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The role of teachers' care and self-determined motivation in working with students in Germany and the United States



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ABSTRACT

Using self-determination theory, this study examined how students' motivation and learning emotions are related to teachers' care. By comparing results from schools in Germany and the United States the study also examined cross-national differences. A cross-sectional study of 870 eighth grade students was conducted. Results showed that American adolescents reported more autonomous motivation, interest, domain specific self-efficacy and anxiety, and higher levels of autonomy support and teachers' care. The study confirmed that adolescents' perceptions of teachers' care is related to autonomous motivation, interest and learning enjoyment. For German students, the data showed a relation between teachers' care and anxiety. The results were discussed within the context of different cultural backgrounds, as well as differences in the organization of the school systems.

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1. Introduction

The role of teachers' care on students' autonomous motivation and learning emotions has been examined as they relate to German and US middle grades students. Recent research has examined the role of teachers' behaviors on students' motivation, and it has been well established that good teacher-student relationships and a supportive classroom environment are essential for engaging student learning (e.g., Bieg, Backes, & Mittag, 2011; Nie & Lau, 2009; Reeve, 2006). However, empirical research that examines the role of teachers' care on students' autonomous motivation and learning emotions is relatively rare (e.g., Goudas & Biddle, 1994), and a literature search could find no cross-national studies that examined the influence of teachers' care on the learning emotions of adolescent students. Education for young adolescents can be enhanced by a deeper understanding of the role a teacher plays in adolescent development. Likewise, it is also important to examine the different structures in school systems in the United States and Germany to better determine their possible influence on these perceptions of teacher behavior.

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1.1. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) provided the theoretical framework for this study. SDT states that in interacting with the environment a person seeks to fulfill the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. The environment is an important factor in this process, as it can support or fail to support opportunities to fulfill those needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT posits that the fulfillment of these basic psychological needs is universal and crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation and a greater sense of well-being. The theory specifies that motivation and subsequent related behaviors can change, depending on the extent to which these needs are fulfilled (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000). In general, *autonomy* occurs when people are able to realize their personal goals, values and interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the school environment, autonomy support can be experienced when teachers can take their students' perspectives and identify with and nurture the students' needs, interests and preferences. They can emphasize important learning goals and create interesting, relevant and enriched activities in their classrooms (see Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010, p. 589). *Competence* is the need to experience satisfaction and success in challenges that are faced. In a school context, this means that the teacher has provided challenging work to the students and the students, in return, have received subsequent positive feedback from the teacher verifying that student efforts have proven to be effective (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for *relatedness* pertains to a feeling that one is connected closely to significant others, and is being cared about by those others, including a sense of belonging with others about whom one cares (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1979; Deci & Ryan, 1991).

Self-determination theory also posits that intrinsic motivation is the base for autonomous behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivation can be simply defined as doing an activity for its own sake (Ryan & Connell, 1989). In addition, SDT has identified four regulatory styles that represent four types of extrinsic motivation. They lie on a continuum, with controlled regulation on one end of the continuum and autonomous regulation on the opposite end (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985). Controlled motivation can include *external regulated* behaviors, which are often driven by a contingency (i.e., a threat of punishment or a material reward to be gained) and *introjected regulation*, which results in behaviors caused by internal pressures to avoid guilt or shame. Autonomous motivation can include *identified regulation*, which occurs when people follow personally important aims and *integrated regulation*, when people's aims and standards of behavior are integrated into their concepts of self. These behaviors are wholly volitional (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). Together with intrinsic motivation, the integrated regulation forms the basis for self-determination, and therefore could be seen as equal (Deci & Ryan, 1994).

Numerous studies have outlined the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness on students' perceived well-being and their levels of positive engagement in school (e.g., Black & Deci, 2000; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). In regard to autonomy support, for example, Black and Deci (2000) showed that college students' perceptions of autonomy support predicted increases in autonomous motivation and decreases in anxiety. In one of the school studies, Reeve et al. (1999) showed that autonomy-supportive teachers demonstrated specific ways of teaching and motivating students in an autonomy supportive manner. This means autonomy supportive teachers listened more, gave fewer instructional materials and no solutions and supported the intrinsic motivation and internalization of students. They also tend to verbalize fewer directives, the student can decide more often what to do, and autonomy supportive teachers respond more to student-generated questions (see Reeve et al., 1999, p. 542). According to competence for example, students reported a higher level of perceived competence when teachers provided hints for them as they solved problems and when they were given enough time to work on their own and have discussions with their classmates (Reeve, 2002; Seidel, Rimmel, & Prenzel, 2005). Studies by Yamauchi and Tanaka (1998) have shown relations between perceived competence and students' self-determined motivation. In a study with German and American university students, Levesque, Zuehlke, Stanek, and Ryan (2004) found higher levels of perceived competence in the American sample. And Schwarzer and Jerusalem (2002) showed that students with low self-efficacy tend to possess inappropriate motivational processes and are not able to provide a realistic evaluation of their own stress levels. Thus they conclude that low efficacy beliefs influence both motivation and well-being.

Additional research has shown that students will be more effective learners when they can satisfy their basic psychological need for autonomy. Black and Deci (2000) showed that instructors' autonomy support could predict students' classroom performance. A study by Grolnick and Ryan (1987) showed that self-determined regulatory styles are associated with greater conceptual learning. Past research also points out the importance of autonomy in helping increase motivation (e.g., Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). But more recently there is a growing body of research which documents how students perceive the level of expressed teacher care for them and their work (Bieg et al., 2011; Goudas & Biddle, 1994; Kunter et al., 2008; Nie & Lau, 2009). From a self-determination perspective, supportive teacher care links to students' needs for relatedness, or how relevant the classroom environment influences their motivation to learn. Previous research has documented the positive relationship between perceived levels of teacher care and positive student outcomes. Reis et al. (2000) found that relatedness in everyday social activity for college students was predictive of positive affect (e.g., enjoyment and fun) but not related to negative outcomes (e.g., worries, anxiety and frustration). The study of Nie and Lau (2009) with ninth graders from Singapore showed that students in classrooms characterized by care and behavioral control were more engaged in learning, and with a caring teacher they were more satisfied with their school life. Similar results were found among German eighth grade students in a study by Bieg et al. (2011). They found that students who perceived their teachers as being more autonomy supportive and caring also reported a higher level of intrinsic motivation. Ryan, Stiller and Lynch (1994) previously found that middle school students showed more intrinsic motivation when they experienced their teachers as caring.

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