



Autonomy and competence frustration in young adolescent classrooms: Different associations with active and passive disengagement

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have attempted to identify distinct psychological correlates of different forms of classroom disengagement. Drawing from basic psychological needs theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), this study investigated two divergent mechanisms predicting active and passive classroom disengagement. Pupils ($N = 647$; age = 11–14 years) and their respective teachers completed a questionnaire measuring the study variables. Using structural equation modelling, pupils' perceptions of teacher psychological control positively predicted pupils' autonomy and competence frustration in class. Pupils' competence frustration indirectly and positively associated with teacher-rated passive disengagement (e.g. daydreaming in class), via reduced feelings of vitality. Pupils' autonomy frustration demonstrated positive associations with both active disengagement (e.g. talking and making noise) and passive disengagement but neither relationship was explained by feelings of vitality. These distinct mechanisms may have implications for educators, identifying potential causes of different forms of pupil disengagement and the importance of avoiding psychological control in classrooms.

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1. Introduction

Engaging school pupils is a principal goal for most teachers in school classrooms. As such, theoretical and empirical research has investigated the adaptive teacher behaviours (e.g., Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002) and pupil perceptions of learning contexts (e.g., Fall & Roberts, 2012; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007) that may effectively promote pupil engagement. Teachers are, however, often confronted with pupils that do not participate, become disruptive, and withdraw themselves from classroom activities. Despite the presence of these behaviours, there seems a lack of conceptual understanding and theoretical evidence concerning the negative processes underpinning classroom disengagement. In the present work, we investigated whether the frustration of two candidate basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy and competence) could explain distinct disengagement processes.

Disengaged pupils are one of the biggest difficulties that

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teachers face in school classrooms and can be an indicator of prolonged academic and social pupil problems (Fredricks, 2014; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). Classroom disengagement reflects negative classroom conduct and detachment from learning activities (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Disengaged pupils will typically not try hard, give up when faced with challenging tasks, and alienate themselves in the classroom by withdrawing from learning activities (Reeve, 2006; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). Pupils are considered disengaged if they lose focus (e.g. daydream), or participate in off-task conversation or argument with classmates, instead of listening to the teacher or completing class activities (Gobert, Baker, & Wixon, 2015). In other words, pupils may be engaged in irrelevant behaviour or thought processes which constitute academic disengagement as they are disconnected from classroom activities.

A closer examination of maladaptive reactions in classrooms suggests two different forms of classroom disengagement. Pupils can *actively* disengage by detaching themselves from classroom activities in an animated and reactive manner, such as disrupting the class, talking over or arguing with others, or disobeying the teacher (Way, 2011). These pupils direct their behaviour towards

irrelevant stimuli and away from instructional information or classroom tasks. Such active detachment within the classroom should not be confused with contrasting displays of interest and enthusiasm associated with classroom engagement, such as passionate debating of learning material between pupils. Rather, our definition of active disengagement refers to reactive and animated types of maladaptive behaviour that is both non-compliant and off-task in nature.

Alternatively, pupils may *passively* disengage by withdrawing in an inactive manner, signified by lethargy, daydreaming, and tiredness in class. These pupils will become unresponsive to teacher or peer interactions that relate to classwork, often not attempting tasks, and avoiding or refusing to answer questions. Pupils who passively disengage do not impose an immediate problem in classrooms and often do not receive the same focus from educators as actively disruptive pupils (Paulsen, Bru, & Murberg, 2006). Researchers have not explored the distinction between active and passive types of pupil disengagement or the associated social and cognitive correlates, despite the clear differences in their respective characteristics. Adopting a generic disengagement perspective does not allow for targeted interventions aimed at minimising passive or active disengagement and this may stunt theoretical advancement.

When examining the social and intrapersonal processes associated with pupil behaviour, self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2002) has gained extensive empirical support within the domains of education and human motivation. In particular, it is posited within SDT that pupils will function less effectively in classroom environments that are perceived as psychologically controlling (e.g., Hein, Koka, & Hagger, 2015). Psychologically controlling teachers attempt to direct, manipulate or pressure pupils by disregarding the pupils' perspective and adopting a teacher centred agenda, typically using external sources to motivate pupil behaviour (e.g. deadlines, incentives, threats of punishment, criticism; Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006). SDT posits that pupils' basic psychological needs will be frustrated when they perceive their teacher as psychologically controlling (Niemi & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). We further propose that the frustration of two needs, namely autonomy and competence, may be differentially associated with active and passive disengagement in the classroom. The need for autonomy refers to the experience of volition and psychological freedom towards one's behaviour (deCharms, 1968). Frustration of this need, therefore, concerns feeling oppressed and pressured to behave in certain ways (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). The need for competence refers to the experience of effectiveness in one's pursuits (White, 1959). Thus competence frustration concerns feelings of inadequacy or failure (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch et al., 2011; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011).

Recent research findings have helped to expand knowledge of this 'darker side', postulating that need frustration may be distinct from need dissatisfaction, and is associated with ill-being and comprised interpersonal functioning (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Cuevas, & Lonsdale, 2014; Costa, Ntoumanis, & Bartholomew, 2015; Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013). Attempts to cope with experiences of need frustration typically provoke defensive and compensatory behaviours such as passivity, alienation, misbehaviour, resistance, and defiance (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). In line with this evidence, investigating classroom disengagement may be better understood by measuring competence and autonomy frustration, rather than dissatisfaction, to appropriately tap into the intensity associated with negative psychological experiences (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch et al., 2011; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011). Indeed, recent evidence demonstrated that

pupils reported higher classroom disengagement and bullying behaviours, when they perceived their psychological needs to be frustrated due to psychologically controlling teachers (Hein et al., 2015; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016). This evidence, in line with many other studies, adopted a composite approach whereby general need frustration was measured. A more nuanced approach to psychological need frustration may unearth new insight into maladaptive educational processes.

School classrooms represent contexts where learners face regular demands relating to their performance and ability (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). In such environments, it will be difficult for pupils who experience competence frustration to maintain active involvement in activities (Nicholls, 1989). In fact, when pupils perceive themselves to lack competence in the classroom, they are likely to withdraw from class activities in a passive manner. A lack of competence has been associated with greater amotivation in education settings (e.g., Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006), which is characterised by an absence of effortful behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similarly, students that were passively detached from school have reported little belief in their capability of being successful at school (Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). This process is analogous to learned helplessness, where pupils develop a belief that they cannot influence or bring about a desired outcome and develop self-defeating behaviour patterns, such as giving up, withdrawing effort and passive avoidance of tasks (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Elliot & Dweck, 1988). Collectively this evidence suggests that if competence is frustrated in the classroom, it will result in learners withdrawing their effort and demonstrating passive, avoidance type behaviours in attempts to evade demonstrating their perceived incapableness.

In contrast to the relationship between competence frustration and passive behaviours, an active and disruptive response may be more likely associated with the frustration of ones' autonomy. Research in the parenting domain indicates that children tend to have actively adverse responses to an absence of autonomy, including higher levels of delinquency (Barber, 1996), problem behaviours (Pettit, Laird, Dodge, Bates, & Criss, 2001), and aggressive behaviour (Joussemet et al., 2008). Young adolescents have also been found to reject parental authority when prevented from acting volitionally (i.e. in line with endorsed values and interests; Van Petegem, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Beyers, & Aelterman, 2014). Extrapolating from this knowledge base, we propose that the frustration of autonomy in classrooms is likely to lead to reactive disengagement and avoidance which manifests itself as making noise or talking to other pupils. In contrast, frustrated competence may be a stronger correlate of passive disengagement in class. No previous research has tested this important distinction despite it being implied by the evidence described above. Exploring potentially distinct correlates of autonomy and competence frustration is required to identify theoretical mechanisms that explain different types of disengagement.

Our portrayal of active and passive types of disengagement suggests adverse behaviours that are underpinned by different levels of subjective vitality, a feeling of aliveness and energy (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). From a broad SDT perspective, the frustration of autonomy and competence will deplete vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Nonetheless, research in adolescent athletes and physical education students has evidenced a stronger association between competence and feelings of vitality, compared to autonomy (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012; Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004; Taylor & Lonsdale, 2010). These studies examined psychological (dis)satisfaction, rather than competence and autonomy frustration. In an adult sample, competence but not autonomy frustration, was associated with reduced vitality (Gunnell et al., 2013). It may be that frustration of the two needs have unique depleting influences

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