

Investigating Student Motivational Factors in American Middle School

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Abstract: In this paper, we focus on the factors affecting middle school students' motivation in the classroom in K-12 schools in the United States. The study used a semi-structured interview format with seven foreign language teachers, four of whom were interviewed in person and three via virtual interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that parents play a positive role in their children's lives and identified several issues affecting motivation, including social emotional learning strategies, an attractive educational environment, peer motivation, and a reward system. The study suggests that autonomous motivation is more important than controlled motivation for student performance. The findings have implications for the Saudi education system, including training courses for parents and establishing a communication system between families and schools to improve students' autonomous motivation.

Keywords: Motivational Factors, Investigating, American Middle School.

1 Introduction

The topic of motivation has been the focus of a large number of scholarly discussions and research around the world. This discussion and research have attracted many educators. That shows the importance of this topic and its relationship with raising the outcomes of the learning process. This capstone project explores this topic and focuses on factors affecting classroom motivation in middle schools in the United States of America. An experimental study of classroom motivation, the project aims to highlight the useful lessons related to motivation from the American education and relate them to the Saudi educational experience. The first part of the project introduces the Saudi educational context; then the discussion focuses more on the challenges and difficulties, and classroom motivation is identified as one of these challenges. The research problem and question are also mentioned. The introductory part concludes by shedding light on the study's objectives.

Motivation has been shown to positively influence study strategy, academic performance, adjustment and well-being in students in domains of education other than medical education (Vansteenkiste et al. 2005). Saudi Arabia, an Arab country and a member of the Gulf Council Countries (GCC), has a population of approximately 30,000,000 people, almost 37% of whom are young (General Authority for Statistics, 2019). Over the past few decades, Saudi Arabia has made a huge effort in developing its educational systems. For example, while there were only fifteen formal schools in the whole country in 1980 (Ministry of Education, 2019), the number exceeded 26,000 schools in 2019 (MoE, 2019). Education is a guaranteed right for everyone, so it is compulsory from ages of 6 to 18. Higher education, however, is optional.

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A number of issues and challenges still affect the education system in Saudi Arabia, among which is classroom size, classroom management, teaching aids, parents' cooperation, and instilling motivation in the students. Shedding light on the challenges in the classroom, the job of the teacher becomes more difficult because he is considered the link between the students, parents, the school, and the curriculum. In addition, educators noticed the rapid development in technologies, thereby placing students' motivation in the classroom at the top of these challenges for many teachers. In Saudi Arabia, increasing numbers of unmotivated students have caused burnout in many teachers. As a result, my capstone project research is reinforced by the following research question: What factors affect middle school learners' motivation in classrooms in the United States?

This project has two main objectives. Firstly, my research will provide a clear study for this issue through investigating and researching this specific area and that will give me a chance to develop my vision about this topic. Secondly, it is hoped that results and recommendations of this study will help the education of middle school students in Saudi Arabia.

2 Motivation Definitions

Saudi people today tend to believe that motivation in the classroom is considered a foundation stone for effective learning. The standard way of thinking about motivation has it that photographs, paintings, cartoons, maps are very useful tools to enhance the students' sharing in the class. To understand the process of motivation, we have to search for a definition of it in both psychological and academic areas with its' both parts (intrinsic and extrinsic). According to APA Dictionary of Psychology, intrinsic motivation is "an internal incentive to engage in a specific activity that derives from pleasure in the activity itself (e.g., a genuine interest in a subject studied) rather than because of any external benefits that might be obtained (e.g., money, course credits)" (Vanden Bos, 2015).

In addition, the same dictionary defines extrinsic motivation as "an external incentive to engage in a specific activity, especially motivation arising from the expectation of punishment or reward (e.g., completing a disliked chore in exchange for payment)" (Vanden Bos, 2015). Basically Ohara (2017) is saying that Psychologists Richard Ryan & Edward Deci agree when they improved the self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation, which overturned the controlling belief that the best way to get the people to do their chores is to enhance the attitude with rewards. And that's true. A teacher working with lazy or hyperactive students can control them and raise their ability of learning through rewards. Even this theory is valid for applications inside the home with children. For instance, a child doesn't want to study or eat healthy food, parents can enhance his\her performance by giving him\her rewards (go somewhere or give him\her some money).

3 Significance of Classroom Motivation

When it comes to the topic of motivation, most of us will readily agree that it is considered as a foundation stone for effective learning. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of whether or not students are motivated in the classroom. Whereas some are convinced that they still lack the motivation, others maintain that they are already motivated. In fact, Saudi people today tend to believe that motivation in the classroom is considered as the base for the process of effective learning.

Motivating students to learn and participate can be very hard. In order to stimulate learning and to motivate positive attitude, lots of teachers use rewards for students. Rewards help motivate students to complete their homework as well as improve outcomes for them. Psychologists

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci agree that improving the self-determination theory of motivation is the best way to get the people to do their chores to enhance the attitude with rewards (Ohara, 2017).

On the other hand, cognitive evaluation theory predicts that extrinsic rewards may decrease intrinsic motivation. This theory says that when students are internally motivated, their feelings of competence and success also come from within. They don't care about the praise or rewards or even punishments to complete their tasks. But when their motivation relies more on their environment, they believe that they have less control on their success. And that means they can't succeed without external rewards.

In conclusion then, as I suggested earlier, defenders of motivation can't have it both ways. Their assertion that intrinsic motivation is contradicted by their claim that this kind of motivation arises from expectation of punishment or reward.

4 Types of Motivation in Classroom

Though I concede that raising motivation is not an easy job, I still insist that when we raise the extrinsic motivation, we can reach high levels of intrinsic motivation. There are some theories addressing this issue and one among these is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; DECI & RYAN, [2010]), in which students' perceived competence facilitates autonomous motivation towards learning (DECI & RYAN, [2010]). Therefore, when students feel competent and effective, they tend to engage in school activities more autonomously. In other words, autonomous motivation occurs when students perform a task because of two main reasons: 1-they identify with its importance, and 2- they feel deep-rooted satisfaction and pleasure when doing the task. On the other hand, when they are guided by controlled motivation, they are under pressure to behave in certain ways. For instance, they may perform the task to avoid losing marks. And according to Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, autonomous motivation is associated with academic achievement, while controlled motivation leads to anxiety and school dropout (Hardre & Reeve,2003) (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Causes of autonomous & controlled Motivation.

4.1 Autonomous Motivation

Researchers have increasingly replaced the terms of 'intrinsic' versus 'extrinsic' with the 'autonomous' versus 'controlled' motivation, where autonomous motivation includes intrinsic motivation and integrated forms of extrinsic motivation. However, controlled motivation intensifies feelings of isolation that comes from external control (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Furthermore, existing intrinsic motivation can be reduced badly when people receive rewards on actions that were initially motivated autonomously (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Psychologists Richard Ryan & Edward Deci overlook what I consider an important point about autonomous motivation.

4.2 Controlled Motivation

Although I agree with Richard Ryan & Edward Deci up to the point, I cannot accept their overall conclusion that the best way to get the people to do their chores is to enhance their attitude with

rewards. And when we talk about rewards we surely go to the controlled motivation, the type of which is generated under pressure either to obtain a reward or evade a punishment. One example is the extra marks on the test or the bonus imposed by the teacher; that will reduce the motivation of the students to study hard for upcoming exams. It is not sufficient to be strongly motivated to get positive outcomes from our efforts.

These conclusions, which psychologists Richard Ryan & Edward Deci discuss in their research, add weight to the argument that the best way to get the people to do their chores is to enhance the attitude with rewards.

5 Methodologies

“It is a methodology integrating social science inquiry with participants’ practical action so that all concerned have a sense of agency rather than consulting themselves as powerless” (Somekh, 2005). This section proposes the methodological aspects of my capstone project, and it starts by describing the study site and participants. I’m going to present and discuss data collection tools. The section also discusses data collection methods and concludes by shedding light on ethical issues of the study. The main purpose of my study is to identify why American students show higher levels of motivation inside schools in comparison to Saudi students. My research involves exploratory engagement with a wide range of existing knowledge drawn from psychology, philosophy, sociology in order to test its explanatory power and practical usefulness in relation to student motivation.

My study takes place in an American middle school (K-12) located in Southern California area. The rate of this school is 8/10 according to a recent review conducted by Great Schools Organization. The school is very big with more than 1200 students. Students attending range from fourth to eighth grade. The school offers a number of extracurricular activities and these include arts, sports and languages.

Data for my study are collected by interviews with teachers. The study individually interviews seven teachers instructing either Spanish or French as a foreign language. Four of these interviews are conducted in face-to-face style and three are conducted online due to some limitations. The Face-to-face interviews are conducted in classroom during the break time and they are all audio recorded.

Using this research tool rather than observations or any other research tool is encouraged by the nature of this study investigating factors affecting student motivation in classrooms. The study uses a semi-structured interview format in which a number of questions with specific details are used. For instance, (question number 1) how do rate your students’ level of motivation? – (question number 9) how can teacher personality be a source of motivation? Such questions reveal relevant insights about the real factors behind increased motivation in American schools.” Ideal position questions elicit both information and opinion; these can be used with virtually any phenomenon under study” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The study also collects some visual as well as voice data whenever appropriate.

When we come to data analysis, we’ll put many methods in our consideration. For instance, model of data analysis is used where data are shortened into summaries, showed

Visually, and concluded at the end. Findings from the data analysis are presented in my research project following the aspects mentioned above giving my study more solidarity and consistency. As I mentioned that the collected data are qualitative, some quantitative descriptive analyses are used, e.g. frequencies or counts. It contains charts to make it easy for understanding and summarizing.

Regarding ethical considerations, the study will respect common codes of ethics, e.g. Vocabulary participation in which none of the participants in this study will be forced (or feel forced) to participate or provide information. All participants will be informed about the purpose of the study. The study will also respect participant confidentiality and welfare in which no harm is to result to

participants, parents, teachers, administrators or schools from participating in this study. Moreover, all names used in this study are pseudonymous and anonymity of the participants will be protected at all stages. All data collected at all stages. All data collected will be used solely for this study.

6 Results and Discussions

The results show that teachers have an overall very positive attitude towards their students' motivation. Most of the participants determined 7 out of 10 as a motivational level of their students (around 70% to 85%). Teacher one, for example, believes that the motivation of her students varies throughout the day. Starting low (5 out of 10) then as the lesson starts progressing, the motivation increased to reach its' peak (7 out of 10). Teacher 3, agreed with this point and added that there are days when her students are really motivated and obviously there are days when they are not. That is why she prefers to focus more on her social emotional strategies and the relationship with the teachers, family and peers. One of the teachers said that about 85% of her students are highly motivated. She added also that 10% of them are motivated but they are not so confident. So, they need a lot of guidance and encouragement. She rated her students in distance learning also and gave them 50% to 60%. The teacher related this, perhaps, to the current conditions of the Stay-at-Home Act during the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that current environment or hardship could impact on the level of students' motivation. (see Figure 2)

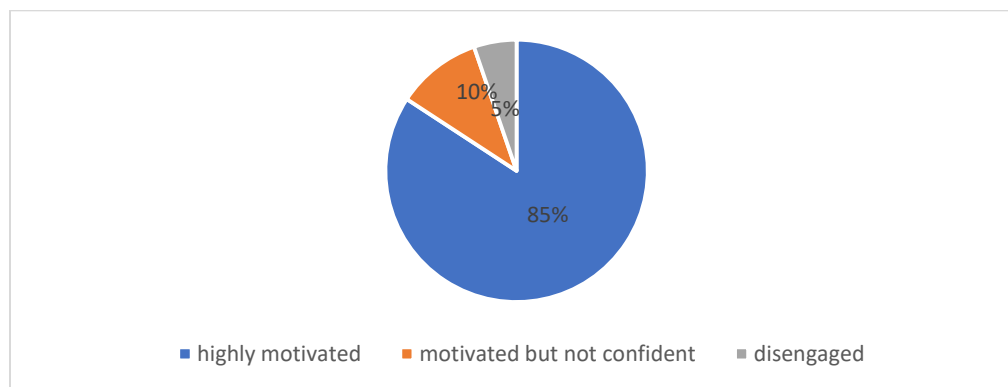


Fig.2: Rate of the student's motivation according to teacher7.

Among the factors affecting students' motivation there were a number of issues. The issue mentioned above was one of these. Another factor according to participants (1, 4, 5, 6, & 7) was the social emotional learning strategies; attractive educational environment; building a strong bond with teachers, peers, and family as well. Actually, all the teachers agreed that the parents and their role in their children's learning process filled the 1st place and considered to be as initial source of motivation through checking on their children and follow up them from the beginning of the year. Also, peer's motivation was very important because their friends will encourage them to work on something or to stay focused.

In this research, I noticed that teachers used many different ways to motivate their students. The first technique was investing in the relationship between the teachers and the students; this was important because it would be increasing the intrinsic motivation for the students. That included encouraging the student, giving them value (verbal motivation) and helping those setting goals for themselves. The participants also mentioned that they could sometimes offer small external rewards such as homework passes, candy, and stationary stuff that might be useful for students in classroom and encouragement tool to enhance learning process at the same time.

I reached a result that mostly all the teachers rewarded their students either verbally or physically. They needed to feel that they were valuable, capable, and have positive feelings about their accomplishments.

Some of them do not believe in themselves, so they need a lot of encouragement from the teachers, parents, and peers. Some of the students loved external rewards as raffle tickets, fun cash, homework passes, and whole class party. All the previous actions and rewards gave the students more confidence in themselves to accomplish their tasks and to grow as healthy students. Sharing the parents their children's success has a strong impact on the students' performance as well. (See figure 3)



Fig.3: An example of homework passes.

There is no doubt that it is very hard job to keep the students motivated till the last minute. But the teachers used many different techniques to do so. All interviewed teachers use brain breaks

between different tasks. For example, sometimes, they sang together, sometimes they asked funny questions mutually. Also, teachers worked with their student depending on their strength points. This means the teachers were applying multiple intelligences in teaching the one class by giving each student one task related to his\her strength point. Teacher 4, for instance, said that she sometimes had to stop and have discussion with the class about what was going on; sometimes she made individual meetings with students. So, she preferred to change her style for what the class responded to.

All the teachers agreed that parents are very important and essential in their children's learning process. They provided their children with the necessary ethics that wanted from them by showing good samples and spending more time with them over homework and daily activities. Nonetheless, unfortunately, they are not always available, according to the data. So, the teachers tried to get parents more involved through a number of strategies, e.g. emails, positive phone calls, and trying to keep their websites up-to-date with information related to the students' learning. Some teachers used weekly letters and notes in binders as teacher 1 mentioned. Teacher 4 said in some incidents she had to contact the parents

individually to discuss a specific case, being positive or negative. Nonetheless, positive calls are reported to be more effective in such situations.

Certainly, and through the data, the teacher's personality is found a source of motivation and that is what all the teachers agreed to. Reflecting this on my own teaching experience and practice, I agree with this idea. According to the data, teacher 7 said that you must be excited about what you are teaching. So, they will follow you and learn from you. Teacher 4 said that students are connected to their friends and peer's motivation is the domain in this age group. Teacher 6 said that consistency through keeping your word is very important while you are working with such ages. Teacher 3 prefers to use Multiple Intelligences in dealing with the students. Most of the teachers endeavor to build connections with the students because they believe that they learn from the people they love.

Although it is difficult to keep the motivation of the student's constant, the participants reported doing their best to do so. They agreed that a teaching must be open and honest. Teacher 5 said that this must be a team effort starting with the teachers, academic advisors, councilors, and ending with the students and their parents. Teacher 1 admitted that the students need to feel they are valuable to the class and to the society as well. So, they can contribute positively in building and improving it. One of the teachers said that this will happen if we are helping the students to set their goals and working on them to accomplish these goals. And again, building a strong bond with the students and convince them that they are capable to succeed.

7 Conclusions

This research explored many issues related to motivation in way or another and all information were collected at a middle school in America. The research started by an introduction which highlighted the useful lessons related to motivation from the American education. The study was supported by the research question about factors affecting student's motivation. It also reviewed some of the current literature on the topic and a theoretical model was used. It discussed methodological aspects of the study. Results were also discussed in relation to the topic and research question. This section provides summary of key finds and presents some recommendations as well. It also discusses some limitations and challenges.

In reference to the research results and findings, it is clear that there are many factors affecting the students' motivation and a number of issues were discussed. The most important among these is the presence of the students' parents in their life and how they provide them with the initial motivation that they need to live and act as healthy persons. The results highlight the importance of the positive role of

The parents. Social emotional learning strategies fill the second place of importance, and that includes building strong bonds with teachers, counselors, academic advisors, friends, and parents as well. Other issues related to students' motivation are attractive educational environment, peer's motivation, and rewards system. One of the noticed issues is how to keep students motivated till the last minutes and that happens through applying many useful techniques. The data show that most teachers use brain breaks and that varies from singing to playing games to moving around the class. The data also show that the teachers are working with the students according to their strength points. And that means they are applying the Multiple Intelligences in their classes. The last one among the factors that mentioned above is teacher's personality. No one can deny this point and if asked about motivation, a person should take a deep look at the teacher's personality. Because he/she must be excited first to make the students excited, too. Teachers also must be open and honest.

According to the research and the findings, the study provides some recommendations that could improve the students' motivation. The most important one is the positive role of the parents in their

children's life. This proposes that educational system is advised to involve parents by way or another into the educational process. For instance, making training courses to teach them how to inspire their children and provide them with the initial motivation that they need. The study also recommends education officials to develop policies that serve the teachers and ease their job duties through applying direct contact system for the teachers with parents and students as well as principals. The study also recommends assigning class for each teacher and that would provide a rich educational environment for the students in any material study. It is also recommended creating an assistant teacher system for each teacher and this will increase the students' productivity and reduce the gap in the educational process that caused by the students' individual differences. The study proposes to create gyms equipped for students because building a mind in a seamless way begins with building the body properly through exercising and providing healthy food in the school cafeteria. The study recommends establishing a firm system to limit the absence of the students due of its impact on the success of the educational process. It is also recommended to make plans for student absence makeup; it is believed that this has positive effects on raising enthusiasm and motivation among students. The study highly recommends creating remedial groups for all grades and for different subjects, seeking assistance from high level students who are motivating due to their great impact in raising motivation among students with low motivation (peer's motivation).

This study cannot generalize its findings due to many factors. First of them the number of the participants is very limited and they are only teachers. By that, the study was neglected the main member in the educational process which are the students themselves. Another limitation is the current situation that we are experiencing which force us to stay at home and conduct virtual interviews from home through using Zoom application.

Due to COVID-19, the study faced many challenges. The biggest one was the meeting with mentors because the university was shut down and we have to discuss the progress of the study

through virtual meetings only. After taking a look to the limitations and challenges, another study covering the same topic but including larger sample would be more generalizable.

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