Male Adolescents’ Conceptions of Success, and Their Perceptions of Their School Experiences—A Case Study

Abstract: This case study research examined the perceptions of success and the school experiences of Form Three boys in a “prestige” school (School P) in an attempt to find out why, according to their teachers, they lacked motivation. Participants were 32 students representative of the target population of 105 Form Three students. The findings indicated that while students do value many of the behaviors and attitudes associated with personal and academic success, their experiences of school left some disappointed with either quality of teaching, teacher behavior and attitudes, or the school’s physical facilities. They all identified morals and values and social skills promoted by the school. Academic success was their main goal but there was a gap between that goal and teachers’ perceptions of student motivation to succeed.

Introduction and background

Adolescent male low academic performance has been the source of much concern internationally and more so in the lower socio-economic strata. However, low motivation in young male adolescents has also been a challenge to teachers in the school system globally. There are many factors that may contribute to low motivation among young male adolescents which may be physiological, psychological, or sociological in nature. Eccles and Midgley (1989) believe that it is only by understanding how these three areas are interrelated that we can better understand the special and unique nature of early adolescence.

In the early secondary school years students are in the phase of adolescent maturation where they establish their own beliefs, values, and life goals. Their constant self-appraisal of themselves is often characterized as being extremely self-conscious. Piagetian psychological theory proposes that during early adolescence (ages 11–13), a new self-image is developed due to their physiological changes. Adolescents normally begin to make use of their newly acquired skills of logical thinking and ability to make rational judgments. At mid-adolescence (ages 14–15), adolescents seek to function independently of their parents, and their emotions and intellectual capacities increase. They are prone to being adventuresome in activity and in thought. It is in this period that there is struggle with their own set of values versus the set established by figures of authority such as parents and teachers, and they begin to make their own decisions about educational and vocational pursuits. However, as “independent” as adolescents may appear to be, socio-structural factors do influence behavior, according to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; 1999).

According to Pintrich (2003) the term “motivation” is derived from the Latin verb movere, which means to move. He suggests that motivational theories attempt to answer questions about what gets individuals moving (energization) and toward what activities or tasks or direction (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Pintrich adds that Higgins and Kruglanski (2000) suggest that this is summed up in the central question of what individuals want and whether there are basic needs that define what people want.

Adolescent development and its attendant challenges in the academic sphere have received the attention of many researchers over recent decades (Higgins & Parsons, 1983; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Ames, 1992; Pajares & Urdan, 2002). There has been much