raising student achievement in literacy

above & beyond

why optimal motivation is a justifiable goal

Trudy Francis (Director of C21 Learning Ltd) collaborates with schools to create personalised, strategic, intensive, ongoing and accountable projects in literacy, visible thinking, the Key Competencies and integrating the curriculum. Objectives are developed with the school in order to achieve the goals selected by the school. A coaching approach is used to build capacity within the school thus ensuring the professional learning is sustainable.

The vision of the New Zealand Curriculum is founded on the notion that students will be motivated to develop the attributes of a life long learner; therefore it would seem reasonable that the idea of supporting optimal student motivation is a justifiable educational goal.

This report will begin by defining motivation and clarifying the link between motivation and learning. Research from overseas and New Zealand highlighting the long-term effects of low or no motivation will be used to explain 'why' educators need to promote optimal student motivation. Drawing from a range of literature this report will explore ways to maximise student motivation to learn (Brophy, 2010). These ideas will be examined in relation to a question from a motivational framework created by Ginsberg & Wlodkowski (2000, cited in Ginsberg, 2005). Self-efficacy and what we attribute our success and failure to will be

described in order to promote ways to address cycles of learned helplessness. The report will conclude with a challenge to all teachers to continue to analyse their pedagogy and practice using a motivational framework in order to create optimal student motivation in order to meet their professional obligations to their students.

Defining Motivation

Ask any classroom teacher about the effects of the lack of engagement by students and they will tell you how they try to motivate them when they feel this way. Teachers can easily explain how the consequences of low motivation impinge on the learning of the individual and perhaps the class in general. So what do we mean by motivation?

Motivation is a term used to explain why people do the things they do: it influences how we think and

feel as well as our actions as we learn. The results we get and what we attribute our success or failure to influences our motivation (St George & Riley, 2008). A theoretical construct, motivation explains the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behaviour (especially goal directed behaviour) (Maehr & Meyer, 1997, cited in Brophy, 2010).

Paris and Turner (1994, cited in St George, Brown & O'Neill, 2008) call motivation the engine of learning and yet Nuthall (2007) warns us to not equate highly motivated and engaged students with learning something new. He states that learning requires motivation, but motivation does not necessarily lead to learning. His ideas are supported by St George & Riley (2008). They too suggest that motivation is necessary but not sufficient for learning and achievement.

Student motivation is used to explain the degree to which students invest attention and effort to a variety of contexts. Their willingness to engage and the reasons for doing so are influenced by their experiences (Brophy, 2010). Levels of motivation are apparent by:

- the choice of task selected by a person in which to be engaged;

- the amount of physical or cognitive effort;

- the levels of persistence a person has in the face of challenges and setbacks; and

- the levels of achievement the person has (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, cited in St George, Brown & O'Neill, 2008).

By understanding what moves individuals to do what they do teachers may be in a stronger position to influence the conditions where optimal motivation will lead to higher standards of achievement and successful learning outcomes.

Why is it important to maximise student motivation to learn?

Unmotivated students manifest a variety of negative behaviours, attitudes and habits. Low levels of engagement and lack of enjoyment equate to learning less and impaired performance. These students are less likely to take risks when sharing their ideas for fear of looking dumb and foolish. Disengagement often leaves the student feeling bored and unable to see the relevance of the learning the teacher is attempting to engage them with (Smith, Dakers, Dow, Head & Sutherland, 2005).

An overall sense of wellbeing is likely to be impaired because the student experiences feelings of frustration and discontentment on a daily basis (Lagault, Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2006) leading to more conflict, more pressure, passivity and a lack of internal markers of achievement (Wylie & Hipkins, 2006).

Research called 'Growing Independence – Competent Learners at 14' completed by Wylie and Hipkins (2006), is interesting due to it being based in New Zealand and its longitudinal nature. From 1993 a cohort of 500 students have been tracked and reported on at the ages of near 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 & 16. Their report was completed when the students were 14 years old. They discovered that 1/3 of this group found school not engaging and 12 % were absent more than 5 weeks per year. Their identities as learners were impaired and many of their behaviours and habits had become 'crystallised'. Behaviours included:

- being switched off to learning,
- being more likely to be involved in risky behaviour,
- being defiant and manipulative,
- experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction and
- being bullied or bullying others.

Even though their report is based on research of high school aged students there are ramifications for primary school teachers. Wylie and Hipkins suggest that the seeds of becoming habitually unmotivated begin early in our lives. Children who have no strong interests at the age of five are more likely to be unmotivated as they grow and develop. Once the child has started school, children who scored low on the attitudinal composite also feature in the statistics for low engagement and unmotivated learning later on. The attitudinal composite measured engagement, internal and external markers of achievement, positive attitudes towards teachers, inclusive and supportive family, positive learning environments and solid friendships etcetera.

The difficulty is that no one can easily rectify the problems associated with low motivation to learn. If it was just a consequence of a learning environment that isn't maximising student motivation to learn then perhaps low motivation would be easier to resolve. One of the enduring trends that Wylie and Hipkins research showed was that the children's out of school lives had a significant impact on how motivated they were to learn. Two trends in particular stood out; low income and low or no maternal qualifications. These trends were consistently reflected in lower student competency levels with the inference that these students also experience lower motivation more often when in school. A third trend of low literacy achievement throughout school was also identified as a marker for low engagement and low motivation to learn.

Does this mean that these children are different from the children who seem more motivated to learn? Well no, all children are instinctively wired to learn. Children are innately inquisitive; they seem to thrive on trying new things again and again until they have satisfied their curiosity, questioning how, what and why to the point parents and teachers may think '*not another question*'. So why do some children seem completely unmotivated and unwilling to learn anything? Guy Claxton (2008) believes these children don't exist; when a child appears unmotivated there could be many reasons why the child is unwilling to learn what you want them to learn. For example: the child may not be interested, tired or sick, have competing priorities or fear failure. Claxon challenges educators to view the issue of children who seemingly are unmotivated to learn differently. Instead of thinking *how* we can persuade these children to learn we should be thinking about what is stopping them or putting them off learning.

How to maximise optimal motivation to learn

The two major trends (low income and low or no maternal qualifications) associated with low engagement and motivation could absolve teachers of the responsibility of creating optimal conditions for motivation and learning. However, Wylie and Hipkins (2006) stated that even though early learning foundations influence student's identity as learners the "die is not cast". What teachers do really does matter; and if it really matters then how do teachers maximise optimal motivation to learn?

The following analysis of five key areas (environment, curriculum connections and alignment, views of intelligence, student self-efficacy and attribution and attribution retraining) has been selected because of the pervasive influence of the teacher (Alexander, 2006). These areas are within the control of the teacher to make a difference for the students he or she teaches. Each of these areas are explained to show how they contribute to creating a learning culture based on the premise of promoting optimal motivation to learn. Where appropriate some of the challenges and implications for teachers have been identified in the hope teachers will find ways to overcome them.

Environment

How do we create or affirm a learning atmosphere in which we feel respected by and connected to one another (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000)?

Brophy (2010) suggests that we will be motivated to learn when there is a sense of community where everyone feels connected to each other, where students and teachers support one another and have a strong sense of shared responsibility for what is happening in the classroom and the school. A sense of belonging begins and is sustained when students' perceive that their teacher genuinely like them and is empathetic and responsive to their needs. In other words the students' believe their teacher care for them and is trustworthy. A caring teacher takes the time to develop reciprocal emotional and social connections with students (Sewell, 2006).

Developing reciprocal connections at an emotional level includes having the freedom to share our feelings and emotions. Caring about each other's lives and promoting value and respect for each other as learners and individuals – believing we all can contribute to each other's learning is integral to the ethos of the classroom. Developing reciprocal connections at a social level means everyone in the classroom contributes and shares ideas about what is worth learning. There is a shared responsibility as a valued citizen within the classroom to care for each other and the environment. Therefore a caring teacher will actively seek the student's perspective as well as sharing his or her own (Newman, 2008).

Alexander (2008) goes further when he states an important role for the teacher is to actively unearth student's beliefs, values, perceptions, and goals. Our goal as teachers should be to secure meaningful and useful information about our students' belief systems. He cautions teachers to be mindful of the fact that students themselves may not know what influe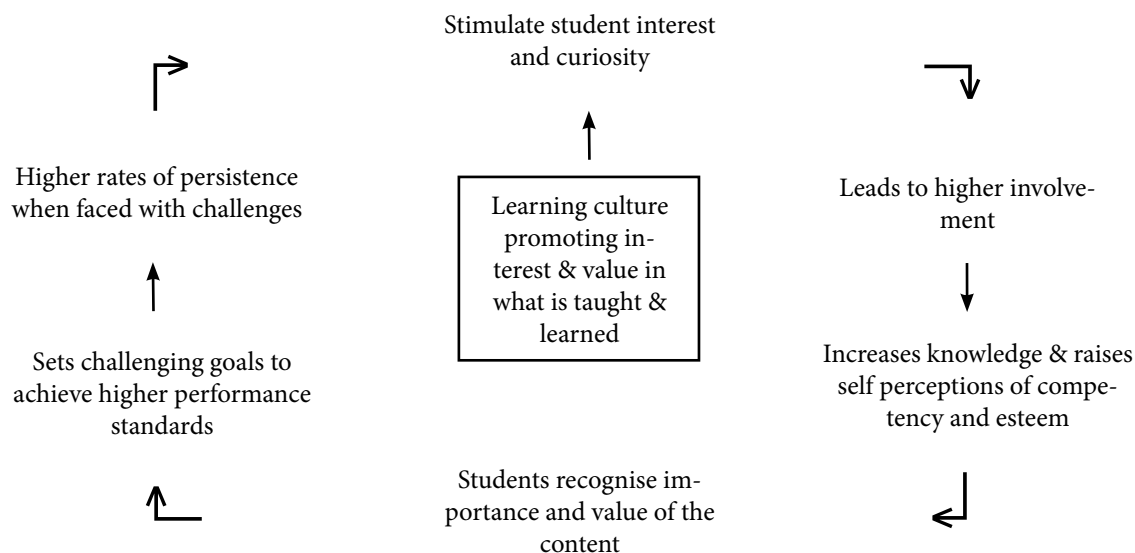nces their learning or achievement and to unearth their beliefs requires skilful questioning, looking for patterns in their responses and weighing up the data by how well we know our students and their willingness to take risks as they honestly record their beliefs and values.

Connections and Alignment (Curriculum Choices)

How do we create or affirm a favourable disposition toward learning through personal relevance and choice (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000)?

Designing lessons to support student motivation to learn begins with making connections between the content of learning and their lives (Aitkin & Sinnema, 2008). Increasing the relevance of what students are expected to learn potentially increases intrinsic value because there is an alignment between the learning goal and students interests; this in turn, has the potential to increase their enjoyment of learning (Alexander, 2006).

The following diagram shows a cycle of learning, which describes a learning culture that fosters student motivation to learn (Ainley, Reio & Wiswell, 2000 cited in Alexander, 2006). Teachers could use this cycle to analyse their classroom environment and lesson design when confronted with evidence of low motivation and engagement.

Stimulate student interest
and curiosity

Higher rates of persistence
when faced with challenges

Learning culture
promoting in-
terest & value in
what is taught &
learned

Leads to higher involve-
ment

Sets challenging goals to
achieve higher performance
standards

Increases knowledge & raises
self perceptions of compe-
tency and esteem

Students recognise im-
portance and value of the
content

Adapted by T Francis from Alexander (2006)

Not all learning can be intrinsic in terms of students experiencing pleasure from learning; learning is often hard, monotonous and perceived as risky. In order to engage students, teachers also need to align the importance of what is being learned to the beliefs and values of the student. Promoting extrinsic utility value relates to the usefulness of the task from a student perspective, it clarifies what the student will gain from success whether it is knowledge or skill development (Alexander, 2006).

Aitkin & Sinnema (2008) explain that alignment also means that teachers identify what their students already know and prioritise important learning outcomes. Sufficient time for students to engage in quality learning experiences help students bridge the gap between their prior knowledge and new learning. This kind of clarity enables teachers to be sensitive to possible misunderstandings students may have and address these. Limited time to learn and misunderstandings combined potentially lowers student engagement and motivation, especially if this occurs frequently over time.

Views of Intelligence – telling them they are smart is not clever

How do we create or affirm an understanding that students have effectively learned something they value and perceive as authentic to their real world (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000)?

Over time students develop a set of beliefs about themselves as learners. Each person will make decisions about how intelligent they are and will be able to give reasons to explain why they were successful or not. One of the early indications for low engagement and motivation at the age of 14 in the Wylie and Hipkins report was low achievement in literacy. Could it be possible that these children attribute their perceived failure to become literate to being dumb? How often do parents and teachers unwittingly reinforce beliefs that intelligence is an innate thing that cannot be changed – the belief that some of us are lucky enough to be born smart and some of us are not? Dweck (2002) states that

our beliefs about our ability profoundly affect our behaviour; and without realising it, our words of praise and encouragement could perpetuate debilitating student beliefs about their intelligence. Every time we tell a student they are clever, or smart, a good boy or girl; are we, in fact telling them they achieved success because they are lucky enough to be intelligent. This can cause the student to worry about how smart they are and cause the student to fear looking dumb when learning is challenging them. The research by Dweck (2002) suggests that when students attribute their success to being smart they are less likely to be intrinsically motivated, less likely to take risks, less likely to put in effort and to persist to achieve success.

Instead, we need to promote the idea that our intelligence is malleable. By emphasising challenge and effort students will see that even geniuses work hard to achieve great things (Dweck, 2002).

The implications for teachers include the need to focus student attention on learning goals. Learning goals are more likely to elicit greater effort from the student. Striving to develop knowledge, understanding, and improve skill is more likely to lead to successful outcomes, especially when the student is able to see the progress he or she has made (St George & Riley, 2008).

Being clear about your learning goals and using criteria to describe success develops student competency and helps them anticipate the desired outcomes. With this in mind students will weigh up whether or not they will be able to perform in a given situation (Bandura, 1986 cited in Zimmerman, 2000).

Empowering feedback plays a critical part in reinforcing a more malleable self-concept of intelligence. Focus on the actions and skill of the student, promote feelings of control by referring

directly to agreed performance criteria and identify growth by comparing where the student is now with where the student was in the past (Alexander, 2008).

Affirming an understanding that students have effectively learned something they value and perceive as authentic (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000) by explicitly promoting a more malleable view of growing intelligence contributes to a classroom culture that promotes optimal student motivation to learn.

Student Self Efficacy and Attribution

How do we create engaging and challenging learning experiences that include student perspectives and values (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000)?

When confronted with challenging learning experiences students will be confronted with a sense of 'can I do it' and make judgements about how well they will be able to perform in given situations (Bandura, 1986 cited in Zimmerman, 2000)? Self-efficacy refers to our judgements about our capabilities (Bandura, 1997 cited in St George & Riley, 2008). Students with high self-efficacy are confident to take on challenges, apply effort and persist in achieving their learning goals. Self efficacy is positively influenced when we engage in challenging tasks, receive credible and specific feedback, have effective role models and experience less anxiety because we are a member of a caring learning environment (St George & Riley, 2008).

With Wylie & Hipkins (2006) research in mind (which highlights the negative impacts of low engagement and motivation) surely optimal student motivation is even more justifiable as a worthy educational goal because students are more likely to develop positive self-efficacy and experience all the benefits of this as learners.
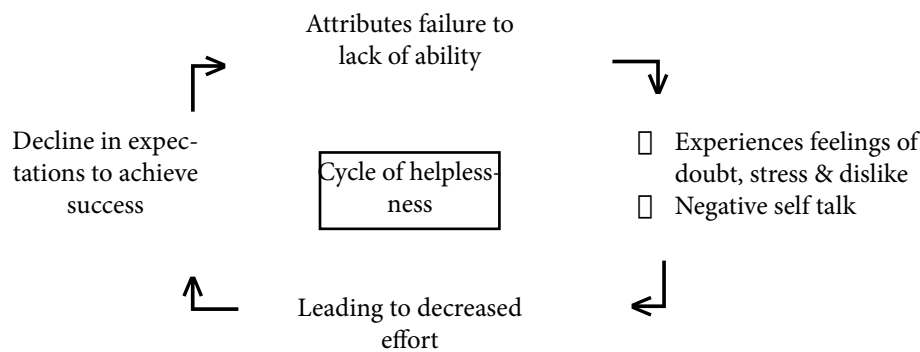
Attribution Retraining

Integral to self-efficacy is the motivational theory about learning beliefs called the 'attributional theory'. Teachers have diverse learners in their classrooms with varying degrees of engagement at any given time. For optimal motivation to be promoted and sustained we need to try and understand why people do the things they do (St George & Riley, 2008). Future learning expectations are centred on the perceived causes for our success or failure.

There are two main reasons given for success or failure; the first reason relates to ability in which students rate their aptitude and the second relates to effort (mental, physical and time given). These reasons can be further classified into three dimensions to explain where the responsibility for these reasons lies. Is it internal (within the person) or external (outside the person), stable (which means the student views ability and task difficulty as consistent) or unstable (therefore more easily modified), is it controllable (pertaining to how much we can influence the outcome) or uncontrollable (e.g. luck) (Alderman, 2008)?

Optimal student motivation will be hindered when the reasons given for success or failure are external, stable and uncontrollable. Students who attribute failure to ability (stable) rather than to the amount of effort required to achieve success may end up in a cycle of learned helplessness (Graham, 1991, Weiner, 1985 cited in Alderman, 2008). The flow map below shows how the cycle of learned helplessness influences the feelings and behaviours of the student.

Attributes failure to lack of ability

Decline in expectations to achieve success

Cycle of helplessness

- Experiences feelings of doubt, stress & dislike
- Negative self talk

Leading to decreased effort

Alderman (2008)

Students who attribute their failure to ability or worse still are stuck within a cycle of learned helplessness need to be retrained in order for optimal motivation to learn to develop. Teaching students to take responsibility for failure and to attribute it to lack of effort will make connections between success and effort, which will lead to increased persistence.

Attributional retraining includes: enabling students to achieve success and then teaching them to attribute this success to effort through very explicit feedback, training students to change their self talk (e.g. I really want to put in my best effort here) and when students don't know why they failed – suggest a strategy to help them accomplish the task and then encourage them to attribute the success to the use of the strategy (Alderman, 2008).

Conclusion

This report has been based on the premise that optimal student motivation is a justifiable educational goal. Research shows there is significant negative impact of low engagement and low motivation on student wellbeing and learned helplessness will not develop the attributes of the life-long learner, which the New Zealand Curriculum aspires to develop.

The pervasive influence of the teacher means all is not lost. The importance of the environment, a caring teacher, a curriculum that engages students and is relevant and challenging cannot be underestimated and when we are confronted with students who find school miserable we can retrain their attributions which in-turn builds their self-efficacy.

This report recommends the motivational framework for culturally responsive teaching (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000, cited in Ginsberg, 2005) to teachers as a way to create conditions for optimal motivation to learn to flourish. Using the ideas in this report to critique our practice, our classroom environment and curriculum will be a positive way to foster student motivation to learn.

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