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Motivation: Theory into Practice

Keynote Presentation for Southeast Professors of Middle Level Education

Collaboration in the Middle:

Middle grades to higher education promoting, advocating, igniting support for middle schools

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A question asked by many teachers, is “How do we motivate the unmotivated kid?” They are many theories about motivation in the classroom and in order for these theories to work, they must become actionable strategies. These theories can be organized into five different categories: Enthusiasm, Empowerment, Encouragement, Emotions and Expectations. There are six practical lessons from my experience that relate to these theories.

Any person who adds enthusiasm to teaching will be successful. John Wooden (2009) included enthusiasm as one of the blocks in his Pyramid of Success and stated that, “A leader lacking enthusiasm will infect the group with the same malady” (p. 40). Coaches like Jimmy Valvano believed that enthusiasm is the key to success.

A second way to motivate students is to empower them by allowing them choice and some control over their education. One of the greatest ways that human beings feel empowered is when they have ownership over their own lives. Stated simply, people defend that which they help create. This works in every part of life from the classroom to careers to interpersonal relations.

Most students are so starved for encouragement, they will accept it even if it is structured. Having students give each other high-fives or turn to each other and tell each other how smart or successful they are will add energy to the classroom.

Filling students’ emotional bank accounts will help motivate students. Discovering their emotional language or giving each student attention helps fill their emotional needs. The metaphor of a bank account is applicable because a small bank account will generate little monetary interest; similarly, a low or empty emotional bank account will generate little or no interest in the lesson.

Finally, educational psychology has shown time and time again that students rise to the level of expectations. Expectancy times value (Expectancy x value) is the formula for student success (Weinstein, & Novodvorsky, 2015). Each side of the equation is important. If students have high expectations of success their motivation will be high. Conversely, if they think they will not be successful then there will be little motivation. On the other side of the equation is the value that students attach to the learning. Mathematically if either side of the equation

(expectancy or value) increases, there is a corresponding increase in motivation. However, if either side is zero, then the motivation is zero. Teachers need to address both sides of the equation. Explaining why the lesson is important or to teach it enthusiastically can increase the value. Expectancy is increased by the skill of the teacher. Students have the tools needed to be successful if they believe that will be successful. It is a combination of self-efficacy and self-esteem.

There are six practical lessons from my personal experience that relate to these theories. There are positions in life whose primary responsibility is to increase motivation and enthusiasm, and I had one of those in college. Oregon State University's nickname is the Fighting Beavers and their mascot is named Benny Beaver. I had the honor of being Benny for one year. Being a mascot is the very definition of fun. However, Oregon State had undergone more than 30 years of losing football seasons, managing only one or two wins a year. I learned six important lessons by cheering for a losing football team.

Cheer teams have lots of cheers, but we had to have cheers for small accomplishments like first downs. We often joked that we needed cheers for no fumbles or interceptions, because we had so little to cheer for. The lesson I took into my classroom was we must learn to cheer the little things. Many students will never score an academic touchdown, and if teachers wait for that they will have little to cheer for. An improvement from B to A is often celebrated but perhaps we should cheer moving from failing to passing. If a student has not turned homework in, perhaps we should cheer when they do. Little successes often lead to big successes.

The second lesson I learned was when to start preparing. Tryouts for the next year's cheer squad were conducted in January because it took that long to create and learn the cheers, routines, and stunts. For teachers to be ready for their next year, we need to prepare a year in advance by being a lifelong learner.

The third lesson was to be spontaneous. We must teach standards, but how we go about it is up to us. This lesson was learned during the first game of the season against a national power. After winning the coin toss, which was very rare for us, we unexpectedly ran the ball for a touchdown on the kick-off. There was a stunned silence in the stands. Since our band rarely played the fight song except for rare first downs, they had put down their instruments and the cheer team had put down their megaphones and pom-poms. Back then the winner of the Pacific Conference went to the Rose Bowl, so I picked up a megaphone and started to yell "Rose Bowl!" The last time OSU was in the Rose Bowl was in 1942 when they played in Durham, NC, for fear that the Japanese would target the event. Soon all 15,000 of the possible 30,000 fans started to yell "Rose Bowl!", a cheer that has not been heard for decades. It might have backfired since we lost something like 50-6 (we missed the extra point as I recall). A number of fans were heard saying that it was pretty cool though to cheer for the Rose Bowl.

The fourth lesson was that we must come out after half time whether we want to or not. I remember wondering what the coach says at half time when the team is down by 30 points. The message is that no matter how bad the year is going or how many students are not doing well, teachers can never give up. Even if a student wins on the last day, like a last-second score, it counts and the impact on that student might change their lives.

The fifth lesson I learned cheering for a losing football program is to remember what we do well. While the football team had trouble winning, Oregon State's basketball team was ranked preseason as one of the top teams. After the football team had just lost big at Stanford, I

started a cheer in the home student section that went something like, “Wait until basketball season! We’re going to beat you twice!” The moral is that each student has strengths that we need to discover, enhance, and celebrate.

The sixth lesson I learned came from refocusing on what was important. At one game the squad was performing their cheers perfectly. They could take a lot of pride in the moment. However, the cheer they were doing was no longer applicable to what was going on in the game. They had lost sight of the reason for cheering. The lesson was reinforced at a game at Washington State University. Very few fans make the long trip since the football team lost badly each time and it is often cold and windy. As the advisor to the squad I pointed out that they were doing their routines flawlessly. However, there was almost no one in the stands. I asked them who they were cheering for and they sheepishly answered no one, but this is the way it has always been done. I suggested turning around and focusing on the original purpose of cheerleaders, which is to cheer for the team. Similarly, teachers can lose their focus at times. We can get caught up in data, test scores, what the principal wants, what the school board wants, what the newspapers say, and the divergent desires of parents. Focusing back on the children is both rewarding for the teacher and motivating for the students.

Between the many theories of motivation and the practical lessons of life, these strategies can be applied to the classroom to increase both the student’s and the teacher’s motivation.

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