

Changing Our Ineffective Scripts so that Children Will Change Theirs

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A major foundation of resilience, about which I have written on many occasions for my website and in the books I have co-authored with my friend Dr. Sam Goldstein, centers on the concept of personal control. Simply stated, resilient people are those who have the insight and courage to change what they are doing if what they are doing is ineffective. They avoid blaming themselves or others if particular actions prove unproductive or counterproductive. Instead, they consider what changes they can initiate to create a more positive outcome rather than wait for others to change first. Such a perspective leads to a sense of empowerment rather than blame.

Assuming personal control or responsibility for one's life is an essential underpinning of emotional and physical well-being, but it is not easily practiced. All too often when confronted with difficult situations, many individuals become frustrated, but instead of considering alternatives to their current outlook and behaviors, they persist in doing the same thing over and over again, trapped in a negative script that frequently involves accusing others for maintaining the status quo.

I have witnessed many examples of negative scripts in my clinical and consultation activities. For example, in consultations I have conducted with schools or clinics about challenging youth, I have heard the following refrain on more than one occasion: "We have been using this strategy with these students (clients) for months. They are still not responding or changing. They are resistant and oppositional."

I believe in perseverance, but I also believe that if we have been using the same ineffective strategy for a lengthy time, I am tempted to ask, "Who are the resistant ones? Are they the kids who are not improving or staff members who are not willing to change their approach?"

Fortunately, I continue to hear from professionals who recognize that if the status quo is to be altered, they must assume responsibility for doing so. I learned that lesson years ago when I was principal of a school in a locked door unit of a psychiatric hospital. One of the children yelled at me, "Don't you get it, Dr Brooks? We're going to outlast

you.” Initially, I responded to this comment with punitive disciplinary measures, which served only to reinforce the resolve of the students in the school to outlast me. It wasn’t until my staff and I began to change our usual ways of operating that the behavior of the kids began to improve.

In my workshops I have recounted the inspiring, revealing stories sent to me by educators, mental health clinicians, and other professionals who have adopted a strength-based approach when working with children and adolescents. These professionals demonstrate a refreshing ability to think outside the box in their quest to enhance the lives of youngsters and their families. Recently, an attendee at one of my presentations was very moved by a vignette I described and said, “I think it would be great if from time to time you shared in your monthly website articles some of the stories you have collected. They would be helpful to many people.” I responded that I liked her suggestion, noting that others had made a similar recommendation.

I reflected upon a number of stories I have received during the past couple of years and decided that periodically I would highlight them in my monthly articles. My hope is that they will be beneficial to all of us as we consider our interactions with youth, especially those who prove very challenging.

In this article I wish to describe an example sent to me by Flynn Corson, the Dean of Students at the Pacific Buddhist Academy in Honolulu, a school that is only five years old. Flynn heard me speak at a workshop I gave in Hawaii this past January in which I discussed strategies for nurturing motivation and resilience in students. At the beginning of the workshop I emphasized the importance of modifying practices that are not effective.

Flynn wrote to me about a tenth grade student who barely passed her freshman year, even with “an enormous amount of help from one of her teachers.” He noted that at the beginning of this year she was not handing in her work, “and to avoid the anxiety of having to face teachers under these circumstances, began retreating regularly to the nurse’s office because she ‘didn’t feel well.’” Flynn surmised, “I don’t think these illnesses were completely feigned. When I would check in on her she would look sick, overwhelmed, exhausted. Because her grades and attendance were so low the administration began discussing the potential for dismissal.”

It was at this time that Flynn attended my workshop. As many of my readers are aware, there are several key interventions that I emphasize, including identifying, reinforcing, and displaying each student's strengths or "islands of competence," and providing opportunities for students to help and/or teach others. I have labeled the latter "contributory activities" and noted that in research I conducted about one's memories of school, the most frequently cited positive memory was when students were asked to help out. I have found that seemingly unmotivated students can often be engaged if we make the effort to discover their interests and talents and apply these talents in activities that involve assisting others.

Interestingly, while many educators have embraced this approach, some have questioned whether it represents the reinforcement of negative behavior. One teacher commented, "Why should we allow students who aren't doing their own work to help others? Doesn't it communicate to them that you will be rewarded if you fail to meet your responsibilities?" While on the surface this may seem a reasonable argument, I have found that it does not hold true for most challenging students. Many are already so burdened by discouragement and years of negative feedback that they have lost hope of succeeding in the school environment. The promise of helping others but only if they first improve their own behavior provides little, if any, impetus for change.

Instead, I have advocated that we summon the courage to alter our script by inviting all students to engage in contributory behaviors without the existence of preconditions—e.g., you must first complete your own work. In reality, these preconditions serve as barriers for many students in accepting our invitation. I have found that once students experience success and appreciate that they can make a positive difference, they are more likely to tackle responsibilities that they have avoided in the past. I am reminded of the late developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's recommendation that schools implement a "curriculum for caring," offering students the chance to learn about and engage in acts of caring with such populations as the elderly, younger children, the infirm, and the lonely. A "curriculum for caring" can be used to complement and reinforce the academic curriculum in a school.

Flynn decided to design a program for his challenging student that was housed within a strength-based model. He stated, "I asked my fellow administrators to roll the

dice and allow me to set up an ‘internship’ for this student. She really likes little kids and is a very talented musician (ukelele) and artist. I know this because I asked her what she liked. They allowed me to make arrangements with our elementary school so that she would spend approximately 5 hours per day in various classrooms as a TA (teaching assistant). She plans lessons and implements them for 1st grade math, spelling, and social studies and 4th grade music; she helps with the clerical work in the room and is an aid in PE, art, and the library. She has a total of 60 students in grades pK-4th.”

Flynn and his colleagues added another component to this girl’s program that proved very successful. Their creativity strengthened my belief that most students will become increasingly responsible when we establish a platform on which they can display their competencies and their capacity for caring. Flynn explained, “An interesting component of this internship is the fact we decided to maintain her enrollment in the on-line math program that all of our students are a part of, but appointed one of our seniors to be her ‘math mentor.’ This means that when she’s not a 14-year-old elementary school teacher, she’s the student of a high school senior with the distanced oversight of the math department head.

“She’s made more progress in math in the past semester than she did in the first year and a half that she was in our school. She feels like she’s done this on her own. Her math mentor loves that she feels this way, and has recently approached me about starting a peer tutoring center (a current work in progress).”

I was drawn to the words “she feels like she’s done this on her own.” This kind of attitude is a basic feature of a responsible, resilient mindset. In designing programs for children and adolescents it is imperative that we assist them to assume ownership for both their successes and setbacks in order that they learn from both. Unlike some others, my view is that enlisting challenging students to help out does not reinforce negative behavior. Rather, if handled in a fashion similar to that demonstrated by Flynn and other faculty at Pacific Buddhist Academy, such an intervention actually increases motivation, self-discipline, responsibility, hope, and resilience.

Flynn’s closing observations deserve reflection by all educators and other professionals who work with youth. “She’s discovered accountability and takes this seriously. I think she is benefiting most from a support team of individuals that cares

about her: her internees, her math mentor, her parents, her doctors, and I are all in close touch. She has learned a lot about different learning styles as well as different instructional approaches to reach a diverse group of learners. I think this has taught her a lot about herself. She is more socially successful, more confident, happier, more organized and responsible. Our work is not done with this girl, but we have made some great progress this semester.

“More important is the fact that this situation has helped the school better define the type of institution it is. We’re now more capable of taking risks to teach our kids and it seems that our student body and parents have a new appreciation for the type of commitment we’re willing to make.”

I wish to thank Flynn for taking the time to share this story with me so that I might share it with many others. I believe his insights are relevant for all schools.

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