



ALL STUDENTS MATTER

Every child deserves an equal opportunity to learn

Case Study 2: A Volunteer Tutor's Experience



All Student Matter tutor discovers a child's 'Island of Genius'

“He’s like a black hole,” his teacher Ms. Scholes said, describing her 4th grade student Mateo at Costaño Elementary School in East Palo Alto. “He doesn’t speak, he doesn’t participate, nobody knows what’s going on or what his needs are.”

“In the beginning, he was a mystery,” said Lucy Barron, Mateo’s tutor from All Students Matter (ASM), a nonprofit organization that’s been placing volunteer tutors in Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) elementary schools for over 10 years. “Now, I want to stay in his life as long as possible,” Ms. Barron said.

“Our program works,” said long time ASM volunteer Talia Parsons, “because of consistency. It’s not just about teaching the kids how to read, it’s about teaching them that people care.”

**Serving the
Ravenswood City
School District for
over 12 years**

- In-classroom support
- Literacy intervention
- Mentoring book club
- Almost 200 volunteer tutors
- Over 6000 hours of service



In 2008, three local moms founded ASM in Menlo Park with the vision that every child deserves a quality education no matter their zip code. They have expanded every year and now coordinate almost 200 volunteers in the RCSD to tutor literacy, math, and social-emotional skills donating over 6000 hours of support every year at no cost to the schools.

“Most of our volunteers come from neighboring communities,” said ASM Executive Director Angie Holman, “and they recognize the disparity. East Palo Alto and the RCSD are surrounded by wealth,” she said, “but the kids in the schools we support are chronically impoverished and underperforming.”

“If anybody can crack Mateo, it’ll be you”

Mateo had a support team, but it was a Catch-22. How do you evaluate a child who doesn’t or won’t speak?

Somehow, someone had to draw the child out. Lucy Barron had been an ASM volunteer tutor in Mateo’s class since September. She had noticed him avoiding eye contact, but she thought he was just shy.

Usually Ms. Barron worked one hour per week with different students for about 20 minutes each. But one day, Ms. Scholes asked her to take Mateo out of the classroom for the whole class. “He’ll be so bored with this project,” Ms. Scholes said. “He won’t talk to you, but I know you’ll figure something out.”

Always enthusiastic, Ms. Barron said: “Sure, okay.”

“I remember that day so well,” Ms. Barron said, “I’d never experienced anything like it. Mateo was walking with his head down, hands in his pockets, no eye contact—all withdrawn body language. But what threw me was that he was walking behind me, so close he could touch me. It was almost like when somebody taps you from behind on the shoulder but when you turn they hide behind the other shoulder.”

The hour passed with Ms. Barron turning around, walking backwards, trying the “standard icebreakers. How many siblings do you have? My kids go to this school, they’re that age, what’s your favorite subject? The usual.”

Nothing.

When they got back to the class, Ms. Barron told Ms. Scholes “We just walked around, he didn’t say anything.”

“He doesn’t talk,” said Ms. Scholes. “But if anybody can crack Mateo,” she said, “it’ll be you.”

“Oh my gosh, who is this kid?”

The following week, Ms. Scholes asked Ms. Barron to take Mateo out again. Volunteer flexibility and creativity is one of the strengths of the ASM model. “It was one of the keys to success with Mateo,” Ms. Barron said. But again, Mateo was a locked door. She decided to use an old stand-by -- silliness. “You know I’m not gonna stop talking,” she said, “you know I’m gonna wear your ears out!” No smile, no nothing.

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~ Talia Parsons, long time ASM volunteer

“If you could go anywhere, where would you want to go?”
No answer. “Disneyland?” Ms. Barron suggested. Mateo
head and looked down. “The bottom of the ocean!”
“Mars!”

Nothing.

“Come on,” she said, starting to use her 4th grader voice,
“just tell me one thing before I go, please! please!”

Nothing.

Ms. Barron turned around and said, “Okay,” in a
frustrated kid voice.

But then she heard a sound, “It sounded like “Fonce,” she
said. “What?” she turned. Then he repeated it clearly:
“France.”

“Wow,” Ms. Barron thought, “I did not expect that one.”

“Why? Why France?” she asked. “That’s fascinating!”

Nothing.

The next week Ms. Barron asked Ms. Scholes if she could
work with Mateo again. In that third hour, Mateo began,
occasionally, to walk alongside her, but still, no eye
contact. Then Mateo opened his door a crack and, in just
a few words, revealed that he wanted to go to France
because he loved French military history.

“French military history?” Ms. Barron thought, “Oh my
gosh, who is this kid?”

“Wow,” she said to him, “French military history.” She
hesitated, “I don’t actually know a lot about French
military history. But I want to find out about it, I want to
find out what excites you about it.”

By the end of that third hour they had taken a few



**"He wasn't reading the article,
he was critiquing it."
~ Lucy Barron, ASM volunteer**

tentative steps down a new path. She asked him about
people or characters that interested him.

“Louis XVI.”

She jumped, “Next week I’ll come back with some facts
about Louis XVI that will surprise you!”

Mateo gave her a look. As Ms. Barron told it, “That look
said all sorts of things. Like in a kid’s sing-songy voice
it said: ‘No you won’t!’ But it was also like ‘Who are
you? And what is this all about?’”

“Islands of Genius”

Ms. Barron and Mateo started small. She would
research whatever Mateo wanted (battles, kings,
territories, etc.) in a kid’s encyclopedia. She wasn’t
sure how well he could read, so sometimes, she would
rewrite an article to make it accessible. Initially, she
would read to him, but over time he began to read
aloud to her.

“Without fail,” Ms. Barron said, “this 4th grader would
identify information that was missing from whatever I
brought. He wasn’t reading the article, he was
critiquing it.” She said it was often a significant detail
about an event that was happening at the same time
elsewhere, so he would “enrich the context of the
story.”

Mateo does not play video games, sports, nor does he
watch TV. He learns not by reading, but by pouring
over internet videos of French and world military
history. He can retain enormous amounts of
information and he’s always spot-on with dates. “I
tried to stump him many times, but I couldn’t. I
couldn’t do it,” Ms. Barron said. “His ability to recall
details reminds me of the movie Rain Man.”

While it’s unlikely that Mateo is in the same league as
Kim Peek, the savant who inspired Rain Man, he
nevertheless shows signs of what Darold Treffert and
Gregory Wallace, both researchers in psychiatry and
experts on savant syndrome, called “Islands of
Genius.” They write that savants “possess astonishing
islands of ability and brilliance that stand in jarring
juxtaposition” to their general personalities and
abilities.[1]

[1] Treffert, D. and Wallace, G. (2002). Islands of Genius: Artistic brilliance and a dazzling memory can sometimes accompany autism and other developmental disorders. Scientific American. 286(6), 76-85.

Indeed, Ms. Barron met Mateo as a 4th grader—he could not spell his own name, didn’t have a single friend, and carried a backpack full of stuffed animals wherever he went. And yet, “there was no one in his entire school,” she said, “who knew as much about French military history.”

Without a doubt, though, Ms. Barron and ASM had made an astonishing breakthrough. As long as he remained silent, no one could help him. “But if we can unlock who this kid is,” she realized, “we can start to supply him with the support he deserves.”

“It made me cry”

For years, Mateo had resisted the school’s support team, “he just wouldn’t engage with them,” Ms. Barron said. Now, he’s evolved to a place where he can accept support for his extensive deficiencies in reading, writing, math, speech, and motor abilities.

“It’s not just me. The district, the principals, and the teachers embrace ASM volunteers for a reason,” Ms. Barron said. Because the tutors are not paid staff, they don’t have to follow a specific format like a reading specialist does, for example. “Because the schools trust the program, we can be very creative. I helped unlock the door, but there was a whole staff of people waiting for him on the other side.”

Furthermore, ASM volunteers have the time to get to know their students; many work with as few as 3 kids. With classes of 30 students each, teachers and staff simply don’t have time—they’re overwhelmed.

When Ms. Barron started working with him, Mateo had one single response to schoolwork: “I can’t do that.” So he might easily be labeled as lazy. But because Ms. Barron could take the time to get to know him, and develop a bond with him, “I knew he wasn’t lazy, he was brilliant! The problem was that he was intimidated. He was deeply insecure.”

Ms. Barron was able to tailor his studies to focus on military history, he slowly began to read and try harder. She worked hard to build his confidence. “Just because you don’t read at grade level doesn’t mean you can’t comprehend information,” she’d tell him. “You are an encyclopedia Mateo, you are an expert in this field. I literally do not know any grown-up who knows as much as you do about military history. You’re fully capable of learning in these other buckets.”

Of course it took time, she said, but eventually, “he started to have more confidence in himself.”

After working with Mateo for two years, Ms. Barron considers the biggest sign of growth to be the fifth grade school play, “Mateo had a speaking part.” She said he even “hammed it up” a bit. “It made me cry.” For a child who has been officially diagnosed with “selective mutism,” that is alarming progress.

Three words: “_ _ _ _ _ .”

Mateo loved the spelling game Hangman, so Ms. Barron made time for it when she saw him. One day towards the end of their first year together, Mateo wrote out a phrase with three words “_ _ _ _ _ _ _ .” Ms. Barron worried that he had misspelled something. She got several vowels, then thought “what else could this be? So finally she guessed “I love you.” It literally made her cry.

“Oh, Mateo!” she said.

“I do,” he said.

“All Students Matter has given me such a gift,” Ms. Barron said. “But for Mateo, it has transformed his life. All students really do matter, and it’s shown him that Mateo matters.”

