

Attribution Theory and School Reform

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Abstract

Weiner's attribution theory is used as the framework to look at the ways in which teachers and other educators cast poor student performance to protect their own self-images. Commonly heard teacher language that attributes student failure to something other than the teacher is examined within these three broad categories: "It's the students fault," "It's the parent's fault," or "It's the test's/standard's/curriculum's fault." The importance of leadership and board policy to confront these false attributions is emphasized.

Attribution Theory and School Reform

Year after year, in school after school, test scores and other data tell us that students who are poor, minority, or English language learners perform poorly in school. Generally substantiated, as well, is the critical role teacher expectations play in any individual student's success or failure - the well known "self-fulfilling prophecy." Looking at student success or failure as influenced by the student's own beliefs about his or her performance has been a focus of attribution theory research.

In this article, however, we are focusing on the role that attribution theory plays in teacher and principal beliefs as they explain school achievement specifically, how do educators perceive and explain the failures of their students? Using attribution theory as the framework, we will focus on school reform and how efforts to improve school performance are impacted by educators' beliefs about student success or failure. Let us begin by reviewing the basics of attribution theory.

Theoretical Framework

Intrapersonal attribution theory (Weiner, 1974, 1986, 2000) states that individuals construct explanations for their successes and failures, which may or may not accurately reflect reality. For example, Mario may believe that he is smart and was prepared for the test, so he attributes his failure on the test to its being unfair. Jamal believes he is a skilled athlete and attributes making the soccer team to that belief. Tina, on the other hand, thinks that none of her classmates likes her which explains why she is picked last for softball.

Weiner (2000) further explains three ways that attributions may differ. First, a student may choose whether or not her success is determined by "internal" or "external" factors. Internal factors include such as ability or effort - in the examples above, "I'm smart" or "I didn't try really hard." External factors include "luck" and characteristics of others- "the test was unfair" or "the coach has it in for me."

A student also considers whether or not a situation is constant, i.e., are the factors stable or unstable. "I'm smart" is likely viewed as stable, and "I didn't try really hard" could be viewed as unstable. The next teacher could give a fair test, so this could be viewed as unstable, whereas the coach's opinion, if it has existed all year, might be viewed as more stable.

Finally, the student considers whether or not she has control over the factors that influence events. If Tina believes "classmates don't like me because I am poor," then she may believe she has little control over others' opinions of her. If, however, she believes they don't like her because she is too loud or too shy, she could say perhaps that these factors are controllable by her.

Attribution theory has long been studied in conjunction with whether or not students expect to succeed or fail in the future and, given that self-constructed knowledge, to what degree they will exhibit effort or

persistence in similar situations. Using the first example above, since Mario believes he is smart (an internal cause) and this one teacher's test was unfair, he will likely study hard and try on the next teacher's test, viewing that as an isolated experience. However, if the experience recurs in another teacher's class, he may not try on *any* tests, as he may feel he has no control (instability) over whether tests are fair.

Weiner (2000) also offers an interpersonal attribution perspective, which considers individuals' "reactions to the performance of others," (pg. 7). However, we do not believe this is the applicable theory here, even though Weiner specifically uses the example of teachers describing student performance. In our view, and supported by an abundance of research, (see Haycock, 1998) student achievement is the product of teaching, and therefore is a measure of *teacher* performance. Thus, when a teacher describes student success or failure, we would posit she is not describing the "performance of others," but rather her own teaching outcomes. Thus, intrapersonal attribution theory applies here.

Methodology

Now that we have looked at the general principles of intrapersonal attribution theory as they apply to students' perceptions of their own success or failure, let us consider how attribution theory plays a role in teacher and principal perceptions of school failure. Just as we looked at student language and thought to understand student attributions, let us look at common educator language and thought to understand educator attributions. The statements below are generally in one of three categories: "It's the student's fault," "It's the parent's fault," or "It's the test's/standard's/curriculum's fault" and are gleaned from the authors' combined 50 plus years of work in public education and education reform.

"Look at the kids we have to teach!"

Recently, one of the authors heard a researcher speak about two schools in the same district: one, a successful high poverty, high minority school; the other school not very successful with the same population. She stated that in her extensive work with the successful school, she never heard faculty at that school refer to students as "those kids." However, in a one hour lunchtime staff meeting at the unsuccessful school, she heard students referred to as "those kids" many times.

Similarly, we heard a very successful principal in a highpoverty, 100% minority school refer to her students as "MY kids." George McKenna, famed principal from LosAngeles, related a story about challenging a teacher about his inaction in asituation. "Well, if it is not your child, I understand. But if this IS *your child*..." (personal communication, 1988).

In South Carolina, we actually formalize the idea that "it's the kids" by comparing school performance on the state achievement test in any given school to children in a "school like ours," which means of similar poverty level. Instead of comparing poor children's progress to all third graders, for example, we only compare them to other *poor* third graders.

Poverty, especially in schools where poor children constitute a high percentage of the enrollment, is widely accepted as an indisputable reason why test performance is low. By extension, poverty becomes the excuse for teachers not producing better outcomes. Schools with high poverty enrollments that perform well are seen as exceptions, outliers that cannot be replicated, and sometimes even viewed suspiciously, rather than as beacons of success to be emulated. Yet, as Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2002) have found, good teaching trumps poverty. President Obama (2009) recently affirmed, "From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents, it's the person standing at the front of the classroom."

So how might this relate to attribution theory? If I attribute the problem to "those kids," I see it as external, unlikely to change, and out of my control a perfect recipe for poor teacher motivation.

"It's the parent's fault"

If kids come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job easier.

If they do not come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job more important.

- Barbara Coloroso (1990)

One of the authors often gives graduate students in her classes teachers who aspire to become principals & the above quote with the last word ("important") left off and asks them to fill in the blank. Often, the responses are in the realm of "difficult." And indeed, it is difficult work to teach children who come to school not having the benefit of parents who have done part of the job of teaching their children for us & teaching them their alphabet, their colors, to write, to behave, to think, to listen.

But those of us in education today must accept that this is the job before us & for most children, we must provide 100% of their education, not 50% or 75% like our teachers may have done for us, after our dads and moms read to us and checked our homework and took us to the library regularly. It is the hand educators have been dealt, and in reality, it is the hand many children have been dealt.

So saying the problems of public education are rooted in the fact that parents don't send us better kids is a foolish, flimsy excuse. As a fellow psychologist once said, parents send us the best kids they have. They don't keep the "good" ones at home. Blaming them for not doing otherwise is just another way of diverting blame. In terms of attribution theory, it is a way of saying that we have no control over these children's education because the parents didn't send us different/better children. The outcome is out of our control an external problem that we really don't see changing any time soon. So why should we even try teaching them?

But the real question to be asked is: if parents don't do everything for the education of their children that we wish they would do, does that relieve us of the responsibility to teach those children to the same high standard we apply to children with optimal parent support? Given what it will take for the United States to be competitive in an increasingly complex global market, we think not. We have to do whatever it takes to ensure the educational success of these children, and not just because it is the right thing to do.

"It's the test's/standard's/curriculum's fault"

Note this story from The Atlanta Journal Constitution (2008), after the state school superintendent announced and explained why 70 to 80% of the state's sixth and seventh graders failed the social studies section of the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test.

Several possible explanations emerged for failure rates that ran as high as 80 percent: New curriculum standards that may have been too vague. A complicated process for creating tests. Flawed test questions. Inadequate training in the new curriculum for

teachers. An unrealistically high passing score. A long history of poor test performance by Georgia students. . . .

"Anytime you have that level of failure almost statewide, you've got to go back and re-examine the test and re-examine everything associated with the test," said Herb Garrett, executive director of the Georgia School Superintendents Association. (Diamond, Judd, & Vogel, paragraphs 3, 5)

Now note a parent's observation in the same news story:

"The whole thing started with this new curriculum, and it's just gotten worse. You have students who aren't familiar with this information and teachers who don't know how to teach it, so of course this all happened."

"This whole thing is a fiasco. How can they think this is fair to the kids?" (Diamond, Judd, & Vogel, paragraphs 12-13)

Contrast the "educator" attributions (vague curriculum standards, flawed test questions, high cut score, historically poor performing students all external to and uncontrollable by the teacher) with the parent's attributions ("You have students who aren't familiar with this information and teachers who don't know how to teach it.") In other words, parents saw it as kids failed the test because they didn't know the material they were supposed to know because the folks who were supposed to teach it to them didn't.

Think about all the complaints that have been uttered over the past eight or nine years about No Child Left Behind, about how unfair it is, how unreasonable its expectations are. Consider how many explanations have been offered up about why schools and school districts do not make AYP. "We have so many English Language Learners." "Some students just aren't motivated." "How does anyone expect us to teach special needs children to a high standard?" "This is a high stakes test, and some kids don't test well."

In the larger context of the global economy, it is foolhardy to view accountability measures and high standards as the problem. All other industrialized nations of the world are setting, teaching to, and achieving ever tougher standards for their children. Only the United States seems inclined to attribute its lackluster performance on international measures to "but the test is so hard!"

Conclusion

It is consistent with attribution theory for educators to attribute the failure of schools to the students they teach or parents, or the test, or curriculum, or poverty because individuals tend to view their environments in ways that will protect their self-images. However, a legion of research confirms that the success (or failure) of schools is much more a function of the educators and instruction than the

students or poverty or anyother factor. (See Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Haycock, 2005; Marzano, 2003;Odden & Wallace 2003; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2002). The "excuse" and "blame" language that educators use to explain student failure becomes embedded in the culture of the school and provides the leader with clear indicators as to where teachers place the responsibility for teaching and learning.

In our experience, it is a rare school board that, as a matter of policy, establishes high standards and expectations for learning for every student and then holds teachers and school leaders accountable for high standards of teaching and performance. As long as this policy vacuum exists, school failure will continue to be attributed to the student, parents, tests, the curriculum, and poverty; all false beliefs that serve to protect the self-image of educators but do nothing but harm to the children whose lives we have the power to change.

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