



Achievement motivation among urban adolescents: Work hope, autonomy support, and achievement-related beliefs

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon expectancy value, hope, and self-determination theories, this study explores the contributions of work-based beliefs and autonomy support as predictors of adaptive achievement-related beliefs. Two hundred and one urban high school students who were enrolled in a work-based learning program completed measures of work hope, autonomy support, and achievement beliefs. Results from the full canonical correlation model revealed that work hope, career planning, and autonomy support shared 37.5% of the variance with achievement-related beliefs. Moreover, work hope and teacher autonomy support further contributed unique variance in explaining these beliefs. The findings contribute to the theoretical knowledge base concerning the value of work-based learning in fostering academic motivation among adolescents.

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The underachievement of youth living in poverty is a persistent issue for educators, researchers, and policy makers (Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Kozol, 2005). While a great deal of research has been invested in understanding the factors associated with underachievement, including poverty, neighborhood violence, racial discrimination, and family stress (e.g., Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Ogbu, 1989), some researchers are paying increased attention to individual and school-based factors that appear to foster academic achievement in students at risk for school failure (e.g., Lapan, 2004; Perry, 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Systemic inequities could negatively impact student learning by undermining motivation. That is, students who attend under-resourced schools and who experience inequality of educational and other opportunities (either for themselves or others close to them) may not believe that their academic efforts will pay off or that their school achievement matters to their teachers or to their own futures (Fine et al., 2004; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1989). Given the pernicious nature of the systemic obstacles low-income students face, the identification of individual and school-based factors that foster student motivation is particularly critical.

Given our interest in career development education and motivation, we have elected to study a sample that includes two important, but often overlooked, aspects of urban high school contexts—work-based learning and a Catholic school environment. Work-based learning is characterized by high school students working in jobs within the adult workplace (e.g., administrative offices, hospitals, etc.) that provide socialization, further educational opportunities, and an experiential means of connecting school to future work. The second contextual factor is represented by a Catholic school environment, which has been an important resource in urban education for many decades. Each of these attributes represents a potentially rich contextual factor that may play a role in facilitating student motivation and persistence. While other contextual factors no doubt contribute to student

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motivation, the specific features of a Catholic school with a work-based learning component provide an opportunity to frame the findings and to suggest further scholarly agendas.

Career development interventions have been identified as one potential means for promoting motivation and school engagement (Lapan, 2004). Documented gains in academic achievement among students enrolled in career education and guidance programs have been cited as evidence in support of career development intervention (Evans & Burck, 1992; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001). Additional research reveals that youth attending intentional school-to-work programs demonstrate modest gains in career development and do better in school than youth whose academic programs do not include work-based learning (Hughes, Bailey & Karp, 2002; Visher, Bhandari & Medrich, 2004). School-to-work programs include structured curricula that attempt to link educational material to the world of work in a rigorous and relevant fashion and often include work-based learning. Despite these promising findings, work-based learning has experienced inconsistent support among educators and policy makers, driven, in part, by concerns about loss of time in academic study (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). Nevertheless, work-based learning has been embraced in recent years by some Catholic high schools (“Cristo Rey Network”, 2010) as a means of providing critical financial support for low-income youth who cannot afford to pay tuition.

Support for work-based learning programs and career development intervention would be strengthened by the presence of clear theoretical models and theory-based research to explain their potential for promoting academic achievement. In one effort to build a theoretically driven research base, Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson and Perry (2006) drew upon life-span, life-space (Savickas, 2002; Super, 1990) and motivation theories (Pintrich, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) to explore some initial relationships to guide further research and theory development efforts. The Kenny et al. (2006) study documented links between an adaptive vocational self-understanding (including vocational planfulness and positive career expectations) and school engagement (characterized by feelings of belonging in and valuing school) among youths attending urban public high schools. The current study seeks to extend understanding of theoretically based motivational processes that link career development and school achievement. Identifying motivational processes that underlie the career development/academic achievement nexus will provide practitioners and public policy analysts with an informed framework upon which to construct interventions and programs.

Motivational theorists and researchers (e.g., Ryan and Deci, 2000, Snyder, 2000, Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) have identified a number of processes that can foster or undermine motivation in educational and work-based contexts. According to expectancy value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), achievement beliefs (e.g., self-perceptions of competence) and behaviors (e.g., persistence) are determined jointly by the expectancy students have for success and the subjective value they place on succeeding. Students differentiate between three components of subjective task value—their interest in the task, its perceived importance, and its perceived utility. The challenge for educators lies in helping students understand that a given set of activities will yield valued outcomes that are attainable.

As applied to career education, work-based learning provides a unique context for helping young people to understand the value of school-based learning for their future vocational choices and opportunities to experience themselves as competent (Blustein, Juntunen & Worthington, 2000). This understanding may further serve to enhance motivation for studying what might otherwise be considered irrelevant academic subjects (Lapan, Kardash & Turner, 2002). According to this formulation, by helping students to gain success experiences and understand the connection between doing well in school and having opportunities later in life, work-based learning and career planning might enhance achievement motivation (Lapan, 2004). The relationships between vocational planfulness, positive career expectations, and school engagement observed in the Kenny et al. (2006) study are consistent with this understanding. Given the large body of research suggesting that interest and motivation in learning is critical to school engagement and learning (Covington, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), the promise of work-based learning lies in its potential to promote student interest and readiness to learn (Blustein et al., 2000).

Recent work derived from the perspective of positive psychology (Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006; Snyder, 2000) also offers a theoretical explanation of the academic benefits of work-based learning and career experience for youth. From the positive psychology perspective, hope has a central role in fostering motivation and influencing human behavior. Snyder (2000) conceptualized hope as composed of three primary dimensions, including the presence of goals, thoughts about pathways or ways to achieve those goals, and the desire, confidence or agency in one's capacity to achieve these goals. Existing research has documented positive relationships between student hope and achievement (Covington, 2000). High-hope students, for example, have been found to set challenging school-related goals and are likely to attain those goals even when they do not experience immediate success (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams & Wiklund, 2002). At the college level, students who express higher levels of hope obtain higher grades and are more likely to graduate, even after controlling for entrance examination scores, than low hope students (Covington, 2000; Snyder et al., 2002).

Juntunen and Wettersten (2006) recognized the relevance of the construct of hope to vocational issues and developed a measure to assess work hope. These researchers suggested that work hope may be particularly relevant in understanding the motivational state of economically disenfranchised groups, who may be challenged in sustaining hope in a context offering limited economic resources and an array of obstacles to school and work success. We propose that the construct of work hope may have heuristic value in explaining the relationship between career experience and achievement motivation. Work-based learning and career experiences may foster a sense of hope by helping youth to identify work goals, expand their understanding of how to reach those goals, and foster confidence in the likelihood of achieving those goals. Because an understanding of pathways to reach one's goals is a component of hope, the previously observed relationship between career planning and school engagement (Kenny et al., 2006) is also consistent with hope theory.

A third theoretical perspective informing the current study is self-determination theory, which recognizes the role of environmental conditions in either fostering or suppressing motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) maintain that human beings have

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