

*Loving Our Differences*  
*Motivation and Special Education*

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## *Loving Our Differences the Impact of Personality and Motivation on Special Education*

### **Introduction**

My 30 years of experience in education have led me down various intellectual paths with regard to educational research and practice. Trends and issues seem to come and go. Most teachers realize that there really is no need to take any new initiative too seriously because if they wait long enough, the pendulum will swing in another direction and the next favored technique will come along. In the span of my lifetime I have seen numerous reading programs, behavior programs, math initiatives, assessment techniques, critical thinking initiatives, etc., etc., etc. be introduced, lauded, lose favor, and be gone!!! This is true across the board at all grade levels, in public and private schools, in general and special education.

What remains as a constant through all those educational initiatives, are the kids. The students we work with everyday have not changed much over the years. Students keep coming to our classes in various stages of preparation, with diverse backgrounds, an assortment of academic capabilities and a wide range of interests. As a special education teacher, one thing that continually challenged me was those individual levels of student motivation. I found a great many teachers who were repeatedly frustrated by students (often my special education students but not always) who just did not seem to want to do the work.

I observed countless teachers over the years refer to students who did not want to work in various ways. Sometimes they just considered them hopeless and labeled them lazy. Often they felt helpless and considered motivation outside the realm of their academic expertise. Once in a while, I would find a teacher who gave up and basically just said, "It is not my problem. I did not raise the child this way and there is nothing I can do with them during my class." In any case, motivation and especially motivation for those students with the most need (special education and other at-risk populations) is a complicated and frustrating concept to deal with in schools.

## **A Definition**

Most definitions for the word “motivate” include a reference to incentive, moving to action or to impel (Answers.com, 2010). Motivation then refers to the process of utilizing incentives that move a person to action. Motivators or incentives help determine behavior. Sometimes those incentives are internal while other times they are external. Hallahan and Kauffman (2006,) define motivation for special needs students as “...feelings about their ability to deal with many of life’s challenges and problems” (p. 190). Lavoie (2007) discusses motivation as the key to learning that includes components of performance inconsistency and learned helplessness. One result of a lack of motivation is, as Levine (2003) discusses a “lack of output” that some characterize as laziness. Selig, Arroyo, Jordan, Baggaley, & Hunter (2010) emphasize the impact of stress on levels of motivation.

External motivators sometimes play a role in providing incentives in schools. A carrot on the end of the stick, whether that is M & Ms for small children or participation in sports as an incentive for older students, concrete rewards can be motivating for some children and even adults. External motivators should not be used as short-term incentives as internal motivation is the ultimate goal.

Students who struggle in school often feel as if external factors are in control with regard to their academic success and external motivators can ultimately decrease self-determination. When students give control to those external factors they also take less responsibility for success or failure. Learned helplessness may result when motivation and academic failure intersect to negatively impact students with disabilities (Hallahan & Kaufman, 2006).

Conversely, internal motivators provide students with a sense that they are in control and able to accomplish what they are determined to do. When students are able to complete projects

and tasks that are within their capability they develop a sense of control and are more likely to take responsibility for their own achievement. Teachers who scaffold assignments, making them increasing more difficult as the student is ready, and allow enough time for students to complete the work set the scene for success and increase that internal motivation. Rewarding for productivity instead of grades is important (Levine, 2003).

Basically – the question becomes -- what is it that makes people tick? This is a very complicated question. Why do some students seem to come to school excited about almost every topic and ready to participate and learn while others lack interest and refuse to complete assignments or participate in class activities? Why is it that some students have the ability to deal with the challenges and problems that they encounter at school while others cannot cope at all?

### **The Problem**

Hence, the problem, how do we motivate students in the educational K-12 setting moving away from external motivation with internal motivation as the ultimate goal? Student achievement is impacted by motivation or lack thereof. Some students come to school unable to function and this impacts their output. How do teachers deal with those students who do not seem to be motivated by either internal or external means, regardless of their ability?

### **Motivation Research and Literature**

Huetinck, L. & Munshin, S. N. (2008) summarize over 20 years of research on motivation and learning. Their work emphasizes the fact that motivation is often learned through discovery activities and that success begets success. They note that enthusiastic teachers who are interested in their students are more likely to motivate their students toward success (Huetinck, L. & Munshin, S.N., 2008).

The National Association of Special Education Teachers highlighted a small study on high school students with learning disabilities (LD) in the JAASEP Research-based Journal in Special Education. *Creating a Motivating Classroom (2010)* investigated motivational factors that lead to academic success (Boon, Spencer & Jeffs, 2006). Five factors emerged as the most important with regard to motivation for LD students in school. LD high school students are motivated by their friends and given the importance of friends to teenagers this is an expected finding. With regard to teacher behaviors, learning disabled students in this study preferred teachers who were respectful and interesting. They also noted that their favorite teachers inspired, encouraged and motivated them while engaging them in classroom activities (Boon, Spencer & Jeffs, 2006). Voke (2002) expands on this conversation with her discussion of motivation and the components of student engagement. Student engagement is another important component of motivation.

There is a great deal of literature (both classic and modern) that addresses motivation and how research and practice should inform instruction. This plethora of information can be confusing. Motivation, as complicated as that may be, impacts output. Any teacher knows that when students are excited about a project, an assignment, or an activity, they work harder and do a better job. Ultimately the question becomes; how do we get the attention of our students and help motivate them to take charge of their own learning so that they become life-long learners long after they leave our classroom?

### **Another Solution, *Loving Our Differences* – Motivation, Talents & Personality**

*Loving Our Differences for Teachers* (Selig et al., 2010) suggests that teachers start by having a better understanding of their students' motivation levels, personality style, and talents. Maturation plays a key role in motivation and knowing whether a student is at the "me" level, the "approval" level, the "personal relationship" level, or is more "others-oriented" is important to

understanding how to approach that student. Likewise, knowing if your student is a ruler, a promoter, a server, or a designer also provides guidance. Selig et al. (2010) explains the importance of knowing whether a student has a talent for leadership, teaching, encouragement, service, compassion, or insight can also support how a teacher handles a student in the classroom.

In *Loving Our Differences* (2010), the authors suggest that diversity goes beyond ethnicity, culture, gender, etc. and starts with individual differences in personality, talents, and motivation. Getting to know students better on an individual basis, their personalities, motivation levels, and talents will give the teacher more tools to effectively plan appropriate academic and behavior plans for their students. When instruction is planned with the unique ability and style of the student in mind, it results in engaged students who are motivated to take control of their own learning.

### **Classroom Strategies**

Teacher Traits play an important role in motivating students. Malikow (2005) found that teachers who set expectations reasonably high and challenged students, had a sense of humor, were enthusiastic, creative and caring, explained the material well and had flexible instructional styles were most likely to motivate students. Other studies show that teachers who are interested in their students, enthusiastic, respectful, know both their students and how they impact their students also have a positive impact on students in their classrooms (Boon, Spencer & Jeffs, 2006). *Loving Our Differences for Teachers* (Selig et al., 2010) suggests that teachers get to know themselves first in order to understand the impact they will have when they interact with their students. Teachers need to be aware of their own personal traits and how these are exhibited in their professional setting so that they are able to intentionally exhibit those traits in their classrooms.

Motivating classrooms present an overall environment that is welcoming, engaging, and supportive. This environment includes both the physical setting and the general psychological atmosphere that sets the scene in any learning environment. Each teacher should ask whether their setting looks and feels like a place that is fun, safe, creative and celebrates diversity. Rick Lavoie (2007) suggests that classrooms need the 6 C's – Creativity, Community, Clarity, Coaching, Conferencing, and Control. Just as teachers need to intentionally exhibit traits that set the scene for motivating students, they also need to address the issue of what kind of an environment they are setting to encourage student motivation.

Teacher who are exhibiting motivational teacher traits and have set scene to motivate student learning through their environment must focus daily on motivational instruction. Knowing students' academic strengths and weaknesses as well as their interests allows teachers to set the scene for success through instructional techniques that meet the students where they are and scaffold the material through to that reasonably, challenging level. Comer (2004) suggests considering a child's developmental levels in order to facilitate self-interest thus engaging students in their own learning as they develop aspirations and the motivation to learn. Utilizing differentiated instruction that addresses students' academic and developmental levels as well as interests is fundamental to providing motivating lessons. The National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET, 2010) provides several suggestions for motivating instruction including but not limited to; culminating events, interesting guest speakers, meaningful choice, fun activities for review, student participation, use of real-world examples, hands-on concrete activities, and celebrating achievement.

Motivating students is a complicated issue but one that all teachers know is important to academic achievement. Teachers can only do so much to enhance student motivation and there are many components beyond teacher control. However, all teachers can be aware of their own

teacher traits and make ongoing efforts to develop traits to enhance student motivation, provide a motivating environment and instruction. The following list summarizes the concept of teacher traits, environment & instruction with regard to enhanced student motivation.

1. Teacher Traits To Enhance Student Motivation Include Teachers Who are – interested, enthusiastic, respectful, fun, creative, caring & self-aware
2. Environments that Enhance Student Motivation are – welcoming, engaging, safe & supportive
3. Instruction that Enhances Motivation – differentiates instruction, scaffolds lessons and assignments, builds in success, is reasonably challenging, provides choice, engages students through activities, relates to the real world, and celebrates incremental success

## **Conclusion**

One of the first concepts most teacher preparation programs present is that of the impact each teacher has on students. Student success can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and that can be positive or negative. If teachers expect students to learn and succeed, students will most often step up and meet those expectations. Teachers have complicated jobs and are not the only variable with regard to student motivation but they are the most important variable in their own classrooms for several hours of every school day. Special education teachers support those students who have the most difficult time finding academic success and those students are therefore at greater risk for low levels of motivation. Though challenging, this can be the most rewarding group of students with whom teachers have the opportunity to work. Accept the challenge, focus on teacher traits through personal and professional awareness, enhance the environment, and provide engaging instruction to make that self-fulfilling prophecy positive!





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