

'I'd do anything to avoid looking stupid': Understanding and influencing young people's motives in school.

Professor Carolyn Jackson

Educational
Research

Lancaster
University



Motivation

‘There are only three things of importance to successful learning; motivation, motivation and motivation ... any fool can teach students who want to learn.’

Sir Christopher Ball - North of England Education Conference, 1995
(cited in Galloway et al, 1998, p. 3)

There are few things more frustrating to teachers than being confronted with a student who actively and purposefully avoids learning opportunities. Increasingly, we are finding evidence that engaging in these frustrating avoidance behaviours may actually be encouraged by the motivational climate of the learning context. (Urdan et al., 2002: 56)

Overview

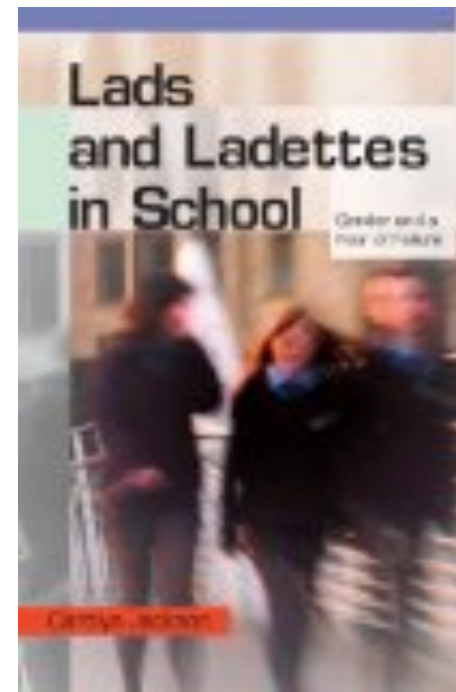
- My research
- Achievement Goal Theory
- Fears of failure – academic
 - Defensive strategies
- Fears of failure – social
 - Defensive strategies
- Implications
 - Students
 - Teachers
 - Policy makers

Jackson's Secondary School Research

(2002, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2014)

Two projects exploring motivation especially in relation to gender

- 8 secondary schools: 6 co-ed, 2 single-sex
- Questionnaire data from ~800 pupils
- Interviews with 203 pupils (year 9)
- Interviews with 30 teachers



Conceptualising motivation

- Achievement goal theory
 - Learning goals
 - Performance goals
 - Approach
 - Avoid

Fear of academic Failure

When it was near the SATs I was really worrying and I was revising like all the time and I didn't really go out at night anymore because I was scared that I was going to not do well. And I know that my Mum would be disappointed in me and it's just, you get like pressure from all areas. Like even your friends because I feel that you always want to do one better than them, or like be the same as them, so there's pressure also coming from there. (Sarah, Firtrees)

Strategies to protect self-worth

- Procrastination
- Intentional withdrawal of effort and rejection of academic work
- Avoiding the appearance of working and promoting the appearance of effortless achievement
- Disruptive behaviour
- Cheating

‘If you’ve tried your best and you’ve got a low mark then it’s sort of like ‘oh you can’t do it and you’re stupid’. But if you didn’t try and you got a low mark it’s like ‘oh I couldn’t be bothered doing it so I only tried a little bit’. (Lee, school B)

Would you ever pretend that you'd not worked hard at something when you had?

Yes. If I'd tried my best and then I got a low mark I'd be like 'I didn't try, I couldn't be bothered doing it', because [otherwise] everyone would think oh my god she got a low mark and she tried and everything. You'd get a bit of a reputation for being stupid. (Paula, Hollydale)

Social 'fears of failure'

Is it seen as cool to work hard in school?

Em, oh not really. No, some people just call you swot. Sameena (Oakfield)

If you work hard in school you're a geek. Jan (Beechwood)

No, [to] mess about is seen as cool. Fran (Beechwood)

No, not really because the bad ones don't really work hard and then they get really popular. And then you get the good ones who work hard and they get like called spiffs and stuff because they work hard. Jade (Firtrees)

Social 'fears of failure'

If it was really cool to work hard in school and you got status from working hard, would you work hard?

Yes I would, I would if it was [cool]. But because at the moment it's not, I just don't [work hard]. I don't try and I don't intend to. (Sandy, Hollydale)

So...

- 1) It's generally uncool to work hard (for boys and girls).
- 2) Apparent lack of effort means
 - More likely to be popular
 - Have an excuse for failure
 - Augments success
- 3) BUT – pupils want and need to succeed.
Dilemma!

Tend to split into ...

- 1) 'Swots' who apparently don't care about being 'uncool' ...
- 2) 'Cool' and apparently don't care about school
- 3) Most – attempt to balance schoolwork and coolwork.

Louise (Ashgrove)

If somebody wanted to be very cool, how would they be able to negotiate working?

They'd probably say that they didn't do it. And then get good marks. And that way they'd think they were really good.

What way?

I don't know. If they think, if they tell people that they don't do any work and then they get really high marks, then they probably think that they're like on top of people. And people would probably think that they want to be like them 'cos they don't have to do any work and they're still clever and things like that.

So is that the sort of ideal position?

Probably.

Do people get picked on if they work too hard?

Craig (Beechwood) Yeah, I think so.

Like they get called swots and that?

Yes.

But you don't?

I did when I was in Year 7.

So what changed?

I don't know, I just started talking to more people and then like finding out how they worked and that lot. And I just made myself work like that.

So what do you mean 'work like that'?

I don't know, like they say, you know 'listen but don't keep staring at the teachers' or something like that, and then I just wouldn't do it [stare at the teachers] and I still got what marks I needed but I just like did what they did.

So would they actually talk about it then, did you say they talked about it to you or did you just pick up on it?

Well most of the time I'd just pick up on it. But then people that I know most like, they'll just tell me.

So it's quite a deliberate strategy then is it of paying attention but not showing it?

Yeah.

What else, what other sorts of things?

Like talking while teacher's talking and that. Then you can still hear it and you write everything down but teacher won't think you were. And writing while they're talking (the teachers) but you're listening really but they don't think that.

Sarah (Firtrees) I don't do that bad, I get like the average and sometimes one above. So I do do well it's just I try not to.

You try not to do well?

Yes, try not to concentrate and things.

So tell me a bit more about why you try not to concentrate.

I don't know because like in my maths class I'm sat next to someone whose like, hangs around and like smokes and things. So I just like try and show off and things like that, so I try to impress her. . . . 'cause like in primary school with this girl I got bullied and everything and I was a real swot type thing, so I don't want her to see me that way now, 'cause like we sit next to each other.

. . .

So it sounds like you manage quite carefully not showing that you work in maths but actually doing work.

Yes.

So how do you manage that?

It's like at the beginning of a lesson I wouldn't do anything and then I'd like rush it all at the end because I'm quite a fast writer. And so I end up getting it done but yet at the beginning I play around for a bit and then actually get down to it but like still talking in between and everything.

So actually at the end of the day you do get it done?

Yes . . . or like things that I don't do in class I finish off as homework and things like that.

Yes because presumably you're clever and able to do that but presumably some people do that that just can't then pull it off?

Yes like they do do that and they try to get it done but they're not like fast enough or they don't know the answers straight away and things like that.

Balancing Acts

- Resources were crucial to successful balancing
 - Physical resources
 - Financial resources
 - Social resources

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What can teachers do?

- Encourage safe co-operative learning environments
- Avoid overt relative ability social comparisons
- Praise effort not intelligence



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