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Theories demonstrating the relationship between motivational variables and school achievement have substantially increased over the past three decades. This can be of great potential to educators because if students' motivation is more acquiescent to change than their ability, then achievement can be enhanced through practices that positively affect motivational development. Unfortunately, information on how such theories can be applied or utilized is often overlooked. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness and practical applicability of concepts from motivational theories on the academic achievement of at-risk students.

MOTIVATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

A Research Paper
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts or Masters of Education

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Abstract

Theories demonstrating the relationship between motivational variables and school achievement have substantially increased over the past three decades. This can be of great potential to educators because if students' motivation is more acquiescent to change than their ability, then achievement can be enhanced through practices that positively affect motivational development. Unfortunately, information on how such theories can be applied or utilized is often overlooked. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness and practical applicability of concepts from motivational theories on the academic achievement of at-risk students.

High school dropout represents an important problem that affects thousands of students each year. Nearly one-third of all public high school students will drop out without having received their diplomas (NCES, 2008). Dropping out of school is not only an educational problem but a social problem as well (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, in poor health, living in poverty, on public assistance, and raise children who drop out of high school. Dropouts are also more than eight times more likely to be in jail or prison than high school graduates (NCES, 2008). Though the decision to drop out of school is multifaceted, a survey of research on high school dropout reveals that a major factor in a student's decision to drop out of school is motivation (Vallerand, et al., 1997).

Studies have shown that dropout students displayed lower levels of interest and attention but higher levels of alienation and boredom toward school than persistent students (Dohn, 1992). Dropout students reported that they participate much less in decision-making processes at school, which they are told to improve more often, and that they are disciplined much more (Dohn, 1992). They also report having less positive teacher-student relationships and low self-perceptions of school competence and autonomy (Vallerand, et al., 1997). In addition, Dohn (1992) reported that when they applied for high school, eventual dropout students indicated pursuing their schooling much more because of parental pressure and much less because of their own wishes or goal directedness.

There are clear and detrimental economic and personal costs associated with drop out, but the reasons why students drop out remain relatively unclear. The primary

purpose of this paper is to approach this problem from a motivational perspective in an effort to introduce alternative interventions within our education system.

Motivation

To be motivated means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impulse to act is characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is prompted to act is considered motivated. Motivation has been a central issue in the field of education and psychology, because it is at the core of cognitive and social regulation (Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W., & Deci, E., 2006).

Historical theories have treated motivation primarily as a unitary concept, focusing on the overall amount of motivation that people have for particular behaviors or activities (Ryan & Deci, 1985). Contemporary theories, however, suggest that there is a motivation spectrum (Ryan & Deci, 1985, 2000, 2008); that people have not only different amounts, but also different kinds of motivation. The idea is that the type or quality of a person's motivation is more important than the total amount of motivation for predicting many important outcomes such as psychological health and well-being, effective performance, creative problem solving, and deep learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The most basic and classic distinction can be made between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as doing an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence (Ryan & Deci, 1985). The phenomenon of intrinsic motivation was first acknowledged within experimental studies of animal behavior. Scientists found that many organisms engaged in playful and curiosity-driven behaviors even in the absence of reinforcement or reward (White, 1959). They were motivated to act for the sake of the activity alone.

Developmentalists propose that from birth onward, humans, in their healthiest states, are active, curious, and playful creatures, displaying a readiness to learn and explore, and they do not need extraneous incentives to do so (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These spontaneous behaviors are critical to cognitive, social, and physical development because it is through acting on one's inherent interests that one shows the most growth in knowledge and skills (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Although intrinsic motivation is clearly an important type of motivation, most of the activities people do are not intrinsically motivated. This is especially true after early childhood, as the freedom to intrinsically explore the world is stifled by social demands and roles (White, 1959). As people age, they become increasingly extrinsically motivated by factors outside themselves such as money or grades. These external rewards provide satisfaction and pleasure that the task itself may not provide, and an extrinsically motivated person will work on a task even when they have little interest in it because of the anticipated rewards or pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

Extrinsic motivation does not mean, however, that a person will not get any pleasure from working on or completing a task. It just means that the pleasure they anticipate from some external reward will continue to be a stronger motivator than the inner pleasure derived from the task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An extrinsically motivated student, for example, may dislike an assignment, may find it boring, or may have no interest in the subject, but the possibility of a good grade will be enough to keep the student motivated in order for him or her to put forth the effort to do well.

Some perspectives continue to view extrinsically motivated behaviors as invariably nonautonomous; however, more recent theories, such as self-determination

theory (SDT) and its sub-theory, cognitive evaluation theory (CET), propose that extrinsic motivation can vary greatly on the degree to which it is autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, autonomous motivation comprises both intrinsic motivation and well-internalized forms of extrinsic motivation in which people have identified with an activity's value and ideally will have integrated it into their sense of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, a student who does a homework assignment because she believes it is valuable for her chosen career is extrinsically motivated because she is doing it for its instrumental value rather than because she finds it interesting. However, this type of extrinsic motivation displays more autonomy because she finds personal value in the assignment.

Controlled motivation, in contrast, consists of extrinsic motivation in which one's behavior is a function of external factors such as reward or punishment, approval motive, and avoidance of shame (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, a student who does his homework only because he fears the punishment he will receive from his parents if he does not do it, is extrinsically motivated because he is doing the work in order to avoid punishment. In this case, the student does not find any value in the work and is therefore demonstrating a type of extrinsic motivation with little or no autonomy. When people are controlled, they experience pressure to think, feel, or behave in particular ways (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

An enormous amount of research (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2008; Vallerand et al., 2006) has confirmed that, across domains, autonomous motivation and controlled motivation leads to very different outcomes, with autonomous motivation tending to yield greater psychological health and greater long-term persistence.

Components of Motivation

Cognition

A common construct found within motivational research is cognition. One belief system that affects motivation is concerned with how people interpret ability. Some children regard ability as an acquirable skill that can be increased by gaining knowledge and competencies (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). These children regard mistakes as a natural part of learning and judge their capabilities in terms of personal improvement rather than in comparison to others' achievements (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Other children view ability as an innate characteristic. For them, performance is a personal reflection of their capabilities. "Therefore, deficient performances carry high threats that they lack basic intelligence" (Bandura, 1993 p. 120). It can be suggested that educators who recognize the beliefs students have about their abilities are more effective in assisting them.

Self-Efficacy

It is believed that our self-efficacy appraisals exert powerful effects on our levels of motivation. When we believe we are good at tasks, we work on them vigorously and persist with them despite temporary setbacks (Crain, 2005). When we doubt our abilities, we work less energetically and are more likely to give up when we encounter difficulties (Crain, 2005). Those who doubt their efficacy visualize failure scenarios and dwell on the many things that could go wrong (Bandura, 1993). It is easy to see how this type of thinking could affect motivation; it is difficult to achieve much while fighting self-doubt.

Psychological Needs

Three psychological needs associated with motivation are autonomy, relatedness,

and competence. These needs, though expressed differently within cultures, are said to be universal (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To be autonomous means to feel volitional or willing to engage in a behavior. Relatedness refers to a feeling that you are being cared for and are connected with others. Competence concerns supports for efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2008); it is the extent to which people feel effective at an activity. According to the motivational research, these basic psychological needs necessary for the processes of growth, integrity, and wellness to ensue (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Practical Application

Learning out of inherent interest yields many advantages and the ultimate goal in education should be to facilitate such learning, but given that many of the educational activities prescribed in schools are not intrinsically interesting, a central question concerns how to motivate students to value and self-regulate such activities. The following are some ways in which educators can do this.

Relevance of Learning Material

A number of researchers have suggested that, in order to enhance students' motivation for learning, it is useful for educators to point out the relevance of the learning material, especially with students who do not show an inherent interest in the material (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Vansteenkiste et al., (2006) also states, "When instructors provide students with a rationale for a learning activity, it is important that they focus on its intrinsic aspects such as personal growth, meaningful relationships with others, becoming more healthy and fit, or contributing to the community, because the students are more likely to become engaged with the learning material and understand it more fully" (p. 28). The decision to drop out of high school may be countered if students are

shown how they could use the information being taught in real-life settings.

Goal Setting

Fairly consistent success has been obtained in research on the effects of goal setting on motivational ratings. As stated earlier, dropout students reported feeling as though they had no role in decision-making processes, therefore, allowing students to set learning goals may enhance their commitment to attaining them, which is necessary for goals to affect performance (Schunk, 2001). Long-term goals can sometimes be too far removed and end up discouraging students, therefore, having students set proximal sub-goals may be a way to facilitate the development of motivation. Setting small, attainable goals that will eventually lead to much larger goals has proved to be helpful, especially with students with low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993).

Autonomy-Supportive Educators

Autonomy support plays a critical role in fostering motivation. Across domains the general concept of autonomy support refers to the “attitudes and practices of a person that facilitate an individual’s self-organization and self-regulation of actions and experiences” (Ryan & Deci, 2008, p. 191). Autonomy-supportive educators recognize the importance of understanding the students’ perspective, encouraging them to solve the problems they encounter, and providing as much choice as possible about how to do it (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). They provide students with unconditional positive regard, support choice, minimize pressure and control, and give meaningful rationale (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Not only does autonomy-support promote long-term intrinsic learning, it creates more positive teacher-student relationships, something dropout students stated they had little of.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this educational approach is that it is hard to observe and measure intrinsic motivation because it is not easily defined. Some authors have defined it in terms of the task being interesting while others have defined it in terms of the satisfactions a person gains from an intrinsically motivated task engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Future research should focus on the methods used to measure intrinsic motivation in order to develop appropriate interventions.

Another limitation is that very little research has addressed gender or cultural differences in outcomes as a function of motivation. However, most educational literature clearly reveals that girls are much less likely to drop out of high school than boys (Vallerand et al., 1997), and every year nearly one-half of African American, Hispanic, and Native American students fail to graduate (NCES, 2008). In light of the important consequences for school persistence, and the effects motivation has on school persistence, more research on the relationships between gender and motivation as well as culture and motivation is necessary.

The most considerable limitation to this type of intervention rests with the standards movement. Research has shown that the degrees to which authority figures are autonomy-supportive versus controlling depends in part on what types of pressures, rewards, and supports they are experiencing in that setting (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Accordingly, it is suggested that teachers being controlling rather than autonomy-supportive is often a function of the pressures they encounter to meet educational standards.

With the introduction of No Child Left Behind, it is no wonder why more

educators are not more autonomy-supportive in their teaching. The standards do not focus on student interests or processes; they only focus on test results and outcomes. It overlooks a substantial body of psychological research suggesting that a focus on how well one is doing is very different from a focus on what one is doing (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1995). Moreover, a preoccupation with performance often undermines the quality of learning, and a desire to be challenged. More research on how to address dropout and other motivational consequences while meeting educational standards is needed while these policies are in place.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine different types of motivation and how they affect the academic achievement of at-risk youth. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation was made, as well as between autonomous and controlled motivation. An overwhelming amount of research suggests that intrinsic and/or autonomous motivation produces better performance, increased persistence, and wellbeing, therefore, greater attention was paid to the ways in which these forms of motivation can be applied in education.

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