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Some thoughts on...SUCCESS!

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Which of the following people can be classified as "pioneers"?

- a) Neil Armstrong
- b) Christopher Columbus
- c) Ferdinand Magellan
- d) Marianne Frostig
- e) All of the above

If you answered "e"... buy yourself an ice cream! Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon; Columbus discovered the New World; Magellan circumnavigated the earth for the first time; and Marianne Frostig was among the first to recognize and investigate the link between neurology and learning.

In 1964, Dr. Frostig began promoting theories and findings that were truly "cutting edge" for her time. She proposed the belief that "perceptual development precedes conceptual development" and identified the strong correlation between learning and visual/perceptual abilities. Her theories and her assessment tools were used extensively for over a decade to identify and remediate children's learning problems. Her pioneering work spawned hundreds of research projects...and some of those studies debunked and contradicted her early theories.

We now recognize that some of Dr. Frostig's emphasis on vision and its impact on learning was a bit overstated and simplistic, but this fact does not dim her greatness or her value as one of American education's true pioneers and heroes. The criticism that is often leveled at Dr. Frostig – that her repetitive visual motor activities "didn't work" – is both shortsighted and unfair. She never presented her remedial activities as a "cure" for learning problems but, rather, as a valuable tool in an arsenal of reading and language arts instruction. In the early days of our field, parents and practitioners were searching for "THE answer" and many felt that they had found it in Dr. Frostig's work. Sadly, they failed to heed her cautions that her visual exercises should be supplement – not replace –focused reading instruction.

The staff at the Frostig Center in Pasadena, California continues the good doctor's tradition of leadership and innovation in education. One of their recent projects clearly reflects their ability to focus upon the genuine needs of struggling children...and those who serve them. In the past twenty years, the field has fully and finally recognized that Learning Disabilities simply do not "go away" with the onset of adulthood. The lives and lifestyles of LD children continue to be impacted and compromised by their learning problems when they are adults. Hundreds of studies and surveys have been conducted that examine the myriad ways that Learning Disabilities can affect performance in the workplace, in postsecondary education and in adult relationships. The Frostig Center under the leadership of Drs. Marshall Raskind, Roberta Goldberg, Eleanor Higgins and Kenneth Herman has taken an innovative approach to studying adults with learning disabilities.

Rather than studying LD adults who have failed and identifying the causes of this failure, these researchers studied LD adults who had succeeded and researched the behaviors, attitudes and characteristics that contributed to that success. BRILLIANT! The implications of this research are clear: Teach or foster these characteristics in children with Learning Disabilities in order to increase their opportunities to succeed as adults.

Of course, "success" is a difficult concept to define and will vary from person to person. But a successful life is loosely defined as one that is productive and satisfying. It includes

relationships that are meaningful and mutually beneficial. After all, aren't these factors that we wish for all of our children.

The Frostig research highlights several traits that were commonly found in successful and productive LD adults. I have taken the liberty of presenting the characteristics in a format using the acronym "SUCCESS".

S: Setting goals and planning

The successful adults had developed specific goals for all areas of their lives... employment, relationships, social and leisure. They designed systems to maintain schedules and these systems reflected clear priorities and goals. They developed long-term ("I am going to get more involved in the social scene at work.") and short-term ("I will join the staff bowling team.") goals. They worked diligently to utilize and improve their executive strategizing skills.

U: Understanding self

The adults surveyed had developed a clear and complete understanding of their needs, strengths and limitations. They accepted their weaknesses, but were able to "compartmentalize" their difficulties. In other words, they viewed their disabilities as an aspect of their persona...but not their entire persona. They viewed themselves as "people with disabilities" rather than as "disabled people". They were able to effectively explain their disorder to others and could translate this information into accommodations and modifications that they used in the workplace.

C: Courage and perseverance

The successful adults understood that diligent and focused effort was needed in order to ensure and maintain social and vocational progress. Further, they knew that trial-and-error processes were often required in order to solve problems and were willing to continue their efforts until their goals were met. They subscribed to the ancient Chinese wisdom, "Fall down nine times; get up ten times." They also learned from their mistakes.

This trait must be fostered and reinforced by parents. As Mel Levine advises, "Teachers should teach kids how to learn...parents must teach kids how to work."

C: Control and proactively

The adults surveyed reported that they had a strong sense of the amount of control and influence that they have over their own lives. They regularly took the initiative and took definitive actions to prevent and solve problems. They were able to make decisions and to invest the energy and resources that were required in order to make the decision effective. They handled transitions well and did not overreact to changes or modifications in their daily lives.

E: Emotional coping strategies

Anxiety and depression are relatively common in the profiles of LD children and adults. The successful adults who were surveyed were able to understand "triggers" and the symptoms of anxiety reactions and had developed strategies to cope with their stress.

S: Self-advocacy

The successful adults not only understood their individual needs, but also were able to explain their needs to employers and supervisors. They are able to advocate for themselves by assisting their employers in developing accommodations and adjustments in the workplace. They were also able to use compensatory strategies that they learned during

their formal education (e.g., note taking at meetings, maintaining calendars to plan and schedule social and work related events).

S: Support systems

The surveyed adults have developed – and nurtured - effective support systems that they access whenever they face crises or difficulties. This support system extends beyond their family and includes friends, professionals and co-workers. They consult with different people in order to solve different problems. For example, if they had difficulty with their automobile, they were likely to contact their neighborhood mechanic...rather than contacting their parents.

They also understood that they had to contribute to these relationships rather than merely “make withdrawals” from the relationship!

The most encouraging aspect of this invaluable research is that the traits that were identified are ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS and CHARACTERISTICS. Therefore, these skills and traits can actually be taught and fostered. As parents and teachers, we should begin fostering these traits with the children in our care. The mastery of these characteristics will contribute immeasurably to the child’s success as an adult. As the research summary states:

“These factors have a greater influence on adult success and happiness than gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, academic skill or IQ.”

This represents a clarion cry to begin promoting these traits in secondary programs on in the home front.

With every good wish,
Rick Lavoie