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Students' Perspective on Intrinsic Motivation to Learn: A Model to Guide Educators

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the collective perspective of what motivates students to exert effort and energy towards learning tasks in a classroom setting. To reach this goal, the researcher utilized a qualitative methodology, the Insider Perspective Approach, to take a deep look inside the classroom experience and examine the broad view of the students' collective perspective. A model for situational motivation is presented suggesting factors that educators can manipulate to enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn: control, competence, active involvement, variety, curiosity, challenge, a sense of belonging, and honored voices. When teachers integrate these constructs as they plan activities and assignments, students' intrinsic motivation to learn will be enhanced.

Students' Perspective on Intrinsic Motivation to Learn: A Model to Guide Educators

Jane Taylor Wilson, PhD, Westmont College

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the collective perspective of what motivates students to exert effort and energy towards learning tasks in a classroom setting. To reach this goal, the researcher utilized a qualitative methodology, the Insider Perspective Approach, to take a deep look inside the classroom experience and examine the broad view of the students' collective perspective. A model for situational motivation is presented suggesting factors that educators can manipulate to enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn: control, competence, active involvement, variety, curiosity, challenge, a sense of belonging, and honored voices. When teachers integrate these constructs as they plan activities and assignments, students' intrinsic motivation to learn will be enhanced.

The Ultimate Goal of Education: Lifelong Learning

Most educators would agree that their primary goal is to help students learn the material for their specific grade level and content area during the course of the term. A higher goal, however, consists of helping students not only learn the content for the term at hand, but motivating students to continue to learn once the term ends. Yet motivating students to learn for the pleasure of the process remains an elusive challenge for many educators.

As a Christian who believes that God is the Creator of all things, the goal of enhancing students' desire to learn about all things both during the term and well beyond is a worthy goal to pursue. Educators who profess faith in Christ seek to be God's image bearers (McCullough, 2008). In this important role, educators seek to encourage their students to daily discover and celebrate the wonder of creation (Edlin, 2009; Van Bummelen, 2009). This study explores this worthy educational goal with the belief that promoting lifelong habits of learning is

the ultimate goal of education and a way to honor God as a teacher.

God Created People with an Internal Drive to Learn One doesn't need to spend too much time with pre-school children to notice that God blessed children with an abundance of internal motivation: they investigate continuously, actively engage in many self-initiated activities, display undaunted effort, approach new tasks with optimism, expect to succeed, delight when their actions produce results, and enjoy the process of discovering and learning.

This innate characteristic so often evidenced in pre-school children is often referred to as *intrinsic motivation*. As initially defined by Robert White (1959), intrinsic motivation is based on one's innate propensity to interact effectively with one's environments and to make sense of one's world. Other researchers extended the idea of intrinsic motivation to include exerted effort for the pleasure of the process. Before entering the school system, children seem to possess an abundance of innate propensity to interact effectively with their environment and experience pleasure in the process.

Why study intrinsic motivation?

Something seems to happen to intrinsic motivation as children enter and progress through school. In the elementary years, many children display decreasing intrinsic motivation towards school. By junior high, many students exhibit behaviors indicating they lack interest in school learning. And by high school, intrinsic motivation to learn seems to be non-existent for many students. This lack of motivation in classroom settings is a well-documented concern (Ames, 1990; Brophy, 1987; Covington, 2000; Stipek, 2001). It appears that there may be something about the classroom environment that is limiting a vital source of young people's spontaneous energy for learning.

If intrinsic motivation to learn is being constrained during the schooling process, this problem is vital

for us to understand. Indeed, it may be one of the biggest failings of the American educational system, if students lose their intrinsic motivation to learn as they progress through the system.

Many psychologists suggest that desire to learn may be one of the most important attitudes to cultivate for people to lead fulfilling and satisfying lives (Bruner, 1966; Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Dewey, 1938). Arguably, people who possess an internal desire to learn new knowledge and competencies will be at the forefront of society as it grows increasingly complex.

This study proceeded on the basic assumption that building on students' innate desire to learn should be a primary purpose of school. God designed people to enjoy and value learning (Van Brummelen, 2009). Paul, in his letter to the Colossians (1:10) offers a prayer that encourages them to "live a life worthy of the Lord" which includes, "growing in the knowledge of God." And many Proverbs remind us of the importance of pursuing wisdom. "Let the wise listen and add to their learning" (Proverbs 1:5). "For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. ... Blessed is the person who finds wisdom, the person who gains understanding" (Proverbs 2:10, 13). "Wise people store up knowledge" (Proverbs 10:14). "By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. A wise person has great power; and a person of knowledge increases in strength" (Proverbs 24: 3-5). Clearly, God desires for us to learn about Him. Since I believe, as does Piper (2009, para 3), that "all truth is God's truth" and that "all truth exists to display more of God and awaken more love for God," it follows that learning about all that God has created is a way for His people to glorify Him.

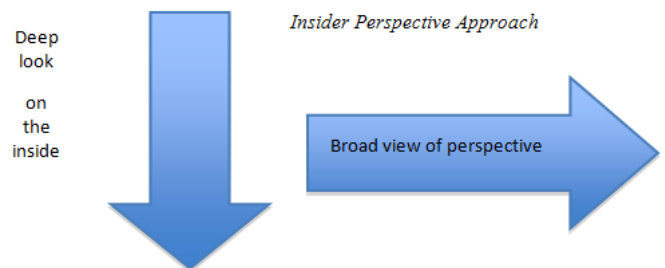
If the ultimate goal of education is to produce lifelong learners who enjoy learning both in and beyond the classroom, and it appears that something in the schooling system is limiting intrinsic motivation to learn, then we need to investigate this problem. How can educators structure classroom environments to enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn? Answers to this question may help produce lifelong learners. By helping students enjoy learning both in and beyond the classroom, it could be that these people have greater potential to

lead more satisfying lives and to honor God with their minds as they experience the rare and beautiful treasures of His creation.

Methodology

To better understand how to craft an intrinsically motivating classroom environment, I turned to the students. I was guided by the words of Philip Cusick (1973, p. 4), "If we are to have any understanding of what students make of their lives, then we have to make a genuine attempt to see and understand their world as they see and understand it." My work began in the 1990s when I conducted two in-depth qualitative studies examining student perspective on motivation in classrooms (Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 1994).

In both studies, I became an observant participant — first in a sixth grade classroom and then in a fifth grade classroom. The first study examined the girls' perspective regarding intrinsic motivation through intense observations and interviews. The second study described in this article took a deeper and broader look at the collective insider perspective of students regarding intrinsic motivation to learn by using the Insider Perspective Approach.



The Insider Perspective Approach (Block & King, 1987; Mitchell, 1993) looks at the educational experience by taking a **deep look on the inside** and going directly to the students to understand the problems they face. Based on the assumption that the truth of a situation would be best understood by those who experience it, the Insider Perspective Approach goes directly to the people affected most by what goes on in the classroom, the students themselves. Fresh insights can be captured from this insider role. As the researcher shares the school experience with students, the researcher gains credibility, gains insider knowledge on how to view situations, and learns the insider ways of talking, thinking, and feeling about situations. This deep look on the inside affords the researcher the opportunity to take **abroad view of perspective** by

examining how students collectively use a coordinated set of thoughts and feelings to guide their actions in classrooms.

To gain this rich picture of classroom life, I searched for an elementary teacher who was willing to allow a researcher to assume the role of a student for the first three months of the school year and who was incorporating strategies that could promote intrinsic motivation to learn. After interviewing five teachers and explaining the purpose of the study (to understand intrinsic motivation to learn from a student perspective) and the unique methodology of the Insider Perspective Approach, I located a willing teacher. Permission was then obtained from the principal who requested that I send a letter informing parents/guardians of the study and requesting permission for student interviews.

I chose to implement what Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) refer to as “impression management” believing that my demeanor and dress could help reduce the difference between these 10 and 11 year olds and myself, a 41 year old. I sought advice from fifth graders who attended a different school on what to wear, what to do, and how to act. They expressed strong opinions that mainly focused

on what not to do: don’t bring a purse with dangling keys, don’t wear makeup foundation, don’t be seen driving to school, don’t have coffee breath, don’t say “good job” (as “that’s what grownups say”), don’t cross your legs, and don’t eat something healthy “like yogurt” every day. I took their suggestions to heart.

The study took place during the 1993-1994 school year in a southern California community of 90,000 at a diverse elementary school of 635 students: 54% Latino, 43% Anglo, 1% African American, and 1% Asian. On the first day of school I entered a fifth grade bilingual class with 14 boys and 12 girls as a “fellow student.” Of the 15 Latino students, nine were bilingual, five were monolingual Spanish speakers, and one of the Latino students was a monolingual English speaker.

Research Phases:

Table 1 highlights the timeline, research objectives, data collection procedures, and data analysis contained in this study. The study involved 65 full day visits, 300 hours of observant participation, interviews with all 26 students totaling 13 hours, and writing samples on eight different occasions.

Table 1: Research Phases (1993-1994)

June-July	August	Sept-Nov	December	April
OBJECTIVES				
Locate classroom	Meet with teacher and faculty	PHASE 1: Participate as a student (Observant Participation)	PHASE 2: Interview students in pairs	PHASE 4: Interview whole group of students
Gain verbal permissions	Get approval from Human Subjects Committee which includes all permission forms	Send informational letter to parents	Send letter to parents requesting permission to interview child	
		PHASE 3: Collect student writings		

DATA COLLECTION

DATA ANALYSIS

Ongoing data analysis – ongoing data analysis – ongoing data analysis

Grounded Theory Method of Qualitative Analysis

Phase 1: Observant Participation (September-November)

During the first three months of the school year I attended school daily as a full-time participating fifth grade student. Simply put, I did just as the students did. I sought to become part of the fabric of the classroom community: gaining credibility, accessing insider knowledge of how to view situations, and learning the insider way of talking, thinking, and feeling about situations. I did not hide the fact that I was doing a study and that I was there to understand what motivates students to learn.

As the students came to view me as equally involved in their world, they seemed to progressively share more of their thoughts and feelings with me. I settled into a pattern of participating as fully as possible while recording notes throughout the day. When students asked what I was writing I said, “Everything I see and hear. Would you like to look?” After they looked at my notes, I asked if I got it right and if they wanted me to add or change anything.

My notes provided me the trigger to recall details of events and conversations. Each evening I reviewed my notes and then composed field notes that included descriptions, interpretations, analysis, and reflections. As is the nature of ethnographic research, data analysis was an ongoing, cyclical process. Each observation period was followed by data analysis, which led to finding new questions, more data collection, more field notes, and more analysis. This cycle continued in this manner until the study neared completion.

Phase 2: Interview Students (December)

My role changed from observant participant to interviewer during this phase. The purpose of the interview phase was to ask students about the

thoughts and feelings that directed their actions in the classroom experience. The interviews, which were each 50-70 minutes in length, were audio-taped and later transcribed into 100 pages of typed manuscript. Students were interviewed in pairs so that one comment might spark ideas from the fellow student. Comments from students were compared and contrasted to provide a better understanding of the collective perspective.

Each interview began with a card sorting activity in which each card represented a different activity in the class. Students were asked to sort the cards into three piles:

Left pile	Middle Pile	Right Pile
Activities which you felt were boring, you did not like, and you found yourself not every trying – not even caring.	Activities that you cannot remember or do not have a strong feeling about.	Activities which you enjoyed, you participated, you tried hard, and you felt were a fun way to learn.

After the card sorting, I set the Middle Pile (activities they could not remember) to the side. I then gave them the cards from the Right Pile (activities they enjoyed) and said, “I am interested in what it is about these activities that helps you to enjoy them and try hard. What makes these activities fun? How do you feel when you are participating in these activities? Does any one activity stand out as being the best kind of learning? Tell me about it.”

We then turned to the Left Pile (activities they felt were boring) and I said, “Look at these activities.

Talk about as many of these as you would like. What makes these activities boring? How do you feel when you are participating in these activities? What would need to change about these activities in order for you to like them, participate in them, and try your best?"

Phase 3: Writing Samples (September – December)

Field notes and transcriptions of interviews were triangulated with student writings from eight different occasions (one in September, six in December, and one in April). The purpose of utilizing student writings was to access ideas, thoughts, and feelings that students may have been unable or unwilling to verbalize and thus unnoticeable in students' actions and interviews. The writing topics were developed to access the students' motivational orientations and their opinions of how various elements of the classroom environment impacted their intrinsic motivation to learn.

Phase 4: Group Interview (April)

In April, I returned to class to share the analysis with the students to confirm the findings of the students' perspective. Students were given the opportunity – both orally or in writing – to agree, disagree, change words, and suggest missing ideas. The result of the interview was strong confirmation of the findings.

Data Analysis

The Grounded Theory Method of Qualitative Analysis (sometimes referred to as Constant Comparative Method) was used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded Theory seeks to illuminate a phenomenon that is grounded in the data. A systematic set of procedures is used to generate and build a theory that is faithful to the data. Creativity, rigor, persistence, and theoretical sensitivity all work together to create both artistic and scientific analytical balance.

Essential to this analysis is continually asking questions of the data and then subsequently comparing answers with emerging ideas. Specially, color-coded copies were made of all field notes, interview transcripts, and writing samples, and they were literally fractured (i.e., cut apart). Thus, the data were broken into thousands of classroom episodes, compared, conceptualized, and then

categorized. Resulting concepts became the building blocks for theory development.

As categories began to emerge, the focus became to select the categories that represented thoughts, feelings, and actions of the collective group of students. As a criterion for selecting collective ideas, an idea needed to be represented (in field notes, interview transcripts, and/or writing samples) by at least 80% of the students. To further enhance the transferability of the study, ideas needed to be observed across groups – boys, girls, Latinos, and Anglos. This analysis identified collective patterns and themes that ran throughout the observations, interviews, and writing samples and which describe the collective student perspective of how classrooms can be structured to tap into and enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn.

Findings

This section highlights the key findings regarding the Insider Perspective Approach and more importantly, what constitutes a classroom experience that promotes intrinsic motivation to learn from the student perspective. I've included only a few sampling of comments for each concept; however, at least 21 of the 26 students confirmed each concept through field notes, interviews, or writing samples. When student comments are included the coding indicates where the comment was heard or seen (FN = field notes, I = interview, WS = writing sample). All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

Effectiveness of Insider Perspective Approach

The Insider Perspective Approach seemed to be effective in gaining a deep look inside the student world. The students appeared to easily integrate me into their classroom experience. On the first day of school, students were paired up and asked to interview one another. My partner, Kelly, introduced me to the class (FN), "This is Jane. She's going to be a student in our class this year, because she wants to understand what it's like to be a student. She's going to do all the work and can get in trouble, so I think it's OK."

At various points I asked students what it was like to have me as a student. Johan explained (FN), "You just blend right in." Estella expressed (FN), "Well, you do the homework. You sit at our tables. You play with us. It seems fine." Steve wrote (WS), "At first I thought it was weird, then all of a sudden

you were just a regular student – only taller.” Anita explained (FN), “You are like a student. The only thing you do different is write in your notebook.” During one lunch period, I was sitting on the grass and eating lunch with a group of five girls. Brooke was sharing something that felt surprisingly naughty; she stopped suddenly and looked at me (FN), “I wouldn’t tell you these things if you were really here. You know, if you were really an adult.” While I don’t pretend that the students viewed me as an ordinary fellow student, it did appear that they accepted me into their world.

Once I was intimately involved as a fellow student, I had the opportunity to listen to the students talk in the midst of school experiences. Interacting as a fellow student not only gave me the knowledge to ask the right questions in our interviews, it also helped me to build the relationships so we could talk freely and opening about issues of concern to them. Roberto said (FN), “You understand, because you ask questions and I tell you what I think. No one has ever asked me before.” It was both the close-up, in-depth observations coupled with interviews and writing samples that gave me access to understanding what it looks and feels like to be a student.

Classroom Experiences that Enhance Intrinsic Motivation to Learn

The findings show a coordinated set of thoughts and feelings held by the collective group of students regarding classroom experiences that enhance intrinsic motivation to learn. The predominate concepts that emerged as a foundational anchor to enhance intrinsic motivation are the concepts of control and competence. Overlaying the foundation of control and competence are three themes that build upon what was generally intrinsically motivating in the classroom experience: promoting fun through active involvement and variety, enhancing learning through curiosity and challenge, and connecting students through a sense of belonging and honored voices. When these variables were in place in the classroom, the students sensed that they were effectively interacting within their classroom world. Time passed quickly. And students experienced a sense of enjoyment, pleasure, and satisfaction.

Anchoring Intrinsic Motivation: Control and Competence

Intrinsic motivation to learn was enhanced when students had a clear sense that they were making choices and getting better. “Making choices” and “getting better” were these students’ terminology for “control” and “competence” which are central concepts to many theories of intrinsic motivation. This foundational anchor demonstrates further confirmation that intrinsic motivation was, indeed, at work in this classroom.

Whether it was through fun, learning, or connecting with others, intrinsically motivating learning experiences occurred when students realized that they were making choices or decisions (control) and getting better at something (competence) in their classroom experience. These two concepts are intimately connected. That is, as students were given choices and made decisions in their lives, the result was a sense of greater competence. Conversely, when students felt increased competence, they experienced a sense of being more in control of their world.

All 26 students expressed pleasure in being able to make choices in the classroom experience. Having choices in their learning seemed to make an activity one that students wanted to do rather than forced to do. When presented with a choice, students needed to make decisions and sometimes needed to adjust activities to match their interests and skills. These choices and subsequent decisions led to a sense of personal **control**. Having control created feelings of excitement, happiness, importance, increased interest, and pride. Anita expressed (I), “I want to learn way more if I get choices.” Ryan (I), “It’s better when you can choose because then you can find something that you want to learn about. Then you can really go for it.” And Jorge explained (I), “It’s more fun and I try harder if I get a choice.” Brooke expressed (I), “When a teacher tells me that I have to do something and that I have no other choice, it makes me feel like I don’t want to do it as much. Like if the teacher says, ‘You can do this, this, or this’ it makes you feel free – like you have a free choice. It’s not like you’re trapped... I don’t want to learn as much when I feel forced to learn. Then it doesn’t turn out very good, because they’re forcing me. It doesn’t even feel fun.”

The second concept of this foundational anchor showed that students liked to get better, be successful, improve their skills, and figure things out. Typically, when students felt like they were

getting better at something, they would return to the activity to be even more involved. When students experienced growing **competence**, they expressed that they had fun, and felt proud, satisfied, confident, and important. Nora explained (I), “I like getting better and better at something... so I’m learning and that feels great.” Pablo wrote (WS), “I really want to learn... It feels good to learn something you didn’t understand.” Anita said (I), “I don’t remember what it was, but I was like trying, trying, trying to do it. Then I finally did it. I was proud of myself. That’s fun.”

Promoting Fun: Active Involvement and Variety

All 26 students used the word “fun” to describe a great classroom experience that enhanced their intrinsic motivation. When I asked them to explain what a fun lesson looks like, they expressed **actively doing** something. In contrast, lack of active involvement felt boring to students. Many students expressed that when activities were fun, they were willing to participate and to try their best. A “fun” classroom experience, in which they were actively involved, resulted in students feeling happy, excited, and energetic. Ryan wrote (WS), “Learning feels fun when you’re active in whatever you are doing... something besides just sitting and listening.” Luis explained (I), “When I do really participate and do something then it’s fun, and I can learn a lot. If I don’t participate, then I don’t learn as much. Estella expressed (I), “I like learning when we are doing something. When I get to do things, it’s fun.”

The most engaging activities, however, began to lose their impact for motivation when used repeatedly. Thus, even the best strategies for teaching need to offer **variety**. Elise explained (I), “I love it when I get to do something that I’ve never done before. Like if I’ve done something a lot I get bored, but if it’s something I’ve never done – it’s like, oh gee, maybe I’ll like this.” Tom expressed (I), “When I really want to do something, then it’s probably something I’ve never done before. And when I don’t want to do something, it’s probably something that I’ve done a whole bunch of times.” Anita wrote (WS), “I want to learn more when the activity seems like it might be something I’ve never done before.”

Enhancing Learning: Curiosity and Challenge

Learning brought pleasure to these students, which emerged as another theme for enhancing intrinsic motivation in the classroom setting. New learning, per se, was not necessarily motivating on its own; rather it was new learning in which students experienced getting better (increased competence) and making choices (having control). Learning appeared to be most compelling when the students were curious about topics and when the activity was appropriately challenging. In these instances, learning impacted students’ feelings in a positive way. Students expressed feeling proud, satisfied and important when they learned something new, acquired new skills, and when they shared this knowledge with other people. Jose wrote (WS), “I really want to learn a lot of things. Sometimes I know that there are things that I don’t know, and I want to know them.” Rocio wrote (WS), “I want to learn all the time.”

Curiosity is a central motivator of learning. Not surprisingly, many students experienced enjoyment of learning when their curiosities were aroused. One poignant moment occurred during a science experiment in which we were observing how a variety of liquids behaved. Drew, a rather reserved and quiet student, exclaimed during a science lesson (FN), “Oh my gosh. Steve look. Nora look. Ryan look. Oh my gosh! This is so neat. It’s so weird. Look, you can move it around. It doesn’t even leave a trail.” Ryan’s pure joy poured forth as he observed something unusual and unexpected, something that tapped his curiosity. Brooke expressed this vividly (WS), “Curiosity hits me like a bolt of lightning.” And Johan wrote (WS), “I think curiosity helps me a lot. It gets me going and makes me interested in learning.”

In addition to curiosity, the concept of **challenge** also appeared to enhance the learning experience. Many students expressed feeling bored if an activity was too easy; however, they expressed feeling nervous and not wanting to try if it was too hard. The best kind of learning occurred when students felt it was appropriately challenging. Rosana explained (I), “I like to do a project if it’s like – you know, not too hard and not too easy.” One interesting example in this class was the “Math Facts Challenge” also known in most classrooms as “timed tests.” Math Facts Challenges were three minute timed tests to increase proficiency with the four basic math facts. The teacher introduced this

skill-based test on the second day of school (FN), “I expect that you know your math facts in fifth grade. I will give you opportunities to test yourself on your facts. I call them ‘personal challenges.’ Your challenge is to get 100% correct in three minutes. When I give a Math Facts Challenge, I will ask who wants to try for a personal challenge. If you feel you are ready or if you want to practice, then you can choose to take the challenge. If you want, you can draw or read. It is also OK if you want to take the challenge but not turn it in. I want to take the pressure off. I want to put you in charge. It is not a test – it is a challenge. I do not care when you turn it in, but I do care if you don’t ever try. When you get 100% correct, we’ll mark it on the chart to celebrate your success.” During this study, the teacher gave the Math Facts Challenge on 29 days. Each day she would ask, “Who would like to take the Math Facts Challenge?” Each time students enthusiastically waved their arms in the air awaiting their chance to take the challenge. Only four students, one time apiece, chose to not take the challenge. The teacher framed the Math Facts Tests as challenges worthy of facing. Students responded positively to this framing. Elise expressed (I), “The Math Facts Challenge is neat. Everybody wants to take it. I like the Math Facts Challenge because you feel really good when you finally pass them. I like getting better and better at something.” Alejandra explained (I), “I like that we can choose to turn it in, but I always choose to turn it in.”

Connecting Students: Sense of Belonging and Honored Voices

The final theme of a classroom that enhances intrinsic motivation suggests that students liked connecting with other students in their classroom. When students connected with other students they expressed feeling happy, important, and relaxed. Learning was simply more fun when they got to learn with another person. The two specific ways in which students experienced this connection were through a sense of belonging and honored voiced.

Students experienced a **sense of belonging** when they had opportunities to help and be helped by their fellow students. Roberto wrote (WS), “When I can help somebody, then I feel important and it makes me want to learn more.” Julian expressed (I), “I like to be with my friends, because if the teacher asks a question and I don’t know, maybe my friends understand and they can help me to understand.”

Pablo explained (I), “I like it when people ask me for help. It makes me feel important.” During our weekly class meetings, the most common sentence frame used was (FN), “Thanks to _____ for helping me.” Likely these weekly affirmations also fostered a positive sense of belonging.

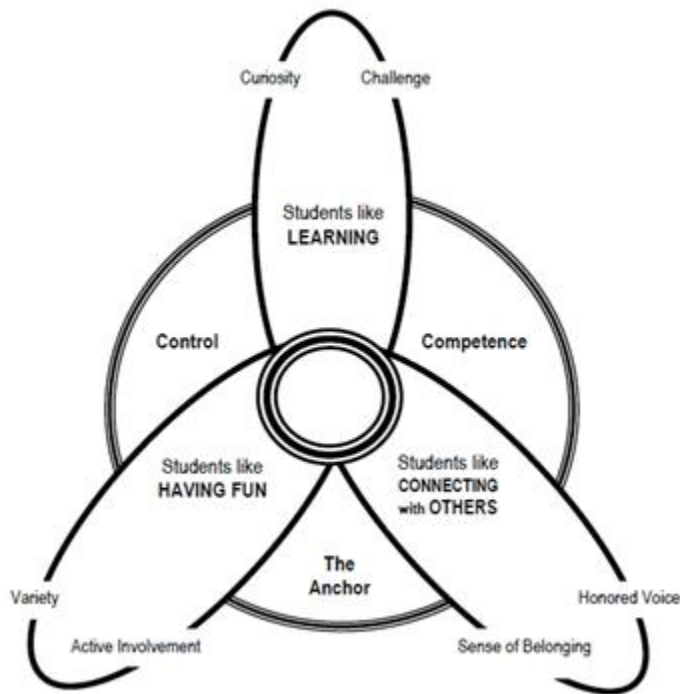
Honored voices were another way in which students experienced connectedness in this classroom. Students felt that they were listened to by the teacher and by fellow students, and that their ideas were valued. Elise (I), “This year I can tell people are really listening to me. It makes me feel important.” Jose concurred (I), “I feel sorta important in the class meetings because people listen to my ideas.” A specific example of honored voices occurred during social studies. After completing a research project students were required to give a short oral presentation. Initially the students told me that they did not want to talk in front of the group, but after their presentation they expressed great satisfaction. So I asked them to tell me more. Pablo explained (FN), “I liked everyone clapping for me. It made me feel so proud.” Alejandra said (FN), “At first, I was so nervous, but then – it was great. I felt so great to share my information.” Roberto wrote (WS), “Sharing information in front of the class made me feel important... I’ve never done this before and I really learned.”

Implications for educators

The findings of this study support and extend theories of intrinsic motivation. Figure 1 presents a model of situational factors that can enhance intrinsic motivation to learn, and visually illustrates the themes and their relationship to each other. The anchor of the model contains the concepts of control and competence. That is, underlying the other three components is a foundation of interacting effectively with one’s environment and seeking to make sense of one’s world. Overlaying the foundation of control and competence are three themes that represent the collective student perspective on what is generally intrinsically motivating in the classroom experience: promoting fun through active involvement and variety, enhancing learning through curiosity and challenge, and connecting students through a sense of belonging and honored voices. This model can equip educators with situational concepts to

enhance students' intrinsic motivation to learn both in the class and beyond.

Figure 1: Model of Situational Factors to Enhance Intrinsic Motivation to Learn



Anchoring Intrinsic Motivation: Control and Competence

The foundational anchor to enhance intrinsic motivation is structuring opportunities for students to experience control and competence in their learning experiences. The satisfaction that emerges when students feel in control and competent compels them to exert more effort toward new learning tasks. It is not surprising that the themes of control and competence are the anchor points to these findings as these two themes are central to many theories of intrinsic motivation (Anderman & Leake, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 1985; White, 1959). These theories suggest that people seek to interact effectively in their world by being in control and experiencing competence.

People have an innate need to feel in **control** of and have power over their own lives. Therefore, when students exercise and validate a sense of control in their learning, they experience intrinsic motivation to learn. Students experience autonomy when they discover that their own effort, decisions, and choices enable them to interact effectively with their coursework, peers, and teacher. When students see that their locus of control lies within

themselves, studies show increased task involvement, concern for quality, responsibility, intrinsic motivation, and usually a higher level of achievement (Anderman & Leake, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sullo, 2009; Wilson, 1994).

At first glance, educators may feel discouraged with the idea of offering control to the students. With pressure to achieve numerous state standards and a mandated (sometimes scripted) curriculum from the district, the notion of student control appears a distant possibility. Educators can, however, offer control to students in a variety of ways.

Central to control is offering choices to students. Students can be offered choices on topics to study, books to read, questions to answer, or products to create. Educators may want to limit the choices to ensure that each choice aligns with the standards, but even having a choice among two or three ideas taps into students' intrinsic motivation towards the task. Students are empowered and energized when they see that they have some choice in either the process or the product and thus, they feel in control of their learning. Educators will likely find that providing a choice shifts the activity in the students' minds from having to do it, to *wanting* to do it.

The second concept of this powerful anchor for promoting intrinsic motivation is *competence*. More specifically, it is helping students to recognize that they are improving their competencies as a learner. The initial tendency for a teacher is to simply tell the student that they are getting better. But again, if a teacher desires to promote lifelong learning, a more compelling approach would be to help the students themselves identify when they are improving. In so doing, the student develops the internal skill to evaluate his/her own work, recognize growth, and feel the pleasure of improvement. This self-knowledge of competence is central to many theories of intrinsic motivation and the end result of such knowledge is that students continue to invest their energies in subsequent tasks (Anderman & Leake, 2005; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Van Brummelen, 2009; White, 1959; Wilson, 1994).

How can teachers help students recognize their own growing competencies? One of the most powerful strategies is to include students in the assessment process so that students are provided the opportunity to see progress in their learning. For

example, students can be involved in portfolio assessment by selecting personal work to be included, comparing their work to earlier work in the year, by identifying why they selected each piece, and by suggesting areas for improvement. Notice that in this case students aren't comparing, or being compared, with others; rather they are comparing their work against themselves. As students identify and recognize progress in their learning they will likely experience feelings of contentment, satisfaction, and confidence. Students can thus feel that they are interacting effectively with their world. Another strategy is to break down learning tasks into more doable sections, and have students set personal goals. With each subsequent goal that is achieved, students gain confidence and competence as they approach the next goal at hand.

Control and competence are intimately connected. When students are offered choices, it not only increases their interest in the task, but also creates a feeling of efficacy as they find that they can make decisions and thus feel competent in their classroom world. With a solid anchor of control and competence in place, educators can plan lessons with the three top wings of the model: promoting fun, enhancing learning, and connecting students (For more examples of strategies to offer control and develop competence, see Anderman & Anderman, 2010; Erwin, 2004; Kohn, 1993; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004; Sullo, 2009; Theobald, 2006; Vokoun & Bigelow, 2008; Watson, 2003).

Promoting Fun: Active Involvement and Variety

Students continually informed me that learning feels best when they are having fun. It shouldn't be surprising that students like to have fun. But can learning be fun? I am convinced it can be. Stanford Professor of Education and Psychology, Dr. John Krumboltz (1990, p. 10) states it well, "Learning is an exciting process; unless, of course, we go out of our way to make it unpleasant."

People desire fun. Through play-like activities in the classroom students can satisfy this desire at all grade levels. From a student perspective, **active involvement** is the first ingredient for experiencing fun. Sitting and listening throughout the day produces boredom and withdrawal of efforts (and often subsequent misbehavior) in students. In contrast, activities that actively engage students

result in enriched learning experiences, willingness for students to exert effort, and usually a more authentic approach to academics (Malone & Lepper, 1987; Sullo, 2009; Wilson, 1994).

Active involvement in the classroom occurs when students get to move, engage in a simulation, role-play, conduct an experiment, or demonstrate a principle with their bodies. While these examples all involve movement and often noise, other examples of active involvement are quieter such as engaging students with puzzles, brain teasers, or detective-like projects. The central point is developing activities in which students need to actively use their minds to participate.

What I've found, however, is that the most engaging activities begin to lose their impact for motivation if used repeatedly. Educators can foster motivating situations by offering **variety** throughout the day. Certainly educators should be aware of the attention span that is developmentally appropriate for their students and vary the lesson accordingly. Educators may also want to vary the order of lessons from day to day. This approach likely needs to be balanced within an established structure so students have security in the daily process. Yet adding variety piques students' interests, and when interest is sparked, intrinsic motivation is enhanced (For more examples of strategies to promote active involvement and variety see Harmin, 1994; Theobald, 2006; Watson, 2003).

Enhancing Learning: Curiosity and Challenge

While students express a desire for fun, the teacher understandably is most concerned with learning. Yet students also enjoy learning, particularly when the learning involves something they are curious about and when the learning is appropriately challenging. Thus teacher can structure learning tasks that tap curiosity and promote challenge.

Curiosity is arguably the most fundamental of scholarly traits and is a central motivator of learning. Hence, when curiosity is aroused in learning situations in the classroom, students naturally probe, explore, question ideas, seek to understand, and insist on explanations (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dweck, 1986). Curiosity can serve as a hook to capture students' intrinsic motivation to explore new subject content. Educators can fan the flame of curiosity during a well-planned anticipatory set by pointing out the unexpected,

novel, or surprising aspects of a subject. In so doing, students' innate propensity to fill in those gaps of their learning is sparked. Another ideal strategy for promoting curiosity is having students conduct experiments in which they explore a concept.

The concept of **challenge** suggests that students will seek out activities that provide an optimal level of challenge; that is, not too hard or not too easy. Studies show that students are more absorbed with the content if the material presents a challenge to them and they need to apply a reasonable amount of effort to obtain success (Brophy, 1987; Malone & Lepper, 1987). When students engage in and master a challenging subject or skill, the internal satisfaction and pleasure they experience will enhance the desire to continue learning.

For educators, providing the appropriate level of challenge to students can be daunting. Not only is there a wide range of student ability within a classroom, but once a student masters a certain level of challenge that level needs to be raised. I find that circling back to the anchor of control and competence helps me to offer appropriate challenge. After a student faces and masters a challenge, we talk about the satisfaction they experienced. I then link the pleasurable feeling to the next activity and offer a choice, reminding them that they will feel more competent and satisfied if they take a challenging path (For more examples of strategies to tap curiosity and offer challenge see Egan, 2005; Theobald, 2006).

Connecting Students: Sense of Belonging and Honored Voices

Life in classrooms is a complex social environment. People strive to experience a sense of social and psychological belonging by establishing connectedness, support, and a sense of community with others. Indeed, some researchers have found that students are often more concerned with their social relationships in classrooms than they are with learning, rewards, or approval (Osterman, 2000). Yet when students feel connected and supported in the classroom, they will be intrinsically motivated to join in the classroom activities. Motivation can therefore be enhanced when students have opportunities to build social relationships in the context of the classroom (Anderman & Anderman, 2010). Two ways that educators can help students

feel competent in their relationships are to create a sense of belonging in the classroom and to honor students' voices.

A **sense of belonging** needs to be established early in the school year. If not, students can experience feelings of alienation and withdraw their efforts in the classroom (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Educators who successfully establish a supportive classroom environment early on in which students feel welcome, accepted, and connected will find that students are more willing to take risks, share ideas, help others, and work together to solve problems (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Juvonen, 2006). At the root of this concept is the idea that students want to feel like they are a part of the group and that they have opportunities to help and to be helped by others.

Educators can create a sense of belonging in a variety of ways. Many elementary educators have found success by creating a class list of rotating responsibilities so that everyone has an important role to fulfill that helps the class operate successfully. This approach seems to be most effective when each student is assigned a responsibility. In one classroom I recently visited, one student was assigned the role of "Welcomer." When I entered the first grade classroom, this student (without prodding from the teacher) got up, came over to me, reached out her hand to shake mine, and then said, "Welcome to our classroom. Right now we are working on blending. Please make yourself at home." This first grader not only made me feel welcome and offered me a sense of belonging, but I believe she experienced great allegiance to her classroom by assuming an important responsibility. As I looked around this classroom, I noticed work and photographs on the bulletin boards to represent all students. And when the teacher addressed the students, she called them a clever group name, which helped the students to feel that they are uniquely connected and a part of this group.

Honored voices is another strategy which connects and empowers students (Glickman, 2010; Oldfather, 1995). Simply put, students feel empowered when others listen to and respect their ideas. When students sense that their teacher values their observations and insights, this gives them a sense of control and competence that in turn fosters intrinsic motivation in the classroom setting.

Honoring voices begins when educators listen to their students – their observations, insights, and questions. Acknowledging and even celebrating their observations can be quite affirming to the students. This also applies when students notice errors made by the teacher. Even at those times, which may feel awkward, a teacher can affirm the student for being observant. By honoring the student’s voice and observations, the student feels safe and motivated to continue offering ideas in the future. Educators honor students by incorporating their ideas and feedback into the lessons. Another ideal strategy to honor students’ voices is to hold class meetings to discuss issues and solve problems that emerge in classroom life. In each of these examples, honoring student’s ideas and voice empowers them not only for the present classroom, but for their future roles in life (For more examples of promoting a sense of belonging and honored voices see Anderman & Leake, 2005; Theobald, 2006; Watson, 2003).

Conclusion

Classroom Experiences which Enhance Intrinsic Motivation to Learn

If educators desire to promote lifelong learning within their students, then creating learning experiences that foster intrinsic motivation should be embedded in their lesson planning. The “Model of Situational Factors to Enhance Intrinsic Motivation to Learn” (Figure 1) can guide educators towards that end.

The center circle of the model encompasses all of the concepts addressed and could be considered the “optimal classroom experience.” With all variables in play, students experience a strong sense of control and competence as they participate in learning activities which promote fun through active involvement and variety, which enhance learning through curiosity and challenge, and connect students through a sense of belonging and honored voices.

Though the center circle could be considered the optimal classroom experience, it would be difficult to have all variables in place for all lessons throughout the day. Instead, educators can experience increased intrinsic motivation to learn from their students as they integrate different concepts throughout the day, week, or term. By doing so, educators will find that students will choose to participate and exert energy for the

intrinsic pleasure that learning brings. When educators notice students experiencing a sense of internal satisfaction or joy, they can guide the discussion to help students recognize the pleasure that learning can bring. By fostering opportunities for students to experience the sheer joy of learning and by discussing these moments as they arise, students will more likely be compelled to continue learning outside and beyond the walls of the classroom.

If you, as an educator, agree that the ultimate goal of education is to promote lifelong learning, then let the model guide you as you plan your lessons, as you seek to establish a welcoming classroom community of learners, and as you respond to the daily concerns and questions that emerge in the classroom. Overlay the model on top of pressing state standards and adopted curriculum to see ways that you can foster learning experiences in which students choose to participate and exert effort because they feel confidence to interact effectively in their world. At the end of the day, an intrinsically motivating approach to learning will bring increased joy and satisfaction to your students and yourself. Moreover, such an approach to learning can honor God as people experience the joy of learning about all things that He has created.

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