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1

Introduction to Student Motivation

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During an undergraduate class, my professor proposed that we should always ask the most important question of all: Why? He stated, "If we stopped asking why, we would cease to grow in our understanding of life." Seeking to understand the *why* of student behavior is where we will begin our journey to successful student management.

Several years ago I read an article about understanding youngsters that began to answer the question of why they behave the way they do. Two important aspects of the article have always stuck with me: (1) youngsters bring their personal lives into the learning environment and (2) youngsters will do their best to keep the leader from finding out who they are on the inside by creating false outward appearances. But there is a great deal more to understand as well.

> Definition of an unruly individual: Difficult or impossible to discipline, control, or rule; resistant to control, fails to submit to rule or control; rebels against authority; one obstinately bent on having his or her own way; willfully and often perversely departs from what is desired, expected, or required.

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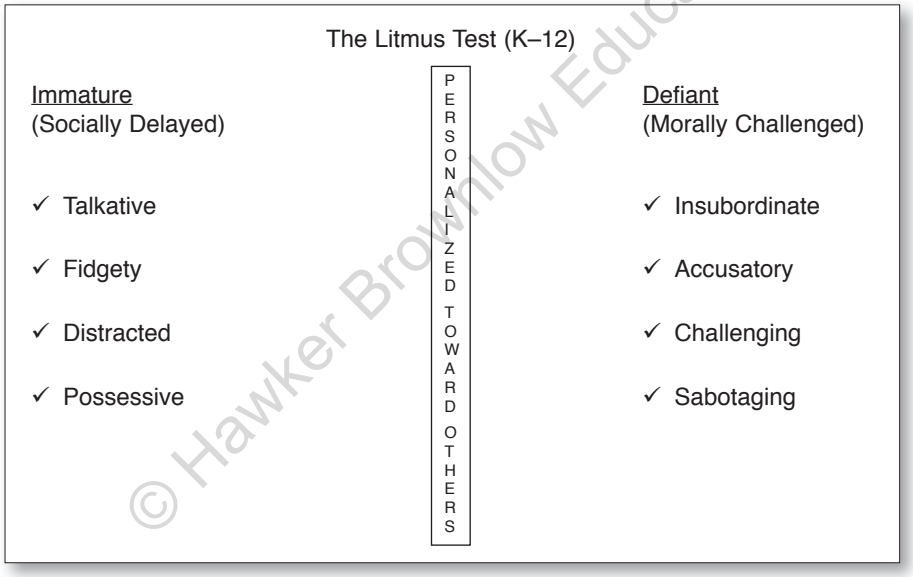
Do any of these descriptors sound familiar with respect to unwanted behavior in your classroom or school?

Why Do Youngsters Misbehave?

Understanding the *why* in student behavior is necessary in order to create a nurturing learning environment for each student. Developing empathy for the disruptive and defiant student will open the door for learning and smooth operation of the classroom. Figure 1.1 shows that underlying causes for misbehavior can stem from both immaturity and lack of moral bearings.

Figure 1.1 Immature or Defiant? That Is the Question



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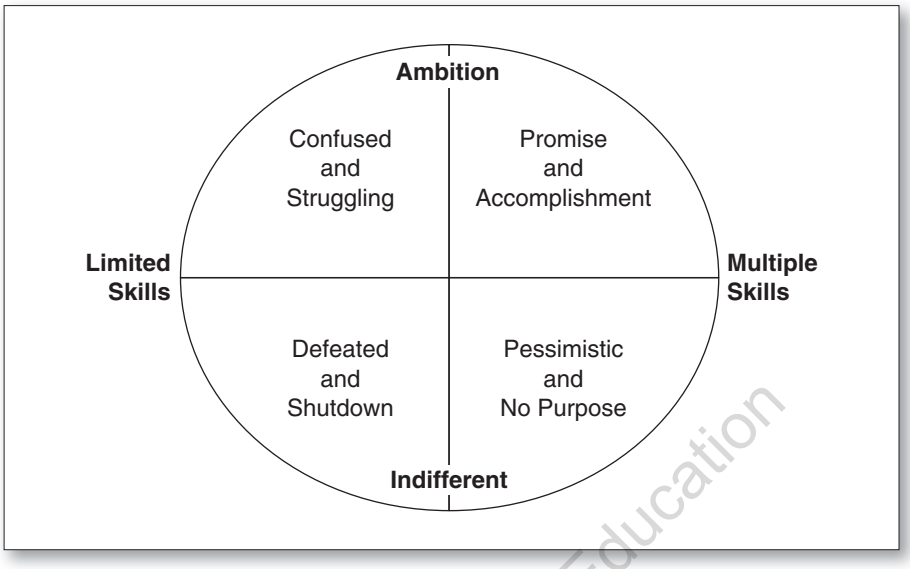
In addition to those listed in Figure 1.1, other forms of defiance might include attention getting or gang affiliation. Causes, in addition to immaturity or moral challenge as shown in the figure, might include peer pressure, poor nutrition, lack of sleep, problems at home, or problems with friends, other teachers, coaches, or an after school job. The list is endless. Therefore, it is not the form or the reason that is the issue; the issue is how the teacher is going to react to the manifestation of disruptive behavior.

Figure 1.2 provides a different perspective on causes, indicating how the interplay of skills and ambition may affect student behavior.

Figure 1.2 What Else Might Be Causing Misbehavior?



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Brain Development

> Research suggests that the cerebral cortex is still developing during the adolescent years, possibly into the early twenties. The cerebral cortex is the reasoning part of the brain. (Strauch, 2004, p. 12)

It has been documented through numerous interviews with teens regarding career path, substance abuse, and so forth that most of the interviewees could not give clear definitive answers as to why they made the choices they did. This understanding also increases our ability to deal effectively with defiant behavior, knowing it may in part be a function of adolescent brain development.

Role Identification

Outlined below are the various levels of emotional identity students share with adults outside the family unit. This outline helps teachers identify why students might be responding in a certain way, knowing that their responses are reflected in the stage of their development. When the teacher knows what the child's emotional needs are, the teacher is prepared to respond in a way that stabilizes the relationship.

Age Level	*Role Identification*
5–9	Parent Figure
10–13	Parent/Authority Figure
14–19	Authority Figure
20+	Coequal

Basic Needs

Abraham Maslow defined basic human needs, and Figure 1.3 shows youngsters' adaptations to those needs. When physical and safety needs (at the bottom of the charts) are met in the classroom, students naturally migrate toward the higher levels.

Students who come from supporting homes will advance more rapidly toward the higher levels of self-actualization. These students

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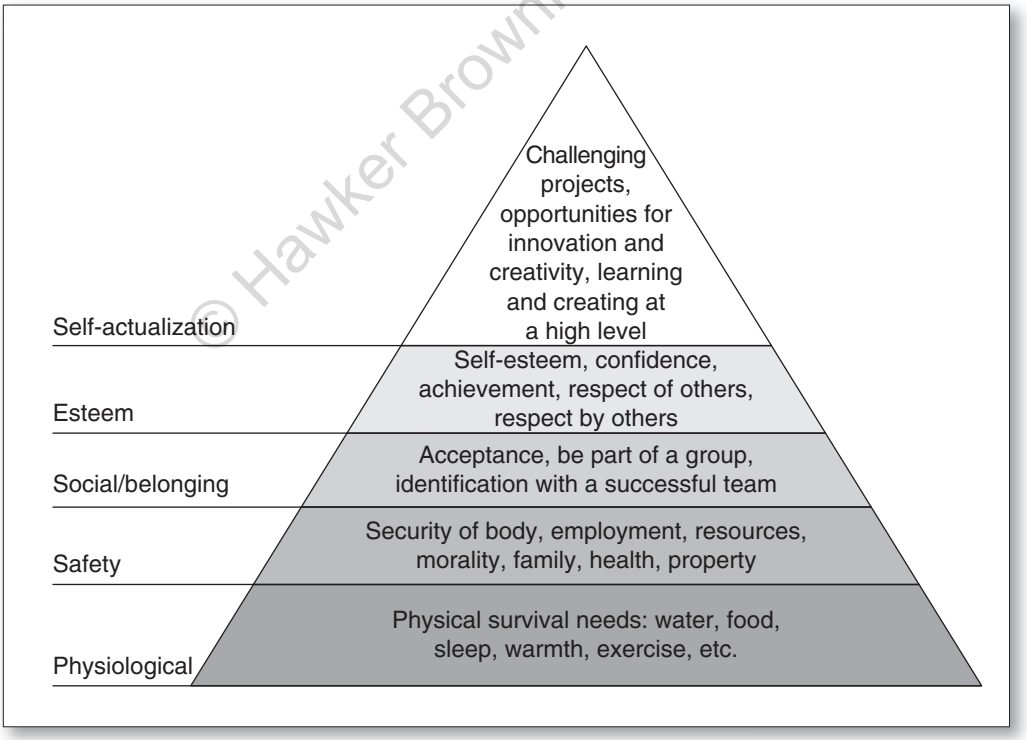
Figure 1.3 Basic Human Needs



Source: Adapted from Maslow, 1943.

often find themselves at a relatively high level of safety and security, and they will not have a need to disrupt to gain the necessary attention. However, they can be more challenging if they feel their advancement toward self-esteem and recognition status is being hindered.

It is the students at the basic needs level who often become defiant and disruptive. Hence, they have a greater need for attention-getting antics. What they lack in home support is sought out in the classroom.

Motivation Defined

Once we understand the causes of negative behavior, we can move on to consider how to increase motivation toward appropriate behavior.

> Definition Number 1: Something that leads or influences a person to do something.

We have all struggled with lethargic students who just won't get motivated. All we want is for them to do something—anything. The interventions outlined in this text will provide an impetus for the most reluctant learners to make an attempt at learning. The key is to get them to understand that any amount of effort will have a positive impact on their grades; in other words, effort will be valued over accuracy. They need to crawl first before they learn to walk and run.

> Definition No. 2: Mental state, internal need, or outward goal that causes one to act.

Have you ever encountered an electronic device, only to discover you can't find the on switch? Working with hard-to-motivate students is much the same. The first stage in motivating disengaged students is to find out what causes them to get curious. Once we get them moving, the next challenge is to keep them moving until they are advancing on their own.

> Motivation is usually defined by psychologists as the processes involved in arousing, directing and sustaining behaviour. (Ball, 1977, as quoted in Robb, 2001b, para. 2)

What the Research Says About Motivating Learners

From the literature on what motivates students to learn, the following key concepts were obtained from a wide collection of sources

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in a variety of formats. Here is a summary of what research has shown to be the top six motivators for learning (see also Figure 1.4):

1. Student control of learning. The focus here is learning. Assessment of learning styles and adapting lesson delivery is vital. If students feel they have their grades in their control (whether they actually do or not), the most resistant learners will engage and take ownership.

2. Relevance to student use and teacher's genuine interest. There is a dual emphasis between relevance and genuine interest. Why a lesson is important and how it connects to life is best embraced by the student when the teacher demonstrates genuine interest in the subject and students.

3. Teacher's enthusiasm. Teacher enthusiasm is vital. If a teacher has been assigned to a grade level or curriculum that he or she is not necessarily interested in, it's time to find the silver lining in the cloud. Students are perceptive and read their teachers' every action, reaction, and comment. Teachers must be excited about what they are bringing to the students if they expect the students to be interested.

4. Quick feedback and assignment return. Student performance is directly correlated to the time between assignment submission and return. Students' learning increases when they can make adjustments to errors in a timely fashion. Teachers should strive to return student work the next day.

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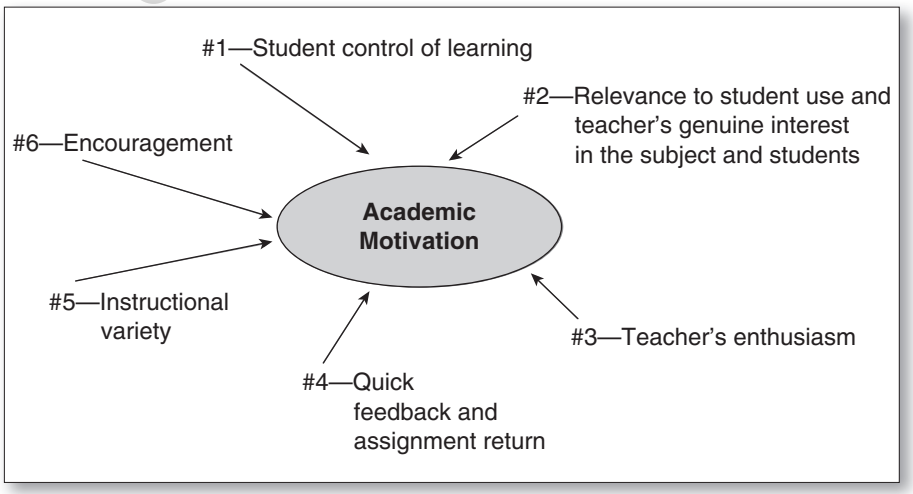
Figure 1.4 The Motivational Web's Top Six Student Motivators for Learning



5. Instructional variety. Technology has provided the opportunity to deliver instruction in a variety of ways. Three shifts in approach to curriculum delivery during a 50- to 60-minute period will help student interest remain high and engaged. Shifting from lecture to group work to independent study keeps students connected and interested.

6. Encouragement. A simple pat on the back, a smiley face stamp, writing "Good Job!" or acknowledging effort can make a big difference in student performance.

In addition to the research findings listed above, our experience has shown that the following also help motivate students:

Relationships. When students trust a teacher's judgment and are truly appreciated for who they are, a working relationship begins to develop in which students are motivated to learn.

Rewards. In addition to verbal encouragement, a more tangible acknowledgment of effort or performance is always a stimulus for additional contributions.

Support. Teacher availability during instructional and noninstructional time is a motivator.

Honoring of personal values. Honoring home values (as long as they do not violate classroom values) provides motivation for students.

Creation of curiosity. Students are motivated when they are encouraged to explore and investigate new areas.

Clear expectations. Visible rules on assignment sheets, walls, and entry activities will keep the expectations consistently in front of the students.

Classroom climate. Classrooms should be inviting and safe, surrounded with charts and pictures that relate to the subject matter as well as points of interest contemporary to student life. Playing jazz (without words) during study time is also effective.

Firm, fair, purposeful action. When action needs to be taken, it should always have the purpose of motivating the student toward constructive ends, weaving the relationship.

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