



# Spectrum Podcasts

Dr. Jane Bluestein  
Instructional Support Services, Inc.

## The Fragile Learner: Reaching and Teaching Struggling Students

**Guest:** Hanoch McCarty, Ph.D.

**Recorded:** January 19, 2012

**Background and Bio:** Dr. Hanoch McCarty is a nationally known keynote speaker, teacher trainer, and a co-author in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series. He began his career as a social worker and then high school teacher in New York City, and later became a professor of education. Dr. McCarty has conducted hundreds of workshops for educators all over the US and Canada. His interests are focused on what he calls “fragile learners,” the students who stay in the lower third of the achievement curve, and especially what can be done to help them increase their success and improve their functioning. His approach is on the practical side: steps that can be taken, incrementally, to help them break out of the cycle of failure.

**Program Description:** What can we do to increase the likelihood of success and engagement for students in the “bottom third of the class,” the ones most likely to drop out? Dr. Hanoch McCarty offers practical and encouraging ways for teachers to change these patterns and break the cycle of failure, which seems to follow students throughout their school lives. Here are effective ways to offer hope to young people, to connect with kids in an emotionally safe environment where they are willing to take risks, make an effort, try again and again— an environment that offers students the possibility that they can indeed experience school success.

### Highlights of Podcast:

Dr. McCarty identifies “fragile learners” as the students in the bottom third of the class. They often start their careers early and very often, students identified as challenged in the early grades will continue to struggle throughout their school careers. Very rarely do these children break out of this cycle of failure.

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044

Fragile learners are often misidentified or characterized as not being capable of success. Hanoch sees an enormous untapped potential in these students. Suggests examining why these students are in this position (lower third) and also what could we do to help them break out of this cycle and achieve success.

Other factors in student performance (fitting into expected model in schools) include poverty and non-traditional learning styles, asking students to adjust their learning styles to our preferences (and teaching styles), rather than asking "what does this child need?"

Also indicates a culture in the schools that doesn't recognize that many children are not able to sit still all the time and that some are not organized around multiple-choice questions. (Many quirky, successful people have had devastating experiences in school.)

Children with parents who have an education and the ability to show love, who value education and pay attention to their children and their school work, who affirm their children's successes and don't attack them for their failures, parents who read and read to their children, who aren't violent, addicted, or crazy have advantages over children who come from a background without these characteristics.

Special education addresses children who are identified to have special needs. But McCarty believes that there is a whole other category of kids in the bottom third who fall between the cracks, who don't fit those identified categories.

What if we were to teach *all* students as if they were "special needs" students? ("A rising tide lifts all the boats." Need to create an environment in which the bottom third of the class does well and that creates opportunities for every child to do better.)

Teach in present time, regardless of students' previous experience or success (or failure.)

## **Strategies**

"Pencil Grading"

McCarty returned papers with grades in pencil giving the students, a certain number of days (depending on the particular project) to revise the project and turn it in again for the "real" grade: "You don't have to fail. Even if you got an F you can still get an A."

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044

McCarty did not average scores on an assignment, basing the grade on the “latest, best work” the student did. (“Averaging works great if you’re getting 98s.” Sees averaging as hopeless.)

Gave the example of a student who gets the following scores on quizzes: 100, 80, 60, and 40 (in that order). This student will have the same average score as the one who gets a 40, 60, 80, and 100 (in that order), but there is a huge difference in the learning (and often, what’s going on in the student’s life).

### **Averaging**

ignores the trends in students’ learning processes.

We need to see ourselves as “hope salesmen,” constantly thinking in terms of “what can I do to convince you that it’s possible for you to succeed in my room.”

### **Allowed movement**

Not going crazy or being disruptive. “If you have to stand up, stand up.” Had one student who needed to stand and pace in the back of the room and was still engaged and participating because she didn’t have to control her energy to sit rigid and still in the room.

### **Uses Active Participatory Lessons**

Avoids lessons that are all lecture. When he has to do lectures, he breaks them up into 10-minute segments and breaks the class up into groups of three.

Chooses one student as a timer to interrupt when 10 minutes are up. Then directs the class to form their groups of three, and talk about what he just talked about, including what puzzled them, what questions occurred to them, what made sense to them, what in their experience relates to what he was talking about.

Gives kids a chance to internalize and process the information in small bits without being overwhelmed with a continuing barrage of new information.

The group of three gives kids the courage to ask questions and discuss without being singled out in front of the entire class. (Top learners can risk making mistakes and “looking dumb” but this configuration provides safety for the ones for whom this is a bigger risk with a bigger cost. Children in the middle or low end of the class can’t raise their hands

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044

because they don't want to look as dumb as they feel.) Tended to get much better questions and participation from the entire class with this strategy.

Refers to short-term memory bookshelf. Many students in the bottom third of the class have a "10- to 15-minute short-term lecture bookshelf." If you keep adding new information before they've had a chance to process and digest this information, it just "pushes the books off the end."

McCarty discovered that in testing students on a longer lecture, if we only count what we cover in the last 15 minutes, they all would have gotten an A. For many kids, "the brain just dropped off the early information; it just got overloaded."

Short attention bursts and brief interaction in small groups increases retention dramatically.

Likely to improve behavior when we improve chances for success, especially for kids who "would rather look bad than dumb." Eventually possible to create an environment where it *is* safe to be the only one who doesn't get it.

Helps integrate kids at different ability levels. Mentions that the kids in the top third of the class tend to socialize with one another. The same is true, in general, with the kids at the lower end.

### **Supporting shy kids**

Working in small groups can benefit children who are uncomfortable speaking up in front of a large group.

McCarty acknowledges shy kids, promising that he will never call on them unless they give him a "secret signal" when it was OK.

Examples: Using a set of cards with green signifying that it's OK to call on them, yellow to say that they aren't sure but might be willing to take the risk, and red asking to not be called on. A certain movement like tugging on one's ear.

Cited a girl who said she would never use the signal but the very next day did so because "it was the first time I had the choice of whether or not I got called on."

### **More than one right answer**

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044

"If there's only a right answer, you're definitely guaranteeing that some people have no place in the classroom."

Asks divergent questions. Even if one kid gives the "correct answer," he asks if anyone has a different answer. "What's another way of looking at this?"

Asks for divergent opinions. "If you were in that situation, what do you think you would do?"

Gives them an experience of success in the classroom because their opinion can't be wrong. (Tries to phrase the question in such a way as to give the students enough information to be successful even if they didn't read the chapter.)

Especially important with children who have had a series of failure experiences to get a "solid grounding in what it feels like to be a success."

### **Look at the power of *trying***

Helps kids appreciate the value of resilience and persistence. Gives kids time to answer. Cites one study that determined that kids only get a few seconds to answer a question. ("Bombardment" rate.) Many kids don't come up with the answer until we've moved onto other students and other questions.

Works with the class at the beginning of the year to help build empathy for times we don't have the right answer or need more time. Attempts to create a social agreement to support one another and not make derisive comments or laugh at a wrong answer because everyone is going to have a moment where they say the wrong thing.

### **Offers to give the kids extra time to allow them to try and take a risk.**

Asks kids to get in groups and come up with 5 questions they think would be fair to ask on the chapter quiz, which gives them a great opportunity to review the material. (Kids tend to be much harder and more demanding when given the latitude to come up with their own assignments, quizzes, or ways of demonstrating a particular concept.)

### **Statute of limitations**

In the classroom, we don't have statutes of limitations on kids behavior. If a child misbehaves, we tend to behave toward that child as though he or she is about to misbehave again.

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044

Has a statute of limitations on old errors and bad behavior: "What can we do to earn our way out of the doghouse?" Doesn't give students free passes. Asks them to help come up with a way to earn their way back "out of the doghouse."

Intention: To give kids hope.

### **The "tenth question"**

On a quiz or test, gives 9 questions. For #10, he asks kids "to write the question you wish I had asked" and then answer it. This automatically gives students 10 points they wouldn't have gotten any other way.

Would love for kids to learn about neuroplasticity, offering a brain class to teach kids that "when you're an active learner, you produce a huge number of new brain connections, and when you're a passive learner, the number of brain connections is... minimized."

Wants kids to see that even trying and getting it wrong, "just the act of trying ends up making you smarter."

Message: "So you have a chance in your life... to build a lifetime of success for yourself by simply trying. Even if you fail, it is part of your growth and development." Wants teachers to be supportive of this process.

Also advises adults (teachers and parents) to take a look at their own language. Our language is often very abstract. Use as many concrete examples as possible, then asks kids to give him their concrete examples. Encourages kids to act out concepts.

### **Additional Resources:**

**"A Defining Moment" (When Teachers Make Mistakes)** Article by Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller, <http://janebluestein.com/2012/a-defining-moment/>

**"Report Card for My Teacher."** Getting feedback from your students. Excerpt from *Becoming a Win-Win Teacher*, <http://janebluestein.com/2012/report-card-for-my-teacher/>

**"Getting away with Success,"** excerpt from *The Win-Win Classroom* by Dr. Jane Bluestein, <http://janebluestein.com/2012/getting-away-with-success/>

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044

**“School Success for At-Risk Learners,”** by Angela Mulkana, Peggy Hopper, Ph.D., and Teresa Jayroe, Ph.D., <http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Mulkana,%20Angela%20J.%20School%20Success%20for%20At-Risk%20Students%20Schooling%20V1%20N1%202010.pdf>

**“Why are Students Unmotivated?”** Article on the Success4Teachers Web site including 6 beliefs of motivation and 5 keys to motivate students, [http://www.success4teachers.com/articles\\_to\\_assist/why\\_are\\_students\\_unmotivated.html](http://www.success4teachers.com/articles_to_assist/why_are_students_unmotivated.html)

**“Shopping Mall Schools Help Struggling Students.”** Transcript of Feb. 2012 NPR broadcast, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/13/146826165/shopping-mall-schools-help-struggling-students>

### **Resources for Parents**

***How to Help Your Struggling Student.*** Guide for parents from The Parent Institute, <http://www.greenville.k12.sc.us/greerms/parents/struggling.pdf>

**“Helping Struggling Students who don’t Qualify for Special Services.”** Tips for parents by Jan Baumel, M.S., <http://www.greatschools.org/special-education/health/676-helping-students-who-dont-qualify.gs>

© 2012, Father Sky Media & Father Sky Productions

a division of Instructional Support Services, Inc. • [www.janebluestein.com](http://www.janebluestein.com)  
1709 Father Sky Ct NE • Albuquerque • NM • 87112 • 800-688-1960 • 505-323-9044