MOTIVATING CHILDREN

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> When tasks are meaningful to students, when students have authority over their learning, and when mistakes are considered as part of the learning process, [this] would encourage students to display more on-task behaviours and would arouse less anxiety, and therefore less disruptive behaviour.
>
> Kaplan et al. (2002: 195)

No human being is unmotivated (Glasser 1998: 44): all human behaviour is an attempt to meet our needs; therefore, when we say that individual children are not motivated by a particular activity, all we are saying is that this activity, at this time, presented in this way, is not meeting their needs. The children's apathy does not mean they have lost their drive to learn, but that learning *this* material in *this* manner does not satisfy them. Apathy is not the problem; it is a symptom of the problem, of the irrelevance of the task to their lives (Gordon 1974). There is no way to motivate children to do something that is futile (Glasser 1998).

Hence, instead of asking, 'How can we make children conform to our expectations by completing the tasks we set for them?', we need to ask, 'How can we provide what children need so that they want to learn?' (Kohn 1996). In order to answer that question, we need to recognise that, rather than being a type of orderly cognitive, left-brain activity, meaningful learning involves both thinking and feeling (Rogers & Freiberg 1994). Without both aspects, children will be unmotivated to learn what we are asking them to learn. Both the content and processes will need to be relevant for them.

Contrary to most beliefs, rewards are not what motivate us to learn. This paper will examine the effects of rewards on motivation and then suggest alternative ways to motivate children's learning.

REWARDS

Most of us have been taught that rewards (including praise, stickers, school awards, student-of-the-day status, extra time on favourite activities, pocket money, and so on) will motivate children to do what we want them to do. In the case of motivation, we intend that rewards will motivate children to do the tasks we set them.

However, these rewards run four risks: to children's self-esteem, to their intrinsic motivation, to their perfectionism, and to their orientation to learning and to challenge.

Risks to self-esteem

The first effect of rewards is that these forms of judgmental feedback lower children's self-esteem by implying to them that their worth is contingent on maintaining their level of achievement. In short, praise of the person imposes

an obligation to continue to act in a praiseworthy manner (Farson 1963, in Grolnick 2003). Doubting their ability to achieve to this level, children's cognitions (thinking), affect (emotions) and behaviour all mimic helplessness, with a consequent reduction in their engagement and work quality (Kamins & Dweck 1999).

That is, person praise *lowers* children's subsequent evaluations of themselves and their work products, and leads to more negative emotional expression and helpless reactions to errors (Kamins & Dweck 1999). Children who are praised become less persistent and more self-critical in the face of setbacks.

Depleted intrinsic motivation

The second undesirable outcome of praise and the other rewards is due to the fact that these are forms of controlling discipline. They are an attempt to induce children to repeat behaviours that we like, or to manipulate them into doing things our way. This external control detracts from children's own autonomy (that is, self-directedness). Much research has concluded that this loss of autonomy is directly responsible for children's subsequent reduced engagement, because being in command of ourselves (that is, being autonomous) is essential to human motivation (Deci et al. 1991, 1999, 2001; Ryan & Deci 1996, 2000).

The result is that praising or rewarding children for their achievements reduces children's intrinsic motivation for the task (Deci et al. 1991, 1999, 2001; Ryan & Deci 1996, 2000). This has consistently been found to be particularly true for children; for females; within controlling interpersonal climates; and for those whose relatively poorer performances result in their not earning an equivalent reward to their peers (Deci et al. 1999, 2001; Ryan & Deci 1996, 2000).

Dysfunctional perfectionism

Praise and rewards for high achievement produce an unhealthy form of perfectionism. Rewards for high achievement produce children who attempt to excel in an effort to prove their self-worth. These *socially prescribed* perfectionists fear failure and, consequently, avoid challenge if failure is a possibility, are highly anxious, depressive, have low self-esteem, and treat themselves harshly when they perceive that they have performed below expectations (Feldhusen et al. 2000; Neumeister 2004a, 2004b; Neumeister & Finch 2006). Their extrinsic motivation causes them to procrastinate so that, if they do less well than expected, they can blame a lack of time or effort, rather than any lack of ability. This pattern arises from authoritarian parents who demand rather than encourage high standards (Rice et al. 1996) and who induce guilt in their children or withdraw love when they perform below expectations; it also comes from competing for school awards (Neumeister 2004b).

In contrast, *self-referenced* perfectionists strive for excellence because they know that they are capable of achieving it (LoCicero & Ashby 2000; Parker 1996; Parker & Adkins 1995; Siegle & Schuler 2000; Wood & Care 2002). They are intrinsically motivated and therefore generally have a strong work ethic: they are organised and thorough in their study habits (Neumeister

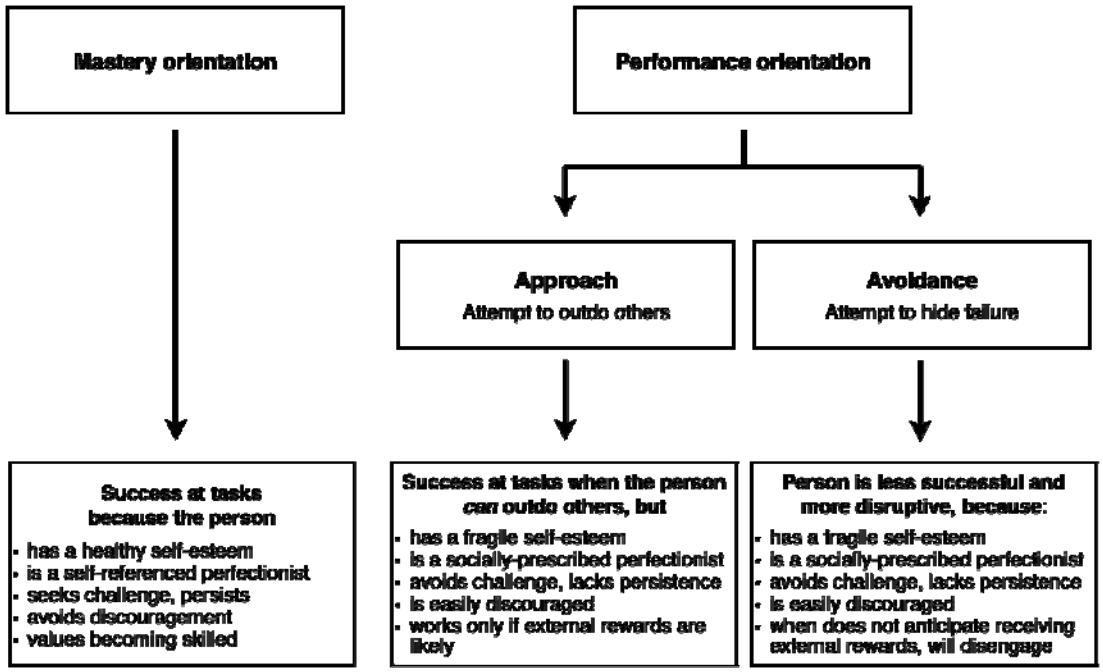
2004a). They develop this style from receiving authentic (rather than judgmental) feedback about their achievements, as a result of which they also develop a mastery orientation to learning.

Reduced motivation

As illustrated below, there are two main motivations to learn:

- Individuals with *mastery* goals apply themselves to tasks in order to gain skill and competence.
- In contrast, those who seek to outdo others are said to have *performance* goals. This category can be further divided into those who *approach* tasks in order to demonstrate their superiority, versus those who *avoid* tasks in an effort to hide their relative inferiority or sense of failure.

Children with either a mastery or a performance-approach orientation can be engaged and achieve highly. However, this is true only as long as the performance-oriented students *are* in fact more successful than their peers. When instead children with performance goals perceive themselves as failing (compared with others), their engagement, effort and performance decline, and their emotions become more negative (Dweck & Leggett 1988; Sylva 1994). They are likely to attempt to preserve their dignity by giving up, avoiding challenge and becoming off-task, which is termed an avoidance orientation (Covington & Müeller 2001).



Meanwhile, in what has been called the 'big-fish-little-pond' effect, able students with a performance orientation – those who seek to *be* the best rather than to *do* their best – will suffer reduced self-esteem when placed within a very able peer group or school, because they cannot excel in that

setting compared with others (Chan 1988; Coleman & Fults 1982; Craven & Marsh 1997; Gross 1997; Hoge & Renzulli 1993; Marsh & Craven 1998; Marsh et al. 1995; Moon et al. 2002; Olszewski et al. 1987; Rutter & Maughan 2002; Schneider et al. 1989; Wright & Leroux 1997).

No such effect of relative failure is found for mastery-oriented students: children with mastery goals will interpret both success and failure as a reflection of their strategy use and, when failing, will change strategy rather than giving up.

Praise and the other rewards encourage a performance rather than a mastery orientation to learning. Praise for high achievement causes children to choose safe tasks and avoid challenge; the children do not persist, experience less task enjoyment of learning, and manifest declining performance over time (Mueller & Dweck 1998).

THE ALTERNATIVE: ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thus, praise and rewards for high achievement fail to teach a motivation to become more skilful over time, but instead teach children to compare themselves to each other. Therefore, instead of judgments, children need feedback that provides specific information about what they have achieved and what their next goal may be. (A second paper on this website describes this form of feedback, which is known as acknowledgment.)

In contrast to the above effects, such *informative* feedback fosters considerate behaviour, promotes a healthy self-esteem in children and sets a positive tone for the classroom. It helps children feel more competent and enhances their intrinsic motivation (Grolnick 2003), promotes a mastery orientation to learning and teaches them that they can turn failure into success by changing strategy, rather than causing them to give up on the grounds that they 'can't' do it or 'will never be any good at' the task (Möller 2005).

THREE ASPECTS OF MOTIVATION

Self-evidently, individuals are not motivated to become competent at everything. Therefore, we need to understand what motivates individuals to invest time, effort and skills in certain tasks and not others. Motivation – or a lack of it – is not an inherent part of children's personality but also depends on the task and social setting. It has three aspects (DiCintio & Gee 1999; Glasser 1998; Tollefson 2000; Wentzel 1997) which Jones and Jones (2004: 193) depict in the following formula:

Motivation	=	expectation of success
	x	anticipated benefits of success
	x	emotional climate

If we observe that children are not motivated by a particular activity, this formula tells us that one of these aspects must be missing. I shall now examine each in turn.

Expectation of success

In order to develop an expectation that they can be successful on a task, children need to experience an optimal (not too high and not too low) degree of challenge, so that they are confident that they can meet demands.

While some challenge is necessary to excite learning, children who experience less pressure to excel report enjoying tasks more and experiencing less tension while completing them (Deci et al. 1994). When children believe that the task is too difficult for them, they can experience anxiety (fear of failure), worrisome thoughts and physical symptoms of stress (Silverman et al. 1995). This stress syndrome will reduce their motivation to invest energy in the tasks, compromise their learning and show itself in processes such as procrastination (avoidance) and attempts to escape task demands (Chan 1996; DiCintio & Gee 1999; Milgram & Toubiana 1999; Vallerand et al. 1994). In other words, children need to feel competent that they can achieve the demands.

Nevertheless, although competence is necessary for children to be motivated to engage with an activity, on its own it is not sufficient to entice their engagement (Deci et al. 1991). A clear appreciation of how success will benefit them is also necessary.

Anticipated benefits of success

When children anticipate that success will benefit them (in terms of meeting their personal needs), they will place a value on being successful. Children who confidently expect success and freely adopt pro-educational values (as opposed to being compelled to do so through rewards and other forms of controlling discipline) are more likely to be willing to engage with educational tasks and to anticipate that doing so will benefit them in the future (Berndt & Miller 1990; Deci et al. 1991).

The personal needs that tasks must fulfil are:

- children's basic needs for physical and emotional safety;
- the emotional needs for self-esteem (which is contributed to by being competent), for belonging, and for autonomy (self-directedness); and
- the higher-level needs for fun and self-fulfilment.

If children cannot see how a task will satisfy these needs, they will not be motivated to engage in the activity.

Emotional climate

The term *climate* refers to the learning atmosphere, attitudes, beliefs, values and norms of a school or educational class, as these affect children's feelings about themselves, each other, their teacher and the subject matter (McEvoy & Walker 2000). In order to motivate children, it will be essentially that they are learning in a caring learning environment where they feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other (Kohn 1996a). Within such a setting, children will be more likely to take intellectual risks – and thus will learn more – because they know that they will not be humiliated or punished for mistakes (Kohn 1996).

The quality of the setting's emotional climate is often overlooked – and yet many of us can recall working conscientiously at a school subject when we liked our teacher (and, perhaps, the reverse of messing around when we did not). This tells us what research has also confirmed: that the emotional tone of the setting is vital to children's wellbeing and social skills and, increasingly throughout schooling, to their academic performance. The student-teacher relationship is the most significant aspect of climate, accounting for 15 per cent of the variance in students' achievements (Esposito 1999).

Hence, children's sense of safety, of autonomy (self-directedness) and of support from teachers, peers and the school at large have to be satisfied before they will be motivated academically and behaviourally (Marchant et al. 2001; Rutter 1983).

CONCLUSION

Rewards for learning do not teach children to like learning, but to like rewards. A second paper on this website gives alternatives to praise, which I term acknowledgment. That paper focuses on the effects of acknowledgment on children's self-esteem. Here, I have reported that authentic feedback is also vital to encourage children's intrinsic motivation, self-referenced perfectionism and mastery orientation to learning.

Although behaviourists (e.g. Alberto & Troutman 2003) claim that rewards are the way of the 'real world', when their survival needs are met and hence they can afford it, adults often select employment for its job satisfaction not its salary; and many volunteer for community agencies for no pay but instead for the inherent satisfaction of knowing that they are making a contribution. In short, when free to do so, adults *choose* intrinsic reinforcers. The evidence about mastery orientations tells us that only a reliance on intrinsic rewards will lead to a life-long motivation to learn those skills that will meet our needs.

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