

Interview with EARLI Motivation and Emotion SIG 2022 Lifetime Award Recipient Thea Peetsma

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Dr. Thea Peetsma is a Professor Emerita of Learning and Motivation at the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam. She is an international highly recognized researcher who focused her studies on the development of learner motivation, and particularly on decreasing motivation among adolescent school students. Dr. Peetsma contributed to the field of students' time perspectives, and especially their perspective on the future, in relation to their investment in learning at school. She also contributed to intervention research by studying motivation in innovative learning contexts and developing interventions aimed at increasing students' learning motivation.

Dr. Peetsma was born in the Netherlands, studied psychology at the University of Amsterdam, and obtained her PhD within a project on future time perspective and learning investment, in which she was a project leader. Not only was she doing fundamental research on motivation of students but also applied research. With the support of the Ministry of Education, she initiated different projects on the position of students with special educational needs in regular schools. Besides research and teaching, she supervised the work of other researchers and was often asked to take on organizational tasks or committee memberships at the University of

Amsterdam. Since 2011 Dr. Peetsma was the Chair of the Department of Child Development and Education at the University of Amsterdam, involving over 250 people. She was also the confidential agent for PhD-students of the department before becoming the chair and the coordinator of the fundamental research of the department. “It was an interesting experience which ended with my retirement. Luckily, I still had some time for research, lecturing, and supervising PhD-students”, said Dr. Peetsma.

Dr. Peetsma published numerous peer-reviewed articles in top-level international journals and books. She is a member of the editorial board of Educational Research Review and was an associate editor of Learning and Instruction. She has been an active member of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) for many years and was a coordinator (1995–1997) of the Special Interest Group Motivation and Emotion SIG 8 of EARLI. In light of these achievements, Dr. Peetsma was awarded the EARLI Motivation and Emotion SIG Lifetime Award in 2022. To learn more about her career, motivations, and research, we conducted an interview with her.

Personal Career

How did you decide to start a researcher career?

After secondary school I entered an academy for higher professional education to become a publisher. I was twenty-one when I finished this academy. After a term of probation, I was invited to work at a big publishing house for school books. I could design books very well, according to the academy teacher and the publishing house, but I didn't have the intention to do that professionally. I was young, just started living in Amsterdam, and had many other interests. I was especially interested in psychology and decided to study psychology at the University of Amsterdam. During this study, I advanced my knowledge and skills in methods and statistics of psychological research. I liked doing research and was particularly interested in motivation research. So, I applied for a grant for conducting fundamental research on motivation, specific future time perspective, and investment in learning. My grant application was approved, and I was working as a project leader in this project. I wrote my dissertation within this project and then I continued to be a researcher.

Why did you focus your research on learning, motivation, and primary and secondary education?

We all are born in a given social context. I always thought it's good to try to influence and to handle the situation you live in the best possible way and to think what you can do yourself and how to use your own possibilities. There was a decline in motivation for education from the start of secondary schools, and not only in the Netherlands. I was curious to learn what can be done to help children understand what they want to be later, what they want to learn, and how they can get there. Good contacts with motivation researchers (e.g., Willy Lens, Martin Maehr, Ewoud Roede), with whom I could discuss a broad variety of topics, supported me in the process of learning.

What is your greatest career accomplishment?

I believe my greatest contribution is the development of the time perspective in motivation research. I developed a reliable measurement instrument. Together with my colleagues, I was also involved in the development of two intervention instruments for students and teachers, based on time perspective and the self-determination theory. I also contributed to the area of special education and participated in different projects, financed by the Ministry of Education, on the position of students with special educational needs in regular schools.

Research in the field of motivation

What have been major changes in the field of motivation research since you have been working on it?

I think that three things mainly changed in the field of research on motivation. Firstly, the affective component received much more attention in motivation research from the 1980s on. While it was more the cognitive component that was investigated in the framework of the Expectancy-Value-Theory from Atkinson in the times before, nowadays the affective component is often included in all kind of concepts and studies. Secondly, the research techniques as well as statistical techniques developed further strongly, as you can, for example, gather data nowadays with mobile phones. When I was a PhD student, only one computer at the institute was strong enough to calculate structural equation models – and the computer needed a whole night for one calculation. The third thing that changed is that many different concepts were introduced in motivation research recently, whereas there were only few motivation theories when I started my career. Especially in the 1990s and early 2000s,

several concepts came up, including the Self-Determination Theory, goal orientation theories, or self-concept approaches.

What are the reasons for your interest in the development of learner motivation and particularly decreasing motivation among school students?

Many early secondary school students have a decline in motivation as they don't see their possibilities, and I think it is interesting to study why and how more students could develop their secondary school interest. I was always interested in what students perceive that they can do and how they can influence it themselves. It is important that students can see what is possible for them after finishing their secondary school. My reason for my research is to give possibilities to students and to help them seeing their possibilities and realizing their own possibilities themselves.

Future Research

What are your next goals regarding your research and what are your future research perspectives?

I still work together with university members and am interested in this field of research. But I see my role now less in conducting research intensively by myself but more in guiding others, for example, I supervise PhD and Postdoc students. I am as well in evaluation committees of the scientific grant organization in the Netherlands and I continue to be involved in this as I did receive many grants myself.

Involvement in EARLI and Lifetime award

How did you start your affiliation with the EARLI?

In 1985, there was a first meeting of EARLI in Leuven in Belgium for invited people. Ewoud Roede told me about this meeting. In 1987, the first open, you could say, EARLI conference in Tübingen took place – and Ewoud Roede again suggested that we should both go there – and so we did. Since then, I have been to all EARLI conferences and for a while, I was the coordinator of the SIG 8 together with Peter Nenninger in Landau. And then, in 1996, there was, one could say, the first ICM, and I attended all ICMs since then. I like both types of conferences very well and I went every year to one of them. I even organized an EARLI conference myself in Amsterdam, together with a few colleagues.

What does being the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award mean to you?

I really appreciate receiving the award. I think that it was very nice and kind that my participation activities for EARLI and specifically for the SIG 8 are recognized by other colleagues so very well. I am very proud of this award as EARLI has always meant much in my working life. Within the EARLI, I had the chance to meet and to work with international colleagues, on the one site. But I have also benefited from EARLI socially, since I know people for a very long time, see them continuously every year and have dinners or lunches with them. I know quite many people by the EARLI with whom I have a close collegial bond. EARLI – and especially the SIG8 – has always meant so much to me, in social life as well and certainly in my work life.

Advice

Could you give some valuable suggestions for future scientists?

Think about your own interests, follow your own idea, because you have to work on it a lot. Keep in mind what is interesting to you and combine it with existing research, where is already known something about, and may be as well the interest of others, because it's also good to work together with others. Look for possibilities, something that is socially very valuable. For example, I was responsible for longitudinal research projects involving about 30,000 children, also many with special educational needs. We could do quite a lot with these longitudinal data.

If you could go back in time, would there be anything that you would recommend yourself as a student in university or when you were a doctoral student?

Keep on looking for things you are really interested in, but also keep looking for other “doors”. It may be that a certain door will open a few years later. In my case, because of higher education for publisher, I learned economics. Later, I was asked for all kind of organizational tasks, and I was quite often one of the few who could read the financial documents well and knew how to do that. One day I was asked to be the Chair of the whole department, which was not my main ambition but a great responsibility. So, it was often useful what I have learned before.

How did you motivate and still motivate yourself during setbacks regarding your research?

I think it's more about "trying again". In the Netherlands, there may be 10 % chance that you receive a grant for scientific research. I had quite often luck, although not everything what I asked for I have received. So, try again, try to understand the reasons why certain things didn't work, think what you can adjust. Or when you receive feedback from reviewers for your article, read carefully what reviewers think. And then choose the things you are able to do yourself. When something is not working or there is something that you cannot do on your own, work with others who are capable and interested as well. I have worked with very competent colleagues, which was a pleasure.