About Intrinsic Motivation from the Perspective of Self-determination Theory

Most pre and inservice preparation programs for educators primarily teach student engagement and classroom management in extrinsic motivation terms (i.e., reinforcement concepts, behavior modification). This is unfortunate given that the key to addressing student engagement and disengagement is an appreciation of intrinsic motivation.

Understanding intrinsic motivation clarifies how essential it is to avoid processes that limit options, make students feel controlled and coerced, and that focus mainly on "remedying" problems. Overreliance on extrinsic motivation risks undermining efforts to enhance intrinsic motivation and can produce avoidance reactions in the classroom and to school and, thus, can reduce opportunities for positive learning and for development of positive attitudes. Over time, such practices result in too many students disengaging from classroom learning.

Engaging and re-engaging students involves much more than effectively using rewards and consequences. A broader understanding of motivation clarifies how essential it is to build on and enhance self-determination and avoid processes that undermine it.

About Self-determination Theory

Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation that builds on the philosophical belief that people have natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways. By developing self-determination theory, Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, and their colleagues have stimulated considerable attention to practices for enhancing students' intrinsic motivation. The SDT website - http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/ – presents a brief overview of the work and provides resources for research and practice.

For purposes of this information resource, it is stressed that self-determination theory (SDT) adopts an organismic approach to human behavior; human beings are seen as having a natural tendency to pursue a fulfilling life by seeking and accomplishing optimal challenges. SDT is a cognitive-affective theory. It stresses that humans are fundamentally driven by three needs: the need to *feel* (1) self-determining, (2) competent, and (3) connected to others. From this perspective, SDT views students as naturally inclined to better themselves if the environment allows and enables them to do so.
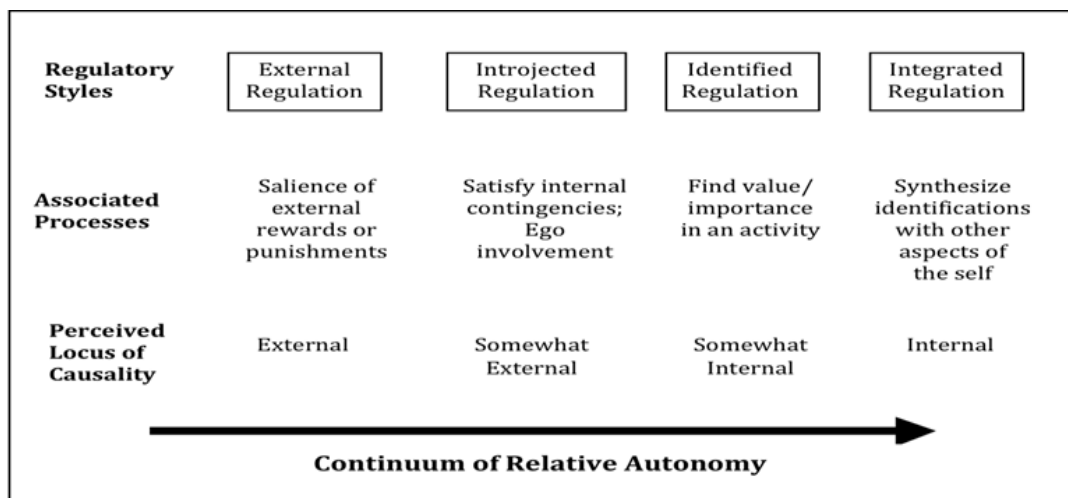
The need to feel self-determining involves autonomous regulation. That is, people need to experience their behavior as volitional. This does not mean there is an absence of boundaries and limits. A key here is that the boundaries and limits are understood and endorsed by the individual, and not experienced as controlling (e.g., rules that are arbitrary and unreasonable). Research underscores that autonomous regulation is associated with enhanced intrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation is associated with engagement, persistence ("grit"), conceptual learning, academic achievement, classroom adjustment, creativity, enjoyment and reduced anxiety.

As Niemeic, Soenens, and Vansteenkiste (2014) state about SDT: "From this perspective, humans are proactive (rather than passive) organisms who are oriented toward integration at the intrapersonal (autonomy) and interpersonal (homonomy) levels." SDT asserts that "the natural developmental tendencies toward psychological growth and adaptation to the environment are supported by social contexts that afford opportunities for volition, mastery, and connection with others. It follows, then, that humans are vulnerable to passivity and control, incompetence, and alienation, particularly when social conditions do not support (or actively thwart) their inherent propensities toward development and synthesis."

Self-determination Theory and Extrinsic Motivation

Clearly, there are facets of school learning that don't have intrinsic appeal for all students (e.g., rote memorization activities). When this is the case, teachers often employ extrinsic incentives to engage students. As illustrated below, SDT delineates four types of extrinsic motivation along an internalization continuum. These vary in the degree to which they are experienced as autonomous, and are differentially associated with classroom practices (e.g. autonomy-supportive versus controlling instruction) and learning outcomes (e.g. conceptual learning versus rote memorization).

Regulatory Styles	External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Integrated Regulation
Associated Processes	Salience of external rewards or punishments	Satisfy internal contingencies; Ego involvement	Find value/ importance in an activity	Synthesize identifications with other aspects of the self
Perceived Locus of Causality	External	Somewhat External	Somewhat Internal	Internal

Continuum of Relative Autonomy →

Implications for Practice

Extrinsic reinforcers are easy to use and can immediately affect behavior. Therefore, they are widely used. Unfortunately, the emphasis usually is on external regulation, and the immediate effects usually are limited to very specific behaviors and often are short-term. Moreover, extensive use of extrinsic reinforcement can have some undesired effects. And, sometimes the available rewards and punishments simply aren't powerful enough to get the desired results.

Remember that for an external reward to be effective it must be experienced by the recipient as rewarding. What turns something extrinsic into a highly valued reward is that the recipient highly values it. For example, if someone doesn't like candy, there is not much point in offering it as a reward.

Because the use of extrinsics has limits, it's fortunate that people often do things even without apparent extrinsic reason. In fact, a lot of what people learn and spend time doing is done for intrinsic reasons. The innate quality referred to as curiosity, for example, leads people to seek stimulation and avoid boredom and, in the process, learn a great deal.

Given that schools mean to increase intrinsic motivation for what is being taught and for learning in general, practices need to minimize threats to feelings of self-determination. competence, and relatedness to significant others and maximize opportunities to enhance such feelings. Of particular concern, is minimizing the negative impact of the schools use of external regulation so that it does not overwhelm and undermine a learner's feelings of self-determination and produce psychological reactance.

See the following Exhibit from a chapter by Niemeic, Soenens, and Vansteenkiste (2014) for examples of practices that be readily adopted by schools.

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Strategies That Can Be Used to Provide Support for Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

Support for autonomy	1. Elicit, acknowledge, and accept the person's thoughts and feelings 2. Explore values and how they relate to the situation being discussed 3. Encourage self-initiation and provide a desired amount of choice 4. Provide a meaningful rationale when limits are set and for other relevant requests 5. Minimize use of controlling language ("should", "must", "ought", and "have to")
Support for competence	1. Maintain a positive attitude toward success 2. Initiate a conversation to identify barriers to success 3. Create optimal challenges in a context of autonomy support 4. Assist the person with skills building and problem solving 5. Provide immediate, accurate, and effectance-relevant feedback 6. Provide structure through the communication of clear, consistent, and reasonable guidelines
Support for relatedness	1. Assume a warm, empathic, and non-judgmental stance toward the person 2. Provide a sense of unconditional positive regard 1. Communicate genuine care, interest, focus, and non-contingent support toward the person

From: C.P. Niemiec, B. Soenens, & M. Vansteenkiste (2014). Is relatedness enough? On the importance of need support in different types of social experiences. In N. Weinstein (ed.), *Human Motivation and Interpersonal Relationships*: *Theory, Research, and Applications*. Springer Science DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-8542-6_4

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Concluding Comments

A 2015 report from the Carnegie Foundation cautions: "When rewards come to be expected, they can have the effect of undermining motivation in general and intrinsic motivation in particular" (Headden & McKay, 2015). The report further highlights research stressing that among the factors contributing to student motivation are

> "a student's belief that he is able to do the work, a sense of control over the work, an understanding of the value of the work, and an appreciation for how he and the work relate to a social group. These factors, in turn, can be shaped by many others, including how academic content is taught and how students interact with and practice that content. Motivation is also affected by life experiences both in and out of school. In the classroom, recent research shows that so-called "toxic stress" brought about by such problems as hunger or homelessness can show up in students as distraction, lack of self-control, and distrust of others. All depress motivation."

With respect to daily school practices, self-determination theory helps expand understanding of motivational factors influencing students, school staff, parents, and other stakeholders. In doing so, it provides a perspective on conflicting motivational forces within and between participants at schools. Such conflicting forces produce different agenda and behavior.

Despite conflicting agenda, agreement is emerging about the need for greater attention to student engagement and to re-engaging disconnected students. With this in mind, we suggest that personnel preparation and continuing education for anyone working in schools focus on:

- expanding understanding of engagement, re-engagement, and intrinsic motivation in the context of school improvement and school climate

- strategic approaches to engaging and re-engaging students, with special attention to avoiding over-reliance on extrinsic reinforcers and minimizing practices that can produce reactance

- engaging and re-engaging families by attending to differences among families and other primary caretakers with respect to resources, motivation and needs, and barriers to involvement with the school

- enhancing understanding that teachers can't and should not be expected to do it all alone and that their work needs to be embedded into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports.

To these ends, the Center has made available for free and easy access four modules on:

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families –*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engagei.pdf

How many students does it take to change a light bulb?

Only one, but the student has to want to change the bulb!

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