

Student Motivation: A Problem Solving Focus

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To achieve excellence, students must be highly motivated to achieve. Unfortunately, many students with learning problems appear unmotivated and disinterested in learning. This can become the most difficult and vexing instructional problem that teachers and parents face.

Motivation - A Perspective

It is a mistake to assume that students with learning problems are unmotivated. The problem lies in the direction, not the strength of motivation. Children are not born unmotivated. They don't wake and say, "Today I'll do a lousy job. I'll be unmotivated." Just the opposite—like all of us students with learning problems are highly motivated to protect themselves from the threat of failure and the embarrassment and loss of self-esteem it produces. This underlying dynamic was poignantly described in Abrams's (1991) discussion of students with reading problems:

It is almost inevitable that a child who is experiencing severe difficulty in reading will develop intense feelings of frustration. As reading failure continues, many symptoms of social and emotional maladjustment will appear. Children -- increasingly bewildered by their inability to meet the expectations of their parents, their teachers, and their peers -- develop a hypersensitivity to the possibility of failure. This fear of further wounds to their pride exacerbates the problem simply because children cannot risk any further humiliation. Instead, all too often, children act out aggressively, withdraw, become depressed, or choose any one of a number of other maladaptive solutions (p. iii).

Motivation emanates from experiences, expectations, and feelings. A student's motivation, or willingness to invest time and energy and take risks, is task and situation specific. A student with a history of reading failure may tenaciously resist anything associated with reading. This same student may toil ceaselessly to earn the bike of his dreams.

Once you **understand a particular student's assumptions and beliefs**, the avoidance of school tasks makes sense. Very few of us, for example, would make sustained, meaningful efforts to learn mathematics after years of continued, humiliating failure. Unfortunately, failure compounds failure, resulting in fearful expectations of even more failure. Thus, antagonistic behavior to avoid anything to do with mathematics and "save face" should not be unexpected. From the student's perspective, it makes sense.

The Student Motivation Problem Solving Questionnaire

Just as it is a mistake to view students with learning problems as unmotivated and disinterested, it is a mistake to view motivation as a solid, impenetrable, monolith. By analyzing the critical, essential elements of motivation, parents and teachers can reduce or eliminate resistance to learning.

The Student Motivation Problem Solving Questionnaire can help program planners analyze student motivation. It can help them better understand why individual students resist particular activities or subject matter. The questionnaire avoids "blame" by focusing on modifiable factors which underlie motivation. The questionnaire's premise is that to a large extent, motivation is a rational response to the confluence of identifiable factors.

The Student Motivation Problem Solving Questionnaire is a guide for focused thought. It is not a norm-referenced scientific instrument for predicting behavior or distinguishing between students. Instead, it asks questions about the more important factors that research has shown to influence motivation (Stipek, 1998). Discussions which systematically analyze responses to the questionnaire's items can engender accurate understanding of the dynamics underlying a student's willingness or resistance to invest time and energy in particular activities or subject matter. In turn, increased understanding can produce ideas likely to foster motivation.

Focusing attention on logical reasons for a student's lack of interest and involvement in particular activities or subjects avoids acrimonious, divisive "blame games" while encouraging rational, productive thought. As an old Irish saying goes, "Think -- It's the source of power." Questionnaires such as this one can **systematically** begin the process.

THE STUDENT MOTIVATION PROBLEM SOLVING QUESTIONNAIRE
PROGRAM PLANNING TEAM VERSION

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Student's Name _____ Date of Birth _____ Age _____

Date _____ School _____ Grade _____

Person Completing the Questionnaire _____ Position _____

Students may appear unmotivated to do what parents and teachers ask of them. Often, students' lack of motivation is associated with particular activities, like reading, or tasks, like finishing homework. Think of a particular activity or task that the student regularly avoids, partially completes, or executes carelessly. He may avoid the activity or task by throwing a temper tantrum. Or he may do what is asked of him with minimal effort, achieving far less than he is capable of achieving. He may, for example, hand in a poorly written report although he has superior writing skills.

Answers to the questions below can identify reasons for the apparent lack of motivation. This information can then be used to formulate a program that encourages his desire to do well and his active involvement. For example, if the student believes the subject matter is unimportant, demonstrate how it can help him achieve a goal that is important to him. If the content of a lesson is uninteresting to him, introduce novelty, uncertainty, or curiosity arousing questions; pair him up with an enthusiastic, task-oriented friend; or design the lesson as a competitive game, which he knows he has a good chance of winning if he makes a moderate effort.

Directions

Answer each question *from the perspective of the student* and not from the perspective of what you think he should think. Use the key:

5	4	3	2	1	0
Yes				No	DK (Don't Know)

Answers to the first section should address **a particular activity or task** for which the student lacks motivation (e.g., writing). The second section refers to his general orientation. If you don't know an answer, write DK for "Do not know." This response suggests that additional information is needed.

Section 1: A Particular Activity or Task

The activity or task: _____

1. Is the task enjoyable? Rating _____
2. Is the content interesting? Rating _____
3. Do I have the ability to succeed if I make a reasonable effort? Rating _____
4. Have I had success with similar activities/tasks? Rating _____
5. Is the subject matter important? Rating _____
6. Am I likely to succeed in the near future? Rating _____
7. Will my efforts produce desirable outcomes? Rating _____
8. Will I get whatever support I need to achieve success? Rating _____
9. Will I will be positively reinforced for my efforts? Rating _____
10. Will I be positively reinforced for whatever success I have? Rating _____
11. Are the reinforcers worth my effort and achievement? Rating _____
12. Will reinforcement quickly follow success? Rating _____
13. Are there immediately available activities/tasks
I find more attractive or reinforcing? Rating _____
14. Is success important to achieving any long or
short range goal(s) I have? Rating _____
15. Will the amount of effort I invest help me achieve
my long or short range goals? Rating _____

Section 2: The Student's General Orientation

16. Are my efforts responsible for the positive things that happen to me? Rating _____

17. Do my peers value school success? Rating _____

18. Is it important that I please other people, like my teachers, parents, and peers? Rating _____

19. Do I have important long range goals? Rating _____

20. Do I have important short range goals? Rating _____

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