

Student Motivation

“I just can’t get her to do any work.” I know he has the ability but he is so disengaged.”
“What can I do to motivate my students?”

These questions and comments are commonly heard from teachers in all grade levels. Student engagement is critical to learning. If students are not engaged in the learning process, teachers cannot gain a true measure of what students know and can do. If teachers can’t gauge what students know and can do, they can’t design instruction to match their students’ strengths and needs.

So, the challenge questions is . . .

What can a teacher do to engage all students in learning?

A word on motivation -

Motivation is defined as “the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors. Motivation is what causes us to act.” We often describe motivation as being extrinsic or intrinsic. However, motivation can only come from within an individual.

According to Kohn, “It’s remarkable how often educators use the word “motivation” when what they mean is compliance. Indeed, one of the fundamental myths in this area is that it’s possible to motivate somebody else. Moreover, motivation is something that kids start out with.”

So, if teachers can’t motivate their students, what can they do?

Although motivation comes from within, teachers can use their knowledge of the theoretical aspects of motivation to create and implement instructional practices that foster students’ motivation. Understanding the theory will also assist teachers in justifying the professional decisions they make for their students.

Below are some of the theoretical underpinnings of motivation, along with practices teachers can implement to cultivate this dynamic learning tool.

Interest and Enjoyment: a desire to do what feels naturally motivating

Many activities children choose to engage in are inherently interesting or enjoyable to them. It’s hard to imagine a 3 to 5 year old not excited about “writing” a story or “reading” a book. Often, in our attempt to “motivate” students to do something they are not interested in or do not enjoy, we promise to give them a positive reinforcer. However, Kohn cautions educators about the use of external reinforcers. He states, “Rewards are most damaging to interest when the task is already intrinsically motivating.” The child who appears to be uninterested in learning was likely the same child who once loved to read and write. It is the

responsibility of educators to find out what caused the change in motivation. Capitalizing on their interest is just one way to foster their motivation.

What teachers can do

Reading aloud to children quality literature is one way to not only capitalize on their interests but to gain their interest. Additionally, when teachers share their own interests and enjoyment of reading, students perceive learning in itself as worthy of their participation. Furthermore, providing students with a variety of texts to choose from during independent reading provides them with an opportunity to make choices that capitalize on their interests.

Recently, a teacher of 3rd graders placed an index card in the reading area. Written on the card she shared the title of one of her favorite books and why she liked it so much. It wasn't long before there were many index cards with written notes from the children about their favorite books.

Relatedness: universal desire to interact, belong, and care for others

Relatedness plays an important role in the process of learning. Children who feel connected to and supported by significant others are more likely to describe their classroom climate positively. Forming relationships, feeling supported, and contributing to the well-being of others are factors that influence an individual's motivation for learning.

What teachers can do

In many classrooms, the teacher sets aside a special time for classroom meetings. During the meetings, children have an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings. They may suggest solutions to problems the class has encountered or they may simply share their gratitude towards another student. Although a sense of belonging needs to be cultivated throughout the day, setting time aside on a daily basis for a classroom meeting, particularly in the morning, can ignite a flame among students that remains lit throughout the day.

Autonomy: regulating one's own behavior and experiences; initiating action

Regardless of age, individuals tend to want to have some control over their experiences. Supporting students' autonomy means understanding and acknowledging the students' perspectives, encouraging them to take initiative and solve problems for themselves, allowing students to make choices when possible, and minimizing the use of rewards, punishments, and controlling language (Deci & Ryan,).

What teachers can do

Teachers can share the responsibility of classroom management with students by involving them in creating rules or guidelines. Rather than the teachers determining what changes need to be made when the management process breaks down, students can offer solutions and help monitor their effectiveness. Additionally, students can perform routine tasks such as: taking role, passing out papers, cleaning and organizing centers, and sharpening pencils.

Rather than ring a bell to indicate time to move from one work station (center) to the next, students in a local school are given the responsibility to decide much time to spend in a particular work station before moving on to the next one. Furthermore, within each station, they are allowed to decide what to do from a menu of choices.

Competence: a sense of mastery derived from completing a task with sufficient challenge

Young children tend to be mastery-oriented, finding pleasure and pride in working towards mastery of a particular activity. However, with the introduction of grades, testing, and external reinforcers, children lean towards a performance orientation. Research has found that students who have a mastery-orientation are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and retain what they have learned.

What teachers can do

While it is likely impossible to avoid assessments that rely on comparisons between students, teachers can foster a sense of competence by giving students the responsibility of setting individual goals. Mastery of those goals can be celebrated and shared. For example, a 9th grade teacher of reading provides time at the end of each 9 week period for her students to share their portfolios with other students and several school faculty members. The focus on their portfolio is on their mastery of particular academic learning tasks rather than test and performance scores.

Sense of Purpose: participation in meaningful and relevant activities

Teachers often acknowledge that the classroom material is not always interesting or relevant to their students' lives. However, providing meaningful learning experiences is a valuable means for tapping into motivation. When students understand why and how a particular experience relates to them, their desire to participate and learn from the activity increases.

What teachers can do

Teachers can share connections between their content and students' lives for their students. For example, recently a math teacher gave her students the opportunity to use the stats from their fantasy football league rather than use the ones supplied by their textbook.

In an elementary classroom, students learned about immigration by turning their tables upside down, creating a boat, writing good-bye letters to their family, and keeping a journal during their boat ride to their new country.

Curiosity: a desire to know more that propels exploration

Babies are born with a natural desire to explore their environment. One learning episode often ignites another. However, as children get older, their curiosity appears to diminish in school settings. Fortunately, teachers can foster students' natural curiosity by creating an environment that reduces risks and allows for exploration. As a result, students are likely to ask more questions and seek learning opportunities.

What teachers can do

Teachers can foster curiosity by sharing their own curiosity type behaviors with students. For example, a 4th grade teacher was reading a story about how Native American Indians built their homes from mounds of bones. When the students did not react, the teacher simply said, “Oh, wow! They made their home from mounds of bones! I wonder where the bones came from!” This ignited a number of questions and enthusiastic responses from her students.

In a middle school classroom, students were engaged in inquiry. Utilizing technology, books, and their peers, they set out to find answers to questions they generated during and after the teacher read aloud, “”.

Self-efficacy: a person’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in a particular situation

The concept of self-efficacy is central to the psychologist, Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory. Bandura believes that the most effective way of developing a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences. When a task is successfully mastered, self-efficacy is strengthened. Additionally, when individuals observe other people similar to themselves successfully completing a task through sustained effort, they are more likely to believe they too possess the capability to master similar undertakings.

What teachers can do

Teachers walk a tight rope between giving students tasks that are too easy and too challenging. Therefore, providing just right tasks or scaffolding the tasks so that with effort students can be successful is key to increasing self-efficacy. Students often know when the task is too easy. Therefore, they are not likely to gain a sense of pride from accomplishing the task. When the task is too hard or they do not have enough support, they are likely to feel frustrated and give up.

Additionally, teachers can help students identify with other successful people with similar characteristics as their own by sharing with them a variety of texts depicting people of various backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, ages, socioeconomic levels, and handicaps.

Attribution: perceived factors that contribute to success or failure

Students tend to attribute their success or failure to ability, task difficulty, effort or luck. When they perceive (the key word is perceive) their success to be due to stable characteristics (intelligence, gender, height, etc.), or conditions out of their control (luck, task too hard) they are less likely to be motivated. When they attribute it to task that are less stable and in their control, they are more likely to be motivated.

Teachers’ responses to students work can also play a valuable role. By encouraging and noting the effort students put forth, students are more likely to contribute their success to actions of their own doing rather than luck or simply the task being too easy. During a

workshop on motivation, the facilitator suggested teachers say, “I saw you work really hard on . . . You must be proud of yourself.” rather than, “You got a 95% on that task. I’m proud of you.”

Final thoughts

Although the above concepts are shared in a format that would suggest they are separate but all related to motivation, there is considerable overlap between each. Assisting children to attribute their success to effort helps increase their self-efficacy and level of competence. Providing choice in order to increase interest and enjoyment, raises autonomy and cultivates curiosity. Therefore, it is valuable to remember that whatever and wherever you choose to place your focus, it is likely that your effort will foster motivation in your students.

Now for engagement . . .

Cambourne's Conditions of Learning.

From Daniel Pink

There's a huge difference between compliant behavior and engaged behavior. With compliant behavior, you're doing what someone told you to do the way they told you to do it. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's different from engagement. With engagement, you're doing something because *you* truly want to do it, because you see the virtues of doing it.

Immersion: Learners are saturated in literacy and learning experiences

What teachers can do

Demonstration: Learners observe learning behaviors modeled by someone who they regard highly

Expectation: Learners receive the message that they can and will learn

Responsibility: Learners make the choice to try out or explore new learning

Approximations: Learners approximate new learning at their developmental level. They are not required to demonstrate all aspects of the learning behavior before attempting to use what they know.

Employment: Learners are given plenty of opportunities to use and practice what they are learning alone and with others

Response: Learners give and receive feedback related to their learning behaviors and experiences

Engagement: Learners actively participate in learning experiences. They are more likely to engage in learning activities when the other conditions are present

Ryan, R. M. & Powelson, C. L. (1991). Autonomy and relatedness as fundamental to motivation and education. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 60 (1), 49-66.