Addressing Barriers to Learning

New ways to think . . .
Better ways to link

Mental Health in Schools UCLA Center Program and Policy Analysis

Volume 16, Number 1
Winter 2011

Special Edition

School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate

"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."

National Academy of Science's Research Council (2004)

Most policy makers and administrators know that by itself good instruction delivered by highly qualified teachers is not enough to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Schools continue to suffer from high dropout rates of students and staff, an achievement gap that resists closure, a high incidence of schools designated as low performing, and the tendency for achievement test score averages to plateau after a few years of gains.

Simply stated, prevailing policy and practice have not effectively dealt with these matters. In particular, student engagement and disengagement are poorly addressed in most efforts to improve schools and schooling. Current practices often work against enhancing engagement and result in many students disconnecting from classroom instruction.

School improvement policy and practices need immediate revision to correct these deficiencies. And in the ESEA reauthorization process, these matters should be assigned a high priority.

Part of the problem is that pre- and inservice personnel preparation programs tend to perpetuate a narrow view of human motivation. Most school staff have been taught to think primarily in terms of extrinsic motivation (i.e., reinforcement concepts) and have had little exposure to intrinsic motivation theory and its implications for school practices. This is unfortunate given that the key to understanding engagement and disengagement is an appreciation of intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is a fundamental consideration in designing cost-effective student and learning supports. Understanding intrinsic motivation clarifies how essential it is to avoid processes that limit options, make students feel controlled and coerced, and that focus mainly on "remedying" problems. Overreliance on extrinsic motivation risks producing avoidance reactions in the classroom and to school and, thus, can reduce opportunities for positive learning and for development of positive attitudes. Over time, the result is that too many students disengage from classroom learning.

Practices for preventing disengagement and efforts to re-engage disconnected students (families, staff) require minimizing conditions that negatively affect intrinsic motivation and maximizing those that enhance it.

Easy to say, hard to do.

To underscore what is involved, this special issue discusses (1) school engagement, re-engagement, and learning supports (2) intrinsic motivation basics, (3) motivation as a key concern of any intervention, (4) the need to go beyond reinforcement theory, (5) the problem of over-relying on extrinsics, (6) psychological reactance and re-engagement, and (7) school climate as an emergent quality.

I. About School Engagement, Re-engagement, and Learning Supports

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*.

Conversely, for many students, disengagement is associated with behavior problems, and behavior and learning problems may eventually lead to dropout. From a psychological perspective, ***disengagement*** from classroom learning is associated with threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and/or relatedness to valued others. The demands may be from school staff, peers, instructional content and processes. Psychological disengagement can be expected to result in internalized behavior (e.g., boredom, emotional distress) and/or externalized behavior (misbehavior, dropping out).

Maintaining engagement and re-engaging disconnected students requires minimizing conditions that negatively affect intrinsic motivation and maximizing conditions that have a positive motivational effect. The figure below and the concepts outlined in Exhibit 1 graphically highlight a range of concepts related to these intervention concerns.

Engagement, Disengagement, & Re-engagement

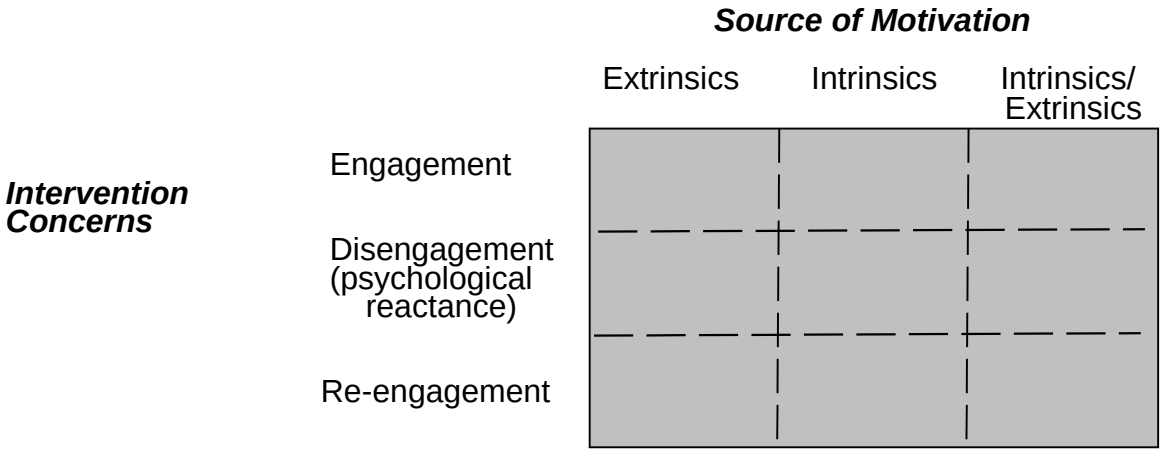


Exhibit 1

Defining, Recognizing Antecedents of, and Measuring Engagement

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) note that ***engagement is defined*** in three ways in the school 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.

Engagement is 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

Antecedents of engagement are grouped as:

- ***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

Learning Supports and Intrinsic Motivation

Development of a *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* enhances a school's focus on promoting engagement and re-engagement of students (families, staff). As our Center's research has stressed, such a system enhances interventions in six critical arenas for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b). The following examples of activity related to each of the six arenas highlight how the system can promote student and staff feelings of competence, self-determination, and positive relationships with significant others and enhance intrinsic motivation:

1. *Classroom focused interventions to enable and re-engage students in classroom learning*

   By opening the classroom door to bring in available supports (e.g., student support staff, resource teachers, volunteers), teachers are enabled to enhance options and facilitate student choice and decision making in ways that increase the intrinsic motivation of all involved.

2. *Crisis assistance and prevention*

   School-focused crisis teams can take proactive leadership in developing prevention programs to avoid or mitigate crises by enhancing protective buffers and student intrinsic motivation for preventing interpersonal and human relationship problems.

3. *Support for transitions*

   Welcoming and ongoing social support for students, families, and staff new to the school provide both a motivational and a capacity building foundation for developing positive working relationships and a positive school climate.

4. *Home involvement and engagement in schooling*

   Expanding the nature and scope of interventions and enhancing communication mechanisms for outreaching in ways that connect with the variety of motivational differences manifested by parents and other student caretakers enables development of intrinsically motivated school-home working relationships.

5. *Community outreach for involvement and support*

   Weaving together school and community efforts to enhance the range of options and choices for students, both in school and in the community, can better address barriers to learning, promote child and youth development, and establish a sense of community that supports learning and focuses on hope for the future (higher ed/career choices).

6. *Student and family assistance*

   Providing personalized support as soon as a need is recognized and doing so in the least disruptive ways minimizes threats to intrinsic motivation and when implemented with a shared and mutually respectful problem-solving approach can enhance intrinsic motivation and the sense of competence and positive relationship among all involved.

Strategies for Re-engagement

Given all this, highlighted below are four personalized intervention strategies for working with *disengaged 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 to alter their negative perceptions and 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 over time through conferences with the student and including parents where appropriate. 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. 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 create a sense of trust, open communication, and provide personalized support and direction. 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 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 in the context of 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.*

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)

WHAT WORKS: 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. 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).

II. Appreciating Intrinsic Motivation

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 personnel preparation programs and schools. One line of work emphasizes the relationship of learning and behavior problems to deficiencies in intrinsic motivation and clarifies the importance of focusing on

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

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 are unlikely to re-engage disconnected students in classroom learning.

Examples of practices for *maximizing intrinsic motivation* are:

- 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

Examples of *minimizing threats to intrinsic motivation* are:

- 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

Strong intrinsic motivation can be viewed as a fundamental *protective factor* and as a 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 fairly straightforward and meshes well with school improvements that primarily emphasize enhancing instructional practices. The focus is on helping establish ways for students who already are motivationally ready and able to achieve and maintaining and enhancing their motivation. 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. They often have extremely negative perceptions of teachers, programs, and school and generally are not open to people and activities that they perceive as "the same old thing." Any effort to re-engage disengaged students must begin by addressing negative perceptions. Teachers and school support staff must work together to reverse conditions that led to such perceptions. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made to enhance such a student's perceptions that (1) the teacher and other interveners are supportive (rather than controlling and indifferent) and (2) content, outcomes, and activity options are personally valuable and obtainable.

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.*

III. Motivation: A Key Concern of Any Intervention

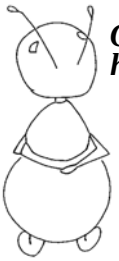
Teachers, parents, and support staff cannot control all factors affecting learning. Indeed, when any of us address learning and behavior concerns, we have direct control over a relatively small segment of the physical and social environment. So, we use what we can to "meet students where they are at." In doing so, most efforts to address learning problems in the classroom focus on improving the fit with a student's current *capabilities*. Much of the agenda for *Response to Intervention* (RtI) stresses this. The agenda for student engagement, however, calls for also including a focus on matching individual differences in *motivation.*

For many years, the emphasis on matching individual differences in capability was referred to as *individualized* instruction. In recent years, this designation has given way to the term *personalized* instruction. However, the focus hasn't changed. In our work, we differentiate individualized from personalized instruction. For us, personalized instruction denotes matching individual differences in *both* capability and motivation. And, we stress that the *primary* intervention need often is to meet students where they are at motivationally, especially when a student is manifesting learning, behavioral, and emotional problems.

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

- ***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 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 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 furtherance of the learning and good behavior outside the teaching situation. Achieving such an outcome involves use of strategies that do not over-rely on extrinsic rewards and that enable youngsters to play a meaningful role in making decisions related to valued options.

How many students does it take to change a light bulb?



Only one, but the student has to want to change the bulb!

IV. Motivation and School Improvement: Beyond Reinforcement Theory

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 it 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, 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 is 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 are widely used. 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 rewarding is 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*, for example, seems to be an innate quality that leads us to seek stimulation, avoid boredom, and learn a great deal.

People also pursue some things because of 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 challenges 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 is an internal push toward *self-determination*. 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 of *interpersonal connection.* (See the reference list for key citations on motivation.)

About Expectations

We may value something a great deal; but if we believe we can't do it or can't 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 that influence our perceptions of how easy or hard it will be to obtain a desired outcome. Sometimes we know we can easily do something, but it may not be something we value pursuing. At other times, we may value something a great deal but not believe we can do it or can only obtain it by paying too great a personal price. Under such circumstances, we are likely to look for other valued activities and outcomes to pursue.

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 2).

V. A Caution about Over-relying on Extrinsics

The discussion of valuing and expectations underscores 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 clarified some undesired effects of over-relying 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 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.

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 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 then the student will re-engage in learning. However, there is little evidence that these strategies enhance a student's motivation toward classroom learning (National Research Council, 2004).

Exhibit 2

A Bit of Theory

Engaging and re-engaging students depends on how the classroom and school address concerns about valuing and expectations. Schools and classrooms that offer a broad range of learning and enrichment opportunities (e.g., content, outcomes, procedural options) and involve students in decision making are best equipped to meet the challenge. At the risk of over-simplifying things, the following discussion underscores a few facets of motivation theory.

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.

VI. About Psychological Reactance and Re-engagement

When students are not engaged in the lessons at hand, it is commonplace to find them pursuing courses of action teachers find troublesome. The greatest concern usually arises when a student's behavior is disruptive. Schools react to such behavior with an array of *social control* strategies. At one time, a heavy dose of punishment was the dominant approach. Currently, the emphasis is on more positive practices designed to provide "behavior support" in and out-of-the-classroom.

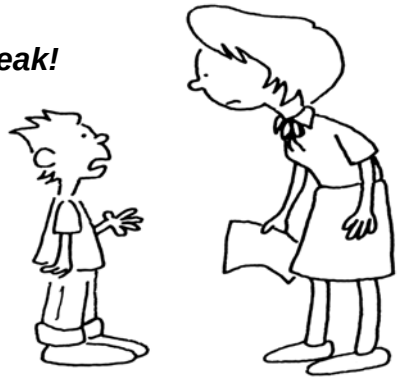
An often stated assumption is that stopping students' misbehavior makes them amenable to teaching and enhances classroom learning. In a few cases, this may be so. However, the assumption ignores all the work on understanding *psychological reactance* and the need for individuals to restore their sense 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.

Psychological reactance is a motivational force that seems to arise when an individuals perceive threats to their self-determination. When this happens, they are motivated to react in ways that protect or restore their sense of personal control.

The argument sometimes is made that the reason students continue to misbehave and not do well at school is because the wrong socialization practices (e.g., punishment, illogical consequences) are used or that good social control practices are implemented incorrectly. Thus, the ongoing emphasis is on convincing schools to (1) continue to minimize punishment and (2) do better in executing programs for social skills training, asset development, character education, and positive behavior support. 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 understand psychological reactance and the implications for engagement and disengagement related to classroom learning. Teachers tell us that they are taught a bit about engaging students, but neither pre- nor inservice focus much on how to prevent students from disengaging and how to re-engage a student who has become disconnected.

> ***So:*** the irony is that overreliance on extrinsics to control behavior may exacerbate student problems. Motivational research suggests that when people perceive their freedom 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.
>
> 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 resistance and enhancing perceptions that lead to re-engagement in learning at school by rethinking social control practices.

If you didn't make so many rules,
there wouldn't be so many for me to break!



VII. School Climate as an Emergent Quality

School and classroom climate are key concerns in discussions about school improvement because of their profound influence on behavior and learning. The climate at a school and in a classroom can range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year. A positive climate can have a beneficial impact on students and staff; a negative climate can be another barrier to learning and teaching.

The climate at a school is a temporal, and somewhat fluid, perceived quality that *emerges* from the complex transaction of many factors and reflects the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school culture. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school are affected by the surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

Related concepts for understanding school and classroom climate are social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; *fit* between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos (e.g., 1979) groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) Relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) Personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) System maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Analyses of research suggest significant relationships between climate at school and matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. For example, studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction and less disorganization and conflict. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against.

Given the correlational nature of school and classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate (Cohen, 2006; Mahoney & Hextall, 2000). Thus, it is likely that the increasing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior contribute to a climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate positive functioning. In contrast, school and classroom climates can be enhanced when a school develops a *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports* because such a system minimizes threats to and maximizes intrinsic motivation for engaging at school.

Prevailing approaches to measuring classroom climate use (1) teacher and student perceptions, (2) external observer's ratings and systematic coding, and/or (3) naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, case study, and interpretative assessment techniques (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999). Because the concept is a psychological construct, climate in a given setting can be perceived differently by observers. With this in mind, Moos (1979) measured classroom environment in terms of the shared perceptions of those in the classroom.

Increasing interest in enhancing school climate is reflected in the establishment of the *National School Climate Center* and the U.S. Department of Education's initiative for Safe and Supportive Schools. See

>the brief *School Climate Research Summary* posted on the National School Climate Center website – http://nscc.csee.net/effective/school_climate_research_summary.pdf

>the National School Climate Standards – http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php

>the U.S. Dept. of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant program which aims to provide the resources for systems to measure school climate and safety at the building level and to help intervene in those schools with the greatest needs.
http://www2.ed.gov/programs/safesupportiveschools/index.html

Concluding Comments

Student disengagement in schooling is a fundamental barrier to well-being. Thus, re-engaging students in classroom learning must be a fundamental focus for all who are concerned about learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Whatever the initial cause of someone's learning and behavior problems, the longer the individual has lived with such problems, the more likely he or she will have negative feelings and thoughts about instruction, teachers, and schools. The feelings may 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 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.

It remains tempting to focus directly on student misbehavior. It also is tempting to think that behavior problems at least can be minimized by laying down the law. We have seen many administrators pursue this line of thinking. For every student who shapes up, ten others may be pushed out of school through a progression of suspensions, opportunity transfers, and expulsions.

Official dropout figures don't tell the tale. The reality seen in most high schools in poor cities and rural areas is that only about half those who were enrolled in Grade 9 are still around to graduate from Grade 12. Most of these students entered kindergarten with a healthy curiosity and a desire to learn to read and write. By the end of Grade 2, 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 and minimizing reactance. 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. Unfortunately, without re-engagement in classroom learning, there will be no substantial and lasting gains in achievement test scores, unwanted behavior is very likely to reappear, and many will continue to be left behind.

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Also see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Motivation* at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm

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

Enhancing School Improvement by Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

Interested in learning more about developing a comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students?

(1) Download the brief center document entitled:
>*Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf

(2) If it peaks your interest, see the online webinar we did in collaboration with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) entitled:
>*Strengthening School Improvement by Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports to Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
https://scholastic.webex.com/scholastic/lsr.php?AT=pb&SP=TC&rID=48915112&rKey=09f14db0881f5159&act=pb

(3) If you want a more in-depth understanding, go to the online Leadership Institute webinar-like course we developed in collaboration with Scholastic Inc.
>*Addressing Barriers to Learning and Re-engaging Students*
http://rebuildingforlearning.scholastic.com/

(4) Also, check out the online "Toolkit" – especially Section A, which has a set of concept briefs, powerpoints, and Q & A Talking Points designed to clarify the big picture for policy makers, administrators, and other stakeholders –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm

(5) Then, if your district is ready to explore moving forward in a strategic way, feel free to contact us to discuss how we can help. Contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Moving Forward

Those of you who have followed our work over the years are aware that we continuously expand our institutional and individual contacts and widely outreach to disseminate resources and provide training and TA. This includes preparing adaptable resources and establishing an extensive clearinghouse for online access, organizing summits, providing leadership institutes, and so forth.

Our research stresses policy and program analyses and development of frameworks for advancing the field (see the Center website – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu). To ensure productive diffusion, we facilitate initiatives and networking across the country.

All our efforts are designed, over time, to strategically enhance cost-effectiveness in school districts, at school sites, and at health and social service agencies. We stress school-community collaboration to reduce marginalization, fragmentation, and counter-productive competition for sparse resources.

At this point in time, we are pleased to report an accelerating impact of the work.

As previously noted, our intervention and operational infrastructure frameworks for a school-based comprehensive system or student and learning supports have been embraced by state departments in Hawai`i, Iowa, and Louisiana and have been influential in other states and various districts. (See *Where's It Happening: Examples and Lessons Learned* online at http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/nind7.htm.)

Recently, as a result of our public-private collaboration with the Community Affairs Unit of *Scholastic Inc.* and the collaboration with the *American Association of School Administrators* (AASA), four LEAD districts are pursuing the work. These are Gainesville City Schools (GA), Indian River County Public School District (FL), Jefferson County Public Schools (KY), and Sabine Parish Schools (LA). The aim is for them to develop a comprehensive approach and then become a focal point for diffusing the approach (see http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/ninhome.htm)

Now, we are pleased to report that we were contacted in the fall by the Tucson (AZ) Unified School District and the Columbus (OH) City Schools and have begun helping them adopt a *Comprehensive System of Learning Supports.*

In the coming months, we will be able to share the processes and progress as these states and districts move forward.

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Want resources? Need technical assistance?

Use our website: **http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu**
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If you're not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS) or our weekly *Practitioners' Exchange*, send your E-mail address to smhp@ucla.edu

For the latest on Center resources and activities, see **http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu** – click on *What's New*

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New!

>Virtual Toolbox for Practitioner's of Mental Health in Schools

Compiles Center developed resources to aid practitioners and those involved in pre-and inservice professional development programs.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/toolbox.htm

>Enhancing the Blueprint for School Improvement in the ESEA Reauthorization: Moving from a 2- to a 3-component approach

A four page informative to share with busy school leaders and decision makers. Prepared in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/enhancingtheblueprint.pdf

A person with a new idea is a crank until the idea succeeds.
Mark Twain

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 graduate and undergraduate students

Support comes in part from the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Admin., U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services.

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