Adolescent adaptability at school

Adaptability is defined as “appropriate adjustments in cognition, behaviour, and/or affect in response to uncertain and novel circumstances, conditions, and situations” (Martin, Nejad, Colmar & Liem, 2013, p. 743). The adaptability of a student in the face of situational uncertainty and novelty is an important construct, particularly for adolescents who frequently face changeable experiences. These experiences require individuals “to adjust and modify appropriate functions to maintain healthy development” (p. 728).

This study of 969 adolescents from high schools in Australia examined two different ages of students; one group was 11-14 years old and the other was 15-19 years of age. The students came from different sectors. Of the nine schools represented, four schools were coeducational, three were girls’ schools and two were boys’ schools. A rating scale was completed by the students at school. Each student completed the scale twice, once in 2010 and again in 2011, one year apart.

Specific findings relating to adaptability

The researchers found that adaptability predicted subjective well-being and sense of purpose. Adaptable students were “more ambitious in their future plans (positive intent), more able to keep up with the rapid pace and variable nature of lessons (class participation), experience more positive academic outcomes (school enjoyment), and [were] less inclined to manoeuvre defensively (self-handicapping) or give up (disengagement)” (p. 740).

Some individuals were dispositionally “better placed” than others for adaptability. Martin et al. (2013, p. 742) found that younger adolescents were more adaptable than older adolescents, and that prior achievement was significantly associated with adaptability. Some personality traits, such as conscientiousness and agreeableness were positively associated with adaptability while neuroticism was negatively associated. The students’ personal beliefs about intelligence also significantly predicted adaptability (p. 728).

Adaptability also “significantly predicted academic (class participation, school enjoyment, and positive academic intentions—positively; self-handicapping and disengagement—negatively) and non-academic (self-esteem, life satisfaction, and sense of meaning and purpose—positively) outcomes” (p. 728).

Self-regulation and adaptability were important in student academic outcomes. It may be that “self-regulation is important for the ongoing direction and control of executive and meta-cognitive functions for daily schoolwork… whereas adaptability may be relevant when new demands and tasks are presented to students. Thus, across the two factors of adaptability and self-regulation, students are better placed to become, and then stay engaged in the course of the school day and week” (p. 741).

Profile of an adaptable student

A profile of an adaptable student would be one who is younger and who has high prior achievement. This student is also likely “to have parents/ caregivers with higher levels of education. In terms of dispositional and characteristic orientations, an adaptable student is likely to hold effort-related beliefs of intelligence and performance” (p. 742) (with the positive
effects of effort-related beliefs more salient for low achievers and males). As well as being agreeable and conscientious, but unlikely to be neurotic, “an adaptable student is more likely to self-regulate and be buoyant in the face of everyday academic challenge and difficulty. Finally, this student’s adaptability is likely to be demonstrated through higher levels of mental health in the form of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of meaning and purpose and higher levels of academic motivation and engagement in the form of class participation, enjoyment of school, positive academic intentions, and low self-handicapping and disengagement” (pp 742-743).

**Targeted intervention**

Martin et al. (2013) also stated that interventions can be designed and promoted in order to sustain student adaptability. Those who could be targeted in an intervention include students who are low achievers, who are low in conscientiousness and agreeableness or high in neuroticism (p. 742).

A targeted intervention might be addressed in a similar way to resilience (p. 741):

1. The individual is taught how to realistically and effectively recognise uncertainty and novelty that might require adaptability
2. She is taught how to make appropriate adjustments to behaviour, cognition, and/or affect
3. These adjustments assist the individual to deal with uncertainty and novelty
4. She is encouraged to recognise the value of these adjustments and then refine and/or progress them
5. This continuous refinement and implementation of behavioural, cognitive, and/or affective adjustment sustains the individual’s ability to deal with ongoing uncertainty and novelty in academic and non-academic life.

Martin et al. (2013) concluded that this research “represents a first step in enabling practitioners to identify the types of students who are likely to be adaptable, assist students who may not reflect some or all of these factors, and assess the effectiveness of their efforts by examining academic and non-academic outcomes to which adaptability intervention should ultimately connect” (p. 743).