

Motivation for struggling students



School resources

Motivation is impacted not only by classroom experience, but also by the mindset with which students interpret their classroom experience and the narratives they tell about their school experiences. Motivation is also affected by students' attitudes, attributions and beliefs about school and about learning.

Motivation can be really challenged when difficulties arise in learning something new. Some students regularly experience difficulties in learning. However, it is how students interpret those setbacks or difficulties that is key to the impact on motivation and engagement, rather than the presence of difficulties or setbacks. For example, students might attribute setbacks or failure to their ability or their effort, their strategies, to the difficulty or simplicity of the task, or simply to luck! If a student believes that their failure was due to a lack of effort or to using the wrong strategies, then they are likely to remain motivated and confident that they can achieve the task by making adjustments in these areas. These are modifiable characteristics that are within the student's control. However, if a student believes that their failure was due to a lack of ability, which cannot be changed, then they experience a profound sense of hopelessness and reduced motivation. They develop a narrative of doubt regarding their ability to succeed and whether they belong in the class environment, which interferes with their capacity to learn.

Motivation is strongest when students believe they can recover from error, that they have competence or can develop it. This is a growth mindset, in which students believe their intelligence can grow or develop in order to meet challenges. When poor performance is ascribed to a lack of effort or an inappropriate strategy, and when students feel a sense of personal efficacy aligned with meaningful goals, motivation increases, as students want to increase effort and change strategies.

Struggling students may need help to restructure the way they think about success and failure and what they attribute these outcomes to.

What to do when students are 'failing'

- Ensure students base their criteria for success or failure on their own prior performance rather than how their peers performed. Refer to curriculum levels and learning goals rather than the work of other students.
- Use errors to teach students to handle failure by adjusting strategies or applying stronger effort. When a student says 'But I tried so hard', ask them what they did while working hard, and talk to them about productive and non-productive effort.
- Attribute failure to a lack of, or incomplete, strategies. Suggest a strategy that will accomplish the task, and attribute success to the strategy.
- Remind students that new learning is frequently confusing at first. Set incremental goals together and provide students with scripts for self-instruction. Carefully structure the acquisition of new content or skill through instruction and feedback.
- Develop student responsibility by asking students what contributed to the failure and what they might have done differently, using the following questions:

The reasons I received this grade/score include:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How I prepared for this work:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What I plan to do differently next time:

References

Silverman, A., & Cohen, G. (2014). Fostering positive narratives: Social-psychological interventions to maximise motivation in the classroom and beyond. *Motivational Interventions*, 18, 177-211. doi: 10.1108/S0749-742320140000018005

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