Managing Student Motivation to Learn

Skilled work, of no matter what kind, is only done well by those who take a certain pleasure in it.

Bertrand Russell

If you asked any group of elementary teachers what brings them the greatest professional pleasure, they would almost certainly mention working with students who have good intentions and who try hard to learn. Conversely, if you asked those teachers what troubles them most about teaching, they would likely mention student misbehavior and an inability to get some of their students interested in learning.

By “learning,” they of course mean school learning, for all students are interested in learning certain things and make intensive efforts to do so. The problem is simply that students’ interests in learning often do not correspond with what teachers are required to teach. Most students enter kindergarten eagerly open to the entire curriculum, but within a year or two they have made clear distinctions between school activities that intrigue them and those that don’t. From that point onward, teachers continually search for ways to attract student attention and engage students in learning activities. In other words, they forever look for ways to motivate their students.
WHAT IS MEANT BY MOTIVATION?

The word *motive* comes from a Latin root meaning “to move” and is defined as an emotion, desire, or physiological need that incites a person to do something. Motive is the “why” of behavior.

The associated term *motivation* has two meanings that are used rather differently from each other. One of those meanings refers to an intrinsic condition within individuals that disposes them toward an activity or goal, such as motivation to learn, motivation to succeed, or motivation to gain acceptance.

Teachers frequently use a second, and different, meaning for the term *motivation*. This second meaning refers to a process by which motives are instilled into students—that is, what one (such as a teacher) does to get students interested in lessons and willing to work at them. Thus, when teachers speak of motivation as a component of a lesson, they refer to what they do to attract students’ interest and engage them more or less willingly in the work provided. They are thinking in a short-term sense and might ask themselves, What can I do for motivation in this lesson?

HOW CAN TEACHERS INFLUENCE STUDENT MOTIVATION?

Since students are not always highly motivated to work at learning tasks presented to them in school, teachers seek things they can do to increase student motivation. Theories of motivation such as those explained by Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and McClelland’s (1965) integration of achievement motivation and failure-avoidance have been around for decades but have not been particularly useful in teachers’ day-to-day concerns with classroom motivation. Teachers have therefore relied on experience to teach them what does and does not work for drawing students into lessons.

Recently, however, syntheses of research findings have been organized into scholarly efforts concerning motivation in teaching and learning. One such effort is that of Pintrich and DeGroot (1990), who give attention to a value component, an expectancy component, and an affective component of student motivation.

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during instructional episodes. The value component concerns student beliefs about the importance of the learning. (Students respond better when they believe the learning is worthwhile.) The expectancy component concerns student appraisals of their ability to perform the tasks required. (Students respond better when they believe they are able to do what is expected of them.) And the affective component has to do with students’ emotional reactions to the tasks. (Students make more effort when the task intrigues or pleases them.) Dembo (1994) used Pintrich and DeGroot’s design to provide many additional practical suggestions for classroom practice.

**MOTIVATION AND LESSONS**

Motivation that resides over time within individuals is called *intrinsic motivation*, while motivation that is supplied from outside the individual is called *extrinsic motivation*. Teachers would love to work with students who were always intrinsically motivated to learn, but they know realistically that most of the time they will have to supply at least some of the motivation for their students.

In that attempt, teachers pay a great deal of attention to students’ known interests such as cars, sports, entertainers, animals, music, and cartoons. They look for ways to incorporate those interests into lessons and shake their heads in wonderment that young students quickly learn such vast amounts of information about dinosaurs and sports heroes.

Teachers also rely heavily on student “wants.” *Want* is an imprecise, nonscientific term, meaning simply something students desire, something they wish to have or do. Some wants stem from *needs*, a scientific term referring to what students require in order to live enjoyably in reasonably good health. As Maslow (1943) pointed out, everyone needs food, water, and air, and most of us need acceptance, love, and association with others. To say we *need* those things is to say that we do not feel well when we do not have them—not healthy, not content, not fulfilled.

But most wants clearly evident among students have little to do with psychological needs. For example, students may strongly want to eat ice cream, watch a film, get a new comic book, or play with a particular person—none of which, if denied, interferes with personal well-being. Such wants nevertheless play important roles in students’ lives, and they provide practical insights into how teachers can motivate students.

The major interests and wants of elementary students of different age levels have been well documented and, in general, have remained fairly constant over time. Examples of wants and interests that predominate in elementary students are shown in Table 5.1.
### TABLE 5.1 Age, wants, and interests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Wants (things students seek and/or respond well to)</th>
<th>Interests (specific activities)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 to 8 years</td>
<td>assurance, physical activity, direct sensory experience, encouragement, praise, warmth, patience, concrete learning tasks</td>
<td>relating experiences, stories, dramatic play, pictures, songs, poems, rhythms, and animals to organized games, models, dolls, jokes, gangs and clubs, collecting, comics, adventure books, animals and foreign lands and people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 to 10 years</td>
<td>praise, physical activity, group membership, being admired</td>
<td>riddles, jokes, puzzles, sharing, competitive games, trips, reading, maps, letters, animals, arts and crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preadolescent</td>
<td>affection, warmth, greater independence, peer group acceptance</td>
<td>riddles, jokes, puzzles, gangs and clubs, sports, competitive and outdoor games, hobbies, construction, pets, movies, TV, comics, reading, drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adolescent</td>
<td>acceptance by and conformation to peer group; kind, unobtrusive guidance by adults; security with independence</td>
<td>music, dancing, cars, opposite sex, sports, trips, TV, movies, magazines, gossip, intrigue, adult roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHAT DOES MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO LEARN?**

We shall not probe further into theories of motivation but will instead review information available to teachers about motivation, accumulated from experience and scholarly research. Then, we will take some time to reflect upon recent insightful contributions made by William Glasser (1969, 1986, 1990), one of those rare psychiatrist-psychologists who moved into the classroom setting to work with, and on behalf of, school students.

Motivation for Elementary Classrooms

Jones and Jones (1990) presented an overview of motivation in the classroom setting that they feel is adequately supported by research. They concluded that students become actively involved in lessons to the extent they expect success, value successful completion of the tasks, and find the climate of interpersonal
relationships acceptable. Jones and Jones present conclusions for students at all age levels. For elementary students, academic needs would include

- being actively involved in lessons
- experiencing success
- seeing learning modeled by adults as exciting and rewarding
- relating the learning to their own lives
- having positive contact with peers

A helpful synthesis of research on classroom motivation was also offered by Brophy (1987), who presents a number of suggestions for teachers, of which the following are most pertinent to elementary age students:

- Adapt lessons to students’ interests.
- Include novelty and variety.
- Provide for active response.
- Include fantasy and simulations.
- Project teacher’s enthusiasm.

Consolidating the ideas of Brophy, Jones and Jones, and others, the following generalizations are warranted and offer concrete, practical advice concerning student motivation:

1. Students like to work with others at ideas, activities, and objects that they find novel, intriguing, and related to their perceived life concerns.
2. Students seek out people and conditions that help meet needs important in their lives.
3. Students try their best to avoid associating with people and conditions they find unpleasant.
4. Students engage in tasks that are unpleasant to them in order to please people they see as important, including the teacher.

As a teacher, therefore, you are well advised to

**Capitalize on students’ needs, interests, and curiosity.**

Use these to full advantage. Students will appreciate your making the effort, and because of their excitement, so will you.

But remember, students detest looking bad in front of their peers; they don’t want to appear stupid or to have their failures displayed. Thus, you should

**Encourage your students and help them feel secure.**

And as you show your helpfulness and support,
And as you show your helpfulness and support,

**Students will try to please you with effort, behavior, and good work.**

These points generally hold true, and have over time. Teachers who capitalize on them often accomplish much with their students. But experienced teachers find that these suggestions do not solve all problems of motivation. Thus, they

**Set up systems of reinforcement for good student work and behavior.**

Many teachers are uncomfortable with the feeling that they might be paying off students for doing only what they are supposed to do anyway. But it is evident that elementary students become excited about receiving, for their good effort, smiley faces, stickers, popcorn, extra time at recess, the honor of helping the teacher, the privilege of feeding the class pet, and many other similar rewards. Students will study their spelling and arithmetic in order to get those rewards. Of course, teachers have also learned, many of them through distressing experiences when they were students themselves, that children can be frightened into working. Many students would rather do their homework than get yelled at, study for their tests than get a failing grade, or feign paying attention than receive reprimands. But these days, not all students will comply out of fear. Motivation through fear is very thin ice for teachers to venture onto. If you genuinely want your students to make an effort to learn and have a reasonably enjoyable time doing so,

**Don’t try to motivate through fear or intimidation.**

Not that it can’t be done, but ultimately, the results are not worth the costs. Students won’t like you and you won’t like them, and worse, you won’t feel very good about yourself either.

Everyone agrees that it is much better to motivate students through what they enjoy and respond to positively, and through things about which you feel all right as well. That doesn’t mean your program has to be insipidly easy; it can be rigorous yet still enjoyable (see Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

Rose Mary Johnston, first-grade teacher, describes the effect of teacher interest on student motivation:

“Teachers can be most interesting when they teach about something they love or know well. I love geography and science. Most people believe you can’t teach much science and geography in first grade. I teach sophisticated theories and processes, but in ways appropriate for my students.

“I teach the steps of the scientific process through very simple experiences (such as things that float or sink). For each step of the process, I use the formal name (observation, experiment, or hypothesis); however, I also have a picture I show the children that goes with the term or means the same

And as you show your helpfulness and support,
thing. After my modeling, the children slowly begin using the processes in dealing with simple problems. “The same idea works for geography. My students learn to recognize the shapes and names of the seven continents and some interesting facts about each of them. We incorporate these experiences into the literature and reading program, and we do a number of activities such as making pop-up books of the continents. This enables us to accomplish the goals of writing, reading, and learning sentence structure, but in a way that interests both my students and me.”

**Personality Traits of Teachers Good at Motivation**

Three personality traits are frequently seen in teachers who are especially effective in classroom motivation. As you reflect on these traits, remember that, while nobody shows them all the time, everybody shows some of them at least some of the time. The traits are greatly appreciated by students, and you can probably increase them in your behavior.

**Charisma.** Charisma is hard to define and harder to acquire, but we have all seen it—that ephemeral quality of personality that attracts and inspires. It is very difficult to say what makes one person more charismatic than another. A reasonably attractive appearance makes one appealing, at first. So does a sparkling personality; though some of the most appreciated teachers could never have been the life of any party. Ability to envision what could be helps, as does steadfastness of purpose and faith in students’ potentials. Add to that some degrees of enlightenment, experience, and wisdom, the normal human frailties, a measure of vulnerability, and the determination to persist, and you are getting somewhere in the neighborhood of charisma. If you happen to be an individual fortunate enough to possess it, motivation won’t be much of a problem for you.

**Caring.** Practically all teachers would prefer that their students learn and lead happy and productive lives. But caring in teaching implies considerably more than simple concern. It refers to teacher willingness to work on behalf of students, to keep trying when little progress is evident, and to persist even when students show no appreciation for efforts expended on them, as will often be the case. It means showing friendship—not to be confused with being a buddy—to every student, no matter how undeserving the student might seem. Depending on circumstances, it means encouraging, cajoling, supporting, or demanding. It may call for warmth in the heart or fire in the eye, but it always communicates that you are not willing to let any student drop by the wayside, to let students be less than they should be, or to say, “Oh well, what difference does it make anyway?”

Caring is within the grasp of everyone. It’s a matter of effort and persistence. It brings occasional reward and frequent disappointment. How well you care depends on your personality, your level of conviction, and your ability to roll with the punches.
Enthusiasm. Up to a point, teacher enthusiasm motivates students. Enthusiasm is contagious, as is lack of it. But enthusiasm must be genuine. Students quickly spot a fraud. If you truly believe in the value of what you are teaching and the worthwhileness of those with whom you are working, your students will respond to your efforts, though not always exactly as you would like. But remember, it is difficult to achieve significant results overnight.

Good Motivators—What Do They Do?

Here we move away from the nebulous area of personality traits to the more definitive realm of teaching skills, acknowledging that there is a considerable overlap between the two. With traits of personality set aside, it is obvious that teachers good at motivation also perform certain skill tasks particularly well, such as the following. These skills can be learned, practiced, and perhaps even perfected. Teachers good at motivation frequently:

1. Use novelty, mystery, puzzlement, and excitement to energize their lessons. Mr. Jones in the reading lesson says, “There may or may not be a double entendre somewhere on this page. If you think you find one and can explain its meaning, raise your thumb so I can see.”
2. Use color, sound, movement, and student activity to attract and hold attention. Mrs. Gómez uses songs, rhymes, and skits to help her students practice Spanish vocabulary, pronunciation, and conversation.
3. Assign individual and group projects, as a means of adding sense of purpose to what is being learned and encouraging students toward self-control and responsibility (see Corno, 1992). Ms. Eggleston has students keep individual folders of the best work they have done in art to show their parents.
4. State clear reasonable expectations and requirements to avoid confusion and enlist student cooperation. Mr. Timkins writes assignments on charts, explains them to students, checks for understanding, and leaves the chart on display while students complete their work.
5. Provide continual support, help, feedback, and encouragement to assist students over rough spots and keep them on track. Miss Rodriguez circulates quickly and quietly among students at work, making helpful suggestions and giving encouraging comments.
6. Listen to student concerns and remain flexible enough to change when it is warranted. Mr. Proybal holds brief class discussions at the end of each day, in which he asks students to comment on the lessons they liked best, those they liked least, and those they found most difficult. He listens to student suggestions and discusses his own ideas for improvement.
7. Provide numerous opportunities for students to display their accomplishments to both the class and to larger audiences. Mrs. Cooper schedules displays of student science and social studies...
projects, and toward the end of the year invites parents to view the displays.

8. **Emphasize student accountability** concerning behavior, work habits, and production of quality work. Mr. Simpson has students keep ongoing charts for privately rating themselves each day on their behavior and work. He schedules brief individual conferences with students to discuss the self-ratings.

9. **Work to build esprit de corps,** which when successfully accomplished mobilizes the class for better behavior and achievement. Ms. Wong challenges her students to surpass expectations, to be their best, and to strive to make their lives works of art. She pitches in, sharing and discussing their efforts as well as her own.

The foregoing noted some of the things good classroom motivators frequently do. There are, as well, many things they assiduously try **not** to do.

**What Good Classroom Motivators Don’t Do**

1. **They don’t bore students to death.** They plan against boredom, and at its onset they change the topic or activity, take a short break, or simply say, “I know this is not very interesting, but it is important, and I need you to hang in with me for five more minutes. Can you do that for me?”

2. **They don’t confuse their students.** At least they try not to, though they recognize that all learners become confused at times. They make their directions short and explicit, and they give explanations clearly. They check for understanding: “Bobby, could you help us remember the three things we are supposed to do? Tell us what they are, would you please?”

3. **They don’t vacillate.** Hour after hour, day after day, they hold to their expectations and to the way they interact with students. They aren’t hot today, cold tomorrow; your pal now, your enemy later. They work to get procedures correct and hold them steady. This is not to say they shouldn’t be flexible enough to change, when change is needed, or that even the best teachers don’t have good days and bad. Illnesses and personal problems affect us all, and in turn affect our work and interactions. But there must be a steadying force in the classroom: the teacher.

4. **They don’t frustrate their students.** Frustrated students sooner or later rebel. Frustration can come from two sources—unreasonable demands or work that is boringly difficult. Mr. Thaddeus is unreasonable when he says, “If the entire class doesn’t make 100 on this test, nobody goes to recess for the rest of the day;” He is unreasonable when he says, “You arc to have all this tomorrow or else you get an F in the grade book.”

   Frustration also comes from boringly difficult work, such as an hour of trying to do hard problems in long division with little if any success, or trying to commit to memory long lists of facts and dates for which there seems to be no earthly purpose.

5. **They do not intimidate their students.** Most teachers tend at first to be intimidating, and others remain so—despite efforts to the contrary. But they do not use a stance of autocratic superiority to try to make students work and behave, nor do they use sour personality, fierce physical stature, hostility, or thinly veiled threats. Rather, good teachers try to downplay intimidation, knowing that for whatever achievement it might inspire, it will certainly produce in students a counterdesire to resist, vanish, or become transported elsewhere.

6. **They do not punish their students for failure or other shortcomings.** That is, they don’t punish in the traditional ‘sense of inflicting pain, acute embarrassment, or loss of face. They do, of Course, follow the provisions of the discipline system used in their class, which often invokes unpleasant consequences for bad behavior or wanton failure to

   And as you show your helpfulness and support,
complete assignments. But that unpleasantness seldom entails more than staying in at recess and, when possible, correcting whatever was done incorrectly. Good motivators rarely punish students for doing poor quality work. They know they can get farther through helpful correction than by hurting students’ feelings or making them resentfully angry.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS IN MOTIVATION?

While most teachers lament the lack of learner motivation, students can, at times, become overmotivated or overstimulated to such a degree that work and behavior suffer. If during a lesson on animals you bring a pet into the classroom, especially one as unusual as a skunk or raccoon, your lesson will probably be lost in the chaos that ensues. If you overemphasize the dire importance of an upcoming achievement test, students may try so hard that they can’t relax and think, and so wind up doing worse than if you hadn’t mentioned it at all.

Aside from the deleterious effects of overmotivation, what teachers do to instill motivation often leaves ethical questions unanswered. For example, if novelty, puzzles, intrigue, and excitement are overlaid onto all lessons, do students come to believe that learning is no good unless a wizard is doing magic or a toy is bouncing and singing? If incentives and rewards are used to spur student work, do you perpetuate the belief that work is to be done only for the reward and not for the satisfaction of learning or a sense of responsibility to oneself? Most teachers find such questions troublesome but would still rather see students working, even if for reasons not laudable, than find them not working at all. To a considerable degree, such concerns can be assuaged by taking to heart some of the teachings of William Glasser.

WILLIAM GLASSER’S CONTRIBUTIONS

Teachers of long experience can tell you that authorities who have discovered the “true path” to teaching (and are hell-bent on making you see the light) do not last very long. The admonitions they fling may be hot topics this year but are likely to be stone cold by next.

One remarkable exception is Dr. William Glasser, who in recent decades seems to have found teaching—or at least, working with students—a more intriguing topic than psychiatry, his original area of expertise. His landmark books in education have been Schools without Failure (1969), Control Theory in the Classroom (1986), The Quality School: Managing Students without Coercion (1990), and The Quality School Teacher (1993).

In the first of these books, Glasser contended that sense of failure produced devastating effects on students and urged that schools strive to reduce drastically the incidence of failure. Subsequent events indicate that his suggestions had little
And as you show your helpfulness and support, effect on either practice or achievement, as he himself has acknowledged. But in his 1969 book Glasser introduced two other notions that still influence teaching. The first has to do with discipline, and contends that students have the power to do right or wrong, know when they are doing so, and need to be helped to make good behavioral choices rather than bad ones. The second contribution urges teachers to hold regularly scheduled class discussions, called “classroom meetings,” in which the class seeks positive solutions to problems that are bothering them.

Glasser’s 1986, 1990, and 1993 books more directly concern actual classroom practice. In Control Theory in the Classroom, Glasser states that “no more than half of our secondary school students are willing to make an effort to learn, and therefore (under present approaches) cannot be taught . . .” (p. 3). While that assertion referred to high school students, many elementary teachers claim they see the same condition in their students by fifth grade or even earlier. Glasser (1986) suggested a solution to that problem that has been well received and fairly widely implemented:

“All of our behavior, everything we do, can be considered our best attempt to control ourselves so as to satisfy our needs.” (p. 17)

Five Human Needs

And what are these needs we so desperately try to satisfy? According to Glasser they are five in number:

1. To survive and reproduce
2. To belong
3. To acquire power
4. To be free
5. To have fun

Glasser contends that these needs are alive and working in every one of us, from tot to dowager, and he says that we can no more deny the urge to fill these needs than we can deny the color of our eyes.

Glasser goes on to say that education—the school, the classroom, and the teaching-learning process—should be organized and conducted so that students, while working at lessons, can satisfy their needs. They will thus learn, behave well, and take an interest in education.

But what, specifically, would Glasser have teachers do? His fundamental suggestion is disarmingly simple. He would begin by setting up the class so that students worked together in small learning teams. Indeed, the cooperative learning groups that he and others advocate have become quite popular with teachers and students, and their effectiveness is shown through research. (See Slavin, 1989). Glasser feels that such teamwork is inherently motivating: Learning teams give students a sense of belonging. Belonging in turn provides initial motivation, which

And as you show your helpfulness and support,
And as you show your helpfulness and support,

spreads as students begin to achieve success. Stronger students find it need-fulfilling to help weaker students. Weaker students find it need-fulfilling to contribute to a team that is getting somewhere. Teams provide freedom and fun as they work with less dependence on the teacher and are allowed to assume more authority. It is evident that many students working in this manner find a good deal of belonging, power, freedom, and fun—the very things Glasser says all of us seek in life.

But teams, by themselves, are not enough. Glasser says that student willingness to work in school depends on teachers’ (1) functioning as “lead-managers” rather than “boss-managers,” (2) emphasizing quality in all student work, and (3) transforming the classroom environment into what he calls a “friendly workplace?”

Glasser elaborated these ideas in his 1990 book, *The Quality School: Managing Students without Coercion*, in which he makes statements such as

[We must] manage students so that a substantial majority do high-quality schoolwork; nothing less will solve the problems of our schools. (p. 3)

[Students’ main complaint is] not that [school] work is too hard, but that it is too boring. (p. 7)

Any method of teaching that ignores the needs of teachers or students is bound to fail. (p. 23)

When [teachers] fail [in trying to control students] it is usually because they depend too much upon…coercive methods. (p. 72)

Among the most destructive of all our coercive practices is our overuse of personal criticism. (p. 73)

A lead-teacher avoids doing anything that might lead students to see him or her as an adversary. If they see the teacher as an adversary, they will either continue to disrupt or support a disruption. (p. 122)

Nothing give students more of a sense of power than advising the teacher, and the more they can help you by doing something you seem unable to do for yourself, the more important they will feel. (p. 126)
In order to establish need-satisfying classrooms, Glasser would have teachers work not in the “boss style” but in a “lead-manager style” aimed at needs satisfaction. In the Preface to *The Quality School* Glasser distinguishes between the two styles:

- A boss drives. A leader leads.
- A boss relies on authority. A leader relies on cooperation.
- A boss says “I”. A leader says “We.”.
- A boss knows how. A leader shows how.
- A boss creates resentment. A leader breeds enthusiasm.
- A boss fixes blame. A leader fixes mistakes.
- A boss makes work drudgery. A leader makes work interesting.

For Glasser, motivation is virtually synonymous with needs satisfaction, specifically, the needs he emphasized. He maintains that when teaching and learning produce needs satisfaction, motivation to work and behave properly follows naturally.
REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS


And as you show your helpfulness and support,