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STUDENTS' MOTIVATION

Educational psychology has identified two basic classifications of motivation - intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation arises from a desire to learn a topic due to its inherent interests, for self-fulfillment, enjoyment and to achieve a mastery of the subject. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is motivation to perform and succeed for the sake of accomplishing a specific result or outcome. Students who are very grade-oriented are extrinsically motivated, whereas students who seem to truly embrace their work and take a genuine interest in it are intrinsically motivated.

Motivation towards learning is undoubtedly one of the key aspects of students learning, and it is also a source of important differences between students (Alderman, 2008; Slavin, 2006). Yet, whereas differences in ability between students are almost taken for granted, differences in motivation are subject to extensive debate and discussion. Indeed, many teachers reported that teaching poorly motivated students was a major source of stress for them in their work as teachers (Kyriacou, 2000). The notion that the vast majority of students 'could do better' is probably the most widely used in teaching.

Differences between students in their academic motivation are a reflection of a number of influences, ranging from experiences in their upbringing to their experiences of success and failure at academic tasks and activities in school. The role of the home and parental encouragement is widely acknowledged to be of major importance in influencing the level of students' academic motivation, although the relationship is a complex one, as many parents of 'unmotivated' students can testify. Studies of child rearing practices have highlighted how such pupil motivation to do well at school can be fostered by parents through developing the child's self-confidence regarding their own capabilities as individuals, and praising them whenever they have undertaken tasks successfully (Smith, 2003). This also reinforces the child's belief that doing things well is valued. Many parents also help their

children prepare for school in the pre-school years by engaging them in school-related tasks, and also by helping them with school work once they have started school. All this means that some pupils find the demands of school in the early years less of a culture shock, and are also better able to concentrate on the academic tasks demanded in school and to complete these successfully. In contrast, some pupils from homes where there was less opportunity to develop proschool attitudes and values and to engage in school-type work, may well find school an alien place at first, and fail to adapt and thrive as quickly as other pupils. For these pupils, a vicious circle can develop if early failures are allowed to engender lower motivation, as this can soon result in gross underachievement in school. Such differences in upbringing vary from home to home, but those characteristics linked with higher levels of pupil motivation do seem to be more prevalent in middle-class homes than in working-class homes.

Differences between pupils in their self-confidence and perseverance, and in their attitudes regarding the importance of school attainment, are evident from the early years of schooling, and as a result teachers do try to take care to make the early years of school as pupil-friendly as possible. This helps to limit the possibility of such a vicious circle of underachievement developing in this first phase of schooling for those children less well prepared to cope with the demands of school life.

Another aspect of the influence of the home stems from the tendency for students to identify with and take on the aspirations of their parents. To the extent that becoming like their parents (or living up to their parents' aspirations) in lifestyle and occupation may require educational success, such students may be prepared to make great efforts at school to succeed. This is most noticeable in the learning strategies pupils are prepared to adopt to be successful. For example, countless students have used rote learning or memorise information or techniques, without understanding what the learning addresses. This strategy of reproducing what the teacher or examiner wants, even if they do not understand the material, is often used by highly motivated students who are keen to gain high-attainment grades. In contrast, poorly motivated students are likely to complain or simply not do the work

if they do not understand or see the importance and relevance of the learning tasks in hand.

Teachers' concern about poor motivation in students, however, is not just restricted to a small, relatively low-attaining group of students. Rather, it is a concern about the vast majority of students. Teachers themselves are aware that the compliance towards learning of many students (across the whole range of ability) lacks that quality of intellectual involvement and excitement about academic work that is the hallmark of the highest quality of educational progress. Teachers often contrast the attitude of most students with the enthusiasm that adult learners bring to a subject during evening classes. For teachers, improving pupil motivation reflects a concern to develop and foster a more positive and enthusiastic approach to their studies, involving a degree of autonomy, independence and self-generated activity. The task of increasing pupil motivation does not only relate to pupils alienated from school work altogether.

Increasing students' motivation depends on giving them more control over their learning, fostering greater self-confidence and increasing the perceived relevance and interest of the academic work undertaken. It is quite crucial, however, that the teacher is skilled in identifying the source of a particular student's low motivation. Underlying a student's low motivation may be a lack of understanding, poor self-confidence, reluctance to apply the required mental effort, or fear of failure. The teacher thus needs to diagnose the problem carefully before deciding on how best to give remedial attention to deal with this effectively.

The interplay between students' and teachers' expectations of each other and how this influences student motivation is a complex one. Teachers clearly need to have expectations, since expectations are crucial to their ability to match the learning experience to students. What is problematic is that such expectations inevitably reflect students' previous attainment, rather than what they may be capable of producing if fully motivated. For students with low motivation and low levels of attainment, it is easy for teachers to increasingly expect less and less from them. As such, teachers need to retain a stance of being positive and encouraging in their

expectations in order to combat such slippage. The problem also applies to teaching very able students, where it is easy to accept consistently good work when a very able child is capable of even better, and for whom 'good' work may reflect marked underachievement. Again, it requires determination from the teacher to sustain a demand for higher level work from very able students, when both they and the teacher know the work produced is well above that being produced by other students.

It is also of prime importance in fostering student motivation that the teacher maintains a stance of conveying the view, through their actions and expectations, that academic work is interesting, worthwhile and of value, and that the progress of each student really does matter. If a teacher's actions convey this is not the case, this can rapidly undermine students' efforts.

Students differ not only in their overall level of motivation, but also in the underlying make up of that motivation. In particular, students differ in the extent to which they are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. Whilst all students will respond to some extent to both intrinsic motives (e.g. making the learning interesting and eliciting curiosity) and extrinsic motives (e.g. merit awards for good work and praise from parents), some students appear to be more responsive to some aspects of the learning experience than to others. For example, some students seem to thrive in a more task-oriented classroom climate, whereas for others a warm and friendly relationship with the teacher acts as the main basis for enhancing their motivation. In addition, students differ in their personality in terms of a number of characteristics. One personality dimension that has been well researched is that of 'introversion - extraversion' (being inward-looking and reserved versus being outgoing and sociable). Another important dimension is that of 'locus of control' (a generalised belief that things in life are to a large extent within one's own control versus a view that they are largely outside it). Although the relationship between a student's personality and what will best foster their motivation and educational progress is a complex one, these do seem to play an important part in explaining why some students seem to thrive more in one class or with one teacher than do other students. In part this may reflect the extent to which the pupil feels able to establish a

comfortable rapport with the teacher, and in part it may reflect how they respond to the teacher's working style and expectations.

Research by Dweck (2002) has also indicated how students make a distinction between learning goals (based on wanting to learn about the material being studied) and performance goals (based on wanting to perform well in tests and examinations). Dweck (2002) has noted that teaching strategies that are effective in motivating students who are learning-oriented may be different from those strategies that are effective in motivating students who are performance-oriented. Moreover, Dweck argues that the picture is also complicated by whether students hold a belief that, in a given academic situation, success will largely depend on their level of ability or whether it will largely depend on their level of effort. Research by Bandura (1997) and Covington (1998) has highlighted how students' self-attributions and self-efficacy beliefs concerning the reasons for their success or failure in a given academic task can also influence how much motivation they are prepared to exert in the future. In addition, a student's academic self-concept is also influenced by their social context and social frame of reference. This is well illustrated by the work of Marsh (2007) on the 'big - fish - little - pond effect' whereby a student's academic self-concept tends to be higher if they are doing better than other students in their class/school, than it is when they are doing less well than their peers but placed in a social context comprising higher ability students.

Thus, few things are more important in educating a child than motivation. Teachers must be motivated to teach well. Students must be motivated to learn. In the early years of education, motivation comes easy. Children are naturally inclined to be curious and enthusiastic about learning new things.

While some students keep their natural enthusiasm for learning, and are often labeled geeks and ridiculed, most students' interests shift to socializing and status. Many parents and educators panic when faced with the task of motivating students. Panic leads to less than wise tactics. I have seen money being offered for grades, by schools and parents. I have seen cell phones and other privileges given for good grades. While this may work in the short term, it is my concern that until students

understand what a privilege education is, they will never truly be motivated. Motivation needs to come from the heart.

References

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