Learned Helplessness and Attribution for Success and Failure in LD Students

By Nicki G. Arnold

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In the 1960 's, a group of researchers observed a phenomenon they called learned helplessness. In a controlled study, they used electric shocks when dogs tried to leave their cage. Later the dogs were provided a way out, but they made no effort to escape. Apparently, they had learned that they were helpless. The fact that learning disabled children may become learned helpless in academic settings has been supported by numerous studies. Continual exposure to academic failure has been shown to contribute to learned helplessness, withdrawal, unwillingness to approach new tasks, and a lack of persistence. Like the dogs in the study, they may apply this maladaptive behavior to new situations where they are capable of academic success, but think their efforts are useless.

Other factors have been shown to contribute to this learned academic helplessness. Grouping students with a variety of disabilities under the tutelage of one teacher with generic training, excessive use of external reinforcement, lack of early identification of learning disabilities, a belief in a fixed static intelligence and a lack of reward for individual effort versus achievement are all important issues to consider.

THE THEORY OF ATTRIBUTION

Attribution Theory contains the underlying principles by which a person decides the causes of another person's behavior These perceived causes can be dispositional and internal or situational and external. People often determine whether a behavior is dispositional or situational by using three key factors: consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. Consensus refers to how most people act in a given situation. When consensus is low, behavior is attributed to dispositional or internal factors. When consensus is high, behavior is attributed to situational factors. Consistency refers to the degree to which people act in the same way on different occasions. Highly consistent behavior is attributed to dispositional factors. Distinctiveness refers to the extent to which people respond differently in different situations. If distinctiveness is low and people act similarly in different situations, behavior is attributed to dispositional factors. In general, if a behavior is unusual, it is attributed to the situation. If it is not unusual, it is attributed to the disposition. While this may hold true in a laboratory, people in real life are subject to many variables, so assigning attribution to any one factor is impossible.

ATTRIBUTION FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND FAILURE

It has been suggested that learning disabled students tend to exhibit less motivation and persistence in academic tasks. One school of thought is that academic failure is based on difficulties in the regulation of locus, stability and controllability. Self-bias also appears to play an important part in this attribution model. This model can easily be applied to children in school. The student who receives an "A" on a test may perceive himself to be bright and intelligent. The egocentric bias kicks in. He feels he was more central than may actually have been the case and is likely to be motivated to work hard for that "A" the next time. The student who receives an "F" on a test, following the same thought process of his "A" counterpart, might assume that he was central to his failure and see himself as stupid, the consequence being a decrease in motivation to study for the next test. The "F" student might, however, say things like "the teacher was biased, " "I was unlucky, " or "I didn't study," in order to avoid making a dispositional attribute of "I'm stupid." He could then view his behavior as controllable and unstable, and be motivated for the next test.

ATTRIBUTIONS OF LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

Research has repeatedly shown that children with learning disabilities make different attributions of success and failure than their normally achieveing peers, and that these attributions may interfere with their classroom performance. Studies have suggested the following about academic achievement and self concept attributions of learning disabled students:

1. Students with learning disabilities are more likely to make external attributions for both success and failure than their non-disabled peers. Specificallv, they are less likely to attribute success to ability or internal, controllable, and stable factors and are more likely to attribute success to luck or external, uncontrollable and unstable factors.

2. Students with learning disabilities have lower global self concepts than non-disabled peers. This lowered self-concept was reported as early as grade three, and was found to remain stable through high school. Students with learning disabilities who were neither identified nor given special placement experienced lower academic self-concepts than those who were identified and specifically placed. Severely learning disabled students who received full-time special placement experienced increased academic self-concept, especially in reading.

SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Students with learning disabilities must he placed in situations where it is possible to experience academic success. The fact that 60% of illiterate adults are learning disabled is evidence of our present failure to educate this population. Early intervention is critical. As stated by Yale University professor Dr. Sally Shaywitz at a 1994 conference sponsored by NCLD in Washington, DC, "We can identify by age five which children will have difficulty learning to read and we know which teaching methods are most successful." Reading ability was chosen as a criterion for learning disability because eighty-five to ninety percent of school aged children with learning

disabilities manifest specific reading or language based disabilities. It is also assumed that an inability to read would make academic success in other academic classes difficult if not impossible. Mainstreaming students with learning disabilities does not improve self-concept, but appropriate special placement and support services increase self-concept. Most teachers are not qualified to teach learning disabled students. Therefore, these students should be grouped outside of the mainstream for academic classes where multisensory and proven teaching techniques can be used. Students should continue in these academic settings until their reading levels are commensurate with their intellectual potential, and attribution retraining should begin as soon as possible. Students with learning disabilities should be taught how to set realistic goals, develop plans to achieve these goals, monitor self-behavior, and accept responsibility for goal directed activities. After specific attribution for success and failure of learning disabled students should not differ from that of their normally achieving peers.

CONCLUSION

Learning disabled students who are unable to achieve academic success can become learned helpless in academic situations. Attribution for academic success and failure can contribute to learned helplessness. If these attributions guide behavior, the attributions must be changed if behavior is to change.