**[Student motivation](https://www.dawn.com/news/1820938/student-motivation)**

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THE best of teachers find it hard to motivate some of their students. Numerous studies in motivation have looked closely at why and how some learners do well in school and others seem to give up without trying. Fear of bad grades, fear of failing and disappointing teachers or parents all play a role.

Excellence in academics cannot be achieved without motivation. The latter is largely a choice that leads to effort, and most students make the choice to stay motivated if they have the confidence that their goals are achievable.

Teachers often talk about ‘making’ students learn, which implies applying coercion. Students don’t need to be ‘made’ to do anything if the underlying motivational needs are addressed. Once they are motivated to study, they only need encouragement and support. The teacher’s role as a facilitator is paramount in ensuring that students develop a level of interest and curiosity that enables them to chase targets, to absorb the content, practise and reinforce concepts that must be studied.

Most facilitators set high expectations and show students how to get there — successful teachers unlock potential by making content accessible and easy enough to grasp. They give opportunities to students to respond to content, engage with each other and they monitor the gaps where students need extra help.

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Telling students to study doesn’t work as well as showing them how to tackle the work at hand. By middle school, many students begin to procrastinate, fall behind on homework and end up facing disgruntled teachers and parents. A student recently asked me: “Where is my motivation?” Interesting thought, reflecting self awareness.

Lack of motivation isn’t a problem in itself, but rather a symptom of something else; just like fever, where the body temperature rises to signal an underlying health condition. Lack of motivation signals something else at play, most often a belief that the work is hard and beyond reach. Those that get left behind in a race don’t run faster if they have given up and accepted that defeat is inevitable.

A study on motivation revealed that students work harder for teachers that they like and do well in subjects that are taught by their favourite teachers. This correlation isn’t a coincidence. The ‘favourite’ teacher clearly understands what will unlock potential and does something right to instil belief and confidence in the student’s ability. Sometimes, the strategies may be as simple as creating a thinking environment, as described in Nancy Kline’s Time to Think, where the facilitator or mentor provides ease and comfort for the learner to embark on some kind of introspection, to understand what is needed to be done for academic success.

Schools, where students spend a large part of their formative years, are supposed to be breeding grounds for thought, interrogation, understanding and knowledge. Ironically, they become spaces that breed anxiety, competition and a desperate bid to avoid failure. Students who spend their time at school avoiding failure are unlikely to be self-motivated — rather, they chase goals set by others and tag along benchmarking themselves through the years against what their peers have or haven’t achieved. Avoiding failure as a strategy is not the same as a strategy for success.

Social and emotional well-being at school is a precursor to motivation for success. Yet, very few schools follow a curriculum that embeds social and emotional learning. Hardly any schools offer formal, structured programmes that cater to social and emotional well-being. At the heart of well-being is the belief that learners can cater to their own growth needs and devise their own strategy for success.

Contrary to what many learners and their teachers believe, ability is not fixed. It’s mostly malleable and directly related to the learners’ self-belief and agency in steering their own course. If they are taught self-regulation early on, their motivation is entirely within their grasp.

Much of students’ academic success is dependent on how their teachers interact with them. If the control is in the learners’ hands and they believe that they are the ‘captain of their ship’, they demonstrate ambition and drive, and no longer need coercion. The reverse is also true. Once a lack of motivation sets in, it becomes a pattern that is hard to break. Students’ behaviour begins to reflect their lack of control, which leads to avoiding studies.

The words of a famous song ‘Teacher, leave them [sic] kids alone’ ring true timelessly. Students need consistent encouragement rather than fear, threats and sarcasm about their ability.

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