Motivational Techniques: Positively Impacting Students from Middle School through College

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Abstract

In the United States, our children face a number of factors that influence their behavior. Children's peers, parents and even the media, especially television, heavily influence students. Because of these influences, it can be difficult to motivate students in the classroom to strive for and achieve success. The purpose of this article is to discuss the influential factors that affect children from middle school through college, and discuss ways to help motivate students to achieve success.

Keywords

Extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation, high school students, motivational techniques, peer assessment, job shadowing, career coaches, parental involvement, growth model.

Two Types of Motivation

There are two different types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic (Intrinsic motivation, Extrinsic motivation). Both types of motivation are very powerful and can be utilized to create positive results in the classroom. Intrinsic motivation refers to that which comes from within each person. If a person enjoys an activity, they are more likely to do it as opposed to something that they do not enjoy. This is why intrinsic motivation is so important. Teachers, parents and counselors can use intrinsic motivation to help students develop a career plan. For example, if a student is interested in computers, that may be something that the student should be encouraged to pursue as a career. Teachers can bring in guest speakers from various career fields to help encourage students to find the right career path. Teachers can also encourage students to participate in job shadowing opportunities. Many businesses are

eager to help young people. Job shadowing gives the student an opportunity to see details about the careers of their choice, but more importantly, it allows the students to freely ask a professional direct questions. These student questions may be outside of the teacher's or parent's realm of expertise. Job shadowing also allows the student to see the world outside of a textbook, get feedback on their resume, gain networking contacts and gain valuable work experience that can be included on their resume (Job Shadowing). Showing students that they can turn an interest into a career is what intrinsic motivation is all about.

Extrinsic motivation is completely different. This type of motivation focuses on a reward or punishment system. Examples of extrinsic motivation are rewards such as money, food/candy, praise or acknowledgement, or good grades. Fear of punishment or failure is also extrinsic and can be very powerful. High school and college are obviously different in many ways. One example of this fact is that, in most cases, the rewards of extrinsic motivation are lacking in a college classroom. But, the fear of failure is likely much higher in a college environment as opposed to high school. This may make the transition from high school to college more difficult for some students. Many professors at the college level are required to conduct research in their respective specialties and teaching is sometimes secondary; whereas grades Kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers are usually focused only on students. This does not make one teacher more important than the other, but simply shows that college professors have less time to devote to individual students and less time to focus on motivational methods. Because of this, students must be motivated for success in a college environment, or they face the likelihood of failure. The lack of motivation is one of the many factors that keep students from completing college.

It is important for teachers to keep students active, to find which type of motivation works on them, to challenge them and to alter the types of assignments. Taking students on field trips, providing hands-on learning experiences and giving challenging assignments are the keys in keeping students involved in the learning process. Also giving students' class time to research careers on websites such as http://www.bls.gov/k12/ and www.careeronestop.org gives them the opportunity to research careers that match their interests. Teachers should also vary teaching lessons to incorporate material that benefits all three learning types: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. Visual learners need quiet study time to enjoy charts and graphs. Auditory learners enjoy lectures, reading out loud and music. Kinesthetic learners need breaks from studying, like building and working with models to enjoy lab environments such as science (Fleming).

And, just as the above practices can be used for both secondary and post-secondary students, teachers must make plans in their curriculum in case they have students with learning disabilities. "Functional sight-vocabulary is vital in learning to read for individuals with learning difficulties. Multifaceted approaches and activities that are relevant and meaningful to students to help heighten and maintain their motivation to participate, persist, and learn" (Morgan and Moni, 2007). Morgan and Moni also write that games and activities such as using vocabulary charts, using vocabulary scrapbooks, using word cards and even bingo can help in building vocabulary skills and also helping students stay motivated.

The Role of the School

For many students, late elementary school and junior high—or the middle school years— are the most critical in terms of future success or failure. According to Johns Hopkins University School of Education, sixth graders with high absenteeism have only an eighteen percent chance of completing high school. In North Carolina, some schools are changing their approach to how they treat their students:

Too many schools serving 6th through 9th graders, however, have yet to find the right prescription for keeping those youngsters engaged at a time when their growing curiosity, independence, and need for the acceptance of their peers may lead them to act out or zone out in school. "Our belief is they'll grow out of it. But the evidence shows that in high-poverty environments, they don't grow out of it" without intervention, said Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Center for the Social Organization of Schools, based at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore…About 40 percent of eventual dropouts could be identified in the 6th grade, he estimates. "The only way to intervene is if we know who the kids are," he said, and are familiar with their records in school. Mr. Balfanz and his colleagues, like several researchers before them, contend that many students begin to go astray well before they reach high school. Middle schools, he believes, should be the first line of defense in tracking those warning signs and intervening (Manzo, 2008).

One of the most important roles the school has is to find ways to motivate students to reach their full potential. Some schools have sought to motivate students by utilizing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

The administration at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School in Boston, Massachusetts posts every student's grade point average on a bulletin board in the school.

The names are replaced by the student identification number. This policy has caused the students to compete with each other, and in turn, motivates them to succeed in school. This may not work in each educational environment, or be feasible due to privacy issues, but it is an interesting option utilizing intrinsic motivation.

Some schools have started giving students rewards for completing projects or taking time to read. New Hope Elementary School in Thornton, California, USA has students who come to the library, get in groups and read aloud before gaining access to video games. The California Department of Education estimates that sixty percent of elementary students in this town are not fluent in English. So, programs like this motivate students to learn, even if it is through an extrinsic motivational system of being rewarded after completing a reading assignment.

Another way to motivate students is to hold them accountable. There should be punishment for breaking any school rule. Just as misbehavior or breaking rules draws punishment, good behavior and meeting goals will gain rewards for those students who excel. It is likely that if lower-functioning students see higher-functioning students getting rewards, it will likely encourage the former to try harder and reach their potential. Some students may still act out, but the author believes that if students are seen getting rewards for excelling, their behavior will be mimicked. This relates to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (McLeod, 2011) where learning is influenced by the environment. Children observe the world and people around them and mimic those people or models. The first part of Bandura's theory is that children will imitate or mimic models that are similar to themselves, especially those that are the same sex. The second part of this theory is that the people who witness the children's behavior will either reinforce the behavior positively or negatively, but regardless, the child will likely change their behavior to seek approval. The third part of this theory states that students will attach themselves to models who exhibit qualities that they can identify with and actually mimic these behaviors.

New Ways to Assess Students

In an effort to help students increase not only their assessment scores on essays, but also their participation, Dr. Jane Facey, the Head of History at Esher College in Surrey, United Kingdom started using conveyor belt peer marking. Students write an essay, then it is passed to at least five or six other students in the class for grading. This is effective because students are likely to try harder, so that they will not receive harsh criticism from

their peers (Facey, 2011). This is a form of reverse, or positive peer pressure. Generally, the more people that grade a paper the better: a teacher may miss an error on an essay, especially if they have to grade a large number of essays at one time. Peer grading also gives everyone a chance to encourage other students. After students finish their papers, they are allowed to make changes. This allows them to improve essay assignments in the future. Facey (2011) found some interesting changes in the students who participated:

In response to the group assessment, students revised and rewrote their paragraphs and were asked to comment upon how they had improved. Ellen was able to see that she was now writing more clearly and specifically, and was linking her answer to the question. Joe also realized that he had improved his answer with more explanation and a more developed point. The students were very much engaged in the task and I would argue that more effective progress had been made in improving their written work than if I had marked individual essays returned with the usual comments and targets (36).

Methods such as peer marking help motivate students by positive peer pressure and give teachers another tool in helping to motivate students and preparing them for success.

The Three E's:

Many high school students today will be first-generation college students. This is especially true in rural and urban high schools, with suburban high school students being the most likely to have parents with college degrees. Because of this, the author believes that it is imperative for today's high school students to have role models and mentors. The author has derived three elements for mentors to help students succeed in a post-secondary education environment. These elements for mentors are to encourage, educate and enlighten students.

Some USA states, including Arkansas, Tennessee and South Carolina, have brought in Career Coaches to serve high schools and work with students to encourage them to attend college or vocational training. In Arkansas, Career Coaches are located in the most economically disadvantaged regions of the state—most often the Delta. These Career Coaches spend their work day giving students career advice, helping with college entrance forms, assisting with financial aid applications and serving as mentors. The Career Coaches are an extension of the school Guidance Counselor, but are able to spend more of their time devoted specifically to student needs and are often able to give college and career

advice on an individual basis. High school students may not be the most motivated members of society, so it is important for mentors, such as Career Coaches, to motivate them toward a goal and encourage them to pursue it—even if the student does not yet know what that goal is. The Career Coach program in Arkansas has been successful. In schools that have a Career Coach, there has been a 19.82% increase in the college going rate (Career Coach). And, applications for financial aid in these schools have increased 32.3% (Career Coach). In addition, community colleges across the state have seen an increase in enrollment in areas where Career Coaches work. Also, due to encouragement from Career Coaches, more students have enrolled in Advanced Placement and Concurrent Enrollment classes that transfer directly to state colleges and universities.

The Role of Parents

Hansen (2006) describes what parents can do to help encourage their children: "One of the most profound ways a parent can encourage education is by fostering a positive attitude about learning. Parents are role models for their children in a variety of ways. For example, if a child fails at first, a parent can emphasize that mistakes offer valuable lessons and then assist the child in identifying lessons from his mistakes" (365). According to Hansen (2006), the best way to help students is for their parents to become actively involved in their school activities:

After taking a basic interest in their children's education, parents should develop a relationship with their children's teachers. Currently, many parents have limited contact with their children's teachers and schools. However, research indicates that parents will have a better understanding of their children's learning strengths and weaknesses after hearing teachers' comments about their children. With a better grasp of their children's educational strengths, parents can build upon those strengths and discover more efficient ways to motivate their children. Parents can do a great deal to get involved and help motivate their children to learn. Parental influence in a child's education can be just as great, if not greater, than a teacher's impact on a student's education (366).

Recommendations

In order to motivate students to reach their full potential, the following steps should take place: schools should develop a reward system for student achievement. This should include both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational methods. An example of this would be to treat excellent students to a pizza party and a movie or trip to a museum. These examples

refer to extrinsic motivation, as a reward system for good behavior, outstanding grades and achievement, or all of the above. Schools that implement reward systems have shown that other students also improve in a form of healthy competition, and this can help foster intrinsic motivation. Another recommendation to increase motivation is to develop a system to thoroughly evaluate each student. Schools are increasingly using alternative methods to evaluate students in addition to performance assessment, including: student portfolios, peer assessment, student self-assessment and classroom observation by the teacher (Rolheiser). This will take time and effort from the school, but, the return on investment would likely be high. This would also help eliminate students from falling through the cracks. For students in grades where there are standardized tests, students can be given extra attention in their deficiency areas. For students in grades without standardized testing, regular quizzes and tests can be looked at to see where students need extra help. This would lead to the next recommendation: to start a mentoring program. Schools are limited by the number of hours of education that they give and budget constraints. Most schools could enact an after-school mentoring program. The mentors could be volunteers, paid by proceeds through grants (if approved), or through charging parents for their services. The mentors could help students with deficiencies and help motivate them to work hard, which may be beneficial, especially if the students do not have parents who help them. Although not everyone is qualified to be a mentor, (college) student-teachers may be an option. It is important to realize that the mentor does not need an advanced degree. But, the mentor should possess these qualities: care about others, especially young people, be empathetic, be enthusiastic, allow others to express themselves freely and most importantly, know the importance of education. Finally, parents should be encouraged by the school to become more involved in the educational process of their children. While many parents may not get involved, participation is likely to increase if the school sends routine updates to parents and also has an interactive school website where parents can stay informed on the progress of their children.

Conclusion

Students need to see what education can do for them. It can remove them from poverty, lower the risk of teen pregnancy and simply prepare them for the future. Whatever it takes to motivate them to succeed in school is well worth it. Taking students on field trips and allowing them to visit different colleges and universities as well as allowing them to job shadow in a career field of their choice helps inspire children and plan for the future. The author has seen this first-hand. Job shadowing opportunities are especially helpful for

students who do not have a clear career path. While job shadowing, students are able to ask questions that their parents or teachers are not likely to have the answer to. Also, seeing what a potential career can give the student may also motivate them to set and ultimately obtain a particular career goal.

Teachers cannot do it alone. Parents should be involved in their children's education as well. While not all parents can volunteer at the school or participate in school organizations, most have time to help with homework or just listen to their children and any potential issues that their children face at school. Simply listening can truly help children and ultimately encourage them to perform at school. Enlisting the help of mentors and Career Coaches is also helping tremendously. One-on-one or small group career and college counseling is beneficial for students who are uninformed on how to prepare for their future.

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