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ABSTRACT

Social and psychological development shapes a child's character and personality as well as academic achievement. This article examines five factors that are critical to this development: self-esteem, achievement motivation, social skills, coping skills, and aspirations. Self-esteem should be a desired result in and of itself, enhancing the quality of students' lives now and in the future. Achievement motivation refers to the ability to persist at tasks or activities to accomplish a goal or learning outcome; it is the drive that students must generate to get things done. Effective social skills allow students to interact effectively with others in a productive, meaningful, and nonviolent manner. Students with good social skills are able to develop friendships, work cooperatively with classmates and teachers, and have tolerance for those they may view as different. A student with good coping skills will be able to overcome a difficult situation whether it is mastering a tough subject or getting along with a particular teacher. Students with poor coping skills create a situation of "learned helplessness," believing they can have little impact on a difficult situation, because it is beyond their control. Students with high aspirations develop challenging and realistic ideas and plans for future careers and adult life in general. Developing such aspirations is a goal of the "school to work" programs in many schools. (Contains 24 references.) (DFR)

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Enhancing Students' Social and Psychological Development

David Bartz and Gary Mathews

The success of schools is usually measured by their students' academic achievement. It is the traditional yardstick used to compare schools within a district or state, and U.S. students with their counterparts in other countries. But there is more to education than academics. There is also the social and psychological development that shape children's character and personality. In this article we examine five factors that are critical to this development: self-esteem, achievement motivation, social skills, coping skills, and aspirations.

1. Self-esteem

The commonly held notion that enhancing self-esteem will automatically improve a student's academic

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achievement has been refuted by the research. But does this mean that schools should not focus on self-esteem? Certainly not. Students' positive self-esteem should be a desired result in and of itself, enhancing the quality of their lives now and in the future.

Schools do not have to nurture self-esteem through a formal program; the day-to-day contact and feedback students obtain from teachers may have more impact. Here are some examples of practices that can improve students' self-esteem.¹

- Reduce competition between students; cooperative learning accomplishes this by having students work in groups under a teacher's guidance.

- Use learning activities for which students receive feedback noting success. This helps build confidence.

- Work with students' "significant others"—parents, grandparents, family members, and other students—to help reinforce what you are trying to accomplish in school.

- Share success stories of adults whose childhood background and accomplishments were similar to those of your students.

- Emphasize reinforcement for good performance and de-emphasize penalties for poor performance.

- Help students identify their strengths and resources, and consider how to use them to achieve school and personal goals.

- Emphasize the relationship between success in school and success in life outside school.

2. Achievement Motivation

Achievement motivation refers to the ability to persist at tasks or activities to accomplish a goal or learning outcome. In other words, it is the drive that students must generate to get things done. Students need to believe that they can achieve, and that what they seek to accomplish is worth the effort. While achievement motivation is often associated with high-achieving students—sometimes labeled as "over-achievers"—it has more to do with the effort and interest children show in achieving a goal. Giving students the opportunity to succeed in small tasks will often encourage them to tackle larger tasks. Here are some other ways to get them started.²

- Seek student feedback and discussion about classroom rules and procedures.

- Use programs that stress goal-setting and self-discipline.

- Structure activities so that every student's achievement is recognized.

- Create challenges for students

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that build on their existing strengths.

- Help students develop time-management skills.
- Create ways for students to assess and discuss their progress.
- Offer “personal best” awards and other incentives for attendance, grades, and/or achievement.
- Integrate students’ backgrounds and experiences into their classroom activities.

3. Social Skills

Effective social skills allow students to effectively interact with others in a productive, meaningful, and non-violent manner.

Students with good social skills are able to develop friendships, work cooperatively with classmates and teachers, and have tolerance for those they may view as “different.” They also develop a general concern for the welfare of other human beings.

Years ago, it was common to find social skills reflected in report card grades for citizenship at all grade levels. While this is no longer the case in many schools, there are a number of ways that students’ social skills can be developed.³

Assign small-group learning activities, provide space for small student groups to congregate, and develop peer-help programs to encourage cooperation.

- Use activities that emphasize social interaction.
- Demonstrate positive social skills in the way you and your staff interact.
- Reduce or eliminate social subgroups that ostracize others on the basis of race or poverty.
- Help students appreciate and accept individual differences.
- Emphasize the need to be sensi-

Meeting the Developmental Needs of Adolescents

In the past 30 years, proponents of early childhood education have increased our awareness of critical periods in human development. Less attention has been devoted to early adolescence which, like early childhood, is a time of rapid change.

Adolescents share the basic human needs for food, shelter, physical safety, access to health care, and transportation to needed services. While keeping in mind these overwhelming survival issues, we must also focus on the developmental needs of young adolescents.

1. Positive Social Interactions

There is a tendency in our culture to underestimate the importance that young people place on meaningful social contacts with caring adults. School personnel can provide critical adult social interaction through strong advisor-advisee relationships, participation in activities, and informal contact outside the classroom.

Schools can encourage socially constructive peer interaction by offering small-group learning activities, by providing space for small groups of students to congregate, and by developing peer-helping programs.

2. Structure and Limits

Schools need to have clearly stated rules and expectations that are generally accepted and understood by students and staff members. Students should be involved in the development of these rules and in the consequences for failing to observe them.

3. Competence and Achievement

Schools need to emphasize high-quality instruction, positive expectations for all students, and meaningful rewards and praise, as well as opportunities for increased independence and responsibility. A variety of teaching methods and a balanced curriculum of basic subjects, high-interest exploratory courses, and extracurricular activities help provide diversity of opportunities so that each student can succeed at some meaningful task.

4. Creative Expression

Young adolescents need opportunities to creatively

express their new feelings, interests, abilities, and thoughts. A middle-grade curriculum needs a balance of core courses and more specialized cultural activities, such as drama, music, cooking, painting, and dance, which allow opportunities for self-expression.

5. Physical Activity

Responsive schools need to provide structured outlets for the physical energy of all young adolescents. Non-competitive physical education, which involves all students, is an important aspect of school life, and physical activity should be encouraged during breaks and at lunchtime.

6. Participation in the Community

Student-initiated community activities, student councils and committees, and school improvement projects are all ways in which schools can engage students in meaningful community participation.

7. Self-Definition

Adolescents need to learn who they are. Schools can help by focusing on how they relate to the larger world, but it is only in the larger community that adolescents learn to find meaningful roles for themselves as they move into adult society. Schools can help provide the background for self-definition through such activities as service learning.

Excerpted from “Meeting the Developmental Needs of Adolescents,” by Frank A. Loda. Principal, January 1995.

tive to the feelings of other people.

- Involve students in community activities, student councils and committees, and school improvement projects.

- Involve students in developing rules and the consequences for failing to observe them.

4. Coping Skills

A student with good coping skills will be able to overcome a difficult situation, whether it is mastering a tough subject or getting along with a particular teacher. Students with poor coping skills create a situation of "learned helplessness" when they believe they can have little impact on a difficult situation because it is beyond their control. They often rationalize that when things go wrong, it is everybody's fault except their own.

A typical example of poor coping skills is when students behave in a manner they know will get them in trouble. They take the attitude that it doesn't matter what they do because they can't control the result—and they will be punished anyway. Other typical signs of poor coping skills are displayed by students who appear depressed or who have no interest in school. Poor coping skills can keep students in a cycle where failure breeds failure.

Educators can break this cycle and improve students' coping skills by using some of these suggestions:⁴

- Focus more on meta-cognitive activities that encourage students to talk about their emotions, listen to their classmates express their feelings, and reflect on what motivates people.

- Provide activities that emphasize social interactions with large groups

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standard from *Standards for Quality Elementary and Middle Schools, Third Edition* (NAESP 1996):

School Climate. The school's environment encourages an individual's capabilities and emphasizes his or her worth.

of students.

- Provide activities that help students cope with typical real-world situations.

- Provide stress-free learning environments for children.

- Teach children to handle conflicts and rule violations through negotiation and peer mediation.

- Train parents to initiate positive parent-child interactions, especially where there is potential for conflict.

- Develop self-control in students by encouraging nonjudgmental and non-disruptive venting of emotion rather than physical aggression.

5. Aspirations

Students with high aspirations develop challenging and realistic ideas and plans for future careers and adult life in general. Developing such aspirations is a goal of the "school to work" programs in many schools. Students need to have a clear understanding of the skills necessary for success in the adult world. Most importantly, they need to acquire information, develop understanding, and establish skills that will help them understand and be motivated to pursue careers. Here are some ways to give them that understanding:⁵

- Demonstrate the relationship between schoolwork and careers by using vocational, career, and other job-related examples in their classroom work.

- Ascertain students' interests and relate those interests to possible vocations or careers.

- Stress the acquisition of skills needed to master prerequisites for specific vocations or careers.

- Point out the relationship between success in school and success in work.

- Assure students that everyone has attributes that, properly coupled with training and aspirations, can lead to a successful and rewarding career.

Self-esteem, achievement motivation, social skills, coping skills, and

aspirations are the critical social and psychological skills that need to be developed if our schools are to produce successful and well-rounded students. □

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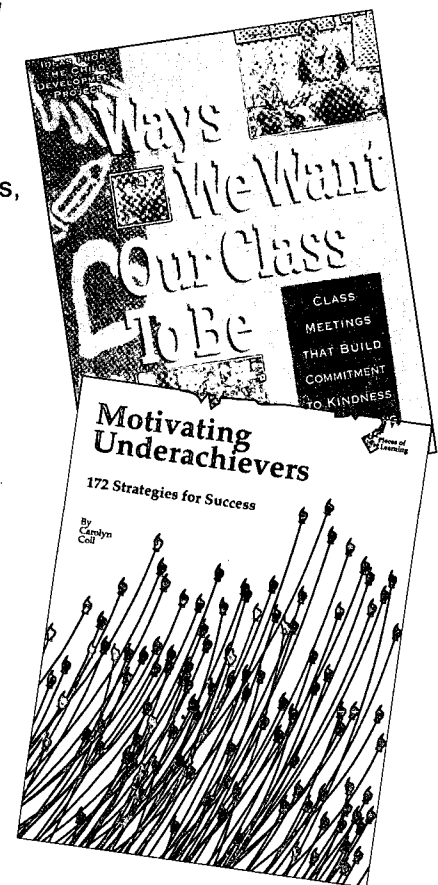
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