

Motivation for At-Risk Students

“Helpless” students need to learn to link their successes and failures to their own efforts.

Student motivation for learning is a major concern of most teachers, but especially for teachers of low-achieving or “at risk” students, whose numbers are on the rise (Hodgkinson 1985). In today’s classrooms, motivational inequality prevails: some students persist and work on their own for their own intrinsic interest, while others work because they are required to and do not believe their actions are related to success and failure (Nicholls 1979). The encouraging news, however, is that motivation research (e.g., Alderman and Cohen 1985, Ames and Ames 1989) and cognitive learning research (e.g., Weinstein and Mayer 1986) offer teachers an abundant repertoire of strategies to foster student success and self-worth.

Understanding Motivation Levels

The motivation theory of attribution has helped us to understand students who have a pattern of failure. The reasons one assigns for achieving success or failure are called *attributions* (Weiner 1979). Students’ attributions affect their future expectations and actions. The following four attributions are used most frequently:

1. Not having the ability (“I’m just not a writer”);
2. Not expending enough effort (“I could do it if I really tried”);
3. Task difficulty (“the test was too hard”);
4. Luck (“I guessed right”).

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These attributions have been further categorized into two dimensions, stable-unstable and internal-external. Stable-unstable refers to the consistency of a student’s pattern of failure. Internal-external refers to the student’s beliefs that the cause for failure lies either within or outside the student. For example, Teresa fails an exam on reading comprehension—she has done this many times. Her attributions for her failure are that she can never answer those kinds of questions and that she is just not a good reader. These attributions have internal/stable characteristics: the student blames herself rather than an outside force for her failure, and she characterizes herself as someone who can never succeed.

Students with such internal/stable attributions for failure consider themselves “helpless”—they believe they can do nothing to prevent failure or assure success (Dweck and Goetz 1978). The “helpless” student actually expends less effort after failure, while a “mastery” student increases effort and looks for better strategies. Failure attributed to internal/stable ability is one of the most difficult motivational problems to remedy. And for the helpless student, simply experiencing success is not enough to ensure motivation.

For example, a student may not attribute his success to anything that he did—he attributes it to luck—so he does not expect success again. Or another student attributes her failure to “stupidity,” so failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The task for teachers is to help these students break this failure/low expectation/helpless cycle.

Efficacy and Expectations

Teachers who are successful in reaching low-achieving students combine a high sense of their own efficacy with high, realistic expectations for student achievement. *Teacher efficacy* refers to teachers' confidence in their ability to influence student learning and motivation. This sense of efficacy, in turn, affects teachers' expectations concerning students' abilities. Teachers with a high sense of efficacy are more likely to view low-achieving students as reachable, teachable, and worthy of their attention and effort (Ashton and Webb 1986).

The effects of teacher expectations on student achievement are well documented (Good and Brophy 1987); the key attitudes for teachers are confidence and determination. This does not mean that they are idealistic in their expectations. Instead, it means that, although teachers are realistic—

aware that students have learning problems—they look for ways to overcome the learning problems (Brophy and Everson 1976). They let students know they want them to succeed and that they will be expected to achieve the objectives. Then they assure them that they will be taught the skills or learning strategies necessary for achieving them.

“Links” to Success

It is not enough that the student achieve success; in order to acquire a high degree of motivation, the student must know how he or she personally contributed to this success. In other words, there must be a link between what the student did and the outcome. Drawing from research on motivation and learning strategies, I have developed the “Links” for helping the “helpless” student become successful and, in turn, develop an increased sense of self-worth. These links are shown in Figure 1.

Link One: proximal goals. The first link to success is the setting of goals for performance. Goals play an important role in the cultivation of self-motivation by establishing a target or personal standards by which we can evaluate or monitor our performances (Bandura 1986). Goal setting provides the mech-

anism for self-assessment. Morgan (1987) concluded that there is a reciprocal relationship between goal setting and self-monitoring; either process will lead to the other. For example, Harris and Graham's (1985) instruction and training program for teaching composition skills to learning disabled students requires students to set a criterion for performance and then keep graphs to show their progress toward their goals.

But all goals are not equally effective in providing standards for self-evaluation. To be effective, the goal should be specific rather than general; harder rather than easier (but attainable); and proximal (close at hand) rather than long term (Locke 1968). It is especially important for students with a history of failure to have proximal goals so they won't be overwhelmed. Bandura and Schunk (1981) found that children who had proximal goals performed better than those with distal or long-term goals.

How do we establish a starting point to forge this proximal goal link? First, we have to find out where students are so that we can establish a baseline. The baseline can be determined by pretests (formal or informal) and analyses of student errors. Teachers and students can then jointly decide on the proximal goals.

Goal setting seems to benefit everyone; it has been found to have a positive effect on elementary and secondary students (Gaa 1973, 1979), as well as learning disabled students (Tollefson et al. 1984) and college students (Morgan 1987). Figure 2 shows a form that can be used and adapted to teach students to set effective goals.

I have used adaptations of these steps for students of various ages and ability and have found that most students need considerable practice in learning to make goals specific.

Link Two: learning strategies. Low-achieving students usually can be described as “inefficient learners” (Pressley and Levin 1987); that is, an inefficient learner fails to apply a learning strategy that would be beneficial. In Link Two, the students identify the learning strategies that will help them accomplish their goals. Examples of learning strategies are: basic

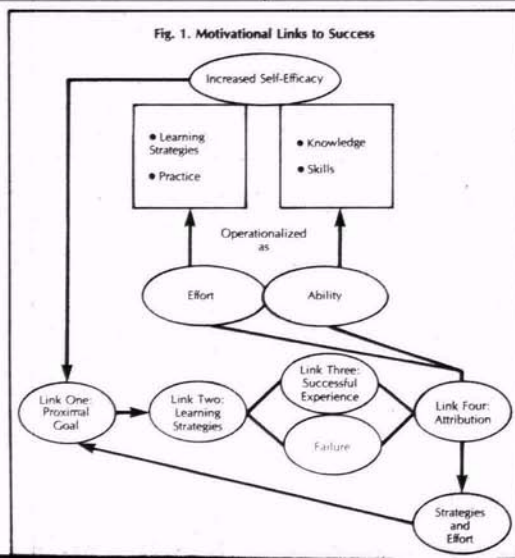


Fig. 2. Proximal Goals and Progress

Make your goal as specific as possible:

Planning

1. My specific learning goals for this week (today) are:
2. I will know I have accomplished my goals by:
3. Actions or steps I will take to accomplish these goals:
4. Possible blocks, both personal and outside, that may interfere with my goals:
5. If I need help, I can go to:
6. My confidence in reaching my goal is:

no confidence very confident
0 25

Evaluating

7. My satisfaction with my goal attainment is:
very unsatisfied very satisfied
0 25
8. Reasons for attaining or not attaining my goal:

and complex rehearsal strategies, comprehension-monitoring strategies (Weinstein and Mayer 1986), task-limited and across-domains strategies, with metacognitive knowledge about when to use them (Pressley et al. 1989); and various reading comprehension strategies, including summarization, question asking, clarification, and prediction. In the latter example, Palincsar and Brown (1984) reported improved reading comprehension scores after students were taught the four comprehension skills.

Link Three successful experience. A learning goal rather than a performance goal is the key to success in Link Three (Dweck 1986). The focus in a learning goal is on "how much progress I made," not on "how smart I am," a performance goal. The student measures his or her success using the proximal goal as the criterion. As teachers, we may think that success is the final link. However, consider the student who is successful but still has low expectations for future performance. It is the *attribution* the student makes for the successful experience that affects expectation: the student must link his or her personal effort or strategy to the successful outcome.

Link Four: attribution for success. In Link Four, students are encouraged to

attribute success to their personal effort or abilities. The teacher's role is to help the student make the appropriate attribution. The attributions most easily changed are the internal and unstable. Thus, since students control their own effort, this is the likely starting place to influence their attributions for success. Teachers can ask, "What did you do when you tried?" Examples of student effort might be: completing all homework, correcting errors, extra practice, redoing an assignment, going to a "help" or review lesson, or using appropriate learning strategies.

Schunk (1984) concluded that for difficult tasks, attributional feedback should begin with effort, then shift to ability as skills develop. Researchers have found that effort attributions were often less valued by students than attributions for ability (Covington and Omlich 1979, Nicholls 1976). Students, especially adolescents, may not view themselves as "smart" if they "tried hard." However, it is important that the student see "ability" as skills that can be learned (e.g., writing composition skills).

The teacher's role in Link Four is to model and give feedback about why the student succeeded or failed at the task. Attributional feedback is information (oral or written) about effort, strategies, or ability. Examples of feedback are: "Jenny, look at your test score, that extra practice really paid off" (effort); "Martin, the latest revision of your story shows you have really learned to use action words" (ability); "Tom, your reading scores improved because you have learned to summarize and find main ideas" (strategies).

This model then goes "full circle." Students who have succeeded and attributed the success to their own effort or ability (and not to task ease or luck) have concrete performance feedback that in turn will lead to increased self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is most enhanced by prior successful performance (Bandura 1977). This increased self-efficacy then leads to increased confidence about goal accomplishment.

In this "Links" model, we have focused on a successful experience. However, failure will occur, and when it does, students' attributions for it are important determinants of their future

expectations for success. Students who attribute failure to not using the proper strategy, for example, are more likely to try again than students who attribute failure to lack of intelligence. This latter attribution for failure results in a dead end for the student. Teachers should be cautious in assigning lack of effort as the cause of failure; they should only use this attribution when they are sure the task was within the student's capability. Often students don't know why they failed (Alderman et al. 1989). When students indicate they don't know why they failed, the teacher can provide them with a new strategy for accomplishing the task.

When we help students take responsibility for their learning, we have taken a giant step in promoting motivational equality in the classroom.

Classroom Structure to Support Success

To foster optimum motivation, classroom structure must support student goals, effort, and use of effective strategies. A "mastery orientation" structure fosters optimum student motivation (Ames and Archer 1988). A mastery classroom emphasizes learning and progress (Link Three) over performance and ability. Thus, errors are viewed as a natural and important part of the learning process, not as an indication that one lacks ability. Teachers in mastery classrooms give students opportunities to relearn concepts and correct errors. Low-achieving students in particular need to know exactly what they are expected to do and the criterion for measuring their success (Covington and Beery 1976). This criterion takes the focus off ability in comparison to other students as the reason for failure.

Progress, Not Miracles

The Links-To-Success model is not an algorithm but rather a guide for fostering students' motivation for success and self-worth. It is flexible: any link of the chain can be the starting point. For example, when a student fails, the cycle can begin with attributing the failure to lack of effort or use of ineffective strategies and returning to Link One: proximal goals.

This model also serves to enhance the teacher's motivation as well, through the same dynamics used with the students. When teachers see progress in their at-risk students, their teaching efficacy increases.

Finally, I make no claim that these links will work miracles with at-risk students. They only provide teachers and students with a framework for beginning the cycle of progress that fosters self-responsibility for learning. When we help students take responsibility for their learning, we have taken a giant step in promoting motivational equality in the classroom. This type of motivational intervention takes time and patience; our focus is progress, not miracles. □

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