

# **MOTIVATION: KEPT ALIVE THROUGH UNSCHOOLING**

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## **Abstract**

Motivation is a process, which can be fostered or killed in the name of education. In this paper, the author explores two theories of motivation-Expectancy-Value and Three Elements of Intrinsic Motivation-within the context of unschooling and within a school system. Based on the concepts presented through these theories, the author concludes that unschoolers hold on to their intrinsic motivation while schooled children's motivation may be killed by attending school.

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One of the most influential factors for a successful learning experience is motivation. Motivation is generally recognized as a process through which our actions are guided and maintained (Driscoll, 2005). Lack of motivation is the absence of those actions. The concept of motivation serves to understand what guides our actions, how do we learn, and what makes us finish our goals. As opposed to intelligence, which has been defined as the purposeful action, rational thinking and effective dealing of the individual with the environment (Wechsler, 1958), motivation is what defines that purpose, gets us to think in the first place, and decides whether or not we will deal with our environment instead of ignoring it.

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Two of the theories of motivation which help explain how this process works in our daily lives are Expectancy Value Theory (Vroom, 1964) and Three Elements of Intrinsic Motivation (Pink, 2009). Details of both theories will be presented in this paper as well as how this knowledge is applied within an unschooled environment. Motivation is related to emotional intelligence as well as learning, which is why it is important to understand how we can effectively foster motivation for all students, instead of killing it (Gasper & Bramesfeld, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1989).

### **Expectancy Value Theory**

Expectancy-value theory is categorized under the cognitive theories of motivation because its components are helpful in understanding feelings and thoughts in relation to performance and what guides our behavior (Huitt, 2011). The individual value of an activity and preconceived expectations of successfully completing that activity are constructs of this motivational theory (Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009).

Three components of expectancy-value theory include: value, expectancy, and instrumentality. Value refers to the results of an action or task for achieving a pre-set objective (Huitt, 2011). Motivation, which guides value, varies depending on the interest to the individual for completing a task. There are four identified types of values attributed to a completed task: Attainment value, which refers to the importance of the task for the individual, interest value which refers to the enjoyment experienced by the individual as the task is being completed, utility value pertains to the usefulness of the task to the individual, and cost value is the perceived effort needed to complete a task and how this affects other activities (Zimmerman, & Schunk, 2008).

In an unschooled environment, it might be easier to perceive all four types of value placed on an activity than in a schooled environment. Guided by the time spent on the activity, the shared enthusiasm of the activity with family members and friends, and how useful it is for further engaging on the same or similar activities, one can determine whether or not such activity has value for the child.

My own 10 and 8 year-old daughters have discovered value on the game of Minecraft (Minecraft, 2009). Minecraft is a sandbox 3D computer game that allows players to construct their world with infinite possibilities using blocks. The game involves two different modes: survival and creative. Both modes require putting into practice survival skills just as in real life and allows for creativity to flow. Construction of a game has been found to have a positive effect on motivation as opposed to playing a game already designed by someone else (Vos, van der Meijden, & Denessen, 2011). My daughters were introduced to the game through YouTube video walkthroughs and decided they wanted to try it out. The past year in our home has been spent doing something related to Minecraft including (though not limited to) learning how to play it, exploring the infinite possibilities the game provides, the similarities with our own world, and making connections with friends and family through the game.

The amount of information they have learned through exploring this game because they wanted to, cannot be matched by an imposed set of curriculum guidelines. My daughters enjoy playing this game, they engage in extensive conversations to persuade on how useful the game is when connected or compared to real life situations. This in turn justifies their effort to continuously learn more about the game and how important it is to play it. Their value system has been defined by themselves through their gaming experiences.

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The second component of the expectancy-value theory is expectancy. This concept refers to the probability of success recognized by the individual (Huitt, 2011). It does not pertain to factual information used by the individual, rather what she is convinced is going to happen while performing a task based on previous experiences (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Expectancy is also referred to as self-efficacy, which is what the individual believes she is capable of doing (Cauley & Mcmillan, 2010). As unschoolers, our daughters very often hear that they can be capable of doing anything if they really want to, but they have to want it bad enough. We cannot determine their capabilities as they can, especially because our evaluation of a completed task is determined by our own expectancy value and not the child's. Hence, our evaluation is totally biased and non-realistic when compared to that of the child.

For example, once my 7-year-old daughter was drawing and coloring (she never liked coloring books or pages with printed drawings ready to color), she very proudly showed me her product. I pointed out to her that she had missed coloring the pants on one of the people on the drawing (my expectation). To this she responded: "No mom, that's the way it is," and walked away happily. Until that moment, I did not consider the task completed because not all of it was colored. Whereas my daughter believed it was completed to her expectation. My response however did not include having to go back to "finish it" as I understood from my daughter's response that it was already a finished product.

It cannot be stressed enough that our expectations as adults, parents, and/or educators are not the same as those of a child. Seeing my daughters grow up with so many choices on their daily life may sometimes increase my expectations of them to do more and take advantage of the opportunity they are having in their childhood. However, they are growing within an environment where they are encouraged to be guided by their own expectations and changing

this environment midway is simply not fair to their wellbeing. It has happened that I provided them with the opportunity to explore and experience taking pictures. I love to take pictures and believe it is of great fun to do so. It has been a month since they each have a camera and no pictures have been taken. Instead, one of them has taken up Wii gaming every day and the other continues to play Minecraft and is self-teaching herself to play a couple of songs on a piano. Their capacity to take pictures or whether they like it or not is not in question. They choose their activity based on what they are convinced is going to happen while doing it. They have more fun playing games than taking pictures, so they choose to play.

The third component of the expectancy-value theory is instrumentality, which refers to the connection the individual makes between achieving a goal and the reward (Huitt, 2011). This may lead the individual to think that completing a task will give him or her something in return. What is considered as a return may include rewards such as tokens or money and praise or internal satisfaction for completing a task. For an unschooled child, internal satisfaction is what defines instrumentality. External rewards may serve for actions other than those chosen by the child such as cooperating on a dreaded (but needed) doctor's visit. For a child in school, instrumentality comes in a form of external rewards such as stickers, praise, and grades.

According to the expectancy value theory, all three components (value, expectancy, and instrumentality) are factors for having high or low motivational levels. To have high motivation, therefore, all three factors need to be high and if one is low, then motivation will be low (Huitt, 2011). It is important to recognize that the thoughts individuals relate to either one or all of these components are not always accurate. Hence, if an individual either holds little value to a task at hand, or is not convinced that she is capable of completing a task, she may not commit to task completion. However, anybody else may see value in the task and the individual's capability

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which is why it is important to make a distinction between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic motivation is the process which guides individuals to actions only because there is going to be something in return, which may not be related to the action itself (Thoonen, Slegers, Peetsma, & Oort, 2011). For unschooled children this may translate to actions someone else asks of them as with external rewards. For children at school, this may translate to everything they do at school, from being in class on time, to staying quiet, completing a test, or receiving a grade. With intrinsic motivation, however, tasks are completed for pleasure and personal interest without rewards (Thoonen, Slegers, Peetsma, & Oort, 2011; Lei, 2010). Unschooling children engage in actions until they are internally satisfied and ready to move on to something else. Schooled children are limited by their environment (physical and social), content, and activities. The school system as we know it does not foster intrinsic motivation and in the long run, any existing one is killed. A child who attends kindergarten for the first time goes in with great enthusiasm to learn, to be there, to meet his teacher, and to have fun. By the time this same child reaches higher grades, the experience is different. Mostly all actions are guided by extrinsic motivation because personal interest, value, and expectations are imposed by adults and not the child. Hence, by definition, intrinsic motivation is killed.

### **Three Elements of Intrinsic Motivation**

From the Humanistic theory of motivation, Pink (2009) presents three elements for intrinsic motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Framed for adults in the workforce, this theory recognizes extrinsic motivators as successful for mechanical tasks, though for creative and long lasting motivation, attention should be given to intrinsic motivation through the three elements of autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009).

For educators, extrinsic motivation refers to what people say and give in order for an action to occur, or for it to stop occurring. Pink (2009) states that giving external motivation only limits the individual to simply comply with requirements and not engage as a more productive being. This system of providing rewards for completed tasks and punishments for non-completion does not work with tasks that require higher order thinking (Pink, 2009). Intrinsic motivation refers to a desire for accomplishing a task for reasons of enjoyment, personal interest, or importance to the individual and not imposed by anybody else (Pink, 2009). Interest value from the expectancy-value theory relates to intrinsic motivation in the sense that both concepts involve completion of a task because of the joy and interest to the individual. Based on intrinsic motivation, Pink (2009) proposes that the individual who is given autonomy, opportunities to master a task, and with a recognized purpose for completing the task, will then be intrinsically motivated.

Autonomy relates to the need to guide our own life, which in terms of engaging an action means the individual needs personal independence. Personal independence is embraced by unschooling through providing an environment conducive to learning based on personal interests as well as fostering respect and value of each individual in the family. Autonomy in a school environment is generally limited to students solving given problems or activities by themselves. Mastery as a link to intrinsic motivation is having the desire to surpass in excellence at performing a task. Because unschoolers have plenty of opportunities to engage in whatever activity interests them, the potential to achieve mastery comes naturally if the child wishes to achieve such level. There is no assessment to determine whether a child achieved mastery or not, this is rather a self-evaluative process driven by intrinsic motivation alone. This process does not

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happen for children in schools since teachers need to report on their learning, hence evaluations are required and determined by other people and not the students themselves.

As unschoolers, my daughters have many choices which allows them to engage in meaningful actions (meaningful to themselves). Playing video games, reading, painting, joining a writing class, all are examples of the choices they make. There is very little supervision as to when and how to complete any of these actions (except for the writing class which has a set schedule from the teacher). Instead, there is a lot of sharing through conversations and guidance for time management which allows them to complete or master any of their chosen activities. The involvement we have as adults is limited to helping them achieve these goals.

The third concept directly affecting intrinsic motivation is purpose, which refers to having the intention to accomplish something in the account of something bigger than ourselves (Pink, 2009). Finding purpose in every activity might be a challenge, however, the more engaged one becomes with an activity the greater the purpose. For example, as my daughters continue to build their way around the Minecraft game, they share with me how the previously inhabited island has attracted more builders (other online players) and developed a town. The need for shops, museums, and gardens has grown and been provided by the larger online community of Minecraft users. Even within a game, a greater purpose is found.

Finding and recognizing purpose is also an individual process. My youngest daughter is yet to find purpose for speaking Spanish (my first language), and even said to me once that she “likes herself just the way she is speaking English”. I cannot impose the purpose of learning a second language to her, instead I keep trying to expose her to some of the language in the hopes that she will find her own purpose. My expectations and purpose are clearly not the same as hers and this is respected.



Providing for opportunities in which students in a classroom find their own purpose would require for them to also have autonomy and opportunities for mastery. These elements of autonomy, mastery, and purpose are recognized in the business motivational models (Pink, 2009). As one of the purposes of education is to prepare students to enter the workforce, it is then beneficial to recognize and provide opportunities for these elements to be achieved by all students. Unschooling fosters all of the elements in the most natural way, which allow for children to keep their intrinsic motivation.

### **Conclusion**

One of the keys to successful learning is the presence of intrinsic motivation. Expectancy-value theory (Vroom as cited in Huit, 2011) as well as the Three Elements for Intrinsic Motivation (Pink, 2009) involve concepts which pertain to the different reasons intrinsic motivation might be increased or decreased on the individual learner. It must be made clear that not having such motivation to begin with does not mean it cannot be created through external motivators. However, unschooling provides a system where individual interests are nurtured and therefore intrinsic motivation is maintained. Whereas in a school, rewards have been used to increase motivation. When rewards are used to increase intrinsic motivation, however, they may do more harm than good. Sometimes rewards may lower intrinsic motivation (Pink, 2009). For example, for a child who begins school with a love for reading, his or her intrinsic motivation may be killed by giving him/her stickers for reading books. The association the child makes with continuously receiving something in exchange for reading is that he will read to get something. Their purpose changes meaning and hence their actions are guided by the external motivator. This causes for the child to learn that reading is done to get something and not for pure enjoyment which is what would maintain the action of reading in the long run.

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Integrating information from expectancy-value theory as well as three elements theory, gives greater importance to providing engaging learning experiences within the context of a school. Experiences, which may allow students to develop autonomy, mastery, increased value, and a clear purpose for learning, all contribute to greater motivation which in turn contributes to higher achievement (Gasper & Bramesfeld, 2006; Pink, 2009; Salovey & Mayer, 1989). In the world of unschoolers, this is everyday life.

**Magda Levin-Gutierrez** lives in North Carolina, USA where I currently am homeschooling/unschooling our two girls. I spend my time with my family, learning and teaching, and exploring photography. I graduated with a bachelor's in Psychology and then a master's in elementary education. Since then, I have taught in elementary schools, tutored, trained teachers, and completed an online certification on Instructional Design and Technology, with emphasis in Online Learning. I am a lifetime learner and it is one of my goals to pass this love of learning to our daughters as well. Presently I am pursuing my PhD in Early Childhood Education at Walden University Online with the goal of facilitating the learning process of future teachers.

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