Children Come First: Motivating Students Through Relationships

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Educators are currently presented with an urgent call and a unique opportunity to ensure that school policies, practices, and strategies for our youngest learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning. For all of its terror, deep sadness, and loss, the COVID-19 pandemic also provides educators with a unique and essential opportunity to boldly step up and make school a positive and transformative time for children, families, and educators.

> **Within the context of the cost of the pandemic to education, the lenses of equity, research, data, parallel processes, and aligned practices must be used to examine the essential and foundational aspects of positive and responsive relationships.**

The long-term goal is to increase the number of early childhood programs and early grade classrooms with high quality learning environments that contribute to reducing inequities, closing achievement and opportunity gaps, and supporting young learners.

At a time when the need for care, nurturing, and support is perhaps the greatest, the structures of school seem to work against it, as many current policies and practices are based on outdated research. For the past sixty years, most classroom management practices have been based on behaviorism and the maximal operant principle of motivation (Boggiano et al., 1991). That is, teachers and administrators believe that the correct way to motivate or control children is to punish behaviors they wish to eliminate and reward those behaviors they wish to foster.

These forms of motivation continue to dominate policy discussions and classroom practices as evidenced in movements such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and classroom management systems such as "card charts" or "clips." Although these systems

are an improvement over laissez-faire management practices, they are inherently ineffective (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2018). While they may possibly work in the short term, this does not mean it is a good idea to rely upon them as their focus is on power, control, and manipulation. The problem with these systems is that they place students and teachers on opposing teams with opposing goals. Teachers are encouraged to work on students rather than with students, which increases dependence rather than the goal of independence. Interruptions to the delivery of content are viewed as oppositional to the teacher's mission rather than integral to the development of all aspects of a child, including their social, emotional, physical, and self-regulatory capacities. Most of what is viewed as misbehavior is often related to a yet undeveloped capacity for executive function, self-regulation, or metacognition (Vuontela et al., 2013).

A significant part of a teacher's job is to provide continuous opportunities for children to develop these skills and abilities, while keeping the dignity of the child and the adult intact (Coloroso, 2010).   Children should be supported in their social and emotional development just as in all the other areas of development and learning. Teachers must adopt a delicate balance between the guidance they provide students as they facilitate socialization and/or learning, and an allowance for children's preferences and sense of independence (Grusec & Sherman, 2011). Teachers can begin to find this balance by critically examining their own practices, clarifying their need for controlling rules and practices, and replacing them with opportunities for choices and autonomy.

All too often, educators introduce external controls into learning environments, including overly close supervision and monitoring accompanied by rewards or punishments. This undermines the sense of relatedness between teachers and students, and stifles high-quality learning. As well, children of color, and especially boys of color, are overrepresented in their experience of the humiliation and punishment that play a large part in extrinsic reward systems. The research makes clear that children's negative perceptions of their own competence become stronger and harder to reverse as they progress through school (Valeski & Stipek, 2001), thus it is imperative that they not experience themselves as children who are 'bad', or in trouble. Keeping in mind the notion that dropout prevention starts early in children's school trajectories, educators need approaches to the early school experiences of children of color and those who come from less advantaged homes to make school a place where they find themselves smart, capable, and knowing they belong.

> **When the research makes clear that children's negative perceptions of competence and attitudes become stronger and harder to reverse as children progress through school (Valeski & Stipek, 2001), it is imperative that they not experience themselves as children who are 'bad', or in trouble.**

Educators are often taught that motivation is better shaped through external contingencies of reinforcement rather than by facilitating students' interests in learning. When motivation is

shaped through external contingencies of reinforcement, the students' feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and interest that once accompanied learning are frequently replaced by experiences of anxiety, boredom, or alienation.

Extrinsic motivation occurs when one is motivated to perform a behavior or engage in an activity to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Extrinsic motivation does not encourage the ability to think for oneself nor to solve problems, and results in children who grow up to be dependent on others for approval. Overall, the goal is to develop students who operate from intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in behavior because it is personally rewarding, contributes to one's social and cognitive goals, and helps develop a sense of self.

Figure 1: Shaping Student Behavior
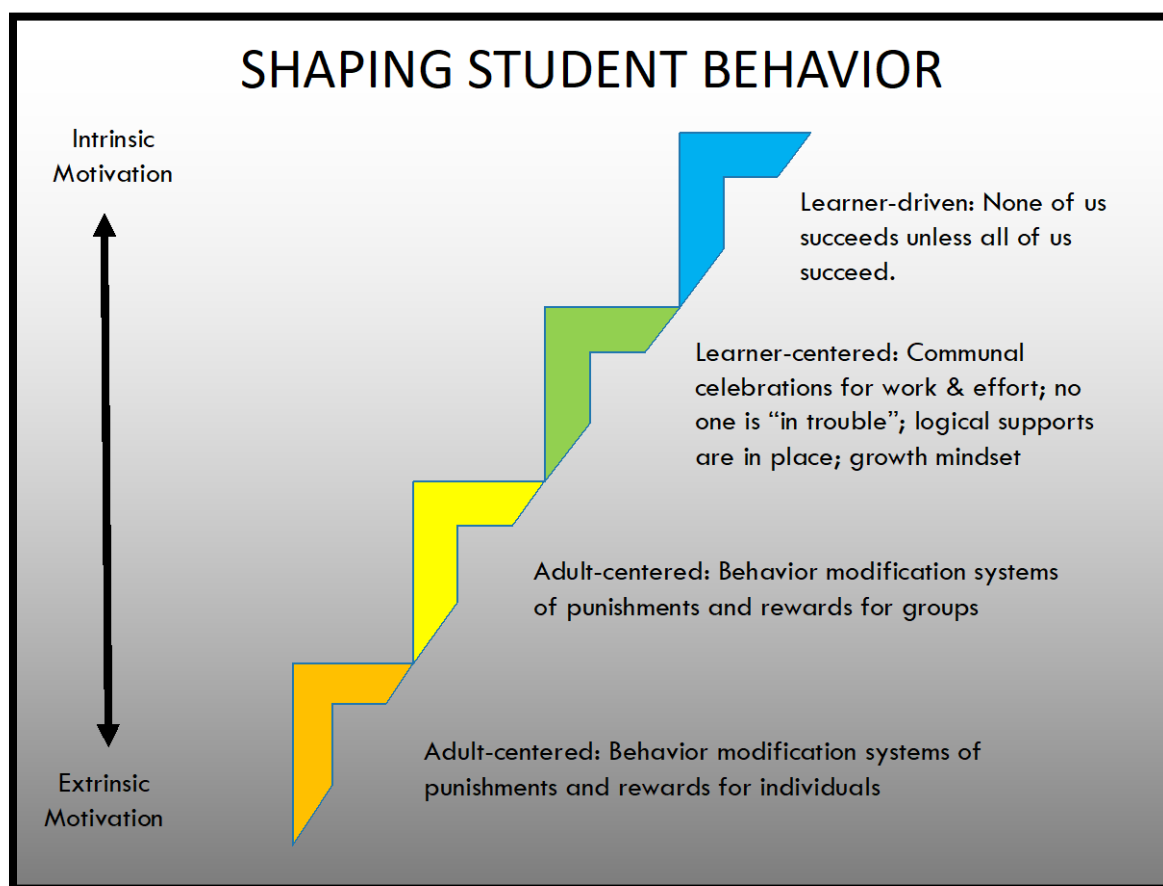
Oertwig, S. (2015) PowerPoint: Motivating Student Behavior. Novato Unified School District. Marin, CA.

Many teachers hold the staunch belief that the only way they can manage a classroom is through the use of a system of rewards and punishments. For example, young boys often have trouble remaining still and quiet during long periods of whole group time. Most teachers respond to wiggly, unengaged behavior by repeatedly asking the boys to sit still, making them move their card or clip, and eventually sending them to time-out, removing privileges, sending them to the principal, or calling their families. Unfortunately, while all these actions

communicate to the boys what they may not do and convey a message that they are not fitting in, none of them teach the child what <u>to do</u>, or do anything to bolster their self-regulation. It is up to the teacher to view children who are struggling as as an opportunity to help them succeed. Instead of punishing children, teachers offer supports which help children to sit still longer (e.g., offering them a chair or a small object to hold). For children who are overly disruptive, the teacher may send them to a designated place in the room where children may calm their bodies using pre-taught exercises such as deep breathing, the use of weighted vests, or fidgets. Such practices allow children to return of their own accord when they decide their bodies have calmed. Along with communicating respect, this kind of response to challenging behavior allows children to develop strategies for managing an optimal level of engagement in the classroom and helps them to be more cognizant of their own bodies and brains (Oertwig & Holland, 2013, p. 110).

It is difficult to simply stop using a system that has been part of a long-time habit. Teachers need support and professional development to learn appropriate strategies to use in place of a system which supports extrinsic motivation. Teachers need to develop positive relationships with individual children and create a sense of community in the classroom. This enables teachers to talk with children about the classroom climate, including the rules they believe are important, and the ways they can help one another co-exist in a safe and happy place.

Changes to long-used systems may take some practice. As well, there are indeed some children who may need to have the structure of a behavior system. Such a system can be put in place for individuals who will benefit. The idea always is to help children move towards intrinsic motivation. No behavior system should be a lasting system. Instead, it should support children as they become more self-regulated and autonomous. The bottom line is when children feel supported, are offered guidance through challenging times, and are valued members of a loving community of learners, extrinsic rewards and punishments are not needed.

Figure 2: Continuum of Motivation

https://barbarabray.net/2018/01/18/continuum-of-motivation-embracing-a-love-of-learning
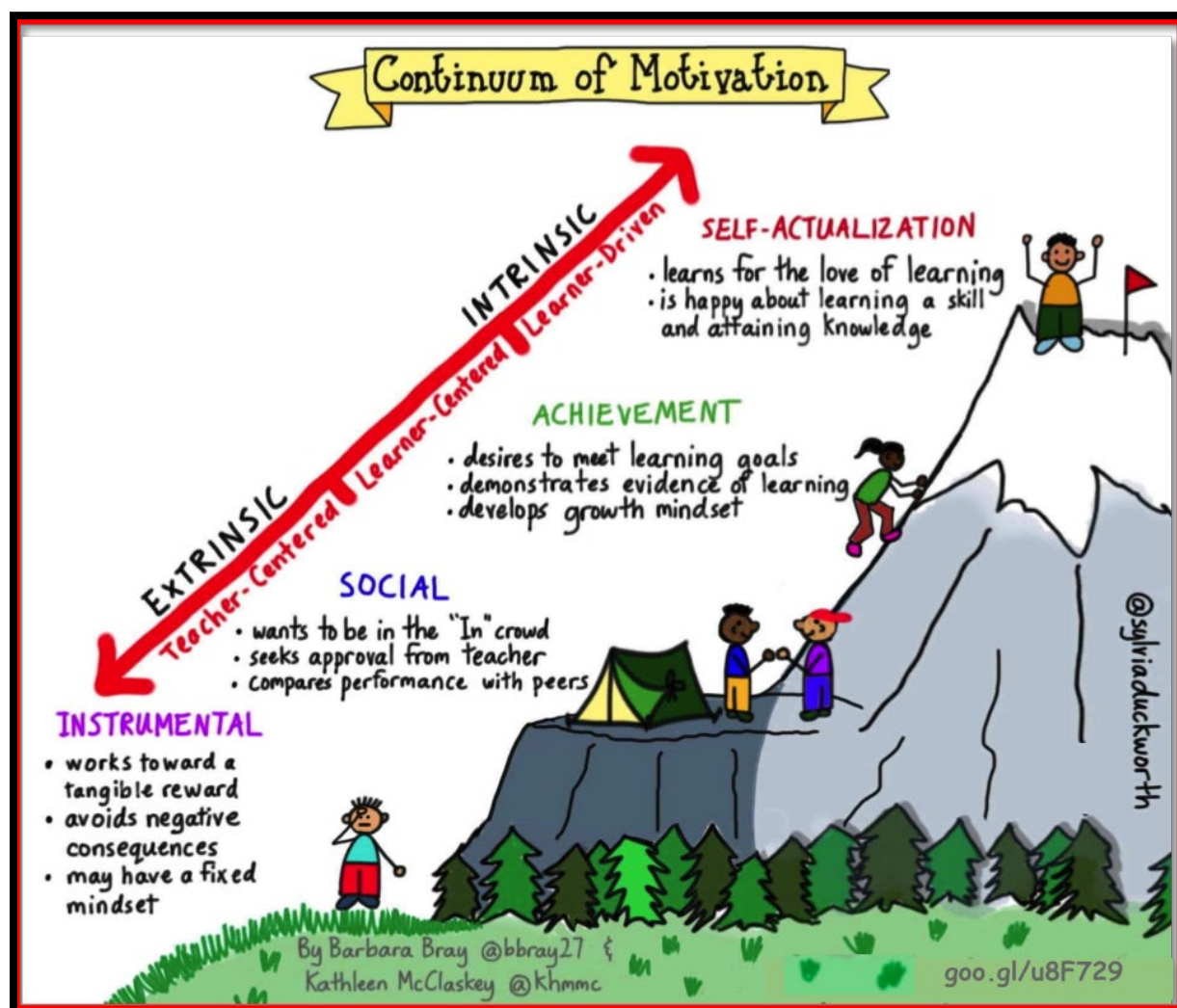
INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

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How does this apply to your learning environment?

- ✓ Look at your data.
  - ➢ Are children being suspended and/or expelled (which includes being sent away from the classroom for short periods of time)?
    - ▪ If yes, who are the children being suspended/expelled?
    - ▪ For what reasons are they being excluded?
    - ▪ What are some of the underlying factors (trauma, unrealistic expectations, immature development), that may have led to the suspension/expulsion?
    - ▪ What role has the environment and/or the teacher played?
- ✓ If you are currently using a classroom management system, which children are getting their card flipped, or something similar?
  - ➢ Who are these children?
  - ➢ Is it the same children each day?
  - ➢ How much time are they losing when sent away from a learning activity?
  - ➢ What experiences and content are they missing while being excluded?
- ✓ What other opportunities could be utilized to guide and support young children toward stronger abilities to manage their feelings and actions productively and appropriately?

For further information see these other briefs in our **Children Come First** series: Using Research to Guide Practice, The Time is Now, and Striving for Relatedness, Competence and Autonomy at: https://region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/, or visit the Early Childhood web page at: https://region6cc.uncg.edu/early-childhood/.

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