

The Idea: Enthusing Unenthusiastic Pupils

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What is an enthusiastic pupil?

It is likely that, in your classroom, you will have a wide spectrum of pupils, ranging from extremely enthusiastic to highly reluctant, in terms of their learning. Enthusiastic pupils are active learners who can focus, ask questions and 'go the extra mile' in their work. While being enthusiastic does not necessarily mean higher academic outcomes, research shows that pupils who are engaged in school are generally more motivated, which can lead to better life outcomes.

Why is enthusiasm important?

Abraham Maslow, in the mid-20th century, worked on a hierarchical pyramid which defined human needs. He believed that humans should self-actualise (fully exploiting their talents and potential) but that this was only possible if the needs below self-actualisation in the pyramid were met.



At the bottom of the pyramid are basic needs; the pyramid builds up to advanced needs and self-actualisation, which includes feeling enthusiastic and motivated, at the top. Being able to be enthusiastic, according to Maslow and many eminent psychologists after him, demonstrates fulfilment of a human desire for self-actualisation.

Why do pupils lack enthusiasm?

Any pupil can become disengaged or begin to lack enthusiasm, and the reasons behind it will be wide, varied and personal. For some pupils, it may just be a short-term problem; for others, it may last throughout their entire school career if left unresolved. Some pupils may become disengaged in just one subject and for others, it can be across the board.

Home reasons:

- home life
- socio-economic
- cultural
- religious
- health
- trauma
- personal relationships

School reasons:

- lack of subject knowledge
- gifted and talented pupil trying to fit in
- poor classroom relationships
- lack of reward
- special educational need and/or disability (SEND)
- lack of confidence

What does enthusiasm look like in the classroom?

Enthusiasm in the classroom, at a surface level, may look like hands in the air to respond to questions, active participation in learning, handing homework in on time with extension tasks completed and utter focus on what the teacher is saying. It is important to remember that these are very outward signifiers of enthusiasm, and there will also be pupils in your class who are 'quietly enthusiastic', their zeal reflected in their books or small group discussions rather than to the whole class.

A lack of enthusiasm, or disengagement, can manifest itself in a number of ways. These range from a quiet lack of interest, where pupils are only willing to do the bare minimum, to challenging behaviour issues which can disrupt the flow of the whole class. Either way, these manifestations of a lack of interest from pupils can be upsetting and frustrating, and difficult to manage as a class teacher.

Remember that there will be pupils in the classroom, those who are neither extroverted in their enthusiasm nor challenging in their disengagement, who you should not overlook. These are pupils who, with the right techniques (such as those below), may begin to exhibit more enthusiastic and engaged traits, which may help to improve their outcomes.

How can unenthusiastic pupils be enthused?

Create an enthusiastic learning environment

Your pupils will respond to the learning environment that you create. A positive learning environment means one in which the surroundings are conducive to pupils feeling safe, encouraged, valued and supported. It is only within this environment that pupils will also show enthusiasm. Here are some things you can do to create a positive, and enthusiastic, learning environment:

- Greet your pupils enthusiastically as they enter the classroom - it will set the tone for the lesson/day.
- Create a sense of order and routine - a well-organised classroom will help your pupils to channel all their energy into learning.
- Celebrate successes - whether it's through displays, certificates or other incentives, make sure that you recognise hard work and achievement in your class.
- Listen to your pupils - from time to time, ask your students how they prefer to learn and, where appropriate, find out what they would like/feel they need to learn and adapt your planning where you can.
- Be reliable - pupils value consistency in the adults around them, so do your best to try to ensure that you are supportive, trustworthy and dependable.

Lead with enthusiasm

It is really important, alongside creating a positive learning environment, that you, as the class teacher, are enthusiastic. Your pupils are mirrors - they will reflect your passion (or lack of) for a topic and reflect it back at you. This is particularly noticeable in both the tone of your voice and your non-verbal communication.

A study by Cornell University found that there was a definitive link between the enthusiasm in a teacher's voice and the response from students. A professor at the university taught the same class twice; he used his normal tone of voice in the first semester and used a more enthusiastic tone in the second semester. The students in the latter group not only evaluated the teacher more favourably and highly, but they also perceived that they had learned more than compared to the first semester students (Lang, 1997).

Similarly, non-verbal communication is really important. For example, lessons will be much more engaging when the teacher is not behind their desk or continually next to the whiteboard, but is instead moving around the room; this is, of course, dependent on how physically mobile the teacher is able to be. Body language and facial expressions are equally important - they convey a lot of information to pupils about how important and interesting the subject is. For example, folded arms, a furrowed brow or slumping may indicate to pupils that the teacher is either disengaged with the subject, or worse, with the pupils themselves.

One of the most important ways to show your interest or enthusiasm in what you are teaching and in your pupils is to make as much eye contact as possible. Parker (2006 cited in Zeki, 2009) attests that "by maintaining eye contact with students when speaking or listening to them, the teacher is asserting that s/he expects conversation and is interested in what the student is saying." In other words, when a teacher makes eye contact with their pupils, it encourages participation. Again, consideration should be given to pupils who may find eye contact uncomfortable.

Make it interactive

In your planning, you should try to make sure that you are thinking of your pupils as active learners, rather than passive observers. Your pupils will engage more, and retain more, when they are actively engaged in what is going on in the lesson. Whether it is a short educational game, activity, discussion or collaborative learning exercise, your pupils need to be kept on their toes and actively engaged.

It is easy for pupil enthusiasm to wane, particularly if a lesson is long, so when this is the case, you might want to build in opportunities for them to move around. One way to do this is by incorporating a 'brain break'; this is a 3-5 minute physical activity session which has a number of benefits for young people but its immediate effect is to focus pupils, tackle restlessness or act as a 'reset' button when a lesson has reached a stagnant or passive stage. Further information about the use of these can be found in our resource on [The Daily Move](#).

Develop growth mindset

Growth mindset is a well-known theory which says that, "the distinguishing feature of geniuses is their passion and dedication to their craft and particularly the way in which they identify, confront and take pains to remedy their weaknesses" (Good, Rattan & Dweck, 2007). In other words, people with a fixed mindset think that their intelligence or potential is fixed at birth and will not change, no matter what they do, whereas those with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be changed and developed throughout their lives.

Naturally, those who understand what a growth mindset is, and support the theory, are more likely to work hard and be enthusiastic because they know that hard work has the potential to change their outcome. You may wish to introduce the theory to your class and refer back to it in your lessons when you need an extra boost of motivation or enthusiasm.

This Will Help If...

- you want to support disengaged or unenthusiastic pupils
- you want to encourage participation, engagement and enthusiasm in your classroom
- you want a low-cost way to raise academic attainment

Start Your Research Here

This [website](#) from Verywell Mind gives you background information on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of need.

This [video](#) by World of Better Learning gives you some top tips for creating a positive learning environment.

This Forbes [article](#) is an interesting introduction to Carol Dweck and Growth Mindset.

Action Points

Self-evaluate

Take some time to consider your own enthusiasm in the classroom and the learning environment you have created. Think about where you might be able to make improvements or changes. If you find self-evaluation difficult, you could ask a colleague to do a short observation and specifically evaluate your classroom environment, your use of tone and your non-verbal communication. Before your colleague starts, you may wish to share this OneStep with them and highlight the sections on 'learning environment' and 'lead with enthusiasm' so that they know what to look out for.

Will you self-evaluate or ask a colleague to observe you?

Which areas do you need to work on? How will you work on them?

Try out a brain break

Read our [OneStep: The Daily Move](#) or [Stretch and Balance](#) and find out more about why it is important to get your pupils moving in the classroom. Try to incorporate one or more of the ideas from these CPD resources when enthusiasm is dwindling in the classroom.

When would be an appropriate time to plan in a brain break?

How will you incorporate the daily move or stretch and balance exercises in your classroom? How will you adapt to accommodate all pupils?

Research growth mindset

There are many approaches to incorporating growth mindset in your classroom, including explicitly teaching it, having a growth mindset display board, using it in extension tasks or as a subject for a class discussion. Before you begin to think about which would work best in your classroom, take some time to research growth mindset using the sources given, and see if you can find any more.

How will you structure your research?

How will you try to use growth mindset in your classroom?

Talk about learning styles

Think about how your pupils learn best, and if you are not sure, ask them! You could do this as a class discussion, or sometimes it can have a better effect if you ask in an anonymous class survey or questionnaire. Consider the results and try to incorporate some of these into your planning. Remember that pupils learn well when they are listened to and have some autonomy over their learning.

How do your pupils learn best?

How will you reflect this in your planning?

Source Material

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