

Intrinsic Motivation, Student Engagement, and the Work of Deci and Ryan

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan at the University of Rochester are leaders in delineating intrinsic motivation concepts and applying them to concerns about engagement in schools, counseling, and the workplace. A major focus of their work is on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which is a theory of motivation concerned with supporting people's natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways. The theory has been elaborated, refined, researched, and practiced by a network of scholars, researchers, and practitioners around the world.

The SDT website – <http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/> – presents a brief overview of the work and provides resources that address topics such as human needs, values, intrinsic motivation, development, motivation across cultures, individual differences, and psychological well-being. Also addressed are applications to:

Education Organizations Health Care Sports and Exercise Relationships Goals
 Psychotherapy Health and Well-being Psychopathology Environment

The following are examples of some recent publications related to intrinsic motivation and education influenced by Deci and Ryan's work.

(1) **Promoting self-determined school engagement: Motivation, learning, and well-being** (2009) by Ryan & Deci. In K. R. Wentzel & A. Wigfield (Eds.), *Handbook on motivation at school* (pp. 171-196). Mahwah, NJ: Taylor-Francis.

In this chapter Ryan and Deci review theory and research relevant to understanding intrinsic motivation and engagement and disengagement from schooling.

(2) *Symposium on self-determination theory*. All of Volume 7 (2009) of the journal *Theory and Research in Education* is devoted to a set of articles relevant to understanding intrinsic motivation and schooling. Here are three examples stemming from Deci and Ryan's group:

>**How K-12 teachers can put self-determination theory principles into practice** by J.M. Reeve & M. Halusic – http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/documents/2009_ReeveHalusic_TRE.pdf

Abstract: Discusses how K-12 teachers can put motivational principles from self-determination theory into practice. To explain the 'how to' of autonomy-supportive teaching, they answer eight frequently asked questions from teachers: What is the goal of autonomy-supportive teaching? How is autonomy-supportive teaching unique? Does autonomy support mean permissiveness? How would I encourage students' initial engagement in learning activities? How could I help students maintain their engagement? What would I say/How might I talk? How would I solve motivational and behavioral problems? How do I know if I provided instruction in an autonomy-supportive way? To answer these questions, we recommend the following classroom practices: take the students' perspective, display patience to allow time for learning, nurture inner motivational resources, provide explanatory rationales, rely on noncontrolling language, and acknowledge and accept expressions of negative effect.

>**Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice** by C. P., Niemiec & R.M. Ryan – http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/documents/2009_NiemiecRyan_TRE.pdf

Abstract: Self-determination theory (SDT) assumes that inherent in human nature is the propensity to be curious about one's environment and interested in learning and developing one's knowledge. All too often, however, educators introduce external controls into learning climates, which can undermine the sense of relatedness between teachers and students, and stifle the natural, volitional processes involved in high-quality

learning. This article presents an overview of SDT and reviews its applications to educational practice. A large corpus of empirical evidence based on SDT suggests that both intrinsic motivation and autonomous types of extrinsic motivation are conducive to engagement and optimal learning in educational contexts. In addition, evidence suggests that teachers' support of students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitates students' autonomous self-regulation for learning, academic performance, and wellbeing. Accordingly, SDT has strong implications for both classroom practice and educational reform policies.

>**Undermining quality teaching and learning: A self-determination theory perspective on high-stakes testing** by R.M. Ryan & N. Weinstein –
http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/documents/2009_RyanWeinstein_TRE.pdf

Abstract: Using tests to compare nations, states, school districts, schools, teachers, and students has increasingly become a basis for educational reform around the globe. Although tests can be informative, high-stakes testing (HST) is an approach to reform that applies rewards and sanctions contingent on test outcomes. Results of HST reforms indicate a plethora of unintended negative consequences, leading some to suggest that HST corrupts educational practices in schools. Although there are many accounts of these negative results, SDT supplies the only systematic theory of motivation that explains these effects. In what follows we describe the motivational principles underlying the undermining effects of HST on teachers and learners alike.

(3) The *Journal of Educational Psychology* increasingly is reporting findings relevant to student engagement and re-engagement that further show the impact of Deci and Ryan's work. Here are two recent examples:

>**The effectiveness and relative importance of choice in the classroom** (2010) by E.A., Patall, H. Cooper, & S.R. Wynn. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 896-915.

Abstract: Examined the effects of providing choices among homework assignments on motivation and subsequent academic performance. Students were randomly assigned within classrooms either to receive a choice of homework options or to be assigned an option for all homework in one instructional unit. Conditions were reversed for a second instructional unit. Results revealed that when students received a choice of homework they reported higher intrinsic motivation to do homework, felt more competent regarding the homework, and performed better on the unit test compared with when they did not have a choice. In addition, a trend suggested that having choices enhanced homework completion rates compared with when no choices were given. In a second analysis involving the same students, the importance of perceived provision of choice was examined in the context of student perceptions of their teachers' support for autonomy more broadly defined. Survey data showed that the relationship between perceptions of receiving autonomy support from teachers and intrinsic motivation for schoolwork could be fully accounted for by students' perceptions of receiving choices from their teachers. The limitations and implications of the study for research and practice are discussed.

>**Engaging students in learning activities: It is not autonomy support or structure but autonomy support and structure** (2010) by Jang, H., Reeve, J.M., & Deci, E.L. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 588-600.

Abstract: Investigated 2 engagement-fostering aspects of teachers' instructional styles – autonomy support and structure – and hypothesized that students' engagement would be highest when teachers provided high levels of both. Trained observers rated teachers' instructional styles and students' behavioral engagement in 133 public high school classrooms in the Midwest, and 1,584 students in Grades 9-11 reported their subjective engagement. Correlational and hierarchical linear modeling analyses showed 3 results: (a) Autonomy support and structure were positively correlated, (b) autonomy support and

structure both predicted students' behavioral engagement, and (c) only autonomy support was a unique predictor of students' self-reported engagement. Discusses, first, how these findings help illuminate the relations between autonomy support and structure as 2 complementary, rather than antagonistic or curvilinear, engagement-fostering aspects of teachers' instructional styles and, second, the somewhat different results obtained for the behavioral versus self-report measures of students' classroom engagement.

(4) Deci and Ryan's work also has implications for understanding stakeholder engagement in school transformation. For example:

> **Large-scale school reform as viewed from the self-determination theory perspective** (2009) by E.L. Deci. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7, 244–253.
http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/documents/2009_Deci_TRE.pdf

Abstract: Successful school reform requires that administrators, teachers, and students internalize the value of improved teaching and learning and of the policies, structures, procedures, and behaviors implicit in the reform. This is most likely to happen when school personnel and students experience satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness while planning and implementing the reform. When the components of a reform are relatively flexible rather than rigid and when the processes through which the reform is introduced and implemented are autonomy supportive, people will experience greater need satisfaction and will be more likely to internalize and endorse the reform. This article focuses on one approach to comprehensive school reform, namely, First Things First, and examines it in terms of self-determination theory principles.

Student Engagement and Re-engagement: Examples of Online Center Resources

- > *Motivation* (quick find) – The Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Finds provide links to Center developed resources and other online resources –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>
- > *About School Engagement and Re-Engagement* (information resource) –
<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdffdocs/reengagestudents.pdf>
- > *Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School* (beginning guide)
<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdffdocs/engagingandre-engagingstudents.pdf>
- > *Working with Disengaged Students* (practice notes)
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdffdocs/practicenotes/disengagedstudents.pdf>
- > *Re-engaging Students in Learning* (quick training aid) – Provides a brief overview and fact sheets on re-engaging students in learning, particularly on motivation. It also includes several tools and handouts for use with presentations

Note: The center at UCLA is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563 Phone: (310) 825-3634. Email: smhp@ucla.edu.