Supporting Motivation in Early Learners

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The following article is an edited transcript of a 25 minute talk about how we can better nurture intrinsic motivation in early learners. In part, this is an article that challenges deeply ingrained practices in our education system. Practices that have been found to diminish ongoing motivation. But in true solution focused fashion, it is also an article that explores key strategies for engaging and motivating children as they set foot on their educational journey in life.

Imagine…

Imagine a child of average appearance, average ability and average health. An ordinary child from an ordinary family. Now imagine that child attending an average state primary school followed by an average state high school. Throughout their time in the education system they are a solid player – not exceptional in academic subjects or sport. Not especially gifted in music or the arts – but solid. In the middle of the pack when it comes to their performance.

An ordinary Australian child.

Now imagine that child loving their educational experience all the way from playdough in kindy to the final months of year twelve. Imagine them embracing and engaging in learning in all their subjects – loving to learn new things, and to have a go. Imagine that child so motivated to learn that they go to school each day with a passion to continue to learn for life, no matter what challenges they may face. A child with a desire to fully engage in all they do. A child with a great sense of wellbeing.

Now wouldn’t that be extraordinary…

In reality…

Despite nearly all children being naturally motivated and enamored with life when they begin school, many finish year twelve with a sense that learning is hard work, challenging, stressful and frequently boring. Current statistics on youth mental health reflect this disengagement observed in young learners. A recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald suggests that 10% of students experience significant mental health problems at any one time. The 2002 National Survey of Australian Mental Health and Wellbeing suggested that 14% of Australian primary school aged children have mental health problems. In 2006, Professor Patrick McGorry suggested that this figure rises up to 19% in adolescence. My own 2002 survey suggested that over 40% of school children in WA experience low levels of wellbeing. This means that even if they have not been
diagnosed with a specific mental health problem, they are not as happy as we want them, or expect them to be. Research is telling us that, as kids travel through the education system, their levels of stress and poor mental health increase.

Although there are undoubtedly a myriad of influences on youth mental health, is it possible that some of our teaching practices are contributing to the problem more than offering a solution?

Hungarian psychologist and author Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is well known the world over for his theory of ‘Flow’. The theory suggests that people are at their happiest when they are in a state of concentration or complete absorption with a particular activity. He calls this a state of ‘flow’. When people are in flow, nothing else seems to matter. The idea of flow is identical to the feeling of being in the zone or in the groove. A state of flow is an optimal state of intrinsic motivation, where the person is fully immersed in what they are doing.

Mihaly suggests that there is a strong link between flow and wellbeing. One that certainly makes intuitive sense. When we are intrinsically motivated and engaged in what we do, we feel truly alive and we experience wellbeing. Similarly the great modern philosopher Joseph Campbell frequently suggested that happiness stems from feeling ‘connected’ with life far more than it equates to finding any particular meaning in life.

Mihaly and others working in the area of intrinsic motivation, myself included, believe that many young people experience diminished wellbeing because they become demotivated and disengaged within a school system that favours the use of extrinsic rewards in almost every area of learning.

So, let's take a look at one of the most approaches to nurturing motivation in early education…

...extrinsic reinforcement systems and praise.

By which I mean rewards, stars, stickers and merit cards and that ‘well done’, or ‘good job’ that we give out to early learners all the time… All those things that we like to give to students to let them know that we ‘approve’ of their behaviour; that we are ‘pleased’ to see them heading along the right path.

Now if you have ever offered to reward a student for doing something well; be it reading, sitting quietly in class or being nice to another student, you will probably have noticed that the student was very happy to comply and take their prize. The delight in many students faces that comes from classroom prizes and lashings of praise, is often taken to be some sort of evidence for the power of rewards to enhance learning and motivation.

So what does the research actually say?
First things first – there is an enormous body of research on motivation and learning – from economics, psychology, sociology and education. Two of the most widely quoted experts in this area are Professors Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. Professors Ryan and Deci, along with many others, have found time and time again that reward systems do not motivate students to engage in learning. In fact they have frequently been found to diminish students’ ability to develop intrinsic motivation and enjoyment in the things they are being rewarded for. This is particularly true if the rewards are given to young children and are for completing set tasks (such as reading a book).

For example, in 2008, researchers Dr Barbara Marinak and Dr Linda Gambrell, published a paper confirming that students who received a reward for reading subsequently showed less interest in doing so (on three separate measures of intrinsic motivation) than those who received nothing.

So what is happening here?

When we offer a reward to someone they become focused on that reward. They may indeed be more compliant (at least in the short term) because they really want to get the prize. But, that focus on getting the reward means attention and effort are taken away from enjoying and engaging in the task, and realizing the intrinsic rewards in that process. Hence the early readers who are rewarded become more interested in their reading certificate (representing the approval of others) than in developing a love of reading (an intrinsic reward).

Time and time again we see that extrinsic rewards lead to short term compliance and a desire for adult approval but diminish long term intrinsic motivation.

If we continue to use such misguided reinforcement systems in early education we are setting children up to gradually experience diminishing motivation and associated poor mental health on their educational journey.

Now I appreciate that when I present these research findings to teachers they often present one seemingly enormous barrier for change; and that is a need for student compliance. In fact I am confident that many teachers are well aware that rewards do little to engage students in a task, but use them because they appear effective in garnering desired student behaviour and co-operation. If you are a teacher of a large year one class full of energetic boys, then it is understandable that behaviour management is an important issue.

So, is there a way we can both encourage desirable behaviour; AND, nurture intrinsic motivation in students?

The answer is an encouraging yes, however, patience is required.
There are many things that we can do to help nurture both intrinsic motivation and desirable behaviour, but, these things often require a larger investment of time, empathy and understanding than the simple offer of a tempting prize for good behaviour.

**With the understanding that early learners the focus of this article, I am going to discuss three of these better options here.**

1. **Relationships**

   We know from research that if a child likes their class teacher they are more likely to listen to them, be compliant and engage in prescribed learning tasks. Moreover, in a recent (2014) Australian study, Dr Lauren Miller-Lewis supported previous research, with a finding that students who had developed positive relationships with their teachers in their first few years of education went on to exhibit fewer problem behaviours and greater pro-social behaviour. These effects remained after adjustment for levels of mental health problems at age four. Dr Miller-Lewis’s findings suggest that building stable high quality student-teacher relationships during preschool may help reduce rates of ongoing childhood mental health problems.

   Getting to know your students as individuals, taking a genuine interest in who they are, and what they love to do, is also vitally important. Students like teachers who are authentic. Teachers who do not try to control them or win them over with insincere enthusiasm but rather, teachers who are genuine, honest and listen to their views and concerns. Effective listening means empathizing, showing you understand how a child feels, and not necessarily trying to find the solution or ‘fill’ children up with praise.

   Ultimately, good student-teacher relationships are built when teachers are socially and emotionally skilled themselves, and genuinely take an interest in the children in their care.

   This is yet another reminder of the importance of paying attention to staff wellbeing.

2. **Fun**

   Why does one child want to read while another wants to play outside? Why is one seemingly motivated to learn about the weather while another seems totally bored by the subject of the week? The answers to these questions often lie in the child’s engagement in a task – and that simply means that ‘children want to have fun’.

   If a learning activity is not fun and engaging then perhaps it is being pitched it at the wrong level (it is too easy or too complicated) or it is not autonomous enough for the child to engage in. For example, think about cooking. Isn’t it amazing how many vegetables kids will eat if they help prepare them? Similarly, it can be wonderful to see how proud a child can be of their self-produced, imperfect craft creation. From a child’s point of view, it is far better to produce a flawed original work than a perfect copy. When it comes to early learners, we need to let go of ideas about producing 29 wonderful works of art within a highly organized classroom. Young children need to be able to have a go
without fear of failure and to do things ‘their own way’ as much as is possible. They need to be able to make mistakes, be noisy, work with friends and make a mess.

And most importantly we need to understand that no matter what the curriculum might suggest, young kids learn most effectively through play. In fact play equates to having fun. As stated eloquently by Dr David Whitehead at the University of Cambridge, young children need to play to set the very foundations for learning and creative development. In fact play is a vital precursor to the neurological development required for creativity, language development, music and maths.

Play needs to be a vital component of engaging in learning in every classroom. Psychologist Karen McInnes and her colleagues in the UK have found that children conceptualize learning as play according to the amount of control and choice they have over an activity. Her 2013 research findings suggest that if a teacher wants the class to enjoy ‘playing to learn’ they need to ensure that the children feel a sense of control and choice over the activities they do.

At every opportunity, ask yourselves, “how can I turn this learning experience into a playful one in which the kids have a sense of control, freedom and fun about the things they are learning?”

3. Physicality

The idea that we have a mind and a body can easily lead to a false distinction being made between the two. We can all too easily end up believing that not only are mind and body separate but that they compete for our conscious attention. This means we may well end up believing that if a child needs to pay attention to what we are saying, they need to keep their body still. In reality, kids actually think and learn more effectively when they are moving around. Not running a race, but fidgeting, standing or walking gently.

Kids are made to move. It can take more attention for a child to sit still (reducing their capacity to listen) than is takes for them to move gently and attend to what we have to say.

In 2014 Ward Elementary School in North Carolina reported surprising findings from their read and ride program. They installed exercise bikes in some of the classrooms so that children could ride whilst reading. The initial aim of the program was to improve physical fitness and help combat the youth obesity epidemic in the US. When it was time to look at the data, the school was amazed to find not only a significant improvement in fitness and health, but also a significant improvement in reading ability compared to the kids who had sat still in class. The program has been so successful it has been adopted by over thirty other schools in the area.

You may not be able to bring exercise bikes into your class but you can still do many things to embrace movement in learning. Rather than rewarding kids for sitting still, try introducing stress balls for kids to play with on the mat and regular exercise breaks (brain breaks) every twenty minutes throughout the school day. This may mean stopping for a
two minute dance to music or even a run around the oval. The Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) has presented some fabulous facts about the link between movement, motivation and learning and can provide some great ideas for brain breaks in an early learners’ classroom.

**Ultimately, I believe that we need to go back to the drawing board of educational practices and consider what are the most important educational aims for young people today.**

I know that I want young people to develop autonomy, to learn to be self-directed and to be able to make healthy decisions for themselves. I want them to be creative and ultimately to be able to find their passion in life. For these are such vital ingredients of life long intrinsic motivation and wellbeing.

So many of the outdated rules and practices that prevail in our schools are about controlling students with approval or disapproval, imposing greater structure on their lives and in effect, telling them what to do.

I want every Australian child to have the opportunity to find their own voice in the classroom and their own passion for learning. They may not be the next gifted child or, the next sporting hero, but, they can certainly all be happy, motivated and extraordinary…

Imagine…

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**Suggested reading**


Other articles by Helen Street can be found at [www.positivetimes.com.au](http://www.positivetimes.com.au)