



Motivation and Middle School Students

Lynley Hicks Anderman and Carol Midgley

Few educators would argue with the premise that student motivation is an important influence on learning. Motivation is of particular importance for those who work with young adolescents. Considerable research has shown a decline in motivation and performance for many children as they move from elementary school into middle school (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Often it has been assumed that this decline is largely caused by physiological and psychological changes associated with puberty and, therefore, is somewhat inevitable. This assumption has been challenged, however, by research that demonstrates that the nature of motivational change on entry to middle school depends on characteristics of the learning environment in which students find themselves (Midgley, 1993). Although it is difficult to prescribe a "one size fits all" approach to motivating students, research suggests that some general patterns do appear to hold true for a wide range of students. This Digest outlines some suggestions for middle school teachers and administrators for enhancing student motivation, and discusses three theories that are currently prominent and that have particular relevance for young adolescent students and their teachers.

Attribution Theory

The first point to be emphasized is that students' *perceptions* of their educational experiences generally influence their motivation more than the actual, objective reality of those experiences. For example, a history of success in a given subject area is generally assumed to lead one to continue persisting in that area. Weiner (1985), however, pointed out that students' beliefs about the reasons for their success will determine whether this assumption is true. Students' attributions for failure are also important influences on motivation. When students have a history of failure in school, it is particularly difficult for them to sustain the motivation to keep trying. Students who believe that their poor performance is caused by factors out of their control are unlikely to see any reason to hope for an improvement. In contrast, if students attribute their poor performance to a lack of important skills or to poor study habits, they are more likely to persist in the future. The implications for teachers revolve around the importance of understanding what students believe about the reasons for their academic performance. Teachers can unknowingly communicate a range of attitudes about whether ability is fixed or modifiable and their expectations for individual students through their instructional practices (Graham, 1990).

Goal Theory

While attribution theory focuses on the reasons students perceive for their successes and failures in school, goal

theory focuses on the reasons or purposes students perceive for achieving (e.g., Ames, 1992; Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Midgley, 1993). While different researchers define the constructs slightly differently, two main goal orientations are generally discussed. These are task goals and ability goals. A task goal orientation represents the belief that the purpose of achieving is personal improvement and understanding. Students with a task goal orientation focus on their own progress in mastering skills and knowledge, and they define success in those terms. An ability goal orientation represents the belief that the purpose of achieving is the demonstration of ability (or, alternatively, the concealment of a lack of ability). Students with an ability goal orientation focus on appearing competent, often in comparison to others, and define success accordingly. Studies of students' goal orientations generally find that the adoption of task goals is associated with more adaptive patterns of learning than is the adoption of ability goals, including the use of more effective cognitive strategies, a willingness to seek help when it is needed, a greater tendency to engage in challenging tasks, and more positive feelings about school and oneself as a learner (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Ryan, Hicks, & Midgley, 1997).

If adopting a task goal orientation is related to positive educational outcomes for students, the question then arises as to how such an orientation can be fostered. Recent studies suggest that the policies and practices in classrooms and schools influence students' goal orientations (Ames & Archer, 1988; Maehr & Midgley, 1991). Specific suggestions (Midgley & Urdan, 1992, p. 12) for moving toward a task focus in middle schools include moving away from:

1. grouping by ability and over-use of standardized tests to grouping by topic, interest, and student choice and to frequent reformation of groups;
2. competition between students, and contests with limited winners, to cooperative learning;
3. using test data as a basis for comparison to using test data for diagnosis and to alternatives to tests such as portfolios;
4. normative grading and public display of grades to grading for progress or improvement and involving students in determining their grades;
5. recognition for relative performance, honor rolls for high grades, and over-use of praise (especially for easy tasks) to recognition of progress improvement and an emphasis on learning for its own sake;
6. decisions made exclusively by administrators and teachers to opportunities for choice and student decision making, self-scheduling, and self-regulation;

7. departmentalized approach to curriculum to thematic approaches/interdisciplinary focus, viewing mistakes as a part of learning, allowing students to redo work, and encouraging students to take academic risks;
8. rote learning and memorization, over-use of worksheets and textbooks, and decontextualized facts to providing challenging, complex work to students, giving homework that is enriching, and encouraging problem solving and comprehension;
9. pull-out programs and retention to cross-age tutoring, or peer tutoring, and enrichment.

Self-Determination Theory

A third motivational theory of particular importance for middle school educators is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This theory describes students as having three categories of needs: needing a sense of competence, of relatedness to others, and of autonomy. Competence involves understanding how to, and believing that one can, achieve various outcomes. Relatedness involves developing satisfactory connections to others in one's social group. Autonomy involves initiating and regulating one's own actions. Most of the research in self-determination theory focuses on the last of these three needs. Within the classroom, autonomy needs could be addressed through allowing some student choice and input on classroom decision making. For young adolescent students, with their increased cognitive abilities and developing sense of identity, a sense of autonomy may be particularly important. Students at this stage say that they want to be included in decision making and to have some sense of control over their activities. Unfortunately, research suggests that students in middle schools actually experience fewer opportunities for self-determination than they did in elementary school (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987).

Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) summarized contextual factors that support student autonomy. Features such as the provision of choice over what types of tasks to engage in and how much time to allot to each are associated with students' feelings of self-determination. In contrast, the use of extrinsic rewards, the imposition of deadlines, and an emphasis on evaluations detract from a feeling of self-determination and lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation. It is important to recognize that supporting student autonomy does not require major upheaval in the classroom or that teachers relinquish the management of students' behavior. Even small opportunities for choice, such as whether to work with a partner or independently, or whether to present a book review as a paper, poster, or class presentation, can increase students' sense of self-determination. Finally, it is important to recognize that students' early attempts at regulating their own work may not always be successful. Good decision making and time management require practice. Teachers can help their students develop their self-regulation by providing limited choices between acceptable options, by assisting with breaking large tasks into manageable pieces, and by providing guidelines for students to use in monitoring their own progress.

Conclusion

Middle school teachers often teach many students over the course of a school day, and for a relatively short period of time. Given such brief contact with so many, it is easy to underestimate the influence that one's teaching practices can have on any one individual. Current moves to implement the middle school philosophy may provide a more facilitative

schedule for both teachers and students, but even in a highly structured middle school, teachers can take specific steps to provide a learning environment that will promote the motivation of all students.

Adapted from: Anderman, L. H., & Midgley, C. (1997). Motivation and middle school students. In Judith L. Irvin (Ed.), What current research says to the middle level practitioner (pp. 41-48). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

For More Information

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