Improving Motivation Through Dialogue

In Beer-Sheva, Israel, teachers craft exchanges with students to lead them to take responsibility for their actions.

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People continually seek explanations for their successes and failures so that they can predict and control the events that affect their daily lives (Weiner, 1986). These explanations reflect people's convictions about the extent to which their own efforts can help them achieve desirable outcomes.

Studies of students' *causal attributions*—their explanations for success or failure—show that successful students tend to attribute their successes to internal factors, such as effort (which they can control) and ability (which is beyond their control), and their failures to external factors, such as bad luck, a difficult test question, or a teacher's grading error. Their conviction that effort brings about success leads them to exert more effort when they encounter a learning challenge (Dweck, 1986; Forsterling, 1985).

Unsuccessful students, on the other hand, tend to attribute their successes to external factors, such as an easy exam or good luck, and blame their failures on internal factors not under their control, such as their lack of ability. These attributions lead unsuccessful students to conclude that they can do little to increase their level of achievement (Carr & Borkowski, 1989; Kistner, Osborne, & LeVerrier, 1988).

People can learn to trace and modify their causal attributions, however, and discover that they are able to influence

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their own success and prevent failure. Through careful analysis, learners can start viewing academic and social failures as events that they can modify by exerting effort and applying useful strategies.

For an educational intervention project in Beer-Sheva, Israel, we developed a program to improve motivation and learning among three elementary schools' 600 students, approximately 12 percent of whom had special needs and were in inclusive classrooms (Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 1995). Our Improving Learning and Motivation program guided teachers and students to attribute academic and social daily events to factors under their control:

effort and effective strategies for achieving their goals.

Focusing on classroom dialogue and teacher-student interactions, the program proceeded in four stages: modifying teachers' beliefs about the causes of success and failure; guiding teachers to provide students with effective feedback; structuring written dialogues between students and teachers; and fostering classroom discussions of social and academic problems and how to solve them.

Modifying Teachers' Beliefs

As the central change agents in the classroom, teachers have to believe that exerting effort and using efficient strategies can promote their instructional success. They also must be confident in their ability to motivate students to learn (Clark & Artiles, 2000).

The teachers met in an initial eight-hour workshop, followed by biweekly meetings. They began by sharing stories of what they perceived as personal successes or failures in the classroom and providing possible explanations for their causes. We modeled feedback that emphasized the personal responsibility of each teacher for the consequences of his or her actions and the value of effort and effective strategies. Gradually, the participants provided their own feedback and discussed strategies to promote success.

One teacher, for example, presented this situation:

> One of my students continually acted up every period. I lost control and shouted at him. I perceive it as a personal failure.

Another said,

> From the beginning of the school year, a student in my classroom has declared that she does not like math and that she does not intend to study it. I succeeded in having her participate and do the classwork.

Participants asked reflective questions: Why do you see this event as a success or a failure? Why could you not control the misbehaving student? What

could you do in order not to lose control? Why did the student start to participate in the math lessons? What did you do to engage her?

The workshop leader emphasized that it is the teacher's responsibility to engage the student and that applying efficient instructional strategies can lessen feelings of failure and intensify feelings of personal success.

Guiding Teachers to Offer Effective Feedback

We then guided the teachers to provide students with the kind of feedback that would help students develop strategies to promote their success in academic and social situations. We advised teachers to include in their feedback

one or more of the following ideas and approaches:

1. Progress is personal and relative to previous personal achievements.

2. Assuming personal responsibility for success or failure is important.

3. Exerting effort has value.

4. Effort requires time, attention, and persistence.

5. The teacher offers positive reinforcement of the students' use of strategies for advancing learning.

6. The teacher details strategies for achieving success.

7. The teacher asks guiding questions to help students analyze their beliefs about the causes of success or failure and to figure out how to improve learning.

FIGURE 1 — A Student-Teacher Dialogue

A 6th grade teacher gives back a literature exam on the subject of rhyming. Mike failed.

Dialogue	Attributional Element
Teacher: Mike, I noticed that you did not review the material. Student: I don't understand these rhymes. They are confusing. It is too difficult for me.	Not using a strategy to advance learning (5)
T: Mike, what can you do when you do not understand something? S: Ask for your help.	Guiding question (7)
T: Right. So who is responsible: you, or the difficult material? S: Of course I am. But what should I do? It was too late when I thought about asking for help.	Taking personal responsibility (2)
T: I am ready to let you retake the exam. S: Thanks. I want to. Will you teach me the material?	Progress is personal (1)
T: Of course. Prepare a list of questions that you don't understand and I'll be glad to help you. S: I would like to have more teachers like you.	Detailing strategy components (6)

Figure 1 (p. 51) provides an example of a student-teacher dialogue, with the numbers in parentheses referring to these feedback ideas. The teachers did not plan these spontaneous dialogues in advance, although they did intentionally include these feedback elements in the conversation. Gradually, the students also learned to speak this *attributional language* and to focus on their personal responsibility to progress and succeed.

The Dialogue Page

Every three weeks, students participated in a written exchange with the teacher on the Dialogue Page, which structured a written conversation designed to promote each student's sense of personal responsibility for achievement (Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 2002). On the Dialogue Page, students described a recently experienced success or failure and then attributed a cause to that event. The teacher then wrote a personal response to each student, and the student responded in writing to the teacher's comments.

Figure 2 is an example of a Dialogue Page of a 5th grade student who has ADHD and is in an inclusive classroom. The teacher's comments followed the guidelines for teachers' responses: reinforcing the student's attribution of success (not to be jumpy and aggressive) to his own efforts, encouraging the student's assumption of responsibility, and asking him to analyze the specific strategy he used to keep himself calm.

Classroom Discussion of Social and Academic Events

Working collaboratively, the teachers composed short vignettes of social and academic success and failure. Each week,

the teachers conducted 20-minute classroom discussions about one of the vignettes, and students discussed the possible causes for the success or failure and proposed actions to take. Figure 3 (p. 54) includes a fictional vignette of a student's experience of a personal social failure and part of an actual classroom discussion of the problem.

The teacher elected to discuss this event with the students because it fit their emotional and social needs. Some had recently moved to this school and felt lonely. The teacher, acting as

dialogue mediator, directed the students to consider how Ron could take personal responsibility for modifying his social situation in the class. Several students attributed causes to the events that were outside Ron's personal control—both for success ("he was good-looking") or for failure ("the class is bad").

But the teacher did not accept causes that were outside Ron's control; he guided the students to consider personal acts that could lead to success. With the teacher's guidance, the students succeeded in focusing on strategies that could help Ron feel valued by his new classmates.

Classroom discussions took place throughout the school year. In the beginning, the teachers presented the vignettes, but gradually, the students initiated the discussions, describing actual events and asking to lead a classroom dialogue about them.

Results

Our research program lasted for three years. During the first year, we intensively guided the teachers in how to implement the program's components. In the second and third years, the teachers took on the responsibility of coaching one another. We measured students' growth in motivation according to their answers to questionnaires before and after participating in the program. Trained university graduate students analyzed Dialogue Pages and conducted weekly classroom observations that focused on student-teacher dialogues and classroom discussion protocols.

Our studies indicated changes in how students attributed causes to success or failure. Gradually, throughout the school year, students

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FIGURE 2   A Dialogue Page

Student's name: Gil   Class: 5th grade

1. *What did I succeed at this week?*
I succeeded in not being jumpy and aggressive toward others.

Why did I succeed?
Because I held myself back.

2. *What did I not succeed at this week?*
I did not come on time to the resource room.

Why didn't I succeed?
I forgot that today is Wednesday.

3. *How could I have made this week even more successful?*
I should have remembered what day today is.

4. *Teacher's comments*
I was glad to read that you took responsibility not to be jumpy and aggressive. I noticed the change in your behavior. Tell me, how do you restrain yourself?

5. *Student's reply*
If someone picks on me, I go to another place or play with a friend.

6. *How did I use the suggestions from the Dialogue Page?*
This week, I succeeded in not being a bully toward Gad. I counted to 10 and managed to hold myself back.

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attributed fewer successes or failures to ability and more to effort. Students also promoted their personal strategies for advancing academic and social goals, such as how to be attentive in class, how to prepare for a test, how to get to class on time, or how to approach a friend for help.

Modifying students' attitudes started with the teachers' awareness of their own attitudes. At first, most teachers attributed students' progress to ability and effort ("You can do it, but you have to try harder"). Gradually, they started to introduce strategy-based attributions ("What do you do when you try harder?") and guided the students to implement these strategies in a variety of subjects, so that Effort + Strategy = Success became a popular motto in the program's three schools.

We decided that we could keep the program alive by introducing its philosophy to new teachers. During their training at the Kaye College of Education in Beer-Sheva, preservice teachers have been learning how to foster student-teacher dialogues that improve motivation, and they have been implementing the program in approximately 130 additional classes in the city's elementary and middle schools.

Teachers can structure and guide a variety of student-teacher dialogues to help students realize the connection between success and effort. ∎

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> The teacher asks guiding questions to help students analyze their beliefs about the causes of success or failure and to figure out how to improve learning.

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FIGURE 3   Vignette: Ron Moves to Beer-Sheva

Ron was sad and lonely. Last month his family moved from Haifa to Beer-Sheva. In Haifa, he had been in the center of activities, on the student council and the basketball team. Here in Beer-Sheva, no one invited him to parties or to play. Worst of all, the students did not let him join the basketball games. They did not believe that he was an excellent player.

One day after school, Ron called Nir, his best friend from Haifa.

"Hi Ron," Nir said. "I am glad you called. How's it going? Have you already shown them how to play basketball?"

Ron was quiet. He did not know what to say to Nir.

"Nir, I've had some bad luck. I am in a bad class and no one even wants to look at me. It's not working out."

Nir was shocked. He wasn't used to hearing Ron talk like this.

"Ron, I don't want to hear words from you like 'luck' and 'bad class.' Tell me, when you were in Haifa, did you get on the student council because of luck? Did you get on the basketball team because of luck?"

Ron was silent, but suddenly he smiled and said, "Nir, you are great! You don't know how much you helped me. I think that I'm beginning to grasp why I am so lonely in class. I'll call you in a few days and tell you how it's going. Say hello to the guys."

An excerpt of a 5th grade classroom dialogue

Dialogue	Students' Attributions	Teacher's Feedback
Teacher: What do you think Ron suddenly understood?		Guiding question (7)
S1: It is not just like that, that you become an excellent player.		
T: What do you mean by "not just like that"? What did he do?		Taking personal responsibility (2)
S2: He probably practiced a lot.	Effort	
S3: Ron was on the student council.		Progress is personal (1)
S1: You can tell that things worked well for Ron in his previous school.	Luck	
T: How does it happen that things work well for one of the kids in school?		Taking personal responsibility (2)
S4: Probably everyone liked him. Maybe he was good-looking.	Luck	
S2: And now what? Is he not good-looking anymore?		
S4: He is good-looking now as well. He probably did not change.		
T: We are talking now about Ron. We cannot tell how he looked. But we know that in his previous school, he was active on the student council and the basketball team. But now he is not one of the guys. When Ron talked with Nir, he understood something. What do you think he understood?		Guiding question (7)
S5: He understood that the kids don't know him yet, so they don't look up to him.	Other significant persons (peers)	
T: What does Ron need to do so that the kids will get to know him and look up to him?		Guiding question (7) Taking personal responsibility (2)
S1: He can tell them what he was in Haifa.	Ability	
S6: But they don't believe what he tells them.	Ability?	
S3: He'd better start to be active in the class.	Effort	
T: What can he do to be active in the class?		Guiding question (7)
S3: If the class goes on a field trip, he can volunteer for the trip committee.	Effort + strategy	Taking personal responsibility (2)
S2: He can join other class committees. He can join the sports committee.	Effort + strategy	
S1: But they don't like him in class?		
S2: Yes. So he needs to do things so that they will like him. To just be nice.	Effort + strategy	
T: So it is not related at all to luck or to the bad class.		Taking personal responsibility (2)
S4: It was related to a bad class, because they didn't accept him in the group.	Other significant persons (peers)	
T: Ron is not responsible for the behavior of the other kids in his class. He is responsible for himself. So it is important that we focus on what he can do to feel less isolated. You have raised several good ideas, such as to join the trip committee or the sports committee, or to help other kids in the class. He can join the student council or the basketball team. Let's suggest more ideas to Ron. What should he do to not be isolated?		Using an advancing strategy (5) Detailing strategy components (6) Guiding question (7)