

## **Belief in One's Abilities Has More to Do With Success in School Than Natural Ability or Potential, Says New Study**

WASHINGTON -- Believing in your ability to do well and wanting to learn are key to doing well in school, according to a new study in this month's *Journal of Educational Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA). Students might not do as well if they only study for external reasons (good grades) and believe they are not capable of success, even if they are above average in ability, said psychologist Marianne Miserandino, Ph.D., of Beaver College.

To discover why some children of the same academic ability do well while others don't, Dr. Miserandino asked 77 third and fourth graders what motivated them to do well in school and how competent they felt in school. All these students scored above the median on the Stanford Achievement Test. 'Those children that were uncertain of their ability and motivated by external reasons lost interest in school, didn't partake in as many activities, felt angry, anxious and bored and suffered a decline in their academic performance,' said Dr. Miserandino.

But, said Dr. Miserandino, 'those children who were certain of their abilities reported feeling more curious and participated in, enjoyed and persisted more at school tasks.' The evidence from this study shows that perceiving a lack of either competence or intrinsic motivation can lead to a decline in grades in one school year in even very capable students.

It is surprising, said Dr. Miserandino, that a child's perception of his/her ability can be so at odds with their achievement scores. 'And unfortunately, a child's performance level is not necessarily predictive of his or her motivation level either.' A student's lack of confidence in his or her own ability predicted a drop in their grades in mathematics and social studies but not in reading or the language arts. It also predicted a decline in their desire to participate in various school activities and led to feelings of anxiety, anger and boredom. Students who were motivated for only external reasons (good grades, appeasing parents), according to the study, had poorer grades in all subjects, lost interest in school activities and also experienced anxiety, anger and boredom.

By third and fourth grade, explained Dr. Miserandino, 'children have formed ideas about their own competence and these ideas are already influencing their engagement in school activities. We can speculate that these children form these self- impressions by comparing themselves to their peers and by their teachers' expectations.' Too often than not, added Dr. Miserandino, classrooms and the structure of the school system unnecessarily control and restrict a child.

A lesson to be learned from these findings, said Dr. Miserandino, is for educators to not only focus time and energy on those students who are failing in or dropping out of school and not assume that children achieving high grades are not susceptible to problems. 'All children need to believe in themselves. Having ability or potential is not enough to enjoy

success in school or in life. Talent and potential will be wasted unless children believe that they possess ability and have the freedom to use it.'

Article: 'Children Who Do Well in School: Individual Differences in Perceived Competence and Autonomy in Above-Average Children' by Marianne Miserandino, Ph.D., Beaver College, in *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 88, No. 2, pp 203-214. (Full text available from the APA Public Affairs Office.)

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