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Self-regulation and the Maturing Mind

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Motivation is a huge factor in the education setting, and one important factor in motivation is self-regulation. Self-regulation is a set of skills that enables children to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and their own feelings (Rosanbalm, 2017). Psychology Today stated that behaviorally, self-regulation is the ability to act in your long-term best interest, consistent with your deepest values. Emotionally, they state that self-regulation is the ability to calm yourself down when you're upset or cheer yourself up when you are down. Students and educators who use self-regulation strategies, like self-questioning, self-controlling, and self-assessing, try to make the information meaningful and be more aware of their quality of learning (Lavasani, 2011). Self-regulation occurs at all levels, from primary school students to educators.

Students begin to develop self-regulation skills in their early childhood and elementary years. Even before starting kindergarten, students are beginning to build skills to recognize and manage their emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive behaviors. Students in early childhood and elementary age are just learning to develop self-regulation with the help of caregivers and educators as well.

In early childhood, preschool, and kindergarten age, children are learning how to recognize and control their emotions, as well as their actions. They need to learn how to control their impulses and to stop behaving or reacting negatively. In kindergarten, especially, children must also have the ability to do something necessary or required, such as following classroom rules or listening to instructions given by the teacher, even if they do not want to do the required task or behavior. According to research, the ability of a child to self-regulate their feelings and actions in preschool is related to their math and literacy skills that are developed in kindergarten

(Rosanbalm, 2017).

Children struggle with self-regulation at an early age. It is our job as educators and caregivers to help children develop the skills necessary to aid in self-regulation. Intentional work by adults to promote self-regulation capacity early in the lives of children can help them develop critical skills like attentional control, problem-solving, and coping strategies for managing distressing environmental or emotional experiences. Capitalizing on the developmental readiness of the earliest years, approaches that systematically combine interventions with supportive caregivers and environments can proactively foster self-regulation skills and help children enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, Dr. Matthew Rouse, states the key to learning self-regulation skills is to not avoid situations that are difficult for children to handle, but to coach children through the difficult situations and provide a supportive framework, "scaffolding" the behavior you want to encourage until the children can handle these challenges on their own. As educators, we can do this by helping students see what causes their frustrations and ways that they can work through these frustrations, such as taking a five-minute break or getting a drink (Child Mind Institute).

Positive feedback is another way that educators and caregivers can help promote self-regulation in elementary students. Elementary students are in the process of learning what school is all about, as well as laying the foundation for their education by learning how to read and basic math skills. Because these things are new to elementary students, there is going to be a lot of frustration when a student doesn't understand a concept the first time and this can result in the student acting out emotionally or behaviorally. Educators need to recognize this and turn this into a learning opportunity for the student to learn about how to self-regulate his or her emotions

and behaviors. Some other ways to help with self-regulation in elementary students, especially when it comes to emotions and behaviors, is to have them take a deep breath and use self-talk to calm down. Self-talk is the first step to self-reflection, which is also a key part of self-regulation. As educators, we can help foster self-reflection by asking students questions, such as, why did you behave that way, or what went wrong and how could you have done something different. Personally, I have used self-talk and self-reflection in my classroom and seen how this can make the students more aware of what they are doing and how they can improve. Elementary students can then learn how to ask themselves these reflective questions using self-talk and improve their self-regulation.

Self-regulation continues to develop through young adulthood and throughout a person's lifespan; however, laying a foundation for self-regulation early may prevent childhood struggles. As students start to enter their teenage years, they may struggle with monitoring their time, staying on task, regulating their emotions, maintaining confidence, and most important learning to learn. Now, this is not the case for all adolescents and that applies to the rest of this article, but in general, their self-regulation can always be improved. Desiree W. Murray and Katie Rosanbalm (Murray, 2017) expressed in one of their briefings that “self-regulation is developmentally ‘out of balance’ at this age” (p.2). A student’s self-regulation may not be at its highest level in middle school or even in high school, but there is always room for growth.

As students grow into their teenage years, they start developing more independence. When it comes to school, they may now have to take their notes, study for tests, or juggle multiple due dates. At this age, students need to "learn how to learn", which is very similar to self-regulation. Students have to be able to recognize when they are learning and when they are

not. They have to be able to set goals and learn from their mistakes. Secondary students have to be able to use their cognitive and emotional skills to accomplish these tasks (Zamora, 2018).

Through high school, students have to be able to identify the areas in which their knowledge can improve. They can accomplish this by following the three phases of self-regulation: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. Students set reasonable goals and objectives based on self-assessment and make a plan to reach these goals (Walsh, 2014). From here, they can perform their tasks and monitor their progress along the way. And finally, after all this, they can self-reflect by thinking back to the goals they had set in the beginning. Did they accomplish what they wanted to or do they have more work to do? This process is a continuous process. Sometimes they have to revisit certain goals and other times, they can move on to new challenges.

As secondary students learn to self-regulate in school, they are also learning specific skills that help them control their emotions and behaviors. They learn to manage their emotions by becoming mindful and persistent when they encounter tough, complex projects (Murray, 2017). Persisting through projects obviously helps students accomplish their goals, however, mindfulness is really what helps them regulate their emotions and behaviors. Through the three phases of self-regulation, students are learning to focus, monitor their progress, and control their attitudes. This mindfulness also helps students create healthier relationships among peers. Stress becomes a little less impactful and students can control their behaviors (Armstrong, 2019).

Managing stress can be a big part of self-regulation. Secondary students can be under a ton of stress when it comes to their school and home life. Manageable stress challenges students but also allows them to grow under this slight pressure. Unfortunately, when this pressure becomes too much for students to handle, it can hinder the development of a student's self-

regulation. Too much stress can make students impulsive or anxious and can have a long-term effect on students. Anxiety has affected my life as I went through high school and entered college. Being able to identify the issue and be open to getting help is so important. Some ways that helped me cope were writing in a journal, exercising, and identifying my triggers. Self-reflecting and identifying what makes you anxious or what adds to your stress, allows you to become self-aware, therefore adding to your ability to self-regulate (Murray, 2017).

When it comes to improving a secondary student's self-regulation, they need the help of their teachers, as well as caregivers. We must encourage our students to set goals, whether they be long-term or short-term. Talking through these goals verbally can bring new ideas into their consciousness, which is also why keeping a journal is a great practice to engage in. Some other skills to improve self-regulation may be to break down projects into smaller sections, write due dates or deadlines in a planner, removing all distractions, and self-reflect (Walsh, 2014). Think about the things that may or may not have gone well, and consider what you learned from setting specific goals. Self-regulation takes time and a lot of practice, but that eventually leads to healthy habits, which in turn help a student's self-regulation flourish.

While all students need to learn self-regulation strategies, it is equally important for teachers to develop and model these skills in their own lives and within the classroom. Teachers experience high levels of job-related stress as well as a range of elevated emotions throughout the day. According to Schultz and Zembylas, "researchers have suggested that the emotional nature of teaching might be associated with burnout, job dissatisfaction, health symptoms, and high rates of attrition" (Schultz and Zembylas, 2009). Teachers who exhibit low levels of self-regulation have a weaker professional practice which negatively correlates with student learning. Teachers must learn to self-regulate in order to improve their personal and professional

wellbeing, as well as improving the academic climate for their students. To effectively do so, teachers must take active steps toward implementing self-regulation strategies into their instructional practice.

A lack of self-regulation can lead to physical and mental health problems, increased teacher absences, and higher rates of teacher turnover. Teachers who experience high levels of stressors with a low ability to self-regulate experience a higher level of sickness related absences from work (Merida Lopez, 2017). According to Chang (as cited in Hoy, 2013), Teachers, especially those new to the profession, also experience “burnout” faster when they don't have the affective coping mechanisms to help self-regulate. Teacher absences and yearly turnover can decrease student support and lead to increased costs for school districts. The effects of low teacher self-regulation impact the individual, the students, and even the district as a whole.

Increased self-regulation allows for teachers to overcome inevitable work-related stress to create a more positive school environment for themselves and their students. Often teachers experience stress about student behavior, parent interactions, performance-related pressure, and social dynamics with colleagues and administration. As teachers begin to develop awareness around their emotions, they are more likely to be able to regulate them appropriately in the professional setting. When they are faced with high-stress situations, teachers should aim to control emotions, tone, actions, and responses. Teachers are more likely to develop this control when they don't become emotionally charged, but keep things in perspective and seek support from their peers (Hoy, 2013, p.433). To implement these techniques into their instruction, teachers must be aware of the need for self-regulation and equipped with appropriate methods to foster self-regulation in their professional practice.

Some strategies to improve self-regulation include mindfulness training and explicit instruction in emotional intelligence. Mindfulness training has been implemented into schools to help teachers “focus attention and emotional resources on the present situation without judgment, recognizing and releasing unnecessary expectations and biases, and developing greater compassion for self and others” (Roeser et al., 2013, as cited in Hoy, 2013, p. 433). Personally, I have benefited from “Mindful Moment” training, in which educators were required to take 5 minutes of deep breathing exercises in the middle of the workday. Implementing this into my own instruction allowed me a moment to reflect on my stress and realign my emotions. Training in mindfulness can also help educators become more aware of how they are feeling, what they are communicating, and how they are reacting and responding.

Explicit training in emotional intelligence also creates awareness and improves self-regulation during instruction. Emotional intelligence focuses on a high level of awareness, control, and expression of emotions. In a 2015 study done by Galler, a correlation was made between "outstanding" classroom teachers and an individual's ability to regulate and manage their emotions. One theme of interest that emerged from this study was that "outstanding teachers engage in more emotional self-regulation techniques in response to frustrating classroom behavior." The study found that "typical teachers" openly expressed their frustration to students, making students aware of how their actions were affecting them. "Outstanding" teachers had a high awareness of their emotional intelligence and used techniques in the heat of the moment to set aside their own emotions, avoid reacting on impulse, and handle the student's negative behavior calmly and constructively (Galler, 2015).

I found this study relatable in my experience as a teacher. Often when I discipline a child for extreme behavior, my own emotions and frustration transcend through in my conversation

and tone of voice. I believe this study indicates that classroom management, tone of voice, and word choice are a direct reflection of your ability to self-regulate as a teacher. Teachers could benefit from training that teaches self-regulation techniques for classroom management including slowing down, deep breathing, listening to students before reacting, formulating a response in one's mind before verbally expressing it, and showing empathy.

Self-regulation directly impacts personal, academic, and professional success and wellbeing for elementary and secondary students as well as teachers. In the early years of one's life, educators and caretakers need to help children build a foundation for identifying the interconnection between emotions and behaviors. As children grow into teenagers, their ability to self-regulate continues to have an impact on their success and wellbeing. Secondary students not only need to recognize their emotions, but they begin to garner an understanding that their self-regulation can spur them further towards successfully managing life tasks and accomplishing future goals. Teachers and caregivers can encourage students to use self-regulation strategies to build persistence and grit in students, but it's important that teachers also have a high ability to self-regulate themselves. As adults, self-regulation skills transfer from academics to professional careers but maintain their importance for fostering wellbeing. Both students and teachers can benefit from self-regulation strategies such as taking breaks, practicing self-talk, journaling, and mindfulness training. We believe that it is important for both students and teachers to be aware of the importance of self-regulation, and explicitly work to manifest these strategies in their academic life and professional instruction.

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