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Strategies for successful learning

PFL-English

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Abstract

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to describe the process of research action throughout the past two years. It first deals with the initial situation I was faced with when I started to teach two parallel classes - a fact that promised many advantages until I realized how different, if not to say opposing, these two classes were. Being blessed with a class that was extremely enthusiastic, desiring to learn, soaking up knowledge, the gap between them and a class that was quiet, introverted and seemingly not motivated to learn, was not to be ignored. Being the same teacher in both classes, teaching approximately the same material with the same enthusiasm, I was struck by the diverse attitudes I was confronted with.

After moderate success in motivating the latter class to talk more within lessons, but realizing, quiet as they were, they did not have an issue to present a topic in front of the class, I became more interested in the reasons why the two classes were so different in terms of class atmosphere, motivation to study, learning outcome and success. This made me want to find out about different learning and success strategies students pursue on their way to graduate from high school.

With the help of questionnaires and interviews, backed up with acknowledged theories in scientific literature, I aimed at finding out more about students' strategies and the reasons for the opposing learning atmosphere in both classes.

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1. Introduction

I have been teaching at Bundesgymnasium and Bundesrealgymnasium Heustadelgasse in Vienna's twenty-second district for eight years, enough time that allows me to say that the school provides many opportunities for students and teachers to learn, teach and develop themselves. The atmosphere of the school can be described as a very open one, reflecting the architecture of the school that is characterized by its glass facade.

Fig 1. Bundesgymnasium and Bundesrealgymnasium Heustadegasse (www.heustadelgasse.at)

Within the last eight years I have been faced with a great variety of students - some of whom were extremely motivated and most obviously found pleasure in studying, learning and succeeding; some of whom were motivated, but were perfectly fine with mediocre grades; and some of whom were completely demotivated and struggled to keep up with the requirements to pass each school year. At times the reasons for their battle were apparent, lying in different goals they had for themselves, difficult family situations, or other personal reasons that kept them from developing their full potential. Paying more attention and trying to motivate those individual students more has mostly proven successful. However, when I was faced with a very passive class, rather than just certain students in a class, that just did not want to talk (neither to me nor to any other teachers), be motivated nor drawn into an active learning process, I had to reevaluate my teaching methods, but also wanted to find out what distinguished their motives, goals and strategies from their parallel class that were the complete opposite of them, namely eager to learn, to understand and to succeed.

The course PFL provided an opportunity for me to do extensive research on the strategies students have developed over years enabling them to learn, to study and ultimately to successfully pass school, but also finding out about learning barriers that keeps them from doing so.

2. Process leading up to research questions

2.1 Initial situation

Teaching parallel classes has many advantages: the same material can be used in both classes, lesson plans can be improved right away as methods can be altered immediately if the outcome of one lesson was not as expected. This way, the learning outcome can be maximized, students can read, correct work from a different group and thus gain an insight into the work of a different group, the teacher can evaluate teaching methods and material better because two groups of the same age are able to give feedback on the same things. Advantages seem to be never-ending.

But where do the disadvantages lurk? What happens if a teacher is faced with two groups, whom s/he is supposed to be teaching the same content, but realizes, that the two groups are inherently different and are really not comparable? Does the teacher then tend to speak about a "good" and a "bad" class? Are comparisons relevant or even justifiable?

I have found myself in such a position, teaching English in a 'Gymnasium'-class and in a 'Realgymnasium'-class. I have compared, contrasted, have tried to change and improve teaching methods, have talked to students of both classes, but nevertheless was faced

- with a class (8B) that is the dream of every teacher: Students were motivated, eager to learn, soaking up information and knowledge as if nothing else in the world existed, happy to talk and discuss, critical towards different issues, not hesitant in any way to voice their own opinion.

- and with a class (8D) that was the exact opposite: Students were reluctant to say a word, preferring the easy way out, doing as little as possible, just enough to pass the course, not wanting to state their opinions, showing hardly any motivation at all, giving the impression that nothing actually interested them, and, probably worst of all, neither wanted to talk nor discuss.

The latter aspect, namely the hesitation to talk in front of others, was the object of my last study. I set myself the goal, to incorporate different teaching methods to increase each student's talking time during the lesson. I was eager to create situations in which they felt comfortable, so they would overcome their inhibition to talk and thus increase their confidence when speaking. The outcome of the study was that speaking time during the lessons did increase, but not as much as I had hoped. Furthermore, students of 8D were still less motivated to speak than students of 8B. I came to the conclusion that acceptance of a rather quiet class from my side was needed.

2.2 Presentation techniques

After finishing my first study, I decided to focus on presentation and communication techniques to provide opportunities for the students to prepare for the oral A-levels, in which they were supposed to present one question. The Vienna School Board had decided that all students should present one of the questions during the oral A-levels. Students could decide in which subject they wanted to take on this extra challenge. They were advised to choose a subject they felt particularly comfortable in. The teacher then decided whether the student should present his / her special topic or a core question. During the presentation the students had to stand in front of the committee and present the answer while visualizing certain aspects on a flip chart. Knowing about the students' reluctance to speak in front of a group I thought I had found a topic for my next study. My plan was to teach presentation techniques and provide opportunities for the students to practice presentations. I was going to evaluate in how far such practice affected the students' self-confidence and ability to speak with poise.

My first step towards the project was to ask students to prepare an 8-minute-presentation on celebrities, focusing on a special achievement of the celebrity, such as humanitarian aid for example. During the presentations I realized that the students, quiet as they were, did not really have any issues when it came to doing a presentation. Even the most introverted and withdrawn students presented quite confidently. Some showed uncertainties, but they seemed to be based on insufficient preparation rather than lack of confidence. Overall they appeared unperturbed and these impressions were reflected in students' memos, where they stated that they felt confident and even enjoyed doing the presentations. They also stated that although they felt anxious about the upcoming A-levels, they saw their challenge rather in managing the load of learning matter, rather than presenting themselves at the A-levels.

These statements made me rethink my project, which by then seemed to be superfluous already.

At that point I returned to the issue of teaching two parallel classes. One teacher, two classes, completely different atmospheres, attitudes, learning success. Considering ultimately teaching the best, most talkative class one can think of next to the most challenging and most quiet class, I tried to find reasons, starting out with my own attitude towards the classes.

I expected excellent learning behavior from students of 8B, which was another factor why they tried so hard as they neither wanted to disappoint themselves, their parents nor their teacher(s). On the other hand, my expectations from students of 8D had declined over the course of time, which probably made it even more difficult for students, as they learned to live with meeting low expectations and thus did not push themselves to more success.

How did students see themselves, what were their goals and with which strategies did they try to reach those goals? These questions along with wanting

to find out what really differentiated students of both classes and which strategies they pursued, was the starting point of developing my topic of research.

2.3 Research questions

Thus, following research questions were formulated:

- ✦ Which strategies do students employ to be able to study successfully?
- ✦ What basic conditions must be given for learning to take place?

3. Research instruments

Action research implies the use of adequate research instruments. Altrichter and Posch (2007, p. 150f) have introduced a variety of methods to gather relevant material. For my research I chose the questionnaire and the personal interview.

The questionnaire has the advantage that it is seemingly faster and easier and more readily to use, but also has the disadvantage that the interviewer cannot react immediately to the response of the interviewee (ibid. p. 167). I have nevertheless used the questionnaire to collect more data. However, wanting to be able to ask more detailed questions about the answers given on the questionnaire, I asked students to note down their names (on a voluntary basis), so I could come back to them if the need arose. Most students were happy to do so.

Following the questionnaires, I asked five students for a lengthier interview, which aims at understanding the thoughts, attitudes and position that constitute one's behavior. Although time-consuming, the interviews were of great importance, value and interest, as open questions within the focused interview provided an opportunity for the interviewee to express his / her opinion on a certain matter without being influenced by already given answers. According to Altrichter & Posch (2007, p. 153f) the choice of interview partners depends on the problem that is to be investigated. In my research I deemed it necessary to interview students who differed in their success at school. I chose two students who have excelled throughout their school career including the A-levels, one student who has passed with satisfactory grades and two students who failed twelfth grade in 5-6 different subjects and were thus not admitted to the A-levels. The interviews were carried out individually.

Additionally, I interviewed eight students from each class on specific matters.

Considering mentioned factors in students' learning process and success, I divided the following chapters accordingly, providing additional theoretical background.

4. Strategies for successful learning

4.1 Success and failure

Success and failure are two dominant factors in the learning process. Reaching a specific target usually means a feeling of pride, whereas failing to reach the set goal often results in shame and frustration. Targets, goals and/or standards can be set by a person him / herself, but also by others. In a test the requirements and thus the standards are set by the teacher, while the students have their own goals, which can range from passing an exam to reaching all points within the exam. No matter who sets the standards, it lies in the nature of humans to want to succeed.

While Atkinson bases his theory of motivation and achievement on the anticipation of success and failure, Weiner focuses on the underlying motive of people to understand the reasons for their actions. One tries to explain success and failure and wants to find their causes. According to Weiner, different causes influence the expectation of success and failure as well as the emotional reaction and the following attitude towards achievement (cf. Schlag, 2009, p. 88).

In the interviews students who often faced failure stated that it was difficult for them to motivate themselves to learn again after they had tried, but failed. They said that they felt overpowered by the bad feeling of having failed, especially when they had the feeling that they had learned enough. One person specifically mentioned his disappointment with his grades he got throughout the year as one of the reasons for having failed twelfth grade. He claimed that because of consistent failures, his demotivation became stronger than his original goal to pass the class and the A-levels.

On the other hand, students who mostly faced success were only more motivated when they did not do so well on a particular test. They felt the urge to show themselves and the world that they could do it better.

What becomes apparent is that failure in students who tend to struggle more can result in demotivation to learn, which can ultimately lead to another failure, whereas students who tend to succeed face failure with disappointment first, followed by the urge to do better on the following test.

In this context I think it relevant to also consider the teacher's point of view. In my experience teachers tend to talk about achievements of a class rather than of achievements of an individual student. What can happen is that teachers transport a feeling of disappointment if many students have not done well in a class, which not only enforces the failure of students who did not do well, but also diminishes the success of students in that class. All students interviewed said that they were significantly affected by the opinion a teacher has of them and their performance. Therefore, it is necessary to place high importance on enabling success among students and to focus on success rather than failure when giving feedback.

4.2 Learning styles

When referring to learning styles one usually thinks of the visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles - a categorization that has its roots in Neuro-linguistic programming. While visual learners tend to visualize new information, preferring visual aids such as power point presentations, diagrams or handouts, auditory learners learn best through listening to speeches, lectures or their own recordings, while kinesthetic learners prefer to learn through experience, such as doing experiments and projects.

Another model needs to be mentioned in this context, namely Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences which looks at intelligence from various modalities, rather than seeing intelligence as dominated by a single general ability. He defines eight different intelligences: the verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligence (cf. Gardner, 2002, p. 45ff).

In my research I found that the knowledge of one's learning type is linked to success in learning and performing in tests. All students who said they did not know whether they were visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners were students who tended to struggle more with school and who did not pass twelfth grade. One student asserted that he studied intensely for two to three weeks for a test, but nevertheless failed many of the tests, which suggests that not knowing his best learning style kept him from learning effectively. He mentioned that some years ago he tried to learn vocabulary by recording and listening to them. This strategy worked quite well, but still he quit doing so as he claimed it was too much work to record everything that he needed to learn. It seemed that he preferred sticking to a learning style that was ineffective rather than investing more time in the preparation for studying (in this case recording the material that needed to be studied) which would most likely have led to better results. Furthermore, each failure to pass a test led to more demotivation.

Teachers are important in providing opportunities for the students to find and accept their learning styles. During the preparation lessons for the A-levels one student, wearing big headphones around his neck, never bothered to take notes on what was being discussed. I wondered how he would manage the A-levels as he appeared not to be working and concentrating in class. However, I was completely misled in my perception. He did superbly well during the A-levels, knew his questions in depth and was able to discuss them with aptitude. Asking him about his preferred learning style he said that he remembered best when listening intently. He said that he did not feel the need to take any notes as that only distracted him from listening. This was the point when I realized how often one expects students to behave in a certain way, not considering the underlying reasons. I had thought that he was not working, just because he did not take any notes, when in reality he was participating and learning perfectly well.

4.3 Time management

Trying to find out more about students' learning strategies I handed out questionnaires (see App. 1) on time management and tried to deduce a link between the ability to handle one's time management and subsequent learning success. However, the questionnaire itself did not prove to be as useful as I had hoped, so I followed it up with short interviews.

According to the questionnaire, there was a slight tendency that students who could manage their time well were more successful in their studies than students who were 'hopeless' when it came to dealing with time, but there were also many cases in which the test showed rather mediocre time management abilities, while students were quite successful in learning. What turned out to be significant in the interviews however, was that pupils who had planned their learning time got less stressed out while preparing for an exam than students who neither made a gross nor a detailed learning plan.

Hofmann and Löhle (2004, p. 83) place a huge importance on making many small breaks rather than a few long breaks as they argue that most people are only able to concentrate on a certain learning task for 30 minutes. They maintain that it has proven of value to actively learn for 5 minutes, followed by a very short break of half a minute; after 10-20 minutes of active learning one should take a break of 2-3 minutes, and after 45 minutes of active learning a pause of 15 minutes is appropriate. Although this theory seems plausible, the interviewed students have very different break-patterns that do not directly relate to their success in learning. Very good students mentioned anything from taking many small breaks of a few minutes each, to many long breaks of 20 minutes and more. What they did have in common, though, was that they were aware of the necessity of taking breaks and did not see them as a waste of time. Avoiding breaks because of fear of 'wasting time' was mentioned by several students whose learning performance was not very good. This lead me to conclude that although there is an advised learning-break pattern one should follow, it is more important to allow oneself to take a break, knowing of the positive affect a break has on the learning outcome.

5. Motivation

Motivation has been defined in many different ways, all seemingly straightforward and clear. Such as:

> Motivation is the driving force by which humans achieve their goals. [...] According to various theories, motivation may be rooted in a basic need to minimize physical pain and maximize pleasure, or it may include specific needs such as eating and resting, or a desired object, goal, state of being, ideal, or it may be attributed to less-apparent reasons such as altruism, selfishness, morality, or avoiding morality.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motivation)

However, it is not as easy as it seems. Many factors influence us in our motivation to do something. One differentiates for example between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated actions are carried out because of the actions themselves. It's not the product of the action that is motivating, but the fun and interest that is triggered while carrying out the action. An intrinsically motivated person completes the task because of the task itself, trying to prolong the action rather than ending it. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand is based on outside consequences, meaning if one is extrinsically motivated, s/he will do the task to experience positive or to avoid negative consequences. Here the end product is of importance rather than the action itself (cf. Schlag, 2009, p. 21).

Csikszentmihalyi (2005, p. 58) compares intrinsic motivation with a flow experience, in which the person becomes one with the task s/he is carrying out. Here, one is completely absorbed in the action, leaving no room for distinguishing between oneself and the outside world.

When it comes to studying, intrinsic motivation is generally considered to be the superior type of motivation as it usually yields a higher success rate because students are dedicated to studying and are thus able to concentrate a lot better. This point was confirmed in the following example:

A seemingly unmotivated and uninterested pupil who seemed very bored throughout a normal school day was highly dedicated, motivated and concentrated in the afternoon or evening when doing something that corresponded with his own goals: playing poker. In an interview with this student who failed twelfth grade in seven different subjects, and who hardly ever showed enthusiasm or motivation for the matters taught in school, talked about his passion poker with such a glow in his eyes, displaying profound dedication and interest that made it apparent that he did not suffer from a lack of ability to concentrate and learn, but from a general lack of interest and motivation to study school subjects.

Coming back to the definition of motivation, it is to say that motives are the reasons for doing something, while motivation stands for all motives in a specific situation. Those motives can be of very different, even contradicting origin. The resulting motivational conflict of contradicting motives can either be the *appetence-aversion conflict*, in which one is attracted to something inviting, yet forbidding, or the *appetence-appetence conflict,* in which one needs to choose between two positive alternatives, or the *aversion-aversion conflict,* in which the choices are two negative options. Thus, it is ultimately necessary to consider a differentiated motivational basis (cf. Schlag, 2009, p. 12). The student mentioned above named graduating from high school successfully as his goal, knew that he needed to study to reach his goal, but was often held back from doing so because he found studying tiresome and not as rewarding as playing poker. The appetence-aversion conflict is apparent in his case. He also mentioned that he knew he had to learn, but really did not want to, which shows his extrinsic, rather than intrinsic motivation. He feels obliged to reach the goal, rather than enjoying the path to the goal, which can also be called negative motivational goal.

Negative motivational goals go hand in hand with the inner conflict of "I do not want to, but I have to," which prevent learning to take place. In yet another interview a student who also did not pass twelfth grade said that he was never really interested in learning English, because he did not see any purpose in knowing English. He stated that he and his family never went abroad, that he did not know anyone who did not speak German and that he thus never needed to speak English. His motivation to study the language was very limited and definitely did not come from within, which made it difficult for him to concentrate and study. The turning point for his motivation came when he travelled to Italy and was faced with having to speak a different language. He recounted having spoken quite a bit of English then and said he really enjoyed being able to converse in a different language. That was the point when he realized the necessity and importance of knowing English and it was also the point when studying became easier. Now he can even imagine going abroad for a semester. The "I do not want to, but I have to" conflict was thus resolved by literally finding the sense in studying English.

This statement of having experienced the significance of being able to speak English and the resulting motivation to improve made me reflect and question my possibilities as a teacher to motivate students, as that can only be done extrinsically. I realized the importance of providing situations in which the significance of English is experienced. Another student said that she knew all along that English was important, but found a new purpose in studying it when I set the task of planning a trip to America, where they not only had to do research on various places, but also had to write emails to hotels inquiring about vacancies, prices, etc. Getting a reply from these hotels really motivated her as it was not just a "theoretical" email, but an email with purpose.

Wanting to find out more about motivation, I then interviewed highly motivated students who had performed really well throughout the last years. A significant amount of students claimed that their motivation had grown over time as they continuously got positive feedback that motivated them even more to challenge themselves and improve their skills. This phenomenon is mentioned by Gage and Berliner (cf. Schlag, 2009, p. 23), who state that the motives of people are the result of consequences of previous behavior, which means that motives become autonomous, if they have turned into values that prompt independent actions. One statement that was truly characteristic of the very eager group of students was made three and a half years ago, when one student came to see me in the teachers' room saying that they were being taught by a teacher who did not really challenge them, which resulted in a lack of motivation in all students. She said they all wanted to learn and wanted to be challenged. I was quite struck by this remark, as learning vocabulary for example is usually not seen as something fun. However, there she was, a student who said she and her colleagues wanted to study and learn, but did not get the opportunity to do so.

5.1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs

This brings me to the next point, namely the desire to grow, which is explained by Abraham Maslow in his model *Hierarchy of Needs* (cf. Steere, 1988, p. 22). He suggests that people have needs and qualities that provide the basic motivation of behavior. He argues that basic needs must be satisfied to a reasonable degree before one strongly desires the next higher level.
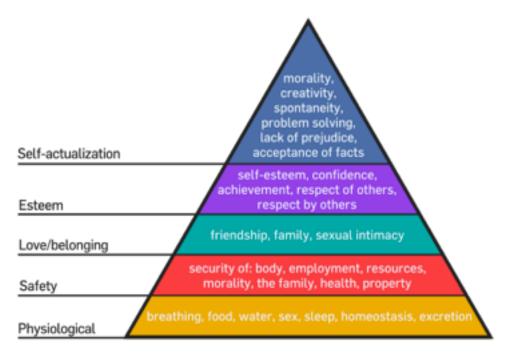

Fig 2. Maslow's hierarchy of needs
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Maslow%27s_Hierarchy_of_Needs.svg)

As is shown in the pyramid above, the basis consists of physical needs which motivate us to strive for and satisfy our basic needs such as the need for water, food, oxygen and sleep. This means, for example, that somebody who is really hungry will hardly be motivated to learn, when the basic desire to eat has not been met.

The second level of the pyramid focuses on the need for security and safety. According to Maslow it is difficult for a child whose family is about to split up and is thus concerned with loss of security to find motivation to learn and consequently to obtain knowledge.

Once people have fulfilled their physical, security and safety needs, they develop the need for love and belonging, followed by respect and self-esteem. The latter need is satisfied by gaining influence and status in groups and by receiving recognition.

Only when the needs of these four levels are fulfilled, is the person able to focus on the last step, namely self-actualization. This need is realized by fulfilling one's potential by seeking knowledge about one's own world through an intrinsic drive and it does not rely on external payoffs. Therefore, scholarly social behavior will be

maintained only if basic maintenance needs are fulfilled first. To ignore this idea is to invite conflicts between teachers' desires and students' needs

The claim that learning is unlikely to occur until a student feels accepted and respected by the teacher and at least some classmates was immensely supported by all students whom I interviewed:

Students of 8D claimed that their motivation to actively work in class, to voice their own opinion, to stand up for their beliefs, to openly discuss a subject matter, was extremely diminished because of subliminal mobbing that took place. They said that there was especially one student who used to openly make fun of people in ninth grade, whenever they said anything in class. Apparently he had stopped putting people down openly, but nevertheless many students refrained from voicing their opinion or from trying to answer a question posed by the teacher, out of fear of being mobbed and bullied. Two students, who failed twelfth grade, and are now in different classes (one of them is attending a private institution to do her A-levels there, another student took part in the lessons of the class he will officially join next year), said that it was a lot easier and more motivating to participate in class discussions now, because the classmates there are a lot more supportive and there is no need anymore to "run for cover."

Two other students, who both joined 8D in eleventh grade, are important to mention in this context as well. Both of them were highly motivated when they joined the class, were eager to learn and to participate, constantly raised their hands to present their knowledge and their opinion. However, that behavior radically changed after a few months, when they both took more notice of the general atmosphere and working attitude of their fellow students. When trying to find out the reason for this behavior, I only got a shrug of the shoulders as a reply. Now, after both of them passed the A-levels, I asked them again about their drop of motivation after those first few months. They stated that after some time they felt really awkward being the only ones talking in class and since they did not want to stand out and feel like outsiders, but rather wanted to somehow belong to the group, they had no choice but to behave just like everyone else.

It seems that students of 8D were still dealing with and trying to meet levels three and four of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and were thus not able to put their full motivation and concentration into the last level of self-actualization.

On the other hand, students of 8B seemed to have fully dived into the last level of Maslow's pyramid, as they were highly motivated to excel, to tap their full potential and to reach their very ambitious goals. In the interviews, students said they enjoyed the very challenging and taxing English lessons, but were extremely motivated to face those challenges and to succeed. The second motivating factor mentioned was the group dynamics in class. Since everyone in the group was so motivated to learn and to do their best, it was easier to stick to their targets or to challenge themselves even more. In this context a student needs to be mentioned who failed ninth grade, but passed the A-levels with distinction. When asked, she said that once she joined the new class, her motivation rose on its own, as

everyone accepted her in the group. Also, students seemed to be highly motivated, which affected her own motivational level.

Other motivating factors mentioned were fun, diversified lessons, speaking only English throughout the lessons and many discussions. Many students found encouragement through positive test results, followed by praise from teachers and parents, but intrinsic motivation was also mentioned several times. Acknowledgement of success highly contributed to many students' motivation.
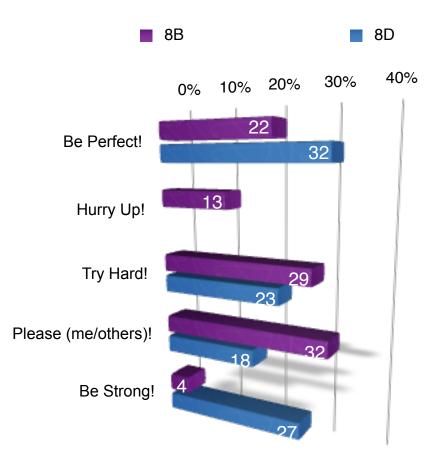

5.2 Transactional analysis - Drivers

My next attempt to find out about my students' success strategies was to make use of Eric Berne's concept (cf. Berne, 2008) of the transactional analysis developed in the 1950s. The goal of this idea was to understand oneself and others better and to analyze communication. According to the transactional analysis, there are three ego-states that people consistently use: Parent, Adult, Child ego states. Furthermore, he defined four life positions that are developed in early childhood:

> - I am OK - you are not OK
>
> - I am not OK - you are OK
>
> - I am OK - you are not OK
>
> - I am OK - you are OK

These life positions refer to the general attitude one has about life itself. Within these life positions we develop so called drivers to counteract injunctions embedded into our belief and life script, which are:

> - Be Perfect!
>
> - Hurry Up!
>
> - Try Hard!
>
> - Please (me / others)!
>
> - Be Strong!

These drivers can be identified based on the so-called "drivers-test" (see App. 2). As can be seen in the chart below, students of 8B and 8D were driven by different motivators. However, when averaging the result most students were motivated by the want to be perfect (27%), closely followed by the need to try hard (26%) and to please (25%).

Fig 2. Driver Test

The outcome was quite surprising as more students of 8D than of 8B were motivated by wanting to be perfect and none of the students of 8D was driven by the inner request of hurrying up and getting things done quickly, as opposed to 13% of students of 8B. Surprising, because from a teacher's perspective students of 8B always strove for perfection in whatever they did. A great force in both groups was to try hard. Pleasing oneself and others was a great motivating factor (32%) in students of 8B, as opposed to 8D with 18%. Another interesting factor is shown in the last bar, as 27% of all students of 8D, in contrast to only 4% of 8B, defined the need to be strong as their ultimate motivator.

Analyzing the data further, I was not able to discern any correlation between motivator and success of the students. What is striking, though, is that students of 8B rated the statements within the test with higher marks. In the chart below one can see that 60% of students of 8B reached 37-46 points in their highest-ranked category, in contrast to only 16% of students of 8D.
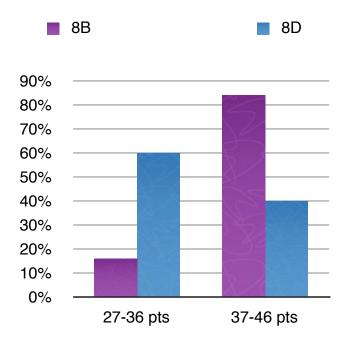
Fig 3. Allocation of highest points in Driver Test

Furthermore, calculating the overall points reached in the test, students of 8B averaged 163 points and students of 8D 148.5 points, which could suggest that students of 8B are motivated by more drivers or are more motivated by the drivers than 8D. This interpretation reflects both my perspective, as well as the perspective of students who were interviewed during the last year.
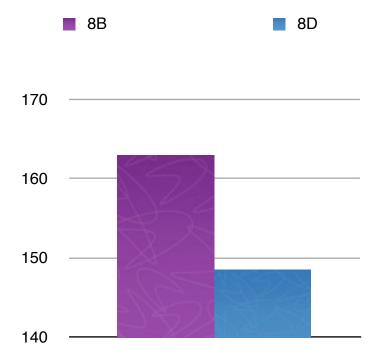

Fig. 4 Overall points in Driver Test

Concluding it is to say that the drivers test is a valuable tool for the students themselves, as they become aware of what their personal driving values are -

values that they might not have associated with their motivation or success before, but might provide an opportunity for them to improve in their personal scope.

5.3 Static and dynamic self-perception

Another distinct issue of classes 8B and 8D was their own self-perception. In interviews it became apparent that those students who performed well and said of themselves that they did not have any difficulties learning English were the ones who adhered to the belief that they could improve, learn and solve any tasks if they just sat down and learned, while students who did not do so well, did not have the confidence to say they could, for example, pass an English test if they sat down and studied hard for it.

Dweck (2010, p. 25f) explains this phenomenon with a static and dynamic self perception. She explains her theory based on the assumption that babies and toddlers do not think about wanting or not wanting to learn, nor do they consider whether something is worthwhile, but they rather strive to learn, to move forward, and to experience new things. Thus, she concludes that we have an innate desire to learn. But what happens to the readiness and willingness to learn? Here she claims that once children start to judge themselves, some are afraid of facing challenges, because they might embarrass themselves in front of others and because they already believe in an unchangeable characteristic, they thus adhere to a static self-perception. Children who exhibit a dynamic self-perception, on the other hand, believe in learning and tend to take on the challenge of solving difficult problems.

Labeling oneself and others has a profound influence on learning and motivation. As explained above, people with a static self-perception tend to adhere to the belief that they are good or bad at a certain subject, while people with a dynamic self-perception believe in being able to reach beyond themselves when it comes to learning. In the interviews I asked students about their point of view, but I was not able to draw any significant conclusions. However, when I asked myself about MY perception of students, I had to admit that I tend to place students in different grade categories. One student told me that she thought it frustrating that I seemingly never gave her the chance to raise her grade from a B to an A as I had already placed her in the "B-category." At the same time she said she was so motivated to show me that she actually was a very good student in English that she did everything in her power to get an A. Her feedback on the one hand showed me the positive side of my behavior, but also made me realize that students with a static self-perception would be very unlikely to establish such motivation to improve and to prove they could do better, but would rather be satisfied to be stuck in one category.

Therefore, it is to say that although students will have acquired their dynamic or static self-perception by the time they enter school, it is important that the teachers do everything to support the development of the dynamic self-perception in their

students rather than support their possible static self-perception, which easily turns from "I failed at a specific task" to "I am a failure."

6. Success strategies

This chapter deals with the different parameters that influence students' learning and success apart from the already mentioned issues.

Dedication, pleasure and discipline were mentioned as the most important factors in reaching success. Some students said they also needed encouragement through others to be able to stay focused, others felt deeply influenced by the teacher and by fun, interesting and diversified lessons.

What distinguished the answers of successful versus not as successful students was that the latter were trying to avoid failure, while successful students, though they were also a bit scared not to do as well as they expected of themselves and as was expected by others, focused more on wanting to be successful.

Stress was another factor mentioned in students' strategies. Students who achieved great results said that they needed the feeling of stress to get the most out of themselves. Feeling pressure increased their motivation and dedication to study. Students who often failed tests stated the opposite, namely that stress and pressure kept them from being able to concentrate, which affected their ability to study and resulted in doing badly on tests.

Higher achieving students also said that discipline is needed for reaching one's goals. The setting of goals was an interesting issue as well: lower achieving students said that their goal was to merely pass a certain class, whereas more successful students wanted to pass with the best possible grades.

One student summarized her strategy really well: She said that the basic interest in learning English, paired with a positive group dynamic and a challenging, motivating teacher, backed up by parents, teachers and friends, while applying an appropriate learning style to reach a specific goal was her recipe for success.

7. Conclusion and outlook

In my research about students' success I have found that, although strategies vary from person to person, there is nevertheless a clear focus on a specific goal that is one of the main motivating factors for success. Other ingredients for success mentioned were being consequent when studying, sticking to a strict time frame, the ability to motivate oneself, but also the backup of parents, teachers and friends. Finding pleasure in learning and knowing about its significance for one's own life were paramount factors.

However, what I found most striking was the huge influence of group dynamics on students' learning behavior. Students belonging to a homogenous group striving for knowledge and success were highly influenced by each other, making learning

easier and more rewarding for them. The competitive factor within that group can also not be disregarded. On the other hand, students who did not feel as if they were all sitting in one boat, but who felt the need to struggle onwards on their own, without any protection and support by their fellow students, found it a lot harder to motivate themselves and to learn successfully.

The conclusions I draw for myself as a teacher are the following:

✦ Teach students how to study even though they might say they know how to do so.

✦ Make them aware of their own learning strategies and help them to change the ones that keep them from learning successfully.

✦ Provide a positive learning environment, focussing on positive achievements and praise.

✦ Help the group to develop a positive group dynamics so that mutual support becomes self-evident.

✦ Make use of various teaching methods to make lessons interesting and motivating.

Next school year my colleagues and I are planning to teach in an interdisciplinary way, exploring teaching possibilities outside the four walls of a classroom, and set apart from strict 50 minute lessons. This will provide many opportunities to put the above mentioned conclusions in action. The new class situation will also offer many possibilities to work with different techniques and strategies to improve group dynamics, which will be the focus of my next research.

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Appendix

App 1. Wie gut kannst du mit deiner Zeit umgehen?

1. Vor jedem Unterrichtstag reserviere ich mir einen Teil für vorbereitende, planerische Arbeit.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

2. Ich delegiere im Kollegium und der Klasse alles, was delegierbar ist.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

3. Ich lege schriftliche Aufgaben und Ziele mit Erledigungsterminen fest.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

4. Ich bemühe mich, in meiner Unterrichtsvorbereitungszeit gezielt und straff zu arbeiten.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

5. Ich erstelle täglich eine Liste mit zu erledigenden Aufgaben, geordnet nach Dringlichkeit. Die wichtigsten Dinge bearbeite ich zuerst.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

6. Ich versuche meine Vorbereitungszeit von störenden Telefonanrufen und unangemeldeten Besuchern möglichst frei zu halten.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

7. Ich versuche täglich, die anfallenden Arbeiten nach meiner Leistungskurve zu disponieren.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

8. Mein Zeitplan hat Spielräume, um auf akute Probleme reagieren zu können.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

9. Ich versuche meine Aktivitäten so auszurichten, dass ich mich zunächst auf die wenigen „lebensnotwendigen Probleme" konzentriere.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

10. Ich kann auch nein sagen, wenn andere meine Zeit beanspruchen wollen und ich wichtige Dinge zu erledigen habe.

      0 fast nie   1 manchmal   2 häufig   3 fast immer

Auflösung:

30-25: kann ausgezeichnet mit seiner Zeit umgehen

24-19: gutes Zeitmanagement

18-13: mittelmäßig, lernfähig

-12: hoffnungslos

App. 2 Antreiber Test

Bewertungsskala: Die Aussage trifft auf mich zu:

voll und ganz: 5

ziemlich: 4

etwas: 3

kaum: 2

gar nicht: 1

Bitte antworte spontan und „errate" nicht was richtig sein könnte.

1) 1 2 3 4 5   Wenn ich eine Arbeit mache, dann mache ich sie gründlich.

2) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich fühle mich verantwortlich, dass sich diejenigen, die mit mir zu tun haben, wohlfühlen.

3) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich bin ständig auf Trab.

4) 1 2 3 4 5   Wenn ich raste, roste ich.

5) 1 2 3 4 5   Anderen gegenüber zeige ich meine Schwächen nicht gerne.

6) 1 2 3 4 5   Häufig gebrauche ich den Satz: „Es ist schwierig, etwas so genau zu sagen".

7) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich sage oft mehr, als eigentlich nötig wäre.

8) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich habe Mühe, Leute zu akzeptieren, die nicht genau sind.

9) 1 2 3 4 5   Es fällt mir schwer, Gefühle zu zeigen.

10) 1 2 3 4 5   „Nur nicht lockerlassen", ist meine Devise.

11) 1 2 3 4 5   Wenn ich eine Meinung äußere, begründe ich sie.

12) 1 2 3 4 5   Wenn ich einen Wunsch habe, erfülle ich ihn mir schnell.

13) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich liefere einen Bericht erst ab, wenn ich ihn mehrere Male überarbeitet habe.

14) 1 2 3 4 5   Leute, die „herumtrödeln", regen mich auf.

15) 1 2 3 4 5   Es ist für mich wichtig, von anderen akzeptiert zu werden.

16) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich habe eher eine harte Schale, aber einen weichen Kern.

17) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich versuche oft herauszufinden, was andere von mir erwarten, um mich danach zu richten.

18) 1 2 3 4 5   Leute, die unbekümmert in den Tag hineinleben, kann ich nur schwer verstehen.

19) 1 2 3 4 5   Bei Diskussionen unterbreche ich die anderen oft.

20) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich löse meine Probleme selbst.

21) 1 2 3 4 5   Aufgaben erledige ich möglichst rasch.

22) 1 2 3 4 5   Im Umgang mit anderen bin ich auf Distanz bedacht.

23) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich sollte viele Aufgaben noch besser erledigen.

24) 1 2 3 4 5   Ich kümmere mich persönlich auch um nebensächliche Dinge.

25) 1 2 3 4 5 Erfolge fallen nicht vom Himmel, ich muss sie hart erarbeiten.

26) 1 2 3 4 5 Für dumme Fehler habe ich wenig Verständnis.

27) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich schätze es, wenn andere meine Fragen rasch und bündig
beantworten.

28) 1 2 3 4 5 Es ist mir wichtig, von anderen zu erfahren, ob ich meine Sache gut
gemacht habe.

29) 1 2 3 4 5 Wenn ich eine Aufgabe einmal begonnen habe, führe ich sie auch zu
Ende.

30) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich stelle meine Wünsche und Bedürfnisse zugunsten der Bedürfnisse
anderer Personen zurück.

31) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich bin anderen gegenüber oft hart, um von ihnen nicht verletzt zu
werden.

32) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich trommle oft ungeduldig mit den Fingern auf den Tisch (ich bin
ungeduldig).

33) 1 2 3 4 5 Beim Erklären von Sachverhalten verwende ich gerne die klare
Aufzählung: Erstens...., zweitens...., drittens.

34) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich glaube, dass die meisten Dinge nicht so einfach sind, wie viele
meinen.

35) 1 2 3 4 5 Es ist mir unangenehm, andere Leute zu kritisieren.

36) 1 2 3 4 5 Bei Diskussionen nicke ich häufig mit dem Kopf.

37) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich strenge mich an um meine Ziele zu erreichen.

38) 1 2 3 4 5 Mein Gesichtsausdruck ist eher ernst.

39) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich bin nervös.

40) 1 2 3 4 5 So schnell kann mich nichts erschüttern.

41) 1 2 3 4 5 Meine Probleme gehen die anderen nichts an.

42) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich sage oft: „Tempo, Tempo, das muss rascher gehen!"

43) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich sage oft: „genau", „exakt", „logisch, „klar" u.ä.

44) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich sage oft: „Das verstehe ich nicht..."

45) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich sage gerne: „Könnten Sie es nicht einmal versuchen?" und sage
nicht gerne: „Versuchen Sie es einmal."

46) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich bin diplomatisch.

47) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich versuche, die an mich gestellten Erwartungen zu übertreffen.

48) 1 2 3 4 5 Ich mache manchmal zwei Tätigkeiten gleichzeitig.

49) 1 2 3 4 5 „Die Zähne zusammenbeißen" heißt meine Devise.

50) 1 2 3 4 5 Trotz enormer Anstrengungen will mir vieles einfach nicht gelingen.

Zur Auswertung des Fragebogens übertrage bitte deine Bewertungen für jede

entsprechende Frage auf den folgenden Auswertungsbogen.

Zähle die Bewertungszahlen anschließend pro Block zusammen.

„SEI PERFEKT"

Fragen: 1__ 8__ 11__ 13__ 23__24__ 33__ 38__ 43__ 47__

TOTAL: ___

„MACH SCHNELL"

Fragen: 3__ 12__ 14__ 19__ 21__27__ 32__ 39__ 42__ 48__

TOTAL: ___

„STRENG DICH AN"

Fragen: 4__ 6__ 10__ 18__ 25__29__ 34__ 37__ 44__ 50__

TOTAL: ___

„MACH ES ALLEN RECHT"

Fragen: 2__ 7__ 15__ 17__ 28__30__ 35__ 36__ 45__ 46__

TOTAL: ___

„SEI STARK"

Fragen: 5__ 9__ 16__ 20__ 22__26__ 31__ 40__ 41__ 49__

TOTAL: ___

App. 3 Interviewleitfaden

- Lerntyp

- Lernstrategien

- Ablenkung beim Lernen

- Lernmotivation

- Einfluss von Stress auf das Lernen

- Stellenwert vom Fach Englisch, Gründe

- persönliche Ziele

- Einfluss von Erwartungshaltung der Eltern/Lehrer/Freunde

- Wertschätzung der Lehrperson deiner Arbeit gegenüber

- Erfolgsstrategien