Motivating Struggling Learners: Three Keys to Success

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Introduction

In a recent report, Engaging Students for Success: Findings from a National Survey, the authors asked teachers for their perspective on a variety of topics. Several of their findings (shown in the graphs below) are pertinent.

Percentage of Teachers Who Believe Motivation Matters

13 **87**
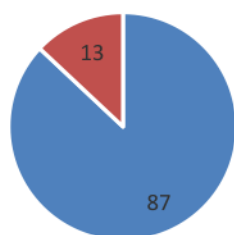
- ■ Teachers who believe motivation is very important
- ■ Teachers who say it's not important or don't know

Percentage of Teachers Who Feel Confident They Can Motivate Students

32 **68**
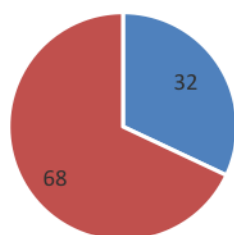
- ■ I am good at motivating students
- ■ I am not good at motivating students or am unsure if I am

Clearly, motivating struggling learners is a critical skill teacher's need. But, as the results from the report show, it's also an area educators struggle with. What can teachers do? Here are three keys to motivating struggling learners: increasing expectations, creating highly engaging lessons, and providing appropriate support and scaffolding.

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Key One: Increasing Expectations

The first key to motivating struggling learners it to hold high expectations for each student. Do you have high expectations? Of course. I've never met a teacher who said, "I have low expectations for my students." The challenge is that we sometimes have hidden low expectations of certain students. For example, one year, several teachers "warned" me about Daniel, a new student in my class. During class, he certainly lived up to (really down to) the teachers' comments. Despite my efforts, my expectations for him became lower. We have to be on guard to ensure that we keep high expectations in place for every single student. But we also have to put those expectations into action.

Many researchers have detailed specific actions we take that are reflective of low expectations. I've used Robert Marzano's (2010) categories of our affective tone and our academic content interactions to provide a summary.

Actions that Reflect Low Expectations

Affective Tone	Academic Content Interactions
Less eye contact	Call on less often
Smile less	Provide less wait time
Less physical contact	Ask less challenging questions
More distance from student's seat	Ask less specific questions
Engage in less playful or light dialogue	Delve into answers less deeply
Use of comfort talk ("That's ok, you can be good at other things.")	Reward them for less rigorous responses
Display angry disposition	Provide answers for students
	Use simpler modes of presentation and evaluation
	Do not insist that homework be turned in on times
	Use comments such as, "Wow, I'm surprised you answered correctly."
	Use less praise.

The opposite is also true. When we have high expectations, we act in certain, converse ways. Which do you use with your struggling students?

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Actions that Reflect High Expectations

Affective Tone	Academic Content Interactions
More eye contact	Call on more often
Smile more	Provide more wait time
More physical contact	Ask more challenging questions
Less distance from student's seat	Ask more specific questions
Engage in more playful or light dialogue	Delve into answers more deeply
Little use of comfort talk ("That's ok, you can be good at other things")	Reward them for more rigorous responses
	Use more complex modes of presentation and evaluation
	Insist that homework be turned in on times
	Use more praise.

In addition to our high expectations, we need to teach students to have personal high expectations. Too often, students don't believe they can learn and grow. That's the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. As Carol Dweck explains, a fixed mindset assumes that our character, intelligence, and creative ability are static and cannot be changed. A growth mindset, on the other hand, adopts the perspective that our intelligence, creativity, and character can change and grow over time.

I'm sure you have seen this with one of your students. Clarissa believes she "isn't good at math," so she doesn't even try. She has a fixed mindset, unwilling to put forth time and effort to improve. On the other hand, Hunter knows he's not the "best math student," but he believes if he keeps working at it, he'll get better. And he does. That's growth mindset. How do you encourage students to develop their own growth mindsets?

We start the process by having this mindset ourselves, then constantly and consistently reinforcing it with students. We do this by providing the right support for them to learn, encouraging them along the path, and celebrating their resilience and successes. As a part of this, we should teach them to use positive language with themselves, such as "This is challenging for me but with some help, I believe I can learn the water cycle."

Teachers can also ensure that all students are engaged in the learning process. A specific questioning technique that is particularly effective for struggling learners is the use of exclusive and inclusive questions. In Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind, Erik Jensen (2013) describes the difference between exclusive and inclusive questions. Particularly when we are activating prior knowledge, we ask questions to elicit students' experiences. However, at times, our questions may exclude struggling students, since they may not have a wide base of experiences.

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Instead, use questions that are more inclusive. Take a look at the samples below.

Exclusive vs. Inclusive Questions

Exclusive	Inclusive
Who has ever traveled out of our city?	Who would like to travel somewhere different?
Who read a book outside of school lately?	I just read a book about xxx. Have you ever heard, read, or seen a movie about that?
Who completed their homework last night?	How many of you remember that we had homework last night? Can anyone tell me what it was about?
Raise your hand if you have been to an art museum?	Raise your hand if you've ever seen a picture you liked?

Adapted from Jensen, *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind*

Using inclusive questions will help you engage your struggling students at a higher level, as well as helping them see they can contribute to the discussion. We can also emphasize mastery and learning rather than grades. Particularly with older students, there is such a focus on "getting an A," that the joy of learning is lost. Or, students are so scared they won't make a good grade, they give up before they start.

Key Two: Creating High Levels of Engagement

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Student engagement is interrelated with student motivation. I'm not sure a student can be engaged without being motivated, and I've never seen a motivated student who was disengaged. But what exactly is engagement? Is it simply a student completing a task?

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (2004) describes the concept of flow, which is one way to look at engagement. When you are in a state of flow, you are totally immersed in the task at hand. You lose track of time, and experience strong feelings of satisfaction. Surely you've seen this with a student. They are so totally involved in what they are doing that you must interrupt them to move on.

How, then, do you create instruction that engages students fully in instruction? One way is to create uncertainty. When students know all the answers, they are in a comfort zone and don't need to fully engage in the task. Therefore, while providing support for struggling students, we also want to give them an activity that requires them to think through alternatives.

Jessica Guidry, one of my former undergraduate students, designed an ecology unit for her science classroom that applies this principle. Her students were introduced to the unit with the following task:

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You are an ecologist from Rock Hill, South Carolina. Recently, members of the United Nations have come together and decided that they must eliminate one biome to make room for the world's growing human population. You and a group of your peers have decided to take a stand. You will each choose one biome to present to the United Nations in New York City this April. It is very important that you persuade the members of the UN to keep your chosen biome alive! The UN has asked that you write a persuasive essay to present to the audience. They also asked that you bring visuals and information about your references. You must be sure that you include how your biome benefits the world population. You need to include information about the habitats, populations, animals, plants, and food chains of your biome.

Throughout the unit, she integrated a variety of other open-ended projects, such as creating a flip book on their biome, participating in a debate, and creating food chains/webs in addition to the regular mix of lecture, guided discussion, and laboratory activities. However, since she began with the open-ended, authentic situation, her students were more engaged throughout the lessons. They were continually applying the lessons to their problem: convincing the UN to save their biome.

For primary students, you might adapt a common classroom activity. When I was teaching first grade, it was typical for me to show a picture to prompt interest in the lesson. To add some uncertainty, simply cut your picture apart into puzzle pieces, and only show one or two pieces. Then ask students to figure out what the picture is by using the parts they can see. They become immediate problem-solvers.

# Key Three: Providing Appropriate Scaffolding and Support

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The final key to motivating struggling students to succeed is to provide appropriate support for learning. But that scaffolding should help students become independent, so they can learn on their own.

When I was a young girl, I wanted to ride a bike. However, I had to start with a tricycle. I needed to be close to the ground, and I needed the support of extra wheels. However, after a couple of years, I was ready to ride a children's bicycle. Of course, it had training wheels, because I still needed the balance of two additional wheels at the back. Next, I remember the day my father took off the training wheels so I could ride without them. He still held on to the back of the seat, to make sure I learned how to keep my balance without the extra wheels. Finally, he let go of the seat and let me ride by myself, one of the proudest days of my young life.

That's what we want scaffolding to be for our students. We want to provide more support as they begin to learn something then gradually lessen our backing so they become independent. It's important to realize that support should be used at an appropriate level through the learning process. At the beginning of new learning, more support is needed. However, as the learning continues, we want students to become more independent in their learning. This is called gradual release.

One way to think about scaffolding is with a diamond, or rhombus. As you can see from the figure below, it starts with me (meaning the teacher). You begin by modeling a lesson. Next, we go to us. There are two parts of this. First is the teacher and the students (us) following guided practice. The second part of guided practice is us, meaning students working with partners or in small groups. Finally, the student (you) does the work independently.

Me, Us, You Diamond

Me

Us

whole group

Us

small group

You
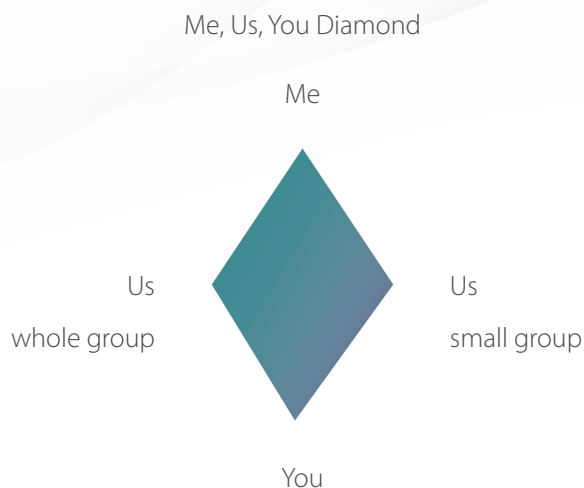
How do you decide when to move a student through the various stages of gradual release? I wish I could give you a set formula, but there isn't one. Sometimes students need to see you model something once; other students may need multiple explanations and models. The same is true for the guided practice. Be sure you are observing their work and using formative assessment strategies to help you know when they are ready to work on their own.

As you build support and scaffolding activities for your students, consider the following guidelines. Support must be planned in advance, and then adjusted throughout lessons. Using the reminders below will help you craft the most effective scaffolding for your students.

Effective SUPPORT
Structured
Understanding is the Result
Provides for Differentiation
Promotes Connections
Optimizes Strategic Learning
Repetitionless
Tied to Memory

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Conclusion

A variety of factors impact student motivation, ranging from parental involvement, to the classroom environment. As teachers, we cannot control some of those issues. However, if we focus on those aspects we can impact, such as increasing our expectations, providing high levels of engagement, and integrating appropriate support and scaffolding, we can increase students' motivation.

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