

School Anxiety and the Tutor

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Childhood insecurities often occur with an emotional component. These unfortunate childhood roadblocks to happiness can stem from a variety of experiences, including dispositions to shyness, social awkwardness, or they can serve as an adaptive strategy. Often these strategies can be simple attempts to reduce new pressures and stresses in their young lives. Muris, Meesters, Merckelbach, Sermon, and Zwakhalen (1988) report that nearly 70% of elementary school children have everyday worries and anxiety, and 5% of primary school children exhibit signs of extreme fear and anxiety. Often these anxieties affect school performance. The calm and focused attention of caring and knowledgeable tutors can ameliorate these stresses and eliminate student-based roadblocks to academic success.

Anxiety occurs in the Obvious Places

A seemingly obvious place where stress can manifest itself in children is in school. School activities, both inside and outside the classroom, are prominent places where stress can manifest itself. Stress is a common experience for children, whether in school or some other social situation. Homework, competition for good grades, fear of failure, peer pressure and bullying are some of the more common reasons for stress in school (Allen & Klein, 1996). Anxiety over situations such as answering and asking questions in class, attending social events, showing assertiveness, and demonstrating in front of peers can frequently lead to avoidance of many different social situations, including school activities (Fisher, Masia-Warner, & Klein, 2004). Student avoidance of these situations can also lead to other problems such as poor school performance, depression, and possible substance abuse (Fisher, Masia-Warner, & Klein, 2004).

Anxiety and School Performance

Anxiety can produce poor school performance. Students can become overwhelmed, causing a distracting level of stress, which in turn can produce additional anxiety (Woolfolk, 2007). Anxiety can

interfere with focused attention, learning, and test-taking (Woolfolk, 2007). According to Woolfolk (2007), highly anxious students feel the need to divide their attention between learning new information and worrying about the correct answer. Anxious students have poor study skills and, if the information is not taught in a well-organized manner, anxiety levels in these situations may increase (Woolfolk, 2007). When it comes to testing, many students find it hard to demonstrate their knowledge due to “freezing-up” or lacking the skills necessary for effective test-taking (Naveh-Benjamin, McKeachie, & Lin, 1987).

Tutors provide a Life-Line of Academic Support

Stressful experiences are a normal part of the academic experience for a segment of our school-bound population, particularly those who struggle academically and find it difficult to find that “lifeline” of academic support that leads to newfound classroom success. Skilled and caring tutors often represent a students’ unique opportunity to return to a path that brings academic confidence. Tutors can take small steps to reduce a child’s anxiety directly related to a particular academic subject or a generalized lack of confidence in their academic skills.

Tutor sessions can be that safe place where children can safely experiment with various means of solving a variety of subject-related problems, all the while discovering that incorrect answers are simply steps along the path to finding the correct answer. Students should be encouraged to think critically about the problem at hand and consider logical ways to solve it. Finding the correct answer to any problem is a learned skill that begins with asking a direct question in a consequence-free and supportive environment.

Scaffolding Provides a Safe Place to Practice and Learn

Scaffolded instruction, as outlined in Figure 1, allows for the student to conduct safe experimentation and is a recommended strategy to be used in tutoring sessions. The teaching strategies of tutor-supported “*direct instruction, guided instruction, and independent practice,*” afford the tutee an opportunity to learn through the student-centered practice of collaboration. This tutor-tutee interaction results in a student’s independent practice, and developing a sense of *agency*— “Yes, *I can do this,*” or

the mastery of an academic skill. This format of academic collaboration is ideally suited for the tutoring session because it allows for consequence-free problem solving.

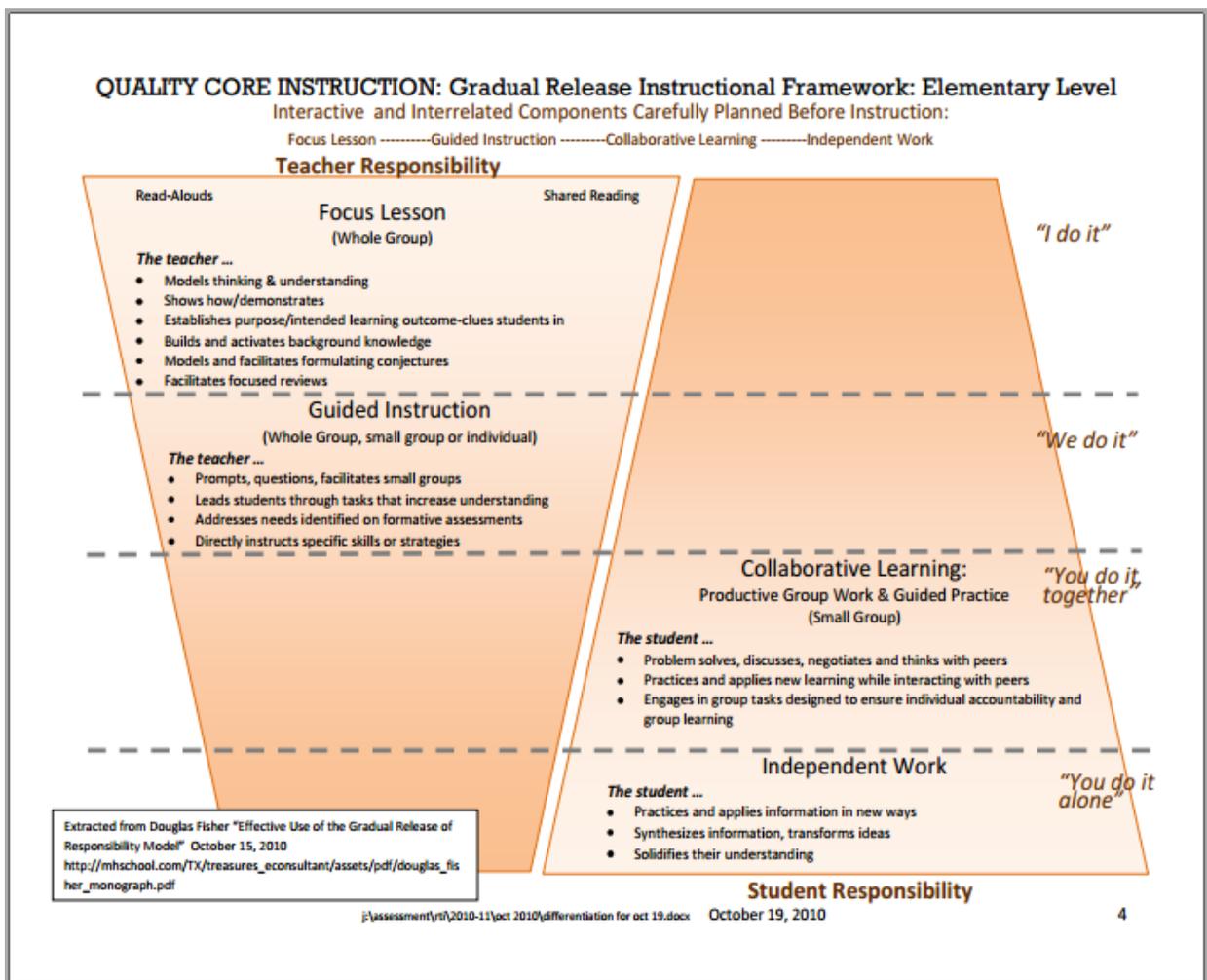


Figure 1: Scaffolded Instruction. From: Effective use of the gradual release of responsibility model by Fisher D. (2010). Retrieved from: www.mhschool.com/TX/treasures_econsultant/assets/pdf/douglas_fisher_monograph_pdf. Copyright (2010) by Fisher, D. Reprinted with permission.

Finally, reducing student anxiety is possible through building effective tutor-tutee relationships within a mutually supportive process of experimentation and problem-solving. Effective tutors build stress-free learning communities by activating a literate learning environment where students can smile and experiment. Figure 2 provides examples of various types of potential communication styles and classroom interaction. There is a direct connection between how kids feel inside the classroom and how they learn. When our tutees feel right and their experiences are not fraught with anxiety, tension, and the

fear of failure, they tend to get engaged, remain engaged, and learn more efficiently. The role that a tutor chooses to adopt within the tutor-tutee relationship is of critical importance both in regards to

**Choice Words: How our Language affects children's learning.
(Johnston, 2004)**

Teacher Comment	That group get back to your work or you'll be staying in at lunch time	When you are loud like that, it interferes with the other discussion. Groups and I feel frustrated	This is not like you. What is the problem? Okay, how can you solve it?
What are we doing here?	Laboring	Living in cooperation	Living collaboratively
Who are we?	Less than equal participants.	People who care about others' feelings	Social problem solvers. Normally admirable people.
How do we relate to one another?	Authoritarian control	Respectful with equal rights	Work out our problems.
How do we relate to others?	Do it only under stress	No implications	No implication

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Figure 2: Choice Words: How our language affects children's learning

reducing a student's anxiety over school performance and the real and perceived benefits they receive from the tutoring session. Choosing the right words as a tutor is akin to choosing a relationship that allows and supports cooperation, collaboration, and fosters a degree of academic responsibility and independence.

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