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How can schools boost students' self-regulation?

Teaching students how to take responsibility for their own effort can enable them to become more persistent and focused about learning.

By Cecilia Le and Rebecca E. Wolfe

A new generation of alternative schools — schools and programs that re-engage dropouts or students who aren't on track to a high school diploma — has demonstrated the power of helping students practice the self-regulation skills they need to succeed. These schools foster and honor the resilience of students, while recognizing the academic and socioemotional challenges many of them face, often as a result of high-poverty backgrounds.

A striking convergence of research, documentation, commentary, and policy in the past five years strongly suggests that an almost exclusive focus on academic knowledge and skills is an incomplete solution. Additional behaviors, skills, and mindsets — sometimes called metacognitive skills or 21st-century skills — are just as necessary for academic and career success and a rich civic life. A significant body of research emphasizes that a focus on these mindsets and skills contributes to improved outcomes on many academic measures, while their absence contributes to inefficient learning (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Conley, 2012; Farrington et al., 2012). One of the most critical of these metacognitive skills is self-regulation. A self-regulating learner can "plan, set goals, organize, self-monitor, and self-evaluate at various points during the process [of building new knowledge or skills]" (Zimmerman, 1990).

Neuroscience, sociology, and learning theory all have shown the detrimental nature of poverty and

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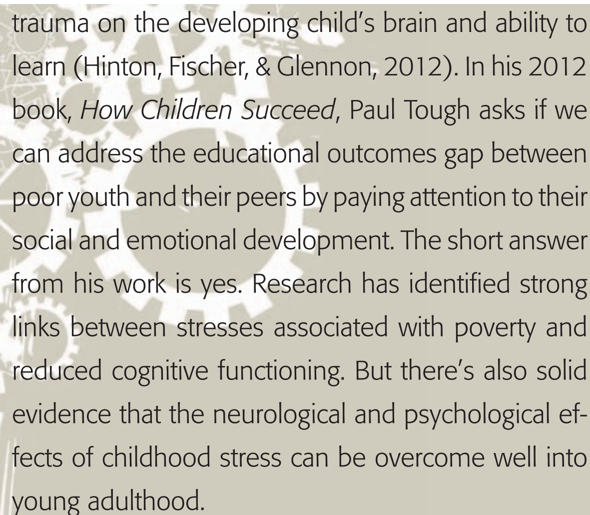

trauma on the developing child's brain and ability to learn (Hinton, Fischer, & Glennon, 2012). In his 2012 book, *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough asks if we can address the educational outcomes gap between poor youth and their peers by paying attention to their social and emotional development. The short answer from his work is yes. Research has identified strong links between stresses associated with poverty and reduced cognitive functioning. But there's also solid evidence that the neurological and psychological effects of childhood stress can be overcome well into young adulthood.

An important outgrowth of this research is its implication for children's learning. The area of the brain most affected by childhood stress is the prefrontal cortex where impulses and emotions are regulated. Children who experience trauma — abuse, neglect, and family members' mental illness, substance addiction, or incarceration, for example — are more likely to have a hard time sitting still, following directions, rebounding from disappointment, and focusing on learning. Childhood trauma compromises the development of crucial executive functions, including working memory, self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and the abilities to hold contradictory information in the brain, see alternative solutions, and negotiate the unfamiliar.

The best schools and programs serving high concentrations of low-income, off-track youth recognize that to facilitate their students' academic success, they must pay explicit attention to developing their ability to self-regulate (among other metacognitive learning strategies). In the following, we describe three different schools serving off-track youth that have embraced explicit approaches to develop their students' ability to self-regulate as a key strategy in improving student learning, student attendance, behavior, and/or high school completion. While these schools honed their techniques out of necessity, their integrated strategies hold great promise for improving the possibility of success for any developing adolescent.

PORTLAND YOUTHBUILDERS

Fostering self-regulation through community building

New arrivals at Portland YouthBuilders (PYB) in Portland, Ore., undergo a three-week trial period to test and build "mental toughness," a key feature of orientation across YouthBuild USA sites nationally. Students must follow rules of conduct such as remaining clean and sober, maintaining 100% attendance, accruing no more than two tardies, and practicing tolerance and inclusion of others at all times. "It's designed to provide enough structure to create a difference between what they've been doing and what this is," said Nancy Pearson, PYB's personal development manager.

"What this is" is an educational, vocational training, and leadership development program for low-income youth ages 17-24 who have not finished high school and who face significant barriers to success. Each year, PYB serves more than 200 young people. Part of the national YouthBuild USA network, PYB seeks not only to equip young people with traditional college- and career-readiness skills, but to spark personal transformation.

PYB's framework for success is based on five habits for success: self-management, resourcefulness, resilience, interpersonal skills, and accountability. The five habits serve as an organizing framework for not just the mental toughness portion of the program, but for curriculum and instruction in academic classes and on work sites. "The case we make is that those habits are necessary for success in any postsecondary environment: work, college, or apprenticeship," said Elise Huggins, PYB's program manager for academics.

During intake, each student is assigned a master's-level clinician who acts as an advocate and meets each student monthly, regardless of need. Students work with the advocate on identifying goals, removing barriers in their lives, negotiating conflict, assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and averting crises.

PYB structures each quarter of the yearlong program as a distinct phase named after a mountain that students must scale: Hood, Tahoma, McKinley, and Everest. In each segment, students take part in different activities to build community, leadership and self-regulation. In the first four weeks of the Hood phase, which heavily emphasizes community building, students sit down to breakfast with one another each morning.

Members of the cohort serve each other, and no one eats until everyone is served. This ritual is designed to teach students to exercise patience and anticipate others' needs. "They understand their independence and individuality, but they move together as a group, learning when it's appropriate to subjugate their individuality for the good of the community," Pearson said.

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Case management teams include the advocate plus representatives from PYB's academic, work-based learning, and career-coaching teams. Each quarter, as students advance to the next phase, case management teams gather with the student for a formal review designed to help students think beyond the moment, take stock of progress, and reflect on how to use strengths in a future career. PYB encourages significant student voice in these meetings and is moving toward a structure that enables the student to run the review meeting.

Students self-assess and are assessed by staff on each of the five habits of success as not yet proficient, proficient, or highly proficient, and they must speak about each in concrete ways. For example, for the habit of self-management, students might cite specific instances when they notified people in advance that they would be late or prioritized their schedule in order to turn in assignments on time. PYB uses a tool that helps students digest the information from their assessment and turn it into actionable items as they complete each phase of the program.

Infractions are viewed as an opportunity for coaching and improvement; students must answer a set of questions about what happened, who was responsible, how they will assume responsibility for the harm, and what they will do differently next time.

Learn more at www.pybpdx.org/

LIFELINK

Building self-regulation through student-initiated effort

At LifeLink, an innovative college bridge and retention program in New York City, students are responsible for every step of their involvement, from enrolling in the program to selecting the types of support that will be most helpful to them in completing community college. Participants move through the program at their own pace as they develop the academic skills as well as the self-motivation and responsibility needed for success in community college.

Good Shepherd Services, a nonprofit community agency providing youth development, education, and family services, developed and runs LifeLink. Good Shepherd Services partners with the New York City Department of Education to help dropouts or students who have struggled in school to graduate. Every year, Good Shepherd helps more than 1,000 over-age, under-credited students complete high school through multiple pathways schools or programs, and it assists another 200 students to earn a GED.

While all graduates of Good Shepherd schools and programs have demonstrated resilience and the ability to succeed by finishing high school, postgraduation data have shown that they aren't immune from the national community college dropout statistics. Some graduates don't make it into college at all, and many who do enroll fall through the cracks before completion. Through two sites, one in Brooklyn and one in the Bronx, LifeLink helps graduates from any Good Shepherd school to transition into and complete college. The program model includes three phases: recruiting and preparing potential high school graduates; mobilizing students for college through a summer bridge; and providing college support services.

"Students control everything. Until they flip the action switch, nothing happens," said Anne Waldfogel, Good Shepherd Services division director of Bronx community-based programs. "But, for the first time in their lives, they are in a room where all their peers are moving. That is what makes the difference. Once they know what they want and are determined to get it, we can help them."

Students must initiate participation in LifeLink, reviewing the syllabus and choosing whether to sign a contract. As soon as students arrive at the LifeLink center for orientation, they begin receiving deliberate cues that the program is student-centered

in a way that is different from most high school programs. Participating students in LifeLink:

- Are greeted by tutors and staff assistants who are close to their age, many of whom are recent graduates of the program;
- See their own and their peers' voices on the wall in the form of answers to questions, such as "Why are you here?";
- Experience a "blended" approach, using computer workstations to work at their own pace on specific academic activities while benefiting from individual and group counseling, personalized support, and team-building activities; and
- Earn stipends and other incentives by completing their work.

LifeLink fosters self-regulation and personal responsibility by focusing on student-initiated effort rather than adult-led activities.

The program fosters self-regulation and personal responsibility by focusing on student-initiated effort rather than adult-led activities. During the summer and for guided study sessions throughout the year, students are expected to come in, say hello, get the materials they need to work on, and begin their work. Adults don't convene the sessions, and students know what work they need to complete. Students who don't stay on task aren't admonished, but those who do complete their work receive stipends and other strategically disbursed incentives. The program incorporates group and individual counseling, team-building activities, and personalized support for transition into postsecondary options.

Some students at the beginning of their time at LifeLink go a few days without getting work done, but, usually after the first meeting with a staff member who asks them to demonstrate their progress, they change their habits when they realize that success in the program relies on their actions. This shift in self-regulation is essential to college success.

At the Bronx site, each participant has a unique study plan based around his or her particular course load and assignments. To help students make good use of study time, Bronx LifeLink staff created a weekly goal sheet that students fill out with a mentor at the beginning of each week. Each time students come to the center, they fill in a sign-in sheet that asks which pieces of their weekly plan the student will work on that day. When students leave, they self-assess their work for the day. This process allows students to manage their own time, but structures are in place to help them set and focus on goals.

Learn more at www.goodshepherds.org/

BOSTON DAY & EVENING ACADEMY

Embedding self-regulation throughout competency-based education pathways

For over 17 years, Boston Day and Evening Academy has served a population of young people often left behind: those who are off track to high school graduation or who have dropped out altogether. From day one, BDEA has used a competency-based approach — a system in which students advance based upon demonstration of skills and content as opposed to progressing because of grade levels or seat time — as a way to accelerate student progress toward graduation and postsecondary success and to foster deep learning and critical thinking.

BDEA serves about 370 16- to 22-year-olds from across Boston. Many students have had significant gaps or interruptions in their learning, especially in the core areas of literacy and numeracy, and come to BDEA with a history of hardship in school. Every BDEA student qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch, 10% are parents, and at any given time about 15% are homeless.

At BDEA, students know exactly what they're learning, what they need to do to demonstrate mastery of the subject, how far they need to go to graduate, and how to self-monitor and take charge of their progress.

Through its competency-based approach, BDEA has tackled one of the toughest education conundrums of our time: how to recover

low-skilled students two or more years off track to graduation, provide them a rich and rigorous education aligned with high standards (Massachusetts is a Common Core State Standards state), and graduate them quickly and college-ready. At BDEA, competency-based education is more than a grading or curricular system; it is a cultural, structural, and instructional mindset.

BDEA's competency-based structures provide exactly the kind of scaffolding that important researchers suggest is necessary for students to develop self-regulation skills (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002; Zimmerman, 1990). When students enroll, they take several assessments — including the nationally recognized Measures of Academic Progress test along with more home-grown and specifically tailored ones — to determine basic skill levels. These tests become the basis of the student's individualized learning plan (ILP). A skilled adviser leads them through a process of developing their ILP, a process that also enables them to observe how a learning plan is developed. The ILP becomes a living document that students carry with them. As they progress through school,

Understanding self-regulation and its importance

To be self-regulated is to be goal-directed and to demonstrate control over and responsibility for one's focus and effort when engaged in a learning activity. From the teacher's perspective, self-regulated learners tend to be self-starters who show effort and persistence during learning, and who "seek out advice, information, and places where they are most likely to learn" (Zimmerman,1990).

Self-regulated learners also are capable of monitoring the effectiveness of their learning strategies and reacting to what they notice by changing their behavior. For example, a student who is reading a short story in preparation for a class discussion on authors' use of symbols notices that she has read the last several paragraphs only cursorily. In a moment of self-feedback, she asks herself what those paragraphs were about and, coming up with nothing, reminds herself to go back and reread the portions she glossed over. In this case, she regulated her own learning to better promote her understanding of the content, and she did so outside any interventions from the teacher.

What teachers need to recognize is that students are human and have to decide to learn first, then muster the necessary techniques to keep at it until they make progress. If learning were always and only fun and offered an endless supply of immediately gratifying experiences, the need for self-regulation would be nil. But since learning typically requires time, vigilance, and effort, all learners need to find ways to sustain it. That students learn best when they self-regulate is clear.

The good news is that self-regulation is among the more teachable skill sets we have. Like anything, self-regulation is learned and developed in relationship to others and to one's environment. Given the proper supports, some students build an impressive toolbox of self-regulatory strategies that enable them to stay focused and build knowledge and skills in academic and nonacademic domains.

Sometimes, however, students may not have access to enough teachers, mentors, peers, or family members who can demonstrate the self-regulatory strategies that promote academic success. To begin to remedy these discrepancies, teachers may need to carefully consider how self-regulation can be developed.

Describing Zimmerman's work, Wigfield and Eccles (2002) theorize four developmental steps in building self-regulatory skills:

- Observation: Watching someone who is already skilled at self-regulation;
- Emulation: Modeling one's behavior after the expert;
- Self-control: Regulating behavior on one's own in relatively simple and structured settings; and
- Self-regulation: Adapting and controlling one's own behavior under a range of conditions and circumstances.

(adapted from Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012)

they work with their adviser to begin to emulate and eventually exert more self-control over the behaviors that enable them to check on and evaluate their own progress. As a student attains benchmarks, teachers sign off on them, giving the student frequent and transparent evidence of his or her progress toward graduation.

From the students' perspective, the transparency of a competency-based system is transformative and empowering. As one student told Head of School Beatriz Zapater, "BDEA is better for me because it's not as easy to fail like in other schools. In my former school, I can miss one paper and be failing. Here, it's not that easy to fail. The benchmarks give you a chance to revise and redo until you get it." In many cases, it is the first time in the student's academic career that they know exactly what they're learning, what they need to do to demonstrate mastery of the subject, how far they need to go to graduate, and how to self-monitor and take charge of their progress.

Learn more at www.bacademy.org/

"You can use the alphabet to text. You can use the alphabet to tweet. Why can't you use the alphabet to spell?"

Conclusion

What students do and how they think about their work and their own capacities, not merely what they know, has substantial influence on their long-term success. These examples offer three different approaches through which schools and programs serving the most high-need young people are helping them develop not only the academic skills for college and career, but a self-regulatory framework that enables them to stay focused, practice self-accountability, and pursue their goals. Whether by community building, student-initiated, or competency-based approaches, these schools and programs offer powerful models of how to integrate developmental supports with rigorous content in order to produce better academic and social outcomes. **K**

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