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LEARNER OPTIONS AND DECISION MAKING TO ENHANCE MOTIVATION AND LEARNING

If Maria dreams of being a musician and wants to spend time learning more about music, is this an option? If David's great passion is collecting baseball cards and memorizing facts and statistics about the game, can his program include a project focusing on baseball? James is curious about electronics, but he doesn't want to take a standard electric shop course because making buzzers and one-tube radios seems pretty far removed from television and computers. Can he have time to explore the topic in ways that uniquely interest him?

And if Maria, David, and James are allowed to pursue such content, what outcomes (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) and what level of competence (budding awareness -- moderate levels of mastery) should be expected from their activity?

Content and Outcome Options

From a motivational perspective, the answers to such questions are reasonably clear. Learners should be able to explore content that has personal value. In the process, they should be helped to pursue outcomes and levels of competence that reflect their continuing interest and effort (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Stipeck, 1988).

Most individuals will find personal reasons for acquiring basic skills and information while exploring intrinsically valued content. For example, the more James pursues his interest in electronics, the more he will discover that he needs to improve his reading and math skills. Thus, his ongoing exploration of electronics can indirectly lead to a personal desire to improve math and reading as he comes to view these skills as a means to his ends -- rather than as something everyone else wants him to do.

There are three ways in which classroom content and outcomes can be readily expanded to provide a broad range of interesting options. The first involves expanding options to include a wide sampling of topics that are currently popular with the majority of the students (see Feature 1). The second way involves asking students, especially those who still think there are too few positive options, to identify additional topics they would like to have included. Third, there are options the teacher identifies as important and worthwhile, which hopefully can be introduced in ways that expand student interests.

The more severe the student's learning problem, the more that variations from established content and outcomes can be argued as worth offering to mobilize and maintain the student's motivation. Indeed, with a severe motivation problem, it may be necessary to include options not usually offered to such students (e.g., auto mechanics, video production, photography, work experiences).

Even more controversial may be the necessity to allow such students to "opt out" of certain content courses (e.g., reading, math) for a while. This occurs most frequently with students whose failures have led them to strongly avoid particular subjects.

Along with strong dislikes, students with motivation problems often have an area of strong interest that can be made the focus of their program. The intent in doing so is to allow a youngster to explore some intriguing area in depth and in ways that uniquely interest him or her.

Actually, such a comprehensive discovery oriented project can be a useful option when any student wants to learn a great deal more about a topic. Projects give an intrinsic sense of form, direction, and immediacy to learning. (Any of the examples in Feature 1 may be undertaken as a project.)

Moreover, in pursuing comprehensive projects, students not only can discover more about a specific content area, they can also rediscover the personal value of improving reading, language, and other basic skills. After all, what makes certain skills "basic" is that they are necessary for pursuing many interests and tasks in daily living. When students come to understand this, they often develop a renewed interest in learning such basic skills.

Feature 1**: Popular Content Options**

The following topics have been extremely popular with the majority of students with whom we work. Although the topic may be one that is regularly taught in schools, the reference here is not to a set curriculum. Students usually are interested in how a topic relates to the world as they know it, or they are intrigued with some exotic subtopic. They do not want to pursue a set curriculum.

- Animals – care, training, and breeding; incubating chickens; learning about prehistoric and exotic animals and about those who live in special climates
- Arts and crafts – expressive drawing and painting, constructing and building, exploring the work of others
- Career and vocation – adolescents, in particular, often want presentations about opportunities to observe jobs that may be worth pursuing
- Computers – basic uses, graphics, language and logic
- Consumer activity – comparing prices, learning about false advertising and advertise gimmicks, learning how to find a particular product
- Cooking to eat and sell – food planning, purchasing, and preparation keyed to specific interests of the students involved
- Creative writing – fiction and poetry
- Cultures of other peoples – comparing the way one lives with how others live (e.g., rituals, beliefs, music, food, dress, art, education)
- Design – graphics, drafting, architecture, construction
- Drama – writing plays; acting, staging performances; observing and criticizing TV, film, and stage productions; learning more about favorite people and current trends in theater, film, and TV
- Driving – most teens have a strong interest in preparing for driving
- Health and safety – first aid, CPR, personal care, sex education
- History – specific events such as invention of the automobile, space exploration, World War II; the background to a current event, such as the turmoil in the Mideast
- Math puzzles and measurement – number and graph puzzlers; how to handle one's money; how to keep records on material related to one's hobby; how to measure in pursuing a particular interest, such as model building, wood construction, cooking, sewing, computers, video; how to compare sizes and weights; creative activities using math
- Motor trends – almost everything related to cars and motorcycles has proved to be of interest to one student or another
- Music – learning to play an instrument or sing, reading music, composing, learning more about favorite people and trends, reviewing and critiquing
- Newspaper and yearbook publication – all facets of planning, preparing, and distributing publications
- Photography – camera operations, picture composition, darkroom skills, creating interesting effects, displays
- Private enterprise/running a business – establishing and running a small business for profit at school, such as a small food service or offering for sale products that are made on the premises
- Psychology – learning more about the views of others in one's immediate environment, understanding why specific individuals and groups behave as they do
- Science – underwater creatures and plants, especially those that can be seen by scuba diving; electricity, especially as used in everyday life; chemical reactions; personal anatomy and biology; current events in science and medicine
- Space – other planets, space travel, constructing and flying rockets
- Sports – learning more about the present and past of favorite personalities, events, and equipment; learning to coach or referee
- Travel – learning what's interesting to visit locally and what's worth seeing in other countries, planning and taking trips, learning to use public transportation; learning about travel aids and skills such as map reading
- Video – writing, producing, acting, directing, camera work, editing
- Work experience – some students want to include work experience as part of their school program in order to earn needed money or to feel a sense of competence

A major concern in expanding options is that additional materials usually are needed. This concern can be minimized by asking those interested in the option to help gather the desired materials. (When topics are popular, several class members usually can be mobilized.)

In general, the many options illustrated here suggest that rather than going "back to basics" it may be better to go "forward to basics" by enabling students to rediscover intrinsic reasons for learning such skills. While we're discussing the matter, we also should reemphasize that there has been a broadening of current views about what is and isn't a basic skill. There is more to coping with everyday situations than having competence to use the three Rs. Another prominent set of basic skills that students need, for instance, is the ability to interact positively in social situations.

Calls for "back to basics" underscore the fact that there is always a conflict between required curriculum content and topics that have contemporary interest and are popular. From a motivational perspective, it would be nice if a way were found to achieve some sort of satisfactory balance. This might result in a decrease in time devoted to the established curriculum but, hopefully, also would increase positive attitudes toward learning and school. Even if such a balance seems unnecessary for most students, it does appear justified in cases of learning problems, since the established curriculum has proved not to be effective.

Process and Structure Options

Content, of course, interacts with processes. An exciting presentation can make a topic really come to life. As with content and outcomes, there are three ways in which process options can be readily expanded -- by adding procedures that are widely popular, by adding those of special interest to specific students, or by adding those newly identified by the teacher.

Again, we stress that students who have learning problems will have had negative experiences with a variety of instructional processes. Therefore, it is necessary to show them there are good alternatives to the procedures that led to their failures. For example, in pursuing projects, students with reading problems cannot be expected initially to rely heavily on reading. Visual- or audiovisual-oriented material, such as picture books and magazines, films and filmstrips, records, videotapes and audiotapes, field trips, teacher and other student presentations -- all can be used. Products can include some written and some dictated material, along with artwork (drawings, graphs, model constructions, photographs, collages) and oral presentations.

James, for example, failed a seventh-grade social studies class and was scheduled to repeat it. The curriculum content for the course consists of specific historical, political, and cultural events and some basic geography. At the end of the course, students are expected at least to be able to identify the events and geographical features covered and to use source materials (atlas, almanac, encyclopedia, card catalogue) for finding additional historical and geographical material. More ambitiously, the intent is to equip students with the knowledge to analyze and discuss significant past events and relate them to life today.

The class James failed used primarily the following procedures:

- Each week the teacher assigned a chapter to be read and questions to be answered and turned in; then, there was a multiple choice, true-false test on the material at the end of the week.
- In class each day, the teacher spoke about the material covered in the text and had the students take turns sharing their answers to the assigned questions. Once a week they practiced looking up assigned material in atlases, almanacs, etc. Once a month they went to the library to learn how to use its resources.
- During the year, each student was to present four current events to the class on topics relevant to the material being discussed.
- Three times during the school year, films were shown.
- Students who wanted extra credit could do a special term paper chosen from a list of topics the teacher had prepared or could choose three books from a prepared list and do reports on them.
- Grades were based primarily on test scores and extra credit work. However, grades were lowered when current event presentations or answers to the assigned reading questions were poor.
- When students, such as James, were found to be having difficulty, the teacher recommended that the parents spend more time helping with homework or find a tutor.

Because James failed the class, it seems reasonable to consider the procedures as not a good match for him. Indeed, if in repeating the course he was confronted with the same processes, it would not be surprising if his behavior reflected a good deal of avoidance motivation. What would a set of alternative procedures look like? An example is provided in Feature 2 (also see Feature 3).

Feature 2 : **Offering Alternative Processes for the Same Content**

A teacher using a topic exploration approach might proceed as follows:

- Rather than assign material, the teacher prepares ten varied topics covering the course content. He also identifies a long list of activities for pursuing such topics, each of which includes use of the desired basic research skills.

- At the beginning of the course, the teacher uses the first few classes to explain the ten varied topics and to help the students explore and choose from them.

He explains that each student can choose one or more topics and can choose from among a wide range of activities in learning about a topic. He also notes that each student can choose to work on a topic alone or in a small group. To help students get a good idea of the choices, he uses pictorial aids, an overhead projector, and filmstrips. The bulletin boards contain a variety of materials, such as pictures of other places and other times, historic newspaper clippings, and brief descriptions relevant to understanding the topics and activities being explored. There also are examples of what students have done in the past. A variety of pertinent reading material at different reading levels (magazines, pamphlets, fiction, and different texts) have been placed on the shelves and some opened for display. The teacher encourages the students to get up and look through the materials and to talk about the various alternatives. He answers questions as they arise. Finally, the teacher asks if any of the students have any relevant and feasible topics and activities they would like to have added. The one guideline he invokes is that groups have no more than four members.

- After aiding the students in choosing their topics and related activities, the teacher meets during class times with groups and individuals to assist and provide support and resources as they pursue their topics.

- Throughout the year, students share what they have learned about their topics with each other. (For example, one group studying how the effects of slavery are still felt in current race relations performs a play they have written. Another group studying the western movement in the United States forms a wagon train to experience the process and problems involved in undertaking such a trek [budgeting, buying supplies, dealing with changes in the weather, surviving harsh terrains]; they report their progress and adventures periodically to the rest of the class. One student chose to study the development and forms of money used from ancient times to the present and, as soon as the information is gathered, reports on each historical stage. Another student decided to learn research skills by tracing her "roots", she not only shares her family history with the class but also is able to tell the others about a wide range of available historical resource material.)

- To link the material together and cover anything that might be missed, the teacher prepares a series of periodic presentations (lectures, films, video) and related supplementary reading and discussions.

- Each student turned in a written progress report summarizing what he or she had learned about the topic at the end of each month. Multiple-choice, true-false, and essay exams were given at midyear and at the end of the year. The reports and exams were used to evaluate how well the students had learned what the course was intended to teach. Students who had trouble reading or writing were given the exams orally. Grades were based on a combination of effort and performance.

Besides specific processes, there is the matter of structure. Maria, David, James, and Matt need and want different amounts of support, direction, and external control (or limit setting) to help them learn. They have each identified some things they can readily do on their own, but they know there are tasks and situations they will handle better with help. To have their changing needs matched, they must have the option of working alone or seeking support and guidance as often as is appropriate.

It is to be expected, of course, that those with the lowest motivation are likely to need the most support and guidance. At the same time, they are likely not to seek help readily. Moreover, those with avoidance motivation tend to react negatively to structure they perceive as used to control them.

In general, a greater range of options with regard to content, outcome, process, and structure are required for those with motivation problems. We will return to this topic after stressing the importance of options designed to enrich the experience of schooling and living.

Enrichment, Discovery, Inquiry, and Serendipity

As important as specific planning is, it is a mistake for school programs to overprescribe the specifics of what and how to learn. There must be time for sampling and exploring unscheduled topics and activities. This, of course, assumes there are interesting things available to investigate. The time for exploring can be viewed as an enrichment opportunity.

Some remedial programs are much too preoccupied with a student's problems and the tasks that must be pursued in remedying them. When this happens, enrichment experiences tend to be ignored and the learning environment takes on an air of pathology, drudgery, and boredom -- all of which are contrary to enhancing motivation.

The model provided by programs for the gifted is a good example of the type of environment that may have a positive motivational impact on any learner. Such programs offer a rich set of learning centers that focus on topics such as those listed in Feature 1 and on many more. Enrichment activities are useful for enhancing motivation and reducing negative behavior and, of course, can lead to important learning.

Although enrichment activities may be seen as a frill for many students, it is seen as important, motivationally, for students with learning problems. The richer the learning environment, the more likely students will discover a variety of new interests, information, and skills.

In recent years, there has been a major push for greater accountability in education. Everyone agrees that school programs should be more effective. But not everyone agrees with the extreme emphasis on highly specific objectives as advocated by some evaluators, especially when such evaluation ignores the processes used to reach desired objectives.

Some evaluators have even gone so far as to say they don't care what means are used as long as the ends are achieved. This extremist view ignores a simple fact: although two procedures may accomplish the same set of narrow objectives, they also may produce a variety of other different outcomes.

Take the approach used with James and the one described in Feature 2, for example. A motivational perspective suggests the two courses may lead to very different attitudes about the material learned. Lecture/text/test approaches tend to produce a distaste for social studies, history, geography, and similar subjects and for those who teach them. Moreover, teachers who teach in this way find little satisfaction in the process other than the sense of having pulled another group of students through.

In contrast, exploratory approaches lend themselves much better to personalization of learning and thus to the fostering and enhancement of intrinsic motivation along with the learning of specific content and skills. Moreover, students and teachers seem to find many personal satisfactions (i.e., valued learning and special friendships).

Feature 3: **Different Processes/Outcomes**

From a motivational perspective, enrichment options are not designed to teach specific inform-ation and skills. There are, of course, specific, and often predictable, outcomes that come from contact with any topic. However, almost by definition, an enrichment option produces many incidental and unpredictable (serendipitous) outcomes.

Furthermore, enrichment activities are not designed to operate as if everything a student learns is taught by the teacher. The "hands-on" nature of enrichment centers encourages independent exploration, experimentation, and learning. As questions arise, students can choose to use whatever information or help is available.

In the end, what students learn depends a great deal on their interests and effort. Some may decide to pursue a topic in great depth and to acquire a good deal of mastery over it; others may simply dabble and gain a surface awareness, which they may or may not follow up on later.

As a general strategy, enrichment opportunities can be established by offering an attractive set of discovery and inquiry centers and helping the students explore the materials and ideas. Let's look at Maria's experience with an enriched program.

> Maria's teacher explains that there are a variety of centers in the room which will change as the school year progresses. At the moment, there are centers dealing with electricity, tropical fish, computers, chemical reactions, African cultures, creative math, and many more. In order to offer a variety of centers each week, some are offered twice and some three times a week.
>
> Maria is given a chance to sample the centers. She then is given the opportunity to choose one or two topics that really interest her. It is made clear that these are "electives" and that she can drop out at any time.
>
> Maria is attracted to the tropical fish. She wants to know if it is hard to take care of them. She thinks she'd like to have some at home. Where do you buy them? Are they expensive? How long do they live? The teacher answers a few of her questions and then points out that there is a group meeting on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They are learning all about where the fish come from, which can live with each other, how to breed them, and whatever else the group wants to explore about aquariums and fish.
>
> Maria is intrigued but a little suspicious. She wants to know if the activity includes reading or other assignments and tests. The answer is an unequivocal no. She can come and learn whatever she wants, in the way that she wants, and no one will ask her to prove anything. It is her questions that are important – not the teacher's.
>
> It is all so inviting that Maria decides to give it a try. And she finds it's as good as it looks and sounds. As she attends regularly, it becomes evident to all who observe her that she is a bright, interested, and attentive learner whenever she is motivated by the topic. She remembers what she has learned and works well with others.
>
> Not long after joining the group, her teacher notices Maria has gone to the library and checked out picture books on tropical fish. A few days later, Maria approached her to ask for a little help in reading some of the captions.

Options for Those with Motivation Problems

The first sep in working with such students involves exploration to find what the individual's interests are: Sports? Rock music? Movies? Computer games? Such personal interests are used as a starting point. A student's interests are explored until he or she identifies a related topic, no matter how unusual, that he or she would like to learn more about (see Feature 4).

After identifying a topic, learning activity options are reviewed to find those that are a good match with the student's needs, interests, and styles. For example, talkative students may prefer to work in small discussion groups. Other students will want a work area that is private and quiet. Students with high activity levels may choose to work with manipulable materials. Most will prefer to work on time-limited activities.

In accommodating a wider range of behaviors, classroom rules and standards are redefined to accept behaviors such as nondisruptive talking and movement about the classroom. For some individuals, certain "bad manners" (e.g., some rudeness, some swear words) and eccentric mannerisms (e.g., strange clothing and grooming) may have to be tolerated initially.

The most basic process option, of course, is that of not participating at times or at all.

> There are times when David simply doesn't feel like working. He wants the option of drawing, playing a game, or resting for about an hour. There are days when Maria doesn't want to go to school. And there came a day when James concluded he was ready to drop out of school.

Which, if any, of these should be offered as options? For whom?

Feature 4: **Options for Students with Motivation Problems**

Harry comes to school with no intention of working on what his teachers have planned. He will spend as much time as he can get away with talking with his friends and looking for some excitement to make the time pass faster. He is frequently in the middle of whatever trouble is occurring. Everyone is waiting for him to do something bad enough that he can be removed from his present class.

There is an alternative to letting this tragedy run its course. Time can be spent helping Harry identify one area of personal interest that he would like to learn more about (e.g., pop culture, rock music, current teenage fashions). Then, a personalized program can be developed based on a topic he would like to explore and ways he would like to explore it.

Approached in this way, most students like Harry will identify a topic and activities that interest them. However, one topic and a few activities won't fill up much time – perhaps an hour, maybe less. What then?

Well, Harry could be asked to pursue a regular program for the rest of the school day; but the odds are that he would simply resume his previous pattern of negative behavior. In the long run, this would probably defeat what the alternative program is trying to accomplish.

Our solution to the problem is as simple as it is controversial. We have students such as Harry attend school only for that period of time during which they have planned a program they intend to pursue. Our reasoning is twofold: (1) we know that students tend to work best when they are working on what they have identified as desirable, and (2) for students like Harry, it seems likely the rest of the time is wasted, including getting into trouble. Obviously, if they are not at school a full day, they are less likely to get into as much trouble. But, more important, the less we are in the position of coercing them, the less we are likely to cause the variety of reactive misbehaviors that characterize such students. Moreover, we find that once we no longer have to do battle with them, many youngsters evolve an increasing range of academic interests, including renewed interest in becoming competent in the areas of reading and writing. The energy they had been devoting to fighting teachers and school may now be redirected to exploring what it is they are interested in doing for themselves. As Harry's range of interests increase, he will want a longer school day and is likely to make better use of it.

We recognize the many practical, economic, and legal problems involved in cutting back on the length of a student's school day. However, we think these problems must be contrasted with the costs to society and individuals of ignoring the fact that for certain students a lengthy school day interferes with correcting their problems. Indeed, in some cases, it only makes the problems worse.

For older students, of course, a shortened day paired with a parttime job or apprenticeship may be a most productive experience. Among the results of work experiences can be an increased feeling of self-worth and competence and enhanced intrinsic motivation toward overcoming learning problems. A job also can provide a student with a source of income, which may be needed, and can even help to establish career directions.

At this point, you may think that such options are too inappropriate even to consider. However, as you reflect on what you have been learning and as you move on to read more about learner decision making, hopefully, it will be clear that the type of options discussed are fundamental to addressing motivational differences.

Decisions about *participation* are the primary foundation upon which all other decisions rest (Adelman, et al., 1984; Taylor, et al., 1985). If the individual initially does not want to participate or subsequently comes to that point of view, all other decisions become highly problematic.

For students diagnosed as having learning disabilities, the decision process related to participation begins with the discussions about placement. Whether a student with problems is placed in a special program or maintained in regular classes, the immediate motivational concern always is whether the individual has decided that the program is right for him or her. And, of course, even if the initial answer is yes, the student's perceptions of the situation may change. Thus, decisions about placement must be continuously reevaluated.

The next most basic decisions are those related to *specific program options*. The objective is to help the student pinpoint alternatives that match personal

interests and capabilities. Again, initial decisions have to be modified in keeping with changes in the students' perceptions of what is a good match.

As the following discussion illustrates, the best decision making processes include opportunities to physically explore and sample options. Thus, all initial decisions can be seen simply as extended opportunities to investigate options.

In overcoming severe motivational problems, it appears important not to insist that a student continue to work in areas she or he wants to avoid. This strategy is intended to reduce the type of psychological and behavioral reactions that occur when individuals think they are being forced to do something they don't want to do. In particular, we don't want to increase avoidance, either in the form of withdrawal (including passive performance) or of active resistance (e.g., disruptive behavior).

Thus, if a student initially indicates not wanting instruction in a specific area, it seems wise to hold off instruction temporarily -- even in basic skills, such as reading or math. The time is better spent on activities that may eventually lead to renewed interests in the avoided area.

Not providing instruction as a step in renewing positive interest in an area seems to go against common sense. We recognize that this is a controversial and, for some, an alarming strategy. It is not one to be adopted lightly or naively, and remember, it is a strategy to deal with motivation problems. From a motivational perspective, it is clearly rational to pursue areas of positive interest. And the case can be made that to focus solely on positive interests may be the best way to eventually overcome motivation and skill problems related to reading and other basics.

Let's look at Maria in this context.

> Maria doesn't want reading instruction. The teacher agrees to set her reading program aside for now. If reading were completely ignored, the best outcome the teacher should expect is that Maria's avoidance motivation would not be significantly increased. For many persons, this might be an acceptable outcome with regard to art and music and other areas not seen as basic skills. It would not be acceptable to most people when it comes to the three Rs. Fortunately, what makes basic literacy skills basic is that most facets of daily living involve their application. Moreover, the fact that they are designated as basic makes them a major point of focus by almost everyone in the society.
>
> Thus, it is likely that most of what Maria chooses to learn about at school and much of her other experiences will lead to frequent natural encounters that cause her to realize that she has a personal need for such skills. And, of course, these daily encounters inevitably bring her into contact with people who convey to her their assumption that she already has or is in the process of acquiring such skills. These experiences affect her feelings and attitudes about acquiring basics.
>
> As Maria's intrinsic awareness of the value of basic skills increases, she can be helped to learn any specific skills she identifies as needed in coping with natural encounters. Eventually, Maria should arrive at a level of motivational readiness at which she will accept the teacher's offer to pick up with formal reading instruction. Equally important, if her intrinsic motivation has increased enough, the time she spends reading may be considerably greater than the time spent in formal instruction.

Appropriate decision processes, then, can increase personal valuing and expectations of success, thereby enhancing motivation for learning and overcoming problems. By "appropriate" processes, we mean those that enable a student to self-select from desirable and feasible options. Besides improving motivation, such processes also provide opportunities for strengthening a student's ability to make sound choices.

Students, of course, may differ greatly in their motivation and ability to make decisions (see Feature 5). That is why we believe learning to make decisions should be a basic focus of instruction and why it is so important to be ready to help youngsters with decision making.

Feature 5: **Are Students with Learning Problems Competent to Make Good Decisions?**

Making a sound decision involves having the necessary information about alternatives and about positive and negative outcomes. It also involves having the competence to evaluate available information. Not surprisingly, when someone is perceived as not competent to decide, they often are not given the information or opportunity to prove the perception is incorrect.

Who is competent to decide? This is one of the more difficult and controversial questions confronting professionals, parents, and society in general.

Is it a matter of age? Education? Intelligence? If someone has a learning problem, are they less competent to make certain decisions than individuals without learning problems?

As yet, there are no satisfactory answers. There is, however, a rapidly growing body of research on the competence of youngsters with and without learning problems to participate in decision making (e.g., Baumrind, 1978; Melton, 1983; Weithorn, 1983).

Findings to date suggest that many youngsters and their parents believe that children as young as ten should participate in making decisions about everyday matters such as what clothes to buy and wear, what food to eat, what time to go to bed, and what friends to make. Parents and youngsters also generally agree that minors (thirteen and older) should participate in decisions regarding school programs and placements and physical and mental health treatment. Studies comparing youngsters' and adults' decisions as to treatment and research participation indicate that the decisions of children as young as nine are similar to those made by adults; and by the time they're fourteen, minors seem able to think as competently as adults in weighing certain decision risks and benefits.

In contrast to this research, studies of practitioners' views of minors' competence tend to be less optimistic about youngsters' competence to decide. Unfortunately, research on practitioners, views of minors' competence to participate in decision making is sparse. In a survey of mental health professionals, we found that slightly less than half of those who were willing to respond indicated they asked clients under eighteen to participate in the treatment decision. However, those who did ask, asked children as young as twelve. Moreover, this group of professionals judge that 72 percent of those they asked did turn out to have the necessary level of competence for making the decisions. Of particular relevance to the ideas presented here, the reason most cited for why they asked children to participate in such decision making was to enhance the motivation for treatment (Taylor, et al., 1985).

Despite the inadequacy of the available literature, findings to date support the importance of avoiding presumptions about students' lack of competence. Furthermore, classroom programs ought to be designed to facilitate and not delay development of increased levels of decision making competence. And, finally, we suggest that motivation often can be enhanced by encouraging students' participation in making decisions.

None of what has been said here is meant to imply that students will always make good decisions; nor will they always stick to a decision nor should they. All we are proposing is that students (with and without learning problems) should be offered a wide range of learning options and should be helped to sample the options so that they have reasonable information upon which to base decisions. Moreover, after they have experienced an activity for a brief while, they may well decide that they made a mistake, and so all such decisions should be renegotiable. As we understand motivation and learning, such options and renegotiations are major factors in determining whether students want to follow through on decisions and whether they become good at making decisions.

Steps in Helping Students Make Decisions

In helping with student decision making, it is useful to view the process as a series of steps.

First, a student must understand the value of making her or his own decisions. Minimally, this means the student's knowing that the process provides opportunities for taking greater control over one's life and overcoming one's problems.

> "We want to work with you in ways you think are good. Therefore, we've put together as many helpful and exciting learning opportunities as we could. While we think there are many good choices, we know that you are the best judge of what you like. So the first thing you might want to do is to look over and sample some of these options and see if any appeal to you. You may also want to suggest some other topics and activities. We only want to work with those that you choose as worth doing. We want you to have more control over your activities and program schedule than may have been the case in the past. Would you like to take some time and see what's available?"

Second, the process must include ways for students to actively sample and select from available options and to propose others whenever feasible.

> "You can spend some time looking over the various options, including watching other students who have chosen them. As you do this, I will be glad to answer any questions you may have. We can also talk about other things you would like to do and learn about that may not be here yet. Let's try to find a topic that personally interests you. The important thing is that you get a chance to decide which things you want to spend your time at school learning about."

Third, working out program details should be done as soon as choices are made. This is necessary so that the student is clear about the implications of following through on decisions. With such information, a student can either back off from a choice because it involves too much work or can publicly commit to follow through.

> "Let's talk about your decision to learn how to use a computer. That group meets each day, over ten weeks, for an hour a day. Before you get to do graphics, you will have to spend the first week learning basic computer operation. There is some reading material available; if you need help, several advanced students will be ready to explain the basics to you. If that sounds O.K. to you, write it on your posted schedule, and you can begin tomorrow."

Fourth, from the moment the student begins an activity, it is important to monitor motivation. If interest drops, the activity should be altered to better match the student; and if it can't be modified, the student should have the option of changing activities.

Teacher frustration is a frequent problem in helping students to make decisions and to improve their ability to do so. Many of a student's initial decisions don't hold up well. For a variety of reasons, a student may quickly lose interest in a topic or activity. This may happen, for example, if a youngster has a disability or does not work hard enough. However, early in the efforts to help youngsters make effective decisions, such "blaming" conclusions about why a particular choice didn't work can be premature and harmful. In general, when early decisions must be altered, it is important both to avoid blaming the student and to help students avoid blaming themselves.

On the other hand, if the student manifests the common tendency to externalize blame (i.e., the activity is described as too hard or too boring), it may be useful at first simply to accept the reasons at face value. By working on changes that reflect the individual's stated "alibis," in time, it will become evident whether the student is merely making excuses.

Again, the point is that the ability to make good decisions is learned (see Baron & Brown, 1991). Making decisions and evaluating their outcomes can be a good process for developing this basic skill. However, if the process is contaminated by accusations and blame, motivation for decision making can be undermined. As with all areas of learning, interactions over time will clarify whether students who continue to make poor decisions do so because of developmental or motivational problems.

Dialogues with Students

As suggested already, decision processes that lead to positive student perceptions involve ongoing dialogue between student and teacher. One result is a series of mutual agreements about what is to be done and how to proceed.

The mechanism for carrying on the dialogue often is called a *conference*, and the agreement often is referred to as a contract. However, terms like *conference* and *contract* do not convey the full sense of what is involved and at times have been interpreted in ways that are contrary to the meaning used here.

From a motivational perspective:

- Decisions must not be made for the student.
- Decisions must be modifiable whenever necessary.
- Dialogues should be designed to give, share, and clarify information seen as potentially useful to a student who is making a decision.
- Dialogues should involve not only conversational exchanges but also actual exploration and sampling of options.

The importance of the dialogue as a two way process cannot be overemphasized. A conference should be a time for persons to say what they need, want, and are hoping for from each other. When problems exist, time should be devoted to problem solving. One conference often is insufficient for arriving at a major decision. Therefore, the dialogue is an ongoing formal and informal process.

Summing up

Although the stress here has been on student decisions, good agreements are not one-sided. In general, the processes are meant to establish, maintain, and enhance a positive commitment on the part of both the student and the teacher toward working in a collaborative relationship. Such a relationship is seen as fundamental to the correction of learning problems.

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