



# A classroom-based intervention to help teachers decrease students' amotivation



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## ABSTRACT

Student amotivation is a state of motivational apathy in which students harbor little or no reason to engage in classroom learning activities; it is a motivational deficit that is strongly associated with maladaptive functioning. Using a self-determination theory framework, we designed and implemented a teacher-focused intervention to help experienced teachers develop a motivating style that could increase students' psychological need satisfaction and decrease their psychological need frustration, which are the twin causes of level of amotivation. Sixteen secondary school physical education teachers were randomly assigned into either an experimental or a control group, and their 598 students reported their need satisfaction, amotivation, and engagement at the beginning, middle, and end of a semester. Compared to teachers in the control group, teachers in the experimental group were scored by objective raters and perceived by students as more autonomy supportive and as less controlling. The students of the teachers in the experimental group reported greater psychological need satisfaction, greater engagement, and lesser amotivation than did students of teachers in the control group. We conclude that the intervention was successful in helping teachers decrease student amotivation.

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## 1. Introduction

In some subject matters, students lack the motivation they need to engage in and benefit from the teacher's instruction. This lack of motivation can be traced partly to students' pessimistic domain-specific ability beliefs, partly to their lack of desire to exert effort in the domain, partly to their low value placed on activities in the domain, and partly to their perception that the learning activities being offered are simply unappealing things to do (Cheon & Jang, 2012; Green-Demers, Legault, Pelletier, & Pelletier, 2008; Ntoumanis, Pensgaard, Martin, & Pipe, 2004; Shen, McCaughy, & Martin, 2008; Shen, Wingert, Li, Sun, & Rukavina, 2010b). These academic beliefs and perceptions are strongly associated with maladaptive classroom functioning and negative student outcomes (e.g., classroom disengagement, superficial learning strategies, poor learning, low performance, and school drop-out; Baker, 2004; Ntoumanis, 2001; Ntoumanis et al., 2004; Pelletier, Dion, Tuson, & Green-Demers, 1999; Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2001; Shen, Wingert, Sun, & Rukavina, 2010a). Recognizing the

maladaptive nature of these beliefs and perceptions, our goal in the present study was to implement an experimentally-designed, classroom-based intervention to help teachers offer a classroom motivating style that could decrease students' class-specific amotivation.

### 1.1. Amotivation

Amotivation literally means "without motivation" (Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). It is a state of motivational apathy in which students harbor little or no reason (motive) to invest the energy and effort that is necessary to learn or to accomplish something. During class, the amotivated student tends to sit passively, sleep (or skip class), or just act as if he or she is participating, as the student merely "goes through the motions" of classroom work rather than really engaging himself or herself in learning activities.

Early empirical work on the amotivation construct conceptualized it as a one-dimensional phenomenon that represented the absence of any intentionality toward action (Pelletier et al., 2001; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Within the self-determination theory tradition, amotivation was contrasted with both autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomous motivation, which is characterized by high levels of

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intrinsic motivation and identified regulation, represents behavioral intentions rooted in wanting to act out of interest and enjoyment (intrinsic motivation) or a sense of value and importance (identified regulation). Controlled motivation, which is characterized by high levels of external regulation and introjected regulation, represents behavioral intentions rooted in wanting to act to attain an attractive or to avoid an unattractive incentive (external regulation) or to comply with pressuring internal demands (e.g., perfectionism) and emotions (introjected regulation). With amotivation, the student has no reason to act—not intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, external regulation, or introjected regulation. The student acts without intentions or reasons (e.g., “I go to school, but I don’t know why.”) or fails to initiate action at all (e.g., “I don’t see why I should have to participate in class.”).

Pelletier et al. (1999) argued that a one-dimensional conceptualization was insufficient to represent the motivational deficits students experience and display during a state of amotivation. Other researchers subsequently validated the following four-dimensional conceptualization of the construct (Green-Demer et al., 2008; Legault et al., 2006; Shen et al., 2010b): *Amotivation—low ability*, which represents the belief that one lacks sufficient ability or aptitude to perform a particular behavior or task; *amotivation—low effort*, which represents a lack of desire to expend the energy necessary to enact a particular behavior or task; *amotivation—low value*, which represents a lack of perceived importance or usefulness within a particular behavior or task; and *amotivation—unappealing tasks*, which represents the perception that the task at hand is simply a personally unappealing or unattractive thing to do. This multidimensional conceptualization proved to be superior to the former one-dimensional characterization because it could explain how even students with the requisite competence and personal control beliefs could nevertheless still experience amotivation—namely, because of a lack of energy, a lack of valuing, or a perception that the task was not worth doing.

### 1.2. Self-determination theory

In self-determination theory, students are said to possess the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Collectively, these three needs provide the psychological nutrients necessary for learning, positive classroom functioning, and psychological well-being (Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004).

The primary reason students experience amotivation is, according to a self-determination theory perspective, because they first experience psychological need frustration (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Having one’s psychological needs for autonomy and competence thwarted and frustrated generates immediate negative affect (e.g., anger, anxiety; Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005) and lingering non-self-determined motivation (i.e., amotivation; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013). Students’ need frustration occurs mainly when teachers are highly controlling (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010; Reeve, 2009)—when teachers refuse to take their students’ perspectives, yell, assert power, use intimidation tactics, intrude into and try to change students’ beliefs and behaviors, and otherwise pressure and coerce students into compliance.

Recognizing these interrelations among a teacher’s controlling motivating style, students’ reactive need frustration, and students’ developing multiple manifestations of amotivation in that class (e.g., low ability, low value), we propose that the classroom antidote to amotivation is for teachers to offer a motivating style capable of involving, vitalizing, and satisfying students’ psychological needs. Students experience need satisfaction when teachers are highly autonomy supportive—when teachers eagerly embrace the

students’ perspectives, welcome their thoughts, feelings, and suggestions into the flow of instruction, provide explanatory rationales for their requests, offer interesting and important learning activities, and acknowledge students’ complaints and expressions of negative affect as valid and understandable ways of feeling during the learning process. A motivating style that relies on these sorts of autonomy-supportive behaviors is highly capable of involving, vitalizing, and satisfying students’ psychological needs and of creating opportunities for students to develop and embrace autonomous forms of classroom motivation (high intrinsic motivation, high identified regulation; Cheon & Reeve, 2013; Cheon, Reeve, & Moon, 2012).

### 1.3. Student engagement

Motivation is a private student experience, one that is largely invisible to the teacher and is therefore something that needs to be inferred from other more visible student indicators, such as engagement (Lee & Reeve, 2012). Students’ psychological need satisfaction is highly positively correlated with students’ classroom engagement, whereas students’ amotivation is highly negatively correlated with students’ classroom engagement (Aelterman et al., 2012). Recognizing this, we included a measure of students’ classroom engagement as a secondary outcome to track changes in the quality of students’ motivation over the course of the semester.

Engagement refers to a student’s active involvement in a learning activity (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). It functions as a student-initiated pathway to highly valued educational outcomes, such as achievement (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Ladd & Dinella, 2009). It is a multidimensional construct consisting of four distinct, yet intercorrelated and mutually supportive, pathways to academic progress—namely, its behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic aspects (Christenson et al., 2012; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Reeve, 2013). Behavioral engagement refers to how involved the student is in the learning activity in terms of attention, effort, and persistence; emotional involvement refers to the presence of positive emotions during task involvement such as interest and to the absence of negative emotions such as anxiety; cognitive engagement refers to how strategically the student attempts to learn in terms of employing sophisticated rather than superficial learning strategies; and agentic engagement refers to how proactively students contribute into the flow of instruction they receive, as by frequently letting the teacher know what they need, want, and are interested in. Individually and collectively, these four aspects of engagement are strong predictors of the academic progress students make (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

### 1.4. Autonomy-supportive intervention program (ASIP) for teachers

Teachers can learn how to be more autonomy supportive toward students (Reeve, 2009). Theory-based teacher training interventions have been developed and implemented in classroom settings in which researchers provide experienced teachers with the knowledge, modeling, scaffolding, instructional strategies, and how-to skills they need to become more autonomy-supportive and less controlling during instruction (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Cheon & Reeve, 2013; Cheon et al., 2012; deCharms, 1976; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2010). Generally speaking, what these empirical studies show is that these teacher-training programs have been successful and that they have been successful for teachers with pre-existing controlling, neutral, and autonomy-supportive styles. Specifically, students of the participating teachers rate their teachers as significantly more autonomy supportive and less controlling than do students of non-participating teachers. Further, when trained objective raters score participating teachers’ classroom

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