

PREVENTING MISBEHAVIOR BY HELPING STUDENTS ACHIEVE

BY CHARLOTTE J. OLIPHANT

Pretend that you've enrolled in a required class. You are assigned to read silently a 20-page article containing the following passage, after which you will fill out a corresponding worksheet and take a test over the material.

Following Cronquist's (1981) circumscriptions with few exceptions, I recognize 15 families. . . of glucosinolate taxa, six of these unigeneric and with Euphorbiaceae represented only by Drypetes. . . . Glucosinolates are thought to be ubiquitous within all these families except Euphorbiaceae, but the species- and genus-level sampling that supports this assumption has been sporadic (Rodman 1981). At generic level, the compounds have been reported in all four genera of Caricaceae, in two of five genera of Gyrostemonaceae, in one of two genera of Limnantheceae. . . ., in three of six genera of Resedaceae, and in one of three genera each of Salvadoraceae and Tropaeolaceae, in addition to the six unigeneric families. . . .¹

Imagine reading 20 more pages like this and then facing the work sheets and test. Then imagine that, except for art and physical education, this is all you ever do in your class, which meets six hours a day, 180 days a year.

Obviously, this illustration was used to help you momentarily empathize with a child's feelings when he or she cannot do an assignment. But the illustration's impact still was minimal, because you experienced this little trial through the insights and perspectives of an adult, and you knew it was

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imaginary.

But what defenses does a child have when all or most of his assignments are "Greek"? A child lacks a philosophical perspective, the hope that things will get better, other sources of self-worth, and the problem-solving powers to go to the principal and say, "I need to go back and take the prerequisites to this course."

I have asked many teachers and teacher-education students what they liked and disliked about their early experiences in school. In general, their memories are positive. Few teachers have experienced school failure.

Different answers emerge when I ask the same questions of adults taking remedial courses to begin college. They tell me what life at the bottom feels like. I hear all the interesting things they tried to avoid being exposed as a failure in front of their peers. For example, some figured out which days the teacher was most likely to have round-robin reading, and they chose those days to be sick. Or they begged to go to the bathroom shortly

before their turn to read. Some made trouble so they would be sent to the corner before they were to read aloud. Many tried cheating.

Summarizing research on student success rates in elementary schools, *Effective Teaching Methods* reports that "The average student in a typical classroom spends about half the time working on tasks that provide the opportunity for high suc-

cess.”² The author’s definition of “high success”: the student understands the task and makes only occasional careless errors.

Now think back to the last five classes you took. How would you have felt if you understood the assignment only half the time? Try to put yourself in the place of an elementary student in this situation. And try to imagine the feelings of a student who understands the assignment almost none of the time.

It is hard for many teachers to put themselves in this situation. However, I’ve visited classrooms in which many students could not do their assignments. I’ve listened to the explanations teachers offered: “She’s not motivated.” “She doesn’t try.” “She doesn’t make wise use of her time.” “He’s so easily distracted.” “He gives up too easily.” “He dallies around before starting seatwork.”

For me, one of the most helpful, though distressing, aspects of my own teacher preparation was taking a course in which I could not succeed. I’d always been a fairly good student, despite dyslexic disabilities and after-school employment. I’d persevered through anatomy, physiology, embryology, general and organic chemistry, quantitative and qualitative analysis. I believed that anybody who tried hard enough could learn anything.

Then I enrolled in a course that I could not pass. I couldn’t understand anything the first day except the teacher’s name. Likewise the second day. I let my other subjects go while I struggled heroically in my “impossible” course. I spent a lot of money on tutoring, to no avail. I understood nothing that was said or written in class, though other students seemed to be “getting it.” Sometimes I hid behind the book to conceal my tears.

Since that time I’ve observed scores

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of elementary and secondary students in similar situations. They don’t listen to directions or make good use of their time—they learned long ago that they can’t do the work anyway. They’ve given up.

Effective Teaching Methods explains: One possible level of difficulty is that of high success, in which the student understands the task and makes only occasional, careless errors; another is moderate success, in which the student has partial understanding but makes some substantive errors; and a third is low success, in which the student does not understand the task at all. Findings indicate that task orientation and student engagement are closely related to level of difficulty as measured by success rate. The findings consistently point out that instruction producing a moderate-to-high success rate results in increased achievement (Fisher, et al., 1980).

In addition, research has shown that instruction producing low error rates can contribute to high levels of student self-esteem and to positive attitudes toward the subject matter and the school (Bennett, Desforges, Cockburn & Wilkinson, 1981).³

In other words, students who can do the work successfully stay on-task and feel good about themselves, the subject, and about school. They rarely misbehave.

Researchers have found that students who spend more time than the average in high-success activities had higher achievement scores, better retention, and more positive attitudes toward school (Brophy & Evertson,

1976; Wyne & Stuck, 1982). These findings have led to at least one suggestion that students spend from 60-70% of their time on tasks that afford the opportunity for moderate-to-high levels of success, that is, that allow for almost complete understanding and only occasional careless errors the first time through the material (Brophy & Evertson, 1976; Rosenshine, 1984).⁴

Another college textbook suggests that both exceptional and regular students should demonstrate expected behaviors at 80 percent accuracy before they attempt independent practice.⁵

For practical purposes, I’d like to define student success as the ability to do the assigned task independently or with the aid of accessible resources. For skills classes, students should demonstrate at least 90 percent accuracy before moving to independent practice. If this success rate seems too high, ask yourself what success rate you like to have when studying or working.

Is there any reason students should not work at a high success rate? I can think of one: Life is often difficult and students need to learn how to struggle, even how to fail and rebound. But “How to Struggle” can be taught separately from the usual classwork. Students can learn “struggle methodologies”

without feeling like failures or hating school.

When I teach students how to struggle, I first model the steps myself. Then I tell them that the purpose of the lesson today is to teach them how to do the same thing. For example, I say, "You usually read at your independent or instructional reading level. Today I'm going to show you how to read at your 'frustration level,' because you have to do that sometimes."

High success can occur at all steps in the instructional process, including discovery learning and grappling with new ideas (critical thinking). High success sometimes means struggling with issues that have no final answer at the end of the class period. In such cases, the teacher gives perspective and direction, and helps students define success in terms of open-mindedness, careful thinking, and doing one's best. However, this article will deal mainly with how to achieve high success in ordinary schoolwork at Bloom's lower levels of learning.

In ordinary schoolwork, high success for the student during *presentation* means "getting the pieces" clearly and consecutively, building and expanding on ideas, remembering the parts well enough to understand "whole" concepts, and seeing how to apply them.

Success during *guided and monitored practice* means being able to copy what the teacher demonstrates step-by-step, then being able to copy or repeat a whole problem (first the same problem, then a problem similar to it), and finally a problem that is slightly different.

Success during *independent practice* means doing practice items at a success rate of 95 to 100 percent. The purpose of independent practice is to gain competence, speed, and automaticity, not to learn *how* to do the work.

A high success rate is necessary so that students won't "practice errors." The student with a low success rate during independent practice learns to accept continual errors in performance. Many of life's tasks call for high accuracy. What rate of success would you like for your dentist to have while work-

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ing on your teeth?"

How to Promote High Rates of Student Success

Here are some ways to correct the most common instructional errors:

1. *Include guided and monitored practice in every lesson.* Many teachers tend to skip this area. They go straight from a short presentation to independent practice. In a multigrade classroom this often means that the teacher gives a group of students an assignment and tells them to work the problems independently. (The teacher then goes on to work with the next group.) In many cases only some of the students can do the assigned work. The rest are likely to "goof around" and infect the students who would do the work if they weren't distracted.

2. *Make prototypes and resources accessible when you can't offer as much individualized guidance as you'd like.* A prototype is a written sample of how to do the work, step-by-step. A flow chart shows what to do if the task goes in varying directions. A simple flow chart can help students decide whether to solve a problem by multiplying or dividing, or how to set up a fractions problem.

Other accessible resources include maps, number lines, tables and charts, glossaries, lists of rules and guidelines, and access to quiet consultations with "resource students" who are "on duty" for the class or the day. Cooperative learning strategies are also useful in this area.

- One very helpful resource is a set of instructions telling how to proceed with the task. For example: "Rewrite the problems we did in the group. These are on your yellow sheet. Then do the first problem on page 71. Check the answer

on your yellow sheet. If it is wrong, rewrite the problems we did in the group two more times, and try the first problem on page 71 again. When you get the first problem right, do the second and check your answer, then do the next eight problems. If you get problem one wrong the second time you try, open your envelope to see how to do it. Copy it and read it through three times. Then try it again. . . ."

3. *Place students at levels where they can succeed.* One teacher accepted a job teaching a rough group of third graders who had run out two teachers in one month. After discovering that they read at first-grade level, she put them back in first-grade readers until they mastered them. Then they went through second-grade readers. Discipline problems dropped as student success rates went up. They didn't cover all the third-grade content, but they were ready to read fourth-grade books.

4. *Emphasize reading for fluency before reading for content.* Students who can't read fluently have trouble with all content areas. Design an intensive remedial program to help the student quickly increase reading fluency. This remediation will require more assistance than biweekly half-hour tutoring sessions. It may happen if students spend most of each school day reading at their independent and instructional levels, even if they temporarily miss out on learning about communities or air currents.

5. *Don't give first priority to "getting through the material."* When teachers tell me about students who can't do reading or math, I ask why they don't put the student back at his or her success level. They look at me in amazement. "Why, I'd never get through the material if I did that!" they say.

What does it mean to "get through the material"? If you were pushed to read 100 pages of the technical botany text in this article's opening illustration, what would you know? When a student gets through his sixth-grade science book by slowly decoding one word at a time, and comprehending nothing, what has he learned? If a student can't do one-digit division, what does he gain

from pages of three-digit problems? Too often “getting through the material” means failing at all the material.

A teacher invited me to observe the avoidance tactics of a fifth grader who read at second-grade level. The girl was assigned several pages in her fifth-grade workbook. The teacher permitted me to take the girl to a separate room for an hour to “see what you can do.”

Since the teacher didn’t want the girl reading “below grade level,” I opened her book to the first page of the day’s story. I offered her a prize to do whatever I said for an hour. I alternated intense drill, using whole-word and whole-passage methodologies, with brief physical exercises. At the end of the hour she could read two pages fluently.

Someone might object, “How could students ever learn to read at the rate of two pages an hour? They’d never get through the material that way.” But there were 60 words on those two pages, many of which were also on the next page. The girl found to her joy that she could read most of the next page as well. She had learned 40 new words in an hour. At that rate, with intensive help, she’d be reading most fifth-grade material within several weeks. From that point onward, she’d be able to “get through the material.”

By putting these five suggestions to work, I’ve helped adults in a group setting to raise their reading levels an average of one grade level per 14 hours of classtime, or one grade level per six hours of tutoring. I started each student wherever he or she could succeed, even if that meant using second-grade level material (with adult-level content).

A regular classroom routine rarely helps those who are behind to “catch up,” even when the program and teacher are excellent. “Catching up” requires a drastic change from the everyday schedule, both in school and at home.

Let’s look briefly at how these pro-

cedures relate to student success in math. (See Figure 1.)

Learning proceeds from left to right. When they aren’t “getting it,” students need to move back to the left as far as needed, then relearn, mastering each step in a problem. In other words, if a student can’t compute the area of a rectangle, you get out the tiles again, and connect them and concrete words to the abstract numbers and words. If the student doesn’t “get” that, you’ll have to move back to manipulate tiles and speak in concrete terms (perhaps moving back to basic multiplication facts).

For students to attain a high rate of success, such review must receive priority. The overworked and overburdened teacher sometimes becomes resigned that many of his or her students can’t do their assignments, or rationalizes that they could if they wanted to. To solve this problem, (1) determine which students can’t do the work; and (2) reject the idea that the situation can’t be changed.

Don’t expect to make drastic changes immediately. First, try these steps. Give yourself time to do the following:

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- Reflect,
- Keep records,
- Do more assessments before independent practice times,
- Consider ways to individualize instruction,
- Adapt options to your circumstances,
- Make tentative plans,
- Try out your best options.

Enlist willing people as volunteers. Train them to assist in the classroom or to tutor after school. Explain student success concepts to parents, and tell your conference supervisor about your efforts.

In the long run, you will save time and emotional energy by making changes that promote high rates of student success. And you will help prevent student misbehavior. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Gary D. Borich, *Effective Teaching Methods* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1988), p. 11.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. James Ysseldyke and Bob Algozzine, *Introduction to Special Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1990), p. 384.

