

The Question:

How can I help my students develop intrinsic motivation?

Story of question:

When I started in my new classroom in January, something struck me that I had not noticed in my prior setting. Incentives, arguably bribes, were a presence in this first grade class. It seemed that following directions and making good choices resulted in a reward, usually concrete, that benefited the student. For example, Friday afternoon snack is an incentive that is constantly mentioned starting Monday morning. When there is a birthday party or some sort of special occasion, being allowed to attend that event is used as an incentive from the moment my classroom mentor finds out about the plans. “If you want snack on Friday, you need to be quiet now.”

Our classroom uses a green, yellow, red management strategy. Students move their colors throughout the day from green to yellow to red, but can move it from red to yellow to green when positive behavior is observed. Colors are recorded in a home journal and (should be) signed by parents or guardians. “Do your math work, or you are getting a red for the day.” Take-home behavior grades are used against the students for every decision made. “Why is your jacket still on? Give yourself a red.” “Why are you talking? Give yourself a red.” “Stop talking and give yourself a red. You will not have snack on Friday afternoon.” As a result of this strategy, I began to hear myself saying things I did not like hearing. As Alfie Kohn writes, it is essential to avoid statements such as “Do this or here’s what I’m going to do to you,” or “Do this and you’ll get that” (Kohn, 352, 2004).

My classroom mentor wants my students to excel and be exposed to and learn new

material everyday. But the classroom climate can become a bit hostile and cold with all of the yelling. It seems the students are numb to the volume of her voice; the loudness has no effect on them anymore.

One Wednesday afternoon in February, we were cleaning up the room as a class because we were having visitors the next day. Groups of students were designated to clean up the coat area, the front carpet, the back carpet, the computers, the tables, etc. As we were straightening up the different sections, a student asked my classroom mentor, “Can we get a snack Thursday afternoon too?” I heard this and thought twice about what was being asked. Is this student being motivated by a snack? Does this student think he deserves an extra snack for doing what was asked?

At another point, when I started videotaping lessons, I noticed some students would turn and talk to their neighbor or throw something in the air as soon as I turned my back. I know this is normal, especially for first grade, but it is intentional and I want my students to do the right thing even when they think no one is watching. Being sneaky and getting away with it now can have long-term effects later in life. My goal is to have my students want to do the right thing when there are no rewards involved and no one is watching because they take pride in themselves and want to be the best person they can be.

One of my desired results during my two-week takeover and curriculum was for “students to walk away wanting to make the right decision in various situations.” (See [UBD Planning Template](#).) In an ideal world, students would know the right thing to do before the teacher even has to say anything. But that is not realistic, nor will it ever be, especially for first graders. During my teaching, I decided to really focus on noticing when students make a good decision and do what is asked of them when no concrete reward is offered.

This started as a question of bribes and incentives, but as I delved into research, I realized what I am really hoping to achieve is the development of intrinsic motivation in my students, making extrinsic motivation less prevalent.

What does the literature say?

Developing a sense of drive, integrity, and dedication for a passion will allow students to grow up and be productive members of society. With everything going on in the world today, our first graders and younger elementary students need to learn to make good decisions and stand up for what is right. They are our future. They are our future leaders, teachers, doctors, parents, presidents, lawyers, and role models. I want my students to do the right thing when no one is watching, to help a friend because they want to, to read a book because they enjoy it, to recycle because they love the environment, and to give a compliment because they want others to feel good about themselves. But how can I create a space for my students to want to do this too? It is important for individuals to not be driven by external motivators because “manipulating people with incentives seems to work in the short run, but it is really a strategy that ultimately fails and even does lasting harm” (Kohn, 1993, p. 74). How can I help my students develop intrinsic motivation at their young age?

Intrinsic motivation is when a person does an activity “for no apparent reward except the activity itself or the feelings which result from the activity” (Deci, 1975, p. abstract). “Extrinsic rewards are often given with good intentions, but they can have detrimental effects” (Ames, 1992, p. 26). Recent research suggests approaches supporting intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivators. A study by Timothy Newbery reveals a heavy-reliance on rewards by first-year teachers (Newbery, 1991).

Career analyst Dan Pink identified intrinsic motivation as “the desire to do things because they matter, because we like it, because it is interesting, because they are part of something important” (Pink, 2009). 21st century jobs require higher levels of thinking and

creativity. Extrinsic motivation no longer works with our current society and was more appropriate for 20th century routine tasks that are now done by technology and software. In his TED talk, Pink discusses how incentives and rewards dull thinking, reduce risk-taking, and block creativity which is not beneficial for 21st century jobs. Pink explains how rewards can actually destroy creativity and influence individuals to think narrowly rather than out of the box. Traditional rewards are not always as effective as we think. Rewards are appropriate for tasks where the goal is right there (e.g. licking envelopes), which are not the tasks that are usually effective in the classroom (Pink, 2009).

Carol Dweck, one of the world's leading researchers in the study of motivation, has written many pieces about why people succeed and how to foster success. When offering praise to a student, it is more beneficial for the student to receive praise based on their effort as opposed to their ability. "Enhancing motivation means enhancing children's value of effort and a commitment to effort-based strategies" (Ames, 1992, p. 268).

Research by Dweck and many others in the motivational field prefer learning goals to performance goals in the classroom in order to support and sustain students' learning and confidence (Montalvo, Mansfield, Miller, 2007). "Learning goals focus on progress and mastery through effort" rather than seeking feedback in ability (Dweck, 1986, p. 1041). Teachers play a huge role in how students perceive their own ability which, in turn, affects student motivation and persistence in the classroom. Setting personal goals is a good support for strengthening intrinsic motivation because students are motivated by achieving their own goal, something that is based on their own ability and gives them a challenge to work toward.

In order for students to believe in themselves, they need to have teachers who are

supportive, caring, and approachable. Teachers should show their commitment to their students as people outside the classroom too. A thoughtful and considerate teacher can maintain student interest and cooperation in school as well as positively influence the level of engagement (Montalvo et al., 2007). When students like school and genuinely enjoy their time in the classroom, they may begin to realize they enjoy the work and find it interesting.

The classroom environment created by the teacher is one of the most critical factors when it comes to student motivation. Teachers cannot make students *want* to do things, but they can provide an environment, task, or activity that is desirable (Dansford, Taff, Kohn, 2004). A learning environment in which teachers provide positive feedback and respect for the students, assist students, offer appropriate praise, and do random acts of kindness for the students can lead to increased student motivation and academic achievement (Montalvo et al., 2007).

Although the job of the teacher is to expose students to new material and provide them with countless learning opportunities, the overarching goal should really be for students to enjoy school and see it as a safe place. The role of schools and teachers is shaping, molding, and creating a unique person in a space where they can explore, ask questions, and discover the world around them.

Happy students want to please the teacher. When students like the teacher, their effort and quality of work improves, which can be a positive step toward students participating in activities for their own sake. This can be a huge factor in helping students develop intrinsic motivation because as first graders and elementary school students, teachers should bring out the best in their students, so they know early in life their

potential. Research shows that fondness for the teacher positively correlates with student motivation (Montalvo et al., 2007).

When students know the real-life application and the purpose of a lesson, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated to participate because they understand they are a part of something important. Daniel Pink said explaining the purpose of assignments to students can help foster intrinsic motivation because it illustrates the bigger picture. Stressing the purpose of lessons and activities is highly beneficial to the students.

Dweck states that teaching students the brain is like a muscle and grows with effort can inspire students to not be intimidated by failure, but rather, use it as an opportunity to get better at something (Yeager & Walton, 2011). When students are presented with the concept of a growth mindset and are shown the brain is malleable, attitudes toward intelligence can change.

Self-confidence and self-perceptions of ability are related to intrinsic motivation. Feeling competent is a basic human need that is strongly linked to self-worth and innate happiness. Studies have confirmed that children's perceptions of competence are related to their intrinsic motivation. Fostering their perceptions of competence is necessary to develop and maintain intrinsic motivation in individuals. In addition, intrinsic motivation is closely related to persistence, academic achievement, and perseverance (Boufford, Marcoux, Vezeau, Bordeleu, 2003).

Using many of the concepts presented in published literature and research can guide me in helping my students develop intrinsic motivation. There is not one factor that affects everyone. Depending on the abilities, personalities, and personal situations of each

individual student, I will implement a variety of combinations of these approaches to strengthen their intrinsic motivation.

My Two-Week Takeover: What did I do and why?

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With the intention of focusing on developing intrinsic motivation in my students, I made specific decisions when designing my curriculum based on the literature. I wanted the students to find the desire within themselves to make [good, positive decisions](#) (1) because it was the right thing to do, not because there was a reward in for them. Another original goal of mine was to “create a climate and tone of warmth and safety” (Denton & Kriete, 2000).

The first thing I did was change the students’ seats. I did not change the arrangement of the classroom, but I changed where people sat and who they sat with after conducting a sociogram (2) to better understand the social makeup of the class. I used this tool to inform my seating chart. It was my goal to put the students at tables where they would succeed. I spent my first three months in the classroom getting to know the students and learning the dynamic. Desks had not been changed since the first day of school and I made the decision to change seats with the hopes that students would be happier and be able to complete more productive group work. Seating charts are like puzzles – there is a combination that works but it takes trial and error. Positive interdependence is a cooperative learning practice where “group members are linked together in such a way that one cannot succeed unless the others do” (Gillies, 2007, p.33). I

incorporated positive interdependence by designing group [activities \(3\)](#) and [lessons \(4\)](#), all of which were created using data from the sociogram.

When students are in a clean, organized environment, they are less distracted and have better attitudes and outlooks about school. Old nametags that had been tarnished were replaced with new, clean, and neat nametags [\(5\)](#) with the new seating arrangement. Students were encouraged to take pride in their nametags and table and not tamper with the new labels.

In order to foster intrinsic motivation so that students make better decisions and try their best, students need to feel competent themselves. When they have the confidence in themselves, they feel worthy of an education and believe they can grow up to be whatever they dream [\(6\)](#).

With my inquiry question in mind, and my desire for students to see the good they possess, I introduced a new daily norm, the [“Mystery Citizen” \(7\)](#). I wanted to show the students I noticed when they were doing the right thing because it is so easy for teachers to get caught up in only recognizing negative behavior. Those who were named the “Mystery Citizen” were allowed to use the computer the next morning for ten minutes. I decided the mystery citizens could have ten minutes of computer time exploring [Starfall](#) because the computers are not used often and they can make learning fun. Also, computers offer learning that is “easily individualized and tailored to the needs and capabilities of the learner” (Lepper & Gurtner, 1989, p.170). “Computers will make learning more intrinsically motivating because it facilitates active learning, provides immediate feedback, and adjusts to match the capabilities and the pace of individual students” (Lepper & Gurtner, 1989, p.171). As a teacher, I knew it was my role to show the students I care and

perform random acts of kindness. Not everyday, but most days, I acknowledge a “Mystery Citizen” (8), or more than one if deserved.

Every morning a stickie was posted on each student’s nametag. This [goal-setting exercise \(9\)](#) was intended to strengthen the sense of purpose for the students and give them something to focus on and work toward throughout the day. I made sure to have a mid-morning check-in: “How is everyone doing with their goals? Give me a thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or a so-so hand.” This allowed the students to stay focused and feel a sense of pride and responsibility to achieve what they set out to do.

Pink discusses how purpose is important. When the purpose is clearly stated, whether it is the purpose of a lesson or the purpose of a student’s role, students seem to be more motivated and engaged. With this in mind, I [redistributed jobs \(10\)](#) and read aloud each job description, its role for the classroom to function, and the character traits that would be needed to take on the job. This instilled a sense of empowerment for each individual and emphasized their critical role in the classroom.

On Friday, April 5, I organized a “[Career Day](#)” (11) for family members and friends to come in and talk to both first grade classes about their jobs and their role in the community. With this activity, I wanted to convey the concept that every individual has the responsibility to play a part in the community running smoothly. This encourages both self-worth and goal-setting, which inspires intrinsic motivation. This also gave students the opportunity to hear directly from those who work in the community how important it is to find something you enjoy because it will make working and life a lot more rewarding.

Brief exercises that do not teach academic content but instead target students’ thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in and about school have had striking effects on educational

achievement even over months and years” (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p.268). I did “circle-time” everyday during my takeover, and have continued since then. Students sit around the perimeter of the rug and each student has the opportunity to speak in relation to the prompt, allowing students to realize their commonalities and differences (Denton & Kriete, 2000). Topics include “keeps and throws” where students share something they want to keep from the day and something they want to throw from the day. This metacognitive practice allows students to reflect about their daily activities and spend time acknowledging what worked for them and what did not work.

Other community-building activities included [hopes and dreams \(12\)](#) for the future, sharing a time or memory of when you were helpful, [compliment circle \(13\)](#), and a time you were [proud of yourself \(14\)](#). These different community-building activities gave students a sense of social belonging in the classroom as well as an opportunity to recognize their competence, positive attributes, and verbalize future goals (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Using Dweck’s research, I [taught a lesson \(15\)](#) comparing the brain to a muscle that needs to be exercised. I used the mode of [PowerPoint \(16\)](#) in order to show pictures and graphics that support the notion that intelligence is malleable and your brain is not a fixed object. Students were engaged, but due to the complexity of the message, following up days and weeks later, both formally and informally, was necessary.

In order to gauge self-perception, I gave my students a survey where I asked them to identify themselves on a scale in math, reading, and writing (Bouffard et al., 2003). In an ideal world, I would have done this once in the beginning of the semester, and then again after my two weeks, but I only have the latter. This exercise, however, provided me with valuable information. The point of this [survey \(17\)](#) was to identify students’ self-

perception because research proves there is a correlation between intrinsic motivation and self-perception. When students have a higher opinion of themselves, they are less dependent on extrinsic rewards and motivators and more able to be satisfied with intrinsic motivators. In order to help my students develop intrinsic motivation, I need to focus on and commit myself to building and gauging their confidence levels.

This survey was an eye-opening tool for me about one boy in particular. Donovan is incredibly smart, asks questions, participates in class, is above grade-level in reading, advanced vocabulary, etc. I was always curious about him, but I can never pinpoint why. When he cries, his eyes just get glassy and sometimes tears stream down his face, but he never “lets it out.” He gives hugs to every adult that comes in and out of the classroom and other adults in the hallways. He constantly asks “Are you mad?” “Do you like me?” When he filled out [his self-perception survey \(18\)](#), he gave himself a one, two, and four when the vast majority of students gave themselves all fives. I had a personal conference with him and asked him why he chose the numbers he chose. When he told me he was a “bad writer” and his work was always “sloppy,” I said “Donovan, I am telling you right now you really are a great writer. I am not just saying that and I wish you saw what I saw.” With that, he buried his head in his hands and started crying. It seems he needs validation because it is very possible that he is not getting it in other parts of his life. His fourth-grade brother has severe behavioral outbursts to the point he crawls under his desk or bangs his head on the desk and wall. For now, I am going to focus on Donovan and help him increase his self-confidence. I hope to be a resource for him and encourage him to help break down the walls he has built.

Every child is different, so the strategies I would use to work with a child like

Donovan to help develop his intrinsic motivation may not be the same strategies I would use for others in the class who may just be immature and values the sparkles, stickers, and being beautiful. Knowing the students in my classroom individually, culturally, and developmentally will increase the likelihood that they will succeed (Denton & Kreite, 2000). As Blanchard & Zigarmi write, "There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals," (Blanchard & Ziagarmi, 1982, p.33) meaning equal is not always fair. It is worth adding that during our compliment circle, a few students were embarrassed or felt uncomfortable, but Donovan could not listen to the person next to him saying, "I like when you do your best." He covered his face with his hands. Donovan was the only person who did not and could not say something about the person sitting next to him. He told me later, he was nervous and that is why he could not say anything about Valerie sitting next to him, but Colin from across the rug spoke.

At their young age, I want my students to now develop or recognize intrinsic motivation with the hope that their self-perception will grow rather than decrease, during middle school and puberty, as some research suggests will happen.

Observable Results?

Noticing drastic differences after only two weeks of focusing on developing intrinsic motivation is not realistic. However, there have been some exciting glimmers worth noting. One piece of data is the fact that Room 102 won "Class of the Day (19)," an initiative started by noon-time aides, recess monitors, and the lunch/cafeteria staff to recognize a class each day who transitions smoothly, lines up properly, and does the routine they have been practicing since September. The first day of this challenge was introduced to the

school on Monday, March 18, the beginning of the second week of my take over. During that week, 102 won the award twice! They were the first class to win on Monday and then they won it again on Thursday, March 21. Once a class wins "Class of the Day" five times, they will earn an extra recess on a given morning or afternoon. This incentive was designed with the intention of helping transitions during lunch run smoother. From my class's accomplishments, I could draw that my students were conscious and attentive about making good choices as well as being good citizens, which was the topic of my curriculum.

Another positive observation is about Brittney, a student who I thought might be an "anticipated challenge." She is an emotional girl who is intelligent, full of life, and her word choices remind me of an older lady. For example, she recently said to a classmate, "Come here child and give me a hug." Her tantrums were sporadic and frustration is a major trigger for her. When she cannot do something, usually academically, she gets so worked up that she has trouble calming herself down. Her tantrums involved laying under desks for an extended period of time, hitting and kicking the teacher, and making disruptive sound effects. From January to March, I estimate these outbursts occurred about once every two weeks and the intensity varied.

She did not have any tantrums during my two weeks or since! During a math test in early April, she went to the "cool-out" area because she was confused with term "half-past" in a unit on time and she was getting upset, but she held herself together. There are two major factors I would associate with this behavior growth. Student location in the classroom plays a huge role. When I changed seats, Brittney was moved to the U-shaped table where my classroom mentor sits with three other students. "Children profit from receiving the teacher's direct instruction" (Adams, 1969, p.320). Brittney also sits next to

Julie, a student who is well-below grade level and will repeat first grade next year, and currently working on her letter sounds. Brittney enjoys working with her. By helping Julie, Brittney may feel more competent and positive about herself. Since the implementation of “Mystery Citizen,” Brittney is the only student to have been acknowledged twice thus far. I conclude that when Brittney’s self-perception is positive and she is receiving direct attention from the teacher, she is building her own intrinsic motivation. She helps Julie because she likes to and they have a good relationship.

Intrinsic motivation is not something that is developed overnight; it takes time, especially to develop it properly. I like to compare it to losing weight. If it happens in a short time span, it probably will not be long-lasting. If it is done slowly and properly, I believe it is really a lifestyle change and is not just a “quick fix.”

Conclusions: Moving Forward

Many in the education field have argued whether intrinsic or extrinsic motivation is the most effective method of inspiring students to fulfill their potential. Recent research supports the idea that intrinsic motivation is essential in developing interest and realizing value for academics in children, therefore, motivating them to be the best they can be academically. Intrinsic motivation is the goal, but it is also a process. It can be developed over time if nurtured appropriately. Extrinsic motivation is the standard first step in developing intrinsic motivation, but the students need to be weaned off rewards and physical prizes to prepare students for older grades and the workforce. “Teachers need to foster the intrinsic motivation necessary in the modern era” (Pink, 2009). “Seemingly small social-psychological interventions in education can lead to large gains in student

achievement and sharply reduce achievement gaps even months and years later” (Yeager & Walton, 2011, p.267).

Praise is appreciated and needed no matter how old you are. Even as an adult, it is a good feeling when someone acknowledges something nice or special they see. With teachers, I am much more willing to work hard when I respect the teacher. These are natural human feelings, so, as a student myself, I understand my students feeling the same way. I enjoyed researching this topic, because this is relevant to students all over the world. Regardless of country, socio-economic level, gender, etc., teachers want to know what motivates students. Is it candy and stickers or an innate desire to learn? The findings and practices I have gathered and implemented are now in my toolbox ready for my own classroom in the fall.

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