Classroom effects on student motivation: Goal structures, social relationships, and competence beliefs

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Abstract

Psychologists and educators have often conceptualized motivation as an individual difference variable, something that some students simply have more of than other students. This view of motivation can underestimate contextual influences. In this article we consider how characteristics of the school and classroom may influence student motivation, as well as the role of educators in shaping school and classroom climate. We describe three motivational perspectives: achievement goal theory, self-determination theory, and social-cognitive theory. The effects on motivation of social relationships with teachers and peers are also considered.

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Psychologists are often trained to think of individuals as semi-autonomous beings with stable personalities that are somewhat resistant to environmental influences. Theories of motivation, which have been developed mostly by psychologists, have often followed this perspective by framing motivation as an individual difference variable. Until recently, psychologists generally recommended working one-on-one with individuals who lacked...
motivation in the classroom to try to “fix” these motivational deficits (e.g., attribution retraining, Foersterling, 1985). Teachers often speak of student motivation in similar ways. They describe students who simply lack motivation and often attribute these motivational deficiencies to stable causes that are beyond the control or influence of the classroom environment, such as weak parenting or stable personality characteristics of the students.

The purpose of this article is to describe and critically analyze research on the contextual influences on student motivation. Specifically, we consider evidence regarding how features of the learning environment can enhance or undermine student motivation. A wide range of contextual factors, including messages about the purposes of academic work and achievement, social interactions among students and between teachers and students, opportunities students are offered for taking ownership of their learning process, and how students are encouraged to think about their academic abilities, affects how students view, approach, and persist in their school work. We begin this analysis by providing a brief overview of motivation theory and research to orient the reader to terms and theories used in the field. Next, we examine three theoretical perspectives on student motivation—achievement goal theory, self-determination theory, and social-cognitive theory—and present evidence of the contextual influences on motivation from each of these theoretical perspectives. Then we describe research examining how social relationships influence student motivation, and how these social relationships can be influenced by the school and classroom context. Finally, we consider some of the limitations of the extant research on contextual influences on motivation in the classroom.

Background on motivation theory and research

Motivation is a complex part of human psychology and behavior that influences how individuals choose to invest their time, how much energy they exert in any given task, how they think and feel about the task, and how long they persist at the task. At different points in the history of research on motivation, and in different sub-disciplines of psychology, motivation has been conceptualized in various ways. Some theories of motivation have focused on factors within the individual, such as their drives, needs, and beliefs. Freud, for example, viewed motivation as primarily resultant from aggressive and sexual drives and motivated behavior as the interaction of these drives and the ego. In the 1950s, drive theories were largely replaced by need theories, most notably Atkinson’s and McClelland’s need for achievement.

In addition to these intra-individual perspectives on motivation, some theories have adopted a focus on the features of the achievement situation that influence motivation. The most influential of these, and one that still exerts a great deal of influence in school settings, is Behaviorism and, more specifically, operant conditioning (Skinner, 1954). According to this perspective, the motivation to engage in a task comes from the contingencies associated with similar tasks. If an individual is reinforced for working on her multiplication tables she is likely to willingly engage in similar multiplication tasks in the future. Similarly, lack of reinforcement for a behavior, or even punishment (e.g., being ridiculed for making a mistake on a multiplication problem) can reduce subsequent motivation for engaging in similar tasks.
More recently, motivation research and theory has emphasized a social-cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Weiner, 1986). According to this view, the cognitions of individuals regarding academic work (e.g., beliefs about their academic ability, expectations about the outcomes of engaging in the task, goals for the task) are influenced by social-contextual factors, such as messages from the teacher about the difficulty of the task, the perceived abilities of classmates, information about the importance of learning the material, and so on. From this perspective, motivation does not reside entirely within the individual or entirely within the context. Rather, motivation emerges from the interaction between individuals within the social context of the classroom and school. This person-in-context view of motivation has a long history (Lewin, 1935) but has only recently emerged as the dominant view of academic motivation.

In this article our focus will be primarily on those elements within the classroom that influence student motivation. Although we will briefly consider school-level effects on motivation, research at this level is scant, so most of our attention will be devoted to classroom-level research. There are a variety of theoretical perspectives that include considerations of classroom effects on student motivation. We focus on three of these: achievement goal theory, self-determination theory (SDT), and Bandura’s social-cognitive theory (with an emphasis on self-efficacy beliefs). Research on achievement goals indicates that the quality of students’ motivation in the classroom depends on how they define success in that situation (Ames, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1991). It also suggests that messages in the classroom (or school) make the criteria for success in those settings salient for students, thereby influencing the goals that they adopt. Self-determination theory posits that students have three basic needs (for competence, autonomy, and relatedness), and classrooms differ in their facilitation or thwarting of these needs (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Stiller, 1991). Social-cognitive theory suggests that students’ beliefs about the likelihood of their success on specific tasks, their competence, and the desirability of the outcomes associated with participation in the tasks all influence their willingness to engage in the tasks and their level of effort (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1984). Moreover, this theory posits that a variety of factors in the environment, including the relative ability of classmates, direct and vicarious reinforcement, and characteristics of the teacher, all influence these beliefs.

Our discussion of each theory begins with a definition of key terms, followed by a summary of findings that have examined the effects of the various forms of motivation in the classroom. We conclude each section with a consideration of the specific classroom processes and mechanisms responsible for variations in student motivation, according to each of these theoretical perspectives.

Achievement goal theory

Research on achievement goals has focused on the reasons students have for trying to succeed. This research has included both individual-level goals and school- or classroom-level goal structures. Personal goals (or personal goal orientations) refer to the specific goals that individuals strive to attain in achievement contexts, such as school. Although a wide variety of goals have been suggested, most research has examined two types of goals:
mastery (also called learning or task) and performance (also called ability, relative ability, or ego). Mastery goals represent a concern with developing competence and skills, and are generally considered to be evaluated against internal norms (i.e., Have I learned? Have I improved?). Performance goals represent a concern with demonstrating competence to others by appearing capable or outperforming others and are usually evaluated using interpersonal norms (i.e., Did I do better than other students in the class? Do others think I’m smart?). Recently, both mastery and performance goals have been divided into approach and avoidance components (Elliot, 1997; Pintrich, 2004). Although the mastery approach and avoidance distinction is quite new and to date there have been few empirical studies that employ this distinction, the performance-approach and performance-avoidance distinction has generated a number of findings.

Research has found a generally positive constellation of correlates with mastery goals. For example, when pursuing such goals students generally persist longer when faced with difficulty, are more willing to attempt difficult or challenging tasks, use more deep-level cognitive processing strategies, are more intrinsically motivated, and feel better about school and school work. In contrast, pursuing performance-avoidance goals is usually associated with a negative pattern of motivational beliefs and behaviors. For example, performance-avoidance goal oriented students are more likely to give up when faced with difficult work or confronted with failure, use more shallow-level cognitive strategies (like rote memorization), are less likely to seek help when they need it, and are more likely to engage in self-defeating practices like self-handicapping (i.e., intentionally creating impediments that undermine successful performance on tasks of perceived importance). The effects of pursuing performance-approach goals are not as clear-cut as those associated with mastery and performance-avoidance goal orientations. Although students who pursue performance-approach goals are more likely to show less persistence and more frequent use of shallow cognitive processing strategies, these goals are also often associated with higher achievement in school (for reviews of this research, see Elliot, 1999; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001).

In addition to personal goals, there are also goal structures. Goal structures refer to messages in the learning environment (e.g., the classroom or school) that make certain goals salient (Ames, 1992). Most researchers who have discussed goal structures have referred specifically to the classroom- or school-level goal structures (e.g., Ames, 1992; Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Urdan, Kneisel, & Mason, 1999). These goal structures have most commonly been assessed with surveys that ask students to report their perceptions of the salience of messages that are believed to reflect a mastery (e.g., an emphasis on learning and understanding) or performance (e.g., an emphasis on social comparison and competition) goals. These messages are often assumed to come from teacher practices (Midgley et al., 2000), although recent conceptualizations also include assessments of shared values among students within a classroom (Urdan, 2004a). In addition to quantitative (i.e., survey) methods, some researchers have used qualitative methods including classroom observations, student and teacher interviews, and stimulated recall methods to examine the presence and effects of classroom goal structures (Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001; Turner et al., 2002; Urdan et al., 1999).
Research on school- and classroom-level goal structures has generally found a positive correlation between goal structures and their respective personal goal, and perhaps a possible causal relationship, whereby the goal structures influence personal goals (e.g., performance goal structure → personal performance goals, mastery goal structure → personal mastery goals); these positive correlations between goal structures and personal goal orientations have been found at the classroom level in the domains of English and mathematics, and across the elementary, middle, and high school levels (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Wolters, 2004; Ryan, Alfeld-Liro, & Pintrich, 1996).

Because personal mastery goals are associated with a pattern of beneficial motivational and behavioral variables, some goal researchers suggest that educators attempt to create mastery goal structures in the classroom (Ames, 1992) and the school (Maehr & Midgley, 1991, 1996). In addition, these researchers have argued that schools and classrooms should de-emphasize performance goals because of their potential to undermine motivation and achievement. Recent research has offered some support for these suggestions. For example, there is evidence to suggest that students’ perceptions of an emphasis on mastery goals in the classroom are associated with positive affect in school (Anderman, 1999), better coping with academic difficulty (Kaplan & Midgley, 1999), and a greater sense of well-being in school (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). Further, Urdan and Midgley (2003) found that when students moved from the last year of elementary school into middle school, a particularly negative pattern of motivational, affective, and achievement outcomes was associated with a perceived decrease in the mastery goal structure of the classroom across the transition. These outcomes included a decrease in the pursuit of personal mastery goals, self-efficacy, positive affect in school, and achievement, along with an increase in negative affect. Additional research has revealed that avoidance behaviors such as self-handicapping and avoidance of help-seeking are associated with students’ perceptions of a performance goal structure in the classroom (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998; Turner et al., 2002; Urdan, 2004b; Urdan, Midgley, & Anderman, 1998).

Creating classroom goal structures

In summary, research suggests that there are benefits for motivation and behavior when students perceive a strong mastery goal structure in the school or classroom. Furthermore, it suggests potentially debilitating effects of a perceived emphasis on performance goals in the learning environment. Given these findings, it is important to understand how educators can promote a mastery goal structure and, perhaps, de-emphasize performance goals in the classroom or school. Ames (1992) suggested that a mastery goal structure can be created by (1) assigning to students appropriately challenging and meaningful academic work, (2) evaluating students in a manner that emphasizes and rewards improvement and growth over social comparison and competition, and (3) offering students more opportunities for choice and autonomy in the classroom. Research in classrooms reveals that when teachers consistently emphasize the valuing of learning and understanding the information presented in the classroom, students perceive a stronger mastery goal structure (Stipek, Givvin, Salmon, & MacGyvers, 1998; Urdan et al., 1999). Turner et al. found that students perceived a mastery goal structure in classrooms where teachers placed high
academic demands on students and consistently offered their students motivational, emotional, and social support during instruction (Turner et al., 2002). One way that teachers can undermine the mastery goal structure in their classrooms is to place too much emphasis on following classroom rules and procedures (Patrick et al., 2001). Finally, teachers and schools can promote a performance-goal orientation by placing a great deal of emphasis on ability differences among students. Practices such as grading on a normative curve, giving special privileges or recognition to high achievers, and emphasizing the correctness of answers over the process of learning can all promote performance goal structures in schools and classrooms (Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Linnenbrink (2005) created mastery goal structures in fifth grade classrooms by asking teachers to emphasize improvement in their recognition and evaluation practices. She created performance goal structures in other fifth grade classrooms by having teachers publicly note the highest achieving students and by using normative grading systems, such as grading on a curve or giving extra points to groups that outperformed other groups.

The specific processes through which school and classroom goal structures influence student motivation are theoretically straightforward. By promoting development, improvement, and learning for understanding, educators convey to students that everyone can learn and that the process of learning and developing skills is more important than who gets the best grades on tests. Such messages encourage students to adopt personal mastery goals, and these goals lead to the constellation of motivational and behavioral benefits presented earlier. In contrast, in schools and classrooms that emphasize high test scores above all else, without regard to the process of learning, the message to students is clear: Students who do best are most valued. Because some students will score well on tests with relatively little effort whereas others will not be the highest achievers even with great effort, the goal in these environments becomes one of ego protection or ego augmentation. Students with high ability will seek to demonstrate that ability and reap the rewards while students who doubt their abilities will take steps to protect their identity, often by reducing their effort and avoiding classes or tasks that might reveal their lesser ability. Although these processes of the transmission of goal-related messages are clear in theory, to date there has been relatively little examination of these mechanisms in actual classrooms. This limitation of the research will be discussed in more detail at the end of this article.

Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) proposes that human beings have three innate needs that must be fulfilled in order to achieve self-regulation, motivation, and personal well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The first of these needs is relatedness, or feelings of security and belonging in the social environment that motivate individuals to follow norms and rules. The second is competence, which is derived from effective functioning and is an important component in developing self-worth. The third need is for autonomy, an individual’s perception of control over his or her actions and success that is critical in fostering motivation. All three needs are intertwined: relatedness provides the security that is required for students to take autonomous initiative; feeling autonomous and independent in completing tasks promotes competence; competence provides the confidence for individuals to feel accepted and related to those around them. The fulfillment of these
basic needs is largely a product of social environments that regulate the amount of acceptance, success, and self-regulation that can be achieved by an individual, and the contexts in which they can be explored and developed.

Research suggests several benefits to students when they are able to meet the three needs described in SDT. For example, students who feel that they are in learning environments that are autonomy supportive are more intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 1985) have higher self-esteem and perceived competence (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986) and are less likely to drop out of school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). Intrinsic motivation refers to the will to complete a task for its own sake rather than for an external reward or effect, such as a grade or to help one’s future. Intrinsically motivated people are more excited and eager to explore, learn, and extend their creative abilities (Deci & Ryan, 1991). Therefore, it is important to foster intrinsic motivation in the classroom by promoting feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Creating autonomy-supportive learning environments

Research examining how educators can meet the needs of students in school from an SDT perspective has mostly focused on the contrast between autonomy-supportive and controlling instructional practices. Autonomy-supportive practices include listening to student input, providing informative feedback (e.g., narrative evaluations) rather than summative feedback alone (giving a grade), providing optimally challenging tasks and activities, offering students choices about what to work on or how to complete assignments, and showing students affection (Assor & Kaplan, 2001; Black & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985). In contrast, controlling practices include imposing strict deadlines for work, making numerous controlling statements (e.g., “You need to know this for the test”), using threats and competition to control behavior, giving incompetence feedback, and discouraging students from voicing their own opinions. Teachers also may engage in overly controlling practices when they offer too much support for student learning (i.e., more than they need), such as when they show students every step in solving a math problem without soliciting input from students, or not letting students try to solve the problems on their own. La Guardia and Ryan (2002) argue that when teachers offer tangible rewards in the classroom, such as stickers or prizes for completing homework, they are engaging in controlling behavior. The attitudes of teachers also impact the fulfillment of needs; student interest and motivation are discouraged by cold, uncaring teachers, and are encouraged by those who express warmth and give positive feedback (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

From an SDT perspective, the mechanisms through which classroom processes influence student motivation are clear. Instructional practices and policies that help students fulfill their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness enhance intrinsic motivation whereas those that thwart the fulfillment of these needs undermines intrinsic motivation. Above all else, students’ feelings of autonomy must be promoted. When students feel that they are doing their schoolwork because of some external coercion, they do not have an opportunity to develop feelings of competence or autonomy. Because controlling practices are often cold and harsh, it is also difficult for students to fulfill relatedness needs in controlling classrooms. Therefore, teachers can help students meet
their needs and become intrinsically motivated to learn when they provide meaningful and challenging work, allow students to take ownership over their work, and provide a caring and supportive structure for learning. Although there is little classroom-based research demonstrating how teachers can create autonomy-supportive classrooms (Urdan & Turner, 2005), correlational and experimental research suggest that certain autonomy-supportive practices do enhance the motivation and performance of students.

**Social-cognitive theory**

Bandura (1986) argued that behavior was influenced by a combination environmental factors and personal characteristics, such as beliefs about possible outcomes of behavior and their abilities to perform a given task competently. A component of this theory that has received much attention is self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996; Schunk & Miller, 2002). Self-efficacy beliefs are the judgments individuals make about their ability to perform a specific task in comparison to a specific standard (e.g., to pass a test, to build a model airplane, to get an A on an essay in English). When students feel confident that they can succeed at a task they are likely to choose to participate in the task (if they have a choice) and to expend effort on it. Students who doubt that they can succeed at a task are less likely to choose to engage in it or to put a lot of effort into it, especially if they encounter difficulty or negative feedback.

**Strategies for enhancing self-efficacy**

According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy judgments are influenced by three environmental factors: past success and failure with similar tasks, available social comparison information, and verbal persuasion. For example, teachers can tell students that they have the skills to succeed and will do well on a task if they are willing to try (verbal persuasion). One effective method of verbal persuasion is to help students understand how new tasks are related to previous tasks on which the students were successful. Another method of promoting self-efficacy beliefs is through modeling. For example, teachers can model the appropriate use of a learning strategy so that students will have an example of a successful strategy that they can readily imitate (Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996). This available model may help students feel more confident in their abilities to accomplish tasks requiring similar strategies. Similarly, teachers can point to models of students with similar ability as a means of boosting a student’s own self-efficacy (e.g., “Johnny was able to complete his multiplication assignment, and you’re just as capable as Johnny, so I know you can do it”). The most powerful influence on self-efficacy judgments is past performance. Students who have done well on past math quizzes often approach the next quiz with a belief that they will do well on it. To help students develop strong efficacy beliefs, teachers are often encouraged to provide genuine opportunities for students to experience academic success in the classroom (Schunk & Miller, 2002). For students having difficulty understanding the work in class, teachers should help students break larger tasks into smaller, more manageable parts that are at the students’ level. Repeated successes on these manageable parts of the problem will boost self-efficacy and encourage students to move onto more challenging work.
It is important to note that self-efficacy is a specific construct that refers only to beliefs about the likelihood of succeeding at specific tasks. In contrast, more global constructs like self-esteem or self-worth have often been promoted in schools, with little direct benefit to student achievement. In an effort to boost students’ self-esteem, teachers have been told to give students general, non-academic praise or to engage the class in generic recognition practices (e.g., having students in the class take turns saying something nice about a specific student). These practices rarely improve academic performance because students can, and do, often manage to maintain positive feelings about themselves even while performing poorly in school (Dweck, 2000). Mentoring programs designed to improve students’ self-esteem and academic achievement have regularly failed to do so (Barron-McKeagney, Woody, & D’Souza, 2003). Thus, although global self-esteem is important for mental health, academic achievement and motivation to engage in academic tasks is enhanced by promoting a belief among students that if they try, they can succeed. To foster such beliefs, providing opportunities for students to frequently experience academic success is important.

Summary

Although achievement goal theory, self-determination theory, and social-cognitive theory were described separately, it is important to note that they overlap considerably. For example, all three perspectives emphasize the importance of providing students with appropriately challenging academic work. When the work is too difficult, motivation is diminished because students lack confidence, feel coerced into completing work that is too difficult, and become overly concerned with failing. Similarly, all three theoretical perspectives note the importance of providing a sense of ownership over the learning process to students. Achievement goal theory suggests autonomy and choice as key ingredients for creating mastery goal structures in schools and classrooms (Ames, 1992). SDT places a premium on autonomy supportive teaching practices, including providing students with choices (Deci & Ryan, 1985). And social-cognitive theorists often place self-efficacy within a larger system of self-regulatory behavior that includes having students take ownership of their learning (Zimmerman et al., 1996). In all of these theories, teachers are encouraged to shift their roles away from the lecturing, controlling expert toward a more nurturing, supportive facilitator that can provide appropriate levels of support that provide students with opportunities to learn for themselves at their own pace.

Social relationships and their influence on student motivation

Schools and classrooms are, by definition, social environments. Within any single classroom, students have social interactions and build social relationships with their teacher, with close friends, and with their non-friend classmates. As alluded to earlier when discussing SDT, schools and classrooms are places where students seek to fulfill affiliation needs as well as competence needs. In this section we consider how teacher and peer relationships in the classroom influence student motivation, then consider the
particular influence of social relationships on motivation during and after the transition from elementary to middle school.

**Teacher influence on classroom social climate**

The social contexts created within classrooms influence not only academic motivation and achievement, but also the individual development and well-being of students. Social contexts are conceptualized as the many situations in which individuals must interact with each other, and are shaped by the attitudes and behaviors of others. When combined with personality traits, environmental characteristics account for a significant proportion of the variance in determining student perceptions of the classroom (Trickett & Moos, 1973). The relationships between students and teachers influence classroom climate, which we define as the general class atmosphere including attitudes towards learning, norms of social interaction, acceptance of ideas and mistakes, and learning structures set by the teacher. Teachers are responsible for regulating the academic environment, including the material covered, approaches to learning presented, and the manner in which individuals communicate within the classroom. Students’ perceptions of teaching styles and the classroom environment guide how they learn and their attitudes towards school and academics. Wentzel (1994, 1997) found that students’ perceptions of positive relationships with their teachers were correlated with their pursuit of pro-social classroom goals such as getting along with others and being socially responsible, and were more strongly linked to student interest in school than perceived support from parents and peers.

Teacher “caring” has a direct effect on student attitudes towards academic and social goal pursuits. Teachers perceived by students as “caring” are reported to have qualities similar to those of an authoritative parent: They provide rules and structure while avoiding the restriction of autonomy. These qualities are outlined in Noddings’ (1992) and include (a) democratic communication styles and interest in student input, (b) respect for individual differences in setting goals and expectations, (c) caring and patience in interpersonal interaction, and (d) providing constructive criticism. Studies have found that students who report congruence between authoritative parenting styles at home and authoritative teaching in the classroom also score higher on measures of positive self-concept and valuation of school, and they receive higher grades than students who report incongruent parent and teaching styles (Paulson, Marchang, & Rothlisberg, 1998, in Wentzel & Battle, 2001). Perceived support from teachers also is a positive predictor of effort in school and the pursuit of social responsibility goals, including acting in prosocial ways that encourage peer cooperation (Wentzel, 1997). Conversely, students who perceive teachers as harsh and cold are found to consistently display poor social behavior and low social goals as well as to achieve lower academically, in comparison with their peers (Wentzel & Battle, 2001).

Research on the effects of teacher caring are consistent with research described earlier regarding the creation of mastery goal structures and autonomy supportive instructional practices. Students care about their relationships with their teachers and respond with greater engagement and effort when they believe that their teachers care about them and are supportive. One way that teachers convey these qualities is through
their discourse with their students in the classroom. Classroom discourse structure concerns the manner in which teachers engage student participation in learning, promote intrinsic motivation, and balance appropriate challenges with skill levels. Turner and Meyer (1999) discussed a method of structuring discourse called “scaffolded instruction,” which aims to engage students in ways that help them motivate themselves. Scaffolded instruction concentrates on constructive approaches to accepting mistakes that encourage risk-taking and the pursuit of challenges, and avoids methodical teaching techniques that require compliance. In other words, appropriate scaffolded instruction creates a sense of safety in the classroom that allows students to take the academic risks necessary for true learning to occur. Meyer (1993) outlined three primary ways to create scaffolded instruction: Making the topics personally meaningful to students by tailoring them to appropriate attention levels and stressing the practical applications of subjects, giving the students responsibility for their learning to promote self-regulation, and providing intrinsic support for learning by giving it value and fostering confidence.

Too much or improper scaffolding, however, can be detrimental to learning and motivation. Scaffolding is meant to provide structures for learning goals which students then internalize and control. As students’ gain confidence and competence, the scaffolding from the teacher can be reduced and the student internalizes the methods and strategies needed for completing the work well. Students must be actively involved in this process as well, including putting forth the necessary effort and a willingness to take responsibility for their own learning so that teachers can reduce their support and begin scaffolding for more advanced concepts and skills. If students are not actively involved, the teacher’s support may become a crutch that artificially props up student learning. In addition, constant scaffolding from the teacher may indicate that the learning challenges presented are too difficult for the class’s skill level, and learning could not continue without continuous support from the teacher. When students’ perceive that the difficulty of the work exceeds their abilities, or are not being asked by the teacher to take responsibility for their learning, they lose confidence in their abilities and withdraw effort. Therefore, scaffolding must be tailored to the class’s skill level, learning capabilities, and willingness to participate (Turner & Meyer, 1999). This model of scaffolding is consistent with the recommendations of SDT researchers described earlier and with the social cognitive model described by Zimmerman et al. (1996).

Peers and classroom climate

Coleman’s (1961) seminal work on peer relationships in high school found that students value popularity above academic achievement, and that academic prowess was not a prerequisite for social success. In fact, according to many students, academic success and social success were mutually exclusive. There has been a wealth of information regarding social relationships among friends and peers in school since Coleman’s work was published, and this subsequent research has painted a more complex picture (Berndt, 1979; Urdan & Maehr, 1995). Students’ social interactions in school take many forms including close friendships, clique and crowd affiliations, and their perception of larger peer norms (Brown, 1989). Although the processes through which peers and friends influence each
other in school is not fully understood, the belief that social and academic goals are
necessarily in conflict has been replaced with the view that the desire to affiliate with
friends and peers can undermine, enhance, or have little effect on motivation and
achievement. Much depends on the academic and motivational orientations of the friends
and peers with whom students wish to affiliate.

Perceived support from peers is an independent predictor of social goal pursuit,
meaning that peer support motivates children to cooperate, be socially responsible, and
follow classroom rules (Wentzel, 1998). The attitudes of students towards academics also
appear to vary with the attitudes of their social groups, as students tend to associate with
peers who share similar achievement and motivational characteristics (Ryan, 2001). Peer
groups also influence changes in students’ intrinsic value, or enjoyment, of school, and
friends’ attitudes about school become more similar over time (Kinderman, 1993; Ryan,
2001). Therefore, the attitudes of peers are important in shaping the classroom
environment and influencing feelings towards academics.

Student attitudes towards school and learning can be adversely affected by negative
social environments, such as family difficulties or rejection by peers. For these children,
teacher support and acceptance plays an especially critical role in compensating for
dwinding motivation and self-confidence. Students whose academic performance is at-
risk because of unstable or unhealthy home lives more frequently name teachers as
mentors and inspiration than do other students (Darling, Hamilton, & Niego, 1994, in
Wentzel & Battle, 2001). Furthermore, because teacher acceptance is a stronger predictor
of pursuit of school-related goals than is peer acceptance, perceived teacher caring may be
able to off-set the negative effects of rejection by classmates felt by many children
(Wentzel, 1994).

Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1991) examined how students from different cultural and
ethnic groups navigated between their different social contexts (school, home, friends).
For some students, the values of friends, parents, and school were congruous, creating
smooth transitions as students moved from one context to another. For these students,
social and academic goals complemented each other, creating high motivation and
achievement. For other students, however, the transitions across contexts were much more
difficult. For example, some students selected friends who devalued academic effort and
achievement. These students had to choose between the values that school promoted (i.e.,
effort, achievement) and those their friends promoted (i.e., devaluing of school). For these
students, social and academic goals were in conflict, resulting in low academic motivation.
Phelan et al. described one small group in their sample that valued their social
relationships with friends above all else. In the classes where interactions with friends
were disallowed, these students failed miserably. But in the one or two classes where these
students were allowed to collaborate with their friends, these students were highly
motivated and achieved at high levels. These findings demonstrate two important features
of the effect of peers on academic motivation. First, the effects are complex and vary
across students, depending in part of culture, ethnicity, and the values of students and their
peers. Second, the relationship between social and academic goals can be influenced by
teacher policies and practices in the classroom. Teachers can reduce the potential conflict
between social and academic goals by not forcing students to choose between the two. In
the language of SDT, allowing students to fulfill both relatedness and competence needs in
the classroom can enhance motivation and achievement. One way that teachers can do this is by effectively using cooperative grouping structures in the classroom. In addition, teachers can allow students the opportunity to choose the social organization of their learning activities. For example, students may be allowed to complete assignments with friends. When teachers focus exclusively on independent work and provide few opportunities for students to work together, relatedness needs are difficulty to fulfill and some students will feel forced to choose between academic achievement and maintaining social bonds.

The transition to middle school: a critical period

Structuring the classroom climate to promote competence, autonomy, relatedness, and intrinsic motivation is especially critical during the transition from elementary to middle school. Early adolescence is marked for many individuals by the desire to feel autonomous on the one hand by rejecting the support and help of adults, and relatedness on the other by seeking the acceptance of peers (Juvonen & Cardigan, 2002). This transition is often accompanied by growing mistrust between students and teachers and declines in students’ perceptions that teachers care about them (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Students perceive their middle school teachers as less caring, friendly, and fair than their elementary school teachers (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). This is most unfortunate because adolescence is clearly a time when students seek to develop social relationships with adults other than parents. In other words, at a time when many students wish to develop a more mature bond with adults (such as teachers) outside the home, middle school teachers are perceived by students to be actually less caring and friendly.

Consistent declines in perceived teacher caring between the sixth and eighth grades correspond with declines in academic motivation (Wentzel, 1997). These changes in the student–teacher relationship are also consistent with decreasing valuation of academics, specifically math (Midgley et al., 1989). Research also shows that in comparison to elementary school classrooms, middle schools place greater emphasis on teacher control and classroom discipline and emphasize grades as extrinsic rewards (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). SDT maintains that decreases in autonomy and the implementation of extrinsic rewards disrupt intrinsic motivation, which would help explain the disruption of interest in and enthusiasm for academics among many middle school students. As young people search for identity and motivation during the transition to middle school, teachers can facilitate the integration of self-reliance and challenge-seeking into students’ self-concepts by projecting a caring persona to students and encouraging egalitarian classroom discourse.

Another complication associated with the transition to middle level schools is that friendship networks are often disrupted across this transition. As social relationships with peers assume a more prominent role in the lives of early adolescents, it is important that they feel connected to a peer network in school. Hawkins and Berndt (1985) found that students who were able to maintain friendships with the same group of peers as they moved from elementary to middle school fared better after than transition than did students who were unable to maintain those friendship networks. Creating opportunities for students to get to know each other well and build new, stable friendships in middle school,
perhaps by keeping students in small teams that stay together for most or all of their classes during the day, may be particularly helpful for students whose friends attend a different middle school than they do.

**Challenges and limitations to the research on classroom processes**

In this article we reviewed research from three theoretical perspectives, and from the field of social relationships, to consider how school and classroom processes may influence student motivation. This research suggests that when students are encouraged and allowed to take ownership for their learning in an environment in which they feel cared for, supported, and socially connected to teachers and peers, and when they are given meaningful and appropriately challenging work, they will likely experience enhanced motivation. We have also offered suggestions, taken directly from researchers in these fields, for how educators can promote these motivationally beneficial environments in classrooms and schools.

It is important to realize, however, that the research examining classroom influences on motivation has often not been conducted in actual classrooms. In addition, when the research has been conducted in real classrooms, it has often employed methods (such as the use of surveys) that make it difficult to determine the actual mechanisms responsible for the association between contextual factors and student motivation (see Urdan & Turner, 2005 for an extended discussion). For example, research on achievement goals indicates that students’ perceptions of a mastery goal structure in the classroom are associated with positive motivational tendencies. Although it makes intuitive sense that goal messages in the school and classroom would influence the individual goals that students pursue, it is also quite possible that students’ personal goal orientations affect the goal messages that they perceive in the learning environment. There is now considerable evidence that classroom goal structures are based less on objective reality and more on subjective constructions among individual students. For example, Urdan (2004a) and Wolters (2004) found that there was a greater variety in students’ perceptions of the classroom goal structure within the same classroom than there was between different classrooms. In addition, there is evidence that students in the same classroom perceive the classroom goal messages differently, and that the effects of perceived classroom goal structures on motivational and achievement outcomes differs for different students (Urdan et al., 1999). Taken together, survey and qualitative research findings suggest that the effect of classroom goal structures may not be particularly strong and, where it exists, will not be uniform across students in the same classroom or school. Overall, it appears that a perceived emphasis on mastery goals in the classroom has potential motivational, affective, and cognitive benefits for students; however, it is not a panacea for all students with weak or maladaptive motivational profiles.

Similarly, little of the research on SDT and self-efficacy has actually been conducted with teachers and students in real classrooms (Urdan & Turner, 2005). Although there is a growing body of survey and experimental research establishing a link between controlling teacher behavior and lower levels of student motivation, to date there is little research documenting teachers’ attempts to promote competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the
classroom or students’ reactions to these attempts. In addition, the research on achievement goals, SDT, and self-efficacy may underestimate the constraints that teachers in real classrooms may encounter as they attempt to promote mastery goals, self-efficacy, autonomy and competence in the classroom. As standardized testing has grown in popularity and frequency, teachers are confronted with an increasingly prescriptive and narrow curriculum and students are required to perform well on a growing number of tests to matriculate (see La Guardia & Ryan, 2002). As demands for teacher and student accountability have grown, so has the emphasis on ability differences between students (which may promote performance goal structures) and the pressure on teachers to produce high test scores (which may promote controlling behavior among teachers). Finally, there is considerable question about whether teachers are well equipped to create mastery oriented, autonomy-supportive environments. Research suggests that teachers have difficulty creating appropriately challenging tasks for all their students (Blumenfeld, 1992) and with providing constructive, informative feedback (Brophy, 1981). If educators want to create the types of environments recommended by motivation researchers, they will need to navigate through the external demands (e.g., standardized testing, large class sizes, textbooks that promote shallow levels of understanding) that may undermine these efforts and receive training in how to create mastery goal structures, autonomy supportive learning environments, and genuine opportunities for success for their students.

Conclusion

The view of motivation as an individual-difference variable, as something that resides entirely within the student, is inaccurate. As psychologists have rediscovered, motivated behavior in school results from a combination of student and situational characteristics. Seemingly “unmotivated” students can become willing participants in academic tasks if the tasks are tailored to their interests, or if students are given the opportunity to fulfill social needs by working with friends on the task. The individual-difference view of motivation takes power away from teachers. When educators believe that motivation lies entirely within individual students, there is no incentive to alter the motivational structure of the school or classroom. It is also important to realize that the currently embraced social-cognitive view of student motivation poses a double-edged sword for educators. Educators can directly enhance student motivation by altering controllable factors such as teaching style, curricula, and school or classroom policies. Conversely, this view holds educators more accountable for motivating students. Stated differently, if the student could be more motivated if the environmental conditions were right, then educators must assume some personal responsibility for the student’s motivation and, by extension, for the student’s apparent lack of motivation.

We realize that academic motivation is multiply determined and reflects a complex interaction of numerous personal and situational factors. Clearly, many of these factors are beyond the control of educators. In this article we have limited our attention to a few of the situational factors in schools and classrooms over which educators have some control: helping students to feel competent, viewing learning as a process rather than an end, and
meeting the social-relational needs of children and adolescents. Enhancing student motivation in schools requires attention to the features of the learning environment, both social and academic, that affect motivation and a willingness to view motivation as more than an individual-difference variable.

References


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