

Students at Risk

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It was already the second week of school when Tyrel came into class for the first time. It was getting close to lunchtime when his father brought him to be registered as a student. The principal walked Tyrel to the first-grade classroom as soon as the paperwork was completed. The young boy stood uncomfortably at the door to Mrs. Peterson's classroom for a moment, until she took him by the hand and led him to a seat at a table.

He was dressed in a faded T-shirt and pants that were too long for him, Mrs. Peterson noted. He dropped his backpack on the floor and slouched in the chair.

"Jimmy," she asked quietly, "Would you show Tyrel our class routine for hanging up coats and putting away backpacks please?"

She watched as the two boys walked together to the back of the classroom. The other students were finishing a math assignment and beginning to clear their tables in preparation for lunch. Mrs. Peterson surveyed her classroom. Susie was bossing Ralph again, telling him to hurry up with his work so they wouldn't be late for lunch. He tried to ignore her, but she persisted. Junie and Jessica had forgotten about their math and somehow wandered over to the art center. How had she failed to notice them? Mrs. Peterson smiled to herself. Abigail and Kendra were finished putting away their work and had started to crawl under the table. Reflecting on the many classroom procedures that still needed practice, she called the children to attention and told them she'd be calling on them to line up for lunch by table as soon as everything was put away.

This was already a much practiced procedure, and most of the students began getting ready. There was a tug on her pants. Looking down, it was Jimmy, standing next to Tyrel.

"He doesn't have any lunch, or any lunch money," Jimmy informed her while pointing at Tyrel.

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She bent down to their level. “That is not a problem. I’ll make sure Tyrel gets lunch,” responded Mrs. Peterson, looking at both boys. “Jimmy, would you show Tyrel how we stand in line and tell him all about going to the lunchroom? You can help him go through the hot-lunch line today.”

Tyrel was looking away, looking at the floor. The teacher reached out and touched his shoulder. “We’ll take good care of you here,” she assured him.

He looked up at her. “I got no money. I’m sorry I got no money.”

“That’s all right. Do you like chicken?”

He nodded.

“Good. I think we have chicken today. Do you like corn?”

Tyrel nodded.

“Good. I think we have corn today. Do you like ice cream?”

This time he nodded vigorously.

“Good. I think we have ice cream today. Do you like spinach?”

He gave her a quizzical look. It made her laugh. “I really like spinach, but they never seem to have it in the lunchroom. I wonder why,” she mused aloud. “I have some wonderful spinach growing in my garden at home. I will try to remember to bring some for you boys very soon. It’ll be a special treat,” she told them with a look of anticipation.

With 25 years of experience as an elementary teacher, Mrs. Peterson watched her classroom with an experienced eye. Many of her children had limited oral language skills and struggled to express themselves and to understand any complex classroom instructions. It was easier to count the children with appropriate social skills than the ones who struggled with social behaviors. Several were physically awkward as they moved about the room and struggled to hold a pencil or scissors correctly. Most of these also had poor hand strength. Even though this was first grade, she had already determined that nine of her students did not yet know all of the basic letter sounds, and three could not yet name all the letters. She wondered about Tyrel, her new student. It seemed likely there were gaps in his readiness for the demands of school.

She watched him as the class walked in a wandering line toward the cafeteria. He was staying close to Jimmy, carefully watching his new friend for clues about living in this new school. Already she felt the connection with him. Mrs. Peterson knew Tyrel would need lots of extra help this year, and she also knew that the children who take the most work are often the one’s we remember so clearly for years. But this year, there were more children who needed extra help than she could ever remember. It was a trend, she reminded herself. Some days she wondered if she were a magnet for these needy ones.

Maybe I am, she wondered. That wouldn’t be so bad.

It's true. There are more children at risk of struggling to be successful in the early years of school. Preschool and primary level teachers widely observe more children with language delays, gross motor skill delays, visual-motor skill delays, and behavioral and social skills that make learning difficult. These at-risk students are coming to school at a time when learning success has never been so important. Although there was a time when teenagers with limited academic skills could quit school and find decent-paying work on farms or in factories, those days are long gone. The learning society and the information age are here, and so are these greater numbers of needy children.

For a moment Mrs. Peterson felt the weight of it. Looking at her line of beautifully imperfect children, she saw the importance of helping each one find the learning success needed for ongoing academic and social learning success and for success in life.

The early childhood years are the most important learning phase in the life of a child. During these years, the brain is growing and developing complexity at greater rates than in any other phase of life. The trajectory of learning success is clearly established during these years. Children who have significant gaps in essential early learning skills by the end of third grade are at a disadvantage for life (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002).

The research is unequivocal. Children who experience reading success in the early years are more likely to become good readers for life (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 1998; Tuscano, 1999; Vellutino, Scanlon, & Tanzman, 1998). Children who do not experience early learning success are more likely to drop out and are more likely to engage in substance abuse and other risky behaviors (Barnett, 1996; Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehart, 2000; Currie & Duncan, 1995). In an extensive study of students in the San Diego Public Schools (Zau & Betts, 2008), it was demonstrated that students at risk of failing the California state-required high school exit exam (administered in 10th grade) can be identified almost as well in fourth grade as they can in ninth grade. The San Diego study highlights the inefficiency of waiting until high school to help students who are at risk of learning failure when we have known for years who they are and in which areas of learning they are at risk.

In 2007, nearly 6.2 million young Americans (16% of the 16–24 age group) were high school dropouts (Northeastern University, Center

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for Labor Market Studies and Alternative Schools Network in Chicago, 2009). Every student who does not complete high school costs our society an estimated \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity (Riley & Peterson, 2008). But most parents know that high school graduation is not enough in the information society. High school graduation is not sufficient to find entry into the higher-paying jobs in today's economy. We want our children to have solid learning skills, a love of learning, and be ready to continue to train and retrain throughout their professional lifetimes.

According to a special report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), 67% of American children are scoring below proficient reading levels at the beginning of fourth grade on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test. Of these, 34% read at the *basic* level and 33% read at the *below basic* level. One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade fail to graduate from high school on time, four times the rate for children with proficient third-grade reading skills. "These scores are profoundly disappointing to all of us who see school success and high school graduation as beacons in the battle against intergenerational poverty" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010, p. 2).

Three quarters of students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Students with poor literacy skills are more likely to have behavioral and social problems in subsequent grades (Miles & Stipek, 2006). The National Research Council (1998) asserts that "academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of third grade. A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by that time is unlikely to graduate from high school."

Sixty-seven percent of American children are scoring below proficient reading levels at the beginning of fourth grade on the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading test.

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010)

For poor children the story is even worse. Overall, 22% of children who have lived in poverty (for at least 1 year) do not graduate from high school on time, compared with 6% of those who have never been poor. For children who have lived more than half of their childhood in poverty, this rate rises to 32% (Hernandez, 2011). This rate is 16 times greater than the 2% dropout rate among proficient readers who have never been poor.

Nationwide, 55% of fourth graders in moderate- and high-income families have reading skills below the proficient level. This increases to 83%

for children in low-income families (Hernandez, 2011). For Latino, Black, and American Indian children, the numbers are staggering. More than 80% cannot read at grade level by fourth grade. If children do not gain the skills and habits necessary to succeed in school by age 8, they are more likely to struggle to perform well and be less motivated for future learning in middle school and high school. They will also struggle to develop the higher-order thinking, communication, analytic, and social skills that are the essential for success in life (Foundation for Child Development, 2011).

Entering the cafeteria that day with her class, Mrs. Peterson saw Jimmy take Tyrel's hand. Months later she could look back and identify that moment of transformation. In that instant she considered her beautiful but needy students as they filed into the cafeteria. She saw some with delayed language skills, awkward motor skills, and lack of social awareness, but she also saw the hopefulness in the eyes of these children. She saw their capacity for trust, their openness to learning, their hunger to live full lives. Mrs. Peterson considered the pressures of her school system, including the overwhelming content expectations, paperwork requirements, overcrowding, understaffing, the constant din of new program requirements, and the educational fad of the month. When she saw Jimmy take Tyrel's hand that day, something changed inside of her. She found a resolve and a sense of peace.

Eighty-three percent of fourth graders from poor families have reading skills below the proficient level.

Hernandez (2011)

Three quarters of students who are poor readers in third grade will remain poor readers in high school.

Shaywitz et al. (1997)

I won't let them fail. They will not leave my class without the skills they need, she promised.

Whatever it takes, she thought. I've been teaching for 25 years, and I'd like another good 10 years. I can do this. I'm going to focus on giving these kids every skill they need to be successful learners throughout their lives. I will reject the pressure to cover material they don't understand. I will figure out what's most important, and teach each child at his or her level of readiness. My students will fall in love with learning. I'll get help, somehow. Tyrel and Jimmy, Junie and Jessica, Susie and Ralph, Abigail and Kendra, and all the rest of these students will get what they need to succeed. These beautiful children will not become part of the grim statistics. All my students will develop the skills and behaviors they need to succeed. No excuses.

Across the busy cafeteria she could hear Junie calling her for help. Mrs. Peterson felt it deep within herself. She wondered how she would ever keep this promise.

CHAPTER 1 STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why are we seeing more children at risk of early learning failure coming to our school?
2. Does our district recognize the importance of proficient skills by the end of third grade?
3. How could we recognize children who are struggling even earlier than third grade?
4. The research clearly establishes the importance of literacy by the end of third grade. Do numeracy skills also need to be well established in the early grades? What about patterns of behavior that are established in this same time frame?
5. Children who are not proficient readers and also live in poverty are far more at risk of falling into patterns of failure. What can we do about this in our schools and community?