
An Analysis of Troubled Youth: An Achievement Motivation Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the attribution of success and failure in five naturally occurring clusters of seventh grade students Popular Insiders, Ambitious Insiders, Outsiders, Alienated Disengaged, and Invisible Students. Participants included 217 seventh grade students accessed through a random selection of required English classes. Descriptive statistics and Analysis of Variance are used to discuss achievement attributions of each cluster. The authors take the position that school counsellors need to understand achievement related behaviour, because achievement is central to the mission of schools. Implications for school counsellors are discussed, with an emphasis on helping troubled youth (Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged).

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'attribution de succès ou d'échec dans cinq groupes d'étudiants de septième année qui se forment naturellement—les Initiés populaires, les Initiés ambitieux, les Non-initiés, les Détachés désaffectionnés et les Etudiants invisibles. Les participants comprenaient 217 étudiants de septième année sélectionnés au hasard dans des cours d'anglais obligatoires. La statistique descriptive et l'analyse de variance sont utilisées pour discuter des attributions de succès de chaque groupe. Les auteurs adoptent le point de vue selon lequel les conseillers d'orientation doivent comprendre le comportement lié au niveau de réussite des étudiants, parce que la mission des écoles est axée sur le succès. On étudie les implications pour les conseillers d'orientation, surtout par rapport à l'aide aux jeunes troublés (les Non-initiés et les Détachés désaffectionnés).

The adult culture in Junior High schools struggles with what appears to be a paradox. On the one hand, student achievement—particularly academic achievement—is considered highly important in schools. Yet at the same time the adult culture concedes that developmentally speaking, achievement may be a low priority for many junior high or middle school students (Brand, 1980). Put simply, some school counsellors and teachers may believe that “junior high school is a socially sanctioned holding tank between the industry of elementary school and the hoped-for motivational recovery of high school” (p. 150). The student viewpoint on achievement is undeniably different than the adult viewpoint, due to developmental task issues such as the importance of establishing peer relationships with both genders, developing emotional autonomy from authorities, and acquiring cognitive skills related to social development (Vernon, 1993). Most adolescents are only vaguely aware of the advantages offered to high achievers and the social and financial punishment applied to low achievers in adult society.

For many schools, student achievement is central to the mission, in part because of the outcry from political leaders and business and industry that youth lack basic academic skills and are not prepared to compete in a competitive world economy (Gerler, Hogan, & O'Rourke, 1990). Statements such as "Every student can learn and achieve mastery," are common components of school missions (Ubben & Hughes, 1987, pg. 89). Beyond behaviour and personal problems, teachers refer students to school counsellors to help students to achieve academic success. Yet, the student culture values affiliation motivation, defined as a need for social approval (McClelland, 1985), over achievement. Freeman (1994) found that both high-performing ninth grade student leaders and low-performing troubled youth had higher levels of affiliation motivation than achievement motivation.

Arguably, the broad task for school counsellors is to be central to the mission of schools by becoming experts in achievement motivation, while working within the conceptual framework of the adolescent. Looking at achievement from the student point of view can help school counsellors avoid faulty premises, such as the belief that a student who earns low grades is unmotivated. In fact, that very student may be highly motivated to affiliate and may have logical reasons (from an adolescent perspective) not to put forth excessive effort toward academic achievement.

The natural peer groups inside the school culture are important in understanding achievement. For example, a troubled student who spends time associating with a group of peers who do not value academic achievement, may risk social isolation if academic performance is improved. Troubled youth are of particular interest to the present study, because many troubled youth are low achievers. At least one quarter of the students in schools struggle with school attendance, low achievement, poor academic grades, retention in grade level, a lack of identification with school, rebellious attitudes toward authority, deficient language skills, and truancy (Wigtill, 1993). Troubled youth have more drug and alcohol problems (Mitzell, 1987; Salzman & Salzman, 1989), higher vandalism (Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), more negative attitudes toward school (Gallini & Powell, 1984), lower educational aspirations (Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), and lower levels of academic self-esteem (Payne & Payne, 1989).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to assist school counsellors in their understanding of achievement through an investigation of the ways in which seventh grade students attribute success and failure in school-related achievement. Attribution refers to the child's beliefs about the reasons

they succeed and fail. Bernard Weiner (1979) an attribution theorist, believes that students have their own answers to the question, "Why did I fail the test?" or "Why does Goerge not like me?" These answers (or attributions) are critical to understanding future behaviour of the student in similar situations. For example, if Lucy believes she failed the test because she is dumb and will always be dumb, then on the next test there is little reason to try.

Two research questions guided the study. 1) What are the natural social groupings of seventh grade students, using social system, family, and school-related variables? This research question serves as a preliminary step to establish a grouping variable within the social structure of the school. 2) How do the natural groupings of seventh grade students differ in the ways in which they attribute achievement success and failure?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Early adolescence is experienced by some as a period of storm, stress, and general upheaval due to developmental task issues such as the importance of establishing peer relationships with both genders, developing emotional autonomy from authorities, and acquiring cognitive skills related to social development (Vernon, 1993). Forehand (1990) reports 20% is a realistic estimate of the number of adolescents who experience major upheaval. With or without tumultuous upheaval, adolescents tend to display the characteristics described below.

One developmental description of early adolescence is found in the work of David Elkind (1969). Elkind proposes the concept of excessive egocentrism, similar to Harry Stack Sullivan's (1947) idea of the "delusion of uniqueness." Elkind's concept is that adolescents have a distorted perception because of a belief in an imaginary audience. The imaginary audience is a reference to the hypersensitivity of this age group to perceived attention, a form of intense self-consciousness. Another aspect of Elkind's conceptualization is the personal fable, a conviction that the self is very unique and individually special. A third premise is that early adolescents have (perhaps for the first time) an inward focus which is accompanied by a lack of outward awareness. These elements lead to the egocentric viewpoint characteristic of this developmental stage (Enright, Shukla, & Lapsley, 1979). Cognitive evolution, then, is a process of equilibrium and disequilibrium, which is marked by explosions of egocentricity.

Awareness of Ability. In interviewing a group of first graders, Stipek (1984) found almost all 96 children believed they were the smartest in their group. Similar to the Stipek findings, Nichols (1978) found that five to six year old students demonstrated a belief that effort, ability, and outcome covary in a simple way: greater effort equates to greater ability.

In a meta-analysis of 25 studies of children's causal attributions for achievement success and failure, Whitley and Frieze (1985) found that children in grades 1 to 7 attribute success to internal factors and failure to external factors. These results support the notion that elementary children believe that effort is rewarded with success.

Perhaps because of the intense self-scrutiny or egocentricity of the adolescent, in early adolescence the heavy weighting of effort over ability diminishes. Like a pendulum swinging too far in the other direction, adolescents become keenly aware of the intelligence or ability norm with their peer group. Stipek (1984) discusses the developmentally appropriate process of students becoming more accurate in their understanding of achievement attribution. A norm group by definition assumes that some will be above and some below average. Within their peer group, students know who is labeled bright and who is labeled dumb; they also know where they stand in the intelligence pecking order of their peers. Having been socialized to believe that meeting or exceeding the standard is preferable, those below the perceived average in their class are burdened with frustration and related self-perception problems. Marsh and Parker (1984) found that average ability children had higher academic self-concepts within the context of lower ability schools than average ability children in high achievement environments.

One of the levels of understanding important in the attribution of motivation is compensatory logic, an understanding that one motive attribution such as effort may be compensated for by another attribution, ability. The negative correlation between ability and effort (i.e. the more able the student the less effort is needed), is a compensatory concept which students do not understand until early adolescence (Harvey, Ickes, & Kid, 1981; Weiner & Peter, 1973). Further, understanding compensatory logic when called upon to do so does not necessarily translate into behaviour. Thus, students who perceive themselves to be of low ability do not necessarily compensate with high effort. Unlike the first grader, early adolescence is characterized by a belief that intelligence is stable; uninfluenced by enthusiasm for task or energy investment. The low effort student who succeeds is assumed to be brilliant by peers (Covington, 1984).

Attribution of Success and Failure. Bernard Weiner (1979) maintains that the key variables in attribution of success and failure are ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. If Lucy believes she failed the test because she is dumb and will always be dumb, then on the next test there is little reason to try. If Greg believes he succeeded only because the test was easy (a variable outside his control), then that success will not lead him to produce more effort next time, nor will it lead to positive feelings of pride. Weiner's theory suggests that high resultant achievers tend to

attribute their success to effort and ability (internal attributions) and their failures to bad luck or a temporary lack of effort. Conversely, low resultant achievers attribute their success to external factors outside their control, and their failures to low ability or difficulty of a task. It follows logically that failure in the high achievement person leads to the production of greater effort, because the failure was either a fluke or it was within their control (I chose not to study for the test). Though failure promotes more effort next time in high achievers, failure in the low achievers leads to giving up, because the failure is attributed to factors outside of the control of the student (lack of ability is outside my control). The child who consistently fails has a view of the world that his/her effort does not translate into success, so why try? Success is random, and occurs because of good luck or easy tasks, including having a kind teacher or an easy test. Failure, on the other hand, occurs because of lack of ability. Whereas effort is clearly understood as a major contributor to success by high resultant achievers, the connection between effort and success is minimal in the person with a pattern of low achievement. The high resultant achiever attributes success to ability and effort, attributes failure to lack of effort or luck, selects tasks of intermediate difficulty, and generally believes that outcome is determined by effort (Jones, Kahouse, Kelley, Nisbelt, Valins, & Weiner, 1972). Failure promotes less effort next time in low achievers, but failure promotes more effort next time in high achievers. It appears that "persons high in achievement motivation perceive effort as an important mediator of performance, regardless of success or failure, whereas persons low in achievement motivation appear less sensitive to this relationship" (Scapinello, 1988, p. 357).

While Weiner's theory has gained much support, a contradictory explanation of student motivational attributions is offered by Covington and Omelich (1979a). Covington's work, grounded in self-worth theory, posits that students low in achievement actually attribute failure not to lack of ability or task difficulty (as Weiner suggests) but to lack of effort. Failure based upon lack of effort is a means of protecting the student from the criticism of lack of ability. It's acceptable to fail, if you fail because you do not try. To try and then fail proves to your peers that you are of low intelligence. From a self-worth theory perspective, students are motivated to obtain and maintain a self-concept of high ability, since low ability is perceived by peers and others as a very negative trait. However, Covington and Omelich (1979b) view this tendency as a double-edged sword. To say, "I failed because I didn't try" may serve the purposes of self-protecting, but it brings upon the student the heavy weight of punishment from the educational system. In schools students who are perceived as having invested effort, even if they have low ability, are rewarded to a much greater extent than those who do not try.

METHOD

Participants

The participants for this study were 216 students enrolled in ten seventh grade regular English classes, a required course for all Junior High students in the population. The sample was selected from two Jr. High Schools in a western state, five classes from each school. Special Education sections of English and Honors English were not included. Excluding Special Education and Honors classes, all students needing seventh grade English were randomly assigned to sections of English by a computerized system. The researchers were attempting to select a representative sample of students at both schools. Two schools (rather than one) were used to create a more heterogeneous sample, relevant to socioeconomic. Parental and student permission were received from all participants. Five participants were removed from the study due to incomplete data, resulting in an n of 211. Ninety-nine of the participants were from school A and 112 were from school B. The participants represented a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. One hundred five females and 106 males were included in the study. Eighty-five percent of the participants were Caucasian, 14% were ethnic minorities, and 1% were unidentified. Ethnic minorities included African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American.

Instruments

A self-report instrument was used to classify the students into natural groups that occur in schools. School officials provided information regarding grades, absences, and discipline referrals, and the survey was used to gather additional information not available to school officials, thereby increasing the sophistication of the grouping variable. The self-report survey used was developed by Freeman (1994) for the purpose of determining natural groupings of 9th grade students. Social system and family related questions included socio-economic status (Nommay, 1988; Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), ethnicity (Pollack & Bempechat, 1989; Tanner, 1989), size of family (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Leflore, 1988; Mitzell, 1987; Nommay, 1988), birth order (Leflore, 1988; Nommay, 1988; White-Hicks, 1980; Zuckerman, 1981) level of education of mother (Gastright, 1987; Michigan Department of Education, 1990; Zuckerman, 1981), and mother's educational aspirations for child (Michigan Department of Education, 1990; Pollack & Bempechat, 1989). Other family variables included pressure from home to perform well in school (Payne & Payne, 1989; Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), and emotional support from parents (Leflore, 1988; Michigan Department of Education, 1990; Pollack & Bempechat, 1989; Nommay, 1988; Payne & Payne, 1989). The school related variables included

academic achievement (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Mitzell, 1987; Mueller, 1990; Stevens & Pihl, 1987; Troob, 1985), school absenteeism (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Hawkins, 1988; Michigan Department of Education, 1990; Mitzell, 1987), difficulty with authority figure and discipline problems (Hawkins, 1988; Mills, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988; Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), homework (Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), and drug and alcohol use (Mitzell, 1987; Salzman & Salzman, 1989). Other school related variables in the study were vandalism (Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), attitude toward school (Gallini & Powell, 1984; Mills, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988), educational aspirations (Pollack & Bempechat, 1989), popularity with peers (Mills, Dunham, & Alpert, 1988), and academic self-esteem (Payne & Payne, 1989; Richman, Brown, & Clark, 1987; Stevens & Pihl, 1987). The leadership questions included leadership positions, club and organizational membership and three questions regarding achievements and the use of free time.

The second tool used to measure the Weiner success and failure attributions was a self-report survey designed by Bleuer (1987). The survey has two parts, one for failure and one for success. Participants are asked to check the items that relate to the reasons they succeeded or failed in every subject area from the previous semester. The 12 items for success include 3 items attributing success to ability, 3 items attributing success to effort, three items attributing success to luck, and 3 items attributing success to task difficulty. The second part of the instrument is identical to the first half, except students are asked to rate the reasons they failed any subject matter from the previous semester. Failure was defined as earning a "D" or an "F" in the subject area. Again, for each subject area the students had 12 questions, 3 relating to each of the 4 attribution areas. An example of an effort item is "I didn't work very hard." "I'm not good at this subject" is one of the ability items, "Assignment was too hard" is a task difficulty item, and "I didn't like the teacher" is a luck item.

Administration was accomplished by the researchers during the 45-minute English classes. The first survey requires about 5 to 10 minutes and the second survey 20 minutes. Students were informed that the activity was voluntary and that all individual responses were confidential.

RESULTS

Attributions of Success and Failure Within Natural Groupings

A K-Means Cluster Analysis of the natural groupings of students was completed to address the first research question. Cluster Analysis is a multivariate procedure which develops a typological classification through the descriptions of simple structure, naturally occurring clusters (Bieber & Smith, 1986). No a priori expectations are necessary, and no assumptions are made about the nature of distribution of the data

(Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). The selection of the number of clusters was made on the basis of interpretability. (Since the K-Means procedure does not produce hierarchical clusters, the common heuristic procedures for determining the number of cluster do not apply.) Two through eight cluster solutions were considered. The five cluster solution was selected because of interpretability.

Descriptive statistics on the attributions for success and failure by cluster are reported, followed by analysis of variance (ANOVA) results of significant differences between clusters.

Popular Insiders

The 44 participants (21 females and 23 males) in cluster 1 were from high socio-economic, intact families (91% lived with two parents). There was one ethnic minority student in this group, and half of the students were from one or two child families. Over 50% of the students in the group were first or only children. The mother's levels of education of the students in cluster 1 ranged from four-year college degrees to a few with graduate degrees. The students in cluster 1 talk to their parents more than students in any other cluster, though they feel less external pressure to perform well in school than any other cluster, suggesting the possibility of flexibility and negotiation in the home. The self-perceptions of this group of students suggests a strong interest in social affiliations, with high participation in club memberships (average of four clubs) and a perception of higher popularity than any other cluster. In addition to high interest in affiliation, these students appear to be both interested and talented academically. They generally like school, have good grades, do more homework than any other group, have high academic self-esteem, and have high, though not the highest, aspirations for their educational futures. As an adjunct to the cluster variables on the questionnaire, all participants were asked the Adlerian magic wand question: "If you had a magic wand and could change something in your life, what would it be?" (Sweeney, 1989). The highest frequency response from the students in Cluster 1 was that they would make no changes. Because of the high interest in affiliation and the strong fit with the school environment, this cluster will be named "Popular Insiders."

On the attribution instrument 35 of the 44 Popular Insiders experienced no failure. Across all subject areas, Cluster 1 students reported that they experienced 95% success and 5% failure during the previous semester. Cluster 1 frequencies on success attribution show that 34% of the attributions for success were related to effort. Effort was followed by ability (24%), luck (23%) and Task difficulty (19%). Similarly, the Popular Insiders indicated that the predominant reason for failure was lack of effort (37%). Luck as a reason for failure was selected infrequently (11%); this is the lowest attribution of failure to luck of any group.

Ambitious Insiders

Cluster 2 is similar to Cluster 1 in that the nature of the variables suggests high interest in academics. There were 29 students in Cluster 2, 18 females and 11 males. Ninety percent of the group were from intact families with two parents, and 63% are only children or one of two children. Consistent with research on achievement by family position, over half of the students in this cluster are only and first children. Seven of the members were ethnic minorities. Ambitious Insiders were slightly different than Popular Insiders in that they were not from high socio-economic families (middle class and upper middle class), and their mother's had a lower level of education (many had taken some college classes). Cluster 2 members had slightly stronger ambitions than the Popular Insiders. School records indicate that Cluster 2 members had the highest grades of any group and the lowest absences—in some cases no absences. The participants reported the highest levels of educational aspirations of any group (all planned four-year college degrees and the majority planned to earn graduate degrees) and the highest level of parental aspirations for the child. The Ambitious Insiders had fewer club memberships than the Popular Insiders, but higher numbers of leadership activities, including school, civic, and church positions. As might be expected, Ambitious Insiders had the least discipline referrals of any group (26 of the 29 had no discipline referrals) and they report liking school more than any other group, a finding which is consistent with the low absenteeism. The highest frequency response to the Adlerian magic wand question from Ambitious Insiders was that they would like to improve their family situations. In reference to their apparent enjoyment of school and their self and parental high educational aspirations, Cluster 2 will be called, "Ambitious Insiders."

Across all subject areas the Ambitious Insiders, like the Popular Insiders, experienced 5% failure and 95% success. Twenty of the 29 in Group 2 experienced no failure in any subject areas. The highest frequency response for success attribution was effort (30%), followed by luck (25%), ability (24%) and Task Difficulty (21%). While the success attributions suggest less discrimination regarding attributions for success, the Ambitious Insiders attribute failure predominantly to lack of effort (47%). Internal factors account for 74% of failure attribution, indicating that the students in this cluster accept responsibility for their failures more than any other cluster.

Outsiders

There were 49 students in Cluster 3 (26 females and 23 males), including 13 ethnic minorities. The family income of the participants in Cluster 3 suggested that most are middle socio-economic status, with mothers who were high school drop-outs. The majority of the students in this cluster

were from families with 3 or more children. Cluster 3 findings suggest that from an academic and social affiliation perspective, the participants in this group were troubled youth. The students in Cluster 3 reported the lowest popularity with peers of any cluster. Similarly, they reported virtually no leadership activities, no club memberships, and they disliked school more than students in any other cluster. School records indicated low academic performance and fairly high absenteeism from this group. The highest response from students in cluster three to the Adlerian magic wand question was that they would like to be smart. Despite the apparent dislike for school, these students had few problems with authority figures and apparently did not act out in impulsive or disruptive ways. In reference to their dislike for school and their perception of low popularity, Cluster 3 will be named, "Outsiders."

On the attribution variables, the Outsiders reported succeeding less than the Insider groups, with 82% success and 18% failure. Twenty-five (51%) of the 49 students in this cluster indicated no failure, while 4 students indicated no success. Effort (32%) was the highest success attribution and luck (24%) was the second highest contributor to success. Failure was attributed first to effort (42%), followed by task difficulty (21%).

Alienated Disengaged

Cluster 4 contains 28 participants (15 females and 13 males), 3 of whom were ethnic minorities. This cluster is similar to the Outsiders in that both groups could be considered troubled, but the Alienated Disengaged students could well be described as more disconnected from school than the Outsiders group. Cluster 4 members had the lowest grades of any cluster, the highest absenteeism, and the highest number of discipline referrals. They indicated that they do less homework than any other group, and have lower educational aspirations than any other cluster. Students in this cluster indicated the lowest level of academic self-esteem of any group. The mother's level of educational aspiration for the students in Cluster 4 was lower than any other cluster. The family income of this group was the lowest of any group (lower socio-economic), and the mother's level of education was high school. The majority of the students in this group lived in households with one parent, usually the mother (60%). Sixty percent of the students lived in homes with 3 or more children, and the majority of the students in this group were middle or youngest children. The students in the group reported that they talk to their parent(s) less than students in any other cluster. In answer to the Adlerian magic wand question, students in Cluster 4 indicated that they would like to make their family circumstances better, including having alcoholic parents seek treatment, and the cessation of physical abuse in the home. Like the Outsiders, the students in this

cluster reported few if any club memberships and no leadership experiences. In reference to the high discipline referrals, high absenteeism, and low grades, this cluster will be named, "Alienated Disengaged."

While the majority of the students in clusters 1,2,3 and 5 had no failures, group 4 was a marked exception. Only 8 (28.6%) of the 28 students in the Alienated Disengaged reported no failures. Three of the 28 indicated no successes in any subject area. Alienated Disengaged students report 30% failure attributions and 70% success attributions, indicating more failure than any other group. Like the other clusters, the Alienated Disengaged attributed success predominantly to effort (29%), followed by Task Difficulty (25%), Luck (25%) and Ability (21%).

Invisible Students

The means of the variables for Cluster 5 indicate that these student are not recognized leaders, nor are they particularly troubled. Of the 61 students in the group, 25 are female and 36 are male, and 5 are ethnic minorities. The socio-economic results show that the average student in the group was middle class, but the group represents students from all socio-economic classes. Forty-eight percent of the students in this group were youngest children, and the average family size was 2.7 children. The typical student in this cluster liked school more than the two troubled youth clusters, but less than the insider clusters. The students in this cluster belonged to one or two clubs, planned to attend college, and had a mother who attended college. The Invisible Students earned reasonable (though not outstanding) grades, and reported having occasional problems with authority, but not to the extent of the Alienated Disengaged. In reference to the lack of evidence of academic or social leadership, and the lack of evidence of troubled or disengaged characteristics, this cluster will be labeled, "Invisible Students."

The attribution variables of the Invisible Students are similar to the other clusters in that effort was the highest attribution for success (33%). Sixteen percent of the total attributions were failure and 84% were success attributions, with 33 (54%) of the 61 students having had no failures. Cluster 5 had very little differentiation between success attributions for luck (23%), task difficulty (22%), and ability (22%). Failure was clearly attributed to lack of effort (37%), followed by lack of ability (24%), task difficulty (23%), and luck (16%).

In considering the frequencies of success and failure for the total sample, 121 (57.1%) of the 212 participants indicated no failure. Failure is defined as receiving a "D" or an "F" in any subject during the previous semester. While failure in one or two subject areas was common, failure in all subject areas was relatively uncommon, with only 5.2% (11 participants) failing all subjects during the previous semester. One overwhelm-

ing result of this study was that the attribution most commonly selected for both success and failure in every cluster was effort or lack of effort.

Analysis of Variance Results

Analysis of Variance was used to determine if there were significant differences between groups on success and failure attributions. ANOVAs were computed on each of the success and failure attributions, and 4 analyses were found to be significant at or beyond the .05 level. Scheffe multiple comparisons were computed on the 4 significant ANOVAs.

Significant differences at or beyond the .05 level were found between groups 1 and 4, and between groups 2 and 4 on the attribution of success to ability. Groups 1 and 2 (insider clusters) both attributed success to ability significantly more than cluster 4 (Alienated Disengaged). Significant differences were found between groups 1 and 4, and between groups 2 and 4 on success attributed to effort. The insider clusters both attributed success to effort to a greater degree than the Alienated Disengaged. The Ambitious Insiders and the Alienated Disengaged were significantly different on success attribution to luck, with the Ambitious Insiders having a higher success attribution to luck than Cluster 4. Significant differences were found between Clusters 1 and 4, and between Clusters 2 and 4 on failure attributed to effort. An examination of the means showed that the Insider clusters (1 and 2) were significantly lower on failure attribution to effort than the Alienated Disengaged. Within the perspective that all groups attributed failure more to lack of effort than any all attribution, Cluster 4 blamed failure on lack of effort more than any other cluster and statistically significantly more than the high resultant achievement clusters.

While not a central theme of this study, literature suggests the possibility of gender differences in the attribution of academic success and failure. To consider this possibility, ANOVAs were computed on each of the eight attribution variables by gender. There were 105 girls in the study and 106 boys. The results showed non-significant differences at the .05 level between boys and girls on six of the eight attribution variables. Boys were found to be significantly more likely to attribute failure to effort than girls (.05 level), and girls were significantly more likely to attribute success to effort than boys (.05 level).

DISCUSSION

The results of the attributions of failure and success within each cluster support both Weiner's and Covington's notions. Weiner maintains that high achievers attribute both success and failure to effort, allowing themselves maximum control over their academic outcomes. While all groups in this study attributed success and failure to effort, the two high resultant achievers clusters (Popular Insiders and Ambitious Insiders)

attributed success to effort significantly more than the low achiever clusters (Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged). Also consistent with Weiner's theory, the Alienated Disengaged attributed success to task difficulty more than any other group. It is likely that the high resultant achievers (insider clusters) have consistently received feedback from teachers and parents praising them for their achievements, and thus they are more accustomed to taking responsibility for their successes and viewing those successes as related to effort and ability. The Alienated Disengaged youth who had the lowest level of academic self-esteem, viewed themselves as poor students, and (according to school records) earn poor marks in school, ranked ability as the lowest attribution for success. This suggests that these troubled students do not see a connection between their innate ability and their successes. Perhaps because they have had fewer successes than the insider clusters, task difficulty is a more frequently used self-explanation for success than ability in the viewpoints of the students. Also, teachers tend to ascribe success of troubled youth to task difficulty and luck, and the Alienated Disengaged cluster had the lowest ratings on mother's educational aspirations for child in the cluster variables, suggesting that socialization (which works to the favour of both Insider groups) may in fact reinforce the notion that the Alienated Disengaged have little ability.

In support of Covington's theory, both the low achieving clusters (Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged) attributed failure more to lack of effort than the Popular Insiders and the Ambitious Insiders. Covington maintains that choosing not to put forth effort (thereby failing) is more desirable than being viewed as unintelligent by peers. Ability is a coveted trait, therefore, it is psychologically protective for low resultant achievers not to try, blaming their failures on lack of effort, rather than to put forth maximum effort and fail. Since the Alienated Disengaged reported that they do not try, their level of ability will remain virtually unknown. Consistent with this interpretation is the homework cluster variable results, which show that Cluster 4 students (by their self-report of number of hours per week) actually did put forth less effort in the way of homework than any other cluster.

The seventh grade students in this study show an understanding that effort and ability are not the same. Ability is bestowed upon some and denied to others. The sense that the participants understood ability to be distinctly different from effort was poignantly reinforced by the content analysis of the responses to the Adlerian magic wand question. Numerous students in the Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged clusters made comments such as, "I'd like to be smart," and "I want stop being so stupid" clearly suggesting that ability is a highly valued trait. This may also reflect Elkind's (1969) notion of intense self-consciousness of early adolescents to the peer group and his/her place within the peer group.

This is a troubling result, which conceptually might be thought to put the seventh grade student in a rather small box. An elementary student, such as the first graders who believed they were the smartest in the class, operate on the empowering assumption that if they try they will succeed. A mature adult understands that those with high ability may well succeed with less effort, but that an average intelligence person can work hard and succeed, thus transcending his/her level of ability. An average-intelligence adult may long for higher intelligence, but they are prepared to transcend their average ability by compensating with high effort. Unfortunately, transcending a trait requires higher levels of maturity and a longer range viewpoint than the typical seventh grade student possesses. The concrete and here-and-now world of the seventh grade student leads to an understanding of ability as a box, without the maturity and future-orientation to transcend the box. This might lead a low resultant achiever to see no reason to put forth effort, a discouraged position at best.

While clearly not all participants attribute success and failure alike, they appear to attribute failure more similarly than they attribute success. They appear (in general) to see failure first as lack of effort and second, as lack of ability. But the viewpoints on success are quite different. The two insider clusters knew why they succeeded. Like the highly successful Weiner adults, they believed effort and ability caused success. Feedback from parents and the school systems doubtlessly support and reinforce this viewpoint. The Outsider and Alienated Disengaged students appeared not to know why they succeeded. They did not succeed as much, so it could be hypothesized that there was a lack of experience with success. A more damaging interpretation is that it is a socialization outcome. Teacher attribution studies suggest that teachers attribute failure in high resultant achievers to bad luck or a faulty task, and attribute failure in low resultant achievers to lack of effort or lack of ability. Thus, the Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged youth may know why they failed, but have no clear sense of why they succeeded. With reinforcement from home and school that they don't have much ability, success attribution to ability is unlikely. Since putting forth maximum effort exposes the students to potential self-scrutiny (the double-edged sword) disengagement from the academic aspects of the school environment is one plausible result.

One result which is inconsistent with both Weiner and Covington's theories is the significantly higher attribution of success to luck by the Ambitious Insiders compared to the Alienated Disengaged. One possible explanation, based upon a direct examination of the specific items with high frequency responses for Cluster 2, is that the Ambitious Insiders are more connected with teachers than the Alienated Disengaged. The most frequently occurring luck response for the Ambitious Insiders was to the

luck attribution statement, "The teacher was good." Ambitious Insiders liked school more than any other cluster, and had less absenteeism. It could be hypothesized that these students like the teachers and therefore believe that the teachers are partially responsible for their successes. In contrast, Cluster 4 students very rarely selected the item, "The teacher was good," suggesting an alienation from the classroom environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELLORS

The Outsiders and the Alienated Disengaged students are the two groups most likely to come to the attention of the counsellor for achievement related concerns. Suggestions for school counsellors include the following:

First, successful students attribute failure primarily to lack of effort while Outsiders attribute it to task difficulty. Assisting the student to understand his/her system of attribution and to help the student make a realistic assessment of the importance of effort may be beneficial. Multiple opportunities exist in the school day for students to see the consequences of their own effort or lack thereof. Another possible intervention is to match peer tutors with Outsiders in such a way that the peer tutor helps the student to understand the importance of effort. Similarly, encouraging parents to point out to their children and to model examples of the effect of effort on achievement in their lives may be beneficial.

Secondly, high achievers attribute success to effort and ability while Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged don't know why they succeed. Assisting teachers to process success with troubled students at least as much as they process failure is beneficial in that the student needs to come to understand that success is within their control. Talk to low resultant achievers about how high achievers attribute their successes, for the purpose of helping them to understand their faulty thinking. With support from parents, help the student to clarify areas of success in their past, perhaps asking them to give examples of successes from their own lives outside school. Help the student to analyze and understand the reasons for these successes.

Thirdly, teachers attribute failure in high achievers to outside sources and failure in low achievers to lack of effort or lack of ability, a system which is prejudicial toward the high achiever and against the low achiever. Reframe failure attributions for teachers so that all students are seen equally. Assisting teachers by determining if the tasks are really too difficult for the Outsider is highly instrumental, in that tutoring, after school assistance from teachers, or testing for special education services may be possible outcomes. Otherwise, help teachers to understand that thinking of students as dumb and assuming that the successes of these students are accidents reinforces the achievement related problems.

Teacher attitudes are central to success in working with low achievers, and school counsellors are in a position to impact teacher attitudes.

Finally, seventh graders do not have the maturity to transcend the "box of ability." For those who perceive themselves to be of low ability compared to the norm group (Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged), the box may be detrimental to academic self-esteem, in essence becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In many cases the perception of the student that she/he has low ability may be faulty. In such cases, showing students their own scores on achievement tests may help them to understand that they have not been denied the magical gift of ability and, in fact, ability is not a black and white trait. Encourage parents and teachers to point out examples of transcending the rigid box of ability. Demonstrating cause and effect across time, can assist the students in working toward a longer-term viewpoint. Helping low ability students to transcend the box of ability may be best accomplished through the use of group work, with a heterogeneous composition of students in the group. The Outsiders may learn from the Insiders the importance of effort. Encourage teachers to build this supportive peer interaction through appropriate cooperative learning strategies in the classroom.

The most effective solutions to the achievement related issues facing Outsiders and Alienated Disengaged students may not be accessed by working directly on academic achievement. Building first upon the need for peer acceptance and affiliation, second upon assisting the student to correct faulty and self-defeating cognitive patterns, and third upon assisting teachers and parents to understand and work within the attribution system of the adolescent are more likely to produce increased achievement.

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