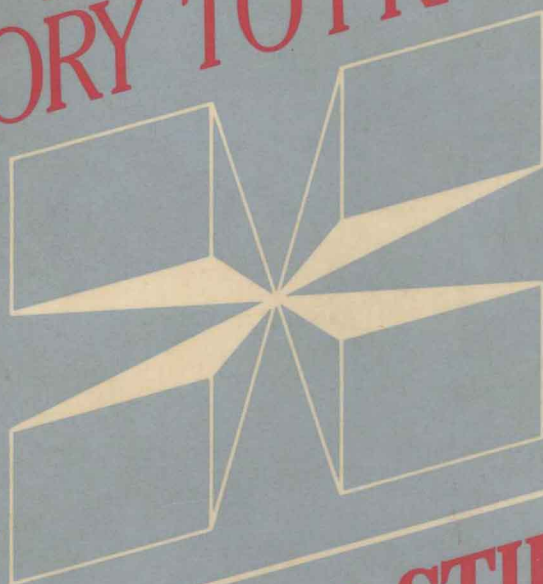


# MOTIVATION TO LEARN

FROM  
THEORY TO PRACTICE



DEBORAH J. STIPEK

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# **MOTIVATION TO LEARN**

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## **FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

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# PREFACE

Why do some children approach school tasks eagerly and work diligently on school assignments, while others avoid schoolwork or work half-heartedly? Why do some children enjoy learning in and out of school and take pride in their accomplishments, while others rarely seek opportunities to learn on their own and are anxious and unhappy in school? These are motivational questions, and they have important implications for learning.

Motivation is relevant to learning because learning is an active process requiring conscious and deliberate effort. We have long since dismissed the notion that a foreign language, or any other skill, can be learned while a person sleeps. Even the most able students will not learn if they do not pay attention and exert some effort. If students are to benefit maximally from the educational curriculum, educators must provide a learning context in which students are motivated to engage in learning activities.

The purpose of this book is to give readers a thorough understanding of motivation theories, especially cognitive motivation theories, and an appreciation of the potential application of this knowledge in educational settings. The focus is on classroom learning, but attention is also given to how strategies used to motivate students in school affect students' motivation to engage in intellectual activities outside of school. The book stresses the costs of individualistic, competitive learning environments in which extrinsic rewards and punishment are salient, and the benefits

of learning environments that maximize students' intrinsic interest in learning. The primary goal of the book is to demonstrate how achievement motivation theory and research can be used to help teachers develop autonomous, self-confident learners who enjoy learning activities in and out of school.

Throughout the book, terms are clearly defined so that a reader unfamiliar with psychological theory and the academic research literature can understand the concepts used. The book contains many specific examples of how principles based on research and theory might be applied in the classroom. It would be especially useful to individuals anticipating a teaching career and practicing teachers. It would also be appropriate as a supplementary text in a course on educational psychology.

## ORGANIZATION

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Chapter One describes hypothetical children with motivational problems that are commonly encountered in classrooms. A profile of each student's behavior in the classroom is used to make these common motivational problems especially vivid. These hypothetical students are referred to in subsequent chapters as concrete examples to illustrate theoretical constructs and research findings.

Chapter Two discusses definitions of achievement motivation and makes two theoretically and practically important distinctions—between narrow, short-term goals (i.e., increasing students' effort on classroom tasks) and broad long-term goals (i.e., a positive attitude toward learning), and between extrinsic goals (e.g., to earn a good grade or to please the teacher) and intrinsic goals (i.e., to solve a problem, to increase mastery).

Chapter Three reviews traditional reinforcement theory and gives examples of the effective application of reinforcement principles to maximize student effort in the classroom. The potential negative effects of over-reliance on extrinsic reinforcement are also considered. Chapter Four discusses the effective use of praise and the role of cognitions as mediators of the effects of reinforcement on behavior.

The concept of intrinsic motivation is introduced in Chapter Five, and teaching practices that have been found to foster intrinsic motivation in the classroom are described in Chapter Six.

Chapter Seven discusses cognitive theories of achievement motivation, including Atkinson's expectancy x value theory, Rotter's concept of locus of control, and Weiner's attribution theory. Chapter Eight discusses self-perceptions of ability in the context of Covington's self-worth theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

The causes and consequences of achievement anxiety for learning and performance in achievement contexts are discussed in Chapter Nine. Specific recommendations are made for alleviating the negative effects of anxiety in the classroom.

Chapter Ten suggests classroom practices that foster self-confidence, high expectations for success, and pride. Research on ways teacher expectations affect student's own beliefs about competence is described in Chapter Eleven.

The suggestions made for maintaining motivation to learn are summarized in Chapter Twelve by discussing remedies to the problems of the hypothetical children described in the first chapter.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## PROFILES OF MOTIVATIONAL PROBLEMS

Like cold or flu symptoms, motivation problems come in many shapes and sizes. But some combinations of problems are more common than others. This chapter describes typical motivation “syndromes”—patterns of beliefs and behaviors that inhibit optimal learning. No child you will ever meet will look exactly like any of the five hypothetical children described here. Indeed, these children are in some respects caricatures. But these vignettes should remind you of real children you have observed or tried to teach. Later chapters will discuss the causes of the kinds of problems described here and ways to improve the motivation and learning of children like these five.

### DEFENSIVE DICK

---

Dick is one of the worst students in his fourth-grade classroom. Poor performance, as far as Dick is concerned, is inevitable. So he puts his efforts into preventing anyone from interpreting his poor performance as evidence of a lack of ability. Unfortunately, the kind of strategies he uses to avoid looking dumb do not lead to improved performance.

His strategies are clever and often missed by the teacher, who does not have time to monitor him closely. For example, one morning Dick is

working on a reading assignment. The assignment is to answer ten questions about a story the children were supposed to have read. The teacher moves her attention from one child to another, monitoring each child's work as well as possible and answering questions. Dick asks the teacher several questions, but he is careful to give the impression that he is working diligently to answer most questions on his own. Actually, he gets all of his other answers by asking classmates or by copying his neighbor's paper. Thus, Dick manages to complete the assignment without reading or understanding the story.

That afternoon, the teacher asks students to take out yesterday's assignment requiring the use of a dictionary. Dick makes a show of looking through his desk for an assignment that he knows, his teacher knows, and his classmates probably know, he has not done.

During a math test Dick spends considerable time engaged in such activities as sharpening his pencil, picking up his eraser from the floor, and drawing stars around the edge of the paper. He makes no attempt to conceal his lack of attention to the arithmetic problems. To the contrary, he seems eager for everyone to notice that he is not trying. Needless to say, his performance on the test is poor. The teacher publicly admonishes him for not trying, giving Dick and his classmates the message that if he had tried his performance would have been better. This, of course, is exactly the interpretation Dick desires.

Dick's strategies serve their purpose, at least in the short run. He manages to complete some assignments with a respectable, if not an excellent, level of performance. By not trying on tests (where other strategies, such as cheating, are not available), he at least avoids the logical conclusion associated with poor performance and high effort, that he is dumb. By not trying, he creates an alternative explanation for failure, leaving open the question of whether he would have been able to do well on the test if he had tried.

The tragedy is that Dick's ingenious efforts to avoid looking dumb are totally self-defeating. He makes little progress in mastering the curriculum, and failure becomes increasingly inevitable. Eventually Dick will give up trying to preserve an image of himself as a capable person, and he will resign himself to the status of one of the dumb kids in the class. If he continues this self-destructive game, he will soon look like Hopeless Hannah, who does not even try to look smart.

## HOPELESS HANNAH

---

Hannah has been sitting at her desk for nearly a half hour doing, as far as the teacher can tell, nothing. She exhorts Hannah to try one of the arithmetic problems she is supposed to be working on. "I can't," claims Han-

nah without even looking at the problem the teacher is pointing to. "I don't understand it." "But I just went over a problem like it on the board; weren't you listening?" "I don't understand," Hannah reiterates. The teacher goes through a long division problem step by step, asking Hannah questions along the way. Hannah answers most of the questions correctly. She obviously has at least some understanding of the problem. "See, you know how to do these kinds of problems," the teacher observes. "Why don't you try one on your own now?" "I don't know how," Hannah stubbornly declares. "But you knew the right answers to my questions," the teacher responds. "I guessed," is Hannah's ready reply. "I think you know how to do these, and I want you to try some of the problems."

The teacher has the last word and turns her attention to another student, leaving Hannah alone with her arithmetic problems. Later, she passes by Hannah's desk and finds no progress. The scene just described is repeated, as it has been so many times that year, and the end result is an exasperated teacher and a student who interprets the teacher's despair as confirmation of her own lack of competence.

Hannah is a classic example of what researchers refer to as "learned helplessness." Her academic performance is uniformly poor, and she is regarded by her classmates as one of the dummies. She has developed a firm view of herself as incompetent and unable to master any new academic material. Failure is inevitable, so "Why try?" she reasons.

Hannah makes little academic progress and is two grades behind in most academic subjects. But she is not disruptive. She is not socially integrated into the classroom and therefore is not tempted to spend her time socializing. She is not an aggressive child, and rather than acting out, calling attention to herself, or interfering with her classmates, she sits quietly, spending much of her time gazing off into space. She makes few demands on the teacher. She perceives no reason to ask questions, because she does not expect to understand, nor to be able to apply the answers.

There are many variations of learned-helpless students. Some children who have given up trying to gain respect through their academic performance turn to other domains for recognition. They may become the class clown or bully or tease. Or, especially as they approach adolescence, they may engage in more serious antisocial behavior to gain respect. It is unusual that the academically "helpless" child turns to legitimate ways to demonstrate competence, such as in athletics, music, or other arts. For some children, the feelings of incompetence are so profound that they assume that there is simply no domain in which they have the capacity to excel.

School offers little joy for children like Hannah. Their days are characterized by hopelessness, despair, and probably, since they spend little time working on academic tasks, boredom. They are shunned by their

classmates, and they are often ignored by their teacher. The teacher's response is understandable considering the recalcitrance of helpless students. Because they don't usually try, they don't usually succeed. Their repeated failures confirm their perceptions of themselves as incompetent. When they do succeed, they are quick to deny responsibility. They attribute the success to some variable over which they have no control—an easy problem, the teacher's help, or luck. The logic is elegantly consistent; the consequences are devastating.

Luckily, pure cases of learned helplessness are rare; weak versions are more common. This is the motivational problem most resistant to change by even the most clever and persistent teacher. Obviously, it is best to prevent it from developing. But teachers in later grades have no control over their students' experiences in earlier grades and, unfortunately, children like Hannah occasionally appear in their classes.

### **SAFE SALLY**

---

In her senior year of high school Sally's SAT scores are in the 600s. This does not surprise her teachers because she is a straight "A" student. In many respects, Sally is a perfect student—well behaved, dependable, and highly motivated. A superficial look at her would reveal no motivational problems.

But despite Sally's straight "As," she is an underachiever. She is motivated, but only to achieve high grades and the respect of teachers that goes along with high grades and conformity. She perceives a "B+" as a disastrous blemish on her record, something to be avoided at all cost.

A careful look at Sally's perfect record reveals a series of courses that offered little challenge. She is in the high-achievement track for English, but the teacher of these courses is well known for giving every student in the class an "A," as long as the work is done reliably. She took only the required science courses. She enrolled in the calculus course but dropped it after getting a "B—" on the first weekly quiz.

In the courses she does take, Sally religiously follows directions for every assignment. She is well tuned in to the teacher and has an astonishing ability to predict what material will be stressed on tests. She over-studies for every test, repeatedly reviewing the text and memorizing every possible fact that she might be asked to recall. She rarely reads anything that is not required for a course.

Sally is anxious, but her anxiety is not debilitating within the context of the intellectual demands she allows to be made on her. She is constantly reinforced by teachers for her achievements, and she appears to be academically self-confident. She enjoys the respect of her classmates and is socially active.

What is unfortunate for Sally is that she does not allow herself to

be challenged. She systematically takes the safe route in all of her academic endeavors. And in her classes she learns only what she is told to learn. The notion that learning has some intrinsic value aside from being a means to good grades and external recognition has simply not occurred to her. She works methodically within the guidelines and structure given to her and makes no effort to be creative.

Sally ignored the school counselor's suggestion that she take courses required for acceptance at a selective university. She lacks self-confidence in her academic skills and prefers not to risk failure. The self-confidence she displays in her own high school is, in a sense, illusory. She knows that she is "smart enough" to excel in the carefully chosen, not-too-demanding courses she takes, but she is not at all sure she could handle a more challenging academic experience. She does not know the true boundaries of her competencies because she never allows herself to test them.

Sally will no doubt excel in college, and she will probably perform well in a responsible, albeit not intellectually challenging job. But she will not, as an adult, continue to stretch her knowledge and imagination. Learning, for Sally, is what you do in school. It has instrumental but no intrinsic value. It brings "As," but not joy and excitement. Learning means memorizing somebody else's ideas, not developing your own. Sally's potential for creative thinking will never be tapped.

### **SATISFIED SAM**

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Sam is the seventh-grade class clown. He is one of the first to arrive at school in the morning, and he is often seen fooling around with classmates on the school grounds long after school is over. He seems to enjoy school, is popular with students, and only occasionally do his pranks get him in-to trouble with teachers.

He is a likable student, but has frustrated many of his teachers. Sam is a "C+" student, "B—" on a good day. He could be an "A" student. His scores on standardized aptitude tests consistently show him to be capable of achieving considerably beyond most of his classmates. He occasionally demonstrates his unusual aptitude in his classes. On those rare days that he pays close attention, he is frequently the only student in the class who can answer a difficult question. His true aptitude is also evident when he becomes seriously involved in a project, such as the prize-winning model of the solar system that he presented to his science teacher after several weeks of intense effort.

More typically, Sam shows little interest in school work. Threats of bad grades have no effect because he is quite satisfied with a grade that requires little effort to achieve. He usually finishes his work, but he never does more than the minimum. He makes it a rule never to study for a test because he knows that he can pass most tests by simply paying marginal

attention in class. He knows he is smart, but he is not inclined to show off. He is not interested in gaining respect from his peers by demonstrating academic excellence, and he is not interested in gaining the respect of his teachers at all. He is motivated to stay out of trouble—at least most of the time—and therefore he does what is required to keep teachers “off his back.”

At home Sam spends hours upon hours working on his computer. The games he plays or makes up are intellectually very demanding. He often plays with his computer late into the night and, as a consequence, goes through the next day of school in a sleepy haze. Sam is also interested in science. He reads every book he can find on space, and often he surprises his science teacher with comments demonstrating sophisticated understanding—usually on topics that are not part of the science curriculum. His performance on topics that are covered in his science class is typical of his performance in all of his other courses—he does exactly what he needs to do without getting into trouble. Science fiction novels are another great love, and he has written a short novel himself. He has some talent for writing, but it is rarely evident on school assignments.

Sam’s teachers know that he could do better in school. Each new teacher goes through essentially the same series of strategies. Noting his half-hearted effort on assignments, teachers first encourage him to spend more time on his work to achieve a higher grade. When holding out a carrot seems not to be effective, they turn to the stick, threatening bad grades, worse than he is getting. But Sam is unresponsive to these strategies because high grades simply do not have the same value for him that they have for some other students and poor grades are not perceived as punishment, unless they dip below his “C+” threshold of acceptability.

Sam sees no reason to push himself on school-related work. He enjoys intellectual challenges, but on his own terms. If his current interests happen to overlap with course requirements, he excels. More typically, his intellectual life is outside of the classroom, and his life in the classroom is not intellectual.

Students like Sam are seen at all grade levels, although they are commonplace in junior high school. They frustrate parents and teachers alike. Unlike Hannah, who convinced her teacher that she really cannot learn, teachers know that Sam has the ability to excel, but conventional strategies to motivate students like Sam are ineffective.

### **ANXIOUS AMY**

---

Amy is in the eighth grade. She is an average student in most subjects but she is doing poorly in math. All of her standardized test scores indicate that she has at least average aptitude in math, yet her performance



on class exams is typically barely passing. Tests are often turned in with only half of the problems attempted. Sometimes correct answers have been written in and erased. Amy occasionally spends math period in the nurse's room, claiming a headache, a stomachache, or some other ailment that miraculously disappears about the time her math class ends.

For the first few weeks of the semester, Amy's math teacher frequently asked Amy questions in an attempt to elicit her participation and to assess her understanding of the concepts the teacher was explaining to the class. But she usually refused to participate and the teacher sensed that she was uncomfortable when questions were addressed to her publicly.

In contrast to her class performance, assignments that she can take home are often returned completed and mostly correct. The teacher knows from conversations with Amy's parents that she does her homework on her own. Her math teacher is puzzled by her reticence in class because she knows from Amy's homework assignments that she could figure out the answers if she tried.

Amy lacks self-confidence and is extremely fearful of giving a wrong answer. Apparently, she finds refusing to answer a question less threatening than risking a wrong answer. It is difficult for her to concentrate on math problems in class because she is distracted by her concerns about failure. However prepared she may be for a test, as soon as it is put in front of her, she panics. She cannot remember the simplest procedures she knew well the evening before. When the teacher asks her a question in front of the class, she is conscious of the other students' evaluative gaze and she cannot concentrate on the question the teacher asked.

Amy will get through eighth-grade math with a passing grade, partly because she can compensate for her poor test scores and class performance with complete and correct homework. But she will take only the math courses required to graduate. And if she goes to college, she will major in an area that does not require any math. For the rest of her life she will claim, if the subject comes up, that she has no aptitude for numbers.

## CONCLUSION

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There is much that can be done to prevent children from developing the kinds of motivational problems described above. And there are ways to solve these problems when they appear. But solving motivational problems requires a good understanding of the underlying causes of the kind of maladaptive behavior manifested by these five children.

The following chapters place motivational problems in a theoretical context and discuss research that bears on solutions to motivational prob-