Motivating Gifted Elementary Students Through Literacy Interventions

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Abstract

Gifted students may have high academic aptitude, or an unusual level of talent in an area. Some gifted students are highly motivated to learn; however, gifted students can underachieve or be unmotivated in certain situations, or may demonstrate a general low level of motivation (Baum, Renzulli, and Hebert, 1995). All gifted students have unique and particular needs that must be met by their teachers. Teachers can possess or nurture characteristics that will make them more effective teachers of the gifted (Hong, Greene, and Hartzell, 2011). Interventions that teachers implement in the classroom may increase motivation in gifted students. Key components of highly motivating classroom activities involve creativity, choice, and student interest (Ford, 1998; Olthouse, 2014; Martin, Powers, Ward, and Webb, 2000; Marinak, 2013)

Introduction

"There are three things to emphasize in teaching: The first is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is (you guessed it) motivation." Terrel H. Bell, U.S. Secretary of Education, 1981–1985 (Bell, 1995).

A common misconception of gifted students involves the assumption that they are all highly self-motivated. In fact, task commitment is part of Renzulli's Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness (Renzulli, 1978). In a survey in which teachers were directed to provide definitions of giftedness, 78% of teachers identified "self motivation" as essential, where only 15% said that boredom or noninterest was part of giftedness (Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady, and Dixon, 2007).

Unfortunately, many teachers confront the frustrating phenomenon of gifted underachievement. Hoffman, Wasson, and Christianson (1985) suggested that the prevalence of students failing to meet their potential was as high as 50% (as cited in Peterson and Colangelo, 1996). Gifted underachievement occurs when a student's academic aptitude exceeds his or her academic performance (Baum, Renzulli, and Hebert, 1995). Gifted underachievers are a frustrating group to work with. Unlike some of their peers, who seem to have more legitimate reasons for their poor performance, such as a lack of familial support or grade level skills, gifted underachievers oftentimes simply appear to choose not to engage in their school assignments.

Interventions can be implemented to increase students' motivation (Rahal, 2010; Martin and Pickett, 2013; Winebrenner and Berger, 1994; Olthouse, 2014; Marinak, 2013). Teachers' high self-efficacy levels were correlated with positive student outcomes, and teachers of the gifted had more sophisticated epistemological beliefs (Hong, Greene, and Hartzell, 2011).

Review of Literature

Coleman and Guo (2013) examined passion, which is defined as "obsessive interest in a particular topic." The researchers examined six students with different academic or nonacademic passions that lasted for more than twelve months. After extensive interviewing, the researchers concluded that "families create the prime context," and "education of passions took place largely outside of typical schools settings," discouraging findings for teachers who hope to induce passion in the classroom.

In other words, the families of the students studied were willing to commit time, money, and other resources to their child in pursuit of his or her interest. For example, parents of a child

interested in filmmaking purchased increasingly advanced digital cameras for him, and parents of a child interested in acting enrolled her in children's theater and singing classes. The researchers did not describe the passionate children's classroom performance.

Teachers can possess traits that make them more effective. Epistemological beliefs include attitudes toward the nature of learning and the nature of knowledge. Teachers of the gifted are more likely to possess sophisticated beliefs (versus naïve), meaning that they believe that knowledge is complex, uncertain, constructed through learning processes, and malleable (Hong, Greene, and Hartzell, 2011). Additionally, teachers with a high level of self-efficacy "set challenging goals for students and themselves, persist when they are faced with learning difficulties, and are enthusiastic for their teaching subjects and willing to experiment with new teaching strategies" (Hong, Greene, and Hartzell, 2011).

Motivation Interventions

One possible intervention is the idea of a "motivation trap," as put forth by Ford, et al. (1998), which includes an enticing, teacher-created activity personalized to the student's interests. The underlying assumption behind this idea is that the largest hurdle involves getting a child started on an activity; once that obstacle is met, motivation will cease to be an issue. Once the child has been "hooked," the activity or assignment will contain elements that reinforce continued participation.

Olthouse (2014) examined gifted students' attitudes and beliefs toward their writing abilities. The researcher found that creative, complex, and diverse writing assignments were instrumental in increasing students' writing skill. Students felt more positively toward writing

when teachers offered feedback, planned fun writing activities, and were flexible. The researcher described a successful writing assignment in which students were asked to retell a popular book or movie from a different perspective (e.g., the villain's point of view, or in a different historical period or setting). Finally, the researcher conclude that a teacher's "open approach to writing combined with a variety of feedback (including both conceptual revisions and technical edits) may contribute to these students' positive relationships with writing." (Olthouse, 2014).

Martin, Powers, Ward, and Webb (2000) attempted a large-scale motivation intervention with two general education third grade classes, and a sixth and eighth grade gifted class. The 18-week intervention program included "integrating cooperative learning and multiple intelligences," as well as implementing a positive classroom management plan and study skill development.

However, the changes noted in the students were superficial. Students wanted to work in cooperative groups more often than before, and wrote down homework assignments with greater frequency, but the social skills taught for the purposes of cooperative group work success did not carry over to any other academic areas, parents did not report changes in the students' work ethic at home, and there was no increase in students' putting forth their best effort at school.

Other successful motivation interventions include teacher read-alouds, in which a teacher reads a designated book aloud to students for a few minutes every day, and literacy discussions in which students have the opportunity to converse with their classmates about a fictional work they've read (Corcoran and Mamalakis, 2009). Marinak (2013) described having students read excerpts of newly-released books with the purpose of recommending which books should be purchased for the school library (Marinak and Gambrell, 2008, as cited in Marinak, 2013). This

unique activity was highly engaging to the students, and incorporated the "choice, challenge, collaboration, and authenticity" integral to motivating students in reading (Marinak, 2013). Students in another study participated in a twist on a book club by writing to adult pen pals about books that they'd both read (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, and Igo, 2011).

Implications for Instruction

Guthrie (2010) suggested that motivating students in literacy includes "learning and knowledge goals, real-world interactions about books, support for student autonomy, interesting texts for instruction, explicit strategy instruction, time for collaboration, and specific, sincere praise and feedback" (as cited in Marinak, 2013). Teachers can make these adjustments to existing assignments with minimal additional work; rather than a complete overhaul, creating a more motivational classroom is more of a paradigm shift.

While many researchers studied motivation and its effects, or ways to increase student motivation, they did not indicate how implementing motivation interventions affected academic performance overall. For instance, researchers stated that teacher read-aloud time increased students' positive feelings toward literacy, but did not indicate whether students' performance on literacy improved (Corcoran and Mamalakis, 2009). Morgan, Fuchs, Compton, Cordray, and Fuchs (2008) indicated that increasing students' reading skill did not increase their reading motivation, but they did not indicate the inverse relationship.

Tasks can be highly motivating but not contribute to students' understanding of the academic material. Therefore, it is essential that teachers ensure that learning goals are being met during motivation interventions. Highly engaged and motivated students may appear to be more

competent than they actually are if assessments are not administered at the activity's conclusion to monitor understanding.

Significant Example

The article "Gifted Children's Relationship with Writing" (Olthouse, 2013) described a successful writing intervention in which teachers directed students to reinterpret a book, story, or chapter they'd read. A similar intervention was implemented with a class of gifted third graders in the context of a novel study of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. After having read seven chapters of the book, and doing numerous comprehension activities, the students were asked to write an "alternative chapter" of the book.

The students were given seven minutes to discuss ideas with other students. This brainstorming session was informal, and students reclined on cushions used for sustained silent reading time. Next, the students were given ten minutes of silent writing time at their desks. This time was structured for maximum writing efficiency and flow of ideas. One student stopped writing before time was called; the student was directed to continue writing until the timer elapsed. After this, students were given ten minutes to share their writing with a peer, and were urged to offer suggestions and feedback to their classmates. Finally, students were given fifteen minutes to revise their work and complete an illustration that depicted their scene.

After this activity, students conferenced individually with the teacher about their writing. Students were offered specific feedback and suggestions for improvement. Students overall demonstrated a high level of engagement and creativity during the activity.

Conclusions

Gifted students can fall victim to underachievement for a variety of reasons, but teachers can help overcome this discrepancy in ability and performance by preparing highly motivating and engaging lessons. While these lessons may initially require more effort and planning, other aspects of a motivating classroom may simply require behavioral changes on the part of the teacher, such as providing specific feedback, understanding learning as a complex process, and having a sense of self-efficacy.

Teachers can design motivation interventions that directly address literacy by incorporating elements of "choice, challenge, control, collaboration, constructive comprehension, and consequences" (Turner and Paris, 1995), creating a reading classroom that includes "learning and knowledge goals, real-world interactions about books, support for student autonomy, and interesting texts for instruction." (Guthrie, 2010, as cited in Marinak, 201). In the future, researchers designing motivation interventions should consider learning outcomes to ensure that students are absorbing the material, in addition to being engaged with it.

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