

The Joy of Learning: What It Is and How to Achieve It

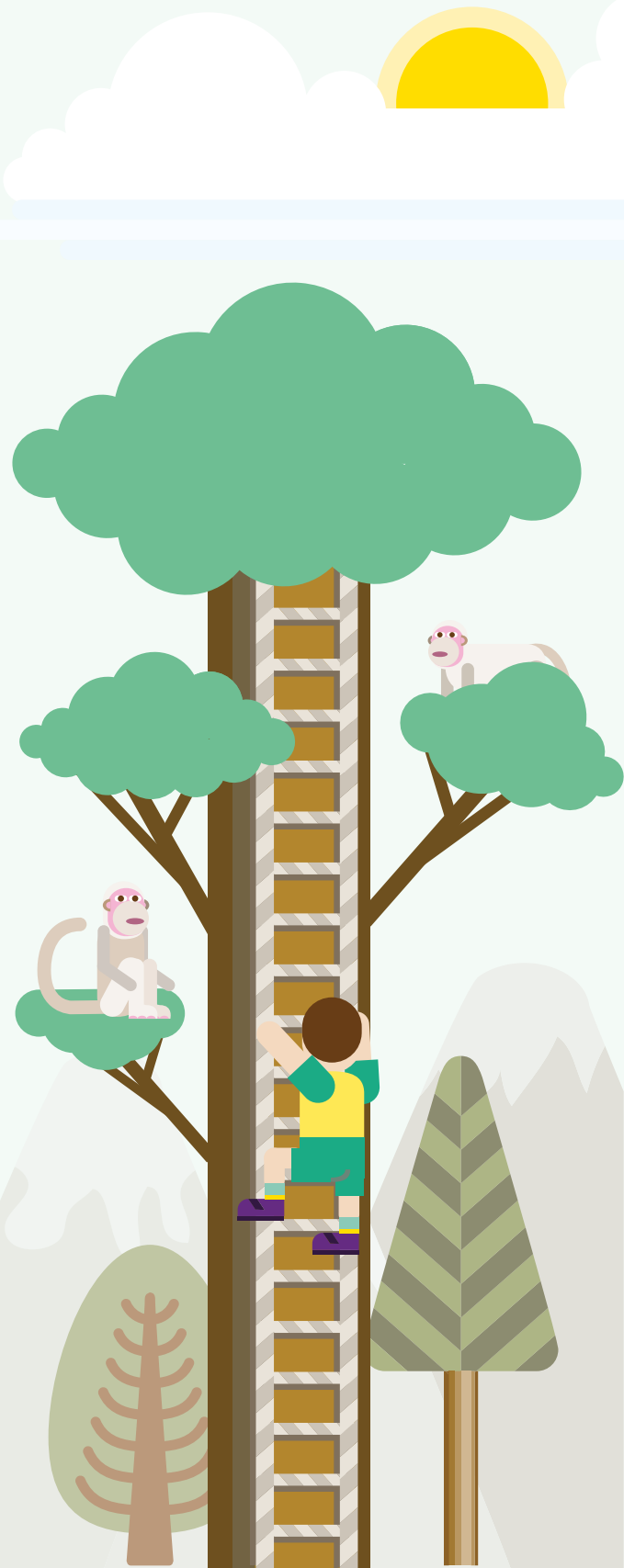
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During the Committee of Supply debate in Parliament in March 2017, Education Minister (Schools) Ng Chee Meng suggested nurturing a joy of learning so that students can be intrinsically motivated, will love what they are doing in class, and will enjoy attending school.

When students look for ‘interesting’ teachers and classrooms, they are in fact looking for an environment that caters to their core needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. They look for teachers who are able to meet their needs and interests and who can create interesting and challenging lessons that are relevant to their lives.

A classroom where ‘joy of learning’ exists is one in which students are given appropriate levels of challenges and one in which they are able to make decisions about their learning. When students are faced with difficulties, there should also be a support system in place to help them.

When they experience ‘joy of learning’, students benefit from a positive learning experience. From the teacher’s perspective, it would always be more rewarding if students were motivated and eager to learn: When teachers see motivated students, they too, become more interested to teach.



This then begs the question, “How can teachers help students to become intrinsically motivated to learn?”

Over the years, the researchers at the Motivation in Educational Research Lab (MERL), led by myself, have delved long and hard into the heart of motivation, working to determine how to cultivate and nurture motivation in students, and get them interested in the process of learning. We have found that when teachers use the following strategies in the classroom (with more suggestions available at the MERL website¹), students are more likely to adopt higher self-regulation in their learning behaviour. These suggestions also make lessons more enjoyable for the students.

1. Provide rationale for tasks

When engaging students in *potentially uninteresting activities*, teachers can support students’ autonomy by offering a rationale for engaging in the task at hand. For example, a teacher who wishes to teach fractions to students can highlight the real-life importance of it and provide some real world applications.

The teacher can also focus on framing these skills towards contexts that may be personally significant and intrinsically motivating to students, such as the use of fractions and ratios in Lego building or in playing computer games.

By providing a rationale, the teacher is able to help the student internalise the activity by changing their perception of what is worth doing, and what is not. This is especially useful when dealing with gifted students, who often demand to know the meaning and relevance of the activities and actions they perform.

2. Use informational/non-controlling language

Teachers can rely on *informational and non-controlling language* to support students’ autonomy when communicating requirements, responsibilities and providing feedback in the classroom. For example, if a teacher notices that a student is off-task, low in motivation, and intentionally disrupting other students, the teacher can choose to do one of two things.

One option would be to scold or punish the student right away. Alternatively, the teacher could help the student *become aware of his or her actions* and the fact that the actions are not helping with the objective of learning in the classroom. As this could disrupt the class momentum, the teacher could further address the issue outside class time.



1. Practical Tips for Educators and Parents in http://merl.nie.edu.sg/res_practicaltips.html

3. Display patience

When students are developing skills through practice on unfamiliar or complex tasks, teachers should display patience. They can:

- take time to listen
- give encouragement and time for students to complete tasks in their own way
- offer helpful hints when students seem stuck
- praise signs of progress
- postpone advice until they understand the students' goals and perspectives, as well as
- provide scaffolding when it is needed and invited.



For example, if a teacher notices that a student in a Mathematics class is facing difficulty in understanding the concepts taught, instead of providing the answer immediately, the teacher could provide scaffolding in the form of more explicit questioning that could direct the student towards the concept, and give the student time and space to figure it out independently as he or she continues to engage in the lesson with the class.

Time – spend it to gain it!

Teachers often feel they don't have the luxury of time to let students learn at a slower rate. However, when students are able to learn at their own pace, they are better able to accommodate new knowledge, understand conceptual as well as emotional issues, and integrate what they have learned with deeper information processing and understanding. This long-term benefit will outweigh any short-term loss due to time.

4. Be open to receiving negative affect

How a teacher chooses to deal with students' off-task and non-engaged behaviour also has implications on student motivation. For instance, a Mathematics teacher may have prepared problem sums for the class to solve. However, some of the students may perceive the task to be boring and irrelevant.



A controlling teacher would brush off all protests from students and force the class to complete the task at hand. Conversely, the teacher who values student engagement would listen to the students' comments and adjust future lessons, for example, by incorporating games or by providing authentic real-world contexts that use the skill, rather than just completing drills. **By listening to the perspectives of the students, the teacher opens up opportunities to enhance student engagement.**

5. Nurture inner motivational resources

The most apparent form of the 'joy of learning' is intrinsic motivation. To foster intrinsic motivation in students, the teacher has to find ways to coordinate instructional activities with students' preference, interest and engagement, sense of challenge, competencies, and choice-making.

For example, the teacher could give more autonomy to the class by *allowing them to design learning activities of their choice*, and give them time to read up on the topic being taught. In order to maintain a feeling of competence while ensuring students are sufficiently challenged and engaged, the teacher could provide activities with *differentiated levels of difficulty for students to pick from*, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. These practices are particularly useful when introducing or making a transition into a new learning activity.

When teachers are motivated to teach and students are motivated to learn, the classroom becomes a very pleasant environment. Students are subsequently more able to enjoy the learning process, and become more engaged in the classroom. This creates a very positive learning environment where knowledge construction is enthusiastically facilitated by the teacher and joyfully engaged in by students.



Motivated teachers make for motivated students!

In recent years, the MERL has also started to investigate the motivation of teachers and its influence on their classroom environment as well as their students. It is interesting to note that teachers, just like the students they teach, need to fulfil their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness in order to be intrinsically motivated. The MERL has also found that there are two key factors that play a part in motivating teachers:

1. Perceived job pressure

Perceived job pressure comes in three different forms:

- Insufficient time to conduct lessons.
- Pressure from school authorities when teachers feel restricted and controlled.
- Evaluation based on their students' performance resulting in teachers feeling stressed by something that is sometimes out of their control.

When a teacher believes that job performance is measured by their students' results, he or she would tend to focus more on what would be tested. Teachers would also be more inclined to drill their students, as opposed to teaching for deeper understanding, which results in additional stress for students.

It is thus important for a teacher to be assured that a deep understanding is more important than exam results per se.

2. Perceived students' motivation

How teachers perceive their students' motivation in the classroom actually affects their own motivational levels. In fact, it was discovered that when teachers perceived their students to be more motivated in the classroom, they were in turn more motivated to teach well.

Intrinsically motivated teachers are also found to be more willing to apply motivational strategies for their students in the classroom. This in turn further motivates their students. A positive feedback cycle thus results within the classroom.

Biodata



Professor John Wang (PhD, Loughborough University) is a BPS Chartered Psychologist and registered with the Health Professions

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He is currently the Associate Dean (Research Management & Programmes), Office of Education Research at the National Institute of Education (NIE). He also leads the Motivation in Educational Research Lab in NIE. The main focus of MERL is on motivational issues in education, adopting the Self-Determination Theory as the core theory in guiding their research. MERL aims to translate research findings into practical guides for teachers and practitioners.

His areas of research include motivational and emotional aspects of physical activity and exercise. His recent publications have been on sport ability beliefs, achievement goals, intrinsic motivation, emotion, and self-esteem. He has also written papers on outdoor education, project work, internet gaming, and problem-based learning.