THE SELF-REGULATING STUDENT

Developmental researchers have identified self-regulation – the ability to respond effectively to various stressors and return to a state of equilibrium – as central to the ability to learn. We know this from our classroom experience. The hyperactive child and the child who can hardly stay awake will both struggle to focus, as will the child who is highly anxious or very sensitive to light and sound.

Dr. Stuart Shanker of York University is a recognized expert in this area through his work with young children with autism spectrum disorders at the Milton & Ethel Harris Research Initiative. His research on ways to help children self-regulate is resonating with BC educators, who believe this approach has the potential to create optimal learning conditions for our students.

THE SCIENCE OF SELF-REGULATION

Scientific studies of the brain tell us that learning occurs best when a child is calm, focused and alert. Yet the child is continually dealing with various levels of physical, emotional, cognitive and social stress that can make it difficult to attain or maintain this state.

Shanker defines self-regulation as “how well a child is able to deal with stressors and recover from the effort.” A child who is able to return to a baseline state of equilibrium is much more likely to learn, form healthy relationships and be self-motivated.

Gravity is a simple example of a physical stress. If we have to stand for an hour-long lecture, the physical demands of standing will likely impair our ability to absorb information. Some children, Shanker says, “may even find sitting to be as physically draining as others find standing.” If this sensitivity is not accommodated in the classroom, the child will have to work that much harder to pay attention, placing him or her at greater risk of falling behind academically.

This concept can be extended to other stressors, be they physical, emotional, cognitive or social. Recent studies suggest that when we are struggling with our emotions, for example, the parts of our brain responsible for cognitive activities may be overwhelmed by the parts of the brain processing strong negative emotions and may even receive less glucose, so that it becomes harder to learn or make good judgments.

Dr. Stuart Shanker of York University is a recognized expert in the area of self-regulation through his work with young children with autism spectrum disorders at the Milton & Ethel Harris Research Initiative.
The goal for parents and educators is to create environments where students become self-aware and discover how they can achieve a state of calm, alert focus. Successful strategies have nothing to do with imposing external control to prevent “bad” behaviour. Indeed, the traditional approach of encouraging self-control through punishment or reward is counter-productive. External punitive approaches often create negative emotions like fear, anger, frustration and shame, which consume energy and ultimately impair concentration and attention. Conversely, Shanker says neurobiological research shows that when motivation is internally generated, the brain produces neurochemicals that actually provide fuel for the brain and give it energy.

**SELF-REGULATION AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

Many children with special needs face specific biological and physical challenges that make it particularly difficult for them to control their energy and emotional states. “What happens is that problems in self-regulation are the downstream consequence of those initial deficits,” Shanker explains. “While we can’t at this point in time change those initial challenges, we can provide kids with tools to help them manage these downstream problems.” Shanker believes that for a great many children between the ages of five and nine, our focus should be on interventions to help them learn how to self-regulate, rather than investing valuable time and energy on assigning a diagnosis to a perceived issue.

His concerns stem from the “unbelievably high number of misdiagnoses” that occur in this age group, as well as the philosophical issue of pathologizing behaviour to the extent where, he says, “it is not uncommon these days to see a classroom in which more than a quarter of the students have had some sort of diagnosis.” Shanker points out that once a child is diagnosed – say, for example, with oppositional defiant disorder – the diagnosis often influences the way the child is viewed by teachers and parents, changing the way they interact with the child.

“Before we get locked into looking at a child through the lens of a diagnosis, we want to work really hard at helping them learn to self-regulate,” he says.

**CREATING THE PHYSICAL SPACE FOR SELF-REGULATION**

According to Shanker, a well-designed physical environment can help us self-regulate more effectively. “One thing we’ve learned over the last 10 years,” he says, “is the unbelievable variability and sensitivity in children’s sensory and motor systems.” His suggestions? Draw on the research of scientists and clinicians who have been studying every aspect of what a ‘self-regulating classroom environment’ should look like. Become aware of and make adjustments to the environmental elements that can overstimulate and bombard some learners’ systems. Too much colour, too much noise (volume or constant background sound) or too much of any variable can overload the student’s brain and block ⚫️

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Dr. Shanker defines optimal self-regulation as the ability to stay calmly focused and alert. We self-regulate when we adjust our level of energy depending on the task at hand – say, for example, when we take a few deep breaths before an important presentation. We self-regulate when we modify our behaviour to reach a goal (such as turning off email notification when working on a lesson plan) or when we control an angry outburst at a driver who has cut us off in traffic.

When we achieve a state of calm, alert focus, we are in a prime state for learning, completing tasks and maintaining positive relationships with others.

As Shanker describes in an article in Education Canada, the child (and adult) must learn to respond to stressors associated with the following five categories:

- biological (regulating our arousal states),
- emotional (monitoring and modifying our emotional responses),
- cognitive (sustaining and switching attention; inhibiting impulses; dealing with frustration, delay and distractions; and sequencing our thoughts),
- social (mastering rules of appropriate behaviour; and co-regulating with others), and
- pro-social (especially empathy).

Numerous meta-studies show that self-regulation is more important than IQ when it comes to predicting a child’s ability to do well in school, make healthy friendships and work towards personal goals.
Shanker also recommends having devices available that help soothe the nervous system, such as Thera-Bands, Plasticine or Koosh balls. An exercise bike at the back of the class is useful for the student who needs to resolve anger or stress. Blankets draped over two desks with a mat on the floor provide a refuge for the child who is overloaded and needs some quiet time.

“But remember,” he says, “this is all about self-regulation. It’s helping the child figure out what calms them down or what brings them up. When you start to get zoned out or hyper, how do you recognize those signs and what do you do? The goal is to help students identify what it feels like to be calm, focused and relaxed.”

COMING NEXT FALL: BC’S FIRST WAVE OF SELF-REGULATING CLASSROOMS

Starting in September 2012, six school districts in BC will participate in the first multi-district self-regulation project. One or two classrooms in each district will implement a wide range of strategies, supported by training for the classroom teacher, a student support services teacher, an education assistant and the principal.

Surrey school district superintendent Mike McKay will act as project director, managing the program and bringing together the expertise of Dr. Shanker with educators and other experts from British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Ontario who have implemented similar projects. The initiative will assess everything from physical classroom environments to intervention strategies for various grades.

“In this first phase, we really want to learn what the best programs are to help students self-regulate” says Shanker. “At the end of the project we’ll be in a better position to expand the initiative.”

SELF-REGULATION AT SCHOOL AND HOME

Shanker is excited about this upcoming BC-based self-regulation initiative, believing it will go a long way to create inclusive classrooms that support personalized learning. He notes, however, that the success of any project focusing on self-regulation requires support beyond the school environment.

“Parents need to be partners in this,” he says. “There are countless examples of what parents can do, and here’s a simple one: make sure your child is getting at least nine hours of sleep. Kids today get an average of two hours less sleep each night than they did just a decade ago. This has a big impact on their ability to self-regulate. Proper eating and activities that promote self-regulation – like regular physical activity – need to be encouraged as well.”

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Dr. Shanker has a new book coming out this fall, Calm, Alert and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation. Until then, a good place to start is his article in Education Canada, “Self-Regulation: Calm, Alert and Learning” (www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/self-regulation-calm-alert-and-learning).

Dr. Shanker spoke at the fall 2010 conference of the BC School Superintendents Association, and his presentation on The Development of Self-Regulation is available on the BCSSA website (www.bcssa.org/fallconference10.html#presentations). He was interviewed on the CBC program Ideas in July 2010 (www.cbc.ca/ideas/episodes/2010/07/15/neuron-therapy-listen/), and you can also watch a clip of the work he does at the Research Initiative on The National (www.cbc.ca/video/#/News/TV_Shows/The_National/1233408557/ID=2220343281).

West Vancouver superintendent Chris Kennedy, Surrey superintendent Mike McKay and Nanaimo-Ladysmith superintendent Dave Hutchinson have written blog entries about self-regulation; see www.cultureofyes.ca, www.mikemckay.ca and www.daves-corner.com. Hutchinson, for example, describes work being done at an inner city school in Regina that is helping some vulnerable students better regulate themselves.