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| Psychology of Instruction for Teaching and Learning |
| **Comprehensive Project Understanding the Development of At-Risk Youth and Best Practices in Maintaining Academic Success** |
| Psychology of Instruction for Teaching and Learning |
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**Introduction**

District Profile

Cuyahoga Falls City School District is responsible for sponsoring Schnee Learning Center as a Conversion Community School. In analyzing the data from the districts most recent report card, the Cuyahoga Falls City School District is rated an *Excellent* district meeting tenth and eleventh grade proficiencies in all academic content areas (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). Cuyahoga Falls District has a graduation rate of 97.2% and attendance rate of 94.9%. Daily average enrollment is 4,790 students with only 2.0% black, non-Hispanic, 1.1% Asian or Pacific Islander , 1.0% Hispanic, 2.8% Multi-Racial and 92.9% White, non-Hispanic. Data also indicates that 37.3% are Economically Disadvantaged, 1.7% Limited English Proficient and 15.5% are Students with Disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). In addition, Cuyahoga Falls High School and Gordon Dewitt Elementary did not meet Adequately Year Progress and are in School Improvement (SI). According to the Ohio Department of Education, “Every school in School Improvement has to create an improvement plan and for any schools in this status for three or more years requires more extensive corrective actions and, eventually restructuring” (Ohio Department of Education, 2010).

School Profile

Schnee Learning Center is a Public-Conversion Community School sponsored by the Cuyahoga Falls City School District. Schnee Learning Center is a credit-recovery school that educates ninth through twelfth grade students who are interested in pursuing a nontraditional high school experience. Many of Schnee students have difficulty achieving in a traditional learning environment and are searching for alternative learning opportunities. “The school provides a continuum of comprehensive strategies to reduce truancy, absenteeism, disruptive behavior, dropouts, and juvenile crime, all of which define the “at-risk” student” (Cardone, 2009). Students are enrolled by individual choice and referred by various community support agencies. Most of the students live in Summit County and reside in the Suburban Areas of Tallmadge, Stow, Kent, Green, Cuyahoga Falls and Munroe Falls. Others live in the city of Akron. According to the yearly report, Schnee is listed as a Low Poverty School as 24.2% are reported as Economically Disadvantaged (Ohio Department of Education, 2010.). The school’s average daily enrollment is 173 students with 92.8% White, Non-Hispanic and 17% of students identified as special needs (Ohio Department of Education, 2010).

According to the 2009-2010 District Report Card, Schnee Learning Center is rated as an *Effective* school, meeting six out of the twelve state indicators. *Effective* is one index away from *Excellent* as defined on the district/school report card (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). Steadily, Schnee Learning Center has shown improvement moving from *Academic Emergency* in 2005-06 to *Academic Watch* 2006-07 & 2007-08 to *Effective* for the first time in 2008-09. The growth from *Academic Watch* to *Effective* was due to the “value added” growth meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on four out of twelve indicators and continuing the “Effective” Rating in 2009-2010 by meeting and additional two indicators, which are the attendance indicator and grade eleven Social Studies indicator (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). Schnee Learning Center currently has a performing index of 90.3 and has met state requirements in Reading (87.2%) and Writing (82.1%) for tenth Grade (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). The school has also met state requirements for eleventh grade in Reading (94.0), Writing (100%) and Social Studies (90%) according to the district’s most recent report card (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). Report Card Data also shows that over 50% of students are scoring *Proficient* in all content areas with the exception of Science (43.5). Additionally, 25% of students are *accelerated* in Reading and Writing, while less than 20% are accelerated in Math, Science and Social Studies. Less than 8% of students score *advanced* in the five content areas. In analyzing Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the 2009-2010 school year, Schnee Learning Center has met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in Reading Proficiency, Reading Participation and Graduation (Ohio Department of Education, 2010). According to the Ohio Improvement Plan with Implementation Details, Schnee Learning Center continues to make goals and plans to improve Math Participation as well as Reading in all content areas measured by five point improvements on the Ohio Graduation Test each year through 2012 (OIP District Plan with Implementation Details, 2009).

Classroom Profile

The ideal classroom situation at Schnee Learning Center would include teaching as an Intervention Specialist with a general education teacher, team teaching in a specific content area. The classroom would consist of eighteen “at-risk” youth ranging from fourteen through twenty years of age. The classroom would have roughly 25% of students living in poverty and/or other stressful situations (e.g. teen parents, single family homes, addictions, mental illness etc...) Within the full inclusion classroom, there would be ninety- percent white, non-Hispanic students with a higher percentage of male students. There would be six students in the class receiving special education services according to his/her Individual Education Plan (IEP). Categories for identification would fall in the mild to moderate range (Learning Disability, Severe Emotionally Disturbed, Other Health Impaired or Mild Autism). The general education teacher and I would establish differentiated instructional methods to be utilized and employ Response to Intervention (RTI) to (1) identify students as “at-risk”; and (2) facilitate skill(s) remediation. “Response to intervention (RTI) is a new movement that shifts the responsibility for helping all students become successful from the special education teachers and curriculum to the entire staff, including special education and regular education teachers” (DuFour, 2008, p. 2). Of the eighteen students, seven students would be targeted as needing intensive academic or behavioral intervention at tier two or tier three of the Response to Intervention (RTI) process. Many of the tier two and tier three students would be having a difficult time achieving state requirements for the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) in at least two content areas. The remaining eleven students would fall within the tier one or the universal level and would need minimum intervention to be successful in the classroom. The general education teacher and I would collaboratively plan lessons and differentiate groupings based on the needs of individual students. Continuous assessment, level of mastery, planning and teaching would occur on a weekly basis to establish student mastery or determine if further intervention is warranted.

**Characteristics of Learners**

Cognitive Development

In the following section, I will discuss the stages of cognitive developmental in adolescence and the connection between brain development and teaching practices/strategies. Piaget’s stages of development will be explored as well as adolescent development and function. I will discuss the ramifications of neurological anomalies associated with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. I will also explore the Information Processing Theory and describe strategies in capturing and engaging focus and attention in adolescent students. Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development will be described with examples of best practice, research based teaching strategies.

Researchers suggest there are three stages of cognitive development in adolescents. The first phase is *Early Adolescence* (11-14 years). This is the stage in cognitive development where students think more concretely, rather than abstractly. Most of the thinking is egocentric (i.e. imaginary audience) and impulsive behavior becomes the dominant trait. During this stage of cognitive development, teens have difficulty problem solving and demonstrating a rational thought process when overcoming barriers. The second stage is called *Middle Adolescence* (15-17 years). In this stage, adolescents develop growth in emotional autonomy and increase in independence. For example, peer relationships become a central focus as opposed to spending time with family. Conflict between the parent(s) and child become more pronounced in this stage. A preoccupation with body image in both males and females is common. Conflicts over making decision are also common in the middle phase. Peer acceptance becomes important and risky, impulsive behavior, such as sexual activities and drugs or alcohol, may increase as feelings of invincibility heighten. The last stage is *Late Adolescents* (18-21). In this stage, a strong personal identity emerges as teens begin to identify with moral and ethical values. Egocentric thinking and thoughts of body image are less common in the final stage. Typically, adolescents are able to problem solve in social situations as abstract reasoning skills strengthen. Building relationships with family and individuals are more important than fitting into a group (Stang, Story, 2005).

With respect to Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development, there are parallel conceptual frameworks of development with research today; however, there are discrepancies between past and current research. For instance, Piaget’s theory suggests that cognition and schema building progress with age, as evident in current research. While Piaget’s *Concrete Operations* stage suggested learning is depended upon concrete experiences in children between the ages of seven and eleven, the *Early Adolescent* stage described previously suggest that learning is dependent upon concrete experiences through age fourteen. According to Lew, Piaget’s concrete operational stage shows, “children in this stage demonstrate skills such as conservation, ordering, and understanding cause-effect relationships. Thought processes proceed in a very concrete nature, placing a premium on directly observable results” (Lew, 2009). Even some children over the age of fourteen think concretely and have difficulty thinking in abstract ways. Piaget’s *Formal Operational* stage emphasizes the ability to think abstractly and solve problems in adolescent development beginning at age twelve. Current research suggests that, on average, children begin thinking abstractly after the age of twelve. Instructional implications should focus on a mixture of tactile learning experiences and critical thinking lessons depending on the developmental stage or milestone students are in (Lew, 2009). Contrary to Piaget’s theory, Ormrod suggest that development in children occurs at different rates:

We must keep in mind that research studies conducted in recent decades suggest that children’s reasoning abilities emerge more gradually than Piaget’s stage theory might lead us to believe. Furthermore, many contemporary theorists describe how children and adolescents *can* think, rather than how they always *do* think at a particular age ( 2009, P. 150).

As a result, one could conclude that there are variances of development across the developmental stages. For example, some children younger than eleven or twelve can think abstractly, while older adolescents may never demonstrate abstract thought especially if the culture in which they live does not promote it (Ormond, 2009). It is important to consider current research in adolescent brain development and cognitive functioning so teaching practices can mirror students’ needs and strengthen critical thinking skills and achievement.

There is a solid connection between brain development, age, and behavioral outcomes in every stage of adolescent development according to Steinberg. There is “also evidence that maturation brain processes are continuing well through adolescents” (Steinberg, 2005, P. 1). Studies have shown that growth and changes in the prefrontal cortex is occurring throughout adolescent development. Most studies support that the process of myelination and synaptic pruning does not stop in childhood, but continues throughout adolescents and adulthood. The process of pruning helps individuals’ process information more effectively (Steinberg, 2005). “Theorist have speculated that this combination of changes may affect and for a short time, possibly limit adolescents functioning in a variety of areas including attention, planning and impulse control” (Ormond, 2009, P. 41). This is important for educators to consider as they plan classroom layout, lessons and activities. Additionally, this builds awareness to why adolescents behave in certain ways, need information segmented into smaller chunks, or require implementing extra time for thinking and processing. It is vital for educators to consider how cognitive development and brain pruning impact students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances. This way, developmentally appropriate teaching strategies can, with good intentions, raise achievement in all students.

It is theorized that students with learning disabilities possess cognitive processing deficits that result in lower academic achievement. For example, students with Attention Deficient Disorder (with or without hyperactivity) tend to have difficulty organizing and planning due to an inactive or “sleepy” frontal lobe function. In addition, some students with learning disabilities are believed to have “neurological traffic jams” whereby neurons are “misfiring,” which intercepts, cognition and learning. For example, “students with auditory processing deficits, have difficulty processing, analyzing and synthesizing auditory information and acoustical stimuli in the environment (i.e. speech sounds) which can negatively impact the student’s ability to acquire academic skills and obstruct oral comprehension.” (Hedges, 2010). These students have a difficult time processing auditory speech quickly and may miss information in the classroom or become overly frustrated keeping up with the class pace. These students may not self regulate or ask for help, which can actively decrease the likelihood of achieving (Ormond, 2009). Students with Learning Disabilities usually need more wait time to think, information broken down into smaller segments, minimal distractions, explicit lessons, visual reminders, and other modification and accommodation within the classroom setting. “Most experts believe that learning disabilities and ADHD have a biological basis and are often inherited” (Ormond, 2009, P. 52).

Students living in duress or with an identified mental health disorder are in constant “survival mode” and operate in the primitive recessive of the brain. As a result, there is little room left for critical and analytical thinking. “Chronic exposure to stress is known to affect learning and memory in adolescents through the release of glucocorticoid hormones by the hypothalame-pituitary-adrenal axis” (McCormick, Mathews, 2009, P. 1). In addition, many adolescents lack adaptive strategies to deal with internal and external factors that can ultimately interfere with cognitive development (Aunda, Stathn, Normi, 2000.). Due to these barriers, students with mental disorders need mental health counseling and outside medical intervention in order to develop affective coping strategies and process through difficult situations.. As a result, students will have better opportunities to learn at higher cognitive levels.

It is important to consider the role of information processing theory in student learning and skill acquisition. Theorist such as Richard Atkinnson and Elizabeth Loftus investigate the process that takes place in the brain as individuals are learning. As teachers understand this process, they are better able to adapt teaching strategies and provide support throughout the learning process. Ormond explains that “these theorist draw inferences about how people may perceive, interpret and mentally manipulate information they encounter in the environment” (2009, P. 15). One model that describes this process in the *model of human memory.* In this model, information is held into the *sensory* *register* for a very brief moment. Some have described this phase of processing as the input stage. A great deal of information can be held in this stage as is encompasses a large capacity. However, some of the information is lost and other input goes into *working memory.* Information can only travel to working memory if attention is being placed on the information. This way, information is actively “being worked on.” Information can only last about thirty seconds (give or take a few) since memory decays quickly. In this stage, individuals chunk or rehearse information in order keep more information stored. Once again, some information is lost, but other input is stored in *long term memory.* This is the function that organizes and stores information. It is believed to have unlimited capacity and is permanent. Information is retrieved and encoded throughout this process by semantic, episodic stimulus, or automaticity (Ormond, 2009). In considering students with identified learning disabilities, processing information may take longer, be distorted, or may be lost within this model. LD online suggest the following:

Learning disabilities are often defined as "inefficient processing of information from the sensory input source to the brain and then back out." This means the information processing system of the student with learning disabilities is expected to be different than that of a student in a general education program. Perhaps information becomes distorted in a relay station to the brain, in the storage process, or in the manner in which information from different sensory input systems is combined (2010).

The key word in this model of processing is attention. Attention is important to learning and remembering information. As a result, teachers need to be able to capture and keep the attention of all students depending on the students’ stage of cognitive development.

In looking at the human brain, the prefrontal cortex is active when individuals are attending to or reflecting on new information (Ormond, 2009,). As previously discussed, the adolescents’ brain is still developing in this area and attention plays a crucial role in learning and remembering information. As a result, teachers need to use teaching strategies that minimize distractions, capture the attention of students, and are based on cognitive maturation. Using senses and emotions to gain attention through music, smell, and touch can be beneficial to gain students focusing and attention (Horch, Wilson, 2002). With respect to adolescent development, one strategy to consider is to build purpose by extracting knowledge from previous knowledge (elaboration). It is important to use this strategy before teaching a new concept and to relate the discussion directly back to the students. This not only instills purpose, but can capture student interest and internal curiosity. Using team building activities such as cooperative learning discussion groups and debating about controversial topics can help capture the attention of students. “Developing integrated curriculum that encourages students to think and discuss issues important to his or her own develop keeps the attention of students” (Horch, Wilson, 2002). Also, brainstorming charts (i.e. KWL) and pre-assessment activities using scatter plots can engage students prior to beginning any lesson as well as gather information regarding students’ preconceived knowledge on a topic. It is important to teach basic skills and identify learning gaps before beginning a new unit. This eliminates frustration and increases confidence as well as focus (Ormond, 2009).

Other considerations in maintaining student focus and attention is the use of metacogntion strategies so students can be involved in self- regulating (self-efficacy, self-worth and goal setting) and monitoring his or her own learning. For instance, having adolescents take notes on a lesson or organize information through drawings and diagrams is one method students can use in thinking about new information. Another is self-regulating by keeping reflective journals about one’s own learning and setting goals in relation to the objective being taught is highly effective in sustaining the attention of students. Teaching comprehension monitoring strategies such as rereading information, explaining in your own words, skimming or stopping and reflecting on a topic can also be useful in maintaining student focus (Ormond, 2009)..

Another teaching modality that has been proven to keep students attention is computer based instruction. Curriculum programs such as Plato Pathways can keep student attention, activate prior knowledge, and encourage meaningful learning at the student’s zone of proximal development. It can also encourage metacognition processes as students remain cognitively engaged because they must continually respond to questions and problems. In addition, students are given immediate feedback regarding his or her own learning (Ormond, 2009, P. 291).

Students taught with CBI often have higher academic achievement and better attitudes towards their schoolwork than do students taught more traditional expository methods. Furthermore, students studying academic subject matter may gain an increased sense that they can control their own learning, thereby, developing more intrinsic motivation to learn (Ormond, 2009, P. 291).

In using computer based learning, it is important to also incorporate cooperative learning strategies such as problem based learning so students have an opportunity to work with peers and use other critical thinking skills since social interaction is minimal during computer based learning.

Mastery versus performance goal centered classrooms can have a positive impact on motivation that increases focus and attention. Creating an outcome based environment where students are expected to meet high standards and sets goals with guidance from the teacher promotes high efficacious learners. Many high efficacious learners stay focused and motivated as teachers show enthusiasm of the content being learned. In a mastery centered classroom, learning is valued rather than ability, or outperforming others as measures of success. In addition, students have more autonomy as mistakes are valued and part of the learning process. Teachers give students time to explore, understand and connect new ideas as well as understand the material rather than memorizing it (Anderman, Edelin, Midgley, Patrick, Ryan, 2001).

Using developmentally appropriate teaching practices with adolescents to create motivation and sustain focus positively correlates with increasing achievement. It is important to provide high quality instruction for all students whether they are low achieving, at-risk or higher achieving students. Linking newly taught information to prior knowledge, considering research based strategies such as metacognition practices, computer based instruction, problem based learning and creating a mastery centered environment can only foster growth and development in adolescents. In addition, the quality of instruction needs to be considered as well as best practices in teaching all students. Other strategy that reinforces critical thinking skills and learning styles will be discussed next.

The key to learning is beginning instruction and problem solving lessons at the stage where students have minimal knowledge of a concept, but also may have some prior knowledge about the objective being taught. Teaching a task or skill that is neither too easy nor hard is called teaching in the zone of proximal development (Ormond, 2009). This teaching strategy was created, explained and understood by Lev Vygotsky. Teaching outside this zone can either lead to boredom or frustration that can negatively impact a student’s ability to stay focused within content. There are many strategies teachers can use to teach within this zone so students can become more automatic in exemplifying mastery. For example, teachers’ can provide guided participation, modeling, coaching and reflective opportunities (Ormond, 2009). It is important to remember that teachers need to exhibit high standards and outcomes for students living in poverty or other duress circumstances. Prior to beginning any instruction, it is important to build a community of mutual respect and autonomy. Creating an atmosphere that promotes risk taking, respect and enthusiasm for learning is immensely important in engaging at-risk youth.

One teaching strategy that supports and guides adolescents within his/her zone is called scaffolding. This is defined as a “support mechanism that helps a learner successfully perform a task within his or her zone of proximal development” (Ormond, 2009, P. 176). Key factors within this strategy are dividing a task into smaller chunks to support manageable components, provide structure by questioning students throughout the process of learning as well as providing ongoing feedback regarding student progress (Ormond, 2009). The idea of scaffolding is to create an oasis for learning. It minimizes frustration and boredom as well as keeps students motivated and focused on the objective to be mastered. Scaffolding also creates confidence and fosters risk taking during challenging tasks since learning gaps are being addressed and expectations high. Scaffolding can be used within cooperative learning groups as heterogeneous groups are formed. Students with more knowledge can scaffold efforts to students who lack knowledge within a topic (Ormond, 2009). Both students benefit since the highest level of learning is actually *teaching a concept* as peers become *transmitters of knowledge*.

Another teaching strategy that can be used to reinforce teaching in the “zone of proximal development” is differentiating instruction. In this model, students are constantly assessed, taught and reassessed for mastery. For instance, before beginning a new unit on monomials in algebra, the teacher would facilitate a pre-assessment to assess student knowledge using Ohio Standards as a benchmark for mastery. Based on the pre-assessment and observations to students’ responses, the educator would differentiate instruction based on student need. The teacher would create three different lesson plans: (1) Lessons to reinforce basic algebraic operations to fill in gaps or forgotten operations prior to giving practice in monomial equations. During this lesson, the teacher would use guided practice and modeling because students are operating in the first stage of the zone of proximal development; (2) Cooperative and independent lessons using monomial variables for students emerging or who have some foundation of knowledge to assist in building automaticity and; (3) Cooperative and challenging lessons involving monomials and polynomials for students that are almost automatic in this process. After identifying groupings, students would participate in the appropriate lesson(s). This strategy can be easily utilized in situations where team teaching is supported. The interventionist can teach lessons to fill in gaps where the regular education teacher can work with the emerging and higher level groups. The purpose of differentiated instruction is to teach students within their identified “zone,” reassess knowledge base and teach the next task or skill once automaticity is demonstrated. This way, students never stay stagnant in a specific ability group the whole year. Students fluctuates between groups as new content it taught and knowledge, mastery and understanding is evident. This is an example of *Targeted Instruction* that meets every individual learning need. The teacher is teaching in the zone of proximal development and provides scaffolding opportunities within the three groups. In addition, students stay more engaged and are less bored as frustration decreases during the learning process (Buffum, Mattos, Weber, 2009). This strategy is also very practical to use in classrooms today since the Individuals with Disabilities Act requires special education students to be educated with his or her non-disabled peers for the majority of the school day.

Some schools are adopting an intervention model to help all students succeed called Response to Intervention. This model not only has proven to keep students engaged in the learning, but also has been proven to raise achievement in most learners. Response to Intervention supports scaffolding and focuses on educating students within his or her “zone.” Clearly, differentiated instruction practices are implemented as students are identified as needing targeted interventions within the three tiers of the model. The first tier is called tier one. Most students can achieve within the core curriculum and succeed within the tier one structure. In fact, many of these students need more challenging and higher level learning opportunities to stay engaged. The second tier is called tier two and identifies students who need immediate and powerful targeted interventions due to evidence of them not achieving. The third tier is called tier three and encompasses students that are not achieving and need intensive interventions in closing learning gaps. Within the three tiers, teachers are constantly giving feedback, refocusing teaching based on student need and assessment. There is evidence of frequent progress monitoring and varied methods of assessment as well as research based teaching modalities (i.e. differentiated instruction). Response to Intervention creates a “student centered” culture where planning focuses on student need and high standards for learning. Many times, this model is the baseline data for students suspected of having learning difficulties or other educational disabilities (Buffum, Mattos, Weber, 2009). According to Reutebuch, Response to Intervention practices ensures that: (1) all students are receiving a high quality education; (2) offer multiple tiers of intervention; (3) effective instruction and assessment is implemented; (4) identifies students at-risk for academic or behavioral problems and monitors response to classroom instruction; (5) provides collaboration support amongst school personnel; (6) involves parent and students in the planning process; (7) determines eligibility for Special Education or related services; and, (8) incorporates a variety of grouping formats such as small group, teacher led, one to one, cooperative learning etc.. (2008).

The last teaching strategy to be examined is direct instruction. Direct instruction has proven to assist students, especially those labeled as “low-achieving” in increasing time on task, focus and achievement. With respect to adolescent brain development and cognitive functioning, this type of teaching and learning can assist students with “thinking ahead” as well as assist with organizing information being learned. This strategy can also be incorporated into The Response to Intervention Model and within differentiated instructional groupings. According to Ormond, Direct Instruction encompasses seven components: (1) review of previously learned material; (2) statement of the objectives of the lesson; (3) presentation of new material in small, logical sequential steps; (4) guided student practice and assessment after each step; (5) assessment of mastery; (6) independent practice; and, (7) frequent follow-up reviews (2009). “Direct Instruction is most suitable for teaching information and skills that are clear-cut and should be taught in a step-by step sequence (Ormond, 2009, P. 290). Direct Instruction also supports scaffolding methods as individual steps are taught to the students. There was a study conducted by Kinder that showed clear evidence linking low-income students with higher achievement outcomes, (demonstrating significant gains in test scores) when using direct instruction (1991). Also her studies prove that lower income students were more likely to graduate high school and had higher college acceptance rates (using direct instruction teaching practices) than lower-income students being educated with other teaching strategies (Kinder, 1991).

Personal Development

In the following section, I will discuss how personal development and self-actualization impacts family dynamics, peer relationships, mental illness and disabilities. In addition, I will explore characteristics of adolescent belief systems and the development of self efficacy. I will also discuss Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and the ramifications of living in poverty for at-risk youth. Lastly, Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development will be considered as well as effective teaching practices in enhancing positive personal development in at-risk youth.

“Young learners construct increasingly sophisticated beliefs about themselves” which shapes personal development (Ormond, 2009, P. 238). There are many biological and environmental factors shaping these thoughts and ideas. Some examples include: heredity, parenting styles, culture, peer relations and mental illness. All these examples influence motivation and behavior (self-esteem) in adolescents, which in turn, aides in developing a sense of identity and self awareness (Ormond, 2009 and Unknown, 2010). For instance, some students at Schnee Learning center have a history of mental illness in the family. A student suffering from bi-polar disorder, for example, may have a poor “sense of self” (low-self efficacy) that negatively influences motivation at school and increases withdrawal in social situations. As a result, some students with bi-polar have experienced school failure and have experienced negative verbal “put downs” from others, shaping feelings of low self-esteem. Also, students living with bi-polar may have difficulty interacting with others appropriately and trouble making friends. Mental illness can create a cyclic cycle of negative beliefs and outcomes that negatively influences personal development. As a result, teachers need to be aware of any behavior plans, accommodations and interventions implemented for students living with mental illness. Also, teachers can be a powerful link to outside resources such as mental health agencies and medical professionals, or refer students to school resources for counseling such as the school psychologist and counselor. It is vital for teachers to demonstrate caring and patient attitudes with these students and encourage positive experiences in the classroom.

There are many typical characteristics associated with adolescent beliefs. These thoughts, whether positive or negative, shape teenagers feelings and beliefs about themselves. For example, teenagers are in the process of searching for the “real me” in high school. Within this process of self-identity, many teenagers are beginning to develop diverse self perceptions with a gradual increase or decrease of self esteem. Older adolescent students begin developing a self-constructed definition of “who they are” and are contemplating the following questions: (1) “Who am I?” (2) “What goals do I want to accomplish in life.” (3) “What do I find important?” All these developmental thought processes and questions influence personal development in teenage students (Ormond, 2009). Students with learning and behavioral disabilities may struggle to answer these questions more frequently than a typical teen-ager. Their thought processes may be distorted as students with disabilities process information at different rates. As a result, educators need to provide interventions with these students by planning self-regulating lessons and short segmented activities regarding self-identity. These students may need more direct guidance and discussions in order to develop answers to self construction questions.

Questioning self-identity directly relates to Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development in adolescents. According to his theory, there are eight stages of psychosocial development individuals from birth to late adulthood transition through. Successful completion of each stage, results in healthy personalities and positive sense of self. Adolescents are in the “Identity versus role confusion” stage. Erikson emphasizes the importance of social relationships for youth between the ages of twelve and eighteen. In this model, it can be hypothesized that some teens value peer relationships more than learning and scholastic achievement. In the “Identity versus role confusion” phase of psychosocial development, teens have a need to acquire personal identity and begin contemplating future career options. According to Cherry, “teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self” (2010). Teachers can assist students with confusion or lack of direction by teaching lessons with self-identity development and career exploration objectives throughout the school year (Heather Media Group, Inc, 2004). The Intervention Specialist could incorporate such services into the students’ individual education plan in order to provide support in identity development. It is also important for teachers to create lessons where students are motivated to learn (cooperative learning and peer discussions) and are able to feel a sense of success. It is the educator’s responsibility to help foster positive self-identity and personal development within daily interactions and lessons.

Many students at Schnee Learning Center are considers at-risk due to social and academic failure. Some have experimented in risky behaviors such as drugs, violence, crime, sexual activities or live in duress environments, while others are pre-occupied with physical appearance and a need to “fit in.” Some students live in dysfunction and unstable environments and are in constant turmoil with family members. “Many teenagers who have weak emotional bonds to their families seem to be especially vulnerable to peer pressure” (Ormond, 2009. P. 243). For many of these students, they are recouping from consequences associated with criminal activity, aggression, conflicts and other acts of anti-social behavior and are looking for a “fresh start” without teacher judgment or ridicule.

One major characteristic of teen development is peer acceptance. Some Schnee students have had trouble making friends or befriended other peers that have low self-esteem and emotional problems. According to Ormond, peers learn more from each other. Learning maladaptive coping strategies from peers is one trend identifiable with Schnee students. As a result, mental health counseling and retraining to facilitate emotional self-regulation is a pertinent piece to educating students as well as encouraging healthy relationships.

Research has identified cliques, crowds, subcultures and gangs as prominent features which shape personal development in teens. Due to peer associations and behaviors, these students are often labeled by other teens. For instance some students at Schnee have been labeled as “bad”, “druggies” and “delinquent” by other teens and are typically rejected. This perpetuates a negative sense of self and low self-esteem. “Students that have high self-esteem are likely to apply adaptive strategies and have confidence in their own abilities to cope, whereas students with low self-esteem uses maladaptive strategies to cope (Aunola, Nurmi, Stattin, 2000, P. 292).

Family, parenting styles and living situations impacts personal development in at-risk youth. Identifying these cultural characteristics is essential to understanding the impact on self-esteem, resilience and identity. Culture can be defined as a system of beliefs, behaviors, norms or values a family passes down to further generations. Students enrolled at Schnee Learning Center have common family structures or dynamics such as low social economic status, single parent homes (female dominant), chemical dependency issues, teen-age pregnancy and family members living with mental illness or educational disabilities. In considering Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, many “float” between psychological and aesthetic needs. Rarely, do students reach self-actualization, which is the best cognitive domain for learning. Typically, families are in survival mode and lack basic needs as well as live in dysfunctional environments where the sense of feeling safe is violated. Some parents resort to harsh punishments or punitive tactics during times of stress which can increase the likelihood that children will have emotional problems and ineffective social skills (Ormond, 2009). Others use permissive or uninvolved parenting styles, which facilitates lower self-efficacy and esteem in some students (Maxfield, 2010). In addition, at-risk youth, like those enrolled at Schnee Learning Center, want to “belong” and have a need to be “loved” and tend to have poor self-esteem due to culture and life experiences (Class Notes). As a result, there are psychological and cultural road blocks to reaching self-actualization. These cultural and psychological road blocks can continue the vicious cycle of low self efficacy and the inability to think through self-constructed questions. Moreover, with typical teen-agers, self construction questioning tends to be innate as students reach transcendence, whereas, at-risk youth, have barriers to this hierarchy. As a result, self construction questioning and thinking needs to be taught directly to at-risk youth. It would also be important to teach about proper nutrient and provide healthy snacks throughout the school day.

According to Ruby Payne, economically disadvantaged families either live in generational or situational poverty. Generational poverty can be defined as two or more generations living in poverty, whereas, situational is a lack of resources from an event such as divorce, mental illness or death. Schnee Learning Center is coded “economically disadvantaged,” as many students can identify with either category. Ruby Payne identifies support systems and coping strategies as vital foundations to those living in poverty. Unfortunately, many at-risk adolescents lack support, structure and coping strategies from parents and other family members. Coping strategies within culture for successful outcomes include: (1) problem solving, (2) temporary relief from emotional, mental, and financial constraints, (3) connection to positive resources, (4) positive self talk, and (5) procedural self-talk. Students that lack these supports have a difficult time finishing a task, engage in unhealthy behaviors, develop emotional problems and learn maladaptive social skills. As a result, non-resilient students develop unhealthy copying strategies that can lead to risky behavior and low self-esteem (Payne, 2001). It is imperative for teachers working with at-risk youth, to become aware of these coping strategies, and create lessons using problem solving, positive self-talk and reflection discussing more adaptive future options. It is our job as educators to foster resiliency development with at-risk students, especially for those that lack outside supports. Also, teachers need to teach about variances of attributions so students begin thinking about situations in more adaptive ways. This retraining places responsibility back on the student to recognize that factors in life can change depending on the choices made. Identifying unstable attributes, and thinking through this with students, increases mastery and motivation while decreasing learned helplessness (Maxfield, 2010). In addition, teachers and schools need to create a climate where every student can feel safe from emotional and financial constraints (healthy snacks throughout the school day and functional learning environment) as well as make connections with positive community and in school resources. Perhaps, students will begin building self esteem as feelings of love, future dreams and sense of safety become validated and positive coping strategies are taught, reinforced and practiced (Ormond, 2009).

There are many other teaching strategies and practices schools and teachers can implement other than teaching coping strategies, locust of control strategies and constructed questioning inquiry to reinforce positive personal development. One such strategy is giving students a sense of control by including choice within classroom activities. Many elementary and middle school teachers naturally use this strategy in classroom instruction. However, many high school classrooms are lecture style or whole group instruction. Giving high school students choice is still important, especially for at-risk students. This is because students who are given this freedom are less likely to misbehave in class and be more engaged in the learning. As a result, students are more successful and feel better about themselves as learners. Another strategy is developing interpersonal relationships with students. At-risk students have a need for relatedness, and once this need it met, they tend to show more motivation and success in school. It is also evident that these students are less likely to drop out of high school. Building relationships with students helps meet the basic need of “belonging” which increases self-esteem. Goal setting is another positive strategy to use with at-risk youth. It is best to set short term, proximal goals with at-risk students. This way, students get frequent feedback about progress and can easily master concepts if goals are broken into smaller, attainable outcomes (Ormond, 2009).

Social/Moral Development

There are several characteristics influencing moral and pro-social development in adolescents. For instance, as students transition into middle and high school, it is believed that they begin to understand the difference between right and wrong. Their ability to empathize with others increases with age as adolescents begin building empathy in abstract ways. For instance, students often show empathy for others or in situations they were not directly involved in. As students mature, they begin to realize that “not one size fits all,” and individual needs vary, whereas, younger students are more egocentric in their thinking. Adolescents are more flexible in their reasoning. For instance teens begin to understand that rules are established for structure rather than for purposes of punishment. Teens also begin to establish obligatory purpose to follow rules and altruistic sense of purpose (helping others in need). At-risk students and those with learning or behavioral needs develop these characteristics, but have diverse temperaments such as impulse control issues, overly shy, easily overwhelmed, have trust issues and are slow to “warm-up” to new activities that make it difficult to think in abstract terms. As a result, at-risk youth and students with disabilities need to be taught self-regulated strategies and share more knowledge through discussions (lessons) about empathy, morals, rules, serving the community and social skills training. It is important to make the curriculum relevant to students’ lives and needs while focusing lessons on self-identity and long term professional success. It is also imperative to show student that they are accountable for their success, instead of blaming others for failures (Ormond, 2009).

Lawrence Kohlberg was a cognitive developmental psychologist that suggested children go through stages of moral development. There are six stages which are grouped into three phases. Adolescents are in Level II: conventional morality phase. In this level students are in the “good boy/good girl” and “law and order” stages according to Kohlberg. In this level, most adolescents focus on maintaining relationships through loyalty, trust and sharing. Social skills are still developing, but adolescents learn to assimilate in order to get along with others. They often want to please authority figures like teachers or peers, and will base decisions on these factors. Kohlberg believed high school students feel rules are necessary for society to run smoothly and believe in following rules, but rules are inflexible and do not change. Teens often perceive rules as “non negotiable” and students sometimes feel they have no control in changing norms. Kohlberg reflected on Piaget’s beliefs of disequilibrium and suggested that adolescents need to feel uncomfortable with abstract moral reasoning, so they begin to think differently about moral dilemmas. Kohlberg would suggest that in order for high school students to reach post-conventional morality, disequilibrium would need to occur in topics such as universal principles, ethnic principles, law, individual rights and rules in order to enhance moral development. It is also suggested by other psychologists that moral reasoning involves *trends* rather than *stages* “where adolescents gradually acquire several different standards that guide their moral reasoning and decision making in different situations” (Ormond, 2009, P. 258). Many standards that guide moral reasoning may be developed based upon student experiences, values, schemas and beliefs (Ormond, 2009).

In order to develop a learning environment that fosters moral development, at-risk youth need support within the classroom structure. It is believed that many at-risk students drop out of school due to intrinsic factors. However, it has been discovered that many adolescents drop out of high school due to environmental school factors where they feel threatened and intimidated by middle class social norms. It is imperative to develop a non threatening atmosphere before engaging at-risk youth in discussions about moral or social issues. For instance, students need to feel a sense of ownership and control in developing classroom norms. Teachers also need to begin developing relationships of mutual respect. This can be done through creating a student centered learning environment where individual gifts of each student are considered and interpersonal mentoring relationships between students and teachers are favored. Classrooms need well developed plans involving structure, norms and expectations for being compassionate and accepting about diverse view points. Teachers need to be effective models in appropriate pro social interactions without intimidating students. It has also been suggested that at-risk youth benefit from keeping with the same teacher for two or three years to establish and maintain relationships. This way, students become more comfortable within the classroom environment and more time can be focused on achieving academically, morally and socially. As students feel more accepted and comfortable in the environment, teachers can create *hot cognition* discussions and lessons about social and moral issues. The topics need to be relevant and revert back to students’ interest areas in order for students to experience cognitive dissonance and moral growth (Ormond, 2009). It is also important to teach students the difference between lower, middle and upper class norms, since most schools are built upon upper-middle class values. Adolescents can begin to grow in moral and social domains through direct teaching of middle class standards such as proper written and spoken English, which is widely used and accepted in cooperate America. For example, teacher’s can generate lessons regarding the difference between casual and formal register as well as distinguish when it is appropriate to use each. Students should be involved in rewording casual language and practice phrases in more formal ways. According to Payne, “Students need to be taught the hidden rules of middle class-not in denigration of their own but rather as another set of rules that can be used if they choose” (pg. 61). In order to grow in moral and social ways, students need to realize societal middle class norms play a crucial role in getting and maintaining a career. As students begin to evolve and supports are maintained for moral and social development, proper interventions need to be implemented. For instance, at-risk youth need to process through three or four acceptable behaviors in circumstances where situations were handled inappropriately. Students need the chance to reflect upon the incident and device a plan for more adaptive and acceptable future ways of dealing with frustrations. Other interventions to assist students in learning societal moral norms are to teach organizational skills and teach students to write steps and goals on paper to assist them in finishing tasks. Students need support and encouragements as well as strategies (procedural self-talk) to finish started tasks since many at risk youth abandon activities due to fear of failure. Other instructional practices such as budgeting, future mapping, career etiquette, punctuality, gender roles, career versus job, benefits of long term goal setting and classroom survival skills are imperative in enhancing social and moral growth in at-risk youth (Payne, 2001). It is also imperative for high school students to acquire a sense they are making a difference. Community service projects can help foster moral and social development and well as “increase their desire to stay in school rather than drop out” (Ormond, 2009. P. 275). It can increase compassion, understanding and cohesiveness within school culture.

Bullying behaviors occur within adolescent culture. It happens in most high schools across America. These threatening behaviors can be physical, psychological or sexual. Sometimes adolescents use technology such as texting, or uploading unauthorized pictures on the internet as a way to victimize peers. Sometimes peers witness bullying without reported it because the definition might be ambiguous to them. It is important for all school personnel to intervene during these events to stop victimization and future acts of bullying. It is more important for schools to provide programming to prevent bullying such as encouraging positive interactions within diverse groups. Many students with disabilities are harassed due to peer misconceptions and attitudes. As a result, it is important to develop disability awareness programming within classrooms. Community partnership programs such as the Arc of Summit and Portage Counties provide free disability awareness programming for schools. Awareness, empathy training and problem solving are keys to reducing bullying in high schools. Schools can also encourage cooperative peer groups where students engage in various activities with peers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, it is important for adolescents to engage in discussions about bullying, hate crimes and intergroup hostilities. Discouraging bullying through active discussions and lessons can assist students to identify bullying behaviors and report such acts of victimization to school authorities. Unfortunately, schools have a difficult time preventing such acts due to size of the school and student to teacher ratio. At Schnee Learning Center, students are often enrolled due to being victims of bullying or engaging in “bully like” behaviors. As a result extra support and guidance is necessary to support these students as well as a “no tolerance” policy for bullying. Teachers are proactive in rectifying and reporting incidents of bullying. All situations are investigated and appropriate actions are taken to support the victim as well as intervene using swift discipline and appropriate interventions with the perpetrators (Ormond, 2009).

**Assessment**

In alignment with the Ohio Standards, it is important for teachers to devise a variety of assessments to measure student mastery, progress and teacher effectiveness. It is important to include formative, summative and authentic types of assessment for diagnostic and planning purposes. As mentioned earlier, it is important for at-risk adolescents to be involved in academic goal setting and be given consistent feedback about progress.

Pre-assessments are effective diagnostic tools to use as common practice. It can be used to identify knowledge and existing schemas pertaining to individual students. Pre-assessments can also provide useful information about student learning styles. At Schnee Learning Center, I use scatter plots, John Collins writing prompts, questioning, discussions, surveys and other paper pencil activities to pre assess knowledge for planning purposes. I also use career surveys, learning styles inventories and student interest surveys to identify gifts and interest before beginning a new semester. This form of assessment can assist in providing important information for structuring lessons and maintaining student interest (Maxfield, 2010).

**Formative**

Formative assessments can be used to assess students’ level of mastery and provides the teacher information for planning further instruction. Formative assessments can be both formal and informal. Some examples of formative assessment are observations, anecdotal note taking, goal setting, questioning strategies, portfolio records, quizzes, discussion boards, verbal/visual presentations and computer based instruction short cycle assessments. In my classroom, students are responsible for keeping track of records and progress in a few ways. For example, every student tracks Plato Progress and plans independent goals accordingly. Students denote progress and amount of work mastered within the week. Students are also involved in reflection to identify learning strategies used, objectives mastered and content learned. In addition, students keep a portfolio called “personal wellness” where they are assigned mind mapping activities and assignments to provide guidance in thinking about future goals. Students are responsible for keeping a daily log sheet to track points and grading within their portfolio. This gives the student autonomy and feedback regarding their performance (Maxfield, 2010).

**Summative**

Summative assessments are used as a final assessment. Many times students can be assessed using exams, final projects, papers, final activities with specific rubric requirements and end of the semester computer tests. An example would be giving students’ choice between writing a final paper, power point, brochure or poster following rubric guidelines to put together formative assignments into a final summative project. At schnee, students are assessed using traditional paper and pencil summative exams, but will show more mastery in alternative summative options. With at-risk youth, I have found it to be very effective in publishing final products or giving them an opportunity to share their learning with peers and other school staff. Students are typically proud of final products and enjoy being experts within a topic. As a result, it is important to create more alternative summative assessments with at-risk youth.

**Authentic**

Authentic assessments are very practical to use with at-risk youth. These assessments are real life, hands-on to determine student growth in learning and development. Many times students are applying what they are learning to real life situations such as building models or actually performing a task (Maxfield, 2010). For example at Schnee, I teach American Sign Language to at-risk youth. Instead of conducting a paper/pencil final, I assess the students using authentic measures. For the last week of class, students are only permitted to use American Sign Language during classroom activities and discussions. At times, I invite a Deaf speaker into the classroom to communicate with students, so they have a chance to use the skill acquired in a real-life situation. In addition, students are assessed performing a song in American Sign Language at graduation in the spring. This is much more practical and authentic way of assessing student mastery. I also find using authentic assessments gets students excited about the learning, increases self-efficacy and yearning to learn more.

**Conclusion**

Schnee Learning Center continues to improve programming and provides researched based instruction for at-risk adolescents. The students at Schnee Learning center process through similar cognitive, moral and social situations as their same age peers, but needs direct teaching in self regulatory practices, adaptive social interactions and metacognition opportunities to reach higher developmental and cognitive stages. In order for students to feel a sense of success, schools need to incorporate a student centered model where mental health, “wrap around” services are available to youth as well as the development of healthy relationships. There is a higher probability of school failure as well as other identifiable traits with, non resilient at-risk youth, and as a result, are at greater risk for dropping out of high school over those which can problem solve and overcome challenges and obstacles. It is important for educators to recognize that at-risk youth struggle academically due to low self-efficacy. It is the educator’s role to help facilitate resiliency through research based interventions, such as, creating a student centered environment, using collaborative culture with high expectations, incorporating multiple intelligence methodologies, practicing acceptable social class norms for employment, conforming to meaningful learning practices with students and provide metacognition lessons to assess self identity and career foreshadowing. Other best practices teachers could consider using is direct instruction, computer based interventions, differentiated instruction, response to intervention practices, problem based learning, community service opportunities and mastery focused classrooms so students can build intrinsic motivation and remained focused within the environment. Students at-risk can build resiliency as self efficacy is elevated with school success and mental health supports. It is also important to provide meaningful assessments for at-risk youth such as summative, formative and authentic measures as well as providing continuous feedback about progress. Teachers can be transmitters of change for these students by providing a sense of belonging, respect and autonomy in “breaking the mold” that is restricting them from reaching self-actualization. Teachers need to be attentive to these students and utilize individual talents instead of adhering to a “one size fits all” mentality. The teacher could empower students by creating disequilibrium in thinking and assist in changing the destiny and future of at-risk students by creating the foundation to molding independent, productive, and determined adults.

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