Improving Behavior and Self-Efficacy Beliefs In the Classroom

Through Cognitive-Behavior Modification

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Brief History
Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977, 1986) developed as a reaction to the behaviorism of the 1950’s. Behaviorism derived primarily from the work of B. F. Skinner, who manipulated the behaviors of white rats in laboratories. In the 1960’s, Skinner’s principles were applied to changing human behavior. Behavior theory is based on the belief that all human behavior is learned. Behaviorists are mainly concerned with observable, measurable events in the immediate environment. Behavior theory states that behavior followed by pleasant consequences tends to be repeated, and thereby learned. Behavior that is followed by unpleasant consequences tends not to be repeated, and so it is not learned (Alberto & Trautman, 1995; Rosenberg, Wilson, Maheady & Sindelar, 1992).

Bandura (1977) observed aggressive behavior in adolescents. He found behavior theory inadequate to explain the phenomenon. His initial theory of “reciprocal determinism” states that environment and behavior influence each other. Later, Bandura (1986) began to view personality as an interaction among three phenomena: environment, psychological processes (thoughts and beliefs), and behavior. Social learning was achieved by attending to and imitating desired behavior, which was modeled by a person, or by various communication media.

Here is how modeling works in the classroom. First, the student must pay attention to the model. Next, the student must remember what he or she has seen modeled. An attractive, same gender, high status, apparently competent model has the most influence on learning. The student reproduces the images remembered from the model, and translates them into actual behavior. Bandura (1977, 1986) found that repetition improved performance. So did imagining oneself in a successful performance. He found several phenomena that motivated student learning: reinforcement and punishment (classic behaviorism); promised reinforcement and punishment (incentives and threats or consequences); and vicarious reinforcement and punishment (seeing positive and negative examples modeled through various learning media). He divided expectations into two types: outcome expectations and efficacy expectations. Outcome expectations are anticipations that certain behavior will lead to certain outcomes. For example, the student who expects an A will probably work hard for it. Efficacy expectations involve the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain way. People tend to avoid tasks they believe exceed their capabilities. But they will perform activities they believe themselves capable of handling. Bandura’s theory also introduced the idea that individuals can observe, judge, self-reward, self-punish – and therefore self-modify – their own behavior. In the 1980’s, cognitive-behavior modification employed social learning theory to help individuals change beliefs and behavior in the classroom (Coleman & Webber, 2002).

Leading Scholars
Albert Ellis (1980), who is primarily credited with the development of cognitive psychotherapy, established a procedure to help individuals identify, challenge and change
their beliefs. For example, a student who believes she “always” fails “all” of her tests is not likely to study. However, if she can examine her thinking and find that she has passed some tests, and that she did not study for the ones she failed, she might change her belief. She might come to realize that she can pass a test if she studies. Pucci (1997) poses “three rational questions” (p. 49) for analyzing one’s own cognition.

1. Is my thinking based on fact?
2. Does my thinking help me achieve my goals?
3. Does my thinking help me feel the way I want to feel?

Note that cognitive-behavior modification is not “positive thinking” pie in the sky. It promotes rational thinking and achievable goals, without discouraging high expectations.

Self-counseling through metacognition is known as cognitive-behavior modification. As a teaching intervention, it can help students change specific, inappropriate cognition and behavior, and generalize learned appropriate behavior to other settings (Coleman & Webber, 2002; Ellis & Harper, 1997). The goal of cognitive-behavior modification is to impart the skills of self-instruction and self-management with minimal external control. So the student is taught to reward herself for appropriate behavior. In the classroom, cognitive-behavioral interventions can be adapted to the needs of teachers, individual students, and groups of students. These interventions target the inappropriate behavior of students who are identified with emotional and behavioral disturbance, and the learning disabilities that often co-exist with the label. While further research is still recommended, there is now a significant body of data based support for the effectiveness of the cognitive-behavioral model and its application in the classroom. It has been shown to improve both behavior and academic performance (Coleman & Webber, 2002).

One of the most effective and most utilized applications of self-management strategies for schools is called self-monitoring. Self-monitoring has been found to increase rates of effective learning behaviors such as attention to task, task completion, and the successful application of reading, writing and math strategies (Carr & Punzo, 1993). Self-monitoring is appropriate for use with students in general and special education classrooms (Coleman & Webber, 2002). Self-monitoring is the process of having a student record data about a target behavior for the purpose of changing the rate of that behavior. Self-monitoring may involve having students tally the number of actual behaviors, or mark time intervals during which a target behavior occurs or does not occur (Alberto & Trautman, 1995; O’Neill et al., 1997). The teaching of self-monitoring follows a typical cognitive-behavioral sequence: direct instruction, modeling, practice, and feedback, combined with external reinforcement (Webber, Scheurmann, McCall, & Coleman, 1993). When modeling a learning strategy, the teacher models the correct response. She may also model typical incorrect responses. Peer models may join the teacher in role-play, identifying and enacting correct and incorrect ways to behave. The teacher may also “think aloud,” speaking her thoughts as she demonstrates a correct procedure (Coleman & Webber, 2002).

Self-evaluation adds an important dimension to self-monitoring. Ideally, students may set their own standards, evaluate whether or not they have met their goals, and reward themselves if they have performed well. Students with learning difficulties tend to evaluate themselves too harshly. So the teacher may initially establish criteria, and have students compare their evaluations with hers, until they have mastered the technique. (Coleman & Webber, 2002).
Central Issues

The language of the No Child Left Behind Act (Heath, 2002) appears to encourage the inclusion of students with learning and behavior problems in general education classrooms and curriculum, and therefore in high-stakes math and reading tests. High-stakes tests are sources of anxiety, frustration and failure for many students with and without learning and behavioral disabilities. Increased pressure on academic performance may highlight and exacerbate children’s perceived inadequacy and potentially disruptive behavior. The application of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) and cognitive-behavior management (Alberto & Trautman, 1995; Ellis & Harper, 1997) in the classroom can facilitate improved self-efficacy, more appropriate behavior, increased academic success, and even foster social justice.

If students with learning and behavior difficulties are to gain positive, participatory access to the general curriculum, both teachers and students must learn to modify their behaviors and enhance their self-efficacy. Teachers may utilize cognitive-behavior modification to learn how to share leadership roles and responsibilities. Meaningful learning can be added to the “drill and kill” curriculum by incorporating cognitive-behavior modification to teach goal attainment and enhance self-efficacy beliefs, focusing on high-stakes academic goals in the process. Students can learn to increase their expectations for success, and reward themselves for both social and academic achievements. Teachers can utilize cognitive-behavior modification to modify the belief that “drill and kill” is an insurmountable obstacle to creativity and autonomy. In curriculum development, cognitive-behavior modification allows creativity in choice of models, role-play, instruments of self-evaluation, and goal setting. Effective instructional leaders encourage and empower teachers to examine their own beliefs. Cognitive-behavior modification through self-monitoring encourages and facilitates reflective practice. Instructional supervision for the 21st Century may be positively transformed through the granting of increased autonomy and higher expectations for teachers and their students. Reflective practice and self-change through cognitive-behavior modification can help accomplish this transformation. By consciously examining and changing their beliefs, both teachers and students can learn to recognize social justice and injustice, and translate critical pedagogy from theory into practice.
References


**Resources**


*Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9*(3), 75-78.

A discussion of social cognitive theory and personal self-efficacy applied to the growing interdependence of human functioning. Analyzes the nature of perceived collective efficacy and its centrality in how people live their lives. Applicable to motivational commitment, resilience to adversity, and performance accomplishments.


Longitudinal research supporting robust contributions of early prosocial behavior to children’s developmental trajectories in academic and social domains. Possible mediating processes by which prosocialness may affect academic achievement and other socially desirable developmental outcomes are proposed.


The ultimate social cognitive theory fest and Bandura-Rama! Articles, bibliographies, biographies, videos – and if you wish you may order an autographed picture of Dr. Bandura. Downloadable power point presentations (promise you will cite their creators)! This website is comprehensive and scholarly, produced by Emory University. Have fun with Albert and Bobo! This is a teaching, research and dissertation resource that manages to be highly entertaining.

A comprehensive manual on how to assess and teach students with emotional/behavioral disorders and solve problems. Instructional techniques rather than curriculum. Pro.ed is a prime source for books about children with disabilities, and special education. You can purchase from their catalog, or pick up books directly from their Austin headquarters. I often refer parents to pro.ed and their publications.


The Martin Seligman Research Alliance is a non-profit organization at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Seligman conducts research on positive psychology, learned helplessness, depression, optimism and pessimism. The website has information about grants, conferences, courses, teaching resources, positive psychology questionnaires, an excellent bibliography of books and articles, and a thorough lesson plan for teaching positive psychology in high school.

Snyder, C. R. Web site: http://www.psych.ku.edu/faculty/rsnyder/Default.htm

Dr. Snyder is the Wright Distinguished Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Kansas-Lawrence. His large body of research concerns the development and refinement of a cognitive theory of hope (conceptualized goals). He and his colleagues are working on defining, measuring, and exploring hope, including its role in academics. Books, chapters, articles by Dr. Snyder and his students.


Describes a conceptual model for viewing the trend in youth violence in the United States. Suggests programs, strategies and activities to prevent violence.


Characteristics of successful teachers, that may be improved through cognitive-behavior modification. JO WEBBER, PhD, is a professor of special education at Southwest Texas State University. Her current interests include advocacy for students with challenging behavior, special education applications of cognitive interventions, and the legal ramifications of level systems.