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# Creating a safe and welcoming school

*by John E. Mayer*



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Cultural Organization



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## Series preface

As revealed by its title, this booklet shows how schools can be made safe and welcoming places for children. Such schools are likely to foster children's learning and their motivation to continue learning throughout their lives.

The booklet has been prepared for inclusion in the Educational Practices Series developed by the International Academy of Education and distributed by the International Bureau of Education and the Academy. As part of its mission, the Academy provides timely syntheses of research on educational topics of international importance. This booklet is one in a series on educational practices that generally improve learning.

The author, Dr John E. Mayer, is not only a distinguished scholar and educator, but a clinical psychologist, author, lecturer and school consultant who has been internationally acclaimed for his work in helping schools and families. He received his doctorate in clinical psychology from Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago, Illinois. For over twenty-five years, Dr Mayer has assisted schools in creating learning environments that help young people thrive. His newsletter, *Mayer's memo*, is in its nineteenth year of distribution and provides schools with guidance on improving students' lives.

The officers of the International Academy of Education are aware that this booklet is based on research carried out primarily in economically advanced countries. The booklet, however, focuses on aspects of behaviour and school management that are universal. The practices presented here are likely to be generally applicable throughout the world. Indeed, they might be especially useful in countries that are currently less developed economically. Even so, the principles should be assessed with reference to local conditions, and adapted accordingly. In any educational setting or cultural context, suggestions or guidelines for practice require sensitive and sensible application, and continuing evaluation.

HERBERT J. WALBERG,  
Editor, IAE Educational Practices Series  
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## Introduction

*Our fundamental mandate: a safe and welcoming place to learn.*

We expend a great deal of resources attempting to create schools that provide quality education for young people. Yet, as we search for the latest technological advances to increase our effectiveness in education, we can neglect the fundamental need for a school to be a safe and welcoming place for children to learn and thrive.

If a school is not safe, the consequences for children are many. Furthermore, if the students do not feel safe inside the school, the consequences to the school and to the staff are just as serious. When children feel unsafe, vandalism against school property increases, abusive behaviour toward school staff escalates, conflict among peer groups heightens and, in general, young people are unable to learn their lessons. The most common response among young people who feel unsafe is that they close themselves off from others. In a school setting this leads to students 'shutting down' and not responding to their lessons or any other influences that the adults at school will try to impart to them. How can learning effectively take place in such an environment? Conflict in the larger society that the school belongs to, world conflict, lack of school resources, and the school staff's response to distress in the students are all contributors to making students feel unsafe at the school.

Similarly, if a school does not convey a feeling of welcome to the students, young people will also respond in the same ways as if they were feeling unsafe. They will close themselves off from the school and attempt to stay in a protective bubble, isolated from the efforts of the teachers and staff to educate them. Creating a welcoming school goes hand-in-hand with safety. If a school is not inviting, students will feel anxious and will not fully participate in their education, no matter how vigorous a school is in trying to reach them. The consequences to the school will be the same as those when students feel unsafe. Vandalism, negative behaviour towards adults and conflict with other students often result when students do not feel welcomed.

It is with this in mind that we propose that creating a safe and welcoming school is a fundamental concept that all schools should take into account in an effort to successfully educate the children of the world.

John E. Mayer

# 1. A welcoming environment

A child should feel pulled towards the school, in the same way that they react when a mother's face welcomes them with a wide smile and kind eyes. The school building and grounds can be made to convey this same feeling. We also welcome students into learning with our enthusiastic and positive attitudes toward them.

Children are very visual. They delight and thrive in environments that evoke pleasure, comfort and safety. An infant's response to their mother's loving face is a primal example.

A school's buildings and grounds announce a welcome to the students. As a child approaches the school grounds, does this area stimulate their natural playfulness and curiosity? A bright colour, an expressive face or an interesting object naturally pulls a child toward it. Yet, most school buildings do not have these qualities.

We so desperately want our children to embrace education enthusiastically, yet we do not realise that emotionless, unwelcoming buildings may be a child's first impression of learning.

Assess your school surroundings. If it doesn't pull a child into the embrace of education, then work hard to create that look and feel to it. Does it convey a sense of adventure, curiosity, fun or excitement? A child should be pulled into the building, curious about what the people inside have in store for them.

Changing the feel of your school building and grounds is not difficult; nor would it take much, if any, money. Engaging the children to help achieve this could be a wonderful school project for them and heighten their sense of ownership of their school experience. Have the students create artworks to adorn the outside of the school. They will show you the colours and shapes that will attract them. The same idea can be used for the school grounds. Let the students decorate the grounds. A side effect from this increased student ownership will be less acts of aggression, less vandalism and less absenteeism. The school will become a safe and welcoming place. The teachers and staff will also feel this new energy and this will lead to better work habits in them as well.

Another basic way that a school can convey this sense of welcoming and safety is by being clean and tidy. Children view the world from a

very different level than adults. Disorder conveys a strong message of an uncaring administration. Unclean and disorganized places also create real danger and potential harm to students, whose physical nature is full of energy and impulsive behaviour.

The school's physical surroundings often make the first welcoming impression on students. Adult's attitudes reinforce the message of welcome and safety. Consider your students as gifts that come into your life each day. Smile at them, thank them for being at school and offer a positive greeting.

*Suggested reading:* Couchenor & Chrisman, 2003; Hopkins, 2005; Hulley & Dier, 2005; Mayer, 2004.

## 2. Safety

Ensure a safe environment for students; respond to sickness and acts of aggression immediately. Keep strangers away from the school.

A child's most basic reaction in the face of fear is to shut down, hide and deny the reality of the situation. So, if children walk into a school environment that is oppressive to them, they will shut down. In other words, they will stop their school work.

Children pick up feelings of safety from very subtle signals in adults. If a student comes to school physically sick and the teacher just ignores their distress, then the other students in the classroom feel unsafe. The other students will feel: "What would happen if I am sick?" All the students will feel safer when a sick student is attended to or sent home as quickly as possible.

Responding to sickness is not the only way that we make students feel safe. Outsiders should not be allowed on the school property. Adults and young people who have no relationship with the students should not be allowed on the school grounds. Outsiders on the school grounds cause your students to feel uncertain, confused and unsafe.

Preventing and stopping physical aggression is another way we can make children feel safe. Strict rules and regulations should be in place that respond immediately to aggression among the students. A child's perception of time is unique. The time that elapses in a threatening situation can seem like an eternity in the scared child's mind. Having clear rules and procedures for responding to aggressive acts in the school allows adults to respond immediately.

*Suggested readings:* Bluestein, 2001; Brand et al., 2003; Kibble, 2004; Randazzo, 2006; Weist, Evans & Lever, 2003.

### 3. How to identify a troubled child

The most effective way to identify a troubled student is to observe whether that student has deviated from their 'baseline behaviour' pattern.

In a safe and welcoming environment, an academically or emotionally troubled student needs quick attention—as much as the physically ill.

At every age, each student expresses behaviours and attitudes that are normal for them. We can call these characteristics 'baseline behaviours'.

The best method for a school to assess the well-being of students is to monitor these baseline behaviours. This monitoring does not take any more effort from the staff than being with the students in order to educate them. When students deviate from their baseline behaviour, teachers should anticipate trouble.

*Suggested reading:* Mayer, 2000; McAuliffe, 2002; Prout & Brown, 2007.

## 4. Student and parent orientation

Oriente students and parents on the ways they can help make the school a safe and welcoming place. Do this early in the school year and repeat it throughout the year.

It is very important that a school instructs the parents and the students at the beginning of each school year on how they can help make the school a safe and welcoming place.

This orientation should stress:

- Alerting school officials if strangers are near the school grounds.
- Explaining why the school doors are locked.
- How the school responds to ill students and what is the parents' responsibility.
- A list of items that cannot be brought into the school—anything resembling a weapon.

Announce and explain all of the school's rules, particularly:

- The school philosophy and goals.
- The need to speak positively about the school at home.
- Encourage parents to take an interest in the school.
- Reward students' efforts even more than their accomplishments.

Repeat this process throughout the school year. Children's fresh minds thrive on repetition and parents will benefit from reminders about how to keep the school safe and welcoming.

*Suggested reading:* Couchenor & Chrisman, 2003; Wessler & Preble, 2003.

## 5. Home and school co-operation

Give students and parents guidance on ways they can help make the school a safe and welcoming place. Do this early in the school year and repeat it throughout the year.

The foundation of co-operation between the home and the school is *COMMUNICATION*. Children learn best when the lessons provided in school are supported at home.

Certainly, orientation of parents is critically important in gaining their co-operation. But, a school should not rely on just this as its sole method of communication with parents. Other techniques can be employed to solicit this co-operation.

One such technique is to have teachers send home a weekly 'classroom note' with each student at the end of the school week. This note could be hand-written by the teacher and then copied by machine and given out to every student to take home. If you do not have access to a copier, then the teacher could recite aloud the note and have the students write it down. This exercise in note-taking could be a very beneficial addition to the students' lessons.

An easy and efficient way to compose this classroom note is to encourage teachers to jot down their thoughts throughout the week. Then, at the end of the week they simply put the notes on one sheet of a paper. Some suggested thoughts to communicate in your classroom note are:

- What this class has been learning this week in each subject.
- How the entire class is responding to these new topics.
- Any difficulties the entire class is experiencing with a particular topic.
- The teacher's past experiences with certain topics that are coming up and what to watch out for at home.
- Tips on how parents can help their child grasp the lessons taught in school.
- Any overall conduct problems with the entire class. (Do not ever name individual students.)
- How the parents can help with conduct problems.
- Any general health, hygiene or safety concerns. (Again, never identify individuals.)

- Any messages from the principal that need to be conveyed to the parents.
- School equipment needed for the next week.

Always include praise and affirmation of the students and of the parents' involvement with their child's education. Always be positive and friendly in your wording.

Another technique to promote co-operation between the parents and the school is to hold 'parent/teacher nights'. These events should encourage informal discussions between the parents and the teachers. Report cards could be distributed at these times and refreshments served. A positive and affirming tone should be conveyed throughout the evening.

Finally, we would encourage schools to hold parent education presentations frequently. These presentations should focus on topics of very high interest, such as:

- Community health concerns.
- Basic child care.
- Medical concerns in parenting.
- Topics aimed at helping students in their lessons.
- Conduct and home discipline.
- Special community news and events.
- Artistic or cultural presentations—possibly using students as performers.

All the above suggestions make the school a welcoming place for parents and this feeling transfers directly to the students. When parents are co-operative, informed and invited into the school, the school becomes a safer and more welcoming environment.

*Suggested reading:* Cotton, 2000.

## 6. Crises in the community and a school's response

When crises occur in the community or in the world, it is important for schools to provide factual information for the student body. This conveys to the student that the school is a safe island against storms of potential danger. Never overlook communicating to the students about a tragedy.

Negative events that occur in the community have profound effects on students. Children react quite differently than adults toward crises in the community and to world events. Adults assume that children will react to crises in the same way that they (the adults) do. Children do not have an experienced emotional or intellectual frame of reference to understand negative events. A child's immediate response to a tragedy is to personalize it. They automatically think that the same or a similar event is going to happen to them. They personalize out of fear. Fear comes from the unknown. A child's next most common response is to worry about loved ones' safety, particularly if they are themselves at school and separated from their family.

A variety of other responses often occur in children. A child can have lingering fears caused by the crisis that can last for a very long time. The specific fears are personal to that child and may become associated with a small part of the tragedy or crisis. For example, one student who witnessed a mentally disturbed man behave wildly on a crowded bus when she was 3 years old had a severe panic reaction to the horse-play of other teenage students on a school bus. The teachers and adult chaperones on the bus felt helpless to calm her.

Another common reaction that children have to a crisis is that other fears will appear, not necessarily related to the crisis situation. For a child, fear and anxiety are generalized feelings; therefore, a child may respond by associating their fears with something else that they are afraid of.

The most effective method to handle a crisis situation is for the school to provide information to the students about the crisis. When we provide facts about a crisis, then the unknown becomes known. Information has a calming effect. A school should not take for granted that the students will be hearing about a crisis from other sources, such as parents, newspapers or radio/television. A school is in a

powerful position in a child's life. The school is already viewed by students as the most reliable source of information—the distiller of knowledge. Information heard from the school can be trusted in the same way that they can trust the content of the lessons they are being taught.

The school can become an island in the lives of students. A safe school conveys to the student a feeling of safety, in spite of what is happening outside the school grounds. The school is then seen as a refuge for students. It becomes a place away from the chaos around them. Creating such a place and keeping distractions away from the thoughts of the students allows them to fill their minds with knowledge. Communication by the school of facts and even strategies for understanding crises in their community is a key element to create this perception of the school as an island.

*Suggested reading:* Jaycox et al., 2006.

## 7. Crises management

It is important for the school to have the attitude of calmness and control in the face of a crisis. A strong method of handling crises situations is to have a Crises Response Team in place that can act quickly and decisively.

In today's world, a crisis can occur inside a school more often than ever before. A school needs a plan for handling crises. Students will judge the school's response to a crisis as a measure of the long-term safety of the school. It is crucial that the school acts decisively and quickly in the face of a crisis.

The first step in forming a Crises Intervention Programme is to determine who will lead the school in a crisis. Don't assume that the headmaster (principal) or president of the school is the best person to lead what we will define shortly as the Crises Response Team. The head of the Crises Response Team should be a person who should be able to:

- Handle traumatic situations, both as a leader and personally;
- Make quick decisions;
- Convey to students, parents and the community a feeling of strength and being in charge;
- Possibly have experience of handling crises;
- Be an excellent communicator;
- Know how to communicate with sensitivity so as not to offend the community, nor to further upset the students;
- Intimately know the school;
- Intimately know the students;
- Intimately know the parents and the community.

Once the leader of the Crises Response Team has been chosen, then the other members of the team need to be picked. The Crises Response Team is a group of school staff members who have volunteered to fulfil the necessary roles in response to a crisis to ensure the safety of the students and the school. The number of staff members comprising the team should be chosen based on the resources of the school and the amount of tasks that need to be accomplished. There should be at least two or three other staff members in the team. One advantage of having at least this many staff

members on the Crises Response Team is to share responsibility and any liabilities so that this entire burden does not rest solely upon the leader. This helps the leader cope with the stress of the situation and also ensures that all of the needed responses are undertaken in a timely fashion.

The remainder of the Crises Response Team members should be chosen using the same guidelines as those that were used to designate the leader.

Turning our attention to the duties of the Crises Response Team, the essential duties in response to a crisis are to:

- Make sure that the students and staff of the school are safe;
- Assemble the Crises Response Team members immediately;
- Check all school safety procedures. If warranted, make sure that all doors are locked, emergency alarms are working, students are accounted for through a roll call, out-of-control or dangerous students are isolated from others, and so forth.
- Provide a space where Crises Response Team member(s) can provide counselling and guidance services to the students and allow the students to “drop-in” on a staff member as needed. Inform the students of this service.

If needed, the leader of the Crises Response Team works closely with the local police or other government agencies to resolve the crisis and guarantee the safety of the school. The leader is the main and possibly *only* liaison between the school and such agencies.

The leader of the Crises Response Team, with the help of the entire team and the administrator of the school, should provide a Statement of Fact about the crisis. This statement is to become the official statement of the school on what happened in the crisis and what steps have been taken to ensure the safety of the students and the school as a whole. This Statement of Fact should be read to the students and given to them to take home. If the media (television, newspaper or radio) contacts the school, this statement will be the only information given out. Students, staff and parents are also instructed that these facts are the only statements to be made to others. All inquiries made to the school should go directly to the leader of the Crises Response Team and will be answered by this person. There should only be one voice that speaks for the school in the aftermath of a crisis. This avoids misinformation and reduces rumours or gossip about the crisis. The leader of the Crises Response Team should provide updates to this Statement of Facts as needed.

Decisions about bringing in outside help and/or holding meetings with the students to help them cope with this crisis are made by the Crises Response Team as a group. Do not automatically feel that

either of these decisions is appropriate in every situation. Taking either of these actions may just heighten the students' fears and prolong them from getting over the crisis. As a general rule, it is important for problems to be handled first internally by the school and school staff before considering bringing in outside help. When the school solves its own problems, it reinforces the feeling that the school is a safe place in the minds of the students. Having a Crises Response Team is a key tool in avoiding the need to call upon outside help during a crisis situation.

The Crises Response Team continues to monitor the safety of the students and the school.

The Crises Response Team meets after the crisis to resolve any conditions in the school that caused the crisis.

The Crises Response Team meets one or more times to evaluate their functioning throughout this crisis and to provide feedback on how to improve their work in the future. Notes are made on these meetings. These notes are important as they can be passed on to new staff members who may in future fill roles in the Crises Response Team.

Throughout every step that a school takes in a crisis, the adults should be able to respond with:

- Calmness.
- Being in control.
- Confidence.
- Unity.

These qualities reinforce that the school is a safe place to be now and in the future.

*Suggested reading:* Broch et al., 2001; Johnson, 2002; Mayer, 1999; Peterson & Straub, 1991.

## 8. School discipline

School discipline is a key to school safety. The simplest rules are the building blocks of school discipline. Enforcement of the rules, even those rules that seem least important toward learning, should be taken very seriously by all staff.

When a school believes in and enforces discipline among the students, it sends a strong message of safety to the student body. Young people learn how to obey rules when the adults in charge respond consistently in enforcing the rules.

It is important for each school to determine what rules will be set for the students. Many of these rules will be specific to the school and the community that it serves, but some rules should be universal among all schools. We would suggest the following rules of conduct for all schools:

- Students should arrive on time every school day.
- Students shall attend each official school day.
- Students shall dress cleanly and neatly for school.
- Students shall maintain good hygiene and health.
- Students shall arrive at school ready to learn. If required, they should bring the necessary supplies to do this.
- Students shall respond courteously, attentively and respectfully to all school staff.
- Students shall do what school staff members ask of them without question or protest.
- Students shall help in keeping the school a clean and safe environment to learn.
- Students shall use appropriate language when in school and not use profanity or vulgarity.
- Students shall never harm another student(s).
- Students shall never disrupt the education of another student(s).
- Students shall respect and be courteous to the other students at all times.
- Students shall not bring weapons or harmful materials into the school.
- Students shall not bring illegal drugs into the school.

- Students shall inform the staff if they require special medical attention and need to take medications while at school.
- Students shall do coursework and homework as assigned by teachers.
- Students shall notify the school if an illness causes them to miss a school day or need to be absent from school for any other reason.
- Students shall not eat food, use tobacco, chew gum or drink liquids except at the designated times throughout the school day, such as lunch periods or official break periods, unless documented medical needs are on record for that student.

In addition to these general guidelines, we would suggest that any other rules that individual schools wish to include should be written down into a Student/Parent Handbook and given to the students and parents at the beginning of *each* school year.

Achieving compliance becomes easier when *all* staff unite to enforce the rules of the school. The leading cause of rule systems breaking down is when they are inconsistently enforced by the staff. If some staff are very diligent on enforcement and others are not, this sends a message to the students that the adults are not in agreement with the rules and, therefore, the students can also disagree. At the very least, this inconsistency in the enforcement of rules sends a message to the students that they have a good chance of ‘getting away’ with disobedience. The rewards associated with breaking the rules then become worth the risk to the student. This is not the beginnings of a criminal mind in a child, it is just human nature.

Consistency in the enforcement of rules starts with strict enforcement of the smallest of the rules. When staff enforce the least of the rules, this sends a strong message that the rule system is being taken seriously. Many staff members may take the attitude that their training and expertise places them above the role of a policeman who has to enforce petty rules. After all, they were trained to be educators, not law enforcers. Such staff members should be made aware that enforcing the smallest of the rules acts as a building block that makes students obey the rules that are essential to the students learning—and thus makes the staff person’s job easier. Teachers who have the most disruptive classes are often the ones who have let the students ignore the basic rules of the school. Thus, it quickly happens that students become disrespectful toward the teacher and disruptive in class, and are not paying attention to their studies.

***Suggested reading:*** Borich, 2006; Charles & Senter, 2004; Cotton, 1990; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Jones & Jones, 2006; Lindberg, Kelly & Swick, 2004; Wolfgang, 2004.

## 9. Illegal substance abuse in schools

Effective substance abuse prevention does not take overwhelming amounts of resources. By weaving it into the basic fabric of the school, it is efficient and inexpensive. Expensive, concentrated substance abuse programmes, often carried out by someone from outside the school, are not nearly as effective as this integrated approach.

Sadly, the use of illegal substances is a worldwide concern. Children of all ages are vulnerable to being influenced into substance abuse. Substance abuse prevention is critical to creating a safe and welcoming school.

The problems with most substance abuse prevention efforts are:

- **The tone:** moralistic and punitive.
- **Their position in the curriculum:** isolated.
- **Time allotment:** concentrated.

We must approach drug prevention and education in the same way that it attracts young users—not isolated from their everyday world, but integrated into it. The components of an effective substance abuse prevention programme are:

- Make your school a SAFE and WELCOMING place. The very subject matter of this booklet!
- The use and possession of illegal drugs by students must be against school rules and violations of this rule must be enforced strictly.

Our world is filled with messages saying that the use of illegal drugs is acceptable, even desirable. These messages are subtle, powerful and integrated into our lifestyle. The school should be a living environment that says illegal drugs are not a part of this place. Go through your school and remove any messages that support illegal drug use. Look for decorations, advertisements, scenes in instructional movies and other places.

Educate all the staff at school on how they can give anti-drug-use messages to the students. Make adults aware that we sometimes talk about drugs casually in front of young people in a way that may make it seem acceptable to use drugs. Young people should be shown that there are so many other ways to enjoy and cope with life. We, as adults, must talk and behave differently about drugs and illegal drug use in our everyday language and conduct.

Parents, as a co-operative part of the school community, should also be taught how the school is preventing illegal substance abuse by these new methods. Also invite anyone from the larger adult community to become involved in this education.

Direct education about drug abuse is integrated into the school curriculum. All teachers, no matter what subject they teach, should include drug education as part of their instruction to the students. Drug education should not be relegated to one subject, such as science or health class, and taught for a short, limited time. The use of illegal drugs pervades our world by infiltrating ALL aspects of society. The best drug prevention education fights against drugs in this same manner.

Get students actively involved. Let the students create 'positive lifestyle' presentations or displays. These presentations could show other students ways to live a positive, healthy lifestyle. They could stress physical activity, good nutrition, friendship, the arts, music and culture, amongst other things.

*Suggested readings:* Fisher & Harrison, 2004; Mayer, 2001; Mayer, 2002; Zucker, 2003.

## 10. Motivation-building for students

Motivation is most effective when it is self-motivation. Success in motivating students comes from adults surrounding the student with a positive, motivating atmosphere.

Keeping students motivated and enthusiastic about education is yet another powerful way to keep your school safe and establish a welcoming environment. Motivated students take ownership of their education and of their school. The best motivation is self motivation—no threats, no bribes, no punishments.

There are several steps that adults can take to keep students motivated academically. These techniques are just as effective at home or at school. These are:

- **Maintain a positive attitude toward the school.** It is surprising how adults give out subtle messages that are negative about school or schoolwork. Be careful of talk that accidentally makes the school seem like a burden rather than a joy in the life of the child.
- **Surround the student with motivation.** Use affirmations repeatedly and liberally around the school and the home. Make posters or signs with positive phrases that affirm the student's success in school. Use phrases or sayings that support schoolwork. Try and make these affirmations personal to the student and their school.
- **Model motivation.** It is important for adults to demonstrate motivation for the young person. It is through modelling that we best transfer behaviours we want to see in our children. Be active in the child's education. Help them with their homework, go to school presentations and talk enthusiastically about the school. Don't be lazy yourself. Be energetic and work hard.
- **Praise the students' efforts even more vigorously than accomplishments.** Accomplishment in many students can be the result of that student's natural intellectual ability. In order to instil self-motivation, it is very important to praise effort even more than accomplishment.
- **Verbal praise from an adult is the best reward.** When adults praise young people, it is the best reward they can get for their hard work. It is better than treats, money or privileges.
- **Watch your expectations of students.** Don't confuse the lack of motivation in a student with the lack of ability. A student may be failing a subject because that subject is hard for them to grasp.

- **Frequently praise them for the basics.** Adults forget that the basics of attending school are a challenge. School attendance is often the first time that a child is away from home. School is also the first time that a child will experience loss and failure, pressure, formal rules and regulations, and so many other aspects of life that adults take for granted.

*Suggested readings:* Brier, 2006; Lane & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003; Mayer, 1998, Pintrich & Schunk, 2001; Rathvon, 2003; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000; Shapiro, 2004; Stipek, 2001.

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