

## **Creating a Motivating Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivational factors that lead to academic success for students with and without learning disabilities (LD) in high school inclusive content-area classrooms. Ninety-one students in regular education and 59 students with learning disabilities in grades nine through twelve were surveyed and responded to six open-ended questions to examine their attitudes and perceptions about factors that are motivating in school. Both qualitative and quantitative measures were used to analyze the data. Results indicated students with and without disabilities have common perceptions about motivational aspects in school, however, students with LD were perceived to more be extrinsically motivated by their teachers and more intrinsically motivated by their parents, while their counterparts without disabilities were found to be more intrinsic in motivational orientation. Finally, limitations of the study, implications for classroom instruction, and future research questions are discussed.

# Creating a Motivating Classroom

## What Really Motivates Students to Achieve in Secondary Content-Area Classrooms?

Motivation to achieve in school is often a major challenge and struggle for students with and without disabilities at the secondary level. In comparison to students without disabilities, students with mild disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities) commonly experience serious academic deficits (e.g., Bender, 2004) and speculated motivational problems, which has the potential to negatively impact their learning and academic success in schools. More specifically, students with learning disabilities often exhibit a number of complex learning and behavior characteristics. Some of these include reading, writing, and math difficulties, failure to develop and mobilize cognitive strategies, poor motor abilities, disorders of attention, a lack of motivation, low self-concept, and avoidance of tasks (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2003; Lerner, 2003).

In addition, students with LD compared to their peers without disabilities often exhibit social and emotional problems such as a lack of motivation (Borkowski, 1992), low self-esteem (Heath, 1996), poor self-concept (Bender & Wall, 1994), experience lower levels of social peer acceptance (Tur-Kaspa, 2002), and tend to display lower academic self-efficacy beliefs and negative academic attribution styles (Tabassam & Grainger, 2002). Also, students with LD are less likely to be intrinsically motivated compared to their peers without disabilities (Adelman & Chaney, 1982), attribute success and/or failure on tasks to external factors (Pintrich, Anderman, & Klovucar, 1994), and exhibit unfavorable attitudes toward academic tasks (Wilson & David, 1994), which can interact negatively with school success and may result in problem behaviors.

As a result, these behaviors are among the reasons for referral and classification of students as having learning disabilities. In addition, many speculate that when students perform poorly academically they will be less motivated to try hard in school. However, the specific nature of what appears to motivate students with and without disabilities in school is less well documented in the research literature. What are the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that motivate students' with and without disabilities to achieve in secondary content-area classrooms?

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine students' attitudes and perceptions about motivating aspects in school with respect to specific content areas to determine what aspects of school are motivational for both students with and without disabilities. Through this investigation, teachers will gain greater insights into motivational factors that influence student behaviors and explore ways to creating a motivating and exciting learning environment.

## Method

### Subjects and Settings

Approximately 2,000 ninth through twelfth grade students attended the high school located in a suburban area in a mid-Atlantic state. A total of 150 students were included in the study and represented the range of socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity. Of the 150 students who participated in the survey, 91 (60.7%) were regular education students and 59 (39.3%) were identified as Learning Disabled (LD). These students met federal and state criteria for the disability classification. A description of the participants is shown in [Table 1](#).

With the consent of administrators and teachers, who had indicated in advance that they were interested in the study as it related to student academic success, six content area teachers agreed to administer the survey in their classrooms.

### Dependent Measures

A six-item open-ended survey to assess motivational factors for secondary students with and without LD was developed and piloted in three secondary inclusive classrooms to assess reliability of the instrument and to identify ambiguous or difficult to answer questions. Students were asked to review the questions for clarity and understanding. Minor revisions were made based on feedback from the preliminary group of participants.

Survey questions included the following:

- 1) What do you like best about school?
- 2) What kind of teacher do you like best?
- 3) What does your favorite teacher do that motivates you to work hard?
- 4) What motivates you to try hard at school?
- 5) What motivates you to complete your homework?
- 6) What kinds of things do your parents do to motivate you?

## Procedures

Six secondary content area teachers were provided with copies of the survey and asked to administer the survey during the class period. The study was presented to the students as an effort to learn what they thought were the factors that motivate them to achieve academic success in the classroom. One hundred and fifty secondary students in inclusive content area classrooms provided written responses to the six open-ended questions.

## Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to analyze the data. Regular and special education students' perceptions of the factors that motivate them to achieve academic success were examined using a Student Motivation Survey. The process of analytic induction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Robson, 1993) was used to analyze the open-ended questions. Responses were categorized by the researchers and an independent rater and grouped into similar themes to facilitate the comparison of data and to establish specific relationships. Further, the themes were revised and redefined to provide a comprehensive representation of categories. The categories were evaluated by coding the answers into SPSS and analyzing the frequencies of each question comparing regular versus special education.

## Results

Based on the students' written responses to the six open-ended questions, categories were identified and analyzed for each of the questions. Results are provided for each question and shown in [Table 2](#).

### Results for Question One

In response to the question that examined what the students liked best about school, four categories were identified. Sixty-nine (78.4%) of the regular education students and 42 (73.7%) of the students with LD chose "Friends" as the number one motivating factor. Fifteen (17%) of the regular education students identified "Extra curricular activities" as something they liked best about school. The lowest categories for the regular education students were "Teachers" and "Learning" with only two (2.3%) responding for each category. As for the students with LD, five students (8.8%) each identified "Extra curricular activities," "Teachers," and "Learning" as motivating factors.

### Results for Question Two

Five categories emerged when students were asked to describe what kind of teacher they liked best. The highest category for both groups of students was "Respectful" with a response of 34 (37.4%) of the regular education students and 33 (56.9%) of the students with LD. The second highest category for both groups of students was "Interesting" with 27 (29.7%) of the regular education students and 14 (24.1%) of the students with LD responding. A teacher's "Sense of humor" and "Teacher's age" were third and fourth for both groups. While seven (7.7%) of the regular education students identified "Organized" as being a motivating factor of teachers they like, none of the students with LD identified this category.

### Results for Question Three

The students responded to the question regarding what your favorite teacher does that motivates you to work hard with five categories. The highest category for both groups of students was "Inspires, encourages, and motivates" with 34 (39.1%) of the regular education students and 23 (43.3%) of the students with LD identifying this category. "Engages students in classroom activities" and "Provides incentives" was second and third for both groups. The lowest category for both groups was "Gives clear direction"

with two (2.3%) of the regular education students responding and three (5.7%) of the students with LD responding.

#### **Results for Question Four**

In response to the question that examined what motivates students to try hard at school, twenty-seven (30.7%) of the regular education students identified “Parents” as their number one motivating factor while 24 (27.3%) of the students chose “Future goals and colleges” as second. Nineteen (35.8%) of the students with LD identified “Future goals and college” as their main motivating factor and “Parents” as their second factor with 16 (30.2%) students responding. The lowest motivating factor for the regular education students was “Teachers” with 6 (6.8%) responding and the lowest motivating factor for students with LD was “Grades” with 5 (9.4%) responding.

#### **Results for Question Five**

Five categories emerged when students were asked what motivates them to complete their homework. Twenty-seven (30.3%) of the regular education students reported that they were self-motivated while 8 (14.5%) of the students with LD identified self-motivation as a motivating factor. “Family,” “Rewards,” and “Grades,” were all important factors for the regular education students. “Family” was the strongest motivator for students with LD with 24 (43.6%) identifying this factor, but “Rewards” were also somewhat important with 13 (23.6%) reporting. The lowest motivating factor for both groups was “Don’t do homework.”

#### **Results for Question Six**

The final question on the survey examined what kinds of things their parents do to motivate these students. Thirty-eight (44.7%) of the regular education students identified “Intangible Rewards” as being the strongest motivating factor with an additional 26 (30.6%) of the students choosing “Tangible rewards” and 21 (24.7%) of them choosing “Discipline.” The students with LD were closely distributed between the three areas. Nineteen students (36.5%) identified “Tangible rewards” as the highest category with 17 (32.7%) and 16 (30.8%) following closely as the second and third categories.

## Discussion

Student responses from the regular education students and the students with LD provided a great deal of diversity within each of the questions. When students were asked what they liked best about school, 111 students identified friends as being the strongest motivational factor with 42 of the students with LD responding. Although research suggests that students with disabilities often have problems with social relationships (Meadan & Halle, 2004; Tur-Kaspa & Bryan, 1994), it clearly appears that friendships are an important motivator for them; however, as Meadan and Halle (2004) would suggest, it is possible that students with LD do not gauge their friendships based on reciprocity.

Teacher characteristics also appeared to have a positive effect on students with LD. Nearly one third of the regular education students and over half of the students with LD identified "Respect" as being an important factor in the kind of teacher they liked best. These findings were consistent with Spencer and Boon (2006) who also found that showing students respect was a highly valued teacher characteristic for high school students with LD.

Interestingly, only a small number of students mentioned incentives as being a motivator, while in reality, many of the programs for students with disabilities provide incentives as part of their program. These results suggest that well-liked teachers do not rely on the use of incentives to motivate students, because they rely on encouragement and efforts that actively engage students in their work. Researchers and theorists have debated for and against the use of rewards for many years. Sprinthall, Sprinthall, and Oja (1998) stated that extrinsic motivators are necessary for learning, whereas McNinch (1997) proposed that the proper use of extrinsic rewards build a student's intrinsic motivation when the task is presented as relevant. Further research should explore whether or not incentives are a critical part of the academic program for students with LD, and what determines the efficacy of those programs.

With regards to parental influence, regular education students stated that parents had a stronger influence on their motivation at school, while students with LD indicated that future goals/college had a greater influence. Furthermore, grades were more important for regular education students, while teachers were more important for students with LD.

In addition, a number of students, both regular education and students with LD, responded that they do not do homework. It was unclear as to whether this meant that the students do not complete homework at all or they complete it at school so they do not have any work to take home. Students with LD stated that family had a greater influence on whether or not they completed their homework, while self-motivation was a greater factor for the regular education students. Parents providing intangible rewards were an important factor for the regular education students, while tangible rewards were more important for the students with LD.

Although this information provides some intriguing insights into the motivational factors of students with LD, there are a number of limitations to be considered in interpreting the findings of the investigation. First, since the population for this study only included six

inclusive secondary content-area classes in one high school, the results may not be representative of all inclusive secondary classrooms. Second, the study included a relatively small sample size of students with learning disabilities. Finally, this study was limited in the representation of various disability categories.

### **Implications for Classroom Instruction**

Results of this investigation provide some insight into what motivates students with and without disabilities in school and at home. While students with LD may often appear to be unmotivated, it may be due to chronic academic failure (Lerner, 2003). As a result of this failure, it is imperative that educators and parents have a greater understanding of how to effectively motivate these students to strive for academic success. Sometimes, it may be as simple as just asking the students, which according to the literature, is not something that is frequently done. This kind of information provides educators and parents with greater insights into the motivational factors for students with and without disabilities in inclusive content-area classrooms. Future research should investigate supplementary motivating factors that potentially impact student achievement and motivation across age, grade level, and disability categories across the curriculum.

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# Table 1

Table 1  
Sample Demographic Information

	Percent
Grades	
9th	42.0%
10th	15.0%
11th	30.0%
12th	13.0%
Gender	
Male	41.3%
Female	58.0%
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	54.0%
African American	7.0%
Hispanic	19.0%
Asian	15.0%
Other	5.0%
Primary Disability Area	
Regular Education	61.0%
Learning Disabilities	39.0%

# Table 2

Table 2  
Student Responses on Student Motivation Survey

Questions	Group	
	Regular Education	Special Education
#1 What do you like best about school?		
Friends	78.4%	73.7%
Extra curricular activities	17.0%	8.8%
Teachers	2.3%	8.8%
Learning	2.3%	8.8%
#2 What kind of teacher do you like best?		
Interesting	29.7%	24.1%
Respectful	37.4%	56.9%
Organized	7.7%	0.0%
Teacher's Age	9.9%	6.9%
Sense of Humor	15.4%	12.1%
#3 What does your favorite teacher do that motivates you to work hard?		
Inspires/Encourages/Motivates	39.1%	43.4%
Engages Students in Classroom Activities	33.3%	28.3%
Challenges Students	6.9%	7.5%
Gives Clear Direction	2.3%	5.7%
Provides Incentives	18.4%	15.1%

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