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Question: I teach Middle School physical education, and I am having a hard time motivating my students to participate in class activities. How can I better engage my students to participate and come prepared? -Unmotivated Teacher-

Answer:

Dear Unmotivated Teacher:

I sympathize with your struggle. I admire the strength it takes any Middle School Teacher to work with students who are changing biologically everyday. It can create a very unique situation. I am confident, however, that with some thought and elbow grease, you can turn this situation around.

I remember my first experience teaching Middle School. I had an eighth grade class, and we spent the first few classes on rules and procedures. I remember having the students in squads, and I went to sit on a table in the room to give a speech. One girl got excited and said, "How cool, we have never had a teacher who sits on a table." I had yet to plan the first unit of the year, and this comment made me wonder what I had gotten myself into. I thought, "Who gets excited about an adult sitting on a table?" I was in a Catholic School, and I was replacing a veteran of 18 years at the school who started its physical education program. I must have spent hours on my computer starting to type up ideas and deleting them because I wanted the perfect unit. After much thought and research, including consulting with the previous teacher, who told me to have them push a can with a stick, I decided on Badminton. I thought it would be different, fun, and build confidence. I was, however, afraid that the kids would be too cool for this and it would not work. To my surprise, they loved it! Who would have thought that these sometimes moody and awkward students, of whom I was scared, would like hitting an object called a "Birdie" on a racket! In retrospect, and with experience to draw on, I am able to see why that was such a successful unit, and how, with some luck, I did many things right that made that first experience go well, and motivated the eighth graders to participate without issue. I will share those lessons in this column, and I hope they translate to help you master your situation.

With that antidote in mind, I want you to consider that motivation is a two-pronged approach: Intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is all the external factors that a teacher can control or manipulate and influences the desire students have to learn. Intrinsic motivation involves personal factors within the student that translate to a drive for acquiring knowledge. You will have to become a little bit of a detective and research both areas to help effectively solve your quandary.

Extrinsic:

Teaching Style/Learner's Style – Take a look at how you are teaching. Are you using direct instruction and running on and on about a subject, or are you involving students in learning through various methods? If you are just standing and talking, you are likely to lose the students' interest. You will need to use multiple ways to teach the subject. You do this by learning the way your students learn and teaching to those styles of learning. You may use Gardner's Multiple Intelligences as a guide to help you. Additionally, you may need to use a getting to know you worksheet to gauge student interest. Either way accomplishes the same goal: You learn how your students learn and what they like and teach to that.

Lesson Planning - Are you just winging it, or are you developing unit plans aligned with curriculum standards and then developing detailed lesson plans from that? One of the ways to ensure student engagement is to plan thoroughly. Yes, sometimes the best-laid plans fail. However, if the students get the sense that you have taken the time to be really ready for them, they will be more willing to participate. Students generally thrive on structure because it allows them to feel safe and informed. Planning facilitates this. In addition, planning will allow you to think out strategies for how to teach the lesson the best way, handle potential challenges that may come up, and think about the assessment strategies you will use. By thinking the lesson out ahead of time, you leave little to chance, keep things moving, and can plan engaging activities. Learners will tend to feel more willing to be involved when your plan runs smoothly and are fun because you thought it out ahead of time.

There are other considerations to take into account when planning your lesson that may make students more motivated. They include: making activities success oriented, developmentally appropriate, giving students a choice, differentiating instruction, using task sheets, incorporating peer tutors, incorporating cooperative learning, using stations or learning centers, including technology in learning, and implementing child designed activities. All of these strategies will help move students toward full engagement.

Classroom Management – Are you laid back and do you just let things flow, or do you demand perfection and jump on every little thing the students do wrong? Knowing how you handle discipline will help create a safe and orderly environment in which students want to be a part. This includes establishing rules and procedures from day one and being consistent with them. Also, it requires creating a safe and warm environment where students can try different things and not feel judged, especially in Middle School when peer pressure can drive students to do the wrong thing. If you can create a safe, warm, and orderly environment where the students will feel like they are a part of something, you will most likely see an increase in participation. Children will not want to be a part of chaos, and that is what you get without a well-run classroom. Moreover, this can involve setting up incentives, rewards, and other management strategies for the young scholars to work with and strive toward. For example, some other management strategies to consider include goal setting and teaching students' self-responsibility and how to monitor their own motivation.

Expectations and Modeling – Do you have high standards for your students and believe they can achieve, or are you of the mind set that some students have built in glass ceilings? Students pick up on our expectations and beliefs about them and rise to meet our prophecies of them. If you show you believe in each of your students and have clear, high expectations, then they will rise to meet those expectations. Additionally, model the expectations and behavior you want from your class. If learners see a personal model of success, and they believe they can achieve success, they will put forth more effort to work toward that goal.

I recommend two great resources on classroom management and teaching personal responsibility through physical education. The first book is called "*Conscious Classroom Management*" by Rick Smith. This book focuses on what teachers with great management do that we don't see. The second book is called "*Teaching Responsibility Through Physical Education*" by Don Hellison. This discusses a model for teaching personal responsibility in P.E.

This covers some of the major locus of control you as a teacher have that you can look into and that affect the engagement level of your class. There are other areas you may consider as you reflect on some of this. I encourage you to journal about lessons afterwards to reflect on what worked and did

not work. Also, I would ask a colleague you trust to video tape you or observe your lesson to help you identify things you can change to increase engagement. This may take some time and work. In the end you will be thankful you made these efforts.

Intrinsic:

Let's assume you have done some reflection, made some changes, and are seeing an increase in motivation from students, but you still have a few people that are still unmotivated. At this point I would suggest that you do some further research. Some students are harder to motivate for many reasons. In fact, you cannot reach inside the head of your students and make them want to do anything. At some point, the students have to have the inner desire to want to do something. This lack of desire is not something to get deterred by or make you decide to quit on a child. However, it may take some digging for you to help some students participate.

There are so many factors that make up a teenager's existence. They can run the gamut from academic issues to home or social issues. Many movies and books have been made detailing the life of a teenager and how complicated it can seem, which can consume a teenager's mind. Therefore, in the case of students who are just consistently unmotivated, I would suggest taking the time to learn more about them and what is going on in their lives. This will help you gain an understanding for why the students are choosing not to participate, and it will give you base from which to start to help the students work towards their success.

There are so many reasons a teenager may present as unmotivated. It could be as simple as that fact that they did not eat breakfast and are hungry. Sometimes when a child's basic needs are not met, they may struggle to stay focused. Or, for example, the student could have gotten in a fight with a friend or with a parent at home before school or class. This will certainly distract him or her from wanting to learn. Take the time to know your students on a personal level. Speak to other teachers they have, as well as parents, to get a larger picture of the whole individual. Involve the guidance counselor and administration if you think they can provide useful insight. This will help you meet the needs of the child, build a relationship with the student, and gain his or her trust. Once you have a greater understanding of the learner, you can better help motivate him or her.

I can recount the many times students came to my class and just stood off to the side. After getting the activity started, I would come over and ask what was going on. Rarely did the students not want to participate because of a total disdain for physical activity. Most of the time it was an interpersonal issue with a friend, getting yelled at by another teacher, a poor grade, or some other concern that was causing them to seem distant. Once the students saw I cared and understood their position, I was able to get them participating in some form or fashion so they showed me that they met the day's objective and earned their grade.

I know in the busy world of education it can be hard to find time outside of class to get to know our students. It is possible. I love to use lunch and breakfast as time to get to know my students. There are other creative ways to find time with your students, including watching their games and concerts, visiting their clubs, sponsoring activities, and so much more. It's worth the investment. Once you know your class, you can move mountains with them.

In the end, however, if none of this helps your unmotivated learners, remember that part of your job is to teach. If you have done everything you can to help a student be successful, and they are not responding, and you have to fail them, then you are still teaching them a lesson. You are teaching

that there are consequences for their actions. If students don't follow protocol and participate, then they are responsible for the consequences. This is an invaluable lesson that young people need to learn.

When I look back on my experience teaching Middle School for the first time, I realize I did many of the things I have discussed. I planned thoroughly, created the right environment for success, and I met my learners where they were by getting to know them. Reflecting back, it is amazing that it took so much thought and work to allow the students to reach such a level of engagement in which they were overly delighted to hit a rubber tipped object with a racket.

To summarize, motivation is not black and white. It involves things we, as teachers, control and it involves factors out of our control that must come from within our youth. However, when we stop to reflect on our own practices, make appropriate changes, and teach to the needs of our students by getting to know them, we can motivate moldable minds to achieve amazing results.

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