

Making a Difference: Motivating Gifted Students Who Are Not Achieving

Del Siegle D. Betsy McCoach

Many factors contribute to achievement, motivation being one crucial aspect. Motivated students appear to exhibit three main perceptions. First and foremost, motivated students find value in their school experience. They enjoy what they are doing or believe what they are doing will produce beneficial outcomes. Second, they believe they have the skills to be successful. Third, they trust their environment and expect they can succeed in it. When students value the task or outcome and have positive perceptions of themselves and their opportunities for success, they are more likely to exhibit the following resultant behaviors: (a) implementing self-regulation behaviors, (b) setting realistic expectations, and (c) applying appropriate strategies for academic success. This article offers classroom strategies and tips for motivating students who are struggling to find value in their schoolwork and feel good about their abilities, who need assistance moving from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, and who need guidance in interpreting their environments.

Gifted students are one group of exceptional learners who are not normally considered at risk for academic failure. We often expect the brightest students to also be the most motivated. Unfortunately, many gifted students seem to lack motivation in school. Watching bright students perform below their potential is a source of frustra-

tion for many teachers, parents, and counselors.

Why do some gifted students demonstrate low levels of achievement? Underachievement has at least four potential underlying causes. First, an apparent underachievement problem may be masking more serious physical, cognitive, or emotional issues, such as a learning disability (Moon & Hall, 1998; Reis & McCoach, 2002). Second, underachievement may be symptomatic of a mismatch between students and their school environment. Third, underachievement may result from students' attitudes about themselves and their schooling. Fourth, lack of self-regulation and study skills may hinder some stu-

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dents from achieving academic success. Each of these reasons requires different intervention strategies. Therefore, educators should attempt to isolate the origin of the underachievement. We also recommend that gifted students who are having difficulty with school should be screened for a wide variety of physical, mental, or emotional issues before focusing on motivation problems (Reis & McCoach; Siegle & McCoach, 2002).

In this article, we focus on four factors that are related to achievement and suggest a variety of strategies that teachers and parents can use to promote motivation and academic success. Students with learning disabilities often exhibit poor academic self-confidence (Baum, 2004; Stone & May, 2002). Further, they benefit from explicit teaching of self-regulation and study strategies (Reis & Ruban, 2004). Therefore, we believe that strategies related to two of the four factors discussed—self-efficacy and self-regulation—are particularly well suited for use with high-ability students having learning disabilities.

Answering the Question "Why Try?"

What motivates a person to put forth effort to accomplish a given task? Students engage in a task for two basic reasons: either they enjoy the activity or they value the outcome or byproduct of the activity in some way. Some students are unmotivated to achieve in school because they do not value the outcomes of school nor do they enjoy completing schoolwork; therefore, they see little value in completing their schoolwork. To reverse underachievement that stems from an apparent lack of motivation, we must first determine how to build value into a student's scholastic experiences. Consider a Social Studies class that is learning about American government. One student may seek high grades to obtain a college scholarship. Another student may have plans to become a

lawyer. A third student may have a strong interest in understanding American government and politics. Although each of these students is motivated to do well in the Social Studies class, each values it for a different reason.

Utility Value

Even though students may not enjoy an activity, they may value a reward or outcome it produces (Wigfield, 1994). Students see utility in tasks that are integral to their vision of the future or are instrumental to their pursuit of other goals. Because goals can play an essential role in attaining later outcomes, we should help students see beyond the immediate activity to the long-term benefits it produces. Teachers need to be able to answer the common query “Why do we have to study this?”

Extrinsic motivation involves the drive to receive a reward or positive reinforcement that is external to the activity itself. One way to increase the perceived utility of a task is to positively reinforce students for completing the task. Extrinsic motivators include such rewards as stickers, praise, grades, special privileges, prizes, money, material rewards, adult attention, or peer admiration. However, teachers should use extrinsic motivators carefully, because providing extrinsic rewards for an intrinsically motivating activity may decrease a person’s subsequent intrinsic motivation for that activity (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

Utility Motivation Tips

- Educators should explain the purpose for lessons and assignments. At the beginning of every unit, explain to students why mastering these skills or learning this information is important to (a) help them meet their own current needs or wants, (b) provide them with social rewards or opportunities for social advancement, or (c) prepare them for occupational or other future successes (Brophy, 1998). Before every lesson, state “why we are learning about this and how it is useful” in one or two sentences.

- Help students set short- and long-term academic goals. Small, short-term goals work better for younger students. An essential feature of the goals is that they be meaningful to students themselves. Goals that adults value may have little meaning to children.
- Help students see beyond the present activity to the long-term benefits it produces. To students, a school assignment may seem unimportant, but they may value such outcomes as acceptance into a prestigious university, a lucrative college scholarship, or a rewarding occupation.
- Invite community members into the classroom. Such individuals can tie the school curriculum to their career activities. Parents can also share how they use various skills they learned in school.



Intrinsic Value

Intrinsic value often results from the enjoyment an activity produces for the participant (Wigfield, 1994). When students enjoy scholastic tasks, they are intrinsically motivated to do well. Both their interests and personal relevance produce intrinsic value for a student. Generally, students are intrinsically motivated to pursue activities that are moderately novel, interesting, enjoyable, exciting, and optimally challenging. Material that is either too hard or too easy is antimotivational. When schoolwork is too easy, students become bored. When tasks are too difficult, students become frustrated and anxious (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

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Intrinsic Motivation Tips

- Learn about students’ interests, and integrate these interests into your instruction.
- Whenever possible, offer students authentic choices about the ways in which they can learn and show mastery of the material in the class. You may want to ask students for ideas about alternative projects or products.
- Students are more likely to become engaged with material that is optimally challenging, so classroom activities should be appropriate to students’ current knowledge and skill levels. Ideally, a lesson’s content should be just above the skill range of the students. The activity should be something that the students can master, but not without effort and the use of appropriate strategies (Morrone & Schutz, 2000). Ideally, students should be challenged, but not frustrated, by classroom activities.
- One reason for the popularity of computer games is that immediate feedback enhances the psychological impact of the activity. When possible, strive to build opportunities for immediate feedback into classroom activities.
- To the extent that you treat your students as if they already are enthusiastic learners, they will be more likely to become interested in the topic (Brophy, 1998). For example, when introducing a complex topic, refer to it as “interesting” or “intriguing” rather than as difficult.
- Encourage students to think seriously about how their performance in present classes can affect their future goals, as well as to explicitly articulate their reasons for choosing or failing to put forth effort in a class. You can use students’ responses to the following statements (See box, “Students’ Responses”) to obtain a

more complete picture of their attitudes, which may, in turn, help them form more specific school-related goals.

Students' Responses

1. When I try hard in this class, it's because _____.
2. I would spend more time on my schoolwork if _____.
3. If I do poorly in this class, then _____.
4. When I don't try hard in this class, it's because _____.
5. I would rather do _____ than do my work for this class.
6. Doing well in this class will help me to _____.
7. Doing poorly in this class will keep me from _____.
8. This class is important because _____.
9. The thing that I am most interested in learning more about is _____.
10. The most interesting thing that I learned in _____ class is _____.

Answering the Question "Am I Smart Enough?"

Although valuing a task can be motivating, simply turning that motivation into action is not sufficient. Students must also believe they have the skills to perform a task before they will attempt it. For example, students must believe they are capable in mathematics before they will attempt a difficult math problem. If they believe that mathematics is too difficult, they are unlikely to put forth appropriate effort.

Success breeds success. Students' beliefs about how well they can perform are first, and foremost, influenced by how well they have performed in the past. Significant adults in children's lives can increase students' confidence by helping them recognize past accomplishments. In this way, success breeds success. Helping students acknowledge past growth is an important contributor toward their future growth.

Motivation Tips to Recognize Growth

- Videotape students as they are engaged in various activities, and encourage parents to do so. Periodically reviewing the recordings helps students realize how much they have improved. For example, a young person who has been taking piano lessons for several years may not think he or she has made any progress. Parents can videotape their child practicing and show the tape to the child 6 months later. The child will be amazed at how much better he or she plays. Without viewing the tape, the child might not perceive that any progress has been made during those 6 months. This technique can be used with any activity in which visible progress can be documented.
- Keep samples of previous academic work, and periodically review students' earlier work with them to show growth and improvement. Students are amazed at how easy their earlier work now appears and how much better they are now able to perform. Student portfolios promote this sort of self-reflection. Students should help select work to include in their portfolios for future review.
- Encourage students to compete with themselves by charting their progress. Most children remember their parents' reserving a special spot in their home to mark their height each year. They loved to observe how much they grew. Just as parents chart height, as a teacher you can help children recognize other forms of growth and development. For example, you can record a running list of mastered spelling words or multiplication facts.

Feedback: Attributing Success

The way we compliment students also has an impact on how successful students perceive themselves. Everyone agrees that students should be encouraged to work hard, as effort plays a significant role in achievement. However, students also need to believe they have the skills to succeed. The essential component in complimenting students is helping them realize that skills are developed and that they have acquired

the skills necessary to succeed. The feedback must contain (a) recognition of the talent and (b) attribution of its development to the student.

Dweck (1999) demonstrated that students who believe abilities can be developed and are not fixed are more likely to attempt challenging tasks and persevere through difficulties than students who believe abilities are innate. Students who have a performance orientation approach new situations as opportuni-

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ties to show what they know. These students tend to believe that abilities are fixed. Therefore, they view any mistakes as evidence they lack ability. In contrast, students who have a mastery orientation view new situations as opportunities to acquire new skills or improve their existing skills. Students with a mastery orientation tend to believe that abilities are malleable, and they are more likely to tackle difficult tasks. Although Dweck found that students already gravitate toward one or the other of these orientations in elementary school, she also found that these orientations are amenable to change.

Gifted students may develop a performance orientation, which may limit their willingness to take academic risks. Gifted students often perceive giftedness as innate, and they may believe they had very little to do with their giftedness. Although gifted students often do acquire skills more quickly and easily than their peers, they still gain such skills through learning. They may have taught themselves to read or learned to read easily at an early age, but they still learned to read. Gifted students need to realize that the talents they possess are acquired and that they are capable of further developing these talents.

Gifted students also need to understand that just because they find something difficult does not mean they are

not smart. For some students, not trying preserves their self-image. They do not perceive “not trying” as poor performance; instead, they can rationalize, “It wasn’t important” or “I just rushed through it and didn’t do my best.” Young people often believe that if they need to work hard at school, then they are not smart. In fact, peers often perceive hard-working students as less intelligent than students who do well in school without making any visible effort.

Attributing success to ability or effort is a fine line to walk. The essential balancing factor is to acknowledge ability while recognizing that effort went into its development. Educators and parents can help students realize the important role both ability and effort play in talent development. One way to achieve this outcome is through comments made directly to children.

Motivation Tips to Encourage Mastery Attribution

- Compliment students on the specific skills they have developed by drawing attention to the skill and to its development. This tactic acknowledges the effort without drawing undue attention to it. An example is “You did very well on this math project. You’ve learned how to solve equations.”
- Use specific rather than general compliments. A general compliment, such as “Good work,” does not carry the weight of something more specific, such as “You have learned to provide very good supporting sentences for the topic sentence in your paragraphs.” Specific feedback allows students to better appraise their progress by letting them know two things: (a) what specific skill they possess and (b) that they developed it. Both components are necessary. Students will reflect on the comment and think, for example, “Yes, I have learned to write a well-organized paragraph.”

Of course, compliments must be genuine and earned. Complimenting children for tasks they did not perform well or for unchallenging tasks can be counterproductive and diminish their trust. Overly effusive and too-numerous compliments can backfire. The goal should

be to help students recognize their developed skill, not to heap undue praise.

Answering the Question “Can I Be Successful Here?”

As was previously discussed, students need to value the task and be confident they have the skills to pursue it. Although these two factors are powerful influences on motivation, a third component is necessary. Students must also view their environment as friendly and likely to provide positive outcomes for them. Students must believe that such environmental factors as school personnel, peers, or the curriculum do not prevent them from being successful. Students who possess positive environmental perceptions believe their home and school environments support their efforts. Their perception of the friendliness of their surroundings has an impact on their academic attitude and behavior. Students must expect they will succeed if they put forth effort. Such phrases as “You don’t understand” or “I can’t learn this way” are strong indicators that students do not view their learning environment as friendly. In other words, they do not believe they can succeed even if they try.

Gifted underachievers often view school negatively (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). They may believe that they do not fit into the system, and in some cases, giftedness can actually represent a stigma in school. Instead of appreciat-

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ing the special gifts and talents these students exhibit, some teachers are threatened by the presence of gifted students in their classroom. Therefore, in some situations, low motivation may represent a coping strategy, whereby students strive to adapt to an anti-intellectual school environment (Cross, 1997). In addition, classroom activities or the curriculum may not be appropri-

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ate for gifted students. Students may already have mastered much of the material that is being covered, rendering them bored and disengaged (Plucker & McIntire, 1996).

Students’ perception of the friendliness of the environment may or may not be accurate. The first step is to determine whether students’ perceptions are accurate. If they are, then changes need to be made in the environment. Research indicates that the person being asked to change must be involved in the process (Emerick, 1992). Therefore, the student should be consulted about how to rectify the environment. For example, if a child thinks the home environment is too noisy to permit studying there, adults can ask what needs to be done to make it quieter. The solution may be as simple as asking, “What would it take for you to do well here?” Students’ involvement in helping find solutions to the environmental roadblocks they perceive is important for two reasons. First it enhances their sense of internal control. Second, it lets them know that something will be changing.

Environmental perceptions go beyond the classroom. Cultural and economic factors may also limit students’ opportunities. Students’ perceptions about the fairness of “the system” or of society in general may affect their motivation. Steele (2000) reported that students may have difficulty trusting the environment, and that their achievement may be less influenced by their perceived abilities than their perception of the fairness of the environment.

Motivation Tips to Enhance Environmental Perceptions

- Teachers and parents can discuss with students the obstacles they believe are keeping them from doing well and what options exist for them. This approach includes a discussion

of what is within the students' control as well as what is beyond their control. Teaching students to appreciate multiple viewpoints should be part of the discussion. Teachers and parents can help students understand when "standing their ground" is important, when compromise might better serve their interests, and when ignoring the situation is the best course of action.

- Avoid letting students use their environment as an excuse. At times, young people may attribute their failures to their environment rather than to themselves. When this situation occurs, a technique such as active listening may help resolve students' concerns (Pickering, 1986).

Answering the Question "How Do I Put It All Together?"

Many gifted students lack self-management strategies, such as time management and study skills. Because gifted students often progress through the early years of school without being challenged, they sometimes fail to develop the self-management skills that other students master. In the early grades, good memory and fast processing skills can compensate for note taking and other study skills. Often, educators attempt to teach students study skills before students need those skills to be successful. This process usually frustrates both the teacher and the students. Students are more likely to internalize self-regulatory skills when they need those skills to solve the problem at hand. Providing gifted students with an academically challenging curriculum early and throughout their school careers promotes opportunities for developing self-management skills.

Motivation Tips to Promote Study Skills

- If students are not being academically challenged, encourage them to explore opportunities to interact with more challenging and interesting material. Curriculum compacting (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1992), an effective process to use with gifted students, lets you give students credit for their knowledge and skills and buys time to pursue more challenging

content. Pretesting or preassessing students allows you to evaluate what students already know about the material they are about to cover in class and to ensure that students have the prerequisite skills and knowledge to be successful in the upcoming unit. An ideal pretest includes questions that all students should have mastered as well as questions that, if answered correctly, indicate mastery of upcoming instructional objectives. You can use students' pretest results to deliver instruction that is optimally matched to students' level of mastery. If students have already mastered an instructional objective, allow them time to pursue interest-based enrichment opportunities rather than give them "more of the same."

- Evaluate what study skills your students need to be successful. A word of caution: teaching study skills to gifted and talented students before they really need them can be counterproductive. Some common study skills include note taking, outlining, and using memory mnemonics.
- Teachers and parents can help students organize their work and study time. Greene (2001) recommends that students create a homework book to record upcoming assignments, projects, tests, and events. Students can use color-coded folders or binders. Organizing all handouts and papers in chronological order in subject notebooks may also be helpful. Students can create reminder checklists, one called "at school" and one, "at home." Students should pack their book bag each night before they go to bed, making sure they include all their homework, and keep the book bag in the same place every night. This habit helps avoid forgetting items and eases the morning rush.
- Some gifted students lack self-monitoring skills. These skills include monitoring distractibility, practicing delayed gratification, and being aware of performance avoidance. The Premack principle, also known as "Grandma's rule," suggests using a more preferred activity as a reward for a less preferred activity. Someone may enjoy exercising, but not writing.

Therefore, he exercises only after he has written a preset number of pages. Parents often mistakenly reverse Premack's principle, which renders it ineffective. "Okay, I'll let you watch 30 minutes of television and then you need to start your homework" does not work as well as "As soon as you finish your homework, you may watch some television."

Students with a performance orientation, which was described earlier, may demonstrate performance avoidance. Such students are motivated by generous reinforcement for success as well as detailed instructions with specific grading criteria.

Motivation Tips for Self-Regulation

- Help students plan schoolwork tasks, and encourage parents to do so also. This approach serves two functions. First, it develops a mindset that the task is doable. Young people are often reluctant to begin a task because they are unsure how to begin. Second, it minimizes the unknown. Through planning, students can visualize a task's coming to fruition.
- Educators and parents can teach students to set short-term attainable goals and to reward themselves once those goals are completed. This skill includes learning to withhold the reward if the task is not completed. For example, a student might reward herself with a half-hour of conversation on the telephone with a friend after reading a Social Studies chapter.
- When working with performance-avoidant students, provide detailed assignment instructions and include an evaluation rubric when appropriate. Divide larger tasks into smaller tasks, and recognize the student's performance at each step.
- Teachers and parents can help students set realistic expectations. This skill involves setting goals that are difficult enough to be challenging, yet not so difficult as to be unachievable and discouraging.

Final Thoughts

Educators and parents should support students and encourage them to pursue

their interests and passions. In addition, adults can help students (a) see that what they are doing serves a purpose, (b) believe they have the skills to perform well, (c) trust that their environment will encourage their productivity, and (d) set realistic expectations for themselves. Early encouragement of these behaviors will help young people lead productive and fulfilling lives.

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Del Siegle (CEC CT Federation), *Associate Professor*; and **D. Betsy McCoach**, *Assistant Professor*, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

Address correspondence to Del Siegle, University of Connecticut, 2131 Hillside Road, Unit 3007, Storrs, CT 06269-3007 (del.siegle@uconn.edu)

Note. Much of our thinking about motivation has been shaped by our work at The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. We wish to acknowledge the contributions of other members of our research team: Sally M. Reis, Meredith Greene, Fredric Schreiber, and Rebecca Mann.

This research is supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, PR/Award Number R206R000001, as administered by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed herein do not reflect the position or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences or the U.S. Department of Education.

TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 22-27.

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