

f Penguins and Personalities

Two years ago, a sheepish junior high student entered the school office and announced he was harassed and stalked by penguins daily. A diligent search surrounding confines revealed no manifestation of penguins or any other birds. In an attempt to reassure the troubled individual, I informed the student that penguins (of any variety) are not indigenous to northwest Indiana. There is no doubt in my mind that the student in the office truly believed that penguins were, indeed, stalking him. Although this real-life case

exhibits an extreme detachment from reality, it illustrates an important lesson when dealing with junior high students: Perception has very little to do with reality.

Pubertal hormones twist and contort the very infrastructure of their human nature, not unlike Lon Chaney Jr. slipping into The Wolf Man. Because junior high students are not quite adults, but no longer children, it's not surprising that the world they believe to be real viciously trumps the real world. Educators could easily record a long list of irrational, self-deprecating statements made by students whose lives have recently crashed and burned. They make declarations such as "My parents hate me," "Nobody in my class likes me," "I'm ugly," "The world would be a better place if I were off without me," "What's the use of me? I know I'll just be a failure," "Nobody understands how awful I am." All of these statements are true actions, and yet all of these statements feel real to junior high students.

Motivation vs. Reality

As an educator to deal with this student's clouded sense of reality? The answer is to be in a better understanding of the real issue. Most junior high students have an underdeveloped sense of self-efficacy and, thus, don't believe in their own ability to successfully complete designated tasks.

For example, a junior high student came into my office last year, tears streaming down her face, lamenting that she didn't understand algebra

and couldn't understand why anyone with a shred of decency would subject algebra to another human being. After consoling the distraught teen, I discovered the student was actually earning a B+ in her algebra class. Through agonizing verbal interaction I discovered the real issue was not her understanding of algebra, but rather her belief that she would never be able to get an A in the class. As a result, she denounced her own ability, bragged on her current and future failure, and would have begun flagellating herself if a flogging instrument had been present.

Carol Dweck writes about self-fulfilling prophecies in *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, explaining, "The view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life." Fixations on success or fixations on failure are powerful motivators. Unfortunately, many junior high students boast a remarkable talent for fixating on perceived negative events and the overwhelming possibilities of failure.

Students exhibiting low levels of academic self-efficacy are often labeled as unmotivated. In *The Motivation Breakthrough: 6 Secrets to Turning On the Tuned-Out Child*, author Richard Lavoie emphatically counters the unmotivated label with the idea that "All students are motivated." Even the student who is sleeping in class is motivated. He might not be motivated to listen to the lecture or participate in the lab project, but he is motivated to sleep. The problem is not lack of motivation, but switching the motivation from sleeping mode

Lack of academic self-efficacy and the accompanying motivational withdrawal is the result of what Paul Coughlin calls timid living. Coughlin, who is the author of *No More Jellyfish, Chickens, or Wimps: Raising Secure, Assertive Kids in a Tough World*, writes that we are "raising children who are passive, pleasant, and malleable rather than innovative, proactive, and bold." Far too many students are overpowered and disabled by the weight of what they perceive to be insurmountable instead of persevering toward a hard-fought victory.

The development of self-efficacy in junior high students can be a challenge. Supportive suggestions for improving self-efficacy and motivation include:

- Developing meaningful relationships with students;
- Concentrating on effort above ability;
- Encouraging perseverance in the face of adversity;
- Refraining from long lectures (and excessive punishments);
- Promoting parental partnerships;
- Developing growth-oriented mindsets;
- Stating the purpose for learning and activities;
- Developing critical thinking skills;
- Promoting the concept of striving for personal bests; and
- Reducing classroom competition (unless it is competition against self).

If students can believe that penguins are secretly plotting and openly stalking, algebra is a medieval torture device, and sleeping is a viable classroom participation strategy, then it stands to reason the possibility exists that junior high students can rechannel more effective ways of thinking about themselves, their abilities, and the world around them. And that is the outlook we must promote in the classroom. ☐

R. Allen Boone is principal of St. Paul Lutheran School in Michigan City