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Resilience and Motivation:

Developing Motivated Students

InnerDrive

RESILIENCE AND MOTIVATION: DEVELOPING MOTIVATED STUDENTS

By InnerDrive

Motivation and resilience both play a central role in students' ability to engage with learning, manage challenges and make sustained academic progress. Research has highlighted how these traits influence both short-term classroom behaviour and long-term outcomes. Whilst individual differences play a part, evidence suggests that teachers can help foster motivation and resilience through specific classroom practice.

DEVELOPING RESILIENT ENVIRONMENTS

Resilience is the ability to cope with setbacks, adapt to change and keep going under pressure. It's not about ignoring emotions or "toughing it out"—it's about learning to respond constructively to difficulty and challenge.

In one of the most important large-scale reviews, researchers suggested that the environment that we create has a huge impact on resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). One of their key findings was that in order to create an environment where resilience can thrive, two factors need to be present:

- High Levels of Challenge – based on situations that require high levels of effort
- High Levels of Support – including perceived emotional, motivational and practical support from others

An environment that is high in challenge and high in support is optimal for growth. Students are encouraged by lofty, ambitious goals whilst also being given the tools, encouragement and emotional scaffolding to support them.

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THE PYGMALION EFFECT

A resilient environment, which is based on high challenge and high support, is underpinned by a culture of high expectations. In one of the most famous psychological experiments almost 50 years ago, researchers demonstrated the power of high expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In this study, teachers were falsely told at the beginning of the year that randomly selected students were 'late bloomers' who were going to flourish over the course of the year. When the researchers went back at the end of the year, they found that these students had indeed made more progress. This was attributed to the high expectations that the teachers had for them, which resulted in them being asked more challenging questions and being supported accordingly.

In the research, the impact of high expectations is known as the Pygmalion Effect (named after the Greek myth in which the sculptor Pygmalion had such high expectations for a statue that it turned into a real person). The opposite of the Pygmalion Effect is the Golem Effect, which describes how, when teachers have low expectations of their students, they tend to do worse (Babad et al., 1982).

THE PYGMALION EFFECT

One of Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction is to ensure a high success rate (Rosenshine, 2012). This is because previous performance is one of the biggest drivers of continued academic achievement. For example, one recent large-scale meta-analysis explored the relationship between motivation and reading achievement in students (Toste et al., 2020). The researchers found that motivation did have an impact on reading achievement. But crucially, when tracked over time, they found a stronger impact from reading achievement on motivation. Essentially, this meant that achieving success in reading early led to higher motivation, much more so than high motivation led to better reading performance.

Being able to refer to a bank of previous positive outcomes can boost student confidence and motivation, especially when they are struggling with a piece of work. This, in turn, boosts their self-perception of their own competency levels.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Self-Determination Theory argues that students need to feel these three components to become motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000):

- ***Autonomy*** – Feeling in control of their behaviours and goals
- ***Competence*** – Believing that their actions will be impactful in shaping their academic success
- ***Relatedness*** – Feeling a sense of belonging in class

These three factors combine to help drive students' intrinsic motivation. This is important as research shows that overemphasising rewards can backfire. In the classic study by Lepper, Greene & Nisbett (1973), children who were offered prizes for drawing (an activity they already enjoyed) became less interested in drawing over time. Known as the Overjustification Effect, this illustrates how external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation.

On the other hand, fostering autonomy, competence and relatedness can help. Students are more motivated when they feel they have control over some of their decisions, get better at a task and feel connected to the group.

CREATING POSITIVE GROUP NORMS

Researchers found that effort is contagious; individuals tend to unconsciously mirror the mental effort exerted by those around them (Desender et al., 2015). If their peers are working hard, they tend to copy this. If their peers are distracted and demotivated, they pick up and copy these cues too. This phenomenon is known as 'effort contagion'.

This suggests that motivation and resilience are not just individual traits but are highly social ones too. Therefore, teachers should pay close attention to the sometimes subtle and non-verbal cues that persist in the classroom, as effort (or lack of effort) can quickly spread. Highlighting and praising students for trying hard will not only benefit that individual student but other members of the class as well.

HOW STUDENTS EXPLAIN SETBACKS

How students internalise and explain setbacks can significantly affect how they approach future events. In the research, this is known as their 'explanatory style' (Seligman, 1991). Students with a pessimistic

explanatory style tend to view setbacks as permanent ("I will always fail at this") and personal ("I failed because I am stupid"). In contrast, those with an optimistic explanatory style see failure as temporary and changeable ("I didn't revise enough this time"). Crucially, this self-talk can be developed and nurtured and is not something that is a fixed trait.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We all want to develop motivated and resilient students. Moving away from platitudes and cheesy slogans and embracing the research in this area gives us a clearer idea of how to do so. Creating the right sort of environment that both challenges and supports all students, having high expectations that everyone can achieve, ensuring opportunities to be successful and equipping students with how to navigate setbacks all offer our best bets for doing so.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

10 Ways to Boost Motivation
https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/boost-your-students-motivation/

Is Everything You Know About Motivation Wrong?
https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/about-success-and-motivation/

7 Ways to Develop Resilience
https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/develop-resilience/

Resilience and Adaptability
https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/resilience-and-adaptability/

Book

Motivated Teaching
https://www.amazon.co.uk/Influential-Teaching-Leveraging-heuristics-behaviour/dp/1717367208

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