

Self Regulation: An Interview with Stuart Shanker

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Recently at our BCSCA Conference, Connect '12, our keynote speaker Stuart Shanker was able to sit down with members of the BCSCA executive and share his ideas about the theory of self regulation and where school counselors fit into the plan for introducing self regulation into BC schools. Dr. Shanker holds a Doctorate of Philosophy from Oxford, and is currently a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at York University. Dr. Shanker is also Director of the Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative at York University, Co-Director of the Council for Human Development, and President of the Council for Early Childhood Development.

It is important to understand that the self regulation movement is coming from the grassroots in British Columbia. Stuart Shanker made it clear that his organization did not approach anyone to try and talk them into this...he was giving keynotes and people kept on approaching him to talk about these ideas. Three superintendents approached Shanker and asked him to set up three sites. Surrey, Coquitlam, W. Vancouver were the original three...next Victoria joined and then Bulkley Valley and Nanaimo. Shanker says "Things were growing more than we wanted. So I asked one of the superintendents to take this on and he did, for no money. He is getting phone calls every day from districts that want to join. This is a 100% grassroots initiative...no Ministry direction or initiative. Districts are using their own money. But it is a big experiment and it remains teacher directed."

Underpinning the theory of self regulation is the idea of stress and how our bodies and minds react to stressors. Self-regulation happens across five domains: biological, emotional, cognitive, social and prosocial. There are complex links among the domains, and the primary goal of self regulation is to achieve a state of calm focus and alertness appropriate for learning in a classroom while being able to deal with stressors in the environment effectively as they arise.

Research now shows us that kids are under a lot more stress than they were in the past...something like 5 times as high as 100 years ago...even comparing the numbers to 1936 when the world was at the height of the great depression. A big factor in the increased amount of stress being reported today is urbanization. During the depression half of Canada was rural and today the figure is about 17%, as a result of rapid urbanization. This brings with it environmental stressors which are playing out in problematic behaviours in the classroom.

We also have a better understanding of what stress is and how stress affects kids. This understanding has grown by leaps and bounds. Shanker points out that there is still a widespread tendency to confuse self regulation with self control but they are different things. Self regulation is about how efficiently a child deals with stress and how quickly they recover from the effort. It is absolutely critical to a child's success in school and in life to be able to self regulate.

Given that the incidence of problematic behaviours has risen dramatically in the classroom, how do we deal with this? We see dramatic escalation in problematic behaviours as a sign that kids are not recovering efficiently. But self regulation is about a child learning how to deal with this on his own. The program introduced in BC and Ontario is designed to help kids master these skills. The problem we are encountering is that there are three elements that need to be addressed for this to be successful. The child is first; they must learn what it feels like to be calm. The second step is that we have to think hard about our schools...in many ways we have created school environments that exacerbate stress. The stress could be physical (walls, sound); it also includes the stress we are putting on our teachers through the increased proportion of at risk students in their classrooms, and finally the family...unless mom and dad are engaged in process through understanding and doing same things at home...and role modeling self regulation, the initiative won't fly.

How does the school counselor fit into all this? The role of the school counselor is threefold: as liaison to parents; trainer for the teachers, who are very stressed (we are losing 40% of the teaching profession every five years according to Stuart Shanker) and need to self regulate as well....but now who is going to implement this? The school counselor is in an ideal position to work with teachers on these skills. The third component is the child: the counsellor works with the students, including those students whom we call "gray area kids" who are not on 1701, who are not mentally ill, but not mentally healthy either. Often they are dealing with emotions they can't handle. Ideally, there are six critical elements to optimal self-regulation:

- When feeling calmly focused and alert, the ability to know that one is calm and alert
- When one is stressed, the ability to recognize what is causing that stress
- The ability to recognize stressors both within and outside the classroom
- The desire to deal with those stressors
- The ability to develop strategies for dealing with those stressors
- The ability to recover efficiently and effectively from dealing with stressors

The school counselor would be able to work with students to increase awareness of both stressors and a student's response to stress, increasing the frequency of self regulation.

The counselor is also in the best position to work with the families of these children. How would the school counselor support a family?

The first step is for counselors to master the model. Stuart Shanker suggested that webinars will be organized for training, and case studies will be used for learning...

An example: A 10 year old student was referred after being two grade levels below in reading. He was first spotted in Grade 3 and put on a Reading Enhancement program...which did not work. In grade 5 staff at his school noticed he was in a

heightened stress condition. His parents were very supportive, and did everything the school asked them to, but still there was no improvement. By Grade 5, there were worries about the student's mental well being. The student was showing heightened stress and withdrawing from life. He was shutting down and playing games online...he dropped his athletics. We wondered if it was a problem of visual processing, so we looked at the concept of visual noise. When the student was overloaded, he had trouble processing information. His brain could not handle the load.

Blind students have been shown to be able to see when visual noise is reduced. We wondered if the same concept could be applied in this case. We reduced visual stimulation in this child's space...as much as we could by taking down posters, flashing lights etc. We used coloured borders around salient content and worked with different fonts, colours etc. We did a home visit to assess the learning environment there. What we found was that the student was doing his reading at the kitchen table. Simultaneously, most days Mom was in the kitchen cooking, the TV was on, his brother and sister were coming in and out of the room and he was totally distracted.

When we asked why he was working in the kitchen, Mom had read that it was better for kids to do homework in kitchen and had TV on as incentive for homework completion. During the consultation, we suggested he read in his room, with mom checking in. A trip to the bedroom revealed that his room was plastered with posters, stuff was hanging from ceiling, and his screensaver was a flashing cube. We explained to parents the concept of visual noise and how distracting his room was for him; as a result they did a bedroom makeover, put carpet on floor, took down posters, and painted the room neutral colours...by end of Grade 5 he had recovered to one grade level below norm. Unless you have mom and dad on board as they were in this case, no change was possible. The school counselor can be the conduit to change in the home. We routinely counsel parents on amount of homework and workload, why not on the learning environment?

This field is growing in leaps and bounds. There is so much expertise in Canada...part of our mandate is to use work of scientists who are working on related issues such as the effects of noise, light etc. and how it impacts learning. Also, there are parallels with trauma....any experience with helping kids who are traumatized. The research in this area is extremely helpful because we have worked with students like this. One example is a case study of girl in school disciplined for swearing in class. When we looked into her background, she was a traumatized kid, with a hairline trigger to stress. During the work the counselor did with her, it came out that she had been sexually assaulted by a family member. This context helped us to work with her to manage her triggers and learn self regulation.

Counsellors will be able to tell us what works with what kids, at what age. We know that adolescents are very different from elementary aged students and the techniques are different. Adolescents need to take risks...but these risks must be

managed. Risks such as the competition involved with being on teams, in groups etc. that are monitored allows kids to take risks in a managed context. Collaboration and communication between parents, counselors and teaching staff is the key to managing behavior. People are beginning to understand that there is this need and we have to try this...the goal is to maintain what we have started and give it a year or two and then reassess. There are no plans to roll this out to the whole province at this time. School counselors will be at the forefront of this movement and can play a key role in bringing self regulation into our schools.