Motivation: The Key to Academic Success


As the new school year begins the most common problem that teachers and parents face is lack of student motivation. Motivation can either come from within the student (intrinsic) or from outside (extrinsic). A child who is intrinsically motivated performs a task because of the joy that comes from learning new materials. A child who performs in school to gain parent approval, grades, or rewards is externally motivated. While research shows that those children with internal motivation may achieve greater success, teachers and parents often find that many children seek external reinforcers. Parents who ask questions that lead to more questions for a child are more successful in developing intrinsic motivation. For example, a parent that gives a child a special toy as a "reward" for reading a lesson about how an airplane works and for completing the related homework that requires answers to questions about the parts of an airplane will stimulate less motivation than the parent who helps a child discover how planes work by building a balsam plane and letting the child practice flying it. This parent can ask what changes the plane’s flight pattern. The child can then experiment, discover and generate new questions and new discoveries.

Motivation, as parents and teachers know, often varies depending on the setting, the people involved, the task and the situation. A child with a learning disability may be a very reluctant reader who resists reading a science assignment or writing the homework assignment but eagerly absorb all the teacher shows about vaporization of water in a science class. The key for each learner is to find that which motivates.

Unfortunately, other factors often intervene to lessen a student’s motivation. Some of these factors are:

**Fear of failure**

Children can be afraid to complete work because they are afraid to make mistakes. They do not want to look foolish in front of their peers, teachers, siblings, or parents. A child with a learning disability might, for example, constantly distract the class with wonderful humor, but never complete an assignment or answer a question in class. The humor covers his reading difficulty and is a cover-up for his inability to complete his work as well as most of the students in the class.

**Lack of challenge**

Children can be bored with schoolwork. This may be for good reason. A gifted student may be "unmotivated" in a class that repeatedly explains a concept s/he already understands. A child with a learning disability may be bored if the material available to study a concept is written far below the child's cognitive ability. The child with LD may also be unmotivated if it is apparent that the teacher attributes a lack of potential success to the child based on the label of LD. If the
teacher, in this case, does not challenge the student, the student may discern the teacher's apparent assessment of ability and simply not demand more stimulating content.

**Lack of meaning**

A student may simply believe that the schoolwork is not important because s/he cannot see how it relates to everyday life. This can be especially troubling for a student with LD. A student with a visual-motor problem, for example, may find it very difficult to organize math problems in order to assure the correct answer. The student always gets the problem wrong because the columns of a long addition problem get mixed up. That student knows the calculator can do the problem correctly in a second. The student is likely to see no meaning to a class on addition, division, or any other math concept.

**Emotional problems**

A child with an emotional problem may have difficulty learning because s/he cannot focus in class. Anxiety, fear, depression or perhaps problems related to home could interfere. Children with LD often have emotions related to the frustration of the learning disability or other related emotional patterns that limit motivation for schoolwork.

**Anger**

Some children use schoolwork, or lack of schoolwork, as an expression of anger towards the parents. This is often called a passive-aggressive approach. For example, if a child feels intense pressure to succeed academically, a factor the student cannot control, the student may yell or argue with the parent. Rather, low grades are earned. This is something within the student's range of control. The more the parent tries to control and structure reinforcers, the lower the grades fall.

**Desire for attention**

Unfortunately some children use lack of academic success as a way of getting parent or teacher attention. Too often in today's rapid paced world parents may not give children who are doing well the attention they need. Children that come home, do their chores, complete their homework, and achieve academically can be ignored simply because they are not causing problems. Children who act out or who seem “helpless” with schoolwork often can gain support and attention. Attention for children is a powerful motivator. It is important to periodically review what types of behavior earn a child attention at home or at school.

Children with LD can find learning a difficult and painful process. Students with LD and/or ADHD are often frustrated in learning situations. Memory problems, difficulties in following directions, trouble with the visual or auditory perception of information, and an inability to perform paper-and-pencil tasks (i.e., writing compositions, notetaking, doing written homework, taking tests) and other problems can make learning a truly "unmotivating" chore. Children with
LD and/or ADHD also often think their lack of school success is not worth the effort. Since their grades often seem lower than those earned by other children they may not see a relationship between effort expended in school and academic success. Thus, to motivate them to achieve academically can be especially challenging.

**How can parents help**

Parents are central to student motivation. The beginning of a new school year is very important. Children with LD and ADHD often struggle with change. Parents can help get the year off to a good start.

1. Provide a warm, accepting home environment.
2. Give clear directions and feedback.
3. Create a model for success
4. Build on the student's strengths
5. Relate schoolwork to the student's interests
6. Help build a family structure that fosters consistent work towards the goal.
7. Help the student to have some control over how and when he learns.
8. Emphasize the child's progress rather than his or her performance in comparison to the other students in the class or family.
9. Remember to reinforce the behavior you want.
10. Use reinforcers wisely. Recall that intrinsic motivation works best. Follow a child's interests, when possible, rather than spending time building elaborate reward systems.

**Simple Practices to Nurture the Motivation to Read**

By: Linda Gambrell and Barbara Marinak (2009)

**In this article:**

- **Self-selection: "honoring" books**
- **Read aloud: share the excitement!**
- **Book collection: balance it**
- **Make your passions public**
- **Incentives: demonstrate the value of reading**

Research confirms that student motivation is a key factor in successful reading. In *Nurturing the Motivation to Read*, we examined the current research on reading motivation and engagement. A number of practical ideas for creating literacy-rich and motivating classrooms can be drawn from the findings. These simple but transformative suggestions include "honoring" books for self-selection, sharing the excitement of read-aloud, building a balanced book collection, making your passions public, and providing rewards that that demonstrate the value of reading.
Self-selection: "Honoring" books!

Research has shown that whenever teachers do anything to make a book special — even something as simple as placing a book upright on a table — children are more likely to choose that book than any others. We suggest planning this type of self-selection by regularly "honoring" books. Here are some ideas that work:

- Highlight individual books as special just by choosing them for displays or to be included in book baskets.
- Provide a quick introduction to the books being "honored." Show children a book and then introduce — and endorse — it by reading a few pages or asking students questions to pique their interest. When you introduce books by instilling in children a desire to find out what's in them, those books fly off the shelves. They can become so popular that you might need a waiting list!

Read aloud: Share the excitement!

A teacher read-aloud is the oral sharing of a book for the purpose of modeling strategic reading behaviors and generating instructional conversation. Theories of child development suggest that the socialization of a read-aloud allows teachers and students to collaboratively construct meaning from text. Share the excitement of read-alouds by:

- Reading aloud a wide variety of text. Include informational books, newspapers, and magazines in your read-alouds.
- Encouraging interaction during the teacher read aloud by inviting discussion. This "give and take" conversation around a shared text engages children in predicting, inferring, and thinking and reasoning.
- Inviting students to choose the teacher read-aloud title from time to time. Student choice can be managed by book talking several possible teacher read-aloud titles and allowing students to vote on the book they would most like to hear.
- Allowing students to read-aloud. Read-aloud is often used synonymously with teacher read-aloud. And though teachers should read-aloud daily, inviting students to occasionally read-aloud a self-selected text or portion of a text (e.g., book or magazine article) can be motivating for all. Allowing students to participate in the read-aloud will require some planning. Students should rehearse their read-aloud for several days at home or with a classroom buddy before reading aloud to the class.

Book collection: Balance it!
There is now wide agreement, among reading educators and researchers about the importance of exposing young children a balanced book collection. The International Reading Association (IRA) has taken the position that young readers should be exposed to a variety of genres, including picture storybooks, fiction and nonfiction material, magazines, and poetry (IRA, 1999). A few ideas for balancing collections include:

- Be sure to include a wide variety of informational books for reading instruction and in classroom libraries.
- Honor all print for instruction and self-selection. This should include reading and learning from fiction, non-fiction, newspapers, magazines, and electronic sources.
- Celebrate student authors by “publishing” their work in the classroom library and/or news corner. The work of student authors should be as diverse as the class and might include fiction stories, wordless picture books, student created puzzle books, poems, informational books, comic books, how-to books, recipe collections, photo documentaries (student pictures paired with narration captions), post card collections, journals, and news stories (short article about important school or classroom events).
- Involve students in the selection of books for the classroom and/or school library. Review and discuss possible titles, invite discussion and debate, and vote for the new books that will be added to the library.

Make your passions public

Reading passions should be made public. Young children want to read and are curious about books with which they are somewhat familiar. Familiarity breeds reading motivation. When children talk about books they most enjoyed reading, they frequently mentioned that they got interested in a book because they had heard about it from a friend, read other books about the character, knew the author, or had read other books in the series. To make reading passions public, consider:

- Arranging and maintaining a "Wall of Fame." This bulletin board can be an ever-changing display of reading passions including student favorites (e.g., books, magazines, series.), teacher favorites, family favorites, and the principal's choices.
- Publish your Top 10. Everyone stays up late to enjoy Letterman's Top 10. Vote periodically and publish your classrooms Top 10 reading passions. The Top 10 can be a year-long activity by including the top 10 favorite fiction books, information titles, poems, magazines, and websites.
- Plan for small group discussion as a part of your self-selected reading time. As Gambrell (1996) notes, students need to share their enthusiasm about books with each other. Self-selection can be more motivating if students know they will have the opportunity to talk with friends about their choices.
Incentives: Demonstrate the value of reading

If your reading program uses incentives, consider using rewards that are proximal to reading. The importance of reading-related rewards may go beyond recognizing the relationship between reward proximity and the desired behavior. It could be that the real value of reading-related rewards is that both the desired behavior (reading) and the reward (books, self-selection, time) define a classroom culture that supports and nurtures the intrinsic motivation to read. Rewards that demonstrate the value of reading include:

- books
- increased read-aloud time
- increased time for self-selected reading
- increased library time
- time to talk about books
- book clubs

Honoring books for self-selection, sharing the excitement of read-alouds, building a balanced book collection, making your passions public, and providing rewards that demonstrate the value of reading are just a few simple but transformative suggestions that can nurture the love of reading in your classroom!

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