

# Teachers' 'controlling behavior' linked to lowered student interest

August 8 2019, by Lars-Erik Malmberg

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

For many students, pressure and expectation are just another part of the school experience. There is pressure to perform certain tasks, conform to uniform standards and to achieve one's full potential. Then there are the expectations—that students will do their homework, turn up on time, and perform to the best of their ability.

Pressure is even higher when expectations are accompanied by threats of repercussions, teacher disappointment, low grades, or being reprimanded. Indeed, researchers have found that "controlling behavior" from teachers is [linked with lower student interest](#).

Although much research has focused on [students'](#) motivation and the role of positive and nurturing expectations by teachers, not much is known about how students experience "pressure expectations." Nor do we know much about how these pressure expectations happen in real-time, such as the tasks students "have to do" and the things their teachers "want them to do"—from lesson to lesson, day to day.

[Our latest research](#) has looked at just this and found that teachers' pressure expectations can lead to students working harder—but that this increased effort comes at a cost to some students.

## **Under pressure**

[In our study](#), we asked 231 students in year five and six classes in UK schools, to report on their learning experiences once in each lesson, each day for one week. In each lesson, students reported on why they were doing the task at hand. The response options were, "I enjoyed it," "I chose to do it," and "I was interested in it." These would be classed as "autonomous motivation" in that students themselves wanted to carry out the task. Students could also select "I had to do it" and "my teacher wanted me to do it." These would be classed as "pressure expectations."

Students also reported on how hard they were working, and how confident they felt about what they learned. Teachers reported how involved they were with each student in their class, detailing how much time they spent with each student, and how much attention they gave each student.



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We found the higher the pressure expectations in a lesson, the harder students worked in subsequent lessons. But our research also found that students reported enjoying these lessons less—and felt less confident in that particular subject.

Our research also showed that if students enjoyed their tasks in the previous lesson of a particular subject, it seems teachers picked up on this and relaxed their pressure expectations in the following lesson. But this actually went on to have the effect of students then reducing their subsequent effort—demonstrating a somewhat complex and dynamic relationship between teacher pressure expectations and students' effort, enjoyment and confidence.

## Breaking free

Of course, realistically, some students might need a little bit of a push at times to get started, to get tasks done, or to work harder. But as our results show, too much pushing can lead students to feel demotivated or less confident. In the long run, a reasonable balance between pressure and reassurance seems desirable, otherwise exhaustion and disaffection could take over—which can eventually lead to lower academic performance.

Indeed, [research](#) shows that teachers who place less emphasis on the realities of deadlines, task completion, and expectations, and place more emphasis on students' perspectives—so getting to know students, their values and thoughts—are able to better identify students' needs, interests and preferences and provide meaningful learning goals by using relevant and enriched activities.

So instead of relying on controlling language, teachers should aim to provide understandable goals, frame upcoming lessons clearly and explain things concisely. Teachers would also benefit from acknowledging negative feelings in the classroom—telling students it's okay to feel tired or nervous.

Teachers can also look to [provide supportive reassurance](#) in everyday interactions with students, using praise and encouragement to help students reach their full potential. All of which hopefully will help students to feel more supported and enable them to achieve their full potential in the classroom.

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