Responsibility in the Classroom: A Synthesis of Research on Teaching Self-Control

Students can learn to take responsibility for their own behavior.

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It is a common perception that students receive less guidance today from home, church, and community than they did in the past. Regardless of its truth, this idea has contributed to increased expectations for the socialization role the public schools should play. Through socialization, children acquire the work and social skills that enable them to function effectively in the classroom, and, later, in the work place. Unfortunately, however, not much is known about the socialization process as it unfolds in school. For the past two years, we have been studying the role teachers play in this process, and it is clear that teachers see two key aspects of socialization—fostering work and social responsibility—as important educational goals.

What Is Responsibility in the Classroom?

Responsibility is a complex concept involving a number of related issues, such as accountability and control, which psychologists have thought about and studied for some time. Skinner (1971), for example, maintains that individuals are held accountable for what they do (that is, praised or blamed) *only* if there is no obvious external factor controlling the behavior. Perception of control is an important factor in responding to one's own behavior as well. Individuals who feel in control are much more willing to accept responsibility for their own behavior. In the classroom, responsible behavior involves self-regulation and self-control by students. Students behave appropriately in large part because they have internalized standards of conduct and know how to meet those standards.

Responsibility has both visible components (behavior) and invisible components (cognition, affect, and attitude). We have chosen to emphasize the cognitive components (beliefs, knowledge, and strategies) because we believe that they distinguish truly self-regulated, responsible behavior from behavior that is more dependent on external cues and consequences. One can behave appropriately without behaving responsibly. For example, students may persist in finishing tasks without distracting others because they want to earn points for free time, or because they believe it is important to complete a job. The latter reasoning reflects a sense of responsibility, but the behavior looks the same in either case.

In classrooms, responsibility has two

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major components: individual work responsibility (doing one's work independently and staying on task), and social responsibility (sharing resources fairly and interacting with others in a socially positive manner). These two components reflect the dual nature of the student role.

The existing research does not address all forms of student responsibility; in fact, most of it has focused on the self-control of attention and on-task behavior, reflecting individual work responsibility, and on dealing with conflict with peers, reflecting social responsibility. In addition, many of the studies were done in laboratory settings, not classrooms, although several involved students who were having problems in the classroom. Despite these limitations, the research reviewed here suggests that teachers can influence children's thinking in ways that will support the development of greater self-control and thus greater responsibility for themselves.

Perceptions of Self-Control

Despite the adage "nothing succeeds like success," recent psychological research suggests that for students, the effect of success on later performance depends on students' understanding of why they succeeded (or failed) and whether they had control over the outcome.

There have been several theoretical approaches to the study of perceptions of control. In most cases, students with a stronger sense of personal control over outcomes are higher achievers who accept more responsibility for their achievement (Stipek and Weisz, 1981). Harter and Connell (1981) determined that students' understanding of the sources of control (either external or internal) was important in determining achievement, self-concept, and a sense of intrinsic motivation. In a study of task persistence, Andrews and Debus (1978) found that more persistent students explained their failures as resulting from a lack of effort—something they could control—rather than a lack of ability or the difficulty of the task.

This last finding illustrates attribution theory (Weiner, 1979), which provides several useful concepts for examining students' sense of control as it varies across situations, rather than viewing it as a general personality trait that resists change.

According to Weiner (1979), four explanations are commonly given for success and failure: ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty. Depending on whether we succeed or fail, these differing explanations will affect how much we expect to succeed at similar tasks in the future, and our expectations will, in turn, affect the effort we are willing to expend. The most important implication of this theory for student responsibility is that attributing success or failure to *effort* is likely to lead to further effort in the future. Attributing performance to personal effort implies that the student feels internal control over the outcome and expects to succeed in similar future situations if enough effort is expended. But when success or failure is attributed to ability, luck, or task difficulty, students are less likely to feel control over the outcomes of tasks and will expect greater effort in the future to make little difference.

While most of the attribution research has been concerned with academic situations, recent work has also examined interpersonal problem-solving situations. For example, Goetz and Dweck (1980) determined that the children least able to cope with social rejection were those who emphasized personal incompetence as its cause, as opposed to effort or misunderstanding that can be overcome with effort.

In both work and social skills, therefore, it is more desirable for students to learn to attribute their performance to their own effort, rather than to causes they cannot control. There are, however, vast individual differences among students in the degree to which they attribute past outcomes to effort, and therefore the degree to which they assume responsibility and exert effort on similar tasks. In several studies, researchers have attempted "attribution retraining" with children who do not feel a sense of responsibility or control. The goal in all cases was to increase the number of times children attributed their successes and failures to their own efforts. In some cases, persistence on tasks was also assessed.

These studies involved children in upper elementary and junior high grades, and one involved students in a special education facility. The methods included ample reinforcement of spontaneous effort attributions (Andrews and Debus, 1978); statements by experimenters that "you tried" following success or "you should have tried harder" following failure (Dweck, 1975; Rhodes, 1977; Chapin and Dyck, 1976); and teaching the student to repeat such statements following success and failure (Fowler and Peterson, 1981; Reiher and Dembo, 1981). In all of these studies, at least some of the desired effects were achieved.

Because these studies were conducted in laboratory settings, their findings do not necessarily apply to the classroom; but many of the studies did use school-like tasks, such as persistence in spelling words (Reiher and Dembo, 1981) or math problems (Dweck, 1975). Further, while attribution retraining has not been tried in the social domain, there is no reason to think that it will not contribute to this aspect of socialization as well.

Applications and Limitations in the Classroom

There is an appealing logic to the argument that we should encourage students to attribute outcomes to effort. Many of the techniques described in these studies are relatively easy for teachers to adapt and use, such as modeling statements about trying hard, emphasizing to students the importance of effort, pointing out to them the relationship between their own efforts and outcomes, praising students for articulating similar statements, and suggesting that they deliberately make such statements to themselves following successes or failures.

Despite the appeal of the argument and the ease of the techniques, there are two important limitations to this research. The first is that students' general cognitive development will affect their understanding of self-control. Very young children (under seven) do not have a clear understanding of the cause-and-effect relationship between effort and outcome (Nicholls, 1978). Children in the early primary grades usually believe that conduct and work habits are determined by both ability and effort, which they cannot distinguish. This superficial appraisal may make them less likely to recognize when true mental effort is being made in the learning process (Blumenfeld and others, 1981; Stipek, 1981). Such work suggests that young students will not benefit from extensive attributional retraining. Moreover, there is an added developmental problem in the social domain, according to Harter (1982). Young children do not think about the social domain in quite the same way as they do the

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cognitive and physical domains: they do not view it as a *skill* domain where effort at applying skills could make a difference.

The second important limitation is that attributing success or failure to effort is not always reasonable if tasks are too difficult. Indeed, emphasizing the role of effort and self-control in the classroom when students were working at tasks beyond their abilities can only increase their frustration and loss of self-esteem and inhibit their responsible behavior (King, 1981; Anderson, in press). Attributions for success and failure become important only when one possesses the necessary skills but is not making sufficient effort to apply those skills.

Skills and Strategies for Self-Control

Patterson (1981) states that young children (and, presumably, less skilled children at any age) are often unfamiliar with strategies for controlling their own behavior. Although some students spontaneously develop the necessary knowledge to control themselves, others do not and must be taught methods of self-control. Patterson reviews research in this area and concludes that when children have been taught self-control successfully, it is because they have been taught some way of thinking differently about the situation.

Research in this area can be organized according to three primary approaches: monitoring one's own behavior, intervention through self-talk, and learning to apply a problem-solving routine.

Self-Monitoring. Part of knowing how to control one's behavior is knowing when it meets standards of appropriateness and when it does not. If students do not know how to assess their behavior, they cannot responsibly control it. In several classroom-based studies, students were taught to monitor their behavior and indicate on a form whether or not they were behaving appropriately when signals were given at random intervals. In most cases, the rate of appropriate behavior increased significantly as a result of students' self-evaluation. This was true whether or not the students' records were compared to those of an observer or the teacher, and it was true whether or not the records were tied to a reward (Glynn and Thomas, 1974; Glynn, Thomas, and Shee, 1973; McLaughlin and Gnagey, 1981; O'Leary and Dubey, 1979; Roberts and Nelson, in press; Rosenbaum and Drabman 1979; and Sagotsky, Patterson, and Lepper, 1978). These studies were performed across several grade levels and one (McLaughlin and Gnagey, 1981) included special education students.

The study by Glynn and Thomas (1974) demonstrates the importance of clear standards if a self-monitoring program is to be effective. They introduced such a system in a classroom where the teacher often interrupted the students during seatwork but was unclear about when they were to resume their seatwork rather than continuing to pay attention to him. Only after a simple cueing system was established did self-monitoring actually help the students. The cueing system required the teacher to flip a card to indicate whether appropriate behavior was watching the teacher and refraining from writing, or doing the work on one's desk. With this clarification, students were able to use the self-monitoring system with good results. This suggests that the teacher's role in making the classroom environment predictable and the standards clear is critical if students are to learn to control their own behavior.

Self-Talk for Self-Control. It is commonly but mistakenly assumed that talking to oneself is a sign of instability. We all do it at times, especially when acute concentration is required. In such cases, we are spontaneously using a technique that has been applied in several intervention studies in which children have been taught to talk to themselves as a way of focusing attention and guiding behavior.

Meichenbaum (1977) developed a general self-talk procedure that has been successfully applied in several studies. In this procedure, an adult models how to perform a task while talking aloud about the steps required. The content of the self-talk represents a detailed, step-by-step analysis of the task. The child first performs the task while an adult speaks the directions, then performs the task while saying the directions aloud. Gradually, the child is taught to whisper and then to think the directions silently.

Many studies at several grade levels (including preschool and college) have used self-talk techniques (reviewed in Meichenbaum, 1977; Mischel and Patterson, 1978; and Pressley, 1979). Unlike the self-monitoring studies, most of these studies were done in the labora-

tory, not the classroom, and often involved novel tasks that would not be performed in the classroom. Success with these techniques in other applied settings (especially clinical settings), however, suggests that they could be adapted and used successfully in the classroom as well. Indeed, a commercial program called "Think Aloud" (Bash and Camp, 1981) has developed specific lesson plans and activities for teaching children self-talk strategies to be used in the classroom.

Routines for Problem Solving. There are more and less effective ways of handling problems, in both the work and the social areas, and these ways can be defined as routines, or sequences of skills that involve both thought and action. In general, effective problem solving involves: (1) the ability to recognize and admit that a problem exists; (2) the ability to generate a number of alternative solutions to the problem and to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each; and (3) the ability to take action. This last step also has an important cognitive component, which has been characterized by Spivak, Platt, and Shure (1976) as "means-ends thinking." Means-ends thinking involves the ability to plan a series of actions that move one toward a specific goal, taking into account potential obstacles and a realistic time frame.

To date, most of the research on problem-solving skills has been done in the social area. This research suggests that children who are better social problem solvers accept more responsibility for their social behavior and are rated higher by teachers in terms of their social adjustment (Spivak, Platt, and Shure, 1976).

A number of studies have demonstrated that it is possible to train children to use social problem-solving techniques (Urbain and Kendall, 1980). For example, Zahavi and Asher (1978) instructed aggressive nursery school children in the use of "alternative thinking" in interpersonal problem situations, and the children subsequently showed less aggressive behavior than did children who had not been so instructed. Training studies of this sort also show that when children's social problem-solving ability is enhanced, their sense of being "in control" in social situations is also enhanced (Spivak, Platt, and Shure, 1976).

Conclusion

There is general agreement that increasing students' responsibility is desirable, but there are many questions about how to accomplish that goal. These questions often revolve around assignment of responsibility for student behavior to either the teacher, who controls by manipulating consequences, or the student, who exerts internal control. It is often assumed that the major issue is how much responsibility should be "given" to students through more choices and accountability.

Although opportunities to exert responsibility are an important factor to consider, this review suggests that teachers can do more than "give away" responsibility in order to encourage it. They can also help students change their perceptions of control and their cognitive strategies for exerting it. "Giving" responsibility to students without providing this kind of instruction will lead many students to fail. In short, teachers must first accept responsibility before they can ask students to accept it.□

Highlights from Research on Teaching Self-Control

Adults can help students become more responsible by teaching them new ways of thinking about self-control. The research summarized here suggests that:

- If students do not feel a sense of control over the outcomes of their actions, they will not exert much effort or assume much responsibility for what they do.
- It is not enough for students to simply believe they can exert control, however. They must also have the right skills—such as talking themselves through a task, monitoring their own behavior, and learning problem-solving routines.
- When students attribute their success (or failure) on a particular task to the amount of personal effort they put into the task, they are more likely to try harder in similar situations in the future.
- Children who believe their own incompetence—rather than effort—is the cause of social rejection have a hard time coping with that rejection.
- Many students can be taught to attribute their success or failure at a task to effort, instead of to luck, ability, or the difficulty of the task. Very young children, however, cannot distinguish between effort and ability.

Resource Information Service (RIS) provides ASCD members access to research and sources of information on selected topics. The information is available through RIS-sponsored research syntheses, the RIS column in *Update*, and the quarterly publication *Curriculum Update*.

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