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### The Achievement Motive and Education

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ONE of the persistent problems in designing curriculum and classroom learning strategies is finding the keystone to what "turns on" students to become interested and engaged in classroom activities. Judging from unsuccessful attempts to construct a comprehensive and predictive theory concerning motivation in the formal educational setting, the solution appears to be neither simple nor singular in nature. Rather, motivation to become involved in school-defined tasks is multidimensional, being characterized by broad variance in individual needs as these interact with the environmental press of particular classroom subcultures.

Individual motives might range from such extrinsic goals as the attainment of praise or compliance with authority on the one hand, to the intrinsic needs for satisfaction of curiosity or being successful in accomplishing a challenging task on the other hand. Teachers have been generally successful in bringing about involvement and effective performance through application of experience and intuitive reading of individual differences. However, the development of educational theory and effective classroom practice will be dependent upon moving the factors that "turn kids on" from the realm of a mystique to one of systematic control and prediction.

The most significant research and theorizing to date concerning motivation in

the educational process have been done in relation to various components of intrinsic motivation, particularly *achievement motivation* and *curiosity*. There is considerable merit in the current interest being focused upon cognitive motivation in the form of the introduction of such concepts as inquiry, creativity, discovery, and divergency. Yet, we may assume that at present the elements of most classroom subcultures are characterized and organized by tradition around the motive to achieve as manifested by "rocketed" and "gold-starred" progress charts; the assignment of normally distributed grades; the existence of a graded and standardized system of curricula, materials, and tests; as well as parental, teacher, and student expectations and evaluations concentrating on individual performance.

Consequently, the logical point to begin an analysis of educational motivation would be to review theoretical and empirical knowledge that has been accumulated concerning the operation of the motive to achieve in both human behavior and the classroom and to point out some of the implications and issues that such knowledge has for the educational process.

#### The Achievement Motive

Adler (1) suggests that the achievement motive is of prime importance in human behavior. Lewin (24) contributed the notion

of purposeful goal striving and differential valence attributable to particular goals, while Rotter (39) discussed the expectancy for success as an important factor in goal striving behaviors. The conception of individual variance of disposition or need to seek certain general goals was developed by Murray (31), culminating in the development of the Thematic Apperception Test to measure individual needs. Further conceptualization, extensive research, and sophisticated projective techniques for measuring the "need to Achieve" (*n* Achievement) is reported by McClelland *et al.* (27).

The need to achieve is basically defined (27, pp. 110-11) as a need to be successful "in competition with some standard of excellence," wherein "doing as well as or better than someone is a primary concern." Behavioral manifestations of *n* Achievement occur as an affective response "in connection with evaluated performance." Thus, the elements of *success*, *standards of excellence*, *competition*, and *evaluated performance* are all elements related to the conception of the achievement motive.

Research evidence seems to indicate that *n* Achievement is developed in early childhood within the dynamics of the mother-child interaction. Investigations (48, 36) reveal that mothers of subjects that are high in *n* Achievement stress early autonomy and high expectations for their offspring and maintain a high standard of performance by using strong positive reinforcements of warmth and approval for success, as well as strong negative reinforcements for failure. The existence of *n* Achievement (20) appears to be a fairly consistent component of personality which extends from infancy into adulthood. However, data have been accumulated that might suggest that *n* Achievement is a less salient motive in female behavior in deference to the need for approval and affection (11, 41).

Atkinson (3) has made an extensive summary and theoretical analysis of the research that has been accumulated concerning the functions of both *n* Achievement and anxiety (an inferred measure of the need to avoid failure). Atkinson discusses research

that supports the hypothesis that the tendency to engage in achievement-oriented activity (the tendency to achieve or the tendency to avoid failure) is a product which results from the interaction between basic *personality dispositions* (the predominance of either *n* Achievement or *n* Avoid Failure) and two environmental parameters of activity—the *probability* that a given activity will lead to success and the *value* placed upon success at that activity.

### The Function of *n* Achievement in Human Behavior

On the basis of theoretical predictions and confirming research evidence (5, 19, 18, 46, 16, 17, 28), it is found that individuals who have high need to achieve and low anxiety scores show preference for tasks with intermediate probability of success. Such individuals also maintain a generally high performance level and are persistent in problem solving tasks. In contrast, individuals who are low in *n* Achievement and high in anxiety scores tend to choose tasks with probabilities for success at either extreme—that is, they tend to select unrealistic levels of aspiration. Such individuals are also less effective in their performance and less persistent in problem solving situations. Moulton (30) obtained confirming evidence concerning an interesting phenomenon. As might be expected, individuals who have high *n* Achievement and low anxiety choose more difficult tasks after success and easier tasks after failure. In contrast, individuals low in *n* Achievement and high in anxiety choose *easier tasks after success* and *more difficult tasks following failure*.

Enough evidence has been gathered at this point to indicate the existence of a positive relationship between levels of socioeconomic class and *n* Achievement. However, this relationship seems to function as a social class phenomenon and not as one involving ethnicity or race (35). A nationwide interview (45) produced evidence of a positive relationship existing between *n* Achievement and educational and occupational levels of attainment.

Differential status in  $n$  Achievement among school children in favor of middle and upper social class membership has also been well established (22, 34, 8, 21). Although Crandall's (11) contention that social class is a residual effect of achievement performance seems an oversimplification, Crockett (13) gained evidence to indicate that a high degree of  $n$  Achievement was positively related to the upward social mobility of lower class males in terms of the attainment of occupational levels higher than those of their parents and the pursuance of a college education.

In addition to the functions that the early child-mother interaction might play in the development of  $n$  Achievement, Crandall (11) maintains that middle and upper class parents communicate expectations for high educational and occupational attainment, while lower class parents play down the attainment of academic competence and perceive achievement in terms of job acquisition. More specific analysis of differential social class styles in reaction to a child's performance has indicated that lower class parents emphasize praise and tangible rewards as opposed to abstract admonitions (correctness of response), which is more characteristic of the middle class (49). However, maternal expectancy appears to be a critical variable in the development of  $n$  Achievement across socioeconomic class lines (7).

In terms of general performance in school, boys with strong  $n$  Achievement can be differentiated from those who are weak in  $n$  Achievement by their exhibition of stronger motivation in specific curriculum areas and sports (48); greater independence and self-reliance (36); persistence in problem solving (10); and higher self concepts in relation to school-related attributes (22). A positive relationship between grades and  $n$  Achievement, with IQ in some cases controlled, has been fairly well established at this point (34, 47, 23, 33). However, learning may actually be accelerated when the probability of failure and high grades are removed from the learning environment (9).

Atkinson and O'Connor (1963) found

that ability grouping increased learning and the arousal of the achievement tendency for students that were high in  $n$  Achievement, but lowered interest and satisfaction with school work among students low in  $n$  Achievement without negative effect on performance. However, teacher expectation may yet operate as a more critical variable in affecting the aspiration and performance of learners (22, 37, 15, 1, 38).

The conflict that might occur between certain manifestations of  $n$  Achievement and other types of behavior has been touched upon only slightly in the research literature by Torgoll *et al.* Some evidence has been accumulated to indicate that in situations wherein there is an inducement to gratify achievement needs, individuals with high  $n$  Achievement will use unscrupulous means to attain goals and avoid aiding others in problem-solving processes (40). Consequently, there are certain moral complications of the manifestation of  $n$  Achievement which negate responsibility for equality as individuals who, for gain of superior status and position, attempt to reach goals which are defined as doing better than others (29, 14). McClelland (27) suggests the appearance of an increase of moral problems in societies characterized by high levels of achievement motivation.

## Implications and Issues

A review of the research concerning achievement motivation pinpoints some concrete realities about the importance of its present function in the American school and culture. Immediate and specific inclinations would be to recommend (a) a lessening of the development of fear of failure in the classroom, and (b) an enhancement of the development of  $n$  Achievement in children through parent counseling and modification of instructional procedures in early childhood education programs. Yet, considering the relative stability of this component of personality, efforts might be more fruitfully directed toward manipulating the expectancies for success within the school environment.

An alternative to the continued and disproportionate dependency on the manipulation of achievement-oriented tendencies within the classroom subculture will hopefully emerge through the increased emphasis on intrinsic cognitive techniques for stimulating activity and performance. Yet, from a long-range vantage point, attempts should be initiated to develop and institute a sophisticated diagnostic system designed to determine individual configurations and group parameters inclusive of a broad array of motivational variables as a basis for plotting learning strategies.

There are also broader issues which should be considered in relation to the position and interpretation of the achievement motive in the learning process. First, there may be a temptation to conclude that a major portion of the population variance in social class, occupational, and educational levels can be accounted for as a function of achievement motivation. Such an assumption suffers from both oversimplification and a paucity of supporting empirical and theoretical justification. Furthermore, from a scientific point of view, caution must be taken to avoid the operation of personal and ethnocentric bias (for example, social atomism [41]) in the processes used by researchers in formulating questions, obtaining observations, and making inferences (25).

An impressive argument for retaining the achievement motive as the primary force in the educational process can be made from the standpoint that the classroom must be maintained as a micro-society reflecting the realities of American society, which ostensibly emphasizes and rewards manifestations of the achievement motive. Yet, a strong rationale can also be constructed which supports the contention that certain elements of the achievement motive are socially antiquated in terms of the personal and institutional reconstructions that are needed during a period of rapid social change and critical world problems.

Karl Mannheim (26), in discussing the ability of modern democracies to resist evolving into totalitarianism, maintains that the social complexities brought about by the

vastly increased interdependence and impact of political, economic, and social events have caused the need for a movement away from a competitively oriented social system which stresses an individualistic morality. Rather, he contends that modern democracies are entering a planning phase of development which demands personal and institutional reconstruction characterized by a group-oriented morality of cooperation and cohesiveness. In such a complicated social system, the meaning and function of individuality take on a more sophisticated definition. The individual must have a comprehensive enough understanding of the social system to perceive how his own needs and goals are inextricably bound up with those of every other member of the system.

On this basis, he can make creative inputs into the system and can affect public policy while serving both individual and group welfare.

In conclusion, it would seem that the institution of formal education should begin to modify the elements of its subculture to redefine and develop concepts of personal creativity, achievement, and individuality within the new context of social responsibility, equality, group cohesiveness, and achievement. The idea is not so new—football teams have been accomplishing this for a long time. Some American young people are already far ahead of the game.

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By Theodore Manheim, Gloria L. Dardarian, and Diane A. Satterthwaite

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