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**What Every Teacher  
Should Know About**  
Student Motivation



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# 1

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

*Instead of asking “How can I motivate students?” a better question would be, “In what ways is the brain naturally motivated from within?”*

—Eric Jensen, *Completing the Puzzle*

**M**ost 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,

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to pass state and national exams, and to be successful in school? All learning begins not in the cognitive system, but in the self-system. It happens with or without our input, but we are more likely that our students will be motivated to learn and to complete tasks when we are directly involved in the learning process from the beginning. Marzano (2001) says, "Once the self-system has determined what will be attended to, the functioning of all other elements of thought (i.e., the metacognitive system, the cognitive system, and the knowledge domains) are, to a certain extent, dedicated or determined." In this chapter, we will examine motivation and why it is crucial to learning and remembering.

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?

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. Many students today have not been taught those skills. If you teach inner-city students and students from poverty, then you may teach students who have acquired responses to learning that work against the self-system of the brain. Motivation to pay attention to the learning, to begin a task, and to complete it are an innate part of the self-system and metacognitive system of the brain, and they can be activated through tactics used by the classroom teacher.

## WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL ABOUT 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.

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. 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

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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), “A growing body of research indicates that when students are working on goals they themselves have set, they are more motivated and efficient, and they achieve more than they do when working to meet goals set by the teacher.” 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 and/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 would 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.

### WHAT IS 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. 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: It will have commercial value and 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



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## What Are the Roots of Motivation?

In his book *Designing a New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (2001), Marzano discusses motivation in terms of three systems of mental processing. In order to understand how motivation works within these systems of thinking, let's look at a seventh-grade language arts classroom as class begins.

As the language arts classroom fills with students for the beginning of the school day, the teacher, Malcolm Trevino, stands before the students to begin a new unit of study. Some students are still arranging their desks, some are looking for their books, some are staring out the window, and some are talking. Within a matter of seconds, each student's self-system will decide whether to engage in the learning—the new task—or to continue what they are doing. Here is a brief explanation of what will happen within the brains of the students.

The self-system is the prime determiner of the motivation that is brought to the new task. Marzano (2001) says,

If the task is judged important, if the probability of success is high, and a positive effect is generated or associated

with the task, students will be motivated to engage in the new task. If the new task is evaluated as having low relevance and/or low probability of success and has an associated negative affect, motivation to engage in the task will be low.

This means that to be motivated, a set of beliefs must be in place. First, the students must believe that the new learning is important, and they must believe that they have the resources necessary to be successful. The students also need to have a positive feeling about the class itself. All of these things do not necessarily have equal weight, but where there is a negative belief about one of the aspects of the system, there needs to be overriding positives in the others. For example, if a student does not see the importance of learning about slope in math class, but feels comfortable and accepted in the classroom and has had positive experiences with math previously, that student is more likely to be motivated to learn slope.

There are four components of the self-system thinking that directly relate to motivation to learn; we will look at them in the next section.

## **HOW DOES THE SELF-SYSTEM WORK?**

While most of us use the self-system of the brain unconsciously, this system is at work anytime we are in a learning situation. The processes of the self-system determine whether we will engage in the learning and how much energy or enthusiasm we will bring to the event. In order to understand how this system works, let's examine the processes that are activated within the self-system as it examines the importance of an activity, our sense of efficacy, our emotional response to a task, and our overall motivation.

### **Examining Importance**

We pay attention to those things that we consider to be important. For something to be important to us, it will usually

be perceived either as instrumental in satisfying a basic need or as instrumental in the attainment of a personal goal. According to Maslow (1968),

Human beings have evolutionarily designed needs that might even exist in somewhat of a hierarchic structure, in which needs such as physical safety, food and shelter are more basic than needs such as companionship and acceptance. If a specific knowledge component is perceived as being instrumental in meeting one or more of those needs, it will be considered important by an individual.

For example, if a student perceives that learning multiplication facts will help keep him from being cheated on the street, he may be more interested in learning multiplication facts. My favorite math teacher has a sign in her classroom that reads, "I promise that I will never teach you anything in this classroom unless I can tell you the real-world application." She teaches higher-level math, and her students do challenge her on this statement at times. She not only can tell them how it applies in the real world, she usually shows them. When students were studying slope, for example, she asked the Special Education Director to talk to her class about handicap ramps in regard to specifications and law. Then she assigned her students to measure, in small groups, the handicap ramps around the school and in the community to see if they met the specifications. (By the way, they did not all meet the specifications.) Those students who ask us, "When are we ever going to use this stuff?" are operating on a need-to-know basis: If they do not need to know it for the test on Friday or for an immediate personal goal, they may not perceive the information as relevant, and information that is not seen as relevant is discarded by the brain. Students feel overloaded by all that they must learn already, and then schools throw in mandatory testing to raise the anxiety level even more. Provide your students with the objectives for what you are studying (based on national and state standards). Put the objectives up in the room where students can see them and refer to them often throughout a unit

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## A Model for Developing Motivation in the Classroom

In the preceding chapters, we have examined many factors that affect motivation. Now, let's put the information from those chapters together in a classroom setting to determine how a teacher can motivate students to learn.

First, we have said that the attitude toward and perception of learning is critical to building intrinsic motivation. Students must feel that they are a part of the learning environment and that they have a strong internal locus of control over their learning. Teachers help students do this by providing information in a variety of ways so that it reaches all learners. For example, many inner-city poor learn through stories and dialogue, and English language learners need visual stimulus and teaching in context, because they do not have the language acquisition skills needed to process the vocabulary of the learning. When teachers teach to all learners this way, it is called *pluralism*, because the teacher is using a variety of methods (plural methods) to reach all learners.

Shanna Walker is a teacher in an urban middle school. Ms. Walker has several students in her classroom who day-dream or work on other class work while she is teaching. After examining the research on motivation, Ms. Walker has decided to walk through the processes that help to facilitate motivation in the classroom and to ask herself some questions about her own classroom. She begins with the attitudes and perceptions about the learning, because she knows that this must be attended to first before she can teach her students.

### ATTITUDES TOWARD AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEARNING

Ms. Walker will move through a series of questions as she works to improve the motivation within her classroom.

#### **What Can I Do to Assure That Students Feel Accepted by the Teacher and Their Peers?**

*In my classroom, I will provide activities that help students to know one another, and I will set as a class rule that we must respect each other. How students work with each other will be a part of my students' daily grades. Students will be assigned to study groups for the six weeks, and I will chart their ability to work together. I will use Form 5.1 to monitor my student's ability to work with others, and I will provide feedback to my students about my observations.*

*From time to time, I will ask my students to self-evaluate how they believe they are progressing. Form 5.2 is one example of a tool I might use to help students self-evaluate.*

*When students work in groups, I will have the group evaluate their ability to work together using Form 5.3.*

*I will carefully construct questions so that they provide opportunities for students to be successful, and I will provide wait time that is consistent from student to student.*

*I will respect my students' individual differences by bringing in a wide variety of materials that show different cultures, both males and females in meaningful occupations, and handicapped students (such as a student in a wheelchair) as important parts of society.*