The Role of Emotion in Engagement, Coping, and the Development of Motivational Resilience

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Abstract

This chapter presents a perspective on emotions in the classroom that emphasizes their role in organizing students’ effort and commitment to academic work as well as their coping and persistence in the face of obstacles and setbacks. A developmental model of motivational resilience, based in self-determination theory, provides a foundation for identifying self-perceptions and interpersonal relationships that can act as resilience resources, focusing especially on how supportive relationships with teachers, along with authentic academic work and constructive interpretations of failure, can promote emotional investment in learning. Suggestions are made for teacher practices, with special attention to the role of teachers’ own emotions and motivational needs.
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Learning in school is hard work. It requires effort, determination, and persistence in the face of challenges and setbacks. In order to learn, students must focus their attention, listen to their teachers, and expend mental energy participating constructively on academic tasks. In fact, this kind of wholehearted (and “whole-headed”) participation in academic work is considered by many educators and researchers to be a necessary condition for learning, and a precondition for students’ long-term success in school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). As a result, researchers in education and psychology have long focused on the question of how to promote and sustain students’ engagement in academic work (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012).

The goal of this chapter is to present one set of answers to this question, grounded in self-determination theory (SDT; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985) and our research on motivational resilience (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Our work fits squarely within the study of motivation more generally, which is fundamentally concerned with psychological processes that underlie the energy (i.e., vigor, intensity), direction (i.e., guidance, purpose), and durability (i.e., tenacity, commitment) of human activity. For us, motivational resilience, at its core, entails constructive energy focused on the hard work of learning: effort, enthusiasm, interest, and commitment, sustained on a daily basis and robust even in the face of obstacles and setbacks. As a result, the process of motivational resilience includes the quality and intensity of students’ ongoing engagement as well as what happens to their engagement when they run into trouble: how they react and cope, and how they can maintain or recover their forward momentum, so they can re-engage with challenging academic tasks. We are also concerned with processes of motivational vulnerability, including the ways that students become disaffected, how disaffection
can trigger emotional reactivity and maladaptive coping when students encounter challenges or problems, and how these reactions can compromise students’ capacity to recover from setbacks, and so lead them to give up in the face of demanding academic work.

In this chapter, we focus especially on the role of students’ *emotions* in motivational resilience. Emotions provide both fuel and guidance for students’ behaviors, and they are markers of the quality of students’ participation and coping, informing researchers and teachers about whether students are building motivational resources or are at risk for burn-out. We examine how supportive relationships with teachers, along with authentic academic work and constructive interpretations of failure, can protect and promote children’s emotional investment in learning, eventually contributing to the development of durable academic assets during adolescence, such as a sense of ownership for one’s own progress in school. We make suggestions for teacher practices that support positive emotional and motivational dynamics in the classroom, and counteract student disaffection, with special attention to the important role that teachers’ own emotions and motivation play in the development of resilience.

**Self-determination Theory Model of Motivational Resilience**

The model of motivational resilience used in this chapter is based in SDT and organized around the assumption that all people come with fundamental organismic psychological needs, focused on competence, relatedness, and autonomy, akin to the physiological needs for hunger, thirst, and safety (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to this perspective, humans innately desire to seek out opportunities to fulfill these needs. They feel energized and joyful during interactions in which their needs are met, and frustrated and dejected when they are thwarted. Based on their history of experiences in particular settings, people construct views of themselves and the world in relation to these needs. Over time, these
expectations come to shape their participation in these settings.

**Three Fundamental Psychological Needs as Sources of Energy and Emotion**

As would be expected if they represent fundamental human commitments, the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy have long histories of study under a variety of labels. The programs of research organized around each need are described briefly in the next section, along with their applications to the study of motivation in schools.

**Competence.** In schools, the most obvious psychological need is for *competence*, which refers to the desire to experience oneself as effective in producing positive and preventing negative outcomes. Studied for many decades under labels such as self-efficacy, expectancies of success, perceived competence or ability, and sense of control (all of which can be considered facets of competence; Skinner, 1996), research has demonstrated that children who are convinced that they have what it takes to succeed in school show higher levels of effort, engagement, persistence, and cumulative academic performance (Elliot & Dweck, 2005). In the same vein, research on helplessness reveals that the experience of non-contingency and the lack of self-confidence can undermine students’ investment and performance, and can lead to passivity, sadness, and eventually, to giving up (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

To these large bodies of work, SDT adds the idea that concerns with control are ubiquitous and powerful because they represent the workings of underlying intrinsic needs for competence or effectance (White, 1959), which are present from birth (Watson, 1979) and are manifest as neurophysiological responses to opportunities for and losses of control (Maier & Watkins, 2005). According to this reasoning, perceptions of self-efficacy derive their potency in fueling emotion, engagement, and coping because they mark students’ cumulative experience of the extent to which school is a place where their needs for competence can (or cannot) be met.
**Relatedness.** The need for relatedness has been studied most thoroughly by attachment researchers, who posit that infants are born with biobehavioral predispositions to seek proximity and derive comfort from their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969/1973). Apparent across the life span (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the need for relatedness has only recently been studied as a force in schools, where students’ sense of belonging – that is, of feeling welcome and treated like valued members of a learning community – has been shown to predict their engagement, self-esteem, achievement, and psychological and behavioral functioning (Osterman, 2000; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). According to SDT, a sense of relatedness is not simply a self-perception, but instead comprises a compelling conviction about whether school (or specific teachers and peers) can serve as a “secure base,” a place where one feels “at home,” embodied by people who are dependable sources of support in times of trouble. If students feel like unwelcome “outsiders,” they will be alienated from school and may seek to fulfill their relatedness needs elsewhere.

**Autonomy.** Studied now for over 40 years, the need for autonomy reflects the human desire to be the author of one’s own actions, to freely express one’s genuine preferences, and to think and act from one’s true self (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Of the three needs, this one seems to be the most controversial, sometimes accused of representing a Western predilection, but it also seems to be the one that students most consistently report as being thwarted by the demands and pressures of teachers and schools (Reeve, 2009). Reflection upon how this need might manifest during infancy, prior to any possible socialization, suggests that even newborns a few minutes old have access to their genuine preferences, and are motivated to express them (loudly). The clearest evidence of the importance of autonomy in schools comes from observational and experimental research documenting that teacher autonomy support influences student engagement, enthusiasm, motivation, and deep learning (Su & Reeve, 2011).
Needs as a Source of Energy and Emotion

The notion that humans inherently seek out and enthusiastically engage in activities that fulfill these three needs, and naturally feel dejected, helpless, and frustrated when these needs are thwarted, suggests that intrinsic motives are the origin of a deep source of energy, invigoration, and emotion. When students are given opportunities to fulfill their needs in school, they should be eager to participate and, when they do, should feel energizing emotions, such as joy, interest, curiosity, and excitement about the academic tasks they undertake. When their needs are unfulfilled, students should be passive and bored; and when needs are actively obstructed, students may experience vigorous negative emotions, such as anger and anxiety. According to SDT, students are not socialized to these reactions. Needs comprise intrinsic wellsprings of energy and emotion available to all students. They are always in play, for better or for worse, and can be supported intentionally by thoughtful teaching and sound educational practices.

The general model of motivation postulated by SDT is organized around these three needs (see Figure 1). Students’ histories of experiences with school, including their interactions with parents, teachers, and peers who support or undermine their needs, cumulatively shape their academic identities, or their personal convictions about whether they truly belong in school (relatedness), have what it takes to succeed (competence), and genuinely endorse the goals and values of schooling (autonomy). These self-system processes, along with the nature of the academic work students are given (i.e., whether it is authentic, relevant, purposeful, and important) are the proximal predictors of students’ motivational resilience (or vulnerability), including their engagement, coping, and re-engagement. These components of resilience, each of which contains emotions as essential constituents, are in turn necessary conditions for students’ continued learning, development, and long-term success in school.
Motivational Resilience: Engagement, Coping, and Re-engagement

In this model, the processes of motivational resilience include students’ engagement, coping, and re-engagement with challenging tasks (see Figure 1). The key idea is that students’ encounters with everyday obstacles and setbacks in school can exert a downward pressure on their motivation. When students are highly engaged, they are not only less affected by these stressful episodes, but also have access to more constructive coping strategies (such as strategizing or help-seeking), leading to increased persistence and re-engagement with difficult academic material. In contrast, students who are disaffected may become even more discouraged in the face of problems, leaving them prone to utilize more maladaptive coping strategies (such as concealment or blaming others) that, in turn, make it more likely that they will give up.

Emotion as Central to Motivational Resilience

As depicted in Figure 2, emotions are embedded in all the components of motivational resilience. Engagement, coping, and re-engagement all represent “patterns of action” that combine behaviors (i.e., motor responses) with emotions, attention, and intentions into goal-directed, emotion-laden functional packages (Brandstätter, 2006). According to this perspective, goals and emotions energize and direct attention and behavior, and it is this amalgam – these actions – that reflect an individual’s motivation. Examples of such actions are “approach” (which depicts positive, interested, focused movement toward interactions with a person, object, or event) or “flight” (which captures fearful, energized movement away from interactions). Action theorists argue that the natural unit of analysis for conceptualizing transactions between people and their social contexts are “actions,” and that it is individuals’ actions (and not behaviors) to which social contexts respond (Brandstätter, 2006). The next sections consider how emotions participate in each of the components of motivational resilience.
Engagement and Disaffection as Ongoing Motivated Actions

Engagement and disaffection, as we use the concepts, include emotion as part of their core definitions (Reeve, 2012; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). The behavioral dimension of engagement involves effort, exertion, persistence, and determination; emotional or affective engagement encompasses enthusiasm, enjoyment, interest, fun, and satisfaction. Behavioral disaffection comprises physical withdrawal of effort, such as passivity or avoidance as well as their mental counterparts, such as inattention or daydreaming. Emotional disaffection includes withdrawal based on anxiety, boredom, frustration, or apathy.

These definitions differ from other conceptualizations in which “emotional engagement” is couched in terms of identification with school (Voekl, 1997) or feelings of connectedness (Fredricks et al., 2004). The emotional features of engagement depicted in our conceptualization are labeled “activity-focused positive activating emotions” by emotion researchers (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012), and the emotional features of disaffection are labeled “activity-focused negative activating” and “de-activating” emotions. In our own studies, as suggested by emotion researchers, we have found that these emotions seem to fuel and direct engaged and disaffected behaviors (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008).

Coping as Action Regulation under Stress

Like other developmentalists, we view coping as an adaptive self-regulatory process that involves the management of complex actions under stress (Compas, 2009; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). In challenging situations, multiple facets of action, including behavior, attention, emotion, and physiological reactions, are typically activated, so that children need to coordinate and sequence these (sometimes competing) action tendencies, or stress reactivity will overwhelm regulation (Compas, Salzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 1999).
The role of emotion in motivational resilience is seen most clearly in the study of emotional reactivity in the face of stress, in which children’s coping and emotion regulation are shaped by the intensity of their initial negative emotional reactions to stressful events. Consistent with decades of work on emotion regulation (Jacobs & Gross, in press), research on academic coping has found that, when students show high levels of distress, it is more difficult for them to cope constructively with stressful academic events in school. For example, in one study of third to fifth graders, students’ initial emotional reactions to academic stressors predicted changes in their subsequent coping across the school year, with students who reported high distress reactions in fall showing decreases in the use of constructive coping and an increasing reliance on maladaptive coping as the year progressed (Skinner, Pitzer, & Steele, in prep-b).

**Appraisals of Personal Resources and Liabilities**

Important predictors of students’ emotional reactivity and coping are their appraisals of the meaning of stressful encounters. The motivational model, not surprisingly, posits that students’ appraisals (or self-systems) of relatedness, competence, and autonomy act as resources for emotional equanimity and constructive coping. That is, students who feel high levels of connection to others in the school setting (relatedness), academic self-efficacy (competence), and personal investment in learning (autonomy) are more likely to maintain their composure and cope adaptively with the problems they face (Skinner, Pitzer, & Steele, in prep-a).

In contrast, students can appraise demanding academic events in ways that amplify their stressful qualities and threatening implications. These appraisals, which we refer to as “catastrophizing,” are also organized around the three basic needs, that is, catastrophizing of: (1) relatedness, which magnifies the harmful interpersonal consequences of the event (e.g., “When something bad happens at school, I feel like nobody will like me”); (2) competence, which
underscores the event’s significance for ability (e.g., “I feel totally stupid”); and (3) autonomy, which accentuates self-blame and guilt (e.g., “I feel like it’s all my fault”). Catastrophizing functions as a liability when students are dealing with problems in school, because it intensifies emotional reactivity and triggers maladaptive ways of coping, (Skinner et al., in prep-a).

**Emotional Recovery as Part of Re-engagement**

Emotion is also an essential ingredient in the fourth component of motivational resilience, in which students “bounce back” from academic difficulties and problems and re-engage with the challenging material. Also referred to as “buoyancy” (Martin & Marsh, 2008) or mastery (Dweck, 1999), the behavioral marker of re-engagement is the maintenance or intensification of one’s efforts and determination. Adaptive coping strategies (such as problem-solving, information seeking, and self-encouragement) seem to provide both guidance and a boost of energy towards those ends (Boekarts, 1993; Skinner et al., in prep-b).

Figuring less prominently in discussions of these concepts, however, is the emotional recovery implied by re-engagement. When students run into difficulties, they can become frustrated, discouraged, or disinterested in continuing. At this juncture, they can cope in ways that leave them mired in negative emotions, eventually leading them to give up (Peterson et al., 1993). And, in fact, several ways of coping, such as rumination and projection, are considered maladaptive precisely because they amplify negative emotions, adding distress to an already stressful situation and potentially sending students into an “emotional tailspin” (Compas et al., 1999). Alternatively, to meaningfully re-engage, students can cope in ways that allow them to keep going despite worry or frustration (such as through help-seeking or self-encouragement), or that allow them to regain their enthusiasm for challenging tasks (such as through problem-solving). Hence, constructive coping and emotional recovery may be keys to re-engagement.
Emotions as Organizers of Profiles of Motivational Resilience and Vulnerability

It is even possible that emotions are the leading edge in organizing and differentiating motivational profiles (or prototypes) of engagement, reactivity, coping, and re-engagement in the classroom (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). The “fully engaged” profile, which includes positive emotions (enthusiasm, interest), engaged behaviors (effort, attention), emotional equanimity, adaptive coping, and high re-engagement, characterizes the prototypically “motivated” student, and both reflects and elicits corresponding motivational support from teachers (Furrer & Skinner, 2009; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Anxiously engaged or “enmeshed” students might show a pattern that also includes high behavioral engagement, but is colored by high levels of worry, emotional reactivity and confusion, concealment, or rumination in the face of problems and setbacks. Despite the presence of behavioral engagement, these students, based on their emotional reactivity and maladaptive coping, may be at-risk for helplessness.

Emotions as part of profiles of motivational vulnerability. Emotions may also be critical in distinguishing diverse kinds of “unmotivated” students, furnishing clues about different routes to passivity or disruptive classroom behavior. The emotional culprit most commonly responsible for undermining students’ engaged behaviors is boredom (Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, & Perry, 2010), which is likely accompanied by half-hearted attempts at coping or simply by escape, and a low threshold for giving up. More activating negative emotions, like anger and frustration, may organize a profile that also includes more active disaffected behavior in class, such as off-task and disruptive behaviors, along with maladaptive ways of coping that are also externalizing, like blaming others (i.e., projection), and giving up.

The most serious pattern of motivational vulnerability may be one referred to as “amotivation” (Vallerand et al., 1993), which has been tapped using self-report items like “I just
don't care about school.” Because it is characterized by the absence or loss of energetic resources dedicated to academic activities, “amotivation” likely includes not only passivity and lack of initiative, but also a scarcity of coping of any sort, and a high probability of giving up, perhaps even before running into resistance. It is important to note that the low levels of reactivity likely to accompany this profile cannot be considered “good news,” since they reflect the underlying emotional states of apathy or indifference.

The Development of Purpose as a Durable Motivational Resource

In the long-term, that is, by the time they reach adolescence, students’ enthusiastic engagement, adaptive coping, and constructive re-engagement may give rise to the development of an overarching sense of purpose or ownership for their own academic progress. Researchers have long discussed the benefits brought to learning when “wholeheartedness of purpose is present” (Kilpatrick, 1918, p. 334). The combination of personal fulfillment and satisfaction in serving others implied by purpose (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003), seems to have the potential to inspire positive emotions and to galvanize action. In fact, as explained by McKnight and Kashdan (2009), purpose can be seen as “a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (p. 242). If students believe that their schoolwork is important and meaningful, these commitments may serve as energetic anchors, especially if other aspects of their motivational systems are fragile. Because of the energy and organization that purposefulness provides to the whole motivational system, researchers recognize it as key to students’ academic resilience (Morrison & Allen, 2007).

Even when academic subjects themselves do not arouse emotions connected with long-term purposes, a sense of academic ownership may arise out of the realization that school itself represents a meaningful goal. Especially as students enter secondary school, their academic
achievement has real consequences, directly influencing their college and career opportunities (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). For at-risk students, in particular, school success is one of the few pathways to financial assistance with otherwise prohibitive college costs or as a means to improve their families’ lives. When students are convinced that academic success is centrally important to their own futures, these commitments can serve as a powerful organizing force for helping students sustain their emotional and motivational investments in learning.

**Internal and External Dynamics of Motivational Development**

How do motivational resilience and vulnerability develop over time? The feedforward and feedback arrows among the components of motivational resilience depicted in Figure 2 suggest that these elements create a dynamic system of reciprocal relationships. If engagement is an energetic resource that supports students’ constructive coping and re-engagement in the face of setbacks, this suggests an “internal dynamic” which builds resilience. If, at the same time, student disaffection acts as a drain on energetic resources and leads students to cope maladaptively, withdraw, and give up after setbacks, this also suggests a dynamic that magnifies motivational vulnerabilities over time.

As shown in Figure 1, students’ self-systems are closely coupled to these processes: Students who feel competent, connected, and autonomous also engage in academic work and react to challenges in ways that allow them to learn and succeed, thus cementing their positive views of themselves and school. In contrast, students who feel incompetent, unconnected, and coerced become disaffected, and are more likely to react to problems and cope with demanding academic tasks in ways that amplify their distress and preempt learning, making failure more likely, and thus validating students’ negative views of themselves and school. Hence, students’ personal resources or liabilities tend to become part of self-perpetuating systems.
External dynamics. However, these internal dynamics play out in the social contexts of classrooms and schools. As depicted in Figure 1, these “external dynamics,” involving students’ interactions with teachers, parents, peers, and the academic work they are assigned, play key roles in supporting or undermining students’ innate psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy in school, and so are decisive in magnifying or counteracting the internal dynamics of risk and resilience. Teachers are especially important interaction partners; the tasks they assign and the interpersonal climates they help to create on a daily basis are critical in supporting or undermining student motivation.

Although empirical evidence is sparse, so far it appears as if feedforward and feedback loops between the classroom (teacher, peers, academic work) and the student (academic identity, motivational resilience, learning) are also largely positive (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Skinner et al., 2008; Reeve, 2012). That is, more engaged students also join peer groups who are more engaged and elicit more motivational support from teachers, whereas disaffected students tend to join peer groups of other students who are also more disaffected, and to receive less support and more controlling responses from teachers (Furrer & Skinner, 2009; Kindermann, 2007; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Some researchers suggest that these recursive internal and external dynamics, as they are played out daily in classrooms, may combine to contribute to an overall developmental pattern of increasingly high interindividual stability with increasingly diverging pathways for students who start off “rich” (in any component) compared to those who start off “poor” (Marcoulides, Gottfried, Gottfried, & Oliver, 2008; Marks, 2000; Skinner et al., 2008).

It is important to note that, because these components form a system of reciprocal feedback loops, the directionality of the system can be guided by any of its initial conditions. For example, “vicious cycles” can be initiated by student disaffection, but they can also be initiated
by low teacher support, peer cultures of disaffection, student learning disabilities, or lack of preparation for academic work. Of course, the systems most likely to lead to problems are ones that contain multiple risk factors in students, teachers, parents, peer groups, and neighborhoods.

**Educational Implications for Promoting Emotional Engagement & Motivational Resilience**

What can teachers do to promote students’ engagement, adaptive coping, and recovery from setbacks and failure? According to SDT, teachers can contribute to motivational development by meeting students’ needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. As depicted in Figure 1, SDT focuses on whether teachers offer their students warmth, structure, and autonomy support. These qualities of classroom interactions are strong predictors of students’ views of themselves, as well as their intrinsic motivation, emotional and behavioral engagement, self-regulated learning, and achievement (Elliot & Dweck, 2005; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Su & Reeve, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008).

**Warmth or pedagogical caring.** Teachers can promote students’ feelings of relatedness by fostering caring and trusting relationships with their students (i.e., pedagogical caring; Wentzel, 1997), through means such as expressing affection, enjoyment, and concern, being available and dependable sources of emotional support, paying attention to, spending time with, and learning about individual students, and considering the “whole student” in curricular and disciplinary decisions. Relatedness is undermined by rejecting interactions in which teachers communicate to students that they are not welcome in class. Teachers can convey disinterest or neglect by overlooking students, not having time for them, disregarding their input, or not listening to their perspectives. More overt dislike can also be communicated by an irritated or disapproving tone of voice, or by criticism directed at a student’s personality or abilities.

**Structure.** Teachers can promote students’ perceived competence by providing
appropriate levels of structure, including high and reasonable standards, clear expectations, and appropriate limits for students’ behaviors and performance, and consistent follow-through on demands (Jang et al., 2010). Structure also includes helping students figure out how to reach high levels of performance and the provision of informational feedback, so that when students do not meet expectations, teachers explain how to improve. Perceived competence is undermined by chaotic interactions with teachers, in which students view teachers as unpredictable, inconsistent, or arbitrary in their expectations or follow-through, especially in grading or discipline. Students can also experience teachers as chaotic if educators do not thoroughly explain to students how to succeed in learning tasks, explain in ways students cannot understand, or do not provide help when it is needed. Feedback about performance can also be experienced as chaotic if it is absent or focuses only on what is wrong rather than how to improve.

**Autonomy support.** Teachers can bolster students’ autonomy by offering students choices, listening to their opinions, and explaining the relevance of work to students’ own goals (Reeve, 2009). Autonomy supportive teachers treat students with respect, seek out and value their views, encourage them to work on issues that are important to them, and provide explanations for why activities that are not intrinsically fun are nevertheless critical to learning. Classrooms attuned to students’ needs can lead to internalization or ownership of what were once extrinsically motivated activities; students are no longer doing a task simply because the teacher assigned it, but rather, because they can see how it is connected to their own personal goals or interests (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Student autonomy is undermined by coercive or controlling interactions, in which students are pressured, bossed, or pushed around (Reeve, 2009). Coercive tactics rely on external sources of motivation, such as commands, deadlines, incentives, and threats of punishment; and use pressuring language (e.g., “should,” “have to”),
including impatience and guilt-inducing criticism. Coercive reactions to students’ negative affect (such as boredom or discouragement) include power assertions in which teachers deny their validity, and instead insist on compliance using authoritarian reasons (“because I said so”).

**Nature of Academic Work**

While teachers can support or hinder students’ motivation, engagement itself is a function of students’ interactions with the actual academic tasks they encounter in the classroom. Hence, one of the most important avenues through which teachers can support motivational resilience is by providing students with authentic academic work, that is, with challenging, meaningful, hands-on, project-based, social, real-world activities that naturally capitalize on students’ inherent motivation to learn (Newmann, King, & Carmichael, 2007; Swarat, Ortony, & Revelle, 2012). These activities seem to capture students’ enthusiasm and energy through two related channels. First, certain task structures inherently seem like “fun.” Active hands-on activities, where students work together to make something happen (such as writing and producing an opera, building a robot, or setting up a store) seem more likely to meet students’ needs for relatedness and competence. Second, tasks that are connected to meaningful real-world concerns (such as reporting information to working scientists, creating a school garden so produce can be contributed to a food bank, or helping to create an exhibit in a local museum) tap into students’ needs for purpose and service to the wider world. Thus, activities that are interesting, fun, relevant, clear, and interactive – tasks based in real actions and real settings, designed to involve students cognitively and emotionally – should provide a key pathway for promoting resilience.

**Fostering emotional and motivational resilience.** When classrooms are focused on fun, meaningful, demanding learning tasks that not only invite interest and curiosity but are also worthy of hard work, many of teachers’ motivational and management concerns disappear--
because students are naturally more engaged. And, because these activities are already aligned with students’ own motivational proclivities, it is easier for teachers to provide pathways to success, relevance, choices, and warm interactions. Even normally disaffected students should find it easier to engage with intrinsically motivating academic tasks (Newmann et al., 2007).

The availability of a teacher who can act as a warm and caring guide attuned to students’ interests and learning should allow students to deal constructively with demanding work and the failures and setbacks it necessarily entails. Teachers who can validate students’ anxious, frustrated, or discouraged reactions to difficulties as well as provide emotional and instrumental support encourage students to persevere with emotional equanimity, using adaptive coping that accesses social and personal resources (through help- and comfort-seeking, or problem-solving and self-encouragement). As a result, students can bounce back emotionally and recover their interest and enthusiasm for challenging academic tasks.

Over time, these interactions can foster student ownership for their own academic progress. Close caring relationships with teachers provide a secure base for students, fostering a sense of commitment to one’s school or community and the trust needed for students to reveal their deeply held interests. Moreover, if commitment to a meaningful purpose is to thrive, students must gain the actual competencies they need to successfully pursue their interests, finding and using effective strategies and pathways for action via their teachers and their own personal efforts. Finally, these actions must tie back into students’ genuine beliefs and feelings, informing students’ identities as well as reflecting them. The emotions driving a sense of purpose – whether inspired by commitment to a particular cause or to school success in and of itself – should help organize a student’s identity (Hill & Burrow, 2012), perhaps as reflected by self-perceptions such as “I am a person who helps others in my community,” or “I will show others
that people like me can succeed in life.”

**Counteracting Disaffection and Motivational Vulnerabilities**

If teachers wish to promote motivational resilience, it is especially important for them to consider how they respond to students’ negative emotions and behaviors in their classrooms. Teachers directly experience student disaffection every day, and they rate dealing with unmotivated and disruptive students as among the most stressful features of their jobs (Chang, 2009). Although research on teacher reactions to student motivation is sparse (Reeve, 2012; Frenzel, Goetz, Ludtke, Pekrun, & Sutton 2009), the few studies examining student engagement as a predictor of changes in subsequent teacher support suggest that teachers typically respond to students in kind, by becoming more involved, responsive, and autonomy supportive with engaged students, and responding to disaffected students by withdrawing their own involvement and becoming more coercive (Furrer & Skinner, 2009; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

**Teachers’ Psychological Needs, Appraisals, and Engagement**

In order to understand teachers’ reactions to disaffected students, it is important to consider teachers’ own emotions. According to SDT, teachers, just like students, have needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, and their interactions with students are an important venue in which those needs are satisfied or thwarted (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). It is easy to imagine how unmotivated students could undermine teachers’ basic needs. Bored students can make teachers feel as if they themselves are boring or incompetent in creating engaging learning activities. Students’ expressions of negative affect can make teachers feel as if students do not like them. And disruptive students, who argue or talk back, can be experienced as coercive, interrupting the flow of a class and forcing teachers into confrontations they prefer to avoid. In general, students, who are not cooperating with a teacher’s plans for instruction (whatever their
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reasons), can easily derail a teacher’s own enjoyment and engagement with teaching.

**Teachers’ appraisals of students’ disaffection.** SDT maintains that it is not only actual objective events that shape teachers’ experiences of whether their needs are being met by interactions with students. It is also, and perhaps as importantly, their *interpretations* of those experiences. These appraisals, and especially interpreting students’ behaviors as personal affronts, are considered to be one important source of teachers’ disaffected emotions (Chang, 2009). If, however, teachers can begin to view students’ unmotivated or unruly behaviors not as insults or roadblocks, but instead as useful information (about students’ views of themselves, states of mind, and motivation) that is not only helpful, but essential to teachers in guiding their next interpersonal or curricular steps – then they can find students’ emotions interesting and enlightening, and come to appreciate their expression, whether “positive” or “negative.”

If teachers encourage students to communicate their true emotions and opinions, and also listen openly and respond warmly when they do, this should allow students and teachers to genuinely get to know and value each other as “whole persons.” Such knowledge is the basis for close relationships and the provision of autonomy support. The more accurate the information that teachers receive, the more easily they can tailor the social-emotional climate, instruction, and management practices to meet students’ needs (Jang et al., 2010). Even if a student really does *not* like a teacher and even if a student actually *is* trying to disrupt instruction, teachers can either take these actions personally (in the sense of a blow to the ego) or recognize them as the culmination of the students’ experiences at school (and home). These interpretations can make a substantial difference to whether teachers react with negative emotions and disaffection of their own or with renewed warm, structured, and autonomy supportive engagement (Chang, 2009).

**Teacher Coping, Re-engagement, and Emotional Recovery**
Just as with students, the overall quality of a teacher’s engagement with teaching can be seen as a protective factor that allows them, when they run into challenges and problems, to react with adaptive coping—such as problem-solving, searching for more information, or seeking social support from friends or colleagues (Skinner & Beers, in press). Constructive coping (including self-encouragement and determination) allows teachers to persist in the face of difficult student behaviors and emotions, and to re-engage even with challenging students. In contrast, teachers who are already somewhat disaffected should be more likely to fall into maladaptive ways of coping (such as escape, blaming others, rumination, or self-pity) when they run into trouble in the classroom. These reactions are likely to undermine teachers’ energy and enthusiasm for teaching even more, putting them at risk for further disengagement, burn-out, and even desistence from the profession (Chang, 2009). Teachers need to develop the capacity to maintain their emotional composure and recover their emotional equanimity after stressful episodes if they are to remain resilient and authentically engaged in high quality teaching over the course of their professional careers (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012).

The Larger Context of the School and the Educational System

In order to fully understand teachers’ emotional reactions to students in their classrooms, it is necessary to consider not only the individual players discussed so far (that is, the issues presented by students and teachers’ interpretations of students’ actions), but also the larger context of the school and profession in which these teacher-student interactions take place. For example, students’ willingness to express their genuine emotions as well as teachers’ capacities to accurately read students’ emotional reactions both depend on how well teachers and students actually know and like each other; this in turn depends on how many students a teacher has been assigned to teach and how much class time can be allotted to cultivating relationships. If teachers
are assigned multiple classes of 45-50 students (as is often the case in secondary schools), it is simply not possible to get to know each student individually. Likewise, if in order to meet accountability standards for external testing, instruction is packed full and subject-centered (instead of student-centered), time for building social-emotional connections is very hard to find.

Larger institutional and political forces help determine whether teachers can meet their needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy in their chosen profession, and thus in very real ways shape the emotions they experience when teaching and interacting with students in the classroom (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). External pressures from above (e.g., based on increases in workload, stressful external evaluations, or threats of job cuts) combine with the bottom up pressures created by students who are unmotivated, unhappy, or unprepared to learn. These coercive forces operating on teachers can eventually lead them to become more controlling in their classrooms (Reeve, 2009). Such tactics not only backfire in terms of supporting student motivation; they also undercut teachers’ own enjoyment and engagement in teaching.

In this chapter, we have tried to highlight what is stake for students and teachers in their daily work together in the classroom. If teachers can tune their interpersonal relationships and instructional activities to students’ motivational needs, they can help students unlock energetic and emotional resources, including sustained positive engagement, productive coping, and the construction of an academic identity that allows students to take responsibility for their own academic success. The development of motivational resilience is not only a life-long gift from teachers to students, it also represents a gift teachers give themselves, since student engagement and excitement in learning are precious resources for teachers, and ones that can spark (or re-kindle) their own joy in the challenging and ultimately rewarding profession of teaching.
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Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* A model of motivational development based on self-determination theory, which specifies the internal dynamics among the processes of motivational resilience, including engagement, emotional reactivity, coping, re-engagement; as well as the external dynamics, or reciprocal connections among the social context (teachers, parents, and peers), students’ self-system processes, authentic academic work, motivational resilience, learning, and development.

*Figure 2.* The role of emotion in the internal dynamics of motivational resilience and vulnerability.