

Motivating students to learn at a Saudi Arabian school within the united kingdom

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Abstract

Saudi schools in the UK provide an opportunity for Saudi children to remain up to date with the Saudi curriculum whilst living abroad. However, at some of these schools there are problems with motivation. To understand the extent of students' motivation to learn this study explores the practical methods employed by teachers at a Saudi Arabian school in the UK to motivate students, and measures the extent to which they are able to recognise motivation within the student body. The study includes findings based on a semi-structured interview of twelve teachers and twelve students and a supporting classroom observation. As predicted, results reveal that the majority of students in this school are not motivated to learn due to: mode of teaching, lack of interest, and difficulty with the curriculum. The teachers successfully identify motivated students based on regular attendance, completion of homework and active engagement in complex tasks.

Keywords: *learning, motivating, Saudi school, students and teachers.*

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Saudi Arabian government policy is to provide Saudi education to those children living abroad for an extended period of time. Consequently, some Saudi schools have been established in different countries around the world to enable Saudi students to continue their Saudi education when they return home. The school A described in the study is one of twenty-five Saudi schools in the UK; it was established in November 2000 and currently has 110 students, 12 teachers and two administrative staff. Students attend the school on a Sunday for the whole day in order to study the Saudi curriculum, and they attend local British schools during the week.

Currently, there is a concern amongst teachers that there are problems with motivating these students to learn. How

this is addressed alters according to context and the extent to which the problem is recognised by teaching staff, and so the current study addresses motivation as an essential concept aiming to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent, from the perspective of the teachers, do students seem to be motivated?
2. How do teachers recognise motivated and unmotivated students?
3. What are the methods being used by teachers to help motivate their students to learn?

literature review

This literature review will describe the different motivating forces that have been identified by researchers. In particular, it will consider references to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the role played by the teacher in the educational setting.

Definition of Terms

There are several definitions of the term motivation, some of which provide a general definition; whilst others prefer to define the concept psychologically. This paper is most concerned with those definitions that relate directly to education. In terms of general definitions, Long (2000) has defined motivation as a process which leads people in a certain direction; or as a factor which energises people. According to Ames (1987): “Motivation is the systematic, qualitative response which people have to the various challenges and threats arising from situations in which either success or failure is possible” (Gallawy et al., 1998: 33).

Brophy (1998) investigated the level of effort and attention students paid to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, irrespective of teachers’ effort. Intrinsic motivation in this case refers to students’ enthusiasm to attend and be involved in lessons and their reasons for participating in

such a specific area. Long (2000) has indicated that motivation derived from teachers is a detectable personal quality that may directly influence learning success.

Relationship between Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation and Needs

People have different tendencies and interests. The interests of one may not apply to all. For instance, we may perform a creative task because we are already intrinsically motivated towards it; while for others there may be some external motivation which drives them to perform the same task, meaning their motivation is extrinsic. Thus what is required pertains to the 'energies' associated with the behaviours of individuals. According to Woolfolk (2004):

“The explanation could be drives, needs, incentives, fears, goals, social pressure, self-confidence, interests, curiosity, beliefs, values, expectations and more. Some psychologists have explained motivation in terms of personal traits or individual characteristics” (Woolfolk, 2004: 351).

Woolfolk (2004) has also stated that people are intrinsically motivated when they pursue their own interests and exercise specific capabilities because of their natural trend to find and control challenges. We do not need extrinsic motivation such as punishments or incentives if we are intrinsically motivated because the activity itself is the source of the motivation.

Extrinsic motivation is when we do something in order to obtain rewards, avoid punishment or to please teachers or parents, and is unrelated to the appeal of the task itself (Woolfolk, 2004). Students, who generally feel successful, perform better than other students do; rather than being driven by a desire to understand something new, they are motivated by extrinsic factors (Meece and McColskey, 2002).

Motivation and the Educational Setting

An established theory relating to motivation is that proposed by Maslow in 1943. He introduced five basic needs, which have become known as the hierarchy of needs. These are:

1. Physiological needs, including food, water, sleep and oxygen.
2. . Safety or security needs, including security, protection against danger, law, freedom etc.
3. Belonging or social needs, including love, interaction with people and the desire to belong to a group or to have friends.
4. Esteem and status, for strength, achievement, adequacy, confidence, independence; and for reputation, prestige and recognition.
5. Self- actualisation or a desire for self-fulfilment.

Within the educational context, Gawel (1997) has stated that in the case of teachers, placing esteem at a lower level than self-actualisation does not seem appropriate. The findings from this research also suggest that people differ in their order of needs; for example it is not necessary for people to satisfy all their safety needs before considering their belonging needs. Some individuals may seek to satisfy their emotional needs, such as love, before their safety needs, so there can be variation in the prioritisation of needs. Culture and environment may also play a significant role in this. Some may only consider the first three needs to be important; while they may not think about the other needs. People lacking self-esteem internally need to accept themselves before they can improve their view of themselves simply by receiving respect, and glory externally (Gawel, 2008).

When teachers wish to recognise motivated and unmotivated students, they observe their behaviour and use

test scores to measure their academic performance. From the author's personal experience as a secondary school teacher, grades and completion of homework were crucial measures of the level of motivation amongst students. However, Meece and McColskey (2002) stated that there are other indicators of highly motivated students. In particular, discipline and regular attendance, paying attention in class and a lack of disruptive behaviour, are all basic indicators of highly motivated students. Students who are motivated usually participate in class discussions and accomplish their work without the need for prompting. Other important indicators of motivation are related to task persistence; such as when a student is more interested in difficult tasks and strives to find appropriate answers without any assistance. The final indicators of motivation are related to independent learning and interest. Self-motivated students demonstrate enthusiasm beyond that which is required of them (Meece and McColskey, 2002).

Improving Motivation

Brophy (1998) suggests that the teacher's personality and behaviour can be the most important motivational factor in the classroom. The teacher may have characteristics that people like, such as sincerity, friendliness, emotional maturity, a cheerful disposition and a presence that demonstrates personal adjustment and strong mental health. Meece and McColsker (2002) have stated that teachers have many ways of demonstrating how they value their students; but the first point is to attempt to see each student as an individual. In addition, Brophy (1998) has also indicated that teachers should share a similar background and life experiences to those of their students if possible, because this may encourage students to be more open in their communications.

The classroom is where teachers and students come together to share and create knowledge. Teachers should

strive to create a warm atmosphere and a good relationship with and among their students. The first necessity is to avoid a traditional pattern of learning in which students sit and listening to the teacher without active involvement in the class. This is known to reduce students' motivation to learn (Albhouachi, 2000). Human intercourse is natural and no less so in the classroom. Many scholars refer to the importance of student engagement in lessons in order to motivate them to learn (e.g. Sotto, 1994).

Due to former experience or lack of experience, some teachers become overly concerned about their authority, particularly how to manage and control students in the classroom. Brophy (1998) has claimed that those teachers who accept that classroom management is a process, which aims to establish a productive learning atmosphere, are more successful than those who prefer to emphasise their authoritative role. Such teachers want to help students to meet their goals and expectations and do not frighten or punish them (Brophy, 1998).

Thus, such teachers want their students to meet their academic goals rather than other goals; whilst students may have other social goals, which they intend to meet, such as seeking to please their teacher or parents. During lessons, and in the presentation of assignments, teachers have to focus on learning goals rather than social goals; helping students to frame their learning goals in terms of obtaining the skills and knowledge required (Brophy, 1998).

When we allow children to speak freely and normally in their childhood, this develops their ability to think (Sotto, 1994). Therefore, it is important to allow students to speak and discuss their learning with teachers before or during the lessons. As stated by Sotto, (1994) "Everybody agrees that we learn best when we are actively engaged." According to Slavin (1996), it has been found, from twenty-two studies that students who are engaged in cooperative learning

achieve more than those who are undergoing traditional methods. Further, Sharan and Shaulov (1990) found that using cooperative learning improved students' motivation to learn more than other more traditional approaches. Cooperative learning in the classroom may create an interesting atmosphere and this in turn may improve students' motivation to learn.

The curriculum is also central to student motivation. Some teachers are concerned about the process of planning and teaching the curriculum in an appropriate way. According to Brophy (1998) teachers often find it difficult to fulfil the requirements of a curriculum simply by following the teaching suggestions provided in textbooks. Teachers may instead need to elaborate on the content, although to do so, teachers would have to examine their unit plans in order to meet their instructional goals. They would also need to identify which part of the content could be ignored, emphasised or developed; and which questions and activities would need to be omitted. This would then help enable teachers to plan their curriculum effectively, and so could potentially positively affect students' motivation (Brophy, 1998).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Motivation is a complex phenomenon, which can play a significant role in learning. Many scholars have studied the different concepts of this (Maslow, 1943 and Levine, 2000: 41- 94), and have focused on the physiological basis of behaviour. Others have mentioned factors pertaining to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Schunk et al., 2008; Gilbert, 2002 and Graham, 1994) and have investigated the mechanism associated with motivation. Despite the significance of this topic, it appears that the majority of studies about this topic have been conducted in western countries rather than eastern countries. Further those studies reporting global findings have principally been concerned with motivating students to learn English rather than other

subjects; such as those by Al-Ansari, (1993); Al-Kahtany, (1995) and Alshehri, (2009).

In the context of the Saudi schools operating abroad on a once a week basis the issue of motivation has not been addressed previously; and the school in which the study is being conducted (school A) has not provided a research context for any previous scholar.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008: 12): “qualitative research allows researchers to grasp the inner experience of participants, to determine how meaning is formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables.” The qualitative approach provides the researcher, as well as the reader, with a better understanding of how variables interrelate with the other features necessary for their functioning (Bryman, 1989). Semi-structured interviews carry greater flexibility than other methods (such as structured interviews and questionnaires) (Smith et al., 1999). This format can then be applied to identify interesting issues as they emerge, encouraging participants to provide more in depth information.

The current study has utilised the semi-structured interview format as its principle method and observation as a supportive method. The main purpose of the empirical part of the research is to investigate teachers’ view regarding students’ motivation and the methods they use to motivate students at the Saudi Arabian school that forms the focus of this research.

The sample interviewed included all the teachers and twelve students. Student participants were chosen based on their level, six students from the elementary stage and three from the middle and three from the secondary stage. The researcher also spent eight days observing students and teachers in the school environment and attended two lessons.

The researcher showed information to the head teacher in printed form to allow him and the other staff to understand the aims of the study, and to understand what would be required at each visit. Then the head provide the researcher with a permission letter and at each interview, the researcher showed this letter to each interviewee to guarantee that ethical considerations were met.

In terms of analysis, the researcher developed a unique approach. The first step relied on obtaining permission from the head to make audio recordings (which was granted), and these were immediately transcribed verbatim, into Arabic. McQueen and Knussen (1999) indicated “the analysis of qualitative data is an ongoing process that is best begun early, as soon as the data collection begins in fact” (p. 239). The data collected from the semi-structured interviews was analysed manually, classifying all the transcriptions in separate files and finally the researcher read all the interviews three times. Then themes and sub-themes started to emerge as described below.

FINDINGS

This study has sought to answer three questions. The first question is about teacher’s views regarding student motivation, i.e. to what extent do pupils seem motivated? The second question aims to investigate teacher’s ability to recognise motivated and unmotivated students. Exploring the modes used by teachers to motivate their students to learn was the aim informing the third question. By answering these questions, it will be apparent why there are motivational problems at the school in question.

First question

In terms of the first question, all teachers indicated that the majority of students in this school were not enthusiastic about learning and that they need motivation to encourage them to learn.

“Motivating students to learn is really worth discussing. Many students in this school are not interested in studying.

They come to the school because their parents want them to learn Arabic and to follow the Saudi curriculum. Workers in this school are mainly volunteers and are not professionals, including the teachers and head-teacher and this may contribute to the increasing number of unmotivated students.”

Students on the other hand expressed a lack of motivation to attend this school for several reasons; including the manner of teaching, lack of entertainment, the difficulty of the curriculum, the boring atmosphere and the large quantity of homework. One student said:

“I do not like this school. I prefer my English one, there is no play time just studying all day, we only have fifteen minutes to have lunch and during this time the teachers do not allow us to play around, they say that this school is not ours and we are responsible for any damage that happens”

Another stated:

“Teachers just giving us a lot of information and do not allow us to speak; it is a bit boring sometimes I feel sleepy and bored in the classroom, I wish we were using computers instead of carrying lots of heavy books, it makes me feel tired when I bring them to school”

To sum up the teacher’s and students’ point of view reveals that students are largely unmotivated for several reasons as can be viewed clearly below:

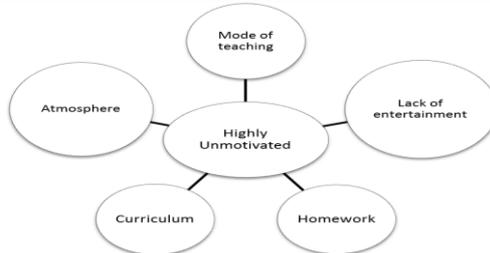


Figure 1. Reasons for poor motivation Second question

When focusing on the second question it was apparent that teachers recognise motivated students from their behaviour, such as regular attendance, doing their homework and feeling interested in participating in complex tasks. From this observation, it is apparent that students were not always completely involved with the teacher, they chat and play and the teachers have difficulty controlling the class. As shown in Figure 2 below poor motivation can be identified based on behaviour in certain situations.

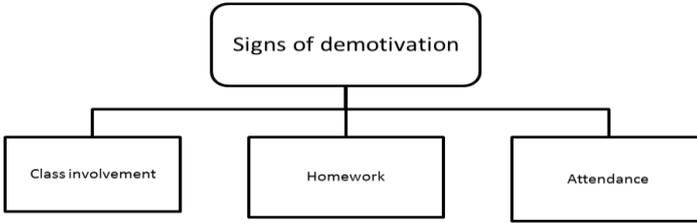


Figure 2. Factors contributing to demotivation

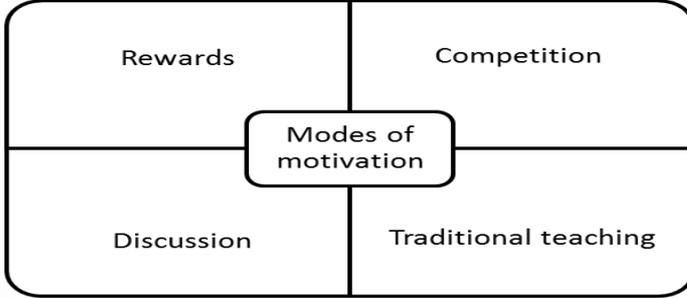
One of the teachers interviewed said:

“Motivated students attending the class usually pay attention during the lesson and do their homework regularly. After each holiday I realise that many students did not attend the school on the first two days and did not provide any letter explaining the reason behind this.”

Based on the observation of a middle lesson at elementary level, some students seemed not to be involved at all with the teacher and five of them asked to go to toilet. The head of the school then found them outside for no reason. After the lesson, while the researcher was in the head’s office, he asked the teacher not to allow students to go outside regularly; then the teacher stated that she believed that these students do not do their homework regularly and leave the classroom to avoid any questions about this. In addition, the majority of students were chatting with each other during the lesson and were not involved.

Third question

In terms of the methods used to motivate students, teachers stated that they discussed the work during lessons, created competitions and offered rewards. It was evident from the observation that the teachers followed a traditional method of teaching, especially with regards to homework. In addition, teachers were not satisfied with the facilities, budget and organisation of the school.



“I prefer facilitating competition between students, and offering rewards (prizes) to motivate them. In addition I really seek to change the decoration and furniture of the classroom in order to create a warm atmosphere; but because we rent this school we are unable to change everything we want.”

In addition, some believed that the curriculum could affect the students’ motivation. They indicated that the Saudi curriculum might only generally meet students’ goals. However, it was felt that some texts needed to be modified, as they contained very detailed information that was considered unnecessary for students of a certain level.

“Of course, it is essential to attempt interesting and useful texts that meet students’ goals. The Saudi curriculum is really useful. However, some subjects are deep and wide-ranging and I have to complete the whole text in a limited time without the deletion of pointless parts because of the centralised nature of the Saudi education system.”

Additionally, some students believed that teacher’s personality could influence their motivation. They

emphasised the importance of being cheerful, helpful, and having the ability to understand students' different abilities in order to help them to be motivated. One of students in one class of secondary level stated:

“Absolutely, teachers have to be helpful, emotional and sincere. Some teachers deal with us as children and do not allow us to be involved with our friends to solve problems or even to help each other to understand the lesson, they are only concerned with finishing the curriculum as soon as possible. In the English school the way of teaching is interesting we are encouraged to work together in the class not just sitting and listening.....oh I am really bored, nothing interesting in this school”

After attending two lessons at the elementary and secondary stages, it was apparent that teachers follow a traditional approach to teaching. They stand up and give the lesson without encouraging students to work cooperatively. In addition, they write a lot of information on the board and ask students to copy down this information. After the lesson, the students are typically asked to do at least four exercises as homework.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has presented a number of issues regarding student motivation. It is widely believed that some students are currently not motivated to study and obtain new knowledge, which is an area of concern. In this study, the nature of motivation has been discussed to investigate teacher's views regarding student motivation and their ability to recognise both motivated and unmotivated students. In addition the study has aimed to explore the methods teachers use to motivate their students to learn. In order to accomplish these goals the researcher has used semi-structured interviews and observations.

The importance of the research lies in the fact that it is undertaken in a relatively traditional teaching environment, as described above. It was found that in such a setting the

majority of students are not motivated to learn; this is the case for several reasons: the mode of teaching, lack of entertainment, the difficulty of the curriculum, the boring atmosphere and the large amount of homework. Students who attend this school reported experiencing a motivation to study when they attend their more modern English school as the teaching there is more exciting. In addition, students expressed a lack of relaxation time as a problem; the students have only limited time to play or take refreshments adding to the atmosphere of hard work in a boring setting. It was apparent from the interviews that some of the students are intrinsically motivated but for them to succeed a supportive atmosphere is needed, as was found by Woolfolk (2004). However, it seems that the other students require more extrinsic motivation, which is not provided by this school.

In this research, it was found that the teachers could recognise unmotivated students, but that they were unable to resolve the problem, or even to control the class. In order to motivate students, the teacher's personality and behaviour can be key and in the interviews conducted the students noted that: "Absolutely, teachers have to be helpful, emotional and sincere. Some teachers dealing with us as children". It was evident from the observation that teachers tended to deal with students strictly and use punishment more than encouragement. Thus, in this case, teachers are failing to create a good atmosphere by ordering knowledge in exiting and attractive way.

In terms of the ways of motivating students, teachers stated that they used different methods, such as discussing their work during lessons, creating competition and offering rewards. It seems from the observation that teachers in addition are following the traditional way of teaching with over duties of homework. In addition, teachers are not satisfied with the facilities, budget and the organisation of the school.

In addition, some believed that the curriculum could affect students' motivation. They indicated that the Saudi curriculum might only generally meet students' goals. However, it was felt that some texts needed to be modified, as they contained very detailed information that was considered unnecessary for students of a certain level.

In terms of the ways of motivating students, teachers stated that they used different methods, such as discussing their work during lessons, creating competition and offering rewards. In addition, teachers themselves were not satisfied with the facilities, budget and the organisation of the school, something that also effects their motivation. After attending two lessons at different levels, the pursuit of a traditional way of teaching became apparent, as was the setting of a large quantity of homework. This traditional approach may play a significant role in reducing motivation; indeed, many scholars refer to the importance of student engagement in lessons in order to motivate them to learn (e.g. Sotto, 1994). Slavin (1996), also found, from twenty-two studies, that students who are engaged in cooperative learning achieve more than those who are undergoing traditional methods and the students themselves expressed recognition of this.

In addition to the teaching approach, the curriculum is also considered to be a problem at this school as it is within Saudi Arabia; its depth and complexity may de-motivate students further. Teachers have mentioned that the curriculum may affect students' motivation. They have also indicated that some texts in the Saudi curriculum need to be modified, as they contain very detailed information that is unnecessary for students at a certain level and is not related to the real life. According to Brophy (1998) teachers often find it difficult to fulfil the curriculum simply by following the teaching suggestions provided in textbooks and experience is necessary to elaborate on content, and adapt their teaching to meet their instructional goals in tandem with those set by the curriculum. The teachers at this school

are not all qualified and have limited experience, making it hard for them to identify which parts of the content can be ignored, emphasised or developed; and which questions and activities need to pass over. This was observed by the head of the school, who mentioned that all teachers are not professional and nor are they specialised. They being are asked to cover the curriculum with a lesser knowledge of teaching as it seems to be impossible to find specialised Arabian teachers in this temporary school.

A further factor for researchers to consider when evaluating such schools is that the level of weakened motivation in this school may relate to the stress associated with attending two schools based on different curricula and cultures. This concern is of primary interest as a direction for future researchers, as the issue of poor motivation derived from a traditional approach is heightened by its juxtaposition with the modern British curriculum, teaching style and classroom culture. It is apparent that all of the factors observed above combine to reduce students' motivation to learn and so steps need to be taken to provide an occasional school setting in which the Saudi curriculum can be taught in an appealing way. By improving the students motivation to learn their success will be greater in this environment; facilitating their eventual knowledgeable reintegration into Saudi classrooms on their return to Saudi Arabia.

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دافعية الطلاب للتعلم في إحدى المدارس السعودية في المملكة المتحدة

أ/فاطمة عبدالله الهازمي

• المستخلص :

تقدم المدارس السعودية في المملكة المتحدة الفرصة للأطفال السعوديين لدراسة المناهج السعودية أثناء إقامتهم في الخارج. إلا أن بعض الطلاب يظهرون عدم الدافعية للتعلم في هذه المدارس. ولفهم هذه الظاهرة تهدف هذه الدراسة الى اكتشاف الطرق العملية التي يتبعها المدرسون لتحفيز الطلاب على التعلم في إحدى المدارس السعودية في المملكة المتحدة وكذلك قياس مدى قدرتهم على إدراك مستوى الدافعية عند الطلاب. اعتمد البحث لاكتشاف ذلك على عمل مقابلات شبه منظمة لاثنا عشر طالب واثنا عشر معلم وكذلك الملاحظة داخل الفصول الدراسية. واطهرت النتائج ان غالبية الطلاب في هذه المدرسة غير محفزين للتعلم للأسباب التالية: طريقة تدريس المعلمين، قلة الاهتمام والاستمتاع بما يطرح، وكذلك صعوبة المقررات. كما أظهرت النتائج أن المعلمون يميزون مدى دافعية الطلاب للتعلم من خلال: الانظام في حضور المدرسة، إكمال الواجبات والمهام المنزلية وكذلك مدى انخراط الطالب في عمل الواجبات المعقدة والتي تحتاج تفكير.

