

## The Importance of Teacher Intrinsic Motivation

*The extent to which teachers succeed ... depends in large part on their general motives, their goals, the value they attribute to teaching, and their confidence in their own teaching abilities – all these are motivational characteristics that may vary from one teacher to the next.*

Kunter (2013)

*We suggest that teachers' own motivation and their beliefs about student motivation are predictors of their tendency to opt for an autonomy-supportive rather than a controlling style.*

Katz & Shahar (2015)

For over 40 years, Ed Deci and his colleagues have endeavored to clarify the nature of intrinsic motivation and its application to education and other enterprises (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2017). They have elucidated that conditions leading to *feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness* increase intrinsic motivation and that conditions that threaten these feelings can undermine motivation. One conclusion for schools from their work is that teachers who are intrinsically motivated not only are more effective in teaching academics, they foster intrinsic motivation for learning in their students. Below is a sample of what the literature offers about these matters.

### Feelings of Competence

Teachers' belief in their competence to teach effectively is positively related to their on the job emotional engagement and efficacy. For example, available research suggests a strong association between teachers' feelings of competence about engaging students, managing classrooms, and planning instruction, and their enthusiasm and job satisfaction, as well as their willingness to cope with daily pressures (e.g., Durksen, Klassen, & Daniels, 2017).

#### Research Examples of Threats to Feelings of Competence

Daniels (2016) research highlights various logistical factors that can interfere with teacher effectiveness and that therefore are threats to teachers feelings of competence. One such factor is the organization of the school schedule. For example, teachers reported that prevailing schedules usually precluded adequate time for doing their job well (e.g., planning, providing constructive feedback to students, ensuring student mastery of what is taught, ongoing professional development). They also indicated that problems arise when difficult classes are scheduled at times when teachers and students are likely to be physically tired and less engaged (e.g., late in the school day).

Evaluation threat is another concern. Current teacher evaluations often undermine a teacher's feelings of competence. Cuevas and colleagues (2018) report a strong association between the degree to which teachers experienced negative evaluations and adaptive and maladaptive motivation, well-being, and ill-being.

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## Feelings of Self-Determination

People in general and professionals in particular want to feel they have a reasonable amount of freedom in determining their choices and decisions. Research points to the importance of enhancing feelings of personal and professional control. When surveyed, teachers indicate they want to play a major role in decisions about what and how to teach (Daniels, 2017). And many school leaders indicate that teachers should be more empowered. The reality, however, is that teachers regularly experience stressful working conditions because of pressures to behave or perform in specific ways (e.g., to meet unrealistic expectations about student outcomes, teach in isolation).

### Research Examples with Respect to Self-Determination

Research indicates that teachers want to have control in designing teaching methods and freedom to try new pedagogical approaches (Daniels, 2017). Such control is associated with feelings of autonomy and enhanced intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Katz and Shahar (2015) report data suggesting that teachers who were more self-determining tended to be more autonomy supportive of their students, which had a positive influence on students' motivation. Increases in student self-determination were associated with more positive teacher perceptions of the students' motivation, and this was seen as further promoting teacher motivation.

Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, and Legault (2002) suggest that the more pressure teachers feel, the more they tend to perceive threats to their self-determination. The researchers identified three types of pressure: pressure from school curricular demands, pressure from school administration, and pressure from colleagues. They report that the less work pressure teachers experienced, the more they felt motivated and the more they perceived their students as motivated.

As with feelings of competence, evaluations can threaten feelings of self-determination. In their study, Cuevas, Ntoumanis, Fernandez-Bustos, and Bartholomew (2018) report that teachers' responses indicated that perceived pressure from teacher evaluations negatively affected their well-being and autonomous motivation. In turn, the negative impact on teachers' well-being appeared to have repercussions on teachers' relationships with their students.

## Feelings of Relatedness

People generally are social beings. They want to feel positively connected to significant others.

In schools, there is a premium placed on relationships. This is reflected in the growing emphasis on promoting social and emotional development, establishing effective student-staff working relations, connecting with students' families, and creating a culture of collaboration among school staff. As an example of one impact on teachers, a study by Milatz, Lüüftenegger, and Schober (2015) suggests that positive relationships with students promote a teacher's sense of well-being.

Unfortunately, while connectedness is recognized as important, little research has focused specifically on the *motivational impact of teachers' feelings of relatedness*. What exists indicates that the findings may be as complex as relationships are themselves. For example, with respect to staff collaboration, Daniels (2017) suggests such collaboration can enhance teachers' feelings of relatedness when it makes them feel supported, understood, and included. Collaborative learning has been reported as effective for promoting continuous professional development (Forte & Flores, 2014). However, Collie and colleagues (2012) caution that increased collaboration can potentially lead to work intensification, such as extra work meetings, which can make teachers feel more stressed. If collaboration feels forced, controlling, or overly demanding and lacks support, encouragement, and warmth, it might lead to negative feelings about colleagues and threaten participant's sense of autonomy.

## Concluding Comment

Despite some methodological limitations, the body of literature highlighting the importance of teachers' intrinsic motivation is growing. It seems clear that school improvement efforts need to maximize such motivation and minimize threats to feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness – for all staff and students. With this in mind, see the Center's 2018 book on *Improving School Improvement* ([http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving\\_school\\_improvement.html](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html)).

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For more on intrinsic motivation, engagement, and re-engagement as related to schools, see the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm> .