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**PRINCIPLES OF LEARNER MOTIVATION**

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**STRATEGIES FOR MOTIVATING STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL AND THE CLASSROOM**

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# Introduction

Student motivation is a determining factor in the success of a learning course. Traditional, learning focuses on learner engagement as a form of ensuring student motivation, yet students may be engaged but still remain demotivated. This can be the case because student motivation comes from many factors. Some, which can be incorporated into the learning experience and others, which need the student to deal with independently, before they can arouse their motivation for a course or learning activity. Whatever the case may be, student motivation is a critical issue and needs attention, if learning should achieve its objectives.

Eswatini is a lower middle-income under developing country with a gross domestic product of US$ 4.06 billion (2015) and a population of 1.2 million. The country has a national poverty rate of about 63 per cent and an unemployment rate of 41 per cent. HIV prevalence is at 31 per cent (OCHA). This information points to the fact that most schools in the country are public funded schools with a shortage of most basic luxuries you can find in schools elsewhere. A majority of these schools are also located in the rural parts of the country. Most communities make a living through farming, which makes school seem to interfere with normal community goals.

Student motivation is key in ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved in Eswatini schools. The essay will emphasize this key point and highlight some of the factors that contribute to the lack of interest in students and how finding the actual course may lead to finding the appropriate strategy to improve motivation. The paper also discussed some of the strategies that the teachers and school principals can employ to support learning through motivating students.

# Possible causes for lack of motivation in students

Many interrelated factors cause lack of motivation in students. The interrelatedness of these diverse issues is what makes coming up with strategies to improve motivation difficult. Most often than not, teachers find themselves developing and implementing strategies that address symptoms of demotivation rather than the actual cause. If the strategy does not address the real reason behind demotivation, the issue does not go away or resurfaces soon after. However, the complexity of identifying causes for demotivation does not mean we have to sit back and watch. We have to try to find out and keep trying out different strategies to keep the situation under control. Teachers who are able to identify the causes of students' lack of motivation tend to use strategies consistent with those causal beliefs (Hardré, 2012).

The home environment shapes the initial attitudes that children hold towards learning (GreatSchools Staff, 2019). Students, who stay in homes where education is regarded as unimportant, tend to be demotivated. In Eswatini, this is prevalent in rural communities where a majority of homesteads survives through farming. Whether they breed cattle or have maize fields, these kids are always encouraged to help more with home activities that support their lives than school that not benefit them when they are older.

Sometimes teachers’ negative attitudes and lack of confidence in students can make students to tune out, stop trying and fail. These teachers present themselves as jerks of all trades and label students as incompetent. (GreatSchools Staff, 2019). The outcome of the kind of attitude teachers have, results in what is called the self-fulfilling prophesy. The students end up behaving the way they have been told to, they become useless and worthless just their teachers believe them to be.

This reminds of the McGregor’s Motivation Theory X and Y. Teachers with a Theory Y perspective (students naturally want to learn) provide increased motivation for students and promote more active learning than Theory X-style teachers who do not view students as active learners. Many teachers are not aware of their Theory X/Theory Y orientation and how this bias may be influencing their interaction with students (Markwell, 2004).



 (GreatSchools Staff, 2019)

# What are some of the signs of demotivation in students?

Students can be classified as intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. It is important for teacher to monitor the signs demonstrated by students who lack motivation. Certain types of behaviors are usually indicators of what type of motivation a student has. This results in dealing with some behaviors quickly and paying more attention to others that are more serious. For example, a student who is intrinsically motivated may be found running around the classroom because they finished their work earlier. That student would simply need more challenging work. However, an extrinsically motivated student displaying the same behavior may just be looking for attention from the teacher because they need feedback on what they have covered already.

Students who lack motivation misbehave. There are many types of misbehaver that should be a concern for teachers (Wiseman & Hunt, 2014).

* Inattention,
* daydreaming,
* doodling,
* looking out the window,
* thinking about things irrelevant to the lesson,
* apathy,
* declining to participate,
* sulking,
* not caring,
* fear of failure,
* not willing to try to do well,
* needless talk, chatting during instructional time about things irrelevant to the lesson,
* moving around without permission,
* congregating in parts of the room,
* annoying others, teasing, picking on, calling names,
* talking and laughing inappropriately,
* using vulgar and many other similar behaviors
* talking back to the teacher
* ignoring the teacher
* hostilely refusing to do as requested

# Key players in student motivation

Before getting into further details, let us look at some of the parties to student motivation and how they can influence the level of motivation in learners. In the private sector, they always talk of top management support as a critical element for the success of business initiatives. Without it, initiating new projects becomes a waste of time and effort for those attempting to do so. Top management makes all the strategic decisions, finances all the resources that an organization needs to run smoothly, they even have the obligation to control how these resources are utilized. Accountability for the achievement of organizational objectives lies with them, it is never delegated.

Whilst most of the material and capital resources of the organization can be controlled by following less complex processes, controlling the human resources of the organization can be a bit challenging. You can acquire identical furniture for senior executives of a company, you can even buy them the same car model, and everything will be accepted. However, a company can have vacancies that require four accountants for example, but the same job advertisement no matter where it is posted, can never get identical candidates to apply for that particular job. Each one of them will be different from the other. Those differences make managing people very complex. Nevertheless, those in management have to be seen to be trying to effectively manage this complex resource.

The same is the case when it comes to educational organizations. Key players in student motivation are the school administrators. Teaching materials of the highest quality, state of the art classrooms and the latest technology alone cannot increase student motivation. Actually schools make the issue of motivation a little bit complex when compared to non-educational institutions. For example, any attempt to influence student motivation, without teacher motivation techniques in place, usually achieves low results. Most school administrators always focus on the learner when it comes to issues of motivation, without regard for the teacher’s motivational needs. We have seen the best public schools in terms of infrastructure and quality of teachers fail to increase student motivation. The question is why does that happen? It could be that teachers are demotivated.

## The role of the teacher in student motivation

Source: EdWeek Research Center, 2021[[1]](#endnote-1)

* Teachers can achieve student motivation by developing positive relationships with their students. Students in Eswatini are socialized into the education system through fear. Students are forced to attend school in the sense that it is never explained at a young age why school is important. In addition, teachers have been using corporal punishment for many years to get compliance from students. The fear that came from the corporal punishment made many students to resent education. If student motivation must increase, teachers must refrain from using coercion to engage students, they must use positive forms of motivation (Bouchrika, 2021).
* Engaging students in the planning of classroom activities. Students have different learning styles that make them have different preferences for learning. This demands that teachers plan practical classroom activities from the point of view of the learners. This also calls for teachers to develop assessments that will capture a student’s performance in various activities, other than the traditional paper based tests and examinations. Planning projects that students have a passion for, increases student motivation. Give students the freedom to choose how a certain activity can be done, as long as the objectives of the activities are met.
* Encourage students to set their own learning goals. Students are likely to commit to goals they can relate with in terms of what they stand to gain if that particular goal is achieved. Setting goals without engaging students results in teachers trying to force these objectives on the students, and if students fail to achieve the goals, it results in conflict between the students and the teacher.
* Teachers should manage conflicts within their classrooms at all times. Conflict is bound to occur where there are people involved. In a school setting, conflict can arise between students of the same class, students and teachers, or even conflict between students and the school management. Identifying the source of conflict early and addressing it can increase student motivation. Sometimes students want to know that someone actually cares about relationships.

The issue of managing conflict for student’s motivation draws me back to an experience I had in 2010. I just joined the Eswatini College of Technology as a lecturer. One of the classes in the department was very wild and disruptive; it was difficult for some colleagues to handle those students. I taught them beginning of 2010 they were due to graduate the following year for their diploma. When they enrolled for the last academic year, I was nominated to be their class tutor. However, I did not even have lesson with them that particular year. My task was now to ensure that these students refocus on their studies and stop their rebellious behavior. What was causing these students to behave this way. Most student behavior is triggered by something; anything that prompts an action from others is a trigger. Teachers need to be aware of these triggers (Wiseman & Hunt, 2014).

I looked closely at the matter and asked a few other students who were not vocal to put me in the picture. I then concluded that the cause for the behavior was that the college principal was having an affair with one of the and so they felt like even if they misbehaved, no one would charge them because the matter will go to the media and become a scandal. What I also concluded was that other lecturers were actually inciting the students’ behavior by discussing these issues and gossiping about other lecturers as well. So there I was in the middle of total chaos that started even before I joined the college. I had to handle the situation because my goal was to have a good class that will graduate peacefully.

On the first day of assuming my role of class tutor, I went to the class to introduce myself, I asked the students to nominate a class representative. I called the class rep to my office to assign him his duties for the academic year. I then asked him to call four boys from the class who were ringleaders in the on-going chaos. I told them that I have assigned the class rep his duties and there is no slot that I reserved for non-academic concerns. I told them that I have heard about the conflict between them and some lecturers and even the principal, but I needed them to refocus. Their academic work was bound to suffer if in this last year, they will entertain petty issues that cause them to disrupt studies. I told them that before they knew it, it was all going to be over, but would they look back with a smile or regret. I told them to go and think about what I had just shared.

I reminded the students of what mattered the most at that point in time. I showed them how unimportant the issues they had were but how they could destroy their careers because even if they left. They still needed references from the college; they needed good grades for competition for jobs. There was total peace that year. The students stopped what had almost become a culture in the department. They attended class and passed well. Their graduation was the best. Had I entertained and promoted that culture, probably some of those students were going to fail the course. They were motivated to learn, after two years of straying. My then head of department asked how I had calmed the situation, I told her that I talked to the students and reminded them why they were at the college.

Chapter 6 of the book Best Practice in Motivation and Management in the Classroom talks about Responding to Student Motivation and Behavior Problems. The kind of problem that my students had was defiance. The book suggests caution when dealing with defiance of students. The manner in which the teacher reacts to defiance can turn a bad situation worse within seconds. Remember that other students are watching the episode. The authors advise teachers to be calm and make means of having a private conversation with the student. This move has three advantages, first, the student will get time to cool off, second, the absence of the fans (the other students) will make them less aggressive and third there will be no one to prove a point to (Wiseman & Hunt, 2014).

## How can school administrators promote student motivation?

* School administrators can increase student motivation if they are highly motivated themselves. Sometimes all it takes is to see how enthusiastic the school principal is about the school, its programs, even extra curricula programs to motivate students. They may not have any comments known, but they do observe and get inspired without explaining why.

A certain school principal has just crossed my mind as I explained this point. In Eswatini, we have a juvenile school that was initially meant for young offenders, Vulamasango School. For years, many, including myself, did not know the school. Probably because of the stigma, it had. No parent wanted to be associated with it, who in their right mind would be proud to have their young child convicted of any crime. However, as the years passed on the school hired a new principal. He was previously in the private sector and joined the school in the last years of his career. As soon as he joined the school, there was a sudden improvement in school results generally, especially the external examination results which were published in local print media. The performance of students in extra curricula activities was outstanding; they never got anything below position two.

The used to be invisible school was now making headlines about its programs and progress. It was a wow situation. Everyone was talking about this school. Even the parents who were initially ashamed to say that their children were in that school were now proud of the school. The principal was a natural in this position. When I first met him, he did look cool, calm and collected. He simply had a passion for the school environment. He motivated everyone by simply walking into the room. I strongly believe that his teachers and students felt comfortable around him.

The principal had experience in the school system acquired when he served in his early years and this worked to his advantage. Before joining Vulamasango High School, he had served as the Chief Executive Officer at the Swaziland National Sports Council. Again, I believe that being a sports fanatic can make you very popular with students. Students just love their sports. If the principal has a passion for sports, he will likely be competitive in nature, and that competitiveness passes on to the students. Motivation is having the drive to achieve a certain goal. A principal, who wants to win, will drive his teachers and students to win.

* Another approach would be to investigate the reason behind student demotivation. Visibly demotivated students and even teachers usually drive the concern about motivation in a school setting. Whilst it can be obvious that certain behaviors are a direct result of demotivation, the actual causes of the lack of motivation may not be clear. Going straight to providing solutions or strategies to increase student motivation, without finding the reasons behind demotivation, can lead to solving symptoms. The problem would persist or even worsen.

As a school administrator, you have to investigate the causes of demotivation in your school. You have to ask yourself why there is lack of motivation. Write down all the pointers of lack of motivation and take a closer look into those. You can meet teachers and hear what they have to say about motivation in the school. Is it an issue to them as much as it is an issue to you? Arrange to meet with your students, per class for example, and have them raise their concerns if they have any, you can also encourage them to suggest ways to improving the situation.

However, if you notice that there is lack of motivation, and when you engage staff and learners, they refuse to share why things are the way they are, you could be the source of demotivation. The question is how much you are willing to change your management style to reduce the negative effects it has on student motivation in your school. We have the department of In-service Training for schools under the Ministry of Education and Training that can help facilitate a course on motivation for school principals. You may initiate that course or organize one for you and your team in order to take a holistic view to increasing motivation across the school.

* Come up with strategies to increase student motivation in your school. These should not already exist before talking to the staff and the students; they should be informed by the outcome of your investigation into the causes of motivation. An already existing list of strategies will solve symptoms as mentioned earlier in the text. Amongst your chosen strategies, you may want to start with the ones that are easy to implement, or the ones that will yield in quick wins. This way you will regain the trust of students, especially if you have consulted them on the lack of motivation. They will expect to see you do something about the issue soon after the consultations.

I once worked at Phonjwane High School as a Commercial teacher in 2008/2009. I had joined the school immediately after completing my postgraduate certificate in education. The Principal faced this issue of lack of motivation in the entire school. Both students and teachers were demotivated. The school was performing poorly in both in external examinations and in other school activities, compared to other schools in the area. It was very confusing because the school looked well compared to neighboring schools. It looked clean and organized, but performance was poor.

The principal thought she had the best solution for the problem. She called a staff meeting and blasted teachers, and even humiliated them for poor performance of the school in all areas. She blamed the teachers for not motivating the students to perform to their level best. It was a very sad meeting. The teachers did not even react to her outbursts. They were just sitting there as if nothing was going on. I was new and I was shocked. After venting, she left the staffroom and went back to her office. Everyone continued to do what he or she always do. Her meetings, according to the old teachers, were always about her reminding them she was boss and never about school challenges and solutions.

# Conclusion

This course has taught me that motivation and improved student performance go hand in hand. The most important concepts learnt through this course are that the biggest part of teaching and general school administration should be centered around improving student motivation. Most students attend school because it is expected of them, sometimes they cannot link their own personal goals to education, and hence the need for teachers to cover that gap by conducting student centered lessons, activities and even assessments. All this depends on the structure of the curriculum, which should also be revised from time to time to meet student needs and expectations.

I also learnt that school principals’ management styles also play a vital role in student motivation. A school principal who cares, kills two birds with one stone, they motivate students through motivated and engaged teachers. The essay also touched on the importance of promoting extra curricula activities that are usually picked by students out of passion. If classroom activities also has fun activities supported by the use of the internet for games and practice quizzes, most student will find learning interesting and partake. The essay described student motivation, and why some students get demotivated and lose interest in learning. The people who have a major role in student motivation (teachers and school administrators) were identified and strategies of how they can promote student motivation were suggested.

The knowledge gained in this course has helped to understand that as a parent, I should pay close attention to my kids’ educational needs so that I pick lack of motivation early on, support my kids, and help them feel enthusiastic about school. It will also help me to reach out to their teachers to advise them on how they can improve student motivation for other kids in the school. As professional lecturer, the course has been a necessary refresher to the importance of participant motivation. In our department, this course is very critical because we teach adults and if your course is not tailored to their needs, they simply do not pay attention or make excuses to leave.

I will use my knowledge to promote the right to quality education by encouraging other students who find it difficult to cope with school. I will engage parents of students in my neighborhood to find out if there are students who may need advice and support to refocus their energy towards schoolwork, and arrange talks with teachers where I feel the student’s challenge is rooted in a particular teachers conduct towards the student.

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)