The Role of School and Home in Promoting Student Engagement*

With nearly one-third of all public secondary students in the United States dropping out of school each year, the focus on factors affecting student engagement and disengagement has increased (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Researchers report that higher levels of parent and teacher support are associated with higher levels of engagement and that students' engagement declines over the school years (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Usher & Kober, 2012).

This brief highlights key matters surrounding the role of classrooms and homes in student engagement and disengagement. The intent is to inform practices for engaging students in formal learning and to counter practices that lead to disengagement. The emphasis is on what the literature on intrinsic motivation has to teach us (see reference lists).

Motivation is a Multi-dimensional Construct

The picture of student motivation that has emerged in recent years is far more multifaceted and dynamic than suggested in earlier literature. (See Exhibit on the following page.) For example, with respect to goals, there are affective, behavioral, and cognitive components for each goal that a student holds, (Dowson & McInerney, 2003; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Multiple goals conflict, converge, and or/compensate for each other to determine a student's engagement or disengagement (Dowson & McInerny, 2003; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006).

Strategies for Increasing Student Intrinsic Motivation

Research supports the idea that instructional practices that enhance a student's feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness increase intrinsic motivation; practices that threaten these feelings undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Dornyei, 2000; Elliot & Dweck 2005; Ormond, 2010; Van Ryzin, 2011) .

Competence-supportive Practices

Feelings of competence emerge when children spend sufficient time exploring and attempting to gain mastery over the many facets of their world. In doing so, they encounter situations that are difficult and learn how to cope either in socially appropriate ways or in ways that enable them to "escape" (e.g., disengage).

Engagement is promoted and disengagement avoided when environments are established where youngsters feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. Such

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Exhibit

Some Theories About Student Goals and Motivation

As generally conceived, *intrinsic motivation* is driven by factors inside the student (e.g., personal interest, needs), rather than external reinforcers or pressures. *Extrinsic motivation* comes from influences outside of the individual (e.g., expected rewards and consequences) that are not an inherent part of the learning activity.

Achievement goal theory stresses reasons for wanting to succeed. These are shaped by internal motivational orientations. Most commonly, student goals are divided into (1) Mastery goals -- developing competence and skills (e.g., Have I learned? Have I improved?). (2) Performance goals -- demonstrating competence and outperforming others (e.g., Did I do better than others? Do others think I'm smart?). Performance goals are divided into two subtypes: (a) performance-avoidance goals for avoiding displays of incompetence, and (b) performance-approach goals for displaying competence (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006).

Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation that focuses on natural and intrinsic tendencies underlying human behavior. The theory stresses that intrinsic motivation is fostered by the fulfillment of three innate needs: namely the need to *feel* a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, (Deci, Jang, & Reeve, 2010; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Social-cognitive theory stresses students' beliefs about their likelihood of success on specific tasks, their competence, and the desirability of the outcomes associated with participation in the task. These all are seen as influencing willingness to engage in a task and the level of effort. An individual's cognitions with respect to academic work (e.g., beliefs about their ability, expectations about the outcomes of engaging in the task, goals for the task) are seen as influenced by social-contextual factors (e.g., messages from the teacher about the difficulty of the task, the perceived abilities of classmates, information about the importance of learning the material). Motivation is seen as emerging out of such socially-based cognitions and, thus, does not reside entirely within the individual or entirely within the context. *Self-efficacy beliefs* are a component of social-cognitive theory. This concept hypothesizes greater likelihood of student participation and investment in a task when they feel confident that they are capable of succeeding; those who doubt their ability to succeed at a task will be less inclined to put forth effort (Bandura, 2001).

Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure.

Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004)

environments can enhance competence by encouraging and supporting youngsters' success in pursuing tasks that they perceive as realistically challenging and understanding their performance and progress over time. At school and at home, it also is important to minimize situations where they feel significant threats to their competence. As youngsters display increased competence, parents and teachers are able to enable more and more autonomy. (In addition to promoting feelings of competence, as discussed in the next sections, positive environments enhance feelings of autonomy and relatedness.)

Research on the concept of self-efficacy stresses that students are more likely to invest effort if they have *confidence in the attainability of a desired outcome.* In the context of enhancing self-efficacy in classrooms, Urdan & Schoenfelder (2006) stress making instruction personally meaningful by tailoring it to students' attention levels and ensuring it is practically applicable. Teachers are encouraged to give students greater responsibility for and self-regulation over their learning. In general, these authors advocate the following practices:

> (a) *Verbal persuasion:* Assure students that they have the skills to succeed and will do well on the task as long as they are willing to put forth effort. Specifically, teachers should connect new concepts and tasks with previous tasks on which students have experienced success.

> (b) *Modeling:* Provide students with learning strategies for success. When students have something that they can imitate, they feel more confident in their own abilities to carry out tasks that utilize a similar approach.

> (c) *Past performances:* Teachers should supply opportunities for their students to experience academic success because those experiences will affect self-efficacy judgments on subsequent tasks. … By starting with easier tasks and moving on toward more challenging work, students' readiness to take on bigger challenges will develop as a result of earlier, more attainable success.

Scaffolded instruction is often cited as an example of an approach for enhancing feelings of competence. The intent is to engage participation in learning and promote intrinsic motivation by matching challenges with current competence. One aim is to increase risk-taking.

Autonomy-supportive Practices

Teacher-provided structure, as needed, is key to students developing a sense of perceived control over school outcomes. (S*tructure* should not be confused with *control*: to be controlling is to provide structure where it is not needed).

Deci, Jang, & Reeve (2010) describe appropriate amounts of structure in the following way:
> (a) Program of action to guide students' ongoing activity
> (b) Clear, understandable, explicit, and detailed directions
> (c) Constructive feedback on how students can reach desired outcomes.

When students perceive freedom of choice in their learning processes, they exhibit an increased sense of responsibility and investment in the tasks at hand. Deci, Jang, & Reeve (2010) describe autonomy-supportive practices as including:

(a) Listening to student input
(b) Providing informative feedback (narrative evaluations) rather than summative feedback (normative grades) alone
(c) Providing appropriate levels of challenge, and offering students choices about what to work on and how to complete assignments.

The following types of controlling practices should be avoided, as they are likely to increase extrinsic motivations for learning and/or discourage students from exerting genuine effort:

(a) Imposing strict deadlines for work
(b) Using threats and competition to control behavior
(c) Giving overwhelming amounts of feedback on incompetence
(d) Discouraging students from voicing their own opinions
(e) Offering too much support for student learning, and offering tangible rewards (e.g., stickers and prizes) in the classrooms or for the completion of homework.

Relatedness-supportive Practices

Youngsters' relationships with parents, teachers, and peers influences attitudes toward learning, home and classroom climate, and the learning structure adults establish (Dornyei, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2009; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006; Van Ryzin, 2011). For teachers, a primary procedural objective is to establish and maintain an appropriate *working* relationship with students. This is done by creating a sense of trust and caring, open communication, and providing support and guidance as needed.

Youngsters' who perceive parents and teachers as supportive and caring show higher levels of engagement and effort in learning, take on social responsibility goals, and have pro-social interactions with others. Urdan & Schoenfelder (2006) describe supportive and caring teachers as:

(a) Demonstrating democratic interaction styles
(b) Taking individual student differences into account when setting expectations
(c) Providing constructive feedback
(d) Resembling an authoritative (as contrasted with an authoritarian) parent by providing rules and structure along with appropriate levels of autonomy.

What motivates friends and peers often plays a large part in determining what motivates a youngster. Parents and teachers can reduce conflict between social and academic goals by not forcing a youngster to choose between such goals (e.g., pursuing strategies to foster positive peer relationships).

What is the best way to use evaluation as a motivational tool?

Given that evaluation is integral to learning, parents and teachers should learn to give constructive, competence- and autonomy-building, and informative feedback. The intentional and unintentional messages adults send affect engagement and performance (Deci, Jang, & Reeve, 2010; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006).

Feedback needs to go well beyond grades and extrinsic reinforcers. Youngsters need to understand the positive facets of their efforts and what to do next to improve. The communication needs to enhance feelings of mutual respect and caring and that, with appropriate effort, they can improve (i.e., can enhance their competence).

Basic aims of feedback are to

>   (a) clarify the purpose of learning activities and processes (especially those designed to help correct specific problems) and why processes will be effective

>   (b) clarify the nature and purpose of evaluative processes and apply them in ways that deemphasize feelings of failure (e.g., explaining to students the value of feedback about learning and performance; providing feedback in ways that minimize any negative impact)

>   (c) guide and support motivated practice (e.g., by suggesting and providing opportunities for meaningful applications and clarifying ways to organize practice)

>   (d) provide opportunities for continued application and generalization (e.g., so learners can pursue additional, self-directed learning in the area or can arrange for additional support and direction).

Exhibit

The Effects of Graded Evaluation on Student Motivation

Prospect theory says that, as stakes increase, the aversion to loss increases exponentially, while the attraction to gain increases at a much lower rate. Because good grades are viewed as a limited resource, the stakes are high and generate performance pressure. As a result, avoidance of substandard performance on graded tasks almost always is at the forefront of students' minds.

In comparing students who expected graded feedback for their work with students who either did not expect feedback or expected comment-based feedback for their work, Butera, Buchs, & Pulfrey (2011) found that students who expected graded feedback -- regardless of skill-level or GPA -- showed increased levels of performance-avoidance goals. Follow-up longitudinal studies showed that the reduction in autonomous motivation experienced by students in graded conditions for one task will also yield performance-avoidance goals for subsequent tasks of similar type. These findings are interpreted as support for conclusions that:

>   (a) Grading generates feelings of powerlessness, dependence, and uncertainty over what is necessary for success; and these feelings lead to a focus on avoiding negative outcomes (i.e., performance-avoidance goals).

>   (b) Reduced levels of autonomous motivation following a graded task mediates the relationship between that initial graded task and the performance-avoidance goals in subsequent tasks of similar nature.

The Role of Parents, Family Background, and Culture in Shaping Student Motivation

Parental/caretaker behaviors (e.g., choices, actions, parenting styles, levels of parental involvement, etc.) communicate beliefs, attitudes, and values related to education in ways that affect how children perceive their identities, abilities, attitudes, and goals. For example, what is communicated influences their views of themselves as learners and about whether schools and teachers are to be valued.

Individual differences in parent/caretaker beliefs and values about education are found across socio-economic status and cultural and educational backgrounds. And reactions to students by school staff have been found to reflect stereotypes about status and background. The literature cautions about the role all this can play with respect to engagement and disengagement in learning. For example, students who experience prejudice often protect their self-esteem and group identity by making external attributions for failure. These external attributions can weaken feelings of control and autonomy, both of which are necessary for the development of strong motivation. Another example is provided by the concept of *stereotype threat*. This refers to a individual's fear that poor performance will either confirm negative racial stereotypes or disprove more positive stereotypes made about his reference group. This fear leads to performance-avoidance goals and disengagement from classroom activities as a way of guarding against stereotype threat.

The implications for home and school are straightforward. Youngsters should be exposed early and often to positive role models (including mentors) and beliefs, attitudes, and values that support engagement and success at school.

Exhibit

Motivational Goals of Immigrant Families

Many facets of immigrant experiences can foster a youngster's engagement and success at school, especially when immigrant parents model positive beliefs, attitudes, and values about schooling. Students from immigrant families may also adopt high-achieving goals "out of duty" when familial obligations are communicated, and the students are expected to consider their family when making decisions. Usher & Kober (2012) use the following example:

> For Asian American students, it is often the case that parental expectations are the primary catalyst of motivation. It may even be the case that some individuals may prefer that choices be made for them by significant figures in their lives. Asian American students tend to attribute academic outcomes to effort while their white peers tend to attribute outcomes to fixed abilities. Research also suggests that Asian American students attend less to the question of whether or not they are able to complete a task and more on how they might complete that task well. While this emphasis on effort has yielded impressive achievements for Asian American students, it is also often accompanied by a higher academic expectations and a greater fear of failure.

Homework and Parents

Engaging youngsters in homework often is a difficult motivational concern, especially for parents. Studies show that students experience a wide range of emotions related to their homework, and the presence and quality of parental support is a major factor in this.

Knollman (2007) stresses that intrinsically motivated students fare well whether parents provide much learning autonomy or more directive instructions. These students enjoy exploring the task on their own and experience positive emotions when given the freedom to do so.

In contrast, extrinsically motivated students experience more positive affect when parents give specific instructions on how to carry out the task at hand. (When asked to work autonomously, extrinsically motivated students report significantly higher levels of anxiety than intrinsically motivated students and face a greater likelihood of failure.) They view a high degree of help and structure as ideal because it provides a fast route to completing tasks and protection against failure. It must be recognized, however, that these students are working to get done, rather than for intrinsic valuing of learning.

Homework provides a challenging opportunity to enhance engagement. For extrinsically motivated students, more directive parental instruction during homework should only be a starting point. As with classroom scaffolding, parents can gradually adjust the nature of their help to be more autonomy-supportive. In providing feedback, they can convey positive facets of the youngster's efforts and what to do next to improve and do so in ways that enhance feelings of competence, mutual respect and caring. They can also use the time to further communicate positive beliefs, attitudes, and values related to education.

Some Practical Resources

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The Center has prepared a set of continuing education modules to provide a more indepth discussion of *Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families* – See
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagei.pdf

Additional references on this topic can be found by going to the Center's Online Clearinghouse QuickFind on *Motivation, Engagement, Re-engagement* --
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm

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