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September 2014 | Volume 72 | Number 1
Motivation Matters Pages 68-70

Commentary / Rethinking High School Pathways

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Students perceived as lazy may just need another option.

I teach *those* kids. You know them. Every high school teacher does. The slackers, the class ditchers, the pains in your backside who won't come to class on time, won't turn in work, won't speak up in class, and won't show up for remediation or detention.

In Tennessee, where I am the coordinator of a rural high school's alternative graduation program for young people with special needs, school is compulsory to the age of 18. My students are regularly marched through truancy court, I've had parents court ordered to attend my class with their children for weeks on end, and I've worked with the local juvenile judge to assign students to detention with me after school as part of their sentencing.

I know *those* kids. And I've never met one without aspirations. I don't even know many I would describe as unmotivated. Unmotivated to show up at school, certainly. But not unmotivated in general. When a student is referred to me, the referring teacher almost always describes that student as lazy. Then I find out the same student works hours after school and on weekends repairing cars, working the family farm, running a business, or caring for a sick family member. Lazy is situation-specific.

It's easy to form stereotypes about *those* kids, but students most at risk for dropping out aren't a homogeneous group. Some struggle with mental illness, some are young parents, and some have drug addictions, but many others have simply given up on education. What leads these students to give up?

Teachers have long noticed, and researchers have more recently found, that students' intrinsic motivation begins to decline in middle school and steadily continues the downward slide through high school (Gottfried, Marcoulides, Gottfried, Oliver, & Guerin, 2007). Intrinsic motivation seems to be positively related to a person's perception of his or her own competence (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Obviously, students who have experienced repeated failures in school often do not perceive themselves as competent in the classroom setting.

Proposed Personas

Education policymakers, curriculum developers, and media writers urge teachers to take on various personas to steer students back on the education path, but we teachers can see the flaws in these roles.

The Cheerleader. You know the refrain: "You can do it! Everyone can make it in college! Just keep plugging away at it and you'll get there!" Even in the countries with the highest rates of education attainment, fewer than half of young people earn university degrees. What alternatives are we offering for the majority of our students?

The Whip Cracker. Students need more "grit," so we tell them, "Plenty of people have had a harder time than you, and they've risen to the top. Get cracking, and pull yourself up by your bootstraps." I have taught students with measured IQs of less than 70 who have gone on to community college with determination to transfer to four-year universities. Some kids overcome unbelievable obstacles to claw their way to the top, but experts have not found a way to force grit into young people.

Sometimes it gets tempting to take on an even less helpful persona:

The Pitier. A compassionate educator might think, "Look at all these kids have to deal with. How can we expect them to achieve anything? They're doing well just to survive." But allowing kids to give in to the obstacles and leave formal education early is a sentence to a life of churning through low-paying jobs and unemployment.

Maybe it's time to reframe our thinking. Instead of debating how to make teens buy into our narrow "college and career-ready" pathway, we might view their behavior as an economist would.

Costs and Benefits

Many students weigh the costs and benefits of continuing in our current education system and determine that a high school pathway designed to lead to college is not worth the effort. And too often, their estimates are right on target. The costs of higher education include not just tuition but also lost earnings and lost opportunities to gain work experience. Lost happiness is also a cost measured by economists and psychologists who study motivation. Students who have had negative experiences in school may judge these costs—along with the social costs of leaving behind family, friends, and local communities to join an academic setting where they don't feel they fit in—as too high to pay.

Students' academic achievement in high school is the main determinant of whether they choose to apply to college (McDonough, 1997). The data on college completion are of poor quality, but they certainly indicate that a large number of young people who begin four-year degrees don't complete them (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Taking on debt and turning down work opportunities to start a university education represents a dire prospect for a student who is likely to ultimately leave college without a degree that would help him or her recoup the loss. Many students who have a history of school failure have enough sense not to gamble on odds so poor.

An Alternate Pathway

In the 2013–14 school year, as a recipient of a Fulbright Distinguished Award in Teaching, I worked at the University of Leeds in England, examining alternative pathways for upper-secondary students. I visited schools across England, as well as some in Finland and Germany, and developed a network of teachers from countries as diverse as Singapore, Morocco, India, and Argentina. As these teachers shared information about their school systems and opportunities offered in their communities, I learned of many established pathways for upper-secondary students that lead to successful careers.

Most European and Asian countries provide vocational education pathways that offer sector-specific work training leading to recognized industry qualifications. Apprenticeships and other routes that combine work experience with training lead to strong returns on investment for both the young person and the broader community (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). Apprenticeships and other work-based learning settings also report high completion rates and overall satisfaction ratings (Olinsky & Ayres, 2013).

Vocational pathways are offered to students at around the age of 16 in many countries, and students may complete them to progress directly to the workforce or continue in training to earn further vocational qualifications or university credits and degrees. Instead of finishing at age 18 with a generic high school diploma and no guarantee of secure employment, students in these programs learn by working in the field and receive training aligned with industry standards.

In most U.S. states, including Tennessee, students may choose to take career and technical education (CTE) courses for elective credit. Typically, students interested in pursuing a vocational or technical path take one or two CTE courses per year to complement academic courses in mathematics, English, science, and social studies.

In contrast, in nations like Switzerland, Singapore, and England, students may choose a specific vocational or technical pathway in which all coursework supports entry into the chosen field and provides prerequisites to higher training and qualifications recognized by the industry that the student would like to enter. I believe that many of the students I serve who have not been successful in the general academic pathway would be motivated to excel in a program tailored to their strengths and career ambitions.

Given the high value that U.S. society places on university enrollment, it's likely that the majority of young people would continue to choose a college-preparatory pathway, even if alternatives were provided. Many of my students, however, have already decided that this pathway isn't for them. When I listen to my students, I hear them asking, sometimes begging, for another way. I hear them describe pathways that would motivate them, often into honorable fields like firefighting, health care, construction, or child care. I have now seen models of how work-based training and vocational education centers in Europe offer routes into these fields, so I know that another way is possible.

Rather than rolling our eyes at *those* lazy kids, we could view them as rational consumers of our services and provide them with more paths toward opportunities they consider worth the cost.

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