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Students' Study Motivation – A Question for All Actors in Daily Work in School

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe and analyze what determines upper secondary students' motivation or lack of motivation. The theories used are social cognitive theory and didactic theory. The study design is a mixed method approach, followed by an inductive content analysis. The empirical results show many similarities in perceptions of study motivation, such as the role of the teacher, study results, friends and family, and teaching. There were also crucial differences between the three groups, such as such as the view of that the physical and social environment, and aspects of the importance of teachers and the content. Students, teachers, and principals can together create a situation with high study motivation and thus make the students become more successful in their learning.

Keywords: *didactics, study motivation, transaction, upper secondary school*

Introduction

Motivation is an important and interesting research area for many parts of social life as well as for several academic subjects. Motivation is also a complex concept with numerous definitions and an at times difficult phenomenon to study and analyze. The content of the word is "essential but elusive. It exists in unlikely places and can be absent in promising locations" (Whiteley, 2002, p. 5). The concept's complexity and meaning are also found in its relation to several other important concepts, such as well-being and concentration.

Motivation, well-being, and concentration are important concepts in the school world in the form of motivation to study. The Swedish school law states that the work in the school should promote children and students to acquire and develop knowledge and values as well as a lifelong desire to learn. The education must also take into account students' different needs. Students should be supported and stimulated so they develop as far as possible (SFS 2010: 800). Study motivation applies both to the formulation of a lifelong desire to learn and to compensate for differences in students' ability to assimilate the education. Understanding and working with motivational issues supports students' work to acquire and develop knowledge and values.

Students' study motivation is an important question internationally as well as in Sweden. In Sweden, about 25% of students leave upper secondary school without complete grades and the dropout number is high (Skolverket, 2020). A comparison with the other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and the European countries that are members of the OECD, show that the throughput in Sweden in 2019 was about 10% lower than that of the other countries (OECD, 2022). The main explanation for the perceived low throughput is that 53% of the students feel they have low study motivation (Sveriges Elevkårer & Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2015).

Considering this background, this study focuses on students', teachers', and principals' perceptions of factors that affect students' study motivation. The results of this study are in our view important for all actors in Swedish upper secondary schools but also in an international perspective.

Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to describe and analyze what determines upper secondary students' motivation or lack of motivation.

The research questions are:

- What do students, teachers, and principals consider to be decisive for students' study motivation?
- What distinguishes students', teachers', and principals' perceptions of students' learning motives?

Theory

This study takes its theoretical starting point in *social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 2001, 2006*)*, more specifically in *goal orientation theory* (Schunk et al., 2010; Schunk & Usher, 2012) and in the German didactic theory. Social cognitive theory assumes that learning is part of a social context in which people interact with each other (Bandura, 2006). The so-called triarchic mutual causality is an important component of this theory, that is, that personal factors, the physical and social environment, and behaviors influence and are influenced by each other. According to this theory, explanations for study motivation can be found in individuals' expectations of success combined with how they value their goals (Woolfolk & Karlsberg, 2015). The social cognitive theory frames and is applied in our study in several ways.

Study motivation is about transaction (Perry et al., 2006). Study motivation should not be understood only as an individual trait, but that it is about negotiations of meaning in the social interaction. According to Perry et al. (2006), there are strong links between motivation and (a) communicated expectations, (b) clear feedback on results, (c) interaction between teacher and student and between students, (d) positive climate, and (e) teacher leadership. To analyze a lack of study motivation as a cause of low throughput in upper secondary school, a perspective is thus required that not only focuses on the individual student but also takes into account the entire school and classroom situation.

Considering this study also covers didactics, we will relate to the *German didactic theory*. From that theory, we will use the didactic triangle, which is based on the teacher, the student, and the content, and between them, realizations, presentation, methodology, and interactions (Hoppman, 1997).

Method and Data Collection

To fulfill the purpose of the study and answer the research questions, the study design used a mixed method approach, followed by an inductive content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) based on group interviews for teachers and students and individual interviews for principals. Below, we describe the participants, the data collection and analysis, the interviews, and the thematic analysis.

This study is based on five individual interviews with head teachers and principals, nine group interviews with teachers *(N = 38)*, and nine group interviews with students *(N = 32)*, for a total of 75 participants. All participants were informed of the project's aims and current ethical principles of research (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). We collected data in the fall of 2017. A study by Blomgren (2016) influenced the design of the interview questions. We conducted and recorded the interviews onsite at the school and subsequently transcribed them verbatim.

We analyzed interview data using inductive thematic content analysis, which is a method for systematic and gradual classification of data to identify patterns and themes more easily. By definition, inductive coding is not tied to a theoretical

framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), thus the students' responses drive the coding. The chosen approach also enables analyses from different theoretical perspectives. Subsequently, comparative analyzes (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009) were performed between the three groups.

Results

The study's main results are summarized in the categories of answers presented in the three figures below. The top row of each figure specifies the main answer categories, and below each category are important clarifications of the categories' content. Regarding students' responses, the blue-colored categories represent areas where we found the biggest variation in responses between different student groups, for example, between theoretical programs and vocational programs.

Concerning students' conceptions of motivation to study, the results showed six different categories: importance of teachers, subject, environment, study results, friends and families, and students characteristics (Figure 1) Within each category are subcategories that nuance them. The blue boxes represent differences between students in study preparation programs and vocational students, for example, students in study preparation programs are motivated more by a good future job and they place more responsibility on themselves and what attitudes they have in their studies compared to vocational students.

Figure 1. *Students' Conception of Motivation to Study*
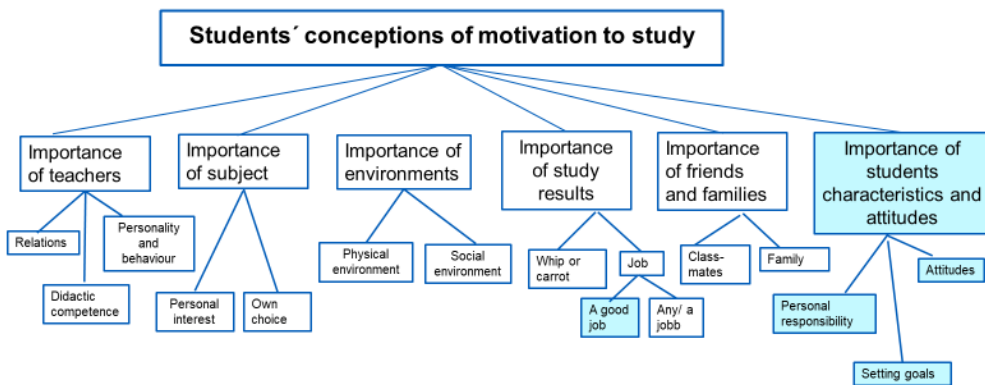

Concerning teacher's conceptions, six themes emerged. Namely, students themselves, teachers, teaching, content, the group and home, and grades/results (Figure 2). Within each category, subcategories also emerged. The various aspects of teaching are most prominent.

Figure 2. *Study Motivation According to Teachers*
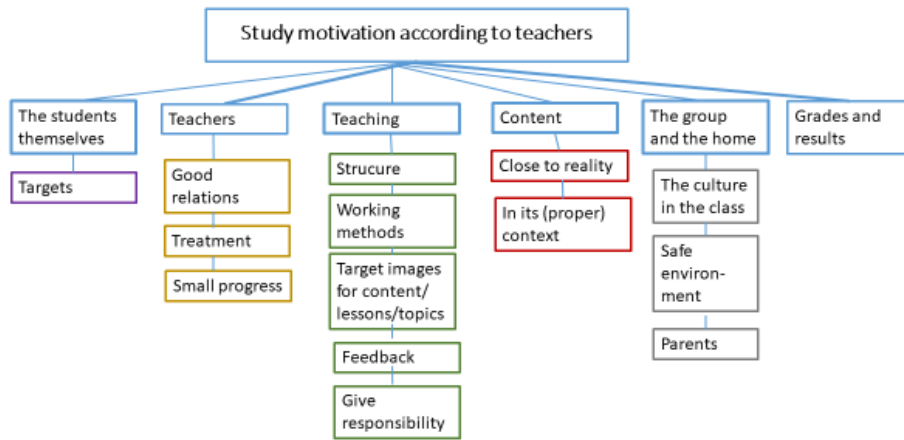
Concerning principals' perceptions, four themes emerged. Namely, students, teachers, teaching, and the group and home (Figure 3). As shown in Figure 3, there are also subcategories in the answers from this group of respondents.

Figure 3. *Study Motivation According to Principals*
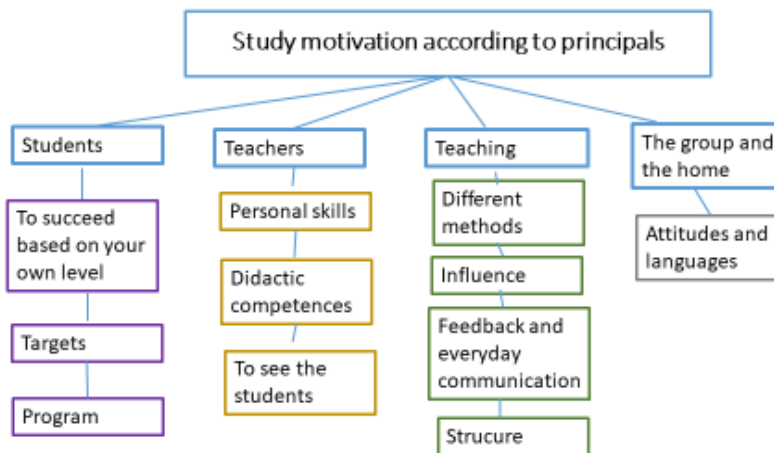
A comparison between the three informant groups shows many similarities in perceptions of study motivation, such as the role of the teacher, study results, friends and family, and teaching. A prominent difference is that compared to the teachers, the students placed more emphasis on the teachers' personalities compared to the teachers who set their competence in the subject high. Furthermore, teachers

placed the greatest emphasis on various aspects of teaching. The students pointed to the physical learning environment also as crucial for study motivation, which teachers and principals did not. The principals clearly emphasized that students' motivation also emanated from their program choices and their goals.

Discussion

The three studied groups' experiences about what can increase students' study motivation in upper secondary school and the reason/explanation for any low study motivation largely show a complex interplay between motivation and expectations, results, the interaction between teacher and student, and between students. Our findings are thus consistent with Perry et al.'s (2006) conclusions. In accordance with Bandura (2006,) we argue that our results show that it is important to pay attention to personal factors, the physical and social environment, and the aspects of the entire school and classroom situation.

The crucial difference between the three different groups was the principals' perceptions compared with the other two groups. Although principals have a student perspective, their perceptions were of a more general nature. Differences between students and teachers are that the former emphasizes the teacher's competence while students are more interested in a fair teacher as a person. To support students' study motivation, a much greater understanding of phenomena among the staff is needed. It is also important to focus broadly on all actors in school and listen to and take into account students' voices.

In our study, students point out that the physical and social environment, together with teachers' teaching, personality, and expectations, are important. The students thus highlight the pedagogical/didactic context and the interaction between the individual and the learning environment (Hoppman, 1997). The teachers, for their part, highlight the students' ownership, the teacher–student relationship, the teaching content, and group dynamics as important for the motivation to study. Finally, the principals emphasize the importance of students' willingness to learn, their interests, the teachers' work, and the school culture. There are thus both similarities and differences between students', teachers', and principals' views on study motivational factors. An important difference is that students strongly emphasize the teachers' social relationship competence (kind), while the teachers emphasize to a greater extent the content of the teaching (knowledge), and the principals the overall school situation (school culture). The differences can be perceived as natural based on the different roles in school, but are equally important regarding attention paid to them.

A common way to analyze motivation is to distinguish between external and internal motivational factors. External motivational factors refer to the effort to meet the expectations that are perceived to exist outside the individual. Intrinsic motivators mean the effort to cope with challenges based on personal interests. Considering the experiences from pupils, teachers, and principals, we conclude that this division is not sufficient. In accordance with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001, 2006), motivation needs to be understood from the perspective of

both the individual student and their entire life situation (including school and classroom situations). Successful learning takes place in pedagogical meetings characterized by trust, care, and respect. Study motivation is thus influenced by emotions (students' belief in their own capacity, self-esteem, goal orientation, and expectations), but also by the study strategies (surface and depth-oriented learning strategies) and the learning environments (teaching and physical and social environment) in which students exist.

The proportion of students who graduate from upper secondary school in Sweden with incomplete grades is too high. This is problematic – not only for the individual student, but also relating to the parents' vision for the child's future, the school's aspirations, and society's needs. One reason for this is a lack of study motivation, which is why this issue needs to be prioritized through didactic development work as well as investments in the school's physical and social environment (the learning environment). Didactic development work can be about teachers' teaching methods and students' learning strategies. Investments in the school's physical environment are necessary to enable a pedagogy that is adapted to today's society and the changing learning patterns that follow from it. A good physical learning environment is important to meet the different types of psychosocial challenges that young people often have to navigate.

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