

## **Motivation and Learning**

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Recently, I've been reading a new book by Kathleen Cushman entitled, "Fires in the Mind". It is gratifying to realize that while Ms. Cushman's work involves middle school students, her findings affirm our teaching methodologies in the Primary School. This is so important as we prepare our young students for the exciting and challenging curriculum they will encounter as they "cross the bridge over the pond". I'd like to share some of this information about what Ms. Cushman's middle school students recognize about developing internal motivation and working toward mastery in their own lives. Then I'll relate these points to the work that happens on a daily basis in the Primary School.

We all recognize the effort and dedication needed to gain expertise; recent research says we need to devote *ten thousand hours of practice!* How do you stay motivated? Teenagers who feel that they are "really good" at something know what helps them invest the necessary time and energy. They're attracted to learning because it looks like fun, they want to be with others who are involved, and someone gives them a chance and encourages them.

Let's consider our kindergarten students at this point in the year. They've practiced maintaining a proper pencil grip and are learning to form their upper and lower case letters correctly and efficiently. Their teachers have modeled how to write the morning message to communicate information. Students think it's fun to be the Lucky Duck of the Day and lead the class in reading the morning message together. Later, as the fall term progressed, each Lucky Duck had the opportunity to transfer his/her oral language into written form. Our teachers have also read many books to the class that focus on a small moment in a character's life. Now the students' preparation is complete, and they are ready to become writers and authors. Each student will begin drawing his/her own small moment in pictures and will learn how to label pictures and write sentences that help tell the story with a beginning, middle, and end.

Each reading and writing of the morning message together as a class involved the children in a successful experience with the power of written language. When a tricky word was difficult to remember and read, the children didn't get discouraged because they trusted the strong relationship they've developed with their teachers. They know that their teachers will help them and encourage them when they're unsure. Strong teaching gives each student a chance to be a leader and supports the individual through challenging learning moments. These practices also nurture the child's internal motivation.

Not only is the children's practice supported, but each challenge is also designed to be at the "just right" level of difficulty. Middle school students recognize that this factor is needed to persevere. Let's reflect on the power of increasing one's reading skills by practicing in a text that is exactly suited to the individual's level of word reading, fluency, and comprehension. And, to make it even more engaging, he/she is allowed to choose the particular book from a wide range of fiction and nonfiction at the "just right" level. The Primary School's reading workshop approach does exactly this. Therefore, our second graders have the internal motivation and a sufficient level of mastery to be able to act as experts and model for their kindergarten reading-buddies. They've developed effective reading habits and can inspire their reading buddies to pay attention to punctuation marks, read with expression, and think about the story as they read to make sure the words they're saying make sense. Being a role model ("expert") for others increases the pleasure of learning.

Middle school students frequently remind us that they find joy and motivation in their extra curricular activities. Those feelings are also evident in our youngest athletes in the Primary School, and I frequently hear them discussing their own activities and the progress of their favorite teams. When we can make direct connections with our students' outside interests, learning can become more pertinent to their daily lives. The following math problem could be used with third grade students and demonstrates how relating personal interests can motivate our students to persevere and broaden their mathematical understanding. *“Some students want to sell sport posters to raise money to buy new soccer balls for their team. They do not want to spend more than \$2.00 for each poster. When they call the poster company they are told that if they order 1-10 sport posters, each poster will cost \$6.00. If they order 11-20 sport posters, each poster will cost \$5.00. If they order 21-30 sport posters, each sport poster will cost \$4.00. If this pattern continues, what is the least number of sport posters the student can order to only pay \$2.00 for each sport poster?”*

We all know how important peer relationships are to adolescents. Teens are aware that teamwork and socialization encourages them to engage in more challenging learning opportunities. When we consider the social and emotional needs of primary students, we recognize that peer relationships develop at an early age and can positively impact student learning. How would your child respond to working in teams to conduct experiments and record the team's findings using the scientific method? The following are first grade science questions from earlier this year. *Will heavy objects fall faster than light objects? Will a pumpkin (any size) float or sink? Can momentum be transferred or moved to a coin that is not moving?* Group work can make difficult tasks more manageable.

Did you do the practical math earlier when I mentioned that ten thousand hours of practice are needed to become an expert? It computes to three hours a day, six days a week, for ten years! We, as a learning community of children, teachers, parents, and coaches, have our work cut out for us. In order to develop learners who are internally motivated and who work toward an increasing level of mastery, we need to begin at our very earliest ages to make the content interesting and fun, engage with others during the learning process, encourage and support students when challenges occur, and learn from mentors who model effective learning practices for us. It begins with exploration and discovery in the preschool and expands throughout the Primary School at Holland Hall.