

Successful Educators



A Practical Guide for Understanding Children's Learning Problems and Mental Health Issues

Nathan Naparstek



BERGIN & GARVEY
Westport, Connecticut • London

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Introduction

This book is designed for educators working in today's schools to assist them in finding out why some of their students are not succeeding and help them do something about it. It will be of use to educators such as classroom teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, or graduate students who want to develop a better understanding of children's learning problems.

Teaching and working with students is a more challenging job than ever because of the increasingly wide diversity of skills and needs that children bring into a classroom. Teaching is difficult in that teachers have to constantly adjust their curriculum to the varying needs of their students. When I ask teachers what is the hardest thing for them to do in a classroom, they often tell me that it is trying to deal with the diversity of skills in their classes.

Teachers often are asked to do more than simply present instructional materials. They spend a lot of time with their students and are asked to deal with children's emotional, social, and behavioral problems. They may also be the first people to identify a child as having a problem that needs further investigation. Although teachers are not expected to diagnose learning problems and other disabilities, they need to have enough information in order to know when they should make a referral to a psychologist or other mental health professional. Many teachers I work with are unsure of when they should refer a student for assistance. After reading this book, the answer to that question should be very clear.

This book is an insider's attempt to address the issue of providing educators with the strategies needed to help their students become more successful. I wrote my first book *The Learning Solution: What to Do If Your Child Has Trouble with Schoolwork* to empower parents to help their children improve their performance in school. I found many parents who were frustrated in their efforts to help their children be better students. I find just as many, if not more, frustrated educators who want to help their students do better but who lack direction and the skills needed to do so. This book was written to empower educators to get the results that they would like to see from their students.

I have been a practicing school psychologist in the public school system for the past twenty years. I have also served as a psychologist in private practice, and as an adjunct professor in a teaching graduate program. This gives me an advantage over other authors who are writing from a parent's position or from that of an educator such as a college professor who only functions outside of the school system. I don't find many books written by people who are currently working inside a public school system. My job as a school psychologist also puts me in a position where I can objectively evaluate a child's progress and the strategies that a teacher has employed.

The principles and information provided will enable a teacher or other educator to develop the skills that are needed to properly identify a student's learning problem. Without that proper identification, you will be unable to communicate effectively with other educators and the child's parents when it comes time to develop an intervention.

This book presents you with a model that you can use to make sense out of any learning problem. A good theoretical model is the key to keeping your focus on effective strategies for confronting and resolving problems in school. You can't have good problem-solving strategies without having a good understanding of the student's problems. Very often educators are in a rush to fix the problem without truly understanding what it is. You would not have your auto mechanic start fixing things in your car without correctly diagnosing the problem. You would be very nervous about driving your car on the road if you still did not know the cause of that problem. You should be just as nervous trying to develop an intervention for a student when you don't understand why he or she is not doing well in school. This student just might break down later on the road of life.

In my work as a school psychologist, I often hear teacher complaints about parents not supporting and working with them as a team. In

my private practice, I often hear the opposite side of the story from parents who feel that teachers have not been working with them in an effective manner. Very often the educators and parents are not communicating with each other in the same language. This book allows you to talk in a language that parents and other educators will be able to understand. Many parent-teacher conflicts are the result of miscommunication and an incorrect understanding of the student's difficulties. This book also gives you the skills needed to make and present an accurate understanding of a student's difficulties. Without this understanding, it will be impossible to effectively treat the student's difficulties and develop good communication with a child's parents.

Being a good educator is not a random occurrence that appears by accident. It is the result of having the knowledge and skills that are needed to make one effective. This book provides you with the scientific problem-solving strategies, communication skills, and factual knowledge that you need to become the educator that you want to be.

This book presents a four-component model that attempts to explain why any student would be experiencing difficulty in school. The chapters are structured around these four components. The first component looks at student's capacity *to pay attention*. The second component relates to the *intellectual and academic abilities* that are needed to be successful in school. The third component looks at the student's desire to put forth the *effort* that is needed to be successful. The fourth and last component looks at the *organizational skills* that the student needs in order to complete his or her assignments in a satisfactory manner. These components are all connected and a breakdown in any of them will lead to problems in school performance.

With this four-component model, teachers will be made more aware of how conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, depression, anxiety, and learning disabilities impact on a student's learning and how they can be addressed in today's schools. This model will also provide you with the questions you need to ask and the means for getting the correct answers.

Chapter 1

Four-Component Model: Factors That Can Explain Why a Student Is Not Succeeding in School

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE FOUR-COMPONENT MODEL

Paying Attention

The theoretical background for my four-component model comes from the research on memory, information processing, and prosocial behavior that I was exposed to while I was working on my dissertation. I figured that if it was possible for memory to be described by a component model, there was no reason why the learning process in school could not be similarly described. Without memory there can be no learning.

Roberta Klatzky described stages of memory that we all have to go through in order to acquire new information. The first step is that of paying attention. You have to use one of your senses such as hearing or vision in order to become oriented to incoming information. If you don't pay attention, the information will not get into your memory system, and there will be nothing for you to remember later on. Memory or learning cannot take place without a person paying some kind of attention to the information that is being presented. The next step is processing the information in short-term or working memory so that you can make sense of it and prepare it for storage into long-term memory. The third step is putting or encoding it into long-term memory. Theoretically, once the information is in long-term memory, it should always be available to you. The last stage is that of retrieval.

The information may be in long-term memory, but you may not be able to access it. This happens when something is “on the tip of your tongue,” but you just can’t remember it. These stages of memory are all connected, and a breakdown in any of these steps will lead to a breakdown in the memory process.

Ability and Effort

While researching prosocial behavior, I became aware that people did not always do what they said they would in various social situations. They would know what the correct or prosocial behavior was for a situation but would not demonstrate it for a variety of reasons such as immediate self-interest. The ability and effort components in this book come out of this finding. Some students have the skills needed to be successful, but do not put in the effort that is required in order to achieve academic success. They can do the work, yet they don’t. For example, there are students with high IQ scores and advanced academic skills who do just enough to get by or are in fact failing. Having good skills is not a guarantee that a student will be successful. A student must have the desire to put in the effort that is required to complete the work assignments. A lack of desire and effort could be due to issues related to depression, anxiety, lack of confidence, or low expectations. Most student failure in school appears to be the result of a lack of homework completion and studying for tests. It is very hard for students at the secondary level to pass if they do not complete their homework assignments, as they count for a large part of their grade.

Capable students who don’t complete their work present a very frustrating situation for a teacher. After reading this book, you should have a better idea of how to handle this difficult situation.

Organization

While further researching why people act the way they do, I found that one can perceive a situation as being one where you need to act in a prosocial way, have the prosocial skills needed to act correctly, have the desire to do so, yet still not act appropriately. The best analogy is that “the mind is willing, but the flesh is weak.” The organizational component relates to students who are disorganized and chronic procrastinators who often don’t get around to completing the work that they can and theoretically want to do. Organization is also a critical

factor involved in memory. If the information is encoded into long-term memory in an organized way, it will be much easier to retrieve it later on.

Importance of Using a Theoretical Model

Just as with memory, there have to be essential stages and components that students must achieve in order to be academically successful. When you think in terms of components, it allows you to develop a better analysis of why a student is not succeeding in school. Whenever I make a diagnosis for a student with a disability, I always try to rule out competing alternatives until I am left with the best possible explanation for a student's difficulties.

A good theoretical model can give you the anchors you need to logically determine where the breakdown in learning is occurring and point you in the right direction in order to solve it. Without a model you are at risk for making a faulty analysis of why a student is not performing well. You are also at much greater risk for making assumptions that you will not be able to back up. If you have a poor understanding of a student's difficulties, your communication to others regarding that student's problems will also be impaired.

THE FOUR COMPONENTS

In order for a student to work up to her maximum potential she must be successful in the four components of *paying attention, ability, effort, and organization*. A failure in any of these four components would lead a student to fail to work up to their academic potential. All these components are interconnected. Throughout this book we look at ways to maximize a student's performance in each of these components. In regard to paying attention, it is important to rule out any factor that could impede maximum focus. You have to look at variables within the student such as hearing, vision, and disabilities such as processing deficits or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

In looking at the student's ability, it is important to determine what the specific skills of the student are, as well as the nature of any deficits the student is experiencing. You have to rule out factors such as a reading disability, low-skill level, weak prior background, or poor understanding of the content material.

In assessing the student's effort, you need to rule out internal factors such as poor self-confidence, depression, anxiety, oppositional defiant disorder, substance abuse, and conduct disorder, as well as variables outside of the student such as the home and school environments. You also have to assess how relevant the student views the learning tasks, and the expectations that exist for that student's performance.

It is also important to look at how well the student is prepared and organized to engage in learning tasks and the level of his or her work habits. Below is a model illustrating the components and the factors that can impact on them.

Paying Attention

ADHD
Hearing
Vision
Processing
Seizure Disorder
Poor Curriculum Match
Interest

Ability

Intelligence
Academic Skills

Effort

Self-Esteem
Confidence
Relevance
Persistence
Depression
Bipolar Disorder
Anxiety
Oppositional Defiance
Conduct Disorder
Substance Abuse

Organization

Work Habits
Routine
Planning

Using the Model

It is not a teacher's job to give a formal diagnosis of a student's learning problems. This task is often left to school psychologists or other educational specialists such as a reading or math teacher. Although teachers do not make formal diagnoses, they usually make informal ones. It is human nature to try to explain why a student is not succeeding and make assumptions or develop a working hypothesis. The four-component model will allow you to make better assumptions and hypotheses. An assumption that is not grounded on a scientific basis can get you, as a teacher, into a lot of trouble, as well as prevent you from looking at strategies that would be helpful. The four-component model will allow you to focus on those areas that need to be addressed and help you to avoid those that should be ignored. It will also give you the information regarding what kind of help you should be seeking for the student and whom you should contact.

An Example of a Teacher Using the Four-Component Model

Jason, who is in the fourth grade, is not getting his work done in class and is doing poorly on his tests. Mrs. Hudson, his classroom teacher, invited his parents to meet with her because of concerns regarding his lack of academic progress. Jason's parents report that they do not understand why he is having problems because he is always able to do the work at home. Mrs. Hudson initially thought that this was impossible but kept this thought to herself. She could have easily become defensive and have taken the parents' statement as an implication that they were able to get Jason to do the schoolwork, whereas she could not. Instead, Mrs. Hudson was focused on making use of the four-component model and redirected the issue to a problem about which she and Jason's parents could agree. She stated, "I'm glad he is successful with you at home, but we still have the problem of his completing the work in the classroom." She then asked Jason's parents if this was the issue that they needed to work on during the meeting. She wanted to make sure that they had the same shared definition of Jason's problem in school. Jason's parents easily agreed that this was the problem. Mrs. Hudson was now in a position to work with Jason's parents in a cooperative manner. She told them that she would like to explore with them all the possible reasons for the different observations. She then used the four-component model and asked his parents the following questions:

1. Does Jason have the ability to *pay attention* in the large group setting of the classroom? Mrs. Hudson reported that he was having a lot of difficulty paying attention, following directions, and getting his class work done. His parents indicated that even though he could get his work completed with them, they needed to constantly sit next to him to make sure his work was completed.

Mrs. Hudson was able to get Jason's parents to agree that his ability to pay attention in a larger classroom setting could be a factor impacting on his work completion difficulties. This was an issue that needed further investigation, and Mrs. Hudson suggested that they contact the school psychologist to see if Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder was an issue here. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is often a major reason in why students are unable to focus and complete their work assignments. However, a lack of focus could also be due to emotional, interest, sensory impairment, or other health issues. A good psychologist will try to rule out all the possible explanations for a student's attending difficulties until he or she is left with

the best possible explanation. A teacher doesn't have to make this determination, but the psychologist may never see a student like Jason unless the teacher makes the referral.

2. Does Jason have the *skills* needed to be successful with the fourth-grade curriculum? For example, does he have the reading skills needed to understand the written materials that are presented to him? His parents stated that they believed that he did. Mrs. Hudson then explained that his scores on standardized tests as well as informal testing had indicated that his reading, writing, and math skills were generally on a second-grade level. Having hard data such as test scores or work products is very helpful when trying to determine if a student has gaps in skills. Jason's parents reported that they still felt he had the ability to succeed with fourth-grade work in the classroom. It's very frustrating when people do not believe what you have to say to them. Sometimes it helps to get independent confirmation. Therefore, Mrs. Hudson suggested that she make a referral to the school psychologist to do more comprehensive testing to further assess his academic skills. Jason's parents were happy with this suggestion, because it was very important for them to know if their son had any deficits in skills.

Teachers generally have a good idea where a student's skills are in their class. The psychologist may confirm the skill level and also give an indication of the student's ability by giving an intelligence test.

3. Is Jason putting forth his best *effort* to get his work done in class? This is an interesting question to ask because a person could always try harder. It is a subjective question in that you are trying to determine if a student is somehow choosing not to do their best work. Mrs. Hudson felt that Jason was putting forth his best effort but was lacking in the attending and academic skills needed to be successful. His parents felt that he was lazy and that his problems were due primarily to a lack of effort. They felt that he needed to be more motivated; this appeared to be an indirect slight to Mrs. Hudson in that they were implying that she was not doing enough to motivate Jason.

Mrs. Hudson could not address the effort component without addressing the other components. They are all connected and impact on each other. Without looking at his focus and academic skills, it was not possible for her to adequately evaluate his effort. She saw him as a well-behaved boy who wanted to do well. Most students want to do well, and there is always a good reason why they don't. Mrs. Hudson didn't want to buy into a label of Jason being lazy, and she didn't want to have to defend herself from an implied accusation of

not being a good motivator. Instead she focused on his problems with paying attention and skill level and told Jason's parents that his effort level could not be properly addressed until the other issues were.

4. Does Jason have difficulty getting *organized* to get his work done? His parents indicated that he is very disorganized at home, and that this could be a factor in his schoolwork difficulties. Mrs. Hudson also agreed that this was an issue that needed to be addressed, and they had a discussion of what could be done to get him into a more regular routine.

By the end of the meeting, Mrs. Hudson and Jason's parents had several ideas to explore in helping him to complete his work in school. His parents were talking to her in a cooperative manner. Given Jason's parents' initial attitude at this meeting, it could have been a complete disaster. Having the four-component model allowed Mrs. Hudson to focus on Jason's difficulties and not get sidetracked into a confrontation with his parents. The use of the model makes the meeting less personal when there is conflict and keeps you focused on the problem-solving process.

SUGGESTIONS

1. Take a look at a student who is not being successful and run him or her through the four-component model. Assess the student's ability to pay attention, skill level, effort, and organizational skills. Then rule out the areas that seem to be okay and focus on those that need improvement.
2. Talk to the student before or after class to see if the student can give you a better understanding of why there is a problem in one or more of these components.
3. Don't be afraid to contact other teachers or the school staff to seek advice on how to address a problem in one of these components. As a school psychologist, I have a deep respect for teachers who want to understand their children better.

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Chapter 2

Paying Attention

IMPORTANCE OF ATTENDING SKILLS

One of the major reasons that a student does not work up to his or her ability in school is a failure to pay attention and keep focused on academic-related tasks. Problems in paying attention constitute approximately 30 percent of my referrals for treatment as a psychologist in the public schools. Paying attention is a necessary component for being successful in school. It is hard to acquire facts, follow directions, and get work completed if you are not paying attention. A student who does not pay attention often misses important details of classroom lessons and develops gaps in skills. Lack of attention can also lead to problems following directions and understanding what one reads. Problems in paying and sustaining attention are strongly connected with a problem in completing one's class work and homework. A student who has difficulty sustaining attention on schoolwork gets easily bored and feels that getting the work done is often an insurmountable task. The student's mind wanders, and the student gets easily distracted by various outside stimuli or internal thoughts. Because the schoolwork is so hard to complete, the student may get symptoms of "learned helplessness" and stop trying altogether because his or her efforts are often so unsuccessful.

Very often a child with problems in paying attention is described by such labels as lazy or unmotivated. These types of labels should not be easily accepted, and instead you should look for the true reasons

why a student is not paying attention. Viewing a student as being lazy does not result in your developing an effective treatment for improving his or her performance. It is a negative term and will only lead you to taking a negative view of the student. You want to go beyond the use of negative labels to determine a more scientific reason as to why the student's work is not being completed. The issues of sensory deficits, processing problems, or other health-related disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder need to be assessed. It would make me feel guilty if I thought of a child as being lazy and treated him or her that way when his or her problems were the result of a physical condition.

GETTING YOUR STUDENTS TO PAY ATTENTION

Teachers tend to place more demands on a student's attention than anyone else. In the classroom the majority of the student's time is expected to be spent by listening to the teacher and attending to independent classroom assignments. Theoretically, the student does not have a lot of choice over what subject matter he or she will pay attention to. The student has to pay attention to what the teacher is presenting to the class. However, the student could end up paying attention to what is happening in the back of the room, outside the window, or to irrelevant objects on the desk. A teacher also has the task of getting and keeping the attention of approximately twenty-five to thirty children for six hours a day. This is a tough job, and one that is not often recognized by parents. The best analogy I can give here is that many of us would have difficulty sustaining our attention if we were currently taking six hours of graduate classes every weekday in the field of education. Getting a student's attention on what needs to be attended to is critical for a teacher. How can the teacher effectively teach a student who is not paying attention to the lesson? An inattentive student is often a significant source of frustration.

Even the most inattentive students will usually keep their attention on video games because they are often viewed as being very interesting. Video games are tasks that involve a lot of novelty, stimulation, and constant reinforcement. They also involve a challenge to get the best score or get to the next level. If education could be made more stimulating so that students may truly feel the challenge to get to the next level, it could lead to an improvement in their ability to focus on schoolwork.