

## Enhancing pupil motivation through an alternative curriculum: Valuing youth-selected activities

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### **Abstract**

*This paper suggests that if activities selected by young people themselves as part of their leisure time were incorporated into an alternative (informal) curriculum this could enhance motivation, and, therefore, achievement, within the formal curriculum. Working from the premise that unicycling is a lifestyle sport, the paper argues that unicycling is an example of a self-selected activity which inspires motivation in young people which could potentially be harnessed in the education system.*

*The paper draws on an ethnographic, doctoral research project which examines case studies of young people who unicycle. Data gathered so far from participant observations, focus groups and questionnaires, suggests three significant findings. Firstly, that young people who are successful at unicycling are motivated to learn, and then further develop their skill level, by the challenge and intense satisfaction felt from clear goal setting and achievement. Secondly, that unicycling has a positive impact on individuals, triggering achievement behaviour. Thirdly, teachers are not harnessing the high levels of motivation created in individuals by unicycling. By not valuing the individual's skills or interests in school, either formally or informally, teachers are missing an opportunity to maintain pupils' engagement.*

**Keywords: motivation, achievement behaviour, concentration, curriculum, unicycling**

### **Introduction**

Recent years have seen growing concern over disengagement of pupils, particularly secondary school pupils, in education nationally.

*'At 76%, UK participation (in education) at age 17 is the fifth lowest among 28 OECD countries. Too many young people are turned off learning and fail to achieve between 14 and 19.'* (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 91)

If the education system is to be successful in engaging young people, re-engaging disaffected youth and maintaining engagement with younger children, then it must consider what motivates these individuals. Motivation is not a new theme in education and its importance has been previously acknowledged. 'There are only three things of importance to successful learning; motivation, motivation, motivation...' (Ball, 1995, p. 5)

This is a rather simplistic view of learning but it does recognise the significance of motivation in education. It is a factor which affects all pupils and which all educationalists must take account of if they are to be effective. It is particularly important for teachers of disaffected children who may be more difficult to motivate than others. However, motivation as a key influence on learning has lost favour in recent years as the National Curriculum has dominated schools with its standardised assessment regimes. If the above quote from Ball is acknowledged as recognising a key factor in education, then it is as relevant and significant today as it was when it was made. The Government regularly renews its commitment to education and especially to raising standards in schools and increasing pupil success: the Tomlinson Report is but one example of this. If the Government is to achieve its goal then motivation levels will have to be addressed.

Physical activity is acknowledged as one means of motivating children and youth. The Government identified five key outcomes which 'really matter for children's and young people's well-being' as part of its *Every Child Matters* policy (DfES, 2003, p. 14). Interestingly, of these five, one is directly linked to physical activity and one to achievement:

- *'Being healthy: enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle.'*
- *'Enjoying and achieving: getting the most out of life and developing broad skills for adulthood.'* (DfES, 2003, p. 11)

Physical activity provides a mechanism for these two outcomes to be achieved. Regular participation in physical activity or sport is key to healthy active lifestyles among children and young people. If teachers and other educators can understand children's motivation to participate regularly in such activity, then the identified motivational drivers can be used in a learning context to build self-esteem and enhance enjoyment and achievement, as research by Xiang et al. demonstrates, (2003).

Unicycling developed from trick cycling, which originated in the late 1800s, when Penny Farthing riders competed to see how far they could cycle. Due to its origins, many outsiders consider unicycling a circus activity, perhaps a form of play. However, the physical skill and level of fitness required by competent riders makes it far more than this. Although many do enter the sport through circus workshops or as a development of circus skills, those who pursue it further, move on to regard it as a sport, as data gathered for this project clearly shows.

Unicycling does meet the Council of Europe's definition of sport (Bignold, 2006), however, it has more in common with newer extreme or lifestyle sports as defined by Wheaton (2004), than with many of the traditional sports, including those in the formal curriculum. Disciplines in unicycling include Freestyle (doing "tricks", such as triple spins or wheel walking, in an aesthetic routine to music), Mountain Unicycling (off-road riding), Trials (riding or hopping over obstacles such as wooden palettes and empty cable drums), Track (distance and speed racing), Street (riding along railings and fences then jumping off them, for example with a double twist) and Hockey. Similarities can be seen here with other lifestyle sports, including BMX biking, skateboarding and mountain biking, with the emphasis on location, equipment, endurance and sometimes the danger involved, through risk-taking tricks or stunts (Chandler et al, 2002). Like other lifestyle sports, unicycling and its various disciplines, have undergone dramatic growth in participation rates recently with Trials and Street being the most popular

disciplines amongst young riders. It has yet, however, to receive any significant academic attention.

### Literature review

Motivation can be described simply as the driving force that makes people do the things they do (Chambers, 2001). Much has been written about theories of motivation and what it is that drives both individuals and groups in certain acts. This paper is concerned with motivational factors linked to the physical activity of unicycling. It is based on the premise that unicycling is a sport and, as such, has common motivational factors present in some other sports. In order to investigate what motivates individuals to unicycle it is first necessary to consider key theories of motivation through a summarised literature review.

A preliminary definition of motivation is given by Beck (2004, p. 3);

*'Motivation is then concerned with our movements, or actions, and what determines them. These factors may be internal (such as being, hungry, thirsty, in pain) or external (such as the presence of tasty food, an attractive person, or cues indicating imminent danger). Motivation is a broad theoretical concept we often use to explain why people (or animals) engage in particular actions at particular times.'*

Beck's definition recognises the conceptual nature of theories of motivation. It is a difficult concept to measure as it is very personal, with many variables, nevertheless, the study of motivation has become increasingly scientific in recent years. Different theories of motivation are concerned with either intrinsic or extrinsic motivators or a combination of the two. More recent developments building on Freud's work in the nineteenth century, for example, James' Instinct Theory, Cannon's Drive Theory and Skinner's Behaviourism. These key theories have developed from Freud's original ideas and illustrate changing views on motivation (Chambers, 2001).

Motivation is a hugely complex concept, not least because different things motivate different people in different situations. Taken in isolation one theory is not comprehensive enough to accurately identify what motivation is occurring at a given time in a given situation. Recent studies of motivation acknowledge a more multidimensional and non-static approach. This can be illustrated by Dornyei and Otto's definition of motivation (1998, p. 65):

*'The dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out.'*

Beck (2004) identifies ten major theories of motivation which he regards as being highly relevant to sports. Those which are most relevant to this study include Achievement Theory, Attribution Theory of Achievement, Drive Theory, Goal Setting Theory and Reinforcement Theory. Achievement Theory is regarded by many as particularly important in the field of sport (Sewell et al, 2005). McClelland's research (1987) concludes that people who have a significant need for achievement are more persistent in striving for their goal than those who have a low level of achievement need. Successful individuals balance the likelihood of

feeling pride through success, by attempting a reasonably difficult task, for example, while avoiding the shame of failure, more likely with too difficult a task.

Mastery orientation is a motivational style within the Achievement Theory which has a direct impact on self-esteem (Galloway et al, 1998). "Learned helplessness", a related style, arises from a strong tendency to attribute a lack of success to a lack of ability. People who have the motivational style "learned helplessness" see success as beyond their own personal control. They assume they are unable to complete the task or tasks successfully. They interpret offers of help as confirmation of their lack of ability and as a result of this they have low self esteem. In contrast to this, individuals whose motivational style is mastery orientation are driven by the desire to achieve mastery over a set task. They are not concerned with avoiding failure, nor motivated to show themselves as better than others. They have reasonable and realistic levels of self-esteem and regard failure as a temporary setback.

According to Roberts (2001) true motivational theories in physical activity must address all three aspects of achievement. These are energization, direction and regulation. The constructs which underpin these are personal goals, emotional arousal and personal agency beliefs, the belief in one's capabilities. The achievement behaviour they effect are behaviours such as to try harder, to concentrate more, to persist longer, to pay greater attention, to perform better and to choose to practice longer.

These are all behaviours which observers take into account when they say whether or not an individual is motivated in a particular sport. The social cognitive approach relates to McClelland's (1987) achievement theory as both regard achievement as crucial considering the individual as being motivated by the need to achieve a personally or socially valued goal. Interviews with unicyclists of differing skills levels suggest that achievement is a key motivational factor in learning to ride and then developing competency.

Intrinsic motivation is regarded as highly positive and is defined as the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore and to learn. (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Learning to ride a unicycle is a challenging experience, in which one explores and develops his/her capacities while learning new skills. What is crucial to intrinsic motivation is recognising the conditions that elicit and sustain it rather than subdue and diminish it. When the latter happens that is the point at which young people, in particular, may begin to become disengaged from their given surroundings (Lawrence, 2006), as can happen in school for some pupils.

## **Methodology**

Six case studies of unicyclists, aged 14 to 24, are at the centre of the project. Key to the case studies are in-depth, semi structured, biographical interviews. The interviews take a narrative, rather than chronological approach, in line with Harding (2006) who argues against the assumption that interviewees can best retell their experiences in the correct sequence of time. She suggests that 'the present is a crucial reference point for attempts to remember the past...' (2006, p. 2) Her own research, on which she bases this argument, was conducted with young people and so is of particular interest to this study. A narrative approach invites interviewees to select key experiences and link these together where they feel appropriate, not necessarily in any chronological order. This is true for this study as the young unicyclists were not required to recount events in any particular order. A loose structure of present, then past and future was offered as an aid, but did not have to be

adhered to. Participant observations of the six unicyclists at actual events were conducted in order to gather accurate details of the contexts in which they ride. Additional interviews and focus groups were held with teachers of unicycling and others involved in the sport to provide a larger picture of the sport and the unicycling community. Alongside these qualitative methods, quantitative data was gathered through a self-selecting questionnaire at a British unicycle convention and at the world championships. This was to identify any general trends from the case studies; 159 correctly completed questionnaires were collected.

Data in the final doctoral thesis will be presented as narratives, telling the stories of the young riders, in the form of creative non-fiction, as defined by Sparkes, (2002). This is to maintain as much of the original stories as possible maximising authenticity and capturing the excitement of the sport which the young people describe with such animation. The intention is to ensure their voices are heard: a crucial element in credible narrative research (Heikkinen et al 2007). Careful ethical consideration has been given to the study, particularly to the construction of the narratives, as they are concerned with young people's self-identity during adolescence. As Elliott (2005) states, such narratives need to be presented sensitively so that they are not damaging to the individuals' sense of self. This research project does not seek to measure levels of motivation brought about by unicycling but to present examples of youth who are motivated by it, as a means of identifying its potential. Extracts from some of these narratives will be presented here to illustrate the findings. All names and places have been changed to ensure anonymity. The extracts included here also serve to capture something of the excitement of the sport for the benefit of readers who are not familiar with it.

## Results

Questionnaires and interviews with unicyclists show that motivation to master basic unicycling, and then to develop further skills and greater mastery, is based around the intense satisfaction felt on achieving small goals set by the individuals themselves. 76% of male respondents to the questionnaire said that they were motivated to learn by setting small goals and the satisfaction at meeting these, while 66% were motivated to further develop their skills by setting new challenges, such as a harder trick, or a faster time. These motivators were slightly lower for female unicyclists with 53% and 43% respectively. Such motivation is evidenced in the responses from questionnaires below, to the question: "What motivated you to learn to ride?"

*'I set small realistic goals.*

*As a kid I wanted people to see me as someone special. Now it's an inner motivation and satisfaction that drives me...*

*It was a goal that I set for myself; now it's to overcome the difficulty of learning a new trick. And more – the desire to succeed, the pleasure of success.'*

These statements clearly link to motivational theories of goal setting, mastery orientation and achievement. The extract below from Zach's story illustrates how in the very early stages of learning to unicycle, when 'failure' is inevitable, small goals become deeply significant. Zach is 14 and his narrative is based on his first unicycling lesson:

*Zach didn't hear them; he was oblivious to everything around him. Would he be able to do this without Dave holding him up? He didn't think so and he clung on to the fence tightly. He sat heavy on the saddle looking at his feet. 'Half a turn, on my own, no way... well I did manage it with Dave. I could just do a quarter turn. If I just push down.... Oh ohhhh!' The wheel moved slightly and stopped. Zach cautiously moved his hands along the fence a little to catch up with his body and sat upright again – 'I did it; a quarter turn! YES!' He stared down at his feet concentrating hard. 'OK, half a turn this time; half a turn mate! Ready!' he encouraged himself. He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn..., 30 degrees,... 60 degrees,... 90 degrees - another quarter turn – 'Keep going!', 120 degrees,... wobble,... stop. 'Don't panic!' He felt pleased; that was the furthest he'd gone yet. It was OK. He was moving. He was riding (of a sort).*

*'Right, ready?' he asked himself out loud, 'Yes!' He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees,... 60 degrees,... 90 degrees - another quarter turn – 'Keep going!' 120 degrees,... wobble,... 'Keep going!', 140,.. 160... almost,... 180! He stopped. 'YES! YES! YES!' The half revolution he'd had as his goal – he'd done it. He'd ridden half a turn of the wheel, all on his own, with no support – well only the fence. 'Yes!' More confident now, he tried again. He concentrated hard and the wheel started to turn, 30 degrees,... 60 degrees,... 90 degrees,... 120 degrees,... 140,... 160,... 180! He stopped. 'YES!', 'Twice!' He'd done it, twice. He could do it! He did it again and again and again! Stopping each time, getting his balance, getting upright, then going again. He kept his eyes on the peddles, looking down and concentrating hard. Half a turn, always just half a turn, but half a turn every time. 'YES! YES! YES!'*

Questionnaire data confirms on-going observations that once individuals have mastered basic unicycling they generally pursue one or more disciplines of their choice and so continue to set themselves new goals or challenges; 86% of questionnaire respondents were motivated to continue riding by the challenge unicycling gave them. For someone doing Street unicycling this may be mastering a 360 degree spin or crankflip; for a Distance or Cross-country racer it might be achieving a faster time or a personal best, on a given course. The extract below from Tim's story demonstrates how further goals continue to maintain high levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for unicycling; like Tim, 78% of questionnaire participants were motivated by the satisfaction they felt in riding. Tim is 24, but has been riding since he was 12:

*'He relished the physical and technical challenge, particularly at a cross-country, twenty-four hour endurance race like this. Riding as one of a team of four could be frustrating though, you were dependent on your team members' skill level and fitness for getting enough laps of your own in and you could never fully predict how long they would take to get round and so what time you'd be going out again. For Tim this was wearisome! He just wanted to be out on the course, riding as fast as he could, pushing his boundaries to beat his previous lap times; that was his motivation, to ride faster, to ride more of the circuit, pushing his limits up the hills and managing the long, tedious downhill sections which unicyclists have to keep peddling on. This year then, for the first time, Tim was doing it as a solo rider, the chance to ride for twenty fours; it would be a great challenge! Not only were many of the cyclists in awe of him just riding the course on a unicycle but the other unicyclists were in awe of him doing it solo.'*

Data gathered from the interviews, on which the narratives are tightly constructed, and from questionnaires, does identify unicycling as being highly motivating to those individuals who ride, or to those who have a go, even if they do not pursue it. Zach's early experience demonstrates this. These high levels of motivation in turn promote Roberts' (2001) achievement behaviour identified earlier, for example, to try harder, concentrate more and pay greater attention.

One male respondent in his early 20s made this interesting comment:

*'When I started unicycling I noticed my grades go up at school – they got better. Looking back now I realise it taught me to concentrate, try harder I mean; it made me feel good too.'*

Self-esteem is a key theme in the larger, doctoral research project from which this paper draws, as it is closely linked to motivation and academic achievement (for example Yu et al., 2006; Wong et al 2002).

## Discussion

Data gathered from interviews and questionnaires, in relation to motivation, so far indicates three significant findings. Firstly, that unicycling motivates individuals to persevere at difficult tasks and can develop concentration and focus, leading to enhanced levels of achievement motivation. Secondly, unicycling, through intrinsic motivation, creates a sense of intense satisfaction as new skills are mastered and challenges met. This in turn has a positive impact on self-esteem and self-identity. Thirdly, the intense satisfaction experienced by the rider can promote Roberts' (2001) achievement behaviour, all aspects of which could be harnessed in school.

32% of questionnaire respondents felt that unicycling had increased their self-control and 34 % that it had developed their concentration, whilst these percentages are not large, they are significant. Some of these behaviours are illustrated in the short narrative extract from Ali's story below. A local reporter is interviewing Ali, a 14 year old unicycle hockey player, in between matches at a national tournament.

*'But it must be good for you; you said you had to be focussed.'*

*'A bit'*

*'What else do you think you've got from it?'*

*'Dunno...stay 'ealthy,...it's a challenge I guess.'*

*'Yer!'*

*'Me mum says it 'elps me concentrate.. She says it 'elped me balance too'*

*'Didn't you want to give up when you couldn't ride immediately?'*

*'A bit... me mum says it taught me to try 'ard things...at school like, to 'ave a go at stuff I can't do. I don't mind 'ard things now; I'll 'ave a go. Me mum says it's good we ride together, wiv Sam and Dad... and Kate.'*

*'Sister?'*

*'Yer.'*

*'What do your teachers think?'*

*'They don't know; they'd just laugh....'*

It was assumed at the beginning of the research that the young unicyclists shared their passion and success with their teachers. What school wouldn't want to harness such high levels of motivation and seek a way to use this positive energy in the classroom? However, it has become apparent through the full range of interviews conducted that this is not the case. Some teachers knew, some didn't, but those who did were not really interested. Perhaps they were too busy planning how to get their pupils to achieve the required level in the next round of standardised assessment tests, or cramming the National Curriculum into the school day to pay attention to the students' outside interests. While the focus of this paper is unicycling, it could, in fact, be any worthwhile, youth-selected activity which stimulates either groups or individuals. The premise is that valuing, and then harnessing, whatever it is that motivates a young person in self-selected activities any help them achieve educationally. The lifestyle sport of skateboarding has received significant academic attention in recent years, (Beal, 1996; Border, 2001). This has similarities with Street and Trials unicycling. Observations of boarders riding alongside unicyclists at skate-parks show that they too continually set themselves new goals to meet in the form of harder and harder tricks to ride or obstacles to jump. To reiterate – valuing and encouraging activities that young people choose as part of their daily lives can enhance educational achievement. If a particular sport, for example, does not appear on the formal curriculum, we should not give it less value than one which does as to the pupils who are motivated to pursue it, it is of significant value in their lived experience. By ignoring such activities in school we are devaluing something of that lived experience.

The majority of individuals whose stories are told in the project have not been physical truants and have not even been disaffected to a high degree but they have, at times, been disengaged. They have, however, through their unicycling, demonstrating high levels of engagement in a difficult activity with both physical and cognitive challenges. Montgomery (1998) has written on curriculum provision for disaffected and demotivated pupils. He is concerned with the large number, but often overlooked group, of pupils who have no cognitive or physical difficulty with learning but who, for other reasons, are not achieving their potential:

*'Although children with learning difficulties may be underfunctioning on a wide-scale there appear to be an even larger number without learning difficulties who are also underfunctioning. The reasons for this are often complex and may lead to the accumulation of missed opportunities for learning which can hamper new learning and lead to further difficulties.'* (Montgomery, 1998, p. 24)

He goes on to recognise the value of using their interests to motivate them and re-engage them; 'It is frequently recommended that disaffected pupils' interests should be the locus for remotivating them and bringing them back into the fold' (ibid, p. 26). This view, of using the pupils' own interests and enthusiasm to engage them in school, is supported by this thesis. Collin, reflecting on what she calls "truants in mind", shares Montgomery's commitment to a curriculum underpinned by pupil interest:

*'...offering **alternative curriculum experiences** would be a good way to reduce truancy in mind behaviour. However, such a curriculum would have to take account of, and respect, the reality of the pupils' daily-lived experiences.'* (Collin, 2002, p. 214).

By this Collin is referring to, in part, activities that the pupils choose to engage in outside of school, as part of their daily-lives. This does not necessarily equate to a dumbing-down of the curriculum, indeed, Montgomery stresses the need for such pupils to be cognitively challenged by the curriculum on offer. Many physical activities which develop particular movement skills, do provide cognitive challenge and learning to unicycle is one example of this. Indeed unicycling can be seen to link directly to the Every Child Matters agenda in four of the five outcomes, for example, in "Enjoy & achieve" it provides fun and friendship and facilitates the setting and achievement of personal goals and challenges.

This paper, and the research project it comes from, is not calling for unicycling to be part of the formal curriculum. What it is suggesting is that schools should review the opportunities that pupils are given in the full curriculum to ensure that all individuals have a chance to develop high levels of motivation in a school context, albeit in a non-academic subject or activity, by valuing activities young people choose as part of their daily lives. If teachers plan learning opportunities creatively and sensitively, they may be able to harness this motivation and its related achievement behaviour. One teacher interviewed - Zach's teacher - talked about a series of IT and literacy lessons following on from an extra-curricular unicycling lesson. She used the motivation and enthusiasm from unicycling to provide a subject for pupils to research on the internet and asked them to write letters to the unicycle instructor about what they had found out. She recalled that this stimulus created some of the best quality literacy work that pupils had done for a long time. Conversely, if educationalists are not seen by pupils to value youth-selected activities in educational settings then, as well as not harnessing related motivation, they are at risk of demotivating pupils, as the extract below from an interview with a father demonstrates:

*'Our son is 14; he's not doing as well as he should be at school, as we would like. He's really into unicycling but his school promotes football. All the time they are admonishing him for not trying out for the football team – he comes home really upset. "Dad, I don't like football, I don't want to play in the team." he tells me. The school says he is not motivated in sport, that he should play a sport as it will "be good for him". No-one else in the school can do a 5 ft drop on one wheel – he's the only one who has this skill but the school's not interested because it's not football. They take no interest in his unicycling so he doesn't talk to his friends or teachers about it – it makes me sad for him and it makes him angry and lazy at school.'*

## Conclusions

The research project underpinning this paper is concerned with the motivation of young people at different levels of engagement in the education system. All of those whose stories are told are motivated by the lifestyle sport of unicycling and see this, to varying degrees, as an important part of their self-identity. Given the difficulty of this sport and the perseverance required to become a competent rider all the individuals interviewed, or who have completed questionnaires, have demonstrated a high level of motivation, of self-belief and of diligence to achieve set goals. The questionnaire comment below demonstrates the potential it has to impact positively on individuals.

*'Unicycling has had a major effect on most areas of my life, both inside and outside me.'*

Of course, not everybody wants to learn to unicycle or will persevere until they master it, but many pupils do have interests which motivate them, activities which are exciting, significant and important to particular individuals. What teachers and practitioners working with young people need to do is to know those individuals well and know what it is that motivates them so that they can harness that motivation. This idea is not new, but in the current climate of increasing government directives, bureaucratic requirements and an emphasis on assessment, it can easily be forgotten.

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