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One to Grow On / Releasing the Will to Learn

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What I've observed in classrooms leads me to a good news bad news conclusion about motivation.

Human beings enter the world highly motivated to learn. It's how we invent ourselves—a survival mechanism. So when educators talk about students who aren't motivated to learn, I figure something is amiss. Either we can't see what motivates the student in question, or the student's life is dangerously off course. In either case, "unmotivated" behavior should register to educators as a call for help.

The Good News and the (Same) Bad News

A recent report on motivation and student success (Education Week Research Center, 2014) shares some findings worth pondering. Teachers and building administrators surveyed cited student motivation as the most important indicator of academic success, but most said that fewer than half of their students were engaged and motivated. They listed lack of parental support, lack of time, and lack of resources as the chief barriers to student motivation. It seems striking that the majority of respondents reported that *they* were good at inspiring students but that their colleagues weren't so good.

What I've observed in classrooms—my own as well as those of others—leads me to a good news–bad news conclusion about motivation. The same reality lies behind both the good and the bad news: The teacher is key to student motivation. We have immense power to unleash—or diminish—a young person's desire to learn. There's so much we can do in either direction.

Three Concentric Circles

It seems to me that catalysts of—or obstacles to—student motivation form a set of three concentric circles. In each circle, students ask key questions that affect their eagerness to learn. Teachers need to be aware of those essential questions and reflect carefully on the answers they're giving their students.

The Personal Sphere

The outermost circle—in which motivation links to a student's concerns about his or her personal relationship with school and school adults—is often the most powerful. In this sphere, a student poses two fundamental questions: Does the teacher see me? and *How* does the teacher see me? Some students feel invisible in their classrooms; some feel judged and found wanting. In either condition, the student's desire to learn is likely extinguished.

A teacher does well to reflect on whether he or she sees each student as an individual. Considering an "unmotivated" kid, teachers should ask these questions: Do I believe in this student's capacity to succeed in my classroom—and am I

communicating belief in that potential? Do I give him or her support, voice, and autonomy in school work? What am I doing to know *this* child better today than I did yesterday?

The Social Sphere

The middle circle houses social links to motivation. In this metaphorical space, a student asks, Do I belong here? Am I valued? Do I have something meaningful to contribute? Humans need affiliation with other human beings. Students flourish when they find a sort of school family—a group that accepts, nurtures, and needs them.

Some kids require help to find that group. So a wise teacher who perceives that a student's effort is lagging frequently asks, How do I represent this learner to all the other students? Do I construct student groups so that he or she—and everyone in every group—has something crucial to contribute to the success of the whole?

More broadly, teachers should consider whether they cast everyone as a traveler on the road to success or think in terms of winners and losers. We feed motivation when we ask ourselves what we can do to model, commend, and necessitate mutual respect.

The Academic Sphere

In the center circle are two questions students ask themselves regarding academics: Is this stuff worth my time? and Can I do what's being asked of me? Knowing that students are chewing on these questions, a teacher who accepts his or her power to ignite motivation asks, Do I tap the power of this content to inspire learning? Do I plan for wonder, imagination, and curiosity in lessons—for example, by beginning with questions rather than answers and showing students the links between what I teach and their lives?

In this sphere, a wise teacher poses these queries: Do I both point to goals that seem beyond the reach of each student and provide learning partnerships that will extend his or her reach? Do I teach skills that pave the way to real learning—like listening, asking, finding out, reasoning, disagreeing, self-correcting, and starting again? Do I require growth from every student? Do I celebrate growth?

Owning Our Power

There's no single fix for weak student motivation. On a given day, in a given year, some students will need teachers to focus on the personal circle to fuel motivation. Others will need more attention to questions in the academic circle. And some kids have barriers to motivation that transcend these circles—life baggage too heavy for them to carry and too serious for us to repair even with our best efforts. Even in those instances, however, a teacher can send life-changing messages when he refuses to give up on a kid or when she approaches a reluctant learner as a dreamer in need of a plan to construct that dream.

We can be architects of circumstances that enable students to become self-motivated (Deci, 1995). Marianne Williamson (1992) said something that always challenges me: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond belief" (p. 92). This quote challenges me in the motivation arena—as a teacher who either will or will not own my capacity to release students' motivation to learn.

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