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Introduction to Student Motivation

During an undergraduate class, my professor proposed that we should always ask the most important question of all: Why? He stated, “If we stopped asking why, we would cease to grow in our understanding of life.” Seeking to understand the *why* of student behavior is where we will begin our journey to successful student management.

Several years ago I read an article about understanding youngsters that began to answer the question of why they behave the way they do. Two important aspects of the article have always stuck with me: (1) youngsters bring their personal lives into the learning environment and (2) youngsters will do their best to keep the leader from finding out who they are on the inside by creating false outward appearances. But there is a great deal more to understand as well.

Definition of an unruly individual: Difficult or impossible to discipline, control, or rule; resistant to control, fails to submit to rule or control; rebels against authority; one obstinately bent on having his or her own way; willfully and often perversely departs from what is desired, expected, or required.

Do any of these descriptors sound familiar with respect to unwanted behavior in your classroom or school?

Why Do Youngsters Misbehave?

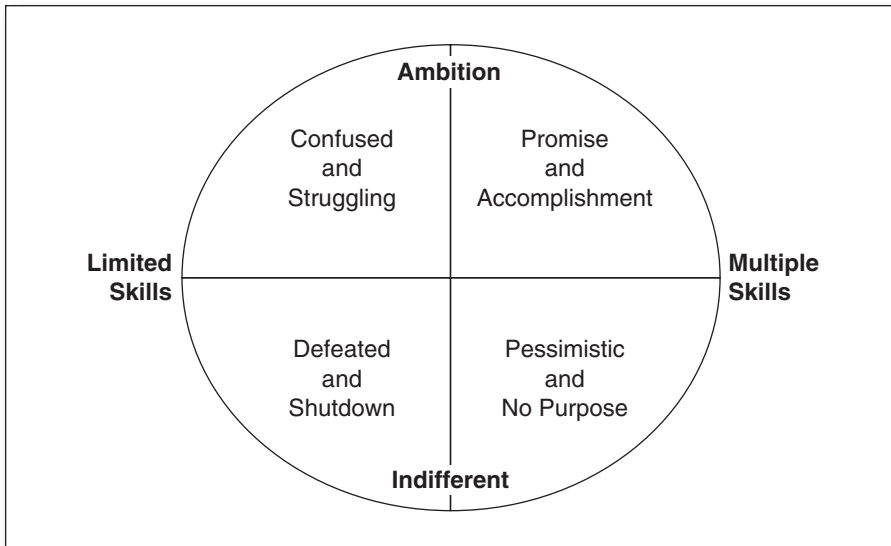
Understanding the *why* in student behavior is necessary in order to create a nurturing learning environment for each student. Developing empathy for the disruptive and defiant student will open the door for learning and smooth operation of the classroom. Figure 1.1 shows that underlying causes for misbehavior can stem from both immaturity and lack of moral bearings.

Figure 1.1 Immature or Defiant? That Is the Question

The Litmus Test (K–12)		
<u>Immature</u> (Socially Delayed)	P E R S O N A L I Z E D T O W A R D O T H E R S	<u>Defiant</u> (Morally Challenged)
✓ Talkative		✓ Insubordinate
✓ Fidgety		✓ Accusatory
✓ Distracted		✓ Challenging
✓ Possessive		✓ Sabotaging

In addition to those listed in Figure 1.1, other forms of defiance might include attention getting or gang affiliation. Causes, in addition to immaturity or moral challenge as shown in the figure, might include peer pressure, poor nutrition, lack of sleep, problems at home, or problems with friends, other teachers, coaches, or an after school job. The list is endless. Therefore, it is not the form or the reason that is the issue; the issue is how the teacher is going to react to the manifestation of disruptive behavior.

Figure 1.2 provides a different perspective on causes, indicating how the interplay of skills and ambition may affect student behavior.

Figure 1.2 What Else Might Be Causing Misbehavior?

Brain Development

Research suggests that the cerebral cortex is still developing during the adolescent years, possibly into the early twenties. The cerebral cortex is the reasoning part of the brain. (Strauch, 2004, p. 12)

It has been documented through numerous interviews with teens regarding career path, substance abuse, and so forth that most of the interviewees could not give clear definitive answers as to why they made the choices they did. This understanding also increases our ability to deal effectively with defiant behavior, knowing it may in part be a function of adolescent brain development.

Role Identification

Outlined below are the various levels of emotional identity students share with adults outside the family unit. This outline helps teachers identify why students might be responding in a certain way, knowing that their responses are reflected in the stage of their development. When the teacher knows what the child's emotional needs are, the teacher is prepared to respond in a way that stabilizes the relationship.

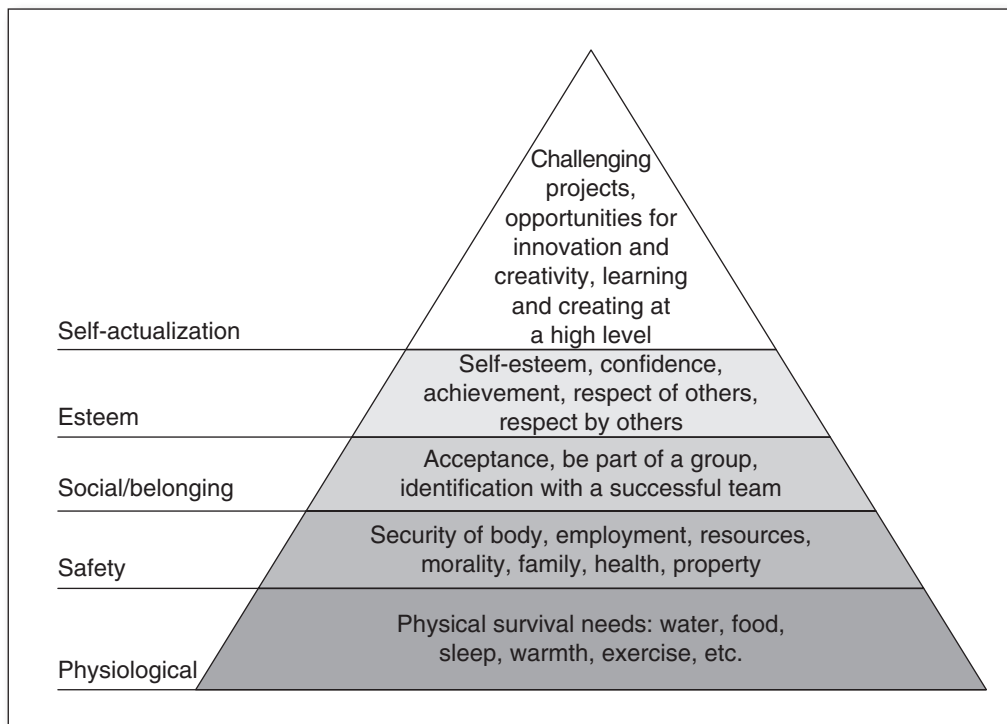
<i>Age Level</i>	<i>Role Identification</i>
5–9	Parent Figure
10–13	Parent/Authority Figure
14–19	Authority Figure
20+	Coequal

Basic Needs

Abraham Maslow defined basic human needs, and Figure 1.3 shows youngsters' adaptations to those needs. When physical and safety needs (at the bottom of the charts) are met in the classroom, students naturally migrate toward the higher levels.

Students who come from supporting homes will advance more rapidly toward the higher levels of self-actualization. These students

Figure 1.3 Basic Human Needs



Source: Adapted from Maslow, 1943.

often find themselves at a relatively high level of safety and security, and they will not have a need to disrupt to gain the necessary attention. However, they can be more challenging if they feel their advancement toward self-esteem and recognition status is being hindered.

It is the students at the basic needs level who often become defiant and disruptive. Hence, they have a greater need for attention-getting antics. What they lack in home support is sought out in the classroom.

Motivation Defined

Once we understand the causes of negative behavior, we can move on to consider how to increase motivation toward appropriate behavior.

Definition Number 1: Something that leads or influences a person to do something.

We have all struggled with lethargic students who just won't get motivated. All we want is for them to do something—anything. The interventions outlined in this text will provide an impetus for the most reluctant learners to make an attempt at learning. The key is to get them to understand that any amount of effort will have a positive impact on their grades; in other words, effort will be valued over accuracy. They need to crawl first before they learn to walk and run.

Definition No. 2: Mental state, internal need, or outward goal that causes one to act.

Have you ever encountered an electronic device, only to discover you can't find the on switch? Working with hard-to-motivate students is much the same. The first stage in motivating disengaged students is to find out what causes them to get curious. Once we get them moving, the next challenge is to keep them moving until they are advancing on their own.

Motivation is usually defined by psychologists as the processes involved in arousing, directing and sustaining behaviour. (Ball, 1977, as quoted in Robb, 2001b, para. 2)

What the Research Says About Motivating Learners

From the literature on what motivates students to learn, the following key concepts were obtained from a wide collection of sources

in a variety of formats. Here is a summary of what research has shown to be the top six motivators for learning (see also Figure 1.4):

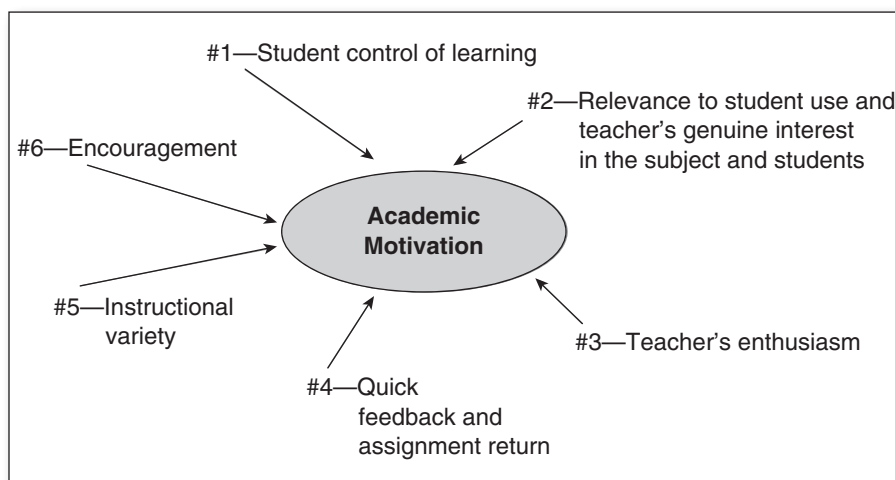
1. Student control of learning. The focus here is learning. Assessment of learning styles and adapting lesson delivery is vital. If students feel they have their grades in their control (whether they actually do or not), the most resistant learners will engage and take ownership.

2. Relevance to student use and teacher's genuine interest. There is a dual emphasis between relevance and genuine interest. Why a lesson is important and how it connects to life is best embraced by the student when the teacher demonstrates genuine interest in the subject and students.

3. Teacher's enthusiasm. Teacher enthusiasm is vital. If a teacher has been assigned to a grade level or curriculum that he or she is not necessarily interested in, it's time to find the silver lining in the cloud. Students are perceptive and read their teachers' every action, reaction, and comment. Teachers must be excited about what they are bringing to the students if they expect the students to be interested.

4. Quick feedback and assignment return. Student performance is directly correlated to the time between assignment submission and return. Students' learning increases when they can make adjustments to errors in a timely fashion. Teachers should strive to return student work the next day.

Figure 1.4 The Motivational Web's Top Six Student Motivators for Learning



5. Instructional variety. Technology has provided the opportunity to deliver instruction in a variety of ways. Three shifts in approach to curriculum delivery during a 50- to 60-minute period will help student interest remain high and engaged. Shifting from lecture to group work to independent study keeps students connected and interested.

6. Encouragement. A simple pat on the back, a smiley face stamp, writing "Good Job!" or acknowledging effort can make a big difference in student performance.

In addition to the research findings listed above, our experience has shown that the following also help motivate students:

Relationships. When students trust a teacher's judgment and are truly appreciated for who they are, a working relationship begins to develop in which students are motivated to learn.

Rewards. In addition to verbal encouragement, a more tangible acknowledgment of effort or performance is always a stimulus for additional contributions.

Support. Teacher availability during instructional and noninstructional time is a motivator.

Honoring of personal values. Honoring home values (as long as they do not violate classroom values) provides motivation for students.

Creation of curiosity. Students are motivated when they are encouraged to explore and investigate new areas.

Clear expectations. Visible rules on assignment sheets, walls, and entry activities will keep the expectations consistently in front of the students.

Classroom climate. Classrooms should be inviting and safe, surrounded with charts and pictures that relate to the subject matter as well as points of interest contemporary to student life. Playing jazz (without words) during study time is also effective.

Firm, fair, purposeful action. When action needs to be taken, it should always have the purpose of motivating the student toward constructive ends, weaving the relationship.

De-emphasis on grades. Much has been written about the value of grades. Greater emphasis should be placed on effort and performance than grades when first attempting to move a student toward becoming a self-starter.

Organization. Students become more accountable when they see teachers being highly organized and maintaining a predictable learning environment.

Appropriate level of difficulty. Accommodations do not only apply to special needs students. Lesson designs aimed at challenging each student are necessary for a productive learning experience. High-performing students need additional opportunities for personal growth when the given task is completed. Methodical students should have the necessary time to complete the task without penalty.

Listening. It is important to listen and paraphrase what students are communicating in order for the teacher and student to move in the same direction.

What Happened to Natural Motivation?

With all this discussion of motivators that teachers can provide, readers might wonder what has become of intrinsic motivation. We were born self-starters, so what changed?

How we respond to experiences will drive us toward our full potential or divert our efforts away from what we can become. Many students come into the classroom with varying degrees and forms of support. Unmotivated students might come from an abusive situation or a home where social, moral, or religious values are misaligned with those of the school. Defiant and disruptive student behaviors are often driven by students' experiences in the home. Hence, they are no longer self-starters but are parroting the learning they have acquired outside themselves. Their choice to align with those outside behaviors needs to be redirected toward an understanding of personal choice. Defiant and disruptive students have chosen or been guided down the path they are on. It is the teacher's challenge to refocus the students toward becoming self-starters.

This is particularly hard at the elementary level due to the students' lack of life experiences. Elementary teachers need to take greater interest in and put more effort into younger students' motivation due to these students' psychological bonds with adults.

Adolescent students have more life experiences to reflect upon and need to be challenged regarding their future goals and dreams.

Our Experience With Motivating Youngsters

Our experience teaching youngsters has shown that the three F's in a youngster's life are

Friends

Fun

Food

Students will do anything to sit next to their friends. Allowing students to sit with their friends is a great motivator, and productive work can take place when they are allowed to work together. Threatening to separate friends is also a powerful motivator. It is amazing how cooperative students can become when they realize their relationship is about to be severed if a focus on learning is jeopardized for friendship.

When learning is perceived as fun, production increases, and students enjoy the process. Students become motivated when they buy into the learning process. Fun can be obtained through activity projects, variety in instructional methods, shifts in delivery approaches every 15 minutes, role-play, and educational games. Variety creates increased interest and a sense of anticipation.

Food is always a great motivator for youngsters of all ages. Taking away food from youngsters, especially teenagers, is a dangerous proposition. It's amazing what youngsters will do for food. Telling the class or disruptive students that they will be rewarded with food can create a situation where peer pressure will work in the teacher's favor. When all the students have something to gain, they will work together, and the disruptive students will likewise be motivated.

True Encounter

At the annual Cinco de Mayo assembly at our high school, the students had been patiently sitting in the bleachers for 30 minutes. As the assembly came to a close, a student representative stepped to the microphone announcing the fiesta to follow. She mentioned that a mariachi band, piñatas, and a taco truck were outside the gym. She also mentioned that one of the teachers was buying the first 20 tacos for the students who got there first. This announcement resulted in a stampede that the student leaders had a hard time stopping.

Connecting With Students

Connecting with students is essential to motivating them. There are three significant stages in connecting with students. They must occur one stage at a time, in the order shown here, if mutual learning and teaching are to take place.

First stage—connecting emotionally. Of the three relationship essentials, emotional bonding is by far the strongest in motivating the defiant and disruptive student. Students respond positively to acts of genuine kindness and sincerity, which often result in greater academic production. Gentle words of welcome and concern move the teacher-student relationship toward connection.

Second stage—understanding psychological barriers. Understanding the student's background, family, individualized education program (IEP), and interests is necessary to help motivate learning. Students are all independent agents who come with their own life experiences. Getting to the core of those experiences demonstrates care and compassion for the student. Once teachers understand why their students behave the way they do, they have a greater chance of aligning instructional theory and curriculum design for each student.

Third stage—modifying behavior. It will be necessary from time to time to redirect student behavior for the purpose of refocusing on classroom goals and objectives. Once the teacher and student have passed through the first two stages above, this process is made easier.

Differences in Values

Many teachers expect students to understand the classroom and school standards from the onset, which is a critical error. Moral expectations of the home and school can be vastly different. Teachers must be willing to accept that there can be a great difference between the two and be willing to address those differences in order to stimulate student motivation to learn.

There was a time in history when it was fairly safe to assume that most students came from homes with similar sets of values, values based on societal standards and traditions.

Remember This

Students do not necessarily come from the same value base as the teacher.

Remember This

The degree in behavior shifts will be different for each student, so each will feel a connection to the teacher at a different point in the learning process.

Today's society is composed of a myriad of different values, and this makes the management of youngsters a challenging endeavor. Predicting family support is difficult; therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to establish classroom expectations and be prepared to follow through with reinforcement of those expectations.

Modifying Student Behavior

What a student needs is an education. What a student wants is to take control of that education. As we have shown above, research makes a strong case that putting students in control of their learning is the best motivator. It's when a student attempts to take control of the *instruction* that problems begin. In situations like this, it's a good practice to keep your back to the wall and always face the class; if necessary, invite disruptive students to your desk.

Somewhere along life's journey, disruptive students have been taught that interrupting adults is the norm and adults are to acknowledge their requests whenever they make them. Thirty students all wanting the teacher's attention turns into chaos; therefore, students need parameters for their behavior and a process to obtain information they truly *need*. Students may need a lesson on identifying the difference between a need and a want. When personal needs are met, wants may be addressed.

Teach Students What Is Expected

All individuals are moral agents, and all have their own standards of right and wrong; for students, these typically are initially the standards they have learned at home. Once they are in school, however, classroom, school, and district rules serve as the moral compass by which each student must abide. It is the teacher's responsibility to enforce the code of conduct. Students who have been taught the code can be easily redirected to the acceptable path.

They, or someone else, might want the teacher to think they aren't able to follow school expectations. However, to make such an assumption is to set them up for failure. When the teacher constantly demands the right and challenges the wrong, students are easier to manage, and instructional time is increased.

Shift Directions to Retrieve Drifting Students

Students and teachers often approach the classroom with different expectations. Essentially, they are traveling parallel paths heading toward their educational goals. However, they are not always traveling at the same rate, and sometimes their paths diverge. Therefore, teachers must make efforts to connect with the students. When a student moves away from the educational goals of the curriculum and the teacher's direction, it becomes paramount for the teacher to shift direction in an attempt to come alongside the drifting student. As the teacher continues to make these adjustments to the student's behavior, the chances for personal connection and academic motivation improve. One degree in a shift of two parallel paths will ultimately lead to a connection.

Remember This

Mixing intervention strategies keeps defiant students off balance. They know that defiant behavior will be addressed; they just don't know when and what form it will take.

Teachers Cannot Save Every Child

This is one of the toughest admissions a teacher has to make; however, knowing you cannot save every child is a liberating realization. Some students are naturally defiant and disruptive by choice or influence. Working through this reality is hardest for young teachers who want to and believe they can save every child. This is simply not the case. Countless hours have been spent trying to reach the callused child, hours that could have been better spent assisting those who show signs of progress. Only through experience will a teacher realize when it is time to divert attention toward the students who are willing and able to learn.

Conclusion

Youngsters go through the natural process of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual maturation. Accepting that youngsters are moral agents allows us to understand they are naturally going to challenge authority. Understanding that they often inherit this problem allows us to not take the behavior personally. In other words, you didn't raise the student, so don't own what you cannot control. When adolescents explode with defiance, what they are really looking for is the caring individual who will let them vent and then offer support in place of criticism. Students should be understood and

accepted for who they are, not who they want people to think they are through dress, hair, tattoos, piercings, and disruptive behaviors.

True Encounter

The student had a vile mouth and did not care what anyone thought of him. When one of his teachers ignored his behavior, it provided him the opportunity to reflect on his comments. As this teacher stuck to the task of teaching and calling the student's bluff from time to time, the student became productive, a leader in this teacher's class, and a whistle-blower when other students were defiant. But in other classes, he continued to be defiant and showed little academic progress.

What was the difference? Was it the subject matter? Was it the seat assignment? The answer is yes, to a limited degree, in both of these areas. But more important, in the class where the student began to make a turnaround, he was allowed to push the teacher's buttons and get no direct response from the teacher. In the class where he was improving, he discovered the classroom and teacher were safe, and he did not need to put up defenses, because nobody was going to take up his challenge.

The turning point came when the student looked straight into the eyes of the teacher with the most defiant look he could muster and said, "F—you," in a soft and intimidating tone. The teacher's quiet response was, "Tell me something I haven't heard before." The student did not respond. He only looked confused, and he never acted out again.

After that, when the student was having a bad day, he would tell the teacher. More important, sometimes he would ask for a different seat, so he would not be tempted to act out. The student knew he was not going to be condemned, made an example of, or sent to the office, and that his parents would not be called. He felt understood and accepted for who he was, not what he wanted people to think he was.

This book will explore the reasons for disruptive and defiant behaviors and what can be done about them in the classroom. We will look at our responses to these behaviors and how we might be contributing to some of the problems. We will consider what motivates students and how to connect with them, as well as how to manage their behavior, both on an individual basis and from the standpoint of managing a whole classroom.

Enjoy the journey. There is hope for a brighter tomorrow. I'm confident you will find solutions within these pages that will help make your classroom a place you as well as your students look forward to being in each day.

Process and Apply

1. List defiant or disruptive behaviors you are experiencing in your classroom.
2. How could you use the defiant or disruptive behaviors as a means to develop a self-starter?
3. Define an unruly individual, and provide three detailed examples of unruly behavior from among the students you work with.
4. Define motivation, and share your understanding of what motivates youngsters.
5. Provide an example of parallel paths leading toward learning. What gets in the way of parallel paths intersecting?
6. Explain why emotional connectedness is essential at the onset of relationship building.
7. What role does the school play in developing constructive social values?
8. List the top six academic motivators and provide an explanation as to why they would be listed in the order they are given in this chapter.
9. Explain how the three F's could be useful in motivating youngsters.
10. How could having empathy for defiant and disruptive students create a more productive learning environment?
11. Why do youngsters misbehave?
12. Outline three reasons why physical and emotional development could be the cause for defiant and disruptive behavior.
13. What do we know from the stages of role identification that will help in developing self-starters?
14. Explain the difference between basic human needs and basic youngster needs.