Introduction

In my nine years of teaching, I have tried to reach several unmotivated students in my classes. They have all possessed the ability to earn better grades. I have become frustrated trying to get them to understand the importance of education. I decided to research motivation because I desperately wanted to find some motivational strategies that might help me reach the unmotivated students in my classroom. I discovered four main areas, which will help me in my classroom.

First, I learned that there are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation comes from within a person. It cannot be forced, but there are ways to increase it. Extrinsic motivation comes from rewards. Although not all extrinsic motivation is bad, rewards can decrease already existing intrinsic motivation.

Then, I researched the difference between a mastery-approach and a performance-approach. A mastery-approach allows students to correct their work until it is mastered. Students tend to feel less threatened in a mastery environment because they are in control of their own learning. With a performance approach, students feel that they are in competition with others. Obviously students tend to prefer the mastery-approach.

Next, I discovered that teacher motivation has an impact on student motivation. How can a teacher expect her students to be motivated if they do not reflect that they are motivated to teach? There are strategies that teachers can use to increase their own motivation. This leads to an increase in student motivation.

Finally, I found some general classroom strategies that teachers can incorporate into their classrooms to increase the motivation of their students. Some of these
strategies include create a safe learning environment, relating the material to the interests of the students, and allowing the students to have fun while they are learning.

Intrinsic Motivation vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is the satisfying internal feeling a person has after completing a task. The accomplishment of the task alone is the reward (Tucker-Lad, 2004). Many researchers seek ways to increase intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, tends to originate from a source outside a person. It is the result of a reward offered for completing an assignment. Students who are extrinsically motivated will typically only complete an assignment if offered a reward or bribe upon completion. Many researchers feel that extrinsic motivation negatively affects students. Extrinsic motivation can produce some unexpected negative behaviors. According to Tucker-Lad (2004, ¶26), “When children are “offered” a reward for reading, they tend to choose the easiest and shortest books, not the most interesting, informative, or provocative.” If the child receives the reward regardless of his book choice, then he will continue to choose the least challenging option to gain the reward. When the reward is taken away, then the desired behavior becomes less likely to occur (Tucker-Lad, 2004). They can even decrease existing intrinsic motivation (Poonam, 1997).

Rewards can also reinforce the unwanted behaviors and increase the likelihood of having them occur again in the future (Tucker-Lad, 2004). Some parents give their children a bribe just to keep them quiet in public. The child quickly learns that if they want a piece of candy, then they just need to throw a tantrum in public. Parents avoid public embarrassment, but they reinforce the unwanted behavior of their child.
However, not all extrinsic rewards are ineffective (Tucker-Lad, 2004). The fact is, many students do not find school satisfying. They have become frustrated by the time they reach high school. For some, extrinsic motivation is necessary in order to keep them in school.

Rewards, if used wisely, can be an effective way to achieve a desirable behavior. Teachers can use rewards to increase motivation in their classroom. According to Huitt (2001, ¶28), teachers can take the following actions: “provide clear expectations, give corrective feedback, provide valuable rewards, and make rewards available.”

Many teachers are not willing to offer rewards for expected behaviors. They would like to have students who enjoy coming to class simply for the satisfaction they gain from learning, not because they are getting a reward (Cook, 2003). Teachers cannot just create a classroom rule that requires all students must be intrinsically motivated (McKinney, 2004). Fortunately, there are several strategies teachers can use in their classrooms that may increase the intrinsic motivation of the students in their classroom.

Poonam (1997) offers six strategies to improve the intrinsic motivation of students in the classroom. First, teachers should involve their students in their own learning (Poonam, 1997). Many teachers have provided data folders for their students. Grade sheets can be kept in the data folders. With the use of grade sheets, students know where they stand on a daily basis.

Next, teachers should focus on being positive in their classrooms (Poonam, 1997). They should also use praise instead of reprimands when possible (Poonam, 1997). When teachers are able to create a safe learning environment, students feel more comfortable
participating in class discussions. Students build their self-esteem, which leads to an increase in intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation also increases in a mastery-learning environment (Poonam, 1997). If students are given the opportunity to correct their work, they retain more of the information. They do not feel like they have to compete with the other students in the class. They realize that each student has an equal opportunity to learn. They feel less threatened when the competition is eliminated from the picture. They are more willing to tackle challenging problems. Students feel better about themselves after they complete a difficult assignment.

Challenging assignments are even more likely to hold the students’ interest in the class (Poonam, 1997). Teachers do need to be reminded of the ability levels of their students. Although they may be willing to tackle a challenge, they may become frustrated if the task is beyond their capabilities.

Poonam (1997) finally suggested that teachers evaluate each individual assignment. Teachers should resist the temptation to compare the students to one another. They should encourage every student to try their best.

McKinney (2004) offered nine additional strategies for improving intrinsic motivation. She suggested that teachers research the backgrounds of the students in their classroom. Once teachers have an understanding of the ability levels of their students, they can adjust their lessons to fit the needs of the students. It is not necessary to “dummy down” the class (McKinney, 2004). Instead, teachers should provide frequent feedback as well as take more than one day to cover more difficult material (McKinney,
2004). This will enable teachers to create an environment in which students can be successful.

While researching background information about their students, teachers also need to discover the interests of the students. Teachers need to understand that the students come to school from diverse backgrounds (McKinney, 2004). They should try to incorporate the interests of the students into the classroom discussions (McKinney, 2004). They can even peak student interest by incorporating the names of the students in the classroom examples or problems on the test.

Next, teachers should talk to their students about motivation. Teachers need to acknowledge the impact grades have on their students. However, grades should not be what teachers emphasize in their classrooms (McKinney, 2004). Instead, teachers should stress that learning is most important. According to McKinney (2004, ¶9), teachers should “use more global grading schemes, grading rubrics, performance grading and criterion/mastery grading.” These tips may reduce the stress of the students.

Then, teachers can increase motivation by meeting the individual needs of the students in the class. In order to do this, students need to understand how they learn best. Even by the time students reach high school, they may not be aware of their individual learning styles. They should be encouraged to keep a learning journal (McKinney, 2004). They can use this to understand how they learn best.

Once the students understand what they need, they should be given some choices in the classroom to help meet these needs (McKinney, 2004). Teachers should gain input from the students on the final version of the classroom rules. Students are more likely to
take ownership of the rules. The students may even offer input on the format of the final exam (McKinney, 2004).

Huit (2001) offered even more strategies to improve intrinsic motivation. Teachers should tell the students why they are studying a particular topic (Huit, 2001). Some students do not believe that they may actually need information in the future. If the students can find relevance in what they are learning, then they are more likely to show interest in the topic. They may even become more curious about the course.

Teachers can encourage the curiosity by including variety in their lessons (Huit, 2001). They can even incorporate games into their instruction (Huit, 2001). If the students find the class fun and exciting, then they are more likely to be engaged in the class. They are more likely to retain the information.

Teachers need to take advantage of the strategies to improve the intrinsic motivation of the students in their classroom. Although extrinsic motivation is not bad, teachers should focus on increasing the intrinsic motivation. If students can learn to appreciate learning without rewards, then they can apply their skills to the rest of their lives. According to Lumsden (1994, ¶28), “Because of the potential payoff – having students who value learning for its own sake – it is priceless, it is crucial for parents, teachers, and school leaders to devote themselves fully to engendering, maintaining, and rekindling students’ motivation to learn.”

Mastery Goals vs. Performance Goals

Unfortunately, many teachers feel that they cannot improve their students’ motivation to learn. They feel that students either come to their class motivated or
unmotivated (Bong, 2004). Therefore, they believe that they are helpless in motivating their students. However, research indicates that teachers can do several things to improve their students’ motivation. Simply understanding the difference between a mastery approach and a performance approach in the classroom can help teachers.

With a mastery approach, students are given the opportunity to work on a task until they have an understanding of the material. A grade is assigned based upon mastery of the assignment. Students are not just given one attempt to prove their knowledge.

Students tend to have higher self-esteem when they view their classroom as mastery oriented. They feel that the completion of the task is dependent upon effort (Ames & Archer, 1988). They do not feel the stress of having to compete with the other students in the class. They believe that as long as they continue to try, they will eventually conquer the task.

According to Ames & Archer (1988), “perceived mastery goal orientation was strongly related to a tendency for students to credit the teacher when they performed well and not blame the teacher when they performed poorly” (p. 263). In today’s society it is especially important for students to accept responsibility for themselves. Today, too many people are quick to blame others for their own mistakes.

Not only do these students accept responsibility for their own learning, they do not shy away from challenging tasks (Ames & Archer, 1988). They want to strive to gain more knowledge (Wolters, 2004). They possess the self-confidence, which enables them to try tasks they may have shied away from in the past. They become excited about learning.
Since they are excited about learning, they tend to procrastinate less if they perceive their classroom as valuing the mastery approach (Ames & Archer, 1988). Many math students are eager to get started on their homework at the end of class. They are not embarrassed to ask the teacher questions when they do not understand. The mastery approach “de-emphasizes the negative consequences of making errors,” (Ames & Archer, 1988, p.261). They do not feel that they are in competition with the other students in the class.

Some students have even learned to enjoy math so much that they claimed that they would take more classes (Wolthers, 2004). This is especially important in Ohio. Students are required to complete three math classes in order to graduate. Many students are dragging their feet by the time they reach their third math class.

These students are typically the ones who perceive their classroom as having performance goals. In a performance-approach classroom, students are given one opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of the material to the teacher. This means that if a student just happens to be having a bad day on test day, then his grade will not reflect his true understanding of the material. The student may even know the material, but fail to perform well when faced with pressure. If the student is not successful on test day, then his grade will reflect that.

Students in a performance-approach classroom attribute their failure to a lack of ability (Ames & Archer, 1988). They compare themselves to the students who are successful. These students believe that they are not as good as the successful students. They feel that if their grades are low, then that means that they just are not smart enough.
They tend to have low self-esteem as a result of repeated failure. By the time these students reach high school, they have lost their motivation.

Due to their lack of motivation, they are not as excited about getting started on their homework in class. They will put off doing their homework as long as possible (Wolthers, 2004). They shy away from asking the teacher for help. They are afraid of being perceived as dumb by the successful students in the class. These students may even create excuses to avoid doing the work. They may tell the teacher that a parent requires them to complete their homework at home. Understandably, they tend to distance themselves from the classroom activities, and may even appear bored in class (Wolthers, 2004).

However, a performance-approach classroom could produce a completely different type of student. The performance-approach encourages competition. Some students thrive on competition. They feel that they can prove their self-worth to others if they perform well (Wolthers, 2004). They believe that if they can earn a better grade than the other students, then that makes them the better person. These students can cause others to feel even worse about themselves.

Teachers might consider giving a questionnaire to their students in order to get a better understanding of how the students perceive their classroom (Beghetto, 2004). Students should take the questionnaire anonymously in order to gain more truthful responses from the students (Beghetto, 2004). According to Beghetto (2004, ¶19), some sample items on the questionnaire might include,

-Making mistakes is part of learning
- I want to learn as much as possible from this science experiment
- It’s important that I keep trying, even if I make mistakes
- I just want to avoid doing poorly in this class
- When I don’t understand my math assignment, I often guess instead of asking someone for help
- I am afraid if I ask questions I will look “dumb”

This questionnaire will allow teachers to see if students see their classroom as having a mastery-approach or a performance approach.

Students with mastery goals tend to outperform the students with performance goals (Huitt, 2001). They tend to have higher self-esteem. They are even more willing to accept challenging tasks. However, in order to be successful in life, a balance of the two is necessary (Huitt, 2001).

Teacher Motivation

According to the Oregon School Board Association (2003, ¶3), “A motivated teacher, as described here, is one who not only feels satisfied with his or her job, but also is empowered to strive for excellence and growth in instructional practice.” A motivated teacher never stops learning. How can teachers expect their students to be motivated and want to learn if they do not model the behavior?

Student motivation is directly connected to teacher motivation. If teachers are not motivated, then their students will model that same attitude (Zapini, 2003). However, some high school teachers will claim that the reverse is true. A decline in student motivation has caused teachers to lose motivation (Zampini, 2003). Teachers and
students can continue to pass the blame, or someone can step up and try to correct the situation.

Researchers have offered several motivational strategies for teachers to improve their own motivation. Teachers can use the strategies to become reenergized. Then, they can model the proper behavior for their students. They might be pleasantly surprised with the results.

First, merit pay became popular for a while (Oregon School Board Association, 2003). The idea was originally believed to increase the extrinsic motivation of teachers (Oregon School Board Association, 2003). It was believed that offering teachers rewards would increase motivation. However, it did not prove to be the solution to teacher motivation (Oregon School Board Association, 2003).

Instead, discovering what teachers value, and using that will increase motivation (Oregon School Board Association, 2003). Teachers appreciate the rewards that make them feel good inside such as respect (Oregon School Board Association, 2003). These rewards increase intrinsic motivation, which is longer lasting than extrinsic motivation.

Teachers can only expect to get back from their students what they model. If teachers are not intrinsically motivated, then they should not expect their students to be (Haberman, 2004). If teachers do not enjoy learning, then they cannot expect that from their students (Haberman, 2004). If teachers do not enjoy their jobs, then they can expect to produce students who do not enjoy education (Czubaj, 1996). On the other hand, if teachers are motivated, enjoy learning and enjoy what they do, then they will see the same behavior come out of their students.
According to Haberman (2004), “Students will model behavior of teachers they respect” (p.52). Teachers should never put their students down, especially in front of a class full of their peers. Teachers who earn the respect of their students listen, are non-judgmental, and try to understand their students (Haberman, 2004).

Respected teachers tend to have less discipline problems than non-respected teachers. Students will pay attention to the teachers they respect. If teachers have to spend most of their class time with discipline, then the teachers as well as the students become frustrated. Neither group can get the optimal classroom experience. This has a direct impact on teacher motivation as well as student motivation (Zampini, 2003).

Teachers can also stay motivated by building a big support system around themselves. It is difficult for teachers to stay motivated if they feel like they are alone (Haberman, 2004). This is especially important for teachers at the beginning of their careers. Beginning teachers need to find at least one other teacher to talk to. They need to share their accomplishments as well as their frustrations. They may even get suggestions from veteran teachers who have been in their situation.

Simply by talking to someone about their frustrations, teachers can reduce their stress. It is important for teachers to keep their stress levels low in order to maintain motivation (Czubaj, 1996). Reducing stress also helps to prevent teacher burnout (Czubaj, 1996). The training program R.E.A.D. exists for this purpose (Czubaj, 1996). According to Czubaj (1996, ¶3). R.E.A.D. is an acronym that stands for “deep relaxation, regular exercise, attitude and awareness, and diet.”
According to Romo (1997, ¶14), “Improving school starts when we improve our classrooms.” Teachers are in control of their classrooms. Students look up to and model their teachers. If teachers are motivated and enjoy being in school, then students are more likely to do the same.

### Classroom Strategies for Motivation

Teachers often claim that their students are not motivated. However, all students are motivated (Lavoie, 2002). They just may not be motivated to do what the teachers want. There is not a magical formula to motivate students. Students are individuals. Therefore, they are not all motivated in the same way (Davis, 1993).

Since every student is motivated differently, it is imperative that teachers take the time to talk to their students at the beginning of the school year. Teachers need to understand why each student is in their classroom (Davis, 1999). They also need to find out what the students expect to get out of the class (Luce, 2004).

Not only do teachers need to have a clear understanding of their students’ expectations for the year, they also need to reduce the anxiety of their students. They can do this by telling their students exactly what they need to do in order to succeed in the course (Davis, 1993). Uncertainty produces anxiety. If teachers reduce the anxiety level, the students will be motivated to do what is necessary to succeed.

Not only do students need to know how they can succeed, they also need to have the opportunity to succeed (Davis, 1993). This is especially important at the beginning of the year (Davis, 1993). Many students are merely trying not to embarrass themselves in front of the class. According to Dembo (2004), “the goal of many students in a given
classroom is to avoid failure, not attempt to succeed” (p.41). Once the students feel confident, then the teachers can gradually increase the difficulty level to challenge their students (Davis, 1993).

Students also learn by doing. If possible, teachers should break up the monotony of the day by using a variety of classroom activities (Davis, 1993). The less time that is spent on lecture, the more time the students are engaged, the better off the teachers and students will be (Berg, 2001).

Teachers can incorporate several strategies to help with motivation in their classrooms. They can model the behavior they expect from the students. They can specifically explain the steps for success in their classrooms. They can even vary the routine in their classrooms. However, teachers must keep in mind that students are individuals. What works for one student will not necessarily work for another.

Summary

Several factors influence the motivation of students in the classroom. Many of these influences are outside the control of a classroom teacher. Teachers can incorporate motivational strategies in their classrooms to try to help solve this problem.

Although intrinsic motivation comes from within, teachers can try to increase it. They can make the students feel like they have some input in the classroom. This helps the students take ownership of their classroom.

I used to pass out my classroom rules on the first day of school. I felt that it helped to set the tone for the school year. Recently, I have been waiting to pass out my rules until I gathered input from my students. Usually they come up with the same rules
that I have had in the past. However, they are more likely to follow rules if they feel that they were the ones who created them.

I have also started putting a plus/delta on the back of every quiz. The students have the opportunity to write down anything they enjoy in the class. They can also write down any areas they see a need for improvement. I have made several changes in my classroom as a result of student suggestions.

Although I currently have a performance-approach atmosphere in my classroom, I will be looking into incorporating some mastery-approach aspects in my classroom. I was skeptical about the mastery-approach when I first started doing my research. However, the research is powerful. I would like to see my students’ self-esteem increase as a result of being in my classroom. By the time many students make it to my classroom, they feel like they are stupid. They have been unsuccessful in their previous math classes. The research indicates that the mastery-approach can increase students’ self-esteem, increases students’ interest in the subject and decreases procrastination.

I also agree that teacher motivation has an impact on student motivation. I have tried to convey to my students that I enjoy my job as well as the subject that I teach. I even have a wonderful group of colleagues who I can turn to when I need support. I probably would not be teaching, or at least enjoy teaching, if it were not for my colleagues.

Finally, I believe that teachers can use several strategies to motivate their students. They must realize that a magical motivation formula does not exist. They must continue to try until they find a mix that works.
Writing this paper has caused me to reflect on my own teaching as well as what I allow to go on in my classroom. I have already made some changes in my classroom. However, I have plans to make many more.
References


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