

LEARNING THROUGH POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

AND INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

A Teacher Inquiry Project

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by  
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## "Learning Through Positive Discipline and Intrinsic Motivation"

While slowly walking around the room, explaining the directions for our next assignment, I arrive at Kris's desk and quietly turn to him and whisper, "Meet me at my desk." He looks up at me and remarks, "I want to do this on my own."

"All-right, Kris!" "Good job." "Way to go, Kris!" ring out the students at his table. You would not have been able to tell whose smile was larger, as a feeling of accomplishment rushed over both Kris and me. As a third-grade teacher working with children and their special needs, this is what I had been trying to reinforce all year long: keeping my students motivated and willing to learn.

The beginning of the year started off with comments from my students with special needs such as, "I can't do that," "I don't know how," and "I need your help." This tone continued with every assignment that followed there after. They were keenly aware of the differences between themselves and their peers. My special needs students were all working below grade level in all areas and had difficulty expressing themselves. They remained quiet and would rather sit back and observe instead of participate. It was at this time, I realized I would have to find new strategies to help motivate my students and get them feeling more positive about learning and about themselves.

## Related Literature

Motivating children is a challenge. My students were extremely unmotivated at the beginning of the year. I had difficulty motivating my special needs students to do any work for me. Since they were identified special education, they were pulled out of my classroom every day for academic studies. When it came to general studies such as science, social studies, health or art, my students did minimal work for me. So, I decided to conduct an action research project on how the implementation of intrinsic incentives would effect the motivation of my students with special needs.

The term "special needs" is a broad phrase that encompasses many areas in the field of education. In my study the term special needs is referred to as "those children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations" (Bos, Schumm & Vaughn, 1997 p.32). This definition is found under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Public Law 94-142. With this law children are granted the least restrictive environment receiving special educational services that best meet their needs.

In order to assist in meeting the needs of my students, I wanted to increase student motivation. Research shows a positive classroom environment is beneficial to all involved (Mastropien & Scrugga, 1994). Therefore, I implemented positive discipline into my classroom and conducted class meetings in which children became active participants in their learning. I became the facilitator and guided my students in leading class discussions and routine activities. Research also indicates that empowering students to have an active role in the classroom leads to a deeper understanding and promotes inner motivation (Nelsen, Lott & Glenn, 1997). For this reason, positive reinforcement and intrinsic incentives became a way of life in my classroom. According to Mark Lepper, children who are intrinsically motivated to work do so "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes" (Lumsden, 1994). While many of my students were intrinsically motivated some had not yet come around. Education Specialist L.Tobin (1991) believes that children who do not feel they can accomplish a task tend to become good at covering up the skills they lack. He suggests that if you want to see a change, you need to make a change. It is

with this that I decided to facilitate my students' learning through positive discipline and intrinsic motivation. I wanted to provide my students with a positive learning environment where they felt comfortable and understood that anything is possible if you put your best effort forward.

Therefore, I decided to conduct my own classroom-based research to find out if intrinsic motivation works with special needs children.

### Purpose

Based on the my research, I was able to establish the question:

How will the implementation of intrinsic incentives effect the motivation of students with special needs in the classroom?

- a) Does student attitude improve?
- b) Will overall student behavior improve?
- c) Will student motivation increase?

### Methods and Procedures

The action research project I conducted took place in my third grade classroom at Travis Elementary, located in San Marcos, Texas. The student population at Travis Elementary is comprised of eighty-five percent of the school's low socioeconomic status. My classroom contained nineteen students, nine boys and ten girls. Of the nineteen students, six were considered "at-risk" and three were identified as special education.

I began my study by administering a questionnaire of the three targeted students identified special education in my classroom. The locus of control questionnaire is a motivational factor used to help in understand-

ing the behavior of some students. It focuses on the child's perceived sense of control over the outcome of an achievement situation (Butler-Por, 1987). I administered the questionnaire to each of my students, at the beginning in the middle and at the end of my study. The three data points collected from the questionnaire gave me an understanding of how my targeted students perceived themselves. Subsequently, I was able to chart whether or not the results showed any growth in their attitude and perception.

I kept track of the student's daily behavior using our campus behavior plan of card changes to graph overall student behavior. The card system works as a visual warning for children to help monitor their own behavior. Everyday students begin on green. Once they receive three warnings on any undesired behavior, they are asked to change their card to yellow. Blue follows yellow proceeded by red. When students reach red, they are given a consequence.

I also collected data from my three students Accelerated Reader (AR) reports to help track growth in student motivation (see Figure 2). Accelerated Reader is a reading program to help motivate students to read. Students choose a book at their reading level that they are interested in and then go to a computer, type in the title of the book, and take a test. Each book is worth a certain amount of points that the students can later redeem for a prize. Since my targeted students were reading at a first-grade level, I paired them up with another student during the forty-minute block of AR time we had each day.

Meanwhile, I would pull one student at a time to read with me and answer comprehension questions related to the book they were reading. Students signed up to read with me and every ten minutes students rotated. Once my targeted students peer-read and felt ready to test they would read to me before we both headed to the computer.

Classroom meetings became beneficial to observe attitude and perception changes as well as motivation. Class meetings took place three times a week for the last twenty-five minutes of the day. During our class meetings, we would all sit in a circle on the floor and give compliments and appreciations to each other. Then, we would move on to more pressing issues. My students would discuss agenda items as I sat back and observed faces and expressions. In the course of class meetings, we discussed how our attitudes effect not only ourselves but also one another. I tried to relate this to them with real-life situations. Once, I asked how they would feel if they went up to order food at McDonald's and the person taking their order was rude to them and

had a bad attitude. We talked a lot about attitudes and perceptions pertaining to real-life scenarios. By the end of the year, my students were able to come up with their own examples of real-life situations where attitudes and perceptions were concerned without my having to make suggestions. Alfie Kohn feels creating a caring environment gives children a sense of safety in which they feel free to ask for help (Brandt, 1995). I believe by conducting class meetings a positive classroom environment provided students with the confidence to speak up and become active participants.

### Analysis of Data and Findings

Observation is a powerful tool for learning more about children. Before I gave the locus of control questionnaire I could tell my students with special needs held low self-concepts of themselves just by observing them. From the data collected during my study, comparing questionnaire answers across time showed all three students increased in self-concept. Students attributed bad luck as being the cause of their low performing abilities: where the end results showed having learned to take control of their actions lead them to a more successful day.

I incorporated a classroom observational recording card on my targeted students. These were given at three data points during my study. I utilized these cards to keep an individual checklist on the progress of my students participation in class meetings. Through my analysis of the cards evidence in lack of confidence also became apparent during class meetings. At first, class meetings were new and unusual for everyone. Some students may have even felt uncomfortable sitting in a circle expressing their feelings in front of the whole class. Yet, once we all became accustomed to them, my students would plead for class meetings. Those students passing on their turn to give compliments at the beginning of the year, toward the end of the year would ask to be the first to share. One student, with a speech impairment, gained enough confidence after a few months to speak up and compliment the class as a whole. Students remained positive while developing communication skills. Class meetings stress the importance of respect not only for oneself but for others as well (Nelsen, Lott & Glenn, 1997). Building the foundation for a positive learning environment was taking place.

Card changes provided immediate feedback for my students. In analyzing my data I found that each child responded differently to the card system. While some like Kris had drastic ups and downs in behav-

ior, others such as Adam and Laura steadily changed over a period of time. From one month to the next, Kris dropped from having the most card changes of the three students to having none (see Figure 1).

Data collected from the Accelerated Reader Program showed considerable gains for Kris the second month with him jumping from zero tests to eight tests in a one month period (see Figure 2). As I analyzed the data, I noticed both Kris and Adam slowly started declining toward the end of the year. These were the two students reading at a first-grade level and reading was a constant struggle for them throughout the year. It was Laura that remained stable taking three to five tests a month. She was on grade level in reading it was her comprehension that kept her behind. She enjoyed reading and being able to read to me motivated her even more. I overheard her remark one day that she hoped time did not run out because she wanted to read me her favorite story.

### Conclusion

Analysis of data supported the conclusion that when children have a positive learning environment where they feel comfortable they become motivated and begin to grow academically, socially as well as emotionally. "What kids deserve is an engaging curriculum and a caring atmosphere so they can act on their natural desire to find out about stuff" (Brandt, 1995 p.14). I provided a positive, caring environment where my students, late in the year, demonstrated increased motivation in reading, and participation in class meetings. They were comfortable with their surroundings and were not afraid to ask for help. I feel children need positive role models to help guide them through the learning process. The environment I provided played an important role in motivating my students. While some found academics easy, some found academics a struggle. Children may need to work harder in one area than in another due to learning disabilities that have them performing below grade level. Results of my study indicate that children may not be aware that they are in control of whether or not they are successful. They are not taught that luck does not control you but you control your actions that lead to feeling lucky.

I found keeping motivated keeps things fun and interesting. My classroom as a whole learned to feed off each other. When they complimented one another they built a classroom community of learners. One of my goals for next year is to make sure that my students have their needs met and that I remain persistent in moti-

vating them to make the most out of life.

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