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# Why We Can't Always Get What We Want

Motivation may be more important for student success than even the teacher's knowledge of the content being taught. Ms. Bartholomew discusses the fundamentals for increasing intrinsic motivation and encouraging classroom excellence.

BY BARBARA BARTHOLOMEW

**H**E was the new reading teacher's greatest challenge — a sixth-grader reading at roughly the first-grade level. Sometimes he acted out, but mostly he just daydreamed, talked, or slept while his classmates worked. No one, including his guardian, knew how to motivate him to want to succeed.

As she was leaving the building one afternoon, the teacher happened upon a rambunctious game of basketball. She entered the nearly empty gym, sat in the bleachers, and immediately noticed the boy playing with his team. She returned his frantic wave. As the game drew to a close, he dashed up to her, and they launched into an excited conversation about the game.

After that, she made a point of going to almost every practice for the rest of the season. There, she would often study the coach, focusing on how attentive the team was to him. They responded to his intensity, his knowledge of the game and the players, his planning, and his single-minded commitment to winning.

Taking this cue, she set a small number of attainable short- and long-term classroom goals for the boy,

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simultaneously adjusting her own demeanor, expectations, and responses to more closely match her colleague's. Progress toward reading goals was measured on a hand-drawn schematic of a basketball court in the boy's folder; each movement toward his "basket" was noted with a ball drawn on the paper court. Soon she and the boy began listening and responding carefully to each other.

The note of exasperation on which the year had begun quietly gave way to a fragile optimism shared by the student and teacher, now learners together. The boy began to believe he could make learning connections off the court, and the teacher began to understand that

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effective teaching depends a great deal on the efforts of the students themselves. After just five months of uneven yet steady progress, the boy's reading score had risen by more than a grade.

The year was 1995. The teacher was me.

### CONTEXT FIRST

What I had stumbled on in my first year of teaching would take years to implement consistently as a way to drive instruction. It was, in a word, *motivation*. Motivation involves creating the inspiration *to do* or *to achieve*. Some students arrive at school fully motivated. Often, though, the opposite is the case.

As a new teacher, I had assumed what most in the field of education believe to be true: motivation springs from effective curriculum and instruction. If we have some perfect blend of elements — direct instruction, whole-language instruction, a new trade book or textbook, an intervention, a new set of standards — students will become deeply involved and interested learners. Everything circled back to effective curriculum and instruction. It had been the focus of my college coursework, of every professional development session I had ever attended, and of every piece of advice I had ever received from a principal. But it was clear to me from that first experience that the most vexing issues I faced as a teacher stemmed less from the content that I knew and could control than from the context of things I did not know and could not control.

Chief among these things was what made my students tick. Human thought processes are not directly observable. Because we see others behaving in a way that is consistent with our efforts to influence their actions, we deduce that we have succeeded in our attempts to motivate them. But for every teacher who has run a “token” society, rewarded those who comply with candy, phoned a parent to gain a student's cooperation, changed seating charts in the hope of ending chatter, or flashed classroom lights as a signal for silence, it remains unclear exactly what is motivating the students. It is easy to confuse behavioral cueing with motivational change.

### THE STAR STORY

A principal I knew had once been a teacher at an alternative high school. Many of his pupils were returning from stints in jail or in drug treatment programs. Most were in their late teens and quickly bonded with him as a strong and important male presence in their lives. His dream for them was that they would be able

to defy the odds of repeated failure and, as he had done, forge independent paths of success for themselves.

He placed a motivational chart in his classroom. As students reached important milestones, he would reward them with a gold star on the chart. One day, with only a few minutes until class was to begin, he realized that it was reward day and that he had run out of gold stars. He dashed across the street to a local grocery, only to find it was sold out of the tiny gold stars. He settled for silver stars instead.

When award time rolled around, he began posting the silver stars that he had purchased as substitutes. Almost immediately furious shouts erupted from his normally quiet group, and within moments the class had dissolved into a chaotic mix of fist fighting and chair throwing. The police were summoned. As the students were being questioned, virtually every one, some in tears, expressed frustration that their teacher had disrespected them by demoting them from the level of gold stars to the lesser status of silver.

With no background in either the power or the shortcomings of behavioral motivation models, he had missed important pieces of the context in which he was working. He failed to account for how much value his students had placed on the public recognition of individual accomplishment played out in front of the entire group. Other contextual issues might have affected their motivation as well. Had fair and equitable rules been set for earning the rewards? Could he have anticipated that an all-male class would see the stars as designations of merit similar to gold and silver medals?

It is well established in the literature of motivation that successful motivational models do not necessarily rely on extrinsically controlled rewards and punishments. Rather, the best motivational models take advantage of those “satisfiers” and “valuations” chosen and controlled by an individual. Without knowing of alternative ways of developing autonomous learners, the teacher had simply resorted to the carrot-and-stick model that was actually least likely to bring him the results he wanted.

### CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT OR MOTIVATION?

A common confusion of teachers and school leaders alike is that classroom management and motivation are basically one and the same. Teachers continue to focus on tight control of the environment and curriculum in the closely held belief that doing so will eventually create motivated students and positive learning outcomes. Since it sometimes does, they are encour-

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aged to keep trying whatever occasionally successful system brings them the result they seek. Because a quiet classroom where students are busy is equated with good teaching, it is an ideal for which most teachers strive. The paradox, of course, is that such successful behavior management does not create motivation to learn, any more than work completed with little care for learning demonstrates student progress.

What classroom management can provide is the space to create motivating opportunities for students to engage in a level of self-determination about their own learning.<sup>1</sup> But if the chance is not seized, teachers will find themselves very quickly painted into a corner of endlessly distributing rewards and punishments, with little opportunity to focus on mastery in content areas.

A number of studies, including the government's own, have established the correlation between teacher attrition and lack of classroom control.<sup>2</sup> These same data suggest that more than 50% of teachers leave the profession because of poor student behavior.

What we have failed to provide in the professional training of teachers is a realistic understanding that control and compliance will not in themselves create a climate for academic attainment. Indeed, in some cases, they may actually prove to be a disincentive to learning. Causes of disengagement vary, from boredom and frustration to anger and depression. So long as we continue to focus on the symptoms of the uninspired rather than on the problem itself, we will persist in overlooking the root causes of why students fail to thrive.

## A MISUNDERSTOOD PRECONDITION

The education community has not done a good job of articulating the idea that student motivation is a necessary precondition to learning that teachers need to create and foster. And teachers must do this nurturing from their diagnostic and practical knowledge of human behavior, not from a knowledge of subject matter. Not one of the top 10 schools of education in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings requires students seeking credentials as teachers or pursuing graduate degrees in leadership to complete a dedicated class in educational motivation. Typically, the study of motivation has been located in graduate schools of psychology or in departments of educational psychology. Students in these areas are not very likely to become the professionals who interact with students daily in a school setting.

If motivation is covered at all in most schools of education, it is folded into the subject matter of another class, such as organizational management or learning

theory, rather than studied as an essential stand-alone subject. In the endless parsing of “best practices” in training programs for teachers and school leaders — both preservice and inservice — learning to foster student motivation, the most obvious of all best practices, is conspicuously absent.

There exists an entrenched belief in American education that student learning will spring from the right alchemic brew of macro components: firm direction from state and local departments of education, strong district- and school-based leadership, a good teacher, the right curriculum, and appropriate books.<sup>3</sup> However, such matters as the steady increase in the number of students whose families face grave economic stresses and the need for common touchstones in a multicultural society argue that the time is right to examine carefully the framework of human variables involved in teaching and learning.

The best place to start is the field of educational motivation, which encompasses a well-developed and compelling body of knowledge from such fields as psychology, sociology, linguistic and speech studies, and organizational management. In this knowledge base we are sure to find at least part of what we need to help us create classrooms that will appeal to those who teach and those who learn.

Higher up the policy ladder, state and local administrators are beginning to reassess the effect on student

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achievement of micromanaged schools and scripted curricula. They will need to consider what elements and training will be necessary to create motivational classrooms. It is also essential that they take a hard look at the impact of factory-model educational designs of the kind encouraged by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act on school personnel's morale and, in turn, on student achievement.<sup>4</sup>

As the reauthorization of NCLB looms in 2007, we would be wise to ask ourselves how we can do better at preparing highly qualified professionals for the jobs they will face. It is widely acknowledged that something monumental has shifted beneath our feet, and teachers have been saying for years that they are social workers and psychologists first. Yet we continue to prepare them as content specialists and to evaluate their teaching proficiency on how well they meet subject content standards. What is our plan, then, for the human content standard?

#### RETHINKING PREPARATION AND PRACTICE

One reason schools, offices of education, and even university departments of education have ignored motivational theory and practice is doubtless the difficulty of identifying generalizable and effective courses of action for teachers, given the endless variety of challenging conditions educators face. It is unlikely that there will ever be a single program to address all possibilities, but some relevant universals can be found.

It is in education that behaviorism has probably come closest to achieving mass popularity, and it has done so in part because of the simplicity of its basic stance and its appeal to commonsense ideas about control and reward. However, as the "star story" illustrates, behaviorism is not always an easy tool to use. Nevertheless, it would be foolish and impractical to dismiss thoughtful behavioral reward systems altogether simply because they do not draw on intrinsic motivation or because they violate an ideological ideal. Those programs that provide meaningful, noncontrolling feedback or those in which students themselves determine how they wish to be rewarded are clearly worth examining.<sup>5</sup>

Programs that have proved useful in enhancing student learning should not be dismissed simply because they do not conform to today's trends in practice. What is important is that both instructional and motivational programs demonstrate a justifiable probability of success. Moreover, whatever the theoretical underpinnings of a program, those who would apply it must learn both the theory and the ways it plays out in practice.

Both teacher preparation programs and educational leadership programs should require a minimum of a one-term class dedicated to the topic of motivation. Indeed, a full-year sequence would be best. Such a program should provide its students with broad preparation in the cross-disciplinary cornerstones of motivational theory and in the details of practice. Case study analyses, combined with opportunities for clinical observation, practice, and reflection, would give all educators a far better chance of success.

#### MOTIVATION IN ACTION

One of the great puzzles of education is how to take a successful innovative program, transfer it to a new setting, and obtain equally good results. Though we don't always like to acknowledge it, classroom and school cultures are created at the local level. Successful instructional motivation programs must therefore be able to take account of the context of individual communities and of the students in specific classrooms. What drives people of all ages to make choices about where to exert themselves is, to some degree at least, relevance to their lives. If we perceive that something is relevant, we will choose to participate in learning it even if it does not interest us or even if we feel we don't have the ability to learn it easily. Following a similar line of thought, psychologist Gordon Paul posed a classic question for clinical researchers: "What treatment, by *whom*, is most effective for *this* individual with *that* specific problem, and under *which* set of circumstances?"<sup>6</sup> These are sage

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words for anyone wondering where to begin a discussion of motivation.

While there is no universal framework to follow, there are a number of fundamentals that apply broadly and can be used as a foundation for building models of classroom excellence. When they are ignored or violated, we decrease our chances of fostering the personally meaningful satisfaction and enrichment of lives that education has always sought.

One such general principle of “satisfaction” could be stated this way: we are drawn to do what gratifies us and avoid doing what pains us — especially when we see no clear benefit from the undesirable experience. Below, I mention briefly several other considerations that would have both broad applicability and individual relevance for creating a classroom where intrinsic motivation rules.

- *Sustainability must be considered.* Good practices get better as routines are established and weaknesses identified and weeded out. No program or component of a program should be kept if it is not working.

- *Age determines course of action.* Opportunities for students to achieve success at every level of schooling are crucial to establishing and maintaining motivation. Younger children are generally more confident that they will succeed in school — probably because their perceptions have not yet been firmly shaped with regard to their abilities and achievement history.<sup>7</sup> From grades 3 through 8, studies have shown that intrinsic motivation falls off steadily.

Older students — like those in the star story — present complex personal histories and problems. Those who have accepted failure and those who have learned helplessness may not believe that they possess the ability to change their learning outcomes. Others seek to avoid failure in a variety of unsatisfactory ways, including not challenging themselves to learn and even lapsing into plagiarism and other forms of cheating.<sup>8</sup>

Standardized assessments may not accurately determine how prepared students are in content areas. And uncovering the strengths students bring to the classroom and the relevance to their lives of classroom learning is key to remediation and engagement, especially for older students.

- *Teachers set expectations and establish routines.* Classroom management will not be the focal point of efforts to increase student motivation. Instead, a well-managed classroom will be the result of good organization, clear expectations, positive teacher communication, and valuing student input and engagement. Teachers must model and enforce the kind of respectful in-

terchange they expect. Praise is an appropriate reward when it is specific and deserved; it should never be used when students have performed work without effort or care. And once again, consistency is essential in establishing an effective classroom and in maintaining a classroom culture of trust and equality.

- *Students, with guidance from teachers, establish goals, strategies, and achievement plans.* Allowing students to set goals is probably the most effective means of having them begin to take charge of their learning. How this process is arranged can vary, but students’ plans should incorporate short- and long-term goals and an explicit outline of what will be needed to achieve them. So as not to overwhelm students, the goals can be broken down into smaller units of daily or weekly goals. Some students may wish to work with partners to brainstorm, to gauge their progress, and to obtain feedback on their work. Student-maintained records of individual progress can provide incentives for self-monitoring.

- *Providing students with choices can be motivating.* In general, we should allow students to participate in class decision making and should give them as many choices as possible about the topics and work they will pursue. Class-constructed rubrics can establish group norms for how work will be evaluated. Students will perceive evaluation systems into which they have had input as fairer than those from which they have been excluded.

- *Teachers set class tone; students set their individual tone.* In the classrooms I have observed, minds at rest have a tendency to stay at rest until an outside force acts on them. Once in motion, if they’re encouraged and supported, they tend to stay in motion and continue to move forward independently. Building students’ intrinsic motivation involves a seemingly contradictory degree of stage setting, coaching, and feedback from the teacher, especially as routines are being set. And even as the students “take over,” teachers must still be comfortable with a wide variety of teaching strategies in order to accommodate the range of subjects and the range of student learners.

Two components that help set the tone are likely to play key roles in the degree to which students engage themselves independently as learners. The first is respecting the power of listening. The simple act of listening carefully to others while holding their gaze conveys attentiveness, interest, respect for (though not necessarily agreement with) the speaker’s views, and a range of other nonverbal messages. By combining attentive listening with such conversational guidelines as turn-taking, gauging understanding, and conveying empathy, the teacher can both build and help monitor en-

agement.<sup>9</sup> Creating opportunities to teach and practice listening is a frequently overlooked element in establishing a mutually motivational environment for both teacher and student. Listening is also an important aspect of relationship building, the most obvious of all motivational strategies.

The second component that helps foster a tone that supports motivation is building and expanding on positives. The expanding field of positive psychology has yielded insights into the phenomenon of “learned optimism,” or the theory that positive thinking patterns can be acquired.<sup>10</sup> In one classic experiment, researchers paired animated, happy individuals with nonexpressive partners in a conversational setting. In a short time, the mood of the nonexpressive individuals began to lighten and approached that of the more positive individuals.<sup>11</sup> Such positive emotions as joy, pride, and contentment have been shown to lead to physiological and psychological changes that cause individuals — at least momentarily — to broaden their cognitive perceptions, to become more open to change, and to increase their emotional well-being.

Barbara Fredrickson has proposed a “broaden and build” theory that suggests that positive moments create opportunities for mental expansiveness. Seizing on these moments when the potential for growth is at its peak can lead to greater classroom learning.<sup>12</sup> Humor, celebrations, trips, visual reminders, and games fall under the umbrella of building intrinsic motivation through positive approaches.<sup>13</sup>

## THE SATISFACTION PRINCIPLE

Educators are not all that different from students. They also thrive in climates where they feel their input is viewed as important, where they can engage in daily curricular and instructional choices, and where they feel valued and respected.<sup>14</sup> Like older students, they will avoid the pain of working in environments over which they have little control and in which they meet daily failure. When they are unable to find satisfaction in their work environment, the data show that that they will leave.

One failing that has been noted about standards-based systems is that, when externally mandated goals are not met, blame enters the picture. In such work climates, teachers are unlikely to experiment with any classroom technique that could cause them to be targeted for blame should students fail to achieve.<sup>15</sup> In the present national environment of rigid adherence to lock-step formulas, following standard practice is the equiv-

alent of job insurance. If students fail because of policies made higher up the chain of command, then schools and teachers can say that they did as they were told, and culpability will be pushed back up the ladder. Teachers are a well-educated group and will, when they have had enough, move on. Students, lacking this option, will be the ones who will lose the most.

It is within our power, as a profession, to reshape what exists into what could be. We have misplaced the knowledge that hope and dreams are the mortar of our business. We now define and justify our actions through the accountability sweepstakes, but until we reset our direction, we will remain disappointed, like the students racing for gold stars and inexplicably receiving silver ones. The star chart has replaced the satisfaction principle.

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