

Pawn or Origin? Enhancing Motivation In Disaffected Youth

Richard deCharms



A unique approach to enhancing pupils' motivation for classroom learning is described here. The use of pupils (and teachers) as "pawns" or as "origins" identifies motivation either as (a) external and manipulative or as (b) internal and integral. The difference, according to this investigator, may yield a clue concerning the problem of disaffection—whether among pupils or teachers.

Recent educational research has come up with two stubborn "facts." First, nothing works with disaffected youth. (Compensatory education is a failure.) Second, teacher characteristics make very little difference in the classroom. The truth is, of course, that nobody really believes the "facts" but they are the message conveyed to administrators and are an easy excuse for ineffective school programs.

We have evidence to disprove both of these so-called "facts," and I will tell you a little about our research. I will, however, tell you more about why I think compensatory education apparently did not work (when it didn't) and I will dwell on policy implications of two observations that I have made in my work in inner-city schools. The two observations are: When pupils are treated as Pawns, they don't learn, they misbehave; When teachers are treated as Pawns, they don't teach, they become drill sergeants.

Enhanced Motivation for School

In 1967, we started a project to help inner-city teachers enhance motivation in their pupils (deCharms, 1976). Our major premises were (a) that in order to learn a child must be motivated, and (b) that motivation is enhanced through feelings of personal causation (deCharms, 1968) and depressed by feelings of external compulsion and pressure.

When people feel that their behavior is externally determined, we say that they feel like *Pawns*. When people feel like pawns, they feel pushed around, they feel that they are puppets and someone else pulls the strings. Feeling like a pawn may be contrasted with feeling internally motivated, feeling that my actions are really chosen by myself—that I have

originated the behavior. Such a feeling we call feeling like an *Origin*. The Origin-Pawn distinction captures differences both between situations and between people's characteristic reactions to situations.

Thus in some situations—being stuck in a traffic jam or being “put upon” by an oppressive superior—everyone feels like a pawn. Similarly, in some situations everyone feels like an Origin. At the same time, some people see their world most often through Pawn's glasses. They expect to be Pawns. Other people more characteristically have an Origin outlook. If we talk about persons as either Origins or Pawns, we are making an oversimplification, but sometimes that is useful. The difference between an Origin and a Pawn is a basic difference in outlook. The Origin experiences his/her actions as meaningful within the context of what he/she wants. The Pawn experiences his/her actions as determined by others and external circumstances.

Using these concepts, we designed our project to provide motivation training for inner-city teachers who, in turn, developed and used motivation training exercises in their classrooms. The study started with motivation and achievement measures of children in the fifth grade and followed two similar groups, one trained and one not trained, through two years of training (sixth and seventh grades). The study continued through a follow-up at the end of their eighth-grade year when none received training. Results of the study were dramatic:

- Academic achievement as measured by standardized tests was significantly better in the Origin-trained classrooms. In fifth grade, the children in this district were typically more than one-half year behind national norms in grade equivalent

scores. This downward trend continued in the nontrained children so that by eighth grade they were a year behind national norms. The trend was reversed for the motivation-trained children to the point that they gained on average more than a full year between the end of sixth and the end of seventh grade and maintained their advantage through eighth grade.

- School attendance and punctuality were positively affected in the trained children.

- Students rated classrooms of trained teachers as significantly more encouraging of Origin behavior.

- Trained students increased significantly on an Origin measure every year of training, whereas the nontrained students did not change.

The data are clear. Motivation training can have a positive effect on the school behavior of inner-city children.

Some Teachers Are Better Than Others

Since it was clear to us from the above study that some teachers, even in the absence of training, enhanced motivation in their children, we set out to find what the characteristics of such teachers were and what specifically they did in their classrooms. Koenigs, Fiedler, and deCharms (1977, in press) investigated the relationships among teacher belief systems, degree of pupil influence within the classroom, pupil experiences of ownership and personal responsibility for class activities, and academic achievement. Highly significant relationships were found between measures of all of the aspects above. The more open and nondogmatic the teachers were the more pupils were able to influence activities, the more they felt personal cau-

sation and responsibility, and the higher were their academic achievement scores.

So, motivation can be enhanced in disaffected youth and teachers do make a difference.

What Distinguishes Origin Training?

Most compensatory education projects were based on one of three basic premises: (a) Inner-city children need an enriched environment at school. (b) School learning is behavior that can be shaped by reinforcement techniques. (c) Learning is a developmental cognitive process that follows a stage sequence à la Piaget. All of these premises were based on solid psychological evidence about *learning*, but they all concentrated on *how* the child learns and not *why*.

Programs and teachers that concentrate on learning (how) to the exclusion of motivation (why) may succeed in forcing children to do the behaviors involved in learning arithmetic, for example, but they may be inadvertently teaching the children to fear and hate math. When teachers feel pressure to produce learning, they typically fall back on two principles, namely, repetition and force. The assumption is—force the children to repeated exposures and they will learn.

To enhance motivation is neither to force children nor is it to let them do anything they want. The most basic principle is that *choice*, even a small choice, gives a person some feeling of personal influence and security. Learning to make choices leads to commitment and to responsibility for the results of choice. This chain (choice, commitment, responsibility) is the core of responsible Origin behavior, and all the links of it have to be learned. Small but real choices must be given in the beginning, and small but real changes in motivation

will result. Too many choices or choices that are too difficult to make are just as bad as too few. A person who is overwhelmed with choices is just as much a Pawn as one who has no choices.

Slow and careful nurturing of the ability to make choices about how to go about the business of school, and allowing more choice as the ability to assume responsibility is learned was the major characteristic of teachers who enhanced motivation and augmented academic achievement. This simple idea is what distinguished our work from many other projects.

The Curriculum Within the Curriculum

If we want disaffected youth to stay around long enough to benefit from the curriculum, we must look more closely at the motivation aspects of the curriculum. Some of the best curriculum packages from the learning point of view have appalling motivational implications. There is no reason that the curriculum cannot use the best of learning principles to present content lessons, and at the same time help the student to make choices, commit himself/herself to action, and be responsible for the results. Few of them do, however. Blinded by the goal of teaching content, many teachers and curriculum packages make Pawns of students in the process.

But let's be concrete. What are the implied motivational principles in a typical spelling "bee" where the children are "spelled down" until the last "star" remains. Competition is paramount. Thinking under pressure is second. Equally important but more subtle is perfection and the ultimate end that only one person can win. All the other players are losers. Even the worst speller in the class is asked to

compete with the best with no chance for success.

Such a spelling "bee" may seem dreadfully old-fashioned and, in fact, most of the teachers we worked with rejected such raw competition. But competition is an important motivator in our society, and a little pressure is sometimes necessary. A few simple changes in the spelling bee devised by the teachers in the Origin training alter the whole motivational tenor of the game. First, the Origin teachers introduced choice. The child was allowed to choose between easy, moderately hard, or hard words at each turn. Second, the Origin teachers introduced a realistic assessment of each child's ability so that each child could share responsibility for winning or losing with his/her teammates. The child was able to contribute at his/her own level of ability rather than standing alone against the class. Each child could be an Origin by choosing, taking responsibility, and winning points. This was the motivational curriculum within the spelling curriculum.

The game was as follows: On Monday, the children took a pretest on the words to be learned that week. Tuesday and Wednesday were devoted to practice. Thursday was the day for the game, and by then the teacher had marked the Monday papers and kept a list of each child's correct and incorrect words. The children began the game by choosing two teams, and when ready the teacher called on the first member of team A. "Would you like to try an easy word for one point, a moderately hard word for two points, or a hard word for three points. Incorrect spelling of any word results in no points, and I will spell the word for you."

The child was faced with a choice and the difficulty of the words was scaled to each child's own ability. The teacher had in hand the pupil's

spelling paper from Monday. An easy word was one that the pupil had spelled correctly on Monday; a moderately hard word was one that had been spelled incorrectly on Monday but that the child had had time to study; a hard word was one from an unseen future list tailored to the child's ability.

Each child in turn on alternating teams had such a choice, and a running score was kept. The team could consult on the difficulty of each child's

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word but ultimately it was the child's own choice. The game continued until each person on each team had had one word.

This spelling game was the best-liked exercise by both teachers and children. Children soon learned to study the words that they missed on Monday and to take moderately hard words (realistic choices). The game was a motivation lesson within a content lesson. The children were treated as Origins, and they learned.

The Policy Within the Policy

We said earlier that teachers who are treated as Pawns don't teach. The Origin-Pawn concept applies to adults as well as to children. Our observations have shown that the more teachers are pressured by principal, parents, or other outside sources, the more they become rigid and clamp down on the children.

The policy set by school districts and school administrators should be

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carefully viewed from a motivational point of view just as curriculum has been. Often a well-meaning nonsense policy aimed at improving teaching and learning unintentionally makes Pawns of teachers. Much can depend on the way an administrator communicates his/her plans. After one Origin training session, a principal sent out a memo to all teachers declaring that all teachers must be Origins. As Andrew Halpin (1966) has pointed out, "behavior is eloquent" and full of "muted cues" that are not lost on the observers no matter how much the person doth protest verbally.

Again, to be more concrete, don't give choices that are not real choices. If you are a principal, don't call a meeting at the beginning of the school year and say, "All right let's decide how we're going to run the school this year." If you really want them to make all your decisions, that is irresponsible. If you do have some

plans, you should share them and point out the choices within the overall game plan.

Don't give choices you can't live with. If you are a teacher who can't stand gum chewing, don't allow the children to vote counting on the majority to vote against. If they don't, you end up with gum all over your face. Better to explain your aversion and tell them that they have no choice in that matter.

In short, both learning and teaching are motivated actions. The worst of both are brought out by too much pressure, yet we all tend to fall back on "pushing" when we want someone else to do something and he/she is resisting. The best of both learning and teaching is an elusive thing that is the result of enhanced motivation resulting from choice and commitment. The next time you are tempted to try to pressure someone to do something, ask yourself if there isn't a better way. ⁴⁷

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Richard deCharms is Professor of Psychology and Education, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri.

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