Beyond Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports:
Re-engaging Students in Classroom Instruction

(http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/beyondpbs.pdf)

Teachers in too many schools are confronted with too many students who have become disengaged from classroom learning. Re-engagement in classroom learning is the key to maintaining positive behavior.

One reaction to all the negative approaches to discipline has been the development of initiatives for using positive behavioral interventions and supports. For various reasons, the first such initiatives came from special education. As noted by the U.S. Department of Education:

> "Students who receive special education as a result of behavior problems must have individualized education programs that include behavior goals, objectives, and intervention plans. While current laws driving special education do not require specific procedures and plans for these students, it is recommended that their IEPs be based on functional behavioral assessments and include proactive positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBS)."

PBS encompasses a range of interventions that are implemented in a systematic manner based on a student's demonstrated level of need. It is supposed to address factors in the environment that are relevant to the causes and correction of behavior problems.

While the focus was first on special education, the initiative has expanded into school-wide applications of behavioral techniques, with an emphasis on teaching specific social skills. Here is how the U.S. Department of Education emphasizes use of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) including universal, group, and individual interventions.

> "In the past, school-wide discipline has focused mainly on reacting to specific student misbehavior by implementing punishment-based strategies including reprimands, loss of privileges, office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. Research has shown that the implementation of punishment, especially when it is used inconsistently and in the absence of other positive strategies, is ineffective. Introducing, modeling, and reinforcing positive social behavior is an important of a student's educational experience. Teaching behavioral expectations and rewarding students for following them is a much more positive approach than waiting for misbehavior to occur before responding."

> "The purpose of school-wide PBS is to establish a climate in which appropriate behavior is the norm. A major advance in school-wide discipline is the emphasis on school-wide systems of support that include proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create positive school environments. Instead of using a patchwork of individual behavioral management plans, a continuum of positive behavior support for all students within a school is implemented in areas including the classroom and nonclassroom settings (such as hallways, restrooms). ... Attention is focused on creating and sustaining primary (school-wide), secondary (classroom), and tertiary (individual) systems of support that improve lifestyle results (personal, health, social, family, work, recreation) for all children and youth by making problem behavior less effective, efficient, and relevant, and desired behavior more functional. ... All effective school-wide systems have seven major components in common a) an agreed upon and common approach to discipline, b) a positive statement of purpose, c) a small number of positively stated expectations for all students and staff, d) procedures for teaching these expectations to students, e) a continuum of procedures for encouraging displays and maintenance of these expectations, f) a continuum of procedures for discouraging displays of rule-violating behavior, and g) procedures for monitoring and evaluation the effectiveness of the discipline system on a regular and frequent basis."

Beyond Social Control: Focusing on Disengagement and Re-engagement

The move from punishment to positive approaches is a welcome one. However, too often, application of interventions focused mainly on ending misbehavior do not focus enough on a basic system failure that must be addressed if improved behavior is to be maintained. That is, they ignore the underlying motivational bases for the misbehavior and they pay too little attention to helping teachers re-engage students in classroom learning.

Students not engaged in the lessons at hand tend to pursue other activity. As teachers and other staff try to cope with that segment that is disruptive, their main concern usually is "classroom management." Currently, this is likely to emphasize providing "positive behavior supports" in and out-of-the-classroom.

While minimizing punishment, these approaches still encompass social control strategies aimed directly at stopping disruptive behavior. An often stated assumption is that stopping the behavior will make students amenable to teaching. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores the likelihood of psychological reactance and the need to restore an individual's sense of self-determination. Moreover, it belies the reality that so many students continue to manifest poor academic achievement and the staggering dropout rates in too many schools.

In most cases, the greatest consideration shouldn't be social control. What teachers need even more are ways to re-engage students who have become disengaged and resistant to standard instruction. Despite this need, strategies that have the greatest likelihood of re-engaging students in learning rarely are a prominent part of pre or in-service preparation. And, such strategies seldom are the focus of interventions applied by professionals whose role is to support teachers and students. To correct these deficiencies, we suggest that intervention thinking must move toward practices that embrace an expanded view of engagement and motivation.

Students who are intrinsically motivated to learn at school seek out opportunities and challenges and go beyond requirements. In doing so, they learn more and learn more deeply than do classmates who are extrinsically motivated. Facilitating the learning of such students is a fairly straightforward matter and fits well with school improvements that primarily emphasize enhancing instructional practices. The focus is on helping establish ways for students who are motivationally ready and able to achieve and, of course, to maintain and enhance their motivation. The process involves knowing when, how, and what to teach and also knowing when and how to structure the situation so they can learn on their own.

In contrast, students who manifest learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems may have developed extremely negative perceptions of teachers and programs. In such cases, they are not likely to be open to people and activities that look like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach are required if the youngster is even to perceive that something has changed in the situation. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made to have them (1) view the teacher and other interveners as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (2) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable. Thus, any effort to re-engage disengaged students must begin by addressing negative perceptions. School support staff and teachers must work together to reverse conditions that led to such perceptions.

Many individuals with learning problems also are described as hyperactive, distractable, impulsive, behavior disordered, and so forth. Their behavior patterns are seen as interfering with efforts to remedy their learning problems. Although motivation has always been a concern to those who work with learning and behavior problems, the emphasis in handling these interfering behaviors usually is on using extrinsics as part of efforts to directly control and/or in conjunction with direct skill instruction. For example, interventions are designed to improve impulse control, perseverence, selective and sustained attention, frustration tolerance, follow-through, and social awareness and skills. In all cases, the emphasis is on reducing or eliminating interfering behaviors, usually with the presumption that then the student will re-engage in learning. However, there is little evidence that these strategies enhance a student's motivation toward classroom learning.

Psychological scholarship over the last forty or so years has brought renewed attention to motivation as a central concept in understanding learning and attention problems. This work is just beginning to find its way into applied fields and programs. One line of theory and research has emphasized the relationship of learning and behavior problems to deficiencies in intrinsic motivation. This work clarifies the value of interventions designed to increase

- feelings of self-determination
- feelings of competence and expectations of success
- feelings of interpersonal relatedness
- the range of interests and satisfactions related to learning.

Increasing intrinsic motivation involves affecting a student's thoughts, feelings, and decisions. In general, the intent is to use procedures that can potentially reduce negative and increase positive feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies with respect to learning. For learning and behavior problems, in particular, this means identifying and minimizing experiences that maintain or may increase avoidance motivation.

Activities to correct deficiencies in intrinsic motivation are directed at improving awareness of personal motives and true capabilities, learning to set valued and appropriate goals, learning to value and to make appropriate and satisfying choices, and learning to value and accept responsibility for choice.

Whatever the initial cause of someone's learning and behavior problems, the longer the individual has lived with such problems, the more likely s/he will have negative feelings and thoughts about instruction, teachers, and schools. The feelings include anxiety, fear, frustration, and anger. The thoughts may include expectations of failure and vulnerability and low valuing of many learning "opportunities." Such thoughts and feelings can result in avoidance motivation or low motivation for learning and performing in many areas of schooling. Low motivation leads to half-hearted effort. Avoidance motivation leads to avoidance behaviors. Individuals with avoidance and low motivation often also are attracted to socially disapproved activity.

It remains tempting to focus directly on student misbehavior. And, in doing so, it is heartening to see the shift from negative to positive strategies in addressing unwanted behavior. However, as long as factors that lead to disengagement are left unaffected, we risk perpetuating the phenomenon that William Ryan identified as Blaming the Victim.

From an intervention perspective, the point for emphasis is that engaging and re-engaging students in classroom learning involves matching motivation. Matching motivation requires factoring in students' perceptions in determining the right mix of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. It also requires understanding the key role played by expectations related to outcome. Without a good match, social control strategies can suppress negative attitudes and behaviors, but re-engagement in classroom learning is unlikely.