

Western Carolina University

Action Research Project

Effects of motivation, rewards and praise to improve academic performance

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Description of Project

For this action research project, an intervention will be provided for all grade 7 and 8 high school students in an underperforming inner-city high school. It will involve several intervention strategies using motivation, rewards and praise to improve students' academic achievement. The students are performing way below their academic levels, hence often displays disruptive behaviors in class. Through direct instruction, praise and motivation, positive reinforcement, parent involvement, frequent data collection and reflection, this action research will aim to use several instruments and tools to promote, support and develop self-organizational and motivational skills of the students.

Relevance to Exceptional Education and Practica

Poor student achievement is often attributed to a lack of motivation, rewards and praise are given to increase that vital student motivation. Students with learning disabilities are very often unmotivated because school is one failure after another to them. The statement, "If they would only try harder, then they would do better on tests, take more risks, or earn better grades" is often heard regarding these students. Through preliminary observation involving this project, specific behaviors were evident. This conclusion was drawn by observing the following behavior: incomplete homework, truancy, absconding from class, poor effort for school related assignments/activities, lazy attitudes, acting out or disrespectful conduct to teacher or peers in class, sleeping, poor self-confidence, student boredom, poor semester grades and/or test scores

and homework grades, and student desire to complete the bare minimum requirements. When praise and rewards are given, they often have the opposite effect of what was intended. High student achievement comes from students who are motivated from inside.

Through the use of positive reinforcement- praise, motivation and rewards, I believe that students would be more motivated to achieve academically. One of my goals as a special education teacher of students with learning disabilities is to teach my students skills that will help them become contributing members of society.

Literature Review

Today's academic performance continues to be understood as a precise proxy for aptitude and is a core determinant of career paths and status achievement even though some doubt its value (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2010). Academic performance is vital to understanding the development of today's well known psychometric "tool": the intelligence test. Because academic performance was thought to mirror individual differences in ability, it became the top criterion for intelligence tests (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2006).

Many schools have developed mission statements that refer to educating students so that they become life-long learners. The people who continue to learn throughout their lives must actively make decisions and take actions to develop their education; that is, they have no teachers handing out deadlines or grades. It can be said that intrinsic motivation plays a vital part in an

individual's choice to take on challenges and keep working on them until completion. In order to develop adults with these characteristics, teachers need to focus a large part of their teaching on developing this important characteristic.

Motivation

There is a need for motivational will to do well in school (Linnenbrink, 2002). “Typically, motivation has been defined as an internal state or condition that activates, guides, and maintains or directs behavior” (Kostelecky, 2005, p. 438). Many instructors struggle with motivating their students to learn. Not every student has the same needs, desires, values, wants, and goals; therefore, not every student will be motivated in the same way.

Motivation is a process that begins with a deficiency that is psychological or a drive aimed at satisfying a goal (Okumbe, 1998). So, it can be said that motivation is made up of needs (deficiencies) that bring up drives (motives) that then assist in acquiring the incentives (goals). Motivation can be understood in two different aspects: intrinsic and extrinsic. Hammer (2001) points out, “intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus, a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better” (p. 51). The definition of intrinsic motivation given by Hammer explains the way in which we do something in order to reach something else; in this case the self-rewarding one. In addition to this, students who are intrinsically motivated in class will just participate because their goal is the knowledge itself. Motivation is necessary for learning to take place. Every educator needs to have a zeal to motivate their students. In order to prepare

young people adequately for the challenges and demands of the 21st century, teachers' parents and all other stakeholders must ensure that these qualities are required for the development of student's life skills. Parents need to be motivated to follow up on the academic performance of their sons and daughters, teachers need it to ensure all aspects of their schools continue to improve. It is the role of the school administrator to initiate and nurture motivation among the various categories of individuals that participate in the educational process. Motivation and praise must be rewarded, increased and sustained at all levels.

Theorists have developed several approaches to motivation which fall into four broad categories. Adopting these approaches can assist teachers in their endeavor to provide the right conditions for student learning. These view points on motivation are the behavioral view; the interpretation of motivation rests on skinner's behavioral learning theories and focuses on the reinforcement of desired behavior using extrinsic rewards. Biehler and showman (1993) showed that behavioral interpretations of learning help to explain why some pupils react favorably to certain subjects and dislike others. Social theorists such as Albert Bandura emphasize the impact of student identification and imitation pointing out their positive academic outcomes. The cognitive view of motivation emphasizes arousal of cognitive disequilibrium as a means to motivate students to learn something new. For example, if students face a problem, they will desire to solve it. This is consistent with Piaget's concept of organization and adaptation. According to Piaget when people experience a discrepancy between something new and what they already knew it produces a state of disequilibrium. To achieve this state Jerome Bruner recommends posing questions that will cause students to recognize gaps in their thinking which they will want to fill.

Cognitive theory emphasizes intrinsic motivation techniques such as the arousal of disequilibrium student value learning for its own sake. The downside of the cognitive view of motivation is that it's very difficult to induce students to experience cognitive disequilibrium sufficient to stimulate them to seek answers (piehler and snowman, 1991). The humanist view of Abraham Maslow the most cited humanist psychologist advanced in his book "motivation and personality" that people are motivated to address certain natural concerns which can be ranked hierarchically in terms of importance.

The importance of Praise to achieve academic success

Praise is a specific type of positive reinforcement many teachers regularly use in their classrooms when interacting with students. According to Conroy et al. (2009), many teachers consistently utilize praise to increase the occurrence of their students' use of positive social and academic behaviors. They further stated that although praise seems to be a simple strategy that teachers can implement themselves, it is actually a complex reciprocal process that involves both the teacher giving the praise and the student(s) receiving the praise.

Infantino and Little (2005) remarked that, "Students and teachers need to agree mutually upon incentives that are realistic and deliverable from a teacher's viewpoint, so that 17 students can strive to achieve these, rather than aim for incentives that are unlikely to be delivered" (p. 504). Research has shown that students prefer to receive private praise as opposed to praise in front of peers when they produce quality work and/or display appropriate behaviors (Infantino & Little,

2005). The reason students prefer this type of positive reinforcement is because they do not like to be singled out (Infantino & Little, 2005). One-way teachers can suit this preference is to use group praise and/or rewards.

Commented [DC1]: These two sentences seem contradictory. Group praise and reward is not private praise.

Implementation

Initiation of project

Prior to the start of this action research project, I met with the school's administrators and discussed my interest of the topic of my proposal. I informed them of the activities and the stakeholders that will be involved during the planning and intervention process. They were very enthused and interested hence, granted their permission to execute my proposed action plan. Students and their parents each signed a form giving their consent to participate in this study (see Appendix A and B). The data collected before and after the reward system was implemented, through direct observation of students.

Action Plan

The following is an outline of the activities and timeline of the action research project.

Week 1

- Copy Parent Consent Forms
- Copy Teacher Questionnaire
- Copy Student Observation Checklist

- Distribute Parent Consent Forms
- Distribute Teacher Questionnaire Form

Week 2

- Collect previously distributed Parent Consent Forms
- Administer Student Motivation Survey
- Analyze baseline data from student surveys
- Collect Teacher Questionnaire

Week 3

- **Begin Interventions**

- Begin positive reinforcement and feedback for each student once per week in class
- Begin/ Introduce student-choice activity in each teacher researcher class –
- Complete Student Observation Checklist for each student once per week in class
- Record weekly grade of each student
- Give positive reinforcement and feedback to each student once per week in class
- Conduct class competitions

Week 4

- Motivation talk - A motivational talk was done by a former student who came and spoke about her challenges and her successes in school.
- Display students' achievements on display board.
- Students award ceremony (certificates) for academic achievement

Results:

Comparison of Pre and Post Data

The pre and post data were compared to each other to see if there was a change in my students' academic performance. I found that students' grades improved significantly through the implementation of the use of motivation, praise and reward strategy also the effective use of modification and positive reinforcement. As a result of this study, I will continue to use positive reinforcement with my students to aid in teaching them appropriate skills they need to be successful, contributing members of the society.

Intervention Process

During the intervention process, all participants which included the school principal, teachers and students were very enthused. It was evident that students were intrinsically motivated to succeed. The use of tangible tokens and rewards were very effective, students became very competitive because they wanted to be reward. Teachers also use positive feedback and constantly praise students during their teaching instructions. I was in awe when I placed the student's academic achievements on a display board, they were very exceedingly excited. I could see the joy in their faces when they saw their names.

Outcome and Conclusion

This research project was very successful and was much exactly as planned. The plan of action was carried out just as it had been described. There were several surprises that came up during the course of this project. It was the first in its kind in the school and all participants gained from it. Students were in high spirits and liked the fact that were not only praised and rewarded for their achievements but also their efforts.

As a whole, I feel that the interventions were successful and they did meet the needs of the students. With the knowledge I have gained through this process, but more importantly the success I have seen through the use of these interventions, it has led me to implement these strategies on a permanent basis. This initiative will allow students to improve intrinsic motivation, goal orientated and self-regulation, to boost their academic success and to play an active role in their achievements and instill a mentality of learning for mastery as opposed to extrinsic rewards.

Impact: What was the impact? Will I continue? What did I learn?

Motivation is something I have long been interested in with my students, so when I first began this research project, I was excited. In my seventeen years as a teacher, motivation is the one topic that has consistently been an issue in the classroom, regardless of my students' gender or age. It is in my view that over the years students have been motivated solely by extrinsic factors.

This action research project allowed me to researching new ways and implement strategies to motivate and encourage my students. With this, I find this project was something I had a great impact on these students and also was very rewarding to see the students yearning for success. Before the initiation of the project, majority of the students constantly struggled to get homework done, didn't care about school, and some didn't even care or wanted to know what their grades were. However, since the inception of this project, it is evident that majority of students are more highly motivated to do well. My ultimate goal was to see what it was exactly that motivated them to want to succeed and to see how I could more effectively turn the extrinsic motivators to those that were intrinsic, in fact I think that my goal has been achieved.

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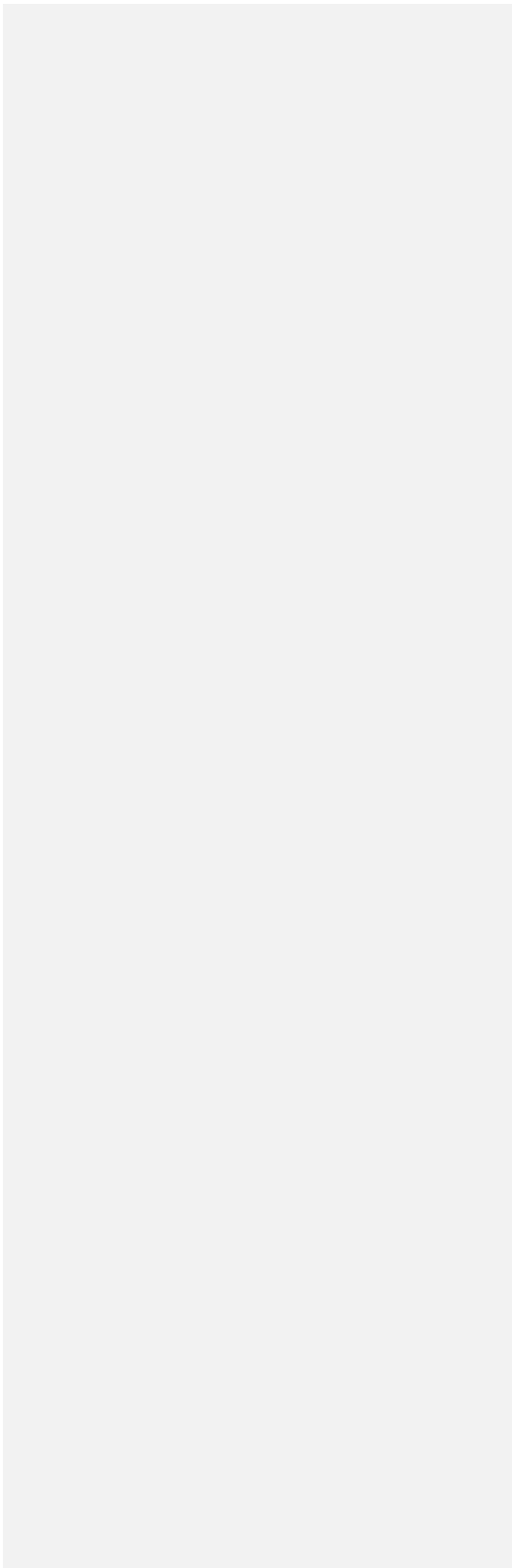
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APPENDIXES



Appendix A

Statement of Informed Consent for Parents

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As part of my master's degree program at The Western Carolina University, I will be conducting an action research project over the next couple of weeks. The purpose of this study is to examine how effective is motivation, praise and reward can improve academic success. It is my intention that this experience will help me better understand how your child/ward are affected by the use of positive reinforcement.

All information will remain confidential, and no actual names will be shared in this research study. Your child's participation in the data collection is purely voluntary and completely up to your discretion. I do not foresee your child being harmed in any way by participating in this study. Furthermore, your child's grade will not be affected by your decision to have him/her participate in the data collection. If you agree to allow your child to participate in this research study, please sign and return the bottom portion of this form to me. I truly appreciate your support and look forward to working with your child.

Sincerely,

Lisa Robinson

Graduate Student Western Carolina University

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child to participate in this action research project. All questions about my child's participation in this project have been answered to my satisfaction.

Child's Name: _____

Parent's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

Questionnaire for teachers:

The following set of questions are for the purpose of getting information on the effect of student motivation on academic performance.

Motivation and academic performance

1. In your teaching experience do you agree that student motivation can affect academic performance in any way

- a) Very much b) Quite a bit c) Negligible d) Not at all

2) Is this effect on academic performance positive or negative

- a) Positive b) Negative c) Neutral

3) Among the following motivation techniques which one do you think can best to improve academic performance

- a) Prizes b) Reinforcement c) classroom competition d) Teaching methods

4) Is the effect on academic performance of these motivational techniques sustainable over a long period of time

- A) Yes b) No

5) In your opinion do you think other factors such as dislike of a teacher affect academic performance a) Yes b) No

6) Do you offer material incentives to your best students

- a) Yes b) No

7) Are self-motivated students more likely to perform better academically

- a) Very much b) to some extent c) Not at all

8) From your observation does classroom competition only found among top performing students

a) yes b) No

Appendix C

STUDENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

MOTIVATION TO ACHIEVE ACADEMICALLY

This questionnaire is anonymous. Please do not write your name, or any other comments that will make you identifiable on it. By completing this questionnaire, you are consenting to take part in this action research project.

Please rate each item according to the following response format and place a number (1 - 4) corresponding to What I aim for and What I actually do on the appropriate line opposite each statement:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| In all of my subjects | put 4 |
| In most of my subjects | put 3 |
| In some (few) of my subjects | put 2 |
| In none or only one of my subjects | put 1 |

| Item wording | What I aim for | What I actually Do |
|--------------|----------------|--------------------|
|--------------|----------------|--------------------|

Aspect: Striving for Excellence Standards

- | | | |
|--|-------|-------|
| 1. I study hard as much as I can. | _____ | _____ |
| 2. I think about what I want to attain in my studies. | _____ | _____ |
| 3. I set for myself high scores which I believe I can achieve. | _____ | _____ |

Goals

- | | | |
|--|-------|-------|
| 4. I try different ways to solve academic (study) problems. | _____ | _____ |
| 5. I set realistic and challenging academic (study) goals. | _____ | _____ |
| 6. I set highest academic goals which I can achieve. | _____ | _____ |
| 7. When I don't get what I expect in my studies, I work hard so that I may achieve my goals. _____ | | |
| 8. If I don't attain my goals, I try again and again. | _____ | _____ |

Tasks

- | | | |
|--|-------|-------|
| 9. I do study outside (beyond) class homework. | _____ | _____ |
| 10. I just aim to complete homework. | _____ | _____ |

Effort

11. I check my work carefully so that I can get good marks. _____
12. I prepare myself to get high marks in my studies. _____
- 13.. I make strong effort to achieve as high marks as I can. _____

Ability

14. I have confidence that I can pass in my studies. _____
15. I receive encouragement on my studies from my teachers. _____
24. I receive encouragement from at least one friend on my ability in my studies. _____
25. I receive encourage from at least one of my parents on my ability in studies. _____

Responsibility for Learning

26. I take my studies as a personal responsibility. _____
27. I struggle to gather information on topics so that I can master them. _____

Personal Incentives Extrinsic Rewards

- 28.I try to work hard because doing well in studies _____
29. I like to study in order to be the winner in my class. _____

Intrinsic Rewards

30. I like studies because we interact with friends while we study. _____

Social Rewards

- 31.. I get honour and praise from my family for passing in my studies/exams. _____
32. I get honour and praise from teachers for passing in my studies/exams. _____

Photo Gallery

Certificate of Award Presentations



Grade 8



Grade 7



Principal and Vice-principal

(for their kind support to the project)

Grade 7 and Grade 8 Academic Achievers Display Board



Top Boy for Grade 7



Top Girl for Grade 7



Top Grade 8 Girl

