

# **The Relation between Children's Intrinsic Motivation and Academic Success**

Senior Capstone

Brian Donahue

April 26, 2020

**Abstract**

The information in this study depicts how intrinsic motivation is valuable for early childhood education. Children who are self-motivated are more likely to understand educational concepts than less motivated children. This research paper will also argue that intrinsic motivation can breed higher levels of academic success. The right parental guidance will enhance a child's intrinsic motivation . When parents focus on a child's creativity instead of critiquing ability, children are more likely to excel academically. Rewarding a child for good grades can be a factor for building academic extrinsic motivation. These children will then focus on completing a task not because they enjoy it, but rather because they know they will receive something in return. Conversely, praising a child's creativity can incite a positive outlook on education. In other parts of the world, like China, children have more freedom for creativity in their education. Teachers also play an important role in intrinsic motivation by allowing children to self-evaluate themselves. The overall academic success of students in these countries exceeds other areas where extrinsic motivation is valued. This paper will also show the effects of competition in education. Competition between students can damage intrinsic motivation and the ability to self-evaluate. However, competing as a team can lead students to find more enjoyment in an activity and result in higher performance levels.

In life, what is your motivation for getting up in the morning? Like anyone else I have asked myself this question multiple times. Throughout middle school and high school I went to a charter school. Some argue that it's a better route for education because charter schools tend to put more pressure on students to prepare for college. Throughout those years, I do have many fond memories. With that being said, there have been times where I've wondered if I was keeping up with my studies for myself, or to please other people. With motivation, there is a difference between extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is when you are motivated by other aspects rather than what you initially want. Intrinsic motivation is when you are driven by your own self interests.

For my senior capstone, I chose to focus on intrinsic motivation. Growing up I was never taught much about college. Outside of continuing to improve myself academically, I didn't know what college to choose, how to apply to schools, and I lacked the motivation to figure those things out. All I knew was ever since I was fourteen I wanted to make music. Seeing other artists succeed at a young age while avoiding college made me believe that I didn't even need to pursue a higher education. My plan was to create music and pursue my dreams. However, during my senior year of high school, my father put pressure on me to research colleges in New York. Not knowing how to play an instrument, and maintaining average grades narrowed the colleges I could choose from. Luckily, I was accepted to a college near my father's house. I was eventually persuaded to pursue a degree in communications as it would "open a lot of doors" for a career in any field.

This is what got me thinking, or should I say motivated for understanding how intrinsic motivation can have an effect on academics. Due to being more extrinsically motivated for success I chose to enroll in a degree for communications. I believed it would be helpful to understand how to best represent myself in the world of media where effective communication drives success. I still wanted to be a recording artist. During my time at Purchase College, I was fortunate to be hired as a sound technician for a Church in White Plains. My fall back was to become a live sound technician. I planned to look for positions in the field of live sound that required a degree in communications. During my college tenure, I was more extrinsically motivated to secure my backup plan. Looking back I always wondered what would have happened if I kept my motivation focused on my music instead of my backup plan.

I wanted to look for the correlation between success in academics and intrinsic motivation. Within most public schools, kids find their motivation through the pressure placed on them by their teachers and parents. Some may argue that kids can excel in “open classrooms”. Open classrooms are classes composed of many students with different skill sets learning together creatively. In these classes teachers act more as a guide for education rather than a dictated force. Before focusing on my research, I wanted to see how intrinsic motivation related to success in academics. In the article “If I Were Secretary of Education: A Focus on Intrinsic Motivation and Creativity in the Classroom” the argument is made that children who are intrinsically motivated find success later in life.

The article argues that, "... (students in) open classrooms were found to be more creative and scored higher on preference for novelty and change than did their more traditionally schooled peers" (Hennessy, 2015, p188). This can be understood within the idea of intrinsic motivation. The kids in the open classroom were more successful as they scored higher in a self-motivated environment. Author Hennessy brings up another point to support intrinsic motivation. She exclaims "... teachers and students in those learning environments had the freedom to immerse themselves in projects and topics that they found interesting and meaningful" (Hennessy, p190). I remember I used to be frustrated at the material I was forced to understand as it did not pique my interest. I want to discover whether or not intrinsic motivation is necessary for a successful future.

This paper will show the extent to which intrinsic motivation affects a child's academic success. In most public and private middle schools, children have been taught at a young age to overstress themselves in pursuit of high academics. They have been told how important academics are for their schools to stay in business. This has taken all creativity away from students in order to push the agenda of core academics to the forefront. Students are considered important to the schools, but only as a means of high test scores. Within my research, I plan to discover how intrinsic motivation can bring back creativity in students that's necessary for their development and success in all academic fields.

To start, I went to the Purchase College library database to find anything I could on intrinsic motivation. I wasn't sure what aspect I should focus on for my Capstone project. Eventually, I came across some articles relating intrinsic motivation to

education. This seemed intriguing to me since as i've mentioned, my life as a student has been extrinsically motivated. I found our databases to be extremely helpful for locating relevant and academically researched sources. The information I found was adequate, but I hoped with more time I could dive into methods that could help kids develop intrinsic motivation for academics.

### **Literature Review**

Many scholars have done research to understand the importance of intrinsic motivation on early level education. Academic intrinsic motivation can be seen as the gratification of learning and the drive for mastery of material (Gottfried, 1999). Having a strong grasp of intrinsic motivation at an early age can help children show higher levels of both understanding and interest in the material they're taught (Hennessey, 2015). As many works lead to the benefits of intrinsic motivation, there are still little known facts for its effects outside western views (Hennessey, 2015). Some connections from the studies I found showed how intrinsic motivation can relate to academic success, parental engagement and increased reward factors.

### **Academic Success**

#### **Development**

Intrinsic motivation can help further develop a child's understanding of academic material taught in early education. Intrinsic motivation should begin to develop before the age of 9 because as kids age, intrinsic motivation will guide a child's success in

“mastery, curiosity, and persistence” in academics (Gottfried, 2001). One hypothesis argues that a foundation of Intrinsic motivation at an early age can remain from middle school through high school (Fleming & Gottfried, 2001). This leads to a higher level of academic success. Specifically, within researched “verbal and math models”, intrinsic motivation seemed to enhance students' growth and success in academics (Fleming & Gottfried, 2001). The benefits of Intrinsic motivation expresses itself even further through childhood education.

### **Benefits**

Academically, intrinsic motivation both enhances classroom success and increases a child's appreciation for learning and drive. Intrinsic motivation not only supports success and academics, but also allows students to develop a broader outlook on their academics (Fleming & Gottfried, 2001). The drop out rates for intrinsically motivated children were drastically less than the rates of those children without it (Froiland, Oros, Smith & Hirschert, 2012). Studies have also shown how the “perception” of school is much more favorable for students who achieve greater levels of academic success (Gordeeva, Pshenichnikov, Sidneva, Sychev, 2018). Intrinsic motivation can also enhance children's theoretical thinking, problem solving skills and their ability to learn (Gordeeva, Pshenichnikov, Sidneva, Sychev, 2018). As children have a better outlook on their academics, they will generally find more academic success.

### **Parental Engagement & Praise Factor**

#### **Positives**

The amount of parental engagement in education can have different effects on a child's intrinsic motivation. There have been instances where praise could potentially aid intrinsic motivation (Froiland, Oros, Smith & Hirschert, 2012). One example is praising creativity. The act of praising creativity instead of praising achievement positively impacted a handful of student's intrinsic motivation (Froiland, Oros, Smith & Hirschert, 2012). The "early provision" of parents taking part in their children's academics by encouragement also improved children's intrinsic motivation (Gottfried, 1990). Through acts of encouragement, support of children's curiosity, and a focus on persistence vs. mastery from a child's parents, intrinsic motivation in children grew with abundance (Gottfried & Flemming, 1994).

### **Negatives**

Some studies have shown that this praise factor can also incite instances that are detrimental to intrinsic motivation. Parental intrusion on education, especially when the child is observed by a parent, can decrease intrinsic motivation, resulting in poorer academic performance (Greene & Lepper, 1975). Evidence also suggests that when children are not under this heavy influence by their parents, they are more attentive and enjoy their education more (Gordeeva, Pshenichnikov, Sidneva, Sychev, 2018). When parents projected extrinsic motivations onto children, like creating rewards for good work, there were far greater negative effects on motivation and academic achievement (Gottfried & Flemming, 1994). These studies conclude that both parental overbearance and rewarding normal expectations negatively impact intrinsic motivation.

## **Reward Factor**

### **Physical Rewards**

Some parents may influence intrinsic motivation by providing a physical reward for completing materials. When children understand that they will be given a reward for completing work, they tend to work harder (Greene & Lepper, 1975). On the other hand, this encourages more extrinsic motivation. When a child expects a reward for participating, their intrinsic motivation in the activity dropped significantly along with their interest (Green & Lepper, 1975). Extrinsic rewards have to matter for self determination and competence in order to be effective for building intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). If any extrinsic motivators encourage intrinsic motivation, it would have to be positive feedback for successfully completing a task.

### **Positive Feedback**

Verbal rewards as extrinsic motivators, as in complements, tend to be more beneficial to intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Positive feedback is also found to influence “competence” which enhances intrinsic motivation (Corpus, Love-Geiger & Ogle, 2006). Once study noted that when children were given the task of solving puzzles, positive feedback made the children complete this task with more confidence (Corpus, Love-Geiger & Ogle, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

In my findings for the effects of intrinsic motivation at a young age, studies have shown that intrinsic motivation can positively influence academics. Research supports

how intrinsic motivation can create a better environment for early level education and boost a child's drive to learn. The research also shows how praising effort and creativity can improve intrinsic motivation. In my home, we call this "praising the process".

My findings consisted of students in our western world from our western view, which makes me question the relationship between intrinsic motivation and academic success for children in other parts of the world. I plan to further research how intrinsic motivation affects children's education in other parts of the world. Using more data, I could determine if the benefits still outway the negatives, as happens in the western world. I don't want to be held to the information only available to the part of the world I live in. If people are to address childhood education by observing my findings, I want to be certain I gather observations from every outlook, in every part of the world. I want to discover whether or not education should encourage intrinsic motivation both here and abroad.

### **Methodology**

When conducting research relating to the benefits of intrinsic motivation on elementary school children, it's difficult to understand its overall effects. Many of the research conducted stems from specific groups of children and cannot apply to all educational outlets. The information listed prior doesn't hold up against situations outside of the United States. If one was to understand fully how intrinsic motivation affects elementary school children, they must understand many aspects. Using extended scholarly research, I intend to shed more light upon other aspects involving intrinsic motivation in early level education. When deciding what's the best outlook for a

child's education, an understanding of multiple scenarios will aid in gaining better knowledge for the information.

### **Materials**

For my participation in the overall subject, I decided to use extended library research. Library research can be defined as a "...step-by-step process used to gather information in order to write a paper, create a presentation, or complete a project" (Rasmuson). My research stemmed from articles found online. Using the Purchase College database, I found more journal articles relating to intrinsic motivation and early level education.

### **Procedure**

Within every article, the information I gathered was then paraphrased and put into a document in order to sort into categories. From my primary research, I have found multiple examples of how intrinsic motivation in education works in the western part of the world. I need to discover more about how it is beneficial to other parts of the world. While researching the parental factor on motivation, I was unable to understand how teachers played a role in creating these motivations. That drove me to discover the importance of a teacher's pedagogical approach on student motivation. I also researched competition between children, I found that competition can work both for and against self-motivation.

## **Results**

### **Education around the world**

Within the entire world, lifestyle and education varies. When compared to schools in China, American children are more susceptible for feeling “controlled” in their educational environment (Chan, Lam, Zhou, 2012). From this study, school children in China feel more free to learn on their own without feeling constricted like in North American children (Chan, Lam, Zhou, 2012). However in another study, it seems as though Americans have more freedom for intrinsic motivation. In India, it is not uncommon for the parent to take a part in a child's life throughout adulthood. Whereas in North America, there is more of an emphasis to accomplish tasks on your own (Li, Rudy, Sheldon, 2015). In India, children had higher levels of intrinsic motivation formed from parental guidance more than in American children (Li, Rudy, Sheldon, 2015). From this study, there is a relation between parental engagement and intrinsic motivation in students from other parts of the world.

### **Teachers Role**

From scholarly sources, the main source of intrinsic motivation for students would be the teachers. One study shows how students are more successful with the perception of higher teacher care and a teacher’s support of their autonomy (Backes, Bieg, Mittag, 2011). In China, they support this theory by demonstrating how the positive relationship between teacher and student will enable children to be more

productive and motivated (Chan, Lam, Zhou, 2012). Creating self-evaluation can enable children to think more critically and even present the teacher with more information to get to know the student more and provide helpful ways to teach. (Bingham, Holbrook, Meyers, 2010).

### **Competition Between Students**

Due to the grading system within schools, children are often compared to one another. Within the research, an article discusses that in a “zero-sum” challenge, children who lost seemed to have decreased motivation and a lack of confidence (Gauvin, Halliwell, Vallerand, 1986). Even when there is no backlash to losing, students still tended to feel less confident when in competition with others. On the other hand, within cooperation to complete a contest, children are shown to have increased levels of enjoyment and performance (Harackiewicz, Tauer, 2003).

### **Discussion**

From primary research conducted on the topic of intrinsic motivation and elementary education, there were extended aspects that needed to be observed. From extended scholarly research, one can observe how the information aids to the credibility of the findings. As primarily observed, the main source material came from education within the United States. Having diverse sets of findings (especially with educational benefits) is necessary. From finding how intrinsic motivation creates academic success, the information leads to an understanding how parental figures play a role.

Highlighting parental engagement within children's academics in the United States, previous research has shown the detriment external rewards can have on intrinsic motivation. The extended library research observed the opposite effect that parental research had on children's motivation in India. (Li, Rudy, Sheldon, 2015). As compared to America, Eastern culture seems to have a stronger grasp on a parent's ability to teach motivation. Extended research shows how other countries have children with higher levels of intrinsic motivation when compared to schools in the United States.

Teachers play an important role when building intrinsic motivation. Within the literature review, examined studies demonstrated how open classrooms helped to aid children's academic success. Extended library research added to this claim by showcasing how intrinsic motivation in education stemmed from both the teachers and the school. The research showed that self-evaluation was an important factor for improving intrinsic motivation. One study that found how teacher support for autonomous learning was beneficial for building intrinsic motivation (Backes, Bieg, Mittag, 2011). Looking at positive relationships between teacher and student, one can conclude how important intrinsic motivation is to finding academic success.

Within the literature review, one can also observe how competition affects a child's intrinsic motivation. A study was conducted measuring intrinsic motivation by examining school children solving a puzzle. The students were given positive feedback during the process of solving the puzzle . Positive feedback was shown to enhance the children's intrinsic motivation (Corpus, Love-Geiger & Ogle, 2006). Looking at

competition, one could argue that it would negatively affect intrinsic motivation. When a child is compared to another child, it lowers their self-confidence (Gauvin, Halliwell, Vallerand, 1986). Secondary research enhances the idea that team-building strategies within competition increases a child's intrinsic motivation, thereby enhancing academic success.

### **Conclusion**

Intrinsic motivation benefits students' early level education. Research was conducted to showcase how success stems from self-motivation through primary sources. The information gathered aided the previous collected studies. Understanding how intrinsic motivation in early level education presents in other parts of the world is important when taking a stance on encouraging children to build reasons for learning. Primary source research shows how teachers play a part in creating intrinsic motivation in their students. Secondary sources also confirm how a more open classroom, self-evaluating teaching environment is beneficial to a child's academic success. All the sources lead back to the idea of intrinsic motivation. Early level education can act as a basis for academic success. Building a child's intrinsic motivation will incite more confidence, determination and overall success throughout their educational path.

### References

- 1) Bieg, S., Backes, S., & Mittag, W. (2011). The role of intrinsic motivation for teaching, teachers' care and autonomy support in students' self-determined motivation/Zur Rolle von intrinsischer Lehrmotivation, Lehrerfürsorglichkeit und Autonomieunterstützung für die selbstbestimmte Lernmotivation von Schülerinnen und Schülern. *Journal for Educational Research Online*, 3(1), 122–140. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1011324441/>
- 2) Bingham, G., Holbrook, T., & Meyers, L. (2010). Using Self-Assessments in Elementary Classrooms. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(5), 59–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171009100515>
- 3) Corpus, J. H., Ogle, C. M., & Love-geiger, K. (2006). The effects of social-comparison versus mastery praise on children's intrinsic motivation. *Motivation and Emotion*, 30(4), 333-343. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9039-4>
- 4) Deci, E., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(6), 627–668. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.6.627>
- 5) Elmer E. Rasmuson Library. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://library.uaf.edu/lr101-research-process>
- 6) Froiland, J. M., Oros, E., Smith, L., & Hirchert, T. (2012). Intrinsic motivation to learn:

the nexus between psychological health and academic success. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 16, 91+. Retrieved from

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A340943604/HRCA?u=purchase&sid=HRCA&xid=f2a2c2>

41

7) Gottfried, A. E., Fleming, J. S., & Gottfried, A. W. (2001). Continuity of academic intrinsic motivation from childhood through late adolescence: A longitudinal study.

*Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(1), 3-13.

doi:<http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2111/10.1037/0022-0663.93.1.3>

8) Gottfried, A. E. (1990). Academic intrinsic motivation in young elementary school children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(3), 525-538.

doi:<http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2111/10.1037/0022-0663.82.3.525>

9) Gottfried, A. E., Fleming, J. S., & Gottfried, A. W. (1994). Role of parental motivational practices in children's academic intrinsic motivation and achievement.

*Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86(1), 104-113.

doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.86.1.104>

10) Hennessey, B. A. (2015). If I were secretary of education: A focus on intrinsic motivation and creativity in the classroom. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 9(2), 187-192. doi:<http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2111/10.1037/aca0000012>

11) Lepper, M., & Greene, D. (1975). Turning Play into Work: Effects of Adult Surveillance and Extrinsic Rewards on Children's Intrinsic Motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31(3), 479–486. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076484>

12) Rudy, D., Sheldon, K., Li, Y., Kamble, S., Bi, X., & Palermo, F. (2015). Who Chooses Best? Explaining the Interactive Effect of Culture and Decision Maker on Children's Intrinsic Motivation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(4), 471–488. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022115572684>

13) Tamara O. Gordeeva, Oleg A. Sychev, Diana V. Pshenichnuk, & Anastasia N. Sidneva. (2018). Academic Motivation of Elementary School Children in Two Educational Approaches — Innovative and Traditional. *Psychology in Russia: State of Art*, 11(4), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.11621/pir.2018.0402>

14) Tauer, J. M., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2004). The effects of cooperation and competition on intrinsic motivation and performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(6), 849-861.  
doi:<http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2111/10.1037/0022-3514.86.6.849>

15) Vallerand, R., Gauvin, L., & Halliwell, W. (1986). Effects of Zero-Sum Competition on Children's Intrinsic Motivation and Perceived Competence. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 126(4), 465–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1986.9713614>

16) Zhou, N., Lam, S., & Chan, K. (2012). The Chinese classroom paradox: a cross-cultural comparison of teacher controlling behaviors.(Report)(Author abstract).

*Journal of Educational Psychology, 104(4).*