

Running Head: Theory into Practice

How do you know a motivated student when you see one?

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How do you know a motivated student when you see one?

Students who are motivated have their resources, are organized, and ask questions. They may not have the best binder or the neatest materials, but they come prepared because they desire to learn. These students also make connections with what we are learning in class, to other things they have seen or are interested in.

Angela, a teacher from California

A motivated student is attentive. They keep eye contact with the instructor and ask questions in class. I have a freshman this year that goes as far as telling others around him to be quiet so he can hear.

Dan, a teacher from Missouri

I wish I knew how to motivate every single student to want to learn and to want to do every activity I put before them. Motivation is what drives a student to want to do something. This usually involves a goal. If they have goals of getting good grades or graduating from school, their motivation to do certain tasks increase. If a student could care less, their motivation will decrease!

Natalie, a teacher from Indiana

How do you recognize a motivated student when you see one? The teachers quoted above, are likely not alone in the various ways they characterize a motivated student. As you pour over their words you may find that you see student motivation in the same way. Or, perhaps you have other images of what makes a motivated student. Indeed our own experiences, as both a student and a teacher, shape a particular set of beliefs about students' motivation and learning. Few would argue the notion that our beliefs as teachers influence our perceptions and judgments, which in turn influence our behavior

(Pajares, 1992). As we think about this notion as it relates to our expectations for students' motivation it raises an interesting question. How is our approach to teaching and learning influenced when a student comes along that doesn't fit the particular "image" of "motivated" which we have in mind?

My purpose in this article is to explore and reflect upon this single question. As we explore my promise is to bring forward evidence and examples on topics from the study of student motivation that are related to answering the question. As we reflect I can only begin the process by offering some thoughtful questions to consider. The article presented here is not intended to provide prescriptions or a new set of principles to implement. My purpose is to simply provide fodder for reflection upon our practice as educators. I leave much of that process up to you after you read the article. My hope is that following a thoughtful exploration and reflection regarding the issues presented in this short piece you will be able to identify action for use in your everyday teaching practice.

Before we directly explore the question above I need to pause and explain some key assumptions I hold about student motivation. These assumptions color the information I am about to present, so you need to be aware of them before reading any further. To assist in exposing these assumptions, let me begin with an illustration. Rebekah was a student in my classroom when I student-taught. As a student she approached any writing task in my class with a sense of confidence; yet often avoided assignments or labs that related to mathematics. She claimed that "math ability was something you either have or don't have". In her eyes, she didn't have math ability and put forward very little effort in the subject area. Due to this lack of effort, certainly not

intelligence or capacity, Rebekah's grades in math often wavered. Rebekah was a reporter in a local student organization with which I worked. From the experience, she decided to explore journalism as a career path, given the talent she noticed for her writing. To assist in learning more about being a journalist Rebekah, without prompting, went to the local newspaper and volunteered to be a student reporter. Luckily, unlike many of her other friends in the small rural town, Rebekah had the ability to volunteer for the position at the paper rather than seeking paid employment in a larger neighboring town which might have taken her away from this labor of love at the local paper. She fulfilled her duties as a student reporter without fail, and even persisted when the tasks she encountered in producing various sections of the newspaper required application of mathematics.

My first assumption is that motivation is a process, not a product (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). When we study this example more closely you can see many of the viewpoints from which researchers have studied and currently study the *processes* involved in motivation including – the inner forces and enduring traits that Rebekah must have possessed, the behavioral responses she had to feedback from the environment like her grades in mathematics, the beliefs she had and judgments she made, her identity and future goals, and social factors that affected what she had access to in terms of extra learning opportunities (see Weiner, 1990; Stipek, 2002; or Pintrich & Schunk, 2002 for a more in-depth discussion of the big trends in how achievement motivation has been conceptualized since educational psychologists began studying the issue).

The processes of motivation lead to various motivated behaviors. We often cannot completely infer or fully understand a student's motivation from just viewing a sample of

their motivated behaviors (Ames, 1990). Defining Rebekah as either a motivated or unmotivated student based upon the behaviors I experienced with her would not be entirely accurate. To me, Rebekah was a very “motivated” student. I would question whether or not her math teacher would agree with my perception. Like most students it is difficult to define Rebekah as one or the other – motivated or unmotivated. In most instances an “unmotivated” student is likely just not motivated to do what *we* want them to do!

A second assumption that must be revealed before we proceed any further involves the relationship between teacher behaviors and student motivation. Based upon experiences, like the one above and existing research evidence, I believe that student motivation and teacher practice share a reciprocal relationship (Stipek, 1996, 2002). In Rebekah’s case I sought to find more opportunities for Rebekah to write. After all, it isn’t everyday you find a student who says, “Let me learn more!” As for her math teacher, I often wonder how she reacted to Rebekah’s lack of effort in her mathematics studies.

Nevertheless, the learning opportunities Rebekah had or did not have seemed to play some role in shaping her course over time. I have few doubts that seeing Rebekah’s reaction of pride as she would submit an article for the organization or her enthusiasm in teaching another student about how to improve their writing craft certainly influenced my ongoing approach to guiding and instructing the emerging journalist. What teachers do in the classroom context – including the opportunities they do or do not provide to students, their reactions to student behavior, what they model as they negotiate situations that arise in the course of teaching, the relationships they develop, the enthusiasm demonstrated for the subject matter – all have some influence in shaping the processes involved in

students' motivation. Likewise, the products of the motivational processes that are occurring at the student level and at a classroom level with all of the students have influence in shaping the future approaches the teacher will take (for a more detailed discussion regarding the reciprocal processes mentioned see Stipek, 1996, 2002; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ames, 1990; and Brophy, 1987). One last note related to the processes mentioned above. While it is not mentioned explicitly, I share in the belief that motivation is separate from learning (Weiner, 1990). Student's motivated behavior may facilitate, direct, or modify learning; but, motivated behavior itself is not the same as learning. Motivation works in the service of learning. Thus, motivation becomes a topic we can explore in an effort to understand more about how to foster effective and/or efficient student learning.

With these two assumptions in mind let's revisit the original question posed. *How is our approach to teaching and learning influenced when a student comes along that doesn't fit the "image" of "motivated" which we have in mind?* With hope, the question may take on a slightly different meaning in light of the assumptions and examples I have shared. Evidence from a synthesis of research related to this question presented by Deborah Stipek (1996) demonstrates that although students bring some motivational "baggage" to the classroom such as beliefs, expectations, and habits the immediate instructional context strongly affects their motivation. Just as we work to prepare solid instructional sequences in our classroom to teach important skills and foster understanding, we also need to consider how to foster motivated behaviors that will aid in student learning. Though we are not entirely responsible for the processes students' motivation; we are responsible for the accuracy of our beliefs regarding student

motivation. To help us further explore the notions that have been raised from a research-based perspective we will peruse through information from the study of teacher expectations and differential treatment of students.

What are teacher expectations and how are they formed?

“I can’t make everyone [motivated]! I have to accept that and work with those who are motivatable so I don’t waste my own energy level and get down in the dumps trying things that just won’t work with some students!”

Natalie, a teacher from Indiana

“I believe that I can motivate most students if I have made an attempt to connect with them. It’s about finding a way for them to see relevance in what we are learning. I also believe that motivation is something that has to be communicated during the first days of school. By sharing my expectations up front, students know what my requirements are. Hard to say why students are not motivated...lack of ability, no support at home, not relevant to them, not interested, just don’t care...[the] list could go on and on.”

Cory, a teacher from Kansas

“Motivating students is a challenge. Although we would like to believe that students can be motivated without any rewards, incentives, trophies, etc. I have found that things along these lines help spur the motivation in the students.”

Cara, a teacher from Missouri

As educators, we all develop particular expectations regarding students and the learning process. Some of the expectations regarding student motivation offered by the teachers above may resonate with you. For over 30 years researchers have studied teacher expectations including topics such as how they form; how they communicate them; and

how they expectations influence student outcomes (some examples of useful reviews to consult regarding the topic include: Jussim, 1991; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Babad, 1993; Stipek, 1996, 2002)

The examples provided from teachers above reflect some of the various expectations teachers have about how best to approach motivating students in the classroom. As follows, many researchers (and likely many practitioners) would not argue against the suggestion that beliefs about teaching and learning influence a teacher's perceptions and judgments which in turn shape behavior (Stipek, 1996). Thus, as we begin exploring the issue of how our approach to teaching and learning is influenced when a student comes along who doesn't fit the "image" of motivated we must begin with teacher's expectations. Particularly, what do we know about how teacher expectations are formed in the classroom?

Several useful lines of research for thinking about the formation of teacher expectations come together to help us understand how expectations regarding "motivated" or "unmotivated" may matter in the course of our teaching practice. One useful line of research has to do with social-perceptions (Jussim, 1991). Particularly this line of research offers a notion useful to our understanding of this phenomenon called the actor-observer effect. The actor-observer effect describes that observers (i.e. teachers) will often attribute behavior (in this case what teachers deem as unmotivated behaviors) to a stable trait within the actor (i.e. the student) (for a more detailed description see Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Often when teachers talk about students' motivation we speak about it as though it is a stable trait (i.e. Rebekah is motivated, Tony is unmotivated). Seeing student motivation through such a uni-dimensional lens may distort our expectations for

students' motivation in the classroom. In particular, a uni-dimensional lens may distort our expected level of control over influencing different students' motivation.

If you re-read the comments from teachers written above you likely can hear a common thread regarding each teacher's belief about the amount of control they have over students' motivation. Teacher's expectations are often based upon a sense of control in a particular situation. One line of thinking regarding teacher control suggests that teachers generally have a positive sense of control over high achievers and a relative lack of control over low achievers because it is difficult to control their behavior and discipline them constantly (Cooper & Tom, 1984). Taken with the actor-observer effect it is plausible to suggest that seeing motivation as a stable trait for particular students may then lead us to a positive sense of control for "motivated students" and a negative sense of control for "unmotivated students."

Consider and contrast the following comments from two teachers. Angela, a teacher from California, writes: "*Day after day I look at my [unmotivated] students and I ask 'Why? Why don't you care? What is it that has brought you to this point?' I seek to connect with them, but I also accept that there are many things I can't change. There are a hundred reasons why I think they are ambivalent.*" Contrast this negative sense of control over unmotivated students with the following thought regarding motivated students from Cara, a teacher from Missouri, "*I continue doing what makes them motivated, and I continue to set new challenges for them so they stay enticed.*" It seems that holding a particular view regarding the level of control we have over "motivated" or "unmotivated" students would eventually influence our judgments regarding our

effectiveness in working different “types” of students who fit the notions we have in mind when we think of “motivation”.

A third, useful line of research regarding teacher expectations relates to the judgments we make regarding our capacity to accomplish a particular task. Generally, this is called a sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Specifically, efficacy for educators involves a teacher’s sense that what they do makes a difference in the educational context (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy & Hoy, 1998). Taken with the beliefs about control and seeing motivation as a stable trait our judgment regarding our capacity to influence those students may lead to a lowered sense of efficacy in working with students who we believe are unmotivated. Evidence regarding the study of this phenomenon suggests that certain levels of efficacy (high or low) influence the effort and approach teachers take to working with students, especially when we judge that the situation exceeds our current capabilities. (for more information on teacher’s efficacy you can access Tschannen-Moran, Hoy & Hoy, 1998). Thus, our beliefs regarding student motivation may lead to particular expectations and behaviors that create disparities in how we engage with different students in our classroom. Moving on from our brief exploration of how teacher expectations are formed we can now turn to a brief exploration regarding how teachers expectations are communicated and what influence they have on student learning.

How are different expectations communicated to students? How do students react?

“I move students who are underperforming in class as well as those who seem unmotivated to the front of the room and I mark their names. I play close attention to them and don’t let them just be present. This arrangement helps me to remember to keep

this on my mind each day. For these students, the occasional one on one or home visit pays off well too.”

Kris, a teacher from California

“Very motivated student achieve at a much higher rate. Additional activities for them to do while the rest catch up helps to keep them motivated. If you teach to the middle of the road you end up losing both the high and low motivated students. Again technology has help instruction tremendously by allowing those highly motivated students to surf the internet, create PowerPoint or other activities where they can advance their learning.”

Dan, a teacher from Missouri

What expectations are communicated to students based upon the techniques a teacher employs in an effort to “motivate a classroom”? There is considerable evidence that suggests that teacher expectations are formed early in the school year and that teachers then begin to treat students differently consistent with their expectations (Brophy and Good, 1974). I can write with certainty that my expectations for Rebekah certainly influenced my treatment of her. I’m also certain that my expectations for Tony (another student in the classroom) were quite different and resulted in completely different behavior – usually disciplining to keep him focused on the task at hand. I can only wonder how my expectations influenced not only my behavior, but the behavior reciprocated from the students.

Expectations for students have been found to be rather stable over time and often are not all that inaccurate. Additionally, expectations for students seem to have a modest effect on measures of student learning such as GPA and test scores (Jussim & Harber,

2005). Expectations, however, have been more clearly linked with different types of behavior teacher's exhibit with different types of students. For example, expectations may influence such things as: the learning opportunities we offer different students; the way we respond to student failure or success; the way we offer feedback; and the emotional environment we create with different students (see Jussim & Harber, 2005 for the most recent review). The largest differences in students in high and low-expectancy groups are treated appears to be in the opportunities a teacher provides for student learning (commonly referred to as input in the literature) and the emotional climate the teacher fosters with that student (i.e. demonstration of warmth) (Rosenthal, 1991; Babad, 1993). In particular, one study - regarding the level of autonomy a teacher gave to students - differed based upon their expectations. Subordinates in the high-expectancy group were provided with more autonomy than subordinates in the low-expectancy group (Pelletier and Vallerand, 1996). Interestingly, this line of research has shown that teachers distribute feedback quite equitably among all students (Babad, 1993; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Recently, some evidence has been provided that suggests teachers do form expectations specifically regarding students' differing levels of motivation (Givvin, Stipek, Salmon, & MacGyvers, 2001). However, this information only demonstrates that there may be significant differences in the way a student sees their own motivation for a subject and the way a teacher views the student's motivation. Nonetheless, this is a present finding related to our understanding of teachers' expectations for students whom they view as "motivated" or "unmotivated."

Perhaps more useful than simply knowing that teachers form different expectations, is the evidence we find regarding students' awareness of teacher differential

behavior. One influential study in this area noted that students notice the following (among other findings):

- High achievers are granted special privileges
- The teacher is more concerned that low achievers learn something than enjoy themselves
- The teacher trusts high achievers
- High achievers are allowed to make up their own projects

(Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979)

As you re-read the comments from the teachers outlined at the beginning of this section we see some of the same patterns might be interpreted from students in these classrooms depending the teacher's perception of students as "motivated" or "unmotivated". Not only are students aware of differential behavior; it is believed to influence their self-perception which may lead to different patterns of motivation (i.e. demonstrating less effort versus persisting) (Brattesani, Weinstein & Marshall, 1984).

One concern with regard to these issues rests on the potential for a self-fulfilling prophecy effect between teacher's expectations and student behavior. A self-fulfilling prophecy is a situation where the teachers' expectations direct them to behave in a particular way that influences the students' to reciprocate behavior that confirm the teacher's prior beliefs. There is evidence that suggests teachers' expectations or 'theories' about students can become self-fulfilling prophecies, in such a way that they actually influence students' motivational patterns (for more information on this phenomenon consult Stipek, 2002).

How is our approach to teaching and student learning influenced when a student comes along that doesn't fit the "image" of motivated which we hold in our mind?

Where does this information leave us with regard to the question posed at the beginning of the article? Generally, we can say that the expectations we have for what makes a student motivated or unmotivated likely have some influence on our approach to teaching. As well these expectations may positively or negatively influence the learning opportunities students experience in our classrooms. While this conclusion may not sound profound, I believe it has some important implications for us to reflect upon.

Moving from viewing students as either motivated or unmotivated has important consequences for the way we approach teaching and learning.

Lynley Hicks (1997) offers, "Teachers and schools are not completely responsible for their students' motivation, but neither are they powerless to affect it." When we add different dimensions to our view of motivation we move away from categories which may hold the potential for limiting how we interact with certain students. When we categorize students generically as unmotivated or motivated, we may overlook some specific behaviors that need to be addressed. As well, categorization may lead to some over-generalized expectations for the student. Most importantly, seeing students as motivated or unmotivated may leave us with the belief that we are powerless to influence the amount of effort students put forth in the classroom.

Questions to Reflect On

- How does my current view of student motivation influence my beliefs about students who enter my classroom?
- All students are motivated. Toward what are my students motivated?

- What counts as “motivated behavior” in my classroom?
- How is my view of student motivation different after reading this article?

If motivation is an ongoing process that involves students’ beliefs, behaviors, social interactions, and mental processes then our efforts to influence student motivation must embrace and reflect this complexity by fostering not only initial interest but sustained engagement in goal-directed behavior.

Often we speak about motivating students through one time events such as competitions or offering a reward. This sets up a narrow view of “motivation” as an object that is transmitted. This image may send the message, “once motivation is ‘caught’ students don’t have to put in effort to sustain motivation and goal-directed activity”.

While gimmicks, competitions, rewards and creating interest with neat activities may be effective at hooking interest we must also consider how to facilitate students in sustaining motivation once we have the student “hooked.” Extrinsic activities are not bad for motivation, but they only play a small role and are usually most helpful for increasing the intensity of behavior for a short period of time (Brophy, 1987). Considering how we can sustain motivation beyond the initial “hook” recognizes that motivation is a robust and complex process that requires multiple strategies and sustained effort from both student and teacher. Providing specific strategies that recognize the robust nature of motivation is beyond the scope of this article. However, for a beginning synthesis of strategies regarding motivating students consult Brophy (1987).

Questions to Reflect on:

- How do I currently capture student interest?

- What messages do my techniques for “building motivation” send to students about the nature of motivation?
- How can I facilitate students’ sustained motivation during and following a lesson or unit?
- How does a student demonstrate sustained motivation? How could I ensure that the features of the assignments and learning tasks in my classroom afford all students the opportunity to demonstrate the behaviors associated with sustained motivation?

If the immediate instructional context can truly influence student motivation then we must find ways to build contexts that promote adaptive and positive life-long motivational beliefs and orientations toward learning.

When our expectations and practices establish a strong divide between those who are motivated and those who are not we fall short of sending the message that everyone can exhibit effort toward goal-directed behavior. Encouraging students to see the relationship between effort and outcomes; promoting mastery of the content rather than grades or outperforming others; building students skills so that they can experience success on a task; and highlighting the relevance of course material outside of the school context are just a few ways to foster adaptive motivational beliefs. Additionally, offering challenging, but accomplishable tasks, evaluating performance on an individual basis, and offering all students opportunities for autonomy are just some variables teachers can manipulate that may positively influence processes involved in student motivation (Stipek 1996).

Questions to Reflection on:

- What messages do I currently send students regarding their capacity to demonstrate motivated behavior?
- What do I currently do to foster adaptive motivational beliefs with my students?
- What do students have to say about their motivation in my classes?

If we know that teacher expectations have real influences on student learning and motivation, then we must focus on developing accurate perceptions of students' motivation based on actual student behavior and performance in the classroom and then use this information in planning our instruction.

Treating students differently isn't necessarily negative. However, we must be aware that our commonsense beliefs regarding the nature of motivation become a lens that influences how we see and interpret student behavior in our classroom (Sivan, 1986). Our beliefs may create inaccurate perceptions that bias us toward certain students. Expectations become a problem when they are so rigid that it causes us to hold firm to a prior "image" about what a particular "type" of student can and cannot do; even when the image has little to do with the actual behaviors exhibited (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Questions to Reflect on:

- How do my expectations for students who are "motivated" differ from my expectations for students who I consider "unmotivated"?
- What evidence from student behavior in my classroom do I have to support my beliefs about the students I consider to be "unmotivated"?

- How do students in my classroom perceive my expectations? Do they believe that I hold different expectations for different students (i.e. motivated students or unmotivated students)? What differences do they notice?
- How do I honor or provide recognition to students whom I recognize as “motivated”? What would a student I consider as “unmotivated” have to do to gain recognition too?

Conclusion

What happens when a student comes along that doesn't fit our “image” of “motivated”? Much of the answer to this question depends upon how we view student motivation. Our beliefs about student motivation do influence the expectations we establish and communicate in the classroom. Static, rigid views of student motivation may not promote the types of positive and thought-filled learning environments we espouse or desire for all students. Embracing the complexity of student motivation in our daily teaching practice may help foster the development and communication of adaptive motivational beliefs among all students. As you finish reading this article and begin to reflect, consider one last important question - How do *you* know a *motivated* student when you see one in your classroom? Most certainly, your response to this question matters.

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