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# Addressing Barriers to Learning

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Vol. 21, # 3

## Grit – Another Buzzword?

### Student Motivation – a Fundamental Intervention Concern!

*Policy makers who assume that giving educators and students more reasons to care about character can be only a good thing should take heed of research suggesting that extrinsic motivation can, in fact, displace intrinsic motivation. While carrots and sticks can bring about short-term changes in behavior, they often undermine interest in and responsibility for the behavior itself.* Angela Duckworth

We are pleased to see greater attention paid to student engagement and disengagement. However, as often happens, we fear the attention will be undercut by buzzwords that don't underscore the importance of motivation, especially intrinsic motivation.

A current buzzword is "grit." In 2013, Angela Duckworth, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania did a TED Talk on grit that resulted in millions of views and widespread discussion. ([http://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_the\\_key\\_to\\_success\\_grit.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit.html))

Educators were further introduced to the term when the U.S. Department of Education published a report entitled: *Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century*. (<http://www.ed.gov/edblogs/technology/files/2013/02/OET-Draft-Grit-Report-2-17-13.pdf>)

#### What is Grit?

Grit is a construct. Constructs are useful ideas that are created and used to help make sense of life and the universe. And history is strewn with constructs that outlived their usefulness. Grit is a highly popular idea now, but it's longevity depends on how useful it turns out to be.

Duckworth's research on predicting achievement has focused on two constructs: *grit* and *self-control*. She defines these as follows: "Grit is the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals. Self-control is the voluntary regulation of impulses in the presence of momentarily gratifying temptations." She notes that "On average, individuals who are gritty are more self-controlled, but the correlation between these two traits is not perfect: Some individuals are paragons of grit but not self-control, and some exceptionally well-regulated individuals are not especially gritty."

These constructs call to mind others such as resilience, perseverance, tenacity, self-determination, competence, self-efficacy, and more. For those who intervene with students, such ideas can become common terms in describing and making judgments about youngsters. But labeling these matters as character traits provides little information about how they develop and what strengthens and undermines them.

#### Also in this issue:

- >Personalization: Don't Let it Become Another Buzzword
- >Working with Disengaged Students
- >Center Resources Update

## **Don't Grade Schools on Grit**

Excerpts from a New York Times Opinion piece by Angela Duckworth (3/26/16)

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/Sunday/don't-grade-schools-on-grit.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/opinion/Sunday/don't-grade-schools-on-grit.html?_r=0)

*... Over the past few years, I've seen a groundswell of popular interest in character development. As a social scientist researching the importance of character, I was heartened. It seemed that the narrow focus on standardized achievement test scores from the years I taught in public schools was giving way to a broader, more enlightened perspective.*

*These days, however, I worry I've contributed, inadvertently, to an idea I vigorously oppose: high-stakes character assessment. New federal legislation can be interpreted as encouraging states and schools to incorporate measures of character into their accountability systems. This year, nine California school districts will begin doing this. . . .*

*Scientists and educators are working together to discover more effective ways of cultivating character. For example, research has shown that we can teach children the self-control strategy of setting goals and making plans, with measurable benefits for academic achievement. It's also possible to help children manage their emotions and to develop a "growth mind-set" about learning (that is, believing that their abilities are malleable rather than fixed).*

*This is exciting progress. A 2011 meta-analysis of more than 200 school-based programs found that teaching social and emotional skills can improve behavior and raise academic achievement, strong evidence that school is an important arena for the development of character.*

*But we're nowhere near ready — and perhaps never will be — to use feedback on character as a metric for judging the effectiveness of teachers and schools. We shouldn't be rewarding or punishing schools for how students perform on these measures.*

*MY concerns stem from intimate acquaintance with the limitations of the measures themselves.*

*One problem is reference bias: A judgment about whether you "came to class prepared" depends on your frame of reference. If you consider being prepared arriving before the bell rings, with your notebook open, last night's homework complete, and your full attention turned toward the day's lesson, you might rate yourself lower than a less prepared student with more lax standards.*

*For instance, in a study of self-reported conscientiousness in 56 countries, it was the Japanese, Chinese and Korean respondents who rated themselves lowest. The authors of the study speculated that this reflected differences in cultural norms, rather than in actual behavior.*

*Comparisons between American schools often produce similarly paradoxical findings. In a study colleagues and I published last year, we found that eighth graders at high-performing charter schools gave themselves lower scores on conscientiousness, self-control and grit than their counterparts at district schools. This was perhaps because students at these charter schools held themselves to higher standards.*

*I also worry that tying external rewards and punishments to character assessment will create incentives for cheating. Policy makers who assume that giving educators and students more reasons to care about character can be only a good thing should take heed of research suggesting that extrinsic motivation can, in fact, displace intrinsic motivation. While carrots and sticks can bring about short-term changes in behavior, they often undermine interest in and responsibility for the behavior itself.*

*A couple of weeks ago, a colleague told me that she'd heard from a teacher in one of the California school districts adopting the new character test. The teacher was unsettled that questionnaires her students filled out about their grit and growth mind-set would contribute to an evaluation of her school's quality. I felt queasy. This was not at all my intent, and this is not at all a good idea.*

*Does character matter, and can character be developed? Science and experience unequivocally say yes. Can the practice of giving feedback to students on character be improved? Absolutely. Can scientists and educators work together to cultivate students' character? Without question.*

*Should we turn measures of character intended for research and self-discovery into high-stakes metrics for accountability? In my view, no.*

Forbes writer, Jordan Shapiro, suggests that many who are using the term grit are invoking “the same familiar go-get-'em cowboy-individualism and unwavering underdog-tenacity that has always dominated the American mythos.” (See *Grit, Optimism And Other Buzzwords In The Way of Education* – <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jordanshapiro/2013/10/14/grit-optimism-and-other-buzzwords-in-the-way-of-education/#4893e4a1790b> )

## Don't Lose Sight of Facilitating Motivation

However, all this plays out, it is important for parents, school personnel, and other interveners to focus less on whether a youngster has grit and more on how to facilitate motivation, and especially *intrinsic* motivation, for learning and performance and for overcoming problems. Interventions usually are not effective when a youngster is unengaged in the process.

At school, there is an ongoing interplay between motivation and learning. The roots of learning, behavior, emotional problems, and disengagement from classroom instruction are planted when instruction is not a good fit. And, of course, problems are reciprocally exacerbating.

In general, then, motivation is a fundamental concern for all students. For those who are not doing well at school, interventions to address their motivation are a *primary* concern. With all this in mind, parenting, teaching, counseling, mentoring, and all others forms of intervention are concerned with the following matters:

*For those who are not doing well at school, interventions to address their motivation are a primary concern.*

- ***Motivation as a readiness concern.*** Good performance and learning require motivational readiness. The absence of such readiness can cause and/or maintain problems. If a learner does not have sufficient 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 is 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, 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 student 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 psychological and behavioral reactivity and avoidance related to a given situation and eventually related to school and all it represents.

- **Enhancing intrinsic motivation as a basic outcome concern.** It is essential to enhance *intrinsic* motivation as an outcome so that what is learned (e.g., reading, good behavior) increasingly becomes a positive internalized attitude that mobilizes further pursuit of such learning and good behavior outside the teaching situation. Developing such intrinsic motivation involves avoiding over-reliance on extrinsic rewards and enabling youngsters to play a meaningful role in shaping their learning experiences (e.g., making decisions related to valued options).

An increased understanding of human motivation clarifies how essential it is to avoid conditions that can have a negative impact on a person's motivation. Examples of such conditions at school are sparse resources, excessive rules, a day-in, day-out emphasis on drill and remediation and short-term outcomes, and other processes that make people feel controlled and coerced and that limit the range of options. From a motivational perspective, such conditions often produce negative attitudes and *psychological reactance* which motivate behavior problems and reduce opportunities for positive learning and development.

***We all react against strictures that seriously limit our range of options or that are over-controlling and coercive.***

For instance, although students may learn a specific lesson at school (e.g., some basic skills), the teaching process may be experienced negatively and counter interest in using the new knowledge and skills outside of the classroom. Worse yet, students experiencing problems at school usually have extremely negative perceptions of and avoidance tendencies toward teachers and activities that look like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach must be made if such students are to change these perceptions. Ultimately, success may depend on the degree to which the students view the adults at school and in the classroom as supportive, rather than indifferent or controlling and the program as personally valuable and obtainable. (We include a brief discussion of *Working with Disengaged Students* on pp. 9-11.)

School staff and parents need to use procedures that increase positive feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies and minimize use of practices that decrease motivation – especially intrinsic motivation.

With youngsters who are manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems, it is especially important to identify and minimize experiences that maintain or may increase avoidance motivation. Of particular concern is the need to avoid overreliance on extrinsics to entice and reward since such strategies can be perceived as efforts to control and manipulate and end up decreasing intrinsic motivation. The point is to enhance stable, positive, intrinsic attitudes that mobilize ongoing pursuit of desired ends, throughout the school, and away from school. Developing intrinsic attitudes is basic to increasing the type of motivated practice, for example reading for pleasure, that is essential for mastering and assimilating what has just been learned. One problem with assigned homework is that the work usually does not stimulate motivated practice.

**Note:** *While our focus here is on students, any discussion of motivation has applications to family members and school personnel. Think about the challenge of home involvement in schooling, and think about teacher burnout and dropout; think about systemic change.*

**External reinforcement may indeed get a particular act going and may lead to its repetition, but it does not nourish, reliably, the long course of learning by which [one] slowly builds in [one's] own way a serviceable model of what the world is and what it can be.**

Jerome Bruner

## Beyond Reinforcers and Consequences

Two common reasons people give for not bothering to do 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 much 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. Rewards often take the form of systematically giving points or tokens that can be exchanged for candy, prizes, praise, free time, or social interactions. Punishments include loss of free time and other privileges, added work, fines, isolation, censure, and suspension. Grades are used both as rewards and punishments.

*While extrinsics often modify some behaviors . . .*

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 have some powerful immediate effects on behavior. Therefore, they have been widely adopted in the fields of special education and psychology as "incentives" for those with behavior and learning problems. Unfortunately, the immediate effects are usually limited to specific behaviors, rote learning, and the outcomes often last for a short duration. Moreover, extensive use of extrinsics seems to have some undesired effects. And sometimes the available extrinsics simply aren't powerful enough to get desired results.

*intrinsic motivation is key to engaged learning.*

Although the source of extrinsic reinforcers is outside the person, the meaning or value attached to them comes from inside. What makes some extrinsic factor rewarding to most people is the fact that it is experienced as a reward. And what makes it a highly valued reward is that the person highly values it. If you don't like candy, there is not much point in someone offering it to you as a reward

Furthermore, because the use of extrinsics has major limits, it's fortunate that humans do so much without extrinsic reasons. The reality is that *intrinsic* motivation is the basis for a great deal of what people learn and spend time doing. Curiosity is a good intrinsic example. Curiosity is seen as an innate quality that leads all of us to seek stimulation, avoid boredom, and learn.

People also pursue some things because of what has been described as an innate striving for competence; humans value feeling competent. We try to conquer challenges, and if none are around, we often seek one out.

Another important intrinsic motivator is identified as an internal push toward self-determination. People value feeling that they have some degree of choice and freedom in deciding what to do.

And people intrinsically move toward establishing and maintaining relationships with others. That is, people tend to value feelings of being interpersonally connected.

### About Expectations

Students may value something greatly; but if they believe they can't do or obtain it without paying too great a personal price, they are likely to seek other valued activities and outcomes. Expectations about these matters are influenced by previous experiences.

Areas where students have been unsuccessful are unlikely to be seen as paths to valued extrinsic rewards or intrinsic satisfactions. They may perceive past failure as caused by lack of ability or effort or due to the unavailability of needed help or bad luck. If they think little has changed with respect to these factors, their expectation of succeeding now will be rather low.

Interventions that provide a good match increase expectations of success by providing a person with the support and guidance he or she wants and needs.

### Expectancy times Value

Motivation theory captures the sense of the above discussion as  $E \times V$ . If this equation is unfamiliar, just think of it as shorthand for the idea that, in general, what we value transacts with our expectations; motivation is one product of this transaction.

For our purposes here, the E deals with an individual's expectations about outcome (e.g., success or failure). The V deals with valuing, with valuing influenced by both intrinsic values and extrinsic reinforcers. (Note, however, that under some circumstances the use of extrinsics undermines intrinsic motivation.) This model of motivation recognizes that human beings are thinking and feeling organisms and that intrinsic factors can be powerful motivators.

*It's fortunate  
humans do so  
many things  
without extrinsic  
reasons.*

Expectancy times value theory has immense implications for learning, teaching, parenting, and psychological and social interventions. For example, facilitating high expectations and high valuing is a route to producing high motivation, while low expectations (E) and high valuing (V) lead to relatively weak motivation and perhaps frustration. 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 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.

In sum, motivation is not something that can or should be determined solely by forces outside the individual. Others can plan activities and outcomes to influence motivation, learning, and behavior change. However, how the activities and outcomes are experienced determines whether they are pursued with a little or a lot of effort and ability or are avoided.

### Focusing on Intrinsic Motivation

The main introduction to motivational thinking that many of us were given in the past involves some form of reinforcement theory. Psychological scholarship over the last fifty years has gone well beyond that and brought renewed attention to motivation as a central concept in understanding learning and attention problems. The latest work is just beginning to find its way into personnel preparation programs and schools. Thus, even though motivational theorists have wrestled with *intrinsic motivation* for a long time, and intuitively, you probably understand much of what they are talking about, you may not have read much of what has been written on the topic.

One line of work emphasizes the relationship of learning and behavior to one's feelings of self-determination, competence, and interpersonal connection. Note that the emphasis is not just on being self-determining, competent, and interpersonally connected, but on one's expectations about whether a particular act will enhance or threaten valued *feelings*.

***Intrinsic motivation – key to resiliency and grit***

Strong intrinsic motivation can be a fundamental *protective factor* and a key to developing *resiliency* and *grit*. 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 fairly straightforward and meshes well with school improvements that primarily emphasize enhancing instructional practices. Given students who already are motivationally ready and able, the process involves knowing when, how, and what to teach and also knowing when and how to structure the situation so students can learn on their own.

In contrast, students who manifest learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems usually are not motivationally ready and able to pursue nonpersonalized instructional practices (see page 8 for a brief discussion of personalized instruction). They often have extremely negative perceptions of teachers, programs, and school. Any effort to re-engage disengaged students must begin by addressing negative perceptions (see discussion beginning on page 9).

### **Examples of Practices Relevant to Concerns about Intrinsic Motivation**

In general, a focus on intrinsic motivation encompasses enhancing feelings of self-determination, competence, and connectedness to significant others and countering threats to such feelings. For schools, this involves analyses of both intended interventions and the many unintended experiences students encounter each day. Below are a few examples of practices for enhancing intrinsic motivation and minimizing threats to motivation:

#### **Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation**

- Personalized (as opposed to individualized) instruction
- Building relationships and planning instruction with an understanding of student perceptions and including a range of real life needs, as well as personal and cooperative experiences
- Providing real, valued, and attainable options and choices ensuring shared decision making
- Enhancing feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others

#### **Minimizing Threats to Intrinsic Motivation**

- Ensuring a welcoming, caring, safe, and just environment
- Countering perceptions of social control and indifference
- Designing motivated applications as opposed to rote practice and deadening homework
- Ensuring extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities
- Providing regular feedback in ways that minimize use of evaluative processes that threaten feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to valued others

Ultimately, engaging and re-engaging students in learning at school involves matching their 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. When students perceive instruction as a bad fit, social control strategies may keep them in line, but are unlikely to re-engage disconnected students in classroom learning.

For more, see *Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families* (4 continuing education modules) – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagei.pdf>

## Personalization: Don't Let it Become Another Buzzword

After years of being bandied about, the term *personalization* is coming to the policy forefront in the U.S., the United Kingdom, Canada, and beyond. With the increasing use of the term in U.S. federal policy, there is a tendency just to adopt it in place of terms such as individualized and differentiated instruction. This tendency is bolstered by the growing emphasis on using technology in teaching, which sometimes is described as personalized instruction. Indiscriminate use of the term turns it into yet one more buzzword, rather than a fundamental move beyond individualized instruction in the unending quest for improving how we meet learners where they are.

Based on a reciprocal determinist understanding of learning and behavior, we view *learning* as nonlinear; that is, it is seen as an ongoing, dynamic, transactional, and spiraling process. Similarly, effective *teaching* is conceived as a dynamic, transactional, and spiraling process that strives to meet learners where they are. That is, the aim is to create a good "match" or "fit" with the learner and, in the process, enhance equity of opportunity for success at school for all students.

Analyses indicate the primary emphasis in *individualized* approaches is on matching individual differences in *developmental capabilities*. In contrast, we define *personalization* as the process of accounting for individual differences in both *capability* and *motivation*.

Furthermore, from a psychological perspective, we stress that it is the learner's perception that determines whether the fit is good or bad. Given this, personalizing learning means ensuring learning opportunities are perceived by learners as good ways to reach their goals. Thus, a basic intervention concern is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well what is offered matches both their interests and abilities. This has fundamental implications for all efforts to improve education.

From this perspective, for example, designing classrooms involves enabling teachers to personalize and blend instruction for all students, provide a greater range of accommodations and enrichment options, and add special assistance in the context of implementing "Response to Intervention." Such a design requires providing teachers with the knowledge and skills to develop a classroom infrastructure that transforms a big class into a set of smaller ones by using small group and independent learning options. It emphasizes active learning (e.g., authentic, problem-based, and discovery learning; projects, learning centers, enrichment opportunities). It includes reducing negative interactions and overreliance on social control disciplinary practices. All this reflects the type of principles stressed by the Universal Design for Learning. Properly implemented, the changes can increase the effectiveness of regular classroom instruction, prevent problems, support inclusionary policies, and reduce the need for specialized *services*.

At the same time, we know that schools are concerned with more than classroom instruction. Personalized instruction is one facet of addressing the context and conditions that must be improved to address factors interfering with student learning and performance. Another facet is special assistance for students as needed. School-wide the emphasis is on (1) enrichment activities that promote engagement at school and facilitate positive development, learning, and well-being and (2) providing student and learning supports to better address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

Personnel preparation and continuing professional development for most school personnel has yet to include an in-depth focus on these essential concerns. The following resources can help fill the gap:

> *Personalizing Learning and Addressing Barriers to Learning* –  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/personalizeI.pdf>

> *ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* –  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf>

## Working with Disengaged Students

**M**otivation is the first and foremost concern in efforts to re-engage the majority of disconnected students. Here are four general strategies to think about.

***First, clarify the student's perceptions of the problem*** – Talk openly with students about why they have become disengaged so that steps can be planned for how to alter their negative perceptions and prevent others from developing such perceptions.

***Reframe school learning*** – For those who have disengaged, reframing teaching approaches is essential 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. This includes eliminating threatening evaluative measures; reframing content and processes to clarify purpose in terms of real life needs and experiences and underscoring how it all builds on previous learning; and clarifying why the procedures are expected to be effective – especially those designed to help correct specific problems.

***Renegotiate 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.

***Reestablish and maintain appropriate working relationships*** (e.g., through creating a sense of trust, open communication, providing support and direction as needed).

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)
- provide a meaningful set of choices support and guide decision making about personal goals and ways to achieve them
- facilitate acceptance and valuing of responsibility for decisions
- increase awareness of personal goals, motives, and capabilities
- support and 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).

From a motivational perspective, key facets of accomplishing this involve enhancing learner options and decision making (see box on the next page).

### **About Options and Decision Making**

If the only decision a student can make is between reading book A, which she hates, and reading book B, which she loathes, she is more likely to be motivated to avoid making any decision than to be pleased with the opportunity to decide for herself. Even if she chooses one of the books over the other, the motivational effects the teacher wants are unlikely to occur. Thus:

#### ***Choices have to include valued and feasible options.***

David wants to improve his reading, but he just doesn't like the programmed materials the teacher uses. James would rather read about science than the adventure stories his teacher has assigned. Matt will try anything if someone will sit and help him with the work. Thus:

#### ***Options usually are needed for (a) content and outcomes and (b) processes and structure.***

Every teacher knows a classroom program has to have variety. There are important differences among students with regard to the topics and procedures that currently interest and bore them. And for students with learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems, more variety seems necessary.

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 instructional 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. 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 stress that providing students with options and involving them in decision making is an effective way to enhance their engagement in learning and improve their learning and performance. 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).

*Simply put, people who have the opportunity to make decisions among valued and feasible options tend to be committed to following through.*

Conversely, studies indicate that student preferences and involvement tend to diminish when activities are chosen for them.

*That is, people who are not involved in decisions often have little commitment to what is decided.*

Moreover, if individuals disagree with a decision that affects them, besides not following through they may react hostilely. The implications for classrooms of all the research in this area seem evident: Students who are given more say about what goes on related to their learning at school are likely to show higher degrees of engagement and academic success.

*Optimally, this means ensuring that decision-making processes maximize perceptions of having a choice from among personally worthwhile options and attainable outcomes. At the very least, it is necessary to minimize perceptions of having no choice, little value, and probable failure.*

The focus here on re-engaging disconnected students can be viewed as an ultimate form of personalized instruction; one that uses extreme accommodations. For some students, this may prove sufficient for engaging them and enabling classroom learning. However, when it is not enough, special assistance can be added, preferably within the classroom.

Using a sequential response to intervention approach, special assistance for students with minor problems begins with a direct focus on readily observable problems interfering with classroom learning and performance. For students who continue to have problems, there is an added focus on developing prerequisites they haven't yet acquired (e.g., readiness attitudes, knowledge, and skills). If these steps are insufficient for ameliorating the problems, the focus shifts to identifying and addressing possible underlying factors. This sequence helps to minimize false positive diagnoses (e.g., LD, ADHD) and identifies those who should be referred for special education assessment.

And as noted in the discussion of personalization, what goes on in the classroom need to be supported with a school-wide emphasis on enrichment activities and a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching.

### Coda

What we have covered in this set of articles has major implications for improving school climate. We suggest as starting points:

- increase the focus on *intrinsic motivation*
- reduce *social control practices*
- address *barriers to learning and teaching* by unifying student and learning supports and establishing a team to develop a systemic approach.

These steps can go far toward minimizing learning and behavior problems and student disengagement and engaging and re-engaging students.

**What are your views about all this? Send comments to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)**



## Center Resources Update

(For regular updates about new Center resources, go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> and click on *What's New.*)

### New Information Resources

#### Policy & Cautionary Notes

- > *Supports for students deemed at risk* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/risk.pdf>
- > *Don't water down a system of student and learning supports* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essential.pdf>

#### Information Resources

- > *Student perceptions of school physical education programs* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/physed.pdf>
- > *Appreciating the impact of intersectionality in education settings using the examples of females of color* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/intersect.pdf>
- > *Sexual harassment by peers in school* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/harass.pdf>
- > *Is Internet use interfering with youngsters' well-being?* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/internet.pdf>
- > *Retaining New Teachers* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newteachers.pdf>
- > *A personal perspective on the Teach for American Program* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tfa.pdf>

### Examples of Recently Updated Resources

- > *Sexual minority students* – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sexual\\_minority/lgbt.pdf](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sexual_minority/lgbt.pdf)
- > *Behavioral Initiatives in Broad Perspective* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/behavioral/behini.pdf>
- > *School Based Health Centers* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/sampler/hlthctrs.pdf>

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#### **Want resources? Need technical assistance? Coaching?**

Use our website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>  
 or contact us – E-mail: [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) or Ph: (310) 825-3634  
 Not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (*ENEWS*)?  
 Or our weekly *Community of Practice Interchange*?

Send requests to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

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### Recently Featured Center Resources

#### *On Welcoming New/Returning Staff, Students, & Families*

For ideas on welcoming and supporting newcomers, see the Quick Find on

- > *Transition Programs/grade articulation/welcoming* – [http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101\\_01.htm](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm)

There you will see links to Center resources as well as links to the work of others. Here is a sample of the Center resources and their direct URL links:

- > *Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/welcomingstrategies.pdf>
- > *Back-to-School Anxiety* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/backtoschanx.pdf>
- > *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/welcomeguide.htm>
- > *Transitions to and from Elementary, Middle, and High School* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/transitionstoandfrom.pdf>
- > *Getting the School Year Off to a Good Start* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newschoolyr.pdf>
- > *Easing the Impact of Student Mobility: Welcoming & Social Support* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/easimp.htm>
- > *Welcoming and Involving New Students and Families* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/welcome/welcome.pdf>

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

Center Staff:

*Howard Adelman, Co-Director*  
*Linda Taylor, Co-Director*  
*Perry Nelson, Coordinator*  
 . . . and a host of students

Why do you think we'll do better at school this year?



Because I heard that Congress passed a law that says every student will succeed!