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All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

by José A. Cárdenas, 1994
IDRA Founder & Director Emeritus

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Chapter 29: Basics of Motivation

"The problem with these kids is that they are not I motivated," is a commonly heard lament among teachers and other school staff!

The difficulty of having students participate and succeed in school instructional activities is one or the most salient problems in U.S. education. School personnel are inevitably faced with the dilemma of the student who is not motivated to learn.

It is surprising, therefore, that I have encountered so little knowledge and understanding about motivation among school personnel. This shortcoming is evident in spite of the requirements for educational certification commonly including one or more courses in educational psychology, in which the concept of motivation is invariably addressed.

Motivation is the propensity for a certain type of behavior. The degree of motivation may vary from one individual to the next, or it may vary within one individual at different times.

Psychologists explain motivation in terms of need fulfillment. Every individual has basic needs that have to be fulfilled. Basic needs are commonly divided into physiological and psychological needs. The physiological needs, such as food, water, shelter, rest, etc., are commonly known and understood. An individual deprived of one of the basic needs directs his behavior to the satisfaction of that need. A thirsty individual may eventually forego all behaviors, other than those which have a propensity for meeting the need for water. The individual is said to be motivated to seek water.

Psychological needs differ only slightly from physiological needs. They are usually subservient to physiological needs, with behavior directed toward their fulfillment only after the basic physiological needs have been satisfied. Psychological needs are also less satiable than physiological needs. Whereas the thirsty individual can drink only a certain quantity of water and having satisfied the thirst can direct behavior to other objectives, the psychological needs are relatively unsatiable.

Different psychologists group and describe needs differently. One common listing of psychological needs may include recognition, affection, belonging, independence, achievement and self-esteem. After meeting basic physiological needs, all behavior is directed to the meeting of these psychological needs, or the behavior may be a reaction to the frustration of not meeting the needs.

A student in the classroom is constantly seeking ways to meet these needs. If they can be met through classroom activity in educationally and socially acceptable situations it is determined that the student is motivated, and there is a high propensity for successful school performance and learning.

A student in a math class does not have an intrinsic propensity for learning mathematics. The classroom instructional activities provide a convenient vehicle for need satisfaction. The student may receive recognition, affection, a sense of belonging, independence, achievement and self-esteem. The instructional activity may provide an opportunity for the satisfaction of any one or these needs, or combinations of some of them. As long as there is need satisfaction through instructional participation, the student continues to learn.

On the contrary, if there is no need satisfaction, the student quickly loses interest in the instructional activity and is described as not being motivated. Actually, there is no such thing as a student not being motivated. What occurs is that the student seeks to acquire need satisfaction in ways other than through the instructional activity, which the student deems a poor prospect for the satisfying personal needs. This is analogous to a thirsty individual finding a water bucket empty when searching for water. It can be expected that the thirsty individual will seek out an alternative way of satisfying his thirst, a water fountain, a pitcher of water, a bottle or soda pop, or something else, until the thirst is quenched.

In many cases, students not acquiring need satisfaction in an instructional activity, can find such satisfaction through an alternative form of behavior. If the math student cannot receive recognition through instructional activity, he may seek and find such recognition by making snide remarks to the class, by throwing an eraser at the teacher, by poking an adjacent student, or some other socially unacceptable form of behavior. The student may satisfy his need for achievement by being the worst-behaved student in the class. He or she may satisfy the need for belonging and affection by associating and being accepted by a disruptive clique in the classroom or school, or by association with a gang in the larger community. Confrontations with teaching and administrative staff may establish his or her independence and self-esteem.

The obvious implication for the school is to provide ample opportunity for need satisfaction in socially acceptable school activity. The school motivates the student by presenting opportunities for need satisfaction. This further implies raising the propensity for success in the educational program, since success is need rewarding while failure is need frustrating. Techniques, such as a determination of a student having the necessary pre-requisite skills for a high probability of success in a learning situation, appropriate increments of difficulty in consecutive learning tasks, and the provision of immediate, strong and frequent positive reinforcement for correct performance, can be used effectively by the school to insure a high propensity for success and the satisfaction of a student's psychological needs.

The continued denial of need satisfaction in school will usually lead to a student determination that the school does not provide sufficient opportunities for need satisfaction, with an accompanying decision to drop out and seek need satisfaction elsewhere.

"The problem with these kids is that they are not motivated," commonly indicates that the students see little propensity for need satisfaction in the instructional setting. It is indicative of a need for modifying instructional materials and methodologies in order for students to perceive opportunity for need satisfaction.