"Is There a Problem or Is He Just Bone Lazy?" A Study of Children with Low Academic Motivation

Linda Gilmore (l.gilmore@qut.edu.au)
School of Learning and Professional Studies
Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove QLD 4059 Australia

Gillian Boulton-Lewis (g.boulton-lewis@qut.edu.au)
Centre for Innovation in Learning
Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove QLD 4059 Australia

Abstract

Children who are poorly motivated at school are at risk of academic underachievement and a range of other adverse social, economic and health outcomes. Attributions of laziness, reflected in comments about children needing to "try harder" and "make more effort" may mask specific cognitive and learning characteristics that explain low motivation in many children. This paper reports preliminary findings from an ongoing study of "lazy" children in the early years of primary school. In order to investigate possible explanations for low academic motivation such as learning difficulties, anxiety disorders, intellectual impairment, attentional problems and giftedness, children were assessed using appropriate psycho-educational instruments, tasks and questionnaires. The discussion focuses on developing a deeper understanding of academic motivation in the early school years through illustrative profiles of poorly motivated children.

Introduction

A substantial body of evidence has documented both the positive relationship of motivation and academic achievement (Broussard & Garrison, 2004; Luster, Lekskul & Oh, 2004; Turner & Johnson, 2003; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998) and also the steady developmental decline in motivation that occurs across the school years (Lepper et al., 1997; Bouffard et al., 2003). Despite several decades of research, low academic motivation continues to be a major problem that is associated with many adverse social, economic and health outcomes.

Much of the focus of previous research has been on discovering universal patterns to explain motivational differences within groups of adolescent or adult learners. This work has led to the identification of important individual variables including self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993), goal orientation (Pintrich & Garcia, 1991), attributions (Weiner, 1984) and self-worth (Covington, 1984) as well as contextual factors such as support for autonomy (Ratelle et al., 2004; Reeve, Bolt & Cai, 1999) and school-connectedness (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Despite evidence that motivational problems begin early and persist (Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried, 2001; Turner & Johnson, 2003), considerably less attention has been given to research with younger children.

Although often explained in relation to features of the learning environment, low motivation has also been associated with individual characteristics including learning difficulties (Gadeyne, Ghesquiere & Onghena, 2004; Poskiparta et al., 2003), intellectual disability (Bybee & Zigler, 1998), attentional disorders (Berlin et al., 2003; Olivier & Steenkamp, 2004) and even giftedness (Diezmann & Watters, 1995; Gentry & Springer, 2002; Reis & McCoach, 2002). These abilities and disabilities are not always easily recognised, and the difficulties of an unknown number of children may be overlooked because they are simply presumed to be lazy (Gilmore & Boulton-Lewis, 2004; Levine, 2003).

The first phase of the research described here aims to investigate possible explanations for low academic motivation by focusing on cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses, attributions for successes and failures, and developmental, school and family histories in a sample of poorly motivated children. In the second phase, half of the sample will participate in an intervention designed to promote academic motivation and achievement while the control group will be wait-listed for an intervention. The current paper reports preliminary data from the first phase in the form of illustrative profiles of poorly motivated children. Although qualitative methods are less frequently used in psychology than in other fields such as medicine, case reports have the potential to provide researchers and practitioners with valuable insights and a deeper understanding of individual lives than can be achieved through group data.

Method

Participants

At least 100 primary school children aged 7-9 years are taking part in the study. Half of the sample has been recruited through parent referral (based on one or more written or verbal school reports stating that the child "needs to try harder" or "make more effort") in response to media interviews with the first author. Since parents and teachers observe children in different contexts, they may have different expectations about children's attitudes towards school learning and they may interpret particular child behaviours in different ways. Thus, to ensure an appropriate sample for the study, and to enable comparisons to be made between children referred by teachers and

parents, the remainder of the sample will be recruited through teacher referral using a brief screening instrument. Children with previously diagnosed developmental or learning difficulties are being excluded.

Measures

The instruments have been chosen to provide diagnostic information about children's cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses, and to provide data about motivation from multiple sources (child, parent, teacher) using established questionnaires. The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Fourth Edition (WISC-IV) (Psychological Corporation, 2003) provides a measure of intellectual ability and a profile of cognitive strengths and weaknesses. The Wechsler Individual Achievement Test – Second Edition (WIAT-II) (Psychological Corporation, 2001) gives information about academic performance in areas including basic reading, spelling, reading comprehension, writing and mathematics. Depending on the results of these two measures, additional psychometric assessments of specific aspects of functioning including attention, memory and phonological awareness may be used.

Measures of motivation are obtained from child, parent and teacher responses to the Dimensions of Mastery Questionnaire (DMQ) (Morgan et al., 2002) which has excellent reliability, concurrent and predictive validity. The Sydney Attributional Scale (SAS) (Marsh, 1984) provides information about children's self-attributions for academic successes or failures, and has good reliability and construct validity. The Classroom Involvement and Motivation for Learning Scale (CIML) (Gilmore et al., 2002) is based on a measure developed by Wellborn and Connell (1991). It gives teacher ratings of children's behavioural engagement in the classroom, measured as persistence, attention, organisation and participation, and emotional responses, including anxiety, frustration and confidence. Both sub-scales have shown high internal consistency (Cronbach alpha coefficients of .94 and .88 for behavioural and emotional engagement, respectively).

Procedure

Families with children who meet the selection criteria in the screening phase are invited to participate in three or four sessions at the university. During the first session, information about the child and family is obtained through parent interviews. The WISC-IV and WIAT-II are administered in the following two sessions, along with the various parent and child questionnaire measures. Additional instruments are used in a fourth session, if required, and parents are asked to take the DMQ and CIML to their child's teacher.

Results and Discussion

As data collection in the parent-referred stage of the project proceeds, the study is accumulating a rich data set containing profiles of children whose parents are concerned about their lack of interest in school learning. Although none of the children has previously been diagnosed with any kind of developmental or learning problems, numerous underlying issues are evident in the sample. The following case studies illustrate the profiles of strengths and weaknesses that are emerging in the study.

Case 1: Seth

Reportedly a model student in preschool and the first grade, 8-year-old Seth began to experience difficulties in grade 2. He often failed to complete work, behaved disruptively and was easily distracted, behaviours that are still evident in his current Grade 4 classroom. He obtained a WISC-IV Full Scale IQ (FSIQ) of 105. Index scores for Verbal Comprehension (VCI), Perceptual Reasoning (PRI) and Processing Speed (PSI) were consistent (VCI = 104, PRI = 100, PSI = 97) but Working Memory was notably lower (WMI = 75). On the WIAT-II, he demonstrated academic skills that were considerably stronger than would be expected on the basis of his intellectual ability and relatively poor school performance, with results ranging from average (e.g., Word Reading = 97 and Reading Comprehension = 110) to superior (e.g., Maths Reasoning = 124 and Spelling = 132). The Connors' Parent and Teacher Rating Scales revealed significantly elevated scores for hyperactivity. In combination, these data suggest that Seth's classroom difficulties and poor motivation may be due to an attentional disorder. Despite displaying signs of inattention, hyperactivity and disruptive behaviour for more than two years, Seth was not referred for assessment and his classroom behaviours were attributed to laziness and naughtiness.

Case 2: Katya

After only 18 months at primary school, 7-year-old Katya is reportedly bored. According to her parents, she has lost motivation for schoolwork because the teacher attends only to children who are badly behaved. Katya is described as a perfectionist who is sensitive and somewhat anxious at school. She is experiencing no particular difficulties with reading or other academic skills, although she is often reluctant to complete class work. On the WISC-IV, she achieved a Full Scale IQ of 139 with no significant differences among the four index scores. Her scaled scores ranged from 19 on Vocabulary, Similarities and Block Design to 12 on Coding. Katya's WIAT-II results showed high academic achievement in most areas. Reading, spelling and phonological skills were in the superior range for her age, while her scores in the mathematics subtests were high average. She achieved lower scores for written expression (in the average range). At times, her excessive concern about producing perfect handwriting appeared to

over-ride her attention to spelling and grammar. In addition, when asked to combine two sentences to form a single one with the same meaning, she tended to elaborate on the content, thus changing the meaning and obtaining lower scores. The assessment results, in combination with interview and observational data, suggest that Katya is an intellectually gifted child whose apparent boredom at school may be related to a discrepancy between the level of schoolwork offered and the level of challenge that motivates her.

Case 3: Joseph

Joseph's father volunteered for the study because he wanted to know whether his son had a problem or whether he was "just bone lazy". During early childhood, Joseph's milestones were achieved at typical ages, although he experienced persistent difficulties with speech articulation. In the first two years of school, he made slow progress but was not identified as needing extra help. Currently in Grade 4, Joseph is well-behaved in class and popular with his peers; however, he reportedly lacks persistence with tasks at school and struggles to complete homework. Joseph's WISC-IV results showed that Processing Speed (PSI = 80) was a notable weakness compared with his other index scores (VCI = 102, PRI = 108, WM = 98). Despite average scores on WIAT-II reading and spelling subtests, his performance was very uneven. For instance, he successfully read many difficult words, but misread simpler ones. He wrote slowly and reluctantly, producing many errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation. Joseph's below average score on the WIAT-II Pseudoword Decoding subtest and an extended assessment of phonological skills using the Queensland University Inventory of Literacy (QUIL) (Dodd et al., 1996) revealed marked difficulties in this area. A significant family history of learning disabilities provided additional support for the conclusion that Joseph has a specific learning disability which has interfered with his academic achievement and motivation.

Concluding comments

The relatively small amount of data which has been collected to date means that no group statistics are available and thus no conclusions can yet be drawn. Although at this time it is not possible to know whether the cases reported here are representative of the eventual sample, they do suggest that the study will produce important insights into academic motivation which potentially will have enormous applied significance for children's learning and development.

Undoubtedly, there are many different underlying reasons for motivational problems. As these cases illustrate, however, it is risky to assume that poor academic motivation can be attributed to "laziness". Weiner (1984) has cautioned teachers about the importance of ensuring that students have the necessary ability for a task before attributing failure to lack of effort. Although in general it may be preferable for children to attribute their successes and failures to controllable factors such as effort, this attribution can be damaging for children whose increased efforts produce little improvement (Robertson, 2000). The consequence may be that they learn to attribute their failures to being globally "dumb" and subsequently withdraw from learning tasks, behaving in increasingly passive, helpless ways which are misinterpreted as laziness (Levine, 2003). This misinterpretation is highly significant because of its potentially damaging effects on academic performance and self-esteem. Possible consequences are anxiety, behaviour problems and social difficulties. Family conflict may occur as a result of unrealistic parental expectations, based on the mistaken belief that low achievement is related simply to lack of effort. Most significantly, children's difficulties will continue to be unrecognised if they are masked by attributions of laziness.

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