

Two Causes of Underachievement

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One of the most discouraging experiences for a teacher is working with students who consistently fail to apply skills they possess to tasks at hand and hence perform below their potential level. On the basis of current research in cognitive development and in reading comprehension, we can identify two important reasons for students' underachievement in any academic arena: (1) their inadequate understanding of how to select, adapt, and monitor strategies for learning; and (2) their insufficient motivation to apply the understanding they do have actively. In this brief article, these causes for some readers lack of academic success will be discussed. Since writing requires even more complex strategic behaviors and even greater motivation than reading, these two factors may be of interest to teachers of underachieving writers as well as to teachers of underachieving readers.

For the attainment of any reading or writing goal, an individual has four types of cognitive capabilities available for use: (1) *basic abilities* (i.e., elementary perceptual, motor, and memory processes); (2) *acquired knowledge* (i.e., language skills, word recognition skills, knowledge of the work in general); (3) *strategies* (i.e., purposeful actions taken voluntarily to achieve particular outcomes); (4) *metacognition* (i.e., awareness of one's own thought processes and the executive processing required to regulate the use of basic abilities, knowledge, and strategies).

The research literature concerning successful and unsuccessful readers indicates that the latter often behave passively. For example, even when word recognition problems are eliminated, poor readers tend to avoid strategic activities, such as (1) integrating word meanings within sentences and sentence meanings within paragraphs, (2) attending more carefully to important information than to unimportant details, (3) drawing inferences to enrich the meaning of the text being read, and (4) integrating background knowledge with the text. Likewise, poor readers' passivity is reflected in their lack of planning and monitoring activities, such as (1) identifying goals, (2) selecting a course of action likely to lead to the desired outcomes, (3) monitoring the extent to which their activities are leading in the appropriate directions, (4) revising their plans when progress is not adequate, and (5) checking at the end to determine if their intended goals have indeed been achieved.

Many of the problems of unsuccessful readers are related to their failure to participate actively and strategically in the

learning process. The discrepancy between their capability and their performance can be seen in the striking effects on their reading comprehension of simple (but explicit) instructions to use a particular strategy. Hence, poor readers have been shown to benefit substantially from explicit prompts to employ semantic strategies such as visual imagery ("Make a picture in your mind of the meaning of each sentence"); sentence elaboration ("Invent a reason for the relationships provided in each sentence"); self-interrogation regarding the meaningful units of a complex sentence and how they fit together; self-interrogation regarding the main components of a story; integration of new information with old knowledge; and self-checking. Frequently, poor readers are able to perform as well as their successful peers under such supportive instructional conditions. In a few studies, poor readers have demonstrated the ability to use the strategy they were taught without prompting and even to maintain its use over several weeks. Rarely, however, have studies of training in the use of strategies been able to demonstrate that students can generalize strategies they have learned to complete in one reading task to related reading tasks in the classroom. Thus, even though students can be taught reading strategies, the tendency of unsuccessful learners to perform passively and, consequently, below potential is not modified.

The first major reason for the underachievement of unsuccessful readers is their immature metacognitive knowledge and skills. Students who understand how their minds work, what is easy to do and what is difficult to do, how to go about solving particular problems, and why some problem-solving attempts tend to be more successful than others, are using their metacognitive abilities. Although research on metacognitive differences between good and poor readers is in its early stages, existing evidence confirms the prediction that unsuccessful readers are less able to judge how difficult a task is, how to identify possible strategies for solving it, and how to evaluate the relative merits of those possible strategies. Moreover, they are much less aware than successful readers that the purpose of reading is to make meaning and to integrate new knowledge with what is already known.

The second major cause of underachievement is lack of motivation. The level at which students are motivated is critically linked to the level of students' strategic activities because employing strategies requires more sustained effort than behaving passively; furthermore, regulating the effective use of strategies requires even additional effort and attention. Consequently, whether individuals bother to perform at optimal level depends on their analysis of the benefit to be accrued for the cost expended. For example, the

evening before an examination, students are all likely to read a text much more actively and strategically than two weeks beforehand. Research on what students believe to be the causes of their own successes and failures has revealed important differences between good and poor readers that seem directly related to the passive performance of the latter: Successful readers attribute their successes to their ability and their failures to lack of effort; unsuccessful readers attribute their successes to external circumstances and their failures to lack of ability. Unsuccessful readers tend to exhibit the symptoms of "learned helplessness" in that they expect to fail and feel there is nothing they can do about it. Their analysis of the benefits they accrue from their efforts — even if they understand the link between strategies and outcomes — rarely leads them to go beyond the minimal effort needed to avoid punishment. Due to their history of failure, the causes to which they attribute their failures, and the greater effort required of them, poor readers are unlikely to behave strategically except in conditions where they are specifically guided by a teacher and specifically reinforced for both the desired activities and the products of their efforts.

The implications of this analysis for teaching passive learners are clear: First, explicit instruction in learning strategies can frequently help unsuccessful students to achieve a substantially higher level of performance temporarily. Second, this instruction will probably be short-lived and dependent on context, providing little overall effect on some students' passive approach to other cognitive tasks. Third, to effect students' general use of learning strategies, more serious attempts to have them develop active, self-regulated learning styles must take place. Transforming passive learners into active learners requires that students develop (1) metacognitive knowledge (i.e., learning what possible strategies there are, why they are useful, when they should be used), (2) metacognitive skills (i.e., learning how to set a goal, select a strategy, monitor its use, revise it or switch to an alternative, check the solution, reinforce oneself for success, and cope with failure), and (3) higher motivational levels (i.e., learning to link expectations for success and failure to effort, provide for success experience, clarify reasons why effort will pay off).