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0521473241 - Social Motivation: Understanding Children's School Adjustment

Edited by Jaana Juvonen and Kathryn R. Wentzel

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1 Introduction: New perspectives on motivation at school

Kathryn R. Wentzel

The social worlds of children are a pervasive and influential part of their lives at school. Each day in class, children work to maintain and establish interpersonal relationships, they strive to develop social identities and a sense of belongingness, they observe and model social skills and standards for performance displayed by others, and they are rewarded for behaving in ways that are valued by teachers and peers. We also know that children who display socially competent behavior in elementary school are more likely to excel academically throughout their middle and high school years than those who do not (see Wentzel, 1991).

Our purpose in bringing together the authors for this volume was to enrich this portrayal of how children's social and academic development are intertwined. We asked the contributors to focus on specific ways in which children are influenced by and motivated to achieve things social as well as academic when they are at school. In response, the authors provided us with a diverse set of unique perspectives on social aspects of motivation. Collectively, however, the various perspectives bring to the forefront the range of social outcomes that children strive to achieve at school and consider ways in which these outcomes contribute to and in fact represent valued aspects of school adjustment. In doing so, many of the authors emphasize the important role of social goals, self-referent beliefs, and social cognitions in explanations of school-related competence. In addition, the social motivational perspectives presented in this volume draw attention to the need for models of school success that consider not only intrapersonal processes as motivators of behavior but the critical role of interpersonal relationships and social concerns as well.

In general, research has paid little attention to the possibility that children's social development is related to classroom motivation and school adjustment. Indeed, much of the recent work on motivation at school portrays children as striving to achieve primarily intellectual outcomes in response to academically-related aspects of curriculum and instruction (see,

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e.g., Ames & Ames, 1989). The empirical work presented in this volume, however, attests to the fact that children are motivated to achieve social as well as academic goals at school and that indeed, school children often behave in direct response to their social environments. We hope, therefore, that the work presented in this volume will provide inspiration and a challenge to continue research and theory development on social motivational perspectives and in doing so, further understanding of children's lives at school.

Themes of the volume

The social motivational perspectives presented in this volume reflect several broad themes. At the outset, the authors remind us that children must be socially as well as intellectually adept if they are to be successful students. The chapters provide multiple definitions of school adjustment, ranging from academically-related outcomes such as attitudes, values, and motivational orientations towards school (Berndt and Keefe; Birch and Ladd; Harter), task engagement (Kindermann, McCollam, and Gibson), self-regulation (Schunk and Zimmerman), grades and test scores (Wentzel), and dropping out (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert, and McDougall), to social and personal outcomes such as the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers (Kupersmidt, Buchele, Voeller, and Sedikes), prosocial and antisocial behavior (Erdley; Ford; Wentzel), self-esteem (Harter), and public presentations of the self (Juvonen).

In addition, ways in which students' social goals and related psychological functioning can either facilitate or hinder school adjustment are examined. In particular, the authors highlight the social goals and motives that underlie school adjustment, including needs for belongingness and relatedness (Birch and Ladd; Hymel et al.), needs for social approval (Juvonen), in addition to needs for admiration, self-enhancement, and verification (Berndt and Keefe), goals to achieve prosocial and socially responsible outcomes (Erdley; Ford; Wentzel), and orientations toward intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Harter).

Several authors also discuss how needs and goals can vary as a function of levels of difficulty and proximity (Schunk and Zimmerman), aspects of social integration (Ford), and the importance and type of relationship children have with their peers (Kupersmidt et al.). Other aspects of intrapsychological functioning that facilitate goal pursuit also are considered. Self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills (Erdley; Schunk and Zimmerman), attributions (Erdley; Juvonen), agency beliefs, emotions (Ford),

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self perceptions (Harter), and social cognitions (Erdley; Juvonen; Schunk and Zimmerman; Wentzel) are presented as processes that are central to the successful accomplishment of goals and the realization of personal needs.

Finally, interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers are described as potentially powerful social contexts that motivate student behavior. Although social relationships are considered to be the central motivational forces underlying socialization and social development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hartup, 1989; Maccoby, 1992), their role in motivating school success (or failure) has not been studied in systematic fashion (see work by Eccles (1993) and Epstein (1989) for noteworthy exceptions). Therefore, in addition to focusing on intrapersonal influences such as social goals and social cognitions, the authors also focus on interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers as motivators of school success.

The chapters in this volume present several ways in which social relationships provide school-aged children with motivational contexts for development. Several authors explore the motivational impact of group membership by focusing on ways that peer groups and classroom teachers communicate and reinforce specific values and attitudes toward school, behavior, and even definitions of the self (Berndt and Keefe; Harter; Juvonen; Kindermann et al.; Kupersmidt et al.; Schunk and Zimmerman). Dyadic relationships are also discussed, with specific mention of ways that friendships with peers and teacher-student relationships influence social goal pursuit (Kupersmidt et al.; Wentzel), satisfy social needs (Berndt and Keefe; Birch and Ladd), and promote healthy social-emotional and intellectual functioning (Berndt and Keefe; Birch and Ladd; Hymel et al.; Kupersmidt et al.; Wentzel).

Finally, several chapters in this volume illustrate how social relationships influence or motivate student behavior, depending on the specific functions they serve. For example, they provide students with emotional support and nurturance (Birch and Ladd; Hymel et al.; Kupersmidt et al.; Wentzel). Relationships are also portrayed as sources of information – about the self, about the expectations and values of others, and about how to accomplish specific tasks (Berndt and Keefe; Harter; Juvonen; Kindermann et al.; Schunk and Zimmermann).

Challenges to the field

The notion that social concerns and influences are relevant for understanding motivation and academic performance is certainly not new. In the

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early 60s, the need for Affiliation, identified by McClelland (1987) as a central motive in people's lives, was linked to academic performance independent of need for Achievement (McKeachie, 1961). Crandall's work (1963) related classroom achievement to children's need for social approval, and Veroff (1969) proposed that social comparison was an integral part of motivation to achieve in school-aged children.

More recently, theory and research has focused on motivational factors embedded in learning contexts. Research on classroom reward structures (Ames, 1984; deCharms, 1984), organizational culture and climate (Maehr and Midgley, 1991), and person-environment fit (Eccles and Midgley, 1989) has greatly expanded our understanding of how the social environments within which learning takes place can motivate children to learn and behave in very specific ways. Theories of motivation once again recognize social and affiliative concerns as basic goals and needs that underlie student achievement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). We believe that the perspectives presented in this volume contribute to and extend this work by focusing on the motivational significance of *social*-psychological functioning and the more proximal contexts of interpersonal relationships.

We hope that the perspectives introduced in this volume provide the field with new questions and challenges for understanding motivation and adjustment at school. For instance, can models of motivation traditionally used to understand skill and task-related performance be used to understand the development of social competence? Juvonen's extension of attribution theory to the domain of social information processing and social behavior provides one example of how this can be accomplished. Berndt and Keefe's use of expectancy-value theory to understand the role of friendships in school adjustment provides another. Ford's Motivational Systems Theory illustrates how general principles of motivation can be applied to the social domain of caring.

We might also ask how theories of socialization and social development can inform models of motivation and school adjustment. Work described in chapters by Harter and Schunk and Zimmerman illustrates how social role expectations and modeling can be powerful socializers of self processes that motivate academic behavior. Chapters by Birch and Ladd, and Wentzel suggest how family socialization processes known to promote healthy social and emotional development might also reflect mechanisms by which teachers and peers motivate social competence as well as academic excellence in the classroom.

A consideration of interpersonal relationships as motivational contexts clearly introduces additional levels of complexity to models of motiva-

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tion. Using theories of social cognition and identity development, several authors suggest that the degree to which relationships are influential depends in part on the unique perspectives and belief systems of the individual (Harter), and the degree to which the individual can identify with socialization agents (whether they are teachers or peers) along certain dimensions (Juvonen; Schunk and Zimmerman). Other authors suggest that when relationships do form, they operate as systems that have qualities separate from those of the individuals that form the relationship (Berndt and Keefe; Birch and Ladd).

When considered as a whole, the perspectives presented in this volume suggest that further exploration of social-cognitive and other social psychological factors, and identification of variables that capture the quality of relationships and social contexts, must take place before the nature of "social" motivation can be understood fully. Commentaries by Dweck and Graham suggest that perhaps even more elaborate models of motivation might be necessary to accomplish this task. Carol Dweck provides us with a complex and dynamic model of psychological processes that underlie accomplishments in both social and academic domains of functioning. Using an attributional perspective, Sandra Graham highlights the role of emotions in describing the mechanisms that link interpersonal relationships to social cognitions and student behavior. Both Dweck and Graham remind us that the search for specific mechanisms and processes that can explain social influences on motivation and behavior is still in its inception and remains a challenge for the field. We hope that the chapters in this volume will provide the impetus for continued efforts in this regard.

Overview of the chapters

Although there was considerable overlap in themes and perspectives across the eleven chapters, we divided the book into two sections. The first set of chapters focuses primarily on intrapsychological processes that motivate school adjustment.

Susan Harter provides a developmental perspective on three aspects of school adjustment, intrinsic/extrinsic dimensions of motivation, self-esteem, and students' "voice." In her discussion of these outcomes, Harter draws particular attention to the need to study change over time, individual differences in student's perceptions of and reactions to change, and the role of teachers and peers in the social construction of the self.

Jaana Juvonen discusses school adjustment in terms of children's understanding of implicit norms for social conduct. Drawing on attribution

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theory, she illustrates how students use this knowledge to present themselves in ways that will lead to social approval from teachers as well as peers.

Janis Kupersmidt, Kathy Buchele, Mary Ellen Voegler, and Constantine Sedikides consider a range of social and academic outcomes in relation to problematic peer relationships. In particular, Kupersmidt and her colleagues describe ways in which social needs and social-cognitive functioning mediate links between peer relationship problems and school maladjustment.

Cynthia Erdley focuses on aggression as a specific example of maladjusted school behavior. In her chapter, she describes a model of social information processing that can be used to explain children's aggressive behavior and subsequent peer acceptance.

Martin Ford presents a model of motivation for explaining socially responsible and caring behavior at school. Motivational Systems Theory describes a set of psychological processes including goals, emotions, and agency beliefs that motivate the achievement of these social outcomes.

Finally, Dale Schunk and Barry Zimmerman discuss the social origins of academic self-regulation and self-efficacy. Drawing from principles of observational learning, these authors describe a process of internalization whereby observed academic skills become self-regulated.

The second set of chapters focuses primarily on the role of social relationships in motivating school adjustment:

Sondra Birch and Gary Ladd discuss the influence of teacher and peer relationships on academic as well as social aspects of adjustment. These authors describe a "relationship features" perspective that highlights the role of specific functions of relationships in motivating student behavior.

Kathryn Wentzel defines school adjustment in terms of prosocial and socially responsible behavior. Her work illustrates ways in which these aspects of social competence contribute to academic achievement and how relationships with teachers and peers motivate children to behave in these socially desirable ways.

Thomas Berndt and Keunho Keefe consider attitudes, classroom behavior, and academic achievement as aspects of school adjustment that are influenced by friends. These authors discuss two alternative pathways by which friends influence academic outcomes, focusing primarily on social motives as mechanisms that link friendship quality to school adjustment.

Thomas Kindermann, Tanya McCollam, and Ellsworth Gibson consider academic motivation and engagement as aspects of school adjustment.

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These authors describe the role of peer networks in socializing motivational orientations toward schoolwork over the course of the school year.

In the final chapter of the volume, Shelley Hymel, Colin Comfort, Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, and Patricia McDougall document the problem of school dropouts. Hymel and her colleagues highlight the role of peer relationships in motivating students to either stay in or drop out of school.

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PART ONE

**Social motivation:
Perspectives on self**

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2 Teacher and classmate influences on scholastic motivation, self-esteem, and level of voice in adolescents

Susan Harter

The classroom setting represents not only an educational arena but a powerful social context in which the psychological adjustment of children and adolescents can be affected. This chapter will focus specifically on the role played by teachers and classmates. Teachers not only instruct, but serve to represent and communicate a particular educational philosophy, including the standards by which students will be evaluated. They not only provide feedback regarding students' academic performance, but have a major impact on students' motivation to learn. Not only do they convey specific approval or disapproval for scholastic achievement, but teachers communicate their more general approval or disapproval for the child as a person (see Birch & Ladd; Wentzel, this volume). Classmates serve as potential companions and friends, meeting important social needs of the developing child. However, they also represent a very salient social reference group that invites intense social comparison. In addition, the approval or disapproval that classmates display can have a major effect on a child's or adolescent's sense of self (see also Berndt & Keefe; Kindermann, et al. this volume).

In this chapter, I will examine the impact of teachers and classmates on three constructs that represent different indices of adjustment within the school context. These include: (a) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for classroom learning, (b) self-esteem, and (c) level of "voice," namely the ability to express one's opinions in the classroom. Specific attention will be given to the antecedents and mediators of the constructs, leading to an emphasis on individual differences. Such an approach forces one to question the reality of certain generalizations that have dominated the literature, for example, that most students lose their intrinsic motivation as they move through the school system, that self-esteem suffers in early adolescence, particularly for girls, and that at this same developmental juncture, girls' voices go underground. A consideration of the determinants of these