

# The Untranslated Expert Story of Student Motivation

This report summarizes the main themes that emerged from 12 one-hour interviews with researchers who have expertise in student motivation (across the disciplines of neurobiology, social psychology, educational psychology, sociology, and economics); three feedback sessions with an additional 10 researchers; and a review of the relevant literature. Together, these themes comprise the ‘untranslated’ story of student motivation—the content that experts want to communicate to members of the public. It is organized around five overarching questions:

1. What is student motivation?
2. What are the factors that support student motivation?
3. What are the barriers to student motivation?
4. What are the implications of student motivation?
5. What should be done to support student motivation?

## WHAT IS STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- **Motivation is a psychological process that drives learning and behavior.** It explains why people think, feel, and act in the way they do at a given time. Motivation is a universal human trait and is crucial to human development throughout the life course. An individual’s motivation may be driven by an interplay of factors, including their activities, experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and contexts.
- **Student motivation is about students feeling energized to learn and is necessary to become engaged in school.** Experts understood student motivation as a precondition for becoming engaged in school.

Students who are engaged show sustained cognitive and behavioral involvement in learning activities, accompanied by positive emotional states (such as enthusiasm, optimism, and curiosity). Student motivation and engagement are supported when learners have opportunities and access to classrooms, instruction, and curricula in which their learning and development are valued and nurtured.

- **Student motivation is a product of both the student *and* the learning environment.** Experts emphasized that student motivation is more than a set of attitudes held by an individual; it is produced by the interaction of the student and the educational contexts they inhabit. This educational context includes the physical space of the school, curricular and instructional practices, and interpersonal relationships, among other variables.
- **Student motivation is highly malleable and varies according to age, developmental stage, and relational and cultural context.** Experts noted that student motivation is not static and can fluctuate over time and across contexts. It can vary based on age, students' developmental capabilities, and the relational and cultural context of the school. For example, the interpersonal relationships that students experience and whether students feel they belong to the school culture affect student motivation and engagement. Experts noted that differences in schools' educational approaches over time can also shape student motivation and engagement.

## **WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT SUPPORT STUDENT MOTIVATION?**

- **An educational environment that fosters a sense of belonging and has a shared purpose around learning.** Experts agreed that a school supports student motivation when it cultivates a sense of belonging among students, educators, administrators, staff, families, and the wider community. This feeling of belonging is fostered when the school building and facilities are welcoming and safe for students from diverse backgrounds; when there are meaningful relationships between students and school staff; and when extracurricular activities are accessible to all students. Students also feel like they belong when they have opportunities to express themselves in ways that are authentic to their lived experience. A school community nurtures a shared purpose when it establishes common goals around the education of the whole person, rather than understanding education as transactional. Belonging and a shared purpose enable students to feel that they have a stake in the school and that they matter in the world.

- **Trusting relationships within the school, family, and community that make students feel valued, cared for, and understood.** Student motivation flourishes in an environment of supportive relationships that are based on mutual trust, care, and understanding. Relationships with educators, administrators, mentors, and families support student motivation when they validate students' diverse identities and perspectives; provide appropriate kinds of praise and feedback; and help students work productively through challenges.
- **Curriculum and instruction that is meaningful, purposeful, and empowers students in the learning process.** Students are energized to learn when curricula are attuned to students' abilities, diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and cultures. This individualized approach to teaching empowers students to learn by ensuring that the curriculum is meaningful and relevant to their lives.
- **Feedback and assessment practices that shape how students see themselves and their ability to learn.** Experts noted that certain types of teacher feedback and assessment practices can be powerful motivators for students. For example, teacher feedback that suggests a student has a fixed level of ability (e.g. "you're good at math!") is less effective than feedback that focuses on specific examples of student effort and how they went about the learning process (e.g. "you worked really hard on this math quiz"), with the latter allowing students to recognize a direct link between their perseverance and improved academic performance. These forms of feedback and assessment, and the ways in which educators implicitly and explicitly convey high expectations of all their students, can instill all students with a belief in their ability to learn. This leads them to see new challenges as an opportunity for growth, rather than a sign that they are incapable of grasping new material and learning new skills, and motivates them to persist in the face of setbacks and challenges. Additionally, students are more motivated when they are encouraged to use themselves as their own measuring stick of growth and development, rather than comparing themselves with an external standard (such as their peers).

## **WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO STUDENT MOTIVATION?**

- **A school environment that is psychologically and physically unsafe.** Schools are psychologically unsafe for students when they fail to foster a sense of belonging and are inattentive or hostile to students' identities, perspectives, and interests. When students are made to feel their voice doesn't matter, they feel psychologically unsafe in school environments. Schools are physically unsafe when violence or threats of violence occur in school buildings and are left unaddressed. Experts agreed that psychological and physical threats to students' safety are separate (but sometimes co-occurring) barriers to student motivation that threaten students' sense of place and membership in the school.

- **A school environment that does not reflect the breadth of cultures in wider society.** Experts noted that ‘cultural mismatch’ can occur for students when the cultural norms that institutions signal through their practices do not align with those of their students. When students’ cultural legacies are not reflected in school (e.g. by not incorporating a diverse range of perspectives and histories into curricula and instruction), it can undermine students’ sense of belonging, particularly among those from minoritized and historically marginalized groups whose backgrounds, perspectives, histories, and languages are often excluded, devalued, or discriminated against in schools.
- **A school environment that pits students against each other.** An educational system that focuses on comparison between students (e.g. through high stakes testing and evaluation) undermines student motivation. These competitive environments can shift learning goals by turning tasks into a race to the finish line, rather than helping students internalize core concepts and reflect on the learning process. Pitting students against one another may also motivate students through the fear of feeling inferior to others, rather than being motivated to learn for its own sake, which makes the learning process less satisfying and can undermine students’ curiosity and motivation in the long run. When his kind of learning environment has high stakes (e.g. via testing), students can suffer from fear of failure, harming the learning process and often leading to burnout.
- **Students’ experiences of bias, discrimination, and stereotyping in school.** Bias, discrimination, and stereotyping are significant barriers to student motivation and engagement, particularly when coming from administrators and educators. Bias can be expressed in both explicit and implicit ways, and may be conscious or unconscious. This includes disproportionate sanctions or praise for certain groups of students, developing curricula that privilege certain students’ needs and perspectives over others, signaling of low expectations, and inequitable allocation of school resources. Students may also experience ‘stereotype threat’ when stereotypes about certain groups’ academic performance raise doubts and anxiety in a student that belongs to that group, impairing their performance. Stereotype threat can lead to avoidance of, or poor performance in, school. Stereotypes about fields (e.g. that men predominately excel in STEM fields over women) can also limit student motivation. Together, these experiences of discrimination, bias, and stereotyping can undermine students’ sense of belonging in school and in certain subject areas in particular.
- **Students’ experiences of structural inequalities and under-resourced schools.** Experts emphasized that societal-level inequalities manifest within the school environment, inhibiting the motivation and engagement of students from marginalized racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools serving students from marginalized

groups tend to be under resourced (for example, lacking access to clean drinking water and adequate heating and cooling facilities) and understaffed, with, for example, rotating substitute educators that are not adequately trained or prepared to teach effectively, all of which inhibit student motivation.

## WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- **Student motivation promotes academic achievement and mastery of skills and subject matter.** When students feel motivated and engaged in school, they are more likely to attend class, to seek out new opportunities, to persevere in the face of challenges, and to more effectively navigate relationships with educators, administrators, and peers. This translates into better learning outcomes and ultimately an increased likelihood of completing high school and pursuing higher education.
- **Students who feel motivated in school experience long-term success and wellbeing.** Students who feel motivated and are engaged in school tend to experience lasting beneficial effects into adulthood, including improved employability, relationships, health, and wellbeing. Moreover, motivated and engaged students are likely to become lifelong learners, which has positive effects on an individual's abilities and successes in many aspects of their lives.
- **There are important societal benefits to student motivation.** Experts understand the benefits of student motivation beyond the individual. Motivated and engaged students are likely to become civically engaged members of society, to contribute to a productive, well-equipped workforce, and to engage in community-building and development in their communities and society.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO SUPPORT STUDENT MOTIVATION?

- **Address the systemic and structural sources of disadvantage experienced by students.** Experts advocate for greater investment in historically marginalized communities. This includes increasing local, state, and federal funding for schools and districts that disproportionately serve students from racial and ethnic minorities, and those facing social and economic disadvantage. These targeted investments can take a step toward re-distributing opportunities and resources in schools and society, which would, in turn, lead to more equitable access of opportunity for students from all backgrounds.

- **Strengthen schools’ relationships with families and communities.** Experts noted that effective school, family, and community engagement practices promote student motivation by being responsive to the diverse needs of learners and their families. For example, removing barriers to family involvement (e.g. by communicating to families in their preferred language), and increasing families’ sense of belonging (e.g. welcoming them to community events that celebrate their diverse identities, backgrounds, and cultures) can cultivate strong relationships and feelings of trust among students, families, and schools. Experts also recommend that schools share information and resources that enable families to more effectively and directly support student motivation (e.g. by offering parents guidance for how to provide feedback to their children that best promotes motivation).
- **Incorporate inclusive practices into all aspects of the school environment.** Experts argued that schools should take steps to ensure all students feel welcomed, safe, and that their identities and cultures are recognized and validated within school settings. They can do this, for example, by promoting a welcoming environment (e.g. by not having metal detectors in entrances); by making sure that the diversity of the student body is fully represented in school (through presentations, performances, art, etc.); by having a teaching workforce that reflects the diversity of the student population and of society; and by fostering warm relationships among students, families, and faculty. Experts also noted that all students benefit from learning about diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural legacies, and socioeconomic backgrounds and perspectives. These measures help all students feel safe and that their voices matter to the school environment.
- **Adopt curricula and forms of classroom instruction that nurture student motivation.** Experts advocate for changes in curriculum and instruction that more effectively foster student motivation. In addition to less reliance on high stakes testing, they advocated for teacher feedback that praises effective effort, and skill and communicates high expectations and confidence that all students can meet them; curricula that is aligned with students’ perspectives, experiences, and reflects diverse racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds; classroom structures that incorporate collaborative learning; group learning and mentoring among students; individualized learning that is tailored to diverse student needs; and opportunities to empower students in the learning process.
- **Improve and expand professional development training on student motivation and increase resources to support educators, staff, and schools.** Experts noted that educators and administrators should be trained on best practices that support student motivation. This includes building educators’ understanding of students’ psychological experiences of school (e.g. increasing their familiarity with concepts such as stereotype threat, belonging, etc.) as well as their cultural competency (e.g. their understandings of students’ diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural

legacies and backgrounds). These measures are important steps to help address bias and discrimination and create safe environments where students feel motivated and engaged. Experts also agreed that addressing factors that shape educators' motivation is key to supporting student motivation. To that end, they advocated for educators to be provided with the resources they need to feel supported in school, including adequate pay and materials, professional development opportunities, and a meaningful role in decision-making.

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