How do we help children growing up in poverty build “future stories” that give them hope and energy?

In Charles Dicken’s book, *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge two gaunt children – impoverished, withered and dirty. Their names are Ignorance and Want. He cautions Scrooge,

> Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.

Jeremy Riffle, principal of the [Triton Elementary School in Bourbon Indiana](http://www.triton.k12.in.us/), is a real life Spirit of a Brighter Christmas future. He has a core group of students that are at the poverty line or below. Jeremy and his teachers have focused on strategies to “help erase some of the back story” to bring out the best in students who have grown up in generational poverty in this rural community in North Central Indiana.

### Four Reasons One Leaves Poverty

1. **Increased Income:** This is perhaps the most obvious reason. Increased income can provide a child with more opportunities and resources, allowing them to overcome the challenges of poverty.
2. **Education:** Education is a powerful tool for breaking the cycle of poverty. It provides children with the skills and knowledge needed to find better-paying jobs and improve their economic situation.
3. **Health Care:** Access to quality health care can prevent and treat illnesses that can hinder a child’s development and success. This can lead to better educational outcomes and increased earning potential in the future.
4. **Community Support:** Support from family, community, and social networks can provide children with a strong support system that helps them navigate the challenges of poverty and achieve their goals.

John's articles are [here](http://www.news.fullerton.edu/article.php?pid=5270&seq=1).
Many of his teachers have attended seminars with Ruby Payne, the author of *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Payne, an expert in understanding the mindsets of poverty, middle class, and wealth in the United States, claims that there are four reasons one leaves poverty:

- It’s too painful to stay
- A vision or a goal
- A key relationship
- A special talent or skill

**Building A Future Story**

Jeremy and his teachers have focused on what Payne calls the child’s development of a “future story.” Payne claims that a lot of students don’t have a future story because they live from 24 hours to 24 hours.

The future story simply says that if a child likes Peyton Manning, the iconic quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts, a number “18” jersey or a book about Manning might be a perfect gift.

Very few young people will approach Manning’s position on the spotlight of the football gridiron, but maybe they can relate to some of the challenges that he went through and be motivated by his deliberate practice to succeed.

Unfortunately, some impoverished children are worried at the moment about what they are going to eat and what clothes are they going to wear. People of poverty tend to look at the here and now because they are simply trying to survive. Providing them with a future story allows them to look beyond 24 hours to a future, whether it be going to college or a trade school – finding something they really enjoy to give them motivation. Christine Cook, the Reading First Cognitive Coach at Triton Elementary, believes that is important to present possibilities for the future that most students of poverty aren’t building within their families. Here is the story of Daniel (name has been changed), a Triton Elementary student that Jeremy has mentored.

Jeremy simply asked him: “What do you have a passion for?”

**Daniel:** “I have a passion for cooking and I want to be a chef and I want to be in a band.”

**Jeremy:** What are you doing on a daily basis to become a better chef?

**Daniel:** “Well, we don’t have a lot of food in our house.”

**Jeremy:** “Okay. What do you do to become a better band member?”

**Daniel:** “Well, I really like to play the guitar, but several of my guitar strings are broke.”

Jeremy provided guitar strings to help that student with his future story. Now there is a high school student who is giving Daniel guitar lessons during his special class time. After a series of lessons, Daniel met with Jeremy again.

**Daniel:** “You know. I learned a song, and I want to play it for the teacher and students in the music class.”

Daniel went to his music teacher and told her, “You know guitar lessons are so much cooler than music class.”

The teacher didn’t take offense to what Daniel said and replied: “You know what? I agree with you, Daniel. And I am so excited to
have you come and play.”

Daniel ended up playing for her music class!

**Best Possible Future Self**

Laura King, a University of Missouri researcher has investigated not only the benefits of writing about challenging past experiences, but also imagining the future and writing about it. Her work with college students showed that those who wrote about their “best possible future self” showed decreases in illness and more overall optimism.

With the first steps of developing a future self, Daniel needed to have resources to achieve his goals and to put his strengths into action, but so many students don’t have the resources to build a future story. Jeremy has encouraged every one of his teachers to pick one child, just to be an extra resource. It may just mean stopping by to say, “How’s it going?” This is the first step in the blueprint towards getting out of their “back stories.”

Tom Rath, the author of *How Full is Your Bucket* claims “You can’t be anything you want to be, but you can be a whole lot more of who you already are.” By educating young people about their possible future stories, we provide them with a hopeful Christmas yet to come – for Tiny Tim and for Daniel!

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**References**


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**Images**

*Scrooge with Christmas Present* courtesy of perpetualplum
*coltssaints226* courtesy of Paul J Everett.
*Little Peyton* courtesy of Jerry
*Guitar Player in London* courtesy of MontyPython
*Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim* courtesy of perpetualplum
John,
This is brilliant and beautiful.
It's like asking the right questions – or giving the right props – at the right time. Don’t we all wish we could help people like that – in the right time, and in the right way?
Great Peyton example – sometimes we want things without wanting to put in the effort to do those things.
Thank you,
S.
Senia: Yes, there needs to be the support to help young people “will” their future, not just to wish for a better world. Providing a future story at least sets a vision – then adult mentors can help young people re-establish the terrain and work on skills to navigate the journey.

John

Emily:

Thank you so much, John. This is a lovely example of making a difference in a very non-splashy but profound way. It provides much to ponder. I am looking forward to hearing about your further work in this area. This article gave me a new tool too...to ask myself the question “What are you doing every day to be a better....?” when I find myself wishing or wanting. Congratulations to Jeremy Riffle and his team at Triton, as well, for taking this “live” every day.

John

Emily: The question “What are you doing every day to be a better...? can turn into a powerful mantra – a call to action. This is a great question that we should have the Triton team asking themselves also. Thanks.

John
Judy Krings: Brilliant review, Aren. Sean’s “Mud and Dreams” plastered a smile on my face from the...

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Ruth Hayes: Nice article. Related to this – a framework for ethical speech that was shared with me and that I...

John: You support a completely discredited hypothesis (Losada Line)?

 Wrest: Thank you Elaine. your review very great

Rebecca: This article really resonates with my personal journey of understanding my own cycles. Thank you for further...

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robinhood: Yeah! Very true, actually I heard about Carin Rockind even in the past that she has taught thousands of...

Lisa Buksbaum: You are both talented and wise.... think of all the lives you’ve enhanced. Twice graced with...

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Rural children have had higher poverty rates for decades. In 1970, the poverty rate was 20 percent for rural children compared with 12 percent for urban children. Although the gap narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s, the rates have diverged since the early 1990s (see figure). The rise of child poverty in rural America is consistent with the growing income gap between urban and rural families over this same period. Poverty Rates Declined More for Urban Than for Rural Children in U.S., 1990-2007. Source: William P. O’Hare, The Forgotten Fifth: Child Poverty in Rural America (2009). Majority of Ru...