Attribution Theory and Education of Special Students

Motivational Psychology

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Each year, students are tested and placed to receive Special Education services. According to the Individual Disability Education Act (IDEA), students are to be served in the least restrictive environment. Once a student is placed in Special Education, a label is placed on that student identifying him or her as a special learner. Students diagnosed with a Specific Learning Disability have distinct strengths and weaknesses in their abilities, which are confirmed by comprehensive testing. Many students have a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, however, how they react or perceive this information is important in how the disability affects them. A diagnosis of a learning disability comes after a student has not made improvements in ability, even after interventions within the regular classroom and by specialists such as Title I services. This “Response to Intervention” must be documented before testing can be initiated with these students. Students must have documented failures to interventions for testing to even be initiated. These students have experienced failures long before they are diagnosed as learning disabled. It is how the student reacts or perceives his success and failures that determine motivation for later learning. After reviewing key components of the Attribution Theory, this paper will review different research information on the subject of special students and how their perceived successes and failures affect school motivation and academic success. It is this theory, it’s implications for special education students and what types of “attribution retraining” would be beneficial for these students that will be discussed within this paper.

Attribution Theory
Bernard Weiner discussed the theoretical beginning of The Attribution Theory of Motivation in an Educational Psychology article in 2010. It was within this article that he compared his theory of motivation with that of other well known leaders in what he called “Grand Theories” of motivation including his mentor John Atkinson.

Specifically, he discussed E.L. Thorndike’s “Law of Effect” which states that “behaviors previously rewarded will be repeated, whereas those that are punished will be avoided or extinguished.” In Weiner’s explanation of his theory, he takes this idea of a sequence of motivation and looks closer at rewards and punishments from prior events. However, he believes that “perceived causes of prior events, determines what will be done in the future.” He contends that it is the perceptions of the rewards or punishments that will determine the motivational consequences. (Weiner, 2010)

Atkinson’s theory of motivation is what initially influenced him in developing the Attribution Theory. Atkinson included three principals not shared by other theorists at that time. In his equation of Motivation X Expectancy X Value, the motive was a need for achievement, Value was pride in accomplishment, and Value was inversely related to expectancy of success, so pride is greater for a difficult task than an easier task. Weiner felt that this theory “was restricted in its predictions.”(Weiner, 2010)

Included in developing the theory was Julian Rotter’s idea of “locus of control,” as well as Fritz Heider’s, (whose ideas are not a theory of motivation,) about ability, effort, and task difficulty. These were the initial foundations for Weiner’s four main perceived causes of achievement outcomes. These are: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. (Weiner, 2010)
Ability and effort are internal to the person and difficulty and luck are external. Our successes or failures are related to whether we believe the cause originates within us or in the environment. Where does the person focus the “locus of control?” Weiner further classified failures and successes to stable and unstable causes. If a person believes that a cause is stable, then future occurrences are likely to be the same. However, if the cause is unstable, then there is a chance for change in the future. Lastly, Weiner identified causes as controllable and uncontrollable. A controllable cause has the ability for change. An uncontrollable cause is one that we believe we cannot change. (Vockell)

To summarize, Ability is an internal and stable factor of which a student does not have much control over changing an outcome. Effort is also internal, however is unstable because a learner has the ability to control the outcome. An example would be studying harder for a test. Luck is an external cause which is unstable. The student has little control over how lucky they might be on a given task. Task difficulty is also external and stable and is mostly not in the learner’s control. An example would be the student perceiving a test to be “hard,” therefore not in their control. (Vockell)

The Special Learner

How does Attribution Theory in action relate to the special learner? In Attribution Theory, perceptions play an important part of how a person is affected by their past experiences. Is there a way to break the cycle of negative perceptions? Is there a way to use Attribution Theory to encourage motivation in these students?
With the special learner we must look at how the student *perceives* his disability. Also, does the student *perceive* their disability as controllable or uncontrollable? When a student does well in an activity, do they attribute the success to ability and effort (internal) or task difficulty or luck (external.) Several studies have been conducted in this area.

There was a difference found in one study that concluded that younger students at the elementary level attributed their successes at school to both effort and their ability. This is a positive attribute, because these students link the cause of their success as something that they can control. They can study more, or differently, and they will see the results of their hard work. However, this study also found that older students felt that if the only thing they need to do is put in a little more effort, they must have high ability, but if they have to put in a lot of effort, they must have low ability. Because of these beliefs, these students would be less likely to sustain effort in their learning. (Stipek, 1993)

A research study titled “Attribution Patterns of Learning Disabled Adolescents,” studied general attribution patterns as well as attributions for success and failure. The study consisted of 35 junior-high school Learning Disabled and Non Learning Disabled students. The students were administered two instruments: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Scale (IAR). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale provides statements in first person singular and measure self-respect and perceived competence. The student would agree with self-affirming statements and disagree with self-derogatory statements to be judged as having high self-esteem. The second instrument, The Intellectual Achievement Responsibility Questionnaire is
comprised of 34 forced choice items. A positive or negative situation is presented and then two attributions must be chosen between. The choice is either between an internal or an external attribution. The “I score” indicates the number of times the student chooses an internal attribute and assumes responsibility for an achievement situation. (Tollefson, Tracy, Johnsen, Buenning, Farmer & Barke, 1982)

A task was developed for the LD sample. The students were given spelling words, five easy, five moderately difficult, and five difficult words. The words were randomized for each student. The students predicted the number of words they would spell correctly. After the students saw how they performed on the assessment they were asked different attributional questions with answers such as: “I am good at spelling,” “I am lucky,” “The spelling words were too hard,” or “I tried very hard to spell them correctly.” The students again were asked how many words they would get correct if they were to take the spelling test again. This measured the expectancy-of-success. This attribution task provided two types of scores. First, it gave an attribution score for easy, moderately difficult, and difficult words as well as the expectancy-of-success. (Tollefson, et. el., 1982)

This research found that responses to generalized questions showed no differences in responses between the two groups. The researchers believed that students gave socially desirable responses to general questions when asked about locus of control and self-esteem. (Tollefson, et. el., 1982)

This same study found that responses to a task-specific attribution measure, LD and non LD students differed on their responses. In analyzing responses students gave in response to a spelling task, LD students attributed success to stable external attribution
and failure was explained by their low ability, which is a stable, internal attribution. This study found that of participating LD students, as a group they did not accept responsibility for their success on the tasks. They did however attribute failure to internal locus of control, more exact, on a personal characteristic such as their ability. (Tollefson, et.el., 1982)

The expectancy-of- success data showed that the LD students had a pattern of decreasing predictions of success which “suggests an attitude of learned helplessness.” “Learned helplessness refers to the belief that achievement outcomes are outside the control of the individual and that, for this reason, exerting effort to succeed is pointless.” (Tollefson, et.el., 1982)

Further research on the Attribution Theory was conducted in 2008 titled: “Why do students think they fail? The relationship between attributions and academic self-perceptions.” LD, non LD, and average students participated in a study which compared maladaptive attributions of these three groups. (Banks and Woolfson, 2008)

There were fifty-three participants in this study. They were divided in two ways: by teacher opinion and by individual student opinion. Teachers classified students into three categories of academic achievement. Twenty seven students were considered average ability; twenty six students were low achievers, fifteen of which had been diagnosed as learning disabled. Students also rated themselves as high or low achievers. The student self-perceptions were collected marking their agreement with one of two statements such as:

“I think I am better than most people at doing my schoolwork.”

“I think I am not as good as most people at doing my schoolwork.”
Attribution measurements included a rating scale that students completed after tasks in which they would circle one of the following: agree a lot, agree a little, not sure, disagree a little, and disagree a lot. To a statement such as: “The reason I didn’t manage to solve any of the puzzles is something that will change.” (Banks and Woolfson, 2008)

A lower score of one would signify that the outcome is stable/controllable and a high score of five would indicate the outcome is stable/uncontrollable. Students were also given an open-ended question to obtain some qualitative data. The sentence that they were asked to complete was: “I didn’t manage to solve the puzzles because…” (Banks and Woolfson, 2008)

The choice of task was carefully considered so that performance from students with a learning disability would not be hindered. They chose to use Feather’s (1961) Perceptual Reasoning Test. The task was to trace four simple line drawings without picking up the pencil and without tracing any line more than once. The first two drawings were unsolvable, the last two were solvable. Participants would be given the first and second puzzle asking them to try to solve the problem at least ten times, or, if they felt they were “stuck” they could move on to the next puzzle. After attempting the first two puzzles with inevitable failure, the students were given the first open-ended question and the rating scales. The students were then given the last two puzzles which were solvable. This allowed the participants success before they left the testing area. (Banks and Woolfson, 2008)

The results of this study showed that the two groups of low achievers made more stable attributions than the students with average abilities. The LD students “appeared to feel they had less personal control over their outcome” than the other two groups. Student
self perceptions of achievement showed that self proclaimed lower achievers felt they had less control over their failure as compared to self proclaimed higher achievers. The difference was “highly significant.” Open ended questions were analyzed. They were classified into attributions of relating to learning difficulties, or to ability, effort, luck, or task difficulty. Only two classifications were needed for the collected responses. These were self attributions and task difficulty attributions. Difficulty of the task attribution was given most often (64.2%) and Self Attributions were given 35.8% of responses. There were no significant differences between any of the groups.

In the two studies that have been reviewed so far, there has high evidence that Learning Disabled students perceive their learning difficulties to be a stable cause for which they had no control over the outcome.

Banks and Woolfson, compared three different subgroups which added lower achieving students who had not been placed into special education. This enabled them to compare not only average functioning students, but also other lower achieving students. In this study the only “highly significant” finding was the comparison of self perceived low and high achievers in which the “low achieving” students felt they had little control over the outcome. This showed that students that saw themselves as low achievers, even if teachers did not see them this way, gave negative attributes for task completion.
Motivational strategies using Attribution Theory or Attribution Retraining

References


(Banks & Woolfson, 2008)


(Pflaum & Pascarella, 1982)


(Thomas & Pashley, 1982)

