What Is Motivation and Why Does It Matter So Much?

Instead of asking “How can I motivate students?” a better question would be, “In what ways is the brain naturally motivated from within?”

—Eric Jensen, Completing the Puzzle

Most of us were trained to teach to the cognitive system of the brain. We stand before our classes to provide access to this world of knowledge for our students. Why, then, aren’t they motivated to learn? After all, isn’t cognitive knowledge what students must acquire to master standards,
to pass state and national exams, and to be successful in school? All learning begins not in the cognitive system, but in the self-system. It happens with or without our input, but we are more likely that our students will be motivated to learn and to complete tasks when we are directly involved in the learning process from the beginning. Marzano (2001) says, “Once the self-system has determined what will be attended to, the functioning of all other elements of thought (i.e., the metacognitive system, the cognitive system, and the knowledge domains) are, to a certain extent, dedicated or determined.” In this chapter, we will examine motivation and why it is crucial to learning and remembering.

Motivation relates to the drive to do something. Motivation causes us to get up in the morning and go to work. Motivation drives us to study new things, and motivation encourages us to try again when we fail. Just as there are times when you or I feel more or less motivated to do something, the same is true for our students. Think about the last time that you had to learn something that was either difficult or for which you had little personal interest. What motivated you to complete the task? When the task became difficult or when you experienced a roadblock, what caused you to complete the task?

We cannot be motivated for our students; that is something they must find for themselves. What we can do is directly teach them skills that will help them to begin a task with energy and to complete it even when it becomes difficult. Many students today have not been taught those skills. If you teach inner-city students and students from poverty, then you may teach students who have acquired responses to learning that work against the self-system of the brain. Motivation to pay attention to the learning, to begin a task, and to complete it are an innate part of the self-system and metacognitive system of the brain, and they can be activated through tactics used by the classroom teacher.
WHAT IS THE BIG DEAL ABOUT INTRINSIC MOTIVATION?

As teachers, our goal is to guide students to use the innate drive that we all have for intrinsic motivation. Often, students who have been given external rewards—such as money, food, or stickers—for desired behavior will have less drive to do something just for the joy of doing it. Teachers can change that behavior by changing teaching tactics and by gradually weaning students from external rewards to celebrations of the learning.

As teachers, there are a variety of approaches that we can take to enhance motivation on the days that our students are feeling less motivated. Before we can create a viable plan for activating the systems of thinking in our students, it is important to understand the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is the drive that comes from within; students do something for the sheer joy of doing it or because they want to discover something, answer a question, or experience the feeling of self-accomplishment.

Based on the experiences that our students bring with them to the classroom, they may or may not be intrinsically motivated. Students who grow up in an environment in which they do only those things for which they receive a tangible reward will be less intrinsically motivated. For those students, it will be more difficult to break the pattern of rewards for work—but this break can be accomplished with the patience and consistency of the classroom teachers involved. Brain researchers say that we are born with the tendency toward intrinsic motivation—watch a two-year-old explore the world and you will see what I mean. However, over time, if students are constantly promised rewards if they will be quiet, clean their rooms, make good grades, and so forth, they may have learned to disregard that natural intrinsic motivation in favor of tangible rewards. With inner-city students or students from poverty, the natural intrinsic motivation with which they were born may have been
extinguished early in life from being with caregivers who believe that they have no control over their lives. Because they believe locus of control comes from outside sources, sources beyond their control, they may have learned early on to look to outside rewards for motivation.

Intrinsic motivation comes from within—specifically from the self- and metacognitive systems. When these systems are activated positively, students work hard for their own satisfaction in learning and doing well. The perceived value of tasks is paramount to intrinsic motivation. According to Marzano (1992), “A growing body of research indicates that when students are working on goals they themselves have set, they are more motivated and efficient, and they achieve more than they do when working to meet goals set by the teacher.” Both the self-system and the metacognitive systems of the brain are built around those characteristics that lend themselves to intrinsic motivation. For example, the self-system is guided by self-concept and self-efficacy and the belief that one can achieve. The metacognitive system is built around personal goal setting and follow-through, which happen without outside rewards.

**What Is Extrinsic Motivation?**

Extrinsic motivation is motivation that comes about because of the promise of a tangible, marketable reward. It is the desire to do something because of the promise of or hope for a tangible result. Extrinsic motivation is a product of the behaviorist point of view, which says that we can manipulate behavior by providing rewards and/or punishments. The father of this movement is generally thought to be B. F. Skinner, who conducted many experiments in which he provided rewards for desired behavior and punishments for undesired behavior (or the absence of desired behavior). Before his death, Skinner himself said that it was foolish to think that human beings would react the same as other experimental animals. Caine and Caine (1997) add,
Behaviorism, particularly as incorporated into schools, is largely based on rewards and punishment; but these are extremely complex, not simple. A smiley sticker is not just a single reward of a single act. The use of a sticker may well influence the formation of expectations, preferences, and habits having impact far beyond any single event. Thus, a single teacher behavior may have vast, but initially invisible, consequences. One of many problems with the behaviorist approach is that it does not provide for a way to acknowledge those consequences.

**WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REWARDS AND CELEBRATIONS?**

Extrinsic motivation is triggered by outside sources, rather than from within. These outside forces may come in the form of a reward, such as candy, money, or stickers. Extrinsic motivation may also be a hug or pat on the back. There is nothing wrong with extrinsic motivation itself: We all work for paychecks and for recognition, for example. The problem with extrinsic rewards comes when it is the only or primary factor in motivating students to learn. One of the ways that we can distinguish between positive and negative forms of extrinsic motivation is to distinguish between *rewards* and *celebrations*. Working only for rewards can be detrimental to learning, while celebrations can have a very positive effect on the learning.

In order to be classified as a reward, two characteristics will be present: It will have commercial value and will be expected. For example, a teacher who tells her students that she will give them candy if everyone finishes their work on time is offering a reward. The students know the candy is coming if they finish their work (it is expected) and candy has commercial value. If students do well on their assignment and the teacher gives them candy, this is not considered a reward but rather a celebration, because the students did not know in...
advance that they were going to get the candy. In other words, they did not do the work for candy; the candy was an unexpected outcome.

This is an important distinction. Alfie Kohn (1993), in his book *Punished by Rewards*, questioned the effects of rewards on motivation, saying that rewards actually help destroy intrinsic motivation. Others have said that the rewards must escalate with the child. An elementary-aged child might do the work for stickers, but by middle school she may want money or pizza. Then by high school, what do we give her—a car?

Of course, we all do some things for rewards; most of us work for a paycheck, which we know that we are getting and which has commercial value. Students work for grades as well. The point is that we want to get students to learn because learning is fun and because it helps them to achieve—not just because they will receive an external reward.

Students who have been raised on a reward system will not immediately rely on intrinsic motivation alone. Begin with extrinsic rewards, and gradually wean them off of them by skipping a reward one time, then twice, and so forth. Make the learning fun and interesting so that students want to know the information and to discover new things.

Students from poverty are often directed toward extrinsic rewards for many of the positive things that they do, so you will need patience and time to move them gradually from rewards to becoming self-motivated to learn. To move students away from expected extrinsic rewards, use extrinsic incentives, such as celebrations, in the classroom often. Celebrate the learning with high fives, cheers, and words of praise.

The use of extrinsic motivation usually begins at a young age with a system of rewards and punishments for desired behavior or completed tasks (e.g., “If you clean your room, you may watch television for an extra hour”). When the child comes to school, this learned behavior is often reinforced in the classroom. Teachers who constantly give students candy,
stickers, or other prizes for good work or behavior are reinforcing the idea that we should only work for tangible rewards.

Extrinsic motivation is closely related to a reward system. For example, a teacher might tell the class that everyone who does well on the daily test will be given a prize; students may then work harder than they normally would because the promise of a reward is offered. Parents sometimes offer their students money for good grades, and teachers may offer students free time for good behavior. All of these are examples of extrinsic motivation and are at the heart of an ongoing controversy about the effects of extrinsic rewards on the brain.

Some researchers say that the constant use of extrinsic motivators actually diminishes our internal drive, our intrinsic motivation. The overuse of rewards is a form of control. Caine and Caine (1997) state,

When rewards and punishments are controlled by others, most children are influenced to look to others for direction and answers. In fact, we now seem to have an entire generation working for the grade or rewards of an immediate and tangible nature. One consequence is that they are literally demotivated in many respects. In particular, their innate search for meaning is short-circuited.

Jensen (1997) adds,

The human brain, when motivated by reward systems, operates differently than it does when motivated intrinsically. The anxiety triggered under the reward system releases neurotransmitters, which can inhibit creativity, problem solving and recall. Rewards are manipulative—part of the old school of behaviorism; and do more harm than good in the long run.

For students who are at risk or who are underachievers, the consequences of a reliance on external motivation may be
lifelong, and they may not ever fully utilize the natural intrinsic motivation controlled by the self- and metacognitive systems.

While rewards have been generally rejected as a classroom tool, there is a question of what actually constitutes a reward, and what is, rather, an incentive. As noted above, rewards are thought of as anything that has market value and is expected. Examples of common rewards include

1. A promise of candy if students turn their work in on time.
2. The offering of an eraser if a student will behave well in class.
3. The regular gift of a sticker to students who offer correct answers on a test.

Extrinsic incentives, unlike rewards, have no material value. Examples of incentives include

1. Free time for work well done.
2. Grades for quality work.
3. Pats on the back, thumbs up, and words of praise for good work or behavior.

Look at the following scenarios and determine if the motivation is a reward or a celebration:

1. Mrs. Matthews tells her students that, if they all do well on the spelling test, they will have pizza the next day.
2. Mrs. Matthews’ students all did a great job on the paper drive for the school and she surprises them with a pizza party.

In the first scenario, Mrs. Matthews has told her students in advance that she will reward them if they all do well: The
The receipt of the pizza is predictable and the pizza itself has market value. In the second scenario, pizza has market value, but the students did not know that they would receive pizza for doing a good job—so this is an example of a celebration. Thus, in the first scenario, the teacher is using a reward for motivation, whereas in the second scenario, the students did well on their own (i.e., through intrinsic motivation) and the pizza is a celebration.

The chart in Form 1.1 may be helpful as you determine whether or not you are relying on rewards for motivation.

**Form 1.1 Reward or Celebration?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation Tool</th>
<th>Reward (Has market value and is expected)</th>
<th>Celebration (May have market value or be expected, but not both)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Promise of prizes if students do well on state test</td>
<td>Has market value and is expected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Students given a surprise party after doing well on the state test.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Has a market value but is not expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students told that if they will behave, they will be given free time at the end of class.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Does not have market value but is expected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Student Motivation

Remember, to be a reward, the tactic must have both market value and students must know in advance that something is being offered. To be a celebration, the tactic can have either market value or expectation, but not both. It may also have neither market value nor expectations—just be a spontaneous celebration of the learning.