



ILLUSTRATION BY KEN VINTON

Motivation: Missing in Action

By Barbara L. Branch

I walked into the post office to mail a package. As I waited in line, my eyes wandered to the wanted posters on the wall. There among the posters for criminals, fugitives and missing children was a poster that was conspicuous. It read, "MISSING IN ACTION: MOTIVATION." In very small print was a plea so gripping that I felt immediately drawn to it. "My gifted child is not motivated in school. Help me find the motivation." I left the post office determined to find an answer for the parent's plea.

The above scenario may seem like the introduction to a Nancy Drew mystery story, but the cry for missing motivation from parents and teachers of gifted children is all too real. I talk to parents and teachers of gifted children frequently and the number one question is, "How do we motivate our gifted children in school?"

What really motivates anyone to do anything? There are only two ways we can be motivated: interest or usefulness. If something is interesting, we will devote emotional, physical, and intellectual energy to the situation or event. If something is useful, we will also be energized and stimulated to be involved in the

task. It is easy to see how interest motivates us. When we are interested in something, we are emotionally involved and the brain pays attention to that which it feels. "Emotion is the building block of all learning, from birth throughout life. Emotions build memories." (Lyons, 2003, p. 66)

It is not as easy to see how usefulness may motivate us. We may not want to do housework or laundry but we see the usefulness in having a clean house and clean clothes. Students may not want to memorize multiplication tables and may not immediately see the value in this task. However, when one is faced with a complicated algebraic equation where use of the multiplication facts would expedite the solution of the problem, knowledge of the multiplication facts becomes useful and therefore motivating. Del Siegle refers to this as "utility value" (2005, p. 11).

For gifted students, finding interest or usefulness in school tasks is often challenging. The post office scenario, while a little dramatic, does not exaggerate the plight of gifted children and the concern of their parents and teachers. Gifted students often find school subject matter to be repetitive or boring. They are



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not being obstinate when they refuse to show interest in or task commitment to familiar subject matter. Their brains are simply not stimulated because the information is not new or challenging. The brain does not want to continue to process old information. The students who do not want to complete tasks or show interest in the current subject matter are often labeled unmotivated or lazy.

However, if one were to delve into the interests of these gifted students, one would find them to have a plethora of interests and maybe even passions. These children are very motivated to learn but not necessarily motivated to learn their current schoolwork. Unfortunately, their interests and passions may not be reflected in the classroom topics. The students may be highly motivated to learn more about the history of the Middle East or the theory of relativity, topics not covered in their grade level classroom work. Students are forced to shelve their interests until out-of-school time when they can pursue their interests further.

To more effectively motivate our gifted children, we must understand what motivation is, why our gifted children are not always motivated, and what methods we might try to motivate them.

WHAT IS MOTIVATION?

If you think back to your college psychology classes you may recall the following definitions of motivation:

- internal state or condition that activates behavior and gives it direction
- influence of needs and desires on the intensity and direction of behavior
- desire or want that energizes and directs goal-oriented behavior (Kleinginna, & Kleinginna, 1981)

The key words in all three definitions are *direction* and *goal*. Without a direction for our behavior or an ultimate goal for our behavior, we are not motivated to complete a task. More importantly, the motivation to complete a task must come from within ourselves. It is inherently intrinsic.

WHY SO SOME GIFTED STUDENTS APPEAR TO BE UNMOTIVATED?

Perfectionism. There are many reasons why gifted children may not appear to be motivated. Some of the prevailing reasons

are perfectionism and asynchronous development; both often lead to underachievement. Children who are perfectionist have a need for achievement that does not allow room for mistakes. They have high expectations for themselves and for others. They are the children who erase the page until there is a hole in the paper, or those who fail to turn in homework for fear of a mistake being revealed. To the teacher or the parent these children appear to be unmotivated when, in fact, they may be afraid of failure. The fear of failure is actually more motivating than the completion of the task.

For much of the early years, schoolwork is often so easy for gifted children that they never learn what it is like to be challenged. When work comes easily and perfect scores are often achieved, they come to expect perfection from themselves. They learn to be perfect and are rewarded for perfection by good grades, parental and teacher praise, and accolades from classmates. They do not learn how to take risks, possibly fail, and then learn from their failures. When finally faced with a daunting task, gifted children may not have the tools to deal with the challenge.

Asynchronous development. The asynchronous development of many gifted children may exacerbate the under-motivated syndrome. When we grow we develop emotionally, physically, and intellectually. For gifted children, the emotional and physical development often mirrors the development of their age peers. However, the intellect usually develops much more rapidly, creating an individual who is out of sync with age peers. Think of the 5th grade boy who loves baseball statistics and baseball strategy. He can share that information with much older boys. He loves to discuss baseball and baseball strategy. The older boys accept his interest and enjoy discussion with him because of his knowledge and mature understanding of baseball. Then the time comes to actually play the game. The 5th grader is not picked to play with the older boys. He is not physically mature enough to play with the older boys but thinks he is. He is suddenly thrown into a state of feeling less-than-perfect and rejects further conversation with the older boys. He has become a victim of his asynchronous development.

Perfectionism is a function of asynchrony. Students set goals for themselves that are really more appropriate for their older friends or even for adults. When students cannot meet their perfectionist goals, they often become unmotivated.

“Motivation is a fire from within. If someone else tries to light that fire under you, chances are it will burn very briefly.”

—Stephen Covey

Desire for peer acceptance. In an attempt to fit in with their age peers, gifted children often chose not to be motivated or chose not to complete work. Their peers may not value achievement, so they choose to “dumb down” their intellect in order to be accepted as part of the group. This becomes particularly relevant in middle school when peer group acceptance is so vital to a student’s personal growth. It’s often not cool to be smart.

HOW CAN WE MOTIVATE SEEMINGLY UNMOTIVATED GIFTED STUDENTS?

Find their passions. Because gifted children often have interests or passions outside of school, it is important to discover what these passions are. For teachers, learning what interests a gifted child can lay the foundation for differentiating instruction where choices for learning are offered. An opportunity to discuss an area of passion or engage in a project where the area of passion is a focus or springboard can often motivate a student to complete other work. If a child knows that her interests can be met some of the time, other work may not seem so “boring” or “uninteresting.”

It’s not always easy for a teacher to find that area of passion but it is critical to helping the child become a motivated learner. Teachers can discover student interests by asking students to complete an interest inventory. A number of interest inventories are available online at no cost, including the following.

- The Adaptive Dimension has inventories for student in grades K-6 and for students in grades 7-12 at saskschools.ca/curr_content/adaphandbook/learner/interest.html#k6interest. Inventories are available at Interest Inventory Webquest.
- Directions are given to create your own inventory and samples of several teacher-developed inventories are provided at: faculty.citadel.edu/hewett/web_files/interestweb.html.

Locate mentors. For parents, knowing that your child has an area of interest or passion is also important. Understanding that your child’s passion may not connect to school work, means that you must help find other supports that feed that passion. Finding a mentor who shares your child’s interest can be a gift that will always be treasured. When gifted adults are interviewed and asked

who made a difference in their life, they often mention a mentor or teacher who shared their passion. Having someone to share your interests and explore them with you is the difference between feeling alone and feeling accepted. When a child is the only one in the classroom with a particular interest that goes undiscovered or unsupported, the child can feel very lonely. Knowing that there is someone else who shares your passion can be enough motivation to feel good about schoolwork and school activities.

Identify learning styles. It is also important to analyze how individual students learn. Many teachers give learning style inventories at the beginning of a school year to help them understand their students. Wise teachers use the inventory results to help them develop lessons and activities that will meet the learning needs of all of their students. Gifted students often have learning styles that are different from that of their teachers. Teachers, for the most part, are auditory-sequential learners. Linda Silverman, Director of the Gifted Development Center, states that gifted students are more likely to be visual-spatial learners. As a former teacher and a very auditory-sequential learner, I had to work hard to understand the needs of my gifted students who were visual-spatial learners. Appreciating the differences in learning styles can be a first step in better serving your gifted students. Students with opportunities to learn in their primary learning styles are far more motivated to complete classroom related tasks.

Parents can also help their children discover their best learning styles. If parents are aware of their child’s learning styles, they can create a homework atmosphere that supports their child’s studying. For example, learning spelling words or multiplication tables using a musical theme might suit the needs of the auditory learner. Visual learners might like to diagram or outline the information needed to study for a test. Kinesthetic learners might need to throw a ball around while practicing spelling words or facts for a test. Tapping into the learning style stimulates the brain to do its best work and provides the motivation to complete the work.

There are many Internet resources for learning styles inventories that are free for teachers and parents to use:

- Two inventories that include scoring guides can be found at: www.rccc-online.com/~psych/LSInventory.html and www.personal.psu.edu/bxb11/LSI/LSI.htm.

- Scholastic Parents has an article about learning styles and an inventory that can be used with middle school students and probably with younger gifted students. It can be found at: scholastic.com/familymatters/parentguides/middleschool/quiz_learningstyles/index.htm.
- A handy chart that shows the characteristics of learning styles adapted from Colin Rose (1987) at Accelerated Learning is available at: chaminade.org/inspire/learnstl.htm.
- A learning styles inventory that is appropriate for younger children is available from Lessons from the Thoughtful Classrooms. It is called the LSIE, and is found at: thoughtfulclassroom.com/index.php?act=viewProd&productId=23. The LSIE does have a minimal fee.
- Abiators Online Learning Styles Inventory Test 1 is available at: <http://www.berghuis.co.nz/abiator/lsi/lsitest1.html>.

Develop study skills. Because gifted children can easily complete typical schoolwork from an early age, they often do not develop good study habits. They may lack what are called “executive functions.” Our executive functioning skills are those that allow us to plan and organize, manage time, and follow directions. Without direct instruction in these skills, gifted students often stumble and become unmotivated when the going gets tough. As teachers and parents we must insure that executive functions are taught and tracked. We aren’t born with a study skills gene.

Study skills must be taught even to the very brightest students. In fact, because the mind of the gifted student is exploring numerous different thoughts at the same time, it is even more important for us to help them organize their work and their thoughts. I often told the parents of my sixth grade gifted students that we would do two things during the school year: get organized and learn to live in the real world with the rest of the people. Parents laughed but then thanked me at the end of the year when their youngsters entered middle school with functional study skills and homework habits. One parent even called me two years later to thank me for providing her daughter with study skills that were being resurrected for use in an honors international studies program in high school.

Parents can help with study skills by providing appropriate homework expectations at home. Learn what the homework procedures are for the class; communicate with the teacher if your child does not give you clear information. Make accommodations for learning style differences or needs that are different from other children in the home. Establish a homework calendar so your student can keep track of his or her own assignments. Assist with homework if needed; check it at regular intervals but do not do your child’s homework. Allow your child to make mistakes. The feedback that the child receives from the teacher will be far more valuable than your efforts to correct the mistakes.

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF NON-MOTIVATION

Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), states, “Motivation is a fire from within. If someone else tries to light that fire under you, chances are it will burn

very briefly.” We cannot motivate our gifted children unless they are interested or find the learning useful. We cannot impose motivation on them. We can provide the tools to help them gain intrinsic or self-motivation. Gifted children often think that success comes easily to others. They may not value or recognize the effort that others put into their work to achieve results. People who are known for excellence have learned the reward of difficult tasks. They have developed a group of motivations that take them to a higher level of performance.

If a gifted child has never had to work hard, she or he does not understand effort and does not learn the reward of hard work. We have to provide opportunities for our gifted children to struggle with new concepts and skills. They have to learn that failure is a step toward further learning, not an end in itself. We have to provide the skills needed to tackle new learning.

Finally, we must help gifted children to set goals that are attainable but reasonably challenging. If a gifted child sets the goal to obtain 100% on every spelling test all year long, what happens in November when the student earns a 95% on a spelling test? The goal is lost and the motivation to complete the goal is lost. Setting a more reasonable goal of an average of 90% on spelling tests all year long is a much more attainable and much more motivating ultimately. Teachers and parents can assist students in learning how to set practical goals that require effort. Students who set short-term goals and receive immediate feedback, function in a much more motivated state of mind than those who do not. ■

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