

PROMOTING INTERNAL ATTRIBUTION AS A MOTIVATING FACTOR FOR  
STUDENTS WHO EXHIBIT LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

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## Abstract

Trends in student attributions for failure and success are explored. Implications of repeated failure experiences and their manifestation into the exhibition of learned helplessness as a preservation of self worth are also investigated. Cognitive behavioral approaches to therapy for learned helplessness and attributional retraining are reviewed with emphasis on correct attributions for failure so as to maintain motivation those being internal and controllable, appropriate teacher feedback so as to not degrade student self worth, and age appropriateness of students undergoing therapy as an adequate understanding of ability and effort is required. A future study is also presented exploring the possibilities of providing success situations outside the academic setting and the possibilities of these success situations effecting attribution reassignment.

## Chapter I: Introduction

### *Statement of Problem*

Students with learning disabilities, by nature, have experienced a more frequent amount of failure in academic settings than their regular education counterparts have. Students with learning disabilities must fail when attempting academic tasks to be first identified as learning disabled. During the response to intervention portion of their identification process, students might continue to fail as the regular education teacher tries to implement different accommodation strategies. This repeating cycle of failure can have an adverse affect on future academic tasks (Firmin, Hwang, Copella, & Clark, 2004). How the students view the causes for their failures is also critical. Students with learning disabilities have experienced failure despite the amount of effort that they put into an academic activity. After repeated failures and realizing that the amount of effort the students put into their academic activities has little correlation to the outcome/grade they receive, the students begin to feel that failure is out of their control (Baker, 2008; Hareli, 2008; Nokelainen, 2007). When experience with uncontrollable events brings about similar expectations for future events, disruptions in emotion, motivation, and learning may occur (Cemalicilar, 2003). Research on causes for success and failure extend back to the mid 1950's when Fritz Heider proposed that causality for success or failure in attempted activities were viewed as either within the person or external to the person (Weiner, 1979). Similarly, Psychologist Julian Rotter proposed in 1966 that expectancies of people govern their actions. Rotter proposed that people vary in the degree to which they perceive the things that are happening to them as being under their own internal control or under the control of outside forces (Darity, 2008a). This locus of

control, and whether or not an individual views his or her experiences as controllable or uncontrollable can have a drastic affect on student motivation (Firmin, 2004).

When motivation drops a student might feel a sense of helplessness. Learned helplessness was first explored by psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Maier in 1967. Seligman and Maier used the term to describe the behavior of dogs that behaved helplessly after experiencing inescapable electric shocks. Learned helplessness as described by Seligman and Maier, describes the many passive behaviors that animals exhibit following exposure to uncontrollable events (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). “Learned helplessness is inferred when people who experience uncontrollability first learn that their outcomes elude their control and then generalize this belief about their own helplessness to new situations where the helplessness produces difficulties for them” (Cemalcilar 2003, p. 1).

#### *Research Question(s)*

Will retraining student’s attributions for success and failure to internal controllable factors, such as effort, increase achievement in students who exhibit learned helplessness? What methods and implications exist when retraining student attributions?

#### *Definition of Terms*

*Attribution Theory:* “Attribution theory is probably the most influential contemporary theory with implications for academic motivation. It incorporates behavior modification in the sense that it emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by the pleasant outcome of being able to feel good about themselves. It incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory in the sense that it emphasizes that learners' current self-perceptions will strongly influence the ways in which they will interpret the success or

failure of their current efforts and hence their future tendency to perform these same behaviors” (Vockell, 2001, Attribution Theory section, p. 1).

*Cognitive Behaviorism:* Thinking precedes feelings and reactions, or behavior. An individual’s evaluation of a situation precedes emotional and behavioral reactions (Toland, 2008)

*Learned Helplessness:* “Learned Helplessness describes a constellation of maladaptive passive behaviors that animals frequently exhibit following exposure to uncontrollable events. Learned helplessness is also a cognitive expectancy based explanation; after repeated inescapable, aversive helplessness, animals expect to be helpless and do not attempt to change the situation” (Darity, 2008a, p. 1).

*Locus of Control:* Individuals perceive experiences that are happening to them as either being within their internal control or under the control of forces outside of themselves, (Darity, 2008b).

*Response to Intervention:*” Response to Intervention refers to a process that emphasizes how well students respond to changes in instruction. The essential elements of an RTI approach are: providing scientific, research-based instruction and interventions in general education; monitoring and measuring student progress in response to the instruction and interventions; and using these measures of student progress to shape instruction and make educational decisions” (Klotz, 2007, p.1).

*Self Efficacy:* “Self efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence in their lives. Self efficacy determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave” (Bandura, 1994, p.71).

## Chapter II: Review of Literature

Great consensus exists among researchers that helplessness, as was described by Seligman and Maier, is a real and fascinating phenomenon. Little consensus exists about the causes of helplessness. Separate bodies of research including learning theory, cognitive theory, cognitive behavioral therapy, achievement motivation, attribution theory, and information processing, amongst others, support and attempt to explain the problem (Darity, 2008a). All aforementioned theories attempt to give somewhat different explanations for the causes of learned helplessness, i.e. helplessness as learned, helplessness as a cognitive interpretation of events, helplessness as a form of ego protection, and helplessness as an adaptive conservation of resources. Regardless of the possible causes of learned helplessness, a result of helplessness is a decrease in motivation (Darity, 2008a).

Attribution theory for motivation was proposed by Bernard Weiner in the early 1970's. Weiner has been refining attribution theory for decades. His work was an extension of Fritz Heider who proposed that students' success is either determined by factors internal or external to the students (Weiner, 1979). Weiner proposed that more factors need to be taken into account but he operated on the theoretical framework of Heider. He cited three other studies that identified too many factors to quantify for student attributions of success. Through a review of research Weiner proposed all causes for success or failure can fall into three dimensions of causality: Stable vs. unstable factors, controllable vs. uncontrollable factors, and internal and external factors (Wiener 1979, 1983, 1985). Weiner (1979) hypothesized causal attributions affect student's motivation, emotions, and expectations for future events.

Causes for success can be either stable or unstable. If we believe the cause is stable, then the outcome is likely to be the same if we perform the same behavior on another occasion. If the cause is unstable, the outcome is likely to be different on another occasion. Causes for success can also be either internal or external. That is, we may succeed or fail because of factors that we believe have their origin within us or because of factors that originate in our environment. Lastly the causes for success or failure may be either controllable or uncontrollable. A controllable factor is one that we believe we ourselves can alter if we wish to do so. An uncontrollable factor is one that we do not believe we can easily alter (Vockell, 2001, Attribution Theory section, p. 1).

Controllable and uncontrollable factors are distinct from internal/external factors and stable/unstable factors (Weiner, 1979). For example, an internal factor can be controllable or uncontrollable in that we can control our effort by trying harder, whereas we cannot control our intellectual ability. Similarly an external factor can be controllable or uncontrollable in that an individual can take an easier course if he or she is failing one that is too difficult, or if Physics is difficult because Physics is abstract, then Physics will always be abstract no matter what the student does (Vockell 2001). See Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Causes of success and Failure, Classified According to Locus, Stability, and Controllability**

	Internal		External	
Controllability	Stable	Unstable	Stable	Unstable
Uncontrollable	Ability	Mood	Task Difficulty	Luck
Controllable	Typical Effort	Immediate Effort	Teacher Bias	Unusual help from others

From “A theory of motivation for some classroom experiences” by Bernard Weiner, 1979, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71, p.7. Copyright 1979 by the American Psychological Association.

Vockell (2001) suggested that the most detrimental attributions a student can make, pertaining to continued motivation at academic tasks, are external, either stable or unstable, and uncontrollable. In that, no matter what the student does, the causes for failure are beyond the student’s control, and they are likely not to change in future situations. Vockell also noted that an important assumption of attribution theory is that an individual will interpret his or her causes for success or failure in such a way that allows him or her to maintain a positive self-image. When learners succeed they will attribute their success to their own efforts; whereas, when they fail they are likely to attribute their failures to causal factors over which they exhibit no control, for example, bad luck, which is a counter productive tendency, as the most productive attributions for both success and failure need to be within the student’s control.

Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978) offered their reformulation of the learned helplessness hypothesis using aspects of Weiner’s attribution theory. They propose that much of life is uncontrollable but not everyone is depressed by life’s uncontrollability. Global-specific causes are also added as causal attributions. Global

causes affect most all outcomes and specific factors are limited to single situations only. “A Global attribution implies that helplessness will occur across all situations whereas a specific attribution implies helplessness only in the original situation” (Abramson, 1978, p. 57).

If, as Abramson (1978) had stated, much of life is uncontrollable but not everyone is depressed by life’s uncontrollability holds true, why do some people become depressed after failure and some do not? According to Dairty (2008a), some people’s motivation is unaffected by experiencing failure. These individuals have a tendency to use failure as an additional source of information. Individuals who fail on an exam are less likely to experience depression or disruptions in motivation if they attribute their failure to causal factors that are internal, unstable, and controllable. For example, I did not put in much effort. The individual could change the causal factor (more effort next time) and subsequently change the outcome (pass the test). “It is extremely hazardous to motivational health for students to fail repeatedly after making a serious effort at academic tasks. When this happens, they will either (a) stop believing they are competent, or (b) stop attributing their failure to lack of effort” (Vockell, 2001, p. 2).

### Effort over Ability

Ability has been described as the perfect example of an internal, stable and controllable causal attribution, whereas effort is an example of internal unstable and controllable attribution. When described this way, ability and effort can have very different implications for motivation. Dweck and Legitt (1988), present a research based model of motivation and personality through their review of current research and

literature. Dweck (p. 257) stated that “attributing negative events including academic failures to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes, like low ability, has been associated with increased personal threat and anxiety”. In a meta analysis of research and their presentation of a revision of the 1978 reformulation of learned helplessness Abramson et al. (1989) suggested that when internal stable and uncontrollable attributions become chronic, motivation diminishes; negative affect increases, and problems associated with learned helplessness could materialize. Conversely, in a review of two studies, Janoff-Bulman (1979) made the assertion that attributing negative events to internal, unstable, and controllable causes, like low effort is associated with maintenance of motivation, and shorter time to recover from the effects of negative events. Andrews and Debus (1978) reinforced the claim that teaching students to attribute failures to low effort enhanced effort attributions, expectancies for success, and achievement behaviors. Phase 1 of the study consisted of 71 female and 87 male test subjects in sixth grade being administered the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (IAR) scale, Effort Attribution Scale (EAS) to measure the tendencies of the test subjects’ attributional behavior. They were also administered the perceptual reasoning test to measure the test subjects persistence level for a given task. The authors’ predictions of a positive relationship between attribution of failure to insufficient effort to maintenance of persistence was supported ( $r=.62, p<.01$ ). Phase 2 of the study included an exercise to offer attributional retraining therapy to those students that were identified as having a tendency to least frequently attribute failure to lack of effort as identified in phase 1 of the study ( $n=42$ , gender balanced). The identified students were broken into 3 groups, a control group, and two test groups, the two test groups would receive different types of reinforcement based on properly exhibited effort

attributions when completing a task, those reinforcements being social reinforcement or a token reinforcement with the control group receiving no reinforcement. The test subjects were then re-administered the assessments from phase one of the study to assess if there was any change in their tendencies to attribute successes or failures to effort. Both experimental groups showed a marked increase in attributing success to effort after the reinforcement activities. There did not appear to be a drastic difference in effectiveness of either social reinforcement or token reinforcement. The control group did not show a tendency to more frequently attribute success or failure to effort. Implications are illustrated in the importance of teachers carefully using feedback properly so as to promote student's effort attributions i.e. "It looked as though you tried pretty hard that time", or "very good, we usually fail because we don't try hard enough don't we?"

#### Attributions and Self-Regulation

Students who are more self-regulated tend to be higher achievers (Shores & Shannon, 2007). Shores and Shannon administered the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire, Test Anxiety Inventory – Revised –Mathematics, and the Mathematics Attribution Scale to 301 fifth grade students and 460 sixth grade students. The relationships between self regulated learning, anxiety, motivation, attributions and achievement in mathematics were examined using multiple regressions. It was found that the listed factors (self regulated learning, anxiety, motivation and attributions) were significant in predicting test scores for fifth graders ( $F=17.976$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and sixth graders ( $F=28.265$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Self-regulation includes activities such as attending to instruction, organizing, coding and rehearsing information, establishing a productive work environment, using resources effectively, holding positive beliefs about capabilities, and

experiencing pride and satisfaction about one's efforts (Schunk, 1996). A very important activity that is a component of self-regulation as described above is holding positive beliefs about capabilities or having a high sense of academic self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) describes self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence in their lives. Self efficacy determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Shores and Shannon (2007) reported that students' self-efficacy perceptions were related to self-monitoring and academic motivation and achievement. Ferla, Valcke, and Schuyten (2007) extended the work of Vermunt and suggested that attributing academic success to effort heightens students' level of self-efficacy and thereby encourages the adoption of a self-regulated study strategy. A questionnaire was administered to 473 college freshman. The 24-item 5-point Likert scale questionnaire measured student cognitions (self-efficacy, attributions for academic success, and learning conceptions). Students with a constructive conception of learning tend to have more traits associated with an internal locus of control:

- a. Attribute academic success to more effort
- b. Feel more self-effacious
- c. Make a greater use of internal and external regulation strategies
- d. Report to a lesser extent that their study process lacks direction
- e. Are more likely to adopt a deep learning approach and make a greater use of both deep and surface processing strategies.

The test population in this study was not gender balanced; the sample population was composed of 424 female and 49 male test subjects. The fact that these students were

college freshman also has implications as the sample population was not an adequate representation of K-12 students who struggle in school.

### Retraining Attributions/Intervention Strategies

Learned helplessness therapy typically operates with the following goals in mind as identified by Vockell (2001).

- a. To help students be more persistent in their academic endeavors teachers must aid them in establishing the belief that they have the prerequisite skills for successful completion and that failures result from some other factor that is not permanent and doesn't apply to all occasions.
- b. Students should not attribute their success completely to ability alone. If they feel that they have an innate ability for task completion they could feel that putting in extra effort is unnecessary.
- c. When a student experiences failure they are more likely to use failure as a source of motivation if they attribute their failure to a lack of effort.
- d. It is most productive for students to believe that their own actions rather than external circumstances results in success or failure.
- e. If a student believes that they lack ability for task completion a teacher must design exercises that facilitate the student developing the belief that they do in fact have the ability for task completion.

Cognitive behaviorism operates on the assumption that thinking precedes feelings and behavior. The individual's evaluation of a situation leads to emotional and behavioral reactions. The evaluations can be influenced by inappropriate beliefs, automatic thoughts, feedback from an external source, or cognitive distortions (Toland, 2008). Toland and Boyle (2008) sought to change the ways that children explained their lack of achievement to themselves. They hypothesized that by helping children think more positively about themselves and by changing the ways in which they thought about success and failure they could be helped to increase their motivation. The study was conducted with 29 children in grades six and seven. Twenty-three of the students were identified as having a learning disability accompanied with low self-esteem, and six students with no learning disabilities and poor self-esteem. Students were volunteered for participation in the study by their school. The students were seen in groups of five for a thirty-minute session every two weeks for a six-month duration. The students were helped to realize that positive thoughts resulted in increased effort in learning. This realization was accomplished through discussion, modeling, role-play and worksheets. Quantitative results showed a marked academic improvement for most children involved in the study in the areas of reading and spelling. The students were administered the British Abilities Scale, pre and post treatment. A t-test was used to assess the significance of the difference between pre and post test assessments. The obtained value of  $t=3.925$  is significant at  $p<0.001$ . The qualitative results of the study had teachers, parents and students reporting a significant increase in progress in the areas of self-esteem and self-confidence. The results were gathered through the administration of a questionnaire.

Cognitive behavioral approaches to learned helplessness therapy have been proven effective (Toland & Boyle, 2008).

The most common approaches to learned helplessness therapy has been to provide some sort of task so that the individual will increase self-efficacy, make internal attributions for success and counteract the depression resulting from the previous helplessness experience, according to Cemalcilar, Canbeyli, and Sunar (2003). Cemalcilar et al. (2003) sought to offer therapy for learned helplessness through a direct re-evaluation of the helplessness experience. The study successfully induced feelings of learned helplessness in a laboratory setting by presenting the test subjects with an unsolvable maze. Therapy consisted of false positive feedback given to the experimental group. The evaluation of the experimental group's performance was changed from negative to positive. The test subjects consisted of 92 university undergraduate students. Levels of internal anger, self-defeating behavior, and ego-defensiveness were quantified through the subjects rating pictures that were previously rated as neutral. The results demonstrated that learned helplessness was induced by the maze activity and that the therapy procedure alleviated the negative effects of the helplessness activity. Although the test population consisted of university students rather than K-12 students these results still offer some insight for educators into how to handle and offer feedback to students who experience frequent failure.

#### Age Related Concerns for Implications

Attributing success and failure to internal controllable attributions like effort is critical for avoiding the dangers of attributing success or failure to ability. It is not beneficial for an increase in motivation if a student attributes success strictly to ability,

the students may have a tendency to feel that extra effort need not be expended because the students already have the ability to complete the task (Vockell, 2001). Some age-related concerns surface in children's understanding of ability and effort.

For attributional retraining and learned helplessness therapy to be effective a distinction between ability and effort needs to exist in the mind of the student. Around the age of 10-11 years students can differentiate between ability and effort. Below the aforementioned ages students have a tendency to attribute outcome purely to effort. Folmer, Cole, Sigal, Benbow, Satterwhite, Swygert, & Ciesla (2007) extending the work of Nicholls (1978) propose that children's understanding of ability and effort changes dramatically with age. Research was conducted in 40-minute one-on-one sessions with 166, mostly Caucasian, test subjects between the ages of 8 and 14. Test subjects were administered the Positive and Negative Affect Scale for Children (PANAS-C), and the Scholastic Competence subscale of the Self Perceived Profile for Children (SPPC) to categorize the test subjects as being in either a high effort condition or a low effort condition. Test subjects were then administered puzzles and given false feedback on their performance. Test subjects were then made to watch a video of a student performing exactly opposite (high effort or low effort) of the test subject. The test subjects were informed that the student in the video received the same score. The test subjects then completed questionnaire to address their performance in comparison to the student on the video with respect to effort and ability. Folmer found that at the ages of 5-6 years effort and ability are not differentiated and their relation to outcome is unclear. At ages 7-9 years, children attribute outcome purely to effort. At the ages of 10-11 years children begin to distinguish between ability and effort and attribute outcome inconsistently to one

or the other, at the ages of 12 and older children see ability as a factor that limits the effect of effort. Any learned helplessness therapy or attributional retraining that involves emphasizing effort over ability with students below the age of ten would be utilizing an improper tool to remedy the problem.

### Teacher Response Implications for Attributional Development

Students make their attributions for outcomes of situations after evaluating those situations. Part of a student's evaluation of an academic situation for success or failure involves teacher feedback. Hareli and Hess (2007) have shown that an explanation for failure is detrimental to an individual if the failure implies a devaluation of the individual's worth. Feedback from others in regards to success, in some cases, has also been shown to cause hurt feelings, anger guilt and shame (Hareli, 2007). Two hundred-fourteen undergraduate students read one of eight variations of a situation that asked them to imagine a situation where they received high marks for an assignment in a very important class. They were then asked to imagine running into another student in the same class a day later and having a conversation about the assignment. The fellow student would offer some sort of feedback (assumed to be the actual reason) for the high mark. This imaginary feedback was one of eight scenarios including attributional factors that are internal/external, stable/unstable, and controllable/uncontrollable. The test subject would then record their response to the feedback. If others' feedback includes attributions for success to external factors, and random factors, such as luck or sudden insight, then the test subject might react emotionally and depression could emerge, which presents a special concern for students with disabilities. A 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of Variance

was conducted to assess the relationship between causal dimensions and hurt feelings. It was found that explanations that include internal causes for success were seen as less hurtful than external causes for success. Explanations that were stable were less hurtful than unstable and uncontrollable explanations were far more hurtful than controllable. This study was gender biased with an uneven distribution of females to males in a ratio of approximately 2:1, and the test population was undergraduate students so one could gather that the study's implications could vary when applied to K-12 students.

Wood and Benton (2005) found that preservice teachers had a tendency to attribute failure of a disabled student to external factors out of the control of the student. 23 Pre-service teachers gender biased towards females, 14 women and 9 men, were given a packet of materials containing vignettes describing students that failed a test. The vignettes described students in varying combinations of three variables, gender, disability status (ADHD vs. no ADHD), and the presence of medication (a student with ADHD taking Ritalin, vs. a Student with ADHD not taking Ritalin). The teachers thought that the student failed because the student is disabled and was more likely to feel pity for the student than offer feedback that would promote a more appropriate attributional response by the student.

Klassen and Lynch (2007) demonstrated through interviews that teachers are also a highly valued source of self-efficacy by students. All of the teachers interviewed (7) stated the importance of providing opportunities for success for students with learning disabilities. Twenty-five of forty-four students in the study stated that teacher comments are the most powerful influence of student self efficacy. Teachers must use caution when offering feedback in both successful and failure oriented situations to maximize the

amount that the achiever attributes success and failure to amount of effort expended by the student rather than the student's ability.

### Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

Students who attribute their successes and failures to factors that are internal, and controllable, such as effort, are more likely to maintain their motivation and use successes and failures as feedback to put forth more effort and higher motivation on future tasks (Andrews, 1978; Bulman, 1979). Individuals who attribute successes and failures to factors outside of their control, such as ability or luck, are more likely to have disruptions in motivation (Abramson, 1989; Dweck, 1988). Repeated failures and repeating instances of attributing failure to external, stable factors can cause helplessness behavior to surface (Abramson, 1989; Vockell, 2001; Weiner, 1979, 1985).

The challenge that surfaces is that students have a tendency to attribute causal factors for successes and failures to factors that preserve the student's self worth (Vockell, 2001). Students who are more self-regulated have a tendency, even in cases of failure, to attribute outcomes to internal unstable factors like effort (Schunk, 1996; Shores, 2007). Students who can be trained to attribute success to internal, unstable factors, like effort, rather than external, unstable factors like luck or sudden insight, or internal stable factors like ability, show increases in levels of self efficacy which is an important component of being more self regulated and reducing the chances of exhibiting the decrease in motivation typical of learned helplessness (Ferla, 2007; Klassen, 2007; Shores, 2007).

Cognitive behavioral approaches to reassigning attributions for success and failure, and to minimize learned helplessness have proven effective in some cases. Children that are helped to think more positively about themselves by modifying their evaluation of success and failure situations show an increase their motivation (Toland,

2008). Other common approaches to addressing the problem of learned helplessness have been to provide students with subsequent situations that will guarantee success. The student is then taught to attribute their success to effort. Direct re-evaluation of the failure experience by the student, and changing the attributions for the failure experience have also proven effective in remedying the exhibition of learned helplessness (Cemalcilar, 2003). If learned helplessness can be induced it can be remedied.

In order for learned helplessness therapy involving changing attributions from ability to effort to be effective a student must have an understanding of the difference between the ability and effort. Students below the age of 10 cannot consistently distinguish between ability and effort (Folmer, 2007; Nicholls, 1978). Attribution retraining used below the age of 10 would probably prove ineffective.

Students cognitively assess academic situations based on feedback by parents, peers, and teachers. Although individuals receiving the feedback have the freedom to interpret the feedback any way the individual chooses, any feedback, even with regard to success, that implies a devaluation of the individual's worth is detrimental. Also noteworthy is the fact that if other's feedback attributes success to external factors like luck then the individual could show some signs of depression (Hareli, 2007; Klassen, 2007; Wood, 2005).

Students are not the only individuals who can attribute causes for success and failure to a situation. In order for the very idea of success and failure to exist there has to be an individual performing an evaluation. Teachers who work with students with learning and other disabilities have a tendency to attribute student failure to the student's disability, an external, stable factor very similar to ability. Teachers in this situation are

more likely to feel pity for the student rather than try to promote proper attributional responses by the student (Klassen, 2007; Wood, 2005).

## Chapter IV – Recommendations and Conclusion

Most high school teachers have had some experiences with students, either with learning disabilities or without, who exhibit learned helplessness. The teachers have undoubtedly felt the frustration of trying to work with a student on a new concept and the student replying “I can’t do it”, after the student exhibits no effort at trying to complete the task. These students exhibiting learned helplessness have experienced failure in situations where the students have expended both tremendous effort and little effort. The students have learned that despite the amount of effort the students expend the outcome will stay the same. The students will fail. The reason for the students’ failure must not be the amount of effort because that does not change the outcome, so it must be a lack of ability. Ability is something that is out of the students’ control so they do not bother trying to change the situation.

Implications for remedying this problem are far reaching. Teachers have a tendency to pity the student if a disability is present, and not try to help the student to properly attribute their success and failure to effort over ability. The students need to feel that they are in control of the outcome, captains of their own ship. If the student attributes outcomes (failure or success) to effort, something they can change within themselves, over ability, or luck, or quality of teacher, something that they cannot change, the student feels more empowered, more self-regulated, and more self-efficacious. Multiple researchers have shown that an increase in self-efficacy, self-regulation, and positive feelings results in an increase in motivation.

Teachers have various tools at their disposal to retrain attributions for success and failure to internal, controllable factors. Typical methods include providing students with opportunities for success, and direct re-evaluation of a failure experience.

Providing students with opportunities for success include giving the students an activity at which they will be successful, and through teacher feedback minimize external attributional factors. The student may then make the predicted internal attribution for success and increase self efficacy and therefore, in part, increase self regulation and self regulated students are more motivated than non self regulated students. Since making students motivated self-regulators is the ultimate goal providing them with countless success experiences is counter productive, they need to experience some level of failure and criticism so they can cognitively assess the situation, monitor themselves, and properly attribute the failure to effort. Since teacher feedback is such a powerful factor in students determining the causal factors for success and failure teachers need to be cautious of the feedback that they offer. Critical feedback, with the intention to help the student improve, can quickly be interpreted by the student as a devaluation of their self-worth. Since it is human nature to preserve self-worth and attribute failures to causal factors that preserve self-worth, like external factors, i.e. “I failed because the teacher dislikes me”, rather than “I failed because I didn’t study”, teachers need to be cautious in their offering of feedback to students in the instance of a failure. In attribution retraining students must first believe their positive experiences are due to their effort, “I studied hard, and did well”. Then they must be gradually taught how to deal with failure experiences. Teachers do not want to take them from the initial provided opportunity for

success directly to a failure experience. The student must be eased into dealing with constructive criticism, and properly attributing outcome to the causal factor.

Direct re-evaluation of a failure experience to retrain attributions should be used with caution. The reason being, that perhaps the failure was, in-fact, due to the student lacking the ability to complete the task. A student must believe they are capable even if they are not. Positive beliefs about oneself result in an increase in achievement and motivation. Re-evaluating a failure experience in which it is not possible to breed positive feelings about capabilities makes retraining attributions more challenging. It's tough to feel good about something that takes away from self worth, and using false positive feedback would be inappropriate.

#### Areas for further research

Having established the need for students who exhibit learned helplessness to experience success and receive some coaching on how to properly attribute success and failure to the most beneficial causal factors, those being internal, and unstable. Thus, ultimately promoting an increase in self-efficacy is a critical component of self regulation and motivation. How are these opportunities for success chosen? It would only make sense that a teacher would want to play on the strengths of the student to make them feel like they are capable and have the internal fortitude to put forth the effort to succeed. With the implementation of high stakes standardized testing and more rigorous curriculum students are being held to a higher standard and the freedom of teachers to devote necessary time to struggling students is dwindling. How then does a teacher create these opportunities for success? Do these opportunities for success need to be in an academic setting? Here a future study is proposed including participation in the National

Archery in the Schools Program and its effect on the academic achievement of the participants.

The National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) is a nation-wide archery program that has been implemented in some school districts as part of their physical education curriculum and in some cases as an after school activity. The emphasis of NASP is to make archery experiences safe, enjoyable, and most importantly, successful for beginning archers. Instructors in the NASP program utilize the concept that positive reinforcement and feedback are the keys to learning and retention. Instructors are taught to use language that accentuates what the student should do rather than focusing on bad habits or mistakes. This helps the student more clearly understand objectives, learn to think positively, and keep their mind free of negative distractions. Archery is a sport that most individuals can participate in regardless of size or physical ability. Participation in NASP is designed to facilitate success. NASP claims that once students enjoy success on the archery range that they come to the realization that they can accomplish many things with proper instruction, practice, and a positive attitude (NASP, 2006).

The study being proposed could include students between the grades of 6-12 as this is the typical age of student for participation in the NASP program, and also by that age students have an ability to distinguish between ability and effort attributions. Students would need to be given a pre-assessment to establish their tendencies for attributional responses to success and failures. The target group would be those students that attribute success and failure to internal, stable, uncontrollable factors like ability or external, either stable, or unstable, and uncontrollable causes like luck, or task difficulty as identified by the pre-test. Once this target group has been identified the treatment that

they would undergo would be participation in the NASP program. With the very implementation of this program and the positive reinforcement and guaranteed success designed into the NASP program, a worthy hypothesis would be that after a post test is administered these students should show a marked increase in their frequency of attributing success and failure to effort attributions when compared to the pre-test.

### Summary and Conclusion

How a student views their achievement in the academic setting can have drastic effects on their future motivation through either adaptive or maladaptive responses to failure. Adaptive responses being, attributing their failures to factors which are internal and controllable, like lack of effort. When a student experiences repeated failure the maladaptive response is to form attributions for failure that preserve self worth, those typically being internal, and uncontrollable by the student like ability, or external and uncontrollable by the student like task difficulty. A student must feel in control of the outcomes of the tasks they undertake in order to maintain motivation. If a student feels that no matter what they do that failure is out of their control due to repeated failure experiences disruptions in motivation occur. When this behavior is established it is necessary for teachers to take steps to create success oriented experiences for the student and to help them see that the success experience is directly a result of the students' actions and not some circumstance beyond their control. A student must feel that they are capable, and that their effort directly influences outcome.

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