



Relationships

The Adlerian Team

Educating our teenagers: Is there something missing in the 3 Rs?

By Cathy Lumsden

Imagine a school system where “creativity” is the mission statement...where teachers and students are excited to teach and learn...where students and teachers are valued for their individual abilities, gifts and learning styles...where the curriculum is relevant to real life...where there exists a belief that all students can reach their full potential and are productive, responsible citizens...where students truly believe they have the power to fulfill their dreams...Imagine!

It is becoming more and more apparent that teenagers are stressed and anxious about their academic successes and their futures. What are some of the factors contributing to their stress?

Universities and colleges are becoming more competitive and achieving high marks is mandatory for acceptance. The cost of attending higher education is increasing rapidly. Many adults and teenagers have a belief that you will be a failure if you do not attend university. The removal of Grade 13 has added to students' stress level. The same curriculum needs to be taught in four versus five years, causing a domino effect of heavier workloads, even in the elementary schools.

As a therapist, I meet and work with teenagers who ask questions and make statements about school work such as “How is this material relevant to my future,” “So much information is crammed in that I can't remember it all.” Memorization is the only way to survive in school.” “The school is only focused on marks.” “Where is the fun in learning?” What about the importance of creativity? Is our education defined by memorization of the 3Rs? My belief is that a change needs to occur before adolescents become discouraged and burnt out.

As a community and a province, we need to step back and look at the purpose of education. Perhaps the “3 Rs” can no longer be the cornerstone of our education system. The main purpose of education is for our children to reach their highest potential and create happy successful futures. What is a happy successful future? Many teenagers are seeing their parents working long hours, looking very serious and unhappy, and are then deciding that they do not want this lifestyle. Perhaps, our adolescents are attempting to choose balance in their lives – a balance of work and fun, quality time.

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.” How do we create an environment where our students teach their highest potentials in a creative energized way? What are the ingredients needed to lift the school organization and propel it forward? Here is some food for thought:

• **Focus on students' strengths and abilities:** “Fill the holes versus find the holes.” Too often as teachers and parents we notice what the adolescents are not doing rather than what they are doing. We need to assist our children in knowing their strengths and using them to enhance creativity in their schoolwork. The Pygmalion Effect states that whatever you believe about a person,

even if you never verbalize it, becomes reality. This is demonstrated in a well-known research study. In this study, students' names on report cards were switched. The A students were now C students and the C students were now A students. At the end of the school year, the results demonstrated that the C students remained A students and the A students remained C students.

The teacher unconsciously believed in the C students, which gave them the desire to continue to achieve to their full potential.

• **Make learning fun:** When students are in the lower grades they are taught in a multi-sensory mode – visual, verbal, kinesthetic (experiential). As the students advance through the grades, the teaching style becomes more verbal and the need for memorization increases substantially. Often with memorization, the information is retained only in their short-term memory, not their long-term memory. Consequently, some adolescents perceive learning and school as boring and mundane.

• **Relevance to the real world:** Helping teenagers see how their schoolwork is relevant to the real world and their future careers is critical to their motivation and involvement on a daily basis. An excellent example of a successful school project is “Imagine Chicago” which works in partnership with local businesses and schools to design and implement innovative projects in the community. The young people are given the opportunity to invest in their city's future using the skills they acquire in school. As a result of “Imagine Chicago”, many other projects were developed. For example, seven Chicago public schools and six museums developed a comprehensive structure to improve reading comprehension.

• **Encourage our adolescents to attain balance in their lives:** Assist them in discovering what energizes them and what de-energizes them. Friendships are very important to teenagers because they listen to each other, they support and encourage each other. Sometime friends are the only “cheerleaders” they have in their lives. Perhaps as adults we can focus on balancing and de-stressing our lives so we can focus on being “cheerleaders” for our children.

• **Reinforcing human beings vs human doings:** Society needs to reinforce to both adults and children that as human beings we are not defined by our skill sets or academic credentials, but rather by who we really are and what we contribute back to the world. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Success is: to laugh often and much...to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden path or a redeemed social condition...”

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