

# Transfiguring It Out

## Converting Disengaged Learners to Active Participants

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Photo

Taka Ezawa using ACT-REACT in the classroom.

Perhaps the most important single cause of a person's success or failure educationally has to do with the question of what he believes about himself.

—Arthur Combs

Do you want to help students believe in themselves and their learning potential? This article addresses the challenge of disengaged students and provides teachers with a “transfiguration” model that uses a practical and robust strategy to transform disengaged learners to active participants. Let’s examine the inclusive education environment and why we need to transform the way we work with *all* our students to set learning goals, create a workable plan, use motivating activities, and reflect and evaluate along the way.

### Inclusion and Engagement

Inclusive classrooms are complex environments including diverse populations of students with varied educational characteristics. Because of the complexity of these environments, teachers must employ many instructional methods to effectively meet student needs. Independent seatwork is one such commonly implemented instructional method in inclusive classrooms.

Teachers favor this instructional format for many reasons. One is that independent seatwork provides valuable academic practice time while allowing effective and efficient use of teacher time. For instance, the teacher can provide rotating instruction to several small groups of students while the remaining students work independently. This seems to offer valid support for implementing this popular instructional technique.

Let’s examine this practice more closely. For example, if an inclusive classroom contains students who are

performing academically above or below their same-age peer group, these students may experience attention and behavioral difficulties during the independent seatwork time. This instructional technique falters when students can’t or won’t independently complete the assigned task and disengage from the activity at hand. The teacher then must use some alternative method to bring disengaged students back to task.

The relationship between learning and academic engaged time is a strong one and is clearly established in the literature (Cancelli, Harris, Friedman, & Yoshida, 1993). In a seminal investigation of students’ engaged academic behavior in secondary classrooms, Frederick (1977) concluded that high-achieving students were academically engaged 75% of the time. On the other hand, students who were low-achieving were academically engaged only 51% of the time. Thus, the longer the students’ attention falters or they remain disengaged from their immediate tasks, the more likely their academic performances will suffer, resulting in undesirable outcomes.

## The Strategic Transfiguration Model

Considering the potential lifelong effect of students' undesirable academic outcomes, undertaking the process of converting disengaged learners to active participants is an important one that teachers cannot afford to overlook. Nonetheless, this undertaking is a daunting task that even the most committed and experienced teachers are tempted to avoid. Academic engagement refers specifically to the amount of time students are actively participating in assigned learning activities (Martella, Nelson, & Marchand-Martella, 2003), whereas disengagement means to withdraw from an activity.

In this article, I use the terms *academic engagement* and *disengagement* synonymously with on-task and off-task behavior. To successfully improve student engagement and thus reduce feelings of frustration and failure, students and teachers need robust procedures that are easy to apply.

The Strategic Transfiguration Model (STM) is a broad-spectrum framework to facilitate positive behavioral change in students who demonstrate active or passive behavioral challenges in the school setting. Transfiguration refers to changing shape or form. To tactically shape students' behavior, STM offers teachers a variety of robust procedures that are soundly constructed on motivational and cognitive research pertaining to goal setting (Iran-Nejad, 1990; Iran-Nejad & Chissom, 1992; Paris & Newman, 1990; Schapiro & Livingston, 2000; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987).

To empower students to change their unproductive and often alienating behavior, STM uses a three-part approach that teaches systematic goal setting, goal monitoring, and goal evaluation. A wealth of empirically validated information supports the importance of incorporating this goal-driven approach in the behavioral change process. (See the boxes on "What Does the Literature Say?" for goal-setting research in three fundamental areas: essential goal properties, effective classroom implementation, and academic/behavioral outcomes.)

## What Does the Literature Say About Goal Setting and Effective Classroom Implementation?

- Teachers need to conduct goal setting on a daily basis and students should receive continuous teacher feedback to increase their goal attainment (Conte & Hintze, 2000; Rasing & Duker, 1992; Trammel & Schloss, 1994).
- Goal attainment is increased when students experience active student choice and participation in goal-setting activities. Generally, individual student-set goals are attained more often than teacher-set goals; however, hard teacher-assigned goals yield higher student performance than easier goals set in a collaborative manner (Latham, Steele, & Saari, 1982).
- Teachers view goal-setting techniques as acceptable interventions for classroom use (Martens, Hiralall, & Bradley, 1997).
- High-achieving students engage in goal setting (Biemiller & Meichenbaum, 1992).
- Goal-setting techniques are more effective when they are combined with other behavioral approaches (i.e., self-monitoring, direct instruction, self-graphing, contingency contracting), than when they are used in isolation (Miller & Kelley, 1994; Ruth, 1996; Trammel & Schloss, 1994).
- Students need to receive explicit instruction in goal setting to be successful (Graham, Harris, & Reid, 1992; Laase, 1996).
- Goal-setting activities are an appropriate and effective instructional technique for students with varying abilities and disabilities (e.g., mental retardation, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and gifted and talented; Carroll & Christenson, 1995; Cole & Gardner, 1988; Fulk, 1992; Grossi & Heward, 1998; Ruth, 1994).
- Students' direct involvement in goal-setting activities increases their level of satisfaction (Barbrack & Maher, 1984).
- Higher goal attainment occurs when students set process and outcome goals than when they establish process-only goals (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1997).
- Goal setting plus teacher feedback is more effective than teacher feedback alone (Conte & Hintze, 2000; Schunk & Swartz, 1993).
- Students' conscious attention to goals (e.g., overt self-talk) can increase goal attainment (Zook & DiVesta, 1989).

## The ACT-REACT Strategy

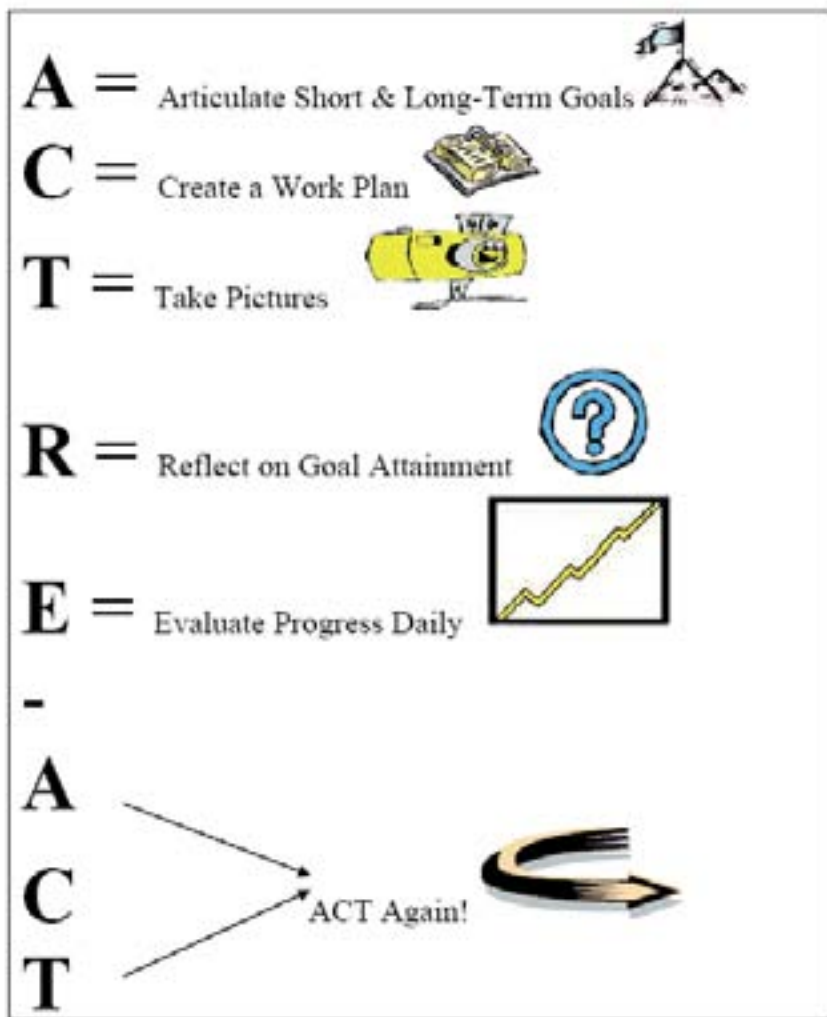
The ACT-REACT strategy is a mnemonic device that teachers can use to represent a specific six-step transfiguration process that includes the following phases: **A**rticulate your goals, **C**reate a work plan, **T**ake picture(s), **R**eflect on your goals, **E**valuate your progress, and **A**CT again. This strategy is one of several associated with STM; however, I developed it as a way to help chronically disengaged students take control of their own learning and deliberately use critical strategies and skills to work effectively during independent seatwork activities.

The ACT-REACT strategy provides students with explicit, step-by-step instruction in the hierarchical structure of academic/behavioral tasks, positive versus negative goal orientations, and specific strategies to reach various educational goals (Paris & Newman, 1990) using a task analyzed format. Figure 1 illustrates the ACT-REACT strategy.

### Step 1: Articulate Your Goals

During the first phase of the ACT-REACT strategy, teachers provide explicit instruction to students in immediate and long-term goal setting using a question and answer format. An important and often neglected aspect of the goal-

**Figure 1. The ACT-REACT Strategy**



setting process involves examining students’ belief systems and theories regarding their learning and behavior. To structure the question and answer format, you can use an interview to determine what students want to achieve in the future, as well as their immediate goals.

For instance, when a teacher posed the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” one student indicated that he wanted to be a millionaire. In contrast, when the teacher asked the same student, “Do you experience any behavioral difficulties at school? If so, what and why?” the student answered that he was always in trouble, in fact he couldn’t walk down the hall without getting in trouble. He also revealed that

the popular kids never got in trouble, and all he wanted was to be popular. Hence, his long-term life goal was to become a millionaire and his long-term school goal was to become popular.

After students identify their general goals, then the discussion becomes an opportunity to converse about how goals such as becoming a millionaire and being popular are linked to school subjects like reading and math. This long-term goal-setting process—for life and for school—is a critical step. Some researchers have suggested that for people to achieve their goals, they need to view them as salient to their future (Oettingen, et al., 2000).

Figure 2 provides sample interview questions that teachers can ask students

### What Does the Literature Have to Say About Goal Setting and Essential Goal Properties?

- Before generating goals, teachers and students should consider goal properties, such as specificity, proximity, and difficulty (Johnson & Graham, 1990).
- Goals must be reasonable, but not too easy, and students must perceive goals as “under their control” (Edelen-Smith, 1995).
- Goals need to be positively stated and specific, and achievement criteria must be articulated (Edelen-Smith).
- High but attainable, teacher-set, specific goals produce higher levels of student performance than a general goal (e.g., “Do your personal best!”; Lee & Edwards, 1984).
- Vague goal statements (i.e., telling students to try harder) are *not* effective (Martino, 1993).
- Goals viewed as salient to the student’s future are more likely to be attained (Oettingen, Honig, & Gollwitzer, 2000).

in inclusion settings. This initial discussion can take as little as 5 to 10 minutes or as long as 30 to 45 minutes. The time variation depends on the student’s cognitive, as well as expressive/receptive language abilities. Initially this long-term goal-setting process may appear time and labor intensive, but it will save valuable learning time in the future because the teacher is not constantly redirecting the student to engage in the task at hand.

In an inclusive classroom setting, the general and special education teachers can work together to implement the ACT-REACT strategy, so that neither feels overwhelmed. For instance, the special educator could interview the students and conduct the question-and-answer discussions that follow.

Also, in Step 1, the students learn to establish immediate academic and

**Figure 2. Student Interview Questions**

1. What do you want to be when you are an adult? Why?
2. Are you involved in extracurricular activities? If yes, what are the activities?
3. Do you think you are smart? Why or why not?
4. Do you think people at school notice when you do a good job? Who and why?
5. Do you experience any behavioral difficulties at school? If so, what and why?
6. What part of the school day is the best for you? The worst?
7. Do you have friends? Do your classmates like you? Why or why not?
8. Do you get along with your friends? Why or why not?
9. Do you get along with your teachers? Why or why not?
10. If you had a magic wand (like Harry Potter) what changes would you make to: your teacher, school, friends, and self?
11. Is your work at school too difficult or too easy? What subjects are easy for you? What subjects are hard for you?
12. Do you work hard at school? When and why?

behavioral goals at the beginning of each independent seatwork period. For example, students are taught how to establish immediate goals in reading or math by indicating the number of pages to be read or problems to be solved, as well as the length of time they will remain focused during the independent seatwork time allotted. Students use the Ready-Aim-Fire strategy (Rock, in press) to accomplish these goals:

- *Ready* is the keyword used to represent the tasks of preparing for independent math or reading seatwork (e.g., getting paper and pencil, printing individualized math assignment, and obtaining a scan card).
- *Aim* means to signify the behavioral aspects of remaining focused (e.g., remaining inseat, quietly reading or solving math problems, and thinking strategically).
- *Fire* characterizes the act of completing the assigned activity (e.g., check work for accuracy, scan, and self-praise).

You might use a three-main-idea frame (i.e., graphic organizer; Ellis, 1998; Ellis & Rock, 2001) to task analyze and teach students the Ready-Aim-Fire strategy. This frame helps them to organize the hierarchical structure of the actions required for on-task behavior during independent seatwork. Ellis's

(1998) frames are especially useful because of their whole-to-part, part-to-whole orientation. The top-down, bottom-up nature of these graphic organizers are essential to helping students understand how to perform the on-task behavior (i.e., the steps), as well as why it is important for them to do so (e.g., elaborations or the connections between their immediate and long-term goals).

Figure 3 shows a student-completed frame. As the figure shows, the student's immediate goal of staying focused in math is task analyzed, using the Ready, Aim, Fire strategy. His immediate goal is also linked to his long-term goal to become a veterinarian. Like the student interview, the completion of the three-main-idea frame may appear to be too time and labor intensive. But this in-depth, guided teaching episode occurs one time when the student is learning the ACT-REACT strategy. To share responsibilities, the special educator can guide the students in the completion of the frame, and the general educator can remind the students to review it periodically.

### Step 2: Create a Work Plan

In the second phase of ACT-REACT, teachers help students create work plans to achieve their goals. Students

### What Does the Literature Say About Goal Setting and Academic and Behavioral Outcomes?

- Goal setting increases students' appropriate behavior in the classroom, positively affects students' motivation, and can change students' negative or self-defeating attitudes (Chang & Lorenzi, 1983; Martens et al., 1997; Quigney & Studer, 1999; Rasing & Duker, 1992).
- Goal setting increases students' productivity, homework completion, school attendance, report card grades, and overall academic achievement (Graham, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1995; Grossi & Heward, 1998; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen, & Chatman, 1986; Trammel & Schloss, 1994; Wickert, 1987)
- Goal setting fosters resiliency, healthy development, and social competence for all students (Bruce, 1995).
- Goal setting can reduce conflict in the classroom and the home (Andrews & Dishion, 1995).
- Students' use of goal-setting techniques predicts academic and health success, as well as self-motivation (Zimmerman, 1996).
- Goal setting can enhance students' self-confidence and promote failure avoidance behavior rather than failure acceptance (Martino, 1993).
- Goal setting improves responsible student behavior and promotes self-understanding (Luckner, 1994; Ruth, 1994).

can include self-monitoring procedures in their personalized work plans. For example, they can divide the academic time allotted each day for math or reading into 5-minute intervals. Teachers or students then create an individualized self-monitoring "think sheet" for recording purposes.

For instance, older students can use a self-monitoring think sheet that is cre-

**Figure 3. Student Work Sample: Immediate and Long-Term Goal Setting Using a Three-Main-Idea Frame**



ated on the computer, whereas younger students can use a laminated booklet that is easily assembled by hand and is re-usable. Students use a variety of time-keeping devices (e.g., watches, egg timers, travel alarms, classroom clocks) to prompt themselves to self-assess every 5 minutes on whether they are achieving the goals they specified in their work plan. If the students think they were achieving their goals, then they place a check on their self-monitoring sheet or booklet. If the opposite is true and students are not reaching their goals, then they don't place a check on that time slot. Figure 4 provides an example of a student self-monitoring think sheet. Students use positive self-talk (e.g., "I can do this"; "I need to kick my focus up a notch") during the self-monitoring process to encourage goal attainment.

As previously noted, the time and labor investment occurs when students are introduced to learning the ACT-REACT Strategy. The special and general education teachers can also work together to reduce the workload during this step. For example, the special educator can teach the students how to self-monitor using the think sheets or book-

lets and timers. And the general educator can keep an eye on the students' use of the self-monitoring procedures during independent seatwork activities in the inclusive classroom.

### Step 3: Take Pictures

In the third phase of ACT-REACT, teachers use photographs to help students create positive and concrete mental representations of their goals. A series of personalized student pictures provides appealing reminders to the students. When the students are introduced to the strategy, the teacher takes photos of each student posing in positions that reflect their immediate academic and behavioral goals related to math and reading.

For example, to teach students how to achieve the immediate goals of the Ready-Aim-Fire strategy (see Step 1), the teacher takes a series of photos of students (a) gathering necessary math or reading materials, (b) working hard on the assigned task, and (c) completing the assignment successfully. Next, the pictures are scanned into the computer, printed, and inserted into the student's individualized self-monitoring think-sheet or booklet. At the beginning of each math or reading class period,

students are reminded to look at the pictures and if their actions resemble the ones depicted, then they earn a check on their self-monitoring think-sheet or booklet because they are achieving their immediate goals. On the other hand, if their actions do not resemble the ones illustrated in their photographs, then they do not earn a check for the 5-minute time period. The photos in Figure 4 show students at work on their goals.

The roles of the special and general educator would be similar to those in the previous step: The special educator can take the students' pictures and teach the students how to use the photos. The general educator can remind the students to use the picture prompts to self-monitor as they are working on independent seatwork.

### Steps 4 and 5: Reflect and Evaluate

In the fourth and fifth phases of ACT-REACT, teachers help students reflect and evaluate their progress pertaining to both immediate and long-term goal attainment. Teachers should not be tempted to eliminate these essential steps. In these steps, students summa-

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***A series of personalized student photographs provides appealing reminders to the students of what focusing on tasks looks like.***

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rize their performance during independent seatwork activities by comparing their attainment of immediate academic and behavioral goals with their achievement of long-term goals.

At this time, teachers need to help students make the connection between their immediate actions in the classroom and their desired future goals that are related to extracurricular activities or adult professions. Through scaffolded or supported, instruction, teachers can

**Figure 4. Student Self-Monitoring Think-Sheet**



**READY!  
GATHER MATERIALS**



**AIM!  
STAY FOCUSED**



**FIRE!  
COMPLETE WORK**

**Set Short-Term Behavioral Goal:**

**Set Short-Term Academic Goal:**

GOAL MONITORING (EVERY 5 MINUTES)				
Bell 1 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 2 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 3 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 4 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 5 Yes ___ No ___
Bell 6 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 7 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 8 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 9 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 10 Yes ___ No ___
Bell 11 Yes ___ No ___	Bell 12 Yes ___ No ___	Evaluate ST Academic Goal:		

**Evaluate Short-Term Behavioral Goal:**



**Evaluate Long-Term LIFE Goal:**

**ARE YOU MEETING YOUR GOAL TO BECOME A VETERINARIAN OR RESTARANTEUR?**

**YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_**

guide students to use self-questioning techniques. Students learn to ask themselves (a) whether they are staying focused like they were in the photographs and (b) whether staying focused is helping them to become a writer, professional athlete, or other profession.

In the beginning of the learning process, students often struggle with this connection. After several weeks, however, most students are able to articulate how staying focused and achieving their goals in math or reading could influence their future goal. For example, one student said, "What would happen if I 'zoned out' when I was up at bat? I would definitely strike out! That's not too cool!"

After reflecting on their goal-related progress, students learn to self-evaluate by quantifying their performance (e.g., the number of math problems solved with a specified degree of accuracy, the number of pages read with comprehension, the number of self-checks earned during the class period). The students record their self-evaluation on their personalized self-monitoring think-sheet or booklet and create graphs to display progress over time. Figure 4 illustrates how reflection and evaluation are also incorporated into the students' self-monitoring think-sheets and visually delineates the multifaceted aspects of goal setting procedures that were described in steps 1 through 5.

***"What would happen if I 'zoned out' when I was up at bat? I would definitely strike out! That's not too cool!"***

Collaboration between general education and special education teachers is helpful during these steps, as well. The special educator can teach students how to make connections between their immediate behavior and their long-term goals using self-questioning techniques. While students are learning to make

## A Capital Idea at The Capitol School!

At The Capitol School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, teachers were involved in a validation project to convert disengaged learners to active participants. The goal of the Capitol School is to meet all students' individual learning and behavioral needs within the framework of multiage classroom settings (i.e., clusters composed of 22-25 students of differing ages). The students include those with differing abilities and disabilities, and classrooms are fully inclusive.

As part of the validation project, teachers at this school nominated 3 students in the 7 to 9-year-old cluster and 6 students in the 10 to 13-year-old cluster to participate. The students were both actively and passively disengaged in the learning process.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participating students. Several graduate students and I observed these students during independent seatwork. We used 1-minute time sampling procedures to determine the percentage of time the students were engaged/disengaged during independent seatwork in math and reading. At the end of every minute, we recorded pluses or minuses to show student engagement.

Our observations confirmed that all teacher-nominated students were chronically disengaged, meaning that they were unfocused during independent seatwork more than 50% of the time. Half of the students were actively disengaged (e.g., calling out, out of seat, talking, disrupting others), whereas the other half were passively disengaged (e.g., drawing, staring into space, head down on desk). The students who were *not* nominated by the classroom teacher were also observed during independent seatwork using the same observational and time sampling recording procedures. These data indicated that the teachers were extremely accurate in selecting students who were chronically disengaged during independent seatwork activities.

**Computer Programs.** The Capitol School used the Accelerated Math® and the Accelerated Reader® curricula, which are produced by Renaissance Learning™. Accelerated Math is a computer software tool for managing and monitoring students' mathematics learning from first grade through calculus. Specifically, Accelerated Math

- Generates unlimited practice assignments—individualized for each student.
- Provides immediate, individualized feedback—shows what mistake each student makes.
- Delineates all the mastered objectives—addressing each student's strengths, needs, and learning styles.
- Immediately computer scores all assignments and tests.
- Helps each student practice the necessary skills to progress at his or her own pace (Renaissance Learning, n.d.).

Accelerated Reader is also a software tool. During independent reading time, students chose a book, read it at their own pace, and took a quiz. The reading practice quizzes help the teacher motivate and monitor increased reading practice. Both the student and the teacher receive immediate, individualized feedback (Renaissance Learning, n.d.).

**STM and ACT-REACT at Work.** The purpose of this on-going, multifaceted, validation project was to design, implement, and validate an STM strategy to transform disengaged learners to active participants. Since October of 2001, the students have been learning the ACT-REACT strategy, and the data indicate that active student engagement during independent seatwork activities has increased from 50% and below to 80% and above; similarly, student disengagement has decreased in the same pattern. Positive outcomes related to academic productivity (i.e., number of math problems completed and/or number of pages

read) and accuracy (i.e., percentage correct) were also documented, most likely because the students spent more time actively engaged in assigned independent seatwork activities. Specifically, student academic productivity increased two to four times, while accuracy remained constant. Moreover, teachers reported that the students appeared to be on task more in other classes, even when they were not using the ACT-REACT strategy, and also that the students seemed more excited about doing their math (Rock, in press).

Teachers, parents, and students offered unsolicited feedback to us. Sample comments included "Wow! Giving yourself all those checks really makes you feel good!" (Sam G., personal communication, November 28, 2001); "I have noticed a big change in the students' productivity, as well as their behavior" (Donna P., personal communication, May 10, 2002); and "I am thrilled that my daughter has done so well. We will try to do this at home when she is working on her homework" (Darlene O., personal communication, April 30, 2002).

The ACT-REACT strategy worked well for *all* the students who participated, regardless of age, grade, ability, disability, gender, and academic functioning level. An added benefit is that teachers and students engage in ethical decision making based on objective data, rather than subjective notions about academic and behavioral performance.

Overall, the validation project has been a success. Students who once believed that they could not be successful are now remaining academically engaged at a higher rate than their same-age peers who were not nominated for participation in the validation.

**Goal setting increases students' productivity, homework completion, school attendance, report card grades, and overall academic achievement.**

these connections consistently, as well as accurately, the general educator can teach them how to self-evaluate their performance by counting the number of math problems completed, the percentage of problems completed correctly, and so forth. Both teachers can help the students learn to record and graph their performance over time.

**Step 6: ACT Again**

In the final phase of the ACT-REACT strategy, teachers help students understand that the technique is recursive. Students who are chronically disengaged need to use the ACT-REACT procedures continuously, not intermittently. Students and teachers need to recognize that ACT-REACT is not a “once and done” process. Rather, students should use the 6-step procedure daily over a period of months to complete the transfiguration process so that students learn to focus, reflect, and self-monitor as a part of their spontaneous behavioral repertoire (See Figure 4).

As students become more proficient with the use of the strategy, the teacher should fade, or gradually reduce, the students' use of overtly structural ACT-REACT elements (e.g., self-monitoring think-sheets, hard copy photos, three main idea frames) with covert ones (e.g., mental pictures and checklists) to systematically encourage the internalization process. The special educator can develop a fading plan with the general educator and the students.

**Final Thoughts**

Do chronically disengaged students care about learning? The obvious answer to this question is, “Some do, and some don't.” A more salient question for educators to ponder is: “Why is it that some

**Table 1. Student Characteristics**

Student/Gender	Description	Grade	Academic Grade Level
Student 1/Male	Asperger's syndrome	5th	5th
Student 2/Male	Gifted & talented	4th	8th
Student 3/Male	Floating harbor syndrome (FHS) Speech & language impairment	5th	5th with accommodations & adaptations
Student 4/Male	Learning disability & attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; without medication)	4th	4th
Student 5/Male	Learning disability	5th	5th
Student 6/Male	Developmental delay & speech & language impairment	5th	5th with accommodations & adaptations
Student 7/Female	Typically developing	2nd	2nd
Student 8/Male	ADHD (with medication)	3rd	3rd
Student 9/Female	Typically developing	3rd	3rd

of these students don't care about learning?” Fundamental to answering this question are these students' thoughts and beliefs about themselves and their abilities. Often, these beliefs are negatively self-defeating (Paris & Newman, 1990) and adversely influence student behavior in the classroom (e.g., students disengage from the task at hand).

Considering that these belief systems are often resistant to change, and teachers are confronted with complex learning environments composed of students with differing needs, an effective technique is necessary to successfully transfigure disengaged learners to active participants. If teachers replace ineffective techniques with robust and strategic ones, and interchange doing nothing or blaming students with accountability and responsibility, then they can support students in achieving desirable educational and quality of life outcomes.

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