INTRODUCTION

Human beings are born with a hunger to learn, a seemingly insatiable appetite for knowledge. Infants and young children appear to be propelled by curiosity, driven by an innate need to explore, interact with, and make sense of their environment. As one author notes, "Rarely does one hear parents complain that their preschooler is 'unmotivated' " (James Raffini 1993).

It is unfortunate that as children progress through our educational system, learning—at least learning that occurs in school settings—often becomes associated with drudgery rather than delight. Many toddlers who immerse themselves in exploring almost anything and everything around them later become "turned off" by the educational system. Somewhere along the line they seem to lose their love of learning.

Figures on dropout rates are one window into the problem of student disaffection with school. Tragically, each year 500,000 students in the U.S. leave school "without diplomas or life skills" (Hillery Motsinger 1993). But the apparent absence of motivation to learn is not confined to students who leave school prematurely.

Many who remain in school also exude apathy. These students seem content with "sliding by," doing the minimum possible to get advanced to the next grade level. They show little interest in, and devote little time or energy to, school-related tasks. As a result, their achievement falls well below their ability. As Raffini notes, "More than one in four students who enter first grade leave before graduating, and many of those who do continue avoid making a personal commitment to the learning process."

Therefore, in addition to being concerned with how motivational problems contribute to student dropout rates, we must also address the issue of why a large portion of those students who stay in school fail to invest themselves fully in the experience of learning. Apathetic students will be less likely to achieve their full potential than those who manage to retain a sense of excitement and satisfaction about learning for its own sake.

Raymond Wlodkowski and Judith Jaynes (1990) are among those who note the correlation between motivation and underachievement. They state that

> since 1980 more than a dozen reports from national panels and commissions that have studied public education in this country agree that the school achievement of our children is below their abilities. In all of these instances, one of the main reasons cited is that many of our children lack motivation to learn in school.

But has the problem of student disengagement really been growing or is awareness of it merely increasing? Apparently disengagement and lack of motivation are more widespread than in the past. Laurence Steinberg (1996) asserts that there has been an upward shift in the proportions of disengaged students over the past twenty-five years.

> Teachers have always encountered students who were difficult to interest and hard to motivate, but the number of these students was considerably smaller in the past than it is today. Two decades ago, a teacher in an average high school in this country could expect to have three or four "difficult" students in a class of thirty. Today, teachers in these same schools are expected to teach to classrooms in which nearly half of the students have "checked out." (Steinberg)

The widespread disengagement of America's students is a problem with enormous implications and profound potential consequences. Although it is less visible, less dramatic, and less commented upon than other social problems involving youth—such as drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, and violence—student disengagement is more pervasive and in some ways potentially more harmful to the future well-being of American society.

As Steinberg emphasizes, the fallout from student disenchantment with school is far-reaching. While a multitude of factors contribute to students' mental and physical exodus from our nation's school system, most educators and researchers agree that when students become disconnected from a desire to learn, they are at much greater risk of either severing their relationship with the formal educational system or remaining in school but failing to achieve their full potential. There are also long-term personal and professional repercussions for individuals who do not successfully negotiate their way through our educational system. Our country as a whole also pays an economic and social price for students' languishing motivation to learn.

Student engagement not only has implications for educational achievement and future occupational attainment but may also reflect students' general psychological and social health. Since attending school is one of the few responsibilities all children are expected to fulfill, and success in school is one of the few values nearly all parents attempt to impart to their children, students' level of engagement in school can be viewed as a broad barometer of their willingness to adopt or internalize not only values related to education but a range of other values widely held by adult society (Steinberg). That is, students who reject education as a relevant value may be more likely to reject other values and precepts embraced by a majority of citizens.

Interest in school tends to serve as a "buffer" against psychological problems (Steinberg). Students with high interest and involvement in school "score higher on measures of psychological adjustment, such as assessments of self-esteem, responsibility, and competence in social relationships" (Steinberg).

On the other hand, disengagement from school is associated with a host of psychological and behavioral problems. According to Steinberg,

> Youngsters who are disengaged from school are far more likely than their peers to use and abuse drugs and alcohol, fall prey to depression, experiment with early sex, and commit acts of crime and delinquency. For these reasons, understanding the causes and correlates

> of children's engagement in school helps us better understand the forces in their lives that affect all aspects of their behavior and well-being, not just their performance on tests of school achievement.

Teachers consistently identify the issue of student motivation as one of their chief concerns (Carole Ames 1990). They want to know more about such things as how to motivate students who appear disengaged from and disinterested in learning, how to help students value learning for its own sake, and how to develop a motivating classroom "personality" or climate.

Unfortunately, the subject of motivation receives scant attention at most teacher training institutions. Teachers usually enter the classroom with an inadequate foundation in both motivational theory and classroom application of motivational principles. They are often left to rely on their intuition to guide them in motivational matters. However, many motivational principles are actually "counterintuitive," which means that the compass of "conventional wisdom" cannot be counted upon to reliably guide teachers through challenging motivational terrain (Ames 1990).

While classroom teachers are instrumental in shaping students' motivational patterns, written and unwritten goals and values that permeate the "culture" of the school are also influential. Although teachers can do much at the classroom level to stimulate students' involvement in and enjoyment of learning, their efforts will be diminished if school-level policies, procedures, and values run counter to those at the classroom level. For example, if the relative standing of students is emphasized at the school level, this schoolwide value will subvert teachers' attempts to focus on individual effort and progress and downplay competition and comparisons across students.

Although teachers and school leaders influence the course of student motivation, parents also play a pivotal, enduring role in shaping their children's attitudes toward learning. After children enter school, the level of parent involvement in their children's education becomes very important. However, attitudes toward learning begin to take root in children long before they ever set foot in a school building. When they are still toddlers, children

begin to pick up powerful messages about learning based on the way their parents respond to their innate curiosity about the world.

Whether children are raised by parents who provide them with a basic sense of self-worth and self-efficacy also influences students' attitudes toward learning. Children who have low self-esteem are generally more psychologically vulnerable in the face of failure than are children who possess a solid sense of self-esteem. Whenever possible, children with low self-esteem are inclined to avoid academic challenges and the risks inherent in learning because the prospect of failure is so threatening to their fragile sense of self-worth.

Another way parents influence their children is through the transmission of values. If parents value learning for its own sake and this value is evident in their everyday lives, perhaps through activities such as pleasure reading or the pursuit of various hobbies, their children are more likely to cherish learning.

Finally, as we attempt to unravel, at least partially, the enigma of motivation to learn, the perceptions of students themselves must not be left out of the equation. When consulted and given a voice, students have much to say about what they need to support their quest to learn and grow.

This book examines student motivation from a practical as well as a theoretical perspective. Why children's passion for learning frequently seems to shrink as they grow—and what to do to prevent or reverse this trend—is one of its central themes. It examines approaches to nurturing and reviving student motivation at the classroom level and the school level, and considers students' perspectives on learning and motivation.

Chapter 1 provides a glimpse at some of the theoretical underpinnings of student motivation through the examination of several motivation-related terms and concepts. Caring and high expectations, two cornerstones of motivation, are examined in chapter 2. Chapter 3 presents a sampling of practitioners' perspectives about student motivation gleaned from interviews. Chapter 4 discusses ele-

ments at a classroom level that may affect student motivation. Finally, chapter 5 focuses on aspects of school-level structure, policy, and practice that may impede or promote motivation and engagement of students.

1

WHAT IS STUDENT MOTIVATION?

There are three things to remember about education. The first one is motivation. The second one is motivation. The third one is motivation.

—former U.S. Secretary of Education
Terrell H. Bell (in Raffini)

Nearly all decisions about schooling, whether made in the school board chamber, the central office, the principal's office, or the classroom—even decisions about policies and procedures that seem remotely related to instruction and learning—have an effect, intended or not, on students' motivation to learn. Without some grounding in motivational concepts and how they apply to the classroom, however, administrators, educators, and policy-makers may remain unaware of the motivational implications of many of their decisions.

Teachers' daily interactions with students enable them to most directly shape students' attitudes. But if teachers have not been schooled in motivational principles, they will lack a framework to guide them in selecting activities that will foster "long-term and high-quality involvement in learning" (Carole Ames 1992). Teachers may also fail to recognize or attend to other aspects of classroom environment that affect the way in which students approach and engage in academic activities.

True, students bring their preexisting motivational patterns to the classroom, but they are not beyond change. Teachers who possess an understanding of some of the dynamics that affect students' motivation to learn are able to act as "*active socialization agents* capable of stimulating the general development of student motivation to learn

and its activation in particular situations" (Jere Brophy 1987) [Emphasis in original].

Beyond the classroom, school-level policies and practices also affect student motivation to learn. If administrators do not understand motivational principles, they may initiate, with good intentions, learning goals at the school level that actually undermine teachers' more constructive efforts in the classroom. What message will students act on, for example, if teachers try to impress on them the value of effort, improvement, and active engagement in learning while the principal promotes a program to reward a few students for their outstanding performance relative to other students?

Of course, the same problem holds if the roles are reversed. Teachers who overtly or covertly reinforce norms of competition can subvert principals' schoolwide focus on the inherent value of learning. To instill in students an appreciation for learning, teachers and administrators must act in concert, their efforts complementing each other.

Of even greater importance for students' motivation to learn is teamwork between school personnel and parents. When children are affirmed and encouraged both at home and at school to take an interest in learning, the more likely they will be to value learning for its own sake rather than for any external rewards they may reap. If, however, the messages students receive at home and at school differ, students are likely to be confused about which set of learning-related values and beliefs to adopt. Clear communication between home and school, and partnerships between parents and teachers, can go a long way toward keeping students motivated to learn.

Granted, there is "no magic solution to the problem of student motivation" (Donald Grossnickle and William Thiel 1988). Much has been learned in recent years, however, about the nature of student motivation and about how to adapt students' motivational patterns. This chapter discusses some motivation-related terms prevalent in the literature and then discusses some factors that affect students' basic beliefs about and attitudes toward learning.

Ways of Conceptualizing Student Motivation

Student motivation is a complex, multidimensional concept. Lyn Corno (1992) mentions some elements associated with student motivation:

> Motivation to accomplish goals, expressed interest in and effort toward schoolwork, self-confidence in one's own ability, and persistence in the face of difficulty—these are aspects of motivation most of us call to mind in the academic arena, and all are theoretically important.

Basically, student motivation has to do with the reasons students engage—or in some cases choose not to engage—in school-related academic endeavors. It is related to what provides the impetus for students' participation in the learning process. When attempting to unravel the mystery of student motivation, it is essential to try to tease out *why* students undertake learning. Two students may each elect to pursue the same task, but their reasons for doing so may be as different as night and day.

It is helpful for teachers to have a sense of the primary reasons that prompt individual students to pursue academic activities, because these underlying reasons "have important consequences for how [students] approach and engage in learning" (Ames 1990). Students whose paramount goal is a good grade will engage in thought processes and behaviors that are likely to differ from those of students who are interested in learning something new about a subject (Ames 1990). As Corno notes, "Students who are generally inclined to approach schoolwork from the point of learning and mastering the material (so-called learning/mastery orientations) tend to differ in work styles from students whose goals or intentions generally lead from the other point, that is, to obtain grades or display competence."

Extrinsic Versus Intrinsic Orientation

Much of the literature on student motivation refers to two basic learning orientations. Depending on why they pursue learning tasks, students are said to be primarily *intrinsically oriented* or *extrinsically oriented*. Mark Lepper

(1988) states that intrinsically motivated behavior is "undertaken for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes." In contrast, extrinsically motivated behavior consists of "actions undertaken *in order to* obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself" [Emphasis in original].

Those with an extrinsic orientation toward learning perform school-related tasks primarily because they view them as a means of obtaining some form of reward not integral to the tasks themselves (that is, they may be striving for good grades or stickers or a place on the school honor roll). Those who have an intrinsic motivational orientation perceive learning as a process that has inherent value and meaning.

Mastery Goals Versus Performance Goals

Mastery goals and *performance goals* are two other terms frequently used to characterize students' motivational orientations (Ames 1992). The two categories represent "different conceptions of success and different reasons for approaching and engaging in achievement activity" (Ames 1992). A student who is motivated by mastery goals focuses on "developing new skills, trying to understand their work, improving their level of competence, or achieving a sense of mastery based on self-referenced standards" (Ames 1992).

Students who possess mastery goals believe that effort leads to success or mastery; they also spend more time on learning tasks and display higher levels of persistence in the face of failure. In addition, students motivated by mastery goals tend to prefer challenging work and willingly engage in academic risk-taking (Carole Ames and Jennifer Archer 1988).

In contrast, when performance goals take precedence, students do not focus on the learning activity itself; instead, they concentrate primarily on how their performance on a task will reflect on their perceived ability and sense of self-worth. They view ability, rather than effort, as

the strongest determinant of outcome. These students have an especially strong need to be perceived as able, and they think of ability in terms of doing better than others, exceeding normative standards, and experiencing success with minimal effort (Ames 1992).

Students who are performance-oriented seek public acknowledgment that they have performed at a higher level than others, that they have displayed superior ability. Those with this orientation view learning as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Their self-concept of ability, so intimately entwined with and potentially threatened by their performance, has an impact on how they cope with academic tasks. If they see failure as probable, they often prefer to withhold effort than to try hard and risk failure, because if they don't put forth effort their failure cannot be attributed to lack of ability.

Although theoretically students are classified in an "either/or" fashion (as being intrinsically or extrinsically oriented or having mastery or performance goals), in reality the division cannot be so easily drawn. That is, students are not generally purely intrinsically or extrinsically oriented. Rather, to varying degrees, intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivate most students just as they motivate most individuals in the workplace (that is, a person may find his job personally satisfying but would not necessarily continue to come to work if a paycheck were not forthcoming at the end of every month).

In addition, what motivates students is not likely to be static across all types of tasks. Depending on the nature of the task they are asked to perform, students may be relatively more or less motivated by intrinsic or extrinsic factors. In one situation intrinsic factors may be the primary motivators, while in another situation extrinsic elements could be preeminent. Although for the sake of clearly distinguishing terms associated with motivation to learn it may make sense to refer to students as having one motivational orientation or the other, real students are multidimensional, complex human beings motivated by a multitude of factors.

Benefits of an Intrinsic Motivational Orientation

One might ask, Why does it matter whether a student leans toward one motivational orientation or the other? If students complete the tasks that educators set before them, isn't that the bottom line? Shouldn't we concentrate on students who seem to have completely lost their appetite for formal learning activities—those who can't seem to find any reason to invest themselves in school-related tasks?

Without question it is crucial for educators to understand why some students become severely disengaged from and apathetic toward school, to decipher why, as Raffini puts it, many students "reject school as a valued activity." However, it is equally important for teachers to nurture intrinsic motivation to learn in all students. This is essential because a growing body of evidence suggests that the way students approach tasks, the cognitive and affective processes they employ, and the level of learning that they ultimately derive from undertaking tasks depend to a great extent on whether students are operating from an extrinsic or an intrinsic motivational orientation.

Behaviors and Effects Associated with Motivational Orientation

One's motivational orientation can affect both the time spent on a task and the quality of involvement in the task (Lepper). Of these two variables, Ames (1990) would argue that the quality of involvement is the more important one. As she notes, information that can be derived from students' time on task is limited. We cannot, by looking at time-on-task in isolation, be certain about what students are attending to, how they are processing information, how they are reacting to their performance, and how they are interpreting feedback. What is critical, Ames says, "is the quality of engaged time, not the duration of engaged time."

Motivational orientation can also have a bearing on the level of task difficulty students select (Lepper). Students with an intrinsic orientation tend to prefer tasks that are moderately challenging, whereas extrinsically oriented

students gravitate toward tasks that are low in degree of difficulty. The latter will be most concerned with doing only what is necessary to obtain some form of reward that is external to the task itself. Extrinsically oriented students are also less likely than internally oriented students to take academic risks as they respond to a given task (Lepper).

Generally, individuals with an extrinsic orientation toward learning tend to expend less mental effort and employ less deliberate and less effective strategies when undertaking an activity than do intrinsically oriented individuals. Susan Bobbitt Nolen (1988), for example, found that students' motivational orientation influenced the types of strategies they valued and employed when studying or performing an activity. Students who engaged in expository reading with the primary goal of learning for its own sake (intrinsic motivation) tended to value and use study strategies that demanded more effort and that enabled them to process information more deeply. In contrast, students who were primarily driven by the desire to demonstrate that they had superior ability at the task relative to other students (a form of extrinsic motivation) put forth less mental effort.

Similarly, J. Condry and J. Chambers (1978) found that when students were confronted with complex intellectual tasks, those with an intrinsic motivational orientation used more logical information-gathering and decision-making strategies than did students who were extrinsically oriented.

Student Motivation To Learn

The concepts of *student motivation to learn* and *intrinsic motivational orientation* are closely related. Although some authors seem to view them as essentially synonymous, others do not. The idea of involvement in academic tasks for internal reasons, such as personal benefits the learner derives from the learning experience, is integral to both terms. Both terms also can be used when describing learning that is undertaken primarily for the personal benefits it brings to the learner rather than for the purpose of meeting various forms of external demands or expectations.

Jere Brophy (1986) is among those who define the terms differently. If a student tends to find meaning and value in school-related activities, and tries to get "the intended academic benefits" from those activities, Brophy would say the student possesses *motivation to learn*. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, "usually refers to the affective aspects of motivation—liking for or enjoyment of an activity," states Brophy. When this distinction is made, it is possible for motivation to learn to be present even when enjoyment is absent. Although students may not find an activity particularly pleasurable, they can still strive to get the intended benefits or meaning from them.

Educators interested in promoting motivation to learn should focus on helping students to "develop goals, beliefs, and attitudes... [that] will contribute to quality involvement in learning" (Ames 1990). To get a sense of the status of motivation in their classrooms, teachers should evaluate "whether students initiate learning activities and maintain an involvement in learning as well as a commitment to the process of learning" (Ames 1990).

Achievement and Performance

Although motivation is related to achievement, valid inferences about motivation cannot be made by examining achievement data (Ames 1990). Motivation to learn must be seen as a worthy outcome apart from its potential to enhance achievement (Ames 1990). If teachers and school leaders promote motivation to learn only as a means to the ultimate goal of increased achievement, they may not notice or even be particularly concerned that some practices that produce short-term gains in achievement also erode motivation. If achievement is stressed at all costs, teachers may fail to nurture in students the types of goals, beliefs, and attitudes that will enable them to engage fully in, and derive enjoyment and satisfaction from, learning (Ames 1990).

Similarly, Brophy points out the necessity of distinguishing *learning* from *performance*. While performance is overt in that it refers to the demonstration of skills or knowledge, the learning process is primarily covert; it

consists of activities such as "information-processing, sense-making, and comprehension." When seeking to support or enhance motivation to learn, then, we should be concerned not only with strategies that have the capacity to enhance students' abilities to take tests and complete assignments, but with strategies that support and strengthen students' information-processing activities, such as paying attention, reading for understanding, paraphrasing, and so forth.

Some Factors That Affect Student Motivation To Learn

Motivation to learn does not exist in a vacuum; many factors influence the initial constellation of attitudes children develop toward learning. Subsequent experiences that students have as they pass through the educational system either affirm or alter their evolving motivational patterns and associations with learning.

The Role of Parents

As Wlodkowski and Jaynes note, parents model and interpret the world to their children; they are "the first and most important teachers in a child's life." At least when they are young, most children tend to view the world in much the same way that their parents do.

Children's initial associations with learning are primarily an outgrowth of what they experience and observe in their home environment. With learning as with other areas, children pick up on the subtle and not-so-subtle attitudes and values that are held by their parents.

When parents nurture their children's natural curiosity about the world by welcoming their questions, encouraging exploration, and familiarizing them with resources that can enlarge their world (such as the library), they are giving their children the message that learning is a worthwhile endeavor, and that it is also frequently fun and satisfying. If, on the other hand, parents are consistently unresponsive or react with irritation or impatience when

their children inquire about things that intrigue them, over time their children will probably curb their attempts to learn more about the world. Their natural interest in learning will probably begin to wane, at least until someone crosses their path who skillfully "primes the pump" by creating a climate in which the child's dormant desire to learn once again bubbles to the surface.

In addition to whether parents are responsive to their children's cognitive needs and supply them with developmentally appropriate forms of cognitive stimulation, the degree to which parents provide their children with a basic sense of emotional security also influences their children's confidence in learning and motivation to learn. If children lack a solid sense of their own worth, competence, and self-efficacy—in short, if children do not learn to believe in themselves—their freedom to engage in academically challenging pursuits and capacity to tolerate and cope with failure will be greatly diminished. The attitudes and beliefs students have about themselves play a significant role in determining whether they develop constructive or ultimately self-defeating motivation patterns.

Parents' own attitudes toward school and education also come into play. If parents' school-related experience was predominantly negative, they may find it hard to view their children's teachers as potential allies. It is regrettable but understandable that parents whose own school experience left a bad taste in their mouths are probably not going to perceive their children's teachers as partners. The pain some parents carry from their own negative school experiences as children may cloud their vision and make it difficult for them to see their own children's educational experience objectively, particularly if it does not confirm their deep-seated preexisting beliefs. They are likely to distrust or be intimidated by school personnel and shy away from direct involvement in their children's formal education.

Conversely, parents who had a positive educational experience during their childhood and place a premium on formal education are more likely to think of school and teachers in a positive light. They are apt to initiate a relationship with school personnel and assume, even demand, a high level of participation and involvement in their children's education. If these parents believe their

children are being shortchanged in the classroom, they are likely to advocate vigorously for their children's educational needs.

Developmental Changes

As children mature, their beliefs about effort and ability, success and failure, also change. Developmental changes that occur on cognitive, social, and emotional fronts as children age also alter their perceptions of themselves and their beliefs about what is necessary to preserve their sense of self-worth. What was relatively unimportant during one developmental stage may loom large in the next. Just as children's physical bodies undergo transformation as they develop, new levels of cognitive and emotional awareness also unfold within them. For example, Ames points out that

> Young children tend to have an optimistic view of their ability, high expectations for success, and a sort of resilience after failure. Moreover, young children tend to equate effort with ability. To them, hard workers are smart and smart children work hard. As children progress through school, their perceptions of their ability decrease and tend to reflect the teacher's evaluation of their ability. Older children's self-evaluations are more responsive to failure or negative feedback, meaning they are more likely to adjust their expectations downward after failing. Older children also develop a more differentiated view of effort and ability. While effort can increase the chance for success, ability sets the boundaries of what one's effort can achieve. Effort new becomes the "double-edged sword." Trying hard and failing threatens one's self-concept of ability.

If teachers are aware of how developmental changes may influence students' responses to learning situations, they will be able to structure more effective learning activities. They will also be better equipped to interpret and respond to, and work at reversing, maladaptive motivational patterns that have taken root in discouraged students.

As children develop, their perception of ability changes. "Studies find consistently the children's expectations for

success at academic performance remain high, often unrealistically high, until about the second or third grade, and continue to decrease, on the average, throughout the elementary grades," states Deborah Stipek (1984). In young children's minds, there is not a clear delineation between effort and success. Young children tend to equate learning with ability, and since all young children are able to learn, they feel competent. Despite repeated failure at a task, young children tend to maintain a sense of optimism about their ability to succeed at the task in future attempts.

When they begin school, children's sense of ability gradually undergoes transformation. They come to think of ability as "being more able than others" and also subscribe to the notion that "success is more impressive when few succeed" (John Nicholls 1984). Their "optimism and readiness to try despite failure gradually diminishes with age" as their concept of ability changes (Nicholls).

Although students of all ages are concerned with preserving their sense of self-worth in the midst of learning situations, the methods older students employ to "save face" often differ from those embraced by younger students. Because some of the strategies used by older students are less straightforward, in many cases teachers may not recognize a student's attempt to maintain a sense of self-worth for what it is.

At first glance, some behaviors older students resort to when their self-concept of ability is threatened may appear to be propelled by a self-defeating motive. However, it is important for teachers to recognize that students engaging in such behaviors are trying desperately to minimize potential damage to their self-esteem and self-concept of ability.

Although strategies such as "not trying, procrastination, false effort, and even the denial of effort" in fact increase the likelihood of task failure, Ames (1990) contends that students who resort to such strategies are actually attempting to avoid some of the negative "fallout" of anticipated failure. She explains that "what these behaviors accomplish is reducing the negative implications of failure" by divorcing failure from effort. If they feel destined to fail, older students may prefer to fail at a task

because of not putting forth sufficient effort than to exert considerable effort and still fail. From the student's perspective, if he fails without seriously investing himself in a task, he has achieved "failure with honor" because the failure experience cannot be attributed to lack of ability (Ames 1990).

Self-Perceptions of Ability and Competence

Children's views of themselves have powerful implications for their motivation to learn. Whether they see themselves as "origins" or "pawns" (Richard deCharms 1976), as able or helpless, as high or low in ability and competence, influences how they cope with learning situations. Based on messages they receive from outside sources, such as their parents, teachers, and peers, children gradually come to think of themselves as generally capable or incapable, competent or incompetent. This general sense of one's ability, sometimes called *self-concept of ability*, "has significant consequences for student achievement behavior" and for the way students respond to challenges and tasks that are set before them (Ames).

Especially after they enter the often competitive world of school, students begin making judgments about their sense of competence. Internally, they size up learning situations and decide whether it is likely or unlikely that they will be able to succeed at a given task. In addition to the nature of the task itself, students' self-perceptions of ability influence their assessment. Those who possess a strong sense of competence will be more apt to initiate and maintain involvement in activities, and, in doing so, will challenge and enhance their actual ability.

It is important to note that although a child's self-concept of ability may be distorted and based on erroneous input, this does not nullify its influence. For example, one student who had an SAT score in the 98th percentile mistakenly thought this meant he had an IQ of 98. Because he thought his IQ was 98, he anticipated that college-level work would be difficult for him. Sure enough, he did indeed struggle during his first year at college. He was ready to drop out, convinced he could not do this caliber of

work. It was only later, after he received an accurate understanding of his SAT score and learned his IQ was really about 140, that his college performance began to soar. Soon he began doing "A" work. His newfound knowledge helped him to achieve his actual, rather than his perceived, potential (Raffini).

Self-Worth and Effort

People need to experience themselves as valuable, as having significance and worth. We all struggle for both self-approval and the approval of others. Two terms frequently used to characterize how people think and feel about themselves are *self-concept* and *self-esteem*. Self-concept involves the collection of perceptions we possess about such things as our strengths, weaknesses, abilities, personality traits, and performance of roles, while our self-esteem is a product of how much relative importance we attach to each of these specific personal attributes and roles (Raffini).

For example, if a person considers himself sloppy, but being tidy is not a priority, his view of himself as sloppy (part of his self-concept) will not have a detrimental effect on his self-esteem. However, if he considers neatness a virtue yet perceives himself as sloppy, then his self-esteem will be adversely affected.

Until children start school, they do not usually occupy formal roles outside their immediate family. Once they enter the public school system, however, children's overall sense of self-esteem or self-worth becomes closely linked to "their self-concept of ability in school settings" (Ames). Early in their educational experience, children often discover that what seems to matter most to their teachers, parents, and even peers is how their performance and perceived ability stacks up against that of other students, not how much effort they put forth or how much they improve their skills and abilities. Before long, they begin to internalize the sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle message that "good students" are high achievers and "poor students" are low achievers.

Students use a variety of strategies to try to preserve their sense of competency and self-worth in the classroom. Martin Covington (1984) refers to the tendency to establish and maintain a positive self-image as the *self-worth motive*. Because academic ability is often perceived as integral to the preservation of self-worth, students consider it critical to be viewed by others as intellectually capable and competent.

Unfortunately, many schools define success as stellar academic performance. And intelligence itself is often conceptualized quite narrowly, referring only to students' logical-mathematical and linguistic abilities. Although all students covet success and strive to be seen as able, some students' talents may lie in areas that are not formally recognized or accorded equal value with what is traditionally defined as "intelligence." Howard Gardner and Joseph Walters (1993), who believe human beings possess multiple intelligences, assert that "an exclusive focus on linguistic and logical skills in formal schooling can shortchange individuals with skills in other intelligences." They emphasize that "nearly every cultural role requires several intelligences" and that it is therefore important "to consider individuals as a collection of aptitudes rather than as having a singular problem-solving faculty that can be measured directly through pencil-and-paper tests." When schools recognize a wider range of human talents as having equal value with what has traditionally been defined as "intelligence," a greater proportion of students are able to regard themselves as being capable and talented.

Some schools and classrooms are strongly oriented toward competition rather than cooperation, which can make it more difficult for some students to define themselves as competent. When undue emphasis is placed on relative academic ability rather than progress and improvement, less able students are more likely to resort to defensive or maladaptive strategies with the intent of avoiding failure or minimizing the negative meaning of failure. Although misguided, these tactics are intended as solutions to the challenge of keeping their self-image and sense of competence intact.

Superficially, many strategies students engage in to ward off failure or the psychological fallout of failure may

seem inconsistent with the goal of maintaining a positive self-image. However, on closer inspection it is evident that behaviors such as procrastinating, cheating, avoiding tasks, and setting impossibly high goals for oneself are actually employed by students to protect their sense of self-worth. Although ultimately ineffective, these strategies temporarily reduce some of the unwanted ramifications of failure.

For example, when a student procrastinates and only ends up studying briefly right before an exam, others will not tend to cast doubt on his ability if he subsequently fails the test. And if he performs well on the test despite investing only minimal effort to prepare for it, others will probably view him as possessing considerable ability.

Another strategy to avoid failure or minimize its effects is nonparticipation, which can manifest itself in a number of forms: slouching in one's chair to avoid being called on, appearing to be too busy taking notes for the teacher to interrupt, being inattentive, and, in its most extreme form, dropping out. Cheating and setting impossibly high standards for oneself are other ultimately self-defeating strategies employed to preserve a sense of competence and self-worth.

In situations where students are required to participate but expect to fail, they often reduce the level of effort they put forth. Students reason that if they expend minimal effort, their subsequent failure will not be as damaging to their sense of self-worth and competence because the failure probably will not be chalked up to a lack of ability. When students fail, the shame they experience tends to be less if their level of effort was low than if their level of effort was high (Covington). This helps to explain why students may withhold effort in circumstances where it might be assumed they would exert extra effort in the quest to succeed.

Raffini asserts that students do not "choose ignorance over competence when they have an equal choice. Many students reject school because they find the academic practices in their classrooms threatening to their sense of self-worth."

Raffini views student apathy as a "rational, albeit self-defeating defense mechanism" students use to cope with educational practices that limit the number of students who can feel good about their academic performance in school. While a few students are labeled "above average," the majority fall into the "average" or "below-average" range.

When students rely heavily on maladaptive failure-avoiding strategies, the consequence "is a progressive deterioration of the individual's will to learn," states Covington. "Psychologically speaking, this involves a transformation in the person from being success-oriented to becoming failure-prone and then, ultimately, failure-accepting."

Causal Attributions

Causal attributions have to do with students' beliefs about why they perform well or poorly on school-related tasks. The causes to which students attribute their successes and failures are another piece of the complex puzzle of motivation. The four most common things to which students attribute their success are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck (Bernard Weiner 1980, cited in Raffini). Which of these is perceived to be the cause will make a big difference in how students experience their successes.

As Raffini states, "When students attribute their successes to effort, they experience feelings of pride since effort is both internal and individually controllable." Similarly, if ability is viewed as the reason for their success, students will also experience a sense of pride and confidence, because the cause of their success is a stable characteristic that resides within them, something that can be relied on to help them with future challenges. On the other hand, if luck is seen as the reason for success, students will neither take credit for nor derive satisfaction from their success, since luck is something over which they have no control.

Students will also be robbed of a sense of pride and competence in their accomplishment if they achieve success on a task that is characterized as easy by the teacher or the student.

While success-oriented students tend to attribute their achievement to a combination of skill and effort and their failure to a lack of effort, what Covington terms "failure-accepting students" tend to view failure as a sign of lack of ability or skill, a reflection of personal inadequacy. Unfortunately, although these students perceive failure as a sign of inadequacy, they do not conversely conceptualize success as resulting from personal adequacy. Instead, its source is attributed to external sources, "factors such as luck, task ease or the generosity of a teacher" (Covington). Students in this category may actively shy away from success experiences because with success comes an implicit expectation that they should be able to duplicate the experience in the future. Students who view their success as externally based are not certain they can produce more successful experiences, since their success is seen as emanating from a source outside themselves.

Wlodkowski and Jaynes point out that each experience involving students' effort and ability is a building block that lays the foundation for their future learning experiences:

> Gaining confidence as a learner is a spiral in which one's effort and ability result in achievement and that achievement serves as the mental foundation for the next extension of effort and ability in learning. We do, and we believe we can do more. By not trying their best in learning, students deny themselves and their society the endowment of their gifts.

Meaning of the Task

Meaning and motivation are closely connected. As we all can attest from firsthand experience, "whether or not persons will invest themselves in a particular activity depends on what the activity means to them" (Martin Maehr 1984). If an individual considers an activity to be meaningful, it is more probable she will invest herself in it. People possess a "package of meanings" based on past experiences that they carry with them to each new situation (Maehr). How we view ourselves, in combination with our beliefs, values, and so forth, all play a role in determining how we respond to new situations.

In addition to our personal history of experiences, aspects of situations and tasks themselves also have an impact on the meaning individuals attach to them. As Maehr points out, students make different judgments about the worth of specific tasks and "place different values on school tasks quite apart from their ability to perform." Whether competition is built into a performance situation, for example, will have an effect on how students respond to it. The element of competition does not seem to significantly impair the performance of students who view themselves as successful and competent, for competition may be seen as another opportunity to affirm their ability. On the other hand, students who do not consider themselves successful will tend to perform less well on the same task if it is organized in a competitive manner than if it is organized in a noncompetitive manner.

Autonomy

Like all human beings, students want to have some control over what activities they pursue and when and how they choose to engage in them. In environments where our tasks and activities are rigidly prescribed by others, our levels of responsibility and commitment often wane. As Raffini notes, this applies to teachers as well as students: "As teachers lose autonomy, they often feel less and less responsibility about meeting curricular requirements, they become cynical about teaching, they blame others for their cynical attitude, and they may even try to undermine the system if given an opportunity."

Although students may display their displeasure somewhat differently than teachers, a parallel pattern often emerges when they are denied a sense of self-determination. On the other hand, if students are given small choices on a regular basis, from such things as "whether to work on math before starting spelling, to where to place one's name on assignments," they will tend to respond positively to being able to make choices and ultimately become skilled at being self-governing.

In addition to small choices, it is important for teachers to give students significant and meaningful choices. By teaching students goal-setting skills and allowing them to

map out some short-term learning goals for themselves, teachers can do much to foster students' sense of autonomy and self-determination (Raffini).

Relatedness and Belonging

Although the primary mission of schooling is frequently identified as that of acquiring academic skills and knowledge, there is no getting around the fact that school is a social as well as an intellectual experience. If students feel socially isolated or rejected by their peers, they will not enjoy their school experience. Attending school will be drudgery, no matter what lengths teachers go to make the material interesting and stimulating. And when students feel out of place in the classroom, their motivation to learn will suffer.

Whether students find a place in the group and feel "at home" in the classroom is influenced by classroom climate. "The classroom, under the leadership of the teacher, can either provide support and approval for all of its members or it can become an arena for constant competitiveness that builds a crystallized dichotomy of acceptance and rejection," states Raffini. By emphasizing cooperation rather than competition and assisting students who are less socially skilled, teachers can promote students' motivation to learn.

Conclusion

Even this cursory review of some factors that affect student motivation reveals it to be a complex subject with its own specialized vocabulary. As a means of summarizing some of the key concepts about motivation discussed in this chapter, table 1 offers brief explanations of several prominent terms.

While it is important for educators to appreciate the range of factors that can influence students' motivational orientations, awareness of theory is not sufficient to create change in the classroom. Theory needs to be translated into practice. However, instead of immediately moving on to classroom and school practices that may promote motiva-

TABLE 1

Terms Related to Motivation

Terms	*Meaning*
Intrinsic orientation	Learning is its own reward. It is undertaken for the knowledge, enjoyment, and sense of accomplishment it provides.
Extrinsic orientation	Learning is the means to obtain some other reward external to itself, such as a grade, a sticker, or a place on the honor roll.
Mastery goals	Students pursue learning in an attempt to develop new skills or gain mastery of the subject matter. Motivation to succeed springs from within, and students believe that effort leads to mastery.
Performance goals	Students pursue learning to bolster their self-worth and to be seen by themselves and others as competent.
Motivation to learn	Students find value in education and are willing to put forth effort to learn, even when it is not fun or pleasurable to do so.
Causal attributions	Most students attribute their success to one of four things: ability, effort, task difficulty, or luck. Students experience their successes differently depending on what they believe caused their success.

tion, the following chapter focuses on two central factors that profoundly affect students' attitudes toward school and desire to invest themselves in learning—caring and high expectations.