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# Longitudinal analysis of the link between learning motivation and competence beliefs among elementary school children

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## Abstract

The present study examined the link between general school-related learning motivation and competence beliefs in elementary school children. In a cross-sequential design, the populations of four German elementary schools (total  $N = 789$ ) were examined over a two-year period. Children completed self-report questionnaires every six months. Absolute (i.e. mean-level) and relative (i.e. correlational) changes in both variables were examined longitudinally. The results show that learning motivation and competence beliefs decreased over the elementary school years. Children's competence beliefs were moderately to strongly associated with their learning motivation. No evidence for causal determination of learning motivation through ability perception or vice versa was found at any point in time. Results are discussed with regard to practical consequences for teachers and researchers.

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In times of ever-changing demands of vocation and everyday life, a high motivation to learn is a fundamental requirement. As the main aim of schools is to prepare children for a successful mastery of future challenges, teachers are expected not only to convey knowledge, but also to foster a sustained learning motivation. It is important for teachers to be aware of this necessity and to possess both the knowledge and means with which to enhance students' learning motivation. Many teachers do not feel well prepared for this task due to a lack of professional knowledge about motivation, its development, and strategies for boosting it.

This paper describes results of a project in which a team of researchers and elementary school teachers longitudinally examined the development of learning motivation over the elementary school years. Together, researchers and teachers developed and examined hypotheses about the beginning decline of learning motivation in elementary school, which has been noted in previous research (e.g., Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003; Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001; Harter, 1981; Meece & Miller, 2001; Wigfield et al., 1997). The present paper first establishes the term learning motivation, which we consider to be at the core of motivational constructs from different research traditions. Second, we focus on the hypothesis that the decline in learning motivation during the first school years might be causally linked to the parallel decline in pupils' competence beliefs.

## **1. The concept of learning motivation**

Young children seem to have an insatiable desire to learn. The motor for this desire has been described as competence or effectance motivation (Harter, 1978; White, 1959), a kind of motivation that is directed towards and satisfied by a feeling of efficacy (White, 1959, p. 322). From the point of view of effectance motivation theory, individuals do not engage in a task because they want to learn something, but because they want to experience the feeling of efficacy, i.e. they want to feel competent. Since this feeling is only derived from moderately new tasks, individuals are unconsciously directed towards new learning experiences. Therefore, according to this approach, learning progress comes about as a by-product of engaging in enjoyable tasks. Individuals who enjoy tasks that bear potential learning experiences are considered to be motivated to learn. In modern motivation theories, this conception of learning motivation corresponds to the concept of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) or interest/intrinsic task values (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The concepts of intrinsic motivation and interest converge in the notion that an individual is attracted to a task for reasons that lie within the task itself and that task engagement evokes positive affects regardless of future consequences.

Other theories posit a more conscious desire to learn at the center of learning motivation. In many goal theories, for example, the desire to enlarge one's competencies or to master task demands is conceived of as a consciously represented goal that motivates learning and achievement behavior (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984). Goal orientation theories describe learning motivation as a conscious striving towards learning progress, the striving for learning, task, or mastery goals.

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