

Motivating the Slow Learner

NEW DIMENSIONS IN HELPING LOW ACHIEVERS

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Teaching a weak student requires extra patience and attention. Indeed, if we wish to help poor students in the long run, we must try to isolate the factors that contribute to low achievement.

A Surprising Pattern

Through work with students of varied performance levels, I have found this surprising pattern. There seems to be a relationship between a student's performance and his ability to judge how well he is doing. Low achievers often cannot accurately make this assessment.

For example, I recently taught a class how to add and multiply fractions. Immediately after illustrating the problem, $3/7 \times (3/8 + 1/2)$, I erased my work and told the class to solve the identical problem at their seats. I circulated around the room and saw that most of the class had absorbed the material. But one girl neglected to get a common denominator for the addition. When I reminded her, she replied, "Oh, yeah. I know it all right, but I just forget."

Even exam failures may not make an impression on the student who feels that he understands, but just "fouls up" on tests. Unfortunately, a student who cannot accurately appraise whether his understanding is up to par is handicapped by not knowing what or when to study.

Achievement Motivation

As thoughtful teachers, we must ask what accounts for this behavior. It is interesting that in studying achievement, David McClelland¹ found that an awareness of one's standing relative to some norm is one of several factors related to achievement motivation. Hence, the underlying cause of this syndrome may simply be that the students have too little achievement motivation, or as McClelland calls it, "need-achievement." This term has a special meaning; it is not the simple desire to achieve, but rather the driving need to

achieve which alone motivates hard and continuous work.

From a larger perspective, high need-achievement is a mixed blessing. Along with it come ulcers and heart attacks. But leaving these considerations to doctors and philosophers, there is no question that high motivation is desirable from an educator's point of view.

Helping Students Acquire Higher Levels of Need-Achievement

There are measures one can take to help students who would like to get through high school or college, but lack the strong motivation which facilitates that end.

It is hard to say what proportion of weak students have low achievement motivation at the root of their problem, but it may be substantial. Therefore, in schools where low achievement is a problem, courses could be offered (titled, perhaps, "Study Skills") which help students acquire higher levels of need-achievement.

Indeed, though achievement motivation is linked to early experiences of independence, studies have shown that need-achievement can be raised late in life. For example, McClelland² worked with middle-aged men who were not advancing in their jobs. He literally taught them to think along lines that characterize people of high need-achievement levels.

He trained them, for example, to be aware of their standing relative to others on tests, etc. In subsequent years, the experimental subjects achieved higher job status than the control group. Since McClelland's course has already been proven effective: high school and college courses could be designed after it.

Conclusion

No doubt many factors contribute to low achievement, so heightened motivation could not eliminate the problem. But it would obviously be a big help especially for slow learners.