



Can **SELF-REGULATION** Create Successful School Communities?

In September of 2010 a new progress report was implemented in Ontario schools that reflected the learning skills and work habits outlined in the document, *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools (2010)*, with the goal to improve student learning. Self-regulation is one of the six essential learning skills and work habits that made the list and is reported on three times per school year for every child in the province. As outlined in the progress report and provincial report cards (1 and 2), when assessing a student's self regulatory capacities a teacher should consider how well the student:

- sets his/her individual goals and monitors progress towards achieving them;
- seeks assistance when needed;
- assesses and reflects critically on her/his strengths, needs and interests;
- identifies learning opportunities, choices, and strategies to meet personal needs and achieve goals; and
- perseveres when facing challenges.

As the term *self-regulation* made its way into the realm of public education, so did questions about what it is, whether it could be taught explicitly and how. In order to understand how self-regulation can be enhanced in every student it is important to begin with a working definition. Baumeister and Voh (2011) describe self-regulation as the ability to:

- attain, maintain, and change one's level of energy to match the demands of a task or situation;
- monitor, evaluate, and modify one's emotions;
- sustain and shift one's attention when necessary and ignore distractions;
- understand both the meaning of a variety of social interactions and how to engage in them in a sustained way; and
- connect with and care about what others are thinking and feeling - to empathize and act accordingly.

self-regulation

There has been much research in the area of self-regulation over the past four decades. The literature has accumulated across disciplines (neuroscience, health, psychology, and education) but there are few connections made between studies and therefore much of the research remains isolated within particular fields of study (Baumeister, 1994). We do know that self-regulation is making a profound presence in the education world.

Zimmerman (1994) defines *academic* self-regulation as being much more complicated than exercising self-control and states that the requisite for self-regulation is that teachers give choice to the learner with respect to: participation, method, performance outcomes, and social as well as physical setting. If students comprehend that their learning is contingent on perseverance and not on ability, their sense of self-efficacy improves with the knowledge that they will eventually succeed.

Unsurprisingly, self-regulation has become a topic of great interest to administrators, educators and parents because it is well documented in the research literature that students who achieve optimal self-regulation are more successful in their: personal and professional relationships, academic studies/pursuits and future careers (Shanker & Bertrand, 2012). The good news is that our brains are not pre-programmed at birth to determine whether we will be successful or not at self-regulating.

In his most recent book, *Calm, Alert, and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation*, Stuart Shanker (2013) presents us with a wide array of classroom strategies to consider across the following five domains: biological, emotional, cognitive, social and prosocial. Shanker (2013) encourages us to use explicit observation and questioning skills to unpack some of the challenges facing our students, and to pay careful attention to the neurosensory system.

The research reminds us that the developmental trajectories for our most challenged students can also be changed when a teacher, administrator, peer, parent, or sibling recognizes that behavioural, social-emotional or cognitive difficulties are actually manifestations of a sensory system gone awry (either on over or under drive). These students are often defined as our “at risk” group who are accessing a wide array of specialized programming through a special education delivery model. Shanker and his team applied many of the concepts and strategies found in the text to a group of students with autism spectrum disorder using the DIR/Floortime intervention model which places a strong emphasis on understanding the sensory system and its impact on self regulatory capacities. Preliminary results

showed greater enjoyment in interactions with their parents and a much more active role in initiating interactions. The children became intrinsically motivated and ready to engage in more elaborate social/reciprocal interactions (Stieben, Shanker, & Casenhiser, 2011).

Many other studies have also revealed the benefits of promoting self-regulated learning in all students. A meta-analysis on primary aged students acquiring self-regulated learning strategies reveals that “the highest benefits from the analyzed interventions can be gained in mathematic performance, motivational outcomes, as well as the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies” (Dignaith, Buettner, & Langfeldt, p.118). The studies also concur that students in primary school are capable of acquiring self-regulated learning strategies and applying them. Additionally, what is clear from the studies is that the teacher plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of these strategies through the successful implementation of instructional models to the teaching of advanced learning skills. Teachers need to be continuously probing their students about feelings of self-efficacy, confidence in the subject matter, and methods of learning proficiently so that they can become competent and resilient learners in spite of the challenges and stressors they encounter. In summary, students may be able to acquire the strategies, but it is the teacher who plays a key role in facilitating and scaffolding experiences that allow for every child to reach an optimal level of self-regulation.

With the ever increasing demands placed on teachers to cover the curriculum, differentiate instruction, and to report on student achievement through carefully constructed authentic assessments, teachers may wonder how to infuse self-regulation strategies into their daily practice. The answer lies in discovering the “person” within the teacher (Fryer, 2012). When a teacher is able to reach an optimal state of self-regulation, he/she can then effectively model what “calmly focused and alert” looks like for the students. In addition, the teacher is then able to effectively question, observe, affirm and support the “whole” student by becoming a teacher who moves from being automatic (going through the rote activities of the day) to one who is intentional and continuously self reflecting on his/her own status throughout the school day.

Over the past year I have had the privilege of working with and learning from Norah Fryer, an esteemed college professor from New Zealand. We came together through a mutual colleague, Dr. Stuart Shanker and have been exploring the

self-efficacy

self-compassion

concept of self-regulation in the teacher. In my conversations with Norah Fryer, she presents a framework for thinking about self-regulation in the classroom that begins with the teacher as a person who is constantly engaged in a careful dance between critical self-reflection and self-compassion. Fryer (2012) states:

In our journey to understanding self-regulation it would help if we thought about it in terms of *intentional processes* and how throughout our life the influence of our family, community and the culture of the environments we find ourselves in have in many ways left their mark- either positive or negative. Studying the neurobiological foundations of the development of mind/self can allow us to explore the processes that lead to the skill of *reflective intentionality*. We all think of ourselves as being *reflective professionals* but how much of our reflective thought is *automatic* and how much of it is intentional? As a busy principal or teacher it can sometimes be a challenge to connect and relate to the person within the *role*. (November, 2012).

Fryer (2012) encourages us to think about our own state of optimal self-regulation and to determine what we need in order to achieve a sense of being calmly focused and alert in our profession. Some questions for us to consider as administrators and teachers include:

1. What environmental accommodations are necessary to ensure we remain calmly focused and alert in our classrooms and office spaces?
2. How do we respond to prospective stressors (i.e. a student having a meltdown) or an angry parent demanding immediate action from a principal?
3. How do we foster feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth?
4. How do we develop flexibility and resiliency?
5. Who are the mentors in our schools that help us self-regulate?
6. How do our relationships with teachers, principals and parents shape the way we approach problematic and stressful situations?
7. Do we remember to show self-compassion when we make a mistake?

In the *Neuroscience of Human Relationships - Attachment and the Developing Social Brain*, Cozolino (2006) states that we, "greatly underestimate the degree of information we are communicating to those around us and how much our unconscious processes,

while invisible to us, are often apparent to others" (p. 112). If we are not afraid to search inside ourselves we may discover we have more positive unconscious processes to share with others than we ever realized - something definitely worth thinking about if you are a Principal (Fryer, 2012). Once we are able to identify what we need to achieve a state of balance, then we are able to successfully engage in a wonderful dance of co-regulation with our colleagues.

I have been invited to join a team of individuals on a MISA project from the Kenora Catholic District school board on implementing self-regulation strategies in a full day kindergarten program at St. Louis school. The necessary steps for a successful translation of self-regulation as construct or framework to self-regulation as 'embedded practice' in the classroom includes:

- immersing teachers, administrators and parents in the literature on self-regulation
- teacher mentorship from administrators, researchers and fellow teachers that involves guiding, scaffolding, investigating and co-constructing meaning
- frequent dialoguing and documenting among teachers and sharing narratives with other schools/districts

Kerri Favreau shares her observations and reflections on the self-regulation project in her full day Kindergarten program in the following vignette:

Through our readings and our own observations in the classroom, we feel that self-awareness is a critical factor in developing and strengthening the ability to self-regulate. In reflecting on this, we realize that supporting children in becoming more reflective learners should have an impact on their ability to regulate in all domains.

Over the past few years we have been using pedagogical documentation as a means of gathering and analyzing student learning. Documentation has become a powerful tool that allows us to reflect on the children's development and learning. Furthermore, it informs our decisions so that we can respond effectively to what unfolds in the classroom. We have become much more aware because the learning is visible. Through this project, we would like to extend this practice to the children. We feel that if they have the opportunity to participate in the process and to reflect on their own learning, it may have an effect on their ability to self-regulate.

self-worth

As adults, we have hopefully developed our own conditions for maintaining balance. The critical elements to optimal self-regulation identified by Shanker (2013) include:

- when feeling calmly focused and alert, the ability to know that one is calm and alert
- when one is stressed, the ability to recognize what is causing that stress
- the ability to recognize stressors both within and outside the classroom
- the desire to deal with those stressors
- the ability to develop strategies for dealing with those stressors
- the ability to recover efficiently and effectively from dealing with stressors

The mental health challenges affecting our school communities is alarming. Self-regulation is the necessary lens to remind us that schools should be more than academic hubs that push curricular agendas. The hope is that our students are learning about resiliency, empathy, emotional attunement, active listening and self-reflection which, when put together, empower them to optimally self-regulate and seamlessly meet the daily challenges/stressors of life.

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