

Setting "Motivation Traps" for Underachieving Gifted Students

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"There are three important things to remember about education. The first one is motivation, the second is motivation, and the third is motivation."

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

Student motivation, or rather its absence, is a troubling and persistent problem in education. In most classrooms, teachers voice frustration and concerns about poor student motivation—disinterest, lack of engagement, off-task behaviors—and its impact on student achievement. According to Newmann (1992), "the most pressing and persistent issue for students and teachers is not low achievement, but student engagement. Students attend class but with little excitement, commitment, and pride in mastering the curriculum. They have no psychological investment in learning" (p. 2).

Poor motivation among gifted students seems paradoxical, because intrinsic motivation is considered a distinguishing characteristic of gifted students. Renzulli's (1986) definition of giftedness, for example, includes task commitment as a central element. Frasier, Hunsucker, Lee, Finley, et al. (1995) and Frasier, Hunsucker, Lee, Mitchell, et al. (1995) found that teachers frequently cite "keen sense of interest" and "highly motivated" as characteristics of giftedness, their assumption being that interest serves to motivate students. And, the most frequently adopted checklist in gifted education has a motivation subscale (Renzulli, Smith, White, Callahan, & Hartman, 1976).

However, not all gifted students are motivated, and many underachieve academically. In a study of gifted Black students, Ford (1995) reported that 38% were underachieving. National estimates are that 20–50% of gifted students underachieve academically (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Whitmore, 1986). While poor motivation cannot fully account for underachievement, it plays a major role. Many gifted underachievers express a lack of interest in school curricula because they find it uninteresting, meaningless, or irrelevant (Ford; Ford, Grantham, & Harris, 1996). Unfortunately, the referral, screening, and identification process for students will overlook many gifted underachievers, especially if school personnel and parents believe that gifted students are, by definition, highly motivated.

Student Interests and Motivation

students may resort to off-task or disruptive behaviors to avoid looking incompetent or to hide their uncertainty about a task. Some gifted students, in their attempts to address these social and emotional needs, may assume the role of tattletale, note passer, spitball thrower, airplane thrower, or class clown. For these students, the negative attention their misbehavior produces is better to them than no attention at all. Teachers can sometimes set a motivation trap to turn a student's off-task, disruptive behaviors into on-task, productive behaviors. Following are two examples.

Note-Passing Trap. Reserve a special time each day for students to pass notes to one another. This activity could gradually be expanded into a pen pal club in which students write and reply to letters from people outside the classroom.

Tattletale Trap. Encourage and teach the "tattletale" how to write about the positive behaviors of his or her classmates. Have the student keep a record of important school/classroom events and let him or her read the recorded notes to the class at the end of the school day or week.

Conclusion

Teaching is a hard job when students make an effort to learn. It is an impossible one when students make no effort to learn. It is an unfortunate reality that every classroom will contain at least one unmotivated student. Teachers of gifted students are no exception. Underachievement is a complex phenomenon, and interventions to improve student achievement and motivation can be complicated and time-consuming. Motivation traps provide teachers with one strategy for increasing students' engagement by placing students at the center of the curriculum and requiring teachers to consider their interests, as well as their social and emotional needs. We contend, as do others, that a student-centered curriculum is a critical ingredient if students are to reach their potential in schools. Motivation traps can help students achieve at higher levels by making instructional activities more engaging, relevant, and meaningful.

An important way to motivate students is to focus on their interests. Interest-based learning is student-centered and increases the likelihood of students being active participants in the learning process. Students have opportunities to focus on topics they consider personally or culturally meaningful and relevant. The most effective learning occurs when students are immersed in an activity in which they can make connections to prior knowledge and interests (Buchanan, Woerner, Bigam, & Cascade, 1997; Dewey, 1965; VanTassel-Baska, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, student-centered curricula and instructional activities are guided by the answers to two fundamental questions: How relevant to students, both now and for the future, is the schoolwork they are doing? and How can I use my students' interests to help them learn and to keep them engaged?

Alber and Heward (1996) described "behavior traps" as a way to help develop students' academic and social skills. A behavior trap uses a student's interests to "trap" him or her into using and developing important skills. Effective behavior traps have four essential features:

1. They are "baited" with powerful, virtually irresistible reinforcers that "lure" the student to the trap.
2. Only a small, easy-to-perform response that is already in the student's repertoire is necessary to enter the trap.
3. Once the student is inside the trap, interrelated contingencies of reinforcement motivate the student to acquire, extend, and maintain targeted academic or social skills.
4. They can remain effective over a long period of time because the student shows relatively few, if any, satiation effects. . . . The fundamental nature of behavior traps: easy to enter and difficult to exit. (Alber & Heward, p. 286)

The strategies recommended by Alber and Heward (1996) hold important implications for motivating gifted underachievers. In this chapter, we extend the application of behavior traps to the motivation of gifted students. We provide a rationale for designing plans to motivate students and present several sample motivation traps.

Motivation Traps

Planning, setting, and evaluating motivation traps is a five-step process.

1. Identify which students need help. Which student is struggling? Who is off task? Who seems uninterested, bored, frustrated?
2. Discover what interests students. Who are their heroes? What are their hobbies? How do students spend their leisure time? Students' interests serve as the bait for motivation traps. "Any trap is only as effective as the bait with which it is set. Make an inventory of your students' interests with the intention of using their most zealous preoccupation as irresistible trap bait, like the most delicious cheese for the mousetrap" (Alber & Heward, 1996, p. 286).

Discovering the most effective bait for motivation traps often requires the least amount of searching. The best bait is usually the most obvious. The more often a student engages in or expresses interest in a topic or activity, the longer the duration of those episodes, and the greater the variety of ways in which the student relates to or engages in the activity, the more likely that topic or activity will be effective bait for a motivation trap. How often does Janna talk about insects? How much time in one sitting does she spend looking at books about insects? Does she draw pictures of insects? Are most of her compositions about insects, regardless of the content of the day's story starter? Does she collect insects? If the answers to these questions are: "Several times each day," "Hours at a time if we let her," "Yes, yes, yes, and yes," then Janna will almost certainly fall "victim" to a well-designed motivation trap baited with materials and activities featuring insects.

3. Find resources and activities to address students' interests. How can I match the topic, lesson, or unit to students' interests? What resources are available? Sometimes, students themselves are the best sources of materials and activities related to their interests.
4. Set the trap. A motivation trap cannot work unless the student gets "caught." Make it easy for students to enter the trap; only a small, easy-to-perform response should be required. Once inside the trap, the student must then use and extend target skills in order to maintain and increase contact with his or her favorite topic or activity. Many underachieving gifted students quickly lose interest in an activity because they are bored by unnecessary repetitions and impatient to proceed to the next level (Howell, Heward, & Swassing, 1996). Such problems can be prevented by providing gifted students opportunities to participate in activities based on task completion, rather than time schedules. Motivation traps can provide an excellent vehicle to address this need.
5. Evaluate the trap. Few plans remain effective without some type of evaluation. Therefore, it is important to appraise students' successes and failures and consider ways to modify the motivation plan or trap. What was ineffective or effective? How can the trap be improved? Not all students will respond immediately to the trap. Some students will need more time than others. Provide students with substantive feedback on their performance and progress.

For more information and suggestions on designing and setting motivation traps, see Alber and Heward (1996). Sample motivation traps are described in the next section.

Sample Motivation Traps

Hero Traps

Most of us have heroes—famous athletes, movie stars, musicians, authors, and inventors—people we admire and hold in high esteem. Teachers can find ways to incorporate students' heroes as bait for motivation traps in virtually every subject area.

Language Arts. Students can write letters to their heroes. They can write scripts or stories using the heroes as characters, conduct mock interviews of their heroes, read biographies about their heroes, or lead a schoolwide letter-writing campaign to get their heroes to visit their school.

Math. Students can create and compute statistics for their sports hero's accomplishments, such as home runs, batting averages, rebounds, and touchdowns. They can create a budget using their hero's salary.

Content Areas. Students can find the geographic location of their hero's birthplace, concert tours, or sports schedules. They can make a timeline of their hero's career, research the influences and origins of their hero's talent, and make a genealogy chart. Students can produce and direct music videos using their musician hero's recordings.

Fetish Traps

Fetish traps take advantage of a commonly identified characteristic of gifted students: intense interest in a particular topic (Frasier, Hunsucker, Lee, Finley, et al., 1995; Frasier, Hunsucker, Lee, Mitchell, et al., 1995). A fetish trap can be set around just about any topic or activity that a student finds exciting, such as computers, race cars, airplanes, horses, dinosaurs, or bridges.

Language Arts. Have students draw pictures and write stories on their interest. They can write research reports or give oral reports on the interest.

Math. Students can develop important math skills while they classify and compare quantifiable characteristics and performance numbers (e.g., prices, speeds, sizes, weights, duration) of the things they find fascinating.

Content Areas. Students can research the history of their fetish. A student who loves horses might identify and research the past 10 winners of the Kentucky Derby. He or she could write a biography of a female jockey or a Black jockey. Which country was the first to permit a person of color to be in a derby? Why have so few women been jockeys in one country or another? He or she could compare the types and price of horses in Japan versus the U.S.

Classroom Club Traps

Some gifted and talented students tend toward introversion; they may choose to read books instead of actively participating in social, creative, or physical activities (Howell et al., 1996; Silverman, 1995). Encouraging the participation of such students in a classroom club packed with high-interest bait may enable them to extend their social interactions and develop relationships with their peers. Classroom club traps may provide motivation to engage in intellectual pursuits, as well as social interactions.

Once the combined effects of high-interest bait and new friendships have allowed shy gifted students to participate comfortably in a classroom club, the teacher might encourage them to develop leadership skills by having members of the club take turns being the leader. The teacher and students together can generate a list of skills a good leader should demonstrate. Prior to taking over a leadership role in the club, the students can use roleplaying to practice skills such as negotiation, teamwork, constructive criticism, and collaborative problem solving. The teacher might begin by stating a problem and having students act out how to solve it (e.g., "What would you say or do if two members of the club disagreed about how to approach a goal?"). Students can practice stating their position or suggestions tactfully and figuring out ways to compromise. The following are a few examples and ideas for classroom club traps.

Cooking Club Trap. Students can apply science concepts (e.g., convection, conduction, boiling points of various substances, chemical interactions), create their own recipes, or publish a cookbook (complete with computer graphics) and sell it as a fundraiser.

Science Club Trap. Students can collect, classify, and inventory their collections of rocks, shells, plants, or insects. They can collaboratively research topics, conduct experiments, and present and publish their findings.

Inventors Club Trap. Students can create their own inventions as possible solutions to problems (e.g., overpopulation, air pollution, diminishing resources) current technology has not addressed or exacerbated.

Classroom Newspaper Trap. Students can conduct interviews, write book and movie reviews, report on school events, write editorials, take and develop their own photographs, and make up riddles, jokes, brain teasers, and puzzles.

Creative Writers Club Trap. Students can write their own fiction, share story ideas, help edit one another's work, and coauthor stories collaboratively.

Sports Trading Card Club Trap. Students can figure out ways to classify players based on their strengths and weaknesses, create new statistics and software for describing and predicting a player's performance, or develop mathematical formulas to project future performances based on athletes' trends, current performance, and age.

Classroom Store Club Trap. Students can figure out how to minimize costs and maximize profits, create advertisements, and test-market new products.

Social and Emotional Needs Traps

Some students underachieve for social and emotional reasons; they want to be accepted, they want attention, they feel isolated, and so forth (Ford, 1996). Other