

# **FORMING A HELP YOURSELF, YOURSELF (HYY) CLUB: TEACHING DEVELOPMENT THEORIES TO YOUR STUDENTS TO HELP THEM BETTER UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN ADOLESCENCE AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR FUTURES.**

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**PRESENTATION ABSTRACT:** Help Yourself, Yourself is a university and middle grades technology supported program that seeks to help preservice and practicing teachers learn, understand and teach development theories to their students thereby promoting student self knowledge and improving academic and social responsibility taking.

## **IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM**

National statistics indicate that by the fifth year of teaching 45% of educators have left the classroom. In addition, scores of experienced teachers seek to retire. Teacher flight at both ends of the continuum fuels our national teacher shortage. Lack of job satisfaction is the root of the problem.

Closely linked to teacher flight is student achievement. Schools across our nation find that many in their student body cannot pass grade level work and, just as important, they do not try or even care. Students' failure to assume responsibility for learning handicaps the teacher's ability to teach. Student achievement and teacher retention are two monumental problems faced by American education.

The problems of today's schools are profoundly felt in teacher education programs. Student teachers, strong in pedagogy and freshly graduated with behavior management plans and content knowledge, find their students' lack of motivation to learn and failure to achieve, to be two of the biggest stumbling blocks to teaching and learning success. Word filters back and student teachers ask how they can be successful when experienced teachers are unable to teach so that *no child is left behind*.

Training our student teachers so that they will be successful in increasingly diverse classrooms is an enormous problem for teacher education programs. We have not solved the problem of students who fail to learn, nor enabled the job satisfaction that is needed to retain our educators. Clearly, something is lacking. How do we address this problem of more and more children being left behind as our teachers rush for the classroom door?

## **ADDRESSING THE NEED**

We have missed one key element that enables improved student achievement thereby helping to ensure teacher retention. Simply, we have failed to give students the tools that enable them to know themselves, how they develop and how they learn, in other words, allow them to

help themselves, themselves. Self-knowledge provides the understanding that empowers children to make better choices and take more positive action. For example, knowledge of Gardner's multiple intelligences would help students know how they learn best and give them a chance to use their learning strengths to overcome academic weaknesses. Charity James' needs polarities helps students understand their own behavior and the behavior of others. Add service learning opportunities and the tools taught in conflict resolution to these and other development theories, and we find students who can understand their own development and make wise academic and social choices.

We teach our student teachers many development theories and they understand why these theories necessitate differentiated instruction. Because their instruction involves relating theory to classroom practice, they understand how to teach to meet the needs of early adolescents. We believe that if we do not teach them the value of sharing these theories with their own students so middle schoolers can understand themselves and how they learn, we reduce our rate of success by 50%. It is time for early adolescents to accept responsibility for their own learning and behavior. Our project teaches about self and provides vitally needed tools, face to face and online, that enable student teachers, classroom teachers and their students to be successful. In addition to undergraduate student teachers, the pilot project for HYY involved graduate students who were also currently teaching in middle grades classrooms. They implemented several of the development theories in their own classrooms. More about the HYY, the Pilot Project, and its results later, but first here's how HYY got started.

## **THE HISTORY OF HYY**

The HYY Project is named after a school club comprised of middle grades boys who live in Pskov, Russia. Their club meets each week and members discuss home and school issues. The boys brainstorm together and each tries to suggest workable solutions for the others' problems. This discussion ranges from how each can learn more and do better in school to how to get along with peers and parents. This sharing process empowers them to help one another as they take responsibility for their own actions both at home and at school. While we don't know if the boys ultimately affect change in their lives, we are impressed that they take the responsibility for trying to address their own concerns. Because most of the boys' discussions involve issues that are informed by development theory, they actually deal with their understanding of theory as it relates to life. They are not taught theory, but inductively use it through their understanding of right and wrong, human nature and social and emotional needs. How much more powerful could they be if they were actually taught the theory that underlies the operations and solutions to their problems? We cannot answer that, but wondered if this Help Yourself, Yourself approach to problem solving could also work for American youngsters. We surmised that we could teach the theories to them and examine the effect the knowledge of those theories has on how the youngsters conduct their lives.

Currently in the middle grades in America, we do little to teach our early adolescents about the growth and changes they undergo during adolescence. Why do we keep this a mystery? Perhaps if they were aware of how they learn, why they behave as they do socially, why they experience the feelings they do and deal with issues as they do, they would better understand themselves and their actions. With this understanding they might be better able to make improved choices in school and at home.

## **THE PILOT STUDY: PLANNING FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF HYY**

In fall of 2002, a pilot study, *Help Yourself, Yourself*, was conducted by graduate education students who were also classroom teachers. Fifteen taught self knowledge through development theory to 500 early adolescents in 10 different classrooms and schools. The teachers met overwhelming success. They asked their middle grades students to keep journals that chronicled the students' own daily activities. They then asked the students to examine those journal entries for examples of where they saw development theory at work in their lives. At the end of the journaling period, students reflected on how knowledge of their own development influenced their behavior. Were they more deliberate when a moral issue presented itself? Did they better understand what was going on in their lives socially? Were they able to understand their actions in light of the Charity James' needs polarities, and make better choices regarding what they did? Did understanding their style of learning a la Gardner's multiple intelligences make it easier for them to choose assignments that played to their strengths? Finally, were they empowered to make changes in their home and school behaviors that gave them some measure of control in directing their own lives? Did they feel that they had the tools to take responsibility for their own learning?

All of this, as well as subject specific tests, was used to measure the results of the project pre and post implementation. Based on definitive qualitative and quantitative research data, *HYY* found that academic work, test scores and behavior improved in all areas and among all levels of students. The project was wildly popular with the students. "Not surprising since usually their studies seem so irrelevant to them," said one teacher. Middle school students who were absent during any part of the study made a point of being caught up to date and insisted on making up the missed work. They took the study seriously and considered that their involvement allowed them to unlock the "secrets of themselves."

Teachers who taught Gardner's Multiple Intelligences noted the following:

- ❖ Students learned about each other's gifts. Everyone was understood to be smart in her own way.
- ❖ They identified their own strength areas and saw that peers considered them to be valuable assets. There was more to them than they thought. "I'm smarter than I think I am and knowing that helps me build up my self esteem tremendously."
- ❖ They felt that they had the option to shift to a learning approach that called on their learning style strength. Each understood that they had all of the gifts but just developed some areas more than others.
- ❖ Students were interested in learning about MI because it was timely and its understanding and use enabled immediate results. This was not remote teaching and learning.
- ❖ Students thought they could make better choices in the classes they chose to take and the jobs they wanted to try. They had a better understanding of diversity.

Teachers who taught Piaget's cognitive development theory noted the following:

- ❖ One student shared her view on the concrete and abstract stages of learning: "I am in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> stages of development. I have mastered the 3<sup>rd</sup> and am partially in the 4<sup>th</sup>. But my brain always wants to go back to concrete because that is what it is used to. It will keep doing that until I have mastered or gotten used to all aspects of thinking in the 4<sup>th</sup> stage. It is just like when you graduate from elementary school and go to middle school. You don't like the amount of work and get lazy and only do as much as you are used to doing."

Teachers who taught Erikson's social/emotional development noted the following:

- ❖ "Wow! This theory helps you know yourself if you look at what happened in the past."
- ❖ They found that they changed peer groups a lot. "If they don't like you, find someone who does!"
- ❖ They came to the determination that knowing themselves was a prerequisite for success.
- ❖ Teachers found that this was the only time students felt anyone wanted to hear about their lives. Teachers found students to be stressed, tired and wanting increased family time.
- ❖ Teachers' comments meant a lot to them and the project made them feel empowered to chart the course of their own lives.
- ❖ Teachers found that they knew their students better.

Teachers who taught Charity James' Needs Polarities theory: the need to need/the need to be needed, the need to move inwards/the need to affect the outer world, the need for routine/the need for intensity, the need for myth and legend/the need for fact, the need for stillness/the need for activity, the need for separateness/the need for belonging, noted the following:

- ❖ Knowing and understanding the theory made students think more about their lives and what they do to try to meet their own needs.
- ❖ The teacher was much more aware of the needs of the students – providing more intense school experiences so that unsafe, after-school, risk-taking was not necessary, providing more physical activity, students need for control of their own environments – sitting where they wanted to in the cafeteria and talking with friends, students' need for alone time – going to their room at home and shutting the door. Parents misunderstand the intent of that action and take it personally.
- ❖ Students felt they were always being analyzed and never taken seriously and that teachers had all the power and did not use it in the best interests of the students.

Teachers who taught Kohlberg's moral development theories noted the following:

- ❖ After learning about moral development stages, 2/3<sup>rd</sup> felt empowered to stand up for what was right.
- ❖ Students had insight into why they behave as they do when they are involved in a tricky situation.
- ❖ Students pledged not to make snap decisions, to care about themselves and others and to be empowered to change their behavior.
- ❖ "After reading about Kohlberg's ideas about moral development in class, I went into some deep thinking. I found myself questioning every moral dilemma no matter how small. I think that knowledge, experience, and wisdom can help people become more morally mature in the decisions they make. Some people cannot look past 10 minutes while others can sacrifice for years later. If everyone knew and practiced Kohlberg and raised their stages, the world would be a better place."

Results in general:

- ❖ Academic: Students were more serious about learning. They knew their own learning styles and made better assignment choices when differentiated instruction allowed for it.

- ❖ Socially: Students better understood how peers and peer groups operated. They felt they could buy into groups or not. Students recognized their own needs and saw how those needs influenced the choices they made.
- ❖ Morally: When students examined dilemmas they realized they had a choice in what they did and could move up the moral development scale by virtue of what they chose to do.
- ❖ Teacher: Teachers found that they had a better understanding of the needs of early adolescents, knew individual children better, felt more success in teaching since the students tried harder and achieved more. Great job satisfaction!

The project quote worth remembering came from a Special Education student. “Why do people always think they know what’s best for us? Now, we know about ourselves and we can make choices for ourselves.”

### **IMPLEMENTING HELP YOURSELF, YOURSELF (HYYP) AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL**

In addition to undergraduate preservice teachers and graduate students who are also teachers, the HYY project also seeks to train current practicing teachers. A three day Help Yourself, Yourself Summer Institute was held in 2003. It involved Centennial Campus Middle School, a local middle school with a large percentage of low achieving students. Workshop goals were to refresh teachers’ understanding of development theories and the importance of them to teaching and learning and to develop lessons to be used to teach development theories to their own students. HYY is currently being implemented at CCMS through the Advisor/Advisee program. Early results suggest student empowerment. Teachers, students and parents have the HYY website to consult for all aspects of the project. As results are received from the project they will be added to the site. The URL to access the site is: <http://www.ced.ncsu.edu:8480/hyy/>

This program is fully replicable and a website has been developed and will be maintained for the program. HYY is deceptively simple in its approach, but the layers suggest that it is inclusive of all students’ and teachers’ needs. Students will be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning thus raising grades and improving behavior. Student and practicing teachers will more fully understand how students learn and develop, and be more effective in classes that better recognize and meet student’s needs. This encourages students to learn and teachers to remain teaching.

#### References

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