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Review

Effects of need supportive teaching on early adolescents' motivation and engagement: A review of the literature

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper we systematically review the corpus of evidence on the effects of need supportive teaching on early adolescents' motivation and engagement for school. Based on Self-Determination Theory, we define need supportive teaching in terms of teachers' provision of autonomy support, structure, and involvement. The results of an in-depth descriptive analysis of 71 empirical studies that were conducted since 1990 show a clear positive association between need supportive teaching and students' motivation and engagement, whereas evidence concerning specific components of need supportive teaching is less conclusive. Furthermore, we find that in most of the selected studies student perceptions were used to measure need supportive teaching. In the small body of studies using observations or teacher perceptions, we find much smaller or even no associations with students' motivation and engagement.

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1. Introduction

For children the interactions with their teachers matter. From different perspectives, teacher–student interactions have been connected with students' motivation and engagement for school. Teacher–student interactions are considered to be of special importance when students have just made the transition toward secondary education; a period in which for many students motivation declines (e.g. Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001; Opdenakker, Maulana, & den Brok 2012; Peetsma, Hascher, van der Veen, & Roede, 2005; Van der Werf, Opdenakker, & Kuyper, 2008). Theoretically, the cause of this decline has been argued to be the existence of a mismatch between early adolescents' developmental stage and their learning environments (Eccles et al., 1993). In recent years, researchers have shown an increasing interest in the question how teacher–student interactions affect early adolescents' motivation and engagement, and now a considerable amount of empirical evidence is available on this topic (see Opdenakker & Minnaert, 2011).

An encompassing theoretical framework that connects teacher–student interactions with students' motivation and engagement is Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Based on SDT it can be made explicit how and why characteristics of the social context are either supportive of or thwarting students' motivation and engagement. Important in this respect is the concept of need support. Within SDT, it is assumed that three fundamental psychological human needs exist, satisfaction of which positively affects motivation and engagement (see Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) for an elaborate grounding of this assumption). Importantly, based on the assumption that people have these three fundamental needs, the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in a mini-theory of SDT (Basic Needs Theory; Ryan & Deci, 2002) three dimensions of the social context are distinguished that are relevant in terms of need support. Specifically, it is argued that availability of autonomy support, structure, and involvement within the social context positively affects need satisfaction and thereby motivation and engagement.

Teachers have a central position in the social context of the classroom. Teachers guide the students in their learning process and bring the educational approach of the school into act in the classroom. Consequently, based on SDT need supportive teaching is expected to have an important positive effect on students' motivation and engagement (see also Opdenakker & Maulana, 2010). In the current article we present a fine-grained overview of the available empirical evidence on the effects of need supportive teaching on early adolescents' motivation and engagement for school. By aiming at such an overview, we want to unveil the extent to which the available evidence supports SDT, including the gaps that remain. We have used SDT to focus our selection of studies; nevertheless, it is our purpose to include evidence from as many research traditions as possible.

In our overview of available empirical evidence, we attempt to provide an analysis based on five considerations. Below, we explain why we suggest these considerations of importance for the purpose of answering our research question, and we argue why we distinguish between different kinds of evidence. First, if need supportive teaching affects early adolescents' motivation, evidence should be indicative of an association between need supportive teaching and students' motivation and engagement. Second, need supportive teaching can be operationalized either in terms of need supportive behavior or in terms of students' perceptions of this behavior. In the literature, it has been argued that it is the way students perceive their learning environment that influences learning, and not the learning environment in itself (e.g. Entwistle, 1991). Ultimately, however, for the concept to make sense not only from a theoretical perspective, concrete behavior has to be identified that makes teaching need supportive and enhances students' motivation and engagement. Hence, we consider both evidence on student perceived and observed or teacher perceived need supportive teaching to have a distinguishable purpose and relevance. Third, we consider evidence into the (unique) importance of the three dimensions of need supportive teaching, as well as their specific components, of particular relevance, as such evidence increases understanding of what it is that makes teaching need supportive. Fourth, implied in every question on effectiveness is a notion on direction of cau-

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