Creating a Classroom Environment that Fosters

Positive Motivation in the Nigerian Context

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Abstract

Self-determination theory proposes that humans have an inherent tendency to use and develop their abilities, explore their environment, and learn. In other words, humans are naturally intrinsically motivated. However, if environment does not support intrinsic motivation, then rewards and punishment are necessary to control behavior in education. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to describe how the classroom environment can be structured to support intrinsic motivation. First, the four major types of motivation – external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation – were described. Next, the three psychological needs of success, relationships, and choice were explained. Finally, seven principles for fostering positive motivation in the classroom were discussed. In conclusion, the classroom environment that the educator provides has a significant impact on students' motivation so educators need to create a learning environment that fosters the three psychological needs of success, relationships, and choice. When educators create a positive learning environment, then students will be more likely to have positive motivation which leads to more positive learning outcomes.

Introduction

Motivation plays an important role in academic success. Motivation influences how much and how well students learn (Vosniadou, 2001). Therefore, educators need to be aware of the principles of motivation so they can develop a classroom environment that helps their students have positive motivation to learn, and as a result, succeed in education.

Before examining the principles of motivation, though, a basic philosophical question must be considered. Are human beings created in such a way that they are naturally curious and eager to learn? The answer to this question has a profound impact on how educators should motivate students.

If human beings are not created to be naturally curious and eager to learn, then the only way to motivate students in school is to provide rewards for positive behavior and academic success on the one hand, and punishment for poor behaviors and academic failure on the other hand. This controlling style of motivation disregards students' inner motivational resources such as curiosity, activity, and enthusiasm. Instead, teachers try to control students' behavior by offering rewards and punishment (Reeve & Jang, 2006). If an educator almost always uses rewards and punishment to motivate students or thinks that the only way to get students of any age to perform well in school is through rewards and punishment, then they

need to reconsider the question posed above. Rewards and punishments as the primary source of motivation assumes that students are not or cannot be naturally curious and eager to learn.

However, if human beings are created so they are naturally curious and eager to learn, then educators can begin thinking about how to create a learning environment that takes advantage of this natural desire to learn. Instead of using rewards and punishment to motivate students, the very act of learning and improving one's understanding can be a reward in and of itself. Self determination theory, the motivational theory that forms the theoretical framework of this paper, assumes that humans have an inherent tendency to use and develop their abilities, explore their environment, and learn. Furthermore, humans are naturally curious and desire challenges to test their abilities (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).

Self determination theory proposes that motivation to be active and engaged in an activity depends largely on the social conditions of the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). In other words, the classroom environment determines whether students are engaged and actively participate in learning on the one hand, or uninterested and lazy in their learning on the other hand. Self determination theory assumes that students are naturally interested in learning. Therefore, the theory examines the features of the classroom environment that can draw out and sustain students' interest in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) without using rewards and punishment.

The purpose of this paper is to apply the principles of self-determination theory to creating a classroom environment that fosters positive motivation among Nigerian students.

Types of Motivation

The most positive type of motivation is intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity for inherent satisfaction in the activity itself (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Sometimes people mistake intrinsic motivation as being motivation that comes from inside a person, but this is not accurate. Intrinsic motivation is when the motivation for doing

an activity is inside the activity, not the person; the reward for doing the activity is simply doing the activity itself. For example, a student is intrinsically motivated in mathematics class if she enjoys doing mathematics.

Intrinsic motivation has many positive learning outcomes. Empirical research has demonstrated that students who are intrinsically motivated to learn have higher academic performance and complete more years of education than students who are not intrinsically motivated (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Furthermore, intrinsically motivated students are more creative and have higher quality learning, meaning that they understand what they learn and can apply their learning to situations beyond an examination (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Intrinsically motivated learners have more positive emotions in school and also are more engaged in the learning process, meaning that they are active in the classroom (Deci et al., 1991).

Because of individual differences in students' interest, it is rarely possible for every student in a class to be intrinsically motivated. When activities cannot be intrinsically motivating for certain students, then educators must consider extrinsic motivation to get them motivated and therefore achieve academic success (Ryan & Deci, 2000b).

The opposite of intrinsic motivation is extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is when an activity is done for a reason separate from the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Many people think extrinsic rewards and punishment are the only type of extrinsic motivation, but this is not true. A student who studies hard because his father gives him money for good grades is extrinsically motivated, as is the student who studies hard because she values getting a good education. Both of these students are motivated to study hard for a reason outside of learning itself – money and the value of getting a good education – so they are extrinsically motivated. However, it is clear that these two students have two different external sources for their motivation. There are four separate types of extrinsic motivation

(Ryan & Deci, 2000a) though this paper will only describe three. Thus, educators can use extrinsic motivation besides rewards and punishments to motivate students on academic tasks that they find uninteresting.

The first type of extrinsic motivation is external regulation. This is the most obvious type of extrinsic motivation whereby a behavior is done to get an external reward or to avoid an external punishment (Reeve, 2001). If a student goes to school to get a reward completely external to school or learning itself, then they have external regulation. This is the most controlling type of motivation and results in the poorest learning outcomes. There are many negative side-effects to external regulation. Once the reward or punishment stops, then the behavior also stops. Once the father stops paying the son for good grades, the son will stop studying. Therefore, rewards are simply a short-term solution to controlling behavior. Another disadvantage of external regulation is that empirical research has provided evidence that external rewards decrease intrinsic motivation (e.g., Deci, 1971; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). If a student originally enjoys learn a specific subject, giving them a reward for learning that subject will refocus their attention on the reward, and the pleasure of learning will disappear. Giving rewards can become expensive and exhausting to an educator. Finally, students who are externally regulated show less interest in school, value school less, put forth less effort in studying, and blamed others such as the teacher for their poor performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Therefore, external regulation through rewards and punishments should be avoided.

The second type of extrinsic motivation is introjected regulation, when a behavior is done to get approval from others or themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Examples of introjected regulation include going to school to make one's parents proud, or look smart to others. Introjected motivation is slightly better than extrinsic motivation, but still leads to negative learning outcomes such as poor performance and anxiety. Students with introjected

motivation put forth more effort than those with external regulation. However, introjected motivation tends to cause students to have more anxiety in school and poorer studying skills (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

The most positive type of extrinsic motivation is integrated regulation. This is when a behavior is done because it matches a person's values and beliefs, the value of doing a behavior is integrated into one's beliefs (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Examples of integrated regulation include going to school because she values being educated or studying English grammar because she values sophisticated communication. A student who studies hard because they value excellence also has integrated regulation. These students are not motivated because they enjoy learning, but for reasons external to learning. However, these reasons fit closely with their personal values. These students understand the reasons for going to school and studying and integrate those values into their own values and beliefs. Integrated regulation shares many positive outcomes with intrinsic motivation such as higher academic performance, better school engagement, and higher quality learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). However, the behavior is still extrinsically motivated because the behavior, such as studying, is done for its value and not the behavior itself.

Conditions to Foster Positive Motivation

When examining the outcomes of the different types of motivation, it is clear that an educator's goal should be to foster intrinsic motivation where students engage in learning for simple enjoyment in learning or identified regulation where students value the act of learning. Next, educators need to consider how they can create a classroom environment that fosters these two positive types of motivation. Recall that self determination theory assumes human beings naturally desire to use and develop their abilities, including their ability to learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). In other words, learners have a predisposition to be intrinsically motivated. However, it is the educational environment that determines whether learners will be

intrinsically motivated or whether rewards and punishments will be necessary to control students' behavior.

When describing an environment that fosters positive motivation, self determination theory uses the analogy of physical health (Reeve, 2001). In their natural state, human beings are physically healthy. However, there are certain physical needs that must be met for people to be physically healthy: food, water, air, and shelter. If any one of these physical needs are not met, then a person's physical health will decline. Without food, a person becomes malnourished and is more susceptible to disease. Without water, a person becomes dehydrated and tired. Without shelter, a person may become sick from the physical elements. However, when all physical needs are met, then individuals tend to be physically healthy.

Likewise, self determination theory argues that in their natural state, human beings are psychologically healthy, meaning that they are curious, use and develop their abilities, explore their environment, and are eager to learn. However, there are certain psychological needs that must be met for people to be psychologically healthy (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). The three psychological needs are success, relationships, and choice. If any one of these three psychological needs are not met, then a person's psychological health will suffer: their motivation will decrease, they will not be engaged in learning, they will be lazy and careless. Therefore, the educator's role is to create a classroom environment that fosters these three needs to ensure that their students are positively motivated.

The first psychological need is relationships. All human beings have the innate need to develop close, personal relationships with other people (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, students need to develop warm attachments to both their teachers and other students in school. For students to feel that they have a warm relationship with the teacher, they need to believe two things: that the teacher cares about his welfare and the that the teacher likes him (Reeve, 2001). Students are more willing to learn when they know that their

teacher cares for them (Yount, 1996). Furthermore, students are more willing to obey

teachers who show that they care for students.

The second psychological need is success. Learners must feel that they are successful

in education for them to be positively motivated (Reeve, 2001). Many students who go to

school every day and work hard, but continue to fail regardless of how hard they try

(Woolfolk, 2007). With past experiences of repeated failure, students have no reason to

continue putting forth effort because they do not believe that they can succeed. If students are

in a classroom environment where they feel that they will fail regardless of how hard they try,

students will have poor motivation.

To be positively motivated, students must believe that they are successful in learning.

The positive feeling of success is a powerful motivator to continue to engage in that activity.

Students who believe that they can succeed in school work harder, persist when challenged,

use better learning strategies, and perform better in school (Eggen & Kauchak, 2004).

Therefore, educators need to help their students have successful experiences in school so they

will continue to work hard and enjoy school. Educators can foster this need of success by

providing information about what a student is doing well and how they can improve on their

performance, called feedback. Furthermore, educators also need to provide optimal

challenges: assignments and exams that challenge students' abilities so they learn more, but

where students also have a reasonable chance of being successful.

The final psychological need is choice. People like to engage in activities that match

their interests and beliefs. On the other hand, people resent activities that they are forced to

do (Reeve, 2001). This final need for choice means that students will be more engaged in

school when they are interested in school and believe in the value of getting an education. In

other words, students' actions come from their own beliefs and values and are not forced on

them by others (Reeve & Jang, 2006). When students feel forced to attend school and obey

rules and regulations that they believe are unrealistic or unfair, then their motivation in school is hampered. On the other hand, if classes are interesting and relevant to students, then they will be positively motivated.

Researchers have spent considerable effort identifying educational environments that support students' needs, interests, preferences, and values. This type of classroom environment is called an autonomy supportive environment (Reeve & Jang, 2006). (Another term for the need for choice is autonomy.) Autonomy supportive teachers provide opportunities for students to see the similarity between school and their own interests, preferences, goals, and values. For example, teachers can foster the need for choice by allowing students to make choices in class policies and assignments. Teachers can also provide a rationale for uninteresting tasks so students see how it is relevant to them. Students who have autonomy-supportive teachers are more engaged in their classrooms, have higher intrinsic motivation, better academic achievement, are more creative, and have a deeper understanding of what they are learning (Reeve & Jang, 2006). More information about how to create an autonomy supportive classroom will be described in the next section.

Recommendations for Improving Motivation

To summarize, intrinsic motivation and integrated regulation leads to the best learning outcomes. To foster these types of positive motivation, teachers must create a classroom environment that meets all three psychological needs: success, relationships, and choice. If any of these three needs are not met in a classroom, then students' motivation will suffer. The rest of this paper will provide recommendations on how educators can meet students' three psychological needs and thereby foster positive motivation.

Motivation Principle #1. Make lessons interesting and relevant to students. A simple truth is that students cannot be interested in learning unless learning is interesting. Many classes are so boring that even students who might be intrinsically motivated in the subject

will not be simply because the classes are dull. Therefore, the first principle of fostering positive motivation is that class activities must be interesting for learners. All subjects study some aspect of the world that God has created, and that world is very interesting. Therefore, almost everything that is taught in school should have some element of interest to the students. It is the teacher's responsibility to find a way to present the class content in a manner that is of interest to the students.

There are many strategies that a teacher can use to make a lesson interesting. The first is by relating what is taught to students' lives. Students find themselves very interesting, so applying class content to students' lives will naturally appeal to them. One way that this can be done is through classroom discussions. Ask the students for their experiences that might be relevant, whether they agree with principles that have been taught, and their own examples that might support a point. Discussions also make a class interesting to students because discussions require students to think and actively participate in class. A strategy for using discussions in large classes is to break students into small groups of about five to have small group discussions before the large class discussion. This helps give all students in a large class the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences. Classes can also be interesting when a teacher tells stories to illustrate main points in a lesson. Likewise, teachers can also gives examples from their own experiences to illustrate what is being taught.

Motivation Principle #2: Provide feedback to meet the need for success. Feedback is information about how well a person has performed and it helps meet the need for success. Providing feedback is the most important way that teachers can help students feel successful in education. There are multiple types of feedback. First, feedback can be praise that tells students how they have been successful (Reeve, 2001). Teachers should always be looking for opportunities to tell the students that they are performing well and trying hard. It is important to support this praise with specific examples of their success. "Well done! You

made an excellent point in this paper about why human rights are important." Not only does the student know that she is doing well, but she also knows exactly what she did well to earn the positive feedback.

Feedback is not just limited to giving praise, though. Students also need feedback about whether they were successful and or unsuccessful on every task (Reeve, 2001). When students complete continuous assessment, tests, and examinations, they need to know which answers were correct, which answers were incorrect, and why. Even feedback about failures can meet the need for success if the feedback also tells the student how they can improve in the future. Too often, educators are very ready to tell students that they failed, but do not provide any information on what the student can do to improve. All negative feedback should be followed by support to help the student succeed next time. If this is the case, a student may realize that they failed this time, but they have specific information about how they can improve in the future and that will help them feel successful.

Indeed, students oftentimes learn more from their mistakes than they learn from their successes. To learn from mistakes, though, two things that need to happen. First, the teacher needs to point out that the student made a mistake. Second, the teacher needs describe how the student can correct their mistake. Since the student made the error, they clearly do not understand how to do it correctly. Therefore, the teacher needs provide instruction on how the error can be corrected. A word of caution about providing feedback about mistakes is in order, though. Teachers need to avoid being harsh when providing feedback about students' mistakes. Humiliating students for their mistakes damages the need for success so students become less motivated to learn in school (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). Instead, teachers should gently point out students' errors and encourage them to try again.

Motivation Principle #3: Provide optimal challenges to meet the need for success. An optimal challenge is when an activity's level of challenge is matched to the students' ability

10

to successfully perform the task (Mandigo & Holt, 2002). In other words, students should have about a 50% chance of succeeding on the classroom activity and a 50% chance of failure. Optimal challenges maximize students' learning and motivation (Clifford, 1990). A student cannot possibly succeed on a task that is too difficult for them, or on a task for which they do not have the necessary background knowledge. On the other hand, students get bored with tasks that are too easy. Teachers need to provide optimal challenges by matching the level of instruction with students' abilities and prior knowledge (Brophy & Good, 1984).

When students succeed on easy tasks, their need for success is not met. "That was so easy, anybody could have done it." However, when students are given tasks that are too difficult, then they will most likely fail and eventually give up like the dogs who gave up in escaping from the electric shock in the experiment previously described. Therefore, teachers should carefully consider the assignments, tests, and examinations that they give to students. Teachers should ensure that students have the background knowledge, resources, and support necessary to succeed on challenging assignments.

Motivation Principle #4: Show that you care for students to meet the need for relationships. There are many ways that teachers can show that they care for their students. One way that educators can demonstrate their care is by getting to know their students personally (Yount, 1996). Getting to know each student will also help the teacher plan lessons because they can make the instruction relevant to students' lives and experiences. Praise for successes and encouragement when students are struggling also helps foster the need for relationships. Educators show that they care for their students by being available to assist students with their class work. Too often, educators feel like their job is finished as soon as they finish lecture. Educators should be available for students outside of class so students feel that they can approach their instructor with questions and concerns about lecture content, assignments, or other issues that students deal with. Being available to students

simply requires that the educator clearly post and keep regular office hours. Educators should also show their students that they care by demonstrating fairness to all students in grading and class policies.

Motivation Principle #5: Take students' perspective to meet students' need for choice. It is important for educators to take students' perspective when planning classes, assignments, and other learning activities (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Try to plan class activities that closely relate to learners' interests, needs, goals, and values. This can be done by looking at class activities from the students' viewpoint: if I were the student what could the teacher do to help me better learn this information, or be more engaged in the learning process? What type of activities would students find interesting and engaging? How might the course content be related to the students' lives and experiences?

Another element of this point is that educators need to provide structure for students, meaning that they need to provide clear and detailed expectations and instructions for learning activities (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Sometimes, educators give directions for assignments and activities that are too vague and incomplete. When this happens, students are confused about how to proceed, and often end up failing. Therefore, when creating learning activities, the educator should consider what types of directions and support the students will need in order to help them succeed.

In addition to taking students' perspective when planning for class, it is also important to take students' perspective as they are doing their class work. If students are struggling to learn a concept or complete an assignment, the educator has the responsibility to provide the support they need to be able to succeed. Educators typically blame students for failing, but there are oftentimes good reasons for students' failure: perhaps they didn't have the background knowledge necessary to complete the task, or they did not have enough resources

available, or the assignment was too vague or too difficult. By trying to take the students'

perspective, educators can provide the support that students need to succeed.

Motivational Principle #6: Provide rationales for lessons and assignments to meet

students' need for choice. Oftentimes, students do not understand how course content or

assignments are important and relevant to them, so they require external rewards and

punishment to be engaged in the learning process. To fix the problem, educators can simply

provide a rationale that explains why a learning activity is important and relevant. This is

particularly important for lessons and assignments that are uninteresting. For example,

students need to learn the rules of English grammar to communicate effectively, but few

students find grammar interesting and enjoyable. If this is the case, then the teacher needs to

provide a rationale by explaining why learning the lesson will benefit the student (Reeve,

2001). Indeed, the lesson's rationale is a valuable component to every lesson. When students

understand why they are studying a topic and how the information will be useful to them,

they will be more motivated to engage in a lesson because it fits their personal values.

Motivational Principle #7: Avoid using external rewards. It has previously been

mentioned that external rewards decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971; Deci et al., 1999).

Empirical research has established that when external rewards are material and expected, then

it hurts intrinsic motivation. For example, if a parent says, "If you earn a B average this term,

we will celebrate with a chicken dinner." The student will stop studying because it is

enjoyable, but refocus their energies on earning the chicken dinner.

However, there are two places where rewards may not hurt intrinsic motivation. First,

rewards in the form of praise are almost always beneficial. When students are praised for

their successes, then it meets their need for success so that helps their intrinsic motivation.

Second, unexpected rewards will not necessarily hurt intrinsic motivation. For example, if a

student comes home with a B average and the parent says, "Congratulations! I am so proud of

you! Let us celebrate your success with a chicken dinner!" In this case, the student did not know that they would get rewarded for the good grade, so it does not necessarily hurt their motivation. However, if educators and parents provide unexpected rewards too often, then students will come to expect the "surprise" and it will hurt their intrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, self-determination theory proposes that students' motivation depends largely on the classroom environment. If the classroom environment meets students' three psychological needs of relationships, success, and choice, then they will be positively motivated. On the other hand, if students' three psychological needs are not met, then external rewards and punishments will be necessary to control students' behavior.

Self-determination theory can be applied to students in all levels of education, from nursery school through university. Many Nigerian educators believe that external rewards and punishments are necessary for nursery school pupils to learn. However, self-determination theory proposes that nursery school pupils are naturally curious and eager to learn. If nursery school children are not positively motivated to learn, then it is because the classroom environment does not match their developmental needs. For example, young children need to be active and explore their environment. If a nursery school classroom forces pupils to sit in chairs and memorize for an extended period of time, then pupils will misbehave because of the abundance of energy that is natural at their developmental level. On the other hand, if a nursery school classroom is structured in such a fashion that nursery pupils can be active in the learning process, particularly through play, then nursery pupils will need no external rewards to learn.

Furthermore, self-determination theory also proposes that there are other types of extrinsic motivation in addition to external rewards and punishment. It is true that not all subjects can be intrinsically motivating for all students. However, instead of controlling

students' behavior using rewards and punishment for uninteresting tasks, educators can

instead use identified regulation by explaining the rationale and relevance of a topic for their

students. Unlike external regulation that is damaging for long-term learning outcomes,

identified regulation has positive benefits in the learning process.

The classroom environment that the educator provides has a significant impact on

students' motivation. Educators should endeavor to foster intrinsic motivation in their

students by making learning activities interesting. Educators also need to create a learning

environment that fosters the three psychological needs of success, relationships, and choice.

When educators create a positive learning environment, then students will be more likely to

have positive motivation which leads to more positive learning outcomes.

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