

insights

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Enhancing Students' Motivation and Engagement in School

The beginning of a new school year is typically greeted with excitement and eagerness by many young children. But research consistently demonstrates that motivation and engagement tend to drop off as children progress through school. A 2014 Gallup poll of 825,000 fifth through twelfth graders documents this disappointing reality - nearly half of the polled students reported that they were either not engaged (28%) or were actively disengaged (19 %) in school.

There are certainly many reasons why any given student might struggle in school, including emotional or behavioral problems, family issues, social difficulties, and learning challenges. But educational psychologists have focused extensively on two key factors that universally impact an individual's motivation: the belief that one can succeed, and the perceived relevance of the material being taught. Motivational psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck has focused her research on "mindset" theory, exploring how a "growth" mindset (success is related to effort and perseverance), as opposed to a "fixed" mindset (success is related to fixed traits or innate ability), positively affects motivation. Dr. Jacquelynne Eccles' "expectancy-value" model of learning also emphasizes the expectation that one can do well, but in addition, addresses the value that students place on what they are learning as a key component of motivation.

Eccles and her colleagues have conducted numerous studies to test her theory, and to determine whether simple, classroom-based interventions can improve both engagement and performance. One study by Drs. Hulleman & Harackiewicz was designed to help students make connections between their high school science classes and their daily lives by introducing a "relevance" intervention. Students' expectation of success and initial interest in science were measured at the beginning of the semester. Then, at various points during the semester, half of the 262 students were asked to write essays about the usefulness and relevance of the course material to their own lives, while the others (the control group) simply wrote summaries of classroom content.

As the researchers predicted, students who initially measured low in their expectations for success, and who completed the motivation enhancing exercise, reported more interest in science at the end of the semester and received higher course grades when compared with students in the control group. Students who already had a high expectation of success, however, showed no increase in interest or performance when compared with control subjects.

Teachers can draw on the "expectancy-value" theory of motivation to design simple exercises to help students increase the perceived value and relevance of classroom material:

1. Periodically ask students to write a few paragraphs about how the upcoming lesson(s) might relate to their daily lives. This can be followed by a class discussion about the value and relevance of the material.
2. Before each module, ask one or more individuals to interview students in upper grades about the usefulness of the subject matter being taught, including relevance to more advanced courses, to non-academic interests, to life skills such as holding a job.
3. Offer students choices, based on their expressed interests, about what material they will research and report back to class about. ■

Resources:

Hulleman, C.S. & Harackiewicz, J.M. (2009). Promoting Interest and Performance in High School Science Classes. *Science*, Vol. 326, No. 5958, 1410-1412.

Collier, L. Grabbing Students. *Monitor on Psychology*. June, 2015.

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