

Why Do High School Students Lack Motivation in the Classroom?

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Abstract

It is fully noted by educational psychologist and researcher in the world of academia that a problem exist throughout the nation to motivate high school students in the classroom. The reality is that a large number of high school students across America lack academic motivation (Snyder & Hoffman, 2002). There has not been a plethora of reasons why many students neglect their studies. It is an earnest desire to further investigate with a deeper understanding why students lack motivation.

The purpose of this study is two-fold: (1) to fundamentally validate the structure of academic amotivation, (2) to investigate the social antecedents and academic consequences of motivational deficits. The aim of this study is to enable the reader to identify factors that give rise to academic Amotivation among high school students.

Introduction

Pintrich (2003) suggests that a very simple and major question one should ask is, "what motivates students to achieve in the world of academia?" Even though academic motivation has indeed been at the center of attention the fact remains that an abundance of high school students lack academic motivation (Snyder & Hoffman, 2002). Conversely, there is a vast need to dig deep into academic amotivation and why it is so prevalent among high school students across America. Amotivation is defined as a state in which individuals cannot perceive a relationship between their behavior and that behavior's subsequent outcome (Deci & Ryan,

1985), 2002) which is the central theory to this research, amotivation is a direct link to the absence of motivation among high school students. The state of amotivation has been correlated to that of learned helplessness (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Amotivation has also been associated with boredom and poor concentration in class, poor psychological adjustment to college, higher perceived stress at school and while studying (Baker, 2004) even more disturbing, high school dropout.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)-Amotivation

The self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002), can be determined as behavior through intrinsic, (pleasure and interest-related motives), extrinsic motivation (instrumental motives) and amotivation (an absence of motivation).

Intrinsic Motivation- arises from a desire to learn a topic due to its inherent interest for self-fulfillment, enjoyment and achieve a mastery of the subject. Students who are intrinsically motivated may eagerly engage in an activity because of a personal interest and internal pleasure (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2005).

Extrinsic Motivation- a desire to perform and succeed for the sake of accomplishing a specific result or outcome. Extrinsically motivated learners are motivated to perform a task as a means to an end, not as an end in itself (Ormrod, 2011). The three expansive academic types of motivation fall along a continuum of self-determination with amotivation being the factor that is of the lowest extreme.

Even though intrinsic behaviors demonstrate the pinnacle of self-determination because they are performed as a result of freewill and pleasure, conversely extrinsic motivation refers to the performance of an activity for a reward. The extrinsically motivated student normally wants the good grades, money, or recognition that particular activities and accomplishments bring. It is important to note that extrinsic motivation is not necessarily a bad thing. Quite often high school students are simultaneously motivated by both factors intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Cameron, Pierce, 1994, Covington, 2000). In general, self-determination has been connected with a multiplicity of outcomes, such as greater cognitive flexibility, conceptual understanding, and active information processing (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987) at the same time as better academic performance and academic self-concept (Deci, Vallerand, 1991).

Moreover, less self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation have been linked to negative outcomes, such as depression, narcissism, negative effect, and physical symptoms. Amotivated

students cannot foresee the consequences of their behavior, nor can they see the motive behind it. They may perhaps feel disintegrated or disconnected from their action or lack of and will inevitably invest little or no vigor in their efforts.

Subtypes of Academic Amotivation

Students are indeed predisposed to lack motivation in school for a variety of reasons. It has been determined that individuals may experience an absence of motivation to perform. There is a belief that a large number of individuals do not have the personal ability to enact the required task, the belief they cannot maintain the effort that is required by the behavior or the belief that they are simply powerless in effectuating a suitable outcome (Pelletier, Dion, Tucson, and Green-Demers, 1999). The environment plays a vital role in amotivation for four different classes of reasons: (1) ability beliefs, (2) effort beliefs, (3) value placed on the task and (4) characteristics of the task.

Ability Beliefs- represents a student's belief or disbelief in his/her ability to successfully complete a task, It is in the same context of the self-fulfilling prophesy. If an individual believes he cannot successfully complete a task, it is most often that he will not be successful. Poor belief in one's ability is the major component of academic disconnection in high school. It has been determined that poor academic attainment is one of the major predictors of high school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). In order to understand why individuals may have such a low capacity about one's ability is to understand the theory that people hold expectations about their ability to apply appropriate strategies in order to execute a task derived from the concept of self-efficacy expectancy.

When students feel better about their academic abilities, more ambitious challenges are perceived, better known as self-efficacy. Contrastly, when self-efficacy is doubtful, failure is to be expected as an obvious result. It is been predicted that students who are detached or disconnected from school have little belief in their academic ability. Students accredit their low academic difficulties to their low perceived capabilities (Wigfield, 1988). Students' low academic self-concept has been identified as one of the major factors in academic motivation (Skinner, 1990).

Effort Beliefs- the concept based on the fact that students do not believe they can initiate or sustain the necessary effort required to complete a mandatory task, they actually doubt their abilities (Skinner et al. (1990). This is also a belief depicted from Pelletier et al. (1999) that

students' desire and capacity to invest the energy or effort demanded by a given behavior to be successful are lacking. They are perhaps very aware of the academic requirements. Even though, they are often very self-confident in their abilities, they may still lack academic motivation. Belief in one's ability and one's effort are equally necessary antecedents to successful academic student achievement. Self-confidence is a vital element as students have to believe they have what it takes to effectively perform in the classroom. It is a widespread belief that most students lack their ability and did not trust that they could maintain the effort required to complete their academic studies successfully. Eccles, Patrick and colleagues (1993) confirmed that academic detachment is a consequence from a lack of ability or desire to put forth necessary effort.

Value Placed on the Task – it is significant to note that consideration of values permits the calculation of behavior (Landy & Becker, 1987). It has been determined that a part of amotivation include a lack of value (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When a task is not important to a student or it is not an integral element of the student's life, amotivation typically results. If there is no inner-relatedness or relevancy to the activity the student will not incorporate their behavior as an expression of him/herself. Activities that are incongruent (Murdock, 1999) with one's self-expression are arduous task to maintain.

Moreover, academic amotivation may be characteristic of school activities that are not expressions of one's self or of one's values. If school is devalued, it leads to devastating consequences that inevitably result in motivational deficit. Students who construe their surroundings as a conveyer of negative information about the value of school are more prone to develop motivational problems. Values need to be explored in order to completely understand academic behaviors (Bigelow & Zhou, 2001).

Characteristics of the Task- The dimension that all schools are not created equal indicate the specific features of the academic task that may direct students to the path to amotivation. If the knowledge of an activity does not engage or stimulate the student then it is very possible that the student will be disconnected. When an activity is uninteresting, dull, boring, routine, tedious, arduous or irrelevant amotivation may develop. If the afore mentioned characteristics are prevalent, the unappealing characteristics of the academic task will likely ensue and lead to academic disengagement.

The four complimentary aspects of amotivation: ability beliefs, effort beliefs, characteristics of the task and value placed on the task are conceptualized as common cores that vary with one another. Amotivation overall is a feeling of alienation and helplessness as described by SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002). From a conceptual perspective, all four amotivation subtypes are determined to be coupled positively with detrimental consequences and to vary negatively with favorable outcomes. Once mutual interrelations are extracted viable creative associations surface to the forefront.

For example, adverse ability beliefs are liable to result in poor academic performance, low academic self-esteem, and an elevated intent of withdrawing or dropping out of high school. Poor effort belief is highly attributed academic achievement; however a reduction of effort is most likely linked to undesirable academic behaviors (i.e., spending very little or no time on homework, skipping class or developing a habit of tardiness). Additionally behavior troubles are typically associated with amotivation due to task characteristics. It is a common fact that unappealing homework presumably fosters avoidance traits. Values provide meaning for difficult or demanding activities. Devaluing school and homework is a third feature that may possibly be conducive to problematic academic behaviors that inevitably results in drop out. Students most often feel isolated and disconnected because they are lacking in social support from their school, parents or community.

Social Support

Academic amotivation is a multifaceted phenomenon, to a certain extent because its boundaries extend beyond the education domain to the broader social context in which the students are categorized economically as well as socially as being placed in within social strata. In the world of academia, academic attitudes and performances are powerfully influenced by significant social agents in students' environment and experiences, whether through teachers, parents or peers.

Self-determination is heightened primarily because individuals feel free to perform out of unrestricted free choice. From an intellectual perspective, teachers, parents and friends normally support another student's sense of autonomy and freedom by optimizing his or her opportunity to be creative and unique. There is an abundance of evidence research that supports the assumption that students' motivation benefits when teachers encourage their independence (Hamm & Reeve, 2002).

Significance of the Problem/Theoretical Framework

Motivating high school students is not an easy task, but it is definitely a rewarding when teachers successfully engage their students in the right way. Unlike middle school students, high school students can think for themselves and do not take things for granted. They can think much more abstractly and analytically. They question accepted world views, values and beliefs. Their intelligence rises. More differences in learning styles are becoming much more apparent. So, what is the problem, why is there a “lack” of motivation in the classroom among high school students, on the contrary, what are some factors to consider to motivate students to succeed in the classroom?

(1) The Role of Social Support- academic attitudes and behaviors are strongly influenced by key social agents in the student’s environment, whether these are teachers, parents, or friends. The influence of these significant others can be illuminated using a sub theory of cognitive evaluation theory (CET; Deci & Ryan 2002). A central principle of this school of thought is that the social environments that promote autonomy, competence and relatedness will smooth the progress of intrinsic and internalized motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002).

(2) Autonomy Support- self-determination is enhanced when the student feels free to act out of free choice. Autonomy support recognizes the magnitude of structure and guidance, while emphasizing the benefits of giving students freedom, volition, and responsibility for themselves.

(3) Competence Support- feeling competent is without a doubt, an essential source of motivation. The art of conveying information effectively is vital to pedagogy; consequently the student is most impacted by the transmittance of useful information that will allow the student to apply his or her learning.

Method/Participants

Data were collected from 225 high school students in the Cape Fear Region of North Carolina. Students ranged in the age of 14- 18 years with a mean age of 15 years. Grade point averages (GPA) were 82. 6%. SD= 12.62%). The participants included 118 girls, 99 boys, and 8 decided not to report their gender, for reasons not known. Participants were interviewed, and questionnaires were completed at school during class time (Table 1).

Analysis of Focused Group Interviews (25 students)

Questions:

1. Think of your favorite teacher, what characteristics make him/her your favorite teacher?
2. If you can think of some strategies or methods to use to get students motivated, what would they be?
3. What do you like about your school, why?
4. What do you dislike about your school?
5. Do you feel motivated when you are in school?
6. Is it your teachers' responsibility to motivate you, why or why not?
7. Should you be responsible for motivating yourself, why or why not?

Responses:

1. She smiles, even if she is angry, you can't tell she is having a bad day. You connect with her class, she has patience, keeps you encouraged, "she gets you."

She lets me be me, she does not judge, has no favorites, treats everyone equal.

2. Stand at the desk, play a game, introduce rewards, do not punish the entire class because one person is "off-task." Use variety of tones, voice inflection, joyous and enthusiastic voice; if you are excited, the students will become excited.

3. Lunch and socialize, learning new things, having a choice, interaction among peers and independence, algebra and the extra-curricular activities, band, drama class and the relaxation.

4. "I don't like school because I have to get-up too early," school should begin at 9:30."

(a)" Some teachers send mixed messages; they want you to act like an adult, but they don't treat you like an adult." Some teachers compete with other classes; they think their classes are more important than other classes. "They blow-off the electives think they are not important."

(b) "Too much pressure on taking test, too many test. I hate bench-mark test, do not like the Comprehensive test, it makes no sense to have to remember material from August to December."

5. "I am motivated because I don't like to fail. I want to graduate early; I don't

want to stay in Hoke County, and I want to get in a good college. I don't want to let my teachers down. I want to make my parents proud of me.”

6. It should be a combination of both, the teacher should motivate me and I should motivate myself, meet in the middle.

The responses from the focus group students were a combination of advanced placement, honors, electives, and average student performance.

Table 1 displays questions and results of participants in the High School Amotivion 5-point Likert Scale Survey. Responses range from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree illustrating why students lack motivation.

Table 1. Responses High School Students Lack of Motivation in the Classroom

Factors	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
School holds no interest.	27%	16%	15%	22%	15%	24%	46%
Studying is not valuable to me.	29%	18%	20%	14%	19%	28%	37%
I have had no good reason to study.	26%	17%	26%	12%	20%	30%	34%
Studying is not important to me.	29%	26%	17%	20%	20%	32%	21%
I don't have what it takes to do well in school.	32%	20%	18%	14%	26%	36%	19%
I don't have the knowledge required to succeed in school.	35%	19%	22%	21%	20%	20%	28%
I'm not good at school.	29%	18%	20%	27%	19%	20%	32%
The tasks demanded of me surpass my abilities	24%	16%	29%	16%	23%	26%	30%
I find that studying is boring.	29%	20%	17%	19%	18%	29%	33%

I don't like studying.	25%	23%	20%	19%	18%	29%	33%
I believe it's always the same thing every day.	26%	19%	13%	17%	27%	19%	39%
My school work is not stimulating.	31%	18%	16%	12%	21%	24%	33%
I'm a bit lazy.	29%	17%	19%	19%	23%	21%	37%
I can't seem to invest the effort that is required.	28%	16%	21%	18%	21%	24%	33%
I don't have the energy to study.	19%	26%	19%	24%	27%	22%	28%
School is not relevant to my future.	28%	19%	20%	26%	22%	21%	30%
I realize that I have not done my part to be motivated internally.	31%	19%	18%	13%	26%	28%	31%
I am preoccupied with other things beyond school.	27%	20%	21%	14%	25%	29%	29%

The information gathered is useful for any and all teachers who are interested in learning about some of the theory behind motivation. Motivation from this perspective is based on three fundamental needs: the need for autonomy, the need for belonging and the need for

competence. An acceptance and understanding of these concepts can help teachers provide a learning environment that therefore increases motivation for students to succeed in the classroom.

Numerous high school students find themselves lacking the desire to do academic task. They often times feel detached from their actions that cause them to lack motivation to complete their task. Many are bored in the classroom because they feel perhaps feel they “don’t belong, they feel a disconnect.” Moreover, they are lacking in academic background knowledge, they seem to get further and further behind and each year in high school brings another year of additional pressure, feeling they will never get “caught-up.”

Conclusion

Research has shown that a great deal of motivation comes from good everyday teaching practices. It also goes back to the three R’s: Relevance, Relationship and Rigor to motivate students.

The following strategies are data taken from the one-on-one interview from the voice of students, what students want:

- **Make it Real-** In order to foster intrinsic motivation, create learning activities that are based on topics that are relevant to student s’ lives.
- **Provide Choices-** Students can have increased motivation when they feel some sense of autonomy in the learning process, motivation declines when students have no voice.
- **Balance the Challenge-** students perform best when the level of difficulty is slightly above their current ability level.
- **Seek Role Models-** If students can identify with role models they may be more likely to see the relevance in the subject matter. Invite speakers to class to whom the students can look up to.
- **Use Peer Models-** Students can learn by watching a peer succeed at a task, someone to whom the students can identify with.
- **Establish a sense of Belonging-** Students who feel they “belong” have a higher degree of intrinsic motivation and academic confidence.
- **Be Approachable-** Students need to feel comfortable enough to come to their teacher with any issues or concern.

In conclusion teachers have a tremendous effect on motivating their students. The teacher’s behavior and teaching style, the structure of the course, nature of the assignment, and

informal interactions with students all have a definite effect on students' motivation.

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