classroom libraries, folder games, and skill sheets connected with the state-standardized test. All teachers used whole class instruction, and two of four teachers used centers when seatwork was completed.

### TUTORING COMPONENTS

The principal identified the following two major reading objectives as weaknesses of the fourth grade students for the tutors' attention in the research project: (1) the student will summarize a variety of written texts; and (2) the student will determine the meaning of words in a variety of written texts. At his request, these objectives were included in the agenda for all tutoring sessions. Although the teachers and principal acknowledged the need for the one-on-one intervention, they felt thirty minutes twice weekly was all the time that could be spared from their instructional program. This proved to be a major obstacle for many of the tutors. Thirty minutes provided only a brief period of time for settling the child into the tutoring routine and allowing for in-depth study or activities.

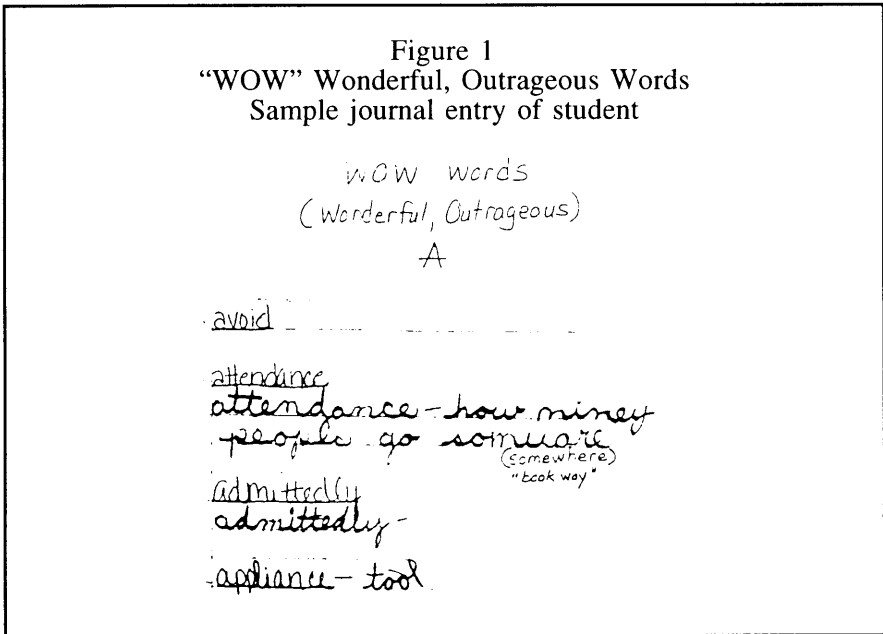
Each tutoring session consisted of four or five basic activities explained to the athletes in initial training sessions. These strategies were quite familiar to the education majors, who had learned these strategies in their undergraduate methods classes. The instructional component of the tutorial session was essentially the same for all dyads involved in the research project. The five tutoring activities were presented to the children in the same order each time by all the tutors. The session began with the child choosing an independent level book to read aloud to the tutor. About two hundred children's trade books were color coded and sorted by levels in boxes along the counter in the large multipurpose room that served as our tutoring location. Each child's level had been determined from pre-testing and was indicated with a colored dot on his/her journal. Many of the books were quality, multicultural titles, carefully chosen to be of interest to the African American and Hispanic American children who were the primary participants in the program. Following the reading of the book, the child would give a retelling of the story just read.

The next component of the tutoring session was an activity provided for the tutors in the form of practice pages made available from the principal. These activities presented the children with opportunities to practice skills using the standardized test format they would encounter in the spring and focused on the two objectives identified by the school as target goals for improvement.

Journal writing was another component of the tutorial agenda. Each child had a journal with three major sections. The child and tutor could decide if entries would be made in one, two, or all three of the sections at any session. Section one, was entitled "WOW" (Wonderful, Outrageous Words), and was a mini-personal dictionary. There was a page for each letter of the alphabet and students were

encouraged to write any unfamiliar words they encountered in their reading on the appropriate page (see figure 1; note invented spellings accepted due to developmental levels of children). Sometimes a sentence or a definition was written. At other times definitions and sentences were discussed orally, but not entered on the page with the word .

Figure 1  
 "WOW" Wonderful, Outrageous Words  
 Sample journal entry of student



Section two of the journal was entitled "ME AND THE BOOK." Each child was instructed to write one or two sentences about the book just read aloud: what they liked, disliked, favorite part, a similar experience that had happened to them as they identified with the main character, or any general reactions to the book. The final section was for interactive writing, "WE WRITING" (Pinnell & McCarrier, 1994). Tutor and tutee composed a story together. At the beginning of the sessions, children dictated their ideas to the tutor since many of them were very reluctant writers. As the sessions progressed, the children began to take over the responsibilities of the writing. Tutors and children used the resource book, *World of words: A writing companion for all kinds of kids!*, (Thomas-Cochran, 1994) to provide fun ideas and topics for tutors and children.

Whenever there was time or if the child chose to write only in one section, he/she would read aloud from a chapter book at instructional level until the end of the session. Children also used an alternative to the instructional level chapter book, *Time Magazine for Kids* published weekly and available at different instructional levels

(Wallis, 1995). Many of the students preferred the non-fiction reading material because it was colorful, timely, and appealing with articles about news events, sports and music stars, and science features.

Additional strategies involved story mapping and modeling basic comprehension strategies using the COMP 8 System (Wilson & Russavage, 1989). See figure 2. Some of the tutors selected a theme for the sessions, and all books and activities centered on a topic of interest to the child as determined by interest inventories administered at the beginning of the project. The theme, chosen by the child as a basis for the tutorial sessions, proved to be one of the most successful tools used by the tutors for establishing rapport and formed the basis for affirming social interactions based on a sincere desire to appeal to the child's interest.

Figure 2  
COMP 8 System Comprehension strategies  
taught by tutors to children at each session

**BEFORE YOU READ:**



**Look**

at title, picture clues



**Think**

about what you already know

**AS YOU READ:**



**Predict**

what you think will happen



**Picture Things**  
in your mind



**Question Yourself**

Does it make sense?



**Read On**

use context clues



**Reread**

silently or out loud



**Ask Someone**

who knows

Note. From "School wide application of comprehension strategies," by R.M. Wilson & P.M. Russavage, 1989, *Reading Issues & Practice*, 6, p. 48

## METHODOLOGY

The researcher and research associate used qualitative multiple data sources including preliminary and post-interviews with the tutors, teachers, and children as well as journal entries of tutors and children. Pseudonyms were used for all participants. Additionally, we wrote field notes and recorded comments of children and tutors throughout the project. As non-participant observers, we adhered to the constant comparative method (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982) throughout the analysis.

Standardized test scores, administered by the school district each spring, were used to identify the population of students for the study, those fourth graders most at-risk of being successful in literacy endeavors during that school year. Although these measures were of limited value in improving the literacy instruction for individual, at-risk children, we provided additional quantitative data in the form of pre-test and posttest scores on measures of reading achievement, writing achievement, and attitudes toward reading. These measures provided additional diagnostic information for the teachers' use at the conclusion of the tutorial project and enabled the researcher to identify the most effective dyads. Although qualitative data were gathered on all dyads, these pre and posttest scores helped the researchers to refine and narrow the focus in this article to describe only the social interactions between effective tutors and highest achieving children they tutored. The quantitative data presented in the descriptions in this article serve the purpose of providing information for the reader to substantiate the researchers' claim that these dyads were successful.

*Dyad 1: Sarah and Mary*

Sarah's blonde hair and blue eyes were her most noticeable features. One would think that she was a descendent of the Scandinavian or German homesteaders who settled on the American frontier in the mid-1800's. Perhaps that is why the American Girls Collection of storybooks, in particular, Meet Kirsten, so captured Sarah's attention from the first day of the tutoring sessions. Her tutor Mary was an elementary education preservice teacher and a positive role model for Sarah. It was a successful match from the beginning. The two young ladies developed a caring and loving relationship "at first sight," an important factor in Sarah's literacy success. In the words of her tutor,

*I love to read and she [Sarah] does too [now], but maybe beforehand she had never found any books she liked. I introduced something new to her .... That "new thing" was the concept that reading can be fun!! We did hit it off the first day. We are both very talkative... and very enthusiastic. She was willing to share about her family which some kids at*



*that age are not, especially what she had or didn't have. I think we were a good pair. If I had had a boy, it might have been entirely different. I may relate better to girls than boys.... I don't think I have gender favorites ...I have favorites more in children like Sarah, children who are willing to learn and don't cause trouble.*

Figure 3

Illustration of two good friends meeting, expressing happiness in sharing, as Sarah and Mary did at each tutorial session. This was one of the passages from Sarah's favorite book.



*"You're here! You're here!"  
Kirsten repeated over and over.*

Note. From *Meet Kirsten* (p. 31) by J. Shaw, 1986. NY: Scholastic

While some might find the tutor's confession alarming from the standpoint that teachers should not have "favorites" or be particularly drawn to a "type" of student, Mary's honesty challenged the researcher to pursue this remark. To investigate the close bond between Sarah and Mary, I interviewed Sarah. When asked what made her tutor so special, she related that she thought Mary's appearance was "... neat, co-ol, ... she's tall, has blonde hair and blue eyes, just like me. We could be sisters, you know." This interchange provided a clue to one essential component of the affirming social context of this particular dyad. Feeling a "kinship" to one's tutor/tutee is an essential part of establishing rapport and building a reciprocal relationship of trust and respect. (e.g., Mary saw something of herself in Sarah, a bright child who was eager to please and do well.)

Mary's decision to choose a highly motivating series of books for her young tutee proved to be just what Sarah needed. Because the book was about a young nine-year-old girl, just like herself, Sarah avidly began reading the book with her tutor's help, sometimes listening only, sometimes echo reading, sometimes reading aloud to her tutor. The book was interesting to Sarah in a way that previous books were not. It captivated her attention and drew her into the story. Her tutor indicated that the tutoring sessions consisted primarily of reading and discussing books from the America Girl series. Since Sarah was enchanted with the book, she was motivated to read for pleasure for the first time in four years of school experience. She kept a personal reading log of her books read outside of tutoring time and surprisingly was excited about the prospect of adding books to her log.

Sarah had begun her fourth grade year of school reading approximately a year below grade level. Her total reading pre-test score (grade equivalent) on the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* (MacGinitie & MacGinitie, 1989) was a 3.2. She had been selected for the program on the basis of her third grade achievement standardized test score, which placed her at the 43<sup>rd</sup> percentile. Her attitude toward reading pre-test score placed her at the 56<sup>th</sup> percentile on the *McKenna-Kear Reading Attitude Survey* (McKenna & Kear, 1990). Sarah's teacher, in an interview, described her in this way:

*Sarah, it took a good six weeks to follow her around and see what she could do. She has been allowed to be lax and not be accountable. She's learned that 'snail's pace thing' where you just sit around .... You get frustrated with her [as teacher] and you just have to sit her out. She's very bright ... and finally she started coming around with that accountability factor and she loves working one on one, that's her favorite thing to do. She wanted to stay after school and work [one on one]. But she also started feeling better about herself and her ability to do this. Then, she liked being*

*up with those kids who finish their work and get the extra privileges... not the smart kids, but the faction [of the class] that the kids know they can ask them for help.*

The tutor came to Sarah's Christmas program, ate lunch with Sarah whenever her class schedule would allow it and took a personal interest in her life at school. As a Christmas present at the end of the tutoring project, Mary presented Sarah with a most appropriate gift, the American Girl book collection. Mary wanted Sarah to know what she had been showing her in their tutoring sessions, that books can be fun and that books are a special gift.

Sarah obviously learned the lesson well for her post-test scores were remarkable. The total reading score on the Gates-MacGinitie, administered after ten weeks of tutoring revealed a 4.2 grade equivalent, approximately what we would have expected of a student at that point in the fourth grade. Her attitude toward reading had skyrocketed from the 56<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 89<sup>th</sup> percentile, clearly an indication that Sarah had concluded that books can be fun! Also, it was exciting for the teacher and tutor to note that the longitudinal effects of the individual tutoring paid off in the spring, as Sarah was one of the highest achieving fourth graders on the standardized achievement testing, with an 86<sup>th</sup> percentile score on the reading subtest. Her writing score of 3 on a 4 point holistic scale was also commendable. When comparing her scores to the previous spring [third grade achievement], Sarah posted an impressive 43-percentile point gain in reading achievement. She was so highly motivated to do her best that her teacher related that she stayed with the test until time was called, desperately wanting to do her best. The teacher related, "The one-on-one started the ball rolling, made them feel special, helped these children blossom. It would be interesting to know what they would have scored without that."

Sarah's success story is ongoing and the effects still being noted. Just recently she was selected for the gifted and talented program at her school. This is truly a remarkable case study of a child who decided that the time was right for improving her literacy. With the encouragement of a special tutor, she was motivated to live up to her potential, finally in the fourth grade.

#### *Dyad 2: Anthony and Lisa*

Anthony, an energetic African-American boy with an identical twin brother, was:

*kind of like a dormant seed in that for the first six weeks after school started, it was always... 'I can't, I don't know how, I can't do this; this is too hard.'*

*One time we played a math contest with flash cards, "Around the World" and he just stomped the whole class. I was just stunned because his ability finally just reared its head. I think he was used to getting by with not giving his best. He likes working one-on-one and I guess maybe a combination of me holding him accountable and the tutor working with him made him focus better on doing his best.*

Anthony's teacher gave this account just weeks after the tutoring began and noted the profound effects on his self-esteem and classroom performance, effects she attributed to the special relationship with and attachment for his tutor, Lisa. Anthony's twin brother was also in the program and on the first day when the children met their tutors, Anthony was furious because his brother had a male track star for his tutor. Not only did Anthony resent not having one of the athletes, he also resented having a female tutor. He had decided at first glance that he would not cooperate and certainly would not learn anything. "I won't read and you can't make me!" was his first comment during the initial tutoring sessions.

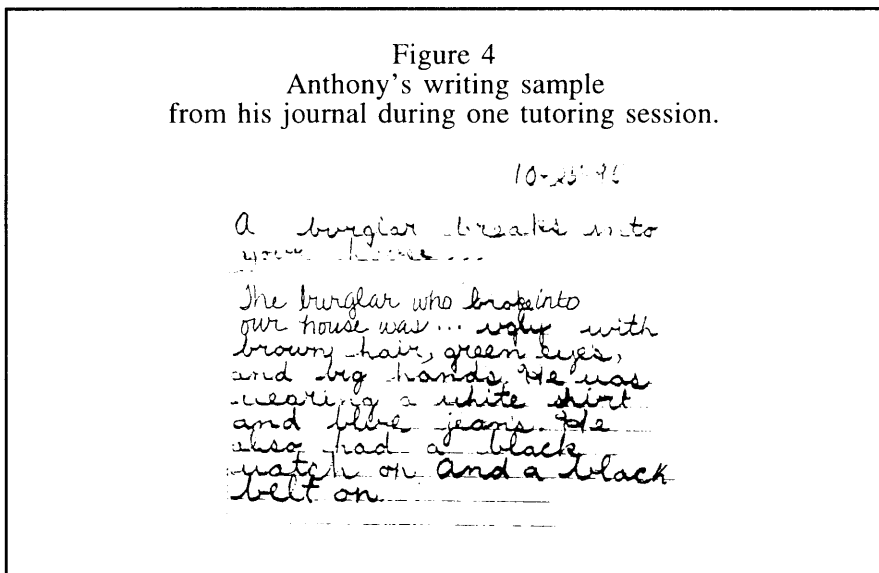
Anthony was one of the lowest-performing children in the fourth grade. Both he and his brother were among the slightest and shortest of all fourth grade boys. His standardized reading achievement test score from the third grade placed Anthony at the 31<sup>st</sup> percentile. On pre-test measures of attitude toward reading, his total overall score was at the fourth percentile while his reading achievement score on the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* indicated that he was performing at the level of a second grader. In general, he had low self-esteem and a poor attitude toward all subjects and school. His reaction on the first day of tutoring was typical of his response if asked to perform an academic task.

His attitude changed dramatically when his tutor Lisa proved to be a "with-it" young lady, in his words, "cool and awesome!" She asked him to share his interests and soon learned he loved all kinds of sports, especially the Dallas Cowboys. Being a fan herself, she brought in tidbits of her knowledge, sought books about football at his instructional level, and planned her lessons around this motivating theme. Another factor in the rapport Lisa established easily was her understanding of African American culture and family life. Anthony was one of nine children being raised by a single mother, father absent and living in Europe. Lisa shared with Anthony that she knew what it was like to miss your father since she too grew up in a single family home. Later, in her elementary school years, her mother married an African American man and although Caucasian, Lisa had African American step-brothers and step-sisters. These cultural connections coupled with her attention to Anthony's special interests, allowed her to form a unique bond with Anthony. Lisa's life experiences

formed the basis of her social interactions with him, experiences, sometimes painful, but shared freely with Anthony.

Lisa followed the same tutoring agenda as the other tutors but with her own unique teaching style. She used lots of humor and encouragement. She always spent the first two or three minutes of each session, just chatting about Anthony's life. She called this their "up close and personal, friendly time." She shared with him the fact that she would be graduating soon from college, the first one in her family to graduate from high school. She told Anthony that he could do that also. She "invited" him to write with her: "You've got the great ideas; I'll write them down." They were a team in every respect. "Let's do this together," she would suggest. "You help me." By the end of the sessions, Anthony had blossomed and was doing all the writing. She had been so adept at motivating him, that the boy who at first refused even to talk with her, was at the end of the sessions reading and writing with enthusiasm (see Figure 4).

Figure 4  
Anthony's writing sample  
from his journal during one tutoring session.



Lisa worked at a local department store in the evenings and on weekends (she paid for her entire college education without any family support). Anthony, his brothers, sisters, and Mother often shopped there. Lisa always gave Anthony a special warm welcome when the family stopped by her department to say hello. As she did during their tutoring sessions, Lisa made Anthony feel as if he were the most important child in her life.

The special bond they shared and the hard work in the tutoring sessions paid off for Anthony. At the time of the post-testing in December, Anthony had made remarkable progress in ten short weeks.

His total attitude toward reading score on the *McKenna-Kear Attitude Survey* had improved from the fourth percentile to the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile, a gain of 84 percentile points. His total reading achievement post-test score placed him at a mid-third grade level, with a gain of 36 NCE's in comprehension. Even more impressive was Anthony's performance on the standardized test (longitudinal reading measure) administered in the spring, four months after the conclusion of the tutorial project. Anthony posted a gain of 32-percentile points, one of the highest gains in the entire fourth grade class.

Here was a student who was motivated to succeed by a unique relationship and friendship with a tutor. Anthony received no other special services or tutorial help during that school year. His teacher believed that her own acknowledgement of his abilities, holding him accountable, and the special attention from Lisa enabled him to reach new heights of academic success. Lisa knew first-hand the impact that one teacher can make on a child's life. She explained in a post-instructional interview that she had been inspired by one high school teacher in her majority African American high school to stay in school and go on to college. No other teachers had ever believed she had the ability to succeed. Lisa convinced Anthony that he too could succeed, just as she had. This relationship crossed gender and ethnic lines as two at-risk learners came together at a "magic moment" in Anthony's life.

### *Dyad 3: Victor and John*

Victor was a courteous Hispanic American boy, quite shy and reserved. When he met his tutor, John, his dark eyes sparkled and the smile on his face revealed genuine excitement. John was an athlete on tennis scholarship who grew up in South Africa. He came to America to play tennis and obtain an undergraduate degree in finance with definite career goals to seek a master's degree in international business at a university in Germany upon graduation. English was John's third language, which he spoke quite fluently. German, the language of his father, was his first language and Afrikaans, his second language.

When the tutoring sessions began, Victor seemed intimidated by John's strange accent. In John's words, "Once I got to know him ... he was a shy little guy... I realized he was really smart and could do some literacy things." We had determined from previous testing that Victor's weak area was comprehension. His pre-test score placed him at a mid-first grade level in comprehension and an overall reading score of beginning second grade. His attitude toward reading score on the *McKenna-Kear* placed him at the 12<sup>th</sup> percentile.

John was quite businesslike and logical in his approach. John analyzed Victor's test profile and set a goal to improve comprehension. We discussed different strategies for John to try with Victor in addition to the common tutorial plan used with all students. John used ideas of his own that had worked for him in his struggles with

comprehension of text in a language other than one's native language. John strongly emphasized retellings because summarizing was a study skill he had found particularly useful in his own college courses. He required a retelling of Victor after each story read. When comprehension breakdowns were apparent, John would stop at the end of each page and ask for a retelling.

John began the sessions with a positive attitude and a sincere desire to help Victor. John talked with him about his interests and soon discovered that he and Victor shared a love of animals. John brought pictures he had taken on vacations to the Kruger National Park and Game Reserve in South Africa, which he and Victor discussed. He invited Victor to write stories about some of the animals and gave Victor copies of the pictures to keep. Victor was fascinated by John's stories of his homeland, South Africa. The pictures and John's descriptions conjured up images of an exotic foreign wilderness where zebras, elephants, and wildebeests roamed undisturbed. "On Safari" became the theme for the sessions, and Victor was transported for that short time, twice each week, to a country far removed from his own fourth grade classroom in southwestern U.S.A. via the web sites: **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and **Error! Bookmark not defined.** for further information about the integration of geography and reading for tutorial lesson plans. Both of these sites offer a variety of intriguing activities such as a chat room, maps, camera views, and listening booth for hearing authentic African music which can prove to be a highly motivating literacy activity as tutor and child together take a virtual field trip.

When observing John with Victor, it was evident that John had a strong commitment. While some of the other athletes would joke around and talk with each other and the other children during the tutoring sessions, John focused completely on Victor and the task he had set for the two of them, improving Victor's comprehension. He always sat beside Victor, looked him directly in the eyes, and gave him quality one-on-one attention. He never missed a tutoring session unless the tennis team was on the road. His demeanor conveyed the message to Victor that he was a special friend and that he believed in the importance of their time together.

Victor's improved literacy achievement was quite significant. Victor's total attitude toward reading score on the *McKenna-Kear Reading Attitude Survey* improved 56 percentile points (12% at pre-test to 72% at post-test in December). The deliberate way in which John focused on comprehension in each tutoring session resulted in Victor's elevated comprehension score on the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test* revealing an increase of 31 NCE's. At the beginning of the tutorial intervention program, Victor had been reading at a mid-first grade level based on comprehension scores and was now reading at a mid-second grade level.

In post-instructional interviews, John shared with me that he used a mentoring style centering on encouragement and realistic expectations. He related that as a thirteen-year-old boy in South Africa, he was sent to an English-speaking school for the first time. His mother had wanted him to learn English. He recalled that he could speak just a little English, but knew nothing of the grammar or syntax. John stated, "It was so tough for me. I can still remember how I struggled." His advice to teachers of second and third language learners, like himself and Victor, is "Don't assume too much of these kids ... just because they speak a little English." John used his past painful experiences and what he learned in that school in a faraway country to make a valuable connection to Victor and his needs. He began with easier tasks and books, and advancing to the more difficult ones, praised every little effort along the way. John used true sincerity, praise only when merited. He was often overheard to say, "This is going to be tough, but you can do it. I believe in you."

#### *Dyad 4: Corey and Russell*

Corey was a young African American boy who had been performing poorly his entire school career. His body language exhibited the despair he felt at his repeated failures in school. He rarely smiled and often entered the tutoring room pushing and shoving his classmates. His standardized test scores from the previous third grade spring placed him at the one percentile of all entering fourth graders. No other boy in the entire class had scored so low.

The teachers were desperate for help for Corey. Unfortunately, their assessment of him was that he would probably be retained in fourth grade; their expectations were low. He had received Chapter One services since his school entry and had been referred for special education in the past but had never been eligible. His teacher noted, "Most of the teachers who have had him wondered about his intellectual ability." Our pre-test assessment confirmed the school's testing data: an extremely negative attitude toward reading as evidenced by his score at the ninth percentile on the *McKenna-Kear* and a total reading achievement score of 1.8 (grade equivalent). Figure 5 is Corey's writing sample at the beginning of the school year when he was asked to write about something that was important to him. His limited literacy skills were quite apparent; yet, a touching sensitivity was revealed in his love for his family and his dog.

With these facts in mind, we began the tutoring program with optimism although it was unlikely that we would see any significant improvement. Corey was assigned to Russell, a male track athlete on full scholarship who also excelled in academics. Russell was loving and generous, a tutor who said in his preliminary interview, "I really want to volunteer for this program because I have two wonderful parents who have given me tremendous support and encouragement. I want to give back some of that to a child who is less fortunate."



Russell shared with me that his parents had been the role model for that attitude of community service and responsibility and had offered their home, free of charge, to a fellow track teammate who needed a place to live that semester.

Figure 5  
Corey's writing sample from  
the beginning of the fourth grade year.

What is importit

What is importit to  
me is my dog and  
my family and my  
aunties and uncles and  
my money that my family  
give me and my room  
my house and my  
family to my me  
and my sisters and  
them and to go to  
my gas house and  
have gas and have  
a football to play  
football at my  
friends house and  
have a basketball  
ball and a basketball  
ring to play  
basketball and the  
stamps and have  
a top toy plays  
with my class  
glad I have a  
saga.

Russell was a hard worker with a strong commitment to the project. He rarely missed a session, arriving early, usually with a "Happy Meal" from McDonald's for Corey. His generosity amazed the other tutors. He sincerely wanted to give something to this young boy in an effort to improve his self-esteem and attitude toward school. Russell, like the other tutors, tried to find out something about Corey's interests and to plan lessons centering on a theme. Corey shared that he loved sports, but unlike Anthony, Corey seemed uninterested in all books, even those about football and basketball. Russell was very patient, but every tutoring session was a "tug of war" with Corey refusing to do anything constructive. His behavior was

avoidance and refusal, as we would expect of a young boy who had experienced so many unpleasant times with literacy. All the tutor's efforts to motivate and interest Corey appeared to fail.

On the days when Russell did not bring the kid's meal, Corey would become particularly uncooperative. On one particularly difficult day, Russell shared with me the following interchange that took place with Corey. Corey had refused to speak with Russell for the entire session. Russell expressed his disappointment to Corey that they were unable to read or write together. He told Corey that if he didn't want to talk that was fine, but maybe he would like to write his feelings on paper. IT WORKED! Russell had tricked Corey into writing about his anger. Although he only responded with "NO! NO! NO!" to every question Russell posed, he did respond. Since Corey was so angry, Russell decided to seize the "golden moment" and talk with him about his track scholarship and how he received it. He shared with him that he too could go to college (yes, he might even become a sports star and make tons of money someday). Russell explained that Corey would be unable to reach those goals if he did not care about himself and start trying to take advantage of the help being offered to him from his teachers and his tutor. He reminded Corey that he cared about what happened to him, but that no one could reach a goal for someone else. The only person who could reach that goal was Corey himself. Russell left the session quite discouraged, as Corey never spoke a word in response. In fact, it appeared that he had totally ignored Russell's words, except for emphatic "NO'S" written on the page.

That incident and the very personal interaction that occurred that day may have planted a seed in Corey's mind; however, it did not appear to make a difference in his attitude, at that point. The tutoring sessions ended a few weeks later. On the day that I was administering the posttests, Corey sat and pouted, refusing to pick up his pencil. (The tutors were not present for the posttesting.) I reminded him of Russell's words and explained how disappointed his friend would be if he did not answer any questions. He looked me in the eyes as if to challenge me to make him "pick up that pencil and try." He sat and waited until only five minutes were left on the reading achievement test and finally began to read and answer the questions. Obviously, since he answered so few questions, the test was invalid. His total reading achievement score placed him at a 2.2 grade level, a slight improvement over his pre-test score of 1.8.

His classroom teacher refused to give up on Corey, holding him accountable for all work. There was good parental support and a phone call to Corey's mother would produce positive results, but only for a short period. Throughout the weeks of school into the spring semester, the same pattern followed: accountability, phone calls to mother, and slight improvement for a short period. No other tutoring services were available for Corey when our project ended in

December. His teacher's goal became one of helping Corey to make it to the fifth grade; she truly cared for this young man who had given up on reading and school.

Corey's story is not one of glowing success as in the other three cases previously discussed, but it is very typical of many older at-risk readers. Every reading teacher has a Corey in her classroom. The influence of Russell's mentoring, his patient presence, "I'm here for you even if you don't like me at all!" and the teacher's concern eventually paid off. The positive gains did not surface until the very end of that fourth grade year when Corey began to prove himself by doing grade level work in all subjects, passing every one. His standardized test scores in reading that spring posted a significant increase of 24.3 NCE's. His writing score was a 2 on a 4 point holistic scale, indicating below average performance, but significant improvement from his third grade year. Corey's teacher, in the post-instructional interview, stressed her appreciation for Russell's patience and dedication. She believed that the tutor's attitude of "I believe in you; I will not accept your refusal to try" made an impression on Corey and helped him to believe in himself, helping him to take one small "baby step" toward improved attitude and acceptance of responsibility for his own future.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL PAIRING: LESSONS LEARNED

The purpose of this research study was to look beyond the instructional component. All tutors implemented the same basic tutoring agenda with a child-centered curriculum. Yet, there were glowing success stories within the athletes-as-tutors group and within the pre-service teachers as tutors group, and there were children from both groups who made negligible gains. Within the successful pairings, it was noted that the children exhibited increased motivation and a desire to cooperate. The children in these dyads exhibited more excitement and enthusiasm, performed well on the reading achievement posttest measure and on the attitudes toward reading scale and eagerly interacted with their tutors. In this study, it appeared that the social interactions played a contributing role to the success of the children in these pairings.

Close analysis of the successful dyads revealed that there were similar categories identifiable from the data in the naturally occurring social interactions. Certain similar characteristics of the tutors' interactions with children emerged. The effective tutors were skillful communicators who had past experiences with children, knew how to converse with them, knew the "with-it" slang, and understood the culture of growing up in poverty in America. In addition, the successful tutors had knowledge of and/or experiences with the African American or Hispanic culture. Only one pairing was of same gender,

same ethnicity; the Caucasian tutors were knowledgeable with respect to their tutee's culture and used that knowledge to be skillful conversationalists. The first three minutes were used to reestablish the communication link, to catch up on the latest news in the child's life, to share tidbits from the tutor's life, in short, to "socialize." The tutors followed directions well, one of the essential elements we discussed in our training sessions. However, not all the tutors in the project were adept at this socializing. Many felt awkward about talking with children informally and bypassed this step to immediately begin the lesson. Those dyads were not as effective. This social time paved the way for cooperation when the lessons began. Those tutors who paved the way with a "spoonful of sugar" were able to convince the children to "take the medicine" later.

One example from an early tutoring session with Sarah and Mary illustrates how skillfully she uses social interaction to set the stage for the instructional component of the session:

*Tutor: Guess what my girlfriend and I saw this weekend when we were at the mall?*

*Student: I don't know. What?*

*Tutor: A really bad beanie baby... a pink pig. What is that one called?*

*Student: Oooh! That's Squealer. I've been wanting him.*

*Tutor: I wish I could have bought him for you but I've got limited funds right now. My pay check doesn't come in for another week. Does your Mom ever buy you a beanie baby?*

*Student: Sometimes, but not often. She says we need other things more. One time I got a fish at McDonald's though. I've still got it.*

*Tutor: That's Goldie, right? Well, hey let's get our book out now. It's time to put our heads together and get some reading done. What about it?*

Another example of this skillful use of conversational social language occurred in a session with Corey and Russell. Russell had brought along the McDonald's Happy Meal and chatted with Corey for the initial three minutes while he began eating:

*Tutor: We had a track meet last week and our team did so poorly. I don't know what happened, man. I was bummed out...*

*Student: How'd you do?*

*Tutor: I usually place in the top five, but I came in at the bottom of the pack.*

*Student: That's bad.*

*Tutor: Do you ever feel like that in reading class? I always like to be first at the meets but I rarely ever make it. I always get disappointed in myself when I miss the mark.*

*Student: Me too sometimes, but ya' know. I don't really care most times. My Mom gets mad at me all the time 'cause I won't try. But I'm just dumb...why try?*

*Tutor: You can't give up... It's hard when you keep on failing, I know. I've been there too, but next track meet I'm goin' run harder, try harder. I may not make it every time, but I'm not goin' give up. Hey! We'll have to bust it to finish our work today. Let's get started. We'll talk some more about this next time.*

Another unique characteristic of the social interactions in the successful dyads was the masterful use of body language and gestures by the tutors. Close physical proximity, sitting side by side, as opposed to sitting directly across from the tutor seemed to send a message of care and a "team" approach. All the successful tutors used this position, while some of those less successful tutors sat across from the child, as if to keep distance between them and to communicate a message of "I'm the teacher, you're the student; I have the power; you do not." Direct eye contact, a "high five" or pat on the shoulder was a common occurrence in the successful dyads. These tutors used non-verbal communication to convey the message to the child that, "You are the most important person in the world to me, right now, and for the next thirty minutes, you have my undivided attention." One example of the use of gestures was Lisa's response to a successful reading performance by Anthony with a thumbs up sign and the words, "Wow, you're awesome, just like Emmitt Smith when he scores a touchdown!" John frequently used a pat on the back when Victor tried hard to complete his assigned tasks. He would keep his hand resting on Victor's back as if to communicate support when the task was particularly challenging. In one tutoring session Russell commended Corey accompanied by a high five, "Man, you're bad, you're awesome. You're batting two for two today!"

Another common characteristic of the interactions within the successful dyads involved the child's interest. This provided the "spark" to engage the child in conversation related to the books being read, to present an instructional strategy, as an attention getter, and to form the theme for the sessions. Although in training sessions, all tutors were advised to use this simple principle, some chose to ignore the advice. All of the highly effective tutors used information from the interest inventories to select materials and books centering on the child-centered theme. Because the child was vitally interested in this topic, he/she brought more prior knowledge to the books and

the “grand conversations” about the books were livelier. One of the tutor’s wrote:

*“I can see that I have to plan very concise, specific activities this semester, and I found out that she likes science and math. I don’t know why but that actually surprised me. I guess I assumed that because a student scores below grade level that she wouldn’t like school at all. Wrong! The science connection will give a base from which to plan our lessons ...”*

Another example of this use of interest is demonstrated in Lisa’s tutoring session with Anthony. He was passionately interested in football so Lisa illustrated the rereading comprehension strategy by relating it to a touchdown pass thrown by Troy Aikman:

*Lisa: Now, Anthony, what do you think Troy does if he drops the ball on first down to keep the San Francisco players from grabbing the ball?*

*Anthony: Well, he probably fall on the ball and cover it with his body.*

*Lisa: Right on! Well, does he quit there? Does he get so frustrated that he asks coach Switzer to pull him out of the game and put in the backup quarterback?*

*Anthony: Of course not! That be ridiculous. Troy no quitter. He awesome!*

*Lisa: Right and neither are you. So what should you do now that you just read that paragraph and you couldn’t answer my question correctly?*

*Anthony: (Shrugs his shoulders) no response.*

*Lisa: When we read and don’t understand, we do what Troy does. He throws the ball again on second down. So we reread the paragraph and try again to understand it. Sometimes that helps me. Let’s do it again.*

*Anthony: Okay.*

All research points to the importance of consistency in a mentoring relationship, and this study confirms previous findings. The successful tutors were highly committed and well-organized, faithful in attendance, missing no more than one session. Two of the four had perfect attendance. They took their volunteer jobs very seriously, as if they were being paid for their work. Positive social interactions with children demand repeated contacts over time. Infrequent attendance or inconsistent communication by the tutor resulted in poor progress for the child.

All of the successful tutors expressed in pre- or post-instructional interviews that they possessed a social conscience, a keen awareness of their responsibilities to help those in society who are at-risk and who need the helping hand of a positive adult role model. (Refer to Russell's comments.) Repeatedly in the tutors' journals were comments such as:

*"I want to make a difference in this child's life."*

*"She explained to me that she will never read or write when she becomes an adult except to read and sign her children's field trip permission notes. I find that to be truly depressing... I only wish that I could make a difference in her life, but I can't help her unless she wants to be helped."*

*"I have a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate than I was. I had supportive parents and teachers. I was so lucky."*

All tutors were volunteers who participated for no pay, no course credit. These college students came from households where social justice and equity issues were modeled for them by their parents or stressed in their high schools and communities. In an interview with Russell's mother, one of the tutors, shared with me:

*"His Dad and I believe in helping out those who are needy. If we see one of the track guys, one of Russell's friends headed down the wrong path, we invite him over for dinner. Right now, we have a young man living with us who really needs a supportive family."*

The children easily perceived this personality trait as desirable and appealing, believing that their tutors cared about them specifically as valuable human beings. While some educators point to the present emphasis on squads of "volunteer do-gooders" as undesirable for solving the illiteracy problems of inner city children of color, certainly this desire to "help a child" is a motivating factor for tutors which impacts upon their decision to volunteer. In the present research study, when a social conscience was coupled with knowledge of the child's culture, it was a winning combination that resulted in positive significant changes in behavior, attitude toward school, and literacy achievement. No one would disagree that social conscience alone, without knowledge of child's culture is insufficient and ineffective; "do-gooders" must be culturally knowledgeable.

Another characteristic in the data that appeared to affect the quality of the scaffolding, resulting in more positive social interactions was a match in life and/or literacy experiences for tutor and child. In a study of this nature, it is impossible to ascertain the direct relationship between this characteristic and the child's achievement. Yet, it appeared that when the tutor felt a connected to the child due to similar life experiences or similar personality type, there was a closer bond and easier communication. As expressed in journal entries, when the tutor could relate to the child's socioeconomic status, the child's being raised by a single mother, the child's being a second language learner, the child being a "rebel like me", or a child who was "eager to please the teacher", the pairing seemed to be a true bonding of kindred hearts.

Mary alluded to this when she described the special kinship she felt for her child Sarah. (Refer to previous quote in descriptive section, Sarah and Mary). As a preservice teacher with many experiences in a professional development school setting, she already recognized in herself a special feeling for children, of any ethnicity, with open, positive attitudes, especially girls like herself who are exuberant and optimistic. This comment, though at first analysis appears offensive, gets at a basic reality that in many inner city schools, teachers are "drawn to" those children who are teachable. Whether reading teachers want to acknowledge it or not, it is a reality and that reality may impact the quality of the social context in which literacy instruction is delivered since many at-risk older children do not possess "teachable, pleasant" attitudes. Many have "given up" on their teachers and school, believing that those adults do not care if they succeed.

Further research is needed into the characteristics of highly successful tutors/teachers in inner-city, diverse settings and the social and cultural contexts in which those tutors acquired literacy, in effect, their own "literacy stories." Perhaps these "literacy stories" impact the perceptions of the teachers and/or tutors who attempt the difficult task of challenging the older, reluctant reader. Would teachers/tutors be able to recognize their commitment to certain children they perceive as "teachable" or understand their lack of patience with children whom they perceive otherwise if they understood their own literacy acquisition and life experiences?

An excellent example of this is in the dyad of Victor and John. As John related in his postinstructional interview:

*I think I was able to help that little guy because I was just like him. Wow, did I struggle! When I was thirteen, my parents divorced and my Mom placed me in*



*an English speaking school. Of course, I spoke German and Afrikaans fluently, but English... I was so embarrassed.*

This bonding is similar to the process of finding a "true friend" in life; often that experience happens only once or twice in a lifetime for some adults. This kindred bonding was not observed in the less effective dyads. In the present study, this characteristic relates directly to previous research in the area of the social-contextual perspective of literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Hiebert, 1991; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

The placement of children with tutors who have similar life and/or literacy experiences merits closer examination for this may be more likely to result in positive and immediate rapport building. This concept has received little attention in the research literature. However, this idea of "best fit" match of tutor and child is similar to the "goodness of fit" research in child rearing practices (Thomas & Chess, 1977). In the present study, the successful dyads of tutors and children were not necessarily of same gender and ethnicity pairings. None of the four case studies presented involved same ethnicity matches. However, in the tutors' opinions, ethnicity was not an essential, but it proved to be highly beneficial for enhanced communication if the tutors and tutees had similar life and literacy experiences.

#### CONCLUSIONS: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research project supports the premise that effective literacy tutoring for the older at-risk student can not be defined by looking at the instructional component alone; effective literacy tutoring for the reluctant older reader is multidimensional as is motivation. Several characteristics were observed within the unique social context of each successful dyad: tutors were skillful communicators; tutors possessed a social conscience; tutors felt a kindred bonding to their child; tutors effectively used body language; tutors were knowledgeable of student's culture; and, tutees were motivated and cooperative as a consequence. In this study with fourth graders, as in Juel's (1996) research with emergent readers, the most successful dyads experienced significantly more scaffolded reading and writing experiences. Vygotsky (1978) confirmed that scaffolding occurs through social contexts and interactions. In the present study, this scaffolding was often observed to be embedded within a conversational framework which tapped into the child's special interests, culture, personality,

and life experiences. Essential scaffolding responses occurred quite naturally in the successful dyads. The highest achievers thrived within a tutoring context rich with enhanced social interactions. The effective tutors became quite adept at providing the necessary support structures for the literacy instructional activities.

This research of a volunteer literacy tutorial project with college student athletes and preservice teachers as tutors of at-risk fourth graders in a culturally diverse elementary school, indicated how difficult it was to circumvent the cycle of failure after grade three. Although there were model dyads, highlighted in this article, with praiseworthy accomplishments and successes, certainly, this researcher does not advocate volunteer tutoring as a panacea to America's problems of illiteracy and children at-risk. Reading educators would agree that the key to improving the literacy achievement for children at-risk is the regular classroom teacher and her/his instructional program. Community volunteers may play a crucial role, and further research is needed to refine the roles of these tutors/mentors and to propose models that capitalize on tutors' strengths as complementary to the classroom teacher. A close examination of specific factors related to the social context of the tutoring relationship and specific interpersonal skills of effective mentors may provide insights as we continue to search for effective models to enable the older, reluctant reader to succeed.

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