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## Work Avoidance as a Manifestation of Hostility, Helplessness, and Boredom

*Work avoidance is a term that describes the behavior of students who seem to make little effort to understand or complete academic tasks. Although the condition has been described in earlier studies, the causes of work avoidance have not been explored. In this study, grades 5 and 6 students who were identified as work avoidant were interviewed to determine the causes of their work avoidance. It was hypothesized that boredom, hostility, and helplessness were three possible reasons for students not exerting effort. Students' protocols indicated that they do withdraw effort for several reasons: because they are bored, as an expression of hostility toward the teacher, or because of feelings of helplessness.*

*L'évitement du travail est une expression qui décrit le comportement d'élèves qui ne semblent consentir que peu d'efforts pour comprendre ou compléter des activités académiques. Alors que des études précédentes ont déjà décrit le phénomène, on ne s'était pas encore penché sur ses causes. Pendant cette étude, des élèves de la cinquième et la sixième année qu'on avait caractérisés comme jeunes qui évitaient le travail ont été passés en entrevue dans le but d'identifier les causes de leur comportement. Comme éléments provocateurs possibles, les auteurs avaient proposé l'ennui, l'hostilité et un sentiment d'impuissance. Selon les protocoles des élèves, ceux-ci renoncent à l'effort pour plusieurs raisons: parce qu'ils s'ennuient, comme expression d'hostilité envers l'enseignant ou parce qu'ils vivent des sentiments d'impuissance.*

There is little doubt that academic motivation is still a primary concern of teachers and researchers. That some students do not seem to put forth effort to engage in academic tasks continues to be a problem for educators. Contemporary theorists have suggested that students' achievement-related behavior may be understood in terms of goal pursuit and have focused on learning goals and performance goals. Recent evidence suggests that work avoidance is a distinct goal, and it is our contention that work avoidance may be explained in part as a manifestation of hostility, helplessness, or boredom.

Students who pursue mastery goals have been described as those who are self-regulating and self-determining. These students' beliefs and characteristics foster cognitive growth and development. They believe that effort (or, more important, an internal, controllable source) is the cause of success or failure; that intelligence is malleable (Dweck & Leggett, 1988); they indicate a greater

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preference for challenge (Seifert, 1995); engage in more strategy use, especially deep strategy processing (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Nolen, 1988; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Pintrich & Garcia, 1991; Seifert, 1995); make more positive self-statements (Diener & Dweck, 1978); and report more positive affect, less negative affect, and are more likely to take responsibility for success and less likely to deny responsibility for failure (Seifert, 1995). The learning-goal student is task- and learning-oriented, processing tasks and situations in terms of challenges to be overcome, demonstrating competence, and learning new skills and knowledge.

Students who pursue performance goals, on the other hand, have been described as being preoccupied with ability concerns. They are more concerned about how well they perform relative to others and how others will perceive them. They are more likely to believe that ability is the cause of success and failure, that intelligence is a fixed entity, to view difficulty problems as failure (Dweck & Leggett, 1988); engage in less sophisticated strategy use (Seifert, 1995; Nolen, 1988); make more negative self-statements; attribute success to uncontrollable factors (Seifert, 1995); and tend not to process information relative to previous success (Diener & Dweck, 1978). In other words, the performance-goal student is *self-*, *other-*, and *failure-*focused, and processes information in terms of self and others. Specifically, pursuit of a performance goal is a self-protective process in which: the student seeks to gain a favorable judgment of competence or avoid an unfavorable judgment of competence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988); to be or appear to be superior to others (Nicholls, Cobb, Wood, Yackel, & Patashnick, 1990); or to achieve an extrinsic reward such as a high grade (Pintrich & Garcia, 1991). According to Covington (1984), attempts to obtain judgments of competence or avoid judgments of incompetence are designed as a means of protecting self-perceptions of competence and sense of self-worth and are the catalysts for many classroom behaviors.

More recently researchers have started to consider a number of goals beyond the learning-performance dichotomy that has dominated research in motivation. In a factor analysis of items assessing goal pursuit Seifert, Schulz, and Davis (1996) identified a number of distinct goals including a learning goal (liking to learn new things), a social acceptance goal (teacher liking me), performance goal (favorable judgment of competence), and work avoidance (avoidance of tasks). Elliot and colleagues have recently suggested that performance goals may be divided into two distinct goals: performance approach and performance avoidance. In pursuing a performance-approach goal, students seek to gain favorable judgments of competence. In pursuing performance-avoidance goals, students focus on avoiding unfavorable judgments of competence (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Researchers have also suggested that students may also pursue social goals such as social affiliation in which they seek to belong to a certain group, social responsibility in which students engage in behavior because of a sense of social responsibility, and social concern in which students' behaviors are directed by a concern for the well-being of others (Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Urda & Maehr, 1995).

Researchers have occasionally suggested work avoidance as a goal distinct from learning and performance goals (Nicholls et al., 1990; Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001; Seifert et al., 1996). Students pursuing a work avoidance goal have been described as consistently avoiding exerting effort, doing only the minimum necessary to get by, and avoiding challenging tasks. Recent research suggests that students who pursue work avoidance goals tend to perceive their work as lacking meaning, may feel less competent than students who pursue learning goals, and may have a greater tendency to make external attributions than learning-goal students (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001).

Work avoidance is linked to effort-minimizing strategies such as asking others for help, copying or guessing at answers (Meece et al., 1988), poor work and study habits, impulsiveness, negative attitudes toward school and peers, and lack of initiative (Bruns, 1992; Pecault, 1991; Raph, Goldberg, & Passnow, 1969). Similarly, Dowson and McInerney (2001) reported that work avoidance was associated with minimizing effort (such as copying, asking the teacher for help, and engaging in off-task behavior); feelings of laziness, boredom, inertia, and possibly anger; and limited cognitive engagement.

An understanding of work avoidance, as with other goal pursuits, may be based on the premise that students' behavior is in part guided by emotional responses to tasks and task conditions. Given a particular task in a particular situation, students generate an affective response that leads them to engage in certain behaviors that can be characterized as occurring in patterns that are manifestations of goal pursuits. In other words, goal pursuit may be characterized by patterns of beliefs and emotions that serve to direct behavior. When presented with a task, students make judgments about the task and respond emotionally based on task and personal characteristics. It is these emotions that dictate subsequent behavior (Boekarts, 1993; Seifert, 1997; Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001).

Emotions have played an important role in major contemporary cognitive psychological theories of motivation. Weiner (1984, 1985) argued that emotions are motivational catalysts: feelings of helplessness, hopefulness, pride, and guilt that arise from attributions influence subsequent behavior. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory postulated that feelings of competence determine the quality of task engagement: high levels of self-efficacy lead to quality task engagement, whereas threats to perceived competence give rise to failure-avoidant behavior (Covington, 1984). Dweck (1986) pointed out that students who feel confident will engage in mastery-like behavior, whereas a perceived threat to competence will lead to performance-oriented, helpless behaviors.

Goal pursuit in students seems to be linked to students' emotions (Boekarts, 1993; Seifert, 1996, 1997; Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001). Students who have a sense of competence and control will tend to pursue learning goals, whereas students who have a lower sense of competence and control tend to adopt performance- (Seifert, 1997) and work-avoidant goals (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001). In addition, work avoidance is related to a lack of perceived meaning and boredom (Dowson & McInerney, 2000; Duda & Nicholls, 1992; Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001).

Given the premise that work avoidance is linked to students' emotions—and there is some evidence to demonstrate this link—we hypothesize three reasons for work avoidance: boredom, failure avoidance or learned helplessness.

ness, and passive-aggression. Boredom as an explanation for work avoidance would state that students who are bored will not be cognitively engaged with the work. As students lose interest in what they are doing, they become less inclined to be deeply engaged and find less satisfaction in their work (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001).

Researchers have consistently reported that many students find school boring (Gjesme, 1977; Larson & Richards, 1991; Robinson, 1975; Rothman, 1990; Vandewiele, 1980) and there are a number of possible reasons for that boredom, including a lack of challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Larson & Richards, 1991); a lack of relevance to personal contexts (Ashbury, 1974; Baum, Runzulli, & Hebert, 1994; Vandewiele, 1980; Wlodkowski & Jaynes, 1992); and monotony (Wlodkowski & Jaynes, 1994). Students who are bored tend to be more hostile; do not look forward to going to school (Robinson, 1975); are easily upset, inactive, easily influenced by peers (McGiboney & Carter, 1988); are less satisfied with their personal existence; and have diminished self-worth and restricted self-expressiveness (Tolor, 1989). Students who are bored will tend to withdraw into themselves, chronically skip class, daydream, clown around, or stir up mischief (Briscoe, 1977; Robinson, 1975; Wasson, 1981). Boredom is related to alienation (Tolor, 1989), disruptive behavior (Wasson, 1981), negative attitude toward school (Robinson, 1975), disregard for rules (McGiboney & Carter, 1988), and dissatisfaction with school (Gjesme, 1977).

A failure-avoidance or learned-helplessness explanation would argue that students who feel they are not capable of doing the work will withdraw effort because they are trying to protect self-worth or because they believe they cannot succeed despite effort (Covington, 1984; Frankel & Snyder, 1978). Failure-avoidant students who are presented with a challenging task may judge the chances of success to be low and perceive the challenge as a threat to self-worth. Because self-worth is linked to perceived ability, the students may withdraw effort to preserve ability perceptions and protect their sense of self-worth. Work avoidance becomes a defensive mechanism for protecting self-worth. The learned-helpless student may also judge the chances of success to be low on a task because of a belief in noncontingency:..No matter what they do, they cannot succeed. Such students see no chance for success and do not exert the effort needed to achieve success because they view the effort as futile.

Learned-helpless students tend to have a low initial expectancy for success; show little perseverance; demonstrate listlessness and passivity; and experience frustration and sadness (Bulkowsky & Willows, 1980; Greer & Wethered, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Mark, 1983; McKean, 1994). In an academic context, the failure-avoidant or learned-helpless student may give up quickly on a test; spend a great deal of time staring at the paper; randomly check off answers; copy answers from others or from answer sheets; or work slowly (Medick, 1979; Spaulding, 1983): all descriptive of work avoidance.

The hostility hypothesis suggests that students engage in work-avoidance behaviors because of feelings of resentment and hostility. This hostility represents a passive-aggressive type of mechanism in which hostility and resentment give rise to dysfunctional behavior. Passive-aggressive individuals harbor resentment at being forced to comply with the demands or rules of others, and their resistance is manifested through behaviors such as dawdling,



procrastination, poor quality of work, or forgetting obligations (Beck & Freeman, 1990; Fine, Overholser, & Berkoff, 1992).

Berres and Long (1979) theorized that passive-aggressive individuals were formed at an early age. Such individuals were typically members of middle-class families that had high expectations of them. Popularity, success, and good behavior were taught as being good, whereas sarcasm, rudeness, and inappropriate behavior were prohibited. Normal expressions of anger and frustration were discouraged, so they developed passive methods of expressing their anger. Hardt (1988) suggested that in a classroom many tactics were employed by the passive-aggressive individual in an attempt to express anger indirectly. Some typical behaviors of the passive-aggressive student include selective hearing (Beck & Roblee, 1983; Berres & Long, 1979); withholding or slowdown tactics (Beck & Roblee, 1983; Berres & Long, 1979; Bricklin & Bricklin, 1967); purposeful forgetting (Beck & Roblee, 1983; Berres & Long, 1979; Bruns, 1992; Medick, 1983); accidental destruction (Beck & Roblee, 1983; Berres & Long, 1979); and asking for help, but making it impossible for the teacher to provide assistance (Berres & Long, 1979): behaviors similar to work avoidance. In general, the passive aggressive child

hears only what he wants to hear, drags his feet at all transitions in the schedule, loses or misplaces belongings and then complains that he can't find them, volunteers to do things but manages to mess them up, and demands constant attention and service. He talks, laughs, and makes noises of all kinds at inappropriate times, is out of his seat frequently and has a steady stream of excuses for misbehavior and failure to do his homework. (Medick, 1979, p. 119)

This study is an investigation of the phenomenon of work avoidance. It is our hypothesis that hostility, failure avoidance or learned helplessness, and boredom are three reasons for work avoidance. Therefore, we demonstrate a link between work avoidance and hostility, perceived lack of ability, and boredom by identifying students who are work avoidant and hostile, work avoidant and helpless, and work avoidant and bored. Although this does not establish causality, it does suggest correlation and provides a first step in establishing causality.

### *Method*

#### *Sample*

Participants were elementary and junior high school students in three schools located in rural eastern Newfoundland. Of the initial 146 students who had provided consent to participate, 20 were identified as work avoidant through a screening procedure. Of these, nine were female and 11 male; nine were in grade 6 and 11 in grade 7.

#### *Procedure*

After obtaining the school's, teachers', parents', and students' consent, students completed a goal-orientation survey. The survey was administered to groups of 10 to 15 students at a time in the presence of the researcher with a completion time of about 10 minutes.

On completion of the surveys, scale scores were computed for all students. Students who scored below the midpoint of 2.5 on the work-avoidant scale were considered to be work avoidant. In addition, a cluster analysis of work-

avoidant, learning-goal, and performance goal scores was performed, and the results confirmed the adequacy of the midpoint cutoff.

To investigate the reasons for work avoidance, the 20 students identified as work avoidant were asked to participate in a personal interview, and all agreed to do so. The interviews were conducted in the students' school during class time. Each interview lasted 20-30 minutes. The the interviews were conducted by a graduate student in the counseling program with experience in conducting clinical interviews, and students' responses were recorded on audiotape.

*Measures*

The goal-orientation scale (Seifert, 1997) was a 4-point Likert-type scale that was used to assess the goal orientation of students. Students rated how true each statement was for them, where 4 indicated *definitely agree* and 1 indicated *definitely disagree*. Items were reverse-scored for scale calculation where necessary.

The performance goal scale consisted of six items that implied students were interested in demonstrating superior ability and in impressing peers and the teacher. The mastery goal scale comprised nine items about learning new and challenging things and trying to improve oneself through education. The work avoidance scale consisted of six items that suggested that the students' goal was to do only enough work to get by or to avoid doing work (see Table 1).

Table 1  
Items of Goal-Orientation Scales

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*Learning Goal* ( $\alpha = .79$ )

- I really like to learn how things work.
- I like solving difficult problems.
- I find the things we do really interesting.
- I try to learn things so I can better myself.
- I try to improve myself through learning.
- I like learning new things.
- I like working on problems that make me think.
- I enjoy learning about different things.

*Performance Goal* ( $\alpha = .63$ )

- I want others to think I am smart.
- I try to get the highest grades.
- I work hard so I won't get a bad grade.
- I work hard so others will say nice things about me.
- I must get an excellent grade.
- I work hard so I won't look stupid to others.

*Work Avoidance* ( $\alpha = .76$ )

- I try to do as little work as possible.
  - I try to avoid doing a lot of work.
  - I do only what I need to do to get a good grade.
  - I do just what I need to do to pass.
  - I try to pass with the least amount of work I can.
  - I try to do the easiest work I can.
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To corroborate the self-report scale, a teacher checklist was constructed from a literature review on work-avoidant behaviors and attitudes. The checklist consisted of a series of statements about a behavior or attitude that was described as being characteristic of work avoidance based on the literature review. Homeroom teachers rated each student as exhibiting each behavior always, often, sometimes, seldom, or never (see Table 2).

From the self-report scales and teacher checklist scores, 20 students were identified as work avoidant (exact procedures are described in the data analysis section). Semistructured interviews were conducted with these 20 students to obtain information on the reasons for their work avoidance. A review of research literature on the topics of work avoidance, passive aggression, helplessness, and boredom led to the development of a set of interview questions based on three themes: students' feelings of competence, students' feelings toward authority, and students' feelings about the curriculum. For each of these topics, general and specific incident questions were developed. General questions asked the participants about feelings of helplessness, hostility, and boredom, whereas specific-incident questions asked the student to recall a particular episode illustrating the topic. Some examples of interview questions are: "Sometimes school can be challenging. You may have a hard task, a subject that is difficult to understand, or your teacher may go too quickly for you. How often is school hard for you?" and "How does your teacher treat you?" The list of interview questions is provided in the Appendix.

Table 2  
Teacher Checklist

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Does this student forget to copy down homework assignments?
Does this student misplace/forget books, pencils or other materials?
Does this student spend exceptionally long periods of time getting ready to start work?
Does this student need directions repeated to him/her?
Does this student give up easily when confronted with a problem?
Does this student require frequent assistance?
Does this student have confidence in his/her ability to complete classroom assignments successfully?
Does this student become so discouraged that he/she "gives up" or fails to compete assignments?
Does this student appear to lack motivation and interest in school work?
Does this student have difficulty completing assignments?
Does this student not complete tasks in the manner requested?
Does this student make excuses for not doing assignments?
Does this student come up with varied physical complaints to avoid doing work?
Does this student find it difficult to work in groups?
Does this student have difficulty getting along with other students?
Does this student complain that other students are preventing him/her from completing work?
Does this student like to act silly or play the role of the class clown?
Does this student complain that class work is boring?
Does this student frequently make comments such as "I couldn't help it" or "He made me do it?"
Does this student have difficulty concentrating in class?

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### Results

Zero-order Pearson correlations were computed between teacher checklist scores and goal orientation scores. The correlation between teacher checklist scores and work avoidance scores was .40, between teacher checklist scores and master goal scores was  $-.12$  and between teacher checklist scores and performance goal scores was .11. These correlations suggested that the teacher's checklist of work avoidance behaviors tended to corroborate the students' self-reports.

The goal orientation scores were analyzed using several data analysis procedures to identify the students with a work avoidance orientation. A mid-scale split and a cluster analysis followed by a series of within-groups and between-groups contrasts yielded consistent results, identifying 20 students from the initial pool of 146 as work avoidant. In the mid-scale split procedure, students who had a work avoidance score greater than 2.5 were potential work-avoidant students. In the cluster analysis procedure (see Seifert, 1997; Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001, for a detailed description of the cluster analysis procedure), work avoidance, mastery goal, and performance goal scores were subjected to a series of k-means cluster analyses that yielded seven clusters of students, two of which could be described as work avoidant.

The 20 students who were identified as work avoidant were interviewed individually and their responses audiorecorded. The recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions were examined to obtain a general sense of the students and their experiences. These data were converted into an ethnograph data file that was examined for indications of students' anger, resentment, perceived incompetence, and boredom. Relevant passages were marked and coded according to the corresponding category, and each transcript was examined for connections and patterns to provide a composite of each student. Because this study is an exploration of work avoidance and we hypothesized three specific reasons for work avoidance, 10 interviews were identified as being illustrative of these hypotheses, and examples are presented below.

The analysis of the interview data was conducted differently from the typical qualitative study. In qualitative research the researcher uses an inductive method of finding patterns common across respondents. The analysis we used was similar to a diagnostic clinical interview, looking for indications of patterns of thought that might indicate dysfunctional thinking. In this case we were looking for self-disclosure of boredom, hostility, and helplessness as reasons for not engaging in academic tasks.

#### *Resentment and Hostility*

An individual may engage in passive-aggressive behaviors as a means of relating to others. Although the feelings underlying the passive-aggressive behavior, anger and resentment, are not readily identifiable by the aggressor, the behaviors are a way of expressing these feelings (Fine et al., 1992). The interview protocols of three students suggested that their work avoidance was a manifestation of anger and resentment.

A passive-aggression explanation of work avoidance suggests that students stop working as an expression of hostility toward the teacher. One pattern that emerged through the interviews indicated that there was a group of students who would not work, engaged in explicit strategies for not working, and

expressed a dislike for the teacher. The relationship between the teacher and student was tenuous at best. The students felt they had been mistreated by the teacher in some way, and this mistreatment became the source of their work avoidance. For example, Student B reported:

- Interviewer: What is it about your teacher that bothers you?  
Student B: She bosses you around like he does, they're the same thing, but he's meaner.
- Interviewer: Any other teacher like that?  
Student B: My teacher last year. I don't like her. She's grouchy.
- Interviewer: How do you feel about your teacher?  
Student B: I don't like her that much. She's bossy and she gives too much homework.
- Interviewer: Why do you think you do work for some teachers but not for others?  
Student B: Because some teachers don't bawl at you, and some do. And the work is boring.
- Interviewer: Describe this teacher for me.  
Student B: Mean.
- Interviewer: So—you are more likely to do work for this teacher or your regular teacher?  
Student B: Regular teacher.
- Interviewer: Because?  
Student B: He's not that good to me.

#### *Learned Helplessness*

A learned-helplessness explanation of work avoidance suggests that students do not do the required work because they believe they are not capable of doing it. Two students self-identified as work avoidant and through conversation with the researcher admitted to not doing the work because of their perceived inability.

From the teacher's checklist these students exhibited work-avoidant behaviors similar to those of the passive-aggressive students. They forgot to record homework assignments, misplaced books, gave up easily when faced with a problem, required frequent assistance, appeared to lack motivation, and had poor work habits and study skills. They displayed little confidence in their ability, required frequent assistance, frequently forgot to copy down homework assignments, and needed directions to be repeated frequently. This is illustrated in the behavior of Student D, who because he could not understand French would sit and do nothing.

- Interviewer: So, you are convinced that you cannot do well in French?  
Student D: Yep.
- Interviewer: How do you behave in French class?  
Student D: Stays in my seat.
- Interviewer: What do you do during French class if you don't understand it?  
Student D: I just does some crossword puzzles in the French book.
- Interviewer: You couldn't understand it, so you just sat there and waited for the period to be over?  
Student D: Yeah, I was happy today when we had no French. She was sick.

### *Boredom*

The boredom hypothesis states that students do not invest effort in tasks because they are bored. If they do not perceive the task as meaningful for them or the tasks do not present any sort of arousal (e.g., curiosity), then students may not invest effort in the task. During interviews, four work-avoidant students admitted that they found school, or at least certain subjects, boring. They were described as lacking motivation and interest in school work, complaining of work being boring, and displaying poor work habits and study skills. They were perceived by the teacher as being capable of doing the work, not requiring frequent assistance or having difficulty completing assignments. They are capable, but because the work is boring they exert little effort.

- Interviewer: How do you think you are doing in school?  
Student H: Great.  
Interviewer: Sometimes school can be challenging. You may have a hard task, a subject that is difficult to understand or your teacher may go too quickly for you. How often is school hard for you?  
Student H: Not very much.  
Interviewer: Is school ever boring for you?  
Student H: Sometimes ... When the teacher is reading, I falls asleep.  
Interviewer: When you find yourself feeling bored, what kinds of things, if anything, do you do to relieve the boredom.  
Student H: I try to listen, but I don't.  
Interviewer: What happens when you get bored?  
Student H: Daydreams lots of time, gets sleepy, plays with my books on my desk.

### *Discussion*

Past research (Seifert, 1997) has pointed out that the relationship between the student and the teacher is critical for developing intrinsic motivation. Teachers who are perceived as being nurturing, respectful, and helping students learn create conditions for learning-goal pursuit by students. If teachers are not perceived as being helpful, respectful, or nurturing, then learning-goal pursuit declines. The interview protocols in which students express hostility toward their teachers is consistent with this view. These three work-avoidant students did not have healthy relationships with their teachers. The teachers were described as mothering, nagging, grouchy, and mean. Consequently, students stopped working. One student explicitly stated that he did not like the teacher, so he did no work for that teacher.

One implication that arises from this finding concerns rules and policies teachers and schools create and how teachers and schools treat students. Students expect to be treated with respect, but often report otherwise (O'Keefe, 1999). Student B reported an incident in which she had a stress ball in her desk. The teacher took the stress ball and never returned it, which engendered feelings of hostility and resentment. Student C reported being falsely accused and subsequently punished for an event in which he claimed innocence. Teachers and schools may arbitrarily make decisions that may not seem fair such as giving students who were absent for a test a score of zero regardless of the reason for the absence. Consequently, if teachers and administrators wish to create a climate conducive to learning based on intrinsic motivation, it is



important to think carefully about practices, rules, and policies that are founded on respect and fairness for students.

The failure-avoidance or learned-helplessness explanation for work avoidance is a familiar theme in motivational research (Bandura, 1977; Covington, 1984; Frankel & Snyder, 1978). Students who feel that their sense of self-worth is threatened may stop working. Similarly, students who see themselves as incapable of doing the work may stop working. Student D and student E illustrated these ideas. Student D claimed that he could not understand French, and thus was receiving low grades. His response was to do as little work as possible such as writing only two or three words in his French journal, or to sit and wait for the period to end. Although Student E did not explicitly state that he did nothing because he could not understand, he did explicitly state that he was not as smart as the others and that he could not get higher marks.

Some implications arise from the failure-avoidance or learned-helplessness explanation of work avoidance. First, as pointed out in earlier research, attributions play a critical role in motivation, especially in failure avoidance and learned helplessness. Consequently, teachers and schools need to consider what messages they convey about the causes of success and failure, the expectations they have for students, and how practices contribute to the formation of maladaptive attribution patterns (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001). Second, teachers and schools need to ensure that practices and policies support students' learning. Student E made a comment that suggested that the teacher went too fast and he could not understand when the teacher went too fast.

The boredom hypothesis suggested that students who are bored may not be willing to become cognitively engaged in the work. Students F, G, H, and I were examples of this explanation. Each student commented on how boring school was for them and that they ended up daydreaming, doodling, or sleeping because of that boredom. Furthermore, the boredom was due to monotony and lack of challenge, two variables that have traditionally been linked to motivation.

Teachers and schools need to reconsider practices and policies that promote teacher-centered instructional practice. Teachers who are "talking, talking, talking, and talking" do not seem to be capturing the imagination of students (O'Keefe, 1999). In contrast, instructional practices that challenge students and help them develop a sense of competence and self-determination will foster students who are intrinsically motivated (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001; Seifert, 1997)

In the context of an academic goal theory of motivation, work avoidance is a goal pursuit that has appeared occasionally but that has received little attention. To understand work avoidance further, three reasons for this behavior were hypothesized. Work-avoidant students were identified and interviewed to determine if characteristics illustrating each of those three reasons could be discovered. Students were identified who were hostile and work avoidant, failure avoidant or learned helpless and work avoidant, and bored and work avoidant. Identifying students in this way does not establish causality, but it does provide evidence on which to found further investigation.

Future research, both quantitative and qualitative, may provide additional evidence of the sources of work avoidance. Further quantitative research might

involve correlational studies in which students' goal orientations are correlated with measures of hostility, helplessness, and boredom. Qualitative studies might involve interviewing work-avoidant students to try to elicit their own understandings of their reasons for not doing the work. At the same time, such research should examine the instructional contexts of work-avoidant students and consider how these contexts contribute to work avoidance. Continued research should help advance our understanding of work avoidance and enhance the quality of students' experiences in school.

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*Appendix: Interview Questions*

1. What are some things you like about school?
2. What are your favorite subjects?
3. What are your least favorite subjects?
4. Sometimes school can be challenging. You may have a hard task, a subject that is difficult to understand, or your teacher may go too quickly for you. How often is school hard for you?
5. When you come to something you don't understand, either in a textbook, a workbook or in class discussion, how do you feel? What do you think of yourself as a student? What do you do then?
6. How do you think you are doing in school?
7. Do you think you are doing the best possible work that you can do? If no, why not?
8. Is school ever boring for you? When do you mostly get bored?
9. When you find yourself feeling bored, what kinds of things, if anything, do you do to relieve the boredom?
10. How often are you presented with material that you already know and understand?
11. How does your teacher(s) usually present a lesson in class? What do you think of their particular method? Do you prefer something different? If yes, what?
12. Are there certain subjects that you find easy? What are you usually doing in these classes?
13. Describe your teacher for me.
14. How does your teacher treat you?
15. What is it about your teacher that bothers you?
16. How do you feel about your teacher?
17. Do you behave differently for some teachers than for others? If yes, why do you perform poorly for some?
18. When you obtain a low grade or a poor evaluation in school, how does this make you feel? What kind of reactions do your teachers and your parents have toward your performance? How does their reaction make you feel?
19. What do your parents think of school? Is there any pressure to do well in school? How do you feel about that?