Motivation in Contemporary Education Practice: A Critical Review and Research Proposal

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Abstract

Motivation is formed by a breadth of elements, including biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental influences, and is characterised as a key component of students' engagement and everyday success. However, motivation within contemporary educational practice can have a significant effect on teaching, learning, and student achievement. This analysis outlines meaningful theoretical perspectives, including Skinner's Behaviourist Theory, Maslow's Humanistic Theory, Piaget's and Vygotsky's Cognitive Constructivist Theories, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and the Self-Determination Theory. These theories provide a distinctive understanding of how motivation can be understood and applied within classroom environments, while providing methods that foster positive behaviour, meet students' holistic needs, and encourage collaborative, student-centered learning. Nevertheless, the limitations and caveats of these theories, along with their implications for teacher practice, curriculum design, assessment, and teacher education, are discussed. Through a critical evaluation of these approaches, the analysis emphasises the importance of teacher and student motivation in creating effective educational environments. Comprehensive motivation is facilitated through the application of these theories as a multifaceted concept that necessitates informed pedagogical strategies, ensuring students receive inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning experiences.

Keywords

Motivation, Learning Theories, Behaviorism, Constructivism, Humanistic Theory, Social Learning, Self-Determination Theory

1. Introduction

This paper aims to critique and analyse the *understanding of motivation in con-*

temporary educational practice. The behaviour of humans can be influenced by an interplay of various individual causes, including biological, psychological, social, cultural, economic, and external stressors, which contribute to impacting how humans interrelate within their environment (Bandhu et al., 2024). Motivation signifies a longing or desire to achieve a task, combined with eagerness and determination for perseverance. This proactive motivation enables individuals to achieve their potential goals (Amaro et al., 2021; Bandhu et al., 2024; Harris & McDade, 2018; Sharma & Gupta, 2024). The primary emphasis of this paper aims to critically present and evaluate key *motivational theories, exploring their implications for teaching and learning within the classroom context.* How could motivation improve teaching and learning? Could improved motivation assist in informed teacher training or curriculum planning? These guiding questions are explored through a review of major motivational theories and their application in classroom contexts, a critical analysis of their limitations, and the development of recommendations for teacher practice, training, and curriculum planning. Provided that there is a limited word count, the focus of this paper will include:

1. Diving into current theoretical motivational theories and how they apply within real classroom environments.

2. Caveats that may structure the foundation for additional studies of the theories and research.

3. Recommendations and propositions that are relevant to the initial lines of inquiry. Through engaging with and critically evaluating motivational theories and assessing their practical application, the author aims to emphasize the roles of motivation in student achievement and its effectiveness in teacher-student interactions.

2. Overview of Literature: Current Theories

2.1. The Behaviorist Theory

The reinforcement theory is one of the oldest theories of motivation, describing the behaviour of individuals. Known as *'behaviourism'* or *'operant conditioning'* (McLeod, 2025). B.F. Skinner developed operant conditioning, a learning process that essentially influences behaviour. Skinner identified three types of behavioural operant conditioning responses that can follow behaviour (refer to Table 1). Skinner's theory of operant conditioning was founded on Thorndike's 1905 (Thorndike, 2013) work with animals using a puzzle box, proposing the theory known as *'Law of Effect'* (McLeod, 2007: p. 1). Skinner studied operant conditioning through experiments on animals he placed in a box called the 'Skinner Box,' similar to Thorndike's puzzle box (see Figure 1).

In the Skinner Box, positive reinforcement worked by placing a hungry rat in the box. As the rat moved around the box, it accidentally knocked a lever (McLeod, 2007: p. 3). When this occurred, a food pellet would drop into a container beside the lever. After a few sessions, the rat quickly learned to go straight to the lever. Receiving the food after pressing the lever reinforced the behaviour, causing the

Table 1. Skinner's three types of behaviours responses (McLeod, 2007).

Behavioural Response	Description
Neutral operant's	Responses from the environment that neither increase nor reduce The chance of a behaviour being repeated.
Reinforces	Responses from the environment that Increase the probability of a behaviour from Being recurring. Reinforcers can be either positive or negative.
Punishers	Responses from the environment that reduce The possibility of a behaviour being Repeated. Punishment weakens behaviour.

Operant Conditioning. https://tinyurl.com/28de2byx
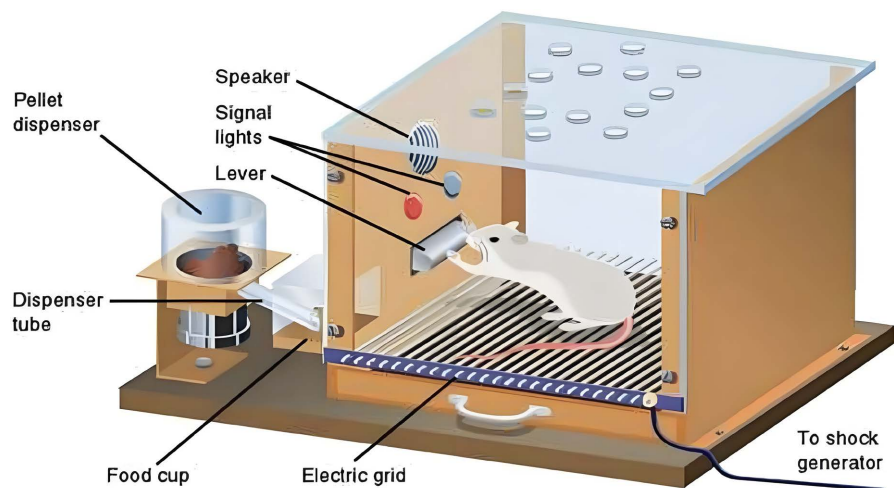
Figure 1. The skinner box.

rats to repeat the action. This example demonstrates positive reinforcement strengthening behaviour by providing a rewarding consequence (McLeod, 2007: p. 3). Skinner demonstrated how an adverse stimulus is avoided by placing rats in the Skinner box and exposing them to an electric current. As with positive reinforcement, the rat moved around the box, accidentally knocking the lever, which switched off the electric current. The rats learned to press the lever immediately after a few sessions inside the box (McLeod, 2007: p. 3). Skinner also taught the rats to avoid the electric current by turning on a light before the current was applied. The rats soon learned to press the lever when the light came on to avoid the electric current being switched on. The learned response from the rats is known as *Escape Learning and Avoidance Learning* (McLeod, 2007: p. 3).

Using Skinner's operant learning theory in the classroom, teachers have an educational tool to control and adapt their students' behaviour (Nawi & Nordin, 2025). By utilising positive reinforcement and consequences, play can influence children's behaviour. This method enables teachers to create a structured and rou-

tine classroom environment, which is beneficial for neurodiverse children who may require well-structured environments. When positive reinforcement is applied, for example, through praise, gratitude, or concrete rewards, such as a child being given a sticker on a reward chart to motivate and continue with their positive behaviours (Nawi & Nordin, 2025), teachers can verbally provide praise, such as "Good job!" This verbal encouragement motivates children, fosters positive behaviour, and enhances children's confidence within the classroom (Nawi & Nordin, 2025). Skinner's theory creates an essential role in forming effective pedagogical practices, specifically in behavioural management and motivation. Botty & Shahrill's (2014) study on mathematics teachers in Brunei Darussalam emphasises how Skinner's method motivates teachers to navigate student behaviour using reinforcement strategies, thereby fostering positive learning outcomes. The use of praise, rewards, and structured routines assists students in associating learning with positive outcomes, thereby increasing the probability of positive behaviours being repeated. This is particularly beneficial in establishing a supportive, secure, respectful, and regulated classroom environment, where students are motivated to participate and engage consistently (Botty & Shahrill, 2014). Applying Skinner's methods allows the learning process to be broken down into manageable steps and supported incrementally. This method assists classroom discipline and also fosters student confidence and motivation over time. Bruneian teachers also found operant conditioning can assist in reinforcing correct techniques and discouraging mistakes by providing immediate feedback (Botty & Shahrill, 2014). While this theory may not directly address internal cognitive processes, it provides a functional and observable framework enabling teachers to inform curriculum delivery and train practices in diverse educational settings (Botty & Shahrill, 2014). By applying Skinner's theory in classrooms, teachers have an educational method to control and adapt their students' behaviour (Nawi & Nordin, 2025).

2.2. The Humanistic Theory

The Humanistic learning theory originated from ancient Greek ideas of reminiscence, combined with mental training and modern theories of natural development (Zhang, 2024). This theory emphasizes the views of students and teachers, focusing on educating the whole child. The theory suggests that children are born with a natural disposition for choice, and they should be allowed to make their own developmental decisions (Zhang, 2024). Psychologist Abraham Maslow believed humans had the right to realize their identity and self-realization. He recognized that an individual's ability to achieve their potential and accomplish personal goals can often be disrupted through societal rejection. Phan & Ngu (2019) discuss how, according to Maslow, there are two groups of needs that humans as individuals desire to achieve (Table 2). This structure of needs is arranged within a hierarchy, ranging from the lowest level of needs, which are required for survival, to the higher-level needs for intellectual achievement, as outlined in Figure 2 (Maslow, 1970: pp. 80-89; Phan & Ngu, 2019: p. 211).

Table 2. Deficiency needs (Phan & Ngu, 2019).

Group	Need	Description
Group One	*Deficiency needs*	Encompassing the fundamental requirements for food and drink, Safety, and protection from bodily harm, as well as the desire For intimate relationships, respect, and a good reputation.
Group Two	*Growth or self-actualisation needs*	Individuals endeavoring to acknowledge their potential, capability, and abilities

Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Motivation plays a vital role in enhancing teaching and learning, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (**Figure 2**) provides a framework for understanding various human needs to improve educational outcomes. Children whose needs are frequently met on a basic level, including nutrition, safety, and well-being, are more likely to engage effectively in classroom learning settings (McLeod, 2025). Conversely, a child whose needs have not been met may struggle to participate effectively in the classroom. When a child's foundational needs are supported through nurturing, well-rounded classroom environments and reciprocal, strong student-teacher relationships, they can have the motivation necessary for academic success (Wang et al., 2024; Wentzel, 1998). Curriculum planning for teachers, inclusive of differentiated instruction and self-directed approaches, can help meet the needs of children, particularly in terms of motivation and supporting holistic student development (Wang et al., 2024; Wentzel, 1998).

2.3. The Cognitive Constructivism Theories

Cognitive theories explore how the behaviour of individuals transforms as a consequence of perception, modification, processing, and recovery of knowledge, all contributing to learning and motivation (Wright, 2015). In contrast to behaviourist theories, which emphasise observable behaviours, cognitive developmental theories emphasise the inner process that motivates engagement in learning. The-

orists, including Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, have provided insight into how cognitive and emotional development can be encouraged, thereby improving children's fundamental motivation to learn (Wright, 2015). Piaget suggested that young infants experience events by processing information through *assimilation,* taking in new information, and *accommodating* or revising previously understood mental schemas (Milak & Marwaha, 2023). Piaget divided his theory of child development into four stages (Table 3).

Vygotsky emphasized the role of culture, noting that executive functions originate within social interactions and are internalised by the individual (McLeod, 2024). Vygotsky believed that the significance of learning was within an individual's cultural and social circumstances. Nevertheless, cognitive development

Table 3. Piaget's stages of child development (Malik & Marwaha, 2023).

Stage	Age Range	Description
Sensorimotor	0 to 2 years	The period during which children develop Two key concepts: causality and object Permanence. At this stage, infants and Toddlers utilise their senses and motor. Capabilities to interact with and learn about Their environment. Children understand the Cause-and-effect of relationships, including parent's response when they cry. Memory develops as the prefrontal lobe matures, which is crucial for the development of a child's thought process and enables them Ability in the planning cycle.
Pre-operational	2 to 7 years	A period during which a child develops the ability to use mental representations, Including symbolic thought and language. Children start to learn how to imitate and Pretend through play. Children can be characterized by egocentrism, for example, A child believes that everyone views the World as they do.
Concrete operational	7 to 11 years	The phase when children use logic Operations to solve problems and engage in generalised reasoning.
Operational	12 and older	Proposes that adolescent children can use Logical operations with the aptitude to Apply their ideas. Piaget suggested that Adolescents can understand theories. hypothesize, and grasp opinions, such as Those related to love and social justice.

stems from social interactions, including guided or scaffolded learning, within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as children and peers co-construct their

knowledge (McLeod, 2024). Learning, from this outlook, suggests it is not an autonomous activity, but becomes inherently motivating when scaffolded effectively (McLeod, 2024; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978, 1987). Vygotsky advocated for an experimental-developmental approach to children's development, involving their interaction with more skilled peers or adults (McLeod, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978). His curiosity centered on children's problem-solving strategies aligning with Vygotsky's perspective on child development, which is shaped through social and cultural influences (McLeod, 2024). Vygotsky's ZPD explains how children can accomplish their objective with assistance rather than doing so autonomously, which is dependent on the experimental method (McLeod, 2024). Correspondingly, the concept of scaffolding, where adults provide support for children's learning, is closely associated with Vygotsky's concept (McLeod, 2024; Wood et al., 1976; Bruner, 1997).

Unlike teacher-student instruction, which behaviorist theories advocate, this theory promotes student-centered learning where the teacher serves as a facilitator within the learning process. Teachers in the classroom help children become active participants in their learning, enabling them to make meaningful connections between prior knowledge and new learning processes (Chand, 2024; Hallas, 2008; Tangney, 2013). Therefore, children become accountable, responsible, and have a sense of purpose and motivation for learning (Chand, 2024).

2.4. Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory is founded upon the idea that individuals learn from their interactions with others within social situations (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012). Notably, through observing the behaviours of others, it is perceived that individuals tend to develop similar behaviours. After these observations, individuals integrate, copying this behaviour, particularly if the observed behaviour has been constructive or includes incentives associated with that behaviour. Albert Bandura founded his studies around this work, renaming it Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT). SCLT has often been associated with the integration of behaviourist learning and cognitive learning theories, as they encompass attention, memory, and motivation, as well as a substantial focus on cognitive notions (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012). Phan & Ngu (2019) discuss that, according to Bandura's SCLT, there are "three major tenets" (see Table 4). Bandura's SCLT provides a perspective on understanding motivation in teaching and learning. This theory's basis is the concept of self-efficacy, referring to a child's perception of their capability to succeed, influencing motivation and achievement (Ring et al., 2018). Ring et al. (2018) explain that social interactions and learning environments form motivation. Bandura suggested that children learn by observing others, internalizing behaviours, and reproducing them when motivated. In classrooms, this suggests teachers and children operate jointly as role models. When children observe others succeeding (i.e., peers), their belief in their ability to succeed grows. This method supports collaborative learning, guided modeling, and positive reinforce-

ment, creating a learning environment where motivation and accomplishment can thrive (Ring et al., 2018). Ring et al. (2018) emphasise that responsive pedagogy should be developed to understand children's motivations and provide learning experiences that foster autonomy, competence, and relationships. These principles align with Bandura's idea of reciprocal relationships, where the environment, cognition, and behaviour affect each other (Ring et al., 2018). When teacher education programs and curricula are designed to foster teacher and child motivation through scaffolded assistance, opportunities for knowledge, and culturally relevant role modelling, classrooms become more engaging and inclusive. Ultimately, motivation acts as a foundational component for effective teaching and supported learning (Ring et al., 2018).

Table 4. Theoretical tenet (Phan & Ngu, 2019).

Description of Theoretical Tenet:
"Human learning is a function of observation."
"We, as individuals, learn to *imitate* by receiving reinforcement."
"Imitation can be explained by *operant conditioning principles*."

2.5. Self-Determining Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) presents a contemporary concept of intrinsic motivation, emphasizing that children are most motivated and perform well in the classroom when their innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2023). Contrary to behaviorist theories based primarily on external reinforcement, SDT holds that enhancing internal motivation fosters greater learning, persistence, and creativity. In the classroom context, this means that teachers can increase motivation by providing children with meaningful choices, offering praise, and establishing constructive relationships with children. This is supported by current research, for instance, that carried out by Froiland & Worrell (2016), which found that when teachers establish autonomy-supportive environments, children demonstrate significant academic engagement and intrinsic motivation, leading to greater accomplishment. Through the SDT framework, teachers can move away from unnecessary rewards and instead build classroom practices that enhance children's own internal motivation, thereby integrating pedagogy in teaching with contemporary psychological, human development, and motivational theory of learning.

3. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Motivation theories differ widely in their treatment of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Both Piaget's and Vygotsky's constructivist theories focus on intrinsic motivation, where learning results from curiosity, active exploration, and social interaction. Skinner's behaviourist theory, contrastingly, prefers extrinsic motivation, where behaviour and learning are established through reinforcement and punishment. Maslow's humanist model encompasses both, acknowledging the

importance of extrinsic needs, such as safety and belonging, while also seeking intrinsic motivation through self-actualisation. Bandura's social learning model also spans the two, acknowledging that external modelling and reinforcement influence behaviour, but facilitate internalised motivation through self-efficacy. More recently, Self-Determination Theory explicitly differentiates between intrinsic motivation and the range of extrinsic motivation, highlighting autonomy, competence, and relatedness as particularly important in promoting more self-determined involvement. All of these distinctions underscore that while extrinsic motivators do affect immediate action, long-term and deep learning are most typically enabled by intrinsic drivers.

4. Caveats for Consideration

While various theories have influenced education, each has limitations that should be considered. Skinner's Behaviourist Theory focuses on external reinforcements and has been influential in managing classroom behaviour, although it may restrict children's intrinsic motivation, learning, and creativity if overused (Skinner, 1953). Maslow's Humanistic Theory suggests that unmet needs can impact children's learning, although the hierarchy may be too rigid, as children can still achieve academically despite some requirements not being met (Maslow, 1943). Vygotsky's ZPD emphasized the importance of social interaction in learning; yet efficient scaffolding requires considerable time, effort, attention, and knowledge of each child's developmental needs (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, Piaget's Cognitive Constructivism is founded on universal developmental stages, although it may overlook cultural diversity and adaptive areas of learning (Blake & Pope, 2008). Bandura's Social Learning Theory emphasizes self-efficacy in the classroom; however, it assumes children will identify with role models and be motivated to imitate them. This may not be evident for all children, particularly those lacking confidence or cultural connection. Finally, the Self-Determination Theory can also show its own challenges, as fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom can be restrained by a rigid curricula, standardised testing, and limited teacher training. These constraints and limitations can reduce the effectiveness of SDT's intrinsic motivation principles in practice within the classroom context (Ryan & Deci, 2023).

5. Propositions for Consideration

Building on the analysis of theories and the identification of caveats in *motivational theories, as well as their implications for teaching and learning within the classroom context,* the author aims to explore an area for further study and development. Research conducted by the author found that, in most cases, children were typical in behaviour and not neurodiverse. The research the author could not find did not focus on children with specific neurodiverse diagnoses, which are characteristically found within everyday classrooms (i.e. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or autism spectrum disorder) (Keser, 2025). The studies the au-

thor did find typically centred on normally developing children and broad patterns of motivation, behaviour and learning within classroom settings. This presents a caveat in terms of generalisation, as the findings may not capture the diverse experiences or needs of neurodivergent children. Furthermore, the author believes that an in-depth, large-scale study covering a wide range of children from early childhood through adolescence, encompassing children from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, should be considered. This wide-ranging inclusion could provide a comprehensive view of motivation for children's learning and development, so that education propositions and interventions are fair, inclusive, and equitable for all children in contemporary classrooms.

6. Conclusion

In summary, across the preceding areas, motivation has a significant impact on learning and education. The theories reviewed on how children learn have demonstrated various approaches to learning and development. Child motivation is influenced by numerous factors, including biological, psychological, social, cultural, economic, environmental, and external influences. Motivation can be formed through children's interactions with their teachers and can significantly influence a child's motivation and engagement in their learning.

Conclusively, when analysed from theoretical perspectives, motivation is a multifaceted idea. Motivation is not solely the responsibility of the child but relies on the teacher's ability. Ultimately, the success of motivational strategies in education depends on a shared responsibility between teachers and children, reinforced by theory and consistent practice.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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