

## **Contextual influences on student motivation in the first year of middle school**

**Caroline Mansfield**

**(Ph.D student)**

**Supervisor : Associate Professor Len King**

**Edith Cowan University**

**Perth, Western Australia**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports research into contextual influences on student motivation during the first year of middle school. An exploratory study conducted in a naturalistic setting, the research used primarily qualitative techniques for data collection and analysis and focused on the cases of seven students through the first year of their middle school experience. Using a goal orientation theory approach, the study set out to investigate how contextual factors influenced the nature of the academic and social goals Year 7 students pursued over the course of an academic year. The research involved weekly observation of a Year 7 classroom, interviews with students and the classroom teacher over the year and administration of a survey. The findings revealed that students pursued a range of social and academic goals over the course of the year and that such goals were significantly influenced by the contextual perceptions they developed and held about the school and classroom contexts in which they operated. This paper discusses the findings and explores implications for teaching and learning.

### **Contextual influences on student motivation in the first year of middle school**

C. Mansfield

The research reported in this paper approaches the nature of student motivation from a contextual or 'situative' perspective and focuses on the perceptions seven Year 7 students developed of a particular middle school and classroom context over the period of an academic year. The study focused particularly on how students' contextual perceptions influenced the nature of the academic and social motivational goals they chose to pursue. Using a qualitative case study approach the study attempted to enable understandings to be developed about the complex worlds of early adolescents and how contextual variables, situations and relationships may influence pursuit of particular academic and social goals.

The primary purpose of the study was to inquire into the perceptions early adolescent students held of the school and main classroom context they encountered during their first year of middle school and to investigate how such perceptions influenced the nature of the personal academic and social goals students pursued. Specifically the study sought to address three research questions.

1. What is the nature of motivation oriented goals pursued by early adolescent students in their first year of middle school?
2. What is the nature of students' contextual perceptions in their first year of middle school?
3. How do individual students' contextual perceptions influence the pursuit of social and academic goals in their first year of middle school?

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is embodied in the literature that focuses on goal orientation theory and student perceptions in contexts. Goal theory was developed by researchers (Ames, 1992; Meece, 1991; Nicholls, 1989) to focus specifically on students' achievement behaviour in classrooms and allows for consideration of both environmental and individual factors in the development of students' motivational behaviour.

In focusing on students' reasons for engaging in learning activities and providing an understanding for the classroom behaviours such reasons promote, goal theory suggests that students may engage in learning activities for several reasons. Students may wish to fulfil a genuine interest in the task at hand and receive a sense of accomplishment from learning (task mastery goals), demonstrate their ability to others in ways that will enhance their ego (performance approach goals), or to complete the task with as little effort as possible (performance avoidance goals). As well as pursuing such academic goals, students also pursue social goals, some of which may include social responsibility goals, social relationship goals and social status goals. Students also pursue multiple academic and social goals in classroom and school contexts (Wentzel, 1992).

The power of contexts to influence students' motivation has emerged as a significant theme in the study of motivation. Eccles and Midgley (1989) argued that the 'fit' between the developmental needs of adolescents and the educational environment is crucial for optimum motivational benefits. More recently, researchers (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996; Turner & Meyer, 1999, 2000) have begun to focus more intently on the role learning and educational contexts play in forming and developing individual's motivational patterns. Turner (in press) argues :

"the present challenge to motivational research is to integrate the notion of self and context. The 'situative' approach attempts to understand persons-in-situations and provides an alternative to both behavioural and cognitive approaches to motivation".

Adopting a situative approach to motivational research allows motivation to be considered as an interactive experience where students and environments influence each other.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework for this study builds on the research suggesting that students' perceptions of the contexts they encounter and operate within, have a powerful influence on their motivational behaviour and school adjustment (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996) by proposing that students' perceptions of family, school and peer contexts influence social and academic goal pursuit.

Each of the three contexts proposed in the framework has been shown by researchers to have significant influence on the development of students' motivational patterns and goals. Within the family context, parental influences and goals (Wentzel, 1996), and the nature of student parent relationships (Wentzel, 1998), have an important influence on student motivation. Students' perceptions of school contexts can also influence their endorsement of academic and social goals (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996) as can perceptions of classroom contexts, instructional environments and goal structures (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Midgley & Urdan, 2001; Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin & Midgley, 2001). In addition, perceptions students hold of the teacher(s), student-teacher relationships (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996), perceived teacher support (Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1994, 1997, 1998), and teacher recognition and praise (Juvonen & Nishina, 1997) have been shown to influence student motivation. Perceptions held of peer contexts and peer support also influence student motivation (Harter 1996; Wentzel, 1998; Urdan, 1997). The framework emphasises that it is the way in which students' perceive each of these contexts that influences motivational behaviour and goal pursuit.

This conceptual framework also suggests the three contexts may influence one another as students' perceptions of one context may influence other perceptions. The personal and contextual variables in students' worlds and their interrelationship have been acknowledged to play a crucial role in developing an understanding of student motivation (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Anderman & Anderman, 1999).

Finally, the framework proposes that the nature of student perceptions regarding family, school and peer contexts is largely responsible for students' motivational outcomes in the form of social and academic goals endorsed. In this sense, student perceptions can provide a "lens" through which students view, interpret and construct meaning about family, schools and peers. Such interpretations influence the social and academic goals students choose to pursue.

Fig 1.0 Conceptual framework

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## Methodology

The study reported in this paper used a mixed method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) exploratory research design that involved naturalistic inquiry focusing primarily on qualitative research techniques and content analysis of data. The research also incorporated one set of quantitative data that were explored and enriched through addition of qualitative data. Specifically, a twelve point survey ('Perceived Classroom Goal Structure' scales from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales; PALS, Midgley, Maehr, Hicks, Roeser, Urdan, Anderman & Kaplan, 1994, cited in Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin & Midgley, 2001) was administered and students were interviewed regarding their responses to survey items.

A case study approach was used to gain a deeper understanding of the contextual perceptions held by seven students and the concerns that directed their everyday experiences throughout the course of the year. Emphasis was placed on exploring students' contextual perceptions during their first year of middle school and investigating how contextual perceptions influenced the nature of personal academic and social motivational goals students pursued.

### Data source

Data were collected through observations, a survey and audio taped interviews with students and the classroom teacher. Classroom observations focused on data regarding

students' interactions and behaviour relevant to academic and social goal pursuit. Data obtained during classroom observation were used to prompt student recall in interviews and to generate discussion about particular classroom events and situations. Interviews focused on data concerning students' contextual perceptions along with data regarding the many facets of student life at that level. Of particular interest were data concerning student perceptions of contextual factors that may have influenced academic and social goal pursuit.

### Data analysis

Observational data were analysed after each observational session and used to generate prompts for subsequent student interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and memos written about other conditions that occurred during each interview (interruptions, student body language etc.). Interviews were analysed according to content and a NUD\*IST (non-numerical, unstructured data, indexing, searching and theorising tool) analysis was conducted to identify key themes emerging from the data. Interview data were initially coded according to the three main contextual areas shown in the conceptual framework. Within each of these main areas other themes began to emerge and were coded accordingly. The coding categories were refined and developed after each set of interviews.

### **Findings**

The data from this study revealed a number of key findings regarding contextual influences on student motivation during the first year of middle school. Generally, the data showed :

- students' perceptions of the contexts in which they operated during their first year of middle school had a significant influence on the nature of academic and social goals individuals pursued;
- students' goals seemed to emerge from a consistent series of negotiations that occurred between family goals, school and classroom goals, and peer goals over the course of the year;
- students 'filter' contextual information and endorse behaviours and goals that correspond with their personal priorities and agendas;
- over time some students reported an increasing desire to protect their sense of self-worth in front of teachers, peers and parents by engaging in avoidance strategies and self-presentation tactics.

The study found specific features of the particular school context to influence student goal pursuit. In particular :

- students' pursuit of performance approach and avoidance goals seemed to be related to perceptions about the school's behavioural control and reward system. . Students described how such perceptions had a negative impact on sense of belonging at school, school affect, perceived levels of teacher care and support, teacher student relationships and self-reported academic engagement and effort.
- Students perceived their main classroom context to emphasise task mastery goals and although such perceptions appeared to have positive implications for learning, in some cases the negative effect of the behavioural control system appeared to override positive motivational benefits of a task mastery classroom emphasis.
- Students' perceptions of teacher support appeared to have a significant impact on school adjustment, school affect, sense of belonging, academic engagement and effort, and for some students even academic outcomes.

Students' perceptions of peer support also influenced goal pursuit. Specifically :

- students linked peer support to sense of school belonging;
- students with supportive peer relationships appeared to pursue social responsibility and relationship goals, however, students perceiving low levels of peer support had difficulty pursuing social relationship goals and seemed to begin to pursue social status goals as a way of protecting their sense of self-worth within the peer group.

Students' family related perceptions also had a significant influence on their motivational goals. Of particular note was the finding that :

- students' desire for parental approval and wish to avoid parental disapproval seemed to be a significant influence with regard to the motivational goals they pursued in classroom and school contexts.

## Discussion

The findings from this study corroborate much research regarding contextual influences on student motivation and the interactions between personal and contextual goals (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Newman, 1998). Furthermore, the data suggest that students 'filter' contextual information and endorse behaviours and goals that correspond with their personal goals. Over the year it became evident that the personal academic and social goals students pursued underwent change as they encountered and experienced different school situations and became increasingly aware of the goal structures emerging from their main classroom context and the school in general. The data serve to illustrate the associations students perceived between academic and social goal pursuit and domains of their everyday experience, namely at home, at school and with the peer group. Specifically, students' personal goals seemed to emerge from a series of negotiations that occurred between family goals, school goals, classroom goals and peer goals. Over time, the process of interaction and negotiation appeared consistent and as factors in one domain changed, repercussions were felt in other domains and personal goals adjusted to suit. The data in this naturalistic qualitative study provide insights into associations between domains of experience that occur in the everyday lives of middle school students.

### Perceptions of the school context

The perceptions students hold of the school context in which they operate have been shown to have significant impact on the academic and social goals they choose to pursue (Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Midgley & Urdan, 2001; Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996). The data obtained in this study demonstrated certain contextual variables the students' perceived to influence their feelings about school, school adjustment and academic engagement. In particular, the school use of extrinsic incentives and behavioural control systems (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996; Brophy, 1999), perceived classroom goal structure (Anderman, 1999a), perceived pedagogical caring (Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel 1997, 1998) and the nature of student teacher relationships (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996) contributed to positive and negative school affect. The data reported in this study adds to the current literature by suggesting that school-related affect and goals promoted by school environments may be related to the personal goals students pursue.

Students expressed concern about the behavioural control system that operated within the school. Generally, they perceived behaviors resulting in penalties to be explicit and behaviors resulting in rewards to be at the discretion of individual teachers. Some students perceived rewards to be given for behaviors and outcomes they perceived to have little value and reported being able to manipulate teachers in order to receive rewards. Students described how these perceptions influenced their school affect (Anderman, 1999a), sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993), perceived teacher support and care (Wentzel, 1997, 1998)

anxiety and stress about school, and reduced ability and enthusiasm to engage in classroom activities. These perceptions in turn had an influence on the goals students pursued in the classroom and led students to increasingly pursue performance approach or performance avoidance goals, and /or social relationship goals.

Brophy (1999) comments that behavioural control systems are often "incompatible with the strategies that have emerged from research on motivation in education" (p. 20). The data revealed in this study suggest that the school wide emphasis on behavioural control had negative implications for students and in some cases appeared to override any positive outcomes of the classroom based motivational approach. The data from this research point to the need for further exploration of the relationship of school discipline systems and students' motivational goals.

The way in which students perceive the goal structure of a particular classroom context has been shown to have a significant influence on the nature of goals individual students pursue (Anderman, 1999a) and classroom behaviors (Midgley & Urdan, 2001).

All seven students reported perceiving their main classroom context to have a stronger task mastery emphasis than performance goal emphasis. Generally, students were able to describe features of the classroom context in ways that have been traditionally indicative of a task mastery goal emphasis including a focus on effort, understanding, learning and skill development, providing opportunities to engage in challenging classroom tasks (Anderman 1999a; Patrick et al., 2001). While there are certain trends that emerge from the data it is also evident that as individuals the students had a tendency to filter classroom perceptions through their own concerns and priorities. Such a notion has been suggested by researchers (Newman, 1998; Urdan, Kneisel & Mason, 1999) who argue that even though contexts can promote goal structures and encourage students to pursue particular goals, contextual goals have meaning that is constructed and interpreted individually by each student.

Researchers have explored student perceptions of teachers with regard to student motivation and pursuit of academic and social goals (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996; Wentzel, 1997, 1998). The data reported in this study seem to highlight two main factors that influenced the nature of the goals students pursued in the classroom, namely, the level of perceived teacher support (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wentzel, 1997, 1998) and the nature of student teacher relationships (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996; Wentzel, 1998). Although students reported perceiving varying degrees of teacher support these perceptions appeared to influence the nature of the relationship individual students developed with the teacher. Students made connections about the influence of perceived teacher support and perceived teacher caring, school related affect, sense of belonging, academic engagement, academic effort, help seeking behavior and academic outcomes. The data from this research add to the current literature by exploring how changes in perceived levels of teacher support and caring can influence the nature of academic and social goals students pursue in the school context.

#### Perceptions of peer context

Researchers have acknowledged the significance of students' perceptions of peer groups in relation to individuals academic and social goal pursuit (Anderman, 1999b; Urdan, 1997). Peer support has been linked to self-esteem (Harter, 1996) and has also been related positively to prosocial goal pursuit (Wentzel, 1998) and negatively to social responsibility goals (Wentzel, 1994).

The data indicate that while all seven students acknowledged a desire for stable and supportive relationships with a particular peer group, some students realised this goal with

more satisfaction than others. Furthermore, for students who established supportive peer relationships during the first half of the year, there were few guarantees that such support would remain strong for the duration of the year. Thus, the business of maintaining supportive relationships involved fluctuations in levels of perceived support for some, and declines in perceived support for others. Some students experienced difficulties establishing and maintaining supportive peer relationships and expressed concern about peer rejection (Juvonen & Nishina, 1997). The level of support students perceived appeared to influence pursuit of performance approach and avoidance goals along with social relationship and status goals.

### Perceptions of family context

Although the seven cases reported in the study had differing family backgrounds, it became evident that students' family backgrounds had a significant impact on how they related to school and the nature of academic and social goals they pursued (Meece, 1994; Wentzel, 1998). In particular the data revealed that students were particularly concerned about attaining parental approval and engaging in supportive parental relationships.

The majority of students expressed a desire to please their parents through academic success, effort, or demonstrating effective work practices. The degree to which individuals sought parental approval, however, varied. For some students, the desire for parental approval dominated the way they engaged with the social and academic aspects of schooling and the subsequent goals they pursued. For other students seeking parental approval became particularly relevant when the degree to which individuals perceived support from parents began to decline.

The data reported in this study support research regarding parental influences on the motivational goals of early adolescents (Meece, 1994; Wentzel, 1996, 1998) and suggest the possibility that the intensity with which students seek parental approval reflects in part the degree of perceived support in student parent relationships. Perceived support and desired approval can result in a variety of outcomes including endorsement and active reinforcement of parental goals, endorsement of avoidance goals to protect self-worth, or intentional rebellion against parental expectations (academic and social) in an attempt to increase parental support. Future research may wish to consider how stable or fluctuating perceptions of parental support may impact on students' desire to seek parental approval and the implications this may have for their school experience and goal pursuit.

### **Implications for teaching and learning**

The research reported in this paper has some implications for educators and administrators working with early adolescents, in particular those involved in middle schools.

An important implication for educators and administrators that emerged from this study was the significant influence that extrinsic reward and behavioural control systems had on students' motivation. Students reported the negative influence such systems had on their sense of school belonging, school affect, perceptions of teacher support, academic engagement and effort. As a result of the data revealed in the study, schools hoping to create a more positive motivational environment may wish to re-consider use of behavioural control systems and, as Brophy (1999) suggests, consider focusing on the implementation of motivational systems.

Most students described in this study acknowledged a desire to protect their sense of self-worth in school contexts and this in turn influenced their pursuit of performance avoidance goals. Students were also able to describe characteristics of the school and classroom

context they perceived threatening to their sense of self-worth, some of which had the potential to be altered through teacher behaviour or contextual modifications. These data suggest that educators and administrators could work towards making school and classroom contexts less threatening for some students and thus encourage more positive motivational patterns.

One notable finding of this study was the impact that 11 and 12-year-old students' desire for parental approval can have on the motivational goals they pursue at school. In particular, for some students, desire for parental approval governed their academic related behaviour and goals. Such information could be of benefit to teachers and administrators who could take steps to work more closely with parents for the benefit of the students.

The data reported in the study highlighted the impact of perceived teacher support and teacher / student relationships on students' feelings about school and ultimately their academic and social goal pursuit. The data indicate that students who perceive high levels of teacher support adopt more positive motivational patterns than those perceiving low levels of teacher support. Such data emphasises the importance of students perceiving supportive relationships with teachers to maximise positive motivational patterns.

### **Conclusion**

The study of student motivation in classrooms seems complex and multi-faceted. The majority of research in this field has been quantitative and sought to draw associations between motivational constructs to enhance understandings about motivational processes and inform educators about how to provide appropriate motivational climates for students, particularly early adolescents.

The data discussed in this paper focus on themes emerging through students' perceptions of a specific school context in relation to their academic and social goal pursuit. Such themes include concern about behavioural control and extrinsic reward systems, desire to protect self-worth, desire for supportive teacher and peer relationships and parental approval.

This research reported in this paper contributes to the study of student motivation in context by providing qualitative evidence of the profound impact contexts and situations have on individuals and their motivation in school. The study highlights the complexity of exploring students' motivation and the academic and social goals individuals pursue in classroom and school contexts.

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