Collaborative Group Work and Social Motivation

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Preservation of Tooth Structure

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Abstract

There are two common themes apparent in the literature surrounding social motivation and group work. One explores the tendency of children to make excuses for unacceptable social behavior. The other theme focuses on the making of meaning in the context of mathematical learning. Both ideas allude to how the environment in which children are raised influences their responses to learning. A review of these two themes and their social implications provides insights into best educational practices.
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Introduction

Children learn very early how to protect themselves and their peers by making excuses that shift blame from themselves when possible. Shifting responsibility from oneself, especially to an unavoidable event, creates less tension for the target audience. Students use different excuses for the same achievement or lack of achievement, depending on to whom they are talking. Teachers expect effort from students, but peers may not want to hear that motivation in their peers is important. Two types of excuse-making among elementary students will be here reviewed, followed by a discussion of the academic, social, and educational implications for each type.

Review of Literature

There are a number of low-level excuses among elementary students. Junoven\(^1\) identifies one such type of excuse known as scapegoating. He argues that sometimes excuses are unwelcome, and a student may benefit more from a self-deprecating truth than from excuses, as in, “I am sorry. I forgot all about that paper until two days ago, and so I am handing it in late. I take full responsibility for my error.” A teacher may be more likely to give this student another chance than one who has all sorts
of external excuses for the assignment being late.

Graham and Weiner\textsuperscript{2} also deal with excuse-making among children, focusing on aggressive and non-aggressive African-American boys. In their study the boys learned early that in many instances making excuses is more socially acceptable than telling the truth, both to spare the feelings of their peers as well as to protect themselves from the wrath of their mothers. Graham and Weiner\textsuperscript{2} found that aggressive boys were less likely to make excuses, either because they seemed to care less for the feelings of their peers, or because they did not understand how they could affect the feelings of their peers. They make the interesting point that children who are raised in stricter households are less likely to give excuses, and are often more aggressive.\textsuperscript{2} This brings up a chicken-and-egg question about parenting styles and child behavior.

Perhaps the article by Wertsch et al\textsuperscript{3} can be seen as a transition between the excuse-making behavior of children and the making of mathematical meaning explored elsewhere. Wertsch et al primarily explicate others’ literacy research and the psychological processes associated with it. They examined schooled and non-schooled participants and how they differed in performing operations, classifying the differences as empirical
or theoretical. Schooled participants were more logical, and used information provided, and thus were able to be more theoretical. The non-schooled subjects provided empirical information themselves. As we shall see, these differences will be useful in looking at another study’s subjects who created their own rules and mores based on their own values and preexisting, as well as emerging, knowledge.4

Discussion

The making of meaning in the context of mathematical learning provided one major theme seen in the work of several researchers. Voigt5 calls his perspective “interactionist,” focusing his attention primarily on theoretical constructs. He points out that the teacher and students have unspoken assumptions about how to make mathematical meaning, but may, in fact, be vague or misunderstood, such as when students use fingers to explain number systems.5 This idea captures the essence of most of the theorists on excuse-giving among children.

Several of the researchers here reviewed disagree when it comes to definition of terms. For example Graham and Weiner, when discussing the word “simple,” wrote: “[D]escribing a specific method as ‘simple’ does not only ascribe meaning to the
method but at the same time gives meaning to the context of mathematical argumentation."² The major point of the article may be this: the student’s thinking and the mathematical theme develop reflexively, and the student’s learning contributes to the evolution of the theme that contributes to the student’s thinking.

Komiko et al⁶ were more interested in synthesizing ideas, bringing the various researchers together under one theoretical umbrella. They demonstrated their theory that “goals are rooted in children’s conceptual constructions, and analyses of processes of goal formation must be grounded in a treatment on children’s understandings”⁶ by using the Treasure Hunt game. Voigt⁵ parallels this in a way by his assertion that theory may fly out of the window in the face of practice. But, importantly, as Wertsch et al³ pointed out:

The interesting piece of the Saxe and Bermudez paper is not only that the children created their own mathematical environments, interactively, but that, in contrast with most mathematical classrooms, recognizing multiple perspectives is an intrinsic part of the classroom. The students were able to recognize different perspectives and
various paths to arrive at the correct answer.

This is indeed a refreshing thought, because it is not how one generally thinks about mathematics, but it is a goal of most teachers in classrooms. Here is a lovely melding of theory and practice.

Conclusion

The body of morality literature that views excuse-making as a question of incidences due to deteriorating morality is certainly important, but it must be supplemented with theorists who, while exploring incidences, also seeks to advocate for formative instruction. In addition we should not forget the work of Vygotsky and Britton and others, as well as morality theorists such as Kohlberg and Gilligan. Perhaps with a wider context of theory to inform our education of students, and a greater understanding of their morality and intent, we can share the vast world of intellectual material with our students, allowing them to join the conversation of the academy more effectively.


