Ben sits in his reading group pouting. Ben is a struggling reader who is poised to enter the third grade; however, he possesses literacy skills equivalent only to those of a first grader. He is attending a summer program designed to remediate his weaknesses, and needless to say, he is unhappy about it. As a result, Ben engages in several disruptive behaviors to avoid reading tasks, including interrupting the teacher, distracting other students, and complaining about a variety of ailments. He is only motivated to read or write when there is a reward attached to the task, and his teachers describe Ben as having a big bravado and a poor attitude.

For decades, educators have pondered the type of pedagogical alchemy that will unlock the potential of students like Ben. Standing at the front of a classroom looking out on a sea of expectant faces, most teachers are judicious to employ language that will spur their students to action, but concocting the perfect motivational elixir is a challenging task.

Educators are under significant pressure not only to ensure academic success but also to maintain orderly, positive classroom communities. Unmotivated students with learning challenges, therefore, present significant challenges because they not only struggle to efficiently process information; they also can be disruptive to their classmates. Ben’s negative attitude about learning can quickly pervade the affect of his classmates who are easily convinced to laugh at his jokes rather than focus on the task at hand. As his teachers work to motivate Ben, they struggle to select the best approach.

Motivational strategies typically fall into one of two categories depending on which kind of motivation they are intended to support: intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation. Students are considered intrinsically or internally motivated when they have either internalized the value of the task and understand its role in their larger goals or find the assignment personally interesting. Pedagogical strategies that foster intrinsic motivation attend to individuals’ innate needs to feel autonomous, socially connected, competent, and make meaning out of their learning experiences.

In contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to behavior that is a response to environmental or external influences. These influences can be enticements, such as stickers, money, or prizes, or deterrents, such as negative consequences for inappropriate behavior. When students are extrinsically motivated, they typically do not demonstrate a personal interest in the task nor do they value the exercise in terms of their larger goals.

Intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation are each associated with a unique set of research findings that support their effectiveness but also illuminate potential challenges or consequences. This entry will discuss intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies and provide specific examples of strategies that can be integrated into the classroom.

**Strategies for Developing Students’ Intrinsic Motivation**

Several decades of research have established an unequivocal link between intrinsic motivation and positive learning outcomes. Students who demonstrate high levels of intrinsic motivation engage in several beneficial achievement behaviors including willingness to attempt challenging tasks, increased effort and persistence in the face of a challenge, and autonomous strategy use. Intrinsic motivation has also been associated with greater comprehension and achievement. The single motivational characteristic that dictates the degree to which children are intrinsically motivated is the extent to which they value a
particular task, and as mentioned earlier, tasks are more valuable when they satisfy four innate needs: (1) the need for autonomy, (2) the need for belonging, (3) the need for competence, and (4) the need for meaning.

**Strategies That Offer Autonomy**

As students work to acquire new knowledge, they have an innate desire for control over their individual learning processes, and classrooms can fulfill students’ need for autonomy by offering choice, validating their opinions, and supporting their personal goals. In these settings, a sense of ownership and personal investment is fostered, and as a result, students often display a greater number of achievement behaviors and increased learning, as compared with the students of controlling teachers. Classrooms that are supportive of autonomy have also been found to support the learning of low-achieving students. Observations of literacy instruction in second- and third-grade classrooms demonstrated that teachers who offered their students choices of literacy activities and involved them in evaluations of their own and others’ work could find improved attitudes toward learning. Even low-achieving students reported high levels of efficacy for learning and did not shy away from challenging tasks. These findings were contrasted with students’ motivational beliefs in classrooms wherein work was characterized as procedural, discrete, and rigid. Low-achieving students in these classrooms were observed avoiding challenging tasks, as well as communicating perceptions of low ability and low efficacy for learning.

Recall Ben, the third grader who showed no interest in reading. Ben’s teachers decided to employ several autonomy-supportive strategies in order to foster his motivation and develop his reading skills. First, they aided Ben in creating individualized, reading-related goals, and devoted a portion of their instructional time toward helping him achieve his goal of reading a comic book. Second, rather than using prescribed worksheets, they provided him with choices for demonstrating knowledge. Sometimes these choices consisted of skill-building centers, each stocked with manipulatives (i.e., letter stamps, letter beads, or letter tiles) that provided different ways of practicing basic literacy concepts. Other times, a choice of text or research topic was provided. Choice was also an important factor in encouraging Ben to change his behavior in the classroom.

Together with his teachers, Ben identified three positive behaviors to focus on each day (raising his hand, independently initiating a task, and making comments that were on topic). Every morning Ben would identify two of his behaviors on which to focus and, at the end of the lesson, he would meet with his teachers to discuss his progress. These strategies provided Ben with ownership and independence in his learning, and his teachers reported greater productivity and cooperation as a result.

Despite the positive effects of autonomy-supportive environments on students’ motivation, practitioners report limited use of strategies to promote autonomy in reading instruction. There is a common assumption among educators that offering students freedom in task choice will result in a lack of productivity. Many teachers adopt a controlling approach out of fear that sharing control will lead to off-task behaviors. However, several examinations of teachers’ efforts in the classroom have demonstrated that practitioners can adopt strategies considered autonomy-supportive, and when they do so, students demonstrate greater engagement, intellectual curiosity, and a willingness to attempt challenges. Furthermore, the promotion of autonomy-supportive instruction is not to the exclusion of setting limits. Rather, an autonomy-supportive environment supports student choice, welcomes student perspectives (even those with negative affect), and provides explanatory rationales for assignments, while minimizing
the need to perform in a prescribed manner.

Strategies That Foster Belonging

Intrinsic forms of motivation are frequently found among students who have positive relationships with their teacher and their classmates. Many educators acknowledge the role that a strong interpersonal relationship plays in eliciting effort and engagement, and students who feel more connected to and cared for by their teachers demonstrate better self-regulation in academic settings.

In order to develop a positive relationship, many educators spend time getting to know their students. Ben's teachers were no exception. They knew that Ben loved sports and decided to use a team metaphor to help him understand several important concepts. The teachers likened their job to that of basketball coaches in that they guide their students toward positive behaviors that will aid them in achieving their goals. In order to make the metaphor concrete for Ben, his teachers introduced a picture of his favorite basketball team and superimposed photos of Ben, his classmates, and his teachers. Ben's teachers also engaged the class in daily activities that were designed to facilitate the development of a community of learners. These activities included dedicated time to personal sharing, encouraging peer-to-peer compliments in a game called Catch a Partner Doing Something Good, acknowledging compassionate and supportive behaviors, and collaborating with the students to develop a Class Constitution that outlined five agreed-upon rules of conduct.

Some teachers might be concerned that team-building exercises detract from the time allotted to academic skill building. Yet group affiliation has been found to have a strong and positive impact on students' motivation and learning outcomes. When instruction is offered in a small group, a community of learners can develop, and perceptions of a group identity, complete with shared goals, have a positive impact on the achievement outcomes of its members.

Strategies That Develop Competence

The importance of competency in motivation cannot be overstated. Building skills is often the primary focus of instruction, and although it is not the solitary precursor to intrinsic motivation, it makes a significant contribution. Perceptions of competency are probably the most widely researched topic in the field of motivation. In particular, Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy gained prominence for its ability to explain how an individual's judgments of his or her competency lead to activity selection, effort, and persistence. The notion of competence is also central to the distinction between the types of behaviors students demonstrate in academic settings. Students who pursue opportunities to develop their competence are referred to as learning goal–oriented because they look for chances to grow their abilities, whereas students who pursue opportunities to demonstrate their competence are characterized as performance goal–oriented because their focus is on managing the impression that others have of their ability. Performance-oriented students will often avoid challenging tasks in order to preserve the impression of high ability, and as a result, they tend to sacrifice learning opportunities out of fear that they may reveal their weaknesses.

In order to emphasize the importance of developing competence in a learning environment, Ben's teachers used three strategies: (1) they provided him with a concrete metaphor for understanding the importance of challenges in the learning process; (2) they offered regular exposure to challenging tasks; and (3) they reinforced positive behavior with feedback that was process-based and emphasized his actions rather than his traits.
To help Ben understand the importance of challenges in the learning process, his teachers utilized a weight-lifting metaphor. They explained that similar to developing your muscles through physical challenges (the use of hand weights), reading muscles need to strengthen by stretching them with tough literacy activities. His teachers provided Ben with brief reading challenges that were slightly above his instructional level. These challenges exposed him to difficult material so that he might be coached through the task and encouraged to independently employ strategies even when he experienced failure. Challenges were accompanied by thoughtful discussions that emphasized the value of mistakes and process-based praise that highlighted specific behaviors or use of strategies (e.g., “I noticed you paid special attention to the vowel sound in the middle of the word today”).

There is a common assumption that in order for students to feel competent they must build skills through incremental success. Along these lines, teachers often feel pressured to scaffold tasks in order to ensure students’ achievement and subsequent feelings of accomplishment. Yet, this approach does not provide students with the skills necessary to manage their emotions and behaviors when they inevitably encounter failure. In order to foster the intrinsic motivation necessary to persist through challenging tasks, students must feel as though they are continually developing their skills as well as feeling that they possess effective strategies for coping with setbacks and disappointment.

Strategies That Develop Meaning

The degree to which a student values a given task is considered the fundamental determinant of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation. Tasks are considered meaningful when they are interesting and/or relevant to students’ objectives. However, since many academic assignments are not directly related to individual interests, teachers are charged with making classwork personally applicable. Ben’s teachers engaged in several activities in order to demonstrate the value of even the most discrete and seemingly irrelevant tasks. First, as noted earlier, they worked with Ben to help him identify weekly short-term goals and larger long-term goals; these goals provided insights into his academic and social interests, and as a result, his teachers knew to introduce comic books and texts about comic book authors as platforms for exploring important linguistic strategies and phonics concepts. Ben’s teachers also made explicit connections between individual skills necessary for fluent reading and his long-term goals. Ben expressed interest in the field of marine biology, so his teachers used trade books about marine biology to help demonstrate the meaning of common prefixes and suffixes that can help him decode multisyllabic words used in the field. Finally, Ben’s teachers selected age-appropriate texts that depicted fictional and nonfictional characters pursuing goals, encountering challenges, and managing failure in order to accomplish their objectives to read aloud with him and to use these as a basis for discussion.

Strategies for Developing Students’ Extrinsic Motivation

Students who engage in targeted behaviors in order to achieve external rewards, such as incentives, grades, and praise, or avoid deterrents, such as punishments and negative consequences without internalizing the importance of such behavior, are considered extrinsically motivated. Incentives and deterrents are popular motivators because they are often effective at eliciting desired behavior in the short term; however, they are considered coercive by many in the field of psychology because they compel students to engage in targeted behaviors rather than fostering student-driven initiative. For example, one of Ben’s
teachers initially suggested using a sticker chart as a motivator, but her colleague expressed concern because she found that as soon as the stickers were no longer a part of instruction, her students became uninterested, and she suspected it was because her students struggled to internalize important academic concepts since the majority of their focus was on the reward rather than the task.

Her suspicions are valid. Extrinsic strategies have been associated with dampened forms of internal motivation, and instructional approaches that employ coercive tactics to regulate students’ behavior result in decreased engagement and increases in task avoidance, even when they are successful at building skills.

There is one important caveat to mention when discussing the presence of rewards in instruction. Tangible rewards that are not contingent upon task engagement or completion have not been found to affect intrinsic interest. For example, there is one educator who dedicated hundreds of hours to collecting used books in order to provide each of her students with a book for their birthday. This story highlights the compassion and extraordinary efforts of many teachers who are dedicated to improving reading outcomes among their students and rely on all means possible to increase motivation and ability.

Conclusion

The motivational strategies highlighted in this entry are not limited to application with students who have learning differences or even students who appear disengaged or disinterested in academic settings. Rather, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is based on behavioral patterns that are fundamental to human development and achievement. When working to motivate students, strategies that are based on evidence-based principles of autonomy, belonging, competence, and meaning making will provide a solid foundation, from which individual behavioral approaches can be derived. The thoughtful integration of these strategies will not only unlock student potential but also foster the independent pursuit of knowledge, persistence in the face of challenging tasks, and an overall appreciation of the learning process.

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See also Fostering Classroom Engagement; Interactive Teaching; Student Interest, Stimulating and Maintaining

Further Readings


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