

The online resource for
principals with students
aged 10 to 14

Matters

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Raising Achievement by Raising Confidence

When students make the connection between study strategies and outcomes, both confidence and achievement increase.

by Jeff Harker

It was everything that one could imagine summer school to be: a room full of apathetic kids with drooping eyes and heads nodding from lack of sleep.

I had been reading *Developing Self-Regulated Learners* (Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996) and while the examples in the book didn't describe what I was seeing in my classroom, I couldn't help but think, "If I can make it work with this group, even a little bit, we'll be ahead of the game."

I wanted to see if I could increase the students' achievement levels by increasing their ability to monitor their own learning behaviors and study strategies. I also wanted to increase their confidence in themselves as math students, and help them to see that if they changed their preparation for a quiz, they could change the outcome of that quiz.

A Multistep Process

The process involved several steps. First, we talked about prior performance. When I asked why they had failed previously, many of the students placed blame on their teacher or some other external cause. Very few attributed their failure to themselves.

We also discussed study strategies, including those that successful students use. I reminded them of these strategies almost daily, so that they quickly became part of their vocabulary and routine.

Every few lessons, I gave the students a short, 10-point quiz. Before each quiz, they were asked to give themselves a confidence rating—Zimmerman et al. call it a self-efficacy rating—that was an estimate of their expected score, based on their preparation for the quiz. It was an expectation, not a goal.

After the quiz, when students compared their actual scores to their confidence ratings, I asked them to think about the con-

nections between the two. For example, if a student's confidence rating was an 8, but he scored a 3, I prompted him to begin to think about, and be realistic about, the exact nature of his study habits, or lack thereof. Likewise, if a student scored a 9, but expected to get a 3, I asked her to try to document exactly how she had prepared for this quiz, because something worked. The idea was to make visible the connection between preparation and outcome.

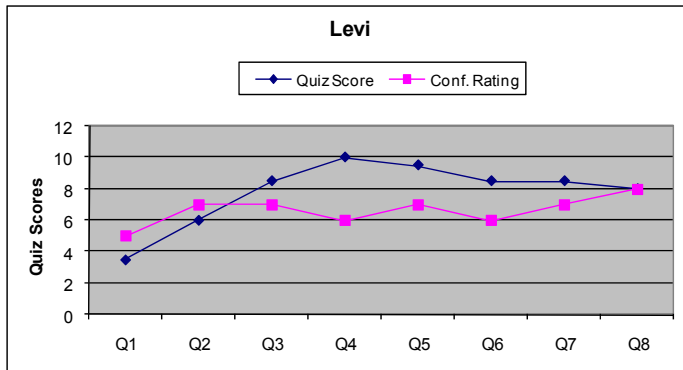
During the six weeks of summer school, I also tried to confer with most of the students. We talked about specific strategies that the students thought were important and doable. We talked about the strategies that successful students use. We also talked about the importance of change and the idea that if you want to change the outcome of an event, you have to change your preparation for that event.

Over the course of my time with them, I began to see changes in some of my students. I attribute most of these changes to the fact that they were beginning to monitor their own behavior and learning. I was no longer the only motivating force in the room. The students began to see a connection between their preparation for a quiz and the outcome. Some students began to volunteer more during class. Some were less disruptive and more attentive, and they did more work outside of class. They did these things on their own because they saw a benefit in doing so. In short, they were self-monitoring and self-motivating.

A Case Study

Levi had never been very good at math and didn't see any reason why he needed to be. During the first week of the summer session, I gave the students three problem-solving activities and told each to present a solution for one of them to the class. When it was Levi's turn, he stood confidently in front of the class, said "I dunno," and sat down.

Needless to say, he was not very engaged in the work. His first confidence rating was a 5, and his first quiz score was a 3.5. In other words, he was sure he could fail, and he did. However, as you can see from the graph below, this attitude did not last long.



Through class discussions and conferencing, Levi began to focus on two strategies—collaboration and class participation. He began to collaborate with a peer on homework and class assignments. He began to volunteer answers more often in class and he volunteered to go to the board more often for extra practice.

By the end of the six weeks, Levi was passing his quizzes with a score at or above 80 percent. More important, he *expected* to do so. He was able to see a direct link between his preparation for the quiz and the outcome. Levi, formerly a very apathetic F student, scored 81 percent on the final exam and received a B-minus for the class.

The Students' Feedback

At the end of the summer session, I asked the students to reflect on their experiences. Here is what some of them said:

- “It helped me see my improvement and boost my confidence.”
- “I viewed my education differently than I did before. I tried this time and applied myself.”
- “It showed me that I can do better and better every time.”
- “It showed me that if I set my mind to it, I could accomplish my goal.”
- “It made me realize that if I study hard enough, I could pass the test.”

I have been using this process for several years. Like any teaching strategy, I continue to adjust and adapt to meet the changing needs of my students. However, I have found enough success with it that I would find it difficult to go back to the way I taught before.

Reference

Zimmerman, B. J., Bonner, S., & Kovach, R. (1996). *Developing self-regulated learners: Beyond achievement to self-efficacy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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