

## **Setting Goals and Motivating the Struggling Reader**

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Seminar: Educational Psychology 5100:624

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August 14, 2013

## **Introduction**

The current state of education in Ohio is undergoing an immense fundamental shift. Teachers everywhere, including Ohio, are under fire from many people and politicians and face many new challenges. Those challenges are, but not limited to, the new Common Core Standards, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College (PARCC), the Ohio's Teacher Evaluation System (OTES), and the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Unfortunately, lost in all of these new challenges is the most consistent and important challenge; the students. New students come to our classrooms every August with behavior problems, learning disabilities, difficult home lives, contrasting personalities, levels of abilities, and various intentions for the school year. Our classrooms typically consists of students from many different nationalities and race, and have diversified religious beliefs and socioeconomic levels. With all of this diversification and complexity, teachers have to make order out of disorder. That is where the challenge comes from. Teachers need to learn about each student as an individual, figure out how they learn best, and motivate them to become successful learners.

Reading is the foundation of learning and a central focus at my school. This emphasis on reading is largely due in part to the pressures of testing, but also because of the importance reading has in life. My school has a reading interventionist who works with struggling readers and we have online programs to help students raise their reading levels. Unfortunately, our reading scores have consistently fallen short of the state standards and this year wasn't any different. The small group I chose for this project scored below the proficient level on the reading Ohio Achievement Test (OAA). This group also started the school year at a third grade

reading level or below. At the beginning of the year, one student was at a second grade reading level, two students were at a first grade reading level, and one student was at a pre primer level (difficulty matching letters to sounds).

The small group consists of two boys and two girls. They are ten or eleven years old, and all of them are special education students. Three of these students are caucasian, and one student is half caucasian and half Chinese. I chose this group because of their need for motivation to read and their reading ability. Reading is fundamental for the other subjects in school and in life. These four individuals struggled to read and were among some of the lowest scores on the Reading OAA.

Millie is my lowest student in the group. Even though she is reading at a pre primer level she enjoys reading. She has difficulty with her decoding skills which are connecting sounds to letters and letter combinations for reading. She has a ton of confidence in her abilities, but she gets easily frustrated when she can't sound out and identify words. When she reaches a certain frustration level she tends to shut down and believe that she is dumb. She wants to prove to everybody that she can read, but has not yet mastered her phonics and her word recognition skills. I am concerned that she will struggle with reading most of her life and have difficulty with life skills after high school if she can not improve her reading skills.

Delaney is reading at a second grade level. She is a slow starter and difficult to motivate. I was constantly trying to find new ways to motivate her and seldom founds techniques that worked. After assigning her a task, it would sometimes take her 15 minutes to start. She needs time to process directions and instructions, but needs constant re-direction to keep her focused on

the task. She avoids starting and completing her assignments because she is not confident in her abilities. She doesn't think she can improve her competence level and doesn't want to compete with other students in class because she is afraid of looking stupid. She usually pairs up with Millie because she knows that in most cases she is smarter than her.

Edric is my least motivated student in the group. He does not understand the value of reading and he thinks he is just fine where he is at. He has little to no desire to improve his competence level. He is reading at a first grade level, and struggles in his comprehension. His vocabulary is very limited, and he does not read fluently. He shows a slight improvement when he gets one to one attention from his teacher. His parents are divorced and he lives with mom, but he spends time on the weekends with dad. He uses this as an excuse of why he does not complete his assignments.

Jerry has a caucasian father and a Chinese mother. Learning the English language is not reinforced at home because his English speaking father is away for business frequently, and he and his mother speak mostly in Chinese while they are at home. He reads at a first grade reading level, and only reads one type of book and sometimes reads the same book multiple times throughout the year. When I try to get him to read other books, he does not want to read them. He is comfortable reading the same book over and over again, because it makes him feel smart. If he read a different book he might not be able to read it or understand it. Reading the same book boosts his self-esteem and if he had to read something else he might lose any self-esteem that he already has. He is comfortable with his reading level and does not see the need to improve it.

For this project I will be applying the Goal and Goal Orientations Theory, the Theory of Fixed Intelligence, and the Theory of Malleable Intelligence. These theories will be applied to help the students in my group become motivated learners and to have a mastery goal orientation. Strategies will be used in the lesson plan that will give my students a reason why reading is so valuable, encourage them to improve their reading level, and learn that their competence level can be improved.

### **Theoretical Analysis**

#### Goals

With summer winding down children and teachers are gearing up for another year of school. For some people, there are mixed emotions about going back to school. They are excited to see what the year brings, but sad that the freedom of summer is ending. With the new school year, there are reminders of old challenges. One such challenge is motivating students to learn. Motivating students can be very challenging at times, but it is one of the keys to successful learning outcomes.

The four students in my group lack intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. It is hard for them to see the value of what I am trying to accomplish in class. Helping them to develop goals for school and for life will help motivate these students to become successful. When setting up goals for this group it is important for them to know the difference between visions and goals. A vision is a specific destination; a picture of a desired feature (Mudrey-Camino, 2013a). The goals are the steps taken to get you to your vision. This group of students often confuse the two and typically write down a vision as their goal. Once this group is able to understand the difference between vision and goals, they need to become familiar with the characteristics of

goals. The three characteristics of goals are, specificity, proximity, and difficulty (Mudrey-Camino, 2013a). When writing a goal it needs to be specific. There should be proximal, or short term goals, as well as long term goals. Finally, goals should be moderately difficult, not too easy, but not too hard. Once the goals are set, it is important to write these goals down on a piece of paper and have a plan that can be referred to. The students will use the form that Mudrey-Camino devised for one of her clinicals. Her form has three stages: planning, efficacy, and evaluation (Mudrey-Camino, 2013b). The planning stage is the steps needed to reach the goal, the efficacy stage is the belief in achieving the goal, and the evaluation stage is the assessment if the goal was met or not.

### Goal Orientation Theory

Many students today are highly unmotivated. These unmotivated students need to be engaged, or motivated in the lesson in order for them to learn. They need to have reasons why they should devote their time to complete an assignment. My small group for this project is no different. During the school year, these students were some of my most difficult students to motivate. Understanding how to motivate them was an enormous challenge. In order for me to help motivate this group, I needed to analyze their goal orientation. According to Kaplan & Maehr (2007) and Pintrich (2003), goal orientations are the purposes or reasons for engaging in achievement tasks (Schunk, 2013, p. 187). A student's goal orientation will determine how they act in response to achievement situations. If this group did not see a reason for engaging in a learning task, they did not put much effort into completing it, or didn't even attempt it in the first place. Dweck and Elliot identified two different types of goal orientation: performance goals and learning goals (Dweck, 2000, p.15). The authors of *Teachers' Communication of Goal*

*Orientations in Four Fifth-Grade Classrooms*, refer to students who have a performance goal orientation as “wanting to be seen as being able, whereby ability is demonstrated by outperforming others or by achieving success with little effort” (Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001, p. 36). When students pursue performance goals they are concerned with looking smart and their level of intelligence (Dweck, 2000, p.15). For learning goals, sometimes called mastery goals (Schunk, 2013, p. 187), students want to learn new skills, master new tasks and have a desire to get smarter (Dweck, 2000, p.15). Students who have a mastery goal orientation “want to gain understanding, insight, or skill, whereby learning is valued as an end in itself” (Patrick et al., 2001, p. 35). My group of students felt as though they were in constant competition with the other students in the class. They were more worried about looking smart rather than acquiring knowledge and being smart. When they knew the assignment was difficult they usually avoided doing it because they didn’t want to look stupid. In this case, they exhibited a performance avoidance goal ((Schunk, 2013, p. 190). Rather than dealing with failure and looking incompetent when comparing themselves to the other students, they thought it would be better to avoid doing the assignment so there wouldn’t be any comparisons made. Helping them to understand the importance of having a mastery goal orientation versus a performance goal orientation, or a performance avoidance goal will help them develop the skills they need for the future.

### The Theory of Fixed Intelligence/Entity Theory

Dweck (2000) mentions that people understand intelligence in two different ways (p. 2). One way people view intelligence is called Fixed Intelligence or the Entity Theory. People who believe in the entity theory believe there is only a certain amount of intelligence that a person can

have and that intelligence can not be changed. After they reach that fixed amount of intelligence, there is nothing more they can do to increase their intellectual ability. The students in my group sometimes lacked the motivation to learn because they believe their intellectual ability won't change. When difficult situations came about, there was little to no effort on their part to overcome the situation. They believed they weren't smart enough to deal with the situation so they usually avoided it. This group did not believe they had the ability to overcome difficult situations. Schunk (2013) writes, "Difficulties are viewed as obstacles and can lower self-efficacy and lead students to display ineffective strategies and give up readily or work half-heartedly" (Schunk, 2013, p. 184). They think they have enough intelligence to get by, and they don't want to learn any more because they don't want to look dumb. Students with an entity theory pass up valuable learning opportunities and they withdraw from tasks that are difficult, even if they did show signs of success (Dweck, 2000. p. 3).

#### The Theory of Malleable Intelligence/Incremental Theory

The other theory that Dweck (2000) describes is Malleable Intelligence or the Incremental Theory (p. 3). People who believe in this theory have a vastly different idea about intelligence. They believe that intelligence can increase through effort and learning. They will work hard to accomplish tasks because they believe their ability can change. They view difficulties as challenges instead of obstacles and conclude that self-efficacy can be raised if they use the correct strategies, put forth effort, and remain persistent (Schunk, 2013, p. 184). Students who hold this theory are not concerned about looking smart or dumb, instead they are focused on new opportunities to learn something new. The students in my group spend their time doing easy tasks to make themselves feel smart, instead of putting forth effort to master something.



For example, for a Revolutionary War project the students designed a game board. The students in my group spent their time designing the game board because it was an easy task and it made them feel smarter. The students who hold an incremental theory spent a majority of their time learning about the causes and the effects of the war so they could use it for the game.

### Research Outcomes of Entity and Incremental Theories

Research by Dweck (2006) and Krakowsky (2007) show that “students who hold an incremental view of ability are more likely to believe that learning will raise their overall ability” (Schunk, 2013, p. 184). Once my group of students see the positive results of their efforts, they will start to believe that their ability is not fixed. Reinforcing that learning is taking place as a result of their effort will help them conclude that their intelligence can be increased. As a result, they will want new learning goals to further improve their intellectual ability. If this can not be done, the results have a dramatic effect. Dweck (1999, 2006) concludes that “students holding a fixed mindset or entity view of ability may be less likely to adopt new learning goals, believing that new learning will not raise their overall level of ability” (Schunk, 2013, p. 184). This negative outcome clearly demonstrates the importance of moving away from an entity theory or fixed mindset, to the incremental theory, or growth mindset. Research by Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck (2007) further shows the importance of having an incremental theory. Their research showed that students who hold an incremental view of ability improved their motivation, achievement, and grades over two years, whereas the entity view of ability showed no changes and even declines in these areas (Schunk, 2013, p. 184). I want the students in my group to believe that their ability to learn is not fixed. They have the ability just like other students to put forth effort to master new skills and concepts.

## Practical Applications

Since all of the students in my group are at least two grades below reading level, and neither one of them passed the Reading OAA, the vision for this group is for them to become better readers. The goals that will be outlined for them in this activity will lead them to their vision. Setting up goals for this group will give them purpose and understanding. The goals will be specific and show them what they need to do and how they will do it. They will be proximate so they can feel proud of their success and difficult enough to slightly challenge them. To help facilitate the motivation to achieve these goals, Schunk (2013) advises the following four strategies:

1. Help students activate a relevant goal for completing a task.
2. Ensure that goals are clear, compelling, and presented in such a way that students understand what they need to do to accomplish them.
3. Help students activate multiple goals.
4. Create appropriate emotions that facilitate motivation (p. 182).

For this group, it is important to move away from performance goals and focus more on mastery goals. They were self-conscious about their academic performances and ability. They spent too much time comparing themselves to other students in the class instead of focusing on acquiring the knowledge they need to be successful and improve their academic performance. Their self-esteem and self-efficacy usually suffered when they tried to outperform the other students instead of learning the necessary skills. Schunk (2013) gives nine suggestions to help students pursue a mastery approach goal orientation (p. 203). Those nine suggestions are as follows:

1. Focus on meaningful aspects of learning activities.
2. Design tasks for novelty, variety, diversity, and interest.
3. Design tasks that are challenging but reasonable in terms of students' capabilities.
4. Provide opportunities for students to have some choice and control over the activities
5. Focus on individual improvement, learning, progress, and mastery.
6. Strive to make evaluation private, not public.
7. Help students see mistakes as opportunities for learning.
8. Use heterogeneous cooperative groups to foster peer interaction; use individual work to convey progress.
9. Adjust time on task requirements for students having trouble completing work; allow students to plan work schedules and time lines for progress (p. 203-204).

Corno and Mandinach (1983) describe motivated learning as “motivation to acquire skills and strategies rather than to perform tasks” (Schunk, 2013, p. 150). This type of learning is important for this group to not only change their goal orientation from performance goal orientation to mastery goal orientation, but to believe that they can increase their intelligence. They believe that other students get good grades because they are just smarter than they are. They hold this entity theory that other people are born with intelligence and that they don't have as much as other students. They believe that when they perform poorly, they have a poor intellect. Following the subsequent strategies will help this group of students understand that intelligence can be improved. When applying motivated learning in the classroom to help students believe that intelligence is incremental Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, (2013) recommend the following principles:

- Make it clear that students are capable of learning the material being taught.
- Point out how the learning will be useful in students' lives.
- Teach students learning strategies and show them how their performances have improved as a result of strategy use.
- Present content in ways students understand and tailor instructional presentations to individual differences in learning.
- Have students work toward learning goals.
- Ensure that attributional feedback is credible.
- Provide feedback on progress in learning and link rewards with progress.
- Use models that build self-efficacy and enhance motivation (p. 154-155).

In this activity for Millie, Delaney, Edric, and Jerry, I will provide a simulation where they have to role play a situation where they are meeting for dinner and a movie. The other students in the class will help with the simulation. I have highlighted the strategies from above that will be used in this activity.

Millie, Delaney, Edric, and Jerry will be role playing a scenario where they are meeting for dinner and then a movie. Their goal is to read a set of instructions that will guide them to a certain room at the school. They will each start from a different place, but all four of them will end up at the same place. When they arrive at the room, a.k.a the restaurant, students will be there to seat them. Once seated, the small group will be given a menu from a local restaurant. Here too they will have a goal to read the menu so they can place their order. Once they decide

what to eat they will tell the waiter/waitress what they want. When dinner is over they will be provided another set of directions that they will read that will take them to the “movie theater.” They will be allowed to work together as a group to determine where they need to go. Once they arrive at the movie theater they will have to read the movie choices and decide what movie to go to. Finally, they will go to the concession stand where again they will have the goal of reading the menu to decide what snacks to eat.

As a reward for completing their goal and taking one step closer to becoming better readers, the class will actually watch the movie that the four students selected. The students will be allowed to bring in snacks to eat during the movie. This will help the group activate multiple goals to help them become more successful.

This role playing simulation will demonstrate to the group of students a focus on meaningful aspects of learning because it is relevant to the real world. There will hopefully be a time in their lives where they will feel confident enough to go out on their own to enjoy a dinner and a movie with friends. This activity also uses the strategy of creating appropriate emotions that facilitate motivation. Incorporating the entire class, not just the small group of four, gets everyone involved in the activity. The students will have fun with it, have pride in themselves when they accomplish a task, and learn with the help of their peers.

This simulation will engage and motivate them in the activity because it offers novelty and interest. It is drastically different from what they usually do in class. Instead of just reading from the textbook or from a novel and responding to questions, they will be fully involved in the activity because they are part of the activity.

By doing this role playing activity the students will understand how important it is to be

able to read. Pointing out to the students that reading is useful in their lives will move them from a performance goal orientation to a mastery goal orientation. Even if the students are not successful in completing the activity they will get a sense of how important it is to master the skill of reading. If a student is unable to complete the task, it is important to teach him or her how to cope with difficulties and how to recover from their mistakes so they don't get frustrated with their efforts and their abilities. Once the students have overcome their obstacles, met their goals, and mastered the skill, they will take this assignment one step further. With their parents support, the next time they go out to eat or watch a movie they have to read and decide for themselves just like they did in the role playing simulation. The parents can email me how they did, or the student can explain what happened when they tried it on their own in the real world.

### **Reflection**

*What problems or difficulties arose in completing this project? Did they force you to think or do things differently for the project?*

One of the main difficulties I had with this project occurred near the completion of the project. While writing the introduction and the analysis sections I was constantly thinking about the application section and what lesson activity I was going to use. Before starting the application section I wanted an idea of what the lesson was going to be. The problem was that the lesson I had in mind did not meet the individual needs of the four students in the group so I had to change my activity. Even now, I am questioning my choice of activities and whether or not it met the needs of the students. Maybe that's what teachers do. They have a plan, execute the plan, and analyze the plan when it is over. They constantly question what they could have done better the next time. This project has made me realize that the one size fits all saying truly

doesn't work for teaching. In order for teachers to be successful our students need to be successful. The only way that is going to happen is by getting to know the students on a personal basis, how they learn, what motivates them, what they struggle with, and how they view learning. After that, it is important for teachers to continue to learn and research strategies to help the students be the best learners they can possibly be.

### *What did you learn?*

To begin with, I learned about performance and mastery goal orientation and that there are two very different theories about intelligence. The entity theory and the incremental theory have changed how I evaluate students. I want to promote an environment where students believe in the incremental theory. I want my students to understand that there isn't a competition between students, and that we all learn differently and at our own pace. In the world of testing students believe that they have to show how smart they are and that they are competing with not just students in the classroom, but students all around the country and the world. I want to make them understand that this isn't always the case. Most of the time they don't need to be in competition with other students. It isn't about performance goals, but about mastery goals. It is more important to acquire the skills and knowledge to increase your intelligence than it is to outperform your classmate. It seems most of my life I motivated myself by setting performance goals. Now, I understand the importance for setting mastery goals. I want to motivate my students through mastery goal orientations and not performance goal orientations. I want my students to feel like they can rise up to the learning challenges in front of them instead of cowering at obstacles. That it is not about outperforming other classmates, but acquiring knowledge to increase their intelligence.

Finally, I learned how important the proper feedback is and that praise is not always the best way to boost a student's self-esteem. Students with an entity theory mindset increase their self-esteem through easy successes, but it will decrease through failures. In order to develop growth mindsets it is vital to provide feedback about the students progress and examples of their work that highlight that progress (Schunk, 2013, p. 185). The lasting impression I will take from this project comes from Dweck when she writes, "self-esteem is something we equip them to get for themselves - by teaching them to value learning over the appearance of smartness, to relish challenge and effort, and to use errors as routes to master" (p. 4). I want them to be more concerned about learning new skills and having growth mindset, rather than trying to look smart or avoid looking dumb and having a fixed mindset. This is what I wish to pass on to the four students in my group and to all my students I will have in the future.



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