

Overcoming Student Failure

Changing Motives and Incentives for Learning

Martin V. Covington and Karen Manheim Teel

TABLE OF CONTENTS

vii Preface

ix Acknowledgments

1 Introduction

The Need for Better Classroom Incentives
A Level Playing Field: Motivating All Students
Overview of the Book

9 Goal 1: Understanding the Negative Effects of the Ability Game

Keeping Score: The Case Against Grades
Ms. Jackson's Classroom
School as an Ability Game
The Dynamics of Self-Worth
Questioning Myths About Motivation
In Defense of Ms. Jackson
Student Activity: Quiz
Paying for Performance
Summary

45 Goal 2: Changing the Rules: Activities to Promote Positive Reasons for Learning

Five Steps to Instituting an Equity Focus
Implementing New Reward Strategies: Karen Teel's Classroom
Step 1: Insure Equal Access to Rewards
Step 2: Reward Mastery and Curiosity
Step 3: Reward Multiple Abilities
Step 4: Offer Alternative Incentives
Step 5: Make Assignments Engaging
Summary
Suggested Readings

103 Goal 3: Overcoming Obstacles to Change

Student Unresponsiveness
Insufficient Skills
Unlimited Rewards
The Myths of Competition
Summary

113 Final Review: Revisiting Ms. Jackson's Classroom

Noel
Sean
Lydia
Michael
Concluding Thoughts

119 Glossary

123 References

131 About the Authors

PREFACE

What is the purpose of school? What is the purpose of grades? What are the reasons we as teachers sometimes use an ability-based, competitive grading system? What impact does such an approach have on young people, especially students who lack confidence in themselves as students? These are the kinds of questions we raise in this book.

We have collaborated over the last 6 years in developing and assessing curriculum and evaluation strategies that address the problems of low academic self-esteem and negative motivation in schools. Our work consists of a series of classroom research projects that have involved both university participants and classroom teachers.

Drawing on our individual and joint teaching and research experiences, we will consider the role of incentives in promoting learning and achievement. We look mostly at the formal structure of grading systems and their role as motivators. We will attempt to dismantle various false beliefs about incentives and motivation by addressing the true educational value of incentives: which rewards can best promote learning, and what rewards can do and can't do. Finally, we will show how rewards and incentives can be arranged to encourage learning, thinking, and proper motivation.

As a vehicle for self-reflection throughout the book, we present a series of self-directed questions. Through these questions, we have tried to set up a kind of interactive conversation. The questions ask you to draw on your own experiences as teachers to organize your thoughts around the issues presented. Consequently, we hope that you will see yourself as an active participant.

Most teachers who read this book will have already thought about the issues raised here and may not always find our ideas especially new. However, we hope that the perspectives we offer will assist you in framing the issues in a helpful light and acting on them more effectively.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are indebted to many individuals who have made this book possible. During the earlier stages of our collaboration, various faculty members and graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley made rich contributions to the development of our thinking and to the many teaching strategies that Karen has used with her students at Portola Middle School. In particular, we recognize Laurie Close, Ramah Commanday, Matt Downey, Cathy McDonald, Sybil Madison, and especially Andrea DeBruin Parecki, who has been an ongoing associate from the start both as a classroom observer and as a data analyst.

In addition, this book could not have been written without the support and encouragement of colleagues in the West Contra Costa Unified School District and particularly at Portola Middle School. We are very grateful to have had the opportunity to test our theories in live classroom contexts. The classroom research conducted at Portola Middle School was supported in part by the National Academy of Education and by a Spencer postdoctoral Fellowship awarded to coauthor Karen Teel. Most importantly, without the cooperation of the students in Karen's classes, we would not have gained the insights we have into the strengths and problems associated with various curriculum ideas and grading strategies.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to three individuals who provided us with yet a different kind of support. We thank one of Karen's colleagues at Portola Middle School, Gail Harrison, and another colleague who teaches science in the Oakland, California schools, Anthony Cody, for reviewing an earlier version of the book and for giving us invaluable feedback. We also thank Judy Shelton for her patience and expertise in typing and retyping several versions of the manuscript.

introduction

Educational reform is the watchword today. Calls for change are driven largely by concerns over declining test scores and fears that America's youth will not be able to compete successfully in the global marketplace of the 21st century. A variety of solutions have been proposed for reversing the statistics that place American schools near the bottom of the achievement ladder among industrialized nations. Chief among these proposals is a call for adopting more rigorous national achievement standards and holding both teachers and students accountable for attaining them.

THE NEED FOR BETTER CLASSROOM INCENTIVES

In order to implement these higher standards, schools are being pressed to extend the school year, require more homework, and employ more testing. These recommendations for reform have been described as a *policy of intensification* (Russell, 1988)—in effect, simply continuing to do what has been done for years, but more of it. There is much to recommend this proposal of intensification. Clearly, holding high standards is critical to improved achievement; if we expect little of our students, little is what we will get. Yet this solution by itself is insufficient; something is missing. The answer to reform is not as easy as simply raising academic standards or adding new courses. If students are not succeeding now against old, less demanding requirements, increased demands seem pointless. This criticism was put bluntly, if not sarcastically, by a businessman who recently commented,

If I had a situation in which one third of my products [students] fell off the assembly line along the way [national dropout rate prior to high school graduation] and two thirds of those remaining did not work right in the end, the last thing I would do is speed up the conveyor belt!

Effective solutions to the declining fortunes of many of America's schools lie elsewhere, requiring a shift in our thinking about the concept of motivation. By focusing on motivation we do not mean to imply necessarily that the

The problem is not a lack of motivation; students are motivated, but for the wrong reasons.

problem facing schools is a lack of student motivation, even among those youngsters who sit silently in class or for those who dare teachers to teach them. Consider also those students who seem to easily master the complicated rules for survival in environments like America's ghettos and barrios, yet may resist learn-

ing the comparatively simpler rules for diagraming a sentence. Actually, for many of these students—the silent, the indifferent, and the resistant alike—the problem is not a

lack of motivation; they are motivated, sometimes even overmotivated, but motivated for the wrong reasons. Some students are motivated to avoid failure by not participating at all, others to defy a system they believe to be irrelevant to their lives, and yet others to escape being evaluated on a narrow set of abilities and skills.

Any efforts at true reform must first recognize just how pervasive these negative motives are among America's youth, and then arrange schooling in ways that encourage other, more positive reasons for learning. Only then will calls for increased standards and for more time in school have the desired effect.

The reasons for learning, or not learning, depend to an important degree on the kinds of incentive systems that prevail in classrooms. Some incentives, which actually function as disincentives, undercut positive reasons for achieving. Other incentives both encourage achievement and foster the will to achieve.

The purpose of this book is to explore ways that teachers can modify classroom incentives (including methods of grading) in order to encourage positive reasons for learning among their students. Our goal is not limited solely to increasing the quality of student motivation as a way to enhance academic performance. An additional goal, above and beyond increasing achievement per se, is to foster the willingness to learn as an important educational objective in its own right. There has never been a shortage of support for this noble objective. A half-century ago John Dewey commented that "The most important attitude that can be formed [in schools] is that of the desire to go on learning" (1938/1963, p. 48). More recently, the American business community has called for workers who can renew their own learning and "identify problems . . . adjust to unanticipated situations, and work out new ways of handling recurring problems" (National Academy of Sciences Panel on Secondary School Education for the Changing Workplace, 1984, pp. 20–21). If teachers are to take these challenges seriously, the question becomes, "How can teachers arrange classroom incentive systems to promote the will to learn?" This is the essential question we pose and attempt to answer in this book.

Nature and Scope of Solutions Proposed

A few words are needed about the kinds of solutions we will propose. We are convinced that the most constructive and sustainable changes are those initiated by individual teachers and not imposed from above by school boards or by federal or state authority. For this reason, the focus of this book is on what individual teachers can do to improve the academic and motivational quality of classroom life. Obviously, teachers cannot single-handedly counter the enormous problems reflected in low test scores nationwide or statistics such as those indicating that upwards of 30% of America's students do not graduate from high school (Haycock & Navarro, 1988). Nor will any one program be sufficient to stem the tide of mediocrity. Moreover, academic failure is as much the result of children growing up in an unstable environment as it is the fault of any single educational philosophy. Nonetheless, we believe that certain school practices contribute to student demoralization and need be reconsidered by teachers, no matter how modest these problems may be compared to the other overwhelming difficulties facing many of America's children today in the form of drugs, crime, and neglect.

Our recommendations are compatible with current theories of human motivation (e.g., Ames, 1984; Covington, 1992) and represent practical steps that can be implemented without any extraordinary demands on teacher time and resources. This suggests that our thoughts are not especially new, but are familiar enough to be introduced without a major dislocation of the system. Indeed, much of what we suggest is already well known, but simply needs more emphasis and coordination. Our purpose is to place known techniques in a larger perspective provided by modern motivation theory, and in so doing elevate the commonplace to a new order of significance. For teachers already using these approaches or convinced of the need to do so, we hope to provide additional justification for their efforts.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to preview the general line of argument we will take.

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD: MOTIVATING ALL STUDENTS

First, we need to define the concept of *motivation*. Basically, the concept of motivation answers the age-old question about the *why* of human behavior: Why, for example, does a student choose to work on one task while virtually ignoring others (*preference*)? Why does the same student work longer and with greater relish on one task than on another (*energy level*)? Why do some students give up working long before others do (*persistence*)?

The answer is that preference, energy level, and persistence all depend on one's reasons (or motives) for learning. For instance, some students learn only for the sake of immediate, tangible payoffs and will quit working when these rewards are no longer available. Other students see school as a "winner take all" contest and will become motivated only when they judge that they can prevail over others. Still other students are drawn to, and captured by, those assignments that call for creativity and self-expression, tasks which in the conventional sense can never be finished. From these examples, one can understand that it is the reasons that students learn that largely determine how much they learn, how well they retain knowledge, and whether the knowledge they gain either enhances or detracts from a sense of self-confidence and the willingness to learn more.

We will liken school to a game, albeit a serious learning game, with a complicated set of rules for achievement. These rules largely determine how classroom rewards such as grades, praise, or gold stars are distributed. We will argue, in turn, that the particular reasons for learning that operate in any classroom depend on these rules (Covington, 1992). Many classrooms feature rules that turn schooling into an *ability game*—that is, the promotion of motives not necessarily to learn, but rather to outperform others in an effort to bolster one's reputation for ability—or the promotion of motives to achieve, driven out of the fear that others will do better (Ames, 1984; Ames & Archer, 1987).

Preference, energy level, and persistence all depend on one's motives for learning.

These are destructive reasons for learning because they distract students from true achievement, undermine the willingness to try, and promote invidious comparisons among learners. In this circumstance, learning becomes abrasive—certainly not something that one would want to continue for even a day, let alone over a lifetime.

From this perspective, then, the improper use of incentives can create a failure-prone environment in which the playing field is tilted against most students. When fear is the stimulus, there are few winners in the learning game. And even the winners may pay a heavy price.

However, teachers can encourage positive reasons for learning, and thereby establish a level or fair playing field from which all students can approach success. We will re-

The improper use of incentives can create a failure-prone environment.

fer to this arrangement as an *equity game*. But how can everyone win, and what is it that makes the playing field level? In effect, what is the basis for such equity? Obviously, students are unequal in many ways. Each student enters school from dif-

ferent starting points: No two students have the same talents; nor do all students exhibit the same learning styles. Yet every student can share common reasons for learning. This concept is what we will call *motivational equity*. Everyone can feel the thrill of intellectual discovery, can become caught up in the act of problem-solving, and everyone can experience the satisfaction of self-improvement. Differences in ability, background, and talent are no barriers to these experiences.

These positive reasons for learning are largely intrinsic in nature, that is, the rewards for achieving them reside in the actions themselves. For example, the act of satisfying one's curiosity is its own reward. And because these rewards reside within the individual, they are open to all, inexhaustible in number, and largely under the control of the individual.

From this perspective, the challenge for schools is to create a motivational parity for all students, with everyone striving for positive reasons by arranging incentives that promote curiosity, that establish meaningful payoffs for self-improvement, and that reward increased knowledge.

We will explore two different strategies for promoting motivational equity. The first strategy rewards the efforts of students to master their environment, to progress, and to strive for something better (e.g., “If you figure out the assignment and explain it to the whole class, I will give you 20 extra bonus points.”). The second strategy seeks to strengthen the will to learn by rewarding curiosity and information-seeking motives. Intellectual excellence is reflected not only by the number and difficulty of the problems individuals solve, but also by curiosity expressed in the process of identifying and even creating new problems (e.g., “You’ll get credit for each additional question you pose whose answer cannot be found in the textbook.”).

Creating equity-based incentive systems is not easy. Teachers must address various concerns that arise whenever the idea of encouraging intrinsic motivation is proposed. Several of these issues are important enough to mention in advance. First, assuming that learning is its own reward, when everyone learns it follows that everyone must be rewarded. But are not rewards devalued when everyone wins? In short, who wants to play a game in which everyone wins? Another concern is whether students can ever truly love learning if they are paid to learn in the form of points, credit, or grades. We will take up these issues later.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Rationale

This book examines classrooms whose reward structure favors an ability game in which students are driven to aggrandize a sense of ability and achieve out of the fear that they are falling behind others. We will explore the devastating consequences of such negative reasons for learning that, first and foremost, cause the destruction of the love of learning. Ability games are based on three wrongheaded assumptions, actually persuasive myths, about the nature of motivation and rewards: (a) Students who do not try in school are unmotivated; (b) achievement is greatest when rewards (e.g., grades) are distributed on a competitive basis, that is, with the greatest number of rewards going to

those who perform best; and (c) the greater the rewards offered, the harder students will try. We will demonstrate the falsity of these myths.

We will also explore the positive educational benefits of incentives. Not everything about incentives is counter-

An equity game involves rewarding the struggle for self-improvement, not winning over others; promoting effort, not aggrandizing ability; and encouraging creativity, not fostering compliance.

productive. In fact, the use of grades and rewards becomes largely negative only when they are part of an ability game. In Goal 2, we will consider how grades and other incentives can be arranged to encourage positive reasons for learning as part of an equity game. An equity game involves rewarding the struggle for self-improvement, not winning over others; promoting effort, not aggrandizing ability; and encouraging creativity, not fostering compliance. In Goal 3, we discuss how to overcome obstacles to instituting

this new system of incentives.

In a final review, we revisit a classroom that was run according to the ability game, and examine the ways learning might change for the same students in an equity game.

Goals

The lessons to be learned from this book can be stated in terms of the goals to be achieved by the reader, which are:

1. an understanding of the negative consequences of schooling when students are motivated by an ability game to outperform others rather than to learn;
2. an understanding of how grades and other tangible incentives can be arranged to encourage positive reasons for learning under an equity game; and
3. an appreciation for the kinds of obstacles that stand in the way of transforming the rules of the learning game, and suggestions for how to deal with them.