

Leading with Impact: How Leadership and Relationships Shape Students' Motivation across School Stages

Olaide Christiana AKINWALE
Lead City University, Ibadan
Oyo State, Nigeria
laidechris@gmail.com
+2348033560016

Abstract

Student motivation is a central determinant of academic engagement and achievement, yet its nature and influencing factors vary substantially across educational stages. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this paper discusses how leadership practices and relational dynamics shape motivation from early childhood to tertiary education. SDT asserts that students' sustained engagement and willingness to learn are strengthened when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. The discussion demonstrates that leadership approaches that are supportive, empowering, and relationally attuned foster learning environments capable of fulfilling these needs, thereby enhancing intrinsic motivation and promoting long-term academic persistence. The paper underscores the significant influence of school leaders, teachers, and peer relationships in shaping students' attitudes, engagement, and performance. It highlights how leadership styles, communication patterns, and relational qualities such as trust, emotional support, and belonging contribute to motivational outcomes. Particular emphasis is placed on the developmental variations in students' motivational needs: young children depend on relational security and emotionally supportive environments; adolescents benefit from autonomy-supportive and transformative leadership that balances independence and guidance; and tertiary-level students are motivated by participatory structures, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for agency. By integrating leadership theory with SDT, the paper explains the importance of adaptive leadership that evolves in alignment with students' developmental trajectories. The conclusion provides suggestions for educational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to foster inclusive, motivationally rich environments that support student success, resilience, and holistic development across all levels of schooling.

Keywords: Impactful leadership, Relationship, Student Motivation, Schooling Stages.

Word Count: 238

Introduction

Motivation denotes the internal factors and external circumstances that originate, guide, and maintain individuals' participation in goal-directed endeavors. In educational settings, it influences learners' motivation to engage, persevere, and exert effort in academic tasks.

Motivation affects academic performance and learning. Student motivation is essential for academic success. It influences student study habits. Student motivation predicts academic success, but social and relational learning settings affect it. Leadership and connections affect students' school involvement and persistence outside of academics. Leadership by school officials, teachers, or peers can inspire or impede learning. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) shows that motivation is linked to three psychological needs: autonomy, competency, and relatedness. Leaders who encourage choice and voice build on past lessons and foster trust and compassion inspire inner motivation. However, excessive control, neglect, or lack of relationships can demotivate people, especially during important growth times. Leadership and relationships help school wide student needs change. Strong relationships and directed support boost early childhood confidence and involvement. Adolescents need autonomy-supportive environments that value independence and connection. Students need participatory and collaborative leadership in higher education to self-regulate. Educational leadership handles motivating or demotivating institutions, culture, atmosphere, and relationships. Quality interactions between students, educators, and administrators improve school attitudes, self-confidence, and academic performance. School leadership requires more than good administration and instruction, according to this paper. It needs tight ties between peers, school officials, and students to motivate. Leadership in this setting needs optimism, community, and modeling values that support learners' identities and potential. The paper emphasizes adaptive, developmentally responsive leadership and how leadership and relationships inspire students using SDT. Explaining these trends across school stages helps schools improve academic achievement, long-term motivation, and well-being. It advises school administrators, legislators, and educators on motivating students through effective leadership and meaningful relationships across school stages.

Impactful Leadership

Leadership plays a central role in shaping students' motivation, learning experiences, and overall school outcomes across educational levels. Relational and instructional forms of leadership contribute significantly to school climate, teacher collaboration, and student engagement, demonstrating that leaders' actions and interpersonal approaches have measurable effects on student achievement, behaviour, and well-being (Degol & Wang, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Effective leaders cultivate inclusive, respectful, and safe environments that promote diversity, cooperation, and a strong sense of belonging, thereby enhancing students' willingness to participate and persist academically (Eadens & Ceballos, 2022).

Educational leaders influence learning by articulating a clear vision, establishing high expectations, and creating systems that support effective instruction. They provide resources, guidance, and continuous professional development to strengthen teaching quality and align instructional practices with school goals (Gardner-McTaggart, 2022; Al-Kubaisi & Shahbal, 2021). Through collaborative cultures and professional learning communities, leaders encourage knowledge sharing and innovation, ensuring that teachers are equipped to meet evolving learner needs (Lambrecht et al., 2022).

Leadership also encompasses the relational skills needed to inspire and unite school stakeholders. Effective leaders communicate purposefully, engage parents and communities, and respond adaptively to emerging challenges. Transformational and distributed leadership models promote autonomy, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility, fostering learning environments that support student motivation and holistic development (Northouse, 2022; Bush, Middlewood & Bell, 2019). When leadership is both relationally attuned and instructionally strong, schools become nurturing spaces where students feel valued, supported, and capable of achieving their full potential.

Teacher-student Relationships

Education relationships include social and emotional exchanges between students, educators, administrators, and peers. The key to inspiring and boosting student performance is positive social and relational dynamics. Trust, open communication, and emotional support define these relations (González, Wang, & Eccles, 2020). These relationships help students feel like they belong and affect motivation differently across educational levels (King & McInerney, 2021). Educational relationships, such as those between teachers and students or peers build trust, communication, and respect, which improve learning outcomes. Educational relationships include peer, social, and emotional interactions between students, teachers, and administrators. These open communication, trust, and emotional support ties foster a sense of community and improve students' academic performance and motivation at all levels. Teacher-student relationships motivate students, especially in English (Syahabuddin et al., 2020). Strong teacher-student developmental interactions boost student motivation, especially in difficult courses like English (Peng, 2021). Such interactions foster trust, support, and respect, creating a positive learning atmosphere that motivates students. Teachers and students need to build trust, respect, and support to increase learning (Sethi & Scales, 2020). These interactions require a teacher to care about students' academic development and well-being to create a healthy learning environment. When instructors are responsive to students' needs, they feel like they belong and participate more. This support boosts self-confidence, engagement, and academic participation. Thus, developmental interactions improve student performance (Hofkens & Pianta, 2022).

Student Motivation

Academic motivation is essential for a student's development and performance, fostering tenacity, effort, critical thinking, and overall achievement. Motivation boosts engagement, perseverance, and performance, which are crucial in the knowledge-based global economy (Berestova et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2022). Educational policymakers must understand motivation to create effective policies, curricula, and support systems. It boosts academic achievement, retention, and job prospects (Koenka, 2020; Remedios & Sewell, 2024). Motivation research offers essential insights into the factors that propel individuals to learn, enabling educators and instructional designers to customize approaches that more effectively address diverse needs, thereby promoting more inclusive and efficient educational settings (Kausik & Hussain, 2023). Motivated students are engaged, academically successful, and more likely to achieve short- and long-term goals (Engels et al., 2021). Understanding academic motivation is important because teacher-student connections affect students' learning. Good

views of professors, especially in terms of support, are linked to good views of learning and academic achievement. Student motivation includes internal and environmental factors that inspire students to study and persevere (Scales et al., 2022). Student motivation refers to the internal and external factors that drive learners to engage with academic tasks, persist in completing assignments, and overcome challenges. Its key components include interest, goal orientation, self-efficacy, and the perceived value of learning. Motivation is shaped by social interactions and leadership practices within the educational environment and tends to vary across developmental stages. Drawing on self-determination theory, effective motivation is supported when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which together foster intrinsic engagement (Schunk et al., 2021).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Studying how leadership and related dynamics affect student motivation requires modern educational theories and leadership models. Motivation is now considered as a dynamic relationship between students and schools. SDT is widely used in education and supported by research. (Ryan & Deci, 2020) found that meeting autonomy, competence, and relatedness demands motivates students organically. School social environment and leadership influence student involvement and well-being by addressing their psychological needs. Ryan & Deci's 1985 Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the three psychological demands necessary for motivation, well-being, and functioning. Self-Determination Theory states that employees with more motivational autonomy have lower job tiredness, burnout, and ill-being and higher workplace engagement and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT is linked to positive psychology, highlights individuals' innate growth tendencies and psychological requirements that drive self-motivation and personality integration, as well as the settings that encourage these positive processes. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Many adult learners use Self-Determination Theory

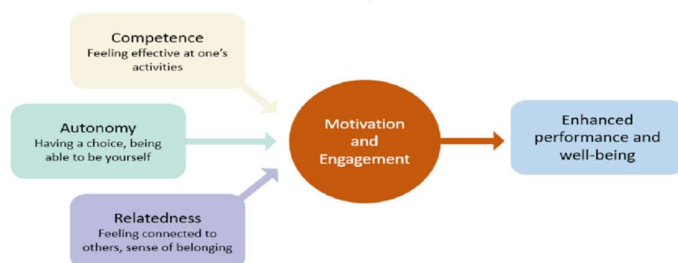


Figure 1: Self-Determination Theory (Source: Ryan & Deci 2000)

SDT explains human motivation. It lists three psychological demands that inspire people: To be autonomous, one must design their actions and judgments. Students have more ownership and are more motivated to learn when they have educational choices (project topics, mastery approaches). Competence requires confidence and efficiency. Students build confidence from positive feedback, achievable objectives, and opportunities to master skills. An expert mindset improves engagement, persistence, and academic performance. Relatedness requires feeling valued, supported, and linked. Motivating classrooms offer instructor help, peer collaboration, and belonging. Strong relationships minimize anxiety and boost motivation. Students are motivated by autonomous, competent, and related learning environments,

according to Self-Determination Theory. Curiosity, personal growth, and mastery replace grades, awards, and punishment. This integration forms the foundation for meaningful and sustained learning. These core dimensions also link STD to broader educational constructs, including classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, and leadership practices. When schools intentionally design relationally supportive, autonomy-promoting, and competency-building environments, they activate the motivational mechanisms central to STD, thereby creating conditions that enhance student success across all developmental stages.

Schooling Stages

Students move through primary, secondary, and tertiary education, and leadership influences motivation differently at each stage due to cognitive, emotional, and social differences (UNESCO, 2017).

In early and primary education, relational leadership that fosters empathy, safety, and belonging supports positive attitudes toward learning. Teachers create secure environments where children feel free to explore and grow, promoting teamwork, creativity, and personal development (Kim, 2020).

During secondary education, adolescents seek independence, social acceptance, and meaningful engagement. Transformational leadership that offers vision, individualized support, and high expectations motivates students by recognizing strengths and encouraging accountability (Leithwood et al., 2020). At this stage, schools must address issues like peer pressure and identity formation, supporting students' academic and emotional well-being (Larsen & Luna, 2018; Yu et al., 2022).

In tertiary education, students value autonomy, purpose, and connection. While university environments can feel impersonal, mentorship, inclusive leadership, and supportive faculty relationships enhance belonging and sustain motivation (Degol & Wang, 2021). Tertiary institutions are also vital for national development, producing skilled, employable, and innovative graduates.

How Leadership and Relationship Impact Student Motivation

Educational leaders must foster a welcoming, inclusive school atmosphere that promotes student engagement and well-being. Educational leaders may foster a welcoming school environment by emphasizing respect, empathy, and belonging. Their rules emphasize equity and inclusivity and mandate specific behavior. Educational leaders foster a safe space for students to express themselves, take risks, and learn fully (Culduz, 2024). Educational leaders value student input in school choices. Students may alter their education with student voice and participation. Student councils, advisory boards, and other forums where students can express their thoughts, discuss ideas, and make learning environment decisions may help. Educational leaders empower students to take ownership, responsibility, and action (Mendes & Hammett, 2023). Leaders value kids' emotional and social needs. They improve mental health, well-being, and relationships. Educational leaders encourage emotional growth and school health through therapy, social-emotional learning, and awareness initiatives. They teach empathy, resilience, and self-awareness to help pupils overcome obstacles and develop healthy coping skills. Education leaders promote social-emotional growth.

Teachers, students, and families should communicate well, as well as education officials. Communication builds trust, transparency, and collaboration. Effective communication from educational leaders informs stakeholders about school activities, policies, and student progress. Education leaders improve communication to enhance collaboration and understanding, establishing a conducive learning environment. Education leadership strongly impacts student engagement and well-being. Educational leaders foster a welcoming, inclusive school environment, promote student voice and decision-making, address social-emotional issues, and increase communication to empower and connect students. Educational leaders encourage academic, social, and emotional growth in students. Teachers boost pupils' self-esteem by encouraging autonomy. Responsibility for acts and experiences demands autonomy. Personal goals are supported by self-directed learners. Teachers' empathy and pedagogy promote autonomy. Autonomy-promoting teachers understand and nurture students' interests, preferences, and emotional health, facilitating meaningful class engagement. Autonomy advocates encourage kids to lead, decide, and engage in meaningful school activities (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Aelterman and colleagues distinguish interactive and attuning autonomy-supportive education. Participatory teachers encourage active participation, provide meaningful options, and tailor education to students' developmental and academic requirements. Attuning teachers validate students' opinions, ideas, and lived experiences, boosting their sense of belonging in the learning environment (Aelterman et al., 2019).

Teachers provide clear, informative explanations while letting students work at their own pace. These strategies motivate and intrinsically instruct students (Ahmadi et al., 2023). Students benefit from teachers who foster autonomy beyond independence. Facilitator roles vary, but autonomous and independent learners believe they initiate their own behaviors. (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Independent students can request help or work alone. Supporting teacher autonomy improves student learning. Autonomy-supportive teaching predicts student well-being, motivation, and engagement (Ryan, 2022). Student self-regulation, competency, and resistance to hard tasks are seen in autonomy-supportive learning. Instructor autonomy support has several benefits for student learning and advancement across educational levels and cultures (Domen et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the influence of leadership and relationships on student motivation at various educational stages, examined via the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The paper elucidated that students' motivation is maintained when their psychological requirements for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are regularly upheld by school leaders, educators, and peers. The discourse has revealed that although these needs are universal, the optimal approach to addressing them evolves with development: relational security is paramount in early education, autonomy gains significance during adolescence, and participatory, collaborative leadership enhances agency and competence in higher education. It highlighted the importance of adaptive leadership, a style that adjusts to students' developmental requirements and reacts to the evolving dynamics of the school environment. Impactful leadership is characterized by its relational and flexible nature, emphasizing that motivation cannot be imposed but must be cultivated. Schools that adopt leadership practices

based on Self-Determination Theory are more likely to cultivate motivated, engaged, and resilient learners. Aligning leadership strategies with students' psychological needs throughout various school stages enables educators to transcend short-term compliance and foster profound intrinsic motivation. Schools enhance academic achievement and contribute to the holistic development of learners, equipping them for lifelong growth, responsibility, and active societal participation.

Way Forward

To attain leadership that is relationally anchored and developmentally flexible, improves academic results, and equips students to become self-motivated, resilient learners in a dynamic environment. The subsequent suggestions should be addressed through their implementation.

1. Establish ongoing professional development initiatives that give school administrators training in transformational and distributed leadership, emotional intelligence, and culturally sensitive methods.
2. Encourage decentralized leadership models that include parents, students, and educators in decision-making to boost buy-in and enthusiasm. Work to eliminate bullying and promote a sense of belonging in the classroom by creating regulations that support constructive connections between educators, students, and classmates.
3. Acknowledge and modify leadership approaches to align with local socio-economic and cultural contexts. Employ innovative problem-solving strategies and collaborative community partnerships to address resource deficiencies and foster supportive educational settings.
4. Establish mechanisms that enable students to actively participate in the development of their educational experiences, influence school policies, and convey their perspectives. Customize relational leadership to the changing motivational requirements of various educational stages.

References

- Aelterman, N., Vansteenkiste, M., Haerens, L., Soenens, B., Fontaine, J. R. & Reeve, J. (2019). Toward an integrative and fine-grained insight in motivating and demotivating teaching Style: The merits of a circumplex approach. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 111(3), 467-521. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000293>
- Ahmadi, A., Noetel, M., Parker, P., Ryan, R. M., Ntoumanis, N., Reeve, J., Beauchamp, M., Dicke, T., Yeung, A., Ahmadi, M., Bartholomew, K., Chiu, T. K. F., Curran, T., Erturan, G., Flunger B., Frederick, C., Froiland, J. M., González-Cutre, D., Haerens, L. & Lonsade, C. (2023). A classification system for teachers' motivational behaviors recommended in Self-determination theory interventions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 115(8), 1158– 1176. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000783>

- Ahmad, N., Ullah, Z., AlDhaen, E., Han, H., Araya-Castillo, L. & Ariza-Montes, A. (2022). Fostering hotel-employee creativity through micro-level corporate social responsibility: A social identity theory perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 853125
- Al-Kubaisi, H. & Shahbal, S. (2021). The Focus of Educational Leadership on Student Learning; Reflection and Assessment-Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education. *Webology*, 18(3), 1699–1720.
- Berestova, A., Burdina, G., Lobuteva, L. & Lobuteva, A. (2022). Academic motivation of university students and the factors that influence it in an e-learning environment. *The Electronic Journal of e-learning*, 20(2), 201-210.
- Bush, T., Middlewood, D. & Bell, L. (2019). Principles of educational leadership & management. *Principles of Educational Leadership & Management*, 1-408
- Culduz, M. (2024). The Impact of Educational Leadership in Improving the Learning Experience, In A. S. Munna, U. Nwagbara & Y. Alhassan (Eds.), *Promoting Crisis Management and Creative Problem-Solving Skills in Educational Leadership* 168-189. IGI Global, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8332-9.ch008>
- Domen, J., Hornstra, L., Weijers, D., van der Veen, I. & Peetsma, T. (2020). Differentiated need support by teachers: Student-specific provision of autonomy and structure and relations with student motivation. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(2), 403-423. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12302>
- Eadens, D. W., & Ceballos, M. (2022). Educational Leadership Preparation and Professional Roles: Are We Serving the needs of Leadership Roles Along the Leadership Continuum. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 18(2).
- Engels, M. C., Spilt, J., Danies, K., & Verschueren, K. (2021). The role of affective teacher-student relationships in adolescents' school engagement and achievement trajectories. *Learning and Instruction*, 75, 101485.
- Gardner-McTaggart, A. C. (2022). Educational leadership and global crises; reimagining planetary futures through social practice. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 25(4), 647-663. Doi:10.1080/1303124.2020.1811900
- González, T., Wang, M. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2020). Teacher-student relationship quality and academic engagement: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(3), 437–463. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320932869>
- Hofkens, T. L., & Pianta, R. C. (2022). Teacher-student relationships, engagement in school, and student outcomes. *Handbook of research on student engagement*, springer, 431-449.

- Kausik, N. H. & Hussain, D. (2023). The impact of inclusive education on academic self-Motivation, academic self-efficacy, and well-being of students with learning disability *Journal of Education*, 203(2), 251-257.
- Kim, J. (2020). Learning and teaching online during Covid-19: Experiences of student teachers in an early childhood education practicum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(2), 145–158
- King, R. B., & McInerney, D. M. (2021). The role of teacher-student relationships in student motivation: Implications for policy and practice. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33, 1127–1148. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-020-09561-3>
- Koenka, A. C. (2020). Academic motivation theories revisited: An interactive dialog between motivation scholars on recent contributions, underexplored issues, and future directions *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101831
- Lambrecht, J., Lenkeit, J., Hartmann, A., Ehlert, A., Knigge, M., & Spörer, N. (2022). The effect of school leadership on implementing inclusive education: How transformational and instructional leadership practices affect individualized education planning. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(9), 943–957. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1752825>
- Larsen B., & Luna B. (2018). Adolescence as a neurobiological critical period for the development of higher-order cognition. *Neurosci Biobehav Rev.* 94:179–95. doi: 10.1016/j.neubiorev.2018.09.005, PMID: [DOI] [PMC free article] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22.
- Mendes, A. B., & Hammett, D. (2023). The new tyranny of student participation? Student voice and the paradox of strategic-active student-citizens. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 28(1), 164-179. Doi:10.1080/13562517.2020.1783227
- Northouse, P. G. (2022). *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (9th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Peng, C. (2021). The academic motivation of students in English as a foreign language classes. Does teacher praise matter? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 778174
- Reeve, J. (2016). Autonomy-supportive teaching: What it is how to do it? In *Building autonomus Learners: Perspectives from research and practice using self-determination theory*(129–152). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-630-0_7

- Reeve, J., & Cheon, S. H. (2021). Autonomy-supportive teaching: Its malleability, benefits, and potential to improve educational practice. *Educational Psychologist*, 56(1), 54–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2020.186265>
- Remedios, R. & Sewell, P. (2024). Employability and motivation: Which motivational theories are most appropriate? *Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning*, 14 (4), 908-919
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). *American Psychologist*, Self-determination theory and facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development and wellbeing. 55(1), 68-78. DOI: 10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.68.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness. Guilford Press. <https://doi.org/10.1521/978146252880>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101860. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
- Ryan, R. M., Duineveld, J. J., Di Domenico, S. I., Ryan, W. S., Steward, B. A., & Bradshaw, E. L. (2022). We know this much is (meta-analytically) true: A meta-review of meta-analytic findings evaluating self-determination theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 148(11–12), 813. <https://psycn.et.apa.org/doi/10.1037/bul0000385>
- Scales, P. C., Pekel, K., & Houlberg, B. J. (2022). Developmental relationships and student academic motivation: current research and future directions *Handbook of research on student engagement*, 257-283
- Schunk, D. H., Pintrich, P. R., & Meece, J. L. (2021). *Motivation in education: Theory, research, and applications* (5th ed.). Pearson
- Sethi, J., & Scales, P. C. (2020). Developmental relationships and school success: How teachers, parents, and friends affect educational outcomes and what actions students say matter most. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 63, 101904
- Syahabuddin, R., Fhonna, U., & Maghifirah (2020). Teacher-student relationships: An influence on the English teaching-learning process. *Studies in English Language and Education* 7(2), 393-406
- UNESCO. (2017). Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives. UNESCO Publishing. equity and student motivation. *Journal of African Education and Leadership*, 6(1), 34–50.

- Wang, M. T., & Degol, J. L. (2021). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33, 1-36 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-020-09532-3> Computers, 3, 275–285. doi:10.1016/j.susoc.2022
- Yu T, Xu J, Jiang Y, Hua H, Zhou Y, Guo X. (2022). School educational models and child mental health among K-12 students: a scoping review. *Child Adolescence Psychiatry Mental Health*. 16:1–16. doi: 10.1186/s13034-022-00469-8 [DOI] [PMC free article [PubMed] [Google Scholar]