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Beware of your teaching style: A school-year long investigation of controlling teaching and student motivational experiences

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ABSTRACT

Relatively little research drawing from self-determination theory has examined the links between controlling teaching environments and student motivation. To this end, two longitudinal studies were conducted to explore how students' perceptions of controlling teaching behavior and experiences of psychological need frustration were associated with a number of motivation-related outcomes over a school year. Multilevel growth modelling indicated that changes in perceptions of controlling teaching positively related to changes in need frustration across the school year (Studies 1 & 2) which, in turn, negatively related to autonomous motivation and positively related to controlled motivation and amotivation in Study 1 ($N = 419$); and positively related to fear of failure, contingent self-worth, and challenge avoidance in Study 2 ($N = 447$). Significant indirect effects also supported the mediating role of need frustration. These findings reinforce the need for research on the negative motivational pathways which link controlling teaching to poor quality student motivation. Implications for teacher training are discussed.

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1. Introduction

For some middle school students, the adolescent years mark the beginning of a downward spiral in school-related motivation and engagement that often leads to academic underachievement (Eccles et al., 1993). This may, in part, be due to a perceived lack of self-determination among students. Many students spend their time in school feeling compelled to follow someone else's rules, study someone else's curriculum, and submit continually to someone else's evaluation (Kohn, 1993). Thus, in order for teachers to successfully facilitate engagement in compulsory curriculum subjects, such as Physical Education (PE), it is vital that students perceive the teaching and learning environment to be motivationally supportive (Haerens, Kirk, Cardon, & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2011; Kirk, 2005). In this regard, the influence of social factors, including the interpersonal style adopted by the teacher, appears to be paramount for student motivation (e.g., Wentzel, 2002). For instance, it has been shown that teachers' instructional behaviors can be discerned according to their dimensions of influence (i.e., power or dominance vs. submission) and proximity (i.e., friendliness or cooperation vs. opposition; Gurtman, 2009). Research suggests that students' perceptions of these types of teacher behavior relate to outcomes such as student satisfaction, confidence, and effort (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). However, whilst there has been extensive empirical evidence on the role of positive teaching behavior for adaptive student motivation, comparatively less research has been carried out examining the mechanisms via which negative teaching behaviors relate to students' motivation-related outcomes (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996; Wentzel, 1999).

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2002) is a widely applied contemporary framework for the study of motivation which differentiates between optimal (e.g., autonomy-

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supportive) and non-optimal (e.g., controlling) teacher behavior (Van den Berghe et al., 2013). Educational research guided by SDT has consistently shown that an autonomy-supportive teaching style nurtures a motivational pathway toward optimal functioning (e.g., Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). However, the existence of a separate maladaptive pathway activated by controlling social environments has been increasingly measured and empirically tested in a systematic way (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2010). Nonetheless, very few studies in education have examined controlling teaching behaviors, as explicated by SDT, and the mechanisms by which such behaviors predict maladaptive cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes from a longitudinal perspective (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016).

1.1. Controlling teaching behaviors

Teachers are controlling when they ignore students' perspectives and behave in authoritarian and pressuring ways in order to impose a specific and preconceived way of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2009; Grolnick, 2003; Reeve, 2009). According to SDT, a controlling interpersonal style can be expressed in two different ways: externally controlling and internally controlling (De Meyer, Soenens, Aelterman, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Haerens, 2016). Externally controlling teaching refers to the activation of a sense of external obligation in students by using explicit and overtly controlling strategies (Ryan, 1982). For example, Bartholomew et al. identified intimidation as a controlling strategy which fosters external regulation by creating pressure from outside to behave in certain ways. Behaviors which are used to intimidate others involve the display of power-assertive strategies such as yelling, the use and threat of physical punishment (e.g., running laps in PE), and overly critical attacks on individual students which are designed to humiliate and belittle.

Internally controlling teaching refers to the use of tactics that trigger maladaptive motivational forces that reside inside the student by appealing to their feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, and self-worth. Such internal pressures are usually activated in more covert and subtle ways (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). For example, teachers may use negative conditional regard (i.e., withdrawing attention, interest, and care when the student fails to act as expected) and other guilt-inducing strategies to express disappointment when their expectations are not met (Bartholomew et al., 2010; Soenens, Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, & Dochy, 2012).

Such external and internal controls pressure students to adhere to the values held by the teacher and can, therefore, be used to enforce discipline and secure student compliance (Soenens et al., 2012). However, behaviors obtained via these compliance techniques are problematic as they impede the internalization of the underlying values of the action (e.g., the health, social, and psychological gains associated with physical activity) and, therefore, undermine optimal student motivation (De Meyer et al., 2014; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Controlling teaching is largely incompatible with the adaptive teaching dimension of autonomy support (Grolnick, 2003). Autonomy-supportive teachers try to foster students' sense of volition and inner motivational resources so that students perceive themselves as the initiator of their actions (Reeve, 2009). However, the behaviors associated with the two interpersonal styles are not necessarily antipodal (Bartholomew et al., 2009, 2010; Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2008) and the presence of controlling teaching behavior cannot simply be equated with the absence of autonomy-supportive behavior (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, et al., 2011). In the same way as fostering growth takes more than the absence of control, it takes more than the absence of autonomy support to predict negative motivational outcomes. Thus, perceptions of controlling teaching and their impact on student motivation must be assessed in their own right. Whilst this assertion is becoming increasingly accepted in the SDT literature, most research has still focused on adaptive teaching dimensions and their beneficial effects on students; far fewer studies have explicitly addressed controlling teaching and its relations to student motivation, cognition, and well-being (Jang et al., 2016; *cf.* cross-sectional research by; Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; De Meyer et al., 2014; De Meyer et al., 2016; Haerens Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Petegem, 2015; Soenens et al., 2012). The present study will add to this relatively small body of research by examining the stability and the range of the associations between controlling teaching behaviors (i.e., intimidation and negative condition regard) and student motivation-related outcomes in PE.

1.2. Basic psychological need frustration

Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that the negative impact of controlling teaching environments occurs because such contexts thwart students' basic psychological needs. Three such needs are identified, those for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy reflects a need for individuals to feel volitional and responsible for their own behavior (DeCharms, 1968; e.g., when students experience a sense of choice in relation to the activities they engage in). Competence reflects feelings of effectance and confidence in achieving desired outcomes (White, 1959; e.g., when students feel capable of completing the tasks set by the teacher). Finally, relatedness concerns the degree to which individuals feel meaningfully connected to and accepted by significant others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; e.g., when students experience a strong bond with their PE teacher or classmates). Students experience feelings of need frustration when their psychological needs are thwarted in controlling teaching environments (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). For example, controlling strategies pressure students to change their behavior to conform to their teacher's expectations (autonomy frustration) and, over time, may cause students to doubt their capabilities (competence frustration), and feel rejected and disliked by their teacher and classmates (relatedness frustration; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Haerens, Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, & Petegem, 2015).

It is becoming increasingly recognized in SDT that the experience of need frustration is distinct from the absence of need satisfaction (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Costa, Ntoumanis, & Bartholomew, 2014; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). This important conceptual differentiation has practical significance as it suggests that processes associated with need satisfaction and need frustration will relate to different motivational and educational outcomes (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, Bosch, et al., 2011; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Importantly, Costa et al. (2014) showed that such differential relations are not simply due to the positive and negative wording of the items used to tap experiences of need satisfaction and need frustration, respectively, and associated positive and negative outcomes (i.e., method effects). Whereas need satisfaction should relate primarily to optimal motivation, good academic performance, and well-being, need frustration should be primarily predictive of maladaptive motivational orientations, poor performance, and ill-being. Initial evidence for the practical import of this theoretical assertion has been provided in the sport context

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