

AN ARTICLE FROM  EDUCATION **DIVE**

# Cultivating self-awareness to move learning forward

Promoting the development of executive function to help students become self-devised strategic thinkers



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When walking through the hallways of average schools, it is not uncommon for the educators to hear comments such as “I am slow,” “I don’t like writing papers,” “math is easy for me,” or “I am a terrible test taker,” suggesting that students have gained reasonable insights into themselves as they identify and verbalize the areas of challenge that may be the source of a roadblock in academic and personal progress. However, most educators are also aware that such observations are neither fully accurate nor do they lead to any constructive improvement in students changing their own destiny by utilizing these insights to shaping academic effort or crafting strategic approaches to improve learning experiences.

Daniel Goleman, author of the book *Emotional Intelligence*, describes self-awareness as the “ability to monitor our inner world – our thoughts and feelings.” In a co-authored article **he, Richard Boyatzio and Annie McKee** write, “This means having a deep understanding of one’s strengths, limitations, values, and motives. People with high self-awareness are honest with themselves about themselves. They are realistic, neither overly self-critical nor excessively optimistic.”

Self-awareness is arguably the most crucial academic skill and a building block of self-regulation, which according to Eisenberg et. al (2010), is the balancing and management of one’s emotions in everyday life. Effective learners successfully guide attention and intention towards the self as a doer, thinker, and an evaluator and help yield academic and social goals set by self for self.

As the French poet Arthur Rimbaud beautifully described “Je est quelqu’un d’autre” (I am someone else), self-awareness requires taking into consideration a perspective that belongs to the other. It is unquestionably the most effective tool for self-change, but it cannot be activated without the involvement of the self as the other – either a neutral observer or as a feedback provider or a critique. Hence, self-awareness is a dynamic and constantly evolving entity that is thought to be constructed through the interactions with others (Rochat, P. 2004). The emergent self-awareness in children is characterized by the realization that who they see in the mirror is their own self AND that self is also perceived by others, is marked by a certain level of self-consciousness, which, if not kept in check, can lead to paralyzing shame and self-doubt.

A crucial developmental component that fuels self-awareness is the concept of Theory of Mind. According to Premack, D., G., & Woodruff, G. (1978) the concept of the *Theory of Mind* refers to the ability to attribute mental states - beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc. to oneself and others and, to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one's own. Emergence of these pivotal skills benefit the developing child in three specific ways:

- By recognizing their own strengths and challenges, the self-aware students begin to experience lessened fear and anxiety and view challenges with a growth mindset
- By learning to identify the nature of personal errors and glitches and accepting them to be part and parcel of learning new skills, the self-aware students begin to seek help with a growth mindset
- By becoming aware of the impact of their own behaviors and actions on others, the self-aware students attune with the feelings and needs

of others and begin to regulate behaviors and actions and hang-back more readily.

In spite of these known discoveries in cognitive psychology and social sciences, there exists a surprising gap between the science and the art of classroom practices that can effectively and consistently foster self-awareness in students. Conventional wisdom affirms that a highly cultivated self-awareness can be an effective tool to enable learners to make better decisions, manage achievement related stress, and ultimately, establish purposeful self-advocacy. However, the higher order thinking skills that academics promote rarely overlap with the domain of building self-knowledge. In fact, in today's academic environment, the effort to imbibe self-awareness practices in our classrooms are often met with fear, frustration, and pushback.

So how do we help our students and their families understand that the true benefits of teaching Executive Function skills through the explicit development of self-awareness outweighs the discomfort it often creates where the learners have to explicitly acknowledge their own shortcomings, weaknesses, and habits?

Here are seven ways to foster the development of Executive Function skills and self-awareness to assist students to gain clear direction and cast a greater influence over their own academic and personal lives:

### **1. Help students discover their Learning Profile based on their perceived strengths and challenges.**

**Here's how to do it:** Work with students to create a personal inventory. Ask them to reflect on what they do well and what they struggle with in, not just academics but all areas of their lives including after school activities, and time with their friends and family. Next, use these self-observations to shape goals and relationships. Work with students to set up interpersonal feedback sessions to craft socially appropriate goals that are designed to self-correct based on how behaviors and actions affect others. Help them think about how they can use their strengths to achieve their goals while compensating for their weaknesses. Teach students how to refer back to these goals and specific strengths and challenges when providing feedback so you can help them come up with alternate plans when they get stuck.

## **2. Introduce the language of emotion and then help students cultivate the capacity for emotional appraisal and self-regulation:**

**Here's how to do it:** Throughout the day, initiate classroom conversations that prompt students to identify emotions pertaining to skills assessment, task complexity and executionary demand. Facilitate listening exercises so that students can practice how best to identify and reciprocate feelings in others. Model emotional awareness and empathetic behavior to demonstrate how to control and redirect emotions effectively and socially appropriately. Explore the benefits of emotional intelligence together to more clearly communicate with others and build stronger, more resilient, and cooperative relationships.

## **3. Teach students how to mindfully examine their own thinking and awareness:**

**Here's how to do it:** During the school day, schedule specific moments to stop and identify cognitive and emotional load and its impact on attitude and performance. Help students recognize what is causing stress and what is producing confidence. Ask students to come up with strategies for working through challenges and ways to adjust negative affect and fixed mindset to attain goals. Finally, discuss the relationship between effort and deep work that produces higher quality work.

#### **4. Invite students to assess glitches and seek and accept feedback:**

**Here's how to do it:** Understand the growth mindset, and apply this understanding to feedback. Focus on the learning process and a student's strengths and challenges and praise effort in learning. Model and discuss a growth mindset by sharing your own struggles and inviting students to do the same. Ask students to listen and restate the feedback. Then ask the student to pause and reflect on the comments. Finally, ask students to develop their own action plan for improvement, thus putting them in charge of developing their own skills and abilities, instead of doing it for them.

#### **5. Through written or video journaling, develop students' appreciation for objectivity and third person perspective taking:**

**Here's how to do it:** Help students think about motivation when reading literature or studying history. Ask students to write about the motives that a character might have had for certain actions. Ask them to consider the motivations for multiple characters and explore how the motives may be in conflict with each other. Through journaling or video creation, ask the students to consider their own motives for certain behaviors. Ask them to imagine stepping into the shoes of the characters and people they are studying to further understand how people make decisions. Teach about ways a person's culture and environment might impact their personality, actions, and perspectives.

## **6. Teaching ways to know the Big-Picture (or the WHY):**

**Here's how to do it:** The notion of the big-picture or the gestalt is critical in connecting the self to the larger context where the student is functioning as a member of the group or culture or the universe. Ask students to consider “why” they are asked to do certain tasks and how they matter. When giving assignments, emphasize the task and the objectives. Ask students to consider ways to know if they are on track to meet the goal or complete the task. Suggest students write down the big-picture goals at the top of the page where it can be easily referenced while the student is working. Help students practice strategies for managing distractions and keeping focus on the “why” of each assignment. Identify reasons “why” assignments are important and how the lessons learned will impact other areas of their lives. Help students understand that learning happens over time, and reward students when they make meaningful connections between something they've learned through an assignment and something else in their world.



## 7. Help students develop an open mind and integrate new insights into flexibility, and the knowledge of self to formulate self-directed strategies:

**Here's how to do it:** Teach students the importance of a plurality of ideas and ask them to purposely engage with or seek out the ideas from those who differ from themselves. Create assignments where multiple opinions in opposition to their own are required. Make your classroom a place where students of all backgrounds can respectfully share opinions based on content and insights based on personal behaviors. Model open-mindedness during classroom discussions by respectfully challenging ideas, encouraging skepticism, presenting counter arguments, or asking tough questions. Give students space to explore thinking in an environment that is patient, flexible, and tolerant.

By implementing these seven self-awareness techniques into the teaching model, teachers and parents can help foster a growth mindset and build behaviors that lead to self-devised strategic thinking. Through the direct and explicit teaching of Executive Function skills, educators can help students become more aware of their own strengths and challenges, as well as, be empathetic towards the strengths and challenges of others, ultimately becoming collaborative learners who discover the magic of moving learning forward by exploring diverse ideas and fostering a better understanding of how to achieve goals independently and collectively.

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## About the Author:

Sucheta Kamath is a speech-language pathologist, TEDx speaker, graduate of Leadership Atlanta, and an entrepreneur whose new software ExQ® just launched in the Ed-Tech space. ExQ®, is a patented research-informed system designed to enhance Executive Function through game-based personalized training. The exclusive ExQ curriculum prompts thinking to ignite processes essential for academic, emotional, and social well-being. Through the strengthening of Executive Functioning, ExQ develops skills core to your student's success in academics, in sports, in the arts, and in relationships. Sucheta's program of interactive games teaches students to learn HOW to learn, empowering the whole child to achieve their maximum potential in school, at home, and in life, and do it with all they've got.

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