



The Beacon

The Windward School
Newsletter for Educators
and Parents

Fall 2014

In This Issue

Head Lines

“Self-Determination Theory:
An Analysis of the “Windward Effect”

By Jonathan Rosenshine
Associate Head of School
and
Dr. John J. Russell
Head of School

Page 1

Review of Research

“Relevance and Autonomy”

By Jonathan Rosenshine
Associate Head of School

Page 3

Graduation Keynote Speaker

“The Priceless Lessons that
Windward Teaches Us”

By Matthew E. Bloom '14

Page 4

Faculty Profile: Alexis Pochna

“Upcoming Lower School
Division Head:
Consistency in the Midst of Change”

By Bonni Brodnick

Page 6

Head Lines

Self-Determination Theory:

An Analysis of the Windward Effect

By Jonathan Rosenshine, *Associate Head of School*
and

Dr. John J. Russell, *Head of School*

Over the last several years, grit and its close cousin resilience have received an unprecedented amount of attention in the popular press. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* by Paul Tough (2012) and *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants* by Malcom Gladwell (2013) are but two examples of the many articles and books extolling the virtues of grit and resilience. While coverage in recent years has increased, the research supporting the powerful influence of these non-cognitive factors of performance has a long history. In 2006, Carol Dweck published *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* in which she applied decades of research on student achievement to explain the potent effect that a growth mindset has in developing resilience and grit, which in turn contribute significantly to student success. At The Windward School, we have developed teaching strategies and a learning culture that inculcate a growth mindset in our students. We see the resulting grit and resilience in our students every day in the classroom, in the hallways, and in their dramatic improvement as readers, writers, and self-directed learners.

A lesser known, but directly related research-based area of study, is Self-Determination Theory. First developed by researchers Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, Self-Determination Theory posits that in order for individuals to thrive in any environment such as school, work, the athletic arena or even the home, they need to experience three conditions: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Deci and Ryan's work, as well as an international body of research, supports their findings that when individuals feel a sense of autonomy and personal agency; when they are supported by close, trusting relationships with the people around them; and when they experience competence in facing challenges, they develop intrinsic motivations to succeed (grit), persevere through adversity (resilience), and maximize their creativity and their intellectual capacity as learners and thinkers. The purpose of this article is to clarify how the experience of a student at The Windward School is a model of Self-Determination Theory in action, both in terms of the inputs and the outcomes.

Autonomy in the classroom does not necessarily mean students roaming at will between workstations, working in groups, and self-directing their learning. Autonomy, more essentially, is seen in the student who attends to her work with a personally chosen sense of purpose and self-directed agency. (In this context, we refer to agency as the power taken by an individual to make “decisions regarding their

Continued on page 2

Cont'd from page 1

preferences and actions.”¹) Although not obvious, the direct instruction methodology that guides the Windward classroom is fundamental to the development of autonomous learners. Every direct instruction lesson begins with three elements:

- the presentation of an aim for the lesson;
- the review of prior lessons, clarifying how the current instruction connects to knowledge and skills already learned; and
- a motivation that gives students an anticipation and incentive for the day's lesson.

By ensuring that every lesson has a purpose, builds upon prior knowledge, and engages the motivation of the students, teachers invoke a *volitional* engagement of students with the curriculum. Students attend to their work and stick to their work with grit, not as a result of fear or dread or the promise of extrinsic rewards, but because they discern and embrace the purpose of their learning.

We see the resulting grit and resilience in our students every day in the classroom, in the hallways, and in their dramatic improvement as readers, writers, and self-directed learners.

Furthermore, the mission of The Windward School to remediate language-based learning disabilities is essentially a mission to develop in students the foundational skills of autonomous learners. A student must first learn how to read if she is going to forge an autonomous path for learning, and the mastery of basic writing skills is essential for the development of complex ideas and arguments. Finally, The Windward School commits to the teaching of self-advocacy skills (autonomy) as part of the School's mission in preparing our students for successful transition into mainstream schools and, indeed, for a successful life of learning and growth.

The second element of Self-Determination Theory is relatedness. First and most obvious to any visitor to our campuses are the warm and supportive caring relationships between every adult in the School and the students. Each year our students write an essay in which they compare and contrast their previous school experience to their Windward experience. The following excerpt from one essay exemplifies the all too frequent difficulties that learning disabled students have to endure: “*At my former school, if I didn't answer a question correctly, the other students would laugh at me and I would feel very stupid and embarrassed. Being different felt awful.*” Windward faculty and staff are trained in how to listen and speak to students with language-based learning disabilities. Children, who in previous academic environments were made to feel unintelligent, invisible, and often confused, find themselves in Windward classrooms, hallways, and sports fields listened to, understood, and treated with care and respect. Eventually, by finding themselves in a community of like learners, students are unburdened of the stigma of having a language-based learning disability. This gives them the freedom to relate to each other without the fear of humiliation and without the need to hide a part of themselves. They develop deep reserves of resilience to overcome their challenges,

and more importantly, Windward students learn to define themselves by their character and their accomplishments, not by their learning disabilities. This prepares them well for relational success outside of the Windward environment.

Finally, the last element of Self-Determination Theory is the experience of competence. Motivation, creativity and flexible thinking are devastated by the conviction that no matter what one does, one is going to face disappointment. The provocative title of Paul Tough's nearly viral 2011 *New York Times Magazine* article, “What if the Secret to Success Is Failure?” could easily give the impression that failure is the path to success. As we receive them from environments that were unable to meet their needs as learners, Windward students all too often come to us having lived through the damaging experience of unchecked failure. “*Imagine going to school every day and praying that you won't be called up to read. ... imagine knowing that you try your best in school every day but still have report cards that say you are failing, not trying and need to start making an effort in school ...*,” writes another Windward student reflecting on his earlier experiences in school.

Failure is an essential element of the successful individual's development of resilience only when the individual experiences that failure in a context of relational support and hope for improvement. And this is where The Windward School's methodology is so powerful. By placing our students in homogenous classrooms for the teaching of fundamental skills (i.e., language arts and math), our teachers are able to offer lessons strategically positioned to meet the students where they are in their learning and build on their skills from there. Homework assignments are designed to review and solidify lessons already learned in the classroom, so when students go home to do their homework, they can actually do the assignment! Students have the experience of *competence*, of being able to do their work *autonomously*, and it should come as no surprise when we hear from our parents that the end of the long, dark homework nightmare allows the *relationships* at home to flourish. We hear the narrative over and over again that Windward's impact has saved a child, saved a marriage, saved a family.

The methodologies and the culture of The Windward School were not created with Self-Determination Theory in mind, but Self-Determination Theory offers a valid, research-based lens through which we can explain the dramatic success of the Windward experience. The reading and writing programs are at the heart of our curriculum, but every teacher, every adult in the School teaches the students how to take ownership of their learning and of their behavior; how to care for others and be cared for; and finally, how to persevere through the challenges of a learning disability to embrace their intellectual competence and experience success as autonomous learners in mainstream environments. ■

¹ National Gateway to Self-Determination. (2010). Promoting self-determination: A practice guide. Kansas City, MO: Loman, S., Vatland, C., Strickland-Cohen, K. Horner, R., Walker, H.

A Review of the Research: “Relevance and Autonomy”

By Jonathan Rosenshine
Associate Head of School

Assor, A., Kaplan, H., & Roth, G. (2002). Choice is good, but relevance is excellent: Autonomy-enhancing and suppressing teacher behaviours predicting students' engagement in schoolwork. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72, 261-278.

This issue of *The Beacon* gives attention to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a research-based theory of motivation as well as cognitive and social development. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (1985, 2000) were the initial researchers to propose SDT, which suggests that the experience of autonomy, relatedness, and competence is necessary in order to foster the strongest motivation, creativity, persistence, and ultimately, performance in individuals. Ben Gurion University researchers Avi Assor, Haya Kaplan, and Guy Roth hypothesized that autonomy, one of the three necessary conditions to SDT, is correlated more powerfully to the individual's experience of purpose and personal relevance than it is to the simplistic view of autonomy as personal choice. Published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, their article, “Choice is good, but relevance is excellent: Autonomy-enhancing and suppressing teacher behaviours predicting students' engagement in schoolwork” (2002), offers evidence supporting their hypothesis that the development of student autonomy is enhanced through the students' experience of academic work as purposeful and relevant to their core values far more than it is enhanced by the opportunity on the part of students to choose what they study.

Within the three general clusters of experience identified in SDT, Deci and Ryan initially argued that the cluster of autonomy-supportive actions includes behaviors such as providing choice, encouraging self-initiation, minimizing the use of external controls, and acknowledging other's perspective and feelings. Skinner and Belmont (1993) added one more component to autonomy-supportive actions: clarifying the relevance of expected behaviors. It is this element of autonomy-enhancing behaviors that Assor et al. focus on in their study. The study sample included 862 Israeli-Jewish elementary school students from grades 3–8 across three schools serving populations of mostly middle or lower middle-class students. Students completed questionnaires that assessed their perceptions of their teachers' behaviors, their feelings with regards to the subjects they were studying and their perceptions of how they perceived their behavioral and cognitive engagement in lessons.

The researchers identify the following *autonomy-enhancing* teacher behaviors: fostering relevance, providing choice, allowing criticism and encouraging independent thinking. The writers note that some researchers have suggested that autonomy is less important for younger students (8–10 years old) while it increases in importance for early adolescents. Assor et al., however, hypothesized that autonomy, in the sense of “fostering relevance,” is equally as important a predictor of positive feelings and intellectual engagement for younger students as it is for adolescents and young adults. Describing what “fostering relevance” looks like in the classroom, the researchers explain, “An educator's action is experienced as highly autonomy-supportive if that action helps children to develop and realize their personal goals and interests, or to understand the contribution of the educator's or the child's present actions to the realization of the child's personal goals and interests. In contrast, an educator's action is experienced as autonomy suppressing if it is perceived as interfering with the realization of the child's personal goals and interests” (p. 263).

Any academic environment that hopes to meet the demands of a curriculum requires that some tasks, if not the vast majority of subjects and assignments, be assigned by a teacher. Taking a simplistic view of autonomy, one might suggest that such classrooms cannot promote autonomy in a significant manner. The researchers suggest, however, that autonomy is not thwarted by extrinsically generated tasks if the teacher can help the students internalize the purpose of the course of study: “... a major way to help students feel autonomous regarding schoolwork is to assist

them to discover ways in which extrinsically motivated academic tasks can become relevant to their goals and interests” (p. 265). Similarly, the onus is on the teachers to convey to their students that initially routine tasks are, in fact, foundational to the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills that will be inherently meaningful to the students in the future.

Ultimately, teachers have to be experts not only in delivering their curriculum but also in knowing and relating to their students. Assor et al. discuss the challenges facing teachers who make it their goal to connect purpose to student learning: “To foster the relevance of schoolwork for children, teachers need to take an empathic-active role in relation to their students. This role requires the teacher first to understand students' goals, interests and needs, and then to link school tasks to those goals, interests and needs” (p. 265). They go on to note that adolescents' need for autonomy “should not be identified with the need for independence, and certainly not detachment, from parents” (p. 265). Far from needing or wanting to be separate from parents and teachers, the value of students' autonomy is in their volitional engagement with their studies, which is powerfully enhanced by relationships of empathy, care and trust.

The findings of the study support the researchers' assertion that

... the need for autonomy [pertains], primarily, to the striving to develop and realize personal goals, values and interests. In our view of the need for autonomy, the role of freedom of action is less important than the extent to which one's actions reflect one's personal goals, interests or values. Freedom of action is, of course, desirable, because it often increases the likelihood that people will be able to realize their personal goals and interests in their actions, but it is not the primary component of the need for autonomy. (p. 272-273)

Furthermore, fostering relevance was the only teacher behavior that was significantly related to both positive feelings for schoolwork and positive cognitive engagement with the academic material. The autonomy-supportive teacher behavior of providing choice, on the other hand, was strongly associated with positive feelings, but the research found that providing choice alone was not a predictor of behavioral and cognitive engagement in students.

The researchers go so far as to assert that teachers who put student choice at the forefront of an “open space” classroom pedagogy might, in the long-term, actually be damaging their students' engagement with the material. Individual choice alone does not pave the way to relevance and purpose:

[I]t appears that many students do not feel that this open-space contributes to their autonomy because they do not see any connection between any kind of schoolwork and their personal goals and interests. It is also possible that some of them have not developed serious personal goals or interests and, therefore, they do not know what to do with this open space. In other words, being able to choose one's schoolwork may not be so important to students because none of the choices seems related to their personal goals or interests, or because they do not have clear goals or interests. (p. 273)

The role of the teacher under such conditions should be to discover the students' interests and passions and guide them towards work that has relevance and purpose to them. According to this active-empathic view of a teacher's role, “the essence of autonomy enhancement is not minimization of the educator's presence, but making the educator's presence useful for the student who strives to formulate and realize personal goals and interests” (p. 273). The researchers' findings prove that young children need autonomy-support, and the findings suggest that teachers interested in fostering positive feelings and cognitive engagement in their students ought to work on clarifying the purpose of the curriculum and on fostering its relevance to the goals, values and interests of the students.

At The Windward School, our use of a direct instruction model promotes the autonomous engagement of students with their work. Every direct instruction lesson begins with the expression of both an aim and a motivation for the students to engage with that lesson. In addition, teachers and students review prior learning to clarify how the current lesson connects sequentially to work they have done before. All of this happens so that the relevance and purpose of the lesson are enhanced—and students are autonomously engaged—before the teacher begins explicit instruction and guided practice. While The Windward School's use of a direct instruction model is based on its proven efficacy over decades of use, Self-Determination Theory offers another lens through which to understand why direct instruction works. For a broader discussion of SDT in action at The Windward School, please read in this issue of *The Beacon* “Self-Determination Theory: An Analysis of the Windward Effect.” ■



Graduation 2014 Keynote Speaker:

The Priceless Lessons that Windward Teaches Us

By Matthew E. Bloom '14



On a warm summer night, when the freedom-filled camp days of frolic and fun began to dwindle, my parents sat me down and told me that I would be repeating first grade at a school called Windward. In yet another futile attempt to alleviate some of my school-related anxiety that once again was beginning to take its menacing hold, they said that *this* school would hopefully make learning a much easier process.

If my parents had gone on to tell me that approximately 14 years later I would go on to be the alumni speaker at that very same school, I would have thought they had lost their minds.

You see, at that time in my life, I was the kid who was allowed to participate only in class activities that consisted of saying, “Here” when the teacher took attendance and drawing during our 15 minutes of free time. The rest of my first grade experience was spent in a small room with no other students and a different teacher each day who would desperately try to teach me how to read, write and do math while she pulled her hair out.

I was the kid in my public school whom no one wanted to play with during recess or sit with during lunch. As I walked the halls, I still vividly remember being called “stupid,” “dumb” and “weird.” Unfortunately, it was not very long before I started to believe these hurtful insults. Anybody would if they are told these things enough times.

I thought I was, in all probability, the stupidest person in the world and that I was utterly worthless.

Fast-forward six years from the time I graduated Windward in the eighth grade, and that same kid who had thought he was worthless and who had not been able to read at his grade level until he was 11-years old has gone on to complete three A.P. courses during his high school career, two among them (ironically) being A.P. Language and Composition and A.P. Literature. I have now completed my freshman year at SUNY Binghamton, where my very first semester I went toe-to-toe with a 380 English Course, which is normally reserved for juniors, and through passion and determination achieved an A in that class. I even received a spot as an opinion writer for the Binghamton School newspaper, *Pipe Dream*, in only my first semester, which is quite a triumph at Binghamton University. The lesson I learned there is that no one likes an opinionated freshman writer at all, ever. But if there is one lesson Windward teaches us, it's to soldier on and never give up. Perhaps my biggest accomplishment, besides being invited to speak here tonight, is my involvement with a Nation Wide Program called Eye to Eye. Through them, I have become a mentor and role model for young children who have undergone similar struggles as I have and are similarly labeled with the same learning “conditions” as mine. With this program I have been given the

extraordinary opportunity to spread awareness about learning differences and disabilities and give a first hand portrayal as to what having one is like. I have spoken at many different schools including NYU, Pace University, University of North Carolina, and just one year ago I was invited to speak in front of the SAT accommodation and evaluation staff. I certainly gave them a little piece of my mind. Just yesterday, in fact, I was invited on the Dr. Rob show along with one of Eye to Eye's executive board members to answer questions about learning differences and how, if honed correctly, they are no longer our disabilities, but our prized abilities. Now when I go to these different places and give my *spiel*, I surprise people by telling them not how I learned to overcome my dyslexia, but how I learned to use it to my advantage. My goal is always to help people see that our different ways of learning and thinking are not the crutch we lean on, but, if we're given the right guidance and training, they are the pedestals we proudly stand on. Our exceptional ways of thinking and learning enable us to see and understand concepts that others might normally overlook and thus give us the power to change the world for the better. However, here at Windward we all already know that, making my job as a speaker much more difficult. So when I was composing this speech, a brief story came to mind that I feel exemplifies and celebrates the priceless lessons and virtues that Windward teaches us, which go far beyond the academic wonders Windward empowers us to achieve.

“Here I learned that walls I once thought could only be hammered down with sheer force, could just as easily be jumped over or walked around if one knows how to think outside of the box.”

When I was in the seventh grade, I decided to join the cross country team after a couple of my good friends tirelessly coerced me into it. Before this, I was the kid who quivered in fear when we had to run the mile in gym class. However, our coach, Mr. Valpacheo, encouraged me and taught me never to give up or have a bad attitude, even when I truly believed it was hopeless. When I was about to quit the team, he took me aside and told me that through perseverance and dedication I could be as fast as I wanted to be and that the only thing standing in my way was *me*. He told me not to work through the pain but work *with* the pain, and that working smarter was always better than working harder. So I controlled my breathing, regulated my pace, and calculated what I needed to do in order to obtain what I considered success. He showed me that if I wanted it bad enough and was willing to push myself to run even when it felt like I couldn't run



anymore, I could accomplish anything. It was that very same message that I bequeathed to my high school cross country team when I was captain just one year ago and luckily that very same message that propelled our feet forward as we ran to the finish line of the New Jersey State Prep Academy Championship.

Windward did so much more for me than just teach me how to read and write. Windward taught me to work with passion to put my whole heart into my craft and to let my creativity and individuality flourish. Windward showed me that tribulations I once thought were unconquerable did not always have to be fought with sweat and tears, but could be solved with determination and innovation. Here I learned that walls I once thought could only be hammered down with sheer force, could just as easily be jumped over or walked around if one knows how to think outside of the box. Windward made me my own ally and self advocate so that one day I could be an ally and advocate for people like me all over the world and help them value their unique minds, which are limited only by the obstacles we set ourselves. Most remarkably, Windward took that little boy who thought he was worthless and showed him how much he was really worth, perhaps a tad too well. In short, Windward has literally shaped the foundation of my life, and I could not be more blessed to call myself a Windward alumnus. Now, I know all of you are excited for what the future holds and for everyone to stop talking so you can get out of here, but I also remember sitting in that chair and feeling terrified of the unknown that had yet to come. I can personally guarantee that if you remember and actively employ the skills and virtues that Windward has prepared you with in every aspect of your life, you will all go on to achieve success beyond your wildest dreams, and you will all go on to change the world! ■



Faculty Profile: Alexis Pochna

Upcoming Lower School Division Head: Consistency in the Midst of Change

By Bonni Brodnick

It all started with a telephone call to the Windward Teacher Training Institute (WTTI) in 2006. Alexis Pochna, current Assistant Head of Lower School, had been seeking to take a course in multisensory reading instruction. After speaking with numerous people for recommendations, she was consistently referred to WTTI. The fact that a member of her husband's family is an alumnus of The Windward School, and spoke so highly of his experience here, was also an inspiration.

"It seemed as if all roads were leading me to Windward," Mrs. Pochna said about the school that seemed to be beckoning her. Taking the WTTI course was the first step in a direction that would change her life as an educator.

Now in her ninth year at the School,

"Building relationships with our students – whether chatting in my office or making rounds throughout the school – is a top priority," Alexis Pochna said. "These interactions with the children are always the highlight of my day."

Mrs. Pochna's experience spans from the Middle to the Lower School as both a teacher and an administrator. She started as an assistant teacher and went on to become a 6th grade teacher of language arts and social studies, as well as a 5th grade social studies teacher. Her next steps included the position of Assistant Teacher Staff Developer, in which she mentored and

observed first-year assistant teachers at both the Lower and Middle Schools, followed by taking on the role of Assistant Coordinator of Middle School Language Arts. In this capacity she assisted in the supervision of the reading and writing programs, mentored and observed language arts teachers and assistant teachers, developed the language arts curriculum and provided professional development to faculty.

This fall marks Mrs. Pochna's second year as Assistant Head of Lower School where she assists Head of Lower School Leslie Zuckerwise with day-to-day operations of the Lower School program and administrative needs. Among Mrs. Pochna's varied responsibilities, she mentors and observes faculty, maintains effective communication with parents and



caregivers, and provides ongoing academic and social support to students.

Mrs. Pochna is uniquely prepared to take on the responsibilities of the Lower School Division Head as Leslie Zuckerwise becomes the first Head of Windward Manhattan when the School opens its third campus in September 2015.

“Alexis came to the Lower School with knowledge of our curriculum and methodologies. She quickly became attuned to the needs of our students, developed positive relationships with our parents and gained the respect of our faculty,” said Mrs. Zuckerwise. “With her dedication, expertise and passion, Alexis will be true to our mission as we launch a new era at Windward.”

Mrs. Pochna received a Bachelor of Arts from University of Colorado, after

which she became a Kindergarten teacher at a school for the gifted and creative. Her graduate work includes a Masters in Early Childhood and Elementary Education and a Masters in Childhood Special Education, both from Bank Street College. This spring, Mrs. Pochna earned a third graduate degree to her credit: a Masters in Administration and Supervision from Fordham University.

“In taking on the role as Lower School Division Head next year, I hope to continue the tradition of educational excellence at Windward,” said Mrs. Pochna, a mother of three children, ages 11, 13 and 17. “As a teacher I was able to foster the development of my students through daily classroom instruction. Now, as an administrator, I can impact both our students *and* our teachers.”

“As a teacher I was able to foster the development of my students through daily classroom instruction. Now, as an administrator, I can impact both our students *and* our teachers.”

“I feel incredibly grateful to be part of the Windward School community and its future,” said the upcoming 2015–2016 Head of Lower School. “I will work tirelessly to support our mission and partner with faculty members, administrators, parents and caregivers to achieve our collective goal: to help our students become more proficient readers and writers, return to the mainstream and, most of all, achieve their potential.” ■



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Fall 2014

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Windward Teacher Training Institute (WTTI), a division of The Windward School, provides professional development based on scientifically validated research in child development, learning theory and pedagogy.

WTTI is accredited for its Teaching and Instructor of Teaching levels by the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council (IMSLEC). The IMSLEC-accredited training program leads to national certification in multisensory structured language education.

WTTI offers more than 35 classes in White Plains, N.Y. and New York City throughout the year.

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