

Chapter 2

Academic Motivation and Engagement: Theoretical Background

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the central theories of academic motivation underlying most previous research into motivation and engagement. Their core constructs will be identified, as well as the behavioral outcomes that they aim to explain. The limitations of the theories are then summarised and Martin's (2003, 2007) Student Motivation and Engagement Wheel (the Wheel) is presented as a comprehensive model of academic motivation and engagement. Finally, age and gender trends in motivation and engagement are reviewed with a special attention given to longitudinal research in Australia.

BACKGROUND

When we ask the question ‘What motivated you to do that?’ we generally mean ‘What caused your behavior?’. There might be a number of different reasons for people to engage in a particular behavior. For example, although two students might both decide to participate in the school musical, one might say that he/she has a particular interest in music and the other might say he/she finds the socialising part of participation is enjoyable. They are driven by two different attitudes towards the school musical although each of the students might take part in the musical in different ways: the first through

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musical appreciation and the second by socialising with the cast. Despite the differences in their attitudes, their behavior might be similar. As this shows, the reasons why different individuals engage in the same behavior can be quite different.

REVIEW OF THE CORE THEORIES OF ACADEMIC MOTIVATION

Students' adaptation to different school situations can not only be affected by their levels of intelligence but also that of motivation, impacting on their academic achievement. There is an extensive literature that investigates the relationship between motivation and achievement (McInerney & Van Etten, 2004). This has shown that highly motivated students are more likely to achieve academic success than less motivated students. Motivational deficits have been associated with lower levels of achievement, with failure, and higher risk of high school dropout prior to completing a secondary qualification (Green-Demers et al., 2008; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Janosz, Leblanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). Both positive and negative patterns of motivation have thus been related to performance on assessments and learning tasks (Armitage, 2008; Boon, 2007; Martin, Marsh, Debus, & Malmberg, 2008; Meyer, McLure, Walkey, Weir, & McKenzie, 2009). Individual differences in student motivation are widely regarded as one cause of differences in academic achievement, that can be potentially modified (Armitage, 2008). Understanding of motivation and engagement might therefore help understand how to improve students' academic performance.

Although many explanations of motivation have been offered, research on academic motivation has been largely anchored in a small number of theories that have identified core dimensions of motivation and their associations with each other. These theories and their cognitive and behavioral implications for motivation and engagement will now be reviewed.

NEED ACHIEVEMENT AND SELF-WORTH THEORIES OF MOTIVATION

Murray (1938) proposed a need for achievement as one of the basic human needs. According to Murray, a need is "a more or less consistent trait of

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