

Motivating Students Through Their Peers

by Marcos Alvarez

Introduction

Students seem less interested in the pursuit of academic excellence and more interested in satisfying an internal need. This lack of interest in academics has caused a decline in many aspects of our education system. A result of this lack of motivation has been an elevated level of students dropping out of school. This research will look at the repercussions that this has on the students, teachers, school and community. The research will also elaborate on various techniques that can be used in the classroom to motivate students as well as demonstrate how the mentoring process can help remedy the situation.

Students Drop Out

According to The Boy's and Girls Club of America (BGCA) (America's Education Crisis, 2010) 3 out of every 10 students do not graduate. This statistic was doubled in African-American, Native-American and Hispanic students. Without a proper High School education it has been difficult for these students to find a job, which has lowered America's tax revenue while raising the need for public assistance. Most of the students that dropout came from either divorced families or single parent homes (Terry, 2008).

For some students, the simple act of going to school is enough of a challenge and could deter them from finishing their studies. In order for them to persist they needed to feel like they were being listened to, cared for and that the school was invested in them. This did not negate the fact that the student needed to be invested their education as well (Knesting, 2008). When a

positive learning environment was created at home the student had a greater chance at success. This included fostering a positive attitude towards education and placing high expectations on the child (Martinez, 2008).

Motivating Students

According to Maclellan (2008) motivation was a dynamic agent that generated key constructs in a student, which helped them succeed in school and life. Some of the key constructs that arose from motivation were goal orientation, volition, interest and attribution. Goal orientation could be subdivided into two types of goals. The first was called mastery goal and it defined competence as a self-defined improvement. Here a student was interested in learning a material and learning from their mistakes. The second was performance goal and it engaged in self-handicapping behaviors. In this case a student was solely interested in getting the job done by any means necessary. A student should have wanted to do a task of their own volition because if not that task becomes meaningless to them. It had to peak their interest and engage them by making them think without being told what to do every step of the way. In this way a student felt they had contributed to their own education. Turner and Patrick (2008) observed how two students were being motivated in a classroom. In the sixth grade, the teacher gave the boy direct instructions and motivation and was also required to participate. In seventh grade he was mostly ignored. The teacher rarely called on him because she asked for volunteers. This enabled him to lay low. The girl's case was different. In sixth grade she had low achievement and made frequent mistakes which evoked low expectations from her teacher. She was rarely called on and when she answered incorrectly she was ridiculed. However in the seventh grade her teacher gave her concise instructions and motivated her by allowing her to participate. She was also recognized

and applauded for her efforts. This motivation gave the girl the desire to improve.

Students were motivated by offering them learning contracts. This is a simple written agreement between the teacher and the student in which the student agreed to do a certain amount of tasks in an allotted amount of time under their own initiative. Providing them with this choice makes the commitment of the student greater. When asked what students liked most about the contracts the number one answer was choice followed by clarity, independence and fun. Through this activity, the students made four points very clear. The first one was trust them because they won't disappoint you. The second was that they wanted to be guided, but not infantilized. The third was to show them, don't only tell them and finally listen to them (Greenwood, 2008). Another approach a teacher can take is to capitalize on the success of television shows such as *CSI*, *NCIS* and *Numb3rs* to teach math. This technique can be utilized in advanced high school courses or college. With this approach you present a crime scene and have the students investigate the scene in order to determine time of death, trajectory of a bullet and other related things. To do the activity three basic rules needed to be followed. The first one was that students should work in teams. The second was to allow all ideas to flow. The third was to ensure that the student investigators understood the mathematical concepts (Leinbach, 2010).

According to Leinbach (2010) math was usually seen as an independent study but it did not have to be. Students should be divided into groups of three or four. The teacher served as a guide and helped the team to function productively while encouraging the students to think out of the box and find new solutions to the problems. The mathematics the instructor wished to teach should not dictate the students' method of analysis. If the students had an idea for solving their problem, but could not find a solution, the teacher suggested some improvements or asked

them to suggest how they could improve their own observations. The teacher needed to allow students to assert some intellectual leadership. The importance of mathematical analysis was not in the techniques that resulted in the answer but in understanding the underlying concepts and why they applied to the situation. Students needed to know why a certain method was appropriate and what the limitations of that method were. Another program dedicated to motivating students is Why Try. It was developed by a social worker as a response to the lack of curriculums that targeted student motivation and dealing with failure. The program was developed for students K-12 and approached teaching in a multisensory manner. The combination of visual analogies, music, and physical activity provided students with a method for developing skills in decision-making and goal setting that were indispensable skills they would need in life. Its main focus was to teach critical social and emotional principles that would help students persevere even though failure may occur at some time in their studies. The program helped students identify how they responded to failure and identified the strengths they could use to instigate a positive change (Alvarez, 2009).

The Mentoring Process

The traditional way in which mentoring has been seen is as an interaction or relationship of an older more experienced person (mentor) and a younger less experienced protégé (mentored) (O'Neil, 2009). O'Neil related three phases of Action Learning Conversation (ALC), which was a collaborative mentoring process between all that were involved. ALC was a reflective practice meant to support transformative learning and has been divided into three phases: framing and engaging, advancing and disengaging. Casey (2008) argued that in order for this type of program to be effective a teacher must understand the socio-cultural environment in

which each child has been raised. This way they could understand the unique needs and interests of each student so that they could find a way of engaging them. The student became engaged because they had the opportunity to make choices about their reading and their participation. At the same time they shared responsibility for learning with their peers and their teachers. Within these groups, relationships between peers were fostered and language became the vehicle for navigating conversations around literature, literacy, and learning.

Jackson (2010) stated that the best way for somebody to learn anything was by teaching it themselves. Having taken this into consideration, the Newark, New Jersey School district devised a plan, which let students teach a class. To accomplish this task the students had to attend mentoring programs in order to learn about the strategies, creating a lesson plan, teach their classmates, and reflect on their teaching experience. This mentoring process was one that was entered into willingly and always maintained confidentiality and trust as long as the situation permitted it (Student mentoring, 2011).

Methodology

The purpose of this project is to motivate the children so that they will become more involved in the class. I focused on motivation through mentoring because I feel that when a student is directly involved in the learning process they learn even more. The project was divided into two separate phases. The first phase was focused on preparing the students and the second phase was the implementation of their work in the first phase. Before beginning the project six students were selected from a group of 30. These six students ranged from the ages of 9 to 12 years old and were formed by 2 boys and 4 girls. They each answered a Pre-Survey that will be discussed in detail in the Results section. After having answered the survey they began the phase

1 process.

During the first phase of this project, the students would meet every Friday at 7:30 p.m. at the church. Here they would get together as a group to plan every aspect of the class they would be giving during Sunday School; this process lasted for 5 weeks. Every week they would address a different aspect of the class. In the first week they established the order in which everything was going to be done and assigned the roles as well. The second week they decided what class they would give and the objective of that class. The class they chose was Jonah and the big fish and the objective they agreed upon was, "Love is the key to forgiveness". On the third week they put together the class, chose a Bible verse so the other students would memorize and the manipulative they were going to give them. The fourth week they chose the songs for their class. After choosing the songs they practiced the choreography and singing them. The fifth and final week they did a dry run in which they went through every aspect they had planned. Along the way both boys were removed from the project because they had only assisted to one meeting each and did not collaborate in any of the aspects of the project. After everything was planned and tied the second phase of the project was realized.

The second phase of the project consisted of them giving the class they had worked on for the past 5 weeks. Before the day came they were very excited and anxious to do this but once the day came it all changed. They became nervous and began second-guessing everything they had planned for that day. After having talked it over they were ready to give their class and they did it with enthusiasm, making sure to capture the attention and imagination of every student they had. After they completed this phase of the project they answered another survey which was directed to how they felt throughout the entire process.

Results

In the survey they took before beginning the project the 6 students were asked seven questions in order to establish a basis on which to begin the project. the questions were as follows:

1. How do you feel in Kingdom Kids?
2. What do you like most about Kingdom Kids?
3. What do you like least about Kingdom Kids?
4. What would you change about Kingdom Kids?
5. How long have you been a part of Kingdom Kids
6. How do you like the classes?
7. Would you like to help out more in the classes? Yes, no or maybe.

To the first question they all answered that they felt good in Kingdom Kids. To the second question 4 answered that they liked the classes more and two that they liked the movies that were being given before the classes more. In reference to question number 3 all six were in agreement that they liked the puppets the least. When asked in question 4 what they would change they all said that they would eliminate the puppets. For question number 5 two answered six years, two answered three years, one answered two years and one answered one year. In question number six they all said that they liked the classes a lot. Finally in question number 7 six said they would like to help out more in the class and one said maybe, depending on what it was.

When they all finished the second phase of the project, by this time they were four, they took a second survey to gauge what had changed for them through this experience. For this survey they answered six questions that are as follows:

1. How did you feel giving the class?
2. How did you feel about working with other people?
3. What did you like most about giving the class?
4. What did you like least about giving the class?
5. What would you change about the class you gave?
6. Would you do it again? Yes, no or maybe

To the first question all four answered that they felt scared at the beginning but once they were comfortable they loved the experience. To question number 2 all four loved the experience of working with others. In question number 3 they could not decide what they liked the most since they liked everything about giving the classes. Question number four was left in black because there was nothing they did not like. In question number 5 everyone of them said that because of this experience the next time they did it they would not be so nervous and that they would be able to do it better. To the final question they all said that they would definitely do it again.

Conclusion

According to the research it has been very difficult for some students to remain in school. For them, going to school presented more of a struggle than the actual academic aspects of school. Many of these students were being ignored, pushed away or asked to leave school instead of being encouraged and celebrated for their efforts. In order for a student to persist in school they needed to feel like they were being heard and were cared about. It was also important for the school to have a role in preventing the student from dropping out as well as the student putting in the effort to not drop out. This could be achieved through committed and caring

teachers, who strived to understand their student's behaviors, believed in their ability to succeed and accepted them just the way they were.

In order for a student to drop out of school many factors needed to come together. It was the same for motivating and maintaining a student in school. It was not the responsibility of a sole person but of many distinct people and factors. Teachers needed to create a learning environment that motivated a student to want to go to school despite anything else that may have occurred to them at that particular moment. Teaching was not limited to explaining how or why something happened but also to being perceptive and intuitive to students needs inside and outside of the classroom. Each person that came in contact with a student shared this responsibility. Teachers were not limited to a moment in a person's life because they have the ability to influence them throughout their lives even though they touch it for only a brief moment.

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