

“Laziness” and How It Affects Our Students

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Introduction

This article analyzes the use of the term “lazy” in the educational setting, how this term affects students, and the pedagogical approaches educators can take within their subject areas to reduce stress for their students. Pedagogical decisions affect student stress, and this article provides suggestions to prevent student burnout in order to improve curricula offerings in secondary and higher-level classrooms. Results show that students often reduced to “lazy” are most likely struggling with an underlying cause for their lack of performance, such as stress, burnout, depression, anxiety-induced procrastination, unknown and undiagnosed mental challenges, and misguided apathy. Results concluded that to reduce student stress and increase intrinsic motivation, educators should avoid shaming students, provide rationale for learning, express interest in students, teach with enthusiasm, and contribute to building a positive learning environment.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to assess the trait of "laziness" in students to draw attention to the range of factors that contribute to a student's failure to perform academically and educate teachers on the value of attempting to understand a student and their situation, so they can effectively communicate with, accommodate, and encourage students. This study aims to help convey to teachers that a failure to implement effective communication, accommodation, and encouragement negatively affects their students and contributes to the further downfall of these “lazy” students' academic careers, self-talk skills, and future employment opportunities. Furthermore, this research will direct teachers to consider pedagogical approaches they can take in order to reduce student stress.

Method

This study was conducted by a single author (WJ) through comprehensive, secondary data, using Dr. Devon Price's book, *Laziness Does Not Exist*, as a framework ideology for discussion and referencing pre-existing educational research and sociology theories related to laziness, motivation, and methods for increasing student motivation to determine why students may engage in “lazy” behavior and find the most effective ways for educators to interact with said students. Secondary research was found through searches using Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles with a preference for those published since 2018, in English, and involving American school-based content; however, some exceptions were made. Search terms included: student laziness, improving student motivation, depression, procrastination, empathy pedagogy, empathy for lazy students, teaching strategies for apathetic students, and other combinations of the preceding and similar terms. Relevant articles were reviewed for potential inclusion, and appropriate articles were chosen and analyzed for use in this research.

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Analysis

Secondary research sources were reviewed to obtain relevant data. Data obtained was sorted into themes using the cutting and sorting method. Data was first sorted into two larger thematic areas, the first being related to identifying why students might be “lazy” and the second being what teachers can do to prevent and manage these issues. Then, data was further divided into subcategories detailing the specific aspects of each theme.

Results: The Laziness Lie & Why Students Are “Lazy”

The Laziness Lie: What Is “Laziness” Really and Why Are Students “Lazy?”
The Laziness Lie is described as a “deep-seated culturally held belief system that leads” individuals to believe that deep down they are lazy and worthless, they must always work incredibly hard to overcome their inner laziness, their worth is earned through their productivity, work is the center of life, and anyone who isn't accomplished and driven is immoral (Price, 2020, p. 9). Price makes the bold statement that “[t]here is no morally corrupt, slothful force inside us, driving us to be unproductive for no reason. It's not evil to have limitations and to need breaks. Feeling tired or unmotivated is not a threat to our self-worth. In fact, the feelings we write off as “laziness” are some of humanity's most important instincts, a core part of how we stay alive and thrive in the long term” (Price, 2020, p. 10). Price further states that “[t]he people we've been taught to judge for 'not trying hard enough' are almost invariably the people fighting valiantly against the greatest number of unseen barriers and challenges” (p.13).

Depressed Students: Managing depression itself is a full-time job, and “the apparent ‘laziness’ of depressed people is a sign that their bodies and minds are protecting them and working to help them heal. Depression also saps the brain's ability to plan and execute activities. ... It's not a moral failure for an exhausted person to let some responsibilities drop. In many cases, it's essential that they be ‘lazy’ in a few areas of life if they want to have the energy to stay afloat in others” (Price, 2020, p. 45).

Procrastinators: Rather than simply feeling too lazy to complete the task, “[w]hen a person procrastinates, it's typically because they're paralyzed in some way: by anxiety, confusion about how to get started on a big, complicated project, or both” (Price, 2020, p. 46). While procrastinators are deeply invested in their success, they often choose to prioritize “short-term mood repair over achieving long-term goals” (Zhang et al., 2019). Despite having the motivation to complete a task, these students do not have the immediate confidence needed to initiate an assignment productively (Price, 2020, p. 47).

Apathetic Students: Due to feelings of “repeatedly being disenfranchised” by authority figures in schools, students may feel apathetic toward their education and rebel against the system or give up (Price, 2020, pp. 48-49). Further, the apathy students experience can be caused by a lack of understanding of the importance of their education or a subject.

Exhausted and/or Burned-Out Students: Students who are exhausted and/or burned are often mistaken as “lazy,” when they are truly very productive and motivated individuals who are over-strung with responsibilities. The effects of student burnout can cause students to “display a lack of interest in class activities, recurrent absences, chronic tardiness, and irresponsible [behavior]” (Fiorilli, 2017). Further, these students are at higher risk for depression, dropping out, lower grades, lower performance, skipping school, negative impacts on their health, and increased risk for depression in adulthood (Fiorilli, 2017).

Not Just the “Lazy” Kids: How the Laziness Lie Affects Students Long-Term

Labeling Theory: After being called “lazy,” students may develop traits of laziness out of retaliation or defeat. Following the labeling the student becomes aware that the teacher's intention is not to understand them but rather to degrade them. Moreover, the student may not understand the cause of their “lazy” behavior either and simply accept “laziness” as one of their character traits, as an authority figure has assigned it to them.

The Over-Achievers: While students who are noticeably “lazy” during their adolescence may have already reached burnout, high-performing students who have internalized the Laziness Lie are prime candidates for burnout in adulthood, which can be detrimental to their mental and physical health, their livelihoods, and relationships. Moreover, “It's easy for a teacher to mistake exhaustion for apathy or lack of motivation, yet I almost always find that when I sit down with students who seem unmotivated, they're impressively productive people who fill their days with full-time jobs, self-improvement, and service to others. Despite all this, many of my most dedicated students believe they're lazy. Often, it's because some teacher in their past berated them for circumstances beyond their control” (Price, 2020, p. 32).

Results: Pedagogical Approaches to Benefit Students

Empathetic Alternative Pedagogical Approaches to Addressing "Laziness" Stop Shaming Students: Imagining Alternative Narratives

“Students feel shame when teachers make reductionistic snap judgments based on visible student performance” (Bayers & Camfield, 2020). When a teacher responds to a student who shows a decrease in performance by shaming them, that student's trust in that educator, and potentially the educational environment, is directly damaged. To make a positive impact on students, educators must refrain from reacting to students in ways that dehumanize them and “undercuts the mission” of education that aims to “collaboratively build critical thinking skills, leadership, and citizenship” (Bayers & Camfield, 2020). To be good role models and enforce the values of a supportive community, educators should be empathetic and understand that human beings, their situations, and their emotions are dynamic.

Eliminating Procrastination: Task Dispersal

While it is common for IEP accommodations to provide students who face executive dysfunction, time blindness, and attention deficits with extra time to complete a task, the time allotted for completion is often not the issue but rather a need for further guidance. When assigning large tasks, breaking tasks up into smaller, more manageable assignments proves effective (LaCount et al., 2015). Practicing task dispersal gives students attainable, short-term goals to achieve in the wake of a potentially overwhelming long-term goal and minimizes the opportunity for procrastination.

Apathy Teaches Apathy: Building a Community with Interest and Energy

Research reveals that “teachers' emotional exhaustion [is] negatively related to students' perceived teacher autonomy support,” and there is, consequently, a “negative relationship between teachers' feeling of depersonalization and students' autonomous motivation development” (Shen et al., 2015). When a teacher does not feel motivated to guide student exploration of subject materials, that loss of intrinsic motivation to engage with subject materials is transmitted to students, damaging their academic performance and emotional wellbeing. To decrease student apathy and increase motivation, it is imperative that educators contribute to making school a positive environment. This begins within each individual's classroom.

Critical Exploration: A Framework for Engaging Interest for and with Students

This teaching approach promotes giving students subject matter directly. Rather than the teacher being the sole authority of knowledge, the subject matter becomes the authority. This opens students' minds to more profound thought generation, allowing teachers to further expand on the subject matter. Critical Exploration also focuses on understanding the student perspective. Rather than attempting to get students to say what the teacher wants them to think, the teacher should get students to voice their own thoughts without influencing what they say. This display of interest in students causes them to then take more interest in what they say and think regarding the course content. Duckworth says, “Without an external authority to be the judge of their thoughts, without the anticipation of an outside censor, the learners develop their own ability in making judgements” (Duckworth, 2009).

Conclusion/Implications

The results conclude that “laziness” in the classroom appears to be a symptom of a student coping with struggles they are facing rather than the cause of underperformance in students. When an educator assesses the root of “lazy” behavior, it will almost always become evident that what one may initially find inexcusable behavior is entirely rational. Such behaviors can stem from stress, burnout, depression, anxiety-induced procrastination, unknown and undiagnosed mental challenges and disabilities, and misguided apathy. The “Laziness Lie” narrative is incredibly damaging to the present and future wellbeing of students, and within the hands of educators lies the power to potentially minimize its effects. In order to reduce student stress and increase intrinsic motivation, educators should avoid shaming students, provide rationale for learning, express interest in students, teach with enthusiasm, and contribute to building a positive learning environment. This study could be furthered by collecting data via surveys, both of students in regards to their experiences with being called lazy and of teachers pertaining to their outlooks on students who present as “lazy.”