Addressing Student Burnout

Classrooms in which students experience a chronic disconnect between their capabilities and interests are breeding grounds for student burnout. In some cases, the problem is emotional (e.g., stress, anxiety, feelings of incompetence, etc.). Excessive and prolonged emotional conditions can cause students to feel unhappy, overwhelmed, and unable to cope.

> In one study, students described emotional exhaustion as a feeling of lethargy or immobilization in response to feeling overwhelmed and stressed.
> (*I just don't do anything. I lose the ability to function.*)

In other cases, the problem is attitudinal (e.g., students who are bored, psychologically reactive to control and authority). Critical factors in this are what options are offered and how classrooms handle choice and decision making.

> *School is not for me. I don't like the teachers or the course work, the school uniforms, and all the rules.*

Students experiencing academic burnout are described as manifesting emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction of personal accomplishment. Commonly cited symptoms include frustration, disabling anxiety, extreme exhaustion, feeling overwhelmed, negative feelings about self, interpersonal problems, inability to attend to necessary tasks, declining performance, apathy, disengagement, depression and other mental and physical health problems (Murberg & Bru, 2004; Salmela-Aro, Savolainen, & Holopainen, 2009; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009; Silvar, 2001). Substance abuse concerns are cited as a causal factor, a resulting condition, and a treatment focus.

> ### *Even Gifted Students Burnout*
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> In a 2019 article, H. Yu details how the constant support of her teachers and parents led her towards relying solely on her "innate genius" to excel in school. Although this was sustainable for a short period of time, her dependence on her natural abilities was not supported with the necessary amount of effort and ultimately led to poor academic performance and an inability to reach the expectations that were set for her. Because of this, Yu found herself burnt out and unwilling to achieve the goals that those around her expected her to reach; instead, she simply did what was necessary to maintain the image of giftedness. Although she was eventually able to realize success on her own terms, Yu portrayed several of the key characteristics of burnout such having as a cynical attitude or being exhausted with schoolwork.

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As is the case with job burnout, the tendency has been to discuss interventions for student burnout primarily as person-focused strategies (e.g. developing effective coping skills, relaxation techniques). Schools are advised to watch for students who are exhibiting symptoms and to provide various supports (including referrals for special help). As to what schools should do to prevent the

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problem, the emphasis usually is on making students aware of the potential stressors and suggesting what students and their families should do to cope with them. As a result, most of the resources on countering student burnout suggest a variety of personal steps students can take (see examples in the online resources listed at the end of this document).

Research, however, points to situational and organizational factors that should be addressed. And, a person-environment fit model emphasizes more than concern for the degree to which an individual is able to match environmental demands and requirements. It also emphasizes the impact of the degree to which the environment does or doesn't provide for an individual's motivation and capabilities. A mismatch with either can affect an individual's well-being and result in problems.

From the perspective of our Center's work on addressing barriers to learning and teaching, our emphasis is first on promoting development and preventing problems, then on helping those for whom problems appear. The framework for the work involves ensuring there is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. (For the most recent in-depth discussion, see Adelman & Taylor, 2017, 2018).

We suggest that the key in all this is to focus on enhancing student *intrinsic motivation*. Research on intrinsic motivation clarifies the value of school interventions designed to increase the following:

- Feelings of self-determination
- Feelings of competence and expectations of attaining valued outcomes
- Feelings of interpersonal relatedness
- The range of interests and satisfactions related to learning.

In particular, the research stresses the importance of

- Minimizing threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness
- Maximizing such feelings (e.g., providing caring support; increasing the range of options and choices and emphasizing real life interests and needs; enhancing student involvement in meaningful decision making; providing opportunities to escape a negative image/reputation)

In this context, we view personalization of instruction as the best approach to engaging student in classroom learning and preventing problems. Then, the following four special intervention strategies are recommended in reengaging a student who appears disconnected: (1) clarifying the student's perceptions of the problem, (2) reframing school learning, (3) renegotiating involvement, and (4) reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship. Here's a start for thinking about each of these:

- *(1) Clarifying a student's perceptions of the problem.* It is desirable to create a situation where it is feasible to talk openly with students about why they have become disengaged. Such open interchange provides an invaluable basis for interpreting responses to intervention (RtI) and formulating a personalized plan to alter current negative perceptions and prevent others from developing. The dialogue with a student should cover (a) why there has been a problem (without getting into a "blame-game") and (b) exploring new ways that the student thinks could make things better at school. (In some cases, the student's parents need to be included in the exchange.)

- (2) *Reframing school learning.* Diengaged students need to (a) view the teacher as supportive (as contrasted with controlling and indifferent) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. To these ends, it helps to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how current activity builds on previous learning; and clarify why it is reasonable to expect the procedures to be effective (especially those designed to help correct specific problems).

- (3) *Renegotiating involvement in school learning.* New and mutual agreements (not one-way "contracts") are needed. This can be done through ongoing conferences with the student (including parents when appropriate) that allow for reevaluating and modifying decisions

as necessary. The intent is to develop positive perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome by clarifying awareness of valued options (including enrichment opportunities), enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the negotiation to be most effective, students usually need to sample new processes, content, and options.

(4) *Reestablishing and maintaining appropriate and valued relationships.* This involves ongoing interactions that create a sense of trust, open communication, and provide personalized support and direction. Special attention is given to minimizing social control and other practices that lead to psychological reactance and resistance.

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Of constant concern in reengaging students:

>*Ensuring that students feel cared about by staff.* Building a strong, positive relationship with difficult students is a challenge. Obviously, it is not an easy task to decrease well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors. Establishing relationships of mutual respect usually takes the efforts of student/learning support staff and teachers working as a team. Support staff often have the opportunity to get to know these students in greater depth and can take the lead in helping others see what is "special" in a student who hasn't yet made good connections with teachers. Teaming and use of volunteers, aides, and/or peers to provide additional support to these specific students also helps minimize the need for discipline, censure, and other controlling techniques by enabling use of personalized support, guidance, and accommodations as needed.

>*Enhancing positive peer connections.* Disconnected students often don't have a supportive group of friends and feel isolated/alienated. Some may just need a bit of help in connecting with other students in a positive way. Other may need a quick dose of social-emotional learning. For students who have acquired a negative reputation, it will help to provide opportunities for them to take on some attractive, positive roles at school.

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For more on *Burnou*t, see the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on the topic:
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/burnout.htm
For more resources related to reengaging students, see the Quick Find on:
Motivation, Engagement, and Reengagement – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm

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Examples of Online Resources Focused on Personal Coping

Tips for Preventing Student Burnout. https://www.fnu.edu/tips-preventing-student-burnout/

Dealing with Student Burnout.
https://www.einstein.yu.edu/education/student-affairs/academic-support-counseling/medical-school-challenges/study-burnout.aspx

5 Tips to Overcoming Burnout as a College Student.
https://www.concorde.edu/blog/burnout-in-health-care-degree

Top High School Students' Stress and Coping Mechanisms.
https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/August/nyu-study-examines-top-high-school-students-stress-and-coping-mechanisms.html

6 Signs Your Child Has Student Burnout and How to Help.
https://www.learningliftoff.com/6-signs-your-child-has-student-burnout-and-how-to-help/

For Parents: High School Students Facing Year-End Burnout.
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/progress-report/201705/parents-high-school-students-facing-year-end-burnout

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