

# Supporting Student Learning

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## Abstract

*Graduation from high school is a tremendous achievement and requires perseverance, determination and the ability to retain information from the various courses and subject areas throughout this journey. Teachers, parents, and peers play an important role in helping a student to attain their maximum potential. Every student has different strengths and weaknesses and every path to success is unique. Teachers need to engage the different learners in the classroom, and use their peers and parents to help support them through the educational process.*

Students will embark on a 13-year journey through the hallways of different schools, searching for wisdom and guidance in hopes that when graduation comes they will have the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful into adulthood. Many individuals will help along the way, so the student does not go on this quest alone. The student will rely on many supports to achieve graduation. Through interactions with parents, teachers, counsellors and peers, students will develop strategies to strengthen their understanding of key concepts, along with skills to behave more independently and become critical thinkers (Gonzalez-DeHass, & Willems, 2016). In order for the student to be supported effectively, the teachers, parents, and peers must be aware of what supports the student needs, help the student to overcome barriers that may get in the way of success, and guide him/her as he/she develops an authentic learning experience.

Teachers interact with students on a daily basis and understand their strengths and weaknesses in learning. Parents have an in-depth understanding of the student as a person, whereas teachers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the student across different subject areas (Tomlinson, & Imbeau, 2010). Teachers will determine the student's knowledge of various learning outcomes throughout the courses they instruct. In order to support the learning of the individual, the teacher needs to become aware of the learning style that is best suited for each student. Just as a snowflake is unique to others, so are the needs of the students in a classroom (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). This has not been an easy task for teachers, because the class sizes increase along with the complexity of class composition, creating a strain on finding enough time to achieve the key learning outcomes (Anderson, Austin, Barnard, Chetwynd, & Kahn, 2001). It is a tremendous balancing act of finding time to address core learning outcomes while creating an educational experience that is unique and meaningful to each learner in the class.

Along with teachers, parents play a vital role in the academic success of their children. Parents are integral in communicating with students the importance of education and being actively engaged in their children's education. Parents can accomplish this by becoming involved in school functions, creating a positive environment for learning in their home, and engaging in conversations with their children about school and the value of education (Wang, & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Attending student-centred conferences, helping students with homework, and engaging in meaningful conversation about the importance of education will model positive behaviours for their children. Opening a line of conversation between parents and teachers is instrumental in student success. Teachers should rely on parents to share their understanding of how their children need to be supported in school (Tomlinson, & Imbeau, 2010). When a teacher and parent work together to achieve educational goals, it is easier for the student to see value in the importance of education. Student engagement also increases when parents take an active role in their children's education (Wang, & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Teachers should not be

the only driving force behind a student's academic achievement, but rather serve as part of a team with parents to engage the students and establish the value of education.

Especially in adolescence, students' peers help to shape their identity and can be a positive influence in sharing the value of education and knowledge. Each year across many school divisions in Manitoba, a survey is completed called Tell Them From Me. The results are very similar every year, although the groups of students change. This influence is especially evident in the category of personal importance. In students' time through high school, it is not their teachers' opinions, or their parents or their principal's, that they value most. Peer groups are number one every year in this category. In the classroom or at home, the students are more comfortable to ask for advice or explanations from classmates and peers than they are from their teachers and parents (Gonzalez-DeHass, & Willems, 2016). A good teacher will tap into this resource and create opportunities for students to support each other in their learning. These opportunities include having students teach each other key concepts in class, and organize small group discussions about what they are learning. Students will take more ownership for their learning by creating study guides with each other for upcoming assessments. These are excellent opportunities for students to support each other in their learning process. These situations will not always happen naturally, so the teacher should guide the peer learning opportunities (Gonzalez-DeHass, & Willems, 2016). Creating authentic learning environments for students to learn from and with their peers is a tremendous tool to help students take ownership of their learning. Making sure that teachers, parents, and peers are alongside the students will help them to feel more engaged about their learning.

Even with all the supports in place, students may still experience barriers that impede their learning process. Equipping students with the required strategies to get through these blockages is important in their learning process. When students feel overwhelmed and they do not feel good about themselves or their abilities, it can affect their performance and learning. Self-esteem plays a major role in students' learning and social interactions in the classroom. Students who have a positive self-image are better able to deal with difficult situations as they arise, and are comfortable in social settings because they feel more accepted by the group (Peters Mayer, 2008). One of the biggest contributors to students having poor self-esteem is when the student is obese or overweight. Girls who feel that they are obese often have low self-esteem, and will generally struggle academically and have a difficult time learning in school (Sabia, & Rees, 2015). The best way for students to build resiliency when feelings of poor body image impede their learning is to build exercise into their daily routines. Not only will exercise help to maintain a healthy body weight, but the endorphins released into the body are hormones designed to reduce stress and depression. If students include a daily routine of activity in their schedule, this would help to improve their mental health and academic achievement (Sabia, & Rees, 2015). Building confidence in one's skills and abilities and having good self-esteem will help to improve a student's mental and academic success.

Anxiety can be quite disabling to students and will interfere with their ability to learn and manage their behaviours in a classroom setting. The most common form of anxiety for students in the high school setting is the generalized anxiety disorder. Students who struggle with this disorder often worry or stress about things that they have no control over, such as tests, group work, and engaging in conversation with other students (Mychailyszyn et al., 2011, p. 223). Teachers and parents can work with students to create strategies to deal with anxiety. Developing these positive strategies will help to keep a student on track to meet his/her academic objectives (Cane, & Oland, 2015). Giving students tips on how to interact with their peers and working on study techniques that help a student to prepare more efficiently for assessments are some ways that a teacher can assist a student who is struggling with anxiety.

Taking risks and leaving one's comfort zone is when real learning takes place. However, if students do not feel comfortable to take these risks due to the environment not being safe, then they are not going to learn to their full potential. If the conditions in the classroom or school do

not make the students feel safe to take risks because of a fear of public ridicule or social ostracism, then these are not optimal conditions for learning (Bradshaw, Waasdrop, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014). There is a social experiment wherein students are asked to remove their shoes and place them on their opposite feet. They then walk around the classroom, and possibly to the closest water fountain for a drink of water, and then return to their seats. This activity helps students to make connections about what it is like to walk around in someone else's shoes. This activity helps students to get a physical feeling about what it must be like for new students in a school where everything is different for them. Some students may feel reluctant to participate in this activity because they feel that they would be criticized and made fun of by their peers. If the classroom is created in a way so that all students and staff who enter feel safe to take these risks, then not only will the students find success academically but they will be more willing to get involved with social interactions (Bradshaw et al., 2014). Removing the element of fear of failure and ridicule in the classroom will persuade students to take more risks and learn more effectively. When students find activities that help to build their self-esteem, find strategies that reduce their levels of anxiety, and learn in a safe environment where risks are encouraged, they will develop the necessary tools to overcome some barriers that impede learning in the classroom.

Teachers can lead students to find authentic learning opportunities by making connections with their learning and the students' everyday life. When students see the value in what they are learning and how that relates to their real-life experiences, students will become more engaged. Awareness of the individual needs of the students and an understanding of their circumstances will help teachers to connect with students in a meaningful way (Cane, & Oland, 2015). Students who struggle to find connections to school and teachers will not achieve as well academically. Creating an environment that nourishes the students' emotional and mental health is important to student learning (Cane, & Oland, 2015).

Trust is an important part of creating an environment wherein optimal learning will take place. For students to feel that their thoughts and ideas are valuable to their learning of key concepts and outcomes, and for them to feel comfortable to take risks to allow learning to take place, a teacher must create a level of trust with each student (Tomlinson, & Imbeau, 2010). Trusting that what they are being taught has applications in their life will help students to recognize the value in what they are learning. When students have opportunities to discover their learning styles and develop a level of trust with their teacher, they can create more authentic learning experiences.

Students must see the value in their learning through the educational process, and it is the teachers, parents, and peers that who will guide the students and support their learning. These supports will help students to overcome obstacles and barriers that may impede their progress and allowing opportunities for authentic learning experiences to take place. Teachers are entrusted to ensure that each student finds success and must recognize the uniqueness of each learner and create experiences whereby students can demonstrate their knowledge (Tomlinson, & Imbeau, 2010). It is the students who need to be accountable for their learning and to look for support in their journey to a higher education.

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### **About the Author**

*Tyler Sloan is enrolled in the Faculty of Education's graduate studies program at Brandon University. He is in his first year of working as a guidance counsellor at Morden Collegiate. Tyler grew up in Morden and is now raising his family there. He enjoys coaching and the outdoors.*