



## Students' objects of pride in a learner-focused school setting: An exploratory study

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### Abstract

*In the past decades, schools have become more autonomous and open learning environments. It therefore seems increasingly important for educational research to also consider contextual influences by including autonomous learning settings in its investigations. Studying the positive activating emotion of pride seems useful to learn more about the effects of this schooling as pride results from exactly those aspects promoted by autonomous learning: Self-evaluation, reflection, self-responsibility and attribution. Moreover, pride becomes relevant for a deeper understanding of students' learning and achievement as pride promotes the desire to repeat already performed achievements in the future. Regarding the growing support of individual learning in schools, the present study investigates objects of pride of students attending a school that promotes autonomous, non-competitive, individualized and cooperative learning. Students of this school plan their timetables and learning process individually and document it in learning logbooks in which they furthermore can state once a week what they are proud of. In total, 1063 pride statements from 134 students were collected from the learning logbooks. A complementary study, collecting students' pride statements detached from the learning logbooks, identified 254 pride statements. Results show that the pride focus of students at the examined school is learning-oriented. The findings indicate that the specific learning setting of the examined school provides specific school-based pride triggers and thus promotes the learning-oriented pride focus of the students. This paper shall serve as a basis for further research on students' pride and objects of pride and its potential effects on motivation, achievement and school life.*

*Keywords:* Students' objects of pride; School setting; Student-centred teaching



## 1. Introduction

Today, education systems all over the world are facing massive changes in schooling with schools becoming more autonomous and open learning environments being introduced in the past decades (Eurydice, 2008). It therefore seems increasingly important for educational research to also consider contextual influences (e.g., Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006) by including different, non-traditional learning settings in its investigations.

The overall aim of autonomous school settings is not only to individualise learning but have students take responsibility for their own learning, reflect and evaluate their own learning processes, feel that learning outcomes are their own success and set individual direction-giving goals for future learning processes (e.g., Assor, 2012; Madjar & Assor, 2013; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In this context, studying students' pride seems useful to learn more about the effects of this schooling. This positive activating emotion precisely results from those aspects promoted by autonomous school settings: Pride can be seen as the consequence of a successful evaluation of a specific event or object for which one feels responsible (Lagattuta & Thompson, 2007; Lewis, 2016). Furthermore, for the elicitation of pride, one's own actions and outcomes of these actions have to be reflected and attributed to internal factors (Hart & Matsuba, 2007; Kornilaki & Chlouverakis, 2004; Tracy, Robins, & Lagattuta, 2005; Tracy, Shariff, & Cheng, 2010). This process is based on a person's self-concept which includes complex cognitive processes such as self-perception and self-evaluation, which is why pride is defined as a self-conscious emotion (Lewis, 2016; Tracy & Robins, 2007). At the same time, the respective person's society's standards, rules and goals (SRG's) serve as reference point for the evaluation of their own actions and determination of success (Lewis, 2016). Consequently, students' sense of responsibility, their ability of self-evaluation and reflection are pivotal for the elicitation of pride, which is why a school promoting those aspects should be examined in this research.

Moreover, the emotion of pride is relevant for students' learning as pride is described as an emotion that results from personal achievement and further promotes the desire to repeat or even outdo this achievement in the future (Fredrickson, 2001; Lewis, 2016). Pride is furthermore considered an incentive to persevere on a task despite initial costs (Williams & DeSteno, 2008), which is why studies in this field additionally become relevant for a deeper understanding of students' learning and achievement and the promotion of students' sense of pride.

While previous research has mainly focused on the impact of pride on achievement and motivation as well as the attributions of success or the correlations of pride to various aspects such as goal-regulation, self-control or achievement values (e.g., Buechner, Pekrun, & Lichtenfeld, 2016; Carver, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2010; Oades-Sese, Matthews, & Lewis, 2014; Pekrun, Goetz, Frenzel, Barchfeld, & Perry, 2011; Weidman, Tracy, & Elliot, 2016; Williams & DeSteno, 2008), the object of pride, i.e. what a person is proud of, has been left somewhat disregarded. An exploratory qualitative study aimed to categorize different domains and emphases of students' pride in the school context of a traditional teacher-centred German comprehensive school (Fraenken & Wosnitza, 2018). Five main categories could be found namely *Learning in school* (aspects that are directly related to learning in school), *Social aspects* (social aspects that do not have to be directly related to learning in school), *Activities besides (performance at) school* (aspects that are established outside the classroom), *Me* (aspects that are related to one's own person and not specific actions), and *Persons and animals* (aspects that are related to other people or animals). Results indicated that students' pride regarding *Learning in school* appeared to be more achievement-oriented and less learning-oriented in the traditional teacher centred school (Fraenken & Wosnitza, 2018). This could be hypothesised to result from the school's competitive learning setting with clearly defined, standardised goals which promotes achievement-focused goals (Self-Brown & Mathews, 2003) and consequently achievement-focused pride after those goals are being achieved.

In the present study, the objects of pride of students from a learner-focused and autonomy promoting school setting are being explored. According to Self-Brown and Mathews (2003), in a non-competitive setting where learning goals are defined and evaluated individually, students' goals are learning-oriented. Concerning the empirically verified positive correlations between achievement goals and pride (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006, 2009), it can be assumed that students' objects of pride are learning-oriented in the examined school



where students set their own goals and define their own learning process. The finding that learner-centred and autonomy-supporting structures apparently have the strongest positive relation to students' mastery goals compared to performance goals (Ames, 1992; Meece, 2003) strengthens this assumption.

With a gender perspective, significant differences can be expected regarding students' pride in *Learning in school* as boys perform worse than girls in most performance areas of German schools (Möble & Lohmann, 2014) and therefore seem to have less reason to be proud at that area. Confirming this, female students from a traditional teacher-centred school made significantly more pride statements about *Learning in school* than male students (Fraenken & Wosnitza, 2018). As women are rated as more communal and socially committed than men (Brosi, Spörrle, Welpel, & Heilman, 2016), it can be expected that female students make more statements about social aspects than male students. This was also found in a traditional school, where female students made significantly more pride statements about *Social aspects* than male students (Fraenken & Wosnitza, 2018). Furthermore, Tracy and Beall (2011) found out that men's pride is considered an attractive expression whereas women's pride is one of the least attractive. This could lead to female students revealing overall less pride than male students.

By encouraging and supporting children's feelings of pride in their academic success, their perception of being responsible for their own success is being promoted (Thompson, 1991). Knowing about the range of objects of pride could help detecting different kinds of potential pride triggers in order to encourage students' pride. This study is a reaction to the emerging change in schools towards student-centred approaches. The overall aim is to investigate the objects and emphases of pride of students attending one progressive school that promotes autonomous, individualized, cooperative and non-competitive learning. It is expected that the students focus their pride on their learning process and progress and less on their achievement outcomes. The results are thought to lay a foundation for future research on pride and possible connections of objects of pride with motivation, learning and achievement.

## 2. Methodology

In order to examine the objects of pride of students in a learner-focused school setting, an exploratory qualitative approach was chosen. Data were collected at a German comprehensive school with a student-centred approach to teaching. The five major subjects (German, English, Maths, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences) are provided as topic-related modules with different degrees of difficulty, on which students work individually in their own time and speed. Minor subjects are taught in topic- and project-related workshops. The school supplies subject-specific classrooms in which students of all grades work individually or cooperatively on their current modules. Teachers act as advisors and tutors while students also support each other. Students' learning process and progress is planned and documented individually by themselves in so-called "learning logbooks", discussed in individual weekly meetings with a tutor, and monitored by exams which the students take as soon as they have completed a module and state to feel ready. In the learning logbooks, students can voluntarily state their personal goal of the week and additionally what they are proud of on a weekly basis. For this, students complete the phrase "I am proud of..." without having to focus on the school sector. These weekly statements of what students are proud of form the database of this study.

The sample consisted of 134 students (school years 5-8, 57% female). Pride statements were collected from the learning logbooks of one school year and were separated into single statements ( $n=1063$ ). Based on deductive categorisation according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010, 2015), the existing category system of students' pride in a traditional school (Fraenken & Wosnitza, 2018) was used during the coding process. All statements were coded into the category system of students' pride. Two different researchers coded 56.44% of all statements (interrater agreement  $\kappa=.91$ ).

*Complementary study:* The logbook entries are also visible for the students' teachers and parents and consequently not anonymous. In order to exclude a methodological effect, a complementary study was



conducted to collect students' pride statements detached from the learning logbooks. For two weeks, 110 students of the same school (school years 5-8, 46% female) wrote down their pride statements anonymously. Phrasing was adopted from the learning logbooks "I am proud of...". 254 single statements were identified.

### 3. Results

Analyses of data showed a wide range of students' objects of pride (overview of the number of statements in table 1). With 72.53% of all learning-logbook pride statements, students focused their pride on *Learning in school*. The main emphasis of the pride statements within the category *Learning in school* lied with 73.15% on the statements referring to *Learning process and progress*. Within the category *Learning process and progress* various new subcategories, which did not appear in the existing category system of the traditional school, could be found which represented 71.45% of all statements within that category. For example, 43.97% of the pride statements were referring to *Modules and subjects* ("that I could almost finish the math module" (#9-20<sup>1</sup>)), 22.87% to *Taking tests or exams* ("that I can write my German test this week" (#18-24)) and 4.61% to *Achieving the personal goal of the week* ("that I have reached my goal of the week" (#11-2)). Most of the remaining statements (21.45%) regarding *Learning process and progress* stated *Getting a lot of work done* ("because I've accomplished so much" (#26-37)). The remaining statements named *Active participation in the classroom* (5.67%), *Homework or learning at home* (1.42%) and *Understanding something* (0.35%). Furthermore, within the main category *Learning in school*, 26.85% of the statements focused on *Achievement outcomes and results*, e.g., *Grades* ("that I have a B+ in the Spanish exam" (#27-14)) or *Praise* ("that I was praised in class" (#16-7)).

*Social aspects* included statements about e.g., *Social behaviour* ("that I deal well with my friends" (#43-14)) or *Classroom discipline* ("because I haven't broken any rules in three days" (#37-1)), which represented another newly found subcategory. *Activities besides (performance at) school* meant for instance *Hobbies and spare time* ("that I had a good, fun birthday" (#48-19)). The category *Me* included e.g., statements about the own *Personality and Characteristics* ("that I am honest with my assessments" (#9-3)) whereas *Persons and animals* referred to others, e.g., *Teacher* ("I am proud of the teachers because they are always nice and helpful" (#41-33)).

Table 1

*Main categories of students' pride in a student-centred school*

	<b>Total statements</b>	<b>Male statements</b>	<b>Female statements</b>
<b>Learning in school</b>	<b>72.53% (771)</b>	<b>73.78% (287)</b>	<b>71.81% (484)</b>
<i>Achievement outcomes and results</i>	26.85% (207)	29.27% (84)	25.41% (123)
<i>Learning process and progress</i>	73.15% (564)	70.73% (203)	74.59% (361)
<b>Social aspects</b>	<b>7.15% (76)</b>	<b>7.71% (30)</b>	<b>6.82% (46)</b>
<b>Activities besides (performance at) school</b>	<b>4.52% (48)</b>	<b>5.4% (21)</b>	<b>4.01% (27)</b>
<b>Me</b>	<b>1.69% (18)</b>	<b>1.03% (4)</b>	<b>2.08% (14)</b>
<b>Persons and animals</b>	<b>2.54% (27)</b>	<b>2.57% (10)</b>	<b>2.52% (17)</b>
Not proud of anything	1.03% (11)	0.77% (3)	1.19% (8)
Rest	10.54% (112)	8.74% (34)	11.57% (78)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100% (1063)</b>	<b>100% (389)</b>	<b>100% (674)</b>

<sup>1</sup> Statement of student no.9 in school week 20



Results of the complementary study revealed that the focus also lied on *Learning in school* (46.85% of all statements) but compared to the logbook entries, students made significantly less statements about *Learning in school* anonymously [ $\chi^2(1, N=1317)=61.707, p=.000$ ]. Within that main category, students focused on *Learning process and progress* (73.11% of all statements within the category *Learning in school*). The remaining 26.89% referred to *Achievement outcomes and results*. In total, 22.04% of the statements were related to *Activities besides (performance at) school* which are significantly more statements than within the logbooks [ $\chi^2(1, N=1317)=86.638, p=.000$ ]. Of all the remaining statements, 4.72% related to *Social aspects*, 2.76% to *Me* and 6.3% to *Persons and animals*. Overall, 3.94% of the statements announced not to be proud of anything and 13.39% of all statements could not be coded (*Rest*).

#### 4. Discussion

Besides pointing out a wide range of pride triggers, the results indicate a connection between the students' objects of pride and their autonomous and individual way of learning and operating in the examined school. As expected, the students' pride focused on their learning (represented by the category "Learning process and progress" and less on their performance (represented by the category "Achievement outcomes and results"). One reason for the large number of statements about their learning process and progress could be the fact that the students can set their own realistic goals by determining and conducting their own learning process self-responsibly. As one has to feel responsible for success to feel pride (Lewis, 2016), students have to feel personally responsible for their learning process and progress to consequently be proud of it which is being promoted by the school. This result underlines the importance of students' perceived responsibilities in the achievement context and the associated pride focus.

The responsibility for the students' own learning process was also being reflected by newly found subcategories which showed that the specific learning setting of the examined school provides specific pride triggers. By providing modules with different degrees of difficulty to be chosen by the students who work on them in their own time and speed (subcategory *Modules and subjects*), the school enables the students' high prospective and, thus, retrospective responsibility for their personal learning process and progress and therefore a school-specific pride trigger. The subcategory *Taking tests or exams* also shows the students' high responsibility for their learning process and progress as they could only be proud of being able to write a test soon because they individually set the date for their exams based on their own ability and learning progress. Helker and Wosnitza (2016) found that students' sense of responsibility for their own learning process and achievement correlates with their sense of competence and autonomy. This puts emphasis on the assumption that the students' high level of autonomy promotes their sense of responsibility and therefore their sense of pride.

The learning logbooks serve as a foundation for students' self-reflection and consequently promote their ability of self-evaluation. By filling the logbooks with learning contents, learning goals and achievements or defaults, students reflect their learning process and progress every day and thus create the basis for the ability of attributing success to themselves and consequently feeling pride. By doing so, students do not evaluate their learning process independently of others but with regard to the school's standards, rules and goals (SRGs) which is essential for the feeling of pride (Lewis, 2016). Keeping the logbooks promotes the awareness and adaption of the school's SRG's and therefore the elicitation of students' pride focus on their learning process and progress.

Whereas keeping learning logbooks appears to promote the students' sense of responsibility and self-reflection, it must also be considered that the logbooks, as research object, could have an impact on students' pride statements as they are accessible to teachers and parents. Even though, the results of the anonymous complementary study reveal that the students' focus still lied on *Learning in school*, only less prominent compared to the findings in the logbooks. By contrast, students expressed more pride about *Activities besides (performance at) school* than they did within their learning logbooks. Apparently, although the students were






not demanded to focus their pride statements on the school sector, they instinctively did so when filling out the logbooks. The very low number of statements about *Activities besides (performance at) school* in the learning logbooks could therefore be explained by social desirability. With regard to *Learning in school*, students of the complementary study still focused on *Learning process and progress* which confirms and reinforces the considerations made above.

Contrary to our expectations, no gender differences could be found regarding main or sub categories. With regard to the examined students' focus on their learning process and progress instead of their achievement and outcomes, it is, however, plausible that potential gender differences in performance did not have a huge impact on their sense of pride. Furthermore, due to the separately coordinated learning schedules and the attention to the individual, gender stereotypes apparently play a minor role than in a more competitive school with direct comparisons between students' approaches and achievement. School year differences, however, could be found. The continuously decreased focus on *Achievement outcomes and results* from school year to school year as well as the simultaneously occurred increasing focus on *Learning process and progress* gives reason to assume that the students internalize the school's SRG's (Lewis, 2016) over time and therefore adapt their pride focus on learning continuously. As the elicitation of pride requires complex cognitive processes which are involving over time (Hart & Matsuba, 2007; Lewis, 2016; Tracy & Robins, 2007), the results could reflect this involvement as the students seem to learn over time that they are responsible for their own learning process and can consequently be proud of it.

In summary, the examined school itself offers school-related, learning oriented pride triggers and additionally promotes the students' ability to perform complex cognitive processes in order to feel pride. In combination with previous research on students' pride in a traditional school (Fraenken & Wosnitza, 2018) it can be assumed that different learning settings provide different potential objects of pride and promote different pride focuses. However, the present study is explorative and only related to one particular school. Building on this study, future research should include various school settings and a greater number of schools in order to further investigate the assumed connection between students' objects of pride and their school environment. Additionally, the results of the present study should be used to investigate students' degree of autonomy, responsibility and ability of self-reflection and its impact on their pride and by implication their motivation and achievement. As the results of the study indicate a connection between the students' objects of pride and their autonomous and self-responsible learning, this should be further explored and verified. Furthermore, the impact of students' objects of pride on their learning process, achievement and motivation should be explored in order to find out if and how the objects of pride themselves matter in the achievement context.

## Keypoints

-  An autonomous school setting may trigger students' pride in making them feel responsible for their own learning.
-  A learner-focused school setting promotes learning-oriented rather than outcome-oriented pride.
-  The longer students attend an autonomous school setting, the more they tend to feel proud of their learning process and progress.

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