How Learning Contracts Motivate Students
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Published by: Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/23044364
Accessed: 05/05/2014 04:55

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We sat in on an interdisciplinary team meeting at a nearby middle school last fall. Teachers of math, science, English, social studies, and reading share a core group of about 130 seventh graders. The team met three times per six-day cycle. The team leader was a contracted supplemental liaison who carries a full teaching load. Part of the conversation went like this:

**Team Leader:** As you know, Mr. K (the principal) pored over last year's state testing results and has charged us with improving reading instruction and reading scores. He did not say which of the two comes first, that's for us to figure out. Our bunch of kids just did not score as well as they should have last year.

**Math Teacher:** That's because the elementary teachers coddle them. They use words like "scaffolding" and "developmentally responsive," but they pass them on, ready or not. The people teaching sixth grade are almost as bad. Most of them have elementary certification—and they pass them on, too. Lots of these kids can't read the word problems I give them, and I know they must have trouble with science and social studies.

**Science Teacher:** It's not my job to teach them how to read. And I've got way too much to cover. It's getting worse, too. As you know, the state is adding science testing in two years on top of writing, reading, and math! I think the problem starts at home. The parents don't make their kids read. Kids these days are all jazzed about their little handheld electronic toys—they just want the immediate gratification.

The conversation continued in the same vein for a while, until the English teacher nudged the group toward our presence and what we might have to offer. She mentioned that several teachers elsewhere in the building had reported some successes and breakthroughs with learning contracts. The science teacher and the social studies teacher had heard some of this, but they thought that the English teacher and the reading teacher should carry the load for the team.

We let them vent a little bit more, then we proffered some thoughts and some tangible first steps.

Scenarios like this are not unusual; in fact, they are becoming more commonplace in many school districts in this country, as one of the reactions to the National Reading Panel's Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) has been increased pressure on school administrators and teachers to demonstrate positive and measurable results. The NRP noted effective school reading programs should ensure that students acquire competence in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (sometimes referred to as the "big five").
Unfortunately, interpretations of the findings of the panel’s report may be misleading instruction in many school districts by limiting teachers’ attention to these areas only, thereby overlooking other important aspects of reading and reading instruction. The panel noted their “silence on other topics should not be interpreted as indicating that other topics have no importance or that improvement in those areas would not lead to greater reading achievement” (2000, section 1, p. 3). However, busy teachers and beleaguered principals could very well gloss over this important message.

Teachers may conclude that their students are lazy, unwilling, and unable to learn and may give up trying to help all students, focusing instead on those who are more “teachable.” This is especially unfortunate for the struggling student, as such teacher action or inaction may either overtly or tacitly reinforce the student’s belief that school-related activities are of little value.

The panel recognized the importance of teacher preparation, even though motivational/affective areas were not included in its report: “The area within comprehension strategy instruction that currently seems to have the most potential for moving the field along is teacher preparation” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, section 4, p. 120). Obviously, teacher education programs should continue to address cognitive aspects of learning, but they must also place greater emphasis on affective aspects of reading. Harris and Hodges (1995) defined affect as “the psychological field of emotional activity.” A relative dearth of reports in the educational literature on reading address affect (Athey, 1985; Wigfield, 2004) and, in particular, motivation, in spite of teachers’ desire to know more about the role motivation plays in their students’ learning (Prawat, 1985).

A useful and often cited definition of motivation is “the process whereby goal-directed behavior is instigated and sustained” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 5). Some years earlier, Gambrell, Codling, and Palmer (1996) defined motivation as “goal-directed behavior that is mediated by social, cognitive, and affective factors” (p. 2). Affect, therefore, includes motivation. Often, teachers judge students’ motivation by the degree to which they participate in a task, a readily observable indicator. Therefore, when a student works assiduously on a task, the teacher is likely to conclude the student is highly motivated. There may, in fact, be numerous reasons why the student is engaged in the task (interest in the topic, appropriate readability level of material, desire to please the teacher, desire to emulate another respected student, inherent value of the task, belief about one’s ability in relation to the activity, avoidance of another activity); these may individually or collectively explain the student’s level of engagement. A teacher knowledgeable about the components and processes of motivation for academic tasks can begin to formulate a plan to increase student motivation and engagement.

One aspect of motivation is choice (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998; Triplett, 2004), and
when not present, resistance to a task such as reading will develop (Atwell, 1998; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Choice is also a major factor in learning contracts, and we wanted to know if middle school students would mention it favorably after using learning contracts in their language arts classes. Again, informal experiences and observations made us quite certain that choice was a useful hook that really resulted in student engagement, whether with younger children or with graduate students. Given the unique developmental needs of young adolescents, however, we thought it would be most timely to pose our questions to this particular group.

Learning contracts
“A learning contract is simply a written agreement between teacher and learner in which the learner undertakes to complete mutually agreed upon tasks in a specified amount of time on his or her own initiative” (Greenwood, 2003, p.1). Contracts are designed to involve students in classroom activities and, ultimately, to enable more teacher flexibility and control (Greenwood, 2003; Knowles, 1986; McCabe & Greenwood, 2005; Tomlinson, 1993). Learning contracts are ideal for middle level students and teachers for a variety of reasons:

• Contracts formalize and ensure the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) that is often talked about but less-than-frequently practiced.

• Contracts harness and capitalize upon student motivation to read (in particular) and to learn (generally) the standards-driven content that they are expected to acquire.

• Contracts encourage and require students to apply some very transportable and useful skills, traits, and dispositions (e.g., time management, task prioritization). Students see tasks as meaningful and useful, because they have a hand in designing them.

• Contracts allow the willing and able students to move forward with efficiency, without delay. Many students need only minimal guidance from their teachers. However, children in need of targeted, explicit instruction can receive full teacher attention while the rest of the class is gainfully occupied.

Initially, learning contracts may be highly structured by the teacher (Figure 4); however, as the academic year progresses, learning contracts evolve to be more student-oriented with less teacher structure (Figure 5), as the student assumes increased responsibility for learning.

Curriculum objectives, however, remain stable and are not negotiable.

“Learning experiences that afford students choice of topic and text maximize the development of intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, providing choice supports students in developing and expanding their own reading goals” (Gambrell, 2004, p. 195). Students’ commitment is greater when they decide their own goals and objectives, compared to when a teacher assigns work without student input. Personal commitment, in turn, results in sustained student motivation, engagement, ability to cope when encountering difficulty, and tenacity in the task (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

What we did
Over the past several years, Scott (the first author), taught a cadre of graduate students (inservice teachers), encouraging them to use learning contracts as a structure to help them differentiate instruction. All experienced contracting as graduate students, and many designed contracts to use with their own classes in their teacher capacities. We were both aware that some schools in the area were developing “contracting cultures,” due to positive peer pressure applied by some particularly enthusiastic teachers. Several teachers in the building involved in the present study requested support and direction. A telephone call from the district supervisor of language arts resulted in an invitation to visit and share, as recounted in the opening vignette.

After listening to the teachers’ concerns and enthusiasm as they aired a variety of instructional, management, educational policy, and political issues, we felt learning contracts might be a way to address all issues simultaneously. It was decided that, for one semester, several hundred students would engage in a succession of three learning contracts that would be used to deliver the required district and state standards via the gradual release of responsibility model espoused by Pearson and Gallagher (1983). For that semester only, the other classes would receive the same content in a more traditional manner. All students completed the Motivations for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) (Baker & Wigfield, 1999), and, in addition, the students involved in learning contracts were asked to respond anonymously in writing to the following two questions:

What did you like most about contracts?
What did you like least about contracts?
These two questions yielded some rich and varied results. Whereas the MRQ data are arrayed on a Likert-type scale and can be manipulated, aggregated, and disaggregated, the open-ended questions presented a different type of challenge.

**How we analyzed the results**

We decided to analyze the responses to these questions at sixth grade level only, because evidence (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006) reported that student motivation to learn is higher at the elementary level than it is in middle school and beyond. The sixth graders in this study were in their first year in this middle school, having just transitioned in from several neighborhood elementary schools, and we felt their self-reported likes and dislikes would provide us and their teachers with evidence to develop a program or establish principles to sustain motivation throughout the middle school years.

Therefore, we randomly selected two classes of sixth graders, totaling 65 students: one classified as “academic” and one as “honors,” containing 34 and 31 students, respectively. We are not proponents of tracking, but this school did group students by a composite score, which was an amalgam of past teacher ratings and recommendations, state test scores, and district norm-referenced data. Honors classes still contained a range of readers based on tastes, predilections, maturity, attention span, and creativity; however, all were reading at, above, or well above grade level. “Academic” students represented a less-wide range, clustering closer to “grade level” along the district continuum.

Each of us took a class set, independently examined the responses, and noted key words and phrases. The key words were not decided upon before the analysis; they emanated from the data, because we wanted the student responses to suggest a coding system useful to categorizing the responses. We each did the same for a second set. Then we traded sets. Only then did we talk about what we were discovering.

**What we learned**

We agreed that the following descriptors captured the concepts in the students’ written responses: choice, time to learn, engagement, clarity, avoidance (of another task), overwhelming, independence, involvement, discussion, working with a partner, interest, flexibility, self-management, creativity, fun, organized, assessment, challenging, rewarding, achievement, maturity, and task management. Each category was represented at least once, although there was overlap, with some responses containing elements of more than one category. Also, we noted these categories could be positively or negatively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (No.)</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Exemplar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (6 pos., 4 neg.)</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>“Well, I like having freedom, when I want to start or finish a project or what book I want to choose to read. I like this because I like to have options, and not have to do everything that the teacher wants me to do, or read, with out any choices of my own.” (positive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (4 pos.)</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>“I know exactly what to do when the teacher says something. I knew what I had to do to get an A+. I did it too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (6 pos., 1 neg.)</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>“It makes me feel responsible and show independence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (pos.)</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>“They were good because they were fun.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (3 pos.)</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>“If I had a reading log, I could read any night of the week. I liked it because if I had a lot of homework one night I could read the next night.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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stated. When a student’s response to both questions was determined to be in the same category, it was tabulated as such. Figure 1 ranks the six categories of response that occurred three or more times for both academic and honors students.

Both academic and honors groups mentioned choice most frequently—positively or negatively—in their responses. Therefore, we gave choice a number 1 ranking. According to our data, a significant number of honors students (25), but many fewer academic students (6), appreciated having choice in these learning contracts. We ranked clarity second in prominence for academic students, and overwhelming second for honors students. Interestingly, as the exemplars above suggest, many academic students in this study felt the contracts were precise; however, many honors students felt they were hard to follow. Independence was the third most frequent concept in responses of both groups of students. The one “negative” response here indicated a need for more direction. Fun was the next concept mentioned by academic students; however, time was mentioned next by honors students. This suggests the academic students in this study appreciated enjoying the activity, while honors students appreciated the opportunity to budget their time to accomplish the task.

**Implications for instruction**

Based on what the students said, we suggest the following be included not only in the development of learning contracts but throughout the year in other learning situations. Choice, the most frequently cited category by both groups of students, leaps out at the reader. There was an approximately three to one positive to negative ratio for honors students and an approximately one and one-half to one ratio for academic students. It is possible that the students in this study designated as “academic” may have had limited previous experiences with choice when learning compared to honors students. There is evidence in the educational literature that supports this speculation. Taylor, Harris, Pearson, and Garcia (1995) noted teachers’ perceptions of students’ proficiency affects how they treat them: Students who are perceived as less able are given less challenging tasks; those labeled as more able are given more challenging tasks. In one meeting with the teachers during the course of the learning contract process, a regular education teacher said it was harder to implement contracts with “lower level students, because they needed to be prodded.”

It is important to note that choice does not mean teacher abdication of control—a free-for-all. In fact, an examination of the exemplary quotes indicated to us that, for these sixth graders, choice meant providing different ways and times to accomplish a goal. Therefore, choice seemed to include both time management and preference issues. We believe the goal of school is to help students become independent learners and critical thinkers. We also believe that choice (of what to do and when to do it), as demonstrated in these learning contracts, seemed to assist students to make responsible decisions.

We feel that the use of learning contracts is an enabling process. Parkhurst (1922) said long ago that choice “is not license, still less indiscipline... [It is], in fact, the very reverse of both” (p. 15). In other words, as these students were involved more in the contracting process, gradually they were given more opportunity to develop the means by which they would achieve the curricular goals; there was less teacher direction and more student direction and ownership of the learning contracts.

Teachers must provide a variety of activities that are interesting to learners, and students should be able to demonstrate what they have learned in a variety of ways, both individually and as a group. Contracting is motivating and powerful because it relies on and promotes student choice. Differentiation of instruction...
is a timely, much-discussed topic for the same essential reasons: Students need to be enfranchised in their learning. They will apply themselves more and be happier as they learn. So will their teachers.

A second descriptor shared by both academic and honors students was independence, a trait most teachers say they value in their students. We wonder, however, if teachers really teach independence. Do they consciously, gradually, purposefully at times render themselves unnecessary (as they should, if student independence is one of their goals)? When students are working under contracts for a block of time, doing things that they have chosen because they perceive them to be interesting and challenging, they do not need their teacher hovering and fretting. Middle schoolers, in particular, crave and value independence. This relates to some other terms a few of the students used: feeling trusted and grown up.

Although not shared by both groups, the emergence of clarity as a descriptor was somewhat surprising to us. These students’ rationales were certainly compelling, and teachers should pay attention to these voices. These students seemed to dislike ambiguity. What they wrote made it clear that being certain of the task and how to accomplish it was important. It was also interesting to note that, while clarity was ranked second by the academic students, it was unranked by the honors students. This suggests to us that academic students, more than honors students, look for “how to” information in school assignments and flounder more when explicit information on how to proceed is not present. Therefore, learning contracts should allow for both structure and clarity with goals and deadlines mutually agreed upon by teacher and student. We would add, however, that clarity should be balanced with flexibility, particularly as teachers and students venture into longer and more complicated contracts.

The term fun carries a certain amount of baggage. Some would contend that if an assignment is “fun,” it must not be rigorous and challenging. We feel, however, that the two constructs are far from being mutually exclusive. Learning can be lots of fun, particularly when it is challenging. The old maxim “no pain, no gain” may work for athletic training, but not for intellectual exercises. Moss and Fuller (2000) reported nine principles for middle level educators, one being “Learning should be fun and engaging for both student and teacher” (p. 274). The authors describe two interdisciplinary examples of “real learning—learning that one carries forever” (p. 274) that are truly fun for both pupils and teachers.

The descriptor overwhelming also appeared in the responses, as we suspected it might. Actually, this feeling can occur with more frequency for adults who are contracting for the first time. Many graduate students have a history of getting good grades the regular way, and are uncomfortable as risk takers. Some of these middle schoolers also indicated a lack of security and a bit of anxiety with a structure that was new and relatively

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**Figure 3** A how-to guide for learning contracts

Here are some useful tips and practicalities for learning contract design:

- **Start slowly in terms of time, amount of work assigned, and negotiability of contracts.** As your comfort level increases, you can expand your work gradually.
- **Explicitly teach the necessary procedures and protocols.** Be willing to take the time to teach your management system, which will maximize learning over the long haul.
- **Analyze and prioritize the things you teach.** Decide what the essentials are. Think of the important skills and strategies you’ll need to teach directly, as opposed to what the children can get without your support.
- **Establish a classroom climate that is both challenging and accepting.**
- **Display and publicly praise exemplary student work.**
- **Give prompt feedback.** Also allow and encourage peer and parent feedback. Above all, expect and value student reflection and self-evaluation.
- **Listen to and trust your students.** Contracts can be used very flexibly. Scott (the first author) cycled five classes of developmental reading students through contracts for one-third of each school year. This translated to approximately 125 seventh graders “on” contracts for 60 days out of 180, with only two classes doing contracts simultaneously. Contracts are excellent for interdisciplinary work and for selected subgroups of a class (e.g., gifted, learning disabled).

Two key contracts are choice and negotiation. These foster the gradual release of responsibility to the children.

Please see the two sample contracts included in this article. Both are designed for sixth graders. The first encompasses three days, is largely non-negotiable, and would be done early in the school year. The second sample would be done late in the year and would take three weeks to complete.

These samples are focused on literacy learning. Note that we have also included a sample menu for the negotiables as well as a rubric. Additionally, please note that the non-negotiables still involve student choice in many cases (e.g., it is stipulated that they work on an SSR book, but they choose the book, and they choose a peer or the teacher for their rehearsed reading).
Figure 4 Sample early contract (annotated)

October, 20xx

Now that you all have completed the one-day mini-contracts, I think you are ready for a three-day version! It will be negotiated and signed on Wednesday, October xx, and you will have all of class time Thursday, Friday, and Monday to work on it. (1) What you don’t do in class needs to be done at home. Remember, EVERYTHING is due by the end of class Monday, October xx. (2) Most of you will do the majority of your work alone. (3) You will have some choice as to what work you do and complete freedom as to the sequence (4) as well as early turn-in of your work. Have fun! (5)

I, __________________________, being of sound mind and body, do hereby agree to complete the following tasks by Monday, October xx. I will work to the best of my ability, as this contract is worth 80 points. (6)

Negotiable:
   a) Collage on lyrics of song or poem
   b) Illustration of emotion plus poem
   c) __________________________ student suggestion

Non-negotiable:
   a) Self-selected reading plus process log. Title:________________________
   b) PAVE sheets: 7 good words from above
   c) Rehearsed reading with __________________________ or teacher

We will render help as needed: Parent __________________________

Annotations
1) Time, clarity
2) Clarity, overwhelming (Please be aware that a student’s contract would not be cluttered with all the information provided here.)
3) Independence
4) Choice, independence
5) Fun
6) Clarity

Figure 5 Sample end-of-year contract

May, 20xx

This is it, your last contract of the year! It will run from Monday, May xx, through Friday, May xx, a total of 15 school days. You will have plenty of options, but be sure to use your time wisely. Have fun.

I, __________________________, being of sound mind and body, do hereby agree to complete the following tasks by Friday, May xx.

Negotiable:
   a) __________________________
   b) __________________________
   c) __________________________
   d) __________________________
   e) __________________________
   f) __________________________

(see sample menu, Figure 6)

Non-negotiable:
   a) Partner reading of “challenge” SSR book (must be pre-approved) plus 10 double entry journal pages
   b) Choose one major writing project: CYO adventure, short story, or book-movie compare and contrast

We will render help as necessary: Parent __________________________

Teacher __________________________

Classroom Environments that Get the Most out of Students
long-term. It is best to confront this directly. We tell students that a moderate amount of anxiety will help them perform well, but too much anxiety impedes performance.

Issues with time interplay with being overwhelmed. Again, with middle school students, we recommend open discussion and explication of the term “procrastination.” We recognize that a sometimes-effective style of dealing with a large amount of work is to put it off for a while and allow the anxiety to build to the right level in order to do our best. We need to make it clear to students that time and task management is a trial-and-error proposition that requires experience to manage. Middle schoolers need to understand that too much procrastination (i.e., underestimating a task and the time it will take to do it well) can be hazardous to one’s grades. They need to manage time efficiently to enjoy the earlier-mentioned contracting pluses: choice, independence, trust, and the like.

We were a bit disappointed that challenge did not come out strongly in the responses we analyzed. Our experience has told us repeatedly that middle level students relish tackling new and exciting tasks, provided the work is pursued in a safe environment where support is available as necessary and where the material is appropriate to each student’s reading level.

Teachera who have not yet tried contracts may have some difficulty conceptualizing how they will translate to their current practices. We have created a series of figures that provide some examples and explanations for using learning contracts (Figures 2 through 8).

Concluding comments

There were some limitations to our study, but we feel that these were more than compensated for by the clear messages that emanated from these students’ responses.

One limitation was the sample size. Obviously, 65 students in one school will not represent the thinking of all sixth graders. As we read between the lines of their comments, however, we concluded that these young students made some powerful statements:
• Trust us, we won’t disappoint you.
• Guide us, but don’t infantilize us.
• Show us, don’t only tell.
• Listen to us.

There are a number of issues that may be muddying the waters of the practices and processes that occurred over that semester with those 65 sixth graders. Although the data we collected were rich and useful, here are some areas we would like to revisit and approach differently:

**Work with all the teachers in laying a foundation.** We took advantage of the enthusiasm and missionary zeal of the contracting aficionados, but in the matching process, we were left with some teachers who probably did not have a deep understanding of building a culture of trust and student control.

**Conduct more spot visitations.** We considered this, but the teachers were already under pressure due to other initiatives. Current testing mandates have created an anxiety ridden reality in many schools; therefore, we opted to visit less often than we had planned initially. This pressure-cooker environment for school personnel and students limits the nature of educational research compared to years ago when there was less palpable high-stakes testing anxiety. This unfortunate effect of the high-stakes testing school culture that results from the benchmarking mandates of the No Child Left Behind legislation (2001) has inhibited, or at least altered, study of educational innovations of the type we report here. This is particularly pernicious for all educators, because the focus on “what works” seems to have been replaced by “what raises scores.”

Although this study did not examine students’ achievement on standardized tests and does not provide evidence that students who are engaged in learning contracts will do better on high-stakes reading tests, we argue that students who lack motivation to read and who are not involved in school literacy tasks are less likely to do well on tests compared to those students who are more motivated to read and learn. We further argue that those factors mentioned most frequently by the sixth graders in this study are essential to learning contracts and all learning.

**Interview students.** At times the written answers led us to surmise either student confusion or teacher misapplication of contracting tenets; it would have been most informative to ask students exactly what they meant. Lack of follow-up is a common problem in large-sample empirical studies. In an effort to generalize by using representative samples, educational researchers may “not see the forest for the trees.” Again, time limitations severely limited student availability.

**Interview teachers.** We talked to the teachers, and collected some artifacts. We also visited some classes during their contracting time, but these were by invitation, because the limitations and constraints noted above affected teachers as well as their students.

**Closing vignette: An invitation from a member of the team visited earlier.**

*We were not able to attend another team meeting after our visit that we partially reconstructed at the beginning of this article. This school was undergoing a lot of “initiatives,” and the teachers were feeling a great deal of stress, as programs and packages were being layered on at warp speed. We were, however, invited in by the social studies teacher, as she worked on contracting with one of her classes, using a contract she had designed with the help of the English teacher on her team. What we saw was well thought out parallel teaching, centered around the novel Johnny Tremain, timed to overlap with teaching about the American Revolution.

That day we saw cooperative groups sharing newspaper articles they had developed to capture important events of the revolution (e.g., the Boston tea party, the battle of Trenton, Paul Revere’s ride). The articles would eventually go into a class newspaper, but the students were still getting a grasp of the chronology; one group was working on a wall-sized timeline to sequence the events. Others were working on their word banks for the novel, preparing crossword puzzles and word searches for their peers to solve.*

**Figure 8** Suggested readings on contracting

![Image of suggested readings](image)
wandered throughout the room and enjoyed the busy hum of activity, occasionally stopping to question students. Their teacher, meanwhile, monitored and guided as necessary. We stayed and chatted with her for a while after the children left. She excitedly pulled out some of the other work that her students had produced.

We consider this a significant improvement in teacher attitude compared to the scenario described initially. This teacher was much happier, because she was able to do her job better (demonstrating improved managerial skills) and feel a sense of accomplishment. In addition, and perhaps more important, her students were diligently involved in a variety of learning activities and enjoying them.

We feel that teacher self-efficacy for job performance and students’ sustained engagement in learning activities are reciprocal and complementary. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) is one’s personal perception of the ability to accomplish a specific task. These middle school students became more involved in their learning activities, and this teacher’s self-perception of job performance increased as evidenced by her behaviors and comments in this closing scenario. We feel her reflections on her performance indicate that using learning contracts enriches both teaching and learning.

References


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