Purposeful Motivation

Meet Jimmy, a sixth-grade student who just moved into the area. He had been retained and rarely volunteered to participate in class. His negative attitude toward learning and just being in school permeated his very being. And I was his teacher. My attempts to coax him to learn were met with groans and glares. But I never wavered in my attempts to engage him, despite his determination to not be a part of the class.

Making Headway
One day, I invited Jimmy to have lunch with me in the classroom. We chatted about trivial things. This single event—something as simple as having lunch with a teacher—cracked this student’s hard, protective shell. Jimmy was beginning to see me as a real person, and asked if we could continue our lunches. Throughout the school year we had lunch together at least once a week.

We talked about our families and what we did outside of school. Little by little, Jimmy became interested in what we were learning in class. He also began to foster a friendship with Josh, one of the smartest and most athletic students in the school.

During one of our lunches, I explained to Jimmy that if he made a credible effort to learn, he could be successful like Josh. I began to see a change in Jimmy. He started to participate in class, contribute to discussions, and form friendships with his other classmates. It appeared that all my coaxing was beginning to pay off. By the end of the school year, Jimmy was working hard and making the grade. He finally believed in himself, and the chip on his shoulder had mended itself to just a faded scar. As I reflected on that year with Jimmy, I realized something special took place.

Effort-Based Ability
I have since become an assistant principal at a middle school and Jimmy’s family has moved to a different town. I was recently reminded of him as I read “Masters of Motivation,” a chapter by Jonathan Saphier in On Common Ground. What Saphier describes is what happened that year Jimmy was in my class.

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I helped to motivate him to learn. Unintentionally, I instilled in him the belief that he was capable of this work and that the work we were doing in class was important. I didn’t give up on him, even when he gave up on himself. This idea has a name: effort-based ability.

Teachers who truly believe in effort-based ability teach differently from teachers who do not. I once had a colleague tell me not to worry too much about the low-performing students. She said, “You can’t bake a cake without a pan,” implying that these students were incapable of learning rigorous material. This was a teacher with many years of experience and had the opportunity to impact the learning of a few hundred students. It made me wonder how many students passed through her classroom and missed an opportunity to learn because of her belief of who was capable of learning and who was not.

While observing teachers in my new assistant principal position, I began to recognize teachers who also were “masters of motivation.” Strategies described by Saphier emerged in their teaching. They:

- Deliver such messages as, “You can do this,” “This is important,” and “I won’t give up on you;”
- Use interactive teaching behaviors such as cueing, wait time, and asking questions in a different way;
- Establish a sense of community within the classroom conducive to risk-taking;
- Teach students how and when to ask for help; and
- Focus on the future by having students verbally state what they want to achieve.

I am using my role as assistant principal to be a “master of motivation,” encouraging teachers to use these strategies. For example, during the first week of school, I encourage teachers to establish a positive rapport with students by calling their homes. Each teacher selects target students at risk of “falling between the cracks,” and then learns information about them such as where they live, who lives in the home with them, their likes and dislikes, and the way they learn best. The teachers then take this information and create lessons specifically designed to motivate these students to learn.

Teachers then hold a weekly class meeting to discuss any issues they see as a road block to learning, such as bullying. These meetings help to create a family atmosphere and develop a sense of classroom community. When teachers take the time to get to know students, it serves as a motivator for children to learn and to succeed.

During the first week of this school year, I presented to staff about effort-based ability and the story of Jimmy. Coincidentally, a few days later I ran into Jimmy, now 19, at a local restaurant. I asked him if his ears had been burning since I spoke about him to the staff. Jimmy had changed. I asked him if his ears had been burning since I spoke about him to the staff. Jimmy had changed.

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