

Motivational strategies to enhance effective learning in teaching struggling students

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The challenges presented by students who struggle to connect with curriculum learning in school constitute an issue that confronts education systems worldwide. This article reviews ways in which such students can be encouraged to engage more positively in their own learning, a process that benefits both the child and the whole school community. In this article a range of strategies to do this is proposed, based on a set of theoretical considerations.

Key words: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, disabilities, rewards, reluctant learners.

Introduction

Struggling students and those with exceptional education needs often have apathetic attitudes or poor behaviours that exacerbate their problems in school. Teachers are often at a loss as to how to help these students and simultaneously feel pressure to ensure they meet the required academic goals and objectives. The most difficult time teachers encounter when teaching struggling students is related to motivational aspects: ‘How can I motivate my students to learn?’ is a frequent question raised by many teachers. Since motivation is an internal process, many teachers feel it is beyond their influence. However, teachers can have great influence in creating opportunities for students to engage in learning, triggering motivation for learning (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Ormrod, 2008).

Beyond solid teaching methods, improving students’ motivation is the key for academic and behavioural success. Yet, with the stress of meeting the demands of high-stakes testing, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of fostering students’ motivation. While some students come to school highly motivated, others exhibit significant reluctance towards learning activities. Yet, intrinsic motivation is significantly correlated with academic achievement in students with learning difficulties (LD) (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 1994; Bouffard and Couture, 2003; Linnenbrink, 2005).

Motivation: a synthesis from psychological perspectives

In general, motivation is defined as the individual’s desire to participate in the learning process; it involves the reasons or goals that underlie their involvement or non-involvement in academic activities (Dev, 1997). The field of motivation has several major research-supported theories, and most of them recognise the role of personal beliefs, environment and socialisation as key elements in explaining motivation (see Figure 1).

While there are differences between the theories, there is also overlap, and all provide a framework by which to understand students’ motivation to learn. This article focuses primarily on the theoretical perspective from two major motivational theories, most precisely Expectancy–Value Theory and Achievement Theory (see Table 1 for a summary). We chose to present these two theories because of their great contributions and applications to teaching practice from the perspective of understanding struggling learners and conditions for learning.

Achievement Theory

Achievement Theory describes motivation as patterns of beliefs and feelings about success, effort, ability, errors,

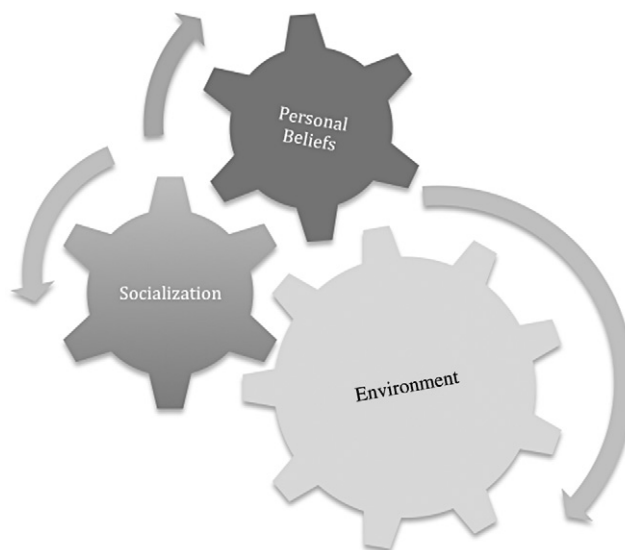


Figure 1. The cognitions of motivation

Table 1. Theoretical motivational perspectives

	<i>Achievement Motivation (Dweck and Elliott, 1983)</i>	<i>Expectancy-Value Theory (Feather, 1992)</i>
Description	Students' motivation in the classroom depends on how they define success in that situation, as well as messages about the criteria for success in the classroom. Mastery goals are those which determine competence or skill development against internal norms (i.e., Have I learned? Have I improved?). Performance goals are those which compare one's competence to others, or by outperforming others (i.e., Did I do better than other students in the class? Do others think I'm smart?).	The effort people expend on a task is a product of (1) the degree to which they expect to be able to perform a task successfully if they apply themselves; (2) the degree to which they value participation in the task itself, or the benefits and rewards that successful task completion brings.
Implications for practice	Programme for success (task analyse and be sure students have the necessary prerequisite skills to be successful). Teach goal setting (near rather than far), performance appraisal (specific expectations/goals – compare students' work to a standard and not other children) and self-reinforcement skills. Help students understand the link between effort and outcome via modelling, socialisation and feedback.	Teachers must help students understand the value of academic activities and make sure they can achieve success on activities with reasonable effort independently.
Essential preconditions	Students need to feel efficacious and competent (Bandura and Schunk, 1981). Students need to attribute their performance on internal or controllable causes rather than external or uncontrollable causes (Weiner, 1985).	Must have a supportive environment: a safe place where the teacher supports and motivates the students, and they motivate each other. An appropriate level of challenge: teacher must have a thorough understanding of what each student is capable of. Meaningful learning objectives: which include activities with clear value. Moderation/optimal use: don't overuse motivational attempts – lose their power.

feedback and standards of evaluation (Elliot and Dweck, 2005). In Achievement Theory, learners either approach or avoid either mastery or performance goals. Mastery goals are those in which the aim is to learn and individuals compare their ability to themselves, whereas in performance goals the aim is to learn enough to appear as or more competent than others. Approaches towards mastery goals are described as the focus on achieving the task completely or better than before, to advance one's skills or understanding, or to master a task. The approach towards mastery goals is considered to be the most adaptive motivation orientation, which is characterised by attributing failure to insufficient effort, sustained or enhanced persistence and performance on difficult tasks, with positive affect (e.g. joy, pride, happiness). There is strong empirical support for approaching mastery goals leading to positive processes and outcomes.

The avoidance of mastery goals is described as the focus on avoiding failure or avoiding losing one's skills and abilities, forgetting what has been learned or misunderstanding the material, leaving the task incomplete. The avoidance of mastery goals is characterised by a more 'helpless' response, in which failure is attributed to insufficient ability, decreased performance and persistence, and negative affect (e.g. sadness, shame, anxiety). Evidence supports avoidance of mastery goals as leading to more negative processes and outcomes compared to the mastery approach; however it is not as limiting as avoidance of performance goals. Approach to performance goals is when the aim is to demonstrate one's own competence or ability, whereas the avoidance of performance goals is when the aim is to avoid the demonstration of one's incompetence or inability (Elliot and Dweck, 2005). It is believed that those oriented towards avoidance of performance goals have the most limiting outcomes (Elliot and McGregor, 2001).

Expectancy-Value Theory

Expectancy-Value Theory describes motivation as being influenced by the relative value of a task along with the probability of success in completing that task (Eccles *et al.*, 1983). In this model the probability of success is influenced by self-perceptions and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to perform specific tasks, and is influenced by previous mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). Tasks are seen as more valuable when they are central to one's own sense of self because they provide an opportunity to express or confirm important aspects of the self (Eccles, 2005).

Key concepts from motivational theories

Having briefly presented the underpinnings of theoretical perspectives from Achievement Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory, we next present key concepts of these motivational theories (i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic motivation), followed by characteristics of reluctant learners.

Intrinsic motivation

Simply put, intrinsic motivation is being rewarded from within oneself. Intrinsic motivation occurs when one participates in an activity purely out of curiosity, or the need to know more about something (Ormrod, 2008); has the desire to engage in an activity purely for the sake of participating in and completing a task (Deci *et al.*, 1991); or the desire to contribute (Mills, 1991). Students who are intrinsically

motivated persist with the assigned task, even though it may be difficult (Schunk, 1990), and will not require any rewards or incentives (Ormrod, 2008). These students are more likely to be excited by the challenge of an activity. Intrinsically motivated students are also more likely to retain learned concepts and to feel confident about tackling unfamiliar learning tasks.

Extrinsic motivation

On the other hand, extrinsic motivation occurs when one is rewarded or encouraged by another person or a thing (Gagné and Deci, 2005). Extrinsically motivated learners complete tasks as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. In school, extrinsically motivated learners have to be encouraged, enticed or prodded by teachers (Ormrod, 2008). Teachers often give students an incentive to participate in or to complete an activity. These incentives may be tangible rewards, such as money or sweets, or the promise of a reward in the future, such as a grade. Rewards may be non-tangible, such as verbal praise, a smile or a pat on the back. Extrinsically motivated students undertake tasks purely for the sake of attaining a reward or for avoiding some punishment (Adelman and Taylor, 1990).

Beyond intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation

The commonly used dichotomy of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation may not provide a complete picture of motivation. There are two types of extrinsic motivation: rewards given by others, and rewards given by oneself (Deci and Ryan, 2008). People occasionally give themselves rewards for completing an unpleasant activity (e.g., going out to dinner, after completing a taxing work project). Understanding motivation as a multilayered complex continuum, in which multiple goals may be present, is more complete than the simple dichotomous model. For example, people can be altruistically motivated because they enjoy pursuing this goal, or because they enjoy the praise they receive when they help people in need (extrinsic motivation by others). A person might reward him or herself with a nice dinner out with friends after volunteering some number of hours (extrinsic motivation by him or herself).

For many years, tangible – or extrinsic – reinforcement has been used to modify the behaviour of students with academic and behavioural problems. Recently, however, this has been questioned. Some have found that emphasising external constraints, such as surveillance, bribes, threats, evaluation by others and rewards, weakens intrinsic motivation and performance (Ryan and Cooper, 2007). The use of extrinsic rewards and incentives for modifying behaviour in students with exceptional education needs (EEN) may be contrary to some current motivation theories (Switzky and Schultz, 1988) and may have detrimental effects on the intrinsic motivation of learners with and without academic problems (Adelman and Taylor, 1983). However, broadly painting extrinsic motivation as almost always detrimental

may be oversimplifying the case. No one of us is intrinsically motivated under all conditions (Hennessey, 2000), nor will our students be so motivated. For students who are not participating in learning and appear unmotivated, it is important to begin where those students are, with a goal of moving towards increased intrinsic motivation. To understand students' motivation (or the apparent lack thereof) we need to understand the reluctant learner, and through the help of the motivational theories presented identify approaches to help struggling students become more active and engaged in learning.

Reluctant learners: how can we help them learn better?

Characteristics of reluctant learners and typical learning behaviours

'Toddlers and young children appear to exude curiosity, seemingly driven to explore, interact with, and make sense of their environment. Rarely does one hear parents complain that their preschooler is "unmotivated"' (Raffini, 1993, p. 70). Yet as children grow, unfortunately many lose their desire to learn. As a result too many students leave school before graduating. Many of those who remain are physically present in the classroom but mentally absent, failing to participate in the learning experience. Teachers can influence students' attitudes and beliefs about learning, and facilitate learning for its own sake.

Students with high-incidence disabilities have had often long histories of failure. Other students who are at risk have also experienced school failure. They have noticed that their general education peers are learning more and are more successful academically. They may hear repeated discouraging comments from both adults and peers. Many believe they are unable to learn. Some students react to this situation by misbehaving, or avoiding academic situations. Students may rebel or dismiss academic achievement altogether. Others 'tune out' or appear apathetic. Still others 'day-dream' or find other ways to entertain themselves rather than engage in schoolwork and learning. In sum, they become reluctant learners.

Students who expect to fail, and are unable to find a way to avoid that failure, may use other methods to 'justify' their failure to themselves and others (Urdu and Midgley, 2001). They place the blame for their poor performance elsewhere. They use self-handicapping strategies, which include reducing effort, procrastinating or excuses to protect their own and others' view of their self-worth. These 'strategies' allow students to put the blame on the lack of effort rather than allowing others to see that they were unable to complete the task. You may hear a student say 'Of course, I got a bad grade, I only started the night before' or older students may say 'I failed the exam – I was drunk!'

Some students may also choose to hide their inability by cheating. They either appear to have the correct answer, or if

they happen to choose to cheat from a student who did not do well, they can blame that person for their lack of success. Less common with students with EEN, some may self-handicap by taking on too much or setting unattainably high goals as a way to explain their failure. Often, students list extra-curricular or home responsibilities in addition to other school responsibilities as a way to justify their failure.

Struggling students may also use excuses, statements or attributions that allow one to ‘minimize personal responsibility for events’ (Schlenker *et al.*, 1994, p. 637). Three types of excuse students may use to avoid taking responsibility after failures are: one had no control in the situation, the obligation was unclear, and it was not really one’s obligation (Schlenker *et al.*, 2001). Although excuse making may serve some social and protective functions, ultimately it is immature, inauthentic and problematic for performance (Sheldon and Schachtman, 2007).

Helping reluctant learners become motivated learners

An often unstated goal of teachers is to increase their students’ independence and interest in learning (Sanacore, 2008). Extrinsic motivators can be initially useful to engage reluctant learners; however, it is important not to forget that the goal should be to move students towards independence and being intrinsically motivated. At a young age, children tend to react negatively to a task as ‘work’ when their behaviour is controlled by socially imposed factors, such as rewards and rules, and they tend to react positively to a task as ‘play’ when there are no constraints imposed. These negative controlling educational interactions decrease intrinsic motivation and interest in learning (Hennessey, 2000).

An environment that supports students’ independence facilitates change towards more self-determined, or intrinsic, motivation. Long-lasting changes in motivation take place through small changes happening at the situational level that are internalised to the contextual level (Lavigne and Vallerand, 2008). For example, poor readers who are given appropriate remedial instruction begin to be successful and become more motivated to read; in turn they begin to develop a new belief about their potential for success. When repeated, such instances of small positive experiences lead to gradual changes that become internalised. Change in motivation is not an instant process but rather takes place through a number of successful experiences eventually becoming internalised. Students who expect to perform poorly often do. Similarly, a student also learns less when he or she perceives school personnel and activities as threatening (Adelman and Taylor, 1990). Positive classroom climate and teacher interaction have a profound influence on student achievement and motivation (Grolnick and Ryan, 1990).

Motivation in the classroom: practical suggestions and applications

Now that we have discussed underlying reasons for students to appear unmotivated, we offer strategies and suggestions

that teachers can use in the classroom to enhance struggling students’ motivation. You may be already using some of these motivation enhancers, but which can you add to your repertoire?

Believe your students can learn

Teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning and the expectations they hold for students are also a powerful influence. ‘To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn’ (Stipek, 1988, p. 209).

Model enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation

Motivation to learn can be directly stimulated by adult and peer models as well as through direct experience. Students often assimilate motivation from those around them, even when doing so is outside their awareness.

Create a learning environment that is encouraging and challenging

Communicate high, but realistic expectations for students. Those with and without EEN have been shown to find appropriately challenging tasks pleasurable (Harter, 1978). By providing optimally challenging tasks and activities, students begin to feel competent, which increases their intrinsic motivation (Assor and Kaplan, 2001). Reluctant learners, in particular, thrive on accomplishing *appropriately* challenging tasks and being held to high expectations.

Acknowledge the difficulty of tasks

Just because specific tasks are easy for some does not mean they are necessarily easy for others. Refrain from saying ‘this is easy’. Instead acknowledge that specific tasks are difficult (Schultheiss and Brunstein, 2005), while remembering to acknowledge that students are capable.

Connect learning to the world

Learners who can see the connection between a project-based task and the real world will be more motivated to understand and solve the problem at hand. Using teaching methods that promote real-life applications, authentic activities, as well as performance assessments would help students better understand the material, process information in a different way and become more effective learners.

Set goals

Setting intermediate goals can be self-motivating because it allows students to feel competency as they accomplish smaller goals (Bandura and Schunk, 1981). De-emphasise

performance goals, those that compare students' performance to their peers. Mastery goals in the classroom (Anderman, 1999) help students cope with academic difficulty (Kaplan and Midgley, 1999).

Involve students in the learning process

Students who are involved in creating the project assignment or the project checklist gain valuable experience in setting their own goals and standards. In addition, this gives students a sense of ownership and control over their own learning. Allow learners to have the opportunity to identify and explore related sub-topics (Skinner *et al.*, 1990).

Allow for independence

Offer students choices about what to work on or how to complete assignments (Black and Deci, 2000). Students' perception of the amount of control they have over learning is strongly influenced by the teacher. Allow the students to set their own goals and monitor their progress (Fulk and Montgomery-Grymes, 1994). Encourage students to self-evaluate their work. Self-evaluation instils responsibility for learning.

Use projects

Students who have the freedom to choose different approaches may become more engaged in the learning process, and these students will be more likely to approach other problems enthusiastically. Learning through projects allows teachers to create tasks whose complexity and openness mimic problems in the real world.

Evaluate the task, not the student

Rather than compare students' performance to the performance of other students, evaluate the task (Butler, 1988). Evaluating students in a manner that emphasises individual improvement and growth over social comparison and competition is important (Ames, 1990). Competition between students has been shown to decrease intrinsic motivation; therefore if it is used it should be based on the outcome of the task, instead of pitting students against each other (Epstein and Harackiewicz, 1992).

Promote mastery learning

Research shows that when students master specific goals they become increasingly intrinsically motivated (Borkowski *et al.*, 1988). Students with mastery goals tend to engage in activities that would help them learn: they pay attention in class, process information in ways that promote effective long-term memory storage and reflect on their learning strategies.

'Immunise' against the negative effects of extrinsic motivation

Help students find ways to focus on the intrinsically interesting, fun and playful aspects of a task, and encourage them to make even the most routine assignment exciting. Offer strategies to distance themselves from socially imposed extrinsic constraints.

Use priming words

Use positive words associated with intrinsic motivation as often as possible. Words associated with intrinsic motivation include: spontaneous, challenge, interested, involved, satisfied, volunteering, mastering, delighted, autonomous, absorbed, competent and enjoying. Limit the use of words associated with extrinsic motivation including: competitive, obligation, expected, evaluated, constrained, demanded, avoiding, restricted, forced, pressured, controlled and proving. Priming words and statements can temporarily increase motivation automatically (Lévesque and Pelletier, 2003).

Respond positively

Positive responses to students' questions can enhance intrinsic motivation (Gottfried, 1983). When a student makes an error, respond positively and guide him or her back to the correct context. Show students affection and use positive responses rather than reprimands.

Praise students

Praise helps learners develop a feeling of competence (Gottfried, 1983) and has been found to increase intrinsic motivation (Cameron and Pierce, 1996). However, do not give vague praise, as it will lose its value. Encouragement should be given when the student is attempting to reach a goal but has not yet achieved it. Teachers should convey the message that everyone can learn and that the process of learning and developing skills is more important than who gets the best grades by praising development, improvement and learning for understanding.

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