
Using Stephen R. Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* in Education

A review of academic literature on the principles taught in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and how these principles apply in the education setting.

The Leader in Me is a whole school transformation process that was developed in conjunction with Principal Muriel Summers of A.B. Combs Leadership Magnet Elementary School as a means to turn around a failing school by teaching 21st Century leadership and other life skills to students in an academic setting. The genesis of the program was to build these 21st Century social and emotional skills to help improve the overall success of students. Principal Summers and the other teachers at A.B. Combs discovered that essential to building these 21st Century skills is teaching students *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and practicing these habits within and outside their school. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* has in an educational context by aligning each habit with established scholarly research on education success.

An examination of the available 7 Habits documents and artifacts have resulted in two primary bodies of literature used in this review: 1) research on systemic education reform; and, 2) research on social and emotional learning. Each paragraph in this report begins with a description of the specific 7 Habit principle, including the beliefs informing the principle, and the key design and content components. The subsequent paragraphs provide a sampling of classic and contemporary research, practices, and programs that align with the relevant habit. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* are:

1. Be proactive
2. Begin with the end in mind
3. Put first things first
4. Think win-win
5. Seek first to understand, then be understood
6. Synergize
7. Sharpen the saw

Habit 1 - Be proactive


Covey's first habit, "be proactive," encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and the direction of their lives through personal choice and initiative. Students are taught to set the direction of their lives regardless of individual circumstance and condition through proactive, responsible choices. Being successful in Habit 1 is largely about choosing a proactive rather than a reactive mindset. For a proactive person, Covey explains that our behavior is a product of personal choice, independent of environment, while a reactive person allows personal environment to dictate behavior (Covey, 2013).

Dr. Carol Dweck, a renowned psychologist from Stanford University, has spent the last twenty years researching intelligence and motivation. Dr. Dweck's work about mindset runs parallel with many of Dr. Covey's principles about being proactive. In Dr. Dweck's work, which is centered on the differences between fixed mindsets and growth mindsets, she explains how our perception of intelligence can impact our success in life. Dr. Dweck describes that an individual with a fixed mindset believes that because of condition, one's qualities are unchangeable, while someone with a growth mindset believes that personal qualities can be cultivated independent of condition. Dr. Dweck explains that while all of us differ, through personal application and experience, we can all improve our talents, aptitudes, interests, and temperaments (Carol S. Dweck, 2006).

Being proactive and having a growth mindset are even more alike concepts than they may appear. A review of the supporting literature about each concept reveals that proactivity and a growth mindset require a similar frame of mind that motivates individuals to take greater responsibility for personal progress.

In 2007, Dr. Dweck co-authored a study published in the *Child Development* journal titled "*Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention.*" The researchers looked at 373 students over a two-year period as they made the transition to junior high school. The study measured students' mindsets to determine if they believed in reactive or proactive theories of personal intelligence. Students were asked questions about intelligence, goals, beliefs about effort, and responses to failure. The study found that students with a fixed, reactive mindset experienced an almost immediate decline in grades, and slowly did worse and worse over the two-year period. The students with a proactive mindset, however, exhibited an increase in grades and overall academic achievement. The research confirms that students who endorse theories of malleable intelligence hold positive beliefs about initiative and proactivity, which, in turn, boosts academic achievement.

Additionally, author Bob Sullo added that educators need to move away from traditional fear, coercion, and reward and reinforcement to motivate students and instead move to a mindset where students "are internally motivated." When students are internally motivated, Sullo says, students are much more successful; they are




able to make learning fun and they are much more likely to continue with their education in college. This is directly related to Dr. Dweck’s philosophy where having a growth mindset means one is internally motivated. Being proactive connotes internal motivation as a student approaches his or her learning in a proactive versus retroactive manner (Sullo, 2009).

Contemporary researchers agree with the concept of encouraging young students to take personal initiative in learning. A 2011 study published by MIT’s Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences investigated traditional methods of teaching and its impact on children’s exploration and discovery. In the study, groups of children were individually presented a toy that could reflect images, play music, squeak and flash lights. One group – using a traditional method – was given detailed instruction from the experimenter on how to operate the toy. A second group was simply presented with the toy and encouraged to proactively investigate it for themselves. The differences were significant. Researchers found the group who received detailed instruction played with the toy for significantly less time and discovered fewer of its functions than the proactive group. The researchers concluded that “[students’] tendency to explore and discover new properties [is] limited in pedagogical settings,” and that strict instruction limits the range of hypotheses children consider (Bonawitz, Shafto, Gweon, Goodman, Spelke, & Schulz, 2011). The study suggests that young students who are taught principals in personal responsibility and proactive behavior can be better suited to explore and discover the world around them.

Habit 2 - Begin with the end in mind

“Begin with the end in mind” focuses on teaching students to think about an end result. Students are encouraged to visualize what they want to be and do so by developing personal mission statements. Mission statements are described by Covey as a personal creed, philosophy, or constitution that can help students gain a sense of self-worth and direction through clearly stated values, goals, and beliefs (Covey, 2014). Students are taught that the realization of their personal vision is dependent upon the ability to plan ahead and set meaningful goals.

Volumes of research support the benefit of teaching students principles in planning and setting goals. For example, a study published in *The Journal of Experimental Education* investigated the effects that individual lessons in goal-setting had on a student’s academic performance. The study examined two groups of students: the first received weekly, individual goal-setting instruction while the second received none. The results of the study indicate that students who have been educated in goal-setting principles show significantly higher classroom achievement (Gaa, 1973).




Sue Shellenbarger, writing for the Gallup poll, spoke of the power of goal-setting in Bruce Junior High in East Texas. Since instituting a goal-setting program, “test scores and state ratings have risen.” Shellenbarger continued, expounding on a Gallup poll that found a majority of students lack faith in their ability to achieve goals and a mere 35% believe “they can find ways around obstacles to their goals.” However, as in the example of Bruce Junior High, students can gain faith in their ability to achieve goals (Shellenbarger, 2010). Habit 3 helps develop this faith by helping students gain the skill of goal-setting early in their lives.

A large body of research suggests that schools who promote goal setting in the classroom can play a significant role in shaping students’ personal goals, motivation, and achievement (Wolters, 2004). Additionally, researchers have found that the environment can play a crucial part in teaching goal-setting habits effectively. In 2012, the *Review of Educational Research* published a meta-study synthesizing published literature concerning classroom goal structures in middle and secondary schools. Goal structures describe the framework of how classrooms promote goal-setting in academic situations. Using meta-analytical methods, the study sought to quantitatively investigate the relationship between classroom goal structures and the impact on motivational, academic, and psychological outcomes. The research included 49 studies consisting of 31,409 participants ranging from the 6th through the 12th grade. Several major findings emerged from the review: first, early adolescence is a critical period in the relationship between goal-setting and achievement; second, goal structures are associated with higher levels of students’ competence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy; third, teachers’ socio-emotional and instructional support in goal-setting is positively related to students’ academic and personal achievement (Rolland, 2012).

In 2009, lead researcher Nancy Hill of Harvard University published a meta-study in the journal of *Developmental Psychology* where she examined 50 studies of more than 50,000 students over a 26-year period. In trying to understand adult involvement in childhood academic achievement, Dr. Hill concluded that “instilling the value of education and linking school work to future goals is what this age group needs to excel in school” (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Habit 3 – Put first things first

“Put first things first” teaches students how to “organize and execute around priorities.” Students are given essential tools to help them develop a self-disciplined approach to life and time management. For example, students are taught how to set schedules, follow a plan, and to make responsible choices centered on self-discipline and personal priorities. Covey explains that Habit 3 is about managing purpose, values, roles and priorities (Covey, 2013).



The theory of self-discipline and prioritization has been well documented through empirical research. A study published by the *Positive Psychology Center* analyzed two groups of eighth grade students and tracked how self-disciplined versus non self-disciplined students performed academically. The study found that “Highly self-disciplined adolescents outperformed their more impulsive peers on every academic performance variable, including report-card grades, standardized achievement-test scores, admission to a competitive high school, and attendance” (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). They further demonstrated that “self-discipline measured in the fall predicted more variance in each of these outcomes than did IQ, and unlike IQ, self-discipline predicted gains in academic performance over the school year” (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Thought leaders in education support many of the principles taught in Habit 3. For example, in his book *What Works in Schools*, Dr. Robert Marzano identifies the need to instill a sense of self-discipline and responsibility in children. Furthermore, Dr. Marzano outlines a number of educator-identified areas of “successful schools” including: providing students with motivational training; implementing a self-discipline and responsibility program; student tracking of learning goals; involving students in designing of projects programs, and training and supporting parents.

Habit 4 - Think win-win:

“Think win-win” focuses on teaching students skills in interpersonal relationships and human interaction. Students are taught that win-win is a frame of mind which encourages them to constantly seek mutually beneficial solutions in all human interactions. Covey explains that win-win is based on the idea that one person’s success is not achieved at the expense or exclusion of the success of others.” Win-win is about finding agreements and solutions that are mutually beneficial and satisfying (Covey, 2013).

Covey’s win-win philosophy is founded on principles similar to Mary Parker Follett’s early work in conflict resolution. Follett is often considered one of the foremost female visionaries in the field of organizational behavior and is responsible for developing early key concepts in conflict resolution and management theory. Her work in conflict resolution continues to have an impact today. For example, her integrated approach forms the basis of what is now commonly referred to as “win-win” (Tonn, 2003). Follett taught that there are three main ways of dealing with conflict: *domination*, which creates a win-lose scenario; *compromise*, where both parties settle; and *integrated*, where a solution has been found in which both desires have found a place. The first two methods result in a scenario where one party sacrifices something to the benefit of the other. Follett explains that both are unsatisfactory because “conflict will come up again and again


in some other form” since “we give up part of our desire” (Graham, 2003). *Integrated*, on the other hand, like Habit 4, encourages people to look for win-win solutions that are mutually agreeable.

In a paper published by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), researchers explained that while conflict is both natural and inevitable, there has been a significant increase in violent conflicts in school. The NASP further points out that “experts in the area of conflict resolution agree that schools must purposefully teach students effective conflict resolution skills because they may not acquire such skills incidentally” (Chittooran & Hoenig, 2004). A study published by the *Society for Research in Child Development* investigated the effects of conflict resolution training with young children. The study concluded that: first, trained children used significantly more constructive strategies to resolve conflict; second, untrained children can develop in unhealthy ways that are destructive to themselves, the people around them, and society as a whole; and third, integrating conflict training into an academic setting increases the probability that conflict programs will be adopted by the children (Stevahn, et. al., 2000).

Habit 5 – Seek first to understand, then to be understood:

“Seek first to understand, then to be understood” seeks to develop interdependence skills through empathetic listening. Covey explains that communication is life’s most important skill and that through empathetic listening we can really come to understand another’s perspective (Covey, 2013). Students are taught to “listen to other people’s ideas and feelings... [and to] see things from their viewpoints” (Covey, 2014). Developing good listening skills impacts students positively by helping them effectively work, understand, and cooperate with others. Students are given the opportunity to develop critical listening skills so they can empathize with others.

Covey explains that empathetic listening is more than registering words, it is about listening with the intent to understand (Covey, 2013). Studies show that effective listening improves students’ educational success. From a research study supporting effective listening, researchers at Penn State remarked that “effective listening is essential to undergraduate success.” They continued by saying “listening is the foundation of critical thinking” and understanding (Thompson & Lientz, 2004). However, students often do not receive the opportunity to fully develop listening skills in traditional school settings. A study published by the *Review of Educational Research* argues that “listening is no longer considered a peripheral aspect of the communicative process” (Duker, 1964). Furthermore, a study by the U.S. Department of Labor identified listening, along with mathematics, reading, writing, and speaking, as essential skills graduates must learn in order to be competent in the work place (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).




From a report published in the *Review of Educational Research*, which analyzed 107 master’s theses and 128 doctoral dissertations about listening, author Sam Duker, likewise noted the power of effective listening skills. Mr. Duker’s work points out that “there is a high positive relationship between school achievement and listening ability.” He went on to say that effective listening positively impacted creativity, relationships, learning, and reading comprehension. Additionally, Baldauf (1960) conducted a study on 352 fifth grade students and found an overall correlation between intelligence and school achievement and between listening and school achievement to be identical.

The Core Knowledge Foundation, a popular publisher and distributor of academic curriculum supporting 1,230 schools, stresses the importance of developing communication skills in students (Core Knowledge, 2014). In their Core Knowledge Sequence, the Foundation encourages a broader view of language by developing skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Core Knowledge explains that a student’s reading and writing abilities are predicated upon their abilities in listening and speaking. They go on to say that helping young students to develop the ability to listen and understand is an integral part of childhood education (Core Knowledge, 2010).

Habit 6 – Synergize:

“Synergize” is about teaching students to work well in groups. It implies that team members work well with others, are humble, and respect and seek out the opinions of others. Synergizing can best be described as creative cooperation. The skills for creative cooperation are achieved through cooperative learning. The habit is about educating students in cooperative learning techniques like peer mentoring, to work well with others, teamwork, be humble, respect others, and value other people’s strengths; Covey describes it as “two heads are better than one” (Covey, 2013).

Cooperative learning refers to instructional methods where teachers organize students into groups, which work together to help each other learn academic material (Slavin, 2009). Cooperative learning methods vary but the practice has continued to grow in popularity. A national survey from the 1990s found that 79% of elementary teachers and 62% of middle school teachers reported regular use of cooperative learning (Puma, 1993). Researchers Marjan and Mozghan Laal have shown that cooperative learning “promotes critical thinking skills much better than competitive or individualistic learning environments.” Additionally, Marjan and Mozghan Laal’s research shows that “cooperative teams achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than learners who work quietly as individuals.” Furthermore, they show that synergizing through cooperative learning leads to better results academically and professionally (Laal & Laal, 2012).



In a study published by the *American Educational Research Association*, researchers Johnson and Johnson (2009) wrote that more than 1,200 studies have been conducted on the relative merits of cooperative learning. The literature communicates that cooperation “tends to promote greater long-term retention, higher intrinsic motivation and expectations for success, more creative thinking, greater transfer of learning, and more positive attitudes toward the task and school.” They go on to say that, “Although many teaching procedures have been recommended over the past 60 years, very few are still around. Almost none are as widespread and institutionalized into instructional practices as is cooperative learning” (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).


Cooperative learning has become commonplace in contemporary education and the work environment. For example, the Success for All Foundation, a popular whole-school reform program with more than 1,100 participating schools, uses cooperative learning extensively to engage and motivate students (Success for All Foundation, 2013). Success for All explains that “cooperative learning is used all the time. Students work together productively to learn and take responsibility for one another” (Success for All Foundation, 2014). Additionally, the University of Minnesota’s Cooperative Learning Institute has found that how teachers encourage student-student interaction has a lot to say about how well students learn, how they feel about school and the teacher, how they feel about each other, and how much self-esteem they have (Johnson & Johnson, 2014).

Habit 7 – Sharpen the saw:

“Sharpen the saw” is about exercising what Covey calls the four dimensions of our nature: physical, social/emotional, spiritual, and mental (Covey, 2013). Students are encouraged to enhance their mental, physical, personal, and social capabilities through activities such as good reading, meditation, diet and exercise, and spending time with family and friends.

Numerous studies have found a strong link between academic success and enhancing mental, physical, and social capacity. One such study performed in Sweden analyzed the statistical difference between students’ academic performance in schools that took part in a national physical exercise intervention program and those that did not. The study found that “Overall, the odds for achieving the national goals [for reading, math, and language] increased [in intervention schools compared to non-intervention schools]” the study concluded with 95% confidence that children who participated in Sweden’s national physical exercise intervention program scored statistically significantly higher than those who did not participate (Käll, et. al., 2013).

A similar study looked at the Mauritius Early Childhood Development program which seeks to instill habits of “nutrition, health care, hygiene, and physical activity” (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2013). Children



who participated in the program were found to exhibit “fewer behavior problems and fewer symptoms of schizotypal personality and disorganization as adults. They were also less likely to [engage in] criminal activity, another indication of the role of self-regulation” (Friedman-Krauss & Barnett, 2013).


Another study showed that a literary intervention program focused on reading and discussing high quality literature “was found to lead to significantly different ratings of literary quality in the children’s writing... This effect was significant at the .03 level” (Dressel, 1990). Hence, when children took the time to read and discuss high quality literature, they saw dramatic improvements in academic achievement, particularly in writing.

In addition, in his book *Inspiring the Best in Students*, Jonathan Erwin discuss the importance of developing five dimensions- physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual- that make up the “whole human being.” He states that when we address the social and emotional dimensions of a student, we simultaneously improve the physical and intellectual dimensions. Erwin found that K-12 is the critical time to encourage emotional, social, and moral development due to the development of the frontal cortex of the brain. Erwin further discusses the increased trend to promote the education of the whole child. His claims are supported by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) in their comment that “the whole child cannot happen if emphasis is placed solely on academic achievement” (ASCD, 2007). Moreover, the ASCD recommends that school districts incorporate social and emotional learning that focuses on developing the whole child into school programs.

Notably, a study entitled *The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth Grade Students*, which was the largest and one of the most anticipated studies on social-emotional development, found a positive academic payoff when schools invest in developing character dimensions in young students. Moreover, the study, which reviewed 317 reports involving 324,303 children, concluded that social and emotional development appears to be among the most successful youth-development interventions for K-8 students (Payton, et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Each of the principles taught in Stephen R. Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* are aligned with educational practices that are well documented as effective at improving student achievement in an educational setting. By teaching students to be proactive, set goals, develop cooperative relationships, and build personal emotional and social capacity, these principles improve learning outcomes, enhance student experiences, and ensure the cultivation of skills that strengthen student achievement. Likewise the *7 Habits* principles do well to



point students and educators to the need to focus on social and emotional learning broadly. Such learning is not only helpful, but appears to be crucial to student academic success.

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