



# Teachers' instructional behaviors as important predictors of academic motivation: Changes and links across the school year



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## ABSTRACT

Learning environments play an important role for students' learning and outcomes. Research indicates that many students show poor academic motivation. Teachers' behavior can function as a protective factor for sustaining students' interest and active engagement in schools. However, the knowledge about the dynamic nature of teachers' behavior and how it relates to the development of students' academic motivation is limited. This study is aimed to fill this gap. 566 students from 20 classes completed measures of teachers' instructional behavior and academic motivation in five waves throughout the school year. Results showed that students' perceptions of the quality of teachers' instructional behavior and that of academic motivation declined over time. The decrease in academic motivation was related to the decrease in teachers' instructional behavior. A high quality of teachers' instructional behavior appeared to be a protective factor for the decline in the level of students' academic motivation over time.

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## 1. Introduction

Academic motivation is an important aspect of students' learning and academic performance and provides cues why some students seem to engage and succeed in learning while others fail (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Students who believe that they are capable of performing certain tasks (self-efficacy), value learning intrinsically, and have a low level of test anxiety, tend to be more engaged academically, use more cognitive strategies and are more likely to persist in learning (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). These motivational components play a significant role in academic performance (Jinks & Lorschach, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Currently, schools and educational researchers have started to pay attention to motivational factors in order to prevent school problems related to low learning interest, low achievement, and high dropout rate (Wang & Eccles, 2013).

To promote academic motivation, it is important to focus on the central figure of classroom learning; the teacher. Teachers are important determinants of classroom learning environments and research has consistently revealed their relevance to students' academic outcomes (Mercer & DeRosier, 2010; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Specifically, research shows that teachers' behavior is strongly associated with students' academic motivation and achievement (e.g., Maulana, Opdenakker, den Brok, & Bosker, 2011a; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2009; Pianta, 1999). When students perceive greater social supports

from teachers, they tend to have more positive attitudes and a higher sense of competence in learning (Rice, Barth, Guadagno, Smith, & McCallum, 2013). Unfortunately, research on teacher-student interpersonal relationships suggests that the quality of teachers' interpersonal behavior tends to decrease across the school year (Mainhard, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2011; Maulana, Opdenakker, & Bosker, 2013b; Maulana, Opdenakker, Stroet, & Bosker, 2013a; Opdenakker, Maulana, & den Brok, 2012). In a similar vein, there is evidence that students' academic motivation tends to decline, with a large drop as students enter secondary school (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). The decline in academic motivation is linked with the decline in the quality of teachers' interpersonal behavior (Maulana et al., 2013b, 2013a; Maulana, Opdenakker, Bosker, & den Brok, 2011b). These studies suggest that teachers' interpersonal behavior should be the priority for schools.

However, teachers' behavior can be studied from multiple perspectives. We know little whether or not teachers' behavior studied from different perspectives will reveal the same patterning with teachers' behavior studied from interpersonal behavior perspective. The present study is aimed at addressing this gap by studying teachers' behavior from an instructional perspective. Specifically, few empirical studies have focused on changes in teachers' behavior (mainly interpersonal behavior), while we found no study focusing on changes in teachers' instructional behavior. Moreover, a limited number of studies reveal a positive relationship between perceptions of changes in learning environments and students' motivational outcomes (Flanders, Morrison, & Brode, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). To date, there is no study investigating the relationship between teachers'

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instructional behavior and students' academic motivation in a dynamic and multilevel fashion, taking into account differences between classes and between students within classes over time. Hence, the present study was designed to advance our understanding regarding changes in teachers' instructional behavior and the longitudinal links between teachers' instructional behavior and students' academic motivation across the school year. Such research is important to inform effective classroom practices as well as to identify characteristics of instructional behavior that matter for academic motivation from a longitudinal point of view.

### 1.1. Teachers' behavior from the instructional perspective

From an eclectic point of view, teachers' instructional behavior is defined as teachers' (and students') role in the learning process that involves the degree to which teachers display instructional clarity to achieve the learning goal, manage classrooms effectively to minimize disruptions and misbehaviors and maximize students' opportunity to learn, and distribute control over students' learning activities (den Brok, Bergen & Brekelmans, 2006a). Within this theoretical framework, effective teaching behavior can be described as performing well on at least the following domains of instructional behavior. First, clarity of instruction refers to the clarity and the explicitness of the teacher with regard to what students have to learn, to do and how. It also refers to the clarity of delivering and explaining the content of the lesson (Brekelmans, Sleegers, & Fraser, 2000). Reviews on educational effectiveness indicate the relevance of clarity of instruction in the form of structured instruction (e.g., Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Scheerens & Creemers, 1996; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Wang et al. (1993) mention the effectiveness of a more constructivist perspective on learning and instruction by introducing an idea of "academic student-teacher interactions". Another domain is classroom management, which refers to the creation of an orderly learning environment and an orderly organization of learning activities. It deals with the extent to which young students have to obey the teacher's rules and the degree to which inattentive behavior is allowed during the lesson. It also deals with how teachers respond to students' misbehavior during the learning process (Creemers, 1994).

Furthermore, teacher control over students' learning activities is an important domain of teachers' instructional behavior. Teacher control refers to the degree to which teachers and students have control over the learning activities of the student. The literature on teachers' control suggests three gradations of teachers' control including: (1) strong control, referring to an instructional system in which the teacher initiates and fills in students' learning activities; (2) shared control, or activating and facilitating students to take an active part in guiding and completing learning tasks, and (3) loose control, or stimulating and motivating students to complete learning activities with little if any teacher regulation involvement (den Brok et al., 2006a; Vermunt & Verloop, 1999). Strong control is characterized by teachers' behavior such as highlighting main points, providing examples, presenting outlines and providing students with strategies to perform learning strategies. Shared control refers to the share of responsibility over the student's learning activities between the teacher and the student (and between students). Students are continually activated by the teacher (explicitly or implicitly) to engage in learning activities, for example, by asking questions, stimulating students to cooperate and assigning tasks. Loose teacher control focuses on students' own decision making during learning activities. This is characterized by allowing students to operate freely and independently during learning activities. Teachers allow this because they believe that students will start and complete learning activities by their own initiative.

Within popular conceptions of "teaching for active learning" reference is made to teacher-led, student-led and co-student led control. Contradictory to previous theories in which teacher-control was advocated (see model of Direct Instruction; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986),

contemporary theories on learning and instruction emphasize the importance of students' active involvement in their own learning and the degree to which they control their own learning activities (Shuell, 1996). Until recently, the constructivist versus a more traditional approach to teaching (i.e., direct instruction) remains a hot topic of debate in education (see for example Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006).

There is evidence that the quality of teachers' behavior tends to change over time. Particularly, studies show that teachers' interpersonal behavior tends to decline across the school year (Brekelmans, 1989; Mainhard et al., 2011; Maulana, Opdenakker, den Brok, & Bosker, 2010; Maulana et al., 2013b, 2013a) and over school years in secondary school (Way et al., 2007). However, other studies indicate relatively stable trends of teachers' interpersonal behavior over time (Brekelmans, 1989; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Therefore, the knowledge about changes in teachers' behavior remains inconclusive. To date, particularly, there is no study documenting the developmental trend of teachers' instructional behavior taking into consideration differences between classes and between students within classes across the school year. This type of research is beneficial for two reasons. Methodologically, hierarchical modeling is more superior for nested data like in the present study because the generated estimates are less sensitive to bias compared to single-level modeling (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). Practically, knowledge about differences between and within classes is important for researchers interested in setting interventions in schools, whether to be targeted at the class or the individual level, to promote a positive growth in instructional behavior over time.

### 1.2. Academic motivation: the expectancy-value model

In this study, students' academic motivation is studied using the framework of an adaptation of the expectancy-value model of academic motivation (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). According to this model, there are three components of academic motivation: (1) an expectancy component (self-efficacy), (2) a value component (intrinsic value), and (3), an affective component (test anxiety) that may link to cognitive strategies needed for students' academic achievement. The first two components are considered as the basis of students' learning engagement (Pajares, 1996).

The basic concept of the expectancy component includes students' beliefs of their capabilities to perform the task necessary for accomplishing desired performances (Bandura, 1986). This involves their answers to the question, "Am I able to do this task?" Jinks and Lorschbach (2003) state that self-efficacy consists of two main elements: (1) efficacy information gained from experience and; (2) student beliefs about their abilities, irrespective of their ability. Furthermore, the value component concerns students' goal for the task and their beliefs about the importance and interest of the task. This involves their answer to the question, "Why am I doing this task?" Pintrich (1989) asserts that intrinsic value consists of two elements including: (1) task value referring to importance of and interest in tasks and; (2) students' achievement of goal orientation. Intrinsic value refers to the degree to which students' hold interest and recognize importance of a task, which is connected to their goal orientation. Finally, the affective component involves students' emotional responses to the learning task. This relates to the question, "How do I feel about this task?"

Students who believe they are able and can and will do well are much more likely to be motivated in terms of effort, persistence, and academic behavior than their peers who believe they are less able and do not expect to succeed (Eccles et al., 1998; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Confident students will also be more cognitively engaged in learning and thinking and have higher academic performance outcomes than their peers who doubt their capabilities to do well (e.g., Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Pintrich, 1999; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Students who believe that the task is interesting and important are much more likely to engage in learning activities (Ames & Archer, 1988; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Additionally, test anxiety is considered as the most

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