**Utilising motivational profiles in educational settings**

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**Abstract**

The creation of motivational profiles has been deployed at both an upper primary level (Years 5 and 6) and secondary level by the authors, who have been engaged in research over three years. This article focuses on the techniques used to characterise pupils’ motivation and discusses how these profiles can identify possible barriers to learning and ways forward.

**Introduction**

Dornyei (2001), though acknowledging the complexity of research in the field of motivation, an area prominent to both the fields of education and psychology, argues that these limitations do not detract from the promise of an exploration of motivational theory in illuminating ways of both understanding and improving children’s behaviour and progress in the classroom. This was the starting point for our work in this area in searching for practical ways of assessing pupil motivation in those pupils deemed by the school as disengaged. From a teacher’s perspective, well-motivated children are a joy to teach. When children are eager to learn, the job of the teacher appears already half done. However, the reality in many classrooms is that “far too many students are bored, unmotivated and uninvolved, that is disengaged from the academic and social aspects of school life” (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong*,* 2008, p.369). Advice (Dornyei, 2001, p.103) has been that, to increase student motivation, teachers need “a menu of potentially useful insights and suggestions”, which they can adapt to the specific need and characteristics of their students.

Our work with motivational profiles starts from the premise that the reasons for disengagement are varied and that an understanding of the reasons why students behave in such a way can suggest strategies for transforming pupil behaviour. Motivational Profiles are created through the comparison of several measures, both objective and subjective, and from a variety of views to include pupils and teachers. Indeed, from such comparisons, which can be conducted at varying levels of complexity, barriers to engagement can be identified and ways forward can be discerned. In our work we have used several measures:

1. *Achievement/ ability scores:* Relevant school achievement records or cognitive ability tests.
2. *Pupil’s perception of academic self-concept*: Burden’s (1999) Myself as a Learner Scale (MALS), which measuresenjoyment in problem solving, confidence about school work, academic self-efficacy, learning self-efficacy, taking care with work, careful learning style, lack of anxiety and confidence in dealing with new work.
3. *Perceptions of pupil engagement:* Participation Questionnaire (Finn & Zimmer, 2013), which measures effort, initiative, non-participatory behaviour and perceived value of school from the perspective of the teacher. We found it useful to have both the teacher and teaching assistant complete this questionnaire. Additionally, in secondary school it is useful to have individual subject teachers complete this, to reveal patterns across subjects and departments.

**Analysis level 1: Does the pupil have a realistic academic self-concept?**

This analysis matches pupils’ actual ability (as measured by achievement / ability tests as being low, average or high) with their perceived academic self-concept (MALS; Burden, 1999) analysed within categories as being low, average or high. Burden (1999, p.22) states that “a score between 60 and 82 can be considered as within the average range. A score below 60 represents a low academic self-concept and a score above 82 represents a high academic self-concept”. This analysis places pupils into one of three categories:

* Realistic academic self-concept (ASC): Ability level matches perceived academic self-concept
* Mismatch 1: Very able student has low academic self-concept
* Mismatch 2: Low ability student has a high academic concept

For the teacher, this awareness of a mismatch is only the first step, as further discussion and reflection is needed to explore reasons for the disparity between ability and perceptions.

*Case study 1: Low ability student with high academic self-concept*

On the Myself as a Learner Scale, Jon scored 76 which was within the average range. Jon stated a moderate (believes half the time) confidence in attempting new tasks, showed a moderate liking for having challenging work and using his brain and thinking carefully about tasks and stated that he did **not** find schoolwork difficult. However, achievement results indicated that Jon was the least able in the Year 9 group. The teacher and teaching assistant noted that Jon’s over-estimation of ability could be masking a current negative self-concept, or preserving a fragile, positive self-concept. The teacher felt that this mismatch could be explained by Jon’s need to protect his self-esteem, ‘the need to big himself up’.

Reflecting on classroom observation, the teacher and teaching assistant acknowledged that, in order to encourage participation, Jon was constantly praised for minimal participation. The TA felt that Jon thinks he is doing all right, that he thinks he is making progress and is always surprised when he gets the same mark. Further in-class observation revealed that Jon lacked underpinning study skills and did not know what it meant to ‘check his work’. With this realisation, remedial sessions in basic study skills were introduced and Jon’s engagement and work began to improve.

**Analysis level 2: Comparisons with teachers’ perceptions**

At the next level, comparisons are made between ability (achievement results), academic self-concept (MALS; Burden, 2009) and measures of teachers’ perceptions (Participation Questionnaire; Finn & Zimmer, 2013). The Participation Questionnaire records:

* Engagement in learning (positive and negative)
* Initiative in learning (positive and negative)
* Valuing school and learning (positive and negative)
* Non-participatory behaviour

Though the questionnaire yields numerical scores, these were further translated into the categories of rarely, sometimes and often. This data was then combined with information regarding academic self-concept in terms of it being either realistic, high or low. The analysis of such data within one secondary school revealed several profiles (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pupil profiles

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pupil****profile** |  **Academic self-concept** | **Engagement**  | **Initiative**  | **Non-participatory behaviour** | **Valuing school** |
| **Profile 1***Only do as much as required – could do more* | Realistic | Positive | Does not take initiative | Infrequent or never | Values school |
| **Profile 2***Don’t see their potential – don’t see what others see* | Unrealistic - very able student has low academic self-concept  | Positive | Does not take initiative | Infrequent or never | Values school |
| **Profile 3***Can see their potential but are not motivated to achieve* | Realistic, able student | Hard to engage positively, often engages negatively in learning | Does not take initiative | Exhibits non- participatory behaviour, better with firm guidelines | Does not value school |
| **Profile 4***Have potential, disaffected-**what’s the point?* | Unrealistic - very able student has low academic self-concept | Nearly always disengaged,either passive task avoidance or constant low-level disruption | Does not take initiative | Engages in non-participatory behaviour often | Does not value school |

*Case study 2: Motivating reluctant learners*

In terms of one secondary school, the priority was to first work with Profile 3 and 4 students who were identified in Year 7. All these students were actively disengaged, often disruptive in class and did not value school; where the students differed was their perception of their own academic self-concept. All these students then participated in a series of 12-week workshops in Year 8 designed for motivating reluctant learners (Norgate et. al., 2012). The sessions focused on attribution theory, the value of effort, responding to feedback and target setting. Motivational profiles conducted after these workshops revealed improvement for all students, with some students showing more improvement than others. All eight students initially classified as Profile 3, which is those who could see their potential but were not motivated to achieve, showed increased levels of engagement and initiative after the workshops. Three of these students­­ had maintained levels of engagement and initiative, as measured by the Participation Questionnaire (Finn & Zimmer, 2013) after two academic years. Students initially diagnosed as Profile 4,that is those who had potential, but had an unrealistic low academic self-concept, showed varying levels of improvement after the workshops. Two out of six students sustained improvement in engagement and initiative over two academic years, while a further two made progress at a slower rate. One student refused to engage, while another remained engaged in the programme but could not sustain positive changes in the classroom. The key to programme success for Profile 4 students was challenging self-belief. With Profile 3 students, the key to success was their realisation that they could change and that the experience of positive change enabled them to experience academic success, which they found self-reinforcing.

**Conclusion**

The use of motivational profiles provided a framework for categorising disengaged students as these are not a homogenous group and require varying remedial strategies. The motivational profiles have been established as a result of longitudinal research within one primary school and several secondary schools and it may be that research with students in other schools presents different motivational profiles. However, the use of motivational profiles is a useful tool for schools and staff to both understand and plan bespoke interventions for different types of disengaged learners.

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