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Motivating **UNMOTIVATED** Students

From **Theory**
to **Practice**

Unmotivated students have always been the bane of educators. As such, many theories and even more research have focused on understanding what motivates students. As in-(school) house professionals, counsellors are uniquely positioned to directly address student motivation problems as well as to consult with educators, administrator, and parents about techniques for encouraging students to become more engaged and active learners. But as practitioners in every applied field know, it is one thing to study academic theories of behaviour and development, it is quite another to translate these theories into day to day dynamic strategies to help students become more successful, happy, and motivated in school.

Psychological Needs and Academic Motivation

Research in motivation has demonstrated that there are three psychological needs students will actively try to fulfill (Connell, 1990; Connell and Wellborn, 1991). They will look for every opportunity to feel a real connection

to the people around them (i.e., relatedness), to be effective and successful at academic tasks (i.e., competence), and to pursue educational opportunities that are personally relevant (i.e., autonomy). The more they experience a sense of relatedness, competence, and autonomy while learning and in school,

the more energized, directed, and actively engaged in learning they become (Skinner, Kindermann, Connell & Wellborn, 2009). Conversely, when students can't fulfill these needs in school, they will look elsewhere, becoming disaffected with school and learning. In other words, unmotivated.

Motivating Students

There are specific aspects of the school environment that promote (or, alternatively, undermine) these important psychological needs and, consequently, student motivation. Being emotionally close to people at school and having real connections with teachers, students and other adults in the school environment (i.e., involvement), leads to the fulfillment of a student's sense of relatedness. Clear and consistent expectations and responses (i.e., structure) promote a student's ability to competently complete academic tasks and effectively learn. Finally, the opportunities for personal choice and pursuit of unique interests (i.e., autonomy support) afforded to students in school encourages a sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation toward learning. The more these qualities are present in the school setting, the more motivated and engaged students become (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner, et al., 2009). The absence of these qualities directly undermines a student's motivation in school.

So, one way to address student motivation, especially in an unmotivated student, is to increase the involvement, structure, and autonomy support in school and in the learning process.

Developing Personal Relationships

Education in schools occurs within the context of relationships: teachers, other students, administrators, and counsellors. When a student is unmotivated, the first question to ask is "Who is personally connected to this kid?" The things you learn by having a personal relationship with students also allows educators to discover ways to draw them back into active learning: What matters to them? What stresses them? What is difficult (and easy) about school and learning? Personal relationships are the context for encouragement, affection, positive regard, and empathy. The involvement of teachers

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and counsellors also provides an effective opportunity for them to instill optimism and hope in demoralized or otherwise unmotivated students.

The first order of business in turning an unmotivated kid around is to get them personally connected to an adult in school.

Structuring the environment and learning tasks

If the tasks are too hard, if there are constant disruptions, if students can't figure out how to succeed, or if there is insufficient instruction, practice or consolidation of information (i.e., inadequate structure), it is difficult for students to feel competent and effective in school.¹ They are likely to give up. This is where teaching effective study skills and learning strategies helps students be more competent. Academic planning that provides a schedule that is challenging without being overwhelming is also important. Unmotivated students get into a cycle of failure. They quit even trying. Providing positive feedback and encouragement for the smallest successes (especially successes that have been intentionally built in) are particularly important for these students. Recognizing and celebrating these small instances of success can get them back on the road to benefiting from grades and learning as rewards. If an unmotivated kid does not have at least one area in school in which they feel competent and effective, correcting that is another important place to intervene.

Supporting personal goals and interests

One of the more difficult motivational strategies to implement in the school environment is providing choice; opportunities for learning that are relevant to personal goals, and nurturing a student's intrinsic interests. There are things kids need to learn in school whether they like it or not. Unfortunately, if they don't understand why or see the personal value of what they are learning, you can lose them (or, at the very least, the quality of their learning is dramatically reduced;

Deci & Ryan, 1985). How many opportunities do students have to make choices about their learning? Even limited opportunities for choice in activities result in motivational enhancement effects (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Do students have opportunities to pursue personal interests or to put their individual

mark on tasks or projects? Are the linkages between immediate educational tasks and a student's longer term personal goals made explicit? How often are students encouraged to play with knowledge and academic skills or learn for the sake of learning (without a grade hanging on the outcome)? Making

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¹ Learning differences and intellectual limitations and major life stressors like poverty and mental illness also have a huge impact on a student's academic motivation but discussions about motivating these students is beyond the scope of this article.

opportunities for students to choose and pursue personal interests is a third way to enhance student motivation.

Counsellors can provide involvement, structure, and autonomy support directly to unmotivated students. Furthermore, by talking about psychological needs and providing concrete suggestions for ways to promote the fulfillment of these needs in students, counsellors are in a position to help their education colleagues more effectively motivate students to become more engaged in school. **CSC**

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Bibliography

Connell, J. P. 1990. *Context, self and action: A motivational analysis of self-system processes across the life-span*. In D. Cicchetti & M. Beeghly (Eds.) *The Self In Transition: From Infancy to Childhood*. (pp. 61-97). Chicago: University of Chicago Press


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Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. 1985. *Intrinsic Motivation*. New York: Plenum.

Skinner, E. A., Kindermann, T. A., Connell, J. P. & Wellborn, James G. 2009. *Engagement and disaffection as organizational constructs in the dynamics of motivational development*. In K. R. Wentzel & A. Wigfield (Eds.), *Handbook of Motivation at School*. (pp. 223-245). New York: Routledge.

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Motivational Resources These are a selection of books that provide more practical, specific strategies for motivating students

- Cushman, Kathleen. 2010. *Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

This is one in a series of excellent books on student motivation. It is also worth looking at *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*, *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom*, and *Sent to the Principal: Students Talk About Making High School Better*.

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. New York: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Csikszentmihalyi has some wonderful things to say about intrinsic motivation and the components and development of expertise.

- Connell, J.P., Klem, A.M., Lacher, T., Leiderman, S., & Moore, W., with Deci, E. 2009. *First Things First: Theory, Research and Practice*. Toms River, NJ: Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

This provides an introduction to the school-wide application of motivational principals to address student engagement. This report and many others on the work of the IRRE can be found at this link <http://www.irre.org/publications>.

- Wellborn, J. G. 2012. *Raising Teens in the 21st Century: Practical Strategies for Effective Parenting*. Brentwood, TN: 12 Mile Bayou Press.

This is a brilliant book (not that I'm biased) that provides parents with strategies for a wide range of typical challenges in raising teens including several chapters on motivation problems and on academic performance issues.

- Karinch, Maryann. *Empowering Underachievers: New Strategies to Guide Kids (8-18) to Personal Excellence*. New York: New Horizon Press, 2006.

- Metcalf, L. 2008. *Counseling Toward Solutions: A Practical Solution-Focused Program for Working with Students, Teachers, and Parents*. New York: Jossey Bass. Solution oriented counselling techniques for encouraging motivation and behavior change are uniquely consistent with the motivational concepts discussed in this article. The strategies can be applied to academic issues as well.

- Murphy, J. J. 2008. *Solution-Focused Counseling In Schools*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

