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Promoting Positive Adjustment: Understanding the Roles of Teachers and Peers

for Struggling Students

In today's world, schools are among the most important contexts for socialization, and play a vital role in shaping the course of child development. However, many students face adjustment issues within school, placing them at risk for academic, social, and emotional difficulties throughout life. Many of these problems begin early in the children's school careers, which incidentally mark critical periods for children's developing minds. The periods of kindergarten and first grade are marked by a change in the child's environment during a time of significant cognitive and social development. Young children who struggle with this transition into the school's social world require additional social support to facilitate a successful outcome. However, when that support is missing, the resulting social isolation and alienation can increase the likelihood of the progression from typical difficulties to more persistent difficulties and serious consequences. Student's interactions with their classmates and teachers impact their social and emotional adjustment as well as their academic motivation and behavior. Based on research and my own experiences at Sauquoit Valley Elementary, the current paper will begin by discussing the various behaviors observed and their potential causes. The remainder of the paper will focus on the interaction between early school troubles and levels of social support from both school personnel and peers, ending with implications for promoting resilience.

The reality of schools is that children will come into schools with varying degrees of readiness, based on a number of different variables. Some background factors that can contribute to these disparities in school readiness are uncertainty or instability in home environment, poor attachment styles, a lack of stimulation during early childhood, and family structure such as coming from a divorced family or a single parent home (Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000). These background factors can predispose children

to issues early on in school. Some of the behaviors associated with low school readiness are frustration with classwork, disobedience, tantrums, aggression, and social withdrawal. These behaviors are often considered to be manifestations of cognitive issues or a lack of understanding of the material, self-regulation difficulties, expressing behaviors modeled within the home, and poor social skills. Certainly, a disadvantaged home background can predispose children to these sorts of difficulties, however, it is clear that a poor social environment within schools can exacerbate the problem

Teacher support is an important factor that determines student adjustment during this transitional phase that marks the beginning of schooling. That is, as children begin school, they must meet a whole new set of demands. For example, they must meet classroom expectations for behavior such as following directions, cooperating with peers and adults, and containing frustration despite new and difficult tasks. Support from teachers helps students to become more comfortable and successful within their new environment. However, when students exhibit challenging behaviors such as those mentioned above, they can interfere with the learning environment both for the student himself/herself and for other students. So, while teachers often do their best to handle the situations at hand, this persistent disruption can lead to serious frustrations, and lead to strain in the teacher-student relationship. Often times, confronting the issues can become a power struggle, and lead to frequent conflicts. One of the major effects of repeated conflicts with teachers is the student's unwillingness to listen to them, or to engage in learning activities. Additionally, my supervisor has explained that reprimanding a student repeatedly becomes similar to background noise for these students, such that they are constantly hearing their name or demands directed towards them. Consequently, alternative means to gaining control over the struggling student are necessary to reduce student-teacher conflict.

These frequent and persistent struggles often end up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy for the students such that teachers and other school personnel hold low-expectations for these students, which the students then internalize. Of course, the process of the self-fulfilling prophecy begins with the student's

initial misbehavior, which then affects the teacher's beliefs about the student. These beliefs then affect the way the teacher treats the student, which, in turn, confirms the student's self-concept as a troublemaker or low performer. This internalization of the negative stigma then causes the student to act in accordance with their new self-concept. An example of a teacher's behavior that affects a student's self-schema could be as simple as an exasperated sigh. However, I have observed school personnel behavior that is far more telling of their low-expectations for these troubled students. For example, while observing a particularly troubled student, MM, in the cafeteria, I noticed that he was raising his hand waiting patiently to get his pudding opened. After over a minute of waiting, he began waving his hand in the air, trying to get the attention of the lunch aides. Finally, after not being noticed, he stood on his chair, waving both of his hands in the air asking for help. Immediately, one of the lunch aides noticed him and shouted across the room: "M, you know better than that. Get down right now and get to the detention chair". Situations such as this one reinforce in the child's mind that they can not perform well or act appropriately. Unfortunately, when students are labeled early on in their school careers, they are often treated in such a way that exacerbates their negative early experiences, self-concept, and level of acceptance from peers.

The same characteristics that cause frustration for the teacher likely also cause peers to view the struggling student as less likeable (Rudasill, 2011). For example, a lack of social skills, aggression, and social withdrawal may lead to strained interactions with peers. However, both research and my own experiences have supported that students' observations of interactions between the struggling student and the teacher can lead to more of a group consensus about the struggling student than individual peer-to-peer interactions may have ever caused (Hamre & Pianta, 2003). That is, adults play a significant role in shaping perception and reputation of peers. The principal at Sauquoit elementary informed me about a startling example of how this reputation affects student's perceptions and interactions with troubled peers. Principal Putnam was eating lunch with another student, NW, and asked the simple question: "who do you hang out with in your class?", "well, not MM! He's a troublemaker!", NW replied hastily. This example

illustrates how MM's reputation directly affects not only the way other students view him, but also how they act towards him. Having such a strong reputation, particularly when there is a group consensus, can ultimately lead a student to become socially isolated. Unfortunately, social interactions in early childhood are the foundation for developing conflict-resolution and cooperative learning skills (Lightfoot, Cole & Cole, 2013). So, struggling students may already be particularly lacking in these social skills to begin with, and are then given fewer opportunities to improve by being alienated and socially isolated

For young children, relating successfully with classmates is a critical task that is considered to be a primary indicator of healthy adjustment (Lightfoot et al., 2013). The development of positive peer relationships has been linked to positive adjustment and academic success in later grades. Conversely, poor early peer relationships have been linked to later consequences such as depression, delinquent behavior, school failure, and poor life outcomes. Additionally, having fewer friends and being rejected by peers in kindergarten negatively influences a child's perception of school, school attitude, school achievement, as well as self-image (Ladd, 1990). To epitomize the effects of poor peer relationships, I have a final story about MM. One lunch period, I went to the cafeteria to say "hello" to some of the kindergarten students I work with. I noticed MM was at the isolated lunch detention chair, as he often is. I am not permitted to go speak with him when he is in lunch detention, so I didn't greet him. However, when he was on his way to clear his tray, he stopped by to say "hi". I asked him if he was making good choices, and he responded with a glowing "yes". When I asked what happened that caused him to be put in "the chair", he let me know that he had done nothing wrong today, but just decided to sit alone because "talking to friends is hard sometimes". While, certainly, this can be interpreted as a positive coping mechanism (recognizing when he needs to take a break), it does also illustrate that his difficulties with peer relationships are evident to him. That is, MM seems to have internalized the idea that peer relationships are "hard sometimes" for him, most likely due to the way in which his peers view and treat him differently.

The above observations and research have serious implications for optimizing student outcomes. It

is clear that the early years are an optimal time to identify and address any evident issues. That is, during these early years of schooling, children's ideas about their academic, behavioral, and social competence are still developing. Thus, it is important to address these difficulties before they become crystallized (Lightfoot et al., 2013). Certainly, there are several ways to address this issue, but I will focus on two main areas that can help troubled students: directly assisting students in need and training teachers.

In my opinion, there is certainly one benefit to the external nature of these issues. That is, these struggling students are relatively easily identified, which allows for early intervention. I believe one of the most effective ways to assist these students is by working directly with them either individually or in group sessions, with a focus on social skills and coping mechanisms. Through guided lessons and play, these groups can help students to build their skill-set for interacting with peers. These lessons can focus on a number of areas, though the focus of the groups I have carried out remained on getting along with others, waiting one's turn, body bubbles, respecting others, being kind, listening, and following instructions. Additionally, these groups aim to provide students with coping mechanisms for when they are experiencing difficult emotions. These lessons include identifying when we feel particular emotions, and then learning how to manage them when they arise. The above lessons can help students to get along better with students, and give them a place where they feel safe and a sense of belonging.

Finally, it is important to address this issue at the level of teachers. To assist teachers with troubled students, it could be useful to provide them with appropriate means of discipline. Additionally, providing teachers with a reward system to work with these students has proven useful in some cases I have observed. Most importantly, however, it is important to provide teachers with frequent training and education programs about their effects on students. By educating teachers on their role in exacerbating these effects, we can help them to be more mindful of their own behaviors, biases, and ways of understanding students. Though it is only natural to get frustrated when students distract from the lessons of the classroom due to "behavioral issues", it is important to understand *why* these outbursts and

distractions are occurring, and how they may only be furthering these difficulties. Additionally, my supervisor at Sauquoit, Paul Dischiavo has provided teachers with excellent advice in assisting these troubled students. Paul says that when teachers come to him asking for help with behavioral issues, he asks what they have done until then to try to help it. Most often, these teachers state particular punishments they have tried. He advises them to focus more on finding out what the student is interested in, what they like to do, what they think about the class and certain subjects, etc. By getting to know the student, Paul suggests that the teacher will gain a better understanding of how they may help, and also provides a supportive and caring relationship for the child. Fortunately, difficulties in the early school years are not indicators of lifelong issues, provided that the proper interventions are present. By assisting students with their difficulties and providing teachers with the appropriate development programs, we can reduce the negative effects of early deprivations. This can have positive implications for student outcomes.

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