

Helping Students Achieve: A Teacher-Librarian's Perspective on Supporting Student Goal Setting Programs

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Abstract

Setting personal learning goals is an important life skill that students are encouraged to develop from the middle years of schooling onwards. However, some students experience difficulty with the processes involved in setting and achieving their goals. This professional paper looks at the role teacher librarians have in collaboratively planning, resourcing, and extending and enriching goal setting activities. Providing resources with authentic examples of goal setting by people from the wider community is one way of developing and extending the motivation and commitment students need to become successful in goal setting tasks and activities. One such resource is recommended and details of it are outlined with suggestions for extending and enriching it with a visit or virtual presentation from its author.

Keywords: Goal setting, life skills.

Introduction

Encouraging students to set personal learning goals is a well established practise in education and an essential feature of pastoral care from the middle years of schooling onwards (Angelo, 2010; Department of Education, Victoria. 2006; Gould, 2011; Mansfield, 2010; Uddage, 2012;).

The Department of Education, Victoria (DOEV) states:

'Personal learning goals are about improving students' learning and achievement. They are about students becoming active participants in the learning process, empowering them to become independent learners, and motivating them to achieve their full potential. Personal learning goals are about building students' capacity to learn'. (2006, p. 3)

This is a powerful statement as it focuses on supporting and empowering students throughout their educational journey. The DOEV document *'Developing, monitoring and reporting on personal learning goals'* (2006) also provides a theoretical basis and practical framework for student goal setting for teachers, mentors and school administrators as well as students and their families.

I have been privileged to work in schools belonging to Australia's three educational systems: state government schools, catholic education schools, and independent schools. In my experience, schools in each of these sectors provide well planned pastoral care and personal development programs designed to encourage and support students in planning and setting goals to support and, sometimes, stretch their learning in chosen or specific areas throughout the school year.

As well as classroom teachers, designated pastoral care teachers including form teachers or tutors, year level coordinators, and heads of faculties or key learning areas are all involved in

encouraging and supporting students in developing, stating or recording and then working towards achieving their personal learning goals.

There is no doubt that many students in the middle years of schooling and above have the maturity and ability to understand the importance and benefits of setting personal learning goals (DOEV, 2006; Murdoch, 2010).

However, a review of academic research and literature added to my observations and personal experience strongly indicates that a significant number of middle year and older secondary school students experience difficulty with the decision making processes involved in developing personal learning goals (DOEV, 2006; Gould, 2011; Power & Dingle, 2005; Seminoe County Public Schools, n.d.; Udabage, 2012;).

That difficulties experienced by students in setting and achieving personal learning goals are similar to those experienced by many adults involved in goal setting activities in the wider community cannot be disputed (Locke & Latham, 2006; Power & Dingle, 2005; Ordonez, Schweitzer, Galinsky & Bazerman, 2009; Seymour, 2001). This may indicate that skills and understandings required for successful goal setting are not age specific or reliant on advanced stages of cognitive development or physical, intellectual, or emotional maturity.

There is a very real possibility that successful goal setting requires motivation to identify and set a personal goal or goals, followed by genuine commitment to the goal or goals being set. Thus, teachers and administrators should become aware that planning and introducing units of work focusing on personal learning goal setting and activities may not result in all students understanding or accepting the task, becoming engaged with it, or even meeting the expectation that goals will be set or achieved.

The difficulties experienced by some students in setting personal learning goals can have many origins or causes.

Students with physical and intellectual disabilities will need extra time and support in goal setting activities, including achieving them, as will any other formally identified Learning Support students, and English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Gould, 2011; Mansfield, 2010; Schunk, 2006; Udabage, 2012). Generally, teachers involved in introducing goal setting programs are aware of students placed within these and similar categories and incorporate extra time, support, and resources in planning and implementing the relevant lessons and activities.

Yet, as indicated earlier, research literature, numerous self help books about personal goal setting, and my personal observations all indicate that a significant number of middle years and older secondary school students experience difficulty with the decision making processes involved in developing personal learning goals (Guy, 2010). These difficulties can manifest themselves as students seeming unable to identify or set appropriate goals in the time allowed or not achieving stated goals.

My observations and experiences in Australia's three education systems have identified that some students are unclear about or do not understand the processes involved in identifying and setting realistic goals, while others may be disinterested in setting goals, or lacking the motivation and/or the commitment needed to achieve the set goals.

After reflecting on personal experiences and observations, academic research, and wider reading about successful goal setting, I came to the realisation that teacher librarians, as specialist members of a school's teaching team, are able to offer and provide the skills and resources needed to support and encourage students experiencing difficulties in setting personal learning and other goals.

Teacher librarians are able to easily meet the ethos of this conference, *“Enhancing Students’ Life Skills through the School Library”* and its Personal Skills strand (developing personal agency and managing oneself) through collaborative planning and teaching, provision of resources, and wider curriculum extension and enrichment activities.

Collaborative Planning and Teaching

The benefits of collaborative planning and teaching are well documented and undisputable (Lance, 2013; Todd, 2008; Hay, 2003). When teacher librarians are part of planning and delivering personal learning goal setting activities, their specialist knowledge and access to related information and resources will support teachers by ensuring more students are captured by and engaged with planned activities and expected outcomes. Teacher librarians are also able to provide enormous support for students out of or away from the classroom as interest from significant others is often a motivational factor for many students.

Resource Provision

The collaborative planning process is essential for identifying and providing existing resources to support and enhance goal setting activities. This stage of collaborative planning will often be the catalyst for identifying and locating or developing new resources, including multi-media and e-resources, designed to attract and engage many of the students no longer excited by traditional pen and paper focused activities.

Teacher librarians can provide a manageable range of resources specific to goal setting activities that cater to the range of needs and interests of students. Recommending and providing resources to attract the imagination and engagement of students supports them and their teachers. And it is this support that can result in more students successfully setting and achieving personal learning goals.

Curriculum Extension and Enrichment Activities

Teacher librarians continually extend and enrich the curriculum with displays of specific resources in the library and or classrooms. This is a natural extension of collaborative planning and teaching work, and one that is valued by teachers and appreciated by students.

When displays are created and promoted for a specific topic or Key Learning Area (KLA), for example, space exploration, or to celebrate a school based activity such as a year level camp or excursion, students will become aware of the displays and thus are given another opportunity of engaging with the activity and its tasks.

This may also result in students becoming more involved in the broader curriculum or specific activity by browsing through and borrowing from displays or exploring other relevant resources.

Focusing on resource provision and curriculum extension and enrichment in the collaborative planning stage allows for the planning of specific curriculum extension and enrichment activities beyond displays of resources.

Virtual resources including e-books and online resources, as well as a range of web based and multi-media activities, are all part of a teacher librarian’s tool kit and fit easily into curriculum extension and enrichment activities.

An example of one such tool kit resource is my ‘Study skills for success’ webpage that provides links to podcasts of inspirational stories from a range of people from all walks of life (Teese, 2012). Resources such as these are well suited for goal setting programs and activities. Students and teachers are easily able to download these or similar podcasts and listen to them at times that suit them best.

Suggested Resource

However, my personal and professional passion for encouraging students and adults to enjoy reading and learning from books now leads me to sharing extracts from one that, to me, is a perfect match for any goal setting activity, in or out of school.

I have chosen the 2010 book, *'The ice beneath my feet: my year in Antarctica,'* not just because its author, Diana Patterson, is based reasonably close to my school and is a recognised motivational speaker but also because the first few chapters of her book provide a model or 'how to' guide for successful goal setting (Patterson, 2010).

In the first section of her book, the author recounts her determination to be selected to work in Antarctica and setting and achieving a variety of goals to meet her main target. And, I believe, it is this section of Diana Patterson's book that many readers – whether students or adults – will not only personally relate to but will also be able to adapt as a model for setting their own goals.

By documenting specific goals and, in some cases, the struggles involved in achieving them, Patterson illustrates that successful goal setting involves much more than recording a thought or two on paper. Modelling the well known quote from Thomas Edison, Patterson proves that the one percent 'inspiration' of any idea or goal must be followed by ninety-nine percent perspiration.

While Patterson's book outlines how she achieved her ambitious goal of working in Antarctica, and documents what this was like, I believe her goal setting processes provide an inspirational, real-life, and practical model for all age groups to follow.

Importantly, Patterson's book also illustrates why motivation, commitment, and persistence are essential attributes when striving to achieve goals.

Conclusion

To enhance students' life skills through school library services, especially in the area of developing personal agency and self management relating to setting and achieving personal goals, teacher librarians should be involved in collaboratively planning and resourcing the units of work, as well as in specific goal setting activities.

This collaboration will provide colleagues with a multi level platform of support comprising specialist skills and knowledge in the collaborative planning phase, in resource provision, and in curriculum extension and enrichment activities that will benefit students and their learning.

While each of these three phases are exciting in and of themselves, the curriculum extension and enrichment stage presents many opportunities for teacher librarians to provide real life examples of experiences of authentic and successful goal setting.

Teacher librarians are able to further support colleagues and students by identifying existing school resources and extending them with relevant YouTube presentations or similar multi-media presentations and guest speakers to maximise and enrich goal setting activities.

One such example is Australian author, educator and key-note speaker, Diana Patterson. Using her book, *'The ice beneath my feet: my year in Antarctica,'* and extending and enriching it with a personal visit or virtual presentation from the author will increase student motivation and strengthen their commitment to achieving their goals.

When students are able to see and hear directly from others how they achieved their dreams through setting goals, they are able to see more clearly the benefits working towards their own personal learning goals.

Even more importantly, teacher librarians can actively enhance students' life skills through the school library by providing resources and experiences that support them in developing the skills and attitudes necessary for successful self management in the twenty-first century.

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Biographical note

Nerelie Teese has been a teacher and teacher librarian in Australia's three education systems: state government schools, catholic education and independent schools in Queensland and Victoria for more than twenty years. She is an avid reader and in 2012 initiated a 'Tablet Book Club' for her middle school students, supporting the school's move to BYOD technology. Nerelie Teese is a co-ordinator of the international literacy project 'Books Through The Seas' that provides books and other resources for school and community libraries in The Philippines. She is on official leave from her school for 2013.