A LOOK AT MOTIVATION AND HIGH-STAKES TESTING IN SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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Abstract

Current research about the motivation used in classrooms indicates that our classroom culture has shifted away from teaching practices. Students require intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to be successful and to become lifelong learners. High-stakes testing combined with standards based curriculum, which is shifting to Common Core, has created a fear among teachers. Because of this, some teachers abandon best teaching practices in order to make students successful on tests instead of focusing on student learning. In order to create lifelong learners, teachers need to shift the focus off of testing and back onto learning itself. Teachers also need to know their students abilities and motivations and teach to those instead of a testing curriculum.
Section 1: Introduction

In the United States, our school system has shifted to a standards based curriculum. Standardized tests are used to measure the success of this curriculum. Because teachers are evaluated based on their students’ success on the standardized tests, teachers often begin ‘teaching to the test’ instead of focusing on creating lifelong learners. Schools also use a lot of reward systems to encourage students to attend school and do their work. This makes the tests high-stakes for both teachers and students. These reward systems are primarily setup as extrinsic motivation. Not all students are motivated that way and intrinsic tends to be generally more beneficial in learning. In this paper, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation will be defined and explored in relation to classroom practices, high-stakes standardized tests, and the emergence of Common Core curriculum.

The purpose of this paper is to inform teachers, administrators and policymakers about the way students are motivated and how certain practices may not benefit students in the long run. Teachers need to take a look at their classrooms to see if they are preparing their students for the future. Administrators and policymakers need to look at the curriculum and standards to see that they are setting students up for success in the future.

Section 2: Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

To first understand the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, motivation itself must be defined. Motivation means to be moved to do something (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is when a person is moved to do something for personal enjoyment or need. It can also be defined as doing something for one’s self (Bénabou & Tirole 2003). Intrinsic motivation is usually characterized as receiving internal satisfaction from the act: such as
learning a new skill for the potential use and or value. Extrinsic motivation is when a person is moved to do something because there is some sort of external reward that follows. The external reward can be anything that another person gives, such as: praise, good grades, admiration, etc. In some cases extrinsic motivation can undermine intrinsic motivation. An example of this would be if someone paints simply because they enjoy it, they are intrinsically motivated, but then if they get paid for their art work, it becomes extrinsic motivation. Often when an extrinsic motivator is offered for an act, in this case money for the art work, a person is less likely to continue that act for intrinsic reasons. Some researchers believe that motivation cannot be divided into two categories and believe that motivation is multifaceted (Reiss & Havercamp 1998), however most psychologists have embraced the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction (Reiss 2012). This distinction is similar to the mind-body dualism. When compared side by side, extrinsic motives generally align with physical needs and intrinsic motives generally align with psychological needs.

Intrinsic motivation exists as part of human nature. Human nature implores people to be inquisitive, curious and playful- all of which create intrinsic motivation to learn and explore. Being intrinsically motivated helps with development because it encourages growth in knowledge and skills. Self-efficacy, or a person’s perceived confidence, can also play a role in whether a person is intrinsically motivated, because if they do not believe they can perform an activity, they will be less motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation becomes more apparent after childhood. Because of social demands and the structure of the education system, opportunities to be intrinsically motivated become increasingly limited. Due to the focus on testing in our education system and the standards that teachers are required to follow, classroom attention shifts from the process of actually learning to
learning for the test (Crow, 2009). Many students are eager to learn as part of their nature and some researchers have found that these students also are intrinsically motivated to seek out knowledge when it is of interest to them. If our education system requires teachers to teach students only what will be tested and what the standards require, the opportunities for students to find interest in gaining the knowledge and pursuing varied interests becomes more limited. Researchers have found that by upper elementary age many students' excitement for learning has waned (Crow, 2009). This could be because the nature of the school system does not focus as much on the excitement of learning as it does on passing the tests.

The extent to which a reason can be classified as extrinsic motivation also can vary based on why the individual is engaging in the activity. For example a student may do their homework because their parents expect them to, or a student may do their homework because the work may help them in the future. The latter example is an extrinsic motivation that has more free choice within it (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Situations are usually not primarily extrinsic or intrinsic, they are often both. Human behavior is usually not one dimensional and the motivation can come from multiple sources.

Section 3: In the classroom

In the classroom, most activities are done for extrinsically motivated reasons. There is usually a consequence for the activity: either positive for completing it well or negative for not completing it or not doing it well. When looking at how a student is motivated, their reason for doing the activity must also be examined. Since extrinsic and intrinsic motivations do not exist as either/or situations, there is the possibility that the student has both motivations for any behavior. In the classroom it is very easy to try to motivate students extrinsically. Many classrooms use grades, a prize box; and praise and/or social recognition for completion and correctness as an
extrinsic motivator to get students to do their work. Other extrinsic motivators used to get students to do their work are negative consequences when work is not completed or incorrect.

Most classrooms have a set of rules with consequences attached, usually negative for infractions, to enforce those rules. The consequences are usually extrinsic, such as a phone call home, missed recess, or removal of free time.

This system works well for students who are extrinsically motivated, but the teacher must also make sure that those students are still learning, an intrinsic reward. When a student is extrinsically motivated, they usually do the work to receive the reward at the end or to avoid the negative consequence if they do not do the work.

It is important for teachers to get their students to be intrinsically motivated to do their work. The goal that many teachers want to achieve with their students is to create lifelong learners. Researchers define lifelong learners as having the "capacity for self-direction, meta-cognitive awareness, and disposition for lifelong learning." (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003 as cited in Crow, 2009). This definition leans toward intrinsic motivation, because self-direction usually implies intrinsic motivation. Also some students may not continue within the school system, but still must be motivated to seek out information and knowledge. Since there are fewer extrinsic rewards in place for adult learners, students must be encouraged to seek out knowledge for their own interests so they learn to become lifelong learners.

A classroom that supports student self-determination is associated with intrinsic motivation. This classroom still has limits and rules, but the teacher is less controlling and does more facilitating (Reeve, 2009). It requires students to make more choices and make their own educational goals. In this type of environment the students also often believe that the work they are doing is important. This classroom would be an ideal type of classroom to support students in
becoming and being intrinsically motivated. This type of classroom also leads to greater success on the part of the students, if it is started early enough in their lives.

When deciding which motivators to use in the classroom, teachers must look at how their students have already been influenced. For teachers working with children in the primary grades and younger, intrinsic motivation is still something that can be more easily developed and influenced. For teachers working with older children, the way they are motivated has already been mostly developed and may be hard to change. Teachers need to know their students to discover what type of motivation they require, but should also remember that students who are intrinsically motivated to do their work often have higher academic achievement (Broussard & Garrison, 2004) and so should foster those intrinsic motivators. In the classroom it may be necessary to have multiple motivators for one activity, for example if a student really likes to read, they may do so for pure enjoyment, but a student who does not like to read or is not good at reading may need a consequence as a motivator.

Researchers have found that play is usually intrinsically motivated (Crow, 2009). Since most students enjoy play time and very few are extrinsically motivated to play, teachers of all age students could try to incorporate more play into their classroom. Strategies such as "including whimsical situations, role playing and imaginative activities" (p. 8) are ways that teachers can incorporate play into the classroom. It is important to have a playful attitude when these strategies are incorporated so that students understand that this is a play time, while also learning. According to Piaget’s theory about play children who learn skills on their own terms are more likely to repeat the skill at a later point in time, but a child who is forced to learn a skill that they do not want to learn or do not understand, they will only perform the skill when an authority figure is around (Piaget, 1932 as cited by Lisi, 2002). Incorporating play into the
classroom can help students be intrinsically motivated to learn and seek knowledge if they think it is fun and interesting.

Section 4: Motivation as Related to Standardized Testing

Statewide mandated standardized testing is considered high stakes testing because the consequences of the tests affect many areas, including teachers' evaluations, district funding and students' assignments to educational programs (Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991). These assessments also serve as benchmarks for learning and a review of educational effectiveness. They can help to determine curriculum and instructional goals.

Standardized tests often focus on a narrow set of skills that not all students may possess (Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991). Students learn in many different ways and the tests do not accommodate the different learners. When it comes to high stakes testing, students are usually either extrinsically motivated or intrinsically motivated to prepare for and perform well on the test. Students who are extrinsically motivated when it comes to high stakes testing usually come in two forms: either they try their best on the test to receive a good score and/or praise from teachers and parents or they previously did poorly on a high stakes test and are worried about not achieving a high score again so they purposely do not try their hardest. Students who are intrinsically motivated for learning do not generally see the point of high stakes testing. This is generally because they either received no consequences the last time they took the test or they truly do not care about the consequences of the testing.

In the classroom, high stakes testing can sometimes affect the way a teacher teaches. In fact some educators feel compelled to abandon what they know to be the best way to teach in order to prepare the students for high stakes testing (Hollingworth, 2007). Usually they abandon their known best way of teaching in favor of a test-preparation curriculum which is designed to
raise the test scores of students. According to Hollingworth (2007), the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) has also decreased the sense of confidence of skill in many teachers because of consequences of the testing. When teachers feel compelled to abandon their best practices in favor of test-preparation curriculum, there is less room in the curriculum for teachers to teach in the way their students need to best learn. For students who are primarily intrinsically motivated, a test-preparation curriculum would not be as beneficial to their goals, because the outcome of the learning is not as relevant as content mastery and interest are to them.

In order to prepare students for high stakes testing while also avoiding a test-preparation curriculum, teachers can implement a few strategies. One strategy is giving students formative assessments throughout the class time. Formative assessments are informal checks of student progress. Some examples of formative assessments include: conferences, listening to student discussion, and asking questions. Formative assessments are important because they give feedback to the teacher on not only how the students are progressing, but also how well the teacher is teaching (Hollingworth, 2007). Teachers can also use formative assessments as an intrinsic strategy for their students. If you allow students to assess themselves and their progress it helps them to see the point of the learning and how much they have accomplished. It also gives students a little more control over their learning and puts the teacher more in the facilitator role. Putting teachers in the facilitator role allows the teacher and student to both act as learner and expert depending on the lesson.

A second strategy would be connecting lessons to real-world contexts. The reading passages that are chosen for standardized tests are often obscure so that no student will have read the passages before. This is done to avoid giving some students an unfair familiarity benefit, but there is a cost to motivation. Students should not be required to read only passages that match the
setup of the standardized test. When reading connects to a real-world context and when students are able to choose what they read students will be more actively engaged in their learning. Students are able to see a purpose for what they are reading when they can make a connection with the material (Hollingworth, 2007). Providing connections and context for students allows them to see the benefit of what they are reading and often will be more willing to read for their own motivations.

The last strategy would be to not compromise on what is known to be best practices in teaching. When teachers lose confidence in their teaching and turn to a test-preparation curriculum, best practices are often dropped. Teachers who are confident in their teaching skills and curriculum should not become afraid near testing time and discard the best practices and content coverage to start drilling their students in test-preparation. It is important to make sure students are prepared for the testing, but good teaching should not be abandoned in the process (Hollingworth, 2007).

**Section 5: Common Core and Motivation**

Common Core has been adopted by many states and other states have adopted a similar set of standards, but made their own adjustments. Forty-five states have adopted the Common Core standards, one state has adopted just the Common Core English Language Arts standards and four states have not adopted any of the Common Core standards (ASCD, 2015). A national curriculum has benefits including: shared expectations, focus, efficiency, and quality of assessments (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yangn, 2011). The federal government is putting money and other resources behind Common Core to encourage its adoption across the nation. A change in standards also provides an opportunity to also change the criteria for the definition of “proficient academic achievement.” National standards give all students access to the same
material (McPartland & Schneider 1996). Because students thus far have not all had access to the same material, due to differing standards or specialized programs, some students may be further behind than others. However, the ever-changing process for adopting standards and measures of proficiency still leave these types of comparisons difficult to perform accurately.

The addition of individual progress and improvement as an academic achievement can help get these students back on track with the rest of their classmates. Adding these criteria can create positive expectations for teachers and incentives for teachers to truly implement Common Core into their classrooms. Research has shown that providing incentives for students to improve, rather than achieve a certain standard, has had a positive effect on the motivation of students and some even found more intrinsic interest in their coursework (Mac Iver, 1993 as cited by McPartland, 1996). The definition for academic success changes when students are measured by their improvement, because they each have their own starting point and are able to measure their progress. Common Core is designed to get students to be at grade level, but does not necessarily specify that improvement should be a defining factor of academic achievement (McPartland, 1996). Students may become more motivated to be lifelong learners if they experience more success in school and more opportunities for intrinsic motivation.

Section 5: Conclusion

To create lifelong learners, teachers need to be aware of their students’ needs and motivations to learn. It is important to try to include as much intrinsic motivation in the classroom as possible so that students take responsibility for their learning and maintain their desire to learn. It is possible to incorporate both types of motivation into the classrooms and still prepare students for testing. This can be done by giving students more choice and control with their learning and also providing students with relevant consequences for their work. Teachers
also need to have confidence in themselves as educators and not fall prey to fear of high-stakes standardized tests.
Works Cited


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