

Headteacher's Blog

"On Your Marks, Get Set, Go - it's a matter of motivation!"

Inspired by a famous portrait for their Self-Identity project, this picture was created by a talented Year 9 pupil at Balcarras School this week. What a powerful message for us as we start the New Year, as the pandemic continues to challenge families and schools across the land, and as the vaccine is rolled out.

As a teacher of more than 20 years, I am always so struck by the resilience, the get-up-and-go, that pupils are capable of, even when faced with the most challenging circumstances. There is certainly a palpable sense of motivation working at The Trust at the moment - with less than 9 months before The High School Leckhampton opens, my colleagues and I are energised and focused on developing our plans. We are lucky, our motivation is driven by a passionate commitment to creating a fantastic school – we have a strong *raison d'être*, we have a clear purpose and reason to get out of bed every morning.



I am surrounded by motivated teachers who are determined to deliver the best online lessons, despite having to radically adapt their traditional methods of working, manage the children of critical workers, and overcome any technical challenges along the way. However, whilst highly motivated at school, I must admit that my New Year's resolutions have already fallen by the wayside. I find this dichotomy fascinating – how can I sustain hours of challenging work and leave school feeling energised, yet struggle to motivate myself for something that, on the surface at least, is so much simpler?

Abraham Maslow, the American psychologist and philosopher best known for his self-actualization theory of psychology articulated this conundrum, '**why is it that we are all born with limitless potential, yet few people fulfil those possibilities?**' Maslow's answer came in the shape of his *Hierarchy of Needs* (1971), a theory which explains motivation in terms of fulfilling innate human needs in priority, culminating in self-actualization. There are countless other theories, often studied by teachers during their training, that explain where motivation comes from.

As teachers we witness first-hand its value in every classroom and it is hard to find a teacher who doesn't subscribe to the consensus that motivation contributes positively to significant life outcomes like achievement, performance, and well-being. It seems to me that motivation is at the heart of every learning experience so, we as teachers, are uniquely placed to 'experience' it more

than most and I believe we have a responsibility to nurture a life-long motivation to learn in our pupils.

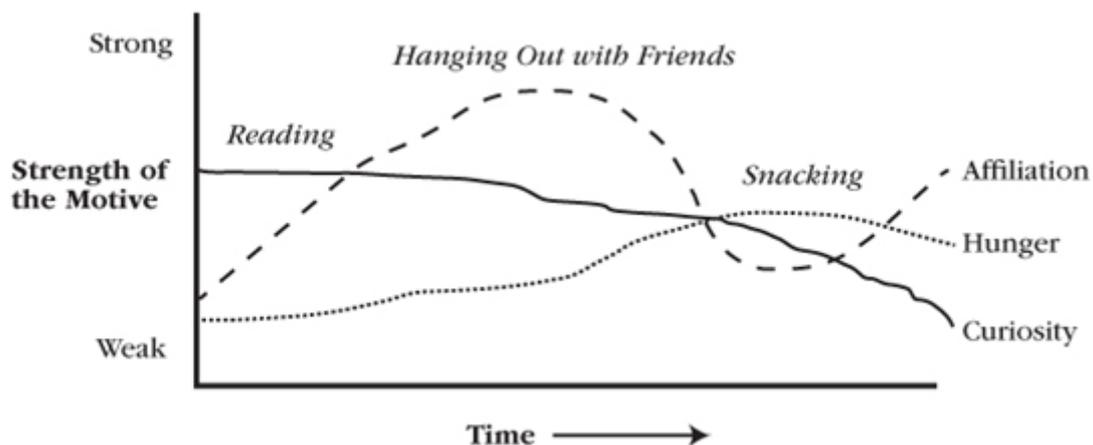
What is motivation?

Perhaps best described as an internal process, whether we define it as a drive or a need, motivation is a condition inside us that desires a change, either in the self or the environment. When we tap into this well of energy, motivation endows the person with the drive and direction needed to engage with the environment in an adaptive, open-ended, and problem-solving sort of way (Reeve, 2018).

In the classroom motivation can become particularly visible and detectable through behaviour and levels of engagement. Teachers instinctively look out for gestures and facial expressions, signs of intense effort, or conversely evidence of distraction and procrastination. It is certainly not a fixed state, it is a dynamic, cyclical process – there are many subtle nuances that lead to a rise and fall in drive as circumstances change and time passes. To further complicate matters, we are driven by a multitude of different motives at any one point in time. (B. Souders 2020) In most circumstances the strongest motive predominates and influences behaviour but as circumstances change, other motives play more of an influential role. This is crucial in understanding how to set goals or targets for pupils.

How to enhance motivation in the classroom

The below example shows how a student's motivation to read varies over time in strength, starting relatively strong then weakening when compared to the need to hang out with friends or to eat a snack (Reeve, 2017)



It is the responsibility of the teacher to understand the cyclical nature of motivation; a skilful teacher will understand the importance of incorporating some of the following aspects into their practice (this is far from an exhaustive list!):

Goal setting

When trying to keep pupils motivated, short term goals can work better for what might be perceived as 'uninteresting' activities, such as learning times tables. This is because pupils are provided with frequent feedback, which can boost commitment, and this reinforces the effort to keep trying. (Reeve, 2017) Clarity and choice can often boost motivation to perform routine tasks as pupils can quickly enhance mastery (skill level) and gain a sense of autonomy, both of which are proven to increase levels of engagement (B. Souders 2020).

When it comes to 'interesting' tasks long-term goals can work better as they often provide for greater flexibility and more autonomy in how to pursue them (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 1990). These 'Autotelic' activities are already engaging, and we are often intrinsically motivated to perform them because they produce enjoyment. But most importantly, we are motivated to pursue them in the absence of external rewards or incentives. But we also need to bear in mind that that motivation to act on the goals is often higher when the goal is based in the near future, while far off goals do not create the tension of immediacy that would motivate us to act right away (Reeve, 2017). So, getting the balance right is crucial. In the classroom, teachers structure their curriculum design to incorporate both long-term 'interesting' tasks, such as producing an original piece of creative writing, with more short-term orientated tasks, such as learning key grammatical techniques, so that motivation remains high throughout the learning process. They are in effect punctuating the learning process with repetition, rituals, timely feedback, autonomy, and choice. (B. Sounders 2020)

Personalisation and challenge

For teachers to successfully motivate their pupils, they also need to understand that one size does not fit all. We each bring certain personality traits that can make us more or less open to new or challenging activities. We are motivated by different incentives, goals, and activities and these can change over time (B. Sounders 2020). As a parent, do not be surprised if the incentive that once motivated your child as a toddler may not necessarily work on your teenager! And that's where challenge comes in, we must seek to get the balance right between a task that is too easy (and therefore pointless) and one that is too challenging (equally pointless). Csikszentmihalyi argues that if you can make tasks challenging enough, then teachers are able to create a powerful motivational emotion:

The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times...the best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limit in voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.

Mihaly Csikszentmihályi

Other psychologists describe this balance as The Way of Flow, but perhaps we will leave that to another blog.

Some concluding thoughts

Motivation is a complex phenomenon – despite the psychological theories it can be very difficult to pin-point exactly where it comes from and it can disappear as quickly as it appears. As teachers we often work in a very instinctive way, our teacher radar learns to sense varying levels of motivation in a classroom and we intervene to keep it as high as possible for the greatest number of pupils for the greatest amount of time. In my experience of school leadership, I can vouch for the fact that motivation is contagious, a motivated teacher creates a motivated classroom. So, at the start of this New Year, when teaching remotely is changing (and challenging) our classroom practice, I would encourage my teacher colleagues to pay close attention to motivation - perhaps the best thing we can all do is to more consciously notice when we feel motivated and enjoy the

feeling. As teachers, if we can identify our own motivations, surely, we are in a better position to motivate others. And, as Psychologist B. Sounders so aptly puts it:

'what could ever be more important than empowering those around us toward more intentional action, goal attainment, optimal experience, full functioning, healthy development, and resilient sense of self.'

Let's hope that hope that's enough to keep those resolutions alive for a little while longer.

Helen Wood, Headteacher

The High School Leckhampton, Part of The Balcarras Trust

January 2021

References and further reading

1. See positivepsychology.com for a wide range of research relating to motivation, particularly helpful were these articles by Beata Souders, MSPP, ACC published in 2020:

<https://positivepsychology.com/what-is-motivation/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/motivation-human-behavior/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/motivation-theories-psychology/>

1. Csíkszentmihályi, M. (1990). Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. New York, NY: HaperCollins
2. Understanding Motivation and Emotion (7th ed.) – Johnmarshall Reeve (2017)
3. Maslow, A. (1971). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature.
4. Maslow A. H. (1973). Dominance, self-esteem, self-actualization: germinal papers of AH Maslow. Thomson Brooks/Col

For more general explanations of motivation, I have enjoyed

1. Pink, D.H (2009). Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us ISBN 9781786891709
2. Syed, M (2010) Bounce: The myth of talent and the power of practice ISBN 9780007350544