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Rachel M. B. Collopy
University of Dayton, rcollopy1@udayton.edu

Theresa Green
Rawsonville Elementary School, Ypsilanti, Mich.

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Using Motivational Theory with At-Risk Children

Rachel Buck Collopy and Theresa Green

Rawsonville Elementary used achievement goal theory to create a learner-centered school, where success is measured not by relative ability but by individual accomplishment.

Rawsonville Elementary is a neighborhood school near Detroit, where the automotive industry is the major employer. Recent layoffs have affected many families in the area, and more than half of the school's 480 students receive reduced or free lunch. Of the district's six elementary schools, Rawsonville has been identified as most in need of Chapter 1 services. For years, the school improvement team had worked hard to improve student motivation and learning. Yet, something was still missing. The number of at-risk and underachieving students entering the school continued to increase.

At the same time, a group of researchers at the University of Michigan had been testing a theory of student motivation known as achievement goal theory (see Maehr and Midgley 1991, Maehr and Pintrich 1991). Their work confirmed what other studies had indicated: The goals that students pursue have a powerful influence on the quality of their learning. Schools, through their policies and practices, give strong messages to students about how success is defined within their walls. As collaborative partners, the faculty at Rawsonville Elementary and the researchers at the University of Michigan aimed to create a school where the emphasis was on learning rather than on relative ability.

## Emphasizing Achievement, Not Ability

Often in schools where students adopt ability goals, students come to believe that success is defined in terms of how they do in comparison to others. Implicit in the comparative definition of success is the belief that some students are smart, some are average, and some are dumb. The goal becomes trying to look smart—or at least not to look dumb. Mistakes and failure, because they indicate lack of ability, are threats to a child's self-esteem (Covington 1984). Students who adopt ability goals are more likely to avoid challenging

tasks and to give up in the face of difficulty (Elliott and Dweck 1988).

In contrast, learning goals define success in terms of developing skills, expanding knowledge, and gaining understanding. Success means being able to do something you could not do before. When students adopt learning goals, they take on more challenging tasks, persist longer, are less debilitated by mistakes and failure, and use higher-level thinking skills than when they focus on ability goals (see Ames 1992 for a review of research).

As partners in a three-year collaboration, we aimed to make Rawsonville a school where the emphasis was on learning rather than on relative ability. Achievement goal theory does not mandate policies and practices. Rather, practitioners use it as a framework to develop consistent, integrated policies and practices that are appropriate to the needs and strengths of their students, staffs, and communities. The issues of most urgent concern to teachers were our starting point.
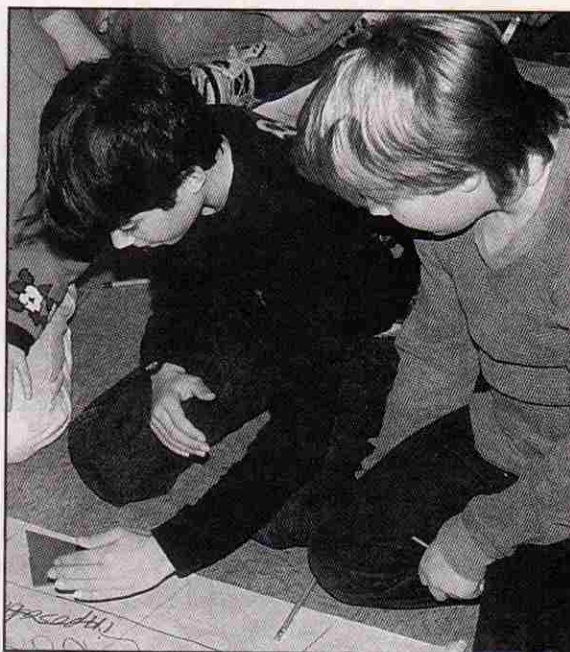
In cooperative groups, students learn spatial awareness using tangrams.

Rawsonville Elementary School's Principles of Recognition

1. Recognize individual student effort, accomplishment, and improvement.

2. Give all students opportunities to be recognized.

3. Give recognition privately whenever possible.

4. Avoid using "most" or "best" for recognizing or rewarding, as in "best project" or "most improved." These words usually convey comparisons with others.

5. Avoid recognizing on the basis of absence of mistakes. For example, avoid giving awards for students who get "fewer than five words wrong on a spelling test."

6. Avoid using the same criteria for all students. For example, avoid giving an award to "all students who get an A on the science test, or all students who do four out of five projects."

7. Recognize students for taking on challenging work or for stretching their own abilities (even if they make mistakes).

8. Recognize students for coming up with different and unusual ways to solve a problem or approach a task.

9. Try to involve students in the recognition process. What is of value to them? How much effort do they feel they put in? Where do they feel they need improvement? How do they know when they have reached their goals?

10. It's OK to recognize students in various domains (behavior, athletics, attendance), but every student should have the opportunity to be recognized *academically.*

11. Try to recognize the quality of students' work rather than the quantity. For example, recognizing students for reading a lot of books could encourage them to read easy books.

12. Avoid recognizing grades and test scores. This takes the emphasis away from learning and problem solving.

13. Recognition must be real. Do not recognize students for accomplishing something they have not really accomplished, for improving if they have not improved, or for trying hard if that is not the case.

Creating Learning-Focused Classrooms

Having heard a lot about the long-term negative effects of retaining students, Rawsonville's teachers were eager to find alternatives to retention. Their early discussions focused on add-ons of financial, human, and material resources. Then, two teachers suggested fundamentally changing the structure of the classroom. If several grades were taught together, they proposed, children would focus on their own improvement and progress at their own developmental pace.

A flood of questions followed. More than just the ages of students would be different in these classrooms. All areas of schooling—from curriculum, materials, and scheduling to teaching methods, classroom management, and evaluation—needed to be reconsidered. Together, we gathered information from experts in other schools and universities. We discussed the obstacles to change. Most important, we confronted our assumptions about the way learning and schooling had to be conducted and began to dream about how it could be.

As the learning-focused, multi-age classrooms began to take shape, it became clear that high- as well as low-achieving students would benefit from the proposed changes:

■ Students would stay with the same teacher for at least two years.

■ The approach to instruction would be interdisciplinary and thematic.

■ Students would progress at their own speed—focusing on meeting learning objectives, not following a lockstep curriculum.

■ The learning-focused classrooms would take advantage of the variety of skill levels through peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and inter-age cooperation.

■ Report cards would reflect progress and mastery rather than emphasizing comparative performance with letter grades.

Four teachers decided to pilot the classrooms during 1990–91. At the beginning, they were understandably anxious about possible student failures. By the end of the first year, however, they reported that students were more willing to participate in learning activities, more enthusiastic about learning, and showed greater concern for the learning of classmates. Now, half of Rawsonville's classrooms contain children of two or three grade levels.

Developing a learning-focused environment for children did not stop at the doorway of multi-age classrooms. The theoretical framework of

Peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and inter-age cooperation are hallmarks of the learning-focused classroom.
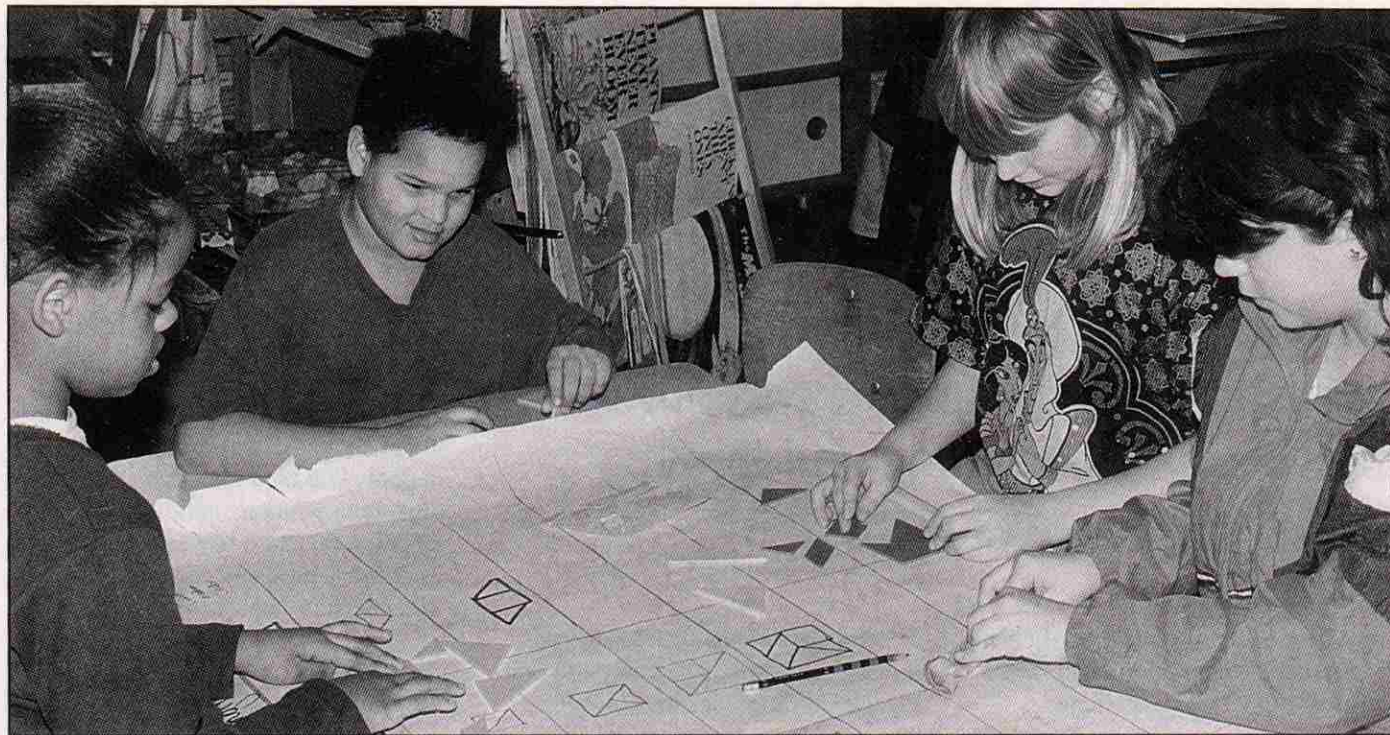
achievement goal theory can be used to redesign single-age classrooms, too. Since Rawsonville's self-renewal began five years ago, the teachers of single-age classrooms have also moved toward an emphasis on improvement, understanding, and effort. Teachers now share methods and techniques that encourage students to adopt learning goals across all classrooms.

School change, of course, is about more than just changing classrooms. Classrooms exist within schools and are affected by the policies and practices of the wider school culture. The efforts of an individual teacher to emphasize learning goals can be undermined by school policies that emphasize relative ability and comparative performance.

Abandoning the Honor Roll

As her understanding of achievement goal theory increased, Rawsonville's principal realized that the traditional honor roll defined the goal of learning as outperforming others, not improving regardless of relative performance. Each term, only a small group of students received honor roll certificates. In addition to serving as a disincentive for the children who never received the certificates, the

honor roll also discouraged high-achieving children from trying challenging tasks.

The principal's decision to eliminate the honor roll started a firestorm of controversy. Many teachers felt that they had lost a carrot to urge students to try hard; they also pointed out that many parents took pride in the honor roll certificates. As they searched for ways to recognize children in a learning-focused manner, teachers came up with Rawsonville's Principles of Recognition. Instead of dictating uniform recognition policies and practices, these principles serve as guidelines that respect the professionalism, creativity, and personal style of teachers (see fig. 1).

Other schoolwide recognition policies were also guided by the new principles. As an alternative to making the honor roll, every upper elementary student now receives a certificate recognizing him or her for an area of improvement, accomplishment, and

effort. Similarly, at the 5th grade awards ceremony, every graduate is applauded for an accomplishment. In the past, only a handful of students were recognized for their achievements—and often these students received several awards. By the fifth or sixth time a student went up to collect an award, other students would groan instead of applaud.

The faculty at Rawsonville Elementary have also redesigned other schoolwide policies and practices in line with a more learning-focused environment. Rather than emphasizing rewards and punishments, discipline procedures now focus on teaching children to become problem solvers. The use of mini-lessons on conflict resolution and peer mediation, for example, has lessened discipline problems more than rewarding the "good" and punishing the "bad" ever did.

After the three-year collaboration with the University of Michigan formally ended, Rawsonville sought

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out a second collaborative relationship with another nearby university with the goal of increasing students' computer literacy. Staff have implemented classroom computer use within the framework of achievement goal theory. Teachers now view computers as a way to help all children—not just slow learners or gifted students—learn problem-solving and reasoning skills.

Continuing the Effort

Rawsonville Elementary's approach is but one example of how to put achievement goal theory into practice. Other schools may decide to focus on other pressing issues or design solutions that are theoretically consistent with, but superficially different from, Rawsonville's. What is important is the theoretical perspective, the philosophical underpinnings, that these changes in practice exemplify.

Today, because a large proportion of children entering Rawsonville is still considered at risk, the faculty's commitment to the course they have set has become more important than ever. At the beginning of each school year, the principal and teachers review the changes they made and discuss the rationale behind them. Teachers have taken over the researchers' role of questioning: Will every child benefit from this experience? What message will this give about the goal of learning? What does this say about what is valued at this school?

Now that we know that achievement goal theory can be put into practice, what difference has it made? Teachers have reported improved attendance, increased enthusiasm for learning, and decreased discipline problems. As one teacher said, "I could never go back to teaching the way I did before." Referring to students' improved attitude toward learning, a 20-year veteran wrote:

> Some students became so interested in some aspect of classwork that they did correlating activities on their own at home. Children brought in books, magazines, newspapers, and artifacts that pertained to areas of study. They wrote plays, drew pictures, and made dioramas.... During our study of Japan, one little boy got so interested in haiku that he borrowed my books on it and began writing it—in school and at home. His mom reported that he was driving them "cuckoo" with his "haiku."

Parents are very supportive of these efforts to change. Through formal and informal feedback, they report that their children have become more confident, more willing to take on challenges, more excited about school, and better at working independently and with others. About her son, one parent wrote on a survey that she saw "great improvement in all areas—from a student who was failing and had low self-esteem to an interested, highly motivated *learner*!"

One clear example stands out of the extent to which the school community has embraced the changes brought about by achievement goal theory. At a recent PTO meeting, two parents suggested adding competitive rewards to an annual school event. Other parents told them that Rawsonville is not about winning and losing. It is about every child having access to the same enriching and educational experiences. It is about *learning*. ■

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Rachel Buck Collopy is a doctoral student, Combined Program in Education and Psychology, 1400 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. **Theresa Green** is Principal, Rawsonville Elementary School, 3110 Grove Rd., Ypsilanti, MI 48198.