



## Teachers can do it: Scalable identity-based motivation intervention in the classroom<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Classroom activities aimed at changing students' identity-based motivation (IBM) improve student outcomes by helping students experience school as the path to their adult future identities and their difficulties along the way as signals of the importance of schoolwork. One way to scale these effects would be to have teachers deliver IBM activities. Hence, we asked if, after a brief two-day training, teacher-delivered IBM intervention could meet fidelity standards and if attaining more fidelity matters. We trained all eighth grade teachers in two middle schools (N = 211 students). We used [Dane and Schneider's \(1988\)](#) five-component fidelity model and [Durlak and DuPre's \(2008\)](#) empirically derived threshold and practical maximum standards for fidelity. We found that most classrooms (88%) and students (89%) received IBM intervention at-or-above threshold standard, implying that teacher-based IBM delivery is viable. Moreover, investing in improving fidelity is worthwhile; above-threshold fidelity improved core grade-point-average and reduced risk of course failure.

“In the beginning of the year we did a program called *Pathways-to-Success*. It was a program about how we thought of our futures, and if something got in the way, how would we make plans to overcome them. Something [my teacher] always told the class of 2023 was that if it's difficult, it's important. I feel like this is true. In life if you find something difficult like school for instance it is important.” (8<sup>th</sup> grader Middle School Graduation Speech)

“Thank you for helping us with what will happen later in life...For giving us a pathway to success and now it is our choice to take that path. You helped us find forks that we may have, the decisions we have to make.” (8<sup>th</sup> grader receiving Special Education services, Thank-you Letter to teacher delivering the *Pathways-to-Success* program)

“This was by far and away the best advisory program we have had and I've been here 10 years. We have had some attempts at it with very little support that have fallen flat on their face. This may be our third or fourth advisory program.” (8<sup>th</sup> grade Science teacher who delivered the *Pathways-to-Success* program)

### 1. Introduction

Students want to do well in school and go on to college, yet they

often fail to attain their high aspirations ([Oyserman & Destin, 2010](#); [Oyserman & Lewis, 2017](#)). One way teachers can harness students' high aspirations is to use identity-based motivation to help their students imagine school as the path to their future, generate strategies to succeed on that path, and see obstacles and failures along the way as signaling importance and value ([Oyserman et al., 2017](#); [Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011](#)). As our opening quotes suggest, both students and teachers appreciate the usefulness of the identity-based motivation (IBM) perspective. Students found the main points of the IBM intervention useful enough to include in graduation speeches and even felt an impulse to write thank you notes to teachers. Indeed, student academic outcomes improve when classroom interventions target identity-based motivation. Analyses of two identity-based motivation interventions revealed significantly improved student academic outcomes at end of school year follow-up ([Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002](#)) and at end of a two-school-year follow-up ([Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006](#)). In these tests of identity-based motivation theory, pairs of college students ([Oyserman et al., 2002](#)) or staff holding undergraduate degrees ([Oyserman et al., 2006](#)) delivered the intervention. These prior tests were important because they provided support for the robustness of IBM theory by showing significant effects in real-world settings on important academic outcomes (core course grades and risk failing a

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class) via change in IBM variables. However, they did not test if, after a brief training, teachers can deliver an IBM intervention with sufficient fidelity to have its promised effects. This test is needed if scaling via teacher implementation is to be possible. We take two steps to address this issue in the current paper.

At step one we test the prediction that a brief 2-day in-service training yields sufficient fidelity to likely have effects. At step two we test the prediction that achieving higher fidelity matters for core grade-point average and course failure rates. We focus on a brief 2-day training because teachers are unlikely to be given time for longer training. We focus on sufficient fidelity because a large review suggests that interventions delivered with less than 60% fidelity are unlikely to have their intended effects (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). We focus on implications of higher fidelity because the Durlak and DuPre (2008) review also suggests that practitioners are unlikely to deliver with more than 80% fidelity. Taken together, this range implies that analyses should focus on whether the fidelity threshold of 60% is attained and whether fidelity above 60% and closer to the 80% practical maximum improves targeted outcomes. To situate our results and their implications, we divide the introduction into three sections. First, we review identity-based motivation theory, the evidence that it predicts academic outcomes, its translation to intervention, and the need for testing teacher-led IBM intervention. Second, we describe what fidelity is and how to operationalize it. Third, we specify our research questions.

### 1.1. Identity-based motivation theory

#### 1.1.1. Operationalization

Identity-based motivation theory is a social psychological theory of motivation and goal pursuit that explains when and in which situations people's identities motivate them to take action towards their own goals (Oyserman et al., 2017; Oyserman, 2015a). Identity-based motivation theory starts with the assumption that people are sensitively attuned to their immediate context and that this shapes identities (dynamic construction). People prefer to act (action-readiness) and make sense of situations (procedural-readiness) in identity-congruent ways—ways consistent with what 'I' and people 'like me' do. However, even though identity (who one was, is, and might become) feels stable, identities are dynamically constructed in context. Dynamic construction means that contexts shape which identities come to mind, what these identities seem to imply for behavior, and how people interpret experienced difficulty. The thing of interest is not that people can change how they regard themselves after sustained effort, but rather the surprisingly large effects that small shifts in context can have on changing how people regard themselves. As detailed next, each component of identity-based motivation (dynamic construction, action-readiness, and procedural-readiness) has been operationalized and its effect on academic performance empirically tested.

#### 1.1.2. Experimental evidence of effects on academic outcomes

In this section, we briefly review experiments documenting effects of identity-based motivation on academic outcomes. First, we consider studies showing that dynamic construction of identity cues action-readiness; readiness to act in ways that fit constructed identity. In one study, researchers subtly shifted what context implied about being a boy (Elmore & Oyserman, 2012). In this study, researchers randomly assigned middle school boys into groups; each group was shown a different graph of accurate statewide census data. One group—the 'men succeed' group—saw a graph showing that men earned more money than women. This graph implied that academic success fits with being a boy. Boys who saw the 'men succeed' graph made more attempts to solve a math task and imagined more school-focused possible identities than boys who saw other graphs. Boys in these other conditions saw graphs that did not mention gender or graphs showing that women are more likely to have graduated high school than men, implying 'women succeed'.

In a second set of studies, also examining the consequences of dynamic construction of identity on action-readiness, researchers subtly shifted what the future self seemed to imply for action by changing the fit between identity and context (Oyserman, Destin, & Novin, 2015). In these studies, researchers randomly assigned students to think about school as a success-likely context in which most students succeed or to think about school a failure-likely context in which most students do not do as well as they hoped. The researchers then asked students to write about their possible identities, with half of the students guided to consider desired possible identities and half of students guided to consider undesired ones. Thus, half of students were led to consider their future self and their current context as fitting together, either because in that context people often fail and their to-be-avoided future self was on their mind, or because in that context people often succeed and their to-be-attained future self was on their mind. The results showed that the action-readiness component of the future self is context-sensitive. That is, students planned to start studying sooner if the way they thought about their possible identities and the way they thought about school fit together. They were more likely to take action after thinking about undesired possible identities while thinking of school as a failure-likely context or after thinking about desired possible identities while thinking of school as a success-likely context.

In other studies examining the link between the dynamic construction of identity and action readiness, researchers used small contextual cues to make student-experienced the future self as relevant to the present moment (Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Destin, 2017; Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, & Smith, 2014; Nurra & Oyserman, 2018). Nurra and Oyserman (2018) randomized students to consider their adult future self as occurring soon or occurring later, as connected to their current self or as distinct from their current self. Experiencing one's adult self as near and connected is consequential for behavior. Across studies, if researchers led students to experience their adult and present selves as connected, students worked harder on current assignments, focused more on boring tasks, and actually attained better core course grades by the end of the semester.

Destin and colleagues (Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Destin, 2017) randomized middle school students to either learn about need-based financial aid (open path) or to estimate the cost of college and report how they planned to cover this cost (closed path). Students who learned that income is not a barrier had significantly higher school engagement compared to students who were asked to consider the cost of college and how they would pay for it. Students who were asked to consider college cost and how they would pay for college seemed to infer that cost was a barrier and hence college was not likely for them, making hard work in eighth grade feel like a pointless endeavor. Landau and colleagues (2014) randomized students to either think about their academic possible identities in the context of an image that implied action (a path) or one that did not (a container). Students led to list their academic possible identities on an image of a path rather than an image of a container were more engaged with their schoolwork. Across studies, these students were more likely to seek out academic help, worked harder on current assignments, planned to study more for an upcoming quiz, and actually performed better on the quiz.

In addition to cuing readiness to act, dynamic construction of identity also cues procedural-readiness—that is, how one makes sense of experienced ease and difficulty with schoolwork as implying something about oneself. Interpretation of experienced difficulty matters for downstream behavior and for identity. Across studies, once students considered that experienced difficulty might be a sign that schoolwork is important, they saw academics as more central to their identity (Aelenei, Lewis, Oyserman, 2017; Oyserman, Elmore, Novin, Fisher, & Smith, 2018; Smith & Oyserman, 2015) and did better on a variety of school tasks (Elmore, Oyserman, Smith, & Novin, 2016; Oyserman et al., 2018; Smith & Oyserman, 2015). Students are also more likely to endorse the idea that difficulty means importance if they experience fit between identity and context, as we previously described. That is, when

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