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## What Is Motivation and Why Does It Matter So Much?

*Rather than rewarding students for doing their job, we should help them celebrate a job well done. It's a subtle shift but an important one. Celebrating their success leaves the onus where it should be, with the student.*

—Robyn Jackson

**I**speak all over the world to teachers and other educators. There seems to be one constant with teachers and that is the lack of motivation to learn displayed by many of their students. I sometimes begin my training by asking teachers to share the one thing that is keeping them from being the teachers they want to be and their answer is almost unanimous—the lack of

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motivation displayed by students today. In his ground breaking book *The Brain That Changes Itself*, Doidge (2008) says that our brains are constantly changing throughout our lives: the brains we were born with are not the same brains that we will have when we leave this world. He says that the old adage that “we can’t teach an old dog new tricks” is absolutely false; we are still learning at any age. Learning is more difficult as we get older only because we are more resistant to changing our mindsets; not because the brain cannot change. In other words, we can teach an old dog new tricks but the old dog has to be willing. The same is true of the newer puppies—our students. They can learn new material but three things must be present: (1) the desire to learn new information or new processes, (2) the right method of teaching, and (3) consistency. Why then aren’t our students waiting with baited breath to learn all this new and exciting material that we are presenting?

Kids today have changed dramatically—not just in the way they dress, the things they pierce, and the kinds of music they listen to—but in their neurological wiring as well. They truly are different from the generations before them. This generation is the first generation—due to their vast knowledge of technology—to be leading their teachers into the changes of the 21st century rather than the teacher leading. Add to that the opposite end of the spectrum, the students from poverty, who often join the classroom with one-half the vocabulary of their middle-class counterparts, and we have the makings for disaster in the classroom (Marzano & Kendall, 2008). With each generation, the media most used—radio, television, computers—affect the way the brain wires itself for learning and for paying attention. Most of us were trained to teach to the cognitive system of the brain. We stand before our classes to provide access to this world of knowledge for our students. Why then aren’t they motivated to learn? After all, isn’t cognitive knowledge what students must acquire to master standards, to pass state and national exams, and to be successful in school? The truth is that the role of education has changed, but unfortunately many educators have not. According to the

research from Marzano (2001) learning does not begin with cognitive processes but rather, it begins in the self-system. I call this the “Do I wanna?” system because it is through this system that we seem to decide very quickly whether we are going to pay attention, whether we are going to engage in the learning, or simply dismiss it as not important. Indeed, Marzano (2007) says that as teachers we can increase student engagement through the following:

1. *High energy.* When we demonstrate energy in the learning process we increase the oxygen level to the brain and increase our attention level. Teachers who bring high energy to the teaching help to motivate students to use high energy as well. Instruction that is paced well with moderate stress and moderate difficulty can contribute as well.
2. *Missing information.* When we provide students with part of the information that they need but with key components left out, we often arouse their curiosity to find out more. When teaching a unit on world hunger, I like to tell my students that we produce enough food in this country alone to provide everyone in the world with more than 2,500 calories a day. So why do we have world hunger?
3. *The self-system.* The self-system has been explored by psychologists as the system that causes us to pay attention. Motivators of the self-system include whether we have been successful before, how we feel about the learning, the classroom, and the teacher and whether the learning is personally relevant.
4. *Mild pressure.* While stress and prolonged pressure can have negative effects on learning and on our well-being, mild pressure helps to stimulate us by putting emphasis on the mild stress. For example, a student who believes that she has a pretty good chance of being called on to answer a question is more likely to pay attention.

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5. *Mild controversy and competition.* We use mild controversy when we provide circumstances for students to discuss or to research to form an opinion.

In this chapter, we examine motivation in terms of new brain research.

### WHAT IS MOTIVATION?

Motivation relates to the drive to do something. Motivation causes us to get up in the morning and go to work. Motivation drives us to study new things, and motivation encourages us to try again when we fail. Just as there are times when you or I feel more or less motivated to do something, the same is true for our students. Think about the last time that you had to learn something that was either difficult or for which you had little personal interest. What motivated you to complete the task? When the task became difficult or when you experienced a roadblock, what caused you to complete the task? For that matter, think about the last time that you were in an education meeting or in staff development. Did you come to the meeting place with a preconceived opinion about the worth of your time versus what was to be discussed? Even if you approached the meeting with a positive expectation, how long did it take you to decide if you were going to actively pay attention? Your internal motivation was probably decided by whether the meeting had personal relevance, whether you had respect for or a positive relationship with the presenters, the material, or the need to know. Your past experiences with these meetings, with the materials being presented or with the people involved helped your brain make its decision. If you are from a culture outside of the dominant culture of most schools, such as a northern European culture, the presenters needed to create a relationship first and then provide the substance. Otherwise, you would have been reluctant to pay attention. If the material did not relate to the students that you teach, you may have sighed and thought about something else during the presentation.

Have you ever lamented over the fact that your students seem unmotivated? I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that we cannot motivate our students; no one can motivate you but you. The good news is that while we cannot motivate our students, there are processes that we can undertake that will cause motivation to happen naturally. While we cannot be motivated for our students—that is something they must find for themselves—what we can do is directly teach them skills that will help them to begin a task with energy and to complete it even when it becomes difficult. These skills must be directly taught and many students today have not been taught those skills. Part of the culture of any student is the way in which their peers and their caregivers view education. What is the expectation in terms of getting an education and what is perceived to be the role of the teacher? If you teach students from poverty, then you may be teaching students who have acquired responses to learning that work against the self-system of the brain. If the people around them went to school but they still live in poverty, the need for learning may have been diminished. If the expectation in their given culture is that females do not need as much education or that education does not have anything to do with their world, motivation to pay attention and to complete a task may be low. If your students were born with the mouse in their hands, if they have been exposed to technology from early years, they will have difficulty learning by listening and taking notes with paper and pen. Take heart, motivation to pay attention to the learning, to begin a task, and to complete it is an innate part of the self-system and metacognitive systems of the brain, and they can be activated by using learning strategies that relate to how they learn best.

### **BUILD INTRINSIC MOTIVATION**

As teachers, our goal is to guide students to use the innate drive that we all have for intrinsic motivation. Often, students who have been given external rewards, such as money, food, or stickers, for desired behavior will have less drive to do

something just for the joy of doing it. Teachers can change that behavior by changing teaching tactics and by gradually weaning students from external rewards to celebrations of the learning. I want to add here that we all do things for external rewards. You love teaching but would probably not be able or willing to do it for free. You have a family to feed, a living space to pay for, and a car and gasoline to buy with the external reward that you receive each month for doing what you love, teaching. External rewards are not all bad; they keep us coming to our work each day even when things are not going well. Some cultures teach from an early age that effort should include rewards; we just want to add to that belief system that rewards don't have to all be extrinsic nor do they have to be immediate. For example, I demonstrate to my students how to problem solve because it is an important skill for this century and will help them to be marketable in a global world. Knowing this will help them to survive in difficult circumstances and to be able to deal with their peers from a stronger vantage point. Their rewards for knowing this skill and being able to apply it may not happen immediately.

As teachers, there are a variety of approaches that we can take to enhance motivation on the days that our students are feeling less motivated. Knowing the culture of our students and the expectations of that culture will help us to make good decisions in regard to how to tap into their natural instincts for motivation. For example, we know that in many cultures and especially in the Hispanic and African American cultures we must build a relationship before we will ever be able to get students motivated to actively participate in the classroom. This is very different from the culture around which North American schools are built. In the traditional culture of our schools, the belief tends to be that we teach substance first, build relationships second. In most other cultures, a relationship of trust, of a coach, of genuine caring and respect are expected to occur before the substance; in other words, relationship first, substance second. The culture from which we come influences our attitudes toward learning, our expectations of the curriculum, the teacher, and the classroom

experience. As teachers, we don't have to know about every culture—but we must know the culture from which our students come. Culture is not just ethnicity, it is the way we view everything and it is based on other factors such as where we were born, the attitudes of our caregivers and friends toward school, our expectations for the future and our environment. A Hispanic student who has lived in the United States her whole life and who only periodically goes back to Mexico to visit family has a different culture than the Hispanic student who lives on the border, who speaks Spanish as her first language, and who goes weekly back to Mexico. Intrinsic motivation is dependent on our knowing the culture and what truly motivates that student to learn.

Before we can create a viable plan for activating the systems of thinking in our students, it is important to understand the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is the drive that comes from within; students do something for the sheer joy of doing it or because they want to discover something, answer a question, or experience the feeling of self-accomplishment.

Based on the experiences that our students bring with them to the classroom, they may or may not be intrinsically motivated. Students who grow up in an environment in which they do only those things for which they receive a tangible reward will be less intrinsically motivated. For those students, it will be more difficult to break the pattern of rewards for work—but this break *can* be accomplished with the patience and consistency of the classroom teachers involved. Brain researchers say that we are born with the tendency toward intrinsic motivation—watch a two-year-old explore the world and you will see what I mean. However, over time, if students are constantly promised rewards if they will be quiet, clean their rooms, make good grades, and so forth, they may have learned to disregard that natural intrinsic motivation in favor of tangible rewards. With inner-city students or students from poverty, the natural intrinsic motivation with which they were born may have been extinguished early in life from being with caregivers who believe that they have no control over their lives. Because they believe

locus of control comes from outside sources, sources beyond their control, they may have learned early on to look to outside rewards for motivation.

Intrinsic motivation comes from within—specifically from the self- and metacognitive systems. When these systems are activated positively, students work hard for their own satisfaction in learning and doing well. The perceived value of tasks is paramount to intrinsic motivation. According to Marzano (1992), when students set their own goals for learning they are more likely to be motivated to pay attention to the learning. In the real world we often refer to this as, “What’s in it for me?” Will it solve a problem I have, make me more powerful to my friends, or just solve questions that I have? Both the self-system and the metacognitive systems of the brain are built around those characteristics that lend themselves to intrinsic motivation. For example, the self-system is guided by self-concept and self-efficacy and the belief that one can achieve. The metacognitive system is built around personal goal setting and follow-through, which happen without outside rewards.

## WHAT IS EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION?

Extrinsic motivation is motivation that comes about because of the promise of a tangible, marketable reward. It is the desire to do something because of the promise of or hope for a tangible result. Extrinsic motivation is a product of the behaviorist point of view, which says that we can manipulate behavior by providing rewards or punishments. The father of this movement is generally thought to be B. F. Skinner, who conducted many experiments in which he provided rewards for desired behavior and punishments for undesired behavior (or the absence of desired behavior). Before his death, Skinner himself said that it was foolish to think that human beings react the same as other experimental animals. Caine and Caine (1997) add,

Behaviorism, particularly as incorporated into schools, is largely based on rewards and punishment; but these are



extremely complex, not simple. A smiley sticker is not just a single reward of a single act. The use of a sticker may well influence the formation of expectations, preferences, and habits having impact far beyond any single event. Thus, a single teacher behavior may have vast, but initially invisible, consequences. One of many problems with the behaviorist approach is that it does not provide for a way to acknowledge those consequences. (p. 16)

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REWARDS AND CELEBRATIONS

Extrinsic motivation is triggered by outside sources rather than from within. These outside forces may come in the form of a reward, such as candy, money, or stickers. Extrinsic motivation may also be a hug or pat on the back. There is nothing wrong with extrinsic motivation itself: We all work for paychecks and for recognition, for example. The problem with extrinsic rewards comes when it is the only or primary factor in motivating students to learn. Marzano (2001) warns that tangible recognition should not be in the form of a bribe or coercion and students should understand the “rationale behind the system” (p. 36). He uses an example from a classroom in which the teacher asks students to set goals for each day and are given five points a day toward their daily grade. Students off task lose a point each time they are off task but can regain those points by getting back on task and staying there. Whatever extrinsic method you use whether it is candy, points, or some type of negative consequence such as isolation time or time out, the point is that students should know the system and its purposes. One of the ways that we can distinguish between positive and negative forms of extrinsic motivation is to distinguish between *rewards* and *celebrations*. Working only for rewards can be detrimental to learning, while celebrations can have a very positive effect on the learning.

In order to be classified as a reward, two characteristics will be present: (1) It will have commercial value and (2) it will be

expected. For example, a teacher who tells her students that she will give them candy if everyone finishes their work on time is offering a reward. The students know the candy is coming if they finish their work (it is expected) and candy has commercial value. If students do well on their assignment and the teacher gives them candy, this is not considered a reward but rather a celebration because the students did not know in advance that they were going to get the candy. In other words, they did not do the work for candy; the candy was an unexpected outcome.

This is an important distinction. Alfie Kohn (1993), in his book *Punished by Rewards*, questioned the effects of rewards on motivation, saying that rewards actually help destroy intrinsic motivation. Others have said that the rewards must escalate with the child. An elementary-aged child might do the work for stickers, but by middle school, she may want money or pizza. Then by high school, what do we give her—a car?

Of course, we all do some things for rewards; most of us work for a paycheck, which we know that we are getting and which has commercial value. Students work for grades as well. The point is that we want to get students to learn because learning is fun and because it helps them to achieve—not just because they will receive an external reward.

Students who have been raised on a reward system will not immediately rely on intrinsic motivation alone. Begin with extrinsic rewards and gradually wean them off of them by skipping a reward one time, then twice, and so forth. Make the learning fun and interesting so that students want to know the information and to discover new things.

Students from poverty are often directed toward extrinsic rewards for many of the positive things that they do, so you will need patience and time to move them gradually from rewards to becoming self-motivated to learn. To move students away from expected extrinsic rewards, use extrinsic incentives, such as celebrations, in the classroom often. Celebrate the learning with high fives, fist bumps, cheers, and words of praise. And, as discussed earlier, make your classroom a collaborative learning place where you are also learning with the students.

The use of extrinsic motivation usually begins at a young age with a system of rewards and punishments for desired behavior or completed tasks (e.g., “If you clean your room, you may watch television for an extra hour”). When the child comes to school, this learned behavior is often reinforced in the classroom. Teachers who constantly give students candy, stickers, or other prizes for good work or behavior are reinforcing the idea that we should only work for tangible rewards.

Extrinsic motivation is closely related to a reward system. For example, a teacher might tell the class that everyone who does well on the daily test will be given a prize; students may then work harder than they normally would because the promise of a reward is offered. Parents sometimes offer their students money for good grades, and teachers may offer students free time for good behavior. All of these are examples of extrinsic motivation and are at the heart of an ongoing controversy about the effects of extrinsic rewards on the brain.

Some researchers say that the constant use of extrinsic motivators actually diminishes our internal drive, our intrinsic motivation. The overuse of rewards is a form of control. Caine and Caine (1997) state,

When rewards and punishments are controlled by others, most children are influenced to look to others for direction and answers. In fact, we now seem to have an entire generation working for the grade or rewards of an immediate and tangible nature. One consequence is that they are literally demotivated in many respects. In particular, their innate search for meaning is short-circuited. (p. 16)

Brain researchers Caine and Caine (1997) found that deep meanings are at the heart of intrinsic motivation and that they guide us in deciding what we are willing to do.

Deep meanings are the source of most intrinsic motivation. They are the source of our reasons to keep going even when we do not understand. Thus, deep meaning is an initial source of energy that spurs inquiry. Deep meanings shape

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what we are willing to look at how we interpret our experiences. Purposes and values have an organizational component that necessarily and inevitably participates in the actual framing of our knowledge. (p. 112)

For students who are at risk or who are underachievers, the consequences of a reliance on external motivation may be lifelong, and they may not ever fully utilize the natural intrinsic motivation controlled by the self- and metacognitive systems.

While rewards have been generally rejected as a classroom tool, there is a question of what actually constitutes a reward, and what is, rather, an *incentive*. As noted above, rewards are thought of as anything that has market value and is expected. Examples of common rewards include

1. A promise of candy if students turn their work in on time
2. The offering of an eraser if a student will behave well in class
3. The regular gift of a sticker to students who offer correct answers on a test

Extrinsic incentives, unlike rewards, have no material value. Examples of incentives include

1. Free time for work well done
2. Grades for quality work
3. Pats on the back, thumbs up, and words of praise for good work or behavior

Look at the following scenarios and determine if the motivation is a reward or a celebration:

1. Mrs. Matthews tells her students that, if they all do well on the spelling test, they will have pizza the next day.
2. Mrs. Matthews's students all did a great job on the paper drive for the school and she surprises them with a pizza party.

In the first scenario, Mrs. Matthews has told her students in advance that she will *reward* them if they all do well: The receipt of the pizza is predictable and the pizza itself has market value. In the second scenario, pizza has market value, but the students did not know that they would receive pizza for doing a good job—so this is an example of a celebration. Thus, in the first scenario, the teacher is using a reward for motivation, whereas in the second scenario, the students did well on their own (i.e., through intrinsic motivation) and the pizza is a celebration.

The chart in Table 1.1 may be helpful as you determine whether or not you are relying on rewards for motivation. Remember, to be a reward, the tactic must have both market value and students must know in advance that something is being offered. To be a celebration, the tactic can have either market value or expectation, but not both. It may also have neither market value nor expectations—just be a spontaneous celebration of the learning.

**Table 1.1** Reward or Celebration?

|  | <i>Reward</i>                           | <i>Celebration</i>  |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Motivation Tool</i>   | <i>Has market value and is expected</i> | <i>May have market value or be expected, but not both</i> |
| 1. Promise of prizes if students do well on state test                                       | Has market value and is expected        |   |
| 2. Students given a surprise party after doing well on the state test.                       |   | Has a market value but is not expected                    |
| 3. Students told that if they will behave, they will be given free time at the end of class. |   | Does not have market value but is expected                |

In conclusion, build relationships first and then provide the substance in such a way that students know it is not you and the curriculum against them but you and them learning the curriculum together. Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) provide two action steps for motivation in regard to disciplinary actions: (1) "Employ specific techniques that acknowledge and reinforce acceptable behavior and acknowledge and provide negative consequences for unacceptable behavior," and (2) "establish clear limits for unacceptable behavior and an effective system to record these behaviors" (pp. 35, 39).