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ATTRIBUTIONAL RETRAINING

Many handicapped pupils perceive themselves to be incompetent in a variety of school-related activities. While these self-perceptions may accurately reflect limited skills in these areas, they may also affect youngsters' willingness to engage in learning tasks. When presented with school tasks, even tasks in which they have evidenced recent success, many pupils will state that they cannot do the work and as a consequence will not even try. To address the learning needs of their pupils, special education teachers need to focus on their pupils' cognitive and motivational characteristics. An intervention procedure entitled attributional retraining has been used to influence pupils' self-perceptions and their subsequent motivation to learn.

Attribution retraining may be defined as a systematic set of procedures designed to influence individuals' perceptions concerning the causes of their performance on tasks. Many of the procedures are derived from research on the area of cognitive behavior modification. In attributional retraining the focus is on modifying learners' thoughts concerning why they have succeeded or failed on a task. Although attributional retraining procedures have been used in treatment programs for a variety of problems including alcoholism, anxiety, depression, and diet management, the focus on this presentation will be on the use of these procedures with youngsters who evidence severe learning problems.

Most of the attributional retraining programs focus on the role of effort on student achievement. This emphasis is due, in part, to the fact that pupils can choose to change their levels of effort. In addition, high achieving pupils tend to attribute successes to their ability and effort and ascribe their failures to lack of effort. When students perceive that increased effort will result in success, they persist; this, in turn, enhances their performance. In contrast, children who have learning problems frequently attribute their failures to lack of ability, and fail to persist on academic tasks.

One of the first attributional retraining studies was conducted by Dweck (1975). In this investigation, children identified as learned helpless were asked to solve arithmetic problems. One group of pupils was given math tasks in which they continually succeeded; another group was given tasks that they occasionally failed at. When pupils did not correctly respond on an arithmetic task, they were given attributional feedback indicating that they should have tried harder. All the youngsters in the study were subsequently given difficult math problems. Pupils who received the attributional feedback maintained or improved their performances after failure, whereas the performance (1976) and Fowler and Peterson (1981) subsequently reported that persistence on academic tasks was jointly affected by reinforcement procedures and attribution retraining. Fowler and Peterson also reported that reinforcement/attrition retraining that involved direct attributional feedback to pupils was more effective in increasing reading persistence than other treatment procedures. Recently, educational researchers have reported that attribution training procedures may influence students' use of learning strategies (Johnson & Winograd, 1985; Palmer & Goetz, 1984). Attribution training may affect both pupils' achievement outcomes and how they learn.

Related to the attributional retraining research, DeCharms (1976) developed a two-part program to help teachers enhance personal causation of elementary-aged children. The project was designed to influence pupils' goal planning and ultimately produce a person who is in control of his or her achievements. The experiment involved two groups: one consisted of motivation-trained teachers using an experimental curriculum; a control group had untrained teachers and the regular curriculum. The first step involved a personal causation training course for all teachers in the experimental group, followed by a year-long implementation of a number of classroom exercises. Personal causation training did appear to affect pupils' self-confidence and their academic achievement scores. Four years later, a semistructured interview revealed higher personal goals and responsibility orientation for those children in the trained group over those in the untrained group. Five years later, it was found that more pupils from the trained group had graduated. While there were a variety of components to the training program, one of the crucial elements was teaching the pupils that they had control over their achievement outcomes.

Although additional research is needed to determine how and when to most effectively use attributional retraining procedures, it appears that teachers' direct attributional feedback to children does influence pupils' willingness to learn and their school achievement. Teachers' systematic feedback to their pupils that effort is important in determining their success or failure may affect youngsters' persistence on school tasks and ultimately their achievement.

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ATRIBUTIONS

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

MOTIVATION

ATRIBUTIONS

Attribution theorists assert that individuals seek causes for events in their environment and that these perceived causes influence subsequent behavior. The individual is seen as a naive psychologist searching for theories and cause and effect relationships that explain his or her behavior as well as the behavior of others. The father of modern attribution theory, Fritz Heider (1958), has argued that individuals' subjective experiences are essential for understanding how they perceive the world. Furthermore, Heider proposed that these causal ascriptions subsequently influence a person's behavior.

Weiner (1972, 1979) has extensively examined attributions for achievement outcomes. Within academic settings, content, ability, effort, task difficulty, and chance are among the most commonly investigated of individuals' attributions (Weiner, 1979). Weiner (1974) proposes that attributions for success and failure can be classified within a two-dimensional taxonomy: locus of control (internal or external) and stability (fixed or variable). Attributions of ability and effort are classified as internal, while luck and task difficulty are considered external. On the stability dimension, ability and task difficulty are viewed as fixed, and effort and luck are seen as variable.

Pupils systematically use a variety of achievement-related information to derive attributions for their school performance. The primary types of information that individuals use when deciding which factors caused their performance include their current performance outcome, their history of performance on similar tasks, and the performance of others on the same or similar tasks. For example, if a pupil with a history of learning difficulties in math just answered some arithmetic problems correctly, as did 95% of the other pupils in the class, that pupil is most likely to attribute success to an easy task. In contrast, if the pupil does poorly on a school task in which he or she has had a history of failure, yet most of the student's classmates or friends appear to understand, the pupil may attribute failure to a lack of competence. These illustrative vignettes reflect the attributional antecedents and attributions that differentiate many handicapped and nonhandicapped pupils. By definition, many special education pupils experience a history of failure prior to being referred and ultimately placed in special education classes. It is this background of failure, current achievement problems, and the recognition that other pupils are doing well on classroom assignments that leads to perceptions of lack of competence. In turn, these perceptions concerning lack of ability influence pupils' expectancy for future performance and their willingness to try new tasks and persist on difficult ones.

Recently there has been considerable interest generated concerning the consequences of repeated academic failure and its effect on the motivation and achievement of special education children. The repeated academic failure experienced by these students may cause them to doubt their abilities and reduce their persistence and effort when exposed to novel or familiar tasks. Researchers have found that learning-disabled (LD) children are less likely than nonhandicapped children to attribute their failures to insufficient effort and more likely to attribute their failures to their own inability. LD pupils also have exhibited less persistence on achievement tasks than nonhandicapped pupils. Investigators have found that LD pupils' tendency to attribute failure to ability is negatively related to persistence. It has also been reported that when LD children succeed at a task, they are less likely to attribute the success to their abilities and more likely to attribute the success to luck or ease of the task. These children appear to blame themselves when they fail and not give themselves credit when they succeed. Low levels of persistence and effort often result in additional failures, and the special education student, more frequently subjected to these difficulties, is caught in a vicious downward spiral of motivation and performance (Licht & Kistner, 1986).

REFERENCES


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ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION