Promoting Learning in Rural Schools

Psychological Insights for Rural Learning

An essential question in education is: Why does a student behave, specifically

learn, in a particular way? The behaviorist answer is that a student's behavior is

driven by external stimuli interacting with previously conditioned patterns of

response. Cognitive science expands this answer to include mental operations

by which the student perceives and processes information, making associations

colored by prior knowledge, attitudes, and sentiments. Theories of motivation

affirm that a student's willingness to take a course of action in pursuit of a goal

and persist in attaining the goal, depends upon the student's estimation of the

goal's value and his or her likelihood of success (Bandura, 1997; Brophy, 2004).

Social learning theory roots this motivational calculation in the student's self-

efficacy or the degree to which the student assumes that he or she possesses the

abilities necessary to success in a particular undertaking. Self-efficacy perception

is both general and specific; a student may possess general confidence in his or

her ability to learn but less confidence in a specific subject area, such as math-

ematics. Further, social learning theory holds that the student learns vicariously

through observation of other people's behavior as well as through the student's

direct experience and that the student actively alters the environment with which

he or she interacts.

Added considerations in student motivation to learn are talent and interest.

Talent is the demonstrated ability to master particular domains of activity, and

interest is the student's personal inclination toward particular domains of activ-

ity. Interest contributes to the student's assessment of the value of a goal, and

talent contributes to self-efficacy perception. When a student learns that a modi-

cum of initial talent can be mixed with a mountain of effort to produce superior

results, the perception of self-efficacy soars. Talent is redefined as substantial effort

Student Motivation and Self-Efficacy Perception

The strength of motivation can be measured by a person's willingness to

engage in an activity and to persist in it. When confronted with a challenge, a

person implicitly calculates the value of the ultimate accomplishment and the

likelihood of success. The likelihood of success is determined by an appraisal of

the difficulty of the task and the person's self-perception of his or her ability to

succeed. Consider a 16-year-old studying the Rules of the Road in order to pass

the written test to secure a driver's license. The high value the youngster places

on the outcome (a driver's license) may overshadow his or her perceived inad-

equacy in mastering the material.

Albert Bandura defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize

and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (1997,

p. 3). When a student

approaches a new learn-

ing task, the student's

perception of his or her

ability to successfully

complete the task bears

on the motivation to

attempt and persist in

the task. Self-efficacy influences academic motivation, learning, and achievement

(Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). A student's self-efficacy

perception, the anticipation of success, is derived from the student's assessment

of his or her own level of skill and the relative challenge of the task at hand (Csik-

szentmihalyi, 1990, 1993). When perceived skill is high and the challenge low, the

student is bored and may exhibit half-hearted effort. When perceived skill is low

and the challenge high, the student becomes anxious and prone to avoid the task.

The job of the teacher is to set learning tasks that are sufficiently challenging for

the student while within the reach of the student's abilities. The skillful teacher

heightens the student's interest in the task to increase the value the student

places on the outcome and the student's perception of likely success. This is the

essence of effective instruction—planning learning tasks for each student that are

appropriate to that student's demonstrated prior knowledge and provided in an

instructional mode that heightens the student's interest, value for the result, and

perception of likely success.

A teacher can increase students' perception of self-efficacy, thus elevating the

students' effort, persistence, and ultimate level of performance by: (1) encour-

aging students to set goals that are specific, challenging, but attainable, (2)

modeling effective responses to tasks, (3) providing feedback that encourages

students to stay on course until mastery is achieved, and (4) making attributional

statements that help students understand and appreciate that they are improv-

ing their own abilities by accepting challenges and maintaining effort (Bandura,

1997; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000).

Motivation to learn for the satisfaction of mastery

can be enhanced when the teacher models an enthu-

siasm for learning and for the specific topic, presents

material clearly, interacts with the students, and

directly teaches the content.