

Student Success: Motivating Middle School Students through Personal Development

By Linda L. Tarr

“How do I motivate my students to learn?” is the question most asked by middle school teachers. The diversity of our student population in today’s schools makes motivating students more challenging than ever. Students come to school with a plethora of cultural differences, differing belief systems, and complex issues stemming from poverty, substance abuse, and dysfunctional families. What is motivation? Motivation is what compels us to act. It is the energy that provides fuel for action.

Motivation can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation relies on effective incentives and providing direction or structure for achievement. Motivation comes from an expected external reward for a desired action or behavior. Intrinsic motivation occurs when students generate the motivation from within, discovering the satisfaction of accomplishment and taking pleasure in doing something just for the sake of doing it.

Much has already been written on extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation. The research shows that as students reach middle and high school, intrinsic motivation wanes. Extrinsic motivators lose attractiveness as students mature. A piece of candy or a star for work well-done no longer appeals to older students. Once the extrinsic motivator is removed, the impetus for the desired action disappears. (Tileston, 2004)

Extrinsic motivation is a short-term, immediate incentive designed to produce a desired outcome or behavior. However, extensive use of extrinsic motivators means sacrificing the intrinsic motivation students develop over the long term. “A reliance on outer motivational resources to accomplish the goals of education is to put at risk students’ later ability to generate their own motivation to accomplish the strivings they have for themselves.” (Reeve, 1996)

Intrinsic motivation is a natural outcome of students actively working on their personal growth and development.



Personal growth and development requires students to become self-aware through self-reflection. Students learn the skills associated with personal growth and development in the context of learning subject matter, making the subject matter more interesting. For example, in assigned reading material the teacher might ask students to identify characteristics they share with the heroine in the story. Every learning opportunity becomes an opportunity for personal growth.

What is personal development?

Personal development is the process of becoming who we aspire to be in life. In the process of personal development we learn the skills, knowledge, and aptitudes necessary to live a fulfilling, satisfying, and happy life. We give ourselves the opportunity to realize our full potential.

Focusing on personal development is a focus on student success. Schools traditionally focus on deficits; what isn't working, who isn't achieving, and who is to blame. The approach to personal growth is a positive one; it takes students beyond strategies for survival and places them squarely on the road to thriving. The process of personal development and growth is the process of seeking authenticity – the full expression of self.

“What is most needed are interventions that focus on positive self-development and a sense of agency or personal responsibility for actively participating in that self-development....Students must be able to see the self-possibilities from learning experiences – possibilities for growth and development of their unique capabilities and skills.....Students need to understand that the art of being human is to create and discover positive possibilities for their overall growth in intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual realms....Finally, they must understand that commitment to positive and responsible self-goals is a basic key to positive self-development.” (McComb, 1989)

Self-Awareness

Personal growth and development requires students to become self-aware. It is a critical dimension of self-regulation and the ability of students to relate to others (Zimmerman, 1989). Through self-awareness, students discover and appreciate their strengths and uniqueness. They learn what is important to them and what they value most. They identify their beliefs and how those beliefs help or hinder their personal growth and success. They become aware of the authentic self and learn to harness the power of the mind. The self-awareness process is a realistic



self-appraisal and involves the discovery and acceptance of all aspects of oneself (Reeve, 1996).

Middle school students are acutely aware of their differences. They mature at different rates both physically and intellectually with dramatic variations. This is the ideal age for students to begin to explore and appreciate how they think, feel, and act in a variety of situations. As students' cognitive abilities move from concrete to abstract thinking, adolescence becomes the ideal age to explore deeply how students see themselves and their place in the world.

A major tenet of intrinsic motivation is a student's perceived locus of control. Locus of control refers to a student's beliefs in his ability to control outcomes affecting him. Students living in poverty have a belief system rooted in fate and destiny; choice is seldom considered (Payne, 2001). Students believing that nothing they do makes a difference in their ability to be successful have what is termed *learned helplessness*. They give up easily, believing that bad events are random and unpredictable. In contrast, students who feel strongly that they can influence their environment are more likely to see a causal link between their behaviors and outcomes, enjoying a sense of mastery (Seligman, 1990). Teachers, who help students understand they are responsible for their own success in life, automatically empower the student. Students wanting to break the cycle of learned helplessness must first be able to identify in themselves the thinking that leads to it.

“Learning and development progress optimally when there is an active participation from the student to take personal responsibility for his or her own learning and developing” (Reeve, 1996).

Self-Concept

There is a direct tie to how students think, feel, and believe about themselves and motivation. It is the *belief* of the learner and his/her self-image (do I possess the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities to learn?) that provide the degree of motivation to learn (McComb, 1989).

Students self-evaluate and judge themselves, forming outcome expectancies of success or failure. If the evaluation is positive, the learner is motivated, viewing the task as a challenge and persevering in the face of adversity. If the evaluation is negative, the student becomes anxious and tends to avoid the task. “Internal perceptions, interpretations, and expectancies primarily determine motivation and performance” (McComb, 1989)



A student's self-concept plays a major role in the kind of help he seeks when faced with challenging work. Students with lower levels of self-esteem, in an effort to protect themselves from failure, chose less effective help strategies (McComb, 1989).

Two factors contribute to learned helplessness - the student's perception of personal control and his or her explanatory style - how they interpret the bad events in their lives. The optimistic student sees bad events as temporary and the cause of external forces. Pessimists see bad events as permanent, pervasive, and their entire fault. In other words, bad events always happen and they happen all of the time in a variety of circumstances (Seligman, 1990). These students tend to engage in strategies to avoid failure, have low self-esteem, and collapse under pressure.

Optimism is a predictor of success in school; pessimism is a predictor of failure. The good news is optimism can be learned. (Seligman, 1990) Students can learn to dispute negative thoughts and replace them with more empowering ones. They learn to self-monitor their experiences and the self-talk that accompanies those experiences.

Students' self-concept or self-worth is directly related to what they believe about themselves and the self-talk they employ.

Negative self-talk (the talk of doubt, worry, anxiety, shame and self-hate) has lasting negative consequences on a student's future. Peer approval is extremely important in middle school and "fitting in" becomes a major preoccupation. Students are quick to point out perceived inadequacies in each other. "Belief and expectation, when expressed through words, have a powerful impact on shaping character." (Bloch, 2003)

Through self-awareness students can identify their patterns of self-talk and change them to be more affirming. Positive self-talk fosters autonomy and self-responsibility while enhancing a student's self-confidence and self-esteem (Bloch, 2003). The old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me," is an obvious falsehood to adolescents in middle school. Middle school is an important time to make students aware of the damaging effects of negative comments and to help them learn ways that minimize the damage to their developing and often fragile self-esteem.

Students with a high self-concept have a strong sense of competency. Understanding their strengths and their learning styles, with ample opportunity to explore and practice their strengths brings a sense of competency.



The search for identity is one of the most defining characteristics of the middle school student. They struggle to find out who they are and where they are going in life. They want to know how they fit in with their peers while trying to understand their inner self (Knowles and Brown, 2000). Giving students the opportunity to explore their identity through the lens of strengths contributes to adolescents' sense of competency.

The new Positive Psychology professes that developing one's strengths is a factor to leading a life of well-being (Aspinwall, 2004). This is in direct contrast to the traditional focus in psychology of correcting weaknesses and curing disease. Until very recently, medicine and psychology have committed research and money to understanding and correcting disease states but have put little if any effort into understanding factors inherent in well-being. Recognizing and developing strengths is a way for students to achieve their full potential. People who focus on developing their strengths show remarkable resiliency in the face of adversity and setbacks (Aspinwall, 2004).

Self-Discipline

Self-discipline refers to self-regulation; the ability of students to set goals, delay gratification to attain a long-term goal, and develop coping skills to overcome setbacks.

Research indicates that students connecting to possibilities – a positive vision for their future and their aspirations – is one of the greatest indicators of a student's success in school (Barker, 1993) "It is the possible selves that provide the plans and strategies for the future – that put the self in action." (McComb, 1989)

Helping students connect to a vision of their future provides them with the motivation to set and achieve goals. In the process of personal development, students not only set external goals (I want to be a doctor and earn a large income), they also set personal goals (I want to be compassionate and a good listener). Connecting to a vision and setting the goals to reach it builds an emotional bridge between the self now and the who they want to become - providing strong motivation for achievement (Reeve, 1996).

Teaching students how to set long term goals and breaking them down into short term goals allows students to experience small successes. There is truth to the saying, "success breeds success." Thus begins the integrated cycle of self-awareness providing the feedback to self-monitor progress while building self-confidence and self-esteem with each new success. Students see the relevance



in everything they do today and how it relates to their growth and development for the future.

Personal development: Implications for teachers

Modeling is one of the most effective methods of teaching. Teachers who openly share areas of their personal growth and development convey the importance they place upon it. Teachers who practice what they preach validate that the practice is of value and useful. In contrast, when a teacher does not model the behavior she is trying to convey, students wonder why and are less motivated to participate (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). In order for students to embrace fully the concept of personal growth and development, it becomes imperative for teachers to embrace and practice what they teach.

Conclusion

Learning through the lens of personal development provides strong intrinsic motivation; the two are inextricably linked. Teachers need to make plain the objectives of personal development and pursue it directly with students to harness intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation becomes a natural outgrowth in the pursuit of personal growth and development. Adolescence is an ideal time to assist students in their struggle to find their identity. Through self-awareness students learn the techniques of self-appraisal and self-acceptance. They build their self-concept by identifying and minimizing disempowering beliefs and self-talk, affirming their unique qualities, and building upon their strengths. They connect to a positive vision of their future, gaining the self-discipline to pursue and attain their goals. Teachers and students are both learners in the process. With a focus on success, personal growth and development is enjoyable and satisfying, giving credence to education's goal of developing life-long learners.

To encourage intrinsic motivation, teachers can do the following:

- Provide frequent, positive, early feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well. Have students examine their own beliefs about their abilities.
- Give students opportunities to succeed. Students design their own blueprint for success and monitor their successes. Focus is on success, not failure. When they don't achieve, focus is on the learning to ensure success the next time.



- Help students find meaning in the material. Meaning can be applied to their personal growth and development. What did you learn about yourself in this exercise?
- Design an open and positive environment. Focus is on growth and success, never on lack, weakness, or failure.
- Ensure students are valued members of a learning community – everyone is valued for their own uniqueness. Students don't feel threatened by others when they feel good about themselves. Put-downs are given as a way to make a person feel bigger or better about themselves. When students are focused on what is great about them, they no longer spend as much time comparing themselves. (Davis, 1993)

For more information on student success and personal development see The Teacher's Guide to the Student Success Mindset™ or contact:

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