

# Introduction

A box filled with instructional activities cannot rightfully be called a treasure chest unless it holds something of considerable value. When *Treasure Chest* was compiled, the objective was to create an expansive resource of activities that foster development of the whole child – not only the parts of the child that read and solve mathematical equations, but the parts that feel, create, relate, communicate, cooperate, solve problems, and make moral decisions. We consider these facets of the whole child to be extremely valuable.

By choosing this collection of activities, in many ways you have become a steward of education's lost treasure. The physical, emotional, and social development of children were once considered essential components of a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. Unfortunately, in recent years they have been partially buried under the weight of standardized performance expectations in reading and mathematics.

Today's narrow, somewhat impoverished approach to education keeps teachers so busy preparing students for frequent make-or-break testing that most have little time to address the needs of the whole child. We are grateful that counselors are doing their best to fill this gap.

Students respond to educational experiences not just cognitively, but emotionally and socially as well. While not the same as numerical scores compared with the scores of thousands of other students, we can teach and measure the achievement of emotional and social skills. We can measure students' self-awareness or emotional intelligence, social competence, creativity, and readiness for democratic participation through deliberate lessons with well-formed objectives. *Treasure Chest* activities identify objectives aligned with the ASCA National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997).

Historically, public schools in the U.S. were established as much for social and moral as for academic instruction. The recent laser-like focus on academic achievement to the exclusion of other developmental concerns is not in the best interests of children, families, democratic institutions, or the emerging global marketplace. We need to develop young people who understand themselves, have empathy and compassion for others, can think on their feet, and are ready to participate in innovative ways to solve the nation's and the planet's many grave problems.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) has powerfully and eloquently urged a return to educating the whole child. The September, 2005 issue of the organization's publication, *Educational Leadership*, states:

The ASCD Position Statement on the Whole Child, derived from positions adopted by ASCD's Leadership Council in 2004, calls for schools and communities to pay attention to each student's academic, physical, emotional, social, and ethical well-being. The statement reaffirms what ASCD educators value: a challenging and engaging curriculum, evidence-based instruction and assessment, safe and trusting classrooms and schools, and a climate that supports students and their families (Scherer, 2005, p. 7).

A feature article in the same issue observes that "students can develop reading, writing, speaking, and mathematical skills as they plan and stage dramatic performances, design classroom murals, compose a school paper, and participate in establishing classroom rules" (Noddings, 2005, pp. 8-13). It is unfortunate that in today's educational climate such an obvious notion needs to be vigorously promoted.

## *Activities for the Whole Child*

*Treasure Chest* is made up of predominantly group activities in several vital areas that promote the development of the whole child.

### *Life Skills*

As the name implies, life skills serve as passports to effective day-to-day living. They build independence, social competence, and interpersonal versatility, enabling students to handle themselves well in whatever circumstances life presents. These activities teach students to communicate effectively, respond assertively, nurture friendships, manage their time, solve problems, and work productively in teams.

### *Learning Strategies*

Counselors have always played an important role in helping students to acquire personal habits that enhance school performance. These activities focus on the development of effective study skills, self-management techniques, and preferred learning styles. They also address factors that greatly influence academic performance, including brain functioning, nutrition, and stress management.

## *Health and Wellness*

This group of activities deals with some of the most important issues facing schools today, such as how to create a safe environment, how to respond to crises, and instructional approaches to combating childhood obesity. Activities address emotional balance, nutrition, exercise and stress management, as well as potentially difficult topics such as fear, grief, unwelcome touching, safety, the effects of TV viewing, refusal skills, and smoking.

## *Emotional Intelligence*

Counselors recognize that emotional intelligence is the silent partner of rational intelligence—equal in importance, yet frequently overlooked and rarely schooled. Curiosity, interest, determination, and satisfaction are as much feelings as they are cognitive states, and profoundly impact performance. This group of activities builds self-awareness, self-esteem, recognition and acceptance of feelings, healthy self-talk, and peer inclusion and cooperation.

## *Diversity*

Cultural clashes occur countless times each day in schools throughout the U.S. Sometimes they are satisfactorily resolved, but many times they go completely unnoticed. Every time this happens an opportunity to improve the educational experience of a student is lost. These activities directly examine cultural heritage, discrimination, disabilities, stereotypes, prejudice, and the attitudes and values needed to promote tolerance and the full appreciation of diversity.

## *Conflict Management*

Conflict is not only a fact of school life, it reflects a powerful human predisposition. Administrators and teachers are charged with handling the disciplinary side of conflict, which gives counselors an opportunity to deal with prevention and management. This group of activities aids in that effort by addressing various causes of conflict, empathy development, anger management, self-control and bullying, and by providing proven conflict-management processes and strategies.

## *Character Education*

The importance of moral education was recognized and promoted by such luminaries as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and its place in public education has been more or less secure for centuries. Whether by design or default, schools teach ethics and values in the priorities they model and the behaviors they praise and punish. This group of activities deliberately instills such universal moral values as fairness, friendship, responsibility, truthfulness, promise-keeping, service, courage, environmentalism, respect, and citizenship through activities dealing with classroom rules, current events, cheating, lying, moral dilemmas, and more.

## *Careers*

Counselors are traditionally expected to help students assess their aptitude for, and interest in, various careers. In addition, career activities can and should be integrated within existing academic subject areas. This group of activities asks students to investigate local businesses, survey occupations, practice job-search skills, test cooperative vs. competitive behaviors, practice teamwork, and trace the career paths of people in the community.

## *Benefits of Group Work*

There are many advantages to working with students in groups. Aside from the obvious fact that groups allow more students to benefit during a given period of time, several other points are worth mentioning. Groups are usually preferable if your intent is to instruct, as it is with these activities. In the process of completing an activity, students often learn as much from one another as they do from the lesson itself. They share experiences, reactions, and ideas. Increased brainpower produces greater creativity and, often, better results.

Students experience safety in numbers. No one student feels singled out or “on the spot” when several students are presented with the same information, problems and questions. In *Learning Smarter: The New Science of Teaching*, authors Eric Jensen and Michael Dabney link group learning with an increased sense of safety:

Research has found that supportive, safe learning environments (including those involving peer collaboration) engage the emotions in a positive way and stimulate attention, meaning, and memory in the brain. Researchers believe this enhanced learning results from both psychological and physiological components found in safe environments. Most of us experience security in numbers since the chance of being singled out is reduced. With others around us to provide a sense of social safety, the brain’s fear response is less likely to be triggered (Jensen & Dabney, 2000, p. 15).

Greater safety allows reticent students to assert themselves more easily, so groups eventually benefit from the views and opinions of all members. This does not often happen in the classroom.

Groups are laboratories for the advancement of communication skills—more constraining than classrooms, but less intimidating than one-to-one sessions. When students talk to one another in groups, your role becomes that of coach, encouraging clear statements, good listening, and congruent body language. Good communication is likely to be a secondary objective of every group, regardless of the main topic of inquiry.

Cooperation and collaboration are encouraged in groups, particularly when instructional activities call for decision making or problem solving of some sort. It's hard to imagine a better venue for practicing aspects of the democratic process. Your ability to facilitate and take advantage of teachable moments will make the most of these opportunities.

Finally, groups build a sense of connection and community. Because of their association in the group, students who otherwise might not get to know one another often develop friendships outside the group. These connections in turn promote cross-connections between grade-level, interest-based and ethnic groups on the campus, which strengthens the entire school.

## *Awareness, Social Competency, and Mastery*

The activities in *Treasure Chest* are designed to develop in students three critical areas of human functioning: awareness, social competency, and mastery. These areas comprise the underlying theoretical components of the entire collection.

### *Awareness*

Awareness is a critical element of self-esteem. Aware students do not hide things from themselves. They are in touch with the inner world of feelings and thoughts, and they are in control of their actions. They understand that other people feel, think, and behave, too. They are also in touch with the reality of the past, the possibilities of the future, and the certainty of the present. Awareness allows students to order their lives flexibly and effectively on a moment-to-moment basis.

By contrast, relative unawareness sets the stage for lack of congruence between what a student believes or feels and how the student behaves. Feelings of isolation (“I’m the only one who has ever felt like this”) occur when students are unaware that everyone experiences similar feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Without awareness, students cannot effectively direct the course of their school experience, or their lives.

## *Social Competency*

Students who are effective in their social interactions are capable of understanding other people. They know how to interact with others flexibly, skillfully, and responsibly, without sacrificing their own needs and integrity. They have a good sense of timing and are effective at being heard and making needed changes to their environment. Socially competent students realize that people have the power to affect one another. They are aware, not only of how others affect them, but of the effects of their behavior on others, and they take accompanying responsibility for their actions.

Without social skills, individuals confuse situations and give inappropriate responses. They lack positive communication skills, fail to develop lasting friendships, have difficulty resolving conflicts, and do not work effectively in teams.

## *Mastery*

Masterful students believe in themselves. They perceive themselves as being capable. They are not debilitated by knowledge of their weaknesses, and have a healthy degree of self-esteem and a feeling of mastery or self-confidence. They try new challenges and do not strongly fear failure.

Students are more likely to achieve mastery in their endeavors when they have a feeling of mastery about themselves. Generally, those who believe in themselves are the ones who continue to succeed, and the more they succeed, the more they believe in themselves. Thus a beneficial cycle is created.

The ways in which significant others respond to what students do plays a critical role in whether or not they see themselves as masterful. If others recognize their efforts and comment positively when they try or succeed, their awareness that they have capabilities increases. Conversely, without favorable comment, they are less aware of their capabilities, even if they experience success. This explains why so many brilliant students do not regard themselves as such. Rather, they are painfully aware of their limitations and shortcomings and miss many opportunities to actualize their potential.

## *Guidelines for Implementation*

Whether you use these activities as a guest facilitator in the classroom, or conduct group counseling sessions in a separate venue, the following suggestions are intended to maximize both your success and the benefits to students.

Begin by developing a safe and trusting atmosphere. As a counselor, you understand that groups develop in a fairly predictable way, maturing and becoming more effective as members spend increasing time together. To facilitate this process, start with activities that promote communication and trust-building and save the more challenging activities for later. Establish ground rules that safeguard confidentiality, promote respect and good listening, and encourage everyone to participate.

Assess the needs of the group before proceeding. Each group is different, with a unique amalgam of interests, talents, and concerns. Depending on your purpose in forming a particular group, consult with referring adults (teachers, administrators, parents) regarding individual members.

Choose activities that deal with the values and interests you wish to promote. For example, if your aim is to encourage personal accountability, you will find appropriate activities in several of the theme areas. If you are working with an anger-management group, Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Management will offer many directly relevant activities. An alternative approach is to announce the formation of a group devoted to a particular theme area and then recruit students who already have an interest in exploring that area.

Modify activities to suit the ages, ability levels, cultural/ethnic backgrounds, and interests of your students. You will know best how to maximize the appropriateness and impact of each activity, so please take those liberties. For example, if the instructions call for the students to write a story and you are working with pre-writing students, you might choose to have them draw pictures instead.

Conclude activities with a summary discussion. Discussion questions are listed at the end of each activity. They are designed to help the students think about and articulate what they have learned from the activity, to apply concepts in different ways, and to contrast and compare ideas. All of this helps the students internalize the main points of the lesson, committing them to long-term memory.

When asking questions, maximize participation by allowing sufficient time for the students to answer. Typically, discussion leaders allow one to three seconds before calling on someone or supplying an answer themselves. This is not enough time for most students to transfer information from long-term memory. Though it may seem awkward at first, discipline yourself to wait longer. After a period of silence, if no one has volunteered, offer a few key words to spark ideas.

Create your own discussion questions based on what has transpired in the group. This is an effective way to lend immediacy to the session. Watch and listen for relevant side issues and personal examples that can be expanded to have universal application. For example, in a conflict management session, if a student touches on the issue of inner (intrapersonal) conflict, you might want to formulate a discussion question that asks the students how they would apply conflict management strategies to conflicting values, opinions, or desires within themselves.

Finally, take full advantage of your knowledge and skills as a counselor. While these are instructional activities, your training has prepared you to give each one a humanistic overlay that can't be conveyed by the printed word. Trust your instincts in this regard. Make the activities work for you.

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