

Nurturing Intrinsic Motivation in the Classroom

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### Abstract

The psychological theory of behaviorism is a theory of learning based upon the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning and that the human being is no different from any other animal, controlled solely by conditioned reflexes. Behaviorism became the primary basis of educational philosophy in the first half of the 20th century. Today it has been largely replaced by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that is far more compatible with the Islamic concept of human nature (fitrah). SDT is an empirically based approach to motivation in which autonomy is a core concept. SDT states that intrinsic motivation is present when something is inherently interesting or enjoyable. It promotes a love of learning, higher quality learning and understanding, increased creativity and a positive attitude. Extrinsic motivation 'refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome. Intrinsic motivation depends on autonomy, the feeling of competence and on belonging. When one or more of these three components is lacking, intrinsic motivation is diminished. I discuss how intrinsic motivation can be supported by assuring that these three qualities dominate the culture of the classroom.

Key words; Intrinsic Motivation, Autonomy, Competence, Belonging, fitrah  
Behaviorism

## FITRAH

*Fitrah* is a gift given to each of us by the Creator. The Qur'an tells us that *fitrah* cannot be extinguished, although it often is not fully actualized. Most non-believers retain a conscience that allows them to distinguish right from wrong and to choose the path of righteousness.

Yasein Mohamed (1996) in his book on *fitrah*, looked closely at the works of both classical and modern Muslim scholars and their richly diverse interpretations. Mohamed defines *fitrah* as "an inborn natural predisposition which cannot change, and which exists at birth in all human beings ... that is inclined towards right action and submission to Allah, the One God". He speaks of *fitrah* as "original goodness" as opposed to "original sin", the doctrine of original sin being irreconcilable with the Islamic concepts of divine mercy and human responsibility. Only humanity has been given the unique combination of *fitrah*, freewill and intellect enabling each individual to achieve his or her role as vicegerent of God.

Our primary mission as educators is to teach and raise children who love and worship God and live a righteous life. It is therefore absolutely essential that we have a full understanding of human nature, *fitrah*, the spiritual qualities endowed in us by our Creator.

This concept -that we are created completely pure with the potential of growing into the ideal individual that God intended, is so basic to Islam and so evident in the way we bring up and teach children. Since the child's *fitrah*, pure at birth, is clearly subject to the influence of the environment it is our responsibility to see that the child is nurtured within an environment that is truly Islamic.

Although we are created to recognize the Almighty, to worship Him and to be His steward here on earth, it is ultimately up to us individually to accept or to reject this role. Our *fitrah* becomes realized only when, using our intellect and based on our own freewill, we choose to assume this responsibility.. Our intellect and freewill may complement and build upon the pure human nature with which we have been endowed or oppose it. Our intellect allows us to distinguish between right and wrong and our freewill to choose which path to follow. To deviate from the right path is not due to any defect in our human nature, but to the social circumstances to which we are exposed and how our intellect and free-will choose to deal with these circumstances.

During their days of childhood and adolescence children must be given the opportunity to learn to make choices and to use their reason to make these choices. It is the role of the teacher to prepare them for the difficult decisions they will be required to make in a future that we cannot even begin to imagine. Freewill *means* choice. Our role is to provide the children with the environment and the guidance to be able to make the choices that are pleasing to God.

We know intuitively that the human mind is far more than billions of interconnected brain cells. Even without the guidance of the Qur'an, reason and contemplation can lead to an understanding and appreciation of the human nature with which each of us have been endowed. The poet William Wordsworth shared his own understanding of *fitrah* in his long poem *Intimation of Immortality* when he wrote:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Strictly through meticulous observation, Maria Montessori also came to appreciate what we call *fitrah*. Her commitment caused her to base her entire pedagogy on this concept. (Standing, 1998).

## BEHAVIORISM

Behaviorism is based on the idea that the conduct of an individual is due solely to conditioned reflexes, or the rewards or punishments that he or she has received in response to his or her behavior. It originated with the study of Pavlov who found that by ringing a bell when his dogs were fed, they became conditioned to salivate upon hearing the bell, even if no food was offered. John B. Watson established behaviorism as a science, studying and promoting his ideas on animal behavior, child rearing and finally advertising, where he is credited in particular with using his skills in behaviorism with enticing women to smoke cigarettes. B.F. Skinner became interested in behaviorism when he came into contact with Watson at Harvard and chose to study with him for his PhD. Skinner went on to further develop the study and was instrumental in instituting behaviorism in the classroom.

Ideas prevalent in behaviorism are (1) that humans and animals differ only in the behavior that they display and that the study of animals will therefore elucidate an understanding of human behavior (2) that there is no such thing as free-will (3) that humans are born with a tabula rasa (blank slate) and their development is only subject to the stimuli to which they are exposed. Behaviorism came to dominate the field of education during the first half of the last century and has become so deeply entrenched that it has remained the method of choice in teaching and classroom management in spite of a general move away from behaviorism.

Behaviorism is particularly damaging in the case of competition when the reward for some become the punishment for others. Teaching competition as a social value, in which one “wins” at the expense of others who, incidentally lose, is beyond the realm of what Islam teaches. How much better it is to encourage cooperation and collaboration. When children are encouraged to work together and to help one another a spirit of community naturally develops that is far superior to the dog-eat-dog atmosphere of many classrooms.

Several years ago I received a query from a journalist writing an article for a local Muslim magazine.

*I am writing an article about cheating for Our Rising Star magazine. I would greatly appreciate it if you could answer the following questions to assist my research for the article.*

1. *As an educator and parent what do you think is the best way to prevent cheating?*
2. *How would you advise parents to protect their children from having others cheat from them?*
3. *If cheating occurs, what is the best way of dealing with it?*
4. *Why do teachers sometimes turn a blind eye to cheating? If a parent suspects cheating has occurred but the teacher fails to respond what should a parent do?*
5. *How should children be taught to be honest in their worship? Fasting for example?*

My response is given below:

*Cheating is unknown at the Islamic School of Seattle... It is simply because we do not recognize the concept of “cheating”*

*The tremendous feeling of satisfaction that comes when mental and/or physical effort results in new or enhanced understanding is the reward that God has built into the human psyche. Our role as teachers is to encourage and nurture this God-given reward not to replace it with meaningless numbers, letters or other prizes and most certainly not to punish one who may progress a little more slowly with meaningless numbers or letters designed to humiliate.*

*In our experience the carrot and stick approach my work for donkeys but is totally counterproductive when applied to children. The innate desire and ability to learn is one of God’s most precious gifts. The blatant disregard of this blessing by attempting to replace it with lesser, unrelated rewards only serves to destroy this God-given incentive that was designed to stay with us throughout our lives. The great rewards promised to talib al-alim (seekers of knowledge) are not only the rewards of the hereafter, but the joy that comes with gaining knowledge.*

*Children cannot cheat when they are encouraged to work together and help one another. Because cooperation is stressed neither the teacher nor the students consider helping one another to be cheating.*

*All people –not just children- are inclined to cheat when it is -or seems to be- necessary to avoid some kind of punishment. The punishment may be looking (and feeling) bad in relation to others or disapproval of parents or teacher. As any good educator can tell you, there are many, many alternative ways of*

*assessing that do not involve testing. On the rare occasions when work must be done independently, our students are informed that the purpose is to see how much they have learned or perhaps what they already know, where they need help and how we can improve on our teaching, so that at this time it is very important to work only by themselves. There is no incentive to “cheat”.*

*Children must learn that fasting, prayer, proper wudu are all done for the sake of Allah, not to avoid punishment by their parents. If children fast or read the Qur'an in Ramadan to get a great gift for Eid, in my opinion, this will retard their incentive to do so for their own sakes and to please God*

Behaviorism is obviously incompatible with the Islamic concept of *fitrah*. According to Mohamed (1996)

*„it is important to note that behaviourism is not an attempt to explain human nature, because behaviourists do not believe that man has a nature. ...Humans differ from other animals only because they have different stimulus responses or reinforcement histories... A charitable, generous and humane individual gives only because he has been conditioned to give; there is nothing of a supposed innate nature which induces or causes such behavior.” Behaviorism denies the existence of both intellect and freewill.*

As Muslims, we know that humanity has a relationship with God that put us far beyond just a notch above other animals. We were specifically created to carry out God's will on earth. Our role and purpose would be meaningless if we fulfilled our duties automatically as other created entities do. As humans, we have the choice of how or even *whether* to live our lives to carry out our role as vicegerents of God

William, James, considered the father of American psychology, was himself unable to accept the mechanistic aspect of his science, convinced that there are characteristics that make us distinctly human. He referred to psychology as “a nasty little subject” because of the disinterest in what is of *real* importance “that which lies outside the bounds of empirical research -the things that make us truly human” (Bakhurst & Shanker,2001, p.4). Bruner, who may well be the most famous living psychologist has referred to behaviorism's “impoverished view of the person”, (Bakhurst & Shanker,2001. P.2))

## SELF-DETERMINATION

Alhamdulillah, during the past half-century psychologists have moved away from the science of behaviorism and its denial of the characteristics that make us human, The result is an understanding that is far closer to that of Islam. We begin life not with a *tabula rasa*, but with characteristics that will serve as the foundation of our later life, what we call *fitrah*. The leading scholars in the application of such characteristics to learning have developed what they have called the Self-Determination Theory, SDT. They note that the child is born with an intense, intrinsic desire to learn and that this drive to improve skills and understanding is basic and universal, part of our human nature. (Ryan

and Deci, 2008). Although this field has become quite diverse and extensive with numerous publications, the foundations established by the original researchers remain intact.

Intrinsic motivation is present when something is inherently interesting or enjoyable. It promotes a love of learning, higher quality learning and understanding, increased creativity and a positive attitude. Extrinsic motivation ‘refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome.

We have all seen this drive at work in small children and may have questioned why the attitude toward learning undergoes a dramatic change after the preschool years. It has, in fact, been definitively demonstrated that intrinsic motivation progressively decreases each year over the first eight years of school (Ryan and Deci, 2000 p.38) Excitement that came from understanding or being able to do something new seems to have vanished. What had been interesting and fulfilling is replaced by drudgery and boredom. It is as if the God-given energy that motivated the young child has evaporated.

Brady(1997)states “...the fact that the human need to understand, to know, to make sense of the world, is one of the most powerful of human drives, but the institutions we’ve created to meet that deep human need would close their doors if it weren’t for mandatory attendance laws, social expectations and institutional inertia”. This loss of motivation is not inevitable and does not happen when we allow intrinsic motivation to continue to guide learning.

Numerous psychologists today are concentrating their research on motivation. There have been hundred of empirical education studies guided by SDT. See Guay, Ratell & Chanal (2008) for a review. I will refer most often to Deci and Ryan, recognized as the leading experts in the field. With their various graduate students they have devoted more than three decades to studying intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, noting the *natural* inclination of humans to learn and explore, to be curious and self-motivated with an inherent desire to master new skills and to share and apply their talents.

They identify three psychological factors that encourage intrinsic motivation, (1) autonomy, (2) competence and (3) relatedness, When these needs are *not* met, intrinsic motivation diminishes Ryan & Deci (200) These factors must be offered in a context of, consistency and predictability with clear expectations, but it is essential that this structure be maintained within a supportive autonomous environment Guay, Ratell & Chanal (2008).

Obviously, not every task is intrinsically rewarding to all people. There is a continuum between behavior that is entirely intrinsic and that for which there is no motivation at all. A skilled teacher can move an extrinsically motivated task closer to the intrinsic end of the scale by encouraging the same psychological tasks that promote intrinsic motivation. When the goal of extrinsically motivated tasks is related more to external control than to a goal that is self-endorsed an uninteresting task it can become more intrinsic.

**Autonomy**, the state or condition of having independence or freedom is supported by challenge, choice and opportunity for self-direction and is undermined by control and perceived control in the form of orders, threats, deadlines, competition pressure and even by praise, rewards, grades, certificates. All of these factors directly cause the purposefulness to become dependent upon external control rather than on self-regulation. be maintained within a supportive autonomous environment.

In one study, prior to the start of the school year teachers were separated into two groups according to whether they were controlling, endorsing the use of punishments and rewards; or autonomy supportive, eschewing external rewards and concentrating on the choices and interests of the children. The results were dramatic. Within just a few weeks the children of the controlling teachers were less intrinsically motivated. They were less curious, less desirous of challenge, and had lowered perceived competence (Deci et al, 1981).

Studies on verbal rewards were that were presented in a way that seemed controlling have been reviewed separately from those that were presented as positive feedback. In college students, verbal rewards can actually increase intrinsic motivation if they are perceived as feedback, but have a negative effect if they seem controlling. *Both kinds of verbal rewards generally have a negative affect on the intrinsic motivation of children,* Tangible rewards, including money, prizes, trophies and certificates undermined intrinsic motivation for both college-aged students and children, but the decrease in intrinsic motivation was *significantly greater* for children Deci & Ryan, 2000)

Can we modify behavior through punishment and rewards? Certainly, but the effects are likely to be short-term and will negatively influence the overall development of positive attitudes. A speed limit is enforced through punishment and it generally works. If you get one costly speeding ticket, it reduces the probability that you will continue to drive above the limit. The primary purpose of the fine, however, is to maintain safety not to motivate a dislike of reckless speed.

To encourage learning teachers are often urged to focus on rewards and avoid punishment. Rewards, can indeed, be an effective method of controlling immediate behavior but in the long-term generally undermine interest, persistence and propensity for challenge, the natural processes that keep us responsive to our environment and in touch with real needs. Deci and Ryan (2000) have written

*We live in the age of rewards. The regulation of behavior by consciously constructed and socially imposed reward contingencies... is ubiquitous within contemporary western-oriented societies...In many cases rewards are used explicitly to try to get individuals to do what does not come naturally, work absurdly long hours, ignore interests and relationships, or engage in unvalued behavior...Imposed reward contingencies are, to an increasing extent, replacing other forces such as community, tradition, internalized values and natural consequences...*



They compare the executive who makes millions of dollars a year, but neglects his health and family to the story of a rat focused so strongly on rewards that he was the darling of his experimenters. One morning he was found disoriented from exhaustion with the only sign of life a weakened paw still reaching for the bar to tap just one more time. Indeed, there is a severe cost to organisms –human and otherwise when they become focused on rewards that do not satisfy real needs and obscure the drives that should guide them towards mental and physical health (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

**Competence**, or the feeling that one gets when one's performance is successful, or is perceived by the performer as successful, also enhances intrinsic motivation. It is essential that a student feel challenged, but also has the understanding and the skills needed to succeed. Children differ in the preexisting experiences, understanding and skills that they bring to the classroom and teachers must avoid the comparison and competition that detracts from their feeling of competence,

Few teachers today actually use the bell-shaped distribution for determining grades, but even when we don't grade "on the curve" there is nevertheless often an expectation that there will be only a relatively small number of students who have actually met the expectations of the curriculum. In fact even those in the A and B sections of the curve may have also not mastered the material. Instead they have mastered the art of test taking or of cramming a lot of facts into their short-term memory. The majority of students have simply not been able to truly learn whatever it is we have been attempting to teach. For whatever reason, they need a little longer to really come to understand.

It is essential for children to remain confident that they are basically competent and will progress. Yet how much apparent mediocrity or failure can ordinary children take before they give up trying? The child who never attempts her assignments is quitting before she even gets started. The child who hates math, or dreads school, or considers himself 'not very smart' certainly does not feel competent, nor does the child of normal or even superior intelligence who comes from a family background with little opportunity to have entered school with the expected prior knowledge and is plunked into a special education class.

The feeling of competence may be the factor that is most difficult for teachers with the best of intentions to regulate because it is so heavily influenced by time. Wood (1999), one of the founders of the Responsive Classroom Program, has focused on the importance of time as essential for keeping children engaged and motivated. As teachers we are committed to the idea that all children can achieve, just not necessarily at the same rate. If children are to be and feel competent they must be allowed the time to achieve.

We ourselves have little control over time. We are rigidly controlled by the designated hour or less that it takes to complete a lesson; the predetermined period allotted to cover a single unit; the nine months in which a child is expected to learn everything that must be learned in a specific grade-level.

In a scathing essay in *Educational Leadership*, entitled "The futility of trying to teach everything of importance", Grant Wiggins (1989, p.45) has described the curriculum in use in most schools today as based on a "medieval view of knowledge"

*"To only have subscribe to the myth that everything of importance can be learned through didactic teaching amounts to a premodern view of learning. The pejorative simile of the school as factory could only have taken hold in a culture which already believed that knowledge is facts passively received. The view that learning is nonproblematic, and inactive is the persistent residue of a medieval, static, and sectarian tradition.*

Howard Gardiner, the Harvard professor best known for his theory of multiple Intelligences, identifies the major problem with American schools as the attempt to "cover" everything. Note that "covering" only means that the material has been presented, through lectures or reading. Even if the student has absorbed it into his or her short-term memory long enough to regurgitate it on a test, few will make the connections within the brain needed to become a part of long term knowledge or understanding.

In most schools the curriculum is tied to texts that thinly cover an encyclopedic amount of material, preventing students from delving deeply into topics that are the most relevant to their own lives and interest and prevent the teacher from focusing on authentic learning that will become a part of the student's long-term memory. Wiggins (1989, p. 45) states that "Teaching has been reduced to the written equivalent of TV news sound bites in pan, because so many groups lobby hard for inclusion of their pet ideas".

Carol Dweck, a leading researcher in motivation, found that there are individuals who feel competent—even in the face of extreme difficulty. They have what she calls a "growth" mindset. They believe that talent, ability and intelligence can be cultivated through effort. A growth mindset enhances intrinsic motivation because of the understanding that competence is related to struggle and effort. Those with a "fixed" mindset who believe that "either you've got it or you don't" cannot deal with challenges and are more likely to give up. Having a fixed mindset, therefore, undermines intrinsic motivation.

This is true regardless of innate intelligence and is every bit as damaging to a child of high native ability or intelligence.

As a young researcher, Dweck (2006) designed an experiment that changed the course of her career -and her life! Her goal was to study how children coped with failure, but what she learned was something entirely different. Children were given progressively more difficult puzzles until they became so difficult that they were impossible to solve. To her surprise she found that there were some who didn't *need* to cope because they didn't experience their inability to solve a problem as failure!

*Confronted with the hard puzzles, one ten-year old boy pulled up his chair, rubbed his hands together, smacked his lips and cried out, 'I love a challenge' ... Another, looked up with a pleased expression and said with authority. 'You know, I was hoping this would be informative!' ... They obviously knew something I didn't and I was determined to figure it out—to understand the kind of mindset*

*that could turn failure into a gift. P3-4*

She did figure it out and has since become a leading authority on motivation. Because these attitudes are primarily established during childhood, Dweck's findings have important implications for educators. Placing a child in a lower reading group, in a leveled classroom or giving her a low grade can promote a fixed mindset but so can labeling someone as gifted or naturally talented.

The good news is that no one is stuck with a fixed mindset. Ricci (2013) offers invaluable ideas and resources to build the growth mindset in children –and perhaps more importantly- in teachers and administrators. To encourage a positive, growth mindset in students it is essential that their teachers develop this mindset within themselves. Parents and teachers need to understand that anything that labels a child as inherently smart or slow; good or bad; talented or not will encourage the fixed mindset that will prevent facing the challenges and struggles that are the stimulus for learning and improvement of every kind. Challenges, and what we see as failures are nothing more than lessons to be learned.

In particular, an understanding of the flexibility of the brain and emphasizing how the act of learning itself causes an increase in intelligence by strengthening the connections between neurons can help children -and their teachers- appreciate their potential.

Ricci (2013) found that just as intrinsic motivation decreases as children progress through school, so does a fixed mindset. She studied children from kindergarten through third grade. The two classes of kindergarteners that she studied displayed 100% growth mindset. By first grade this fell to 90%. By second grade 82% and by third grade 58%. Another study in a suburban Washington D.C. school found that only 40% of children in sixth grade had a growth mindset.

Relatedness, or a sense of belonging, has been less intensely studied in relation to intrinsic motivation than autonomy and the feeling of competence, probably because it is widely recognized as a basic, compelling human need and therefore more obvious and less controversial.). There have, however, been a number of studies that measured relatedness in the classroom and its specific link to intrinsic motivation. There are three key findings that are notable. (1) The findings are positive across all age groups (2) The teacher has a critical role in encouraging a sense of community and (3) cooperation and a sense of community actually enhance the sense of autonomy.

Relatedness is easily implemented by the classroom teacher, but only if the teacher is aware the need for children to feel a sense of community and acceptance. Classrooms where teachers encourage cooperation and participation by all of the students, focusing on individual mastery, as opposed to competition, are most likely to exhibit a strong sense of community.

Some have suggested that the need for autonomy is only valid among cultures that are individualistic and are less inclined toward relatedness. But this is a misunderstanding of autonomy. It has been shown that all three of these autonomy, competence and

relatedness provide self-determined motivation in many very different cultural contexts. Each of these qualities enforces the others. There is actually a positive feedback system between autonomy and relatedness. Choices and a role in decision-making increases relatedness and a feeling of competence, while a sense of community increases autonomy. People feel most related to those who support their autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2008) .

This is inline with the Muslim perspective discussed by Musah.(2011) who emphasizes that individualism and community are inseparable,, inborn in humans and should be nurtured together; the group recognizing and supporting the wellbeing, rights and growth of the individual and the individual fulfilling his responsibility to the group.

The role of the teacher is not merely to encourage a sense of community among the children. Although generally discouraged by school administration, students benefit from a close personal relationship with their teachers. When teachers encourage students' autonomy and competence and are perceived as warm and supportive, holding high expectations, providing assistance and are seen as warm and friendly, a sense of community prevails. Parents who exhibit these same qualities also encourage intrinsic motivation.

It is our sacred duty to question the methodology we may have mindlessly assumed; to recognize and appreciate the *fitrah* of the child and to respect and build on the gifts bestowed by God on every human individual.

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