Motivation, learning and togetherness

An introduction to Workshop 3 'Preventing early drop-out: Motivating the desire for ongoing education' with Noemi Katznelson

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Education has become a central experience of being young (Sørensen et al. 2013, Cuervo & Wyn 2011, Illeris et al. 2009, Pless 2009, Runfors 2008, Walther et al. 2006, Balvig 2006, Frønes & Brusdal 2000, Andersen 1997). But while education may be central, many teachers find that for young people at school the activity of learning is peripheral (Beck & Paulsen 2011). Young people talk of struggling to 'pull themselves together', of playing truant, of being late or of neglecting homework etc. (Pless & Hansen 2010, Hutters & Murning 2013, Stauber 2007). At the same time educationalists are concerned about increasing problems of drop-out from 'youth education and training' (AE-rådet 2011, Danmarks Statistik 2011) and about the fall in pupil well-being (DCUM 2010, Rasmussen & Due 2011) that can be seen not just in the Nordic countries (Nordahl et al. 2010, Skolverket 2007).

It is easy to ascribe these failures to a lack of motivation amongst young people, as though motivation were something they could choose to have more or less of, as an individual and 'quantitative' concept (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2007), and, indeed, as though all motivation was necessarily positive. Most often it is this understanding of motivation that is dominates in everyday parlance and in public debates about school and education, where the focus always seems to be on young people's lack of motivation.

The debate about pupil motivation is characterized, then, by 'deficit-thinking' (Ågård 2014), and the question is often framed as though the educational system should be 'doing something' about young people's lack of motivation. This way of thinking is not only common in everyday language but has had a central position in motivational theory and tends to impede discussion about what and where motivation is truly to be found and why it is generated in some contexts but not in others.

Motivation can more usefully be seen as a complex and differentiated phenomenon that arises in the interplay between young people/pupils and a given educational context (e.g. a classroom). Thinking like this shifts focus from a preconceived preoccupation with young people's (lack of) motivation to a more scientific exploration of the processes whereby students convert contexts of meaning framed by the school into a part of their own identity (Wenger 1998). Seeing motivation as a process that is dependent on context, one that arises when young people respond to encounters with educational settings, allows us to appreciate that motivation is ubiquitous, that all actions are motivated, that circumstances are as central in determining motivation as in demotivation or amotivation, and that all people can be motivated but that this happens in different ways, in different contexts.

> *If motivation is the result of 'an interplay between young people and an (educational) context, is it possible to be motivated in a social vacuum?*
> *If, as seems to be clear, motivation is not some innate characteristic but is generated, in part at least through social factors, which of these factors are most significant in a school context?*

A brief historical overview

During the first part of the 20th century, theories based on behaviorist thinking and individual psychology dominated theoretical views of motivation. Motivation was regarded as a result of award and punishment systems that altered behavior or as linked to stabile and enduring personality traits (Deckers 2005). Behavioral studies were increasingly challenged from the 1950's onwards by humanistic and cognitive approaches to motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2001, Ågård 2014, Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2007). In the 70's and 80's, the psychologists Richard M. Ryan & Edward L. Deci argued that motivation cannot solely be seen as a result of biological processes or external influences (Ryan & Deci 2000). Instead motivation should be understood as being linked to basic human needs with roots in cognitive functions.

They pointed to three basic human needs: 1) to experience mastery and control of a given outcome, 2) to engage, be in contact with and care for others, and 3) to control one's own life in accordance with one's own sense of self. These three underlying needs form the basis for three motivational drives: a) towards competences, b) towards relatedness, and c) towards

self-determination/autonomy. If these needs are not met and rewarded in a given context, then the individual's motivation for participation will dwindle. Using this approach to motivation, Ryan & Deci divide motivation into two qualitatively different forms of motivation (Ryan & Deci 2008), *extrinsic* motivation, where motivation is dependent on an extrinsic goal and *intrinsic* motivation, where the pupil engages in an activity for its own sake. They saw the two forms of motivation as influencing learning processes in markedly different ways, in that they address basic human needs differently. If the school system is to promote learning at a 'higher' and more durable level, it must, according to Deci & Ryan, aim to develop pupils' intrinsic motivation and with it the immersion and wonderment that accompany it.

> *If social relatedness, as Ryan & Deci claim, is a basic human need, then could establishing togetherness in the classroom not be a key to (intrinsic) class motivation?*
> *If so, does that mean that creating togetherness should be regarded as a priority, as the precondition evev for any form of intrinsic motivation – and therefore should be in place prior to teaching subject matter?*

Over the past decades theories of motivation have refined or moved on from this somewhat bilateral approach to look beyond the subject being motivated, the pupil, and the object of motivation, the activity. There has been increasing focus on situation, on the social context of learning, on the experience and self-efficacy of the pupil, on self-determination and autonomy, on 'amotivation' (Deci & Ryan 1985), on 'self-guides' (Markus & Nurius 1986, Oyserman & James 2009, Dörnyei 2009) and so on.

If we understand motivation as differentiated, contextual and contingent, we can direct our focus at variations in motivation that are closely linked to the interaction between the experiences and motives the pupils bring to school with them and the school context they are involved in. Central to this, of course, is the social context of the school. Motivation is now no longer an individual quality or expression of need but becomes instead a constellation of factors in an interplay between what pupils bring with them, what they are motivated towards, how they are motivated and under what circumstances. Some of these meaning-making processes in pupils and, by extension, some of their motives for engaging/not-

engaging in school work will be individual, while others are part of a shared culture (Kaplan et al 2002). Such shared cultures are forms of togetherness and they can support or undermine motivation at school.

One area that has appealed to theorists involves theories of achievement and goal-orientation that focus on young people's motives for participation (or non-participation) in schoolwork (Nicholls 1983, Dweck 1999, Kaplan et al. 2002). Here it is common to distinguish between two overall goal orientations: performance goals and learning goals. Performance goals are characterized by a focus on social comparison, on doing well (or better) than your peers, whereas learning goals (Senko et al. 2011, Jackson 2006) involve increasing understanding and learning new skills as part of a subjective learning process.

Performance goals and learning goals encourage distinctively different learning strategies. For a pupil using a learning goal strategy, efforts made to solve an assignment will be viewed as positive and necessary in order to develop and learn more (Skaalvik 2007). Difficulties need not be seen as set-backs, for the focus will be on learning from them – and 'doing better next time' (ibid. :51). Pupils oriented towards performance goals, on the other hand, will be focused on how others view them and on whether their performance meets up to the teacher's expectations. Performance goals can undermine motivation if they reduce self-worth and weaken the will to meet up to challenges and defeats (Covington 1984). Learning orientation on the other hand is often singled out as what Jackson terms *'…the darling of motivation researchers'* (Jackson 2006:26).

While the distinction between both these goal-orientations is recognized as being important to an understanding of young people's motivation and participation in school, research has focused primarily on academic goal orientations, while social goals (i.e. achieving social status among peers) have received far less attention (Winther-Lindqvist 2010, Jackson 2006, Kaplan 2004).

> *How do performance goal motivation and learning motivation relate to togetherness?*

Can togetherness add a cooperative element to performance goal motivation? Can learning motivation be facilitated by encouraging togetherness as a classroom culture?

Levels of motivation

Recently, greater attention has been paid to the various qualities of motivation – its direction, its intensity, its duration. This latter quality requires what is sometimes now termed 'grit', a quality that some regard as a 'personality trait' (von Culin, Tsukayama & Duckworth 2014) but that others see as being formed by situations in which the young person has experience of success and mastery (Bandura 1993). It does seem to be the case that young people who develop a belief in their own abilities and an expectation that they can master given tasks at school will typically be more motivated to engage in new assignments than young people who have low self-expectations in regard to handling school assignments or whose negative experiences have produced a fear of failure (Hutters & Lundby 2014:19-20, Jackson 2006, Covington 1984). But it also seems to be the case that, while success may be a determining factor for some, for many it is the appearance of success in the form of recognition from peers that generates the highest level of motivation. And if a peer group sees success at school as social failure, then there is a clear motivational conflict.

Teachers are generally aware that it is peer group assessment that carries the greatest potential for generating or undermining self-efficacy. How can togetherness affect peer group attitudes?

Is it not the case that the primary and most significant context for pupils at school is not the school itself but the social environments in which they move within it? How can the school <u>as a whole</u> become the determining social environment?

Increasingly, we are understanding motivation as a complex phenomenon that arises in an interplay between a variety of factors, some personal, some interpersonal, some accidental, some circumstantial. It is, in other words, as culturally and subjectively situated. It seems clear that past experience does, indeed, form our sense of what we can and cannot master, and that this is an important motivational factor. It is, however, also clear that we form

communities of self in our interactions with our environment, and that, particularly perhaps for young people, classroom cultures and pressure to social conformity can develop forms of togetherness that have a powerful motivational pull.

The extensive research in recent years carried out by the Centre for Youth Research at Aalborg University has led to the recent publication of *Unges motivation i udskolingen*[1] (Young people's motivation on leaving school) by Mette Pless, Noemi Katznelson, Peder Hjort-Madsen & Anne Mette W. Nielsen, University of Aalborg Press, CeFU 2015 and to the development of models of motivational orientation. These are not intended in any way to present a 'unified theory' but aim to encourage reflection and debate. Noemi Katznelson from the centre will be referring to these models in her workshop, and discussing their five motivational orientations with reference to early drop-out:

> a) a simple desire to learn and acquire knowledge
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> b) a desire to perform to maintain a position in class and recognition outside
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> c) a desire to master a set of skills
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> d) a desire to engage with others
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> e) a desire for personal involvement

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[1] http://www.cefu.dk/emner/forskning-publikationer/alle-publikationer/unges-motivation-i-udskolingen-et-bidrag-til-teori-og-praksis-om-unges-lyst-til-laering-i-og-udenfor-skolen.aspx