

From *Education Follies: four decades of tilting at windmills for no apparent reason*
by Jeff Lee Byrem, (c) 2016



What Happens to Four-year-olds?

For many years, I struggled to understand why normal four-year-olds—all of whom (according to my nonscientific sample of one) seem to have a remarkable capacity and eagerness to learn by exploration and experimentation—become fifth graders who are either emotionally disengaged from learning, or are students who appear to be motivated solely by the acquisition of gold-star stickers, dollar (or larger) bills for A's, or recognition as student of the week. I encountered these fifth graders everywhere I went, and as a secondary teacher, virtually all of my students were these ubiquitous fifth-graders grown up.

Was this just the normal development of humans, I wondered; were we born with an innate curiosity that was aflame as a small child but destined to flicker and go out as

we approached our adolescent years? The evidence suggested this was the case, but there was other evidence presented to my nonscientific sample of one, which suggested something else was at play.

There were moments in my classes when, exposed to demonstrations filled with cognitive dissonance (e.g. *Wait a minute! How can that piece of cardboard keep water in the cup when the cup is turned upside down?*) or challenged by questions never before considered (e.g. *The heat and light—the energy—coming from the burning candle you’re holding has come from the sun, which is 149,600,000 km away: How could that possibly be?*) nearly every student became imbued with the same intense curiosity—the strong desire to learn—one sees nearly every day in a typical four-year-old.

Sidebar: my nonscientific sample of one memory is that my highest achieving students were less impacted by those things that engaged the majority of students; I recall one of the “high flyers” telling me, after an inquiry-driven lesson that had generated significant student engagement, “Why didn’t you just tell us what we needed to know instead of expecting us to figure it out? What a waste of time.” We chatted further, and I discovered the student just wanted to know what she needed to know for the test, so she could get her usual “A.” Hypothesis: the “best” students as measured by GPA are the students most likely to have been rewarded extrinsically throughout their school experience, with the consequence that they may have a significantly-reduced intrinsic motivation to learn like a four-year-old.

During a six-year hiatus from Education (1978 to 1984), I worked as a human resources executive with a retail firm, and later, with a university. Business management courses and professional development exposed me to findings from decades of research conducted in the fields of Industrial and Organizational Psychology regarding motivation—research, interestingly enough, ignored for the most part by educators.

What I was learning as a business person seemed to challenge the Skinnerian approaches to which I had been exposed as an undergraduate, approaches that had been promoted by education academics to my generation (e.g. kids are like pigeons: desirable behaviors can be conditioned by appropriate stimuli). One management workshop facilitator raised a very significant challenge to my then way of thinking: he claimed studies had shown extrinsic rewards directed at motivating a specific behavior almost always eliminated any intrinsic motivation a person might have had to, in fact, practice the desired behavior.

It was not until the late 1990's, while investigating Marvin Marshall's [Discipline without Stress](#)¹, that I encountered a recommendation to read Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Motivation by Edward L. Deci and Richard Flaste. It was a dense and challenging read, but worth every minute that I put into it. For the first time in my professional career, I began to understand and appreciate why we humans (adults *and* children) do what we do.

In the previous chapter, I suggest that the Knowing-Doing Gap is a deep, underlying cause of Education's malaise. I want to hypothesize herein that another deep, underlying cause of the malaise is: *what has been discovered about motivation is not known by most educators*; in other words, when it comes to the matter of motivation, there is no knowing-doing gap because (I hypothesize) there is a remarkable paucity of understanding about motivation among American educators.

Motivation is integral to everything an educator expects of others. A large body of research-based knowledge about motivation exists, which should be sufficient to require mastery of such knowledge, and yet, despite the importance of motivation in

¹www.marvinmarshall.com/the-raise-responsibility-system

what we do as educators, such expectations are difficult to find in American college catalogs.

It might be helpful to know the degree to which the previous strong statement is accurate—I am relying on my nonscientific sample of one. If it is accurate, perhaps this deficiency is something that deans and other academicians in departments of education need to be address.

In the meantime, I suggest that educational leaders who may not have a deep understanding of motivation need to begin self-study in this area. An excerpt from the description of Why We Do What We Do from its Amazon.com page is a teaser and an opportunity to self-assess one’s understanding of motivation:

If you reward your children for doing their homework, they will usually respond by getting it done. But is this the most effective method of motivation? No, says psychologist Edward L. Deci, who challenges traditional thinking and shows that this method actually works against performance. The best way to motivate people—at school, at work, or at home—is to support their sense of autonomy. Explaining the reasons why a task is important and then allowing as much personal freedom as possible in carrying out the task will stimulate interest and commitment, and is a much more effective approach than the standard system of reward and punishment. We are all inherently interested in the world, argues Deci, so why not nurture that interest in each other? Instead of asking, “How can I motivate people?” we should be asking, “How can I create the conditions within which people will motivate themselves?”

Want to know more? I *strongly* encourage you to peruse [*Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions*](#)² by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci.

² Access to *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions* is available via this link: <www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanCeci

In addition, I encourage you to investigate Deci's et al's Self-determination Theory or SDT, beginning with the [SDT website](#)³ to learn about scholars' investigations into how we can support “our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways,” so that we can ensure that the remarkable capacity and eagerness of four-year-olds to learn by exploration and experimentation lasts for a lifetime!

_IntExtDefs.pdf>

³ *SDT homepage*: <<http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org>>