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LEADING LESSONS
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Creating a Self-Regulated Community of Learners

With self-regulation, children grow and thrive in their social-emotional development and academically.

naesp National Association of Elementary School Principals
March/April 2023
naesp.org

One of the greatest challenges for teachers is helping students become self-regulated learners. What does this look like in the classroom, and how can administrators and faculty work together to ensure teachers have what they need to help students learn to self-regulate? This guide is designed to help you—school leaders and your school's teachers—work together to reflect on the processes you have in place and determine the most efficient, effective course ahead to meet your school community's unique needs

We know that without self-regulation, children experience struggles in the following areas:

- Controlling their feelings when they are upset;
- Engaging in positive social interactions;
- Making friends;
- Paying attention during classroom activities;
- Remembering information on purpose;
- Possessing cognitive flexibility; and
- Developing intrinsic motivation to learn.

With self-regulation, children grow and thrive in their social-emotional development and academically.

Deborah Leong, Elena Bodrova, and Barbara Wilder-Smith, from Tools of the Mind, outline four big ideas to create a self-regulated community of learners:

1. Understanding self-regulation and executive functions;
2. Increasing child use of language and peer interaction;
3. Helping children learn how to learn; and
4. Building a culture of peer scaffolding.

As you use this guide, be on the lookout for the following:

Key considerations: These are factors to keep in mind for any school looking to develop or grow its tools, processes, and resources to help students self-regulate.

Reflections: These are questions to ask yourself when looking to develop or grow your tools, processes, and resources related to student self-regulation for your school and its unique circumstances.

Understanding Self-Regulation and Executive Functions

According to "Executive Functions," by Adele Diamond, three components of executive function make up self-regulation. Here are some examples of each.

1. **Inhibitory Effort Self-Control:** Examples include controlling emotional arousal, acting appropriately when tempted to do otherwise, delaying gratification, and staying on task, even when bored.
2. **Working Memory:** Examples include holding information in your mind, answering a question and explaining how you got the answer, and remembering all the steps in directions and how to follow them.
3. **Cognitive Flexibility:** An example is being able to change the focus of attention from the words in a math problem to the operations on numbers in the problem or changing focus from decoding a single sound to blending the multiple sounds into a word.

Together, these components of executive function are a strong predictor of success in later life, predicting graduation, college enrollment, employment, and adult mental health. Research even shows that executive functions at age 4 predict school achievement better than IQ and socioeconomic status.

Self-regulation has a big impact on behavior and learning. Without it, children act first and think later. With it, children think first and then act. Acting before thinking leads to impulsive actions, like grabbing a toy instead of using social problem-solving strategies, blurting out an answer, being unable to take turns, and losing your temper. Thinking first leads to self-regulation.

How is self-regulation developed? It goes from the outside in: It begins with regulation by others, which in a classroom setting is the teacher regulating the students; progresses to other-regulation, which looks like students telling other students how to regulate; and finally develops into self-regulation by the students themselves.

While in most classroom activities, children have a lot of experience being regulated by adults; children need activities where they practice voluntary self-regulation and other-regulation for self-regulation to grow. Self- and other-regulation grow best in activities like make-believe play, the dramatization of stories, and playful learning games.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Every student doesn't have to be self-regulated to achieve a regulated classroom. A self-regulation tipping point occurs when a critical mass of students is self-regulated, which influences the behaviors of students around them. The actual number of "self-regulation leaders" might vary from one classroom to another.

Although not every child will be self-regulated all the time, the classroom begins to feel self-regulated when:

- Unregulated behavior doesn't spread;
- Children scaffold unregulated peers to re-engage; and
- The teacher can quickly bring the group back to the regulated state.

Adult-regulation Looks Like:

- **Adults constantly prompting regulation;**
- **Students following rules when an adult is present;**
- **Students not exhibiting self-regulation skills when a substitute teacher is leading learning;**
- **Students who are unable to follow rules once the context is changed; and**
- **Adults resolving disputes over sharing and who goes first.**

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What barriers do we face when creating a classroom where all of the children develop self-regulation?
2. What are signs that a classroom is regulated in our school?

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Self-regulation Looks Like:

- **Students regulating themselves whether an adult is present or not;**
- **Students following the rules whether an adult is present or not;**
- **Students following the rules when a different adult is present;**
- **Students following the rules even in a different context outside of the classroom, like on a field trip, during an assembly, or in the cafeteria; and**
- **Students solving disputes about sharing and who goes first on their own based on a fair system of rules.**

Increasing Child Use of Language to Support Self-Regulation

Young children think as they talk. Private speech, or self-talk used for self-guidance and self-regulation, is positively correlated with impulse control, task performance, and achievement. Children use the same words while talking to themselves when talking to each other.

KEY CONSIDERATION

First, children practice remembering a specific rule or directions to a task as they repeat these to each other. Later, they will be able to use this speech as private speech to direct their own actions.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In what innovative ways can we use materials and centers to encourage children to engage in private speech?
2. In many classrooms, teachers tend to ask the same children to talk and volunteer answers, which places children unsure of their skills or who are English Language Learners at a disadvantage. How can we achieve equitable outcomes when it comes to encouraging all children to learn skills by thinking as they talk?

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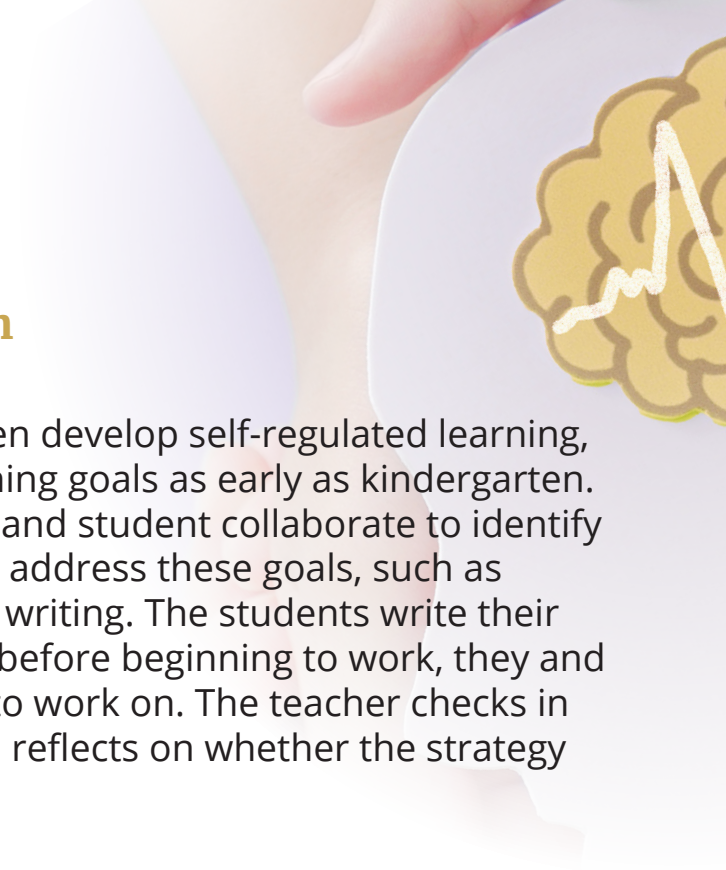

Helping Children Learn How to Learn Leads to Self-Regulated Learning

Goal-setting is one effective way to help children develop self-regulated learning, and children can be taught to set realistic learning goals as early as kindergarten. What does this look like in action? The teacher and student collaborate to identify the goal and the strategies the child can use to address these goals, such as working on the middle sounds in a word when writing. The students write their own goals from this discussion, and every day before beginning to work, they and their Study Buddy review what they are going to work on. The teacher checks in with the students weekly to track progress and reflects on whether the strategy was helpful, and if not, why not.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of learning goals would promote self-regulated learning?
2. How do you measure success as your students grow into self-regulated learners?

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Building a Culture of Peer Scaffolding

An idea made famous by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, peer scaffolding can be an effective way to support the practice of newly learned skills and can hasten internalization and fluency. Scaffolding doesn't always have to be delivered by an adult.

To promote peer scaffolding, teachers can set up an activity so that students can support each other with specific parts of learning—remembering directions, developing strategies for learning or steps in a skill, and checking the answer to see if it's correct. Activities must be designed so that children have enough objective ways to verify if the partner makes an error and know how to help their partner correct this error without doing the work for their Study Buddy. By helping their partner, children strengthen their own self-regulated learning skills.

KEY CONSIDERATION

Peer scaffolding activities should be set up so that students with different levels of ability can support each other as equal partners. Pairing children so that over several weeks they work with every other child in the classroom is key.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What peer scaffolding activities can we incorporate into learning?
2. How can we collaborate across grade-levels to continue growing students' self-regulation skills?

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Understanding these big ideas—gaining a better understanding of self-regulation, increasing use of language, helping students learn the art of learning, and using peer scaffolding—school communities will grow and succeed. Add in an environment where teachers include students in the process grow their self-regulation skills, and schools are left with a positive school culture and a self-regulated community of learners.

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Authors: *Deborah Leong, Ph.D.; Elena Bodrova, Ph.D.; and Barbara Wilder-Smith, Tools of the Mind. Learn more at* ***toolsofthemind.org****.*

Visit ***naesp.org/webinars*** *to watch the NAESP virtual seminar "Creating Self-Regulated Learners By Creating a Community of Learners," presented by Tools of the Mind.*

This guide was made possible through the support of the Foundation for Child Development. Learn more about them at fcd-us.org.

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