

## The role of context in students' perceptions of motivational change

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### Abstract

Nicholls (1989) has identified three different types of motivational orientations towards learning characterising different personal goals; task orientation, ego orientation and avoidance of work. Each motivational orientation forms the basis of students' differing theories of success.

Ten students considered to be motivationally "at-risk" on the basis of their motivational orientations, were interviewed before and after the transition from primary school to high school, but only three of the students are introduced in this paper. The students were part of a larger study examining students' theories of success in Maths and English.

This paper presents the students' critiques of school (after Thorkildsen & Nicholls, 1991) and their perceptions of the changes necessary within themselves and the school environment for motivational change to occur. Each student's perceptions are linked to their theories of success and a model of students' perceptions is presented which relates student's concerns to the

contexts they perceive to be important in their own motivational change.

### Background

In this paper motivation is framed within a goals perspective, which claims that students differ with respect to their personal goals about success (Nicholls, 1989). Further, students' perceptions of the world around them, including the salience of the psychological dimensions of the classroom (Ames & Archer, 1988), and the climate of the school (Maehr & Midgley, 1991) are seen in relation to their personal goals. Nicholls describes three personal motivational orientations: a task orientation, implying the goal is to increase one's understanding, to accomplish something one had not previously done, or to improve performance; an ego orientation, implying the goal is to establish superiority of one's ability relative to that of others, and a work avoidance orientation, implying the goal is to do as little as possible. Nicholls claims that the task and ego orientation represent independent dimensions so student's orientations may combine various goals.

Studies of the relationship of personal motivational orientations to students' beliefs about the causes of academic success (MacCallum, 1993; Nicholls, Patashnick & Nolen, 1985; Nicholls, Cobb, Yackel, Wood & Patashnick, 1990; Thorkildsen, 1988), the purposes of schooling (Nicholls, 1989), and perception of the teacher's personal goals and students' study strategies (Nolen, 1988; Nolen & Haladyna, 1990a, 1990b) suggest that a high task orientation is most adaptive for long term learning. Task orientation is related to a belief that success in general is related to effort and cooperation, a greater satisfaction with school and beliefs that the purposes of school are more to do with commitment to society and understanding the world than to gaining wealth and status. In studies of high school science students Nolen found task orientation to be related to the valuing and use of monitoring, elaboration and organisational strategies in studying science tasks and a perception that the teacher wants students to master material by understanding, learning from mistakes and developing

independent thinking.

Such evidence would suggest a worthwhile aim for education would be the enhancement of students' personal motivational goals towards a task orientation. To date little research has studied change in goals or the interrelationship between students' goals and students' perceptions of the educational contexts students believe encourage them to learn. In ecological terms there is a mutuality between student and context, each influencing the other. Nicholls' research implies that students' motivational orientations are relatively stable, but work on classroom goal structures (Ames & Ames, 1984) and school environments (Maehr & Midgley, 1991) suggests that the classroom and school environments can influence students motivational orientations in some ways. Within intrinsic motivation research a number of researchers (eg Deci & Ryan, 1992) have found that changing the environment to enhance students' self-determination and perceived control over their own learning results in increases in intrinsic motivation, which is conceptually related to a task orientation. Usually, when motivational researchers discuss enhancing motivation to learn, the assumption is made that teacher strategies or modified learning environments impact the majority of students in similar ways. Recent research suggests this is not the case. Nolen and Nicholls (1993) found considerable variation in students' valuing of teacher practices for motivating students in mathematics and substantial differences between students in years two and five. MacCallum (1993) found students' motivational goals change in differing ways, some remain stable and others change in different directions, over the transition from primary school to high school, an event which involves change in expectations and educational climate.

From a goals perspective on motivation, the motivational goals a student brings to bear in any learning setting, focuses the student on particular aspects and concerns within the learning setting. It seems likely, then, that differing patterns of motivational goals will translate into students having differing understandings of the contexts in which motivational change can and does occur for them.

#### The Students

Ten students were interviewed in December near the end of year 7 (the last year of primary school)<sup>1</sup> and again the next year in July (midway through the first year of high school year 8)<sup>2</sup> but this paper will concentrate on data from interviews with three of the students. All ten students proceeded to the same high school and were considered by their teachers to be at least average with respect to their school work and six of the ten students (two of the three) had attended some courses in PEAC, a one morning per week extension programme for primary students.

The ten students were selected for the interviews on the basis of their motivational orientation scores, obtained from their responses to the Motivation Orientation Scales (Nicholls, 1989) which were administered as part of the larger study. Nicholls maintains that a task orientation is related to a particular view of the world which leads to

better quality learning and ought to be more adaptive. The benefit of an ego orientation is contentious given that the high school environment, with graded courses and regular assessment, may be more competitive than that of primary school. As the main aim was to examine students' perceptions of school and how they believed motivation could be enhanced, students with low task orientation scores were chosen. Thus students with low task orientation scores in one or both of the subject areas (English and Maths) were selected. Ego orientation and Work Avoidance scores ranged from very high to low. The three students discussed in this paper had distinct motivational goal patterns (see Table 1).

The students were asked about their perceptions of change directly. The interview questions were designed to elaborate information from the questionnaires and to complement the information gained from analysis of the group data. The main themes were:

- (a) student's perceptions of the differences between primary school and high school,
- (b) student's perceptions of the possibility of change, and what would have to happen, either personally or in their environment, for change in their motivation to occur, and the characteristics of motivation enhancing environments,
- (c) student's perceptions of the reasons for differences or similarities in their goals, beliefs and perceptions across subject areas.

Student responses were not coded as each interview concentrated on specific aspects important to each student. The text of relevant sections of the interview transcripts are included to illustrate the concepts developed. The specific aspects highlighted in this paper are the contexts students perceived to be different between primary school and high school, their stories of motivational change and the contexts in which they perceive motivational change occurs for them.

The contexts of motivational change

The students had different concerns, firstly about what was different about high school, and their stories about changes in wanting to learn emphasised different aspects of the learning contexts. These contexts differed in importance in each student's perceptions of motivational change. In this paper the learning contexts refer to the contexts in which interaction and change occurs and can be thought of as layers or concentric circles surrounding the self in the centre.

Self

Peers - friends, other students

Teacher(s) - subject areas, classroom

Wider school organisation

Family

Wider community

The three students discussed in this paper have been named Marnie, Paul and Shane. Marnie and Shane came from the larger primary school and Paul from the smaller one.

Marnie was a student whose goals emphasised easy superiority and performing at a high level (low Task orientation, high Ego orientation, and mid Work Avoidance). She was a high achieving student and was very well regarded in primary school by students and staff and liked being important and special. The principal of the primary school she attended referred to her as a model student. At the end of year 7 she wasn't looking forward to going to high school and was concerned about going from the top of the school in year 7 to being youngest in high school.

After the transition she found being the youngest wasn't as bad as she expected but was still hesitant about high school. In reply to a question about whether high school was better than she'd expected she said:

M: No not really, it's just.....it's OK.

Her answers to questions about the differences between the primary school and the high school focussed on teachers and school organisation. Different teachers were "good" because:

M: if you've got one you don't like you don't have to have them the whole day.

She had applied for and been accepted into the Academic Extension Programme (AEP) at the high school. She was very critical of it as the AEP hadn't lived up to her expectations. She expected the best teachers and for the AEP class to look the best. In one sense she wanted the work to be harder but seemed to be surprised at how hard the work was and her class didn't seem to be any different from some of the others. Marnie actively made comparisons of work and student grades between classes and between herself and her classmates.

M: We do exactly the same work as the other kids do.....they're not very organised

I: Who's not very organised?

M: Well, I don't know.....I've talked to other kids and they do exactly what we do. So, I don't know what we're meant to do.....or anything,.....but there's no difference.

I: How does that affect you?

M: Well they said it's a course where.....you know,.....it's extended, but it's not.

I: Are you finding it interesting, challenging or.....?

M: Mm, but it's harder than the primary school.

I: I think you found primary school pretty easy.

M: Yeah, it was, cause you sort of did the same stuff,.....but [in high school] in maths every day or every week you do something new.

I: Are you finding it a little bit more difficult?

M: Mm

Marnie tended to have two types of responses, answers that were very definite and others, such as Mm, that suggested she'd rather not say. Later in the interview she came back to the issue of the extension programme and it seemed she had given it some thought and wanted to tell all.

M: in this brochure it says they will get a better education and everything,.....but we're not, we do exactly the same as everyone else and

they get better marks too than what we do,.....and they say they'll give us the best teachers.....as well, but the teachers we get are real losers,.....and they are not very good at explaining things<sup>3</sup>

I:Oh do you wish you weren't in that programme ?

M:Nup I wish I wasn't in it

I:Is this the school you'd have come to anyway?

M:Yeah

I:So you'd rather have not been in it?

M:Oh its good to put on your application form that you're in an extension,.....but then they think.....extension does that mean she's dumb?.....and needs extended work,.....so I don't know.

Marnie did not enjoy learning nor did she expect to, but being 'successful' in her terms did make her feel good. In primary school she said:

M:this says what makes you feel successful. If you do better - well it does, if you do worse it doesn't make you feel very good does it?

In the second interview, in high school, Marnie made similar comments, this time making a clear distinction between "being successful" and "liking":

I:...you agree with those that make you feel story writing has gone well for you. Is that still what you feel?

M:Well that means you feel successful in writing.

I:Yeah.

M:It doesn't mean I like it.

I:OK you feel successful but you don't like it still?

M:Yeah.

I:So you want to make a complete and absolute distinction between making you feel successful and liking it.

M:Yes.

She did not seem to doubt her own ability to handle the work, but seemed surprised that so many new concepts were introduced in high school. It was the teacher that made the difference. She skirted around questions about change in herself and from her responses to the questions about improving and the ensuing discussion, did not wish to engage in reflection on her own work and how she might improve it.

I: Do you work hard all the time?

M:yeah it takes me a long time to do it that's all,.....in English I'm probably the last person to get mine written out. I don't know whether I write slow or something but I'm always last

I:Are you spending more time thinking about what you are writing?

M:Yes it takes me ages to find an idea

I:Mm, would that be the same in maths or would you have a bit more spare time in maths?

M:Oh probably in maths,.....there are lots of people in maths who don't understand as well I think it's the teacher.....If we had another teacher like Mr S.....and he explained it to us then we'd probably understand it.

At another point in the interview we discussed what she had written in

answer to a question in the questionnaire in May of year 8 about how she might improve her writing. She had said she didn't enjoy writing because she couldn't think up ideas and then it took "ages to write and rewrite".

I:Now we talked a little bit about this before. Thinking up ideas was obviously what you think you could improve in.

M:Mm

I:You were going to improve it by reading more fiction books and imagining more.

M:(Chuckle)

I:Have you been doing that at all?

M:Oh, not really. But at school we have these English courses and we have to read books, but that's about all.

I:So, have you been reading more books than you usually do?

M:Yeah, probably.

I:So do you think that helps at all with ideas?

M:Nup.

I:...or helps you compose things better if you've been reading what other people say.....It hasn't?

M:Oh. They were just questions. I just wrote that down.

Marnie had consistently written down and talked about not being able to think up ideas to write about, so it is likely that she was being reasonably honest about that. It was the part in the questionnaire about how she intended to improve that was questionable. The comment "they were just questions" could be construed as evidence of low validity for the responses of this student. But there are other possible interpretations. Marnie values school for the success it can bring her and her ability to perform in the highest classes, but she doesn't like it nor does she expect to enjoy it. It appears that Marnie 'plays the game' of learning and completing work (including questionnaires) and plays it very well. But she expects the school and the teachers to play the game properly too. The question required an answer so she gave a plausible one. It is also significant, I think, that it was a question about improving to which she admitted just writing something down. She was sceptical about anything improving writing and thinking up ideas. Earlier she said that being smart (and everyone considered her smart) helped students do well in writing because "they can write more intelligently and it sort of sounds better I suppose".

These interpretations are supported by her responses to a later interview question about improving and learning from mistakes. Marnie emphasised the teacher, in the sense of 'reading what the teacher wanted':

M:say the teacher,.....with mistakes like spelling and that, the teachers says this is wrong, so then you don't do that anymore, so they learn from what they did wrong.

With respect to change, Marnie focused on the school and the advertised programmes. She expected the teachers in AEP to be excellent and the

work offered to be harder than what the other classes did, or at least extended. Marnie's critique is about the school and her perception that the school was not fulfilling its part of an agreement. In one sense, she perceived the school to be inhibiting her achievement. Perhaps it was. She was prepared to 'play the game', to go to school, work hard, achieve well, even if she didn't enjoy it.

In class, Marnie was sitting away from other students and seemed a little disconnected from the classroom social groups. This reinforced the idea that she was different, even from the other students in the AEP class. Marnie did not wish to be interviewed in year 10, but was reported to be still in the AEP class and achieving well.

In contrast to Marnie, Paul believed success came from hard work, not from easy superiority. His task goals increased over the transition to high school and he had moderate ego goals.

When asked about the differences between primary school and high school, Paul concentrated on the increased responsibility:

P:It's different to what I thought because mainly I was listening to my sister who came up here (year 9 now) and she said it was really good so I was expecting it to be really good and its just..... its so much different to primary school.....you're more independent.....and like you have to rely on your own self.....you have different teachers and you have to make sure you arrive at the right class at the right time you have to.....like down at primary school you had a siren or a bell and here you don't have anything.....you've just got to keep looking at the time and make sure you don't get to your classroom late

I:Do you not like that?

P:well.....it was hard to get used to at first I wasn't used to it, but and I kept on getting lost but well I like it now,.....I'm used to it now, and its, I find high school quite good this year,.....I mean this term. Paul also mentioned teachers, whether they were nice or not but his emphasis was more in terms of the subjects and whether they interested him or not. Whether he continued to enjoy high school more and more as time went on would depend on:

P:... the kind of subjects I have or what,.....sometimes the teacher, sometimes they might be nice ones,.....and they might not be so nice.

I:Have you had a lot of different teachers?

P:Not really, .....for social studies I've only had two teachers one Mr S for two terms and Mr J,.....and, I had the same teacher twice for Science that was Mr M and I've got him second term and this term, and first term I had this other guy and,.....I like it better when we have a change in teachers,.....it's more interesting...

I:... Do you think a different teacher makes a difference or a different topic to study?

P:Well this term I think it's probably the topic we're studying. I find it really interesting.

He was enjoying maths more than he had in primary school:

P:... you are learning more things and more like algebra and things

I:you like algebra?

P: Yeah but its different to primary school.....just learning the normal sums which were easy.....so I find it more enjoyable learning different things.

Previously, while still in primary school Paul explained why he was looking forward to high school and couldn't wait to get there, partly because of information told him by his sister. He didn't always ask the teacher for help in primary school but he was going to in high school:

P:... my sister's already in high school and she says that if you try hard you'll find it easier so if I don't understand something I'm going to ask the teacher, and the teachers in high school know.....are doing that subject and they know more about that subject, be able to get the proper.....I'm not saying that's not proper, just it will be clearly told to you.

In the high school interview he said he had found most high school teachers did explain things better.

Paul told a little story about an incident in primary school that encouraged him to work harder and improve.

P: One day I came in from going to the dentist, my story.....the beginning of my story was up on the board.....and I really liked that.

I: You did?

P: He [the teacher] thought it was an excellent beginning and I liked that ...

... if you are better than others then it gives you more confidence and you think .....well, oh, you're really good at it and you try harder.

This incident did make Paul try harder and encouraged him to find out how to do direct speech properly so that the rest of the story was as good as the beginning. It was an ego-involving situation, in this case public acknowledgment of superior performance, that motivated him, gave him confidence and faith in himself to try to improve his perceived weakness - using direct speech in a story. Paul also saw a poor result in a test or inability to understand something as a signal to work harder. He considered teachers, parents and peers as sources of assistance but in different ways. Teachers and sometimes parents could help you to understand, whereas he saw peers as helpful in finding the easiest or fastest way to do something.

P:... if they can get along with students they may be able to discuss their ideas between each other and they will be able to come up with the easiest one.

In primary school he thought that teachers ought to go through work with students who didn't understand.

P: If someone's not getting a good result, on a sum, I reckon that they [the teacher] should go through it with them until they understand or the next time they do it they just won't understand it and they'll get it wrong again.

I: How's the teacher know who needs help?

P: By their test results,.....if they have a bad one.....if they have a couple

of sums and they get them all wrong or even one wrong then they can go

through it with them. Ask them whether they understand, if they do OK then.....but if they don't understand, they should go through it with them.

Even in primary school Paul saw that the student had some responsibility for accepting help when offered, but in high school he saw the student had more responsibility in requesting assistance if needed. Paul's comments in year 10 support this further. He reflected that in primary school "you had a lot of people looking out for you" but in high school "you have to stand up for yourself".

Paul tended to not be critical of the school or of teachers and tended to look for the positive aspects. He focussed on the ways that teachers could help students to understand the work. He was much more critical of himself, for example not coping initially with the extra responsibility in high school, finding his way around the school, coping with lots of assignments, having to manage his time better and having to work harder if he did badly on a test.

It seems that the two student's responses differ in the focus of their critiques, Marnie focussing on the limiting aspects of the school and teacher-student contexts and was less reflective about self, with Paul focussing on the positive aspects of the teacher-student context and more critically on the self.

Shane's goals emphasised work avoidance. He came from the same school as Marnie and the comment of the principal, "I can see you've selected the extremes", suggested the principal thought Shane was very different from Marnie. Shane was very consistent in his responses over the time.

In both writing and maths he found little to make him feel successful except for easy work.

Shane expected everything to be different in high school, "people, classrooms, teachers, like everything just about" and was looking forward to high school. In the interview at high school in answer to the question about high school he eventually focussed on teachers, but not whether he liked them but whether they liked him:

S:It's alright

I:Do you like it?

S:Oh yeah

I:better than primary school?

S:yeah in some ways

I:what ways?

S:different teachers

I:Do you like that?

S:Yeah cause when one teacher doesn't like you, you go to another one.

I:Do you mean different teachers for different subjects or different ..

S:different teachers for different subjects.

Overall the high school interview with Shane expanded on some of the ideas he put forward the year before. He only put in as much effort as was necessary and seemed to be afraid to do better himself, as he was pleased to be in the normal English class instead of the "really high" one he was put in initially. If you were in a low class you would do well and if in a high one you could stuff up. He didn't want to be in a position where he might display lack of ability.

S: Well one class was harder and now I've gone into an easier class.

I: Why do you think that is?

S: I went into the top class and I got a C, I went back down to a normal class again.

I: Are you pleased about that or not pleased ..

S: I'm not bothered.

Actually his answers to others questions revealed he was much more comfortable in the "normal" English stream.

I: Last time I talked to you definitely thought that it would depend on which classes you got put would in this year how well you'd do at school

S: Yeah well it does. If you get in a really low class and you know how to do everything of course you'll do well, but if you get put in a really high class and you don't know how to do anything of course you'll stuff it up

I: So which classes do you prefer to be in then?

S: Just the normal classes.....there's low, medium and really high

I: So you were in the really high one for English were you?

S: yeah .....that wasn't that hard but.....um I'm alright at English it's one of my better subjects.

I: Is it?

S: yeah

I: You don't like it much though?

S: Oh, I like some bits of it

I: What bits do you like then?

S: Just writing stories and that.

He didn't think the "writing stuff" that they tended to do in late primary school and high school was relevant to what he wanted to do (a "DJ or TV cameraman"). He preferred writing stories where he had choice and could write about what he liked but that hadn't happened in year 7 or much in year 8.

Shane equated feeling successful, liking and being good at something and thought all students felt the same way he did. In primary school in answer to the question about what would have to happen for learning something interesting in writing to make him feel successful he said:

S: that I like it, not something boring that I don't like.

I: You don't like writing stories?

S: No

I: What don't you like?

S: Um, because I'm not very good at it.

His answer to a similar question about maths also focused on being able to do it:

S: That I get it right.....That it's something interesting that I like doing.

I: Maths isn't interesting?

S: Not really, not usually, like when you do somethings I like doing and somethings I don't.

I: What do you like doing?

S: Things that are fun.

I: What kinds of things?

S: Things that I know how to do, like what I've already done, like addition, subtraction, all them,.....times

I: Are you not so keen on new things?

S: If I pick it up I don't mind.

And later in the interview when talking about maths.

I: You feel better if it [the work] is easy though

S: Mm

I: Ok

S: most people do

I: Oh some people love a challenge, you know those people exist .. Not you?

S: No way!

These comments are quite different from those Paul made about new things. They both talked about something interesting but Paul meant new different work whereas Shane meant familiar work he could know how to do. When asked whether he thought people can improve Shane said yes, they could see what they did wrong and try harder. Trying harder was the key to improving and everyone could improve, but going on some of his other comments, he had to "want to" as well. Later Shane said that learning new things was part of improving but that teachers tried to make you do too many new things before you had mastered the previous ones.

Shane enjoyed Phys Ed, Sport, Drama and Social Studies much more than

writing or maths. When asked what he enjoyed he said "I just like them". He agreed he found them easy and interesting but added "I'm better at them than these".

On the questionnaire he had indicated that he did well in spelling and timetables.

I: Do you do well on things that you can memorise?

S: Yeah

I: You're good at memorising?

S: Yeah, depends what it is but, like if I want to memorise it.

I: What makes you want to?

S: Well, spelling, we always have tests, we always have tests and I don't want to go wrong on them, so...

I: You like doing tests?

S: Yeah.

It is clear that Shane thought everyone could improve, "learn new things" in maths if the teacher gave you enough time, you were in the right class and were prepared to try harder. He felt he had been restricted from improving in story writing because he hadn't been able to do his own thing (something he didn't expect to be able to do in maths). Obviously the teacher had a role in all this because the teacher's action could restrict improvement, but also the students had to put in effort and, for Shane, that was conditional on the work being interesting and something he liked, which tended to mean something he

was good at (or could pick up). This seems to come back to enough time to pick it up, so the teacher and the student are integrally involved in all this. He was basically concerned about not appearing dumb. When compared with his primary school teacher's rating of his competence Shane tended to underestimate his competence.

I: So you don't like working real hard?

S: Nup

I: I seem to remember you saying you were going to work a bit harder this year

S: No

I: And what about teacher s? What do they do in classes? Do they do things that are helpful to you to learn?

S: No

I: What could they do to be more helpful?

S: Not give us as much work

I: So you really don't like so much work? Are you enjoying any subjects this year?

S: Yeah Phys Ed and metal work and things like that

I: You like those do you? What do you like about them?

S: You don't have to write and stuff like that ...

I: .... As long as its not writing? Making things?

S: No I like doing things I'm good at.

He tended to see things as static and not changing although he thought people could improve if they increased effort, he seemed to think for himself it was dangerous to do so. Also, he had not made new friends but stuck much the same as before.

There was one class though that seemed to have sparked a desire to learn. He had a new maths teacher for term three.

S: ... this teacher..... like he wants to get us better like that teacher last term he didn't really care he just did it as a job to get paid

I: Oh so that's what you thought?

S: That's what everyone thought

I: I see, but this term you think you are going to learn more?

S: Mm

I: What makes you think the teacher is more concerned about whether you understand or not?

S: Oh he told us. He said he wants to get us high marks in the test

I: Alright and how has he gone about that?

S: He's explained all the stuff to us and given us quizzes to see how well we are going and um just helped us along

I: So you find that helpful if you have quizzes ?

S: Yeah, because you know what you know and you know if you do know how to do something and you know if don't know how to do something but if you just keep doing exercises it just gets a bit boring

I: Right, Ok so you like to have feed back?

S: Mm

He wasn't sure about "learning more" or getting "feedback" but he was pretty sure he was going to get a higher mark for maths. Even though Shane professed to not want to do much work he actually liked certain kinds of work and responded positively to a teacher he considered sincere and wanted to help his class learn.

He thought it was the teacher's role (in maths) to help students understand and to show students to way to do things. In answer to a question about explaining ideas to others he replied:

S:Not in maths it doesn't because no one wants a know all who tells everyone how they do stuff or with that one um the teacher just wants you to do it the same as everyone else in his way.

### Conclusions

Each of these students' perceptions of motivational change is quite different from the others. Their patterns of motivational goals mean they focus on different aspects of the learning contexts, engage in different interactions with others and respond in different ways. Table 1 summarises the main differences in emphasis between the students and the focus within the contexts of self, peers, teachers and the wider school. Marnie focussed less on herself as a learner and more on how high an achiever she appeared to be. Her focus is primarily on the teachers and the school organisation, perceiving that greater success for her required extension or different work from the regular classes and the best teachers. Peers were seen as sources of comparative information and teachers as evaluators of her performance. Paul focussed on himself as a learner and becoming more independent. He was motivated by interesting, new and different work and mainly saw teachers and the school organisation in a positive light and contributing to his learning and development. Greater success for him was dependent on greater effort on his part with assistance from teachers, peers and family. Ego- involving incidents gave him confidence to persist. Shane did not want to appear unable and limited the amount and difficulty of work he attempted. He seemed to "know" he could increase effort and improve at any time if he wanted to or if he thought the work relevant to his future needs. Like Paul, his focus was more on the self, but teachers could be important.

The perceptions of these students imply that changing the environment towards a mastery or task focus may not be enough to engage students like Marnie and Shane in better quality learning. These students have "critiques of school" and through these critiques could be engaged in discussion about their views of success and purposes of school. As Nicholls (1989; Thorkildsen & Nicholls, 1992) suggests, changing students' world views may involve more active discussion and debate, as well as democratic negotiation of classroom practices.

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#### Table 1

Summary of students' perceptions of motivational change

MarniePaulShane

Motivational goalsLow Task

High Ego

High Easy superiorityIncreasing Task

Mid Ego

v Low Work avoidanceLow Task

Low Ego

High Work avoidance

Difference between primary & high schooldidn't have same teacher all

day - get one you likeincreased responsibilitydifferent teachers - one

might like you

Self focus High achiever, perceived herself as not like other students  
Perceived himself as a hard worker, had a ethic of hard work, didn't  
compare himself with others in this sense (although liked it when the  
teacher did) Perceived himself as ordinary - others thought like he did  
Peers A source of information on which to make comparisons Source of  
assistance for finding easier ways to do things Peers not a source of  
information. Didn't like 'brainy acts' to tell you anything (no one  
did like this) teachers tell you these things

Teachers Expected to do their part, eg evaluate her work Explain, assist  
when students need help, point out when students doing better than  
others Explain, tell students what to do, give students less work  
How to improve School/teachers get organised, provide interesting work,  
different, extended work for high achievers Find out mistakes, get help  
with areas of difficulty, work hard Anyone could improve but had to  
'want to'. Help from sincere teachers.

Story of improving Others restrict her achievement Teacher publicly

displayed his work as good, which gave him confidence, then worked hard  
to improve in other areas Maths teacher said he wanted to help the class  
improve and went about helping individuals and giving quizzes  
Critique critiqued others and school organisation, not self-reflective  
didn't critique others or the school organisation, focus on self  
improvement and critique of self critique more of different subject  
expectations, eg doing things 'differently' brought success in English  
but not in maths

1 In year 7, five of the students (3 females, 2 males) attended School  
1 and five students (2 females, 3 males) attended School 2. As School  
1 was a reasonably large primary school the students came from three  
different classes taught by Mrs A, Mr B and Mr C, whereas the students  
from School 2, being a smaller primary school, came from a single class  
taught by Mr D. Both schools were in middleclass areas of Perth WA.

2 Six of the students were interviewed again in September year 10  
after they had made their subject selections for year 11. Two of the  
initial ten students subsequently left the school and another two  
declined to be interviewed in year 10.

3 Another student in the interview group, Sarah, had positive  
perceptions of the AEP class. Several teachers told me that there  
were many students in the regular classes who were more capable than  
some of the AEP students and so they were receiving more challenging  
work too.