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Equipping Students with Tools for Positive Change

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I serve as an English Language Arts/Special Education teacher at an opportunity academy with students grades eight through twelve. My school, located in the Northwest quadrant of Washington, DC, which is currently experiencing gentrification. Rents are high now and steadily increasing: average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the Shaw neighborhood is \$3,363 per month. One hundred percent of our students, on the other hand, are living in poverty, mostly in the SE quadrant, where rents are somewhat less expensive (but also rising). Because of this long (sometimes more than an hour and multiple modes of public transportation) commute, among other reasons, attendance is our biggest problem. Our students were often truant in their neighborhood schools, and now the journey is longer, more tedious, conflicts with the times their siblings may need care, and goes through unfamiliar/dangerous areas. The next major roadblock for our kids is that they are overaged, under-credited, and (mostly) performing significantly behind their same age peers in both math and reading. Students who do not attend class do not learn the material from class. They have failed so often that success seems impossible or they see no reason why they should expend energy on learning concepts and skills that have little bearing on their daily lives. They look around at the mostly wealthy, mostly white folks in NW DC but see no connection to a possible future for themselves.

In order to get our students to attend school, we must make what they are learning relevant to their lives in a way that allows them to view school as worthwhile. Our school must meet at least some of our students' social and emotional needs in order to help students learn. The learning must be personal and individualized. Our students need to feel we see each of them as an individual with different strengths, weaknesses, and desires. For that reason, this unit material encompasses several varied pathways to get to a similar place of understanding and improved abilities to effect positive change for both their communities and themselves.

The Unit

This unit will take place over eight-nine weeks. The unit should be the first of the school year. It begins with a bang: students will download the violent crime reports from a specific neighborhood (where they live now or a past residence). We will make page charts of different neighborhoods and analyze the reported crimes there over a specific time period. Using the median income, age, education level, crime levels/types of crime, and other data points, we will attempt to draw correlations between areas and then move on to how it might look

and feel in each area. Is the tone of the place because of the level of crime or vice versa? How are the residents affected? Is there a difference between violent and nonviolent crime effects? Students are asked to bring in a few photos of the area in question. Alternately, we explore the area on Google Streetview.

Hopefully, this activity will lead us to a genuine curiosity about: The effects of crime on people and communities (moving from the macro to micro view).

Once students have a foundation in the general state of their neighborhoods with regard to violent crime and its effects on individuals, families, and communities, we will move on to what we can do on a personal and community level to improve conditions. My biggest goal with this unit is to allow students to realize that they can affect positive change in their own lives and in the lives of their families, school, and neighborhoods. In order to achieve this goal, students must understand that the current state of violence/violent crime in their communities has negative effects beyond the immediately obvious one of physical harm so that they have a rationale for expending the time, energy, and focus to learn of ways to lower their chances of becoming both victims and perpetrators of violence. This is where we tackle the concepts of risk and protective factors. Students will investigate studies that show the correlation between the prevalence of risk factors and higher incidence of violence. Then, they will research protective factors that can help students avoid or overcome the effects of violent victimization as well as the chance to lower the risk of acting violently. Students will construct plans to help weaken changeable risk factors and strengthen changeable protective factors. Though therapeutic means are obviously worthwhile, this unit focuses on what can be done by students in classrooms.

Because knowing something is possible can change the way people think of their abilities, students will be offered a choice of literature (short stories, essays, novel excerpts, poems, biography, autobiography) featuring people who have overcome major obstacles to gain success. Students will read closely then identify at least one strategy/resource for decreasing a risk factor/increasing a protective factor that applies to that person's ability to be successful. We will keep a running list of our findings about these strategies and why we think they helped, practicing Accountable Talk Discussion and Rules of Respect while we do so.

Each student will choose to research in greater depth one of the above strategies/resources that seems compelling to him/her, ultimately synthesizing the collected information into an informative essay investigating a focus question. During this time, mini lessons on organization, punctuation, transitions, accountable talk, subject/verb agreement, tone, formal language, (etc.) will assist those who need them.

Along with the essay, each student will create a visual illustration of important concepts and relevant points of preventing risk factors and improving protective factors in order to create a sort of mini-guide to their topic. Finally, these visual products will be laminated and displayed during a Gallery Walk and Talk, where other classes are introduced to the concepts deemed important by each student. Student authors stand by to discuss issues and field questions.

Students then move on to a two part project:

Part 1: Students create an actionable project to improve protective factors or decrease risk factors for their neighborhood, including: proposal, justification, needed resources to complete improvement, action plan, letter to allies and power connectors to assist in completion.

Part 2: Students create an actionable project to improve protective factors or decrease risk factors for them personally, including: plan, justification, needed resources to complete improvement, smaller action steps, identification of supporters and allies, identification of anticipated roadblocks and possible workarounds, and

personalized tracker to record progress.

Both of these projects will be done individually but with collaboration and peer/teacher input, suggestions, questions, and revision assistance. I hope to create a classroom culture of hope, empowerment, and resilience.

Violent Crime in the United States

This unit's focus is on strategies that will empower students to decrease violence in their own lives as well as the lives of those in their neighborhood and school community. Many of our students have lived with violence for so long that they have normalized it and its effects as just how life is for them. The first step toward helping them to see their experiences as outliers in the United States is providing them with the information about rates of violence in other places throughout the country as compared to rates in their own communities. We must look at incarceration and violent crime rates in their hometown, Washington, D.C.

The United States' incarceration rate in 2018 was 698 (per every 100,000) people. In comparison, the countries that share our borders rates are much lower: the Canadian incarceration rate is 114 which is more than six times the rate of the U.S.; Mexico's rate is 165, more than four times the United States. When looking at the rates of our Western European neighbors, France (102), United Kingdom (141), Italy (96), and Germany (78), it is clear that the United States corrections system is much more punitive than that of the rest of the world. Much has been made of the state of Oklahoma's newfound status as the "Prison Capital of the World," but at a rate of 1,079, it falls significantly behind the nation's capital, the District of Columbia, which incarcerates 1,153 people out of every 100,000, the highest rate in the country.¹ Clearly, this number is skewed since D.C. is clearly a city and as such, would be expected to have a higher incidence rate than a state because of urban population density, however, D.C.'s rate is still shockingly high.

The most recent data available regarding violent crime reported to the police compared to violent victimization as self-reported and published by the Bureau of Justice as the findings of the National Crime Victimization Survey was January to December of 2017. There are some worrying constants in this survey, the most pressing of which is that more than half of all violent victimizations were not reported to the police. Victims gave as reasons for not reporting that they: feared reprisal, did not want to get the perpetrator in trouble, believed that officers wouldn't (or couldn't) help, thought the crime was personal, and/or believed the crime was not important enough to report.

Responses from both the 2016 and 2017 survey showed that less than half of victims of violence reported the crime to police. Since our data on violent crime is gathered from police reports, and the National Crime Victimization Survey consistently shows that less than half of victims report the victimization to the police, it is reasonable to assume that the number of violent crime occurrences is at least twice what is currently reported. Since the Survey collects information from primary victims, homicide is not included in the survey as it would be impossible to glean information directly from someone who has been killed.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics show that of the 13 violent victimizations per 1,000 people, 9.2 were considered violent and 3.8 were considered to be serious violent victimizations. Since this data was gathered from police reports made by persons age 12 or older, we can conclude with some confidence that the actual

instances of violence are at least twice that. For the last two years (2016-2017) only eight percent of people who are victims of violence receive help from a service agency. A service agency for victims is any organization (public or private) that supports victims in emotional and physical recovery, help plan protections from additional future violence, serve as guide through an often complex criminal justice system, and/or help victims to get some sort of restitution for the injury caused. The other ninety-two percent reports receiving no assistance after their victimization. It is important to note that the rate of victimization increased as income levels decreased, so the poor were much more frequently victimized than others.²

Clearly, there is too much violence in the United States. Violence begets trauma. Exposure to trauma causes deep and lasting wounds that cause a multitude of troubling effects. Some of these effects (homelessness, running away, poverty, substance abuse, school problems, associating with delinquent peers) are known to be both consequences of trauma and risk factors for behavior leading to crime, which leads to more trauma, and so on. It is a cycle that eventually destroys opportunity.³

Trauma

Violence causes trauma. It undermines trust and growth as well as the ability to progress through normal human development stages. Not only are our students traumatized, their parents, relatives, and neighbors are too, which leaves them without the many safeguards available to youth who do not live in violent communities. Students need to understand that trauma has detrimental effects. Students need to learn what they can do to ameliorate those effects in order to increase their chances of realizing their great potential. They can also develop the ability to identify the effects of trauma in their neighborhoods and work to increase awareness and understanding.

The word “trauma” comes from 17th Century Greek and it literally means “wound.” The Oxford English Dictionary provides the following current definition:

“1a. A deeply distressing or disturbing experience;

1b. Emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may lead to long term neurosis;

2. Physical injury.

When it comes to trauma as it relates to behavior and thinking, two kinds are generally acknowledged. The first is simple trauma which is usually a singular event or short occurrence that may cause (or threaten to cause) physical or emotional injury. Simple trauma is often immediately followed by a social response of caring from an individual, family, social group, or civic organization where the victim’s needs for healing and help are recognized and tended. The second is complex trauma which describes physical or emotional injury which has a longer duration or involves multiple events of violence (or threats of violence), ongoing abuse or neglect, and/or repeated harmful acts. Complex trauma is often not immediately followed by a caring response and, in fact, the victim may be considered somehow complicit in or deserving of the trauma.⁴

Personal Consequences of Trauma

The American Psychological Association advises that experiencing, witnessing, or learning about a traumatic event can lead to debilitating and long lasting conditions such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Kids and adolescents with PTSD can have problems: regulating both their emotions and physical responses; and can struggle with maintaining or focusing attention, level of aggression, dissociation, as well as experience physical and motor problems. A child with PTSD may have an unnecessary and debilitating acute reaction of alarm triggered which activates physical stress responses repeatedly, eventually damaging important psychological and neurological systems. This damage causes disadvantages for the child in all settings and leads to behavioral issues, developmental and language delays, lower academic achievement, and higher rates of failing and suspension.⁵

Complex Trauma can be thought of as a disorder impeding both current and later development. Traumatic events trigger the disorder and cause traumatic stress reactions like depression, difficulty attaching in relationships, dissociation, chronic hyperarousal, and inability to regulate emotions. The younger the person is when complex trauma exposure began, the more severe and chronic the impairment can be.⁶

Complex trauma exposure causes structural changes as well as functional changes in the developing brain. The hippocampal, prefrontal cortex, and amygdala show decrease in size and result in impairment of the stress response system. These changes form the base of symptoms like emotional and behavior dysregulation, hyperarousal, reexperiencing or flashback, attention difficulties, dissociation, numbing, and deficits in executive function. The brain shifts to survival mode instead of focusing on learning. In addition, depression, anxiety, and aggression alter a person's ability to cope with emotions and regulate impulses. Young people who experience complex trauma often have quickly changing moods and unnecessarily extreme responses triggered by what seems to others as minor incidents or even zero antecedent. On the other end of the spectrum, young people exposed to complex trauma can also experience impaired attention and consciousness and can seem disassociated from emotions, lack sustained curiosity, and have difficulty planning, remembering, and engaging. These symptoms of trauma can make even simple tasks challenging, producing yet more stress that retriggers additional trauma response. Young people in the grips of trauma symptoms and reactions make poor and impulsive choices, perform poorly on academic tasks, have problems with semantic, episodic, and procedural memory, and are at a higher risk of substance abuse.⁷

Violence causes substantial consequences in the areas of health and economics. The physical and mental health of children and adolescents are compromised when they perpetrate, experience, or witness violence. These consequences can be both serious and longstanding. Acts of violence cause over half a million physical injuries requiring medical intervention annually and are a leading cause of death for youth. Beyond the physical consequences, young people who experience, cause, or witness violence often develop behavioral difficulties and struggle with mental health. Some of these difficulties include: substance use, smoking, high-risk sexual behaviors, academic difficulties, depression, suicide, school dropout, obesity, and future violence perpetration or victimization.

Economic Cost of Trauma

It is estimated that youth violence costs over eighteen billion dollars annually just in medical bills and lost time/productivity. The cost added by the criminal justice system's expenses for arrest, incarceration, prosecution, and re-entry services combined with the cost of psychological damage and social consequence for victims and their families proves that we cannot afford our current level of violence to continue. There is an enormous cost to the communities where the violence occurred when it comes to funding healthcare systems and social services systems, not to mention drastically reduced property values as a result of crime.

All these costs add up to a deficit in the availability of funding for communities to fund other needs. There is a finite amount of funding, and even less in low socioeconomic areas where property taxes and spending are lower than in wealthy areas. Massive requirements for money to fund incarceration means that there is less or no money available for other needs that might prevent or inhibit incarceration rates, such as: school funding, improved community design, mental health support, parenting classes, etc.⁸

Inequities by Race, Sex, and Socioeconomic Level

99% of our students are African American. The 1% are mixed race and Hispanic. This is relevant because the cost of violence varies greatly by race. There is a disproportionate risk of violence for African American youth than for white youth. In fact, the 2011 homicide rate for African American youth (28.8 per 100,000) was more than thirteen times higher than white youth (2.8). Among white youth, homicide is the fourth leading cause of death, but among African American youth, it is the first leading cause of death. There is also a large difference in homicide rates between sexes. Youth homicide rate for males (12.3 per 100,000) was much higher than that of females (2.1).

When looking at physical fighting among high school aged teens in the United States, 35% of African Americans reported being involved in at least one fight in the last year compared to only 21% of white students. Again, physical fighting among high school students also varies by sex, 30% to 19% by males to females, respectively.

Though males clearly report more instances of violence, data show that females between the ages of ten and twenty-four are also involved with violence. In fact, among young females, homicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 2012 and that same year 221,900 females were treated for injuries acquired by physical assault. In 2012, 30,830 young females were charged with violent crimes and represented 19% of all violent crime arrests, including aggravated assault, robbery, and murder.⁹

Race and sex are not the only factors that show disproportionate exposure to violence. Another indicator is low socioeconomic level. Across all personal crimes, rates of victimization are much higher for those living in poverty. 100% of our students meet the guidelines for living in poverty in the United States. This is important because victimization rates for people with family earnings at \$15,000 or less are more than three times the victimization rates for people with incomes of at least \$75,000. Violence and attempted violence hurt the poor much more frequently than those who earn more. Though the rates for drug use between low and high income families is nearly equal, the rate of violence and other crimes are much higher.¹³

Since 99% of our students are African Americans living in poverty, it is imperative that we use every legitimate means in order to both shield and heal them from the violence they frequently experience while offering the tools and justification for using the tools needed to develop their personal power to succeed.

Risk and Protective Factors

Central to the problem of violence and trauma is the concept that each person has factors which influence the likelihood that they will experience trauma. We must do everything possible to decrease risk factors and increase protective factors. A risk factor can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological,

family, community, or cultural level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes. Conversely, a protective factor can be defined as “a characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, or community (including peers and culture) level that is associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduces the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes.”¹¹

Youth violence is influenced by or associated with many risk factors, including: personal characteristics/experiences, relationships, neighborhood/community, and surrounding society. The presence of risk factors does not always mean that a young person will experience violence, but the more risk factors experienced, the higher the likelihood of violent exposure and associated trauma.

Individual Risk Factors

Individual risks that often lead to being violent and/or experiencing violence include: substance use, impulsiveness, aggression, poor grades, weak feelings of belonging in school, abuse, neglect, home or community exposure to violence, delinquent peers or friends, parental involvement with drugs, harsh discipline, depression, anxiety, chronic stress, conflict, rejection. In addition, youth who are arrested have an increased risk for school dropout, substance abuse, and future acts of violence and crime.

Community Risk Factors

Community factors can also contribute to increased likelihood of exposure to violence: crowded and poor housing conditions, residential instability, the number of alcohol-related businesses, high levels of unemployment, concentrated poverty, neighborhood violence, few positive interactions among residents, and acceptance/normalization of drug use/violence.¹²

Protective Factors

Decrease in youth violence is also associated with protective factors. Protective factors can reduce or inhibit the development of youth violence. Development of several protective factors can even decrease the harmful effects of risk factors experienced over time. Some protective factors are: school readiness, academic achievement, connections to school community, healthy social skills, ability to problem solve, increased regulation skills, positive and warm parenting, physical environments that are clean and maintained, public spaces with increased visibility and positive interactions, financial security, safe housing, access to social supports and services, economic opportunities, helpful neighbors, and the mindset that violence should not be the norm.¹⁰

It makes sense that investments in both increasing/strengthening protective factors along with decreasing/weakening risk factors will benefit all youth. We must strive to positively affect as many factors as possible in order to ameliorate the many exposures to violence experienced by our young people. There are blanket protective factors that will benefit all youth, whether or not they are likely to experience trauma. Developing a proactive approach to prevent further violence exposure is important, but does not negate the need for addressing the damage already done to our students.

In schools, we are somewhat limited to the risk and protective factors we are able to develop. I am choosing

to focus on what we are able to build and/or improve upon. Later, students will develop projects that may improve families and neighborhoods as well as themselves, so the wider circle of community protective factors that can be developed will be discussed then.

Schools and Their Place in Empowering and Protecting Students

Being a place of learning, schools have a unique ability to build students' knowledge and skills to increase safe behaviors. Direct instruction in conflict resolution, communication skills, and the importance of choosing nonviolent behaviors can positively impact the frequency of violent actions. Students need to understand the harmful effects of exposure to violence and its ripple effects throughout their communities. Teachers and social workers who are able to help students develop effective problem-solving skills, clear communication, impulse control, anger management, and emotional regulation can increase the health of our young people.

Learning to understand the thoughts, motivations, and emotions of others can be accomplished through analysis of literature, film, scenes from daily life, and nonfiction. Understanding how others think and feel as well as why they behave in certain ways can support students' empathy and willingness to communicate with the goal of peace and real understanding or student's ability to walk away from engaging in violence. Learning to manage anger through understanding how the brain processes emotions and practicing strategies for reducing anger response and impulsiveness can support students' abilities to not react instantaneously with a fight response. Reducing the number or severity of violent experiences can allow improvements in feeling positive about the future, developing ideas of self-worth, and opportunities for leadership development. These learning experiences can be provided in many different settings but are easily incorporated into school days or before/after school enrichment opportunities.

Introducing and building positive connections between students and caring nonviolent adults can support nonviolence even if those adults are not primary caregivers. Developing mentorship programs and forming healthy and stable relationships between young people and teachers, coaches, school staff, and outside mentors can provide opportunities for informal and friendly monitoring and guidance of behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Youth violence can be decreased by providing connections to warm adults, increased experiences with positive and nonviolent role models, and adults who actively help, communicate thoughtfully, and value cooperation over coercion.

Developing and consistently maintaining positive environments and social connectedness can allow a sense of belonging and safety to grow. Even a shaky, fledgling sense of safety is better than no safety, and provides a starting point to build foundational skills in learning to trust. Students who understand that adults in schools have their wellbeing in mind, care about more than just academic achievement, and see them as valuable individuals are more likely to make progress academically and decrease violent behavior. Teachers have a unique opportunity to create a welcoming safe classroom environment that both encourages cooperation and respect as well as allows students to take learning risks. That environment depends on a teacher who consistently sees and meets the needs of students as individual learners.¹³

School, Community, Business, and Neighborhood Partnerships

Not only the classroom needs to be safer. Physical environments in communities must be safe and well maintained. Public spaces can strengthen social relationships which, in turn, strengthen the support systems and resources available to youth. Physical environments' characteristics influence crime, safety, and violence. Repairing and maintaining schools, neighborhoods, and common spaces, along with adequate lighting, opportunities to interact with nature, and availability of spaces that encourage positive social interaction are plagued by less violence, lower perception of the acceptability of violence, less opportunity for danger, and higher emotional satisfaction of residents. These characteristics show youth that the environment is safe, orderly, and caring which encourages them to act in safe, orderly, and caring ways, too. We model what we see all around us.

Schools can help by promote economic opportunities by offering students vocational skills, career and technical education, and interest-inventory based explorations of possible job matches that, with adequate training, can stabilize and increase economic growth for residents and businesses.

Since lack of opportunities for legal income increase risk of illegal activity and risk of violence, improving job skills and career awareness should decrease violence while increasing income and opportunity. Students who understand that there are legitimate and rewarding vocational opportunities in their future may not feel inclined to obtain money through illegal means such as drug sales or theft. Positive economic growth inherently increases neighborhood stability and encourages businesses and residents to improve health and safety while also providing economic growth opportunities.

Since it is known that positive connections among people in a community work to strengthen the community's safety, health, and prosperity, offering students the chance to develop skills such as cooperation, teamwork, respectful interaction, and empathy can improve both the student's sense of self as well as his or her participation and visibility in the community. Violence decreases with high collective efficacy.

Schools and communities must work together to change the notion that violence in any situation is acceptable. Carrying weapons and settling conflict with physical attack needs to be clearly labeled as unacceptable. Violence in both word and action must be shown as the evil it is. It will take whole school coordination in order to change the culture of normalized violence prevalent today. Focusing on studying the effects of kindness and cooperation as well as the effects of violence is imperative in order for students to see the benefit/harm relationship. Creative and innovative strategies can inspire students to lobby and work for cultural change by creating their own kindness projects as they endeavor to collect qualitative data on the results from others and themselves. Changing the culture will take frequent and multiple long-term teaching and learning. We can speed the process by allowing students to take ownership of projects so that they can eventually see themselves as the powerful change agents they can be.¹

Although we may not be able to change the parenting our students now receive, we can change the parenting skills our students can learn for their current younger siblings and their future immediate families. Good parenting skills are not innate, but learned. Teenagers can benefit from an introduction to basic childhood development and psychology as well as parenting skills from infancy to adolescence.

Specific Prevention Strategies

Building on the idea that all kids have the different strengths and needs, we must offer varied programs designed to help students grow on multiple levels and in multiple ways. The following are some evidenced based practices to support all students, but particularly helpful in addressing students who have experienced complex trauma as a result of violence.

Direct Instruction of Metacognition

Children and adolescents can show positive effects in learning after direct instruction in processes linked to metacognition, or self-regulated learning. Improvement in metacognition can boost the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate while also increasing students' positive beliefs about themselves and the goals they can achieve. It has been proven that metacognitive instruction does improve both cognitive learning and motivation. Using scaffolded individual instruction and repeated practice of skills, students showed increases in both skill and motivation. Metacognition skills allow students to learn deeply, to organize their knowledge, to evaluate credibility and reasoning, and to make informed decisions about what is supported and truthful. Improved metacognition also improved students' ability to transfer knowledge and skills from one topic and subject to others. Metacognition instruction also increased awareness of academic strengths and weaknesses. This is important because as soon as a student is aware of a particular learning deficit, a teacher can offer strategies to fill or strengthen the gap. As academic failure is one of the risk factors for violence/trauma exposure, we need to do everything possible to help our students become more savvy learners while building their awareness of the learning process.

There are generally three important stages to developing metacognition: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. In the planning phase, students gain needed knowledge, create goals, and investigate strategies for obtaining their goals. Then, they map out smaller action steps important to achieving the goal and identify possible resources and roadblocks in order to increase their confidence in their own ability to succeed. Understanding the planning process and practicing its steps will help students achieve self-efficacy which will in turn increase motivation. Since teens (and adults) who have experienced trauma are often overwhelmed, understanding how to create a clear and orderly plan is enormously helpful when trying to reach a goal. Also important is that the goal is genuinely important to the student. If the student does not perceive the goal as useful and worth effort, he or she is unlikely to commit the time, attention, and energy needed to get it done. If the student does not truly understand that the goal is a valuable accomplishment, the effort will be minimal. The next phase is monitoring or self-control. Students who have a plan must now maintain the effort and focus needed in order to make progress toward the goal. They must follow through with action steps and monitor their own progress. They must also be willing to seek help from others and to use available resources. This is not an easy process for many, and it is especially hard for people who have not been able to depend on much throughout their lives. Care must be taken to find appropriate and available mentors whenever possible to facilitate trust. Lastly, the evaluation phase, has to do with deciding whether you've met a goal (or not) and why. Good evaluators must understand that it is possible to improve with practice, focus, and effort. Students must believe that the brain is capable of growing connections and strengthening understanding. Too many kids think that they're just not smart like others, when intelligence and performance in many areas can be greatly changed with continued effort, timely instruction, and correct coaching.¹⁴

Using Visualization, Affirmation, and Psychophysiological Regulation to Develop Self-Regulation

Visualization has been used for decades, but only recently have scientists been able to prove that the brain's chemical response to visualization is the same as its response to an actual experience. Scientists have used MRI to show that brain activity during imagined scenes stimulated the same networks as brain activity during actual events. Students who are led through a detailed visualization of success and safety may be able to encode a construct of positive and calm emotional experiences to use as a cornerstone for future expectations and experiences. Eventually, students can master leading themselves through visualizations that promote confidence in goal achievement and ability to remain calm under stress. Even more interesting, is that there is now evidence to show that neural activity can mirror actual experiences in witnesses to events. Someone who sees another person experience something positive or negative can have the same brain stimulation as the person actually having the experience.¹⁵ Some posit that this is how we develop empathy; I say this underlines the idea that seeing and feeling lead to higher probabilities of doing.

Affirmation, like visualization, can boost confidence by allowing the student to receive positive messages about him or herself whether or not they have been successful yet. A student who can say aloud with emotion, "My patience is improving daily. I am becoming a patient person." Is more likely to develop confidence in his abilities to fight impulsivity. Who we think we are is a combination of what we see, hear, feel, and do. Learning to develop positive affirmations and using them regularly can have positive results in emotional stability, subjectivity, and memory. Further, students who understand the positive effects of affirmation can also assist others by using affirmations. Students who are surrounded by peers who tell them that they can achieve, that they are making progress, and that their goals are important and worth effort are much more likely to continue working even when the work is difficult.

Adolescents often experience problems in regulating their thoughts and emotions, but trauma introduces additional problems with regulation as a result of the intense stress response to triggers. Helping students to learn to regulate their bodies and thoughts give them a stronger sense of control and empowerment, thus increasing confidence and resilience. Adolescence is the start for building reflective behavior and learning self-regulation skills as a group has proven to be more effective since classmates can create a sort of reference space for developing regulation. The ability to let go of not useful negative thoughts and shore up skills in developing positive thoughts can go a long way in releasing anxiety and stress. The calming effect that happens as a result of releasing emotional stress counteracts the stress of trauma, refreshes the tiredness caused by anxiety, and generally helps children and adults to feel better. There are three main methods/skills involved with self-regulation: breathing control, managing movement and muscles, and word influence. Specific Instruction is provided in rationale, biology, psychology, followed by repeated guided exercises and practice, until students are able to internalize processes in times of stress independently. Developing self-regulation skills is important because it allows students to overcome the stress response that is draining them of energy and joy, thus allowing the possibility of more positive thoughts and actions in all areas.¹⁶

Character and Leadership Education

Well-designed character and leadership education help students in learning skills and developing traits aligned with positive moral and performance behavior. The traits were separated into knowledge units needed to achieve Foundational Understanding (Positive Attitude, Preparation, Perseverance, Respect, Honesty, Integrity), Skill Acquisition (Courage, Appreciation, Composure, Empathy, Gratitude, Compassion), and Positive Futures (Tolerance, Service, Loyalty, Responsibility). Each trait was paired with a developed unit that

provided explanation, experience, and reflection in activities matched to the topic. For example, the trait of Preparation tackled how and why to develop goals and priorities, then asked the student to create a plan for a prioritized goal. Peer and small group work allowed for discussion and activities offered real world usefulness. The program has had positive benefits for many students over the last fifteen years and is still being modified annually to best fit the needs of kids. Learning and practicing skills of character and leadership allow the opportunity to be better received in many social settings. Confidence and increased self-esteem are its obvious results.¹⁸

Teaching Mindfulness Skills

There is new evidence that youth who have learned mindfulness skills are more able to stay in the present with a focused awareness, maintain concentrated attention, show compassion for themselves as well as others, and better regulate affect. Those skill sets help students develop socially, combat flashback, focus attention, and improve memory. Mindfulness has been shown to improve executive function across a range of children. Further, mindfulness instruction can be comforting and fun, helping to connect and deepen trusting relationships.¹⁴ Teens who have been taught about the different functions of the brain in thinking and emotional response have greater ability to be optimistic about training the brain with regard to mindfulness and control/self-regulation. Teens need to know the basic functions of the amygdala and limbic system in order to understand how the effects of trauma can be both debilitating and ameliorated. Helping people experience calm is a worthwhile endeavor because it increases the probability of working to stay calm. When humans can stay calm, they can reason and reflect. Without calm, the stress of trauma or even everyday life, can lead to impulsive, reactionary, and regrettable actions. One way of increasing frequency and duration of calmness is practicing meditation skills.

Meditation has been shown to be helpful in getting to and maintaining a state of calm as well as improve cognitive ability. Starting with guided meditation and moving toward self-monitored meditation, students are better able to take the time needed to consider motivation and consequences of any action. Those minutes of thoughtfulness can dramatically change both how a teen sees him/her self as well as how others see him, further reinforcing the notion that heshe is in control and capable.

Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative Justice seeks to allow victims a voice in the justice system. The process facilitates dialogue between victims and perpetrators and supports reasonable reparations and as much understanding as possible. Restorative Justice can validate and provide some sense of closure for the victim of a crime. It also allows the opportunity for the perpetrator to better understand the impact of the crime and to attempt to alleviate some or all of the financial loss. Since victimization and delinquency often intersect, both the victim and perpetrator are offered the opportunity to explore the impact of victimization in their lives. Perpetrators often have their own history of trauma and while that trauma cannot be used to excuse violence committed, revealing it can sometimes lead to support services and the consideration of mitigating factors. It also allows perpetrators and victims to see each other as unique human beings with strengths and weaknesses. Making reparations can positively impact both parties. The careful process can offer many advantages.¹⁹ There are many schools who have embraced restorative practice as their new buzzword strategy, but it is important that all participants understand both the process and the motivation and to have a trained facilitator to help everyone communicate. Restorative practice also takes time to establish and a willingness to change the discipline structure. With dedication, schools can develop into communities that honor individuals while functioning for the greater good.

Teaching Strategies

Compare, Contrast, and Off the Chart- A Different Approach to Finding Solutions

Students identify what's similar, what's different (singular), and what's entirely off the chart (meaning new and interesting ideas and approaches of their own design). This strategy is particularly beneficial coupled with a brainstorming approach as it allows a student to identify related concepts/ideas/problems/traits that may lead to novel connections and ideas or test the strength of previously accepted notions.

Fishbowl

Students form a small inner group to discuss a topic. Remaining students form a larger outer group to watch the discussion. While the inner group explores the topic, the outer group explores the dynamics of the inner group's discussion, including: points, evidence, connections, rationales, fallacies, and participation. After a specified time, the groups switch roles. Whole class discussion follows. Fishbowl works well in strengthening critical thinking and metacognition as well as raising awareness of accountability during discussion. How the topic's content is addressed as well as how the inner circle's claims, counterclaims, and discussion practice was (or was not) supported. Students in the outer circle have time to evaluate the points made without the pressure to respond right away. Students in the inner circle are more likely to perform well because they understand that the role of the audience will be to later evaluate both their talk and action.

Jigsaw

Each small group or partner set investigates a specific piece of a larger concept. Later all the groups/partners come together to share learning, combining the pieces in order to form a more complete whole. Jigsaw works well if participants are committed to deep investigation of their part and are ready to defend it. Groups need to be given time to preview content (in a poster, mini-guide, parking lot, etc.) and to construct questions for the other groups. Jigsaw presentations can also work by redistributing groups so that students in group A disburse throughout the classroom, each teaching to the other groups. Rotations continue until all questions are addressed.

Question and Response Musical Gallery Walk

Objects, paragraphs, literary works, art, photos, (etc.) are posted on or near the classroom walls at least a few feet apart. Students each stand in front of one exhibit. They have a set amount of time to examine the exhibit and place a question or comment about the display. When the music stops, they move on in a circular fashion and repeat the process. When every student has had at least three minutes to add their question or comment to each exhibit, we take a short break. Then, we complete the process, but this time we are responding to questions or comments others have written. At the end, we talk about how the exhibits go together and investigate some of the more interesting ones.

Reporter

Students are tasked to interview a real person with interesting open-ended questions that explore a certain subject. Then, students are tasked to use those same questions to interview a subject from history. They make up what they think responses should be, and then justify their answers with evidence from what that historical figure believed, stated, or did. This also works when students are asked to study a person currently

alive (for example: former President Barack Obama, Senator Mitch McConnell, Oprah Winfrey, Will Smith, Trevor Noah, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) and construct responses to open-ended questions based on their past actions or words.

Project Better

Students design and implement a project that:

1. Improves them personally
2. Improves the school day
3. Improves the classroom
4. Improves the school
5. Improves their neighborhood
6. Improves a targeted community

This strategy depends upon several parts: identification of a problem, investigating its causes, researching what has been done to solve/improve the problem, finding a solution that could work to solve some part of the problem, creating an action plan, finding resources, publishing the project, and getting it started. Students who experience working on problems proactively have better chances of becoming proactive instead of reactive. They also become more confident and optimistic.

Standards

The unit will satisfy Common Core ELA Standards for all four levels of high school and is focused on the following objectives.

Reading

Key Ideas and Details: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Craft and Structure: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.

Writing

Test Types and Purposes: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. *Presentation of Knowledge and*

Ideas: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

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