

ACADEMIC

INTERVENTION

SUCCESS

A Whole-Child Approach to K-5 Achievement



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Corinne Burton, M.A.Ed., *President and Publisher*
Aubrie Nielsen, M.S.Ed., *EVP of Content Development*
Kyra Ostendorf, M.Ed., *Publisher, professional books*
Véronique Bos, *Vice President of Creative*
Cathy Hernandez, *Senior Content Manager*
Colleen Pidel, *Senior Graphic Designer*

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Foreword

by Michael C. Rodriguez

As dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota and a professor of educational measurement and evaluation, my work has focused on how we teach, assess, and support student learning in ways that honor the whole child. My research has focused on accessibility in testing and assessment, with more recent attention to the measurement of social and emotional well-being and the sociocultural contexts of youth development. I have seen the power of centering students' strengths—what we call *developmental assets and supports*. When we recognize that academic, emotional, and social development co-occur, we open the door to more meaningful, equitable, and lasting learning outcomes.

My work was influenced by positive psychology and the role of assets in human development. I learned about asset framing in graduate school and it became an important component of my approach to program evaluation. Although the term *social and emotional learning* was introduced in 1994 by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), their work was preceded by decades of scholarship, from David and Roger Johnson's groundbreaking work in cooperative learning in the 1960s (see Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec 1994) to the introduction of developmental assets by Search Institute in 1990 (see Scales and Leffert 2004).

These efforts recognized two truths. First, there are multiple ways in which each child develops, and they are fundamentally intertwined. Developmental assets and social and emotional readiness and well-being can be taught and nurtured throughout life. Second, children and youth have an inherent capacity for positive development, and although learning is social and promoted through meaningful relationships, youth are major actors in their own development (Benson et al. 2006).

Sue Strom and Lucy Payne weave these enduring concepts aptly throughout their presentation of The Gear Model in a way that churns theory and knowledge into tools and resources for educators in any setting. Their centering of developmental relationships (the current research and practice focus of Search Institute) is well founded and appropriate. Developmental relationships are the key ingredients of effective youth development and intervention programs (Li and Julian 2012). Strom and Payne are intentional in their use of *developmental* relationships, those with high and attainable expectations with the supports, encouragement, and trust needed for students to succeed.

The evidence to support the components of The Gear Model is well summarized and framed to acknowledge the interdependence of each gear: Academic Intervention, Enrichment,

Communication, Attending to Emotions, and Collaborative Movement and Play. From decades of neuroscientific evidence, we know that little cognitive learning occurs for children and youth without social and emotional readiness and well-being; emotions shape cognition (Leighton 2023). In fact, Leighton, a cognitive psychologist and measurement specialist, argues that “students are rights holders in their own learning” (2023, 4), and successful learning requires trust, where “trust comes about when teachers recognize and nurture their role as secondary attachment figures and duty bearers in the lives of children” (2023, 4). The integration of the gears in Strom and Payne’s intuitive model provides clear pathways for adults and students to establish the trust needed for successful learning.

When Strom and Payne present practical ways to employ The Gear Model, they embody these notions of trust, rights holders, and duty bearers, through approaches such as collaborating and co-teaching, building community among students, communicating with parents and engaging families, and connecting with neighborhood programs and organizations. These ensure the relevance and responsiveness of interventions that support and nurture learning. They ensure consideration of sociocultural contexts of learning. And these aren’t just big ideas presented in an academic voice. Strom and Payne write in an engaging narrative style; illuminate stories and examples throughout; recount conversations between educators, students, families, and community leaders; and converse with us, the readers, as though they were sitting next to us enjoying tea.

It is clear to me that both Strom and Payne are accomplished educators; they know their subject matter and how to teach it, they are committed to students and their learning, they are reflective practitioners, and they are members of learning communities. The Gear Model provides a way for all professionals working in education settings, both schools and after-school programs, to continue to hone their craft. The model supports program design, responsive implementation, and continuous improvement for paraprofessionals, coaches, youth workers, education leaders, and so many others. The authors provide sample checklists, design principles for interventions, questions to engage parents in dialogue, example student work and reflections, and many other tools and resources. Strom and Payne narrate a comprehensive story around a natural system of gears (practices and contexts) that foster children’s dignity and well-being in support of learning.

In the final chapter, Strom and Payne ask: *Can we come together and create conditions where all youth have what is needed to grow into independent, contributing, healthy adults?* The answer is a resounding YES. With The Gear Model, we have a doable, responsive roadmap to get us there, and it’s closer than most may realize.

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Introduction

**"Start from wherever you are and
with whatever you've got."**

—Jim Rohn, entrepreneur and author

Our Purpose

This book is a work of passion—our passion for youth and a passion to do better for them. Here we offer an all-encompassing yet simple and replicable structure for an intervention program that effectively improves outcomes for youth. Our purpose in writing this book is to help you create intervention programs and learning experiences that promote youth development and empower youth to become adults who are contributing community members.

We all know that there are a large number of (often overlapping) disparities that impact students' abilities to reach their full potential, including access and opportunity. Each individual has a unique context and story about how these disparities impact them. For too many, the results are tragic, and society loses out on their potential.

If the solution to resolving these disparities were simple, our educational systems would have already done so. We believe we all need to think differently to create something different. In this book, we share our thinking and encourage you to think about what could change or needs to change for youth and about how to intervene to ensure they are gaining the academic and social skills required to become productive community members.

This book is relevant whether you work in an urban, rural, or suburban school or community. Shifting housing patterns and changing school enrollment options are now bringing economic disparities to almost all school communities. All schools have students and families who are or have experienced isolating and under-resourced conditions. Like never before, schools need to understand, support, and integrate students of all income levels and backgrounds into their communities.

Teacher educator and author Zaretta Hammond's work inspires us to believe in the potential of ALL children. To be successful in our goal to develop independent, contributing, healthy adults, we are called to aim high:

As educators, we have to recognize that we help maintain the achievement gap when we don't teach advanced cognitive skills to students we label as "disadvantaged" because of their language, gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Many children start school with small learning gaps, but as they progress through school, the gap between African American and Latino and White students grows because we don't teach them how to be independent learners. Based on these labels, we usually do the following (Mean and Knapp 1991):

- Underestimate what disadvantaged students are intellectually capable of doing.
 - As a result, we postpone more challenging and interesting work until we believe they have mastered "the basics."
 - By focusing only on low-level basics, we deprive students of a meaningful or motivating context for learning and practicing higher order thinking processes.
- (Hammond 2014, 14–15)

Influenced by Hammond's writing and that of others, we use the term *disparities* to mean the inequities and differences we see in the treatment and achievement of youth. And to expand the circle of responsibility for learning, our use of the term *educators* includes all adults involved in the places children learn: families, schools, athletics, the arts, youth groups, mentoring programs, and civic groups. Our purpose and passion is to reach all learners by asking the right questions to move us all out of our own comfortable spaces and into better-coordinated approaches to learning.

Who Is This Book For?

The intervention model we describe is applicable to people who believe all youth can succeed. We see a place for intervention in schools, in community programs, through youth agencies, in faith-based organizations, and by anyone interested in supporting youth to learn and grow. It is for people working in diverse roles, across diverse environments, with diverse groups of learners. Our intent is to provide useful information and actionable ideas to all partners and allies who work on behalf of learner growth. Each of us has our own spheres of influence, and we hope you are able to take pieces and parts from our experiences, discoveries, and strategies into your context to support learners. We wrote this book for everyone who cares about youth in this and future generations.

As you read, consider your role in the lives of learners. What do you bring to the work? What is in your sphere of influence and control? What do you hope to learn from this book? How do you hope to change and grow? What can you implement today, tomorrow, and further in the future? How can you move forward, taking the first step toward a new approach to intervention on behalf of learners? Who could be your thought partners on this journey?

Finally, as you read and reflect on what we share, please know this is not a recipe book that needs to be followed step-by-step for success. This book shares a recipe that we have repeatedly tweaked and improved for different environments. Your version of the recipe will be highly dependent on your philosophies, your learning context, and most importantly the learners you work beside. Please take our experiences, thoughts, and ideas and use them to create your own program personalized to your learners and context.

Why This Book?

There is no shortage of resources about intervention strategies. These strategies are foundational to our work; however, our goal with this book is to inspire readers to consider the larger systems in which learning interventions are implemented. Our model, known as The Gear Model, is made up of different components, typically disconnected, that we bring together for a cohesive intervention program. You can implement our model as we present it, use only some of the pieces, or make other changes to your context based on what we share. The real power of the model is the integration of the components, but you must consider your own learners and context to determine what is possible.

This is not a technology-based or scripted program. We see technology and curricula as tools to help us implement our new and innovative Gear Model and as a support for student thinking and learning. Our philosophies are based on human-centered ideas and the relationships we build across communities with others. We purposely focus on learning interactions and individualized cohort growth.

Everyone brings a variety of perspectives and experiences to this work. As we have focused on ending the isolation of parts, we have always worked from an inquiry perspective. As a result, you will see a unique blend of both research (asking questions) and easy-to-implement ideas to break down isolated efforts and effect change for learners. We encourage you to read what we have to share; think about your context, your learning, and your goals; and then begin to ask questions and start to make changes to develop your intervention program into what you want it to be.

About the Authors

We began our teaching careers in different California cities, both teaching kindergarten. Kindergarten is a magical place. We had the flexibility to be responsive to the developmental, social, and learning needs of every child. Kindergarten teachers usually teach all subjects, which gave us the freedom to be connected and integrated across curricular areas. Five- and six-year-olds' behavior provided rapid-fire feedback as we learned, forcing us to improve instructional strategies immediately or go home frustrated and crying, something we hope to help others avoid. Especially when it was hard, children have been our best teachers.

Our philosophies and approaches to teaching were built in racially and economically diverse communities. At the time, in the late 1980s and 1990s, California ranked significantly below the national average in spending per student in school funding (Teague 2000). Resources were sparse. Elementary classrooms had thirty-two or more students, and multiple languages were spoken. The classroom teacher was also the art, music, and P.E. teacher. Creativity was the key to teacher survival. We learned a lot about whole-child development and classroom management as we taught all subjects to the youngest learners in under-resourced schools.

We both moved to Minnesota, where we continued our work with students and learned from being parents to our own children. Becoming parents allowed us to witness learning from both sides of the equation, integrating the parent world and the traditional teaching world. As we each raised our own families, our views of learning ecosystems broadened. We were fortunate to always have networks to call on when our children encountered challenges in learning.

Lucy went on to work at the university level and expanded her perspective by serving on a local school board and with various education organizations. Sue continued teaching elementary grades. Her experiences were further informed by ten summers of YouthWorks community service work across the United States, seven years as the school liaison for biweekly after-school neighborhood programs run jointly with an established and well-resourced local nonprofit, and twelve years working both in and out of school with students in reading and math intervention and special education.

Minnesota has some of the worst reading and math disparities between racial subgroups on standardized tests in the nation (Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis 2019). Sue's school district decided to get creative with programming for students in need of additional support. In the district, test scores improved most for learners who were seen during school for small-group intervention classes *and* after school in tutoring- and enrichment-based neighborhood clubs.

Sue's extensive experience and natural curiosity led her to think about intervention systems and how to improve them on behalf of all youth. Eventually, she took time away from the daily teaching routine to research, learn, think, and explore successful programs. This time and space to pursue her thinking (instead of continuously reacting to the emerging issues of the classroom) was essential to the development of The Gear Model.

A Key Partnership

In 2005, Lucy and Tom Koch, the principal at Sue's school, formed a partnership dedicated to reaching and teaching every student. This is when we (Lucy and Sue) first met, as Sue was a teacher leader in this work. The partnership took time to develop, but ultimately, each of us contributed to the research, the design, and the application of The Gear Model intervention program.

As a university professor, Lucy brought current research, an ability to question the status quo, and curiosity to try new things. Sue brought her expertise as a veteran classroom teacher, her passion for youth success, and her drive to make a difference. Tom Koch brought a brilliant

capacity to listen carefully to all education partners while growing deep relationship roots in every nook of a changing school community and setting unbelievably high academic goals.

Since beginning our work together, we have focused on learners we teach within school buildings. We have gained broader perspectives of what it takes to develop a whole, independent human while raising our own children. We have also learned so much by sharing and discussing our successes with others through site visit tours, school board presentations, and conference presentations.

As we developed and implemented The Gear Model, we realized that it is often the spaces between the programs and groups—the relationships, experiences, and challenges—that advance all youth to the ultimate goal of education: becoming independent, contributing, healthy young adults. We hope you will find this book a helpful tool in achieving that goal in your own schools, communities, and spaces.

How This Book Is Organized

This book has three parts. Part 1 (chapters 1 to 3) gives the overall purpose of our work, a short summary of our intervention model, foundational concepts to our work, experiences and relationships that influenced our thinking and development, and what we learned visiting successful intervention programs.

Part 2 (chapters 4 to 9) covers The Gear Model. These chapters take a deep dive into each component, or gear, of the model. We introduce each gear, present a rationale for the gear, share stories from our experiences and work with learners, and explore application of the ideas to intervention.

Part 3 (chapters 10 to 12) summarizes our learning from our experiences, discusses our current thinking and wondering, and explores next steps. We aim to offer you hope and excitement for what is next in your work supporting youth.

Overview of What's Ahead

In the coming chapters, you will first hear about a fledgling community-based kindergarten-through-eighth-grade Neighborhood Homework Club that grew and developed at two community locations over seven years. You will learn how it became a powerhouse program others visited to learn from as they built their own out-of-school academic and/or enrichment youth development programs. With a teacher partnering beside a nonprofit neighborhood outreach manager, the program evolved to its fullest potential. By listening responsively and continuing relationships over learners' lifespans, rich long-term relationships between teachers, youth workers, children, and their families led to amplified success. A microcommunity raised a cohort of independent, contributing, healthy young adults.

You will then hear about the two-year full implementation of our Gear Model After School Club. This newly created, multifaceted program ran for two hours twice a week and was conducted with third through fifth graders who qualified for intervention service. Both the Neighborhood Homework Club and The Gear Model After School Club supported the classroom and intervention learning occurring during the school day.

As we consider youth and their development, we think about how to harness their energy and focus it to the desired outcomes. We work to stay focused on the question “Who do they see themselves becoming?”

Both programs focused on uniting cohorts of students in upper elementary school, since those years are uniquely important for development. Our goal is that students at this age are empowered to become more independent as they begin to move their learning into the real world. As we consider youth and their development, we think about how to harness their energy and focus it to the desired outcomes. We work to stay focused on the question “Who do *they* see themselves becoming?”

Both programs utilized partnerships to surround youth and their families with layers of academic and social supports steeped in multi-age, longer-term developmental relationships. Both were multi-year programs that resulted in learners showing up to school more bright-eyed, enthusiastically asking questions such as, “Will I see Mr. Ryan in school today for reading (or math)?” and “Do we have After School Club today?”

Our curiosity and the needs of our students outrank the need to stay in our comfort zone. Ideally, this book about the intervention program we created will help you examine and create your own balanced, learner-focused intervention programming for your community.

The Gear Model provides the essential parts, or gears, to create a balanced approach to learning and belonging focused on the learner. It will help you create a truly difference-making intervention program during the traditional school day and/or outside of the school day and school year with partnerships with youth development groups. This program provides learners with needed academic intervention and enrichment experiences, and develops their own beliefs that they can be who they aspire to be. The model has been shown to increase student motivation and individual academic outcomes, and it sets the conditions where growth accelerates because all gifts and talents contribute to the shared success of the microcommunity of learners where everyone is highly bonded and mutually connected.

Reflection Questions

- What experiences and hopes do you bring to your work?
- Where are all the places learning is happening for children and youth in your community?
- How will you share your learning and thinking as you continue reading?

PART 1

**How
the**

GEAR MODEL

Was Developed

The Gear Model

“Learning is rooted in relationships, and supportive relationships can unleash the potential of every student.”

—Michael Fullan and Maria Langworthy,
educational researchers and authors

We developed The Gear Model based on our professional experiences working at a university and in school districts, combined with all we have learned by visiting evidenced-based, long-established, successful, and growing intervention programs across the United States. The model is informed by conversations with participants and leaders about how their programs personalized their work to individual learners’ needs, what roles parents were playing, what assessment tools were most helpful, what kept youth engaged, and much more. Chapter 3 provides details on the sites we visited across the country and what we learned from them.

The following questions are answered in this chapter:

- What are the basic components of The Gear Model?
- What gear drives the entire model?
- What are the foundational concepts that support the development of The Gear Model?
- How do these concepts work together for a cohesive model?
- What can we learn from the youth we seek to further develop?

The Gear Model: Whole-Child Intervention Success

Our work strives to put a simple, replicable structure around intervention strategies by connecting effective practices to improve learners’ outcomes. We know that reactive problem-solving and patchwork solutions are the reality of many intervention programs. Developing programs and improving them at the same time is less than ideal, especially when educators and

youth development professionals are exhausted and overtaxed. Currently, intervention programs are typically separate from family systems and support services. The Gear Model unifies families, schools, and communities to streamline interventions for the maximum benefit of the whole child. It represents the important moving parts that are interconnected and drive the program, leading to stronger outcomes for students.

There are five main components (gears) that surround the largest gear, which is Relationships. The five gears are Academic Intervention, Enrichment, Communication, Attending to Emotions, and Collaborative Movement and Play. In this section, we provide an overview of the components. We examine them more fully throughout the book.

Relationships

The Gear Model is built around authentic, positive, growing, and loving relationships. Little to nothing occurs without reciprocal, intentional, ongoing personal relationships. We have found over our years of experience that students and families who are truly connected with their school and community networks feel as if they belong. Then, engagement in learning increases. Students

Little to nothing occurs without reciprocal, intentional, ongoing personal relationships.

become more comfortable taking risks and tackling challenges in their learning. If students or their families feel uncertain about their sense of belonging, we have seen time and again the detrimental effects on them. These negative effects show up in many forms: reduced motivation, decreased emotional well-being, hesitation

to accept feedback, and a sense of isolation. Relationships matter! Some relationships are short-term sparks of inspiration, and some need to be long term. Youth benefit from both types of relationships. Both can be transformative. Long-term relationships (beyond the family) can be harder to come by for the youth we aim most to support. But we have seen how these long-term relationships have great impact on future success.

Academic Intervention

This gear requires that academic interventions and small-group tutoring tied to classroom instruction and standards be personalized based on multiple assessments and input from classroom teachers. These interventions support learners by strengthening their reasoning and critical-thinking skills. Most importantly, the work is at the right level of rigor for each learner to engage in productive struggle and for all learners to be proud of their increasing confidence and accuracy. Success builds motivation and a self-concept of being a strong learner. Chapter 5 addresses this gear more in depth. In our program, we centered on mathematics for academic intervention, but any academic area could be used. The nature of integrating learning into enrichment, movement, and social-emotional skills supports improvements in whatever academic area the leaders select, whether math, reading, writing, oral expression, the arts, sciences, and so on.

THE GEAR MODEL: WHOLE CHILD INTERVENTION SUCCESS



Enrichment

Enrichment through the arts, culture, STEAM, and nature are an essential part of our model (see chapter 6). When learners who are not rising to their full potential have access to enrichment in an intervention program, the experience supports them in developing positive self-image, thinking strategies, teamwork skills, leadership skills, self-advocacy skills, and more. Enrichment

Enrichment ignites possibilities and offers opportunities for adults to share power with learners.

ignites possibilities and offers opportunities for adults to share power with learners. Integrating math and reading into enrichment activities helps learners see their relevance, ultimately motivating participants to learn even more. Enrichment activities communicate to youth that they are capable and smart. Much of

our work focuses on learners from under-resourced communities; they almost always have fewer opportunities for academic enrichment than their peers from higher income brackets. The Gear Model is intentional about narrowing these disparities.

Communication

The ability to communicate and listen is essential for the relationship building that holds The Gear Model together. In Latin, *commun* is short for *communis*, which means “common” or “shared by all.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2009), one of the definitions of *community* is “social cohesion; mutual support and affinity such as is derived from living in a community.” Communication unites all the humans that surround the learners in our program, fostering a sense of belonging and the natural bonds required for our vision of microcommunities (more on this later in this chapter).

As former kindergarten teachers, we value language development. Our model includes oral language, vocabulary, listening skills, writing, and other literacy components consistently embedded across the entire approach, immersing students in ongoing language learning. Communication is explored in chapter 7.

Attending to Emotions

Learning to identify and attend to emotions is another mighty gear in our model. A first step in dealing with an emotion is acknowledging and putting words or pictures to it. Youth need dedicated time to practice acknowledging how they are feeling and to explore how their feelings might be impacting their learning. We include simple routines to address one’s feelings in chapter 8.

Collaborative Movement and Play

We all know young bodies need to move. So, deliberate movement activities that integrate math and reading skills are part of the daily routine and are described in detail in chapter 9. We incorporate structured activities and open-ended play to meet the needs of learners and desired outcomes of the day.