

Student Apathy: A Motivational Dilemma

Below-average students protect themselves against failure in an educational competition they cannot win. But they *could* win if schooling tied success to effort, time on task, and performance standards—rather than to ability.

Student apathy and noninvolvement are as common as chalk dust in many of our nation's classrooms. Unfortunately, they are more lethal. Last year in Chicago, for example, nearly 40 percent of 9th graders ended the year by failing *two* or more courses (Banas 1985). Few cities of equal size can boast of better results. Paradoxically, the educational procedures that have contributed to this apathy have also produced many hardworking, competent, and intellectually curious students, often working side by side with the noninvolved. In short, schools are giving us winners as well as losers, and if we hope to increase the former by reducing the latter, we need to understand the motivational factors that have contributed to this dichotomy.

Ironically, one of the problems may be that many students are *not* willing to accept mediocrity, choosing instead apathy and even failure rather than "average" or "below-average" performance. From a perceptual point of view, the essence of all motivation is enhancement of self. Given our personal perceptions of reality, we all strive to be the "best" we can be. When this sense of self-worth is threat-

ened, we act in ways to protect it. Students' self-worth is directly related to their ability to achieve—and to achieve is to be of value (Covington and Beery 1976). When students see school as a threat to their self-worth, some are forced to choose apathy and noninvolvement as a defense.

Norm-Referenced Evaluation

The measurement and evaluation system that most schools use relies heavily on norm-referenced procedures that compare one student's performance with that of another. This allows for the determination of average performance, without which above- and below-average performance could not exist.¹ The institutional references to average, above average, and below average are so ingrained in the educational lexicon that their continued use is unquestioned. College entrance exams, national achievement tests, final exams, grades, and often daily quizzes depend heavily on this norm-referencing. We often assume that only the dull, lazy, or unambitious are below average; in reality, it's a fixed percentage of the population—regardless of achievement.

These norm-referenced, competitive evaluation procedures force 50 percent of the student population into the bottom half of their graduating class. In actual practice, the ranking and sorting of students starts much sooner. Allowing for few exceptions, most students conclude early in their educational experience that once below average, always below average. According to Benjamin Bloom,

the correlation between measures of school achievement at grade three and grade eleven is about .85, demonstrating that over this eight year period the relative ranking of students in a class or school remains almost perfectly fixed (1981, p. 133).

All of this has contributed to a superficial understanding of the term "average." If a local newspaper ran the headline, "Half of High School Seniors Reading Below National Average," there might well be a public outcry. Wisconsin's state superintendent of education was quoted as saying, "Without question our public school students are doing well when compared to the national average. However, we should not overlook the fact that although Wisconsin averages are high, there are a number of students who

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fall below the national average” (Bednarek 1983). I’m sure he’s not alone in wishing that Wisconsin were as fortunate as Garrison Keillor’s mythical town of Lake Wobegon, the place “where *all* the kids are above average.”

By determining grades from the percentage of items correct rather than from curved frequency distributions, some teachers assume they are using criteria rather than norm-referenced evaluation. Criterion-referenced evaluation, however, requires formative or diagnostic-progress tests that measure specific learning objectives. According to Bloom, the purpose of these tests is to help ensure that each set of learning tasks is thoroughly mastered before subsequent learning tasks are started.

Formative evaluation tests should be regarded as part of the learning process and should in no way be confused with the judgment of the capabilities of the student or used as part of the grading process (1981, p. 170).

Ability vs. Effort

It is apparent that for many students success in school is equated with being above average. When students enter school with their varying academic abilities and individually determined effort, they quickly discover that they must compete with each other for a limited number of rewards. During this competition, the system teaches students that effort is less important than ability. The most desirable reward is being labeled “above average.”

Assuming that everyone works hard, those with high ability get the As and Bs and those with lower ability get the Cs and Ds. (Fs are usually reserved for

those who do not show effort.) Granted, teachers and parents often use praise and encouragement to reward effort, regardless of ability. These subtle reinforcements, however, are greatly overshadowed by the more official rewards of high grades, honor rolls, and top reading groups.

Competition and Self-Worth

The education system’s reliance on ability over effort to determine rewards results in a forced and unfair competition. To ease the pain for the losers and to encourage their continued effort in the face of hopelessness, we share with them the story of the tortoise and the hare. Most will remember that the tortoise enjoys the good fortune of the hare falling asleep during the race. It doesn’t take long for “below-average” students to realize that the story is a fairy tale; few hares are falling asleep today.

It may be argued that this is simply the reality of the society in which we live. But in some ways the school’s evaluation system is more brutal than the real world. Few in the work force are subjected to the humiliation of norm-referenced evaluation. According to Gardner, “The top corporate executive is apt to be particularly eloquent in defense of individual competition, but his ambitious subordinates will usually find that he has himself well protected against any unseemly rivalry on their part” (1961, p. 111). Even if valid criteria were available, how many public school teachers would allow school boards to develop a norm-referenced merit system that would force half of the teachers to be below the median? Such a system also would be catastrophic in a university setting where 80 to 90 percent of the faculty believe themselves to be in the top 10 percent.

Competition, in itself, is not debilitating. When students are free to choose and when they believe that they have a reasonable chance for success, competition often spurs them to high levels of effort and excellence. A sizable percentage of the school population thrives on the competition of our present evaluative structure. Competition is debilitating however, when it is forced on people of unequal abilities who do not have an equitable chance of winning.

Failure-Avoidance Motivation

As a result of forced academic competition, slower students become victims of a system that can reward some only by punishing others. They learn that the As and most Bs are reserved for the upper half of the students who have the ability and learn more quickly.

Failure, of course, is a subjective term that need not be restricted to an F. For some students, Ds, Cs, or even Bs may be indicative of failure. Students who are motivated to protect their self-worth, however, are struggling to avoid a *sense* of failure rather than failure itself. While it may appear contradictory, the common defense against a sense of academic failure is to stop trying. Many parents and teachers assure students that they can fail only if they don’t try. What they really mean, of course, is that if you fail you haven’t *really* tried. It doesn’t take long for students to learn that if you haven’t really tried, you haven’t failed.

Students motivated to avoid failure approach each new learning experience with apprehension and fear, which they mask with apathy, aloofness, or indifference. Their philosophy toward school becomes “Nothing ventured, nothing failed.”

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On the other hand, schools will not tolerate students who do not exert at least *some* effort. Failure to try results in being kept after school, letters home, or parent-teacher conferences. To avoid these unpleasanties, failure-avoiding students are forced to expend a minimum amount of effort, or at least feign the appearance of effort. As a result, they experience no clear cut failures or successes, and their philosophy becomes "Just enough to get by." An outsider might see in their behavior the acceptance of mediocrity. The student might see it as a coping strategy to bolster a fragile sense of self-worth. It is less painful to reject school than to reject oneself. From either point of view, it's a tragic waste of human potential created by an educational system that rewards some only by punishing others.

All Can Succeed

We have no control over the innate ability we received at birth. We do, however, control the effort we choose to expend on any given task. Bloom (1976) argues that 90 to 95 percent of our student population have enough academic ability to master all of the content and objectives of our curriculums, assuming maximum effort, enough time on task, and optimum learning environments. But it seems unlikely that those labeled below average will expend this effort in a norm-referenced, competitive environment. It is much more humane and productive to evaluate an individual against identifiable standards of excellence than against another's performance. By so doing we can make it possible for all to succeed.

There is considerable opposition to setting aside norm-referenced evaluation. It is impossible to shed the label below average unless we are also willing to eliminate the label above average. Students in the latter group often thrive on grade competition and are likely to feel cheated if it is removed. For them it is the scarcity of an A that makes it valuable.

Nevertheless, if our goal is maximum effort from *all* students, then our educational system must demonstrate to all students that increased effort *can* result in success. This requires outcome-based instruction in which formative tests are used to determine who needs enrichment and who

needs additional instruction and more time on task. Only when grades are based on standards of absolute performance of clearly stated objectives, and differences in student ability are viewed primarily as differences in the amount of time students require to master these objectives, will it be possible for effort to result in success. When competition is replaced with differential amounts of time on task and quality instruction, Bloom reports that "about 80 percent of students reach the same final criteria of achievement (usually A or B+) as approximately the top 20 percent of the class under control group instruction" (1981, p. 134).

Educators must confront the discrepancies between the actual and stated goals of education. Only then will it be possible to forge an answer to the challenge John Gardner offered 25 years ago.

How can we provide opportunities and rewards for individuals of every degree of ability so that individuals at every level will realize their full potentialities, perform at their best and harbor no resentment toward any other level? (1961, p. 115).

For those who are forced to choose between rejecting schooling or rejecting their sense of self-worth, let us hope that the process begins soon. □

1. Statistically, the mean, median, and mode are all measures of central tendency or "average" performance. The term "average" in this article refers to the median.

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