

In Mind

A series of articles for those working with children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

1. Motivation

I Am Disengaged

by Dr Rob Long

The aim of this article on 'motivation' is to provide the busy teacher, or teaching assistant, with some user friendly ideas on how to support a learner who lacks motivation. There will be some theory but the emphasis will be on what can be done to 'motivate the unmotivated'. There are no easy answers, you may be already using similar ideas to the ones suggested, or it may prompt some new ones. Either way, Good Luck.

This article will consider:

- What 'motivation' means and key theories.
- The value and limitations of rewards.
- Practical ideas to tackle disengagement.

Motivation - What is it?

Many sciences are concerned with trying to explain why people act as they do. Are we pushed by internal drives or pulled by external forces? With human behaviour there can often be more than one explanation each time. For example going to work will satisfy the need to pay the rent and buy food, but it may also give meaning to our life and add a degree of social status as well.

There is a fable of three people struggling to carry heavy stones. One did it because they were a slave and had no choice. One was paid to do it and the third did it because they were building a church.

This is a simple example of the same behaviour but with very different explanations. We can expect the same when we turn to psychological explanations for behaviour in school. Different theories will have very different explanations about human nature and why we behave as we do.

So motivation can be seen as a catch all term. It describes everything while explaining nothing.

Motivation is seen to be the force that impels people to act. It is easier to give examples of motivation but hard to measure what it actually is.

Our concern here is understanding why, in an educational context some students may or may not be motivated. Also why can they be motivated in one situation but totally apathetic in another?

The information presented below makes an assumption that in a class where the lesson is engaging and involves the learners, there may be a small number of students who do not engage.

Theories of motivation

First a quick overview of some of the dominant psychological theories that try to explain motivation. Freud's psychoanalytic theory will not be included. It is good at explaining behaviour but not at predicting it. In all fairness it is more useful in understanding and supporting those with mental health issues.

The following three theories will be outlined here and then in more detail later with practical implications.

Behaviourism

Behaviourists believe that behaviour is determined by the environment. If a behaviour is followed by a positive outcome - reinforcement, then the behaviour is likely to occur again. So motivation describes the likelihood of a positive stimulus in the environment either resulting in the behaviour happening again or not. In the classroom this means a positive reinforcer could be a student receiving verbal praise or points towards a trip for behaving well.

However, things can be complicated. If a student doesn't like being in a lesson, and they misbehave, the teacher may send the student for time out. For the teacher this is giving the student a punishment, and is intended to encourage appropriate behaviour in the classroom. For the student their misbehaviour has been reinforced, in that misbehaving enabled them to avoid something they didn't like. So they are likely to misbehave again.

Cognitive

For the behaviourists the human mind was a 'black box' of processes that went on inside, thoughts and emotions could not be scientifically studied. Some people were dissatisfied by this, which led to the creation of cognitive psychology. Cognitivists believe that between the stimulus and the response processes such as memory, problem solving and thinking need to be understood for behaviour to make sense. These processes are known as mediational ones as they 'go-between' the stimulus and the response.

The Pygmalion Experiment by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1965), told teachers that a group of children could be expected to be 'growth spurters' based on test results. These results were fictitious and the children chosen randomly. The results showed that the children chosen, improved significantly more than the others.

The Journey to Children's Mindsets by Carol Dweck (2017), has highlighted how perception of their abilities, whether they have a growth mindset or a fixed view of intelligence, influences their learning success. There are students who through successful motivated learning experiences have developed the belief that they are able to satisfy their needs for belonging and mastery. Other learners who have a history of failing, believe that they cannot satisfy their basic needs through positive behaviour, choose to behave in unmotivated ways which typically involves negative behaviour.

Humanistic

Humanistic psychology grew out of an opposition to the way behaviourism and psychoanalysis explains human behaviour. Humanists believe thoughts and feelings are essential to understanding behaviour, and disagree with the Freudians that early experiences and drives determine one's behaviour. For humanists, such as George Kelly, the only way to understand another person is to learn how they construe the world. Every individual is unique and cannot be entirely explained by universal principles.

So while we all share many similarities, how we live our lives differs according to beliefs and aspirations. A key figure in the humanist approach was Abraham Maslow who proposed a hierarchy of basic needs that all individuals must address before they can fulfil their potential, referred to as self-actualisation. While Maslow proposed this model in the 1940s it has stood the test of time and justifies being included.

Extrinsic motivators (Influenced by behaviourism)

Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviour that is driven by some external reward. The reward may be tangible, a sticker or a point; or they may be psychological, verbal praise from an adult. A student may do a task for house points or praise from a teacher. There is a difference of opinion on whether rewards should be used in the classroom. Is it a good or bad thing to offer money to students if they obtain certain grades? Most children would not need such rewards to motivate them to learn, but what of those who do not readily value education. While they work to obtain money, they also obtain qualifications that could open new opportunities for them.

The view here is that there is rarely a rule that fits all. We all learn and behave differently. An extrinsic reward may be part of a progressive plan to move a student from not learning to learning. You have to start where the student is, not where you want them to be. Here are some suggestions to make rewards effective, but also some pitfalls.

Using rewards effectively:

- Be clear as to the behaviour you are looking for.
- If it is a complicated skill, break it down into smaller parts.
- Look at how can you give the student opportunities to engage in the behaviour.
- Decide how often the behaviour has to occur to earn the reward.

Using the reward:

- Involve the student to draw up a menu of rewards.
- If using a point system, rank the rewards for points.
- Have a 'mystery' reward.
- Use a 'spinner' with different rewards.

Example rewards:

- Activities
 - ◇ Sit near a friend.
 - ◇ Be first in lunch queue.
 - ◇ Act as class manager of resources.
- Social recognition
 - ◇ Call home to parents/carers.
 - ◇ Recognition at circle time.
 - ◇ Special assembly.
- Tangibles
 - ◇ Stickers.
 - ◇ Certificates.
 - ◇ Pens/pencils/toys.

Problems with rewards

- They can devalue learning. "If you do this, then I will give you a reward", devalues the learning task, as the student is motivated for the extrinsic reward and not the learning activity. (Cohen, 1999).
- They can weaken motivation. Students that are rewarded for doing a task are less likely to freely choose to do the task when there is no reward. (Lepper, Greene and Nisbett, 1973).
- Rewards weaken personal responsibility. Learners do not take charge of their own behaviours (Ferguson and de Charms, 1977).

- They can increase performance and success on a task, but weaken a learner's learning attitude (Elliott and Dweck, 1988).

Short and long term rewards

Students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties can find it hard to wait any length of time for a reward. This is because their disruptive behaviour has an immediate pay off and that is a reward. It might be negative attention from an adult, but it is attention, and it is here and now. To take responsibility for their behaviour the child has to resist this reinforcement history that they have become habituated to and not repeat it. It is human nature to repeat a behaviour that has previously been rewarded.

We need to also appreciate that a disruptive learner will often receive some internal reinforcement. For example:

- The student that wants to be in control, says "I won't" and gets a strong internal feeling of being in control.
- The student that wants attention, shouts out, and receives a strong internal feeling of attention.

The long term gains of better behaviour are more beneficial to the student, such as happier peer relationships, more positive feedback from school staff and improved learning. Some disruptive behaviours will satisfy short term needs, though they can be detrimental in the long term.

Turning down a short term reward for a long term gain is very difficult, as any of us trying to lose weight or exercise knows. In the short term it is hard to resist shouting out or poking another student, knowing that it will provide immediate attention or feelings of control.

We now have the difficult task of convincing children that in the long term, working and behaving well will pay off.

Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation has active participation and control by students with options such as when, where, how and in which order activities are completed.

When we do an activity for the pure enjoyment of doing it, we are doing it for the fun or the challenge. Usually there are no outside prods, pressures or rewards. We do it for its own sake, for the inherent satisfaction of doing it.

This is different from extrinsic motivation where we do the task in order to obtain some separable outcome. Examples of how we might try to motivate students extrinsically are:

- Reasoning - "you should do this because ... "
- Telling - "Do it or else ... "
- Rewarding - "If you do this I will give you ... "
- Negotiating - "If you do this, I will do ... "
- Threatening - "Do it or else ... "

But they aren't guaranteed to work, if a student decides they will not comply - you can't make them - then some of the techniques are likely to trigger a flight or fight response in the nervous system. For educationalists like Alfie Kohn (1999) the use of rewards is counterproductive. When we say to a student, "If you do this, I will give you ...", we are devaluing whatever the "this" is.

Some general ideas for promoting intrinsic motivation:

- Learn the student's personal interests.
- Allow the student choices on the when, where and how of work.
- Teach self-monitoring techniques.
- Celebrate effort as much as success.
- Make goals achievable.
- Build the student's global self-esteem.
- Wet their appetite with a new topic.
- Make lessons fun.
- Link learning to real world issues.
- Promote independent and active group learning.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's view of human nature is much more positive and less deterministic than those of either Skinner (Behaviourism) or Freud (psychoanalysis). For Maslow human nature is hard-wired for personal growth. To achieve personal growth, or as Maslow describes it self-actualisation, basic human needs have to be satisfied. If these basic needs are not met then problem behaviours will occur.

To quote a gang member explaining to Officer Krupke in the movie, West Side Story, "Hey, I'm deprived on account of I'm deprived." So the following essential needs have to be fulfilled to progress to self-actualisation.

We are driven to meet these needs. If a need is not satisfactorily met then it becomes the dominant drive, or as Maslow put it, the prepotent or strongest need. Unmet needs, that are lower in the hierarchy, are the ones that motivate us. So if a student has not had breakfast, a physiological need, then that becomes the prepotent need that drives their behaviour. When this is satisfied then the next need can be addressed. Having too much of a need is as much of a problem as having too little. So the student deprived of attention, can be as motivated by a need for attention as is the student who is given an excess of attention.

For Maslow the basic needs follow a predictable order, namely:

- Physiological.
- Safety.
- Love.
- Esteem.

Physiological

The body needs food, water, sleep and warmth. The emergence of breakfast clubs in many schools shows the understanding that a hungry student can never be ready for learning. When these needs are met, we move to the next level.

- School action:
 - ◇ Do students have access to water?
 - ◇ Are the toilets readily accessible?
 - ◇ Can they obtain nutritious snacks?

Safety

Feeling both physically and psychologically safe is a need that schools address by challenging bullying. Students who are in fear for their safety are unable to turn their attention to learning.

- School action:
 - ◇ Do students know how to report incidents of bullying?
 - ◇ Are vulnerable children actively supported?
 - ◇ Are classrooms organised to be fair, orderly and safe?

Love

This refers to the need to feel cared for and accepted by others. It is the antidote to loneliness. When we do not feel loved we are motivated to behave in a way, to try to experience love and belonging.

- School action:
 - ◇ Do students have the opportunity to work in a cooperative manner?
 - ◇ Are there opportunities for fun and relaxation?
 - ◇ Are friendship groups inclusive for all?

Esteem

There are two types of esteem. Competency esteem which is the result of being good at specific tasks, and social esteem. The latter is the attention and recognition that comes from other people.

- School action:
 - ◇ Do learners receive frequent feedback on progress?
 - ◇ Do peers give feedback on each other?
 - ◇ Are students praised for above average work?

The higher up the hierarchy a student is the more motivated they are to engage in learning.

When these basic needs are met, students are able to focus fully on learning. An important note is that these needs will fluctuate. They are not achieved once and forever. A student may have a good sense of belonging one day and not the next.

These four basic needs are essential for any student's wellbeing. If these needs are under or over fulfilled in a student, it will interfere with them achieving their potential.

Self-actualisation

Once these basic needs have been met we are drawn towards achieving our fullest potential, which is to become the kind of person we would like to be. It may be a quest for knowledge, social kindness or sporting success. The more any of these are met, the more we are drawn to achieve more. So in a way, we can never fully achieve our potential, it remains an elusive goal that we have to pursue.

Motivational Interviewing (MI)

MI was originally developed by Miller and Rollnick, (2013) to support adults, with addictive, behaviours to change. Since then it has been developed to help understand and motivate young people who are reluctant/resistant to change their behaviours. When working with students who seem to lack motivation, their determination not to change can be increased by adults who:

- Try to convince them they have a problem
- Argue for the benefits they will have if they change.
- Warn them of the consequences if they will not change.

In fact the 'psychological reaction' principle warns us of what will happen if we try to impose change. The attempt to impose behavioural change means that the individual's sense of freedom and personal autonomy is threatened. This triggers a strong reaction to not change. When someone tells you that "you must ..." or "You should ..." many of us will feel an urge not to comply.

Managing resistance

Resistance can be seen as a form of energy that we can either intensify or lessen, depending on how we respond to it. When a student's resistance increases, that is a clear signal to the adult that they need to take a different approach. The adult's goal is to reduce the level of resistance by not actively fighting it. When we try forcefully to insist on change, we can in reality be strengthening the student's determination not to change.

MI addresses this problem in a positive and supportive manner.

Core MI Rules:

- Resist the urge to immediately fix the problem.
- Understand the student's motivation for resisting change.
- Listen to the student.
- Empower them to take control.

MI believes:

- Working collaboratively with the student is the best way forward.
- Solutions drawn from the student are likely to be effective.
- The student is ultimately responsible for the path they choose.
- You cannot force student's to change.

The willingness to change is not seen as a fixed trait within a person. In fact motivation is defined as: "Motivation is a state of readiness or eagerness to change, which may fluctuate from one time or situation to another. This is one that can be influenced."

MI has six stages of change. Each stage needs to be understood, for example suggesting solutions to a problem before the student accepts that they have a problem, is no solution. At each stage there is a key task that needs to be addressed before moving to the next stage.

The Six Stages of Change:

Stage 1. Pre-contemplation "I'm not ready"

Task - Awareness

- In a caring supportive way time is spent encouraging the student to accept that there is a problem.
- Providing supportive evidence can help them accept this.

Stage 2. Contemplation "Shall I?"

Task - Tip the balance

- Reasons why change is beneficial to the student's goals.
- Example of change talk - "I wish things were different".

Stage 3. Determination "Will I?"

Task - Explore strategies

- What can be done, ideas that are appropriate, accessible and acceptable.
- Example of change talk - "I know what I need to do".

Stage 4. Action "I need to keep at it"

Task - Take steps

- Explore options and plan implementation.
- Example of change talk - "I wish things were different".

Stage 5. Maintenance "I did it"

- Task - Prevent relapse
- Anticipate problems and rehearse coping strategies.

Stage 6. Relapse "Whoops a setback"

Return to Stage 1.

Some students do not know how to change their behaviours, they are "failed self-changers". Using the six stages of MI, supportive adults can systematically work with students wherever they are on the wheel of change. No student, no matter how unmotivated, cannot be supported.

An expectancy theory of motivation (Wigfield and Eccles, 2002)

This theory believes that the effort a student is prepared to put into a task depends on whether they think they can do the work, combined with how interesting/relevant they think the work is.

$$\text{Effort} = \text{interest in task} + \text{likelihood of success}$$

Using this key idea gives us four possible learning groups in any class.

Group A - The Engaged

- These are students who expect to succeed at the work and are interested and value the task.
- Behavioural indicators:
 - ◇ Regular attendance.
 - ◇ Additional work produced with little prompting.
 - ◇ A strong willingness to actively participate in discussions.

Group B - The Avoiders

- These are students who could manage the work, but see no point or value in it.
- Behavioural indicators:
 - ◇ Work rate differs in different subject/topic areas.
 - ◇ Persistent low level disruption in certain subjects.
 - ◇ An unwillingness to actively participate.
- Possible strategies:
 - ◇ Involve student in self-monitoring.
 - ◇ Develop with the student a menu of benefits for working.
 - ◇ Place with Group A students.

Group C - The Supported

- These are students who are interested in the work, but do not believe they can succeed. They say “yes” when asked if they understand the task, but really mean “no”.
- Behavioural indicators:
 - ◇ Poor work rate in different subject/topic areas.
 - ◇ Works well when given support.
 - ◇ A willingness to do non-learning tasks, handing out materials.
- Possible strategies:
 - ◇ Check tasks are differentiated appropriately.
 - ◇ Assign teacher assistant in key areas.
 - ◇ Monitor progress to build self-esteem.

Group D - The Rejectors

- These students don't value what is on offer or expect to succeed even if they try. These will be students at risk of truanting.
- Behavioural indicators:
 - ◇ Late for class, frequently absent.
 - ◇ Passive, non-active manner when in class.
 - ◇ Weak relationships with peers.
- Possible strategies:
 - ◇ Develop regular links to home.
 - ◇ Check for learning difficulties.
 - ◇ Assign a learning mentor.

This model can help us understand that three students may be unmotivated but for very different reasons. Once you have an idea as to which group a student is in, then you can tailor support to see if this changes/improves their behaviour.

The Future Self

“The future is not over yet.”

This may seem a little odd as a technique to increase motivation in those who lack it. A theory of Possible Selves was put forward by William James. William James (1842-1910) considered by many - especially in America - to be the father of psychology, thought that the idea of who we may become acts as a motivator to present behaviour. So how we behave today is not so much determined by our past, but the idea of what we wish to achieve in the future.

Possible Selves represent those elements of the self-concept that individuals could become, would like to become, or are afraid of becoming - Fear of Possible Selves.

Possible Selves could be self-regulatory and can serve as road maps for one's behaviour. Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) in reported studies linking increased numbers of positive Possible Selves with a reduced risk of substance use and sexual activity.

Sun and Shek (2010) showed that adolescents are less likely to engage in problem behaviour when they have a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Exploring Possible Selves among youths sheds light on the development of prevention and intervention programmes that target youths who may be, or are, affected by drug use and other at-risk behaviours.

Future Selves

Wellbeing programmes will contribute to a student's sense of hope and optimism. An aspect of wellbeing is 'helping behaviour'. Some example activities:

The Help Journey.

Ask your student to “Count the helps” received from others and to find at least one opportunity for them to help somebody else. Ask them to do it every day. In the evening in their bedroom ask them to write the details of the help received and provided. Ask them to try to write “what did I feel” when I received a help from others. They should try to write “what did I observe” in the behaviour of the person when I offered a helping behaviour and “what did I feel” when I have seen that somebody has been benefited by my behaviour.

There is no right way to write these. Don't be bothered about spelling or grammar mistakes. The point is, you develop a habit of paying attention to the help you offer and receive.

Goal directed learning

In and outside of the classroom, provide opportunities to practice skills in socially meaningful ways. Examples would be cookery, gardening and mechanical projects. All can be used to help the student consider how these skills could be used in the future.

Adventure based activities

For students a degree of risk in an activity can be motivating in itself. Kayaking, sailing or rock climbing when properly supervised can be highly engaging for students. During such activities, the skills of team work will be developed, essential skills for most future employments.

Career education and guidance

Linking a student's present skills and interests to future occupations can widen their career horizon and stimulate future orientation. It also helps challenge gender stereotypes and myths concerning certain career choices.

Home-school links

Parenting skills, especially with a focus on the teenage years, can support parents/carers to accept and respect their children for who they are and what they could achieve. Responding to their changing needs can be demanding, but can avoid setting unrealistic expectations.

Role models

Exploring with students who they identify with, in both sport and entertainment, and showing how they achieved their positions. Using such a method can motivate students to focus on who they wish to become and what they need to be doing now to follow their path.

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