ISMS: A New Model for Improving Student Motivation and Self-esteem in Primary Education

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Abstract

In this study we introduce a new model for primary education called ISMS: Improving Student Motivation and Self-esteem. Following a two-year study undertaken in a primary school (*n*=67), the new model was found to be successful. Students who participated in the research, reported that a course based on ISMS principles was very helpful for strengthening their perceived ability and their motivation to make an effort. They became more enthusiastic, responsible, self-confident, optimistic and determined to succeed. The meaning of such findings is that it is possible to improve key variables having vital influence on student learning and academic performance. The ISMS model was found to be applicable to primary education, in particular, but it may be suitable to secondary schools as well.

Keywords: ISMS, motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, academic performance.

Introduction

Motivation is supposed to be one of the most important factors that educators deal with in order to improve learning (Williams & Williams, 2011). It is essential in facilitating a desire to begin to engage in and pursue educational goals (Elliott, Hufton, Willis & Illushin 2005; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Reeve, 2006). Student motivation is defined as a process where the learners' attention becomes focused on meeting their scholastic objectives and their energies are directed towards realizing their academic potential (Christophel, 1990; Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973).

Student motivation is a vital element that is required for high-quality education. How do we know when students are motivated? They pay attention, they begin working on tasks immediately, they ask questions and volunteer answers, and they appear to be

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happy and eager (Palmer, 2007). Basically, very little if any learning can occur unless students are motivated on a consistent basis.

Self-efficacy is the extent or strength of one's belief in one's own ability to complete tasks and reach goals. Self-efficacy involves the self-evaluation of an individual's perceived skills in reflection of the situation they are experiencing (Bandura, 1982). Bandura is the most notable contributor in postulating ideas within the social learning theoretical framework that are applicable to the notion of student motivation (Lancellotti & Thomas, 2009).

Bandura (1982) presupposes there is a rich interplay within the dynamic process of motivation as the social environment helps in providing feedback about an individual's successful (or unsuccessful) attempts to use their skills. The three-part process (person, behaviour and environment) outlined by Bandura (1999) is known as reciprocal determinism. Self-efficacy can be conceptualized along a continuum with self-doubt at the opposing end to self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Students are presupposed to move along the continuum according to the many different experiences they encounter in reaction to their perceived skills (Bandura, 1999). Researchers indicate self-efficacious beliefs are a powerful influence on the motivational process (Lancellotti & Thomas, 2009). Students who believe that they possess the necessary skills have greater likelihood of attaining higher than average grades (Lancellotti & Thomas, 2009). Researchers' findings suggest self-efficacious beliefs, student motivation and course descriptions are good indicators for predicting student effort because they stimulate attitudinal processes that are future-oriented towards achievement outcomes (Lancellotti & Thomas, 2009). Additionally, another research supports Lancellotti and Thomas' (2009) notion that self-efficacious cognitions feed a person's beliefs concerning self-competence to such a large degree that approach-behaviour toward goals is highly correlated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Social feedback is one means by which students gather information as to their skill success during a collaborative learning process (Reeve & Deci, 1996). Hence, self-efficacy is both a social and cognitive requirement.

A similar term to self-efficacy is self-esteem. A common definition for this term is as follows:

"Global cognitive and affective/feeling orientation that focuses on how an individual feels about him or herself as a person" (Burnett, 1994, p. 165).

This definition is in line with a description of global self-esteem as overall feelings of self-worth (Lawrence, 1996).

Self-esteem has a pervasive impact on human behaviour (Baumeister, 1999). For example, it has been found that global self-esteem is related to areas such as conformity, attraction, competition, helping, and causal attribution (Campbell, 1990). Furthermore, level of self-esteem has a powerful effect on students' assertiveness, independence, dominance, and ambitiousness (Campbell, 1990); interpersonal skills (Carlock, 1999); and students' perceptions of self-referent (Rudich & Vallacher, 1999) and evaluative feedback (Woo & Frank, 2000). Additionally, evidence suggests that there are positive correlations between global self-esteem and academic performance (Khalid, 1990), self-confidence, success at schoolwork (Lawrence, 1996), and the successful functioning of the individual (Williams & Eden, 1995). The results of these studies highlight the important influence of self-esteem.

Persons' self-esteem is continuously developed throughout their entire life, through life experiences (Orth et. al, 2012). The development of self-esteem starts as early as childhood. Children are largely influenced by their parents at a young age to determine

what is right and wrong. If a parent is constantly giving positive reinforcement to a child, the child is more probable to respond and do well (Rudy & Grusec, 2006). However, if children are continuously given negative feedback, or told they were naughty, the more likely that they will begin to believe it (Rudy & Grusec, 2006). As people go through life, they will constantly be faced with judgments from family, friends, or other influencing people, all of which will have an impact on how people see themselves – their self-esteem (Pelham & Swann, 1989).

Multiple studies have shown the importance of the association between academic achievement and self-esteem (Bauemeister et. al, 2003). Studies have shown that a child with high academic performance is much more likely to have high self-esteem, compared to someone with poor academic performance (Bauemeister et. al, 2003).

At this point, it should be mentioned that according to Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoresen (2002), both terms, self-esteem and self-efficacy measure the same single factor and demonstrated them to be related concepts. Therefore, the term self-esteem would be used exclusively from this point on.

Based on the literature mentioned above, it is evident that both motivation and self-esteem are essential variables having an influence on student learning. Therefore, if a method for improving motivation and self-esteem had been found, it could have created much better learning at school.

The new model

The study introduces a new model for primary education called ISMS: Improving Student Motivation and Self-esteem. The model is focused on practical procedures, which can be easily undertaken in every primary school in order to achieve that desired goal. According to the research literature, it is well known that such advancement might affect students' learning significantly and positively.

Unfortunately, many students do not fulfil their intellectual potential because of low motivation and self-esteem. Such a situation might be changed following an improvement of these variables. The new model intends to achieve the following main objectives:

1. Increasing students' perceived ability to fulfil their intellectual potential by strengthening emotional skills:
   a. To "touch the child's soil" and to help him/her to change negative perceptions such as "I cannot/I am unable" to positive believes: "I can/I am able".
   b. To assist students to release emotional barriers preventing them from being available for learning – low motivation and low self-esteem. That can be done by fostering a sense of efficacy, strengthening self-belief and motivation in the context of success in life in general and at school in particular.
2. Assimilating the message that man creates his life as he sees fit. Students have the power to determine their future life in general and in the academic area, in particular.
3. Increasing students' awareness of the importance of necessary components to succeed, such as: belief in the ability to prosper, willpower, setting goals, striving for their achievement and persistence.
4. Increasing students' awareness of difficulty factors, namely, students should realize that such difficulties can be solved through self-determination.

Basic metaphor

The model is based on the fundamental term "Architect," which is a metaphor for creation of life success. It begins by introducing the following phrase: "I am the architect of my life." Students are asked to describe their thoughts relating to "being the architect of my life." The meaning of this slogan is that success in life in general and at school, in particular, depends mainly on the individual, and it requires meticulous pre-planning. Planning of personal career is similar to the process that an architect undertakes while designing a new house. The basic objective of the new model is to nurture high internal locus of control (the extent to which individuals believe that they can control events that affect them). It fits the "self-fulfilling prophecy" which is a prediction that causes itself to become true, namely, if students believe they can study successfully, the probability they would practically succeed, would be much greater, and vice versa.

Following the first discussion, students are requested to answer the question "Why in your opinion, the course is called 'I am the architect of my life'?" Such a discussion can be undertaken in class or via a digital forum in the course website.

General Framework

The model is about to be undertaken in groups of up to 15 students during 14 one-hour lessons undertaken once a week. It is guided by teachers who have learned its principles. It is based on the assumption that perceptions affect behaviour and its main objective is to significantly strengthen motivation to succeed and self-esteem.

Improving motivation to succeed and strengthening self-esteem

The model is based on the following two basic principles:

1. Participating in challenging activities based on creative thinking: students are trained to think "out of the box" in order to find applicable solutions. Such activities take place at the beginning of each meeting in order to assimilate the following message: "in situations where we are stuck in life or/and in studies, it is necessary to think outside the box in order to make a breakthrough for achieving our desired targets."

While dealing with challenging activities, students experience a simulation of real-life situations where people might feel helpless or hopeless concerning certain circumstances. However, deep thinking shows that such a perception is usually wrong because reasonable solutions do exist, even though, they are not easily seen. Such a simulation is about to teach students that in many real-life cases, failures are not inevitable. On the contrary, disappointments can be prevented and success might be achieved if students would be used to believe they can and they would prefer an optimistic view over a pessimistic one. Furthermore, in many occasions, people use to do "more of the same": they move in the same direction instead of thinking creatively what might cause a breakthrough. The fact that somebody did not succeed is not an evidence for being incompetent.
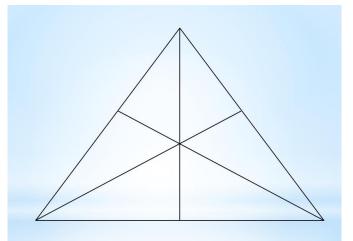
Students are guided to realize that they have the ability to successfully deal with difficult situations, dependent on the adoption of the following two basic perceptions:

a. Belief in the existence of a feasible solution.
b. Action in different ways based on deep thinking for achieving an efficient practical solution.

Following each activity, the perceptions mentioned above are discussed and explained so that students are expected to gradually change their defeatist way of thinking, adopting new assertive views.

Examples:

    a. There are six matches, and it is required to use them only in order to build four equilateral triangles.

    b. At first, the mission looks impossible. Nevertheless, it might be a simulation of real-life situations in which difficulties look unsolvable initially. After deep and creative thinking, preliminary perceptions are about to change and a simple solution might be found (transition from planar perception to spatial thinking, namely, building a triangular pyramid, including a base and three faces, all of which are equilateral triangles).

    c. How many triangles are there in the following drawing?

Figure 1. An example for a challenging activity - number of triangles.

At first, it seems that there are only six or seven triangles. Later on, more triangles are viewed (combinations of two, three or six small triangles – overall 16).

    2. Developing awareness of vital characteristics for fulfilling personal potential and success: in order to develop such an awareness, students take part in discussions and exercises dealing with the important factors influencing success and potential fulfilment, such as:

        a. Belief in student ability to succeed: students are taught to adopt the following concept: "our thoughts create our world." That perception is introduced by relevant quotes emphasising the great importance of positive thinking. It includes the belief of one self's ability to overcome fears, accepting oneself-positive as well as oneself-negative characteristics. The vital importance of continually making effort, in spite of all difficulties, is stressed repeatedly. A very important view is not to give up while facing difficulties. On the contrary, students learn to realize that it is absolutely crucial to be patient and persistent, in order to eventually achieve success.

In order to assimilate such perceptions, students are given relevant quotes and are asked to discuss the main ideas, such as:

"You have powers you never dreamed of. You can do things you never thought you could do. There are no limitations in what you can do except the limitations of your own mind." (Kingsley, 2006).

"You are today where your thoughts have brought you; you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you". (Allen, n.d.).

b. Change of attitude on life: famous quotes are introduced in order to stimulate discussion directed at enabling students to change their attitudes on life. Relevant examples of such quotes may be the following:

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty" (Churchill, n.d.).

"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, the education, the money, than circumstances, than failure, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company... a church... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it. And so it is with you... we are in charge of our attitudes." (Swindoll, n.d.).

c. Characteristics of success: students are asked to remind and describe real life situations which they faced successfully, including involved emotions and feelings, as well as helpful abilities, strengths and skills. Following that, they are asked also to interview a close relative (father, mother, grandfather, grandmother) and to deal with the relatives' equivalent successful life situations.

Furthermore, students are exposed to ways of achieving success as demonstrated from the point of view of successful celebrities. That is undertaken by reading texts expressing famous people's views towards success. A relevant example is that of Bill Gates (Macabasco-Yanuaria, n.d.):

1. Passion to create things and make a difference.
2. Hard-work and dedication.
3. High emotional intelligence
4. Humility and simplicity.
5. Value of taking one step everyday

Students may learn a lot by being exposed to such quotes and discuss them deeply. They are about to realize that success depends on hard work, it is reached gradually and not at once, and it is dependent on motivation and willingness to advance.

d. Motivation and Self-locus of control: in order to teach students that achievements are based on high self-expectations and hard work, they are asked to choose a quote from a list of proverbs and to explain the reasons for their selection. The following are relevant examples:

"Just remember, you can't climb the ladder of success with your hands in your pockets" (Lewis, 2012).

"A leader is a dealer in hope" (Bonaparte, n.d.).

"People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it" (Bernard-Shaw, n.d.a).

"People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them." (Bernard-Shaw, n.d.b).

"People do not lack strength, they lack will" (Hugo, n.d.).

"Success is not achieved without labour" (Ibn Ezra, n.d.).

"You are good enough, smart enough, beautiful enough and strong enough. Believe it and never let insecurity run your life" (Davis, 2012).

Such a discussion can be helpful for students to realize that in order to reach desired goals, effort should be invested, they have to be optimistic and believe in their own capability. Furthermore, they should believe they have the strength to influence and that most daily situations depend mainly on themselves and not on the external world. It should be stressed at that point that in order to reach a conceptual meaningful change, such discussions should be taken place repeatedly. Such a comprehensive change depends on continuous activities.

Method

General Background

The study framework: evaluating the effectiveness of ISMS model

Primary school students (School A, *n*=67) who studied in a course based on the principles of the ISMS model, participated in a study intended to evaluate the course influence on their attitudes. Therefore, a pre-experiment design, including one group pre-test - post-test, has been chosen (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The field experiment was undertaken twice: the first one, during the year 2012-13 and the second, in 2013-14. Students' level of motivation and self-esteem were examined before and after the ISMS course in order to find out if there is a significant difference between the two measurements. The meaning of such a hypothetical significant gap is that implementing the new model can improve students' motivation and/or self-esteem. Such a result might have an important positive influence on students' future learning and consequently, in the long run their achievements are likely to be better.

The research question

The research question intended to measure the effectiveness of the new ISMS model in primary schools. The model's effectiveness was measured relating to hypothetical improvement of two main variables: students' motivation and self-esteem.

The following research question was worded:

What influence does ISMS model have on primary school students' motivation and self-esteem?

Population and Samples

Population: The population addressed through the study included all students at school A which is a primary school located in a city close to Tel-Aviv. The institution has six grades (from first to sixth), there are approximately 500 students overall and 35 teachers.

Samples: the study was based on the following two samples, including four grades (3th-6th, age 11 to 14):

Sample 1: year 2012-13 - 38 students.

Sample 2: year 2013-14 - 29 students.

Overall: 67 students.

Students were asked to answer the same questionnaire before and after participating in a course based on ISMS principles, during two academic years (2012-2013, 2013-2014). The aim of the study was to measure their level of motivation and self-esteem and to check hypothetical differences between both measurements.

The questionnaire was anonymous, and the rate of response was 100%.

Tools

In order to answer the research question, a questionnaire, including 26 closed statements and two open ended ones was prepared. For each question, respondents were requested to mention their views on the following Likert five-point scale:

1   Strongly disagree.
2   Mostly disagree.
3   Moderately agree
4   Mostly agree.
5   Strongly agree.

The open-ended questions were designed to accomplish the main data gathered by the quantitative part of the questionnaire, as follows:

1.   Was the ISMS course helpful for improving your own belief in your ability to succeed?
2.   Did the course have any influence on your will to succeed and making effort at school?

Data Analysis

In order to examine the validity of the questionnaire, factors' reliability was calculated (Cronbach's alpha). Item analysis was undertaken as well in order to improve reliability. Based on the reliability found, the following four factors were calculated:

1.   Motivation – pre-course.
2.   Self-esteem – pre-course.
3.   Motivation – post-course.
4.   Self-esteem – post-course.

For each factor, there was found a high value of reliability (ranges from 0.738 to 0.914). Every factor has been determined by calculating the mean value of the items composing it.

For each factor, a mean score was calculated (including standard deviation). The following statistical tests have been undertaken as well ($\alpha <= 0.05$):

1.   Independent Samples T-test: in order to check significant differences of factors' means between 2012-13 and 2013-14.
2.   Paired Samples T-test: it was conducted for checking significant differences between pre-course and post-course factors (for both motivation and self-esteem).

Table 1 summarizes the four factors, the items composing them and the reliability.

Table 1. *Factors and reliability*

Factors	Questionnaire's questions
Motivation *Pre-course: Alpha=0.880* *Post-course: Alpha=0.914*	It is important for me to learn everything that the teacher teaches at class. I strive for good grades at school. Even when I do not succeed in a test, I am trying to learn from my mistakes. The studies at school are important for me. I have a strong will to succeed at school. I prepare myself carefully before each test. I'm trying to do my homework well. I'm trying to learn even when the lesson is boring. I take responsibility in order to succeed at school. I set goals in order to make progress at school. I'm making plans to help me making progress at school. I make an effort at school until I succeed. I am ready to invest time in order to succeed at school. I meticulously prepare my school assignments. I am willing to continue to invest at school, even if I failed. When I fail in a certain subject, I continue to make an effort. I'm able to think creatively in order to deal with difficulties at school. When I fail in a certain subject, I know how to find creative solutions that would help me succeed.
Self-esteem *Pre-course: Alpha=0.738* *Post-course: Alpha=0.772*	I am a good student. I think I have the talent to succeed at school. I have knowledge and understanding in many areas. I am able to succeed at school. I can cope well with most learning tasks. I am organized pretty well with my time. I think my teachers appreciate me. I believe I can do well at school.

Results

There was no significant difference between the years 2012-13 and 2013-14 concerning the mean scores of all four factors, as follows (Independent Samples T-test, $\alpha \leq 0.05$):

Motivation – pre-course: $t_{(65)} = 1.933$, $p = .058$

Self-esteem – pre-course: $t_{(65)} = 1.211$, $p = .23$

Motivation – post-course: $t_{(62)} = 1.031$, $p = .307$

Self-esteem – post-course: $t_{(62)} = 1.341$, $p = .185$

It means that there was a replication of the results found in the first year (2012-13) also in the second one (2013-14). It strengthens the findings and gives them more validity. Therefore, mean factors' scores are presented for both years together in table 2.

Table 2. *School A – mean factors for 2012-13 and 2013-14 together (Pre/Post-course).*

Factors		*N*	Mean	S.D
Motivation	Pre-course	64	3.9786	.55
	Post-course	64	4.1794	.57
Self-esteem	Pre-course	64	3.9040	.61
	Post-course	64	4.1895	.55

Table 2 introduces the following findings:

Relating to motivation (t-test, $\alpha \leq 0.05$), there is a significant difference between pre-course (3.9786) and post-course (4.1794) results ($t_{(63)} = -2.663$, $p = .01$). Concerning self-esteem, the gap between pre-course (3.9040) and post-course (4.1895) results was found to be significant as well ($t_{(65)} = -3.234$, $p = .002$). The meaning of these findings is that a course based on ISMS model, has a positive influence on improving of both motivation and self-esteem. The open-ended questions strengthen the closed statements as shown in the following quotes (school A, 2012-13/2013-14):

> "*The course improved my belief in my ability to succeed both at school and in life. In case I do not succeed in something, I realized that I should never give up. The course increased my willingness to make an effort at school. I learned that if I wish to succeed I have to think out of the box*".

> "*Since the course, I am enthusiastic to succeed. I realized that I have to take responsibility for myself, and if I want something, nothing would stop me.*"

> "*The course improved my courage to study and increased my self-confidence.*"

> "*The course taught me that many things which looked to me insoluble in the past can be solved if I am determined.*"

> "*I learned that if I want, I can. I began to believe in myself.*"

> "*The course encouraged me to believe that I am able to succeed.*"

> "*Following the course, I learned to be much more determined. If I experience any difficulties, I fight and do not give up.*"

> "*I studied to think positively and to be persistent all the way to achieve my desired goals.*"

> "*All my way of thinking has been changed. I started thinking creatively and began to believe in my own ability.*"

> "*I discovered new abilities which I have never known.*"

> "*It is very important that many other school students would study in the course because it changes the way of thinking.*"

The quotes mentioned above stress the very important contribution of the ISMS course to primary school students. It improved their whole way of thinking, their self-esteem and their motivation to make an effort. Students learned to believe they have significant

abilities, and they fully understood that in order to fulfil their potential, they should invest much effort and never give up. Such a conceptual change might have a substantial influence on their future achievements at school, in particular, and in life in general.

Conclusion

According to the study's results, the ISMS model was found to be a practical and successful tool for improving primary school students' motivation and self-esteem. This conclusion is based on two components:

1. Quantitative part (questionnaire's closed questions): there were found significant differences between the initial levels of both variables and their final values. The positive results were gained after a relatively short period of time: a 14-hour course based on the ISMS model. Besides, the same results received in the first year of the study (2012/13), repeated in the second one as well (2013/14).

2. Qualitative part (questionnaire's open-ended questions): additional detailed evidence was achieved by the qualitative part of the research. According to students' verbal responses, the model was found to be very helpful and effective for strengthening their perceived ability. It had a substantial contribution for improving their persistence towards goal seeking and their motivation to make an effort. Furthermore, students became more enthusiastic, responsible, self-confident, optimistic and completely determined to succeed. They learned how to adopt positive and creative thinking and in what way to discover new capabilities, which have been hidden so far.

The repetition of the quantitative results during two years and the mix of both methods (quantitative and qualitative) strengthen the validity of the whole research substantially.

The meaning of such findings is that it is quite feasible to improve key variables having vital influence on student learning and academic performance (Christophel, 1999; Elliott et al., 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004; Khalid, 1990; Lepper et al., 1973; Reeve, 2006). Moreover, such a change might be undertaken within a primary school framework without external assistance or additional substantial expenditure.

The study's findings might be applicable for improving learning and academic performance, particularly in primary schools. However, the new model might be suitable for other kinds of schools as well, such as junior-high or high schools. It might be used to create even longer courses than the one examined, or it can even be added to the regular timetable of each grade as a permanent lesson. Probably, expansion of the courses based on ISMS principles, might give better results.

As mentioned earlier, the new model deals mainly with changing students' attitudes and perceptions relating to their ability and self-confidence. In order to assimilate such a change at schools, teachers should be trained for acquiring relevant knowledge required for guiding students. The success is completely dependent on teachers' qualifications and belief that such a model can entirely change students' way of thinking. The next step which may strengthen the ISMS model can be an additional course that would train parents how to nurture their children's motivation so the mission would not be school dependent only. A combination of home and school might be synergetic, leading to a comprehensive improvement of student's motivation and self-esteem. Such a change will probably lead students to more effective learning and consequently, better achievements.

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