

ELIMINATING LEARNED HELPLESSNESS, DEPENDENCY, LOW SELF-ESTEEM, AND LOW ACHIEVEMENT

One of the most common tasks of anyone engaged in teaching young people is helping a student who is stuck during independent practice of a directed lesson. The giving of corrective feedback is so common and ordinary that it goes unnoticed in teacher training while rarely considered as a problem area in teaching methodology. The research is quite clear: helplessness, dependency, low self-esteem, low achievement, and most discipline problems are a direct result of the way a teacher gives individual help to a student who is stuck. With the best of intentions and doing what comes naturally to most - teachers, aides, tutors, and parents have been inadvertently reinforcing the exact behaviors they are trying to eliminate.

Based upon observations in real classrooms a teacher will spend five minutes helping a student "understand" the skills/concepts that the teacher just taught during the acquisition phase of a directed lesson. The kids that need help are the same kids (usually about 5 or 6) hour after hour and day after day, and it doesn't matter if it's kindergarten or twelfth grade - the ones that needed help when they were six will be the same ones when they're seventeen. How could something as simple as helping a student with good intentions foster such chronic underachievement?

To Get Noticed You Must Fail

Kids learn at a very early age that if you want attention from your parent you have to get "noticed". Not following directions, whining, and clinging are just a few of the techniques young children learn in order to get undivided attention. In school there's no parent -- but the teacher will do just fine! Clinging and whining may work in kindergarten and the primary grades, but as the students go through the upper grades they learn new "notice me" techniques. Following directions and working independently will not get you noticed in a class of 34 students. If you want to get noticed, first you have to fail. Raise your hand after a lesson and the teacher will have to come over to you (that's their job) and then say, "I

don't get this?" The teacher will then spend five minutes (maybe more) re-explaining the lesson one-on-one. For the students who have Ph.D's in adult manipulation raising your hand is minor league. Better to goof off and draw the teacher's attention, then when the teacher arrives to do discipline, side-track them with "But I don't get this!" - get to goof off and get individual attention too - can't beat a deal like this!

Learned Helplessness

If a teacher takes five minutes to help a student in a work period of 30 minutes, then he/she can help six students ($5 \times 6 = 30$) while the rest of the class gets no help. It is also conceivable that while the teacher is helping the first student the last student to get help could be working for 25 minutes incorrectly. For these students, waving their hands and waiting for a private lesson from the teacher is a way of life in the classroom. They will never learn to read or do math since the only time they're engaged is when the teacher is standing over them. As soon as the teacher leaves, they stop working. And what do these students do while waiting for help? They fall off-task and start to find other ways to entertain themselves. Now the teacher is drawn into doing discipline to keep order which takes time away from helping.

Increasing Helplessness: Give Me An Aide

When special funds are divvied out many teachers' first priority is to hire a classroom aide. With extra help, surely the most needy students will get the individual attention that will bring them up to grade level. This time-honored approach sounds like common sense - reduce the student-teacher ratio. An **untrained** aide, however, can be an educational disaster. In ten seconds an untrained aide can undo what has taken the teacher weeks to accomplish. As one teacher put it after going through training and getting her students to work independently, "When I came back from training in the use of the 'Positive Helping Interaction', it just so happened that my aide was ill on Tuesday which gave me a week to use the technique before she showed up on Thursday. I was helping a student when she entered the room. Twelve students immediately jumped out of their seats and ran up to the aide shouting 'I don't get this!', 'Can you help me!', 'I'm confused!'. Upon leaving, I heard one student say 'We like Mrs. Smith better than you.

She helps us. You don't help us anymore like you used to." Expect little thanks from students who are forced to grow up and work on their own.

The 20 Second Helping Interaction

If a teacher can cut the helping interaction to 20 seconds he/she can help the whole class while at the same time eliminating the "helpless" students (they won't want you if you're only going to stay for 20 seconds).

How do you help a student in 20 seconds? First, let's examine the TYPICAL WAY a helping interaction is performed:

Math: (Step 1)

T- "Sally, you need help?"

S- "I don't get this?"

T- "What part don't you get?"

S- "I don't get any of it!"

(Step 2)

T- "Let's see, you have a mistake in step two - where you forgot to bring down the 3. Watch me do it and I'll re-explain long division as I go along. Now you try it"

S- "Okay"

(Step 3)

T- "Good. Now let's do some practice ones together. . . oops, you forgot to multiply right here"

S- "Gosh, I hate math" etc., etc., etc.

Now, let's examine what went wrong:

Step 1) Message: *You again! Gosh, you're dumb!*

Step 2) Message: *Not only are you dumb, but I'm going to point out just how dumb you are. Then I'm going to fill your head with all 12 steps of long division which I know you can remember flawlessly .*

Step 3) Message: *Since I don't trust you to do this by yourself, I'm going*

to stand here and . . . oops, dumb again!

If the teacher is lucky, he/she should be done with Sally in 5-7 minutes - only to return after recess when Sally will again be stuck, this time, in creative writing.

The correct way to help a student who is stuck:

- 1) Tell them what they have done CORRECTLY - (Although you will always see what is wrong first- stop and take a breath- then focus on the last part of the problem that is correct)
- 2) Tell them the next STEP - (trying to re-explain all the steps causes cognitive overload)
- 3) Turn and LEAVE - (Staying signals "I don't trust you - you'll probably fail")

Let's help Sally again, the correct way:

(Step 1)

T- "Sally?"

S- "I don't get this!"

T- (after recognizing the error -relaxing breath- then focusing on the last step Sally did correctly) " I can see you've done step 3, multiplying 4×7 which is 28 correctly."

(Step 2)

T- "The next thing to do is bring down the 3 here. Do that and I'll come back to check it."

S- "Okay"

(Step 3) Walk away.

Done correctly, this helping interaction should take about 20 seconds (less as you become better at it - more depending on the prompt: "The next thing to do is . . . "(teacher judgment).

If a teacher is ever going to break a student's chronic helplessness cycle he/she has to stop "rewarding" the student with their body for five

minutes of undivided attention - better to come back five times for 20 seconds in a class period teaching one step at a time than standing over a student pointing out his/her failures and confusing them with "talk" that they're not going to remember anyway. Once the students see that there is no incentive (the teacher) for being helpless , that they can do the work on their own (one step at a time prompts), they are not failures ("You did _____ correctly") and are trusted to work on their own (walk away) they will give up their game of "notice me" and begin to become independent learners.
