

THE UNDERACHIEVER: WHAT YOU CAN DO

Teachers every year have students in class that they beg, plead, threaten, and counsel on completing work inside and outside of class. Some with positive results, some not. What we can say about getting students to do the work is that all learners are different and different strategies work for different learners. This makes for our own learning curve as we try to determine how to help. The good news is that we can learn the strategies: it's up to us to determine where and when to use them.

DISABILITY

There are several things to consider first. If there is a gross difference between what the student should be able to do and what they actually do, you should consider whether they have a disability. If the student is frustrated by the work and appear to try but cannot learn, they may have a disability. If this is the case, check with the school counselor and work with the student to understand what they are experiencing. Speak with your school counselor, administration, and school team about how to proceed.

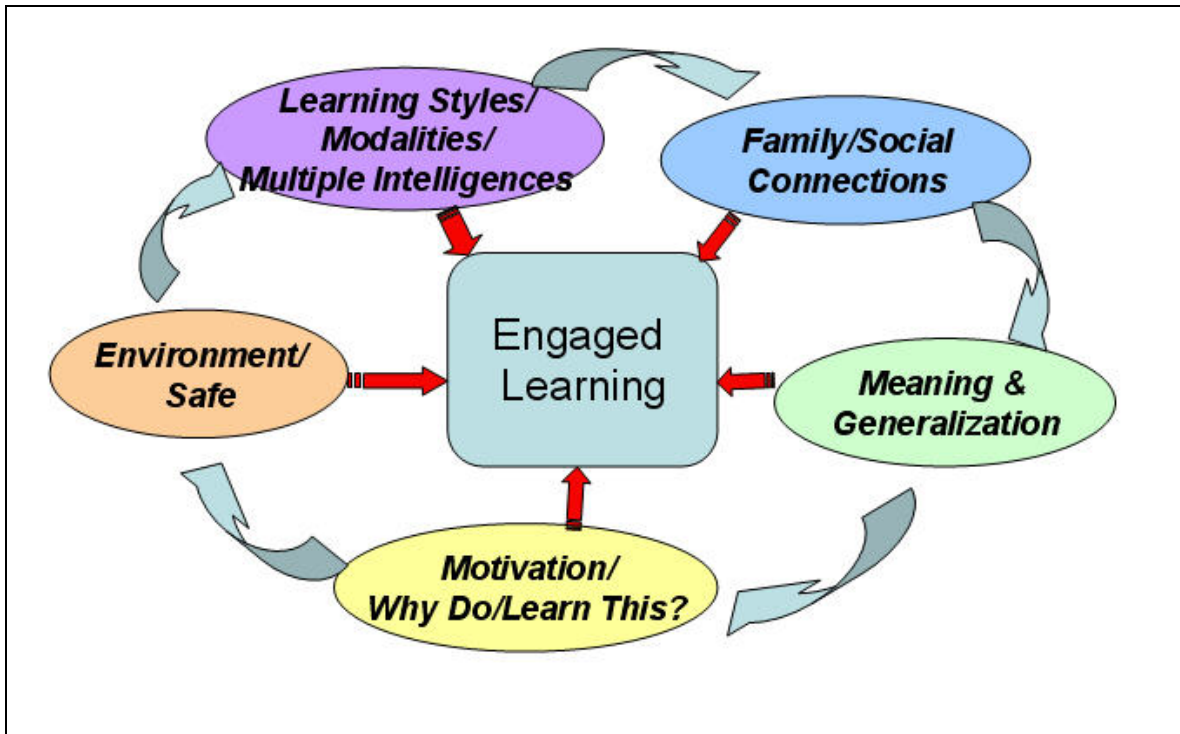
IS THE BEHAVIOR A MANIFESTATION OF THE DISABILITY?

If the student does have a disability, is their behavior a function of their disability? Carefully read their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to determine how their disability should impact their learning and what you should do to “level the playing field” for them. If you can find no reference in their IEP for their behavior, you should discuss it with your school counselor or Special Education personnel. If it is not a manifestation of their disability, you should proceed as you would with all other students.



UNDERSTANDING UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND MOTIVATION

There are a variety of factors that can impact student motivation negatively and the result is a lack of achievement in both class and outside of class. As the facilitator of learning in your classroom, try to fight the urge to lump all students together or listen to “locker-room” talk in the teacher’s lounge about how unmotivated students are.



Modified from Muir, 2001

MOTIVATION-

As your students begin to moan and ask “*why do we have to learn this?*”, remind them of the **WHY**. Don’t say “*because you need it to graduate*”, or “*it’s part of the curriculum*”. If you don’t know why, **FIND OUT**. Try to find several good reasons why this is relevant to them.

The curriculum must be relevant and interesting. This may entail some research on your part. If it is not, try to find a way to make it interesting. Bring in a guest speaker, explain how it correlates with other things the student is learning.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Students that feel safe have more opportunity to learn. If learners feel comfortable, they will more often contribute to classroom discussion.

LEARNING STYLES, MODALITIES, AND MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Learn as much as you can about learning styles, modalities, multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, and other strategies that help you reach more students. You should not just teach in one way, but use various strategies to reach as many learners as possible.

FAMILY & SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Research shows that students who have a strong family and social connection have a greater propensity to not just learn, but thrive. The form of the family is not as important as the student perception of it.

MEANING AND GENERALIZATION

Tying curriculum to what they already know in order to better understand new content is essential. Take material that has just been learned and have students brainstorm how it can be used. Link past and future learning.

Each of these factors has a very real effect on learning and motivation. The relationship that the student has with you, the teacher, is also very important and can be critical in the learner's interest in school and learning.



STRATEGIES

To prevent underachievement and encourage motivation, there are several strategies that can help.

1. Give positive feedback if the student “earns” it. Make sure it is sincere. Adolescent learners are quick to distinguish insincere praise and it will have a detrimental effect.
2. Create a welcoming, safe atmosphere in your classroom.
3. Vary your activities to prevent boredom. If teaching after lunch, try to get the students “out of seat” for part of the time.
4. Use relevant examples.
5. Ensure opportunity for success while still keeping the curriculum challenging. Do not assume it is too hard.
6. Take a personal interest in your students and helping them learn.
7. Teach them to learn from each other. Encourage working together and reward students who help others in learning concepts or motivating.
8. Make sure that basic student needs are being met. A student that has an unmet need may not be able to concentrate on learning.
9. Work with parents and guardians on ways to encourage participation and interest. Ask them what you can do to help them. Make sure they understand that you are going to work with them as a team to help their child achieve.