



WHAT MAKES STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN? MOTIVATION AND ACADEMIC BEHAVIOR AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: *This paper looks at why students choose to study, and how different reasons for studying affect their learning and well-being. The main theoretical basis is Self-Determination Theory, which separates motivation into intrinsic (genuine personal interest) and extrinsic (studying for grades, parental approval, or career goals) types. The paper focuses on how these ideas apply to secondary school students in Uzbekistan, where family expectations and exam pressure play a strong role in shaping student behavior. Based on a review of existing research, the paper finds that students with genuine personal interest in learning tend to perform better, feel less anxious, and retain knowledge longer. At the same time, it argues that family-driven motivation in Central Asian culture is not simply a form of external pressure: when students truly adopt family values as their own, this motivation can be just as positive as personal curiosity. The paper ends with some thoughts on what teachers and schools could do differently to support better forms of student motivation.*

Keywords: *student motivation, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, academic performance, Uzbekistan, educational psychology, self-determination theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

Think about two students sitting in the same classroom, studying from the same book, taught by the same teacher. One is genuinely engaged: asks questions, thinks about the material, maybe reads about it on their own time. The other is there because they have to be, doing the minimum to get by. The gap between them is not always about intelligence. Very often it comes down to motivation.

Motivation in education has been studied for decades, and there is broad

agreement that it is one of the most important factors in how well students learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000). But motivation is not one thing. Psychologists have identified different types of motivation, and the type matters almost as much as whether motivation exists at all. A student who studies because they are curious about a subject is in a very different psychological position than one who studies only because they are afraid of failing an exam.



This paper focuses on student motivation in Uzbekistan, a country that has been actively reforming its education system for over a decade. Official policy increasingly calls for critical thinking, student-centered learning, and moving away from rote memorization. But in many schools, students still study mainly to pass tests or meet family expectations. Understanding this gap is the starting point for this paper.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the main theoretical and empirical literature on student motivation. Section 3 describes the methods used in this review. Section 4 presents the key findings from the literature as they apply to the Uzbek context. Section 5 discusses what these findings mean in practice. Section 6 offers a brief conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Self-Determination Theory

The most widely used framework for studying student motivation is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, where a person does something because they find it genuinely interesting or satisfying, and extrinsic motivation, where the reason is external: a grade, a reward, parental approval, or avoiding punishment.

According to SDT, intrinsic motivation consistently produces better outcomes: students understand material more deeply, remember it longer, and feel

better while learning. Extrinsic motivation is more complicated. When it comes purely from outside pressure, it tends to produce surface-level learning, higher anxiety, and lower long-term interest in the subject. But SDT also recognizes that some external motivations can be internalized over time, meaning a student can genuinely adopt values that originally came from outside and experience them as their own (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

SDT also argues that three basic psychological needs must be satisfied for healthy motivation to grow: the need to feel competent (believing you can actually do the work), the need for autonomy (feeling that your actions come from genuine choice rather than force), and the need for relatedness (feeling connected to teachers, classmates, and family). Schools that support these three needs tend to produce more motivated students; schools that ignore or undermine them push students toward external regulation or disengagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

2.2 Motivation and Academic Performance

The link between motivation type and academic performance has been confirmed in many studies. Pintrich (2003) showed that intrinsically motivated students use what researchers call deep learning strategies: they connect new information to things they already know, think critically about what they are reading, and try to genuinely understand rather than just recall. Extrinsically



motivated students more often use surface strategies: memorizing for the test and moving on.

Vallerand et al. (1992) developed the Academic Motivation Scale to measure different types of motivation in school settings. Their research found that intrinsic motivation was consistently linked to better engagement and satisfaction, while purely external motivation was associated with lower persistence and enjoyment. Importantly, amotivation, where students feel no reason to study at all, was the most damaging condition of all.

The connection between motivation and anxiety is also well documented. Students who study mainly out of fear of failure or social shame are significantly more likely to experience academic burnout, chronic stress, and in some cases complete avoidance of school-related tasks (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). This is particularly relevant in competitive school systems where a single exam determines university access.

2.3 Self-Efficacy and Its Role

Closely related to motivation is the concept of self-efficacy, which Bandura (1997) defined as a person's belief in their own ability to succeed at a specific task. Students with strong self-efficacy set more ambitious goals, try harder when things get difficult, and interpret failure as a reason to work more rather than as proof of incapacity. Self-efficacy is not the same as actual ability: two students with equal skill can have very different beliefs about whether they will succeed,

and those beliefs strongly influence what they actually achieve.

Motivation and self-efficacy feed each other. Students who are intrinsically motivated tend to persist longer and accumulate more successful experiences, which builds their self-efficacy. Students driven mainly by fear tend to avoid challenging tasks, which limits their opportunities to build genuine confidence. Teachers who give specific, honest feedback and create conditions where students can experience real success are directly supporting the motivational foundation of learning.

2.4 Cultural Dimensions: The Case of Central Asia

Most motivation research has been conducted in Western, individualist societies, where personal autonomy is treated as a basic positive value. Applying these frameworks to Uzbekistan requires some adjustment. Uzbekistan is a collectivist society: people tend to define themselves through their family and community rather than as isolated individuals, and social obligations carry significant weight in everyday decisions (Chirkov et al., 2003).

In this context, a student may work very hard at school not because of personal interest in the subject, but out of loyalty to their family, a desire to avoid bringing shame on their parents, or a sense of duty that has been part of their upbringing since childhood. In standard SDT terms, this would count as external motivation. But for many Uzbek students, these family-based reasons do not feel



like external pressure: they feel like genuine personal values. Researchers studying similar patterns in East Asian cultures have argued that when family-oriented motivation is truly internalized, it functions much like intrinsic motivation in terms of its psychological and academic effects (King & McInerney, 2014).

At the same time, there is a difference between internalized family values and pure compliance. A student who studies because they love their parents and genuinely want a good future for their family is in a different position than one who studies only to avoid parental anger. The first has made the motivation their own; the second is acting under compulsion. This distinction matters for how we understand motivation in Uzbekistan.

3. METHODS

This paper is based on a narrative literature review. The goal was not to conduct original data collection, but to bring together existing research on student motivation and examine how it applies to the educational context of Uzbekistan.

Sources were selected through searches of Google Scholar and the databases PsycINFO and ERIC, using terms such as 'student motivation', 'intrinsic motivation secondary school', 'self-determination theory education', 'academic motivation Uzbekistan', and 'collectivism and school motivation'. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters from

the last 30 years, with some foundational texts included regardless of date because of their central importance to the field (for example, Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Sources specifically addressing the Uzbek or Central Asian educational context were limited in number, which itself is a finding worth noting: the region is underrepresented in international educational psychology research. Where direct evidence was unavailable, the paper draws on studies from culturally similar settings, particularly East Asian contexts where collectivist family structures and examination-focused schooling have been studied in more depth (King & McInerney, 2014).

The review follows the IMRAD structure adapted for a theoretical paper, with the Literature Review section covering background theory and the Results section presenting the main findings drawn from the reviewed sources as they apply to the Uzbek context.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Dominant Motivational Patterns in Uzbek Schools

Based on the reviewed literature, the predominant motivational orientation in Uzbek secondary schools appears to be extrinsic. The educational structure itself encourages this: the university entrance examination system places enormous weight on a single performance event, which naturally pushes students to focus on exam preparation rather than genuine learning. OECD and World Bank reporting on Uzbekistan confirms that



memorization remains the dominant classroom practice despite ongoing reform efforts (OECD/World Bank, 2018).

This does not mean intrinsic motivation is absent. Students in subjects they find personally meaningful, or taught by teachers who create engaging classroom environments, do show signs of deeper engagement. But the systemic pressure toward external performance makes it harder for this kind of motivation to develop and sustain itself across the school years.

4.2 Family Expectations as a Motivational Force

Family expectations emerge from the literature as one of the most powerful motivational forces in the Central Asian context. In Uzbekistan, academic success is strongly tied to family honor and social standing, and children are often aware from an early age that their performance reflects on the entire family. This creates a particular kind of motivational pressure that does not fit neatly into Western categories.

As argued by Chirkov et al. (2003), the key question is not whether the motivation originates outside the individual, but whether the individual has genuinely adopted the underlying values. A student who has truly internalized the belief that education is important for their family's future is not simply complying with external demands: they are acting on values they experience as their own. This form of motivation, which SDT calls identified regulation, is associated with

similar positive outcomes as intrinsic motivation in terms of engagement and persistence.

4.3 Self-Efficacy and Anxiety in High-Pressure Environments

The reviewed literature consistently links high-stakes examination environments to elevated academic anxiety and lower self-efficacy, particularly among students who have experienced repeated failure or public criticism. In Uzbekistan, where classroom culture can involve direct comparison of student performance and where teacher authority is rarely questioned, conditions for building self-efficacy are not always present.

Bandura (1997) identified four main sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences (successfully completing tasks), vicarious experiences (watching others succeed), verbal encouragement from trusted figures, and physiological states (feeling calm rather than anxious). Of these, mastery experiences are the most powerful. A school system that gives students many small opportunities to experience genuine success, and that does not make failure feel catastrophic, builds the kind of confidence that sustains long-term motivation.

5. DISCUSSION

The picture that comes out of this review is fairly consistent. Students learn better when they have personal reasons to care about what they are studying, not just external ones. This is not a controversial finding, but applying it in the Uzbek context requires some nuance.



It would be too simple to say that family-driven motivation is bad and that Uzbek students should learn to study for purely personal reasons instead. Family loyalty, social obligation, and the desire to make one's parents proud are not shallow motivations. For many students, they are among the deepest values they hold. The issue is not to eliminate these motivations, but to make sure they are genuinely adopted rather than simply imposed. A student who has internalized these values will likely behave quite similarly to an intrinsically motivated student. A student who is only complying out of fear will not.

The more immediate practical problem is the mismatch between what research supports and what most classrooms in Uzbekistan look like. Teachers lecturing while students copy notes, exams that reward memorization over understanding, and limited space for students to ask questions or express genuine curiosity: these are conditions that tend to push motivation in the wrong direction, regardless of what is happening at home. Changing this requires more than new curriculum documents. It requires shifts in how teachers are trained, how classrooms are organized, and how success is measured.

A student's motivation is also not fixed. It changes based on their experiences, their relationships with teachers, the feedback they receive, and whether they feel that what they are learning matters at all. This means there is always room to improve, and small

changes in how a teacher interacts with a class can have real effects on how students feel about learning.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed what educational psychology research tells us about student motivation and considered how those findings apply in Uzbekistan. The main points can be summarized briefly: students with genuine personal interest in learning tend to do better academically and feel better psychologically; purely external motivation produces more superficial learning and more anxiety; and in the Uzbek cultural context, family-based motivation occupies a complicated but potentially positive role, depending on whether students have genuinely adopted it as their own.

None of this is simple to put into practice. Educational reform in Uzbekistan has made progress in some areas, but changing the motivational climate of a school system takes time and involves many people: teachers, school administrators, families, and policymakers. The research reviewed here suggests that the direction is fairly clear, even if the path is not always easy.

Future work in this area should try to go beyond general theory and look at what actually works in Uzbek classrooms specifically. Which types of teaching practice seem to support genuine student engagement? How do students from different regions or family backgrounds differ in their motivational profiles? These are questions that deserve more



direct attention from researchers working in the Central Asian context.

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