

**Teacher-pupil relations: their significance for motivation**

**Professor Carolyn Jackson  
Department of Educational Research  
Lancaster University, UK**

**Email: [c.jackson@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.jackson@lancaster.ac.uk)  
Twitter: [@CarolynPJackson](https://twitter.com/CarolynPJackson)**

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## Teacher-pupil relations: their significance for motivation

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.

(Urda et al., 2002: 56)

This paper provides a starting point for discussion at the workshop 'Teacher/pupil relations: their significance for motivation'. It draws on published research on motivation from around the world and research that I conducted in secondary schools in England (see Jackson 2006). While there are many differences (as well as similarities) between the education systems in England and Denmark, I hope the paper will stimulate reflections on aspects of motivation that traverse nations as well as on how differences between systems have implications for motivation.

Motivation is often presented in popular discourse, and in some areas of psychology, as something that one has or does not have; this is referred to as a quantitative model of motivation. From this perspective young people who do not engage in schoolwork are often presented as deficient: they, as individuals, *lack* motivation, and the aim is typically to increase the quantity of motivation they have. By contrast, motivation is conceptualised in this paper in a qualitative way, so motivation is not seen as something that an individual does or does not possess. Rather, conceptualising motivation qualitatively means that the focus is on *why* people behave in particular ways. It enables researchers to address questions that teachers, parents, researchers and policy makers all regularly engage with about what motivates particular types of behaviours. For example, why do some pupils mess around in class and disrupt the lesson rather than work? Why do some students work really hard on a task whereas others do not even attempt it? Why do some students leave their work until the last possible moment? These questions, along with many others, present conundrums and frustrations for educators on a regular basis. I argue that in order to answer these questions we must engage with pupils' motives. Furthermore, as implied in the opening quote, we must engage with the ways that motives are shaped by the interactions and contexts within which pupils operate in their daily lives. As Pless et al (2015) argue, such an approach shifts the focus from how little or how much motivation the pupils are 'endowed' with, to a focus on what they are motivated for, in which ways and under what circumstances. The attention to interaction means that teacher-pupil relations as well as pupil-pupil relations are crucial to consider.

In this paper I focus in particular on the ways in which fears of failure motivate particular types of behaviours – typically defensive behaviours - among some students. Elsewhere (e.g. Jackson, 2006) I have written about the importance of considering social as well as academic motives and fears. Social fears are prevalent and important in school contexts (for example, fears about being unpopular, isolated, bullied and so on) and interact with academic motives and fear (fears about academic failure, looking stupid and so on) in complex ways. However, in this paper there is space only to focus on academic motives, although I will mention social motives in passing.

At points in this paper I make reference to data from my research. My project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), explored, among other issues, fears about

failure in secondary schools. Data generated during this project include questionnaire data from approximately 800 pupils and interview data from 153 pupils (aged 13-14 years) and 30 teachers. Six secondary schools located in the north of England were involved: four co-educational (Beechwood, Elmwood, Firtrees, Oakfield), one girls' (Hollydale) and one boys' (Ashgrove). Based initially on data from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) reports, and supplemented by information from the schools, schools were selected to ensure a mix of pupils in terms of social class, 'race' and ethnicity, and a mix of schools in terms of overall examination results, and gender of intake (single-sex and co-educational). For more details see Jackson (2006).

I start with an introduction to achievement goal theory, which underpins the rest of the paper. I then move on to explore fear of academic failure in school, as fear of failure can promote particular types of achievement goals and related defensive strategies, which are also explored. Next I consider how teachers can exacerbate or reduce the likelihood of prompting defensive behaviours, before offering brief concluding comments about the importance of building safe and supportive learning environments in which students are encouraged to work together rather than compete with each other.

### **Achievement goal theory**

Achievement goal theory is widely acknowledged to be of central importance in enabling us to understand the factors that influence the amount and quality of pupil learning in school. It is regarded as a qualitative theory of motivation, as 'rather than focussing on the level of motivation (i.e., high effort, low interest), the focus is on the goals or purposes that are perceived for achievement behaviour' (Middleton and Midgley, 1997: 710). Achievement goal theory emphasises the importance of how individuals think about themselves, and attempts to understand an individual's self-constructed meanings for pursuing a particular course of action, and to explore the individual and contextual factors that shape these subjective constructions. In other words, it is underpinned by the assumption that a pupil's motivation at school is affected by her/his self-constructed meanings or purposes for engaging (or not engaging) in an academic task. This purpose is termed the 'achievement goal'. Midgley et al. (2001: 77) define the achievement goal as: 'the purposes for behaviour that are perceived or pursued in a competence-relevant setting.' So when we ask what a pupil's achievement goal is we are asking *why* s/he engages in an achievement-related behaviour (Kaplan et al., 2002a; Kaplan, 2004).

Achievement goal theory has emphasised two main types of goals, namely, learning goals (also known as mastery or task goals) and performance goals (also known as ego or ability goals). Learning goals are the darlings of motivation researchers as studies consistently show them to have positive effects on learning (Covington, 2000; Midgley et al., 2001; Kaplan et al., 2002a; Freeman, 2004; Kaplan, 2004; Wolters, 2004). Learning goals relate to a focus on self-improvement, learning new skills, and increasing understanding, and appreciation, of what is being learned. In other words, learning goals are about developing competence. In contrast, performance goals relate to a concern with social comparisons and with a demonstration of competence in relation to others; they involve 'outperforming others as a means to aggrandize one's ability status at the expense of peers' (Covington, 2000: 174). Whilst there is a general consensus amongst researchers that learning goals are beneficial for learning, there is no consensus about the effects of performance goals.

The mixed and sometimes contradictory research findings about performance goals have prompted researchers to look more closely at them, and the result has been a division into performance-*approach*, and performance-*avoid*, goals (Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996). Performance-*approach* goals refer to a pupil's concern to demonstrate high ability (e.g. I want to be top of the class), whilst performance-*avoid* goals relate to a concern to avoid demonstrating low ability (e.g. I don't want to be bottom of the class) (Kaplan et al., 2002b). Some performance-approach-oriented students<sup>i</sup> are successful academically, as they often invest considerable time and effort devising study strategies and ways to be successful. By contrast, performance-avoid-oriented students, who are eager to avoid appearing stupid, frequently adopt strategies that involve reduced effort on academic tasks and so are often unsuccessful in academic terms. For example, a student concerned to avoid looking stupid might decide to not do a piece of homework rather than run the risk of doing it and getting it wrong. There is a general consensus that performance-avoid goals are 'maladaptive' in educational terms (Linnenbrink, 2004). According to Kaplan et al. (2002a) performance-avoid-oriented students are likely to a) feel anxious; b) have a low sense of academic efficacy<sup>ii</sup>; c) avoid seeking help; d) engage in academic self-handicapping<sup>iii</sup>; and e) have lower grades. Whilst performance-approach goals are not consistently associated with the range of negative feelings, behaviours and outcomes that performance-avoid goals are, performance-approach goals may be associated with test anxiety and with self-handicapping. Importantly, both performance-approach and performance-avoid goals are associated with a fear of failure (Urduan et al., 2002); this is discussed in more detail later.

Whilst much of the research in this sphere has concentrated on the goals constructed by individuals, researchers have also been interested in the ways in which learning contexts (e.g. classrooms) shape these goals (Kaplan, 2004). So, whilst personal goals are those that individuals construct and pursue in specific learning situations, these are related to, and influenced by, the goals emphasised or encouraged in the learning context (Kaplan et al., 2002a; Linnenbrink, 2004). The goals emphasised within a learning context have been referred to as 'goal structures'. Kaplan et al. (2002a: 24) conceptualise goal structures in terms of 'the various classroom- and school-level policies and practices that make mastery [learning] or performance goals salient, as well as the explicit goal-related messages teachers communicate to their students'. So for example, some teachers might emphasise the importance of learning and personal improvement, reward students for effort rather than getting right answers, discourage competition and relative-ability social comparisons, and place little emphasis on tests and grades. Such a classroom climate might convey a learning goal structure. By contrast, other teachers might encourage competition for top of the class, place high value on, and reward, good grades, emphasise differences between students and encourage relative-ability social comparisons by publicly announcing test results. Such a classroom climate is likely to convey a performance goal structure and may prompt fears of failure and avoidance motives among many students. In general: 'avoidance behaviours reflect motivation to move away from, or avoid, some perceived threat in the learning context' (Urduan et al., 2002: 56). According to motivation researchers, academic failure, or being regarded as an academic failure by others, is frequently the perceived threat. So fear of academic failure is central to understanding avoidance behaviours in schools.

### **Fear of academic failure in schools**

There is now considerable evidence to support the notion that many students fear academic failure and that their sense of self-worth, and aspects of their public image (sometimes referred to as social-worth<sup>iv</sup>), are bound to notions of academic competence. The pressures and fears have been exacerbated by the growing importance of academic credentials for getting 'good' jobs, and increases in high-stakes national tests (Reay and Wiliam, 1999; Warrington and Younger, 1999; Gleeson and Husbands, 2001; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Many of the pupils interviewed in my research articulated very clearly their fears about failing academically and about looking 'stupid' or 'thick' in front of their peers. Extracts from interviewees David and Alysia convey their desires and strategies to avoid looking stupid.

David

*What do you tell your friends if you get a low mark? How do you explain it?*

I probably wouldn't tell them, I'd probably say that I got a high mark.

*Why would you do that?*

Just to show off.

*Why is that important?*

'Cause I wouldn't like them going round acting, knowing that I'm the dumbest one out of the whole lot of them.

Alysia (Hollydale)

*Do you compare marks with other people?*

No

*Not at all?*

No

*Why not?*

Because if they've got like high grades and I've got like a low grade then they might think I'm thick or something. So I don't, it's not often I compare my grades with anybody else.

Both of these pupils were concerned about their image, about how they appeared to their peers. They were concerned not to appear stupid in school, and both employed strategies to avoid looking 'stupid'. According to the work of motivation theorists such as Dweck (2000) and Covington (1998), defensive strategies may be provoked by situations that provide a threat to one's sense of self-worth in school. Such situations are plentiful in schools in England where assessments and grading are abundant and social comparisons are rife. In such contexts there are two obvious ways to protect self-worth. One is to avoid failure, which is not always possible in an education system where not everyone can succeed. The second is to avoid the *implications* of failure. There are numerous strategies to circumvent the implications of failure and these have been termed defensive strategies.

### ***Defensive Strategies***

Defensive strategies are generally false, but plausible, explanations generated by students to justify or excuse their behaviour, in this case (potential or actual) poor academic performance (Covington, 1998). There are numerous defensive strategies, which are also sometimes called avoidance behaviours or preferences (Urduan et al., 2002) and sometimes self-handicapping strategies. Many of these defensive strategies are interrelated and, in

general, they provide excuses that enable individuals to blame factors other than a lack of ability for academic failure. In this section I introduce the key defensive strategies and avoidance motives, namely: 1) procrastination; 2) intentional withdrawal of effort and a rejection of academic work; 3) avoiding the appearance of working and promoting the appearance of effortless achievement; 4) disruptive behaviour. These are also behaviours that teachers find frustrating and difficult.

### **1. Procrastination**

This 'technique' requires little introduction and explanation. Putting off work until the last minute provides an excuse for failure that deflects attention away from a potential lack of ability. Procrastination keeps open the possibility that success would have been possible if effort had been applied earlier: 'I could have done better if I'd had more time . . . .' The procrastinator is able to attribute failure to factors other than ability, and hence maintain self-worth. Further, self-worth may be enhanced if the procrastinator is successful, as success with little effort is regarded as a sign of 'true intellect'. As with many of these defensive strategies, there is a distinction between what students claim to do and what they actually do. Some may claim to leave work until the last minute, when in actual fact they have worked long and hard on it. Covington (1998) calls these students 'closet achievers', but in the context of procrastination they might equally be called 'reported procrastinators'. Of those who actually do procrastinate ('actual' as opposed to 'reported' procrastinators), procrastination occurs along a continuum. Some individuals procrastinate but eventually do the work (although the work may be poor in quality), whereas others may procrastinate to the extent that the work is never undertaken. The latter scenario may then lead to the second of the strategies discussed here, namely, an intentional withdrawal of effort and rejection of academic work.

### **2. Intentional withdrawal of effort and rejection of academic work**

'when 'wannabe' hegemonic boys do not 'win', they tend to adopt a 'can't win, won't win and don't want to play' stance' (Warrington and Younger, 2005: 5).

Intentional withdrawal of effort and rejection of academic work are inextricably linked as self-worth protection strategies. The notion that our self-esteem or self-worth is influenced by our pretensions dates back to the ideas of William James (1890: 310) who argued that 'our self-feeling in this world depends entirely on what we *back* ourselves to be and do'. If some students are able to convey the impression that academic success is not important and therefore that they are unwilling to take part in what Covington (1998; Covington and Manheim Teel, 1996) calls the 'ability game', then these students are able to protect their self-worth and/or social-worth:

I left two weeks' homework to yesterday.

*Why's that?*

Had *better things* to do. (Tahir, Elmwood, my emphasis)

What is difficult to know, is whether students who publicly denounce academic work really do believe that schoolwork is worthless or whether such displays are primarily self-worth protection mechanisms because these individuals fear the consequences of academic failure. Galloway et al. (1998: 36) highlight the difficulty of making this distinction, arguing

that 'some pupils may reject the goal of academic success in order to maintain their status in the peer group, not because they fear academic failure' (see Willis, 1977; Marsh et al., 1978). These motives are not mutually exclusive; I argue that rejecting academic work can serve a dual purpose. First, it enables students to act in ways currently aligned with coolness and popularity in their schools (to be popular amongst peers); particularly as there is a dominant discourse in English schools that being seen to work hard is uncool (see Jackson 2006). Second, it provides an excuse for failure and augments success. Overall, the evidence that rejecting academic work acts as a self-worth protection mechanism is convincing.

### **3. Avoiding the appearance of working and promoting the appearance of effortless achievement**

From a self-worth protection perspective 'effortless achievement' is the ideal. To achieve academically without hard work gives clear signals about an individual's ability. Avoiding overt hard work also provides a convenient excuse if success is not forthcoming – failure without effort does not necessarily indicate a lack of ability, but success without effort indicates true genius (see Jackson and Nyström, 2014; Heyder and Kessels, 2016). It is perhaps not too surprising then, that overt withdrawal of effort is appealing in many ways. As Galloway et al. (1998: 128) point out, effort 'is a "double-edged sword": the harder we try the more we feel let down if we do not succeed; and if we do not succeed in a task which other people find easy the effect is compounded'. A key difference between this strategy of self-worth protection and the last one (intentional withdrawal of effort and a rejection of academic work) is that the last one was concerned with *actual* withdrawal of effort, whereas this one is concerned with the *appearance* of withdrawal of effort. In fact, individuals who adopt an effortless achievement approach may well be one of Covington's (1998) 'closet achievers'. As mentioned earlier, closet achievers are those pupils who establish a pretence that they have done no work when actually they have spent a considerable amount of time studying. For closet achievers then, the pretence of not working is principally a performance for others.

### **4. Disruptive behaviour**

Disruptive behaviour provides another method of blurring the relationship between failure and lack of ability. Where pupils exhibit disruptive behaviours, failures may be attributed to being inattentive in class rather than to a lack of ability per se, and the behaviour may act to deflect attention away from poor academic performance and onto their behaviour instead (Skaalvik, 1993; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). Whilst disruptive pupils clearly jeopardise their own chances of academic success, they also make learning more difficult for other members of the class. As such, one might argue that, to some extent, disruptive behaviour acts to sabotage the efforts of academically oriented peers - an 'if I can't win, nobody will' approach.

Overall, the potential benefits of disruptive behaviour for the perpetrator are fourfold. First, it can deflect attention away from poor academic performance by focussing attention on the behaviour. Second, poor performance can be attributed to not paying attention in class rather than to a lack of ability. Third, disruptive behaviour may sabotage the efforts and performances of classmates and so make grade social comparisons more favourable.

Fourth, disruptive behaviour in class can increase a pupil's status within her/his peer group, as being disruptive can increase popularity.

So what can we as teachers do to discourage these defensive strategies? Thinking about how we attempt to motivate students and what classroom climates we foster are important.

### Classroom climate and teacher practices

In my research some teachers attempted to motivate students through fear or shame, which tended to exacerbate pupils' fears about academic failure. Teachers incited such fears in a variety of ways, including emphasising the dire consequences of academic 'failure' for pupils' future careers and life chances, as well as spelling out the negative implications for the school if results were not 'up to standard' (see Jackson, 2013). There is space here to illustrate and discuss only one example of the ways in which teachers attempted to motivate through fear or shame. As such, I have chosen to focus on a relatively common tactic, namely, making pupils' marks known to the whole class by, for example, reading them out. In all of the schools in my research there were instances of this practice, although it was more prevalent in some schools than in others. It was a practice identified by pupils across the schools to be a significant pressure that provoked anxiety. Clare at Firtrees, for example, suggested that the public reporting of scores made tests much more stressful.

Clare: It doesn't bother me doing tests, but it's just that she shouts them out - your score. If she just like gave them you then that would be alright. But your mind's like, when you're doing a test, that she's going to shout it out - the score that you've got - and then you just try and do your best to get a higher mark.

CJ: So why is it particularly important that she calls them out, is it about being so public, can you say a bit more about why it matters so much?

Clare: 'Cause if she shouts them out and you've got a low mark everyone looks at you and your friends are like 'are you alright, you've got a low mark but you'll be better next time' and you're a bit embarrassed.

Richard at Elmwood also disliked the public announcement of results. He, like Clare, was anxious not to appear 'stupid' and feel embarrassed if he got a low mark, and suggested that people get laughed at for poor performances.

CJ: Some people have told me that teachers actually read out the results in some classes.

Richard: Yeah, I don't really like it 'cos if you get a rubbish score ... some people laugh at you sometimes.

CJ: So do they [teachers] do that very often?

Richard: Yeah, they do it near enough all the time. Some teachers don't [read out the scores] 'cos they know some people get embarrassed and get upset when they read the answers out.

CJ: Why do you think teachers do that?

Richard: To see if, you know, that if you do get embarrassed, you know you have to try harder so that you won't get embarrassed.

Richard's analysis of why teachers announce test results to the class is insightful; it is likely these teachers do believe that such practices will motivate pupils, that they will shame them into working harder so that they are not bottom of the class (although someone always has to be bottom). However, what is missing from this lay theory of motivation is how pressures to demonstrate success (or to not demonstrate failure) can encourage amongst some students a range of defensive behaviours (discussed earlier) that ultimately are more likely to reduce rather than improve attainment levels.

There were even more remarkable examples, in my research, of the ways teachers would attempt to highlight and shame (relatively) low attainers. Lawrence (Ashgrove) explained that in his top set maths class pupils are seated according to relative ability: 'clever ones' at the back of the class, 'not as clever' ones at the front.

Lawrence: There's a bit of rivalry in the classroom ... 'cause part of the system is if you're not as clever then you sit at the front in the middle, which is better because it's easier to hear. Then the clever ones sit towards the back ...

CJ: So it's quite an explicit way of ranking people in the class then?

Lawrence: Well, in my first lesson in maths I was sat right at the front after a bit, which I wasn't too worried about because it was the first time I'd been in set one. But it helped me because the very next test I was sat quite a bit further back and it wasn't, well it wasn't because of the extra pressure, it was more because I was at the front and I could see everything she was doing and I couldn't miss a word and you don't lose your attention as easily when you're sat towards the front. And I think that was the main aim of it rather than just to embarrass us.

The teacher's method of seating pupils according to ability is striking for its emphasis on making performance visible; it is difficult to imagine a more overt and visual way of ranking a class according to individual (grade) performance. Lawrence attempts to find positive aspects of this method of spatial organisation: 'less clever' ones can see and hear the teacher and are less likely to get distracted. However, underlying his response is also recognition that some students are explicitly positioned as bottom of the class, and that this is embarrassing. Wilkins (2011) provides a similar example, in his case with Year 8 pupils, of how a teacher visibly highlighted success and failure by getting all students to stand in class, and then to sit down in order according to their test scores, with the last pupil standing declared the winner. Such strategies strongly emphasise relative ability comparisons and encourage competition rather than co-operation and togetherness. They also promote classroom climates that emphasise performance (*demonstrating* competence) rather than learning (*developing* competence), and are likely to foster fears of academic failure.

I am not suggesting, however, that teachers use or relate to fear in a straightforward way; in general, teachers seem to have an ambivalent relationship with it. On the one hand, many teachers express genuine concern for pupils about the increasing pressures and anxieties created by frequent high stakes tests and the need for them to get good qualifications. This is conveyed by Ms Holtby at Hollydale girls' school:

[Increased testing has] had an impact from junior school onwards ... several of my colleagues have got children at junior schools who are just doing their SATS [national tests] and they are saying that their children are showing signs of anxiety ... I am absolutely dead against the testing that there is. That's my personal opinion ... Because of the way society does focus them so much on ... their SATS, GCSEs, AS levels, A levels, university ... it's almost like you've got to sprint on this race ... I know there's a lot of pressure on them ... you know it's exams every year now for probably ten, well between eight to ten years, you know, for the bright ability kids, and you think well, you know, that is tough.

Teachers also express concern about fears generated for pupils by other pupils, for example, through pupil-pupil bullying. On the other hand, as I illustrated earlier, and as I demonstrate and discuss more fully elsewhere (Jackson, 2006), many teachers use fear and shame in their attempts to get pupils to perform (and also to behave well in class). The ambivalence about pressure, and the fears pressure creates, is discernible in the comments of Ms Walters, also at Hollydale girls' school:

There's never a break; it's continuous testing. They are put under pressure and they are put under pressure to achieve and perhaps our expectations of them are very high. That's perhaps one of the reasons why I like teaching here ... because to me this is a very good school and it has high expectations of the pupils who come through the door. And sometimes it is very difficult for girls to live up to that.

The ambivalence is not surprising. Like Ms Holtby, many teachers are opposed to the frequent high-stakes testing in schools, and the related anxieties caused by it. They sympathise with the pupils, and witness first-hand the anxieties that many students experience as a result of the testing. However, in many ways most mainstream schooling is built upon, and sustained by, fear. Writing particularly about the UK, Shaw (1995) argues that schools and teachers rely on fear and attempt to use it as a motivating force (see also Davies, 2004; Harber, 2004; Francis and Mills, 2012). They attempt to scare children into working by highlighting how hard they must work, and outlining the consequences of 'failure'. Shaw argues that fear keeps the educational system working, it relies upon fear, it is built into the organisational structure of secondary schools, it is their 'social technology'; schools could not function without reports, tests, exams and selection. High levels of anxiety are important for maintaining discipline according to Shaw. Of course, teachers have their own fears, which impact on their behaviours and approaches to pupils and teaching. Teachers, like their pupils, are under tremendous pressure to perform, and their own successes and failures are scrutinised and made public. Teachers and schools are judged on, amongst other things, the exam results of their pupils. So, in a system where results are publicised through league tables, and league table positions influence parents' choices of schools for their children (which in turn has implications for a school's funding), and where 'failing' schools are closed, the stakes for teachers are very high. Thus, the fears of teachers and pupils are multi-layered and intersect in complex ways.

## **What can teachers do?**

Drawing on goal theory, self-worth theory and empirical data I have argued that academic performance and standards discourses encourage self-worth protection strategies amongst some students. Students adopt these defensive strategies because, when faced with pressures to attain results in a climate where so much value is attached to academic ability (measured by academic 'success'), many pupils fear failing academically and being regarded as academically deficient. These defensive strategies include, amongst others, procrastination, intentional withdrawal of effort, rejection of academic work, and disruptive behaviours; all of which provide excuses for academic 'failure' that deflect attention away from a lack of ability. So they do not help students to avoid academic failure – in the long-term they may actually make failure more likely – but they protect students against the most damaging implications of academic failure, that is, that they lack ability. In the short-term these defensive strategies can feel like 'friends' because of their academic self-protective advantages (Martin and Marsh, 2003); but in the long-term they are almost always 'maladaptive' in terms of educational experiences and results. So what can we do?

The educational climate needs to shift from a performance climate in which pupils fear academic failure and its implications, to one where pupils feel safe to experiment with learning. I am not suggesting that all assessment is 'bad'; assessment has numerous benefits (Pollard, 2005). Neither am I suggesting that children should not experience 'failure'. In the right context 'failure' (although it may need to be reconceptualised) can have positive consequences. As Covington (1998: 215) argues: 'failure is interesting partly for the fact that successful thinkers actually make more mistakes than those who give up easily and thereby preserve their unblemished record of mediocrity, and for the facts that mistakes can usually be set right by trying again.' Students who are learning-goal oriented are far more likely than students who are performance-goal oriented to see 'failure' in positive terms: as a learning opportunity, a challenge to be navigated. But to encourage this view of 'failure' amongst all students would involve significant educational change, both at the level of policy and classroom practice.

### ***Policy-level strategies***

A competitive, performance climate in education is at the root of many of the problems discussed in this paper. Arguably if we want to reduce defensive behaviours we need to reduce competition and shift the climate in schools from a performance-oriented one to a learning-oriented one (ideally, both academically and socially). Clearly, this is much easier said than done, and I am not offering a solution; but certainly in academic terms, reducing the amount of high-stakes testing in schools would be a substantial step in the right direction. In a nutshell, if there is to be high-stakes testing, the tests should be designed to foster learning-goals by rewarding understanding, rather than encourage performance-goals by rewarding memory and 'right answers'.

### ***Classroom-level changes***

A key difficulty for teachers and schools wanting to improve the learning contexts for their students is that, to a large extent, many of the problems are externally imposed and there is little that teachers can do to counter them. In other words, many teachers regard the system as problematic, and feel frustrated and powerless within it. It is crucial that we

recognise that many current problems are generated by the way the education system is organised and operates, and avoid approaches that 'blame the individual'. I critique a 'blame the individual' approach - which is sometimes implied by motivation researchers and theorists - and I argued that most motivation theorists need to engage more fully and critically with the broader educational framework and discourses that shape individual actions.

However, whilst such macro-level engagement is essential, it does little, in the short-term, to help the individual classroom teacher or school who may be looking for recommendations for practice. So, without suggesting that teachers are to blame for the faults of the system, it is legitimate to ask whether there are things that teachers can do on a day-to-day basis to make the best of a far-from-perfect system. Can teachers work at the classroom level to discourage a performance-goal culture and build a learning-goal culture? I suggest that the answer to this question is a tentative yes. Tentative in the sense that whilst it is not possible to provide a formula for building a learning goal classroom structure (a classroom that makes learning or performance goals salient), it is possible to say what factors are likely to encourage one. Furthermore, it is possible to state with even more certainty what factors promote performance-goal classroom climates and so should be avoided.

#### *Encouraging safe, co-operative learning environments*

Andrew Martin (2003: 28) highlights the importance of co-operative learning environments, arguing that 'it is important to reduce students' fear of failure by developing a class and school climate of cooperation, allowing students to make and learn from mistakes, and showing students that their worth as a person is independent of their academic achievement.' Yet, as we have seen, many classroom practices promote competitive climates where there are 'winners' and 'losers'; publicly announcing test results is one of those practices. Publicly announcing test results to encourage relative ability social comparisons was common in the schools in my research (although it was more common in some than others). This practice was disliked by most pupils and was seen to add to the pressure of the test. It created anxiety and, in some cases, contributed to defensive posturing. Overall, publicly announcing results fosters a classroom performance structure – it reinforces the importance of relative performance levels. An easy step for teachers to take in order to move away from a performance classroom climate is to avoid public relative ability social comparisons, and to discourage them amongst pupils.

I realise that students find other ways to undertake relative ability social comparisons of grades after tests. Some pupils actively seek out the results of some classmates, and that this prompts some students to deliberately hide their results from peers and if necessary, lie about poor marks. So moving away from a system whereby teachers publicly announce results will not stop grade comparisons, but it would mean that teachers are not encouraging or endorsing them in the same way that they are with a public results system.

Anderman et al. (2002) point out that whilst relative ability social comparisons can be problematic, some informational comparisons can be useful. So, for example, teachers might highlight the features of a particularly good piece of work, or point to a strategy that was particularly effective in approaching a problem. These strategies are not about

highlighting differences in grades between students, nor about fostering competition. Rather, they are about sharing good practice and ideas. They are about helping to generate the sort of co-operation between students that can foster new approaches and strategies for learning and understanding. Fostering student co-operation rather than competition is crucial for reducing fears of failure; students need to feel that they are in an environment that is safe enough for them to explore their understandings. They need the time and (safe) space to discuss their learning, to do what Younger and Warrington (2005) refer to as: talking themselves into understanding. In such environments setbacks are not discouraged, but are presented as valuable opportunities to learn and develop (Midgley et al., 2001). A number of other researchers have highlighted the need for teachers to create 'safe' classroom environments in which students co-operate rather than compete. For example, Lucey et al. (2003: 55) warn against teachers providing space for confident students to compete and attempt to demonstrate their ability:

We would suggest that teachers need to be wary of letting whole class sessions become a public arena for confident children, predominantly boys, to demonstrate their autonomy and creativity, and in which less confident children, mainly girls, dread being exposed. . . . pauses for group discussion may take the spotlight off individual performance; allowing less confident children to report the conclusions of their group, rather than their own answers.

Unfortunately, at the moment there is more evidence that schools are increasing competition than reducing it. In the context of concerns in many countries about boys' alleged 'underachievement', Younger and Warrington (2005: 67) point out: 'it has become conventional wisdom that boys respond to and benefit from competition rather than collaboration, and that pedagogies which emphasise competitive activities will engage and motivate boys more readily.' Based on this conventional wisdom that boys like and benefit from competition, some schools have deliberately increased competition in the classroom in an attempt to raise boys' attainment levels (see, for example, Swan, 1998)<sup>v</sup>. However, given that the pressures of competition are at the root of defensive behaviour, this strategy is likely to exacerbate the adoption of defensive strategies on the part of the boys and girls in these classes. Covington and Manheim Teel (1996: 6) argue that there is a need to reduce competition in schools if defensive behaviours are to be reduced. Indeed, they argue that learning is the first casualty in highly competitive school environments and that 'when fear is the stimulus, there are few winners in the learning game. And even the winners may pay a heavy price'.

### *Praising effort not intelligence*

Praising children for their achievements is widely perceived to be beneficial; the benefits of it are largely unquestioned and generally regarded as 'common sense'. However, Dweck (2000) argues that praising achievement is problematic, and her case, and the evidence she presents to support it, are persuasive. Her research over many years, in a series of different studies with a diverse range of students, has shown that praise for achievements are related to a range of negative, albeit unintended, consequences. Overall, Dweck argues that praise

for intelligence for a job well done has a host of drawbacks. First, she demonstrated that this type of praise can make children sacrifice learning by shying away from challenging tasks that could jeopardize this positive judgement of their intelligence. Instead, they gravitate towards easier tasks that reaffirm the view that they are clever. Second, she found that intelligence praise makes students so oriented towards performance goals that they will lie about failure. This was relatively common amongst interviewees in my research. Third, it also makes students vulnerable to failure so that after they encountered a setback their persistence and their enjoyment dwindled, their performance suffered and their faith in their ability plummeted. Fourth, it cultivates the view that intelligence is fixed rather than incremental, which means that students are more likely to give up, rather than try harder, when they encounter failure.

By contrast, Dweck argues that effort praise promotes a host of desirable outcomes. First, effort praise leads to learning goals. Second, it promotes the view that challenge promotes learning. In other words, it is more likely to encourage persistence in the face of a set back. Third, effort praise encourages the view that intelligence is malleable and developed through effort, rather than fixed.

Dweck's theory and research is interesting, and from a motivation point of view makes a lot of sense. She is not suggesting that pupils are not praised for their success, but that they are praised for the effort that went into it, and the strategies the students adopted, rather than for being 'clever'. In so doing, she argues that we can begin to chip away at the notion that effortless achievement is the ideal. For example, she raises the question of what teachers should do when there is no effort to praise: when a student has done something quickly, easily and perfectly. This, she argues, is a time when we are sorely tempted to give intelligence praise. But she suggests that instead the teacher should apologise for wasting their time with something that was not challenging enough for them to learn anything from. Dweck (2000: 121) argues that 'We should not make easy successes the pinnacle of accomplishment and we should not be teaching our children that low-effort products are what they should be most proud of. We should direct them to more profitable activities where their time will be better invested.' What is crucial to bear in mind about Dweck's suggestion is that it must be applied consistently. It is essential that teachers do not fall into the trap of praising some children for ability and others for effort, or those praised for effort will quickly assume that they are being praised for effort because they lack ability.

Adopting Dweck's strategy of praising effort is not, on its own, going to be sufficient for changing the classroom climate. However, in combination with other strategies it could be one step towards creating a co-operative and 'safe' environment in which pupils feel able to undertake challenges without the risk of being labelled as stupid.

## Conclusion

Imagine how we would go about designing an educational program if our purpose were to make students hate to learn. We would not involve them [students] in establishing the purpose of their class. We would require them to perform some impossible tasks – for example, to be perfect in everything they do. Third, when we discovered that the students were failing to master the impossible tasks, we would ridicule them and report

their mistakes, failures and shortcomings to their friends and relatives. (Krumboltz cited in Covington, 1998: 104)

By understanding more about motivation we can begin to understand why pupils behave as they do in what are complex settings. While this paper has focused mainly on academic motives, it is important also to consider social motives, which add even more complexity to the picture (see Jackson 2006; Jackson and Sherriff 2013). Unfortunately, the system outlined above shares many features of education systems today, certainly in England. Arguably, we need to challenge education systems that emphasise competition and attainment above learning and understanding. I've suggested in this paper that competitive, performance-oriented climates prompt fears of failure among many students which, in turn, may prompt a range of defensive strategies. Such defensive strategies impact negatively on the process and experience of learning. So, we need to look for models of education that offer alternative ways of teaching and learning: ones that are based on co-operation rather than competition, on understanding rather than rote learning, ones that are foster interest rather than fear. I hope this paper will stimulate interesting discussion about these issues at the conference.

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<sup>i</sup> In using the term 'performance-approach-oriented student' I am suggesting neither that goals are a feature of the individual nor that they are stable. Rather, I regard goals as fluid and dynamic. As Dweck (1996: 190) argues 'an event like failure, conflict, or rejection can elicit new goals (or change the relative values of existing goals)'.

<sup>ii</sup> Academic efficacy, also termed self-efficacy, refers to an individual's beliefs about their capacity to succeed on specific tasks, for example, a set of algebraic problems.

<sup>iii</sup> Self-handicapping involves an individual creating obstacles to successful performance on tasks that s/he considers important. For example, purposely getting drunk the night before an exam, or deliberately not studying for an exam, would constitute self-handicapping (Urdu and Midgley, 2001: 116).

<sup>iv</sup> Whilst self-worth and social-worth are conceptually different (self-worth relates principally to an individual's self-perceptions and social-worth relates principally to the individual's perceptions of what other people think of them), in practice it is often difficult to separate them. As such, some authors argue that self-worth and social-worth are inseparable and operate mutually in self-protective behaviour (Thompson, 1999: 23). I use the term self-worth to incorporate self-worth and social-worth.

<sup>v</sup> This approach has is problematic in that it relies on stereotypes about boys and treats boys as a homogeneous group.