

Motivation theories in education



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The reason why we study psychology in education is to understand why human beings act the way they do. One other reason is to influence, by changing or improving, their actions. Motivation is only one of the central issues in psychology. However, it is one of education as well. The importance of motivation in learning has long been established and certainly much has been written about it. However, we still seem to encounter a problem when it comes to knowing what motivation exactly is. As Drucker puts it, " We know nothing about motivation. All we can do is write about it. Whatever is being aroused by the mere use of reinforcers remains largely mysterious and elusive. " Motivation, like the concept of gravity, is easier to describe (in terms of its outward, observable effects), than it is to define. Of course, this has not stopped people from trying. " Covington, 1998 Simply put, motivation justifies behaviour. Why, for example, does a student decide to misbehave in class? Why does another one behave? The answer to these questions is very simple. Different people have different reasons to achieve different things. A student might misbehave in class in order to gain his classmates' attention.

What students learn, how much they remember and how engaged they become in the process depends largely on which reasons for learning dominate. Over the past several decades, two broadly different conceptions of achievement motivation have emerged (Covington, 1992). One perspective views motivation as a drive, that is, an internal state or need that impels individuals toward action (Heyman ; Dweck, 1992). A second perspective considers motivation in terms of goals or incentives that draw, not drive, individuals toward action (Heyman ; Dweck, 1992).

Motives as Drives Three major theories fall under this conception of achievement motivation. First we find the Need Achievement Theory which was developed initially by John Atkinson (1957/1987) and by David McClelland (1965). This theory states that human achievement is the result of a conflict between striving for success and avoiding failure. It is the difference in emotional anticipation, more precisely pride versus shame that brings an individual into acting in a particular way. The second theory is the Attribution Theory.

Beginning in the early 1970's, and having Bernard Weiner as its pioneer, the theory poses a radical reinterpretation of the Need Achievement Theory of the 50s. As opposed to Atkinson, Weiner believed that thought processes rather than emotional anticipations were the agents responsible for the quality of achievement. Weiner stated that how individuals perceive their particular task and in deciding how long to persist once it begins and with what amount of enthusiasm. The shift from emotions to cognition is a very subtle one but has very important implications on education.

For example, if cognition is what controls motivation, then educators would be better off if they taught their students how to analyse the causes of their successes and failures in the most constructive, yet realistic, ways possible. One of the main features of the attribution theory is that of the role of effort in achievement. Weiner et al. believed that student effort can be controlled by teachers through the application of rewards for trying and, when necessary, punishment for not trying. Whether this premise is true or not is largely debatable.

One thing is sure teachers do put it into practice. Students whom teachers see as having studied hard are rewarded more in success and reprimanded less in failure than students who do not try. The third theory falling under the conception of achievement motivation is the Self- Worth Theory. In our society, success is largely measured by one's ability to achieve competitively. Nothing contributes more to a student's sense of self-esteem than good grades, nor shatters it so completely as do poor grades (Rosenberg, 1965).

Thus it is achievement that dominates in the mind of most school children. This explains the fact that ability affects the level of self-esteem in an individual (Berry, 1975). This theory conflicts with that of attribution. The Attribution Theory emphasises on effort, while the self-worth theory emphasises rather more on those sources of worth and pride that follow from feeling smart, such as is self-esteem. This conflict could be avoided only if we take a different approach in our education system.

Unfortunately, in our system, it is ability which is rewarded rather than effort. A student who puts little effort but is able to pass his/her exam is definitely rewarded more than the one who puts a great deal of effort without succeeding in passing the exam. This is what Covington Omelich call a " double-edged sword". The Self-Worth Theory argues that the protection of a sense of ability is the student's highest priority. What this theory implies is that students may not study in order to have an excuse for failing that does not reflect poorly on their ability.

A number of strategies for avoiding failure, or at least avoiding the implications of failure, have been identified by researchers such as Birney, Burdick and Teevan (1969). According to this theory, the student who misbehaves in class is already motivated, driven by circumstances to protect his or her self-esteem. Thus, the misbehaviour is just the result of being motivated but for the wrong reasons! Therefore, the solution would be for educators to change the reasons that lead to disobedience or misbehaviour rather than simply increase rewards for effort and punishment for not trying.

Once the teacher changes the reasons for which students learn, from negative to positive, the symptoms should coincidentally disappear. Failure in the will to learning. Motives as goals " The answer to school reform lies not so much in increasing motivation - that is, arousing existing drive levels - as it is in encouraging different kinds of motivation together. The key to this transformation is to view motivation not in terms of drives, but in terms of goals, and goals that are largely intrinsic in nature. Deci, 1975 Intrinsic motivation refers to the goal of becoming more effective as a person. It is motivation that arises from within the person, rather than from the external environment. A student who behaves well during school hours because he/she thinks it is good for his/her well-being is intrinsically motivated. In this case, learning becomes valued for what it can do to enhance one's effectiveness. The key to understanding intrinsic motivation is that the reward for learning lies in the action themselves.

Satisfying a personal interest is intrinsic in itself, while good grades or praise are extrinsic. The kinds of goals which are ideal for students are the ones that are intrinsic in nature. Because intrinsic reasons are their own reward,

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the payoffs for learning are attributed to all, not just a few individuals. Also, when the individual is intrinsically motivated learning becomes the means to an end, not an isolated event whose only purpose is to get the right answer or to please the teacher. Where education is concerned, things go better when intrinsic motives predominate.

For example, a student who behaves well in class because it gives him a sense of pride or satisfaction is better off than the student who behaves well because he is given good comments by the teacher in return. I feel that here it is important to note that intrinsic motivation may originally start through extrinsic reinforcement. For example, the student who originally behaves well in class because he/she is praised by the teacher may continue doing so in the future because of, for example, pride in doing so, rather than the teacher's praise. Motivational contracts may be an alternative favouring such a situation. These will be discussed next.