

Learning depends on reinforcement

by Eleanor Rose Moore

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MANOKOTAK — Student learning depends largely on the positive or negative reinforcement the teacher ascribes to the student.

Some positive reinforcements include respect, high expectation, high grades and encouragement. These attributes promote positive development to student learning.

OPINION

Some negative reinforcements are disrespect, low expectation, low grades and discouragement. These negative attributes damage student motivation and self-development that are linked to learning.

In understanding the detrimental effects of the negative attributes given to the student, teachers should change their attitude and concentrate on motivating students with positive reinforcement.

Respect is shown to the student by the action of the teacher. One is in the area of discipline. In disciplining a child, the teacher who gives a child a task such as washing the blackboard or straightening books on the shelves is showing respect to the child's ability to learn to avoid "bad" behavior. At the same time, it teaches the child responsibility.

Another area is in listening to the student. As suggested by Bruce Joyce and Marsha Weil in *Models of Teaching*, the teacher should let the student pour out thoughts and feelings "instead of asking direct questions for the purpose of eliciting feelings."

Joyce and Weil say this shows respect for the student's emotions, helps the student analyze problems and takes steps to solving problems. Respect, I believe, is a positive reinforcement to student self-development.

Disrespect is shown to students when corporal punishment is used as a form of discipline. It is a way of saying students are subjects who must be controlled or trained in the method that animals are trained.

It also implies students are incapable of being reasoned with, have no feelings or emotions and do not need help in learning how to overcome problems. These negative attributes lower the level of the students' desire to learn, their self concept and self development.

As pointed out in *Pupil Evaluation in the Classroom* by Douglas M. Brooks and David W. Van Cleaf, a student with poor self concept and who is weak academically "engaged in withdrawal and avoidance behaviors because he wanted to avoid further academic and personal failure."

I believe that corporal punishment results in a mixture of negative feelings such as low self-esteem and personal failure in academic areas, which affects students' ability to learn.

High expectation is another positive reinforcer that affects student learning.

I believe that high expectations are associated with how the teacher interacts with students and what the teacher expects of students.

As a student, I was told to help other students who needed help with their school work. I was also given responsibilities such as checking test papers and passing out homework.

The positive interaction and expectation from the teacher reinforced my motivation to learn and heightened my

self-concept and self-esteem.

I also believe that understanding is related to high expectation because teachers seem to better understand the answers of students they believe are capable of understanding the question.

High expectations are shown in a variety of ways by the teacher. This has been proven to be a positive reinforcer to student learning.

Low expectation has proved to have a negative effect on student learning because of the response and interaction between the teacher and the student; the teacher gives more criticism and less praise to those they have grouped as low achievers.

Case Studies in Classroom Research by Martyn Hemmingsley did a classroom observation study that supports this idea. I know this to be true because I had the opportunity to substitute as an aide for a teacher in my local village school. I noticed that the student who did not do so well in his work was criticized more often when he needed to be motivated and was given less praise when he needed it.

Low expectation from the teacher has a negative effect on student learning because the criticism and less praise lead to low self-concept compared to the high achievers in the classroom.

High grades are also a positive reinforcement of student ability to learn.

I felt competent and motivated each time I got an "A" on my paper. I believe high grades are a result of high expectations from the teacher. I also believe high grades are a form of praise given to the student for work. Therefore, high grades are a positive reinforcement of student learning.

Low grades have a negative impact on a student's ability to learn. I believe when a student receives a low grade, self-concept is lowered and he or she feels inadequate.

I have experienced the feeling of receiving a low grade in one of my college courses, and I did not feel good about myself. I also felt I could not do a very good job in studying for that course because before the test, I had studied hard.

As was mentioned by Brooks and Van Cleaf, poor self-concept and weak academic skills result in withdrawal, and this, I believe, does not help in the learning skills of a student. Therefore, low grades have a negative effect on student learning.

Encouragement has a positive effect on student learning. Encouragement includes respect, high expectation and high grades. All these are motivators to students' learning development. The teacher's actions and interactions with students help to reinforce the students' motivation to learn.

Discouragement comes in the form of how the teacher interacts with the

student. Disrespect, low expectation and low grades contribute to the negative effects of student learning.

As studies have shown, teachers treat students whom they believe are low achievers with an attitude that further discourages the student from learning.

All the positive reinforcements are given to students whom the teacher believes are high achievers, and negative reinforcements are given to students perceived as low achievers, which further lowers the level of the students' ability to learn.

Teachers should therefore concentrate on motivating the "low achievers" and help them become high achievers in using the positive reinforcements they use on the "high achievers."

This form of segregation in the classroom should be removed and concentration should shift to motivation of all students to learning.

Eleanor Rose Moore is an Alaska Native living in Manokotak where she is pursuing a degree in education. She wrote this piece in an English composition class taken via audioconference from Chukchi College, a branch campus in Kotzebue of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.