ATTRIBUTIONS DEFINED

Attributions refer to one’s beliefs concerning the outcomes of one’s actions. Attributions are our perceptions about the causes of our success and failure (Weiner, 2005). Stable attributions are those that refer to an individual’s personal attributes—internal attributions. External attributions refer to forces external to the individual. Within internal attributions there are stable attributions—those about ability—and there are those that are seen as temporal—dealing with the person’s efforts. Attributions that are seen as stable are believed to be less alterable than are temporal attributions. It is best to attribute success to internal temporal factors such as effort. Bad outcomes should be interpreted as alterable (Bryan, 1998).

Attributions are individuals’ explanatory beliefs about why things happen to them. Teachers must stress accurate, facilitative attributions throughout the day and to teach their students to do the same. Facilitative attributions associate student success with controllable factors such as effort, the correct use of strategies, and persistence. Facilitative attributions are statements that the student was successful because he or she stuck to it or followed a cue card or tried very hard (Margolis & McCabe, 2003).
LIVE ACTION FROM THE CLASSROOM

“I hate math, and you can’t make me do it. Math is just too hard, and I’m stupid in it.” The words come out of Jason’s mouth during the first week of school.

Mr. Sands is a fourth grade teacher and prides himself on how well he teaches mathematics and reading and how well he motivates his students in math. This year, Jason is in his class, and Mr. Sands is frustrated with Jason’s comments about his own stupidity and his hatred toward math. He wants to instill in Jason a sense that, if Jason works hard at his math, he can do well.

Mr. Sands decides that he will work with Jason on his math. He reviews Jason’s records and finds that Jason is achieving at a third grade level in math. He knows he will have to work hard to give Jason work at his achievement level and work to build his skills—actually, 10 other students in his class are achieving at approximately the same level.

Mr. Sands provides Jason with math problems—he uses concrete objects to show how to do the problems, and he provides step-by-step directions and many examples. He starts out with a few problems for Jason to do at one time. When Jason completes those, Mr. Sands praises him and says, “Jason, you worked hard at that—your efforts really paid off.” Jason is pleased with himself.

Mr. Sands slowly increases the number of math problems that Jason does—frequently praising Jason and attributing Jason’s success to his own efforts. Jason becomes more confident in his math skills and beams when Mr. Sands praises his efforts. Jason has gained more confidence in his ability.

Within 3 months, Mr. Sands notices that Jason is helping other students with their math. Mr. Sands has to chuckle to himself because one day he overhears Jason talking to another student and praising that student—attributing the other student’s success to his efforts and hard work. By the end of the year, Jason has made significant progress and is at grade level. Furthermore, Jason likes math.

Read on to see how this strategy is used at the secondary level. Mrs. Ebert has a young lady, Carrie Ann, in her high school English class. Mrs. Ebert is really impressed with Carrie Ann’s writing talent. She is very creative when she does write. However, Mrs. Ebert has a great deal of difficulty getting Carrie Ann to write. Carrie Ann only completes her assignments about 50 percent of the time. Mrs. Ebert talks to Carrie about what is going on. She shares with Carrie that she is really impressed with her writing talent. Carrie Ann says the stories that she did turn in were just luck and she really doesn’t have any talent at all.

Mrs. Ebert explains to Carrie that she would like to help Carrie develop her talent, but she needs Carrie to try. In class the next day, Mrs. Ebert gives a creative writing assignment about a topic that she knows Carrie is...
interested in. Carrie has told her she wants to be a fashion designer, so the assignment is for students to write about a fashion trend they have observed. She tells the students they have to write at least three paragraphs. Because the assignment is short and is about an interest of Carrie’s, Carrie completes the assignment and receives an A. Mrs. Ebert tells Carrie that she did well because she put forth the effort, and she explains to Carrie that she knows she will continue to put forth the effort.

In the case of Carrie, Mrs. Ebert knew it was important to ensure Carrie’s success and then to attribute Carrie’s success to her effort.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS**

There is a body of research that says that students who are able to attribute their success to their role or effort make better academic and behavioral progress than those students who attribute their success to outside forces.

When students attributed their successful school performance to personal, controllable causes such as effort, they enhance their work and increase the probability of their success. In one study, hope was found to have direct and indirect impact through attributions on successful school performance (Stephanou, 2012).

In a study in 2011 with African American adolescents, it was found that boys were more likely than girls to attribute math successes to high ability and to attribute English failures to low ability. When students believed that their failure was due to low ability, students may be less persistent and may believe that their low ability will limit the positive effects of effort on their part (Swinton, Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, & Okeke-Adeyanju, 2011).

Attributing task failure to one’s abilities can result in maladaptive outcomes because ability is considered a stable causal factor that students are unable to control. In one study, individuals knew that attributing their success to ability was maladaptive, but they couldn’t avoid engaging in such attributions (Sakaki & Murayama, 2013).

In an early study by Okolo in 1992, computer-assisted instruction was utilized with attribution versus neutral feedback for students learning multiplication facts. Ability attribution feedback was given to the students after each set of five problems—statements such as “You really know these” (p. 329) and effort feedback such as “You are really trying hard or “You can get it if you keep trying” (p. 329). Students in the attribution training group made significant improvements in multiplication performance compared to the students who received neutral feedback (Okolo, 1992).

Bryan (1998) found that students with learning disabilities are more internal in their attributions for their failure but are less likely than their normal-achieving peers to be internal in their attributions for success. In other words,
if these children are successful, they attribute it to someone being nice to them or the work being easy. When they do badly, they attribute it to the fact that they are not smart. Students without learning disabilities tend to attribute failure to lack of effort (Hallahan, Gajar, Cohne, & Tarver, 1978).

Attributions are best if the teacher gives the student the appropriate conditions for students to learn—conditions under which the child’s efforts pay off. This includes being sure that the work is at the correct level of difficulty, teachers must be ready to give help when the student needs it, and teachers must remember that ability can change incrementally (Weiner, 2005). Increases in ability have happened in part because of effort.

What is the impact of attributions on behavior? In a study by Anderson, Horowitz, and French (1983), it was found that children and adults who were lonely attributed their social success to external and unstable causes and their social failure to internal and stable causes.

When students attribute their behavior problems to hostile intent toward peers, there is a strong association with aggressive behavior (Lambert & Miller, 2010).

Bryan (1998) found that, rather than spending time building student self-concept, educators should focus their efforts on teaching students to attribute their success to their efforts.

Another study measured how teachers’ feedback impacted student performance. Stipek and Daniels (1988) found that teachers’ feedback did impact the performance of kindergaten children. In classes where normative evaluations were given such as graded assignments, best papers placed on bulletin boards, or positive or negative feedback after tests, those children rated their competence lower than those children in classes where normative evaluation was not emphasized. In those classes, comments as opposed to grades were given on assignments and on report cards, comparisons with others were discouraged, and children were encouraged to seek help from their classmates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Non-examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You did well because you worked hard.</td>
<td>You did OK because I taught you well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You listened carefully, and it paid off.</td>
<td>Jenny helped you with the key points of the lecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is apparent that you studied and read a great deal of information about the Vietnam War.</td>
<td>I am glad I provided you with the notes you needed to learn about the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You showed a lot of effort on this assignment.</td>
<td>That work was really easy.</td>
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BASIC DIRECTIONS TO FOLLOW WHEN UTILIZING THIS INTERVENTION

Educators should always attribute student performance to those factors that are within the child’s control (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013). When students succeed, it is important to accentuate what the student did that achieved his or her success. As an example, if students did well on a math test, the success should be attributed to the fact that they really put forth a great deal of effort or studied hard or used the skills that they had learned.

1. Assess the student’s level in the particular academic task to determine whether you are providing assignments that are at the appropriate instructional level.

2. Engage the student in an academic task at the appropriate instructional level.

3. Give the student interpretive feedback about the causes of performance—“You have really been working hard” or “All your effort on this task has really made a difference.”

4. Encourage the student to make the same interpretation. Make sure that the student makes statements that attribute success to his or her efforts. Agree and reinforce the student when he or she makes attribution statements.

5. Model the use of attribution statements when you are completing a task that the student observes; for example, “I am so glad you enjoyed doing our geography lesson. I really worked hard to plan it for you. It was sure worth my effort to see all of you do so well.”

6. Give yourself credit for matching the students’ performance level with the work you give to the students.

7. When collecting data, you will want to collect it both on how you use attribution statements with your students and also on how your students use attribution statements about their own efforts. To monitor your use of attribution statements, you can simply keep a tally sheet on your desk or in your pocket and mark down how many times you make statements that attribute the success of your students to their efforts. Look at your tally sheet at the end of the day to see how you have done and vow that you will increase the statements the next day. Remember that, when we are modeling the use of those statements, we are showing students how they can use such statements.
When collecting data on how your students use attribution statements, you can keep a sticky note on each student’s desk or a small sheet of paper with the name of each day of the week on each student’s desk. Each time you hear the student make a statement about how his or her success is attributed to effort, you can place a mark on the sheet, and either at the end of the day or the end of the week, you can review it with individual students and keep the data on how they are doing on its use. Remember that it will be important that you have taught your students how to use the statements and provided them with examples.

### Working With Parents to Promote the Use of Attribution Statements

When working with parents and establishing a positive rapport, use attribution statements with them as well as with the students.

"I admire your efforts in getting your child to school every day."

"The help you gave your child with his homework really made a difference in his grade. I appreciate your effort."

"You really worked hard to get to this conference."

These are examples of attribution statements you can make to parents. Praise their efforts to cooperate with you to achieve success for their child. By modeling such statements, the parents learn how to use the comments at home with their child.

Stress with parents how they can use attribution statements with their child when they are helping the child with homework. You can suggest that the parents praise the child when the child is working hard on his or her homework by saying, “You are really working hard on that homework. I am so proud of your efforts.”

When you write notes home to the parents, use attribution statements about the child: “Bill really put forth the effort on his math today and got an A on the assignment” or “Jim stuck with his science project until he got it done.”

### Troubleshooting if the Intervention Is Not Working

1. The work I am giving may be too difficult for the child and is so frustrating that the child is unable to achieve success. The child then sees that, even if he or she tries, he or she is unable to complete the task.

2. Other students may be putting the student down, and I am not hearing their comments. They may be sabotaging the success of the student. It is critical that I listen for such negative comments and not allow those. I need to continually encourage each student’s efforts.
3. In the process of providing attributions to one student, I may be forgetting to use these statements with all of my students.

4. I need to consider whether I am matching the work I am giving the student with the specific needs of the student—visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic.

A Checklist to Help You Remember

✓ Do I tune in to what my students are saying about why they succeed or don’t succeed?

✓ Do I frequently tell my students that their success is due to their efforts?

✓ Do I chart my positive attribution statements to my students to see if I am increasing my use?

✓ Do I model the use of attributions by attributing my good work to my effort?

✓ Do I reinforce my students verbally when I hear them attributing their success to their effort?

✓ Do I understand that the student may have been in the habit of attributing success or lack of it to outside forces and it may take a period of time to change the behavior?