Goal Selection

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

High school students (including those with learning disabilities) perform better when their goals are self-selected rather than assigned. Student participation during goal selection (a) improves performance outcomes, (b) may affect performance by mediating the individual’s sense of goal commitment, and (c) may enhance the sense of potential accomplishment with which students approach learning tasks. Research supports the importance of goals in mediating all students’ performance.

Description of Strategy

As part of this strategy, the teacher first establishes a set of clear goals (from which the student may later select) that are within the learners reach yet difficult. This set of goals should include: an unambitious goal (which requires students to maintain baseline performance), a moderately ambitious goal (a reasonable goal that sets performance at about 50% more than baseline), and an ambitious goal (requires students to double their baseline performance). Prior to each task or group of tasks, the teacher presents the student with the set of goals, and asks the student to choose his or her goal. The student may change their goal each time the choices are presented.

Research Evidence

At least one randomized controlled trial supports this strategy. One study that looked at the effectiveness of goal structures and performance contingencies with 20 learning disabled high school students. Students were randomized into one of four groups: assigned goal/noncontingent group, assigned goal/contingent group, self-selected goal/noncontingent group, or self-selected goal/contingent group. The study found that the contingency did not have an effect of performance, though that may be due to the nature of the reward not being appealing enough. The study found that students who where given a choice of goals performed statistically significantly better than students with assigned goals.

Sample Studies Supporting this Strategy


Twenty learning disabled high school pupils who had active individualized education plan goals for improving computational skills were assigned randomly to goal conditions and, within goal conditions, to contingency groups. Mathematics computation performance was measured pre-, mid-, and post-treatment. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) indicated that students who selected their goals performed better than students with assigned goals.

Additional Resources