



Teachers use of fear appeals prior to a high-stakes examination: Is frequency linked to perceived student engagement and how do students respond?

David W. Putwain ^{a,*}, Ghada Nakhla ^b, Anthony Liversidge ^b, Laura J. Nicholson ^b, Benjamin Porter ^b, Monika Reece ^b

^a School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

^b Faculty of Education, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers who perceive low student engagement use more frequent fear appeals.
- Fear appeals can be appraised as a challenge or a threat.
- Challenge appraisal links to greater behavioural and emotional engagement.
- Threat appraisal links to lower behavioural and emotional engagement.
- Fear appeals are a risky strategy.

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ABSTRACT

Prior to high-stakes examinations teachers use messages that focus on the importance of avoiding failure (fear appeals). This study examined whether teacher use of fear appeals was related to their perceptions of student engagement, followed by students' interpretation of fear appeals, and how they related to student-reported engagement. Teachers used more frequent fear appeals when they perceived student engagement to be low. More frequent fear appeals resulted in stronger challenge and threat appraisals. A challenge appraisal was associated with greater, and a threat appraisal with lower, behavioural and emotional engagement. Student appraisal seems to determine the effectiveness of these messages.

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1. Introduction

High-stakes school leaving examinations are a feature of many educational systems (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, 2012). The outcomes of these examinations can have a profound bearing on the subsequent life trajectory of students and, increasingly, are being used as indicators of teacher effectiveness (Allensworth, 2005; Carnoy,

2005; Jacob, 2005; von der Embse, Schoemann, Kilgus, Wicoff, & Bowler, 2016). It is, therefore, not surprising that teachers, and other school personnel, communicate to students the value and importance of these examinations and the implications of success and failure; these messages convey a potentially potent motivational quality. Extant research has focused on messages used prior to high-stakes examinations that focus on the importance of avoiding failure, those factors that determine how students interpret these messages, and what effects they might have on students. Understanding of the factors that might impact on why teachers use these messages is currently limited. The present study addressed this limitation by examining how teachers' perceptions of student engagement related to the use of teacher messages,

* Corresponding author. Liverpool John Moores University, IM Marsh Campus, Mossley Hill Rd, Liverpool, L17 6DB, UK.

E-mail address: D.W.Putwain@ljmu.ac.uk (D.W. Putwain).

subsequent student appraisal of those messages, and student-reported engagement.

1.1. What are fear appeals?

Fear appeals are persuasive messages that highlight the negative consequences of a particular course of action, and how those consequences can be avoided with an alternative course of action (Maloney, Lapinski, & Witte, 2011; Witte & Allen, 2000). They have been most commonly used, and researched, in promoting health-conscious behaviours such as smoking cessation, safe sex practices, and UV protection in sunlight (Peters, Ruiters, & Kok, 2013; Ruiters, Kessels, Peters, & Kok, 2014). The goal of the fear appeal is to create an adaptive fear of the negative outcome in order to motivate an alternative course of action (Popova, 2012). The past decade has also seen fear appeals researched in an educational context used prior to high-stakes examinations. In this context, teachers and school managers, communicate to students in lessons and assemblies the negative consequences of failure on high stakes examinations for one's future life trajectory (e.g., continued study and training, employment opportunities), and one's sense of self-worth, as a means to motivate students to engage in those behaviours (e.g., effort, persistence, and participation) likely to enhance chances of success (e.g., Putwain & Roberts, 2009; Putwain & Woods, 2016).

1.2. How frequently are fear appeals used?

Putwain and Roberts (2012) surveyed 230 secondary school teachers about the types of messages they used prior to the high-stakes school leaving examination used in English schools (the General Certificate of Secondary Education: GCSE). Results showed 51.7% of respondents agreed, and 29.9% of respondents strongly agreed, that students should be reminded that they would fail if they did not complete coursework and revision; 56% of respondents agreed, and 11.5% of respondents strongly agreed, that students should be reminded that they would not get college or university places if they failed. Furthermore, when asked to report their typical use of fear appeals, both teacher- and student-reports suggest that in Years 10 and 11, during the GCSE programme of study, on average, teachers use fear appeals fairly regularly (Putwain, Remedios, & Symes, 2016). The use of fear appeals would therefore seem to be relatively widespread prior to high-stakes examinations and worthy of investigation.

1.3. What is student engagement?

Student engagement is a metaconstruct that is used to describe and capture the range of behaviours, cognitions, and emotions, that contribute to successful completion of, and performance on, educational programmes of study (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Gried, 2003; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). In this study we draw on the classic two-component model of student engagement comprising behavioural and emotional engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Finn, 1989). Emotional engagement is a sense of belonging, and valuing of one's lessons and other school activities; indicators include interest and enjoyment (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2011). Behavioural engagement refers to active participation and involvement in one's lessons and other school activities; indicators include on-task behaviours and persistence on challenging tasks (e.g., Appleton et al., 2006; Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2011).

1.4. Why might teachers use fear appeals more or less frequently?

The classroom and instructional behaviours of teachers are subject to a wide range of influences, including experience, pedagogical and subject knowledge, self-efficacy, and expectations of their students (e.g., Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Elliot, 2014; Good & Brophy, 2000; Kyriakides, Creemers, & Antoniou, 2009; Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2010; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007). Specifically, when teachers perceive their students to be less engaged, they use instructional behaviours that are more controlling, coercive, and directive. For instance, external observers rated physical education teachers as using a more controlling instructional style with students they perceive to be less motivated (Sarrazin, Tessier, Pelletier, Trouilloud, & Chanal, 2006). Similarly, elementary school teachers report using more coercive behaviours, and less autonomy support, when they perceive their students to be less behaviourally engaged (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

If teachers do not perceive their students to be engaged in tasks, particularly when those might adversely impact on students' chances of success (as is typically the case with a programme of study leading to a high-stakes examination), it is plausible to suggest that teachers might warn students of the consequences of their actions (i.e. use fear appeals). Indicators of behavioural enjoyment are overt and tangible, whereas indicators of emotional engagement are private experiences that are necessarily harder for observers to judge accurately (see Appleton et al., 2006; Urhahne, Chao, Florineth, Luttenberger, & Paechter, 2011). Therefore, a more pronounced relationship might be expected between teacher perceptions of low behavioural engagement and the more frequent use of fear appeals, than for teacher perceptions of low emotional engagement.

1.5. How are fear appeals interpreted by students?

Building on models of the stress appraisal process and frameworks for health-based fear appeals, Putwain and Symes (2014, 2016) propose that fear appeals could be interpreted in different ways depending on the importance afforded to success or failure by the student, and the belief that they are capable of performing those behaviours required to avoid failure (or attain success). In appraisal models of stress (e.g., Folkman, 2008; Lazarus, 2006; Skinner & Brewer, 2002) events are judged in a two-part process of primary and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to the personal importance or significance of an event and secondary appraisal refers to beliefs in whether a favourable outcome can be achieved. Similarly, models of health-based fear appeals (e.g., Maloney et al., 2011; Popova, 2012; Witte & Allen, 2000) propose that fear appeals are interpreted in an adaptive way when the person receiving the message believes they are susceptible to the negative outcome and capable of performing those behaviours required to avoid the negative outcome.

Studies examining the appraisal of fear appeals, prior to high-stakes examinations, have drawn on expectancy value-theory (Eccles, 2005, 2007; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2016) to inform the measurement of importance and outcome beliefs. Importance is judged in terms of attainment value, referring to the importance of achievement for one's sense of self-identity and self-worth, and utility value, referring to the importance of achievement for one's goals or aspirations. Outcome beliefs are judged in terms of academic self-efficacy, that one is capable of performing a particular course of action, and expectancy of success. The combination of high subjective attainment or utility value with high academic self-efficacy or expectancy of success leads to the appraisal of fear appeals as a challenge (Putwain, Remedios, et al., 2016; Putwain &

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