How does children’s motivation evolve over the school years? In a cross-sequential study, children’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivations both declined over the course of a single academic year. Shifts in children’s motivation were accompanied by shifts in their perceptions of the school context.

Introduction

• Harter’s (1981) classic scale of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation reveals age-related decreases in intrinsic motivation and increases in extrinsic motivation. But, it is unclear how each type of motivation changes independently of the other because Harter’s scale requires children select either intrinsic or extrinsic reasons for their behaviors.

• Lepper, Corpus, and Iyengar (2005) recently decomposed Harter’s scale to develop two separate measures. They found a linear decline in intrinsic motivation from 3rd to 8th grade, but few differences in extrinsic motivation. This brings a new understanding of age differences in motivation, but their cross-sectional approach does not indicate the timing or precise nature of developmental change.

• Some longitudinal research on motivation exists (e.g., Gottfried, Fleming & Gottfried, 2001), but it tends to measure motivation only once in a given academic year, which obscures the temporal location of change. Perhaps the majority of change is happening within, rather than between, academic years (Meece & Miller, 2001).

Therefore, we addressed two central questions in the present study:

1. How do children’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivations change within a single academic year? We expected a decrease in intrinsic motivation but little change in extrinsic motivation.

2. Are within-year shifts in children’s motivation accompanied by within-year shifts in their perceptions of the school context? We expected that children who became less intrinsically motivated over the year would experience the school context as increasingly learning-focused and increasingly evaluation-focused. We expected any shifts in children’s levels of extrinsic motivation to be accompanied by parallel shifts in their experience of the school context as evaluation-focused.

Method

977 3rd- through 8th-grade students from 8 schools completed a survey two times (fall, spring). Items assessed their intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations and their perceptions of the school context as learning-focused and as evaluation-focused.

Results

Developmental Shifts

Intrinsic motivation decreased from fall to spring, and this decline was especially pronounced for the adolescent (Grades 6-8) as compared to the elementary (Grades 3-5) participants. Surprisingly, extrinsic motivation also decreased from fall to spring, especially among the elementary participants. (Fig. 1)

Contextual Predictors

Children’s perceptions of the school context were related to their motivational orientations in the predicted fashion. (Table 1)

Moreover, changes in children’s perceptions of the school context explained variance in their spring motivation that was not explained by their fall motivation. These predictive relationships held for both age groups, as indicated by nonsignificant interaction terms. (Table 2)

Conclusions

• Both age groups experienced within-year declines in both types of motivation, though the decline in intrinsic motivation was sharper for adolescents and the decline in extrinsic motivation was sharper for elementary children.

• Despite slightly different patterns of mean level changes, both age groups showed similar relationships between changes in the perceived school context and shifts in motivation.

• The decline in intrinsic motivation may be due, in part, to shifting perceptions of school context as less learning-focused and more evaluation-focused.

References
