Ross Nicol

Educational Psychology

Multifaceted Nature of Intrinsic Motivation: The Theory of 16 Basic Desires Discussion Paper

It’s a question educators ask themselves constantly, “How can I motivate my students?” However, educators aren’t the only individuals who have been concerned with motivation over time. Ancient Greek philosophers attempted to explain the driving forces behind human behavior by characterizing them based on the needs of the body, mind and soul. Aristotle, one of the earliest philosophers helped to break down motives into two categories: ends versus means based on the purpose behind the behavior. Further exploration into the concept of motivation helped to establish what some social psychologists classify as the “two global categories, called drives and intrinsic motives.” (Weiss p. 180).

Drive Theory attempts to explain human behavior in relation to particular biological and psychological survival needs. Thorndike’s law of effect “reduced human motivation to categories of reward and punishment.” However, drive theorists defined a reward as “a reduction in a state of deprivation” indicating that rewards existed to serve a biological need and reduce tension. Psychologist, Clark Hull characterized drives based “hunger, thirst, sex, and escape from pain” (Weiss, p. 180). These theories used animal studies to help support their perspective however, the same thought process is limited when applied to human behavior. While humans engage in some behaviors to meet biological and psychological needs Drive Theory does not account for the more complex reasons behind why people do what they do. The human brain has evolved to include the most complex area known as the prefrontal cortex. Responsible for planning, organizing, decision making and other executive functions beyond meeting basic needs. In areas of the world where basic needs such as hunger, thirst, and escape from pain are being met what else is said to drive human behavior? Just in the way that humans have evolved over time the motives behind their actions have as well.

In another attempt to explain motives Unitary IM Theory was created. This theory accounts for other aspects of human behavior such as play, exploration and manipulation. Robert White’s article asserts that “competence motivation is a common property of nondrives, defining IM as behavior which a person engages in to feel competent and self-determining” (Weiss p. 181). As educators we are aware of how important feelings of competency and mastery over one’s environment are. Classroom management training tells us to allow students choices during academic tasks in order to foster feelings of independence. Students who do not feel as though they have control over their environment may engage in maladaptive behaviors or struggle with anxiety. In addition to allowing students choice in the classroom recently the classroom structure has shifted towards stations and small group instruction. This push for small group instruction is partly due to a need to foster intrinsic pleasures and make learning fun. The characteristic of intrinsic pleasures indicates that “people are motivated to engage in activities they expect to experience as pleasurable” (Weiss p. 182). While we are required to cover a curriculum that may not always be inherently pleasurable educators have the freedom to expand learning through more hands-on and technological friendly ways. Utilizing choice boards, chromebooks, and small group work helps to increase the intrinsic pleasure of school.

The Theory of 16 Basic Desires is a multifaceted model of Intrinsic Motives suggesting that there are 16 desires that motivate all people however, all individuals prioritize them differently. Research using the Reiss Profile self-report method showed that how students self-reported their motives was consistent with their behavior. This information can be extremely useful for educators in terms of helping to foster motivation in the classroom. In the same way that we understand all students learn differently we must expand our teaching practices to understand that not all students are motivated by the same thing. We have all come across students who show little to no reaction when they receive a poor grade. We often ask ourselves did they not understand the material? Did they not care to study? And we are all guilty of thinking maybe they are just lazy and don’t care about school. Instead of thinking to ourselves that students don’t care about education we need to go one step further and ask ourselves why. Understanding how to tap into motivation is a powerful tool for educators. Too often educators get stuck using school-wide and end of quarter PBIS related rewards (i.e. movies in the afternoon and pizza parties) thinking these will motivate all students. However, at times these “rewards” are often too far away to alter behavior and may not be desirable by all students. Providing students with reinforcement or motivational surveys may be the next logical step when we think we’ve hit the wall with a student. As teachers differentiate based on skill level we must also consider differentiating based on motive. For the student who desires social contact increasing group work and peer projects may be the answer. For the student who desires independence allowing choice on projects or assignments may make the difference.

In the same way we shifted from a lecture style classroom to stations and small group work we must too shift our mindset to a new way of thinking about how to motivate students. Grades and tangible items may work for some students but tapping into basic desires and intrinsic pleasures may ultimately be the answer for motivating students inside and outside of the classroom.