

## **Intrinsic Motivation, Lifelong Learning, and the Heart of Teaching**

As I reflect on my time as both a teacher and a parent, I've come to realize that how we motivate students reveals a lot about how we were motivated—and how we've come to define success. In my own journey, I've learned that some of the most common classroom practices—especially those rooted in behaviorism—can quietly undermine the very qualities we hope to foster: curiosity, self-worth, and a lifelong love of learning.

My perspective on this wasn't shaped by theory alone—it emerged through experience. I'll never forget the moment I noticed how deeply a reward system was shaping student behavior. I was teaching art at a school where students earned pretend money for good behavior throughout the week, which they could spend at the "Friday Store." On paper, it seemed harmless. But in practice, it changed how students related to learning. For many of the 6th to 9th graders, every request I made was followed by, "*What do I get for it?*" Intrinsic motivation had been replaced with a transactional mindset.

What really broke my heart, though, was how the system created separation and shame. On hot days, only students who had earned enough were given popsicles—while others sat watching, excluded, sometimes even taunted by their peers. It was a painful scene to witness, and I knew I had to intervene. That moment became a turning point. It forced me to examine the deeper emotional impact of extrinsic motivation. That experience helped me recognize what I now call the "Big Three" of harmful outer motivators: **Shame, Blame, and Fame**.

- **Shame** often appears in public correction: "Why did you do that?"—a question that transforms a teachable moment into humiliation.
- **Blame** isolates the student who makes a mistake, as if being wrong is a moral flaw.
- **Fame**, which can sound like praise—"You're so good at that"—is often used not to affirm growth, but to encourage performance for the teacher's approval.

At best, these tactics generate short-term compliance. But in the long run, they erode self-trust. They disconnect students from their own sense of agency. And worst of all, they take away the joy of doing something simply because it's meaningful.

One of my favorite teaching memories emerged from this realization. During a class with my 2nd through 5th graders, I asked a simple question: *"Why do we care about being good?"* As expected, their first responses focused on rewards—more screen time, special treats, or praise. I kept gently asking, "But why else?" Finally, one child said, *"Because it feels good."* That moment gave me goosebumps. **Doing good feels good**—not because of what we get, but because of how it aligns with who we are. That insight continues to guide my approach to teaching today.

At home, I saw similar dynamics play out in parenting. When my son was young, I was advised not to separate "the good" from who he was. Over-praising him for specific behaviors, I was told, could lead to dependency on approval. And I saw it—he began chasing that validation. What I now call *praise addiction* started to form. Instead of saying, *"You did that so well,"* I shifted to, *"How does it feel to have done that so well?"* That small change empowered him to connect with his own internal sense of accomplishment.

This week in Educational Psychology, we studied **Dan Pink's** research, which articulates exactly what I've seen in practice. His framework—**autonomy, mastery, and purpose**—resonates deeply. According to contemporary studies, students thrive when learning is meaningful, when they feel competent and supported, when they have voice and choice, and when their learning is connected to a deeper sense of purpose.

This theory helped me make sense of another pattern I've noticed, especially in my work as a homeschool parent. When children are pushed to memorize information that has no emotional or contextual relevance to them, and are then tested under pressure, the learning doesn't last.

The stress interferes with memory. Once the pressure lifts, the knowledge disappears. I've come to understand that this isn't a failure of intelligence—it's how the nervous system works. When stress is tied to learning, the body rejects it as part of its coping mechanism.

That's why I believe that students with special needs are the early warning system of education. Their sensitivities highlight what's not working—sooner and more visibly than it shows up in others. But the truth is, the system isn't working for many students. The cracks just show earlier in those who are more vulnerable. If we designed learning environments with their needs in mind—emphasizing personalization, emotional regulation, sensory awareness, and curiosity—we'd create better schools for *everyone*.

Even in foundational subjects like phonics, for learning to read. And the 5000 words in the context of use and with pictures. I've seen how much more effective child-centered approaches are. One of my favorite tools is the *Macmillan Picture Wordbook* (1990), which I've recommended to many families. Though it's out of print, it's affordable and impactful—especially for students new to reading or needing visual support. And can help them communication needs before they can talk. It pairs well with audio resources, and I was inspired by a TED Talk where a teacher shared how much faster students learned to read when they could listen to recordings as they read. This kind of multisensory approach isn't just more accessible—it's more joyful.

So what does this all mean for the future of my teaching?

This reflection has helped me make sense of my journey. It's helped me see not just what I've learned, but *how* I've learned to see. It's reminded me that my teaching is a living practice—one that should be re-evaluated, reshaped, and refined as I continue growing. And it's given me the courage to speak these ideas out loud—to share them with colleagues and peers, so we can all keep learning from each other.

I don't claim to have all the answers. But I do know this: I want to be a teacher who creates spaces where students feel safe to explore, express, and grow—from the inside out. I want to help them reconnect with that place in themselves that knows, *"This feels good because it's real. Because it becomes important to me and that is how I see myself."*

I agree that earning rewards can be beneficial - it is how it is done. If it divides the class with those who get rewards and those who don't I feel it is counterproductive. We all get paid for our work so it is realistic to have payment for hard work. Again, it is how it is done. I have a method that I used with my son when he was learning basic self-care and good habits for self-discipline at 6–10 years old - by that time it had become ingrained habits. I have told many parents who also use this method and found it worked really well for them too. Again, it is how it is done. Rewards need to come without extra baggage that take away that innate desire to do what is good for ourselves because it feels good, not for the reward. Yet it can help to lead them in that direction. The idea is to get them to be self-disciplined because it is good for them and to be rewarded, yet not punished if they don't or constantly told what they need to do. I call it the "Gold Star Behavior Method". I put Gold Stars everywhere I wanted my son to do

Self-Care or other Self-Disciplines:

A gold star at the bathroom sink where he brushed his teeth.

A gold star in the bathroom where he took a bath when it was time.

A gold star at the kitchen sink where he put his dishes after a meal.

A gold star in his bedroom at his laundry basket where he put dirty clothes.

A gold star in his bedroom at his desk where he did his homework.

A gold star in his bedroom where he went to sleep when it was time.

A gold star at the kitchen trash that he took out - his household job.

Then, when we went shopping he would find something he wanted to get (under 5 dollars.)

He would ask me for it and if he had been doing his Gold Star behavior, I would say yes, you have been doing great with your Gold Star behavior, you have earned it.

If not, I would say, I see that this is something you want, and I will remember that, yet I need you to earn it with your Gold Star Behavior.

Once he knew what he was being asked to do, I did not ask him to pick up his clothes or put his dishes in the sink, ever. I found that parents who did that - with constant nagging made the task something they had to do for the parents and not because they were self-disciplined and aware of the need for their own self-care. So again, we get paid to work a job. That is true yet the boss who nags us to get things done, instead of rewarding us with a bonus for doing a good job are very different ways to use rewards.

A good example is amazing teacher with the film "The Ron Clark Story" - (The Excellent 11-best-selling book) and how he got the students to believe in themselves and achieve their best with his motivation at the beginning but always reminding that it is for themselves, their goals, and what they can achieve for why they worked so hard on their studies. In the end, after the students who had the lowest test scores when he showed up, and had achieved better than their grade level in the year-end test scores, and he gave them trophies to honor how hard they worked. It is not the same as working hard because you will get trophies. And because he kept motivating them to do it for them... it builds intrinsic motivation. So it is not the idea of rewards, it is how they are framed by the student and the teacher and if it supports the students to better themselves because it feels good and leads to a joy of lifelong learning.

So that build on what I was saying with the idea of "Praise Junkies" - a term that was being used as we were raising our son. It meant that they did not want to do things unless they got praised, and they needed more and more praise to do anything. We learned that instead, it is best for the

child to ask how they felt about doing a good job, engages them in their own progress without having it be something to please the parents or teachers.

We also had our son earn things like his professional camera by paying half. It meant much more to him because he had earned it. So my point is, it is not the rewarding system, as much as how it is framed and if it honors their need for innate motivation within the structure of what is being asked of them so they own their progress.

Being in the Home School community taught me a lot about how parents motivated their kids to do schoolwork or other tasks. I learned a lot and this is why I feel strongly about innate motivation vs out motivation. This reflection has helped me clarify my values, and it continues to shape the kind of learning environments I hope to co-create. One thoughtful, heart-centered step at a time.