

Hope

by Mark Van Ryzin

Background

Student motivation, especially in secondary school, is widely acknowledged as a key concern for today's educators. Educational researchers have demonstrated that student motivation decreases, sometimes quite sharply, as they transition into and progress through secondary school.¹ As a result, many students gradually disengage from school during their secondary school years, a process that can lead to delinquency, drop-out, and participation in high-risk behaviors.²

In searching for an explanation for this decline, educational researchers have examined the nature of the school environment itself. According to *stage-environment fit theory*,³ a mismatch or misfit between these adolescent developmental needs and the educational environment can result in negative outcomes like disengagement, drop-out, negative self-image and behavioral problems. In other words, school environments can exert an influence on student motivation and engagement through their support (or lack of support) for students' developmental needs. These needs, broadly speaking, are autonomy, belongingness, and competence.⁴

In the school context, autonomy refers to the ability to exert some control over the process of learning and to make choices according to one's own interests and values. Belongingness refers to the feeling of being supported and valued by the teachers and other students in school. The need for competence is expressed as a need to succeed in relevant ways, on one's own terms, and to be recognized. According to stage-environment fit theory, school environments that meet these needs will inspire higher levels of engagement in learning, greater academic achievement, and superior psychological adjustment in students (see Figure 1); those that do not will hinder student engagement, achievement, and adjustment. Students with higher levels of motivation and engagement should, over time, gain a more favorable impression of themselves as achievers and come to believe more strongly in their ability to succeed regardless of the obstacles.

Unfortunately, the traditional secondary school environment can be detrimental to student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence.⁵ For example, secondary school classrooms typically offer few opportunities for students to exercise choice, and students often experience more controlling behavior by teachers, all of which reduce perceptions of autonomy. The transition from one teacher in elementary school to 6 or more in secondary school can reduce perceptions of teacher support, and students generally have fewer opportunities for interaction and cooperation with peers, which reduces the sense of belongingness in school. Finally, the transition to secondary school often implies more whole-class instruction, increased ability grouping, public evaluations, and a greater emphasis on grades and competition. These changes reduce perceptions of competence by highlighting the difference between those students who can get the top grades and those who cannot. Public recognition usually accrues only to the

highest-scoring students, while high levels of effort and significant personal gains are less often recognized; thus, many students attempt to reduce the risk of negative comparisons with others by exerting minimal effort or denigrating the value of academic achievement.

In combination, these factors go a long way to explaining the decline in motivation and engagement that researchers have found in students entering and moving through secondary school. If schools could put greater emphasis on encouraging student autonomy, belongingness, and competence, then the research demonstrates that student engagement would increase and students would become more confident, goal-oriented achievers.

The Hope Surveys

Up until a few years ago, no easily accessible tools existed to measure students' perceptions of the school environment (or, to use a more familiar term, the *school climate*). The Hope Surveys were designed to be just such a measure.⁶ Pulling together reliable, valid measurement instruments from different sources, the Hope Surveys enable schools to assess their school climate *through the eyes of their students*, by measuring student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence, as well as their resulting engagement in learning and their dispositional orientations toward achievement (i.e., their "hope"). Matched with their achievement scores, the resulting data can provide a detailed picture of the school climate and its effects on student performance. The Hope Surveys do this in a manner that protects student confidentiality yet still can measure student performance over time. In addition, the surveys require very little time, which means that they will not significantly impact instruction.

The core of the Hope Surveys is the measure of "hope". "Hope" reflects an individual's perceptions regarding their ability to clearly conceptualize their goals, develop the specific strategies to reach those goals (i.e., pathways thinking), and initiate and sustain activity based upon those strategies (i.e., agency thinking).⁷ According to hope theory, a goal can be anything that an individual desires to experience, create, obtain, accomplish, or become.

By promoting student hope, schools can realize benefits in terms of student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement, and students gain an increased confidence in themselves as achievers that benefits them throughout their life span. Research shows that higher-hope students not only set more challenging school-related goals for themselves when compared to lower-hope students, but also tend to perceive that they will be more successful at attaining these goals even if they do not experience immediate success.⁸ Higher-hope students also perform better in college.⁹ Hope scores can predict final grades in a college class after taking into account the grades on the midterm exam. In addition, hope scores can predict college grade point averages after controlling for entrance examination scores on the ACT. Higher-hope students are also more likely to graduate. In other words, for students of relatively equal ability, the higher-hope students will have a greater chance of success in college. Finally, higher-hope people report more optimism about life, more physical health and greater levels of happiness, as well as less anxiety and depression. We measure the students' self-reported levels of hope using an instrument originally developed by Prof. Richard Snyder at the University of Kansas (the "Dispositional Hope Scale").

Besides hope, the Hope Surveys also measure student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence, as well as their resulting engagement in learning. Each of these measures is described below.

Autonomy. The renowned psychologist Erik Erikson argued that the need for autonomy is innate in all human beings and that a frustration of this need during childhood or adolescence would lead to maladaptive behavior and neurosis. Subsequently, educational research has demonstrated the value of student autonomy in terms of encouraging academic success and personal development. Provision of student autonomy doesn't imply that students "get to do whatever they want", but rather that the student's personal point of view is acknowledged and students are given some level of choice in satisfying learning requirements. These types of high-autonomy learning situations stimulate student motivation, engagement, and persistence, which in turn results in higher levels of achievement and lower dropout rates.¹⁰ In contrast, a controlling approach in the classroom reduces perceptions of autonomy, which can interfere with student learning and creativity, especially with regards to more complex tasks.

Autonomy is also essential to healthy adolescent development.¹¹ Higher levels of autonomy are associated with positive coping strategies in school, whereas less autonomy is associated with higher levels of anxiety and negative coping strategies. Lack of autonomy in childhood and adolescence, when the need for increasing amounts of autonomy is critical to psychological development, can lead to various forms of psychopathology and increased participation in externalizing or high-risk behaviors.

We measure student perceptions of autonomy using of an instrument originally developed by Prof. Edward L. Deci at the University of Rochester (the "Learning Climate Questionnaire").

Belongingness. The need to belong, or the need to form strong, mutually supportive relationships and to maintain these relationships through regular contact, is a fundamental human motivation that can affect emotional patterns and cognitive processes. In school, positive peer relations and teacher-student relationships are vital to maintaining high levels of motivation, engagement, achievement and positive behavior in school.¹² In contrast, socially rejected students show lower levels of engagement, have higher levels of academic and behavioral problems, and can be at significant risk of dropping out of school.¹³

Belongingness also has a profound impact on adolescent mental health and well-being.¹⁴ Intimate, supportive relationships can enhance adjustment, perceived competence, and self-esteem, as well as reduce emotional distress and suicide ideation and lead to lower levels of involvement in high-risk behaviors.

We measure belongingness in terms of student perceptions of support from educators and from the general peer group in school. We use of an instrument originally developed by Prof. David W. Johnson at the University of Minnesota (the "Classroom Life Scale").

Competence. A student's "goal orientation" refers to the reasons behind their efforts to achieve. A "learning" or "mastery" goal orientation represents a desire to achieve purely for the purpose of obtaining knowledge and increasing skills. In contrast, a "performance" or "ego" goal

orientation represents a focus on appearances rather than real learning; thus, for a student with a performance goal orientation, the purpose of all activity in school is not the enjoyment of learning or the satisfaction of personal interest but to either demonstrate superiority or avoid the appearance of failure.

Research has found that the perceived goal orientation of a school can significantly impact a student's own goal orientation. Students who perceive a learning goal orientation in school seek challenges, show persistence in the face of adversity, use more effective learning strategies, have more positive attitudes, and are more cognitively engaged in learning.¹⁵ A learning goal orientation creates a desire to learn for the sake of learning, without need for external comparisons, and as a consequence has been linked to higher levels of motivation and, in turn, academic achievement.

On the other hand, students who perceive a performance goal orientation in school seek to avoid challenge and, in the face of failure, exhibit a "learned helplessness" response (i.e., negative emotion, strategy deterioration and disengagement).¹⁶ As a result, a performance goal orientation leads to reduced motivation and academic achievement.

We measure students' perceptions of the learning and performance goal orientation of their school using an instrument developed by Prof. Robert W. Roeser, who is currently at Portland State University (the "Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales").

Engagement. Engagement refers to the student's behavior and attitudes in school. Being behaviorally engaged, for example, means that a student works hard, concentrates, and pays attention. When a student is not behaviorally engaged, they are bored, distracted, and doing just enough to get by. Being emotionally engaged means that a student enjoys being in school and learning new things, whereas an emotionally disengaged student feels worried or discouraged and believes that school is not a fun place to be.

The quality of a student's engagement in school is a reflection of the amount of effort and persistence they put into their learning.¹⁷ If a student is not engaged, then they will likely not be able to complete their work on time and will not achieve to their potential. An engaged learner, however, will attack their schoolwork with passion and will regularly achieve solid or outstanding results. The quality of the learning is also superior in that an engaged learner will obtain a deeper understanding of the material and retain the knowledge for a longer period of time. Finally, engaged learners will be more likely to complete school.¹⁸

Engagement in learning is encouraged when students' core developmental needs are met in school. In other words, if the school environment is perceived as providing opportunity for autonomy, support for belongingness, and a learning goal orientation instead of a performance goal orientation, then students will be more engaged in their learning.¹⁹

We measure the students' self-reported engagement from both a behavioral and emotional perspective using an instrument originally developed by Prof. Ellen A. Skinner at Portland State University ("Engagement vs. Disaffection with Learning").

Research Findings

Our early findings confirm that students who perceive their school environments to be more supportive of student needs (autonomy, belongingness) report higher levels of engagement, and higher engagement in turn promoted growth in hope over time.²⁰ In other words, those students who believe their environment to be more supportive of their needs tend to be more engaged in their learning, and, in turn, this process of active engagement promotes students' hope. In addition, engagement in learning was found to positive impact student perceptions in a reciprocal fashion, creating a positive feedback loop. In sum, these findings documented a mechanism by which secondary school environments can, both directly and indirectly, contribute to positive student engagement and adjustment.

More recent findings²¹ demonstrate that student engagement contributes to both hope and student achievement. As in earlier research, the relationship between these variables is reciprocal, with positive perceptions of the school environment promoting engagement, achievement, and hope, and engagement and hope promoting more positive perceptions of the school environment. Thus, by paying greater attention to student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence, schools can initiate a positive feedback loop that results in increasing levels of student achievement and improvements in student hope. In short, the results of our research provide support for a model by which the school context can be a source of protective factors for students (in other words, how school can foster *resilience*).

Last year, the Hope Study was administered to several dozen schools throughout the United States. These schools were a mix of rural and urban settings, different sizes, and a wide range of student demographics. In meetings with school personnel, the Hope Study demonstrated a remarkable ability to enlighten staff and, in some cases, clarify the nature of issues that the schools were having. For example, one school demonstrated positive results on the Hope Study with the exception of a single measure that was outside of the normal range. After further analysis and discussion with the staff, it was discovered that the students' point of contention was the perceived unfairness of the reward scheme that was used to determine who could go off-campus for lunch. This scheme, it turns out, was impacting student attitudes and engagement in school. After more discussion, several modifications to the reward scheme were proposed to reduce the perception of unfairness. A recent book about the Hope Surveys²² documents their positive reception by school staff and attests to the unique insights that the Hope Surveys can provide (see Chapter 7).

How the Hope Surveys are Used

Results from the Hope Study can provide a unique picture into the inner workings of a school. In general, student perceptions and attitudes are rarely assessed, despite the fact that these factors play a significant role in determining whether a school flourishes or fails. By collecting data from students, a school can understand at a deeper level how students view the school's staff, peers, and the learning environment.

When we implement the Hope Surveys at a school, we work with the staff to review the results, discuss the implications, identify the key impediments to their success, devise a plan of action,

and obtain the resources that are needed to implement the necessary intervention programs. Such programs generally introduce modifications to existing pedagogical practices to (1) provide increased opportunities for student choice in meeting classroom requirements, (2) more opportunities for students to develop supportive relationships with teachers and peers, (3) greater emphasis on deep learning and a more individualistic focus in student evaluation. In short, the Hope Surveys are used as a diagnostic tool to pinpoint the ways in which new pedagogical practices and innovations can be most profitably applied. If such pedagogical practices and innovations can enhance student perceptions, then gains in engagement, hope, and academic achievement should follow. Further, our research demonstrates that these changes should instigate a positive feedback loop in which student engagement contributes to more positive perceptions of the school climate. The feedback loop contributes to enhanced student adjustment and achievement, much like the compounding interest in a bank account (see Figure 2). We would hasten to add that addressing student needs for autonomy, belongingness, and competence should not be seen as a *responsibility* of schools, but rather as an *opportunity* for schools, given that No Child Left Behind has firmly established that schools are accountable for the success of all students, regardless of background and ability.

Conclusion

Regardless of location, demographics, or size, any school can benefit by taking into account student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. By incorporating proven procedures from successful schools, or by developing home-grown practices aimed at supporting these developmental needs, secondary schools can reverse the downward trends in motivation and engagement and show some growth in academic achievement and hope among their students. In such an effort, the Hope Surveys can be used to assess how changes in the school environment are viewed by the students themselves, since their reaction will ultimately determine whether these changes are successful.

Indeed, the field of positive psychology emphasizes the importance of positive psychological adjustment and calls for the creation of environments, such as schools, that foster positive psychological development.²³ The field of positive youth development also recognizes the benefits of promoting “wellness”, or positive adjustment. Like positive psychology, this field acknowledges the status of education as a powerful, but not yet well-harnessed force for advancing wellness, and calls for the creation of educational environments that promote healthy psychological development.²⁴ The Hope Surveys demonstrate a mechanism by which schools could “...transmit knowledge but do so in ways calibrated to advance wellness”.²⁵

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³ Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Carol Midgley, “Stage/Environment Fit: Developmentally Appropriate Classrooms for Early Adolescents,” in Russell E Ames and Carol Ames (Eds.), *Research on Motivation in Education Vol. 3*, pp. 139-186 (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1989). See also Robert W. Roeser and Jacquelynne S. Eccles, “Adolescents’ Perceptions of Middle School: Relation to Longitudinal Changes in Academic and Psychological Adjustment,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 1998, pp. 123-158.

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⁷ C. Richard Snyder, “Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind,” *Psychological Inquiry*, 2002, pp. 249-275.

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