

An Examination of the Relationship Between Teacher Pedagogy and Student Goals and Motivation in an Alternative School Setting

Introduction:

Student motivation in the classroom can stem from a wide array of goals for the future. Even though each individual's future goal and, thus, motivation is specific to each student, the teacher's pedagogy can either enhance or hinder the student's ability to achieve his or her goal. Motivation can be defined as "the forces that compel students' movements toward school achievement" (Thompson, Kushner-Benson, Pachnowski, and Salzman, 2001, 20). However, I'd like to examine motivation in the context of an overarching student goal and how both student goals and motivation factors are incorporated into a teacher's pedagogy in an alternative education setting. The Middle Settlement Academy, an alternative education program for high school students in the Oneida County area, offers multiple programs for students who either by choice or by force leave their school district either permanently or temporarily. I conducted my fieldwork in two very distinct sections of the school: the GED program and a ninth grade alternative education living environment class. In this ethnography I will focus on how the teachers' pedagogy reflects the goals of her students and the importance of incorporating motivational factors while teaching in order to produce an efficient and effective classroom environment. In an alternative education setting, it is not sufficient for a teacher to only focus on the students'

goal in her pedagogy without using other factors of motivation; thus, a balance of incorporating general motivating factors and goal orientation is necessary for an effective classroom environment.

Classroom Structure and Environment:

There are many factors to consider when determining a classroom's environment. Gary Borich describes how the physical set up of a classroom can send a message to the students: "placement of furniture also sends a message to students: Rows of rigidly spaced desks suggest a very different learning climate than suggested by small groups of desks turned toward one another" (Borich, 2011, 64). Both environments that I observed had different physical structures and, in both classes, the set up was a significant factor in student engagement and motivation.

Once a week I observed the GED classroom at Middle Settlement Academy where I worked one-on-one with students preparing to take the GED exam. The number of students present each day ranged anywhere from six to twelve and ranged in age from approximately sixteen to twenty years old. The classroom was arranged so that all the students were sitting individually. There were tables up against the walls with dividers separating each one. This set up was conducive to the pedagogy of the instructor because each student was assigned individual bookwork based on his or her individual level. For more information about the setup of the classroom, see Observation Journal page 2: "The classroom was structured to enforce and encourage individual work. Each

of the approximately six students had his or her own desk with dividers that surrounded the perimeter of the classroom” (Cohen, Unpublished Manuscript, 15). Upon entering the program, each individual is tested to see what grade level the student is currently operating at. Based on these scores, the teacher assigns lists after lists after lists of assignments that the student has to work through individually. Thus, because everyone is working at a different level, there is no class instruction. Students work individually and the teacher walks around checking work and asking if anyone has a question. I also noticed that the walls were covered in motivational and inspirational posters.

The living environment classroom was arranged very differently. When the students arrive everyday the desks are in rows, but when the students enter, they usually rearrange the setup and sit toward the back of the room. The structure of the class varied daily, but the disorganization was consistent. Borich finds classroom disorganization “to be related to reduced instructional time and therefore reduced opportunity to learn” (Borich, 2011, 65). All of the students are already considered to have behavioral problems, which is the reason they are in the alternative education program; they have been removed from their home school district because they have disrupted their classes. Thus, they are already predisposed to act out. Rather than being stricter with behavior and cooperation, the teacher spends a majority of her time trying to control the students, taking away from instructional learning time.

Relationship Between Student Goals and Teacher Pedagogy:

Each student has his or her own dream or goal for either during high school or after high school. Although goals vary from individual to individual, each student is driven by his or her own goal and the student's teacher can structure the class in order to work toward an overarching goal of all of the students. In another one of his books, Effective Teaching Methods: Research Based Practice, Gary Borich discusses goal theory as a perspective on motivation. He claims, "goal theory places special emphasis on classroom practices that can enhance a student's personal goal beliefs. These goal beliefs can affect a broad range of motivational behaviors, including persistence, use of learning strategies, choices, and preference" (Borich, 2011, 354). Thus, if teachers use the students' goals to construct their pedagogy, then, by acknowledging and encouraging goals, the teachers can increase motivational behavior. In the two environments I observed, the GED classroom and the living environment classroom, the teachers adopt a type of goal strategy by acknowledging students' goals from the beginning and structuring their pedagogy accordingly.

The students in the GED setting were all individuals who did not care to finish high school for whatever reason but all sought a General Equivalence Degree. Thus, the overarching goal of all of the students was to pass the same exam. However, the motivating factors behind their desire to pass the exam varied. Some of the motivating factors, according to the teacher, consist of making more money at a current or future job, being the first in his or her family

to achieve such a degree, wanting to better one's life coming from a poor family, and being an inspiration for his or her future child (a more immediate factor for a pregnant student). Because the goal of each student was very specific (passing an exam), the teacher had a very specific method for achieving this goal and getting her students to pass the exam. As I mentioned before, while describing the environment of the room, each student works individually out of a book until the teacher feels as though the student is ready to take and pass the GED exam.

Generally, the students seek to complete their required work as soon as they can so that they can pass the GED exam and be done with their "high school" education. Many of them go on to two-year colleges and some even enroll in a four-year college. By acknowledging this desire within her students, the GED teacher effectively constructs her pedagogy to reflect the aspirations of her students. I find her methodology to be very effective because she attests that her students very rarely fail the exam. In the last twenty years that she has been running the program, only a handful of students do not succeed on their first attempt at the exam. Based on my observations, it was very clear that those who were anxious to learn the material and pass the exam as quickly as possible had good attendance and diligently worked independently to complete their assignments. Those who were not as driven to get their degree as soon as possible had inconsistent attendance and were not working as consistently as their peers. These students could occasionally be found with their head on the desk, clearly not working very diligently. The teacher would occasionally tell a student to focus, but she believes that when a student was ready to complete the

work and get out of there, then he will, but she cannot force a student to do anything. The setup of the classroom allowed for a successful execution of her pedagogy because the dividers between the students prohibited one (less motivated) student from distracting his or her peer.

The students in the alternative education living environment classroom had a radically different overarching goal. Their main goal while in the alternative education program is to be able to return to their “home” school district. The students were sent to Middle Settlement Academy because they were considered a disruption to their classes in their mainstream high school and, ultimately, seek to return to that school. In order to be allowed back to his district, a student cannot be “written up,” a disciplinary procedure implemented by Middle Settlement Academy that indicates what a student has misbehaved or broken a rule, for ten weeks. Additionally, the student cannot receive and disciplinary action at school or with the police. If a student’s record stays clean and his teachers at Middle Settlement Academy and the administrators approve of his behavior, then a student can return to his district.

The teacher whom I observed in the living environment classroom used this goal as a means to encourage good behavior. If a student was misbehaving or not cooperating, then the teacher would regularly threaten to write that student up, if his behavior had not improved from previous requests. An example you can find on page 24 of my observation journal reads, one day a student was “not cooperating with anything the teacher said, so she threatened to write him up, so he finally sat in his seat for a few minutes” (Cohen, Unpublished Manuscript, 37).

The teacher had asked this student to take a seat multiple times, but he refused to listen until she threatened to write him up. In general, very little got accomplished during a class session because a majority of the time was spent reprimanding students and not on the living environment material. Even when the teaching method varied, whether it was a notes day, a test day, a lab day, or whatever the lesson plan consisted of, the class consistently acted out and did not respect the teacher as an authority figure. It was difficult to track individual students because attendance was so inconsistent. As you can see from my observation journal, I stopped tracking student's names midway through my fieldwork because I rarely saw the same student consecutively. There were 13 students on the class roster, but the highest number of students present at once that I observed was six and the students who were present were never consistent from week to week.

The teacher implemented the behavioral goal into the pedagogy of her classroom, by spending a lot of time correcting (or at least trying to correct) behavior problems. Even though the teacher recognizes the goal of her students is to improve their behavior so that they can be allowed to return to their respective districts, the teacher's incorporation of this goal into her classroom was not effective. There was more time spent addressing behavior issues than there was learning the material. Thus, due to the fact that she had to consistently spend so much time correcting behavior, the students' were clearly not making any behavioral improvement. By continuously threatening to write students up, the teacher can eventually calm a student down, but every time a

student gets threatened and the teacher does not follow through (which is very frequently) the threat seems to become less and less effective. The mere fact that so much time is spent on correcting behavior is sufficient evidence that the behavioral problems are not improving in her students.

Discussion of Motivational Factors in the Two Classrooms:

Although each student has a different level of motivation, there is still a lot a teacher can do to help boost a student's motivation level. One of the most basic strategies a teacher can use is by choosing engaging activities:

“developing or finding activities is one of the best ways to motivate students” (Thompson, Kushner-Benson, Pachnowski, and Salzman, 2001,22). Rather than choosing the easiest activity to present to the class, if a teacher chooses an activity that captures the attention of the students, then the students will be more motivated to complete the activity and will actually learn more from it.

One factor of motivation is “probability of success,” which is defined as, “motivation increases when individuals perceive that there is a good chance they will succeed” (Guillaume, 2002, 253). The students who continuously work hard in the GED classroom know that their probability of success is high. I have heard the teacher repeatedly talk about her exceptionally high success rate of the students she has prepared from the exam. Thus, the students know that they are in a good program and are under the instruction of a successful teacher, who will only let them take the test when she has no doubt that they will pass. Her

students are motivated to work hard because success is in their foreseeable future.

On the other hand, I did not notice that the “probability of success” was a positive influence on the students in the living environment class. During one class session that I observed, the students were taking a practice New York States Regents exam. There was a lot of whining and complaining from the students. On page 17 of my observation journal I note, “They [the students] kept saying how “we know we’re going to fail’ and ‘we’re not as smart as you” (Cohen, Unpublished Manuscript, 30). Rather than positively reinforcing and encouraging the students, all the teacher kept saying was how it’s not up to her and that New York State requires the assessment. Thus, reinforcing that she doesn’t have high expectations for her students on the practice test.

Another motivating factor discussed by Guillaume is “knowledge of results,” which is described, “motivation increases when individuals have specific, immediate information about the result of their effort” (Guillaume, 2002, 253). I noticed a difference regarding this factor in the two classrooms as well. In the GED classroom the teacher would periodically walk around to assess the work that the students have completed individually. She would explain to them their errors or commend them if they were getting the answers right. She checked in with each student multiple times per day, so no student was ever left without feedback for too long. On the other hand, the students in the living environment class were constantly asking the teacher what their grades are. The fact that the students don’t always know where they are standing can be attributed to the

attendance issue, but the teacher could also have a better system that ensures the students are getting regular feedback on their performance.

Receiving positive feedback can also serve as a motivating factor. Borich argues, “teacher praise motivates learners to want to imitate what they have seen” (Borich, 2011, 238). Receiving positive feedback is a confidence booster. When a student is praised by a teacher, he will want to receive praise again, therefore, leading the student to want to replicate the good behavior or result that earned him the praise. I found that the GED teacher gave positive feedback when it was earned. One example of this reinforcement is when she commended a student on his improvement on a practice test compared to the one he took at the beginning of the year: “the teacher sat with one student and showed him how much he improved on his practice test compared to the test he took in September. She sounded enthusiastic and excited for him. She said that he is almost ready for the [GED] test” (Cohen, Unpublished Manuscript, 39). Following this encouragement, the student seemed really confident and continued to work hard for the rest of the day.

However, a student cannot be motivated to want to replicate praiseworthy behavior when praise is never given. I cannot recall one time when I heard the living environment teacher commend a student for good behavior. Because she was constantly reprimanding students for misbehaving or not cooperating, she overlooked or neglected to commend a student who was following directions. By not acknowledging those who are behaving properly, the teacher is not

encouraging the students who are making progress toward the goal of getting back to district to continue demonstrating good behavior.

Overall, by incorporating factors of motivation into her pedagogy, a teacher can improve the environment of her classroom, as we can see from the GED teacher and the effectiveness of her classroom. The more factors of motivation that are addressed and incorporated, the more motivated the students will be to try to achieve their goals, making their aspirations seem more realistic and improving their day-to-day motivation.

Conclusion:

It is evident that teacher pedagogy has a large influence on student motivation. However, we cannot conclude that if teacher pedagogy takes into consideration student goals, then the students will be motivated enough to create an efficient and effective classroom environment. As we can see by comparing the GED class and the living environment class, both teachers factored student goals into their pedagogy, but only one was executed effectively. The GED teacher incorporated general factors of motivation into her pedagogy while also maintaining an emphasis on achieving student goals, which created a successful environment and motivated students. However, when student goals are recognized but other motivational factors are not incorporated, such as in the living environment classroom, the students were less effective in achieving their goal and the overall classroom environment was disruptive. Thus, in addition to accounting for the goals of the students, teachers need to incorporate

motivational factors such as “probability of success,” “knowledge of results,” and “positive feedback,” in order to effectively motivate their students.

The preliminary conclusion that I can draw from this ethnography is that student goals drive student motivation in school insofar as the teacher further encourages their students with general motivation techniques. If the pedagogy implemented by the teacher reflects both the goals of the students and includes encouragement techniques, then the students will create a better class environment. It is imperative that teachers pay attention to the goals of their students and that they implement techniques to inspire these goals in conjunction with incorporating more general methods of motivation. Thus, a teacher needs to know her students well because “what could be motivating to one student could be a turn off to another” (Thompson, Kushner-Benson, Pachnowski, and Salzman, 2001, 20). In other words, there is no “one size fits all” structure to motivation. It is also important to note that this conclusion is specific to an alternative school setting where students share an overarching common goal in the different programs. I cannot expand these results to a mainstream high school where student goals are different. I hope that my next fieldwork opportunity will allow me to expand this finding to another learning environment.

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