

The Self-Reg View on Series.

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

The Self-Reg View of: Schools as “Self-Reg Havens”

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“What,” Susan asked me, “do you mean when you talk about schools becoming ‘Self-Reg Havens’ and why is this so important?” My immediate reaction was: Ask me an easy one why don’t you! But the fact is, our experience over the past few years has shown us that this may just be the most important issue that we need to address: it helps us define the goal that we should be striving for, although not necessarily the route to get there.

The answer, of course, is that a Self-Reg Haven is a school in which everyone, students and staff, feel emotionally as well as physically safe. But then, such an answer might seem to border on the trite. After all, scientists have been reporting on the importance of creating a safe learning environment since the 1990s; the big stumbling-block has been knowing how to accomplish this feat. It turns out that instituting draconian disciplinary measures has the opposite effect from that intended; yet motivational character messages haven’t proven to be much more effective. But before we can wrestle with the How we have to clarify the What: i.e., get clear on what it means to “feel safe.”

The key here is that when we talk about feeling safe we are referring to a state of mind: whether or not this state is objectively warranted! That is, there is a fundamental difference between being safe and feeling safe. I had a colleague with such a pronounced fear of flying that she would choose a long drive over a short flight, even though she knew that, statistically, driving is much more dangerous than flying. But it didn’t feel that way: maybe

because driving gives one a sense of personal control; or maybe it’s the strange noises and sensations involved in flying; or maybe it’s just that plane crashes are so much rarer than car accidents and, when they happen, make for sensational news. There are lots of reasons why someone might feel safer driving rather than flying, but the point is that for someone with this phobia, going over the “facts” isn’t going to help a bit; for their anxiety surges up from their limbic system, and “limbic perception” – neuroception, if you will -- is quite blind to statistics. And insisting that it’s all in their head and they just need to control their limbic system is guaranteed to make the problem considerably worse.

The same point applies to schools that adopt a zero-tolerance policy. What happens is a sharp increase in suspensions, but not in feelings of being safe. In fact, the exact opposite occurs. This is because there is an important causal relation and not just a strong correlation operating here. Zero-tolerance is born from the self-control mindset: The student knew the rules, could have acted differently, chose to act up and must now pay the consequence, and everyone must see that transgressions will not be tolerated. But even in those cases where the number of “infractions” is in fact reduced, the overall feeling of anxiety – in teachers as much as in students – goes up.

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The problem is that zero-tolerance profoundly influences the way in which a student’s behaviour is perceived, seeing as misbehaviours what are in fact stress-behaviours [Self-Reg] It’s not just outbursts or “oppositional defiance,” but even fits of anxiety – which all too rarely are understood as such – are seen as due to a lack of self-control. And even if a teacher struggles to restrain what he or she says to the student, what they feel “leaks out” in their nonverbal behaviours [Leakage]. The student in turn feels their teacher’s irritation or anger, and their relationship, which is absolutely pivotal for educational attainment and social-emotional wellbeing, is soured [Teacher-Student Relationship]. Both of them have a kindled alarm, and their limbic arousal spreads to those around them.

The key to establishing a positive student-teacher relationship is that both has to feel safe in the other’s presence: this is the defining feature of Social Engagement. But neither punishment nor well-crafted information will help to turn off a threat-response. That can only happen by practicing the five steps of Self-Reg. This is not a matter of following a set program, however, but rather, of seeing things differently: the student’s behaviour, your own reaction.

I had such an interesting example of this a few years ago. A high school Principal, who was an avid convert to the Self-Reg way of thinking, had come up with what seemed like a great idea: for those teachers who were interested, she would videotape them interacting with a student they were having trouble with and then go over the recording with them afterwards. But she now had a serious problem on her hands with one of her novice teachers who, after watching himself on video, had decided that he just wasn’t cut out for the profession.

The problem was that while he was talking to a student – quite calmly, so he thought – about

how he needed to stop being so mean to the kids in the class, the muscles around his eyes and forehead had constricted, giving him quite an angry-looking facial expression, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists. But he was completely unaware that he was doing this. The problem was, this teacher abhorred how this young teen was acting and was finding the tension between what he felt and how he was supposed to act intolerable. But just as Self-Reg is not about managing a student’s behaviour, neither is it about managing a teacher’s! So the key here was to get to the heart of what this young teacher was feeling, but for that to be possible we had to try to understand what was going on in this young teen.

I arranged to meet with the teacher and the student in question and didn’t even need to look at either of them when they walked into the room to know what they were feeling: I could literally sense their tension. The boy was in a total state of freeze: his eyes were downcast, his face a sort of pasty grey, his body hunched over and very still. I asked him a couple of innocuous questions to try to put him at ease and he responded in very short, clipped tones. So I resorted to plan B and asked him to tell me about what he most liked doing and this really opened up the floodgates. He loved playing Grand Theft Auto, or just watching videos about how to play GTA. He relaxed, his face became animated, he was smiling and energetic. But then I then asked him what I thought was a perfectly harmless question as to whether he played GTA with any of the other kids in the class and he instantly went back into freeze. It was like watching the lights suddenly go off in a room that was brilliantly lit up: his shoulders slumped, the blood drained from his face, and you could see him struggling not to cry. And from beside me I heard a sharp intake of breath.

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Suddenly, the teacher saw a completely different young teen in front of him: one that was friendless, that was struggling with acute social anxiety, who had little idea how he was supposed to behave with his peers, let alone why everyone was so upset with him. His feelings towards this young boy transformed in an instant: where a moment before he had felt cross, he now felt a deep sense of sadness and concern. And it showed on his face, in his tone of voice, in his posture. And within a millisecond the boy responded in kind, raising his eyes and sharing his teacher’s gaze. Without saying a word, they had suddenly connected in the sort of right-brain to right-brain communication that is the mainstay of Social Engagement. It was going to take a bit of work on both their parts to figure out why social interaction was so stressful for this young boy, but the seeds for such an effort had just been laid.

The point is, Self-Reg is not about forcing ourselves to behave in a certain way: it is about understanding that children and teens may lack, not just the verbal ability to tell us what they’re feeling, but more fundamentally, the self-awareness to even know what they’re feeling. And this is one of the key features that defines a “Self-Reg Haven”: it is an environment that, instead of increasing irritation or anxiety, inspires us to look at challenging behaviours nonjudgmentally, with puzzlement and openness. On a Self-control mindset our automatic reactions are: “How do I stop this?” “How do I protect the other students?” “How am I supposed to get through my lesson plan?” But the Self-Reg automatic is simply: “Why?”, and perhaps more to the point, “Why now?”

Every one of us has to find our own tempo for grappling with this aspect-shift that lies at the heart of Self-Reg. Some, like this young teacher, may experience a sort of epiphany; others require a much slower and gradual learning process. But the lesson from the fear-of-flying

example is that you can’t force this change: can’t insist that the limbic system see the light of reason! Each of us has different triggers, finds some behaviours more stressful than others. And for someone who is strongly vested in a self-control mindset, the very thought of shifting to the kind of “reflect-and-reframe” outlook of Self-Reg can, at first, be destabilizing. So a Self-Reg Haven is one in which teachers navigate and negotiate the theory and practice of Self-Reg as and when they feel ready. This has to be a voluntary journey, not mandated, and that means that a Self-Reg Haven has to be seen in terms of providing resources rather than a regimen.

This last point is especially important in a school struggling with a large number of out-of-control students, where the strain on teachers is so great that they see zero-tolerance as their only recourse. But that brings us back to the problem that the harsher the discipline code the less safe a school feels, locking students and teachers alike into their dysregulated stress cycle. What is especially important for such a school’s journey to becoming a Self-Reg Haven is that whatever is done serves to reduce rather than increase teacher stress. In this regard, one of the most important lessons that we’ve learned is that the school’s outlook has to be proactive and not just reactive. Without this focus, there is a substantial risk that Self-Reg will be seen as just another method of behaviour management, which does little to mitigate stress-loads.

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This is why we recommend that you do things like reduce noise levels, visual as well as auditory; explore different kinds of self-regulating furniture and aids; incorporate Feng Shui ideas into the classroom; create different “micro-environments.” Why so much emphasis has to be placed on physical activity: before, during, and after school. Why we want to see students involved in music, choir, dance, art, chess, community activities. Why students need to be guided, in a developmentally appropriate manner, through the five steps of Self-Reg, so that they can become the agents of their own self-regulation. Why it is essential that at least some members of the school are Self-Reg certified through the 4-course Foundations program, so that they can serve as resources for the other teachers and staff.

Every Self-Reg Haven that I visit is the same: filled with happy, smiling students and educators. The students are inquisitive and eager to show me their work. And so are the teachers! What drives them and makes all this possible is that, once started, Self-Reg leaves us constantly wanting more. That’s one of the features that most defines a Self-Reg Haven: the incredible hunger for Self-Reg knowledge that it creates. We want to learn everything we can about the effects of excessive stress; the different kinds of stressors, hidden and overt; about what students can do to enhance their desire and ability to learn, and what teachers can do to rediscover the joy that drove them to become a teacher in the first place.

I’ve seen such exciting developments across the country: an amazing outdoor learning space constructed by the school and its community in Abbotsford, BC [Barrowtown]; the special “calming” room created at [Aptoquet]; the Take a Breath (the Self-Reg song) gifted to parents and educators by Raffi through his organization, Child Honouring. But it’s the thirst for knowledge that is always

the key: that drives gifted superintendents [Superintendents as Blog Leaders] and educators [Living Avivaloca] to blog about Self-Reg; that has led school districts like Durham to spend countless hours creating Self-Reg learning materials for all their teachers [Durham District School Board]; that has seen the remarkable spread of a Spark Self-Reg across Nova Scotia [Sparks Fly] that has seen the birth of a truly extraordinary learning community in the cohorts enrolled in our Self-Reg Foundations Courses.

I have been so inspired by what I’ve seen that I’m no longer content to just talk about seeing our schools become Self-Reg Havens: I want to see Canada become a Self-Reg Haven. Or maybe what I should really say is: I want to see Canada stay a Self-Reg Haven. In fact, I want to see this happening everywhere. And what’s absolutely clear is that schools are the vital key to this vision.

