



*Improving Schools,
Engaging Students*

Guide for Practice . . .

*Engaging and Re-engaging Students
in Learning at School*

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Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School

Learning and succeeding in school requires active engagement. ... The core principles that underlie engagement are applicable to all schools—whether they are in urban, suburban, or rural communities. ... Engaging adolescents, including those who have become disengaged and alienated from school, is not an easy task. Academic motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school. Furthermore, adolescents are too old and too independent to follow teachers' demands out of obedience, and many are too young, inexperienced, or uninformed to fully appreciate the value of succeeding in school.

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Motivation is a prominent concern in all schools. While our focus is on students, any discussion of motivation has applications to all facets of school improvement. Think about engaging and re-engaging parents and staff.

After an extensive review of the literature, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) conclude: *Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure* (see Box on next page). Conversely, for many students, disengagement is associated with behavior problems, and behavior and learning problems may eventually lead to dropout. The degree of concern about student engagement varies depending on school population.

From a psychological perspective, student *disengagement* is associated with situational threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and/or relatedness to valued others (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The demands may be from school staff, peers, instructional content and processes. Psychological disengagement may be internalized (e.g., boredom, emotional distress) and/or externalized (misbehavior, dropping out). Re-engagement depends on use of interventions that help minimize conditions that negatively affect intrinsic motivation and maximize conditions that have a positive motivational effect.

In this guide, we briefly highlight the following matters because they are fundamental to the challenge of student (and staff) disengagement and re-engagement:

- Disengaged students and social control
- Intrinsic motivation
- Two key components of motivation: valuing and expectations
- Overreliance on extrinsics: a bad match
- Focusing on intrinsic motivation to re-engage students

About the Concept of Engagement

As applied to schools, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004) stress that *engagement* is defined in three ways in the research literature:

- *Behavioral engagement* draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out.
- *Emotional engagement* encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influences willingness to do the work.
- *Cognitive engagement* draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills.

They also emphasize:

Antecedents of Engagement can be organized into:

- *School level factors*: voluntary choice, clear and consistent goals, small size, student participation in school policy and management, opportunities for staff and students to be involved in cooperative endeavors, and academic work that allows for the development of products
- *Classroom Context*: Teacher support, peers, classroom structure, autonomy support, task characteristics
- *Individual Needs*: Need for relatedness, need for autonomy, need for competence

Engagement can be measured as follows:

- *Behavioral Engagement*: conduct, work involvement, participation, persistence, (e.g., completing homework, complying with school rules, absent/tardy, off-task)
- *Emotional Engagement*: self-report related to feelings of frustration, boredom, interest, anger, satisfaction; student-teacher relations; work orientation
- *Cognitive Engagement*: investment in learning, flexible problems solving, independent work styles, coping with perceived failure, preference for challenge and independent mastery, commitment to understanding the work

Disengaged Students and Social Control

Learning
supports
are essential to
re-engaging
students who
have actively
disengaged
from
classroom
learning

In general, teaching involves being able to apply strategies focused on content to be taught and knowledge and skills to be acquired – with some degree of attention given to the process of engaging students. All this works fine in schools where most students come each day ready and able to deal with what the teacher is ready and able to teach. Indeed, teachers are fortunate when they have a classroom where the majority of students show up and are receptive to the planned lessons. In schools that are the greatest focus of public criticism, this certainly is not the case. What most of us realize, at least at some level, is that teachers in such settings are confronted with an entirely different teaching situation. Among the various supports they absolutely must have are ways to re-engage students who have become disengaged and often resistant to broad-band (non-personalized) teaching approaches. To the dismay of most teachers, however, strategies for re-engaging students in learning rarely are a prominent part of pre or in-service preparation and seldom are the focus of interventions pursued by professionals whose role is to support teachers and students (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004).

It is commonplace to find that when students are not engaged in the lessons at hand they tend to pursue other activity. As teachers and other staff try to cope with those who are disruptive, the main concern usually is “classroom management.” At one time, a heavy dose of punishment was the dominant approach. Currently, the stress is on more positive practices designed to provide “behavior support” in and out of the classroom. For the most part, however, the strategies are applied as a form of *social control* aimed directly at stopping disruptive behavior. And, the argument sometimes is made that when students continue to misbehave it is because the wrong socialization practices have been used or have been implemented incorrectly.

An often stated assumption is that stopping the behavior will make the student amenable to teaching. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores all the work that has led to understanding *psychological reactance* and the need for individuals to restore their sense of self-determination (Deci & Flaste, 1995). Moreover, it belies two painful realities: the number of students who continue to manifest poor academic achievement and the staggering dropout rate in too many schools.

To move schools beyond overreliance on punishment, there is ongoing advocacy for social skills training, asset development, character education, and positive behavior support initiatives.

All behavior-focused interventions must go a step farther and include a focus on helping teachers re-engage students in classroom learning

The move from punishment to positive approaches is a welcome one. However, most of the new initiatives have not focused enough on a basic system failure that must be addressed if improved behavior is to be maintained. That is, strategies that focus on positive behavior have paid too little attention to helping teachers deal with student engagement in classroom learning.

Student engagement encompasses not only engaging and maintaining engagement, but also *re-engaging* those who have disengaged. Of particular concern is what teachers do when they encounter a student who has disengaged and is misbehaving. In most cases, the emphasis shouldn't be first and foremost on implementing social control techniques.

What teachers need even more are ways to re-engage students who have become disengaged and resistant to standard instruction. The developmental trend in intervention thinking must be toward practices that embrace an expanded view of engagement and human motivation.

Intrinsic Motivation is Fundamental

Engaging and re-engaging students in learning is the facet of teaching that draws on what is known about human motivation (e.g., see Brophy, 2004; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Stipek, 1998). What many of us have been taught about dealing with student misbehavior and learning problems runs counter to what we intuitively understand about human motivation. Teachers and parents, in particular, often learn to over-depend on reinforcement theory, despite the appreciation they have about the importance of *intrinsic* motivation. Those who argue we must focus on "basics" are right. But, the basics that need attention have to do with motivation.

Obviously, intrinsic motivation is a fundamental consideration in designing classroom and school-wide interventions. An increased understanding of motivation clarifies how essential it is to avoid processes that limit options, make students feel controlled and coerced, and focus mostly on "remedying" problems. From a motivational perspective, such processes are seen as likely to produce avoidance reactions in the classroom and to school and, thus, reduce opportunities for positive learning and for development of positive attitudes.

Eventually, such processes will cause students to disengage from classroom learning. Re-engagement depends on use of interventions that help minimize conditions that negatively affect motivation and maximize conditions that have a positive motivational effect.

Of course, teachers, parents, and support staff cannot control all factors affecting motivation. Indeed, when any of us address learning and behavior concerns, we have direct control over a relatively small segment of the physical and social environment. We try to maximize the likelihood that opportunities to learn are a good fit with the current *capabilities* of a given youngster. And, with learning engagement in mind, we try to match individual differences in *motivation*.

Matching individual differences in *motivation* means attending to such matters as:

Motivation is:

>a readiness concern

>an ongoing process concern

>a reactance concern

- ***Motivation as a readiness concern.*** Optimal performance and learning require motivational readiness. The absence of such readiness can cause and/or maintain problems. If a learner does not have enough motivational readiness, strategies must be implemented to develop it (including ways to reduce avoidance motivation). Readiness should not be viewed in the old sense of waiting until an individual is interested. Rather, it should be understood in the contemporary sense of establishing environments that are perceived by students as caring, supportive places and as offering stimulating activities that are valued and challenging, and doable.
- ***Motivation as a key ongoing process concern.*** Many learners are caught up in the novelty of a new subject, but after a few lessons, interest often wanes. Some students are motivated by the idea of obtaining a given outcome but may not be motivated to pursue certain processes and thus may not pay attention or may try to avoid them. For example, some are motivated to start work on overcoming their problems but may not maintain that motivation. Strategies must be designed to elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation so that a youngster stays mobilized.
- ***Minimizing negative motivation and avoidance reactions as process and outcome concerns.*** Teachers and others at a school and at home not only must try to increase motivation – especially intrinsic motivation – but also take care to avoid or at least minimize conditions that decrease motivation or produce negative motivation. For example, care must be taken not to over-rely on extrinsics to entice and reward because to do so may decrease intrinsic motivation. At times, school is seen as unchallenging, uninteresting, overdemanding, overwhelming, overcontrolling, nonsupportive, or even hostile. When this happens, a

student may develop negative attitudes and avoidance related to a given situation, and over time, related to school and all it represents.

>a basic
outcome
concern

- ***Enhancing intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome concern.*** It is essential to enhance motivation as an outcome so the desire to pursue a given area (e.g., reading, good behavior) increasingly is a positive intrinsic attitude that mobilizes learning and behaving outside the teaching situation. Achieving such an outcome involves use of strategies that do not over-rely on extrinsic rewards and that do enable youngsters to play a meaningful role in making decisions related to valued options. In effect, enhancing intrinsic motivation is a fundamental *protective factor* and is the key to developing *resiliency*.

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.

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.

Two Key Components of Motivation: Valuing and Expectations

Two common reasons people give for not bothering to learn something are "It's not worth it" and "I know I won't be able to do it." In general, the amount of time and energy spent on an activity seems dependent on how much the activity is valued by the person and on the person's expectation that what is valued will be attained without too great a cost.

About Valuing

What makes something worth doing? Prizes? Money? Merit awards? Praise? Certainly! We all do a great many things, some of which we don't even like to do, because the activity leads to a desired reward. Similarly, we often do things to escape punishment or other negative consequences that we prefer to avoid.

Rewards and punishments may be material or social. For those with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, there has been widespread use of such "incentives" (e.g., systematically giving points or tokens that can be exchanged for candy, prizes, praise, free time, or social interactions). Punishments have included loss of free time and other privileges, added work, fines, isolation, censure, and suspension. Grades have been used both as rewards and punishments. Because people will do things to obtain rewards or avoid punishment, rewards and punishment often are called *reinforcers*. Because they generally come from sources outside the person, they often are called *extrinsics*.

Extrinsic reinforcers are easy to use and can immediately affect behavior. Therefore, they have been widely adopted in the fields of special education and psychology. Unfortunately, the immediate effects are usually limited to very specific behaviors and often are short-term. Moreover, extensive use of extrinsics can have some undesired effects. And, sometimes the available extrinsics simply aren't powerful enough to get the desired results.

It is important to remember that what makes an extrinsic factor rewarding is the fact that it is experienced by the recipient as a reward. What makes it a highly valued reward is that the recipient highly values it. If someone doesn't like candy, there is not much point in offering it as a reward. Furthermore, because the use of extrinsics has limits, it's fortunate that people often do things even without apparent extrinsic reason. In fact, a lot of what people learn and spend time doing is done for intrinsic reasons. *Curiosity* is a good example. Curiosity seems to be an innate quality that leads us to seek stimulation, avoid boredom, and learn a great deal.

The immediate effects of extrinsic reinforcement are usually limited to very specific behaviors and often are short-term, and their extensive use can have undesired effects

People also pursue some things because of what has been described as an innate striving for competence. Most of us value *feeling competent*. We try to conquer some challenges, and if none are around, we usually seek one out. Of course, if the challenges confronting us seem unconquerable or make us too uncomfortable (e.g., too anxious or exhausted), we try to put them aside and move on to something more promising.

Another important intrinsic motivator appears to be an internal push toward things that make a person *feel self-determining*. People seem to value feeling and thinking that they have some degree of choice and freedom in deciding what to do. And, human beings also seem intrinsically moved toward establishing and maintaining relationships. That is, we value the *feeling interpersonally connected*.

About Expectations

We may value something greatly; but if we believe we can't do what's necessary to obtain it without paying too great a personal price, we are likely to look for other valued activities and outcomes to pursue. Expectations about these matters are influenced by past experiences.

Previously unsuccessful arenas usually are seen as unlikely paths to valued extrinsic rewards or intrinsic satisfactions. We may perceive past failure as the result of our lack of ability; or we may believe that more effort was required than we were willing to give. We may also feel that the help we needed to succeed was not available. If our perception is that very little has changed with regard to these factors, our expectation of succeeding now will be rather low. *In general, then, what we value interacts with our expectations, and motivation is one product of this interaction.* (See Exhibit on the next page).

Mother: *You have to get up and go to school!*

Son: *I don't want to. It's too hard and the kids don't like me.*

Mother: *But, you have to go. You're the principal.*

A Bit of Theory

Motivation theory has many facets. At the risk of over simplifying things, the following discussion is designed to make a few big points.

E x V

Can you decipher this? (Don't go on until you've tried.)

Hint: the "x" is a multiplication sign.

In case the equation stumped you, don't be surprised. The main introduction to motivational thinking that many people have been given in the past involves some form of reinforcement theory (which essentially deals with extrinsic motivation). Thus, all this may be new to you, even though motivational theorists have been wrestling with it for a long time, and intuitively, you probably understand much of what they are talking about.

E represents an individual's *expectations* about outcome (in school this often means expectations of success or failure). **V** represents *valuing*, with valuing influenced by both what is valued intrinsically and extrinsically. Thus, in a general sense, motivation can be thought of in terms of expectancy times valuing. *Such theory recognizes that human beings are thinking and feeling organisms and that intrinsic factors can be powerful motivators. This understanding of human motivation has major implications for learning, teaching, parenting, and mental health interventions.*

Within some limits (which we need not discuss here), high expectations and high valuing produce high motivation, while low expectations (**E**) and high valuing (**V**) produce relatively weak motivation.

Youngsters may greatly value the idea of improving their reading. They usually are not happy with limited skills and know they would feel a lot better about if they could read. But, often they experience everything the teacher asks them to do is a waste of time. They have done it all before, and they *still* have a reading problem. Sometimes they will do the exercises, but just to earn points to go on a field trip and to avoid the consequences of not cooperating. Often, however, they try to get out of doing the work by distracting the teacher. After all, why should they do things they are certain won't help them read any better.

(Expectancy x Valuing = Motivation 0 x 1.0 = 0)

High expectations paired with low valuing also yield low approach motivation. Thus, the oft-cited remedial strategy of guaranteeing success by designing tasks to be very easy is not as simple a recipe as it sounds. Indeed, the approach is likely to fail if the outcome (e.g., improved reading, learning math fundamentals, applying social skills) is not valued or if the tasks are experienced as too boring or if doing them is seen as too embarrassing. In such cases, a strong negative value is attached to the activities, and this contributes to avoidance motivation.

(Expectancy x Valuing = Motivation 1.0 x 0 = 0)

Appropriate appreciation of all this is necessary in designing a match for optimal learning and performance.

Overreliance on Extrinsic: a Bad Match

There are many intervention implications to derive from understanding intrinsic motivation. For example, mobilizing and maintaining a youngster's motivation depends on how a classroom program addresses concerns about valuing and expectations. Schools and classrooms that offer a broad range of opportunities (e.g., content, outcomes, procedural options) and involve students in decision making are best equipped to meet the challenge.

Throughout this discussion of valuing and expectations, the emphasis has been on the fact that motivation is not something that can be determined solely by forces outside the individual. Others can plan activities and outcomes to influence motivation and learning; however, how the activities and outcomes are experienced determines whether they are pursued (or avoided) with a little or a lot of effort and ability. Understanding that an individual's perceptions can affect motivation has led researchers to important findings about some undesired effects resulting from overreliance on extrinsics.

Because of the prominent role they play in school programs, grading, testing, and other performance evaluations are a special concern in any discussion of the overreliance on extrinsics as a way to reinforce positive learning. Although grades often are discussed as simply providing information about how well a student is doing, many, if not most, students perceive each grade as a reward or a punishment. Certainly, many teachers use grades to try to control behavior – to reward those who do assignments well and to punish those who don't. Sometimes parents add to a student's perception of grades as extrinsic reinforcers by giving a reward for good report cards.

We all have our own horror stories about the negative impact of grades on ourselves and others. In general, grades have a way of reshaping what students do with their learning opportunities. In choosing what to study, students strongly consider what grades they are likely to receive. As deadlines for assignments and tests get closer, interest in the topic gives way to interest in maximizing one's grade. Discussion of interesting issues and problems related to the area of study gives way to questions about how long a paper should be and what will be on the test. None of this is surprising given that poor grades can result in having to repeat a course or being denied certain immediate and long-range opportunities. It is simply a good example of how systems that overemphasize extrinsics may have a serious negative impact on intrinsic motivation for learning. *And if the impact of current practices is harmful to those who are able learners, imagine the impact on students with learning and behavior problems!*

The point is that extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic reasons for doing things. Although this is not always the case and may not always be a bad thing, it is an important consideration in deciding to rely on extrinsic reinforcers in addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Motivation and Behavior & Learning Problems

Many individuals with learning problems also are described as hyperactive, distractible, 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, perseverance, selective attention, frustration tolerance, sustained attention and follow-through, and social awareness and skills. In all cases, the emphasis is on reducing or eliminating interfering behaviors, usually with the presumption that the student will then re-engage in learning. However, there is little evidence that these strategies enhance a student's motivation toward classroom learning (National Research Council, 2004).

Ironically, the reliance on extrinsics to control behavior may exacerbate student problems. Motivational research suggests that when people perceive their freedom (e.g., of choice) is threatened, they have a psychological reaction that motivates them to restore their sense of freedom. (For instance, when those in control say: *You can't do that ... you must do this ...*, the covert and sometimes overt psychological reaction of students often is: *Oh, you think so!*) This line of research also suggests that with prolonged denial of freedom, people's reactivity diminishes, they become amotivated, and usually feel helpless and ineffective.

Focusing on Intrinsic Motivation to Re-engage Students

Psychological scholarship over the last fifty 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 work 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.

General Strategic Considerations

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.

The point for emphasis here is that engaging and re-engaging students in learning involves matching motivation. Matching motivation requires an appreciation of the importance of a student's 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.

To clarify matters with respect to designing new directions for student support for disengaged students, below are four general strategies to think about in planning ways to work with such students:

Clarifying student perceptions of the problem – It is desirable to create a situation where it is feasible to talk openly with students about why they have become disengaged. This provides an invaluable basis for formulating a personalized plan for helping to alter their negative perceptions and for planning ways to prevent others from developing such perceptions.

Reframing school learning – As noted above, in the case of those who have disengaged, major reframing in teaching approaches is required so that these students (a) view the teacher as supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (b) perceive content, outcomes, and activity options as

personally valuable and obtainable. It is important, for example, to eliminate threatening evaluative measures; reframe content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscore how it all builds on previous learning; and clarify why the procedures are expected to be effective – especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

Renegotiating involvement in school learning – New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The intent is to affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

Reestablishing and maintaining an appropriate working relationship – This requires the type of ongoing interactions that creates a sense of trust, open communication, and provides personalized support and direction.

***Options and Student
Decision Making
as Key Facets***

To maintain re-engagement and prevent disengagement, the above strategies must be pursued using processes and content that:

- minimize threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others
- maximize such feelings (included here is an emphasis on a school taking steps to enhance public perception that it is a welcoming, caring, safe, and just institution)
- guide motivated practice (e.g., providing opportunities for meaningful applications and clarifying ways to organize practice)
- provide continuous information on learning and performance in ways that highlight accomplishments
- provide opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., ways in which students can pursue additional, self-directed learning or can arrange for additional support and direction).

Obviously, it is no easy task to decrease well-assimilated negative attitudes and behaviors. And, the task is likely to become even harder with the escalation toward high-stakes testing policies (no matter how well-intentioned). It also seems obvious that, *for many schools, enhanced achievement test scores will only be feasible when the large number of disengaged students are re-engaged in learning at school.*

All this argues for (1) minimizing student disengagement and maximizing re-engagement by moving school culture toward a greater focus on intrinsic motivation and (2) minimizing psychological reactance and enhancing perceptions that lead to re-engagement in learning at school by rethinking social control practices. From a motivational perspective, key facets of accomplishing this involve enhancing student options and decision making.

A greater proportion of individuals with avoidance or low motivation for learning at school are found among those with learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems. For these individuals, few currently available options may be appealing. How much greater the range of options needs to be depends primarily on how strong avoidance tendencies are. In general, however, the initial strategies for working with such students involve

- further expansion of the range of options for learning (if necessary, this includes avoiding established curriculum content and processes)
- primarily emphasizing areas in which the student has made personal and active decisions
- accommodation of a wider range of behavior than usually is tolerated (e.g., a widening of limits on the amount and types of "differences" tolerated)

From a motivational perspective, one of the most basic concerns is the way in which students are involved in making decisions about options. Critically, decision-making processes can lead to perceptions of coercion and control or to perceptions of real choice (e.g., being in control of one's destiny, being self-determining). Such differences in perception can affect whether a student is mobilized to pursue or avoid planned learning activities and outcomes.

People who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through

I suspect that many children would learn arithmetic, and learn it better, if it were illegal.
John Holt

People who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through. In contrast, people who are not involved in decisions often have little commitment to what is decided. And if individuals disagree with a decision that affects them, besides not following through they may react with hostility.

Thus, essential to programs focusing on motivation are decision-making processes that affect perceptions of choice, value, and probable outcome. Three special points should be noted about decision-making.

- Decisions are based on current perceptions. As perceptions shift, it is necessary to reevaluate decisions and modify them in ways that maintain a mobilized learner.
- Effective and efficient decision making is a basic skill, and one that is as fundamental as the three Rs. Thus, if an individual does not do it well initially, this is not a reason to move away from learner involvement in decision making. Rather, it is an assessment of a need and a reason to use the process not only for motivational purposes, but to improve this basic skill.
- Among students manifesting learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems, it is well to remember that the most fundamental decision some of these individuals have to make is whether they want to participate or not. That is why it may be necessary in specific cases temporarily to put aside established options and standards. As we have stressed, before some students will decide to participate in a proactive way, they have to perceive the learning environment as positively different – and quite a bit so – from the one in which they had so much failure.

Reviews of the literature on human motivation suggest that providing students with options and involving them in decision making are key facets of addressing the problem of engagement in the classroom and at school (Deci & Flaste, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Stipek, 1998). For example, numerous studies have shown that opportunities to express preferences and make choices lead to greater motivation, academic gains, increases in productivity and on-task behavior, and decreases in aggressive behavior. Similarly, researchers report that student participation in goal setting leads to more positive outcomes (e.g., higher commitment to a goal and increased performance).

Concluding Comments

Getting students involved in their education programs is more than having them participate; it is connecting students with their education, enabling them to influence and affect the program and, indeed, enabling them to become enwrapped and engrossed in their educational experiences.

Wehmeyer & Sands (1998)

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 strong 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. Poor effort, avoidance behavior, and active pursuit of disapproved behavior on the part of students are sure-fire recipes for failure and worse.

It remains tempting to focus directly on student misbehavior. And, it also is tempting to think that behavior problems at least can be exorcized by "laying down the law." We have seen many administrators pursue this line of thinking. For every student who "shapes up," ten others experience a Greek tragedy that inevitably ends in the student being pushed-out of school through a progression of suspensions, "opportunity" transfers, and expulsions. Official dropout figures don't tell the tale. What we see in most high schools in cities such as Los Angeles, Baltimore, D.C., Miami, and Detroit is that only about half those who were enrolled in the ninth grade are still around to graduate from 12th grade.

Most of these students entered kindergarten with a healthy curiosity and a desire to learn to read and write. By the end of 2nd grade, we start seeing the first referrals by classroom teachers because of learning and behavior problems. From that point on, increasing numbers of students become disengaged from classroom learning, and most of these manifest some form of behavioral and emotional problems.

It is not surprising, then, that many are heartened to see the shift from punishment to positive behavior support 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 key point 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 temporarily suppress negative attitudes and behaviors, but re-engagement in classroom learning is unlikely. And, without re-engagement in classroom learning, there will be no major gains in achievement test scores, unwanted behavior is very likely to reappear, and many will be left behind.

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- Also, see Unit B – “Engaging Students (and their Families) in Learning: Real and Valued Options and Decision Making” in: *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling* online at: *Enhancing Classroom Approaches for Addressing Barriers to Learning: Classroom-Focused Enabling* Online at: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/contedu/cfe.pdf>

